

**Waiting for Godot in New Orleans:  
A Field Guide**

**Edited by  
Paul Chan**



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WILL BE IN ATTENDANCE: APRIL 12, 2008 SECONDLINE STARTS 2:00PM TO 4:00PM  
BLOCK PARTY STARTS 4:00PM TO 7:00PM**

**ROBERT GREEN 1826 TENNESSEE STREET N.O., I.A. 70117**

Flyer by Robert Green, Sr., 2008, pdf



Robert and granddaughters, 2008



Robert's new house, 2009

## IT TOOK A LIFE OF ITS OWN

### Interview with Robert Lynn Green, Sr.

MAY 18, 2009

robert green: My name is Robert Lynn Green, Sr. We're sitting at 1826 Tennessee Street, New Orleans, Louisiana, in the backyard of our new house, which is built on the site of our old house.

The first time I met you, we were sitting down at the table in the trailer and basically you presented me with an idea of what you wanted to do. I had an antagonistic attitude towards people who come in—not so much for people who come in general but for people who come in with projects they want to do. But after getting a chance to listen, I realized that what you were trying to do was a great thing. Rather than just give in to the idea easily, I sweated you for a good while, making you believe I didn't like the idea and really giving you a hard time. I wanted a chance to wait a little bit, read through the material. Once I read through the material and some news reviews of *Godot*, I realized that this was a perfect thing for us. So, I just looked at the idea of the play here in the Ninth Ward, here outside, as a great idea.

I've lived in the Lower Ninth Ward since 1967. My mother bought this house right after Hurricane Betsy, after we were put out of the Desire projects on April 14, 1967. So we've lived in the Lower Ninth Ward on Tennessee Street for forty-two years.

We were here when Hurricane Katrina hit. We were actually trying to get away before Katrina came, and we wound up leaving ten o'clock on Sunday morning. And when I say "we wound up leaving," it was my mother and my grandkids that left, and my cousin Hyman and my son, Robert. They didn't have room for my brother and me. Being veteran hurricane survivors, we decided the two of us could stay and handle ourselves. So my mother, my grandkids, and my son packed up at ten o'clock on Sunday morning and drove towards Nashville, Tennessee.

When they got on the road they ran into a lot of traffic. They ran into so much traffic. Cell phones weren't working, and as they continued to drive, my mother got sick. My son Robert was afraid that she would die from the road trip, so he turned around and came back home. He got back on Tennessee Street at about 3:45 in the afternoon and the first thing I remember asking him is, "What the hell are ya'll doing here?" Not that I knew Katrina was going to be bad, but the idea was to get

them to safety, which was in Nashville. So when he came back at 3:45 after realizing that my mother wasn't going to be able to make that long road trip, we headed to the Superdome, where we were faced with very long lines. The first thing I did was get out the car and tell a police officer that my mother's sick and ask how we could get inside the Superdome without her having to wait in those long lines. The officer told me to go around the back of the Superdome to a section called Special Needs. But we found out that they weren't going to be able to take her in because they didn't have the hospital beds, the nurses, or the doctors in place. So they told us to go back home, come back later. We didn't get a chance to go back later.

Later I had a news correspondent with me and we came back to the neighborhood with the intention of looking for my granddaughter's body. We came back with the intention of walking the path that our house floated, just to give people an idea of some of the things that happened to some of the people who were affected by Katrina.

I missed the first anniversary of Katrina, which was August 29, 2006. There was a miscommunication and I didn't get a chance to come to the city-sponsored memorial services that were held here in the Lower Ninth Ward. So when I moved into my trailer on December 19, 2006, I decided that I would be here for the next anniversary. So I started working with neighborhood groups, nonprofits that were trying to co-sponsor a memorial service in the Lower Ninth Ward with the City of New Orleans. As we went to all kinds of meetings, we decided that this big memorial service in the Lower Ninth Ward would show the world where ground zero was, show the world where the recovery was really going very slow. We kept on having these meetings, and I planned on having a march for my mother and for my granddaughter. I planned on flying the flag that I got at my mother's funeral. As I worked with this group, the memorial plans developed but the city backed out on us. When the city backed out and decided they didn't want to have the memorial service in the Lower Ninth Ward, I said, "To hell with the city. I'm just gonna go ahead and do what we were going to do for my mother." I started sending out emails to all the people that I had met. I started sending out emails to all the people who had come back into the Ninth Ward. It took a life of its own, but it was mainly because the city decided that it didn't want to bring attention to this area. They wanted to show people that New Orleans was back, that the French Quarter was back, that the Superdome was back. They wanted to show the world the "better" side of the city. Anyway, we went forward and things started to fall in place. A friend of mine named Pizola had a cross that somebody had given him. He said, "Hey, you can have this cross." I met Gumbo, who came down for our Essence Fest. He has a

radio station in Saint Charles and he said, "I could get you somebody who could do your headstone." And things just snowballed. But it all centered around the effort we had put forth as a community to bring attention to the Lower Ninth Ward.

The biggest thing about working with you on the pre-staging of *Godot* was.... Well, here's somebody that came from New York, that brought a group called Creative Time, that brought Wendell Pierce, that brought the Classical Theatre of Harlem to help us. I asked myself what I could do. You gave me the book, I read the book; you gave me the press releases, I read the press releases. And I realized that *Godot* was a way for us to express what had been going on in the lives of people that were affected by Katrina. *Godot* was a way to bring attention to the Lower Ninth Ward in a way that maybe you had not planned on. I felt we could make it really bring attention to what was going on down here with FEMA, with The Road Home, with the Mayor, with the Governor. All these people, who were like Godot, promised to help us. Even George Bush promised to help us, but he never showed. And like the good people we were, when somebody promise you somethin', especially somethin' to help you, you listen to 'em, you give credit to 'em and you stick by 'em. And that's what *Godot* is all about, stickin' by a promise made from somebody who you put all your faith and trust in.

The play was a way of letting people know that we had trusted our politicians. A way of letting people know that we trusted, and that we believed people were going to come and help us, that we weren't going to give up on them—because if we gave up on them we gave up on ourselves. So basically the play was just everything that we had been feelin', everything that we went through. And the best example of what we're saying is, at the opening night, we had reserved a seat for the President, we had reserved a seat for Governor Blanco, and we had reserved a seat for the Mayor. We had a seat for the Director of FEMA, we had a seat for The Road Home people. And just like Godot, they didn't show. Basically it gave us a way to point the finger at people like George Bush, who wasn't in his seat. Point the finger at Kathleen Blanco, who wasn't in her seat. Point the finger at Walter Leger, who wasn't in his seat. To point the finger at Robert David Paulson and Mayor Nagin. All of these people who you would think would be here to support something as great as what the Classical Theatre of Harlem and Creative Time were doing, as great as Wendell Pierce and J Kyle Manzay were. You felt that they should be here to show support because the people themselves came out and showed support for the play.

paul chan: On each of the first three nights in the Lower Ninth Ward there were about 800 people watching the play. Were you surprised by that?

robert: Well, you're being modest; there were thousands. My meetings and talking to ya'll and talking to the people who were doing the play set my expectations. I'm a very optimistic person. I said that we would have ten thousand people come to see the play. And the first night I was really happy for you, I was happy for Chris, I was happy for Anne, I was happy for everybody who was participating in the production—because we didn't know what was going to happen. And people turned out that night. I would say the numbers was close to 1,200 people. I would say the next night brought a thousand people. And there were a thousand more the third night, which was the night that was added only to accommodate those who had been turned away. I wasn't going to say, "We might have two hundred people." Ya'll had seating for five hundred, and I wished there were more.

paul: We're outside in your backyard, and we're hearing construction sounds. Can you tell me what they are?

robert: Well, basically the neighborhood is coming back. We're sitting in the back of my house, which has guys doing electrical work. In the foreground we hear the sounds of welding going on, beating and hammering. This is the make-it-right area. This is the Lower Ninth Ward where Brad Pitt had the vision to start rebuilding houses and bringing this community back. And basically all around us are the signs of life. The signs that things are going to get better, because we have new houses, new designs, environmentally friendly designs—houses with solar panels on 'em. We have patios, which we never had before. This is basically the beginning of this neighborhood coming back.

paul: When is your house going to be ready?

robert: My house is actually expected to be finished. They're putting the outside lights on; they're putting the ceiling fans in. All the outside walls are in. So basically, in another two weeks, all the finishing touches should be done on my house.

paul: How exciting.

robert: Very exciting! Almost to the point that I can't think about it. I've learned to be patient, you know. And good things come to those who wait. Well, I'm waiting patiently without any great, great anticipation. Until a couple days before, at least. I think I'll get antsy then.



