MEAGHAN (MEA) BISSETT

Gleaner's Garment:

Walking with the Windfall of

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Gleaning is the act of slowly, laboriously collecting the excess crops left behind by the reapers and the harvesters who have already commercially culled. To glean is also to question or tease out meaning from collected information. In this paper I will discuss what I gleaned by way of a/r/tographic inquiry while walking with Olmsted's design for parc Mont Royal. Reflecting on the entanglement of meanings that were made while walking, I will outline the renderings of a/r/tography as theoretical spaces situated in the act of gleaning. Following, I will expand on the connotations of gleaning as collecting research, living inquiry as the pursuit of the pedagogical opportunities within a/r/tography, and the moments of teaching and learning that occur throughout practice based research in the arts.¹ In doing so, I unfurl and perform what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the rhizomatic potentialities of an environmental arts pedagogy that invites new materialism and movement as provocations for post-colonial ways of knowing.²

To walk towards the mountain is to grant oneself a pause from the stressful demands of urban living. Such was the intent for the design of parc Mont Royal, completed by Frederick Law Olmsted for its inauguration in 1876.³ Ever since, parc Mont Royal has offered Montreal's urban dwellers respite from the chaotic demands of the city. As joggers and cyclists cross the first stretch of grass and arrive at the foothills of the mountain, the city sounds fade away. A canopy of Moose Maples and Red Oaks reach overhead, and the dampness of the forest floor brings cool air to the skin. As Hilary Ramsden articulates, walking is a practice of investigating the relationships between landscape, environment, and ourselves from the wide perspectives of history, literature, emotions, and socio-politics.⁴ These perspectives include the construction of McGill University, which was built on the mountain in 1821, followed by a cemetery in 1852, the historic hospital Hôtel-Dieu in 1862, and the park which was established in 1876. Before these colonial establishments, however, the geographical region around the mountain was a gathering place

and bountiful hunting ground for Indigenous foragers since 9000 BCE.⁵ In the last 200 years, Montreal has been significantly shaped and changed by industrial human activity, and thus the mountain has become a salve for modern turmoil. That being said, the park itself serves a greater purpose than just that of convalescence: the strategic, thoughtfully designed parc Mont Royal is an example of public art. By Cartiere and Willis' definition, the design of parc Mont Royal is public art because it is freely accessible to the public, is concerned with and affects the community, is maintained for, and used by the community, and it is publicly funded.⁶ What's more, it is discrete and harmonious with the naturally occurring environment and located in a place of congregation, both requisite qualities according to Montreal's mandate on public art.⁷

Figure 1. FLONHS, “Mt Royal Plan, 1877” in *Mount Royal in the Works of Frederick Law Olmsted*.⁸

These qualities of harmony and collectivity were meticulously considered for Olmsted's design of a park situated on the mountain, which had been named le Mont Royal by Jaques Cartier in the early 1500's.⁹ As Beveridge wrote in *Mont Royal in the Work of Frederick Law Olmsted*, he believed the quality of scenery was the most effective remedy for the harmful influences and stresses of urban life; “It acted in an almost mysterious and magical way to achieve that transformation to lift us out of our habitual condition into one which we should recognize as poetic.”¹⁰ It is in this park that I took up a/r/tography as a living inquiry that considers artistry, research and teaching/learning as equal identities that coexist simultaneously.¹¹ By applying this contiguity to more-than-humanism, we can consider nature and culture not as separate from our being, but as agentic forces at work with our experiences.¹² In this sense, Olmsted's design is public art in action: in performance with my performance, with nature as artist, myself as artist, Olmsted as artist; learning from one another by way of experimentation. Here, there is contiguous artistry/research/teaching.

Figure 2. *Gleaner's Garment*: Amalgamating the potentials of body/object/environment.

I began my performative walks in early autumn, during the climax of seasonal change. I focused my inquiry to the foothills of the mountain, situated in contrast with the surrounding city. In this area of the park, there are small nature paths, blazed by those who strayed from the larger dirt roads or established boulevards. I ambled along these trails and focused my attention to the relations between the elements of nature, culture, growth, decay, environment, movement, and matter.¹³ These relations between body-object-environment are not obvious or immediate. Attuning to these connections requires a sensitivity and curiosity, which is made possible through an a/r/tographic disposition. As Irwin states, slowing down and paying attention to the particular during forest walks enables us to see beyond that which is taken for granted, offering another perspective of the experience of walking.¹⁴ As an emerging a/r/tographer, I reflected upon the theoretical implications of attunement while walking.¹⁵ I was compelled to further participate in the interconnectedness of all things, meaning, I sought to experience the materiality and meaningfulness of the forest from a more-than-human perspective.¹⁶ With this in mind, I returned home to stitch together a garment to be worn while walking in the woods.

