

Teachin' Books Episode 1.15 – Robert Montgomery's Public Poetry Installations

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I almost forgot my own tagline. I'm Jessica McDonald and today I am talking about the public poetry installations of Robert Montgomery.

0:30

If you're not familiar, Robert Montgomery is a poet and an artist born in 1972 in Scotland, although I think he's now based in London. He's best known for these public poetry installations that I'm going to talk about today. So these are installations that are sort of out there in the public world, in cities and urban geographies, sometimes in other kinds of landscapes, like mountain scapes. And they're essentially poems or snippets of poems that are done in different materials, like sometimes they look like billboards, like kind of a classic traditional billboard, sometimes they are neon light poems, created in neon lights. Sometimes they're made in fire, and he lights them on fire and they kind of burn away. And they're all, like I say assembled and featured and put up all around the sort of urban landscape of different cities, and out in public, essentially, public poetry installations.

1:35

I will put a link to his website in the show notes so you can go check out his work if you're not familiar with it because that will help you get a sense of what I'm going to talk about today, the way that I teach Robert Montgomery's public poetry. Just as an example, so a couple of the ones that are featured on his website that you'll see if you check it out... He has this one installation that reads "All palaces are temporary palaces," and it's done in neon lighting at the bottom of an unfilled swimming pool.

2:07

He has another one that says "Everything in the city is perfect the voices in the streets are sacred music and the streets belong to no one," unpunctuated, kind of like how I read it. And that one's assembled in neon lights and kind of fills up the back of a truck, I was trying to think of the word for the back of the truck. The truck bed? Bed of the truck? It escapes me right now but... so yeah, there's site-specific installations that are actually in vehicles. He has another one that you'll see on the website as well, if you look through it, that reads, "to wake up and be like the weather to be no longer the brokenhearted servants of mad kings," and it's written in material that's set on fire, sort of amidst what looks to be a field or a lawn with a lot of greenery around -- which actually incidentally or as a side note, brings up the question of the safety of these poems, especially when they're done with fire, and the risks of this kind

of public poetry that is materially shaping the geographies around it and because, of course, trees can catch on fire.

3:21

So take a look at his website, you'll see how his poetry incorporates these visual elements like the neon lights, and the fire, and that sort of thing, as well as textual elements the language itself, and it really plays with materiality. Once you do that, feel free to come back and hear me talk a little bit more about Robert Montgomery's poetry installations.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

3:53

Oh yeah, so first I should just set the stage. This is a author, a poet that I teach in a poetry class. I've talked about this poetry class at least once before on the podcast, but it's a semester-long, first-year university Reading Poetry class. So it's all poetry, all the time. And as you might remember, if you happened to listen to the Instapoetry episode of Teachin' Books, I organize that course to deliberately sort of pull at the edges of what poetry can be, what it looks like, what students assumptions are about what a poem might sound like, what it ought to look like, what a poem feels like. So the whole course is geared around -- geared around? -- the whole course focuses on this question of what a poem can be, what can poetry look like? So already, I'm sure you can see how Robert Montgomery's work can fit nicely into that kind of a course.

4:56

The unit that I placed his work in is at the very end of the course actually. It's a unit on oral and public poetry. And in that unit we look at spoken word poetry, we look at poetry in or as performance, song, Instapoetry, Sachiko Murakami's Project Rebuild, which I actually hope to talk about on the podcast one day, but it's a collaborative online poetry project. So we look at a whole bunch of different forms of oral and public poetries or poetry in performance in this unit, and we kind of ask the question, what happens when poetry moves from the private, sort of more intimate space of the written page to more open venues, public venues, venues with collaboration, with audiences, maybe even venues that are a little bit unexpected? We ask what happens to our reading strategies when we move from looking at a poem that's printed on the page, to seeing a poem in performance, or listening to a poem? Or what if a poem is never written or printed on a page at all? What if it's only made out of other material, other objects? How does the materiality of, for example, Robert Montgomery's public poetry, shape the meaning of the poem?

