

Higher Ground

*Honoring Washington Park Cemetery,
Its People and Place*

An exhibition of work by
Jennifer Colten
Denise Ward-Brown
Dail Chambers



GENERAL
PLAN
Washington Park
Cemetery

Higher Ground

Jennifer Colten



WPC Section 10. [271.11], 1991

In the early 1990's soon after moving to St Louis, I began documenting Washington Park Cemetery in Berkley, Missouri. The cemetery's long and tragic history reveals a complicated tangle of social injustice, racial politics, imbalance of power, and painful neglect. The history of this prominent African-American cemetery established in 1920, reveals within its microcosm of events, issues representative of larger and systemic conditions facing our region and the country at large.

When I began my artistic research I knew very little of the history of this place. What I found just beneath the surface, was a story too profound to ignore. What I saw as I wandered the site: the beautiful decade's old trees, the once careful landscaping, the quiet environment, all sat parallel to the upheaval caused by controversial politics. I also saw evidence of small yet tender offerings placed at grave sites. I saw efforts to maintain connection in spite of the disruptions imposed upon the most personal and private tributes to loved ones and to a community's cultural heritage. I began following this story – documenting, making work that was guided by the need to honor the families who had little or inadequate representation.

This land, the cemetery land, was not only beautiful, but the real estate also happened to be very valuable. On three notable occasions, the peace of the grounds was disturbed: first in the 1950's with the construction of Interstate 70, then in 1972 when Lambert Airport acquired nine acres for its use, and again in 1992 when bodies were disinterred to make way for the Airport runway expansion and MetroLink's extension to the airport.

Efforts to show the work in St Louis twenty years ago were unsuccessful yet I have always felt it important to show the work within the St Louis community first. This is the community to whom the work belongs, but it is also the community which needs to acknowledge the injustices that have been perpetuated. The need to examine our past and confront our present condition exists. Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri as well as across the country make this even more pressing.

In addition to honoring families with direct ties to the cemetery, the work might provide a forum for dialogue. The larger project, Higher Ground: Honoring Washington Park Cemetery Its People and Place, can raise awareness of the plight of the cemetery, and contribute to discussion of important issues of race and power in both the St. Louis region and beyond.

I aim for the work to celebrate the cultural and historical significance of Washington Park Cemetery, and to honor the people affected by decades of oversight, neglect, and disruption. Art has the power to facilitate healing and to initiate dialogue, while simultaneously and directly acknowledging historical, political and racial injustice.

My photographs are in part protest, in part tribute, and in part historical documentation



WPC Section 15. [105.6]
1993

WPC Section 13. [109.18]
1992



“My Hopes Were Never Brighter Than Now”
Race and Remembrance in Washington Park Cemetery
(excerpt)

Azzurra Cox



WPC Section 1. [87.11], 1992

As the spatial reification of the project of remembrance, the cemetery as type renders palpable the metaphorical cycle between landscape and memory. Yet the notion of continuity—and its antithesis in the form of erasure—is particularly poignant in the case of Washington Park Cemetery.

On a bracingly cold November day, sightlines are clear across the main lawn. Gravestones in various states of reveal punctuate the swells and valleys, and scattered trees read as silhouettes against a white sky. The bright yellow of a Waffle House billboard announces itself on the near horizon. Closer still, a communications tower makes a mockery of neighboring trees, its trunk taller and rootless. In the forested southeast portion of the cemetery, a dirt path weaves through brittle undergrowth, with occasional gravestones hinting at the many more hidden beneath. And then, a clearing: a stand of young cottonwoods encircle one grave. Above their branches, an airplane roars to landing. From the cemetery’s high point to the north, the land registers as a broad, unified gesture—until the buzz of Interstate 70 cleaves the still.