Gentilly house after *Godot*, 2009

Residents of Gentilly

**WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?**

**November 7, 2007**

**Vickie Belle of Gentilly Heights East**

- Waiting for Road Home to reappraise my home at a fair value; living through an unfair process
- Waiting on my insurance company to give me more than a nominal amount of money; living in a damaged home because of unfair treatment by the insurance company
- Waiting for my residence to be fixed
- Waiting for contractors who won't eat me alive
- Waiting for Gentilly to be treated fairly
- Waiting on money
- Waiting for political people to help, to do SOMETHING to bring people back
- Waiting for people to COME BACK!
- Waiting for somebody to clean and replant the neutral ground
- Waiting for a job (right now I sell peanuts, do you want to buy a bag of peanuts?); you do what you have to
- Waiting for neighbors to return
- Waiting for the Gentilly Association to come together; we are fragmented
- Waiting for communication; successful Neighborhood Associations have to tell us how they are finding success – where is the money?
- Waiting for the core of the community, on the back streets, to return
- Waiting for a divided people to start working together
- Waiting to feel like an American – feel like a non-American facing so much inequality and unfair treatment of Gentilly
- Waiting for the Tzar, Blakely, to do something
- Waiting for SOMEONE to offer to help – paint, haul, anything
- Waiting for people to listen, to ask how I am, and let me answer fully (thanks!)
- Waiting for my family to come back together, to overcome the issues and the separation that Katrina brought
- Waiting to come together legitimately
- Waiting for the time to pass – it takes time to do things right
- Waiting for events like *Godot* to motivate our community with positive force

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**Douglas Carey of Milneburg Civic Association**

- Waiting for businesses to renew

(This page and the following spread) Waiting in Gentilly document, 2007, pdf

- Waiting for businesses to at least try to come back
- Waiting for other folks to do something with their property
- Waiting for the city to do something with the properties they bought
- Waiting for my contractor to start on our house

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**Sylvester Desponza**, originally of the St. Roch Bend Association – now lives out of state

- Waiting for the politicians to either get out of office or do what they are supposed to do
- There has not been enough action in the last two years to inspire me to come back and to start all over
- Waiting for a plan
- Everything that has not happened is disgusting
- Waiting for it not to flood when it rains in my neighborhood
- Waiting for the utilities to stop going on and off
- Waiting for the crime to stop
- In the present condition it is too stressful to go back to New Orleans
- People that are there are in the trenches, and you shouldn't be in the trenches in your retiring years
- Go to the 2900 and 3000 block in St. Roch and see how empty it is – the conditions are still the same
- Waiting for the present conditions and administration to change

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**Nathaniel Jones** of St. Roch

- Waiting for the remainder of the Road Home money. We were given false hope – told to expect a certain amount. We renovated our home based on the amount we expected and now they tell us that we only get a part of that money – not the elevation amount. We have not been reimbursed for the work that we have done
- Waiting for more police, not military – police. We need community-orientated people patrolling our neighborhood
- Waiting for the education system to open the St. Roch elementary school. Our system is in shambles and we need a coherent approach to education

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**Harry Greenberger** of Bancroft Gardens Association

- Waiting for the Road Home people to give me my money. It's been a long wait

**Gwendeolyn Hawkins** of Gentilly Heights/Vascoville Association

- Waiting for street signs
- Waiting for someone to get onto the people who are not back and make them clean up their properties
- Waiting for someone to fix the streets. I live on Annette Street and it is a horrible mess
- Waiting for the shopping center to reopen

## THE SPACE REALLY ECHOED Interview with Natalie Sciortino

MAY 17, 2009

natalie sciortino: My name is Natalie Sciortino. I'm from New Orleans and I'm currently living and working here as an artist and a writer.

paul chan: In which New Orleans neighborhood did you grow up? And what neighborhood do you live in now?

natalie: I pretty much grew up in Lakeview, not too far from the 17th Street canal. And I'm currently living in Gentilly. Actually, not too far from the site of one of the *Godot* presentations.

paul: When did you know you wanted to study art?

natalie: I think I grew up in that environment. My father was really kind of a Gaudi-esque architect. So I grew up in a crazy sculpture. He was always drawing. And a lot of it was from my great-grandmother, who went to art school in the 1930s. She was one of the first women in our family to go to school. And she went to art school. And I always thought that was pretty admirable. So I was always being encouraged to draw and paint and be creative.

paul: And where did you study?

natalie: I went to the University of New Orleans for undergrad and then I received a fellowship to go to grad school right before Hurricane Katrina. And then, immediately after the hurricane, I ended up at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The Art Institute was taking in students from New Orleans and giving them a free place to stay and free tuition for that semester. At that point, it was really a life-saver, literally, for me to have somewhere to go and keep going with my education.

paul: What happened to you during Katrina? Before Katrina?

natalie: I was dead set on staying here for Katrina. And, as usual, my mother was worried. People were evacuating and it was about fifteen minutes before my family was about to get in the car and leave and she called me for the twentieth time and started weeping and asked me, begged me, to come with them. And that's what made me finally go, the fact that she was crying. And so she said that they would come by and



Natalie Sciortino, 2009. Photo by Jeff Rinehart



pick me up. So I threw a few shirts and shorts in a bag and got in the car and left. And that's all I ended up with in the end. I lost everything. I was living really close to the breach, so everything that I left behind was gone.

I first came back to the city in October after I had been living in Chicago for some time. My landlord called and said he was going to throw everything out unless I wanted to come back and do it myself. I knew that there were some things I could save. So I came back and actually did end up saving quite a few things, a lot of photographs and objects that had been in my family for quite a while. I salvaged them from the flood.

paul: This was in October?

natalie: This was just before Halloween; there were very few people still here. And it was really hard to get around the streets. Once I moved back in January, I remember noticing the sound of birds for the first time since the flood. Being there in October, there was no sound of any living thing, no sight of any living thing. Everything was covered. It was kind of like what I imagine the fall-out from an atomic bomb would look like. Everything was sort of covered in this thin film of dust. And people were walking around in jumpsuits and face masks while cleaning out their homes. It was really, really surreal.

paul: How long did it take to resettle?

natalie: I think I'm still resettling. We just bought our first house here, which is located between two properties that haven't been touched really since the hurricane. There's still a lot of resettling going on. Things will come up that I will remember that I used to own. Whether it's a book, or a painting, or a letter from a friend that... that is gone. So it's still an ongoing process.

I came back to New Orleans to live permanently in January of 2006 to resume graduate school at the University of New Orleans.

paul: How did it feel?

natalie: That was an interesting semester. There was a lot of excitement. I felt like such an outsider while I was living in Chicago. And there was a real excitement to be back in my city, in my hometown, and sort of grieve together with the people that were here. And to be rejoined with my family and friends and heal together. And I think among the grad students at school, we got together and made a real effort to form a community during those first few months.

paul: And what did that community consist of? Did it involve drinking?

natalie: (Laughs) Yes, there was... a lot of drinking was involved. FEMA should not ask me for my receipts from that time.

paul: And when did you first hear about me teaching in New Orleans?

natalie: I think it was towards the end of the spring semester when I first heard that you were coming. This would have been May of 2006.

