

“Even though the travelers were witnessing the daily realities of the contact zone, even though the institutions of expansion made their travels possible, the discourse of travel that natural history produces, and is produced by, turns on a great longing: for a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence.” (Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 57)

Beyond Anti-Conquest:

Unearthing the Botanical Archive with Locative Media

This essay considers the role locative media can play in unearthing the complexities of the colonial archive associated with botanic gardens, and foregrounding the history of human and non-human entanglements in urban green spaces such as public gardens. Of late, institutions like the New York Botanical Garden, the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, and the Singapore Botanic Garden are supplementing the printed information distributed to their visitors with locative media applications such as *NYBG in Bloom*, *Discover Kew* app, and *SBG Navigator*. While these digital platforms have the potential to introduce visitors to a more critical understanding of the history of botanic gardens, to date they have tended to reinforce the perception of gardens as a “sanctuary of illusory innocence and eco-archaic return” (Nixon 187). In the course of conducting my archival research on the colonial plant-hunting and the origins of botanic gardens at some of these institutions, I became interested in the untapped potential of locative media for disrupting the perception of these gardens as spaces outside time and politics. This paper briefly overviews the history and design of alpine gardens, the critical affordances of locative media apps, and the design of the locative media experience I created for the Jardin botanique de Montréal (JBM)—the *Alpine Garden MisGuide / le Jardin alpin autrement*. I consider how mobile media platforms can be used to challenge the nostalgia for colonialism that often unconsciously inflects the way visitors are encouraged to experience botanic gardens, and also highlight the politics of the human/nonhuman entanglements that have produced these plant

collections in the past, and enable them to thrive in the present. Unlike most locative guides currently available in botanic gardens, the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* is structured to prompt garden visitors to engage with the garden's colonial archive, and grapple with the ongoing impact of globalization and imperialism on the environment. While other types of public museums and galleries struggle with recent calls to come to terms with the colonial attitudes that underpinned the practices of acquiring and exhibiting their collections, botanic gardens remain relatively uninvolved in this process of self-reflection.¹ Instead, most botanic gardens tend to present their plant collections and gardens devoid of reference to the history of colonialism, adopt a paternalistic attitude toward the environment, and thus deflect a serious examination of how this might continue to shape their visitors' perceptions of issues such as environmental justice, sustainability, and climate change.

Alpine garden design as anti-conquest

The *Alpine Garden MisGuide* is a locative media project that brings the complex cultural and historical insights of the paper archive on botanical exploration in dialogue with the embodied experience of visiting botanic gardens. Rock and alpine garden culture first gained popularity during the late nineteenth century, prompted by a shift in away from the use of large and expensive Victorian glass houses to maintain more fragile tropical plants, toward naturalizing and integrating more 'hardy' plants gathered in the mountainous regions in south and central Asia into outdoor gardens at the imperial centre.² In other words, rather than maintain exotic plants in climate controlled glass houses in the winter, and then 'bed them out' in

¹ See for example two recent articles in *The Guardian*, "Museums and looted art: the ethical dilemma of preserving world cultures," and "French museums face a cultural change over restitution of colonial objects."

²See Elliot 2011 for an excellent overview of the history of British rock and alpine garden culture.

formal displays during the summer months, British horticulturists came to take pride in adapting alpine exotics to northern gardens, designed to display and sustain foreign plants as ‘wild’ and ‘indigenous’.³ Ironically, though the ‘wild’ aesthetic of rock and garden design suggests a critique of anthropocentrism, it also simultaneously masked how the collection and transplantation of exotic alpinines was enabled by the control of territory through European imperialism, as well as the power relations that informed the practices of colonial botanical exploration during this same period.

Counter-landscaping with locative narratives

The app seeks to engage garden visitors in this more critical understanding of the influence of colonialism on botanic garden aesthetics, and by extension, public parks, and other types of urban green spaces.⁴ The conceptualization of the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* emerged out of the following questions that hinge on issues related to design: How can locative media be used to unsettle rather than reinforce nostalgic or “eco-archic” ways of experiencing botanic gardens, spaces that are otherwise coded to encourage a relationship to nature that is innocent, apolitical, and outside time? How is research on colonial plant-hunting and garden writing transformed when it is tied to visitors’ experience of botanic gardens, essentially curating the garden with this material using a locative narratives and mobile media?

Despite the current lack of innovative mobile apps for critically curating the history of botanic gardens, creators and theorists of locative media have been engaged in charting an ambitious agenda for using mobile media to disrupt habituated ways of seeing and experiencing

³ Elsewhere I have written about the colonial attitudes that link British colonialism, plant-hunting, mountaineering, and rock and alpine culture. See Didur 2015b.