Established in 1920 as the region's largest commercial black cemetery, Washington Park embodies a tumultuous history. To this day, the site and its sprawling context provide equally weighty clues to reading this history. The cemetery's northern edge ends abruptly in ten lanes of asphalt. Barely past I-70, the runways of an international airport press in. Less than three miles further, one finds what remains of Kinloch, once the oldest incorporated African-American community in the state and since subjected to a nefarious regime of buy-outs. More broadly, the over 90 municipalities in surrounding St. Louis County form one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the country. Ferguson, the birthplace of #BlackLivesMatter, is a ten-minute drive away. The parallels between the gradual breakdown of Washington Park Cemetery and the civic fabric around it are unmistakable. The cemetery today is as much a site of African-American pride, tradition, and self-preservation as it is a living record of systemic breakage and neglect. While highly specific, Washington Park also speaks to the politics of memory in black cemeteries across St. Louis and the country as a whole—spaces where the continuity of plant life is both a nod to the transcendental and also, frequently, a means of erasure.

When considering contested sites which have fallen into disrepair, the seductive narrative of wilderness often frames such ruins as the apex of a natural progression of events. Detroit's so-called "feral houses" suggest a rewilding, a reversion to a state of unfettered nature. But where we see biomass, we too often forget design. As the product of complex sociopolitical processes, the state of Washington Park Cemetery is as much a result of carefully managed systems—in the form of racist policies and predatory norms—as was G.D. Joyce's original plan or, indeed, Frederick Law Olmsted's parks.

Yet while the vegetation tends to naturalize the structural violence embodied in the site, it is also a living testimony. Washington Park Cemetery's many histories are both covered and spoken by the landscape. *Higher Ground: Honoring Washington Park Cemetery, Its People and Place* encourages us to listen, to see, and to bear witness to Washington Park Cemetery's many legacies. It pushes us to understand this landscape, and the voices woven into its own, as an evolving record. In the very fact of this evolution thrives possibility.

THE ST. LOUIS ARGUS, FRIDAY, JUNE 18, 1920

WASHINGTON PARK

GROUNDS NATURAL BRIDGE
AND BROWN ROADS
PHONE, Cabany 1936

A GARDEN CEMETERY OR BURIAL PARK

WITH PERPETUAL CARE
AND MAINTENANCE

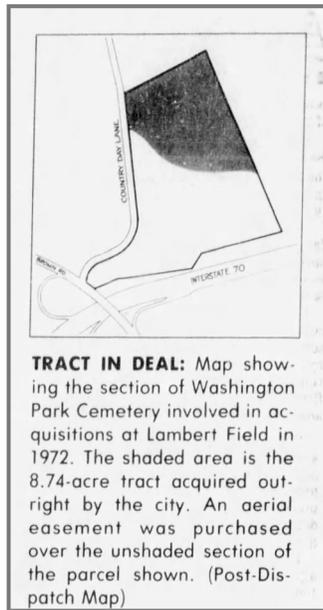
OFFICE: 220 CENTRAL NATIONAL BANK
BUILDING, 705 OLIVE STREET
PHONE, Olive 7825



FOREGROUND, ENTRANCE CHAPEL AND KEEPERS LODGE AS SEEN FROM NATURAL BRIDGE ROAD

VISIT THIS BEAUTIFUL PARK--GROUNDS OPEN DAILY FOR INSPECTION

Drive out Natural Bridge Road to Brown Road or take Kirkwood-Ferguson Car to Carson Road--Automobiles to grounds meet all cars every Sunday afternoon from 2 to 5 o'clock



TRACT IN DEAL: Map showing the section of Washington Park Cemetery involved in acquisitions at Lambert Field in 1972. The shaded area is the 8.74-acre tract acquired outright by the city. An aerial easement was purchased over the unshaded section of the parcel shown. (Post-Dispatch Map)

Washington Park Newspaper Advertisement
The St. Louis Argus, June 18, 1920

Annexation Map
The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 20, 1975

*No Landscape Tells But One Story,
No History Follows But One Path*
*Considering Washington Park Cemetery
and Narratives of a Divided City*
(excerpt)

Michael R. Allen



WPC Section 5. [7.18], 1992

At Washington Park Cemetery, the actual geography of a place like St. Louis becomes evident. This is a geography where lines laid by surveyors and landscape designers alike are cleavages marking social territories. In this world, lines confer interior and exterior status, no matter how pretty the lawns in between. This territorial ferocity, this fearful division of people, draws itself into lines across this entire continent. This cemetery is not a small lament, recognized locally, but part of an ineluctable system of land divisions whose scars are named and picked but never healed. There are many Americans who assume that Black Lives Matter – as cry or suspicious subject -- began with Ferguson, or in outrage expressed to litanies of tragically mundane police shootings, or in disgust with the Chicago murder rate. That's an amnesiac history.

