

## mayfield brooks and Alec Duffy in conversation

NOV 01, 2019 *BY EDITORS* IN DANCE

*In an ongoing series on social justice and making art in a time of crisis initiated by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, **Rehan Ansari**, Brooklyn-based writer, playwright and artist, along with Rubin Foundation staff **Sara Reisman** and **George Bolster**, speak with institutions and individuals whose work centers on art and social justice. In August they spoke with **mayfield brooks**, a performance artist and urban farmer, and **Alec Duffy**, founder and co-director of the performance space JACK in Brooklyn. JACK has been engaged in an ongoing series of performances, including one with brooks, workshops and discussions around the topic of distributive justice for black Americans. The conversation centered on how they came to addressing political issues as reparations and distributive justice, through something as abstract as dance.*

Rehan Ansari: How did this collaboration come about, and what is *Viewing Hours*?

mayfield brooks: *Viewing Hours* was a two-hour performance that I created while participating in Dance and Process at The Kitchen in New York. I created it as an installation, in conjunction with a dance piece I performed called *Inter-Entropy Garden*. The focus was to have a space where folks could meditate on death, decomposition, and witnessing, as a call to action. I began by burying my body under over 40 pounds of dirt, compost, and decaying flowers in a conference room. People would come in and hear some text in the waiting room before they viewed the body. They were then

led to sit with me for about five to ten minutes. The idea was to bring them into a garden of sorts, to contemplate and witness what was happening.



*mayfield brooks, "Viewing Hours," performance at The Kitchen, April 6, 2019.  
Photograph by Paula Court.*

RA: What was the recorded text they heard in the waiting room?

mb: The text they heard before they saw the body, was me asking: “Can I get a witness?” That urgent question comes from the Black Church. Its urgency is about taking in something that you’re going to act upon.

I’m a dancer and an urban farmer, and I witness the process of decomposition all the time in my work. I also witness the injuries that accumulate in my body as I age. The idea is to bring people into that space, to be with all of the aspects of what it means to witness this intimate process of decomposition.

RA: Your work challenges received forms of theater and dance. How did you train for that? It actually seems, at times, closer to a conceptual art practice involving movement.

mb: I grew up in an evangelical environment. I started dancing when I was really young, but my mother took me out of dance classes because it was worldly. My way back into dance was through athletics. Because I wasn’t allowed to dance, I ran track. In my final year of college, I commenced a theater and dance program here in New York at La MaMa. From that point on, I began taking dance classes in multiple genres, but mostly contemporary release technique, somatics, and improvisation. I was in a dance company in San Francisco that did aerial dance. The great thing about being in a company is that you train all the time, because you’re performing all the time. I was also doing a lot of rock climbing.

My most consistent activity to date has been farming, both urban and rural. I dropped out of dance to farm for two years because I felt that there was no meaning in performance. I’ve always had this kind of tumultuous relationship with dance as a presentational form that doesn’t always give me fulfillment. When I went to grad school in 2013, I wrote about improvisation in relation to blackness and came up with this term: improvising while black or IWB which became the umbrella for all my work—dance scores, teaching, community experiments, zines, happenings—so yes there is very much a conceptual aspect to my work. Also, in San Francisco, I had an experience of driving while black. I was arrested for driving 30 miles an hour and wrote about what it feels like to

be a black body in captivity. I thought about improvising in a tight space so as to move towards a larger idea and feeling, but not necessarily freedom. I thought of improvising as a way of being in the wreckage that is American history and blackness. I brought in my experience of growing up in the church, and early experiences of the charismatic – singing gospel, speaking in tongues – which is somatic and very movement-oriented, into my dance practice.

RA: Could you expand on what you found in farming, that wasn't there for you in dance?

mb: I was 27, in New York, dancing and waiting tables, but I felt empty at that moment. I was accepted into an apprenticeship program at UC Santa Cruz. We lived in tents, tilling the soil by hand and working on sustainable organic farming. That experience came through in my current work *Viewing Hours* and *Letters to Marsha with the flowers*. I'm obsessed with compost and decomposition as a way to look at transformation in the body. Decomposition is continually happening to us and around us, but we are under an illusion that it is not. My practice is about dissolution. This idea is relevant to me in terms of the blackness and nothingness. For me, improvising while black is always a question of dissolution or things breaking down. We (black people) did not arrive on American soil as whole humans. We were brought here in pieces.

RA: How did you and JACK decide that you wanted to make a performance around such a political subject? For me, the subject of reparations is accessed through prose and economic formulas. For example, the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction developed formulas for labor reparations.

mb: For me, the black vernacular phrase, "Can I get a witness?" is a call to action towards reparations. Witnessing is a form of archiving and active listening. I hope witnessing my black body under decomposing matter can be a way into this conversation about labor and reparations.

I was reading the recent New York Times Magazine article, *The 1619 Project* dedicated to re-examining the legacy of slavery in America about a crossroads in Georgia, which is known as *The Weeping Time*. It is a place

where 436 people were auctioned off, and now they are about to commemorate that piece of land. The idea of the weeping time is a potent one. When we're at a wake we know that something needs to be grieved, and that is also a type of labor. It's a different call to action, one that isn't so loud. It's an inhabiting of it, and I feel the urgency for it. How can we be with this history that is deeply informing our present moment? How can we be with it in an active way and not a voyeuristic or a consuming way?

