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THE PANORAMIC MODE: IMMERSIVE MEDIA AND THE LARGE PARKS MOVEMENT

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract. This dissertation traces the nineteenth-century emergence of large urban park landscapes within a visual culture defined by spectacle. In addition to ameliorating insalubrious urban conditions and boosting real estate markets, the landscapes of the large parks movement participated in an expanded visual and discursive field that included immersive media. This insight follows from the theoretical position that landscape is itself an entity that is produced in part through representational practice. Case studies from Europe and the United States show that immersive representation defined nineteenth-century visual and media culture and shaped period understandings of geography, nature, and the urban milieu. The panorama, a 360-degree painting rendered at the scale of architecture to deliver virtual experience at the scale of landscape, epitomized a period interest in bending space and time through the production and consumption of immersive spectacles. The landscapes of the large parks movement participated alongside panoramas and panoramic media in a culture of perception that elided representations with “real” places, and together they expressed the full scope of a visual and discursive field defined by spectacle.

The dissertation asks how the immersive coordination of optical and somatic perception influenced period understandings of urban space and place and how such understandings coalesced in the actual space of the city as park landscapes. Chapter One establishes the study’s topical, theoretical, and methodological objectives. Chapter Two deepens the study’s theoretical framework. Chapter Three demonstrates the cultural reach of panoramic media and its significance for popular understandings of geography, nature, and designed landscapes. Chapter Four analyzes the use of panoramic images and strategies in designs for and representations of specific large park landscapes, including Edinburgh’s Calton Hill, London’s Regent’s Park, Manhattan’s park spaces, and the Parisian park system. Chapter Five charts the development of

Chicago's 1869 park-boulevard system alongside that city's unrecognized activity as a center for panoramic production and consumption in order to show that the system functioned as a panoramic device for seeing the city as a whole. Because the study treats both urban park landscapes and panoramas as representations that capitalize on the workings of perceptual psychology, Chapter Six draws on a body of visual theory that is informed by psychoanalysis in order to review the dissertation's findings and distill new insights for interpreting and curating historic places today.

Dedicated to Henry Briggs Wilson and George Alter Wilson

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PREFACE. I lived in Chicago from 1994 through 2007. During the latter years, my young family of four resided in West Humboldt Park, one of a constellation of west side neighborhoods roughly bounded by four large, historic parks. As we became avid users of the West Parks, I began to sense them as the confluence of images with real space. My awareness of my own subjectivity motivated questions about the role of representation in the places we experience as landscapes. The research that ensued addresses the nature of subjectivity in landscape perception.

Humboldt Park, which lay a few blocks east of our 1904 brick worker's cottage, was refurbished in the 1990s to reflect landscape architect Jens Jensen's (Danish-American, 1860-1951) early twentieth-century tenure as the West Parks System supervisor. We would drive two miles south to the Garfield Park Conservatory, which since 1908 has remained the largest botanical collection under glass in the United States. Douglas Park, southernmost among the three landscapes known during the nineteenth century as the West Parks, is the least intact of the group, but its varied features continue to reward visitors. Columbus Park, added on the city's furthest periphery as it expanded westward ca. 1920, is the only park Jensen ever developed solely from his own designs. His association with the other Chicago parks reflects his supervisory role and his adaptation of existing designs.

It was in these places that my children learned to ride bicycles and soar on swing sets. Together we collected crawdads and preying mantises, carrying them home to keep in makeshift terrariums and aquariums. We swam at the manmade beach in Humboldt Park—since the 1870s, Chicago's only inland beach—and flew kites from the big hill on the park's western face. In the winter, we sledged down the same hill, coasting across the frozen lagoon at its foot. We fished, mostly for bluegill, and watched as other fishermen landed enormous, invasive Asian carp. We dug bait from worm bins provided by the park district until someone showed us how to chop

crawdads for bait. We rode kick scooters and launched model rockets. We explored the formal gardens at all four parks, and inspired, we depaved our own back yard, which a previous owner had covered with eight inches of steel-reinforced concrete. There we planted a garden of prairie perennials in the full sun of a landscape devoid of any trees save for a weedy *ailanthus* across the back alley.