The attempt to locate origins of movements, to mark in time cries for humanity that are perpetual, has traumatized both designated memorial landscapes and vernacular neighborhoods of St. Louis alike. When Washington Park Cemetery opened in 1921 as a speculative capitalist project, black St. Louisans were fighting for equal access to use public parks in north city. White St. Louisans had tortured survey lines since the Great Migration began, using streets, parks, and cemeteries – spaces that should have constituted commons capable of forming an inclusive public – into a containable series of policed domains, often with financial benefits. Washington Park Cemetery reminds us that the present condition is continuous with our past, and that the

beauty realized then could well be the justice achieved now. James Baldwin powerfully enjoined us to know that: “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.”

Preservation efforts like the current campaigns at Washington Park Cemetery and nearby Greenwood Cemetery are underway across the country, and typically are not part of larger regional, mostly white-led preservation fundraising efforts and cultural heritage tourism. There is a perpetual separation from abundant social resources for many black cemetery landscapes. Yet these cemeteries also maintain cultural customs often forbidden by strict management programs at other cemeteries, such as the use of homemade wood or concrete markers, grave decoration, offerings and tree and bush plantings by family members. Black cemeteries enact burial customs going back to the early diasporan influence in North America and even back to African societies. Their preservation is defiant, but difficult.

Today, the gatekeepers of the land are failing Washington Park Cemetery and so many other sites of black heritage. Historic preservation, which largely has been the record of privilege in this country, decided that the federal National Historic Preservation Act should make cemeteries – landscapes of the everyday rituals that unite people – difficult to be granted official status because of their commonality. The preservation of historic exceptions

reinforces class and race divides. Simultaneously, as architects and designers probe the fractured reaches of St. Louis, they often come to mark their own intellectual territories. Sites that deflect easy readings, and fit the strands of human grief that tie all people together, seem to have no stewards –only people drawing lines atop the decades of lines that have already exhausted hope .

Washington Park Cemetery’s current condition reveals a hard honest truth, no longer concealing power relationships, and suggesting an ecological beauty constant amid social maladjustment. Of course, the current state does not necessarily represent justice for those buried there. Justice remains the aspiration for this land, and current awareness and ownership place that closer in reach than ever before. While the abundance of unplanned trees disrupts visual order and individual burials, the trees are powerful. One African American burial tradition is the planting of a tree at a grave site as a symbol of immortality. Washington Park Cemetery’s accidental forest almost seems protective and healing, although equally an affront to the landscape’s intention. The forest saw the land through rough days, but also kept the burials shielded from larger disturbance. Removal of the forest is a goal of those whose loved ones reside on the land. As the forest slowly disappears, what will emerge in full view again will be a hallowed resting place, renewed as a cultural land shared in common.