We heard that this artist was coming, which was kind of a novel thing at UNO. We don't get many visiting artists. And someone who was willing to do an entire semester for free, to teach a class, felt really good—that someone was that interested in us and what we were doing. It was encouraging that people were still interested in the situation in New Orleans.

paul: Was there a real fear that people elsewhere had forgotten what was happening?

natalie: I think there was. The media would talk about Katrina fatigue. And how the rest of the nation was getting tired of hearing about the storm. So yeah, I think we were kind of afraid of being left behind. And there was still a lot to deal with.

paul: I think I talked about wanting to stage *Godot* in New Orleans in the first class. What did you think about what I wanted to do?

natalie: Honestly? I was sort of curious, I think, to see what it would be like. I know the theater community here really struggles to get people to come see what they're doing. And then the art community as well was so scattered at the time that it seemed like the project would be an uphill battle. So I think I was sort of skeptical of what the outcome would be like. And I ended up being really, really surprised.

paul: You remember those signs I posted around the city? The ones that read, "A country road, a tree, evening"? What did you think of those signs?

natalie: Well, the sign was very simple. It was on white corrugated plastic and not unlike many signs that kept cropping up all over the city. I think that was something that became really engrained in the visual landscape of Katrina, this immediate communication to people. People posting signs for services, looking for friends and family. There would

be hundreds of signs covering telephone poles on the neutral ground. So the sign felt a lot like that—like the signs that were appearing after Katrina. It was very simple, with bold, black letters on this white plastic. It was really exciting seeing them on the streets. I guess I had known that the signs were coming. And to actually see it... it was a nice connective tissue throughout the city. It was a message that those who knew about this project were in on, and really poignant, too. Just the simplicity of the sign was really powerful.

paul: Which of the performances did you see?

natalie: I saw the play several times actually. I was there for the first dress rehearsal in the Lower Ninth Ward, and then for the opening night in the Lower Ninth Ward, and then in Gentilly I saw it on the last night.

paul: What are some of your memories of the play?

natalie: A lot of my memories are of just before the play started. I think the crowds of people watching the bridge spanning the industrial canal, which was backed up with a long line of cars, endless headlights—it was really, really amazing. To see headlights going off into the distance, going over the levee, people trying to park so they could come see the play. And I remember serving people food that night and the sense of community. I think it was one of the very few things that was an open invitation to the city after Katrina, one of the few opportunities for communities to come together and see people face-to-face for one of the first times since the storm. There were a lot of positive feelings that night.

paul: And the play itself, what did you think?

natalie: The play itself was incredibly moving. I think it's impossible to separate ourselves from our immediate experiences. And so I was reading most of the play in terms of my own experience with Katrina and losing everything. And the sight in the Lower Ninth Ward, which was so vast and so much of it a void that it captured exactly how I think a lot of us were feeling at the time about everything in the city. The space really echoed that, literally echoed. And I think that there were many moments in the play where it just felt like Beckett had written specific lines for this city, in this situation, and in this time.



Street signs in the Upper Ninth Ward, 2009

## I SAW CHRIS Interview with Greta Gladney

MAY 20, 2009



Greta Gladney, 2009

greta gladney: My name is Greta Gladney. I'm a community organizer and the founder and executive director of the Renaissance Project, a small community development organization here in New Orleans.

As long as I can remember I've lived in New Orleans. I was born here at Sara Mayo Hospital up on Jackson Avenue, but my mother's from here, my mother's mother grew up here, and my mother's mother's mother lived here—also in the Lower Ninth Ward.

The Renaissance Project works toward alleviating poverty in New Orleans. New Orleans is a very poor city, and when I founded the organization I wanted to improve the quality of life in the Lower Ninth Ward through programming in education, arts and cultural projects, economic development, and food access—farmers' markets and the like. In New Orleans, African Americans suffer disproportionately from diet-related illness and disability, including obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

I founded the Renaissance Project when I was living in New York City in 2001. I was in New York from 1999 through 2002; I joke that I've lived through three disasters in my lifetime. In 1965, I was living in the Lower Ninth Ward and our house was flooded due to Hurricane Betsy; then I was in New York City on September 11, 2001; then back in New Orleans in August 2005 for Hurricane Katrina. So hopefully I won't do any more disasters this lifetime. But it was while I was in New York after September 11 that I incorporated Renaissance Project and began the process of applying for 501(c)(3) designation. I always had plans to move back home after finishing my MBA at Baruch College. I wanted to come back to my Lower Ninth Ward community and do some good work.

paul chan: So the third disaster was Hurricane Katrina?

greta: Yes.

paul: And you were here?

greta: I was here in the city, because my mother refused to leave the same house that flooded in 1965. And I had just moved my dad to New Orleans

in June 2005. He lost his sight a few years before the storm, and he and my stepmother were separating; they were living in Voorhees, New Jersey. So I moved him here to the American Can Company that summer, before the storm. My father, my son Stephen, my husband Jim, my daughter Danielle, my two grandsons, my son-in-law and I all stayed at my dad's apartment during the storm. Since I'm an only child I figured I needed to be close to the city, or in the city... close to my mom in case she needed anything after the storm. But of course we got separated, because she was in Lower Nine and we all ended up having to evacuate to other cities.

We stayed with friends in Clemson through December. Stephen was enrolled in middle school in Clemson, and I wanted him to finish the semester, so we returned home in December at the end of the academic semester. I returned to the city first in October, and between October and December I made many trips to New Orleans and to visit my mother in Houston.

paul: What was it like first coming back?

greta: It smelled really bad; everything was brown. People had begun putting all the refrigerators out on the street. And when I first returned, the Lower Ninth Ward, north of Claiborne, was barricaded, so we couldn't, we weren't supposed to, go into the area, couldn't go in or check our houses or retrieve anything. I remember sneaking past the barricades just to take pictures of my mother's house so I could let her know the house was still standing. She was in Oklahoma at the time and was really worried that it was taking so long for us to get back into the city. She remembered Betsy and that it didn't take as long to return to the neighborhood after Betsy. She was worried that she had lost everything again. So there were X's on the houses with lettering and markings that designated which group had come through to enter the houses and check for bodies. There was a marking on the tree at our house that indicated they had taken a brown female dog. On that first trip, that's really as far as I could get in the Lower Ninth Ward. Our house in City Park didn't get flooded. The American Can Company building was being restored quickly. So on the first trips back I was able to stay at my dad's apartment which had air conditioning and electricity. And then, after that, his apartment pretty much became the staging area for friends returning to the city who didn't have anywhere to stay. My dad didn't come back until six to eight months after the storm, at which point my friends had to move out. So they moved from his apartment to our office floor.

After September 11, I remember being bombarded with images on the TV twenty-four hours a day, the recap and the re-broadcast of the planes flying into the towers over and over and over again. After a while, I had to turn the computer off and turn the TV off because of the stress. I

couldn't watch it anymore; it was overwhelming. And I had that same experience with Katrina, but this time instead of seeing buildings, I saw the faces of people. Hundreds, thousands of people who were just stranded. People who looked like me. So it was a different experience, because I saw the faces of people who looked like me stranded in New Orleans, and I'm from New Orleans. I don't have the same attachment to New York City, as a place, that I have to New Orleans. It involved so many more people, so many people of color, so many African Americans in my hometown. So that was qualitatively different; emotionally it was different. But also the governmental response was very, very different. It took so long. The storm arrived on Sunday and Monday, yet it was only about Tuesday night or Wednesday that we began seeing military food drops, MRE's and water. It felt very, very different from the response in New York City. I remember how quickly services were restored and cell towers were re-routed; I had Internet service again pretty quickly. I realized that, in New Orleans, eighty percent of the city that was flooded, that the disaster was expansive, but the response was just disheartening.