Humboldt Park was close enough to walk to; the others lay within easy driving distance. Each park seemed a world away from downtown Chicago and the lakefront, and also from the middle-class neighborhoods closer to the lake. Getting to the lakefront was challenging, because the west side is poorly served by train lines and a slow bus system. Relentless congestion makes driving slow as well, and parking in many lakefront areas is expensive. But it was easy to drive to any of the West Parks, where parking remains free and plentiful.

Despite their ample size (Garfield, the smallest, comprises 185 acres), amenities, and historic interest, the West Parks are used primarily by residents of the surrounding neighborhoods—not by visitors from other neighborhoods, nor by out-of-town travelers. The probability of witnessing illicit activities and the symptoms of poverty, likely at Humboldt and Columbus and virtually guaranteed at Garfield and Douglas, keeps middle-class Chicagoans who don't live in proximity to these places from using them as destinations. As such, the parks feel separate on multiple levels. They stand out from the gray grid, because they are green and organic; and they are separate from the middle-to-upper-class, predominantly white city, because Chicago is starkly divided by class and race.¹

¹ For recent analysis of the history and current state of racial and economic segregation in Chicago, see Luhby, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/01/05/news/economy/chicago-segregated/index.html>; Moore, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/08/racial-segregation-chicago-ills-america-too>; Moser, 2017, <http://www.chicagogamag.com/city-life/March-2017/Why-Is-Chicago-So-Segregated/>; and Nasr, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/09/story-segregation-chicago-170927055031348.html>. For recent graphic representations of United U.S. Census data on racial segregation by city see Cable, 2013, <http://demographics.coopercenter.org/racial-dot-map/>; Garfield, 2017,

Compelled by the otherworldliness of these vast (by Chicago standards) designed landscapes, I painted them.² In several bodies of work, I used the formal effects of composition, tonality, and chromatics to distill the landscapes' dissonant status as real places and as period representations. In *Humboldt Park* (2007), I composed an elevation of the park by tracing trees precisely from projected photographs. I rendered their forms in milky blue and layered them between translucent washes of iridescent white on a pale blue-gray ground. Depending on where the viewer stands, the trees shift from light-on-dark to dark-on-light, shimmering into and out of visibility in a manner that describes the hidden-in-plain-sight strangeness I sensed in a landscape that seemed by turns urban and rural, civilized and wild, artful and neglected, bucolic and dangerous.

In *Fabula: North Avenue* (2006), I painted one tree from each block of North Avenue as it transects the city, beginning at Lake Shore Drive and grazing the northern face of Humboldt Park along the eight mile distance to the city's opposite border at Harlem Avenue. Each tree is traced with documentary fidelity from research photographs but positioned subjectively in an effort to replace the grinding reality of my daily commute with a confabulated, wished-for landscape. In this way, the thirty-foot-wide painting stands both for the studio practice I was struggling to maintain and for the reprieve from the grid that the West Parks were themselves commissioned in 1869 to deliver—a reprieve I continued to seek.

diverse-parts-us-2017-8; "Mapping Segregation," 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/08/us/census-race-map.html?_r=0.

² Czerniak defines "large" parks in her introduction to *Large Parks*, 2007. Whereas Chicago's west side parks do not make the cut, Lincoln Park, at 1000 acres, does. So do Washington Park and Jackson Park, because she subsumes their respective acreages (1045 total) as one park under the long-disused nineteenth-century moniker "South Park." Measuring 219, 185, and 218 acres respectively, Humboldt, Garfield, and Douglas Parks are too small to fit Czerniak's rubric; the smallest park in her inventory, Paris's Sausset Park, occupies 445 acres. But Chicago's West Parks, as they were known when they were planned, were conceived as a compound whole comprising 622 acres plus interconnecting gardenesque boulevards, and in that sense, they constitute exemplars of the large parks movement.