6:19

And there's sort of a bit of a caveat here, sort of a side note here that the public poetry / private poetry divide doesn't really make sense, or it's not clear -- that divide is not clear because, of course, there's published poetry that, you know, occurs on a printed page that also starts as a performance and publication also makes a text public in certain ways, poems exist in public forms and private manuscript forms at the same time, they also might exist as performances at the same time, so this public private sort of binary that I'm establishing here is already troubled. But the concept of public just provides an anchor for the last few kinds of poems that I like to look at, and have students look at, in this course at the very end of the semester. So that's why I use it here but with the caveat that it's not really separable from private, public and private are contested and, yeah, there's a lot more to say about public and private, to both those two terms and the sort of contested relationship that they have together, or with one another.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

7:38

So what I do with Montgomery's poems when I'm teaching them is I use his work from his website, just right from his website, to teach some of the important dimensions of public poetry that I want students to consider. So factors that factor into public poetry installations and our reading of them, aspects of public poetry that make it interesting or rich or significant to study. I basically create a sort of slideshow, where I pair examples of Montgomery's work with a different factor or dimension of public poetry that I think that piece of work exemplifies. So you'll get a sense of that as I go along here and sort of talk about the different factors of public poetry that I highlight through his work.

8:32

One of those factors that I start with is talking about how public poetry is a really boundary-crossing phenomenon, because art and "the real world," quote unquote, kind of blur through site-specific, out-in-the-real world installations like Robert Montgomery's. There's an example that I bring up of his work, when I'm talking about this factor, this important factor of public poetry, where one of his billboard poems is sort of positioned in the middle of a protest that's going on, and a whole bunch of people with signs are crowded around the billboard. And it's an example of how the art, the poem, becomes like part of the geography of the real world, right? It becomes almost part of the protest. Art as landscape, poetry as landscape landscape as poetry.

9:32

So that's one of the things that public poetry like this seems to do is blur that line between "art" and "the real world," and I'm using those terms both so... with such attention to the ways that they're already destabilized, they're already unstable, but I'm also saying that that instability is emphasized by these kinds of public poetry that end up being features in a landscape of protest, features in the landscape of human relations that are going on right around it and outside it. This public poem, I'll link to the specific one that I'm talking about here, I'll try to link to his images in order maybe if I can, this specific poem ends up being part of the geography of the protest around, it actually shapes the space around it.

10:29

The second important factor of public poetry that I go into with Robert Montgomery's work is that these poetry installations will often make visible the labour of poetry. The fact that poetry takes work, the fact that it's, it takes work to create, and it's a job. So here's what I mean by that: if you look at some of his work online you'll see, let's say, neon exhibits, like neon poems that are held up by sort of material infrastructure, I guess, they are actually held up by visibly visible material. Like you can actually see the way that the neon poems are standing on a kind of stand or include poles and wires and all sorts of infrastructure that is visible to the reader, that is visible to the poem reader. So for example, on his website, there's one poem, it reads, "the mountains must have imagined the city in their echo and they drew it in the sky for us and the seabirds carried messages from the water to the mountain birds as the sea rocks walked here slowly." And that's all written in neon, below which and around which you can sort of see the material that's holding up this poem. And that's what I mean by these kinds of public poetry installations, in their visible materiality, really showcase the labor of poetry, the fact that work goes into and behind making this poem appear. You can actually see the structure that lifts this poem up. And I'm not really just speaking metaphorically here although that works too, I'm also speaking literally, somebody has to do the labor of putting that poem up, so these public site-specific poetry installations really show and showcase the labour of poetry -- that it's physical work, too, even just the act of writing a poem by pen, or by typing or other means, even like speech, speech-to-text writing, all takes physical bodily work. And that's something that Robert Montgomery's poetry highlights for us.