I'm still not back in my house in Lower Nine in Holy Cross near the river. I'm still working on the house. It's normal inasmuch as I have a place to stay. My work was never interrupted because I was able to take the work with me to Clemson. You can write grants from anywhere.

paul: Where is Clemson?

greta: Clemson is in South Carolina, and the Strom Thurman Institute at Clemson provided office space for me to work. I know, folks laugh every time I tell them that the Strom Thurman Institute provided space for Students at the Center and for the Renaissance Project, since we're African-American programs. But it was easy. They gave us office space and we had Internet access and all—so it was easy to continue to do the grant writing and to stay in touch with people who were displaced and living all over the country. I think that I'm just beginning to feel the long-term physical effects of chronic stress. I was never hyperthyroid before; I'm hyperthyroid now. And I think that the storm has taken a toll on many of us. I mean, the crime rates are higher even though we have a smaller population; more people are sick and being diagnosed now. That doesn't feel normal. The health concerns don't feel normal.

paul: Do you remember the first time we met? That first meeting?

greta: From that first meeting I remember three people: a woman, a man, and you. I was coming from my sister-in-law Kathy Randels' house. Kathy is Artistic Director of ArtSpot Productions. We both have so little time. We're both traveling so much. We had so little time to spend time

together that we got together at her house that morning just to be social. We were reconnecting because we hadn't seen each other in a while. And, as always, she was pressed for time because she was on the way to a meeting with some folks who had talked about doing a production of *Waiting for Godot*. I had no idea what *Waiting for Godot* was, what it was about. And she said that she was on the way to a meeting at Community Coffee House, and somehow I agreed to give her a ride. My intention was to drop her off, but she said you're welcome to join me for this meeting if you'd like. So I said OK, fine. And what I remember is that we got a drink and sat down with three people. They talked a little bit about wanting to do a performance of *Waiting for Godot*, and I listened because it wasn't really my meeting. I barely remember the Asian guy; he was really soft-spoken. I didn't know any of these folks, but he talked about *Godot* and wanting to explore the theme of waiting. And they asked what I thought, 'cause they were thinking about doing it in the Lower Ninth Ward. And, you know, I had concerns about outsiders coming in and wanting to do work. I wanted to know how the community would benefit. There had never been reason to do a tour of the Lower Ninth Ward before the storm. So I had mixed feelings about people coming in, you know, students who had press badges could go into my neighborhood to videotape, while I had to ride a tour bus to get in. I had to take the East or West Lower Ninth Ward tour bus. They'd drive you around to see your house, but you couldn't get off. I'm saying all this just to give you some context about why I felt weird about these folks I'm meeting with at CC's who are proposing to do a production on vacant land owned by people who could not return, had not been able to return to the city, or may not have been able to return. I articulated clearly my concerns and my experiences and my desire to know what was in it for my neighborhood, what was in it for us if we—if I—facilitated their production in the Lower Ninth Ward. In fact, one of my conditions was that they had to give something back. The soft-spoken guy—I really didn't remember anybody's name walking away from the table that day, although they were in touch with me later—talked about the theme of waiting. I talked about the waiting for FEMA and all. And I admitted that I had never read *Waiting for Godot*. Talking to my friend Kalamu Ya Salaam after that meeting, he said that it wouldn't matter if I had read it or not. He said it was something you have to just experience, that it wouldn't make much sense on paper. So I hadn't read it, hadn't read anything by Beckett. I didn't have a picture in mind.

Anyway, the folks I was meeting with said that they wanted to set up a shadow fund and try to help some organizations in the city. For whatever reason, in the moment, I trusted them enough to give them a list of contacts, people in the city they should talk to, elected officials. And I think that became the starting point for the group pursuing, you know,

staging this play. It didn't seem definite at that moment; it seemed a little exploratory. Who knew several months later they'd pull it off? And I think it was great for the community. My one regret was that—well, we had no way of knowing that thousands of people would line up for a performance in the Lower Nine. And residents had mixed feelings. It was funny because folks were trying to usher us. We were sitting on the stairs of what was a house, just the stairs were left, and one of the ushers was trying to tell us to get in line or whatever. And we basically said, "No." I remember Ken Ferdinand (Kalamu's brother) said, "Baby, I'm just too tired." From the perspective of residents of Lower Nine, well, you really can't herd us and tell us we have to get in line when we used to live right over there. There was a feeling of, "This is our neighborhood and you're invited guests in the neighborhood. And we're going to do what we want and you have to deal with it." There were strong feelings about the number of whites who had come down for a performance. And I remember in the first show, when Wendell made a joke about look at all these white people in the Ninth Ward, we fell out laughing. Because whites, unless they were going to Saint Bernard Parish, had, you know, no reason—not in numbers like that—to come through the neighborhood. It was just amusing, even with volunteers and all. It was a little traumatic for us, too. We were happy to have the help, but it was strange. And we wondered, where were the people of color? Where were the black people who were supposed to come and do something grand in the Lower Ninth Ward? They never showed up.

paul: What did you think about the play?

greta: The play was hilarious. I remember Pozzo and Lucky. I remember Wendell Pierce, and their tattered clothing. I don't remember the other actor's name, but I remember when he took his shoe off, and what I remember was about how long his toes were. He had really long toes. It was a bit of an emotional rollercoaster ride. The performances in Lower Nine... people who were in the audience had grown up there and were thinking about whose house had been where the seating was. As far as you could see, other than the lighting for the performance, it was just darkness and stillness under the sky. It was really poignant for those of us who were from there. Very emotional. Emotional and tense, intense but also fraught with tension because—how do I want to say this?—there were so many outsiders that those of us from the neighborhood had to temper our reactions, our behavior. Some folks cried while they were watching the production, because sometimes lines would reflect the disaster that we had experienced. I remember when at one point in the play Pozzo looks around and says something like, "Look at all this," and he pulls out a little disposable camera and snaps a picture. I remember, in another performance, the first time he snaps a picture the flash doesn't go off, so he winds it and does it again. It was so appropriate in the Lower Ninth Ward

because there were so many outsiders and tour buses driving through the city... well, through the neighborhood. Folks were just getting out and taking pictures, just like that.

I remember the bike being like a huge tricycle with a basket. I remember Pozzo standing and Lucky driving or something at one point. But the bike seemed appropriate for the setting, because it seemed like a cross between a vehicle that could have been in the circus—sort of like a unicycle because of the large front wheel. [Laughter.]

The other thing that's fun about doing performances outside is that you have so much background noise—just people living their lives. But in Lower Nine, during *Godot*, nobody was living nearby so those noises were absent, conspicuously absent. It seemed like the bike could have been found somewhere in Lower Nine among the debris of someone's home. What amazed me also during the performance was... I don't know how Pozzo managed to stay so clean. You know I remember the Lower Nine performance and also Gentilly but somehow his safari-like outfit managed to stay clean. I don't know how, because it was nearly white. Oh, also the tree that was in the middle of the street, close to the middle of the intersection, it reminded me of Charlie Brown's Christmas tree, from the old Charlie Brown episode: the tree with one branch with one ornament that tipped it over. But it reminded me of so many trees in New Orleans, like trees that were ravaged by the winds of Hurricane Katrina, by Katrina and Rita. And it reminded me of the barrenness of the city in general, and the Lower Ninth Ward in particular, after the storm. When everything was just brown and there were no leaves on trees, just the few branches that had managed to stay attached to the trunks.

When you asked me to speak before the last performance, to welcome people to the Lower Ninth Ward, I remember how emotional it was, because every other night I had been sitting somewhere in the stands. I remember how different it was to stand at the microphone and face the audience. I remember how different it felt being an insider, whereas in the audience I was on the outside looking in. I had the opportunity to talk about how I felt about Creative Time's work, how the group had followed through on the promises from the very first meeting, and how my organization and Students at the Center benefited from that. There were bleachers to either side and a central aisle, which was the entrance from which Wendell Pierce had run out the first night and made the comment about all the people in the Ninth Ward. It was hilarious, and I had that to compare with this last night of the performance in Lower Nine. I remember getting choked up and emotional and asking for blessings of the people who couldn't get back home to Lower Nine.

But the strangest thing was that as I looked out onto this aisle, in the distance I saw a close friend of mine, Chris Jackson. Chris and I have been very close for years; we both graduated from McDonogh 35 High School. He said he was gonna come to that performance, so I wasn't surprised to see him. After I finished speaking, my son Stephen played "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" on the saxophone. And then we sat down to watch the play. I'm getting choked up now thinking about it. I called Chris after the performance. I said, "I ended up leaving early with my grandkids because we needed to get home, so I didn't get a chance to speak to you after the performance." And he said he was really sorry he had missed it. Chris wasn't at the performance that night. He wasn't there. But I saw him. I saw him when I was speaking. I saw him standing in the distance wearing clothes like he'd always wear. There was no confusing him with someone else. I saw Chris.



