

Walking our Way Through *Garden/ /Suburbia*: Auto-Topography as Performance in Lawrence Park

By Andrew Houston

We write ourselves into the landscape. We own space because we can tell stories about it.

Graeme Miller¹

Sharing A Reflective Nostalgia for Lawrence Park

Initially I was a long distance consultant on *Garden/ /Suburbia*. Melanie Bennett and I have worked on a number of projects together, but since 2006 she had moved around the country for grad school, and it was becoming common for us to discuss our respective work – projects we were doing with other people – over the phone. Having grown up in suburban Toronto, not far from Lawrence Park, I was interested in this new performance she was working on with a new collaborator, Hartley Jafine. I knew Lawrence Park well; I had worked at a ski shop in the area as a teenager, and I had spent a good deal of my adolescent life ‘hacking around’ in a ravine system that connected to the ravine Melanie was planning to use for part of the performance. The more we spoke about *Garden/ /Suburbia* the more I realized Melanie and Hartley were addressing a place I knew intimately, and a place I had not thought much about since leaving the home in which I grew up. And then in 2009, on brisk autumn nights, over the phone I began relaying my stories of Lawrence Park to Melanie, as the stories from her and Hartley prompted my own. It wasn’t long before we realized that the landscape they were ‘writing’ was in many ways one we all shared in unexpected ways.

Deirdre Heddon, a Scottish performance artist, whose practice often turns to the way a single route through a landscape can illicit several narrative junctures describes the kind of connection Melanie, Hartley and I discovered:

You can find or make a route,
my story is your story.
Your life is not yours alone.
You can find or make a route,
your story in my story.
You can be here and there.
You can find or make a route,
my story in your story.
One person’s present
is perhaps someone else’s theft.
You can find, or make a route,

¹ Cited in Carl Lavery, “Walking the Walk, Talking the Talk: Re-imagining the Urban Landscape; Graeme Miller interviewed by Carl Lavery,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, 21 (2), May 2005, p. 161.

your story in my story.
 The frame is always porous.
 You can find or make a route,
 my story in your story.
 Your story in my story (Heddon qtd in Mock 151).

All three of us were collaborating on a kind of auto-topographical map. There was autobiography, but as facts were filtered through our varying perceptions and experiences of place (Heddon's 'porous frame'), what was emerging was part creative and part factual; an act of selecting, of ordering, of editing, of forgetting, of embellishing, of invention. This dramaturgical weave of narrative is what made this exercise more reflective than restorative nostalgia for me. Svetlana Boym makes this distinction – between reflective and restorative nostalgia – in her analysis of post-communist urban cultures, when she observes that,

[I]f restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space. While restorative nostalgia is intended to shore up traditional imaginings of a mythic collective past and future, reflective nostalgia positions the individual in a flexible historical trajectory” (Mock 11).

In *Garden/ /Suburbia*, narrative-based mapping provided a kind of performative agency that placed Lawrence Park, our referent, into a space of instability, challenging that status of what we thought we (and others) saw in the place. As Heddon maintains “the challenge for all autobiographical performance is to harness the dialogic potential afforded by the medium, using it in the service of difference rather than sameness” (Mock 15). When autobiographical narrative is located in a certain place, it thereby also becomes topographical, it opens autobiography to multiple ways of knowing and relating through navigation.

Auto-topography

Topos, from the Greek, for place; *Grapshein*, to scratch, to draw, to write. Topography, then, is the writing of place. Adding *auto* to this mix is to admit the self that writes every place, since topography, like autobiography, is a creative act of interpretation, of perspective, of location. As geographer Tim Cresswell writes, “[p]laces, like selves, are not simply given but are made. Places are constructed by people doing things and in this sense are never ‘finished’ but are constantly being performed” (Cresswell 39). In discussions with Bennett over the fall of 2009 and the winter of 2010, it was clear that for both her and Jafine, the creation of *Garden/ /Suburbia* was as much based upon ‘who’ they are as ‘where’ they wanted to situate the performance; moreover, as Bennett had spent the last few years shifting her artistic research from Waterloo to Calgary to Toronto, I knew that for her, where she was had become more to do with who she was; place and self were deeply imbricated – both being contingent, shifting, always

‘becoming’.

In the winter of 2010, it was determined by Bennett, Jafine (Collier) and myself that after the creation of a workshop performance of *Garden/ /Suburbia* for a graduate program class at York University, I would shift my relationship to the project from dramaturgical consultant to director, in order to help develop the performance for presentation to an international audience of theatre and performance scholars, who would be in Toronto in June 2010 for the Performance Studies International annual conference.

As a director, my two main concerns for the growth of the performance were, first, to further develop its connection to site, and in so doing, my second concern was to create a more meaningful, active role for the audience, who ultimately I hoped might consider themselves to be creating their own auto-topographical maps of Lawrence Park alongside the map created by Bennett and Jafine.