Gleaner's Garment is a handmade linen jacket covered in pockets of different sizes and is modelled after the uniforms of the landscapers and custodians I observed in parc Mont Royal. The creation of the garment exemplifies the a/r/tographic rendering of contiguity: it enables me to embrace the ambiguous conditions of walking with the forest environment and Olmsted's park design. I began routinely walking in *Gleaner's Garment*, each time yearning to fill the pockets with the leaves, fronds, stems and stocks, folioles and stipules that piled up on the forest floor. This yearning to glean and fill the pockets recalls Deleuze's characterization of desire.¹⁷ Desire happens when a productive drive appears "as a questioning, problematizing, and searching force."¹⁸ This force produces an assemblage, a building of questions and problems that demonstrates a becoming. This approach, which focuses on becoming, moves away from the traditional need for learning outcomes within an education. Instead, the focus is on process, how learning takes place.¹⁹ Each time I reached out to touch the forest floor I was driven by a desire to learn more about what Olmsted had intended in his design, and how the natural growth of the forest had surpassed his intentions. It was in this desire that I became aware of the pedagogical possibilities when experiencing movement and materiality.

Figure 3. *Gleaner's Garment* on Mont Royal.

The action of gleaning in this garment can be broken down into minute movements, each one theoretically linked to a/r/tography through the concept of renderings.²⁰ First, mindfully walking in the *Gleaner's Garment* required the intersecting dispositions of Artist, Researcher and Teacher. The garment served not only to further the process of gleaning, but also to document what had been gleaned. Here, contiguity accounts for the intersecting positionality of a/r/tographer and the documentation of the experience. The next movement within the action of gleaning is that of actually seeing and desiring something to cull. I decided what plants to pluck based on my instincts, informed by a tactile awareness of what is sharp, what is rotten, what would sting, and what I had not yet held. As a living inquiry, I instinctively drew on my previous experience to inform my gesture of gleaning. Once picked, I reflected on the implications of my actions. I considered the broader connotations (openings) of gleaning in the woods. I pondered: Who had cleared the landscape known as Montreal? How had they harvested the forest as a resource for capital gain? Furthermore, Indigenous peoples were displaced for this colonial harvest, so how can we consider this park truly public? As an example of public art, is the park really accessible to all?²¹ The assemblage of questions continued to grow just like the piles in my pockets. What I had gleaned stood in as a metaphor for cultivating a curiosity, and therefore the research process. In this sense, as Manning describes, new materialist data is something abstracted from experience into a system of understanding that is decipherable precisely because it is taken out of its original context.²² These data abstractions took shape as geo-stories, what Donna Haraway considers to be multiperspectival, co-creative thinking which opens us up to otherwise unimaginable possibilities.²³

Historically, gleaning was a legal prerogative of the poor in a number of Christian kingdoms, whereby citizens could gather the crops left behind from an already harvested landscape.²⁴ My gleaning of Mont Royal provoked a parallel with the colonially razed landscape of Montreal. I considered the uncultivated land gathered in my pockets, and the compatibility of Indigenous ontologies with new materialism, which acknowledge the vitality and agency of animals, plants, and elemental forces.²⁵ I understood that a living history was at work with my walking, and that as a latecomer to this landscape, I was gleaning the scraps of a land that once boasted a hearty landscape for foragers.

On one wandering walk, I passed a row of wood chipping trucks which were devouring trees that had come down in a storm. The sounds of destruction surrounded me as I hurried passed the heavy machinery operated by the caretakers and custodians of the forest. In another instance, up from the ground, a glimmer caught my eye. I turned to glean what was a small shard of mirrored glass and came to recognize it as a square shaped mirror that I had adhered to a cliff edge two years prior as part of a previous art installation. As I continued, I noticed the garbage scattered on the forest floor, soon to be buried under snow. I pocketed what I could and then moved on. I observed diverse uses of the pathways and lookouts of the park that demonstrated an accessibility to all abilities, just as Olmsted had intended. Strollers, canes, and crutches - no matter the prosthetic, the slow incline and wide paths were well worn by all. As I filled the garment with my observations and impulses, I developed an excess of matter and information. I had gleaned a robust understanding of nature as an invitational site for culture-making and experiential learning. This excess drew attention to the importance of reciprocity in reconciliation and in the equality of more-than-humanism. I asked myself, how might I focus on reciprocity as a mutual gifting rather than continued extraction?