12:56

Okay, third important factor that I talked about with regards to Robert Montgomery's work and public poetry is that it brings up the question of where poetry belongs: in classes? in books? in pages on pages? in art communities? in museums? in galleries and libraries? or just simply everywhere? There's an argument sort of built right into the structure of a public poem -- like for example the one that he sort of assembles in the back of a truck -- and that argument is that poetry belongs everywhere around us. His work seems to attempt to make the argument that poetry does belong everywhere that there shouldn't be a kind of gatekeeping or closed-mindedness about where we find poetry, that it's allowed to shape the daily geographies of our lives and to be all about all around us. So when he puts his neon poem in, in the back of a truck, in that very act, in its very placement, is this argument that poetry should be taken

to the streets, should be taken out to the public squares, to the town squares, to the vehicles, to the roads, to the non-places of the world -- that poetry really doesn't need to be gatekept, and sort of kept into these elite communities, that it should be opened up to broader publics.

14:35

And I've said this a couple of times, but the next important factor is that Montgomery's poems, his public poetry installations, they often play with the materiality of poetry. That means that in every case I'm going to say they're not just, you know, sort of poems written on a page or on a screen. They're poems where their materiality, what they're made out of, how they look and feel, actually factors into the meaning of the poem. Sorry, to back up here: I would argue that materiality is always a factor in every type of poem, but what I'm trying to say here is that these are poems that, by the fact that they are made of fire, or and are sort of crumbling and burning away, or are made of different colors of neon or a made to resemble a sort of advertising billboard, that choice of different material, even just in that choice, there's a kind of playing with the materiality of poetry here. What this means for students I find is that it provides cool - I'm not sure if they would say cool, but -- to say, it seems to me that it provides cool, new ways to think about poems. So for example, if you have a poem that's constructed through wooded materials that are now burning, you then are called not just to think about the meaning of the poem and the language, but also, what does this poem mean as it starts to burn? How does the burning change the meaning of the poem? What about if some of these words are burnt and some of them aren't? And in the end, that's how it stays? How does that change in materiality change the meaning of the poem? So public poetry installations provide an opportunity to have, again, cool, fun, exciting discussions about how materiality shapes poetry. As I said it always, in my humble opinion, shapes poetry, shapes the meaning of poems, but these public poetry installations sort of literalize that because if a poem is made out of fire, it's a little bit easier to get at the reading of how materiality impacts its meaning.

17:02

Somewhat related to that, the next important factor that I talk about when I talk about public poetry, these public poetry installations, is that meaning is also derived for these poems by where you stand and your physical perspective, your physical distance from the poem, around the poem. That distance can shape the meaning. Here's what I mean by that: just remember the poem I talked about at the beginning of this episode where it reads "All palaces are temporary palaces," and it's in the bottom of a swimming pool. The meaning of that poem to the reader will likely be different and come across as different depending on where the reader's standing. If you see that message from above, it's a little bit different from seeing that message straight on or from below. If you see that message from the side, and you can't fully even read all of the words or it is hard to read all of the words, that might change the way that you read this poem and the meaning of the poem. It might even make you feel like this poem is trying to do something more sarcastic with its message, or something more, wink wink, nudge nudge, with its message. The physical distance, your proximity to the poem and around the poem, will affect your reading of the poem, and public poetry installations make that reality of all poetry, which is that readers make meaning in different ways depending on their positions, they make that literal, because

you can actually move physically around the poem, and achieve different readings or move towards different readings depending on your position in relation to the poem.

