

# UC Berkeley

## Room One Thousand

### Title

In Demonstration

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bv9k7q8>

### Journal

Room One Thousand, 3(3)

### ISSN

2328-4161

### Author

Hejinian, Lyn

### Publication Date

2015

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2015 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed



Lyn Hejinian

## In Demonstration

In *Ghostly Matters*, the sociologist Avery F. Gordon suggests that we “ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts *out of a concern for justice*.”<sup>1</sup> The phrase she italicizes is from Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, as is the concept, though, in Derrida’s original, the paradox is so elaborately convoluted as to seem unable to extricate itself from the idea at hand. In the event, he opts to glimpse no more than a glimpse.<sup>2</sup> Fair enough. Very early on, Derrida says his text will proceed “like an essay in the night.”<sup>3</sup> Mine, however, like its subject, will proceed in bright daylight. This essay is about a protest march that took place on a beautiful spring day, from noon to five, though it was part of something that had already taken place, and would take place again, and, perhaps, was never not taking place, namely protestation.

That said, in retrospect (and, let’s say, thanks to “hospitable memory”), I must acknowledge that, even in bright daylight, there were ghosts adrift on that spring day. They are not themselves the paradox, but they are in it. The paradox that Derrida gestures toward emanates from the fact that the struggle for justice is both backward- and forward-looking. The two perspectives are largely incommensurate; the past exists, and the future doesn’t. And that’s only for starters. One

Opposite: Model by Kirsten Larson and Cindy Hartono from *Dense Ecologies / City and Bay*.

can't undo history, nor entirely know it. Nor can more justice, in the future, generate less injustice in the past. There is a substantive—and very real—discontinuity between them that, in real life, dialectical thinking cannot remedy, and Derridean deconstruction can only point out. The ghosts in question step out from that gap in which we live—the present—to undertake protest but with real life at stake.

In the immediate wake of the global financial turmoil precipitated by the collapse of the mortgage-backed securities market in 2007-08, the University of California declared itself to be in a state of financial crisis. Then UC President Mark Yudof was given “emergency powers” by the UC Regents, and a sequence of crisis-driven remedial actions went into effect. These included staff and worker lay-offs and/or unpaid furloughs, the decrease of library access, elimination of some campus services, and a massive 32 percent increase of undergraduate fees (now properly termed “tuition”). Meanwhile, construction of new buildings continued and the salaries given to administrators increased. Many campus workers, along with many graduate and undergraduate students and some faculty, felt that the pressures to which the university was succumbing came less from a legitimate financial crisis (lack of money) than from neoliberal interests determined to seize resources from the public sphere. The privatization of a great public university was set in motion (and still continues), and a colossal impoverishment began—diminishing personal, financial, experiential, educational, intellectual, and creative possibilities along the way.

Mobilization for a massive day of protest began in the fall of 2009. At a statewide convention, drawing people concerned with the full spectrum of California's public educational entities, from preschool through grad school, a date for the proposed rallies and marches (March 4th) was chosen. Student organizers, community organizers, and an array of public sector unions joined forces to coordinate and

facilitate the events. On the day in question, a convoy of buses took groups of public college and university students and faculty to the state capitol. I chose to rally and march with a more “grass-roots” UC-Berkeley consortium, which wanted to express commonality and solidarity with the local university and city community rather than visit the seats of power.

It doesn’t require much bravado to participate in a protest march, nor much courage to be an organizer of one. The protest march is familiar, and even shopworn, but is still an often powerful manifestation of community expression and collective energy. It also reiterates its participants’ relationships to geography and to history, and in these, as in other ways, the protest march is akin to a pilgrimage.

People make pilgrimages in, as well as to, cities, even when not thinking of their expeditions as “pilgrimages” per se. Though standard definitions identify pilgrimages as religious or spiritual journeys, vernacular usage suggests that they may be undertaken under an array of motivations—sentimental, eulogistic, touristic, or for fun. A person can as credibly “make a pilgrimage” to City Lights Bookstore or to Jim Morrison’s grave as to Masada, Mecca, the Ganges, Calvary, or Canterbury. What pilgrimages have in common is some underlying spirit of devoutness, a fulfilling of some vow, the carrying out of a public or private commitment.

