

A Rite to Heal

by Shannon Jackson, University of California, Berkeley



In April of 2011, a dozen artists and designers gathered in a large warehouse turned Z Space Studio. These busy people traveled from Chicago, Southern California, and various parts of the Bay Area, leaving other art projects on hold and finding someone else to take care of the children. That the packed schedules of such busy people had reconciled in order to develop and rehearse *red, black & GREEN: a blues* was itself an achievement, but everyone knew it was going to be worth the effort.

“I don’t know what this is yet,” said Marc Bamuthi Joseph, clearing a safe space for himself and the other members of the group who gathered in a circle to hear his text in process. He began to read, starting with a preamble that described a cast of characters. “Four characters. One speaks through text and body, one speaks through character and movement, one speaks through song and sculpture, one lives in sound and fury.” The lyrical phrasing outlined the contours of the collaboration that was about to begin.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph’s *red, black & GREEN: a blues (rbGb)* is a multi-disciplinary performance experiment. It mixes visual art, spoken word, choreography, theatre, and film in ways that expose the boundaries that still exist amongst these art forms; its composition is an aesthetic act that integrates ritual, critique, and community engagement at once. Now there is a great deal of fine work out there that aspires to similar goals. In this early 21st century, those of us who try to keep tabs on the creativity of contemporary artists find them blurring boundaries of all kinds. Choreographers are siting their work in museums as often as theatres; sculptors are organizing interactions instead of creating objects; and videographers are creating installations in spaces other than the cinema. Meanwhile, much of this work aspires to social engagement with this cross-media mixing, searching for new ways to activate viewers and mobilize communities. Let’s think about what this crossing means. But let’s also think about *rbGb* in particular, and about how its making and its dissemination prompt a recalibration of what we think collaboration can be.

We can start with the journey of Marc Bamuthi Joseph himself—he who “speaks through text and body”—and recall his roots as a champion spoken word artist who has launched a successful career in both solo and ensemble performance, creating signature intermedia pieces such as *the break/s: a mixtape for stage* and *Word Becomes Flesh* that tested conventions for speaking about race, masculinity, class and cultural difference, and earning awards such as the United States

Artists Rockefeller Fellowship, the Alpert Award in the Arts, and recognition from Smithsonian Magazine as the one of “America’s Top Young Innovators in the Arts.” Bamuthi simultaneously co-founded Youth Speaks with James Kass, expanding from the spoken word form to create school and community programs that developed the expressive skills of young people. “At heart, I am a 10th grade English teacher,” says Bamuthi during a recent interview with *The Root*.¹ We can also recount his shock upon hearing in 2007 that the EPA had decided to loosen rather than strengthen environmental restrictions, a moment that prompted him to focus his own performance practice on environmental issues while also bringing a more complicated racial perspective to Green politics. That pursuit was buoyed by the likes of Van Jones, whose 2008 vision of a Green Collar economy hoped to solve the problem of job creation and the problem of planetary salvation at once.²

Bamuthi began working in his own way, organizing gatherings in the parks of under-resourced communities to prompt citizens to reflect upon environmental issues from toxic dumping to toxic eating that affected their communities. The effort prompted one of many recalibrations. “I was using a vocabulary and a world view that I had inherited from scientists, and that wasn’t appropriate because we had a different project...our message was about creating a safe space for learning, which has been a problem for the Green movement.”³ The experience provoked a name change and a philosophical one: “we moved toward Life.”⁴ De-emphasizing a Green rhetoric that seemed not to address the basic needs of daily survival in under-resourced communities, Bamuthi and Youth Speaks decided to focus on the language of Living. The Life is Living (LiL) project has since coordinated festivals in four cities that mix games, public art, and food into occasions for asking “what sustains Life” in one’s community. The invitation prompts a wider imagining of what qualifies as sustenance and what counts as Life. Bamuthi’s environmental art practice thus coincides with a number of progressive urban planning movements. His world view coincides with that of AbdouMaliq Simone who argues that “people” function more deeply as a self-sustaining “infrastructure” in urban neighborhoods where traditional material infrastructures have broken down.⁵

