

## A conversation amongst two artist writers who witnessed the performance together

Imani Roach and Jenna Crowder

**Imani Roach:** I think I went into *Re.Past.Malaga* expecting an overtly raced experience. But the racial dimension of the performance was much more implicit, and also somewhat less central, than I anticipated. That was partially a function of the multi-racial makeup of the cast of performers and servers (which in turn reflected the diversity of the original Malaga residents and their descendants). But also, in the actual acts of remembrance, our energies were being directed more towards honoring the residents' shared humanity than towards marking their blackness.

When the student performers spoke about the lives and pastimes of individual residents, like Eliza Griffith, they made no mention of race. When we read resident's names aloud, there was no indication of which residents were black or mixed-race and which were white. Even the choice of cardboard as the material for the painted silhouettes, which were placed along the footpath from where the

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**Jenna Crowder** is a writer and artist. She is the Founding Editor of *The Chart*, a Maine-based online arts journal that explores the specificity of regional perspectives in national conversations. Jenna's practice extends across installation, participatory practice, print-making, and curation to consider the convergence of written language and visual aesthetics. Her writing has recently appeared in *Temporary Art Review*, *The Rib*, and the anthology *Enter Rural Scene* from Wash and Fold Press.

boat docked to the clearing where we ate, seemed intentionally ambiguous in terms of race. So then the repast, which is itself a black practice, became a frame or schema for thinking about a whole host of ideas like memory and material history and communion and loss. Does that make sense?

**Jenna Crowder:** It does! To underscore your observation, I want to mention a recent talk<sup>1</sup> that was held at Colby College Museum of Art hosted by the Lunder Institute for American Art. In it, Theaster Gates discussed relationships to land; it was followed by a panel in which Gates, Myron M. Beasley, and the artist Daniel Minter spoke about — among other things — the concept of race in mixed-race communities like Malaga. They offered the idea that this particular community on Malaga Island was perhaps too progressive or too provocative in its very existence for the white communities of the state: the then-governor eradicated this community by forced eviction and in some cases, subsequent institutionalization. Minter said something that really struck me: he noted that because the state intentionally dissolved this community, there was so much that was lost. It's actual progress that was lost.

**IR:** Interesting.

**JC:** In hindsight, we can see what might have been a path toward progressive ideas and practices of racial equality. Because the governor evicted the inhabitants in 1912, we're now so much farther back than we could have been. The discussion really put that into perspective. It makes me wonder: is the commemoration of the people that lived on Malaga, in this way, a kind of prefigurative act as an effort to right the course? Does *Re.Past.Malaga* imagine how things could have been today, and thus make the notion of overtly describing race irrelevant? Or did it shy away from talking about what we might need to talk about?

**IR:** I didn't necessarily perceive it as shying away from anything, and I'm certainly not implying some kind of post-racial fantasy. It felt more utopian than that — and also more subversive — particularly in light of what you're mentioning. What made the Malaga residents not just forward thinking but an actual threat to the state, it seems, was their ability to be in harmony with each other across difference rather than their eradication of difference per se. In that context the fact of race remains critical but maybe the race of individual bodies becomes less important.

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<sup>1</sup> Gates, Theaster. "Theaster Gates on Land." Lecture, Lunder Institute of American Art, Waterville, ME, November 15, 2019.  
<https://www.colby.edu/museum/2018/10/30/theaster-gates-on-land/>

**JC:** As I re-watched the video documentation of *Re.Past.Malaga*, I was able to imagine all of us as a kind of community there. What if we were the people who had lived there? What if we — forty-five guests representing each of the inhabitants at the time of the eviction, plus the performers and hosts — were living there together, eating together, singing songs together? Of course, there were some descendants in attendance, and so perhaps it becomes something quite else to imagine how their lives might be so very different.