Mural, storm, tree, 2009



Mardi Gras Indian after new housewarming party, 2009

## SHADOW FUND

GROUP	AMOUNT	CONTACT INFO
NOLA human rights film festival	\$5,000	<a href="http://patoisfilmfest.org/">http://patoisfilmfest.org/</a>
Neighborhood story project	\$5,000	<a href="http://www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org/">http://www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org/</a>
Students at the Center (with Kalamu Ya Salaam)	\$5,000	<a href="http://www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/sac/">http://www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/sac/</a>
Churches supporting Churches (CSC)	\$5,000	<a href="http://www.cscneworleans.org/indexB.html">http://www.cscneworleans.org/indexB.html</a>
Renaissance project	\$5,000	<a href="http://therenaissanceproject.la/">http://therenaissanceproject.la/</a>
The New Orleans Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force	\$5,000	No website
Pontilly Neighborhood Association	\$5,000	<a href="http://www.pontilly.com/site/1/default.aspx">http://www.pontilly.com/site/1/default.aspx</a>
The Porch	\$5,000	<a href="http://ny2no.net/theporch/">http://ny2no.net/theporch/</a>
Community Book Center	\$1,000	<a href="http://www.communitybookcenter.com/">http://www.communitybookcenter.com/</a>
NENA (Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association)	\$1,000	<a href="http://www.9thwardnena.org/">http://www.9thwardnena.org/</a>
The New Orleans Kid Camera Project	\$1,000	<a href="http://www.kidcameraproject.org/">http://www.kidcameraproject.org/</a>
Burbank Gardens Neighborhood Association	\$1,000	No website
Episcopal Church House gutting program	\$1,000	No website
House of Dance and Feathers	in-kind (personal donation from Paul Chan and Classical Theatre of Harlem)	
St. Mary of the Angels School	in-kind (personal donation from Paul Chan)	
MLK Jr. Elementary School	in-kind (1,500 children's books from Theresa Kubasak)	
Drew Elementary School	in-kind (1,500 children's books from Theresa Kubasak)	
Common Ground Collective	in-kind (personal donation of video editing system, printers, and donation of 100 Boston Fern plants to counteract poisons in FEMA trailers)	

Shadow Fund spreadsheet, 2007

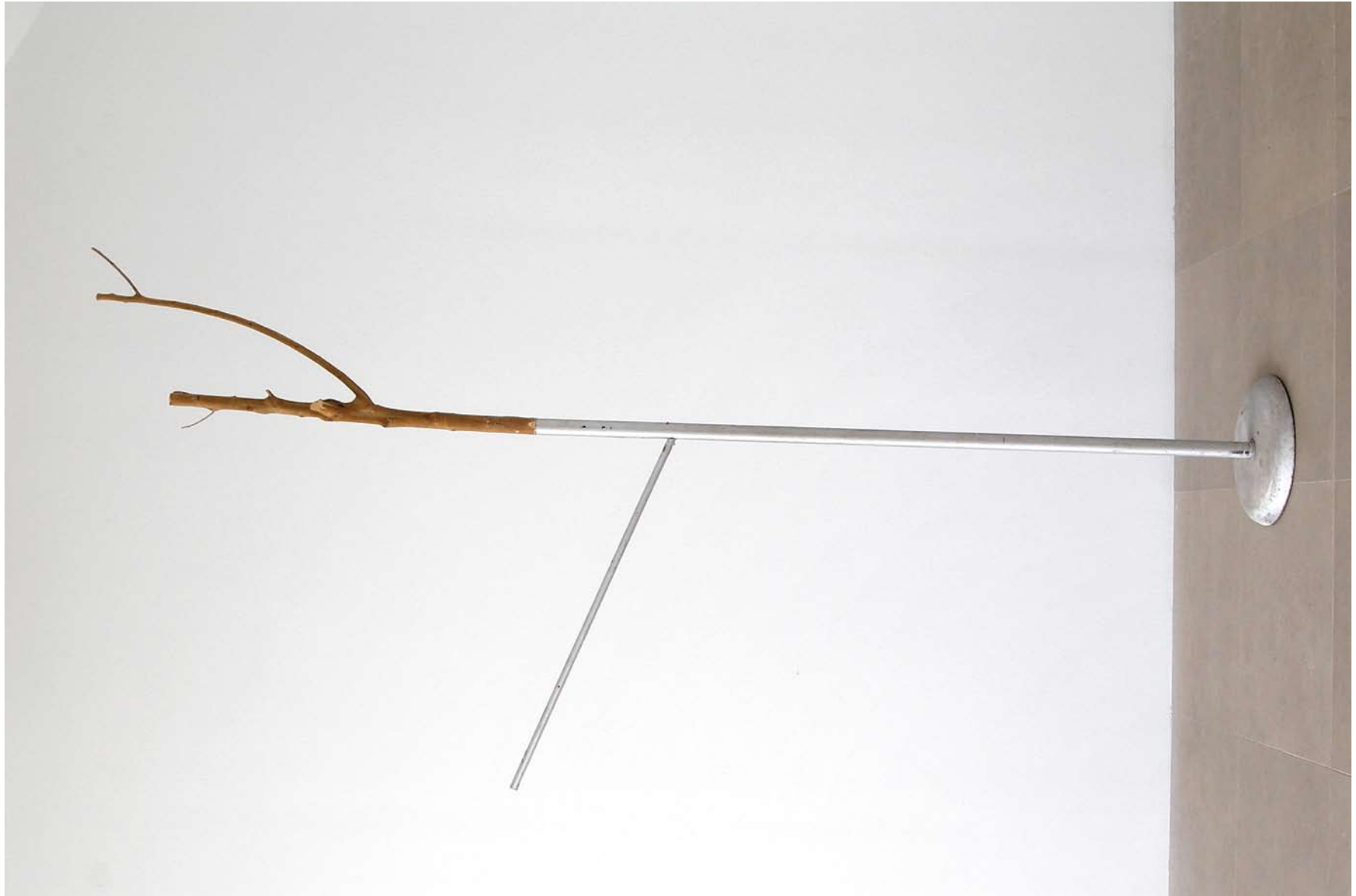


Pozzo, 2007. Photo by Jason Mandella



Lucky, 2007. Photo by Jason Mandella





A woman, 2007. Photo by Jason Mandella

UNDOING  
A Conversation Between Kathy Halbreich  
and Paul Chan

NOVEMBER 6, 2009

kathy halbreich: You first went to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to give a lecture at Tulane. Why did you decide to return?

paul chan: For two reasons. Barbie, a grad student at Tulane, took me around the city for a day during my first visit. She grew up in New Orleans. On the way to the Lower Ninth Ward, she stopped the car and said she couldn't go on. She started crying.

She dropped me off and I had to walk the rest of the way. That was the first time I really saw and felt the devastation. We all saw the images on television. But that was the first time I felt it. I didn't return for her, but I think I returned to try to understand what made Barbie unable to go on. I think the second reason is that I am attracted to things I don't understand. And the landscape of New Orleans made no sense to me. I started hallucinating.

kathy: Did you actually hallucinate?

paul: I did. I thought I saw Vladimir and Estragon on a street corner off Claiborne, one of the main thoroughfares of New Orleans. Hallucinating is fundamentally a form of protection; when you hallucinate you're trying to escape from where you are and what you are confronted with. I think I needed to mentally protect myself from the nonsense I was facing. And I think the persuasiveness of a hallucination is proportional to the need for escape.

kathy: Can you describe the landscape?

paul: It was November 2006, so around a year after Katrina. Fall was starting to wane and winter was setting in. The television images depicting chaos and desperation were nowhere to be found. There was an eerie silence to it all. No birds, no animals, very few people. Occasionally I'd hear the echoes of voices far away. The landscape felt like things had been there but were no longer. A strange stillness. It was odd because I usually love silence, but this was unsettling.

kathy: You mentioned earlier that we all were partners to these images because we watched them on television for many hours. What was the difference between having seen those horrifying images and the experience of being there?

paul: Just vast. We're living in a time when we feel like we can touch every corner of earth, but that touching is so weightless. The sense of touch is so impoverished if you reduce that touch to an image. Those pictures we saw on CNN, in *The New York Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* – all those news images are true in the sense that they documented facts. But they may not add up to a truth. And I think a truth, then, is something much more full-bodied.