red, black & GREEN: a blues returns Marc Bamuthi Joseph to an art world of studios and theatres, but it also distills and transforms the practice of Life is Living. The form and content of Life is Living drives that of *rbGb*; audiences will find it in the video projected, in the murals displayed, in the handwritten texts pinned to walls of a modular set that has been constructed entirely of found materials. As stories unfold and bodies dance, performers will move and be moved by a set that represents four cities of LiL’s urban engagement--Oakland, New York, Houston, and Chicago—each of them occupied by distinctive characters who field the complex politics of poverty, violence, and gentrification. If today’s urban neighborhoods rely on a living infrastructure of exchange and support, then *rbGb*’s cast enacts that relational reality in their material movements and embodied gestures. When asked about the difference between the creation of community festivals and the creation of scripted and choreographic works like *rbGb*, Bamuthi says, “I don’t see them as two different types of creativity. In general, we seek to be collaboratively generative. We seek many ways to create safe space, whether it is in a classroom, in a community, or in the

1 Simone Jacobsen, “Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Sustaining Life is Going Green,” *The Root* (posted February 8, 2011).

2 Van Jones, *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* (Harper One, 2008).

3 Author Interview with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.

4 Author Interview with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.

5 AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16.3 (Fall 2004): 407-429.

frame of performance art. The frame for development of all of these things is all pedagogical, all environmental, the impulse is to enable an active participation, an immersion, an ownership, amongst as many platforms as possible in order to advocate for that safety.”⁶ In seeking to create an alternate platform, it is no wonder that Bamuthi asked director Michael John Garcés to guide the piece. As Artistic Director of Cornerstone Theatre, one of the most renowned community-engaged theatres in the United States, Garcés wants always to be “connected to making work that impacts deeply the people who are seeing it.” For Garcés, directing a collaborative process means remaining “rigorous about the inquiry and attentive to how themes change in response to a process.”⁷

With these social and aesthetic goals in mind, let’s think more about the unique “platform” that is *red, black & GREEN: a blues*. The performance is divided into different components, each with their own form of relational encounter; first comes *the colored museum*, followed by *colors and muses*; the performance ends with *back talk*, an extended discussion with all artists and audience members. To be encountered with a “museum” upon entering a performance space is already a challenge to a theatre-going audience used to taking their seats quietly in the dark. Upon entry, however, spectators will be invited to stroll in and around the playing space, moving between walls and peering into the windows of a living installation. Performers occupy different zones of the playing space, and their movements and voices expand and contract in response to the needs of a shared narrative. Recalling but redefining the form and content of George C. Wolfe’s canonical play “The Colored Museum,” four quadrants of the space each have a color and are lit and activated to feature stories and movements from four urban regions.⁸ It is during *rbGb*’s Colored Museum, for instance, that Bamuthi’s poem play “Chicago/Sudan” receives an airing. Slicing and offering watermelon while speaking with conversational lyricism, Bamuthi shares a poem written after he met a Chicago mother and African immigrant who had lost her son to urban violence. “Me and the woman whose son just died are sitting on a bench.” The conversation was pivotal for Bamuthi in the re-definition of his own relationship to the Green movement. “I ask a mother about environment/ She tells me of guns/Of emotionally disabled boys,” says Bamuthi’s character, chronicling a new self-reflexive awareness of what it meant for him to “throw an eco-party in the hood.” Stunned into a political sense that “If you brown you can’t go green until you hold a respect for black life,” Bamuthi quietly beseeches those who have assembled to hear: “So think of this brother brown/Now see this mother black/See how dark the day becomes when you bury the sun/ How you set the future back.”

Through moments like these, audiences are invited to modulate literally and metaphorically their own relationship to an assembly of images, structures, sounds, and texts. As a mode of reception, the “Museum” form makes that modulation more acute through the offer of both proximity and mobility. Receivers can get close to the structure, touch it if they want. Decisions to stand, to walk, or to walk faster belong to them. Receivers can move in close to hear the stories better; they can also find themselves backing away. Each decision has an ethics. While the codes



6 Author Interview with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.
7 Author Interview with Michael John Garcés, June 2011.
8 George C. Wolfe, “The Colored Museum,” Grove Press, 1988.

