



DESCRIPTION 1: 11233: SARATOGA PARK

Johannah Rodgers Donald Breckenridge

DOUBLE TAKE READING SERIES

APEX ART

APRIL, 2016

In late 2015 the poet, critic, and editor Albert Mobilio invited us to participate in Double Take, a reading series that he has curated over the last nine years at the Apex Art gallery in Manhattan. The reading series is organized around a constraint: two writers trade takes on a shared experience.

Donald and I talked about several possibilities for the project that we would collaborate on, deciding finally that a description of our neighborhood park, Saratoga Park, where we walk together at least once a week would be a fitting subject for our shared project. What does it mean to describe a place? What does it mean to see something? What do you see? How do you see? How does what you see differ from what I see? These were some of the questions that we hoped to address in this project. No description of anything is ever exhaustive. Since we know how important Saratoga Park is to our community, we wanted to share our project with you and invite you to contribute to it by writing your own description of your experience of the park.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Albert Mobilio, Apex Art, and Poets and Writers for giving us the opportunity to participate in this project.

We always enter from Howard Street then proceed counter clockwise through the park, on Sunday morning or early afternoon, in every season when the weather prompts us to take a walk around the corner in order to unwind.

There are alternating views. Actually a series. In time, in space, which may amount to the same thing, but one involves movement in the physical world and the other duration.

From a pedestrian vantage point the asphalt pathways (wide enough to accommodate a parks department truck or a police van) form two conjoined ovals that intersect in the center of the park. Two ovals where the center of each oval lays over the perimeter of the other is a symbol of eternal life.

A circle that is not a circle, but instead a figure eight, two circles meeting at the center point of the park, at Columbia, more frieze than statue.

I try not to obsess on my smartphone when the sun hangs over these oaks.



The park writes itself with its curving pathways. A script. An ampersand. A keyhole.

Before James C Brower sold this 3.2-acre lot to the city of Brooklyn in 1896 this site occasionally played host to traveling circuses.

Though, however suggestive that word may be of aspects of the park and one's experiences of its shape, objectively the park does not resemble a keyhole at all so much as the rectangular metal plate through which the keyhole is bored and the knob attached on doors in old houses.

The circle in the center of Saratoga Park contains the one story yellow brick building that houses the bathrooms, a three tier flag pole, the partially enclosed picnic area and a recently reconstructed bronze statue of Columbia—a personification of freedom and liberty—holding a shield and a palm frond, signifying both victory and peace beside the two plaques that contain the names of 106 servicemen and one servicewoman, all from the neighborhood, who died fighting during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War.

There are levels of information: coordinates regarding the park's geographic location, its longitude and latitude, it's sitting, its global positioning, its demographics: there are (or may be) 1,376 persons residing in the row houses and buildings immediately surrounding this park. The structure of the park is rectangular, the shape of the experience serpentine. As a result, its overall message is decorative, a curlie-cue.

What is the longest way to the warmest unoccupied bench presently facing the sun?

Before cameras, there were just bare eyes recording sights and sounds and writing was considered the best medium for documenting movements in space and time.

James C Brower and his family lived in this neighborhood where he made his fortune as a hardware merchant.



Writing is such a distorted mirror that it is hard to believe it was ever considered objective.

But it was. Or, allegedly was.

Lillian May Bogen Patterson resided a half a block away from Saratoga Park at 748 Macon Street, she worked in a Marine recruiting station in Manhattan and died of influenza while her husband Albert Edmond Patterson was fighting with the Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Coastal Artillery Corps against the Germans in France.

An eye and a mind take a walk in the park. The assignment is to record and report on the experience.

Styrofoam takeout containers smeared with ketchup, a nearly empty plastic two-liter orange soda bottle, foul smelling black plastic bags and a cluster of determined flies circling the garbage can.

While the camera unites the mind and the eye, or at least pretends they are one and the same, in writing they can wander and record separately.

Saratoga Park takes its name from Saratoga Avenue just to the east, itself named for the two separate Battles of Saratoga that occurred eighteen days apart near the town of Saratoga in upstate NY during the fall of 1777. The colonists resounding victory over the British at Saratoga convinced the French to formally recognize the validity of the colonist cause and enter the war as their ally.

Saturday, March 19, 12:56 pm. The park is not crowded. It never is. But there are a handful of people in it. Some kids playing on the jungle gym, a man walking his dog, a parks Department worker checking on something. A handful differs from scores in that it is possible to describe the location, appearance and activity of each individual.