WPC Section 6. [80.6]
1992

WPC Section 5. [14.11]
1992



Works in Show

Jennifer Colten

1. *WPC Section 10. [271.11]*, 1991
2. *WPC Section 15. [138.15]*, 1993
3. *WPC Section 1. [290.4]*, 1991
4. *WPC Section 5. [21.9]*, 1992
5. *WPC Section 5. [133.1]*, 1993
6. *WPC Section 1. [2.2]*, 1992
7. *WPC Section 11. [287.18]*, 1991
8. *WPC Section 1. [87.11]*, 1992
9. *WPC Section 1. [289.15.2]*, 1991
10. *WPC Section 14. [113.13]*, 1993
11. *WPC Section 13. [109.18]*, 1992
12. *WPC Section 6. [80.6]*, 1992
13. *WPC Section 15. [134.17]*, 1993
14. *WPC Section 14. [113.7]*, 1993
15. *WPC Section 6. [9.1]*, 1992
16. *WPC Section 5. [11.13]*, 1992
17. *WPC Section 5. [7.18]*, 1992
18. *WPC Section 14. [136.15]*, 1993
19. *WPC Section 15. [134.19]*, 1993
20. *WPC Section 10. [289.14]*, 1991
21. *WPC Section 7. [7254]*, 2014
22. *WPC Section 10. [7779]*, 2014
23. *WPC Section 5. [14.11]*, 1992
24. *WPC Section 5. [44.1]*, 1993
25. *WPC Section 14. [88.11]*, 1992
26. *WPC Section 16. [81.17]*, 1992
27. *WPC Section 15. [81.6]*, 1993
28. *WPC Section 15. [135.16.3]*, 1993
29. *WPC Section 14. [107.9]*, 1992
30. *WPC Section 14. [291.13]*, 1991
31. *WPC Section 12. [79.15.2]*, 1992
32. *WPC Section 14. [111.12]*, 1993
33. *WPC Section 15. [105.6]*, 1993
34. *WPC Section 14. [79.17.2]*, 1992
35. *WPC Section 15. [114.8]*, 1993
36. *WPC Section 1. [21.1.2]*, 1992
37. *WPC Section 14. [107.4]*, 1992
38. *WPC Section 7. [90.16]*, 1992
39. *WPC Section 10. [273.12]*, 1991
40. *WPC Section 14. [7146]*, 2014
41. *WPC Section 15. [7139]*, 2014
42. *WPC Section 1. [8643]*, 2014
43. *WPC Section 10. [7766]*, 2014
44. *WPC Section 6. [7112]*, 2014