6 Author Interview with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.
7 Author Interview with Michael John Garcés, June 2011.
8 George C. Wolfe, “The Colored Museum,” Grove Press, 1988.

of museum display activate a traditionally-seated theatre audience, conventions of reception are also challenged in reverse. A traditionally mobile museum spectator is arguably less used to encountering an object that talks back, much less one that meets her gaze.

The first section of *rbGb* is thus a space of aesthetic as much as social re-calibration, a place where the conventions of performing art and visual art fields are redefining each other, moment to moment. As such, *the colored museum* is also a place to reflect upon another dimension of this collaboration, specifically the infrastructural contribution of artist Theaster Gates who designed the “set” and performs as well. Theaster Gates—he who “speaks in song and sculpture”—is known to many in the artworld as a rising figure in expanded visual art practice. For over a dozen years, he has cultivated a profile as a ceramicist, learning the techniques of Japanese pottery as well as those of the largely white, male craftsmen of the California school. Gates began to think more deeply about what it meant to be an African American craftsman, creating contexts for pursuing that question that simultaneously exposed the repressed raced and classed politics of the object world. Such questions widened the scope of his practice to considerations of space and the built environment; re-inhabiting abandoned houses in his native Chicago, he has remade structures into libraries, bookstores, and “soul food” kitchens, undoing the interiority of a private home for local public use.⁹ Gates says of his practice: “I want to enunciate PLACES that already exist and



occupy those Places with happenings...While I may not be able to change the housing market or the surety of gentrification, I can offer questions within the landscape. To question, not by petitioning or organizing in the activist way, but by building and making good use of the things forgotten...Creative people have the right to be concerned with the built environment and should engage the tools of architecture as a way of making meaning of their spaces....Beautiful objects belong in blighted spaces and creative people can play a pivotal role in how this happens.”¹⁰ As Gates’s visual art practice “expanded”

along architectural lines, his work coincided with that of other socially-engaged architects such as Houston-based Rick Lowe.¹¹ Known most widely for his Project Row Houses, Lowe argues for the use of art in urban recovery and was a key collaborator in the Life is Living Festival in Houston; he appears as a character in the *rbGb* text. Integrating these and other influences into the design, Theaster Gates’s “set” is striking, not only for its use of recycled materials, but also for a modularity that makes different kinds of “happenings” possible. As rotations occur textually, they also occur architecturally with performers rotating scenery in different permutations. The same structure that signifies an exterior porch will become part of an interior parlor with a single turn; elements

⁹ See, for instance, “The City as Studio: Theaster Gates,” The Pulitzer : <http://vimeo.com/9055177>; and projects posted on his website at: <http://theastergates.com/home.html>.

¹⁰ <http://theastergates.com/home.html>

¹¹ Of the many writings on Lowe’s work, see Aimee Chang, “The Artist and the City: New Models for Creative Public Practice,” *Transforma* (2005-2010): 11-24 and Michael Kimmelman, “Art is Where the Home Is,” *New York Times* (December 17 2006).

in the background suddenly rush to the foreground. Meanwhile, performers occupying this set will find themselves differently exposed and protected with each shift. As in Gates's own re-inhabited houses — as in most experiences of urban dwelling—performers in this space have to become comfortable with constant shifts in their experience of privacy and publicity.