⁴ And hints at the broader influence human and nonhuman entanglements of the environment and anthropogenic climate change.

space and place. Anders Sundnes Løvlie defines locative media as “mobile media applications which are sensitive to the user’s physical location—[and] make it possible to connect texts with places” (1). On the surface, this is essentially what museum guides do—they are hand held texts or recordings that link ‘data’ or information to place in ‘useful’ or practical ways. It is the expectation that mobile media can only be used to provide didactic information, however, that the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* subverts.

The *MisGuide* app challenges the idea of transparent, objective knowledge of the botanic garden and instead defamiliarizes ways of looking and moving through its collection. The app foregrounds the embodied quality of the user’s perception by linking the content and function of the locative app to specific locations in the garden, and in the process, draws attention to the entanglement human/non-human agency in alpine garden design and colonial knowledge-making projects such as plant hunting.

Playing on the embodied quality of experience and place-making affordances of locative media, in 2012 I began the process of conceptualizing and developing the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* for curating alpine collections at contemporary botanic gardens. Working with my programmer, Ian Arawjo, we developed a locative narrative interface that functions to make visible botanic gardens’ implication in the history of imperialism and extractive capitalism, as well as raise questions about how this shapes contemporary attitudes towards the environment. After many hours spent designing and testing of the platform, creating the artwork, researching, writing, recording, and assembling materials for the plant hunting-themed locative narrative, we

published the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* on the iTunes Apple Store and launched the app for public use in at the Jardin botanique de Montréal in May 2015.⁵

At the entrance of the Jardin alpin at the JBM, signs invite garden visitors to download the app and “explore the relationship between the history of alpine garden design and colonial plant-hunting.”

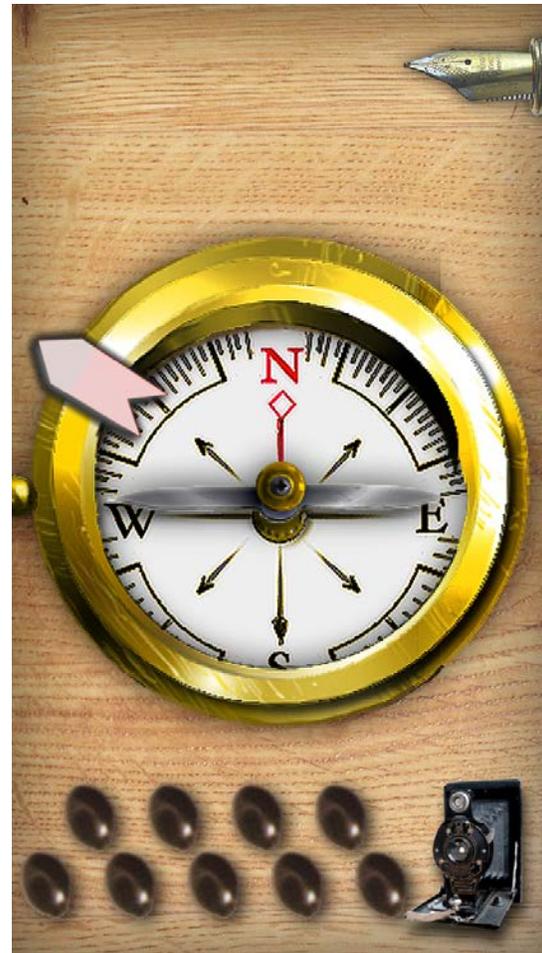
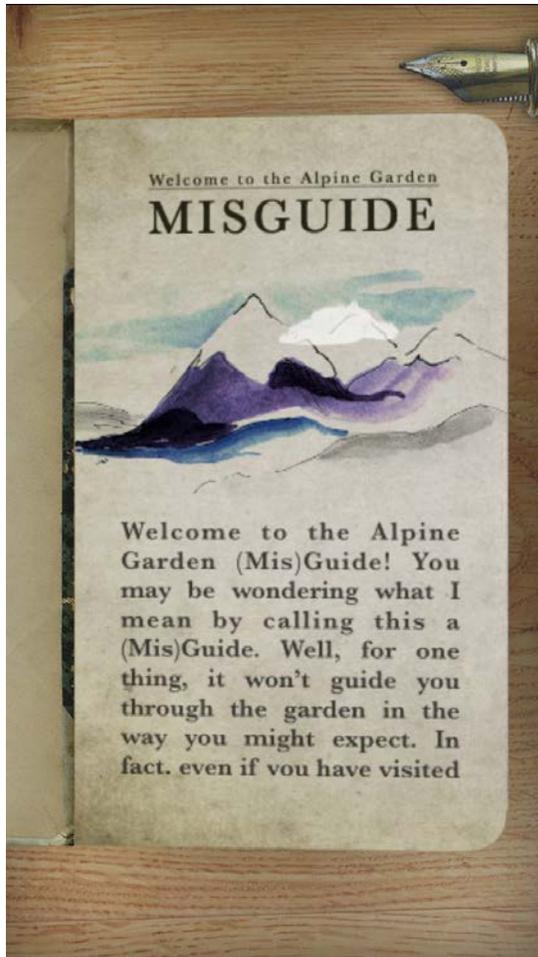


