

Performing the Untold: *Re.Past.Malaga*

Myron M. Beasley

The relocation of peoples has ignited and disrupted the idea of home and expanded the focus of identity beyond definitions of citizenship to clarifications of foreignness.
— T. Morrison¹

Governments seeking legitimacy and identity seem able and determined to shape themselves by the destruction of a collective other
— T. Morrison

Memory operates as an alternation between retrospection and anticipation that it is itself, for better or worse, a work of art.
— J. Roach²

Le Radeau de la Méduse/ The Raft of the Medusa, a painting by Théodore Géricault occupies a significant presence in the halls of the Louvré. The image, considered an icon of French Romanticism and the work that established Géricault's career, documents the 1816 incident of the French navel *La Méduse* that ran aground off the coast of Africa. The captain and his crew abandoned the one hundred forty-seven mixed raced group of passengers, who were cast adrift on a makeshift raft for thirteen days: the fifteen passengers who survived endured starvation and even cannibalism. The incident was an international scandal and continues to be a point of shame for the French. In 2006, at the bewilderment of many, Toni Morrison selected Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse/ The Raft of the Medusa* as the premise of her debut exhibition at the Louvré entitled, "The Foreigner's Home." She

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¹ Note: quotes from Morrison in this essay derive from the film: R. Brown & Pingree, G.(Directors). (2019) *The Foreigner's Home*. United States: Video Project.

² Roach, J. (1996) *Cities of the Dead*. Columbia U Press: New York. p.33.

insists the painting positions “the viewer among the survivors and the dead. He [Géricault] forces us to share the hope and fear, rescues not for certainty. This painting lends itself to a raft of perceptions in a perfect state of art living beyond its frame.”³

Morrison’s curatorial endeavor upends the sacred space of the museum by including an array of performative actions from slam poetry, break dancing, and rap music, both inside and outside the corridors of the museum building, thus disrupting (and disturbing) the fine and popular art divide. Morrison’s use of *The Raft of the Medusa* as a monument to the victims of the horrific event allows for “The Foreigner’s Home” to adequately address the haunted nature of the historical narrative and thus makes linkages to contemporary social and cultural politics. In “The Foreigner’s Home,” Morrison interrogates the concept of home as she does the idea of the foreigner and what it means to be considered a foreigner in the land of one’s birth. Simultaneously, Morrison cogitates on what it means to remember and how to memorialize the tragedy. More significantly Morrison interrogates how social and political discourses emerge and create an atmosphere to cause society to deem a people as the other, a foreigner in their land.

A similar haunting persists for me after witnessing a twenty-six-minute *Maine Experience 103* documentary about the story of Malaga island on my first night in Maine⁴. I arrived in August 2008 to take up a new faculty appointment at a local college. After a day of traveling and unpacking, I flipped on the television in the hotel only to see the beginning of the film about the inhabitants of the island. The 41-acre island located at the mouth of the New Meadows River, and just two miles off the coast of Phippsburg, Maine, was once inhabited by a fishing community of black, white, native American, and mix-raced people. The yellow journalism of the moment described the community as “degenerates,” “peculiar,” and the island as “disgusting.” The discourse surrounding the community reflected the confluence of the racist eugenics movement in the United States, the Maine as “Vacationland” campaign, (as the towns along Maine’s coasts were becoming summer destinations), and economic retribution. Not wanting such a stain on the state, the then-governor, Frederick Plaisted drafted a declaration in 1912 to have the more than 45 inhabitants forced off the island. The homes were leveled, the one-room schoolhouse was removed, and the graves were exhumed and reburied as a mass grave inland. Several of the residents were committed to the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded (now the plush Pineland Farm and Center) in the small town of New Gloucester. Today the island sits abandoned. In 2010, after years of petitioning by citizens of the State of Maine, former Governor Baldacci issued a formal

³ R.Brown & Pingree, G.(Directors). (2019) *The Foreigner’s Home*. United States: Video Project.

⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/video/maine-experience-episode-103-2/>

apology to the descendants in a ceremony on the island. In 2012, the Maine State Library mounted *Malaga Island: Fragmented Lives*. Curated by Kate McBrian, the exhibition consisted of objects found in the archeological dig, conducted by Dr. Nathan Hamilton of the University of Southern Maine, that upended the reputation of the island fostered by the inaccurate propaganda and yellow journalism of the early 20th century. In 2017, the governor, Paul LePage, acknowledged the horrific event and placed a commemorative marker at the Pineland Farms gravesite. The island has sat vacant since the forced eviction. Even still some of my neighbors, who are life-long Mainers had not heard of the island and its story. This special issue of *Liminalities* is a deliberation about the performance *Re.Past.Malaga* that interrogates the dialectical tensions between home and dislocation; genocide and erasure; with collective memory and documentation; all of which emerged from a meal on an abandoned island off the coast of Maine. I theoretically situate the onetime site-specific installation as a public memorial and thus ponder, like many of the contributors in this issue, what does it mean to memorialize or commemorate national trauma and tragedy. Which, in turn, allows for a space to continue to re-think the concept of a monument. This special issue traverses the attenuated boundary between performance and history. Performance possesses the power to reveal intimate meanings and evoke empathic redemptive comprehension.

Performance also has the capacity to disarrange history and untidy monolithic narratives which swirl around memorials. Morrison's descriptive reading of Géricault's painting as a monument to the lost lives, teases a prolonged yet uninterrogated mourning that positions the bodies on the raft as an ongoing tragic performance. Géricault's, *Le Radeau de la Méduse / The Raft of the Medusa* is positioned as a public memorial, a monument to help society remember the atrocities of humanity. On July 12, 2018, I curated a public memorial in the form of a site-specific installation of a repast meal to remember the legacy and families of Malaga Island. The Malaga memorial is also an interventive creative action to cause awareness and prevent the erasure of the story of Malaga. The event grounded in archival and historical documentation, *Re.Past.Malaga* as a memorial lives between performance and history using narrative as a means to play with a 'vanishing' history. Vanishing to connote the ephemerality of performance against the perceived permanence of the historical fact with an impending silence. A unique component of performance is the use of narrative as a foundation of human to human interpersonal communication. Narrativity, fundamental to historic facts and archival materials, positions Malaga Island to 'speak for itself' (Pollock 12). I use performance as a means for "imaginative summoning and interpretive replays of past events in the light of present situations and struggle" (Conquergood 337). History is contested. Truth is political and hinges between, as feminist scholar Trinh reminds, municipal structures. "...each society has its own politics of truth; on the other hand, being truthful is being in the inbetween of all regimes of truth" (Trinh 21).

Interestingly, the title of the seminal audio documentary about Malaga Island is, *A Story Best Left Untold*⁵ speaks to the haunted nature of the narrative, for some not wanting the story to be told. ‘Vanishing’ speaks to the continuous obfuscation of the true story promulgated by yellow journalists, and it speaks to the continuous nature of history. Like performance, history never ends. They are a set of ongoing discoveries, unraveling, ruptures and possibilities. In the case of Malaga, the collection of artifacts unearthed through the archeological labor, “speaks for itself.” The not sharing the narrative risks erasure.

Memorials are contested. In 2016, I curated *Patience on a Monument: Recent works by Eto Otitigbe* (a sculpture exhibition). The exhibition was part of a series of discussions at the University of Texas, Austin about the confederate monuments littered across the campus. The regal and ornate statues in many instances were crafted by European artists trained to evoke a sense of deeply ingrained (and engraved) historical permanence. The statues are effigies, that in their performed ostentation project societies as what they imagine themselves to be and to signal fear to marginal communities (Roach 36). I write in the curator's statement of the show that the monuments are “Mementos of the precious past, or perhaps obstructions to other narratives of that past. Nonetheless, their elegance and regal nature command a passivity, an allegiance to their absoluteness that, when left unattended, seeps into the unconsciousness” (2016). The confederate monuments function to obscure the harsh realities of the enslaved and thus portend a fabricated history. My interest in memorials is drawn from a curiosity of the chronicles hidden and buried underneath. “Any historical narrative is a bundle of silences,” according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot (3). The labor of acknowledging and then memorializing the silenced or hidden historical narratives asks for a rethinking of the definition of a public memorial.

