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Garden/ /Suburbia: Mapping the Non- Aristocratic in Lawrence Park

by Melanie Bennett

This area is the kind of place where the cool kids don't hang out ... this area has always suffered from a sense of being off the trendy beaten path, a foggy "place up there."
—Shawn Micallef, *Stroll: Psychogeographic Walking Tours of Toronto*

Garden/ /Suburbia is an MP3-led sound and live performance walk I conceived with the collaboration of Hartley Jafine, Aaron Collier, and Andy Houston. A partly site-specific/ partly ethnographic performance walk, it took place in and around the north Toronto neighbourhood of Lawrence Park in April 2010 as a workshop¹ and then again in June 2010 for the Performance Studies international Conference. Jafine and I devised the script and performed as guides in the walk. Aaron Collier² created a musical score and sound composition, which incorporated pre-recorded narrative text that Jafine and I performed. These audio tracks were transferred onto MP3 players to be “checked out” at the Locke Library by the spectators at the beginning of the walk. Collier performed as a library employee offering tips for operating the players and indicating when to select the next track. Finally, Andy Houston³ joined the project in June to offer directorial guidance and help facilitate participatory happenings into the performance. My artistic practice has mainly focused on live, performance-based, site-specific events. *Garden/ /Suburbia* was one of my first attempts to create an MP3 sound walk juxtaposed alongside a live performance event. The event was a research project that combined strategies of auto-ethnography and site-specificity with participatory practices. It was a first step toward my larger examination of how ethnography and site-specificity can create performances that are more reflexive, intersubjective, and ethical. This article will describe how auto-ethnography was used in *Garden/ /Suburbia* to generate alternative fictions to the uncontested histories and “realities” embedded into Lawrence Park’s discourse.

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Because of site-specificity's interdisciplinary approach and tendency toward animating the historical, spatial, and social dimensions of an environment, it already includes traces of the ethnographic and audience participation in its form. What often happens, however, is the spectacle becomes the focus of the performance or installation and the spectators become less interactive. Furthermore, most site-specific events offer a critique of a community that veils the artists' positionality. I wanted to consider how site-specificity could transform if I was explicit in borrowing the fieldwork methodology from ethnography, particularly the practice of auto-ethnography. Broadly defined, ethnography is the social scientific representation of human social phenomena and communities, through means such as fieldwork. A branch of cultural anthropology, ethnography focuses on the study of human societies. Auto-ethnography can be considered as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal (auto) to the cultural (ethno)" (Ellis and Bochner 739).

Garden/ /Suburbia began by unearthing the historical, cultural, and political characteristics of the area through a combination of archival research and interaction with the neighbourhood. I attended open houses to understand how real estate agents were representing the area. I talked with shop owners, nannies, construction workers, landscapers, park employees, and dog walkers. Rarely did I have an opportunity to speak with actual residents! A recurring theme throughout the research was that the act of preservation was significantly valued in Lawrence Park. The many people I spoke with were all contributing a form of labour toward preserving the neighbourhood. This theme of preservation became the conduit for *Garden/ /Suburbia*, in which we chose specific landmarks that were either an authorized memorial or a pseudo-memorial that we reinvented by drawing an auto-ethnographic association.

Lawrence Park is a north Toronto residential neighbourhood that attempts to cater to an exclusive demographic. It is located amidst a lush setting of rolling hills, ravines, numerous parks, winding paths, and big trees as well as some of Toronto's most stunning stately homes. It was developed in 1907 by the Dovercourt Land Company as an "aristocratic neighbourhood" for the "well to do" (Toronto Neighbourhood Guide). As Toronto's first planned "garden suburb," Lawrence Park is still considered the city's most affluent postal code despite having a population that also includes middle-class residents. Due to urban sprawl, Lawrence Park is no longer perceived as a "suburb," yet