After *the colored museum* ends, audiences return to their seats to bear witness to the *colors and muses* portion of the evening. If *red, black & GREEN: a blues* is a place where Gates's ceramic objects become "props" and his spaces become "sets," this is also a place where his own performance skills find a hearing. Gates comes to this work as a trained gospel singer, a talent that is in danger of being repressed in visual arts contexts but that is newly integrated here with the performance idioms of hip-hop (Bamuthi), theatre (Garcés), choreography (Stacey Printz), as well as the composition and performance training of Tommy Shepherd and Traci Tolmaire. In *colors and muses*, that integration happens with renewed intensity. This longer section takes us on rotations from city to city, extending beyond the conversation with the Sudanese mother in Chicago to introduce us to central figures in Houston, New York, and Oakland. Along the way, Bamuthi's central questions around environment and racial justice refract and change. After asking "a mother" about environment, he will "ask a sculptor about environment," too, receiving answers such as those of Rick Lowe who describes his community practice. Throughout, citizens demonstrate that neighborhood rituals of trust and bonding are central to "sustaining Life" in communities. "The 3rd ward I am coming to know is social sculpture fashioned in melanin and clay," says Bamuthi's character, "hung by shotgun on birch wood frames/dim blue porchlights/boxing rings/young mothers/workshop space/flower men." The phrase "social sculpture" belongs to Joseph Beuys, a famous German conceptual and activist artist who coined the term to define his desire to incorporate the actions of the social world into his art practice.¹² In applying the famous concept to the imperiled sociality of under-resourced neighborhoods, Bamuthi calls the bluff of artworld avant-gardism by recounting the practice of neighbors highly skilled in the durational work of social belonging. "I ask a sculptor about environment/He speaks to me of misters/Old men gathered to pastime/Play young/men games/Share news/Insult/Seed comfort/Cultivate friendship." Meanwhile, the text calls the bluff of the Green Movement's clinical do-gooderism, one that would fixate on the benefits of organic food without noticing the inequities of an urban infrastructure that make it inaccessible to the urban poor. Houston's Marciela Icet launched her own community garden cooperative precisely to address the implicit injustice. "You have the right to education, clean water, you should have the right to fresh food," she says in a monologue portrayed by Traci Tolmaire. "You shouldn't have to get on a bike or bus and ride for 20 minutes to get fresh healthy food.... Grocery stores around here are 20 minutes away in one direction and there's one across the freeway. And you know everybody doesn't have a car so they can't just hop in the car. You can't go to the corner store and go pick up a salad. We hope that by growing things people like and enjoy they'll come out here and pick food locally."¹³

As the piece moves from city to city, we encounter similar stories of environmental justice but also reflections that demonstrate the distinctive landscape of different cities. In New York, the overwhelm of a large, concentrated city brings a unique rhythm to both the performance and the text; here, Life is Living activists find that they have "more people to accommodate in the same

12 See for example, Mark Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (Tate, 2005) and Thierry du Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (M.I.T Press, 1996)

13 This and all textual quotes are from the working script of *red, black & GREEN: a blues* (2011).

amount of minutes/in new york, you literally cannot go green fast enough.” Appropriately, it is in Harlem that we also encounter a poetics that reflects more on the title of the piece as well as its relationship to a history of African American literature and culture. “In winter the harlem bells can’t ring loud enough.../Red blood black people green land and such/Red black and green like a messiah messianic dream/ Like an afternoon wedding shot dead at dawn in queens/Silent. Bell.” With the under-punctuated stream of words, Bamuthi’s torrent sees today’s Harlem residents as descendents of those who first launched the historic red, black, and green of the Pan-African flag. Designed in 1920 by Marcus Garvey and his followers, the flag was created strategically to define African peoples as citizens and unite them as comrades. Red referred to the blood that they shared and shed, black to their distinguished race, and green to the verdant natural resources of the African continent. The pedigree of the play’s title thus also makes another aspiration of the play clear, for if Bamuthi seeks to introduce a racial consciousness in an environmental movement, he is also asking us to shake free a new understanding of “GREEN” in the long history of African American and civil rights movements. If the color green has mobilized civil rights, it is now time to complicate its referents, to question any association that would position “Africa” romantically or exploitatively as a natural resource capable of infinite bounty. Another layer of political complication emerges when *rbGb* returns to Bamuthi’s home town of Oakland; there, this teacher finds himself taught by a roomful of young female poetry students who share stories of sexual violence. “Men go where we are not wanted and fuck shit up.” he recalls, “Continents. Constitutions. Coastal reefs. Women’s bodies.” Asking feminist questions of environmental imagining and racial solidarity, their words connect the dots between social degradation and acts of destruction that are still so central to insecure conceptions of secure masculinity.