**IR:** Yes! I also had questions about the nature of the community that was being imagined or forged during the performance. Because the assembly was something of a hodgepodge of descendants, college students and (from what I could tell as a relative outsider) members of the Maine art world. And then there were also the scientists, historians and others who had long-standing personal or professional relationships to the island, though they were not themselves descendants. As a member of the “art world” subset of the attendees, I couldn’t help but wonder what my witnessing of the event was doing for the people whose connection to the island had absolutely nothing to do with art or performance. What did framing it as a performative meal, and inviting a group of spectators, accomplish for *those* folks that just having a meal amongst themselves in the same clearing would not have?

**JC:** That’s a powerful question. I often think about this in regard to performance spaces and site-specificity or performances that take history and historical events as their central theme or inspiration. Myron is and has been in touch with a lot of the descendants, and so it is also a question that one could actually ask in order to tease out the relationships among those in attendance and their different roles and perspectives.

**IR:** Thank God there are archeologists and historians who are doing the critical work of reconstructing life on the island. But even as *Re.Past.Malaga* leaned on a certain scholarly record, in translating that record into the realm of performance, it also tapped into and mobilized the cache of the art world and the power of beauty in a way that felt important. And that switching between discursive registers, that knitting of different layers and kinds of authority together into a new record, seemed aimed at maximizing the visibility of this very niche, very under-acknowledged piece of Maine history.

**JC:** And so are you talking about the work of the archive?

**IR:** Absolutely, and that’s complicated because so often marginal histories only become visible when they enter the archive. The archive lends events and people a (largely false) sense of fixed-ness and solidity that the society at large values.

Diana Taylor writes about that system of values and also highlights more ephemeral, embodied traditions of memory transmission in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. But *Re.Past.Malaga* seemed to take a kind of both-and approach to memorialization — an approach rooted in making the archive come to life both for the performers and for us as participant observers.

There was that moment when the students took turns listing all of the objects, the personal effects, that had been recovered from the island. And I couldn't help but reflect on the various translations that those objects had gone through to get from their former lives to my ears. Through intimate use, everyday objects develop such an emotional patina, such a buildup of our little hopes and disappointments. That's why we get so attached to them. And so when those objects are boxed and put into someone's logbook as "comb" or "fishing hook" so much is lost. It felt important to be putting those objects back into space and into relation with bodies, even if only as sound.

**JC:** So then the archive is shaped, at least in part, by our responses perhaps? As artists and as participants? It seems as though the work of the repast as a performance is a gesture of archive. The work is the documentation of the responses shaped by new or shifted perspectives as well as histories that might be revealed through this process. I'm thinking of not only our responses, but the testimonies of the descendants during the repast.

**IR:** Absolutely! And there was some productive tension there for me between the official archive and those personal testimonies. Again there are so many different kinds of authority that are being invoked.

**JC:** As we think about the tensions inherent in revising an archive, I'm also reflecting on the very end of the repast when the performers, costumed in period clothing like long dresses and simple overalls, took apart a sculptural representation of one of the original houses on the island. I think at first it struck me as almost a little violent, rubbing up against my understanding that houses of the inhabitants were razed. But upon reflection, it seemed to me more as if the disassembly was now on their own terms. I reread the care they used to take the roof and the walls apart and away, slowly going off into the woods with the pieces to a poetic point past our view-line. Their actions allowed the story to unfold in a different way.

**IR:** I didn't read the dismantling of the house as particularly violent, though I like your point about reenacting the process on the inhabitants' own terms. To me that part of the performance felt the most properly "religious" in its controlled pacing, in its processional quality, in its direct engagement with symbolism.

One of the horrors of the Malaga island removal story is that bodies which had been buried with love in the natural course of time were exhumed and re-interred in a mass grave on the mainland. In an inversion of the contemporary repast, which acts as a kind of porous seal on the funeral itself, *Re.Past.Malaga* felt like an opening. I saw the house, with its various joints and limbs, as a kind of resurrected body. And as a focal point of the ceremony, the dismantling process became a reburial. Even the fact that the endpoint of that process was well out of view felt like it was signaling an afterlife, or at least a threshold beyond which our knowledge fails.