kathy: So how did you start?

paul: After I came back from that first trip I began drawing. I wanted to see what a performance of *Godot* might look like in the middle of one of the street intersections I encountered in New Orleans. I started talking to Creative Time. At a certain point of thinking through what it would really take to make this project happen I started talking to Christopher McElroen at the Classical Theatre of Harlem. It led me to reading much more about what Susan Sontag did in Sarajevo.

kathy: Who were the first people you contacted in New Orleans?

paul: The first was my lawyer, Bill Quigley, who I had last seen in the summer of 2005, in a Federal Courthouse in D.C., where he was defending me and the rest of the group Voices in the Wilderness from a \$20,000 Treasury Department fine for going to Iraq. After Katrina hit, he started writing about the despair of the evacuees and their difficulties in trying to get home. I learned a lot from Bill and his writings. Other people I contacted were the friends I made at Tulane, the grad students who gave me information about artists in New Orleans. A friend named Dan Sinker who used to run a zine called *Punk Planet* in Chicago hooked me up with Abram Himelstein, a writer and teacher who is also co-director of a high school writing center in New Orleans. So friends led me to friends.

kathy: You speak often of needing to undo things in order to find the new. Terry Eagleton, in his essay "Political Beckett," writes, "Beckett's art maintains a compact with failure in the teeth of Nazi triumphalism, undoing its lethal absolutism with the weapons of ambiguity and

indeterminacy.” Talk to me a bit about the power of undoing and what you had to undo in order to do this project.

paul: It’s just the way I work. Even when I’m in front of a blank sheet of paper about to make a mark, I feel that the mark is the start of a process of undoing that empty sheet, making it unravel into something else. I think that in the twenty-first century there is a feeling of overwhelming plentitude in the order of things. Undoing may be my way of not adding to the dogpile of things without giving up on making something material and present. We are literally being buried under all the things we make for ourselves and others. And it’s no longer nature that holds the sense of the infinite, it’s now culture. We know natural resources can and will run out. Natural landscapes now are being diminished by the hour. Mountain ranges and oceans are being depleted and polluted. What made nature the ultimate image of the sublime was that it held the promise and frightful power of infinite plentitude, which was considered to be an expression of the divine. But it feels like this is no longer the case. It is in fact culture that seems to self-generate and go on forever.

kathy: It doesn’t feel as divine, does it?

paul: More distracting than divine.

kathy: It’s interesting that you identify the landscape as once representing a spiritual sort of infinite plentitude and we just spoke about a landscape in New Orleans that was the opposite.

paul: It was truly a landscape of impoverishment.

kathy: So, in order to build something in that landscape, I can imagine many things you had to undo. For example, you describe yourself as not much of a people person. But this project was based on collaborating with people. How did that work?

paul: Difficult, which is always the case when you deal with issues of trust. I had to figure out how people could trust me, as a stranger, an outsider. And ironically, the way that came about was by emphasizing how foreign I was to New Orleans soil. I made it a point to tell people that I had no roots in New Orleans, that I had never been there, and that I didn’t know much about New Orleans music or history. It was important to make people see I had no roots. They had to really look at what I was doing on the merits, as opposed to where I’m from, or what institution or tradition I belong to.

This reminds me of a story New Orleans artist Willie Birch told me when we were hanging out in his studio in the Seventh Ward. This was in October 2007. He told me how, in his neighborhood, the number of shootings had gone up. There were the usual suspects: high unemployment, a poor school system, an impoverished sense of the self. Kids killing kids and anyone in their way over drugs and money. So he decides to do something. After the next shooting, he goes outside by himself with a broom and pan. He starts to sweep up the bullet casings and other stuff left in the shooting’s wake. And he does this so everyone can see, especially the kids doing the shooting. So here he is, Willie Birch, painter, sculptor, elder statesman of the Seventh Ward in New Orleans, cleaning up the mess on the street by himself for all to see. And what’s important for him is that the kids see that he’s not afraid, that he is willing to risk more than them to live in the neighborhood. I think of this story because it seems to me that the secret of trust is risk. To build trust, one has to risk more.

kathy: There’s a big difference between working in the calm of your studio and working in a devastated landscape. How did you convince people that art was necessary at this time?

paul: I didn’t. I put art in the background. My basic pitch was this. “Hi, I’m in town doing a project that may or may not interest you. It would be nice if it did, but it’s cool if it doesn’t. In the meantime, I have skills and experiences that you might find useful while I am here. I can teach. I know how to make videos and films. I know how to fix a computer. And I have some time on my hands while working on this project. So if there is anything you’d like me to be a part of, please let me know. Here is my number. Nice to meet you.”

This was the gist of how I introduced *Godot* to people in New Orleans. I tried not to use the play as a carrot. Because I knew the carrot is a stick. People in New Orleans have seen art and cultural projects come and go; they see how these projects use the background of New Orleans as a way to sell themselves and the idea that art can make a social impact without the projects actually benefiting anyone in the city long-term. I didn’t want to do that. During my first visits to New Orleans, I really got an earful about this. Once you get an earful, you have a choice: are you going to do it the same way, or are you going to do it differently?

One of the simplest ways of doing it differently was to live and work in other people’s time, as opposed to having the people living

and working in ours. The trust and collaboration came from New Orleanians realizing that we were willing to work with them on their terms first, so that they had a choice of working with us or not. That was necessary. The relationship became more than merely transactional.

kathy: What does that mean exactly?

paul: It meant that our relationship did not depend on a quid pro quo.

kathy: In other words, you might do something for them that would have nothing to do with the *Godot* project?

paul: Yes. I would say most of my time there was spent doing things that had little or nothing to do with *Godot*. In my two semester-long classes. I talked about Beckett only one day. I did workshops on art, so I talked about my own work. But I didn't talk about what I was doing with *Godot*. Classical Theatre of Harlem did workshops in high schools, elementary schools. They taught basic acting techniques. They didn't try to sell *Godot* to their students and other participants. We trusted our ability to develop relationships with people, so that when they were ready to listen to what we were up to, then they would ask us.

kathy: And when you talk about their time, what was that time?

paul: It was Thursday nights from six to nine. This was Kalamu Ya Salaam's weekly high school student group meeting to watch and talk about filmmaking. So I would show up and watch Antonioni or Kurosawa with them, and then talk about the history of cinema or tracking shots. It meant showing up Friday afternoon to McDonogh 35 High School to speak in a writing class because someone had invited me. It meant speaking on a panel at a downtown space young artists in the city had rented to show their work. It means working in and with the natural rhythm of what's already established.

kathy: The big "undoing" in this project seems to me to be that art was a by-product of a network of relationships.

paul: That was one. Another was the attempt to undo certain divisions that widened in the city after Katrina. When you live with a sense of scarcity, you hold on to what you have. The things you hold on to most tend to be close. You take care of your **OWN** and

what you think you own. Things mix less and fewer possibilities emerge. So one of the things I tried to do in both the organizing of *Godot* and in its form as a performance was to undo those divisions, or the various ways we hold onto ourselves in the midst of a place that holds no promise for anything.

kathy: What were the hardest parts of the process?

paul: Not having time to myself. I was working every day; we all were. It was important that we were constantly engaged. But this took a toll.

kathy: What lingers?

paul: The relationships are the best of what remains with me. The people I met, became friends with, and who I'm beholden to. Now I'm responsible for them, as they are responsible for me. And I think that's a good thing. I think the bad things are, frankly, physical. New Orleans is still a tough place, politically, environmentally, physically. I'm not the same.

kathy: How did you describe what you wanted to do with the play?

paul: I said, "I want to stage a play in the middle of the street by a playwright named Samuel Beckett. This play is called *Waiting for Godot* and it's about waiting. It's about waiting for things that may never come. It's in two acts. One critic described it as two acts in which nothing happens, twice." And then, I would stop talking. Or rather, I would ask what they thought of what I wanted to do. I would then listen. And it was through this give-and-take that the shape of *Godot* really took form, giving us a sense of how to do it and what to do. What I mean by that is that it became less of a play and more of something else.

kathy: Did this influence the director's way of proceeding?