The water fountain has not yet been turned on for the spring and summer.



A panorama is not a map.

The personification of Columbia as a symbol of virtue reflected the emergence of American neo-classicism that was exemplified by numerous appropriations of Roman symbols and terms. Although Columbia's personification has never been fixed, she is portrayed as a beautiful demigoddess of feminine virtue, somewhere between youth and middle age, and frequently draped in spangled classical garments while donning a laurel wreath, as she is in Saratoga Park, although sometimes she is depicted wearing a Native American headdress, a military helmet, or a liberty cap.

To write a map, I must give each location we have identified a name. We have so far identified nine: the entrance, the playground, the statue, the meadow, the chess area, a.k.a. the Saratoga Street entrance/exit, the sketchy part, the bathroom, the playground, the exit.

Statues of Columbia can be found atop the Capitol Building in Washington DC, atop Memorial Hall in Philadelphia, and here in Saratoga Park.

On top of this map, one imposes the tree map, specific varieties of trees and their attendant sizes and shapes being a part of the experience of being in any one location.

Here on the right and in every season there are four or more Mourning doves. Today they are foraging among the clumps of new green grass and clusters of daffodils that have already shed their yellow blossoms.

The mighty oaks at the entrance, the stately plane trees that let in more light around the playground, two or three dying saplings in the meadow, which is more of a patch of dirt, but being roughly in the center and being the largest open space in the park, I refer to it with this honorific title.

We proceed along the asphalt pathway holding hands—although not always—while reflecting on the previous week: family issues, renovation projects, exchanging gossip, the health of our cats, the books we are reading, speculation about vacation destinations is inevitably followed by a short list of potential cat sitters.



On the south side, the meadow is lined with Beech trees whose non-symmetrical forms distinguish them as survivors (Trees heal and repair themselves through intensive growth around a damaged or diseased area-- like human scar tissue, this becomes an organic band aid). With their flat gray bark the color of elephants, the beech trunks are ideal for inscribing messages and signs.

Five slender dusty brown Mourning Doves quietly moving with mincing steps and bobbing heads among the clumps of bright green grass.

As trees with writing on them, they are the park's scriptorium, its written archive: it seems obvious that P hearts T would not be legible to passersby on the chunky bark of an oak tree, but it is only as you walk by the extensively annotated beeches that you understand what ideal tablets they are.

A few years after the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War the Italian American sculptor J S Novelli was commissioned by the city to create a memorial in Saratoga Park and the statue of Columbia along with the plaques honoring the war dead was dedicated in 1921.

As a result of the text, there is some chatter in this stretch; a sense of other people, the proximity of this park to the dense urban environment which it so briefly interrupts making itself evident.

When they take flight their wings—uniform brownish above and with grey under wings—  
make an airy whistling sound.

The asphalt jungle seems an apt metaphor for describing the area surrounding the park though I find this metaphor troubling in its connotations, which, undoubtedly are part and parcel of its signifying power.

The frequent walks through this park usually suspend, at least temporarily, some of the frustrations we share.



The path veers to the right slightly and then curves around the bottom of one of the eights at the southeast corner. There is some padding here, as is always the case when a curve meets a right angle.

The word Saratoga is either of Iroquois or Mohawk origin and can be defined as "springs from hillside," or "place of miraculous water in rock" although neither the Iroquois or Mohawk Indians ever called what is now Brooklyn home—before the Europeans arrived and eventually stole it—this land was populated by the Lenape Indians whose territory covered what is now Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Southern New York and Eastern Delaware.

Smaller, spindly trees are planted in this buffer area. Neither shrubs nor bushes, these are just smaller trees that are meant to be decorative and are distinct because their branches all stem from the short trunks that rises only about six inches above the ground; they look more like fountains than trees.

During the great depression Novelli worked on the monuments crew for the parks department and in 1937 he helped repair his own statue of Columbia in Saratoga Park.

There are hedges behind the built-in seating area facing the Saratoga Street entrance.

Cement tables with chessboards permanently inscribed on their tops, alongside benches, which are, like the tables, attached to the ground.

The Mourning Doves light on the branches of any one of those four imposing oaks.

Immediately recognizable as commonly installed pieces of urban street furniture, these tables must have a name though I do not know it. They can be used for playing various games. In Manhattan, you most often see chess being played; in North East Brooklyn, you sometimes see people playing checkers, though even that is a rare sighting.

And everything under the Sunday afternoon sun related to our love passes through this park.