A protest march, of course, is not directly an act of devotion. But it may require a leap of faith. And the march, profane and political though it may be, carries with it affective burdens that have strong affinities with those that, I assume, are borne by religiously motivated pilgrims—reverent, desperate, desirous of solace or revelation, or merely dutiful, they are shadowed by failures (though not always their own) and beckoned by possibilities (however wild). It is clear that tradition, for pilgrims, and history, for protestors, provide the journeys’ *raison d’être* and lay out their trajectories. And bound into

these are vestiges—memories, scraps of protocol, patterns of response and expectation. But it is not these per se that haunt the pilgrimage and/or protest march, or that charge its participants. Avery F. Gordon identifies the ghosts that haunt contemporary society generally as the unmentioned (and in many contexts unmentionable), repressed presences of unaddressed, unameliorated, or irrevocable pains, harms, immiserations, etc. As she very rightly understands it, capitalism breeds these ghosts; as a result we are haunted by racism, debt, exploitation, sexual violence, war, ecological destruction, etc.

We know these exist. And because eliminating them has failed, they have become ghosts; they haunt us. They are ghosts as, rather than of, locally interpersonal as well as large-scale societal failures. They bear the presence of those we didn't help or of things we let happen.

I have written elsewhere about the sadness that comes with our awareness that we can't undo, or even lessen, the sufferings that others have experienced in the past. Historical irrevocability is with us. Indeed, we wreak it every day. This suggests that *guilt* is one of the ghosts in the protest, and I think that's accurate. *Love* is another. Two motifs, two motivations, both awkward to articulate and awkward to impose. They transmute readily into anger—often in its most optimistic form, as determination, stubbornness—and produce, in protest, often unpoetic chants. These have performative rather than substantive value, but they can at times be provocative—or would be, if those to whom the chants were directed were listening, but those people tend to have their windows closed, or to be out of town.

The chants have evocative force, too, at times, catalyzing energy, bringing spirits into play. By "spirits" here I mean inspirational forces ("the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.," "the spirit of Big Bill Haywood," "the spirit of Emma Goldman") and emotional energies

(“high spirits,” “good spirits,” the joy of camaraderie, adrenalin-suffused excitement), not ghosts. The ghosts don’t answer to chants, and aren’t brought forward by them; the ghosts are already here.

On March 4, 2010, after a noon rally on Sproul Plaza, on the University of California Berkeley campus, several thousand protestors marched from Sproul Plaza, the central public space on the University of California-Berkeley campus, to the large triangle of urban open space at the heart of Oakland’s city center, known as Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, or, as it had been recaptured by protestors over the preceding two months, Oscar Grant Plaza. In the resulting palimpsest, the name of a Japanese American civil rights leader, Frank H. Ogawa, is both present and overwritten by the name of a slain African American Oakland youth, Oscar Grant. Eight and a half weeks before the March 4, 2010 protest march, on New Year’s Eve, in response to reports of fighting on a BART train, Oscar Grant and several other passengers were detained; Grant was forced to the ground, face down, and in that position he was shot in the back by a public transit cop. He was declared dead at an area hospital a few hours later.

Among the assumptions implicit in the notion of a pilgrimage is that it involves a journey (long or short), to a destination (of historical and/or cultural significance), motivated by an idea (of personal or public importance), invigorated by a belief that gives the journey per se meaning. And, at some level, it is meritorious—it can be emotionally or intellectually justified, it may be beneficially transformative, it may be redemptive or revolutionary; it is a good thing to do. However inefficacious it may turn out to be, it will speak to an even greater failure, a failure of reason and of the justice it would guarantee. The life of Oscar Grant, the concept of public good, access for everyone to high quality education—there were losses to answer to.

Stretching south from Sproul Plaza and the main entrance to the University of California-Berkeley campus, the first four blocks of Telegraph Avenue have become something of a derelict zone in recent years. A sense of what's valuable—what's worthwhile—persists (though the specifics vary), even as meaning gets devoured by capitalism. But for an increasingly large percentage of the population, attaining what's worthwhile seems increasingly difficult. Grunge and goth-garbed kids sit on the sidewalks, street merchants watch over their wares. There are stores, but there are also boarded-up storefronts, and the unrecovered sites of burned out buildings. These four, once populous and probably prosperous northernmost blocks of Telegraph now feel increasingly downtrodden.