As users open the app, they are presented with an animated ‘field notebook’ (complete with turning pages, scrolling text, and a sketch of a distant mountain range cloaked in animated

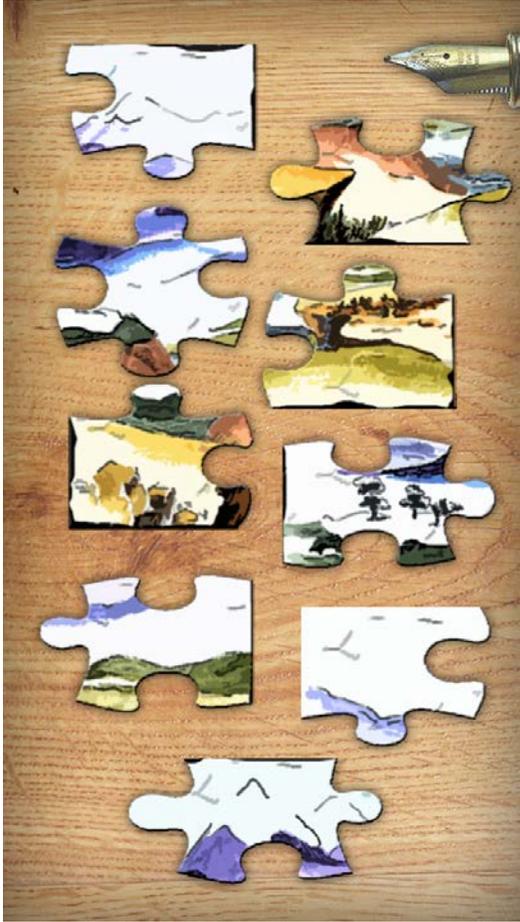
⁵ I wish to also acknowledge the research support of le Laboratoire NT2 and the Technoculture Art and Games Research Center at Concordia University, Montreal. I am also grateful to the administration and gardeners at the Jardin botanique de Montréal for supporting this project throughout its development, especially René Giguère, chief horticulturalist in the Jardin alpin at the Jardin botanique de Montréal.

drifting clouds), and greeted by the voice of a narrator who invites them to embark on a “plant-hunting expedition.” “Welcome to the *Alpine Garden MisGuide*,” states the narrator,

You may be wondering what I mean by calling this a ‘misguide.’ Well, for one thing, it won’t guide you through the garden in the way you might expect. In fact, even if you have visited the Alpine Garden before, I hope the *MisGuide* will help you see and experience the garden in a new way. Did you ever wonder how the garden and plants got here in the first place? I’m not just talking about the history of this garden, but alpine gardens in general. This *MisGuide* asks you to consider how alpine gardens have been shaped by the history of colonialism, botanical exploration, and writing about rock and alpine gardens in the first half of the twenty-first century.



The narrator then quickly explains how to use the GPS enabled 'compass screen' to locate nine different QR codes installed throughout the garden, how to use the in-app QR code scanner (disguised as a Kodak Brownie) to scan the QR codes, and how to activate the content linked to images of jigsaw puzzle pieces that appear on the 'desktop screen' after the QR codes are scanned.



By scanning the codes, the user “collects” nine different jigsaw puzzle pieces that, when touched, are linked to fictitious expedition paintings of plant specimens, each of which surrounded by images of several paperclips also linked to touch-activated sound recordings, images, and texts. This material introduces users to different historical, autobiographical, and literary texts about alpine plant-hunting and garden design meant to deflect the impression of botanic gardens as “anachronistic spaces.” Flowers in the expedition drawings fall away from the screen if touched by the user and reappear in the in-app “herbarium,” a feature meant to remind the user that plant-hunting involved the collection and transport of the plants away from the landscapes in which they were found. The images of the gramophone (sound icon), Brownie camera (QR code scanner icon), and pen nib (navigation icon), represent period specific forms of

media that were used by plant hunters to frame their experience of travel in foreign landscapes in ways that reinscribed colonial authority. Once all nine jigsaw puzzle pieces are collected, they can be assembled to reveal an imaginary alpine landscape, the fictitious location where the expedition drawings of different plant specimens were created, and a reminder of the ‘elsewhere’ that is always in tension with the collection housed in the botanic garden.