Figure 4. *Gleaner's Garment* filled with Bloodroot, Dog's Tooth Violet, Red Oak acorns, Sensitive Fern: Some of which are native species and some of which are noninvasive foreign plants.

Figure 5. *Gleaner's Garment* after having been naturally dyed.

Again, I returned home with a full garment. This time, I emptied the pockets into a large basin, and steeped the nuts, seeds, and acorns in water. Over the next week I tended to the broth, enjoying the smell of the forest floor in my home. The oddment of Olmsted's park had coloured the dye-bath a warm brown. I lowered the *Gleaner's Garment* into the bath and let the linen soak in the colours of the forest. Soil gathered and stained the bottom of the pockets, and the garment wrinkled into a supple, worn state. Once the garment absorbed the natural dye, I wrung out the cloth and hung it to dry. The following morning, I emptied the basin of all the stones, shells, seedlings, and debris, once again filling the pockets of *Gleaner's Garment* with the windfall. As a final reciprocal gesture, I walked back to Olmsted's parc Mont Royal and emptied the contents of my pockets onto the forest floor.

Walking as a situational, relational, experimental methodology required an openness to tactile and sensual ways of making meaning.²⁶ I understood my ontological shift towards new materialism as an invitation to attune to the forceful agencies of other species. Doing so caused reverberations across the boundaries between body-object-environment and ruptured the nature/culture divide. Walking with the environment, with Olmsted's design, and with my senses connected my living inquiry to an embodiment of more-than-human perspectives. Entangled within the emergent questions of land care and public accessibility, I unearthed greater themes of environmentalism and colonialism. Between the interstices of detritus and substratum, I gleaned an understanding of the importance of reciprocity when teaching/learning, caring for the environment, and reconciling with the living past. The historic landmark of parc Mont Royal offers not only a site for refuge and a place for public gathering. It is also a space for conceptualizing environmental arts pedagogies and has for many millennia been a locale for foraging, harvesting, and gleaning.

Figure 6. Returning acorns to parc Mont Royal.

Endnotes

- 1 Rita L. Irwin, "Becoming A/r/Tography," *Studies in Art Education* 54, no. 3 (2013): 26.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1987), 23.
- 3 Charles E. Beveridge, *Mount Royal in the Works of Frederick Law Olmsted*. (Montréal, Direction des Grands Parcs et de la Nature en Ville, 2009): 5-13.
- 4 Hilary Ramsden, "Walking & talking: making strange encounters within the familiar." *Social & Cultural Geography* 18, no. 1 (2017): 57.
- 5 N. Lampron. *L'histoire*. (2011). Retrieved November 01, 2020, from <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/siteofficieldumontroyal/histoire>.
- 6 Cameron Cartiere, and Shelly Willis, eds. *The Practice of Public Art*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-4.
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- 8 FLONHS, "Mt Royal Plan, 1877" in *Mount Royal in the Works of Frederick Law Olmsted*. By Beveridge, Charles E. (Montréal: Direction des Grands Parcs et de la Nature en Ville, 2009), 18.
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- 13 Rousell et al., "Propositions for an Environmental Arts Pedagogy," 1820-1825.
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- 17 Gilles Deleuze and Paul Patton. *Difference and Repetition*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 106.
- 18 Rachel Fendler, "Desire Paths: A Reflection with Preservice Students in the Eventful Space of Learning." *Studies in Art Education* 60, no. 4 (2019): 276.
- 19 Ibid, 277.
- 20 Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Sylvia Wilson Kind. "A/r/tography as Living Inquiry through Art and Text." *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, no. 6 (2005): 898.
- 21 Lampron, *L'histoire*, 2011.
- 22 Erin Manning, "Ten propositions for Research-Creation." In *Collaboration in Performance Practice*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 133-141.
- 23 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 40-50.
- 24 Stephen Hussey, "The Last Survivor of an Ancient Race': The Changing Face of Essex Gleaning." *The Agricultural History Review* (1997): 63.
- 25 Tim Ingold. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 63-75.
- 26 Springgay et al., "A/r/tography as Living Inquiry Through Art and Text," 897 - 909.

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