The protest march flowed across Bancroft, blocking traffic, opened space to let a few cars go by, acknowledged cheers from a truck-driver, closed ranks and continued. We passed a Walgreens, Blondie's Pizza shop (with its few high round tables and take-out counter), the dull, solid, almost windowless Bank of America branch, the head shop Annapurna, vestige of a far earlier era. We passed the rubble-filled site of the burned-out Raleigh's—or whatever it was called when it burned down; it had changed management and name a few times, reportedly in the wake of being closed down for serving drinks to under-age customers. We passed Amoeba Music (which, despite the loud background of music they maintain, feels cavernous now, far less vibrant than in the 1990s when the multiple clacks from browsers flipping through rows of CD cases made it sound like a cicada-works or typing pool). And a few minutes before 1 pm, we went by the enduring Moe's Books and past the Café Med. We passed the blighted site of Cody's Books, long empty and to all appearances abandoned, its gray façade and tall windows stained with inept graffiti. Avery F. Gordon characterizes a threefold character of political haunting:



[T]he ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge.

[T]he ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope.

[T]he ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*.<sup>4</sup>

Where Dwight Avenue crosses Telegraph Avenue it alters its trajectory, turning Telegraph's southward direction slightly toward the west. And, in effect, Dwight separates the four blocks of Telegraph that used to cater to students from the long stretch of middling businesses, banal chain restaurants, occasional local landmarks, small shops, single-family and multi-family bungalows, and apartment buildings that line Telegraph Avenue's slight but undeniable downhill slide into Oakland. As the protestors, many carrying "Education Should Be Free" signs, passed Willard Jr. High, students and teachers appeared in doorways and at windows, waving and cheering. Willard had been a rough school when I went there in the mid-1950s. The fights that broke out in the girls' locker room were wild, faces getting clawed, arms bitten, hair pulled. Over what? Boys, perhaps, petty thefts, social inequities, race.

The march crossed Ashby Avenue and passed the large Whole Foods store at 3000 Telegraph, the former site of the Berkeley Co-op (more

formally known as the Consumers' Cooperative of Berkeley). Rows of packaged greens and plastic containers of sliced fruit now line the wall on which the Co-op's long, cluttered bulletin boards once hung, posted with notices—of things sought, things lost, things needed, services available, things found, things for sale, random thoughts, elaborately coded ads for roommates, listing with minimalist designations the characteristics required, e.g., female, secular, cat-loving, vegetarian, non-smoking, etc.

Traversing Woolsey Street, the protest march passed The Smokehouse and crossed from Berkeley into Oakland. We passed the rundown White Horse Liquors and, across the street, the White Horse Inn, the oldest continually operating gay and lesbian bar in the U.S. (founded in 1933, immediately after the end of Prohibition).

As is the case with participants in a pilgrimage, those in a protest march want to reach a point of no return. The holy places to which religious pilgrims travel are perceived as sites where the mundane and the supramundane coincide, and a voyage to them, if completed, can change the successful pilgrim forever.<sup>5</sup> The participants of a protest march, meanwhile, want to cross the boundary that separates present impossibility from future possibility in such a way that no return to immiseration and no return of its sources will occur. Furthermore, they want their protest to result in conditions in which the ghosts of injustice, cruelty, etc. are irrelevant, social spaces to which they don't return; they want a new life, that's unhaunted and free of ruin. It is from pilgrims, on the other hand, that protestors can learn to travel without tripping or succumbing to pitfalls. And perhaps to notice when some particular ghost ceases to accompany the protest and departs forever (if, in human history, they ever do so).

We went by a True Value Hardware, a Jack in the Box, Ahadu Restaurant (Ethiopian), and the Alcatraz Shade Shop. The early March sunlight was bold, the mood confident, the temperature around 60

degrees. We passed Pet Food Express and Pet Wash, Solar Car Wash, Spoke Cyclery. We passed the site of a commune of women and children, where I used to hang out sometimes, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, home to two sex workers, a bank teller, a waitress at the Hayes Street Bar and Grill, and seven children. The waitress, who was my closest friend in those days, died years ago. The house was torn down at some point in the 1980s, and two nondescript apartment buildings now occupy the space.