Usually the tables are simply there, abstract public statues, unmovable and therefore somewhat monumental but clearly designed to be used. Sometimes, a person will be lounging in the sun next to one of them.

A few years later, despondent over his floundering career, Novelli took his own life.

The feel of the park changes dramatically as you leave this sunny area and enter the shaded walkway that runs along the park's northern boundary. There are gingko trees here and some benches made of wood slats painted green and attached to black cast iron frames.

After the city of Brooklyn purchased this plot of land from James C Brower for one hundred and twenty two thousand dollars it was graded, young trees were planted, new paths were laid and the area was enclosed with an iron picket fence, a few years later a brick and wood frame shelter was erected within the park.

Inevitably there is a strung out individual draped over one of the two benches in the shade but the third and fourth face the sun directly in the mid-afternoons and are usually empty.

Their mournful hooting song, which is sometimes mistaken for an owl call, issues forth from the overhead branches.

We often sit on one of these in the full sun to bask for a minute. We discuss things here: house projects, life plans, the difficulties of the day or week. We and the sketchy characters are the only people who regularly sit in these benches though the people walking their dogs in the “meadow” often approach and come near. We have met many small dogs in the discussion area.

In 1974 the brass plaques listing the names of the war dead were stolen and sold for scrap.



The single story brick modernist structure which is painted yellow and sited next to a windswept juniper shrub always reminds me of northern California and its civic austerity.

Being here—that oak, those Mourning Doves, the overflowing garbage can, a recording of James Brown singing the title track from his album *The Payback* presently blasting out a car window as it cruises down Macon Street—is where we've found ourselves.

The bathrooms are here, and I assume, some storage space for parks department equipment. The tin facing edging the flat roof of the structure and the flag pole situated just in front of the building's south side make it look like a ship from this vantage point: that distinctive tripartite flag pole used in city parks often resembles a mast.

In 2000 Columbia was boosted from her pedestal and sold for scrap.

The American flag flies on the highest, center pole and below it is a POW flag. The white and green Parks Department flag is on the eastern pole and the City of New York flag on the western one. The building, its surrounding, shaped flower-beds and the flagpole give a distinctly civic air to this section of the park.

The young boy on the slide urging his friends to join him at the top.

The park is highly civilized in each of its components and in its entirety, but in this section one feels the presence of the governing organizations that make the park possible and maintain it. The statue of Columbia faces the yellow brick building and though on those occasions when we examine the statue we usually do so as we stroll down the path on our way to the meadow, it is much more a part of this section than the others, which are more playful, less tidy.

During a modest ceremony in September of 2014 the parks department unveiled a reconstructed Columbia based on historical photos, archives, and fragments of the original statue that were seized by the police at a scrap yard in Queens before being melted down.



Three steps on, there is the "Adam and Eve" tree with its twisted boughs that form the trunk. It is not an apple tree, in fact, it may not even be a fruit tree, but the intertwined branches curving around one another look like serpents.

I sometimes hobble over to the playground and hang on a bar after I've thrown out my back.

Then there is the black cement seal statue that is also a fountain, or functionally, a sprinkler: water spouts out of the seal's snout in the summer and kids run in and out of the spray. The seal, which is the size of a large sea lion, is recognizably a seal because of its smooth features and black color. It is surrounded by a blue lagoon painted onto the concrete. The lagoon itself is surrounded by a sandy color border: the beach.

A Sunday afternoon walk that provides us with a chance to unwind, the essence of these walks are predicated on associating a collection of qualities and characteristics that are unique to Saratoga Park and unique to the two of us as we hold hands—but not always.

The last section begins just after the playground, the path, before curving slightly to the right, is covered with reddish colored seeds that are fan shaped and have distinguishable bristles. From one angle, they remind me of those miniature Ecuadorian dolls that come packaged together in matchbooks; they are exactly the same burgundy color as the doll's dresses. But their overall shape makes them reminiscent more of a specific makeup brush: the one with the long handle and the flat, curved bristles.

The bronze plaques listing the local dead from the 1<sup>st</sup> World War were also reinstalled.

At other times of the year, the seeds on the ground will be a light green, not a burnt red.

We are circling back to what we call the entrance, now the park's exit and are again surrounded by wide and high and tall oaks.

James Brown's *Big Payback* trails out the window of a passing car.



On the north side, these trees are planted closer together than on the south side so you experience them more as a grove than as a vista or tableau. I have no doubt that the sense of an ending I associate with this stretch of the pathway has influenced my understanding and perceptions of these trees. They provide closure. Some darkness. A reason to leave.