paul: A lot. Chris and I knew we had to be exposed to the city as much as possible for the city to seep into our process. It started with where we were rehearsing, St. Mary's in the Upper Ninth Ward, an old abandoned school that was used as a recovery center after Katrina. Wendell Pierce, the main actor, is from New Orleans, so he knew the patois and rhythm. He schooled us. He took us to the places where he would hang out growing up. People would visit us in rehearsals, and the play became at once familiar and foreign.

kathy: Did the actual rhythms of speech reflect the place?

paul: I think the way Chris directed it made *Godot* more musical. For example, during one scene Wendell mimicked Satchmo—and people got it. This seeping in of New Orleans did not lessen the austerity of the play. It still felt foreign and that was important. “Alien” may be a better word. It still felt as if this spaceship had landed in the middle of the street for people to experience. What I appreciate most about what we did was this ability to embody both qualities: to have it feel at peace with the place while at the same time feel completely alien. Because that’s the truth of it.

kathy: Is it the truth of art itself?

paul: I don’t know. But that’s something I’m attracted to.

kathy: The alien?

paul: Yes. The feeling of making something that has its own inner shape, its own reason, and its own way in the world—in a manner that feels unworldly but not otherworldly.

kathy: I think of alien as being sort of surreal. But I don’t think of your work that way.

paul: Thank you. Definitely not. I live in this reality. I don’t want another one.

kathy: Let’s pursue this idea of the alien a bit. You moved in 1981, at age eight, from Hong Kong, which was still a British colony, to Omaha. In your diary from Baghdad, where you went in 2002, which was, as you mentioned, against the law, you said you felt very Western. You’ve talked about your video *RE: The Operation* (2002) as a kind of “play with radical empathy.” Beckett also moved around a lot, dislocating himself. Has the experience of living in two cultures shaped your empathy?

paul: Yes, in a fundamental way. There’s a beautiful quote from the French writer Helene Cixous, who said, “I’m perfectly at home, nowhere.” When I grew up in Hong Kong there was already a kind of homelessness: I was a British citizen but was also Chinese. At school we studied Chinese, Portuguese, and English. Already it was clear that there was no one way. And if there is no one way then there must be many ways.

kathy: I was going to ask you where you belonged but you answered that, didn’t you?

paul: Nowhere. But I think that’s an impossible thing. Everyone belongs somewhere, whether we want to admit it or not. For example, *where* I lived in New Orleans said a lot to other people. I ended up living on the borderline between uptown and downtown, a little more towards downtown. And this was because where I lived signaled to New Orleanians who I was running with.

kathy: What’s the difference between uptown and downtown?

paul: Well, to say it crudely: race and class, black and white, rich and poor.

kathy: And where does each live?

paul: Uptown is white and rich. Downtown is poor and black. It’s more complicated than that—but in many ways not much more. All American cities are like that in one way or another because we still have a kind of economic segregation. In New Orleans the divisions run deep and that’s what made the project worth doing.

kathy: That’s the utopian part of your work.

paul: I’m trying to get rid of that.

kathy: Why?

paul: Because it’s a will to power.

kathy: What is?

paul: Utopian thinking.

It’s a difficult word, “utopian.” I remember Seymour Hersh writing in *The New Yorker* about how members of the Bush administration were real utopians. I thought that was the smartest thing I had read in a long time. Hersh believed the Bush administration was the most utopian administration we’ve ever elected because they thought that they could remake the world in their image, irrespective of reality.

kathy: Do you think this has anything to do with religion?

paul: That sounds like a rhetorical question.

kathy: Yes, the first one!

I am still a little confused about how you use the word “spirit.”

paul: Why?

kathy: But honestly, I don’t understand it any more than I understand who Godot is.

paul: I recently wrote an essay called “The Spirit of Recession.” A friend read it and said, “It’s a nice essay, but I still don’t know what spirit is.” I simply may not have the conceptual aptitude to really describe it. But I think we feel it when momentum shifts or when things change. It’s real, it’s not mystical. It’s very matter-of-fact. I think that’s something art tries to give a language and a form to.

kathy: You describe the shadows that appear often in your work as being both abstract and intimate, which also seems to describe Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

paul: Yes, if it’s done right.

kathy: Can you talk a little bit about abstraction in your work?

paul: I think abstraction can connect to what we were talking about before, about undoing. Abstraction is a kind of undoing or clearing away of the sedimentation that comes from living. Things settle. Layers build. To abstract is to clear away and to find new, undiscovered uses in the order of things. *Godot*, for me, was truly an abstraction of one experience I had in the post-Katrina landscape. The story around *Godot* is that Beckett drew on his experience in Paris as a translator for the French Resistance, when he was waiting for messages he had to pass on during the Nazi occupation. He took that experience of resistance and changed it into another experience. He turned it into art.

kathy: There are many kinds of—and overlappings of—abstraction in your work. For example, in the *Tin Drum Trilogy*, beautiful abstract passages turn out to be processed images of beheadings that appear online. Were they just impossible to watch? Is that why the image is abstracted? In other work, geometric colored shapes float in and out, obscuring the already abstracted animated image. Are these two types of abstraction the same?

paul: They’re the same in the sense that both draw on my idea of beauty. Beauty’s sole purpose is to allow us a glimpse of what is unbearable. If beauty does not account for the unbearable, it’s merely pretty. Beauty allows us, without being hurt, to be exposed to things that we never want to look at or experience. Beauty has to have something malodorous at its core if it truly aims to be beautiful. The beheadings are literally the most horrifying, moving images that you can see.

kathy: Isn’t this like facing New Orleans after the hurricane? You took this horrible abstraction for those of us who were viewing it from afar through the media—the horrible abstraction of this government’s willingness to let some of its citizens die—and, through engaging with the reality on the street, crafted an experience that wasn’t any longer an abstraction.

paul: Maybe we can call this the spirit of abstraction.

kathy: What’s the “spirit” of abstraction?

paul: The force that allows us to rethink what we thought we couldn’t think before because it would have been unbearable, which is what makes it unthinkable.

kathy: Or not experiential?

paul: What do you mean?

kathy: It might just have been an idea. You could watch CNN and cry. You could be angry. Yet you’re still removed from the smell and taste of devastation and death. But from what you’re saying, when you take those emotions, plant them in the landscape, and enable something to happen, the people are more vivid than your own outrage.

paul: Yes. Yes. Once you seed it there, it gives those emotions someplace to go. It doesn’t fester. Once I felt those emotions, I didn’t want to live in regret. But there was a point in January when I thought, “I can’t do this. This is insane.” In January 2007, when I was talking to Creative Time and Chris, I still had doubts. It’s not because of will. It’s because it may not have been doable. I really had to weigh that, because if I began the project I would be responsible for something and this responsibility is intense. Because it’s real.

kathy: And the responsibility would mean bringing some hope without ultimately stomping on it. Again. Sometimes when you go to work

in a community and you're not familiar with it, because you're not from there, you may get rejected because of a whole history of prior relationships, right? But when you manage to make some relationships with people and you begin to imagine a common necessity together, if something fails, it's a bigger failure.

paul: Yes. I could not fathom being able to live with that bigger failure. Bringing something as perverse as a play into New Orleans was already beyond the pale.

kathy: So map out the timeline. Who was key to making this work?

paul: We started traveling to New Orleans from New York in February 2007. Initially we would go once or twice a month. I started living in New Orleans in mid-August, and began teaching at Xavier University and the University of New Orleans in late August, the beginning of the fall semester. This is also when the real, on-the-ground organizing kicked in. Classical Theatre of Harlem arrived in New Orleans in October and began rehearsing and teaching. I continued organizing and teaching at the two universities, but then expanded the teaching schedule to include workshops in high schools and community centers. Creative Time landed in earnest around late October to set the stage for the performances. *Godot* premiered in the Lower Ninth Ward on Friday, November 2, 2007. We played for two more nights in the Lower Ninth. Then *Godot* played in the neighborhood of Gentilly the following weekend, November 9 and 10. I continued teaching after the performances and stayed in the city until a little before Thanksgiving, essentially until the end of the fall semester there.