The protest passed Addis Ethiopian Restaurant, in its eccentric small building, Jim's 'Lectric Washhouse, and Rashdashen Ethiopian Grocery. We crossed 57th Street, only a few blocks from musician Donald Robinson's house, and swept under the Highway 24 overpass, the shade a relief, our chants echoing off the concrete. We marched past a "Psychic Reader and Hairbraiding" establishment, past a 201-unit Section 8 housing complex, cheered on by a small crowd standing on the sidewalk in front of its long fence. We passed a pawn shop and a cash checking business, and the gloomy, massive, vacant, fenced-in Global Entertainment building. We crossed 51<sup>st</sup> Street, a block from the converted garage in which Rova Saxophone Quartet has its rehearsals on Sundays, and continued southward between the stolid adobe Wallgreens on the west side of the street and assorted restaurants and cafes on the east side: Bakesale Betty, Pizzaiolo, Dona Tomas. Bakesale Betty, famous for its fried chicken sandwiches, closes around 2, so it was probably just closing as we went by. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Oakland's Temescal district was a largely Italian-American neighborhood, but its demographics have changed; it is home now to a significant population of Eritrean and Ethiopian émigrés. It is also becoming increasingly upscale.

All along the way people were coming out to watch the protest, which, with its papier-mâché effigies, its huge banners, the Lady Gaga tracks booming from the back of a mini pickup truck, the chants and drumming, was almost indistinguishable from a parade. Performativity

has an established role to play in protest. “This is what democracy looks like”—so went one of the chants. People came out of doorways or off the sidewalks and joined the march.

It is not with one’s “individual conscience” or one’s “private consciousness” that one participates in a protest march. One marches as a social being. Likewise, the ghosts are generally not those of specific individuals. We are, in effect, haunted collectively by history. Ghosts are that which is neither entirely ruined nor entirely repaired. They are perpetually forthcoming, making themselves known in protest.

We went noisily, even gaily, past Hooper’s Chocolates, an excessive, Cape Cod style building from the 1950s, painted pale pink with white trim, supposedly because pink was the favorite color of the owner, George Hooper’s wife Barbara. The company closed a few months after the protest march, and currently (in the summer of 2014), though the old Hooper’s Chocolates sign remains, the storybook pink building is home to the Temescal Community Thrift Store, “Voted Best Thrift Store by East Bay Express” (according to a sign standing on a patch of grass in front).

We marched past a McDonald’s, Kasper’s Hot Dogs, a Jack in the Box, and, having entered “Koreatown Northgate” (KONO), a trio of Korean shops. We passed Benjamin Moore Paints on the west side of Telegraph and Kelly-Moore Paints half a block further, on the east side of the street. Are the two companies related? “Probably not,” says an online site responding to the question: “Kelly-Moore Paints was founded in 1946 by two men, William H. Kelly and William E. Moore, While Benjamin Moore was founded in 1886 by Benjamin Moore.”

We went by Church’s Chicken, then, a few doors down, the Harmony Missionary Baptist Church. We surged across the wide intersection of 40th and Telegraph and passed the Glamour Beauty Supply (purveyor of Glamour Wigs), then a Subway Sandwich shop. We marched past

the large, glowing ochre façade of the Beebe Memorial Cathedral at 3900 Telegraph, whose first services took place on April 17, 1966 after a “Grand March” to the location led by Rev. L. S. White, Bishop Walter H. Amos, and Presiding Elder Wellington Smith. The congregation itself had been in existence for a little over forty years; according to the Cathedral’s account of its history, “In January 1925, a small group of Christians gathered in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Wayner and thusly the first Christian Methodist Episcopal Mission Church in Oakland, CA was launched.”

We passed the bland façade of the California Highway Patrol’s North Oakland building and, across the street from it, a building, now apparently some kind of Korean center, that I think was formerly a funeral home. If so, that is where the strange memorial service for the poet Barbara Guest took place, organized by her daughter and conducted by a black pastor who, by his own account, made it his practice to prowl hospital corridors in search of dying patients whose souls might be, at the last moment, saved. It is there that he had “met” Barbara Guest, after the sequence of strokes that were to end her life. His sermon scarcely mentioned her, and, given her patrician style, ended incongruously with a recording of Tony Bennett singing “Nearer, My God, to Thee.”

The mood of the protest march was cheerful, the excitement intensifying despite the long walk. But, inevitably, the ghosts in a protest incite self-criticism, at a collective level (are we interrelated well? is our group meaningfully constituted? is our collectivity adequate and honest?), and for each of us individually. What, for example, are *my* motives—what am I doing here? And what, now that I’m here, are my obligations, my responsibilities? Have I, by example or by exhortation, exposed others to risks they shouldn’t take? And what claims do I have to our destination, or to the sites along the way?