45. WPC Section 12. [7715], 2014

46. WPC Section 10A [2265], 2012

47. WPC Section 12. [48.5], 1993

Denise Ward Brown

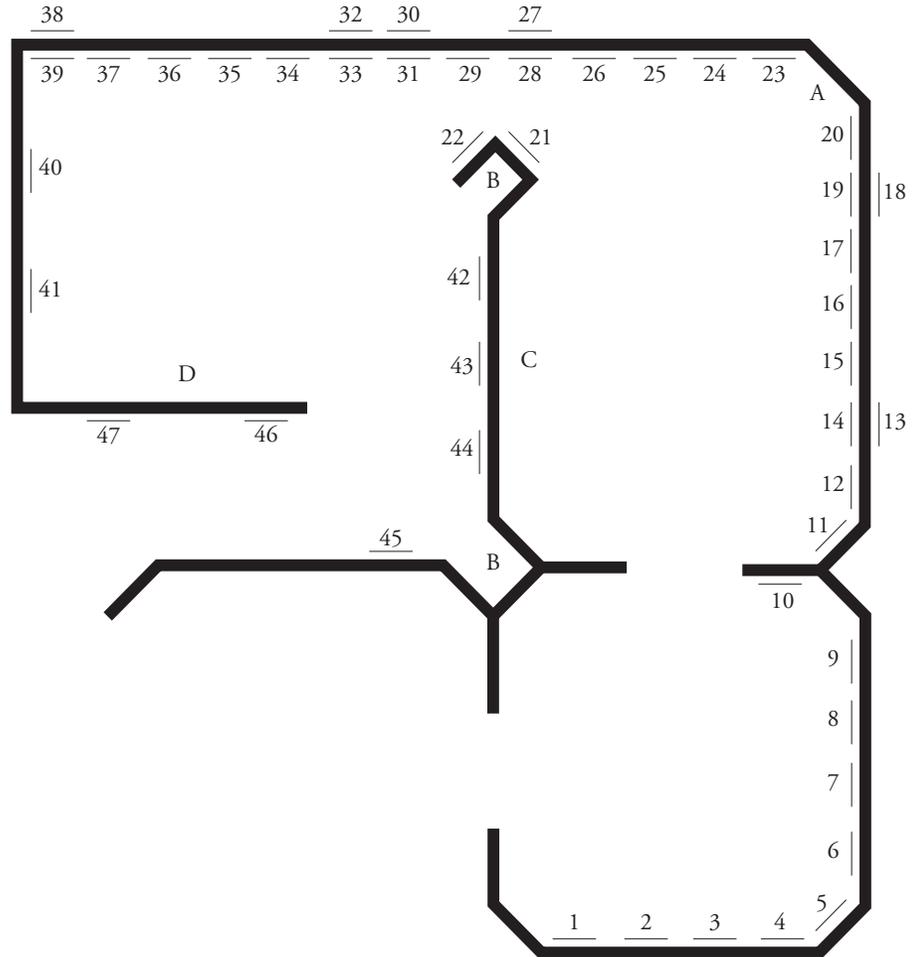
A. *Home Going*

B. *Home Going, Video Interviews*

Dail Chambers

C. *A Mythological Journey*

D. *Sankofa*



Thank You

Many have helped make the exhibition possible. Thank you to:

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- County Blue
- Nova Color Inc

 Washington University in St. Louis
SAM FOX SCHOOL OF DESIGN & VISUAL ARTS



Booklet design by Jesse Vogler

Cover photo: *WPC Section 14. [107.9]*, 1992

Frontispiece: Title Plate from *Washington Park Cemetery General Plan Map*

Schedule of Events

Artist Gallery Talk

The Sheldon Art Galleries, Friday, April 7, 2017, 6–7:30 p.m.

Featuring Jennifer Colten, Denise Ward Brown, and Dail Chambers.

Admission free, but reservations are required.

Contact Paula Lincoln: plincoln@thesheldon.org or 314.533.9900 x37

Panel Discussion

Missouri History Museum, Wednesday, May 24, 2017, 6:30–8:30 p.m.

Moderated by Gwen Moore, Missouri Historical Society Curator of Urban Landscape and Community Identity.

Featuring *Higher Ground* project artists Jennifer Colten, Denise Ward-Brown and Dail Chambers and catalogue essayist Michael R. Allen.

The panelists will illuminate the history of Washington Park Cemetery and discuss the process of honoring its history through this exhibit.

Missouri History Museum's Des Lee Auditorium, admission free.

Information at mohistory.org or by calling 314.746. 4599.

Additional Programming

Notes from Home Gospel Concert

The Sheldon, June 13, 2017

Artist workshop with Dail Chambers

The Sheldon, April 8, 2017

Several *cemetery cleanup days*: dates and times to be announced

Information on additional programming will be available on

The Sheldon's website: www.thesheldon.org

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to Olivia Lahs-Gonzales and the Sheldon Art Galleries for agreeing to host this exhibition. The project has been complex, with many ambitious goals. I am so glad none of us knew how involved the project would become - we might never have started.

Many people have contributed to the final production of this work—too many to individually name. Special recognition though to Research Assistants, Terri Williams for her incredible tenacity and ability to find crucial information — information which would otherwise remain scattered and forgotten, and Kari Varner for her precision and technical prowess. Thank you to Sonya Rooney and Shannon Davis with Washington University Olin Library Special Collections, for helping produce the project's website.

I am honored to have worked with fellow artists Denise Ward-Brown and Dail Chambers, and to writers Michael Allen and Azzurra Cox. Their creative voices have added enormous dimension to the project, deepening and extending its message.

Very special thanks to Gwen Moore, Curator of Urban Landscape and Community Identity at the Missouri History Museum. If it were not for her keen eye and fierce spirit, I would not have re-ignited efforts to exhibit this work. More than once Gwen's persistent and steadfast belief in the project buoyed me and brought me back to focus. Also, a profound thank you to Jesse Vogler—my excellent friend and creative partner. With boundless enthusiasm and deep understanding, he has offered wisdom and unwavering support, listening to my ideas and providing thoughtful counsel.

Finally, I offer this work to the community of Washington Park Cemetery. This exhibition is a small gesture, but one I hope will inspire cultural awareness and civic accountability. Above all I wish to honor the historical and personal narratives of the people of Washington Park Cemetery— those who were buried there and those still living and remembering.

Jennifer Colten
2017