Audiences can watch and listen as different elements of a social puzzle emerge and recede, adding layers of emotion and complication with each story. The “people” who form the infrastructure of these American cities are embedded in tangled networks of affect and responsibility. Moreover, representing these people requires its own artistic network, collaborators whose relations of affect, responsibility, and technical skill produce their own living infrastructure. At the time of this writing, all *rbGb* artists are still seeding and growing the piece; however, they all have a clear vision of its significance and their own position inside it. Having contributed choreography for other of Bamuthi’s pieces (*Word Becomes Flesh*, *Scourge*, *the break/s*), Stacey Printz already has a keen sense of how movement figures in his cross-disciplinary aesthetic: “Oftentimes when you do theatre pieces or spoken word, you don’t get people who are able to think about movement as deeply...But Marc is such a big and passionate mover. He and I impulse movement similarly.”¹⁴ Printz’s charge is to develop what Bamuthi is calling the “Kasé” sequences of the piece, specifically the moments “when the best way to speak is to move.” Printz’s movement phrases function as supplements to some of the most volatile moments of the piece, taking over when the



Sudanese mother's despair needs visceral expression, channeling the rage that rises from stories of environmental injustice into a "recommitment to working." These phrases underscore the text, advance it, "punctuate it," and also transition between different sequences. Like every other artist in the ensemble, Printz found herself most inspired when in the presence of actual performing bodies—along with the set pieces created by Theaster Gates.



"You get players in the room, and suddenly I am in the corner creating movement phrases that get threaded into texts to create something that wasn't there before. It puts me in a space to let go of preconceived notions... Walking away from the week [at Z Space], we realized that there is so much more that we can do with the sets, jumping, lifts from the higher platform; it opens up new possibilities that aren't there when you are playing on a standard stage."¹⁵ For his part, Gates is only too happy to imagine performers jumping off his modular sculptures. "My objects can be objects that need people to touch them and respond to them and react to them."¹⁶ Gates's lack of preciousness toward his contributed art coincides with Bamuthi's aspirations. "It's not a 'don't touch the art' kind of party," says Bamuthi. "Leave your DNA on the floor. Here's the set, play it."¹⁷

With all of these artistic intelligences in the room—performers, sculptors, choreographers, along with video, mural, and lighting designers—creating the conditions for effective collaboration is still a process. Bamuthi's hope is that "everyone involved grows by the exponent of collective investment," and Michael John Garcés' focus as a director is to make sure that it happens.¹⁸ For Garcés, collaboration is "not about just hoping that something will happen;" it is more precisely about creating a structure that frees creativity. "My job is to start making decisions, allowing them to be subject to change... Collaboration is two or more people coming together to reach a goal that is as yet unclear, and that means they share a willingness to try things, and being willing to change them, trusting that we'll get there."¹⁹ It should be said that many artists trained in their respective fields would find it impossible, aesthetically as well as temperamentally, to commit to such a process. Collaboration across the arts not only means "working with others" but also allowing the boundaries of your own art form to be subject to change; it means that the script will change on the actors, that a set will be used in ways unintended, and that a documentary film will suddenly serve as "background" for a "happening." As artists with multi-disciplinary talents, however, this ensemble is willing to take the risk. Indeed, for Theaster Gates who has often been asked to choose between art worlds, the opportunity is particularly welcome. "People are always like, 'are you a visual artist with performance interests, or are you a performance artist with visual tendencies?'... This time I feel like I was wholly a collaborator, not just an actor, not only a potter...I felt I was being asked to collaborate in the structure of the piece itself."²⁰

If the hope for *red, black & GREEN: a blues* is to encourage growth "by the exponent of