Alexander Muir Memorial Garden.
Photo by Melanie Bennett

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it retains its original "garden" atmosphere because of its bountiful greenery, parkland, and trails. With the slogan "Small town feel, big city appeal," the area's charm and old-fashioned aesthetics are far from cosmopolitan. For me, it was the stuffiness, monoculture, and lack of hipness that offered a playground of opportunities to challenge the social and political effects of the area's coded Anglo-centric blue-blooded discourse. As an artist who normally works in environments that are marginalized, remote, disused, or abandoned, I was interested in developing a project in a locale that was such a staged utopian fantasy. I was also excited to create a project in a location where I lived, especially because I was a newer resident who was still adapting to my new home. Thanks to the municipality's mixed-income initiative and heritage preservation designations, graduate students like myself and middle-class families are able to rent units in a cluster of Depression-era apartment buildings that have avoided the developers' wrecking ball. Lawrence Park is the first neighbourhood I have lived in that is considered upscale—an aspect I hadn't realized until I began exploring my new surroundings. The wide pristine sidewalks, nature trails, off-leash dog parks, manicured properties, and appealing shop windows on Yonge Street inspired me to spend a lot of time walking around. I quickly recognized what a rare luxury and freedom it was to live in a location that enabled comfortable and safe pedestrianism, one that was an ideal setting to devise a performance walk that highlights this kind of unburdened walking as a class privilege. My enchantment with my novel



A dog fountain in honour of Willy, "Born a Dog, Died a Gentleman."
 Photo by Melanie Bennett

surroundings was akin to a tourist sensibility that led me to seek a co-collaborator who knew the neighbourhood more intimately than me. I invited Hartley Jafine⁴ into the project because he offered a perspective of someone who grew up in and around the community. Jafine's memories of Lawrence Park included being cared for by a nanny, attending the well-known Upper Canada College, and spending time at the prestigious Granite Club. As an applied drama practitioner influenced by Augusto Boal's "pedagogy of the oppressed," Jafine was in a position to be highly critical of the classism that the area evokes while acknowledging the access his privilege allows.

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The choreography of *Garden/ /Suburbia* took the walkers through residential, commercial, and parkland settings, stopping at local landmarks (a library, a neglected children's sandbox, a formal memorial garden, an unusually shaped tree stump, a dog fountain donated by a resident in memory of his deceased pet, historical houses, newly constructed houses, a construction site, and a bridge covered in graffiti). These selected landmarks served as memory-triggers to an alternate representational practice that negated the ubiquitous reality constructed by the city and some of its citizens. Scenes that were more confessional and personal in nature were heard on the MP3 players with corresponding live action, while the scenes that posed as part of a sanctioned tour of Lawrence Park landmarks were spoken and performed live. There were also scenes without text that incorporated action with sound compositions.

In order to illustrate how we combined site-specificity, auto-ethnography, and participatory strategies into *Garden/ /*

Suburbia, I will describe two examples from the performance: a scene from the residential section and a scene from the park. Different than the often contested gentrified communities which gradually evolve from lower-income and working-class housing toward wealthier neighbourhoods, Lawrence Park has changed very little since its inception. What has caused friction among the predominantly Anglo-Protestant residents, however, is a clash between *new* money and *old* money. Due to an infrastructure unable to keep up with the significant increase in population, Toronto's gridlock has become worse than Los Angeles and New York (Kalinowski and Spears). In the last decade, suburbanites have gradually begun to move closer to the downtown. With its close proximity to the city's main highway (401), a central artery (Yonge Street), location on a subway line, and family-friendly residential vibe, Lawrence Park has become a popular neighbourhood to house prosperous suburbanites looking to shorten their commute time. Many of these new residents are accustomed to two-car garages, large expansive lots, contemporary custom-designed homes, and are not willing to compromise their suburban lifestyle. For this reason, many of Lawrence Park's old houses and their surrounding trees have been demolished and replaced with larger mega-homes. This encroachment has created a tension between those who wish to preserve the legacy of the neighbourhood's past and its architecture with the newer residents and real estate developers whose imagined future does not include memorializing the community. Neighbours on Dawlish Avenue were in the midst of a long drawn-out battle called "Dawlish vs. Goliath." The Toronto Preservation Board along with residents of Dawlish Avenue approached City Council about including various houses scheduled for demolition on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties. *Garden/ /Suburbia* focused on one particular property dispute that was going on at the same time as our project.