Rather than provide didactic information about the types of plants contained in the garden, the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* redirects garden visitors’ attention to the historical context and power relations that informed the practices of botanical exploration, the cultural attitudes that shaped the aesthetics of rock and alpine garden design, and details of the labour that goes into maintaining the gardens in the present. For example, the chief horticulturalist of the Jardin alpin at the JBM, René Giguère, describes how he trims the large conifers to appear as though their growth has been stunted by high alpine conditions, and explains how the garden’s ‘mountain stream’ (controlled by a hidden tap) is meant to imitate snow-melt from imagined mountains above. The visitor’s combined experience of the app, the garden setting, and the textual and recorded accounts of colonial and postcolonial plant-hunting and gardening, works to disrupt the “smooth optics of tourism” (Nixon 182) associated with contemporary botanic gardens, and instead, makes visible the ‘absent-presence’ of a colonial archive associated with botanical exploration and garden history.

The *Alpine Garden MisGuide* is a locative media experience that is structured to leverage the productive tension between reading and viewing critical, creative, and archival materials in the context of a site-specific installation. The pedagogical opportunities afforded by tying the experience of place to the experience of reading is one that has received much attention by scholars of locative media. The use of locative media in these literary and counter-intuitive ways

is now well over a decade old, with interactive audio installations such as *Urban Tapestries*, *[murmur]*, and *textopia*, as prominent examples of artistic uses of the technology. As Brian Greenspan has argued “locative media represents a productive hesitation between literary fiction, documentary, audio-visual installation, and site-specific theatrical performance” (1). “As cultural practices” writes Greenspan, “they are located in the everyday sites of commerce and leisure within both natural and built environments, at the crux of the user’s public and private identities” (1). The *Alpine Garden MisGuide* enhances this aspect of the digital interface, asking the user to engage in the practice of searching for and collecting QR codes installed at various locations throughout the garden. Though the app encourages the activity of collecting and accessing the content of the ‘vouchers’ (the botanical term for pressed flower specimens we used to refer to the app content) while in the garden, the user also accumulates the content as a souvenir of the visit, allowing for the review the material outside the garden, thus extending the user’s engagement with the app content beyond the immediate visit to the JMB.

Of course, encouraging reading or engaging with texts outdoors is not new. As Andrew Piper reminds us in his recent study, *Book was There*, “by the end of the eighteenth century, reading outdoors was decidedly in vogue” (109).⁶ Reading outdoors, Piper explains, brought book lovers together as a community and encouraged the idea of escape to an elsewhere through the book. Despite the performativity associated with locative media, the experience of reading visual and written signs still relies heavily on the idea of being “transported to fictional worlds”,

⁶ “In turning outward toward the woods, the tree reminded readers of the turn inward into the expanse of human thought. Even at it most experientially poignant (being in nature), reading a book outdoors could serve as a means of accessing no place at all. It served as a space to lose one’s sense of place” (Piper 112).

away from one's immediate context (Greenspan 3). However, it is this understanding of the experience of reading that the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* capitalizes on, while at the same time tying the experience of reading and viewing to a particular location in the garden through the search for QR codes. As Greenspan explains, locative media "mobil[izes] printed literatures traditional mode of decontextualized engagement within a spatial context in ways that often *interfere* with the performance of place, foregrounding the productive tension between the traditional experience of fictional transportation and new modalities of mobility that constitutes our present medial condition" (2). Like Greenspan's *StoryTrek* (a locative platform he has developed for adapting to any space using GPS tags), the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* seeks to exploit the "spatial tension between conventionally sedentary modes of literary engagement and more dynamic, continuous and complex models of spatial interaction" that locative technologies allow for in the garden. (2). Thus "where the book was both somewhere and nowhere" argues Piper, "digital texts by contrast are almost always somewhere and *elsewhere*" (112-113). In other words, while on the one hand, digital texts make it harder for us to get lost in the action of reading (when text is anchored to place through things such as GPS or QR codes), on the other, the texts the *Alpine Garden MisGuide* ties to specific locations in the garden pull us away from place, in the manner of the book. Moreover, while users can download the app to their iPhones from anywhere in the world, they cannot unlock the context tagged to the botanical drawings without visiting the JMB Jardin alpin to locate and scan the QR codes. "Despite this intensification of place" Piper explains, "digital reading can also feel like it is happening in many places at once" (122). In this sense, locative media counters the disembodied, decontextualized experience of viewing or reading material online in stationary ways by forging what Piper describes as "corporal connections [...] between what we've seen and where we've seen it"

(121). A locative narrative like the *Alpine Garden MisGuide*, therefore, is meant to span the space between the garden and the archive and serve as an electronic palimpsest that relies on a “transitive” reading experience, “layering reading on top of real space in an interactive way” (123).

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In 2015 she launched a locative media application, the *Alpine Garden MisGuide*, at the Jardin Botanique de Montreal, and she has another project underway for installation in Montreal's Champ des Possibles in 2018. Recent peer-reviewed essays have appeared in *Media Theory* (forthcoming 2018), and *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing* (2018).