There are so many key people. Robert Green. He was so many things to me: conscience, friend, security. He knew everyone in the Ninth Ward. That's what community means. He knew the person who owned the gas station up the street, he knew the kids who were running a new barbershop on the second floor of that gas station, he knew the churches in the area. He knew Pastor Hayward at New Israel Baptist Church. A lot of the places that he introduced me to when we were organizing *Godot* were churches, because they were still organizing people when many had left and no one else cared or had the time. We would go to church Saturdays and Sundays, and it helped that I was familiar with scripture.

kathy: From your childhood?

paul: No. From Iraq. After that experience I began educating myself about religion, reading the Old and New Testament and auditing a class at Union Seminary in New York. In New Orleans, religion became something of a passport. It was very helpful that I knew the difference between Romans and Leviticus. I grew up in a poor white neighborhood in Omaha. And I went to high school in a predominantly poor black neighborhood. So in a way the places Robert and others took me to—the barbershops, the Baptist churches, the gas stations—I recognized from my past. I wasn't uncomfortable, but I knew I couldn't be that Paul in New York who spends fourteen hours in a studio drawing or making things alone. I had to be someone else.

kathy: You had to undo yourself.

paul: I had to find another road to Damascus.

kathy: James Nelson says of Beckett that many of the features of his later prose and plays arise directly from his experience of radical uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger, and need during the Resistance in Paris.

paul: The past is never dead. It's not even past.

kathy: When did you know you wanted to go to art school?

paul: High school. I sometimes talk about seeing Beckett for the first time on a date when I was a freshman. It really hit me like a freight train. I knew I was in the presence of something great. Every hair on my body stood up. After that I read all I could about Beckett, which led to others like Pinter, Albee, Sam Shepard, Ionesco, and Joyce. Learning is that way. It's all detours. My English teacher, who also happened to be my ceramics teacher, knew what I was reading, so he suggested Gertrude Stein. It was then that I knew I was going to be in the arts somehow.

kathy: What you're talking about now is a fascination with literature. Why didn't you study writing?

paul: The funny thing is that literature was more visual to me than visual art. The power of those three short Beckett plays I saw was, among other things, how they looked. The experience was not only about the text and the words that were emanating from the actors, but how they all worked together. It was the total experience that became the opening. I never thought of Beckett as a playwright. I thought of him as an artist.

kathy: Okay. But let's stick with language for a moment. We can imagine Beckett's favorite word is "perhaps." What's yours?

paul: It's like choosing your favorite child.

kathy: You can give me a few.

paul: "No" is one of them. It's a beautiful word. I like the word "courage." I like the way it sounds. I like the way it makes me feel, which is uncomfortable. I've always been fond of the word "Chlamydia." It has a nice rhythm.

kathy: It sounds so pretty, but if people said *no* more often, there wouldn't be Chlamydia. Do you want to talk about Sontag's *Waiting for Godot*? How do you think it differs from yours?

paul: I think the fundamental difference is that I wasn't invited. She was invited by a Yugoslav theater director to do a play in Sarajevo. I invited myself, made my own infrastructure, and forged my own reason for being in New Orleans.

kathy: What was your reason?

paul: For what?

kathy: To go.

paul: Once I think something, once it registers as a thought, I have to contend with it, because now I have a choice. Once I thought *Godot* was an interesting thing to do, I had to figure out what the consequences were of either pursuing it or dropping it. I realized I couldn't live with the consequences of not doing it, of not making it happen.

kathy: Many people quiz you on what's political and what's artistic in your practice. In this particular project, I don't think you can disentangle the two.

paul: They are rarely disentangled. What I find facile and unconvincing is when people assume that they're the same thing, or that the conjoining makes for better art, or a more powerful politics.

People who have taught me most about what politics is helped me see it this way.

kathy: But do they also have a certain ideal about what art should be?

paul: Let's say they have a clarity about it. Art is whatever they looked at or read that gave them the courage to laugh or think or go on. And the art did not have to be directly connected to the political work they were doing. In fact, they rarely were. Kathy Kelly, the co-founder of Voices in the Wilderness, the group I went to Iraq with in 2002, loves Flaubert. Lynne Stewart, the great New York civil rights attorney and political activist, admires William Blake. The people with whom I've worked with and respect as political activists need art to be untethered from the daily demands of their work so that they can draw from art the pure play of possibilities. In politics, it really does come down to winners and losers. And our purpose is to give resources and to support people who we think ought to win. There are no winners and losers in art. The play is the thing.

kathy: The great luxury is to let our minds wander.

paul: I'd like to add "wanderlust" to the list of favorite words. You're right, it is a luxury and a necessity. If one were to be struck by wanderlust, the potential becomes greater for being more open to change, to chance, to the less known. To encumber art with purpose, no matter how progressive or worthy, limits art's potential to wander, which for me reduces its power and pleasure.

kathy: What does Vladimir's sentence, "But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not," mean to you?

paul: It's the beating heart of *Godot*. This line is evidence that for all the tragedy and comedy, what keeps the play moving is the insistence that the human remain human. The characters don't leave, they stay in place.

kathy: You return to New Orleans occasionally, don't you?

paul: I try to go back three or four times a year now. I have people I'm beholden to. I went to see Robert's new house. Also took part in a benefit for a high school writing program. I try and go back as much as I can.

kathy: What's happened to the Shadow Fund?

paul: It's been given out. It was given out right after the last performance of the play.



kathy: And where did it go to?

paul: It went to eleven groups I had chosen. You know, the official title of the project is *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: a play in two acts, a project in three parts*. And the Shadow Fund is the third part. Its central idea was that we would raise money to match whatever the production budget was, and that money would stay in New Orleans in the form of small grants. I asked Oxfam for advice on the fund and they told me the hardest thing about giving out money is knowing who to give it to, who to trust. The problem is that groups like Oxfam either didn't have the resources or the manpower to really see how local groups are working in areas they want to fund. I thought since I was going to live in New Orleans, I'd find out who was doing good work. But it was important for me not to use *Godot* as a carrot, so I didn't talk to anyone about the Shadow Fund. Working within the natural rhythms of New Orleans allowed me to see who was doing what. And toward the end of the project I felt like I had a pretty good idea who was doing good work, whether or not they were connected to *Godot*.

kathy: How many had worked with you?

paul: I would say less than half.

kathy: And did you ever feel awkward about it coming from you as opposed to a committee?

paul: No. You don't need a committee to see which way the wind is blowing.

kathy: What would you do differently, if anything?

paul: There are so many things. Before leaving for New Orleans in August, I had pinpointed the cities where the evacuees had relocated: Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, New York, and so on. Then I pinpointed cultural institutions, museums, not-for-profit spaces in those cities. I was prepared to reach out and work with them to get as many former New Orleanians back to the city as possible to see the performances. But I ran out of energy and time. I wish we had raised more money for the Shadow Fund, because the production budget ballooned. We didn't reach parity. I wanted the symmetry between the production budget and the fund because it meant we were serious about the project being more than the play.

kathy: It was like the relationship you wanted to create.

paul: Yes, equal. I think that was a failure. I wish we had created a VIP line specifically for people who lived in the neighborhoods where the play took place, so they could have gotten to their seats quicker. I wish I had more time to draw and let my mind wander during my time in New Orleans. I wish I looked better during that time too. I felt like shit.

kathy: Were you stressed out, or was it the pollution?

paul: Worn out. Too many po' boys.

kathy: My last question is: Whom would you like to thank?

paul: A lovely and profound question. Let me think...

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Well? Shall we go?, 2007

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Christopher McElroen is the Co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), for which he produced forty productions between 2000 and 2009 that yielded thirteen AUDELCO Awards, six OBIE Awards, two Lucille Lortel Awards, and a Drama Desk Award. Selected directing credits include *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, and *Marat/Sade*. He has also directed at numerous venues, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Duke University, and the Walker Art Center.

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Nato Thompson is Chief Curator for CreativeTime, where he has organized major projects, such as *It Is What It Is: Conversations about Iraq* (2009), a project that encouraged public discussion of the history, present circumstances, and future of Iraq. Prior to CreativeTime, he worked as a curator for MASS MoCA, where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions, such as *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, a survey of political art of the 1990s. His most recent book, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production*, is available through Autonomedia.org.

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