With its steeply pitched roof, pointed dormers, and asymmetrical massing, 79 Dawlish evoked French-Canadian architecture, Georgian, and cottage styles. Built in 1928, it was designed and occupied by the notable architect Forsey Page, who lived there until 1933 (Moon and Myrvold 49). The house had a particularly distinctive and charming presence and sold for approximately \$1.7 million to a couple from a suburb north of Toronto with the purpose of replacing it with a brand new mansion and subsequently flipping the property for profit. The residents opposing the demolition argued that the property has heritage value and contributes significantly to the character of the Lawrence Park area. Eventually, an agreement was made where the purchasers were allowed to build an extension twice the size of the current house, so long as the "street view" exterior remained unchanged. At the time of the walk, the house was midway through partial demolition.⁵ *Garden/ /Suburbia* recognized this old money vs. new money dispute by animating differing positions on



Example of a new home squeezing into a lot where an older smaller home once stood.
Photo by Melanie Bennett



79 Dawlish Avenue before construction.
Photo by Melanie Bennett

progress and preservation that highlighted the class reality that being on either the preservation or demolition camp was a luxury reserved for a small population. For me, 79 Dawlish was the kind of house that encapsulated everything that my childhood working class home in Scarborough lacked. I expressed this nostalgic attraction to its idyllic aesthetic by asking the spectators absurd questions like, “Would growing up here have given me a clearer sense of identity? ... Would my dad have been nicer to me if we lived in a house with 3 fireplaces? Do people who live near streams and forests have more freedom? Is life larger for people who live in utopian environments?” (Bennett and Jafine 11). In front of the half-demolished abandoned old house, Jafine counters my wistful questioning by sharing his memory of growing up nearby. He sheepishly confesses how his parents demolished an old bungalow and old tree in the backyard to build a large home and pool. He then adds, “It was my mom’s dream house. She only lived three years in it though ... It’s probably why my dad doesn’t want to sell it even though he lives there all alone” (Bennett and Jafine 12). We then ask the spectators to leave postcards in the mailboxes of any house on the street that attracted them and to fill in a message that stated what they imagined about the house (e.g., “This is the kind of house that would have a golden retriever,” or “This is the kind of house that costs a fortune to heat”). The idea of the postcards was inspired by my niece Saiya, who on a drive through the area noticed 79 Dawlish because of its distinctive features. She told me it was “the kind of house to find ghosts.” When I told her about the risk of it being demolished, she drew a picture of the house from her memory. Her artist rendition was printed on the postcards given to the spectators.

One of the more serendipitous encounters I had during devising the performance was with a distinguished senior who was shuffling alongside his equally aging golden retriever. The man noticed me photographing a large tree stump with the



Hartley Jafine describing the process of demolition in front of 79 Dawlish Avenue, which was beginning the construction process of building an extension.
Photo by Melanie Bennett

word “Heaven” spray-painted on its base. The stump blocked the path so that walkers and runners had to detour around it. The park was so meticulously mapped and maintained, that I was curious why the city would not have torn it out. The gentleman with his dog said that he approached the city about



Saiya Bennett's rendition of 79 Dawlish Avenue.
 Photo by Melanie Bennett



Melanie Bennett sharing a childhood memory about a broken family tree.
 Photo by Melanie Bennett

salvaging the stump, because it was a “strange and beautiful landmark” that was around for as long as he could remember. In *Garden/ /Suburbia*, the stump became a relic of my own broken family tree that I shared with the walkers:

What happens when a tree falls in a forest and your whole family is around to hear it? But they pretend they didn't hear it. They continue behaving as if the branches are still blooming with leaves, that they can still count on resting under its shade. I want to say, “there's no fuckin' shade anymore! A mere hollow stump that's useless.” I just wanted someone to acknowledge that the tree wasn't as strong and protective as we thought. But they all continued living as if the trunk was continuing to widen with the years of memory. As if the tree was still there in all its majesty. Is my memory distorted or is theirs? Sometimes the truth is too hard, so we find ways of making a heaven out of a hell. (Bennett and Jafine 7)

Due to its complex form (live and pre-recorded performance alongside scenes of audience participation) and ambitious goals (combining methods from site-specific performance and auto-ethnography), *Garden/ /Suburbia* could evolve to include ethnographic material drawn from residents of Lawrence Park. The June 2010 event was staged for an international audience of performance studies and theatre scholars who were attending the conference. It focused on Jafine's and my relationship with the site, while inviting the spectators to draw their own connection to the location through the participatory moments and their own observations. During the “free time” of the event midway through the performance walk, they were invited to wander off the route to explore, collect souvenirs, and take photos. At the end of the performance they were invited to think about the paradox in their own community:

Every suburbia has a garden if you take the time to look for it. This neighbourhood and many other Toronto

neighbourhoods are surrounded by lush green parkland and sentiments of community. Perhaps your own home is also such a place. Whenever I travel to other parts of the world, I am inevitably drawn to aspects and people that make me feel more at home. They may not remotely resemble anything recognizable to my own home, but there's something resonating that extends a feeling of familiarity and continues to live on in your memory long after a trip is over. A lot of you are visitors from far away and some of you live close by to here. Wherever you come from, we hope you saw something here today that you can take with you. We hope you're able to recognize the paradox in your own community as we have here. (Bennett and Jafine 14)

It is my intention to develop another incarnation of the project that expands the ethnography to include the participation of community residents. Ideally, I would like to restage the walk during Lawrence Park's annual Village Day Street Festival that takes place every June. Organized by the Lawrence Park Business Improvement Association (BIA),⁶ Village Day is an annual event that includes musical performances by local talent, sidewalk sales, art installations, children's activities, and an official “historical walk” hosted by volunteers at the Locke Library. The festival is an opportunity for residents to discover their community in an unexpected way.

Notes

1. The workshop was previewed to an audience of York University graduate students enrolled in a performance art class facilitated by Professor Laura Levin. As a result of time constraints and Collier being on tour with his band, the workshop excluded the MP3-led portion and focused solely on a live performance with myself and Jafine.
2. Aaron Collier is a musician, producer, and teacher. He is a regular composer and sound designer for Halifax's Angels & Heroes Theatre Company and has worked with Festival

Antigonish Summer Theatre, DMV Theatre Collective, Forerunner Playwrights Theatre Company, and WORKhouse Theatre. For more information, see <http://www.aaroncollier.ca/AARONCOLLIER/HOME/HOME.html>.

3. Andy Houston is the recently retired Views & Reviews Editor of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, a position he held since 2003. In 2002, he and scenographer Kathleen Irwin started Knowhere Productions, a performance company that had its debut with a multidisciplinary, site-specific performance in a disused wing of the Saskatchewan Mental Hospital at Weyburn, Saskatchewan, entitled *The Weyburn Project*. He has recently edited a collection of writings on environmental and site-specific theatre in Canada, published by Playwrights Canada Press, in their *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* series. Andy is a faculty member of the Department of Drama and Digital Arts at the University of Waterloo.
4. Hartley Jafine is an instructor facilitating drama- and arts-based courses, in the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) program at McMaster University while concurrently working on a PhD in the Faculty of Education at York University.
5. At the time of the writing of this article, the construction for 79 Dawlish has been completed and is listed for sale for an asking price of \$3.96 million.
6. Lawrence Park BIA is an association of local business and commercial property owners who work alongside the local municipality to promote various events and projects that are meant to improve the community. For more information, see <http://www.yongelawrencevillage-bia.com/index.asp>.

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