**JC:** You've been to repasts before, too, right?

**IR:** Yes, well they are quite common, particularly amongst churchgoing black folks. I haven't attended many in recent years, but essentially every time a family member of mine has passed away, there has been a repast — usually in the basement of the church where the funeral services are held. When I talk about them being kind of porous, what I mean is that, because the ceremonial dimension of the repast, which is centered around food and close family and friends, is much less structured than the service itself, which I would say is more public-facing and more God-facing, you are able to circulate freely, to speak to and reconnect with people freely, even to enter and leave the ceremony at various points.

**JC:** With this repast as a performance, do you see commonalities? Does the repast feel or exist differently if it's a performance?

**IR:** I'm curious about the repast being called a "performative meal," because in my mind, "performativity" is so connected to ideas of affect and gesture. And *Re.Past.Malaga* didn't feel like it was about specific affect or gesture, at least not at the level of the individual body. It felt more invested in marking certain steps — like making sure the names of the inhabitants were read — instead of being overly prescriptive about the way those steps were executed or embodied, you know?

**JC:** Yes, absolutely. Being in attendance felt much more like showing up as a guest than an audience member.

**IR:** I mean, the proceedings required a certain level of reverence and buy-in, but there was no prerequisite skill set, no strict guidelines about how to behave. It was important for the songs to be sung, for the ritual to be carried out, but there was very little preciousness about any of the individual components of that ritual.

If it *had* been more of a performance with a capital "P," it would have felt very different from any repast I've ever participated in. There is something in the

humility and inquisitiveness that the students brought to the proceedings as students that allowed for a kind of familiarity and comfort and yes, porousness. Of course I would typically only attend a repast for someone who was a close family member or friend of my family's. And that's really the most critical distinction. In that sense I felt very much like an outsider at *Re.Past.Malaga*. I live and work in Philadelphia, so particularly the experience of accessing this remote island by motor boat felt almost mythically foreign.

We talked before about how the boat ride, in addition to being functional because Malaga is literally an island, was itself a kind of ceremony. It provided space to drop into a different frame of mind, to meditate or reflect with the wind in your face and the sun glistening off the water. But there is also a tension there for me, because the Malaga settlers were removed to bolster this image of Maine as "vacationland," as this pristine, unblemished landscape ripe for tourism. So while I found the voyage to Malaga incredibly romantic and picturesque, I'm still grappling with the relationship between my pleasure in consuming "Maine" and the historical erasure itself.

**JC:** You know, that's something I was trying to reconcile for myself as well. I'm not from Maine, though I've lived here for a long time and consider it my home. I think that Vacationland gaze can be — and often is — applied to Mainers, too, and so I also felt implicated as a tourist in some ways. I was very conscious of my presence in this protected place — both privileged and responsible to attending to this history.

**IR:** Really though, I think we should talk about how good the food was. Because that was such a huge and important part of it — maybe the most important part, actually. The meal, which was undeniable aesthetically speaking, really provided its own context which bolstered the storytelling and remembrances.

**JC:** There was a deep authenticity and beauty in the attention paid to the meal. It felt like we were cared for as guests in the way that I think Myron was perhaps hoping for us to care about the inhabitants and their story as well — a beautiful cycle of receiving and remembering. And *caring*. Caring for the food, caring for the people that you're with, caring for the people that lived on this island — all ways to carry that care and remembrance and responsibility forward.

I have definitely felt a significant sense of responsibility since. As a repast and remembrance for this community that has largely been forgotten by so many people — or who never knew about it to begin with — I know now, and there's a responsibility to carry that forward in some way.