In my approach to site-specific performance, the site is the primary resource from which the various layers of performance are developed. These various layers, or animations, are fabricated responses to the site, and it is the role of the audience to piece together the found and the fabricated in order to make sense of the work. When I began working in the role of director on *Garden/ /Suburbia*, Bennett and Jafine had already significantly developed the performance from the site. For example, Yonge Street, including Bennett’s rental apartment, had generated text that spoke to a more complicated, cosmopolitan read of the neighbourhood and its history than it is often given credit for in Toronto’s popular media and presumably the minds of most Torontonians. Alexander Muir Park provided many resources for animation that revealed layers of meaning in the personal narratives of Jafine and Bennett, while also prompting the audience to consider the political and economic implications of a water fountain for dogs and the underside of a bridge, covered in graffiti. Finally, the animation of some of the residential streets in the area proved that Bennett and Jafine were not shying away from addressing the homes of Lawrence Park’s elite residents, rather they constructed text that effectively animated the voyeur quality of our role as gawking tourists, gazing at the house fronts of a level of material wealth none of us would ever know from personal experience. As director, I worked to develop points of animation already created by Bennett and Jafine.

More importantly my direction focused on how we might remind and empower the audience to embrace their role as active interpreters of the map we wanted them to follow. Key to this task was the development of an awareness on the part of our audience of how walking created a speed of interaction and proximity with the site that encouraged a more meaningful understanding of place.

Walking as Spatial Acting-Out of Place

Viewed from the position of what Paul Virilio calls “dromology” (the science of speed), the focus on walking in *Garden/ /Suburbia* could be seen as a mode of resistance against the acceleration of the world. A desire on our part to re-humanize space by

encouraging our spectators to experience Lawrence Park at a properly human pace, “the bodily beat of three miles per hour”; rather than flying by the neighbourhood – as many do – either in a car on Yonge Street or in a subway under Yonge Street. Implicit in this approach is the argument that walking is conducive to the production of space, a perfect technique for merging landscape, memory and imagination in a dynamic dialogue. Or as Michel de Certeau would have it: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to statements uttered... It is a spatial acting-out of place” (de Certeau qtd in Mock 47).

But for all of this emphasis on speed, is it really true that we are all flying by Lawrence Park – or anywhere else – quickly? Isn't Yonge Street often full of slow-moving traffic due to one traffic jam after another? As Ben Highmore points out, many of our everyday activities are characterized by stasis and endless waiting. For example, we spend a lot of time, say, waiting for a flight and then a lot of time waiting still more on the flight, while it is getting us somewhere; as Highmore states: “[f]or those who submit to the relentlessness of the machine, the experience is often one of slowing-down, time stretching out, a torturous boredom as the line sluggishly and insistently moves; fast enough to stop you doing anything else, slow enough to leave you constantly waiting” (Highmore qtd in Mock 47). From this perspective, walking in *Garden/ /Suburbia* is not so much a return to ‘slowness’ as a quest to find a more fluid, mobile and close mode of interaction with one’s surroundings, a mode of interaction with place and performance that is in part based on a self-generated rhythm.

If walking is a revolt against the paradoxical stasis induced by modern communication and transport systems, it is also a reaction against the public-passivity produced by what the Situationist Guy Debord famously called “the society of the spectacle”. For Debord, spectacularisation is not simply to do with the triumph of the image in an aesthetic sense; rather, it concerns the triumph of the image in a total sense – that is to say, the moment when individual consciousness and social relationships have been colonized by representation alone. As Debord says: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord 2). According to the Situationists, wandering or what they called ‘drifitng’ through the city is an antidote to spectacularization. Instead of passively registering the world of images and spectacles, drifting allows the individual to encounter and imagine the world actively. The drifter or *dérviste* is thus a producer – and not a consumer – of meaning. The cityscape is her/his stage. There are many examples of how this happens in *Garden/ /Suburbia*; perhaps the most politically potent is when Jafine and Bennett narrate the houses on Glengown Road as women dressed in attire calculated to create a certain impression of wealth, taste, recognition and success.

Finally, as site-specific performance theorist Keren Zaiontz reminds us,

Audience labour is not simply a matter of delegating critical acts to participants but is an encounter with those acts that occurs through such kinesthetic operations as touch and movement. By coming into contact (or proximity) with the discourses that are being dramatized, spectators

navigate the artwork through what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call a “smooth space,” a space perceived through direct physical engagement. Laura Marks in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* explains that smooth spaces are necessarily experienced at “[c]lose-range” and “navigated not through reference to the abstractions of maps or compasses, but by haptic perception, which attends to their particularity” (Marks qtd in Zaiontz 12).

Site-specific spectatorship, as Zaiontz articulates, at “close range” shifts the parameters of conventional spectatorship for how it disrupts the binaries of performer/spectator and representation/real to that of “beside.” She draws on Eve Sedgwick to help illustrate how conceiving of spectatorship as beside conventional roles and parameters of representation command a range of analytical possibilities that do not end in opposition:

‘Beside’ is an interesting preposition because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations (Sedgwick qtd in Zaiontz 13).

In addressing site-specific spectatorship as an experience of “beside” we not only examine how audiences parallel, differentiate, identify, and mimic through their doubled position, but how in having the witness lie beside the performer, the spectator beside the site, we learn how such roles slide, embrace, and *fold* into one another.

The idea of spectatorship that is beside both the conventional theatre binaries: representation / real and spectatorship / performer is important for how it creates a perspective on agency that is relational, performative and contingent on varying local contexts. Site-specific performance should take account of ‘local contexts’ and transnational narratives while travelling between two types of knowledge: official abstract ‘maps’ and personal embodied ‘stories’. In doing so, such a form may situate itself ‘beside’ hegemonic forms that so often limit theatre’s impact.

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