15 Author's Interview with Printz, June 2011.

16 Author's Interview with Gates, June 2011.

17 Author's Interview with Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.

18 Author's Interview with Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.

19 Author's Interview with Garcés, June 2011.

20 Author's Interview with Gates, June 2011.

collective investment,” then that sense of collectivity will continue in the third and final portion of the piece. At the end of the show, audience members will be asked to enter the playing space for conversation. A community of partial strangers will explore the central topics and techniques of the work, entering into dialogue about “what sustains life in our communities” and thereby transforming the gathering into an extension of the Life is Living movement. Of all stages in the work, this one arguably involves the most risk and willingness to confront the unknown. Who will talk? And what will they say? Who will disagree and how will this highly provisional community deal with that disagreement? For Bamuthi, it is essential that the conversation exceed the conventions of a typical “post-show” discussion. Indeed, as an artist whose work depends upon its own responsiveness to dialogue, this element of the work is essential to the form. Garcés reminds us that call and response is central aesthetically and socially to Bamuthi’s process. “Bamuthi challenges notions without making assumptions of those notions. He came in with an inquiry that was about the Green movement and people of color, and his sense of the goal changed because of how people answered him when he asked them questions. And I think that’s fairly rare. The process really defined what the show became. It’s really about an aesthetic rigorous process.”²¹ While the rigor of the process has involved researching the arguments of environmentalists and racial justice advocates who have documented the economic and physical health of city-dwelling Americans, Bamuthi’s inquiry also means stepping away from the professional “glossary” of sustainability when necessary. “There has to be a certain protection of terms to maintain a standard and efficiency, but in this case, we are talking about our environment. So while there has to be a certain standard, it’s also in all of our best interests to be as inclusive as possible. ... I am a language guy, so I get it. ... I could say that this is about obesity, diabetes, and food justice, but the purpose of using broad language is to acknowledge that all of these things are like an eco-system.” Post-show conversation is thus about broadening this already broad language, devising new glossaries together and reminding each other of who and what resides in the eco-system that we share.

More than likely, that reminding and that devising will not unfold without tension or fear or mistrust. No doubt, many audience members will feel enabled by Bamuthi’s own self-reflexive relationship to the material presented. Indeed, rather than assuming the righteous tone of the environmental know-it-all, Bamuthi cracks jokes at his own expense, positioning himself as a “Starbucks activist” in need of education himself. Moreover, he refuses to allow his racially marginal position to keep him from reckoning with the privileges of his own gender and class position. Calling himself “a gentrifier arriving in the dark,” Bamuthi knows that no one occupies a position of purity in the decidedly complicated puzzle of urban re-imagining. But a conversation about Life is always going to be a dodgy one. As non-controversial as the word “Life” may sound, it comes loaded with conceptual history from different quarters. The word Life was a signature term for avant-garde artists of the sixties who touted “Art-into-Life” as a mantra for dismantling the institution of art and for staging radical experiments with groups of (largely white) kindred spirits. If Life was a generalized term for many of these artists, Life is Living brings forward other urgent connotations, implicitly asking whether and how the issues of survival and justice can animate the Life experiments of the artistic avant-garde. From another direction, though, the term Life is not robust enough to address a highly wrought and historic system of racial inequality; for those who consider the degree to which “social death” has been a principle structural activator of African-

21 Author’s Interview with Garcés, June 2011.

American history and identity, Life is too naïve a term. For social historian Orlando Patterson and subsequent generations of African-American thinkers who gave up on Garveyism long ago, no vision of African-American subjectivity is complete without a clear-eyed understanding of the systemic obstacles to racial survival.²² Bamuthi says he gets this too. “Green isn’t necessarily a shared value; life isn’t necessarily a shared value for black males under the age of 24. The leading cause of death for black males age 16 to 24 is violence perpetrated on each other. So injecting that word Life is to shift the perception of what it means to be environmentally literate and what it means to sustain our communities.”²³ Life then is not a given, nor is it a given that Life is good. But in a dire context, loaded with irony and justified pessimism, Bamuthi argues for what he calls “his rite to heal.” To claim such a right and to craft such a rite is thus a highly charged political act.

This essay was commissioned by the Contemporary Art Centers (CAC) network, administered by the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), with major support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; and The America Project, a program of MAPP International Productions, with support from The Ford Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

22 See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard UP, 1985) and, more recently, Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiracism and the Critique of Multiculturalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Frank Wilderson, *Incognegro, A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (South End Press, 2008) and his *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke UP, 2010).

23 Author’s interview with Bamuthi Joseph, June 2011.