**IR:** Right. As a non-Maine resident, I wasn't particularly surprised that I hadn't been taught about Malaga island before now. Nor was I surprised by the story of the removal itself — it's exactly the kind of thing that happens in settler colonies all over the world. Histories of solidarity are erased and written over. My own research actually deals with a mixed-race community in Johannesburg called Sophiatown that was removed by the Apartheid government during the 1950s. There were even similar claims made that the area was "unsanitary." So, in that way the story of Malaga felt very familiar.

But it does beg the question: How many Malagas are still waiting to be remembered? In this country alone are there five dozen or five hundred? It speaks to how important the work of local history is. And it forces me to consider the place where I do live, and the places I have lived in the past, and what stories are buried there that I now have a responsibility to uncover.

**JC:** Absolutely. How much progress has been collectively lost, and what is there to regain?

**IR:** Shifting gears a bit, I'd like to return to those silhouettes, which I invoked earlier because of their ambiguity. Their featureless brown-ness signal the idea of race without illustrating any particular racial phenotype.

But they also seemed significant as objects on the periphery of the meal itself. Alongside the students in period costume, the installation elements felt like a nod to permanence. How did you experience those silhouettes as sculpture and how did you feel they related to the more performed aspects of the repast?

**JC:** By their very nature, they felt more permanent than the ephemeral elements that took place during the repast — maybe as permanent as, say, the podium that Representative Hickman was speaking from or the tables and chairs that were placed out. They didn't feel like they could weather very long, but their concreteness as physical objects alluded to a life lived in a place, a supposed solidness.

**IR:** Right.

**JC:** The flat, cut-out figures were ambiguous. They were roughly hewn, with minimal marks that suggested who they might be, and, for me, read like a kind of signage. I suppose encountering them soon after the sign marking the trust land for island assisted this read. As I found them along the path to the clearing — I did relate to them as a wayfinding system — of not only demarcating the past, but also as a welcome which grounded them with the performance. It was a magical, illustrative transition, in which the silhouettes or their materials slowly took on a

life in the form of the facilitators and the hosts and performers, and ultimately as *us* as part of the work and this created world. And in closing, we were guided to walk back through them. As if an opening and closing of a portal.

**IR:** Hmm. I really like that idea of them as signage. I hadn't considered that, but in retrospect I did experience them in that way. I specifically recall the figure of a man playing a violin or a fiddle, and another of a mother and child or woman and smaller person holding hands.

There was also a speculative dimension to them as markers of what might have happened in certain spots, or of what kinds of relationships people might have had. And like the listing of the artifacts found on the island, that speculation rooted the repast in the world of the everyday that I found really powerful. It's one thing to think about what Malaga symbolized as a racially harmonious community, or to bemoan what society lost on a macro level when it was removed, but it's another thing altogether to think about the minutiae of life on the island and what it meant to the residents on a very micro, mundane level.

On the other end of the spectrum, I'm curious about how and where music was used during the performance. In those moments the repast felt like more than just a proper reburial, it felt like a resurrection. I'm actually surprised that the theme of resurrection, and all of the religious implications attached to it, hasn't come up yet.

**JC:** You mean that it felt like *Re.Past.Malaga* was playing with those Christian themes?

**IR:** It did, but not at all overtly. Again, I don't know how the songs were chosen, but first we have this more traditional spiritual about a soul that is not bound by the grave. Then the second selection is this ostensibly secular pop song that literally invokes "rising up" in the face of adversity. But because Andra Day comes out of a soul/RnB lineage there is still that kernel of black spirituality there.

Since her death I've been re-visiting Aretha Franklin's gospel album, *Amazing Grace*, and from the very first track, which talks about the story of Lazarus, to the very last, the idea of resurrection and also the aesthetics of resurrection are so present and potent. On one level, resurrection operates as a metaphor for the resilience of black people in America, but on another level there's a very African way in which the deceased continue to have agency in this world. So in terms of *Re.Past.Malaga*, the music felt like a nod to the power that these residents and their stories have to resurrect themselves through us. These histories that were buried are in fact irrepressible.





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