The Vietnam Memorial and *The AIDS Quilt* disrupt and challenge the phallogocentric stoned fortresses that popularly occupy landscapes in the United States. *The AIDS Quilt* and the *Vietnam Memorial* invite an overt visceral engagement and require a dissimilar ocular schema. In the case of the *Vietnam Memorial* participants massage the sunken black granite stone to touch the chiseled names of the veterans. The polished and smooth textured horizontal slabs is a mirror, casting a reflection on the observer and thus casting themselves in the historic and present moment. The *AIDS Quilt* draws from and complicates a discourse of domesticity and gendered craft-making tradition. Observers have an opportunity to participate in the construction of the memorial itself. For example, people living with AIDS construct or assist in making their own quilt panel, thus directly import how they want to be memorialized and remembered. The flexibility of the textile-based monument allows for its dispersion, nationally and internationally, to be viewed and touched by many. The two monuments evoke performances of active

⁵ <http://www.malagaislandmaine.org/about.htm>

expression and intimacy to assist individuals to mourn and to remember. The *Re.Past.Malaga* asked the participants to engage in a sensorial and visceral performance as a monument.

The Performance

*Art invites us to take the journey from data to information, to knowledge to wisdom.
Artists make language, images and sounds to bear witness, to shape beauty and to
comprehend it... this conversation is vital to what it means to be human.*
—T. Morrison

The performance took place on July 12, 2018. A descriptive account of the performance written by Mary Pols appears in the *Portland Press Herald* on July, 22, 2018⁶. In this issue, Pols, a Mainer, writes reflexively about writing about the performance and the meaning of Malaga in her life. Also included in this issue are links to the official *Re.Past.Malaga* website⁷ and the video⁸ of the performance. Here, I provide a précis of the memorial.

As the curator, the over-arching goal of the endeavor was to make the project, assessable, inclusive, and collaborative. It was vital for me to involve local artists, community members, and Malaga descendants. Forty-five guests were invited to attend the repast. The Forty-five reflected the number of residents living on the island at the issuance of the eviction notice. The guests included a mix of descendants, artists, academics, journalists, and government officials. The event was also live-streamed.

Though in plain sight off the coast of the small town of Phippsburg, the island has not been inhabited since forced removal in 1912. No docks or landings are present. The village of Phippsburg forbids parking by non-residents, guests were asked to park just over the city limits in the parking lot of a Nazarene Church and were shuttled to a landing dock in Phippsburg, then taken by boat to the island.

On the island, the guests were guided through a mowed pathway adorned with cut out figures made from doubled-walled corrugated cardboard representations of Malaga residents. On the path, the guests walked through a sculpture in the form of a house to be greeted to the tableclothed tables set with china, suggestive of the tableware discovered on the archaeological digs on the island. The house sculpture and tables were designed and built by set designer/artist Michael Ready.

Maine State Representative Craig Hickman lead the ceremony that followed a program that was printed by the Maine based master printmaker David Wolfe (Wolfe Editions). The performance engaged the audience in a variety of ways. It

⁶ <https://www.pressherald.com/2018/07/22/food-from-the-past-words-from-the-present/>

⁷ <http://www.myronbeasley.com/malaga89/index.html>

⁸ <http://liminalities.net/15-2/>

was important for me to include local high school students from Maine because the story is not included in the state history curriculum; and to introduce them to various forms of how to present research. The students from the Maine School of Performing Arts, dressed in period costume read a poem by poet, Julia Bouwsma⁹ and an essay by writer Patricia Hager (who also has an essay in this issue) in readers theatre style. The food, prepared by Chef Leslie Oster, drew from historical and archeological documentation of the foodways on the island and the Maine foodways during the late 1800 to early 1900 period and geographic area. The chorus of two performed three songs harkening remembrance. A moment was included in the performance for each individual audience member to call out one name of the evicted. The names were printed in the program.