My family and I hoped to live in Humboldt Park for many years. Instead, we left Chicago in 2007 as the strain of raising a family amid a cultural landscape shaped by poverty and drug addiction became unsustainable. West Humboldt Park wasn't improving; it was becoming more unstable. Whereas other Chicago neighborhoods where I had lived over the years since 1994 gentrified to the degree that I was repeatedly priced out, the region west of Humboldt Park has proven resistant to such change. Home values are dramatically lower in 2018 than during the inflated 2003 housing market we bought into. Most of the neighborhoods' elementary schools closed during Chicago's historic, city-wide school consolidations of 2013.³ In 2012, five years after we left Chicago, a thirteen-year-old boy—the same age as my oldest son—who lived two doors from our house stepped onto his front porch and died in a drive-by shooting. This was not unusual; the neighborhoods in the area roughly circumscribed by the West Parks comprise one of the two most impoverished regions of Chicago, regions that together continue to account for the majority of the city's highest-in-the-nation incidence of shootings and shooting deaths.⁴

The fact that I was able to relocate describes an obvious difference between my family and many of those who remain there. Although we were living paycheck-to-paycheck, cyclically uninsured, and generally struggling to make ends meet on modest and unstable incomes, I had an education, a portable if nascent career as a visual artist and educator, and familial ties in other communities. Many of those who live on Chicago's west side were born and raised there; others are recent immigrants to the United States. For various reasons, they don't have the agency to

³ See "CPS to Close," 2013, <http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2013/03/21/cps-begins-informing-schools-of-closing-plans/>, and Carroll, "The Interaction of CPS' Space Utilization," n.d. [after 2013], http://www.ushrnetwork.org/sites/ushrnetwork.org/files/blocks_together_report_school_closures_in_west_humboldt_park_chicago.pdf, accessed January 5, 2017.

⁴ See "Chicago Shooting Victims," continuously updated, <http://crime.chicagotribune.com/chicago/shootings/>, accessed September 2, 2017; Sanburn and Johnson, 2017, <http://time.com/4635049/chicago-murder-rate-homicides/>; and "Gun Violence in Chicago, 2016," 2017, <http://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/attachments/store/2435a5d4658e2ca19f4f225b810ce0dbdb9231cbdb8d702e784087469ee3/UChicagoCrimeLab+Gun+Violence+in+Chicago+2016.pdf>.

pick up and move when they fear for their family's safety. I remain aware of and compelled by circumstances I lived in temporarily, circumstances that hundreds of thousands of sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and grandparents inhabit permanently.

For my family, part of the region's appeal was affordable single-family housing located in proximity to four large, historic park landscapes. And yet, the fact that these parks offer the only naturalistic outdoor experiences for tens of thousands of Chicago children, many of whom have never even seen Lake Michigan, describes a situation in which these landscapes are functionally inadequate.⁵ The parks themselves remain aesthetically beautiful and recreationally useful; since the 1990s, a civic commitment to funding their maintenance has reversed a material decline that began in the late nineteenth century and persisted through the 1980s. But with proportions that are much greater in longitude than latitude, the parks limit east-west traffic through the west side. This has the effect of physically isolating the west side neighborhoods and thereby shields them wider public consciousness of the deteriorating social and material conditions within.

This is not a recent phenomenon. The parks themselves began to deteriorate almost as soon as they were built. Conceived in a boom and constructed during a cycle of recurring booms and busts, their grand proportions and aesthetics reflect aspirations for a situation that never really existed. They are not, and were never, surrounded by affluent or middle-class neighborhoods. Impressive period homes do line some of the boulevards, but most of the neighborhoods adjacent to and enclosed by the parks consist of modest early twentieth-century two and three-flats and single-family worker's cottages. Today, many of these homes sit beside industrial sites and superhighways built decades later.

As I moved through the parks with my children, I felt the presence of a past that conflicted with the image the landscape evinced. I sensed that we were moving around inside images. This

⁵ Kamin, "No Room to Run," 2011, 1.1.; Kamin, "How to Correct," 2011, 1.14.

dissertation grows out of my curiosity about the park landscape's expression of a period visual and media culture and its continuing capacity to convey period conceptions of nature, geography, and urban space and place.