



Black Radical Brooklyn: A New Art Exhibition Unearths Bed-Stuy's Self-Determined History

By MARJON CARLOS SEPTEMBER 25, 2014

A walkthrough of Creativetime's new project raises questions of gentrification and cultural memory

Descending upon [Weeksville Heritage Center](#) this past Saturday, in attendance of Creativetime's much-anticipated walkable art exhibition *Funk, God, Jazz, and Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn*, the word 'bucolic' immediately rose to mind. Situated firmly amongst vestiges of the centuries-old, self-determined community founded by former slaves in 1838—in what is now Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights, Brooklyn—the center had recently been reimagined as a modern, glass-enclosed compound amongst a clearing of unrestrained greenery.

There was a hill—a lush, green, expansive hill—that met me as I walked through the float-glass back doors of the center and led me to its base, where I stood, for who knows how long, gauging the scene that unfolded before me. At the foot of this hill was a bunny whose angora coat was being woven, live, in front of a rapt audience. Honeybees from Weeksville's own bee colony buzzed around the very saucers they sweetened for the center's Bioheritage Farm preserves, and off, in the not-so far distance, were ducks milling about in the community center's organic garden.



Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn

Amongst this near-pastoral tableau was [Kara Walker](#) hugging [Xenobia Bailey](#) [the latter pictured above], two black female art giants, meeting in a meta-moment of black contemporary art that could only have been ordained from above. They embraced within the repurposed walls of one Weeksville's historic homes along Hunterfly Road that Bailey had repurposed in the visual dialect of "funk." In low tones, the artist talked wistfully to any passerby about the participation of students from Bed Stuy's Boys & Girls High School who collaborated with her on this project; one of them blushed quietly in a corner after overhearing these glowing words. To say the least, I was overwhelmed when I came to the bottom of this hill and saw all this activity swarming about. It was idyllic, strange and familiar, and all amongst a neighborhood I once called home.



Xenobia Bailey's installation in one Weeksville's historic homes.

There isn't enough bandwidth, of course, to discuss gentrification in Brooklyn, and Bed Stuy most specifically. I myself was, in very typical fashion, priced out of my apartment on Stuyvesant Avenue two years ago, so I know the aftermath all too well of this urban plague, and I tried to keep myself from pushing that narrative onto this project.

Instead, it was Elissa Blount-Moorhead, the former Vice Director of Weeksville Heritage Center, who urged me to let go of my preoccupation with the erosion or upheaval of space; buildings are really a Western fascination, she explained. Rather, this project was predicated upon the idea of black 'cultural memory', an indelible, unfailing, and ineffable expression of freedom or customs. "[Black] culture is what we carry, and that's not new...we've always been nomadic," said Blount-Moorhead. "These buildings are a beacon, a testament, but if they went down tomorrow, we are inspired by that history." Gesturing toward the few remaining Weeksville community homes, she could have also easily been referencing the other *Black Radical Brooklyn* sites that extended along this 5-block installation—especially the refurbished 1959 Cadillac DeVille that'd been turned

into temporary outdoor radio station **OJBK FM** by the Houston-based **Otabenga Jones Collective** (which includes Robert Pruitt, Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus, and Kenya Evans) and parked steps away from the Utica stop on the A-line.

Installed at the plaza between Fulton Ave and Malcolm X, the remodeled DeVille was spliced in half, only the back remaining, and had been painted a bubble-gum pink, with stacked speakers looming large from its trunk. With plush seating and a DJ booth off to the side, the OJBK radio station was buoyed by songs by the likes of Shabazz Palaces and OutKast and primed as a meeting place for local community members, activists, featured radio show guests including musician Robert Glasper and MOMA curator Thomas Lax, and general spectators. Created as an enthralling homage to Bed Stuy's now-shuttered cultural center, The East—an educational and cultural center that developed over 25 community-based projects and programs based upon the tenets of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism during its stay from 1965 to 1986—the paradox of OJBK's free-standing design was not lost on Otabenga's members. As Robert Pruitt explains, "We are looking at The East cultural center as a history that we find important, relevant, and I think it's ironic that that place doesn't exist anymore. So whatever thing they were building was cut short... It's a loss to lose that building and to lose that space."



Otabenga Jones Collective's OJBK radio station in the back of a refurbished 1959 Cadillac DeVille.

But in the face of that physical displacement, Pruitt's cohort Jamal Cyrus harkened back to cultural memory and archiving as necessary tools: "But that's part of the reason why memory is so important, with keeping those things going, because the space does not exist," he said. "Somebody lives in the building that used to be The East, but y'know, at the moment it doesn't exist any longer, so how do you keep that consciousness evolving and developing?"

For *Black Radical Brooklyn*'s curator, Rashida Bumbray, it is alternative forms of black radical gestures that are necessary to maintain this momentum—like sculptor Simone Leigh's project, The Free People's Medical Clinic. Situated within Stuyvesant Mansion, which was the former home of Dr. Josephine English, the first African American OB/GYN in New York State, the project explores the pioneering history of Weeksville's black female medical community. In turn, the installation also takes pages from the Black Panther's Free Clinics of the 1960s and 1970s, which took "health into our own hands," by functioning equally as a working free clinic for interested participants. But as Bumbray explains, "When we went to hospitals to ask [nurses for] their participation, legally, many of them, their hands were tied. And so it just showed us that it's very difficult to do the same thing our parents did; we have to be more strategic. So what Simone wound up doing is working with local homeopathic practitioners as well as midwives."



Simone Leigh's project, The Free People's Medical Clinic.

What emerges then is a modern black radical gesture that differs from generations before, but advances a self-determined politic that is reflective of our times. So, rather than "flying in projects" into the neighborhood, or supplanting assets with those from outside networks, these artists fully engaged with those that pre-existed within the Weeksville community. It's the reason why the well-woman exams offered at Leigh's clinic are fully booked until October 5th; it's the reason why OCBK chooses to stream music from former performers at The East, like Miles Davis and Jimmy Hendrix. Everything, as Blount-Moorehead stressed to me, is already here, among us.

But why then the resentment I felt when walking past my old apartment after leaving Leigh's exhibit? Why the attachment to a building I no longer resided in? Why the fascination with an old neighborhood's rapid change? My nomadic self had moved twice since moving out of Bed Stuy, but I can assure you I was still probably getting mail at

this address. I wanted to believe I didn't believe in buildings, but I do—along with cultural memory and radical gestures of resistance. I think about who gets to stay and who has to leave, and where to next. I think about food deserts and the projects that surround Weeksville; that perhaps black culture isn't preternaturally “nomadic,” but was forced to be.

I think about the filmic homage participating cinematographer [Bradford Young](#) (*Mother of George*) made to the crumbling innards of PS 83, which once housed Bethel Tabernacle AME Church on Schenectady Avenue and Dean St. Although the erosion of this now-abandoned building in no way negates PS 83's history as the first racially integrated school in Brooklyn or Bethel Tabernacle's one-hundred sixty-seven year old legacy as Brooklyn's third established African-American church, there is still something pained about that dilapidation.

Black Radical Brooklyn isn't, in and of itself, necessarily a definitive resolution to any of this, but perhaps it's simply created a space that allows me to ask plenty of questions.

[Funk, God, Jazz, and Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn](#) runs until October 12, and is open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 12-6pm at Weeksville Heritage Center.