Near the end of the performance, the performers dismantled the house sculpture. The audience was asked to carry their chairs to the shore as they embarked on a boat back to the mainland. The disassembling of the house sculpture and the carrying the chairs to the shore, was an experiential reminder of the forced removal. The performance lasted one hour and forty-five minutes. It was structured between low and high tides.

The Issue

Art has the power to tear down walls
— T. Morrison

This issue consists of fifteen essays; including three peer-reviewed essays, one photo essay, a video of the performance, an audio interview between a descendant and a recent Maine transplant, and a series of reflexive statements by those who attended the event, I titled that segment of the issue, Bearing Witness. Historian, Kate McMahon, the first to write a dissertation on the topic of Malaga and who participated in the first archeological dig on the island, places the story of Malaga in the broader context of the global slave trade and recent social, political movements such as #BlackLivesMatter. Food studies scholar, Scott Barton situates the concept of the repast within the panoply of Africana thought and culinary history. Using the history of food items and dishes served at the performance as a point of departure, Barton interrogates repast as metonymy. Barton cites Connerton, “the repast ritual mnemonically harnesses food to incorporate memory into the body, concretizing the moment and the prepared dishes as symbol and sign to foster signification” (58-9). Rebecca Bryer’s essay, “We will remember, we will repast,” locates *Re.Past.Malaga* as a *lieux de memoire* (site of memory) which she explores through the lens of performance theory. Byer explicitly ponders, what does it mean to remember in the context of a collective and participatory performance.

⁹ Bouwsma also reads from her recently released collection of poetry on the topic of Malaga, *Midden* (2018), Fordham University Press.

The “Bearing Witness” segment of this issue is reflexive responses from a diverse portion of the forty-five attendees who witnessed the event. They are academics, legal scholars, artists, descendants, and writers who respond to how they engaged in the repast performance, while others interrogate the beleaguering effects. The reflections mirror the diverse backgrounds of the participants; some respond in poetry, photography, sound, interviews; some submitted a paragraph or two, while others responded in more extended essays. All attend to the experiential engagement in the *Re.Past.Malaga* performance.

Tending to the Haints

...all of modernity is haunted by its histories of murder and genocide and war and death. And that what is simultaneously equally true is the presence of an amnesia which attempts to lure us away from looking at and reckoning with these traumas.
— Jessica Lynne¹⁰

In addition to the ephemeral nature of performance is its capacity to haunt.¹¹ I was asked by a colleague what the performance meant to me; I reflected on my personal introduction to the story of Malaga, which I shared at the beginning of this essay. The short video about Malaga that I viewed on my first night in Maine has haunted me since that moment, similar to Morrison’s engagement with Géricault’s, *Le Radeau de la Méduse/ The Raft of the Medusa*. Her selection of that particular painting as the cynosure of the exhibition drew great surprise and discomfort because the image was a reminder of a tragic and haunting moment in French history. Morrison engaged in the image and the story through creative production as a means of looking at the historical traumas, fully. Like Morrison, *Re.Past.Malaga* engaged in a “vanishing history,” a looking at that which haunts to critically ponder to precipitate transformation. *Re.Past.Malaga*, a memorial to the life and legacy of the people who once inhabited the island, was both a reminder of societal depravities and a confrontation, a critical interrogation that prompts us to link the past to the here and now with the hope, at least, to prevent a reoccurrence.

¹⁰ Lynne, Jessica. “Tending to the Haints of Malaga Island.” *The Chart* 3.3, 2018. <https://thechart.me/tending-to-the-haints-of-malaga-island/>

¹¹ See D.Taylor . *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003) and Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle, *De L’hospitalite*. (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 2005).

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