We went under Highway 580, past Phatt Matt’s BBQ and then

A Taste of Denmark Bakery and Café two doors further south. We passed another Walgreens, the enormous Summit Alta Bates hospital complex, and the offices of my eye doctor. We went by the defunct and empty Courthouse Athletic Club, the Grant-Miller Mortuary, Pizza Hut and KFC, and Young's Wigs on the northwest corner of 27th and Telegraph. We crossed the intersection and passed the massive old art deco Sears building, which opened on March 13, 1930, closed in 1993, stood empty, then was renovated, and now houses fifty-four live/work loft spaces.

We continued on, passing what was once Ron Richards Western Wear, where, in 1973, I bought a pair of cowboy boots. The space is now occupied by Happy Market, TNT Check Cashing, and a Metro PCS (prepaid card services) branch. We passed the vibrantly pink Beauty Supply Warehouse, advertising "Wigs and Weaves." To our left was "Pill Hill," a neighborhood dominated by the sprawling Summit/Alta Bates Hospital complex and related doctors' offices, rehab clinics, labs, etc.—and several wig shops. In the context of political protest and anti-capitalist sentiment, the Beauty Supply Warehouse's declaration ("We want you to win your battle, and we'll do everything we can to help you with your wig needs through perilous times") seemed hilarious, but perilous times come to persons as well as societies, and I registered an underlying poignancy.

By West Grand, the size and density of the protest march had enormously increased. Pedestrians, shoppers, ordinary people had joined in. The pilgrimage/protest march brings ghosts out into everyday life. Indeed, what Henri Lefebvre says of philosophers can also be said here of ghosts: they are committed to everyday life; they "watch over its meaning and its development from within."<sup>6</sup>

We went past the Stork Club, which is something of a dive bar—and likes being that—but puts on a few poetry events and a lot of live music,

including free jazz (the Glenn Spearman Double Trio played there a number of times in the 1990s) and some avant-garde improvisational music. A bright mural, "Refuelin' Station," decorates its south side façade, showing a top-hatted stork riding a whiskey glass propelled on martini glasses by blasts of music. We continued on, past the First Baptist Church (and Oakland Burmese Mission), past a mural of vivid blue birds flying swathes of turquoise across the dark gray walls of the Lost and Found Beer Garden, past Angel Beauty Supply, and past the rococo "Middle-eastern style" (semi-domed) Fox Oakland Theater. It opened in October 1928 as a movie palace, closed in 1970, was derelict for a number of years and then, in the early 2000s was renovated. There's still a big concert venue there, but much of the building is now home to the Oakland School for the Arts, a grade 6-12 charter school that opened in 2009, and, every summer, to the East Bay Girls Rock Camp.

We passed the Uptown, another bar and music venue (the Larry Ochs-Donald Robinson duo plays there occasionally) and marched across 17th Street. Telegraph Avenue had narrowed, the height of the buildings increased. We were in downtown Oakland, Broadway was in view, and, on the right, just around the corner lay Oscar Grant (Frank Ogawa) Plaza.

By the time the march reached Oscar Grant Plaza, the protesters included parents with toddlers, union leaders, workers, students, young professionals, street people, clerks, and many of the people who would realize the political experiment that emerged as Occupy Oakland eighteen months later on the very plaza at which the March 2010 protest march arrived.

A pilgrimage is never properly perpetual. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, however one narrativizes it. But whatever memories it carries, and whatever it actualizes as its goal, are ongoing. The protest march intensifies the potential inherent to pilgrimage. It politicizes the

spaces it transits, demanding that the creation of an as-yet-unrealized future become the prospect of the present. No pilgrimage can end injustice, of course; indeed, a pilgrimage doesn't aspire to do so. This remains the proper goal—ostensible, though not-yet-fulfilled—of a protest march.

[Endnotes]

1. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; with new introduction, 2008), 60.
2. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*; translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 175.
- 3 Derrida, *Specters*, xviii.
4. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; with new introduction, 2008), 63-64.
5. My thanks to Padma Maitland for this insight.
6. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*; translated by John Moore (volumes 1 and 2) and George Elliott (volume 3); (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 119.