RA: Do you think about your audience as being different than the likeminded? Today I read about a pollster who perfectly predicted the last congressional elections, who says that basically no one in America is changing their mind.

mb: I think that people can access decomposition as an idea. We can't live without it. We need to build, and rebuild. I think that that conversation is across the board. Look at the majority of Trump voters. They're in places where these conversations need to happen around labor and climate change. Trump supporters vote because they believe they need to repair something. When ideology gets in the way, it's very difficult for people to change their minds. I think people can change emotionally. I've seen it with my own family, in how they regard me as their child who has strayed away from their ideological fixation. I'm not sure how it happens, but I think there has to be a commitment to being engaged with people.

RA: Are you optimistic that Trump voters will figure it out?

mb: I'm mourning. I'm grieving. I also feel there is a rumbling that is exciting. People are coming to a different awareness because of the political, economic and climate crisis.

Sara Reisman: How is JACK working with you?

Alec Duffy: We were talking to mayfield about presenting their dance piece *Letters to Marsha* and then realized that *Viewing Hours* might be a good fit for our *Reparations365* series. The series looks at the topic of reparations through different lenses, including performance.

RA: *What is Letters to Marsha?* And how does it connect to *Viewing Hours*?

mb: *Letters to Marsha* comes from this moment in my life where I was really struggling. I had just gotten out of grad school and was working seven days a week. I had a poster of Marsha P. Johnson, the gay liberation activist, and self-identified drag queen also honored as the Black trans woman who started the Stonewall riots, that I would bring with me everywhere. I felt like she came to comfort me. I started writing to her every day as a practice of honoring her legacy. The product of that epistolary writing over three years is the foundation for a lot of my work in particular she informs the dance piece version of *Letters To Marsha* in an aesthetic, sensory, filmic and emotional sense. I've never performed the piece in it's entirety but will premiere it at JACK in Jan/Feb 2020. The idea of decaying flowers covering me, along with the soil in *Viewing Hours* came to me when I visited the Flower District in Manhattan to talk to people who knew Marsha. They would give me flowers that were past their prime. Marsha was famous for wearing crowns of fresh flowers.

RA: In the zine that accompanies *Viewing Hours* there is a reference to Genet and flowers. Are you invoking his novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*?

mb: He was a writer whose radical queer boldness, changed my mind when I was in college. I found a print of the book cover with flowers and decided, that's got to be in the zine. And *Our Lady of the Flowers* is Marsha P. Johnson. She changed everything.

George Bolster: I am interested in the idea of grieving within an artwork, as an act of self-repair, something cathartic. Is there an element of that in your practice?

mb: I have a lot of rage, but I don't always know what to do with it. Underneath there are centuries of grief that I inherited, but I don't know what to do with. So, I'd like to be buried for a while, and let the decomposition work on my bones. I went through multiple state changes while being under all of that earth. When the audience would come in, I could feel their presence but sometimes I felt like I wasn't even there. I invited a maximum of five or six people at a time in the room to be with me. It was very intimate, and from feedback that I received, it affected them deeply.

SR: Our next exhibition at The 8th Floor is called *Relational Economies: Labor Over Capital*. Thinking about the show, I wonder what reparations look like in a labor market?

mb: Perhaps it can be returning land to those it was stolen from. It started to happen post-Civil War. Today, we could abolish the prison system as reparations for slave labor. There has to be a revolution for these ideas to come about, a dismantling, or revolutionary thinking. It has been done before in this country, except it excluded some people.

SR: Is it possible within the current system or will it have to be dismantled?

mb: When I was studying social movements of the 60's I thought about consciousness raising. That needs to come back into our language as a tool for shifting the paradigm. Bernie Sanders has that rhetoric. But Trump does also, in a way.

AD: Through our Reparations365 series at JACK, we have been learning about the many ways reparations can take hold in our country that go beyond a check from the government. We've seen universities such as Georgetown and Brown – colleges that built their wealth through the slave trade – start to address what it would mean to make amends. We've also learned about person-to-person reparations efforts, particularly through the artist Natacha Marin's Facebook project, where black people can post requests for support for white people to fulfill. We've learned that it takes imagination to get to the place of healing and moving forward. That's why artists like mayfield are key to this process. The road to reparations begins with a reckoning within each individual who has benefited from the oppression of one people for the uplift of their own people. And that reckoning begins with deep listening and bearing witness – an opportunity mayfield offers with *Viewing Hours*.

There is no preaching to the choir when it comes to considering reparations, because there is no choir. It's a lonely act. White Americans like myself must dig deep into our own experience and examine how we benefit from the continued oppression of black Americans. And once we've done that, we can start to imagine how we can be a part of the healing from

that. It is a challenge that transcends political affiliation. It transcends who sits in the Oval Office. It will take a revolution in thinking to effect real change in America. From individual to individual, 327 million Americans must be convinced of the need to invest in both large- and small-scale reparations efforts in order to move our country forward. And that seemingly overwhelming impossibility – the greatness of the challenge – is exactly why we must continue to push it forward. We’ve been hiding from it for years and years. But that hiding must come to an end. Importantly, next year is 2020, which can be interpreted as a 2020vision year where folks commit to clear vision in a metaphorical sense. I think with confidence, I can ask “Can I get a witness?” as a call to action!