18:49

Okay, the last factor I talk about -- the factor, again, of an important factor of public poetry that I read through Robert Montgomery's poems -- is that there's a lot to say about how readers, poetry readers, can encounter these poems by surprise. There's sort of a surprise element because they are poems that are positioned sort of all around the city in unexpected ways. So the reader might not actually know their role as reader ahead of time. It's a lot different from somebody who goes out to a bookstore, buys a poetry book, comes home, reads it, knows they are a poetry reader and therefore sort of experiences that book from their role as reader. This is much different than that because you can have people who are just travelers, city inhabitants, workers walking around the city unexpectedly becoming readers, poetry readers, in their travels. And that shapes their reading experience. When you're sort of sparked into the role of reader from sort of passive traveler or consumer or city wanderer seeing the sights, there's a kind of activation there in encountering these public poems, especially in unexpected places. There's a kind of activation of the bypasser: it really encourages a sense of agency, spontaneous thinking, spontaneous reading. All of a sudden you're a poetry reader and you didn't expect it. And because of that, public poetry installations like Robert Montgomery's play with the question of who gets access to poetry? Who is "permitted," quote unquote, to be a poetry reader? Who sees themselves as poetry readers? Because these poems sort of ask of the casual passerby that they become even for one instant a poetry reader. And there's some charge in that that really seems to shape, not only the qualities of public poetry and what they can do, how they can spark people, but also seems to shape the individual reader's experience. When you encounter a poem by surprise and it's up in front of you in billboard form, there's something a little bit different about that reading experience than, like I said, when you go out to a library, get a poetry book, come home, and read it and you know your role as reader. And there are cool things I think that can happen -- cool again, I guess -- there are cool things that can happen in the surprise and spontaneity of all of a sudden going from being somebody on their commute to work, to being "Oh, I'm a poetry reader! I've just read a piece of poetry."

21:40

So in the end, after I've gone through all of these important factors of public poetry using Robert Montgomery's poetry, acknowledging that there are more than just the few important factors that I've highlighted, I end up leading into this discussion board assignment because I have taught this online. The discussion board assignment I've talked about once before it was essentially just: find an artifact in your house, in your neighborhood, around you; argue that it's poetry; and really try to make the case for why it is poetry. I talk about that assignment in episode number five on Instapoetry if you're interested -- I talk about that a little bit more. But in this case it's sort of the transition between public poetry by Robert Montgomery and the Instapoetry that I look at in this poetry class, and so that assignment, becomes a sort of transitional wrap-up and introductory exercise. And that's where the class ends.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

22:48

But I want to say a little bit more about, like, why you would teach this. Why would you teach these public poetry installations? A couple of the things that I think this kind of content gets at are, first of all, it helps students, and all of us, stretch and test our strategies for reading, to really pull at them and test them, especially in a class where we started with very traditional printed-on-the-page forms of poetry, sonnets and that sort of thing. Robert Montgomery's public poetry allows us to think about how our strategies for reading change when the poem is, let's say, a material object right in front of us outside a building. How are we going to read that differently? What about if it's on fire, how are we going to read that differently? Why does the neon matter? So these poems provide a way of getting at artistic and poetic choices, too, at craft, really -- the idea or the question of what does it mean that this poem is burning? What does it mean that it's on fire? To what effect did the poet choose to use neon lighting? Why this particular color? All of those questions have to do with how our strategies for reading change when we approach a work like Robert Montgomery's public poetry, versus the kinds of poems that in this class I position towards the beginning of the course.

24:20

I also think it's worth it to teach these public poems because they get us back into the issue of what a poem can look like which, like I've said, is something that this whole course is built around: the process of questioning and assessing any gatekeeping impulses that might have students and all of us think of poetry in one way or in narrow ways. And that's important because it has to do with what we see as "worthy" quote unquote of the title of poetry and how that worth has to do with power and cultural value. For example, is it only poetry if it's published by sanctioned official publishing houses, and if so, that's a problem and we probably should consider who is making the decisions about what gets published and what gets called poetry.

25:14

And another thing that makes this kind of poetry worthwhile to study, I think, which I was only able to get into a little bit when I've taught this before because of the timing of the class and the realities of online teaching. There is a conversation to be had about what kinds of public poetry or public art are welcomed even paid for commissioned sanctioned by official bodies, and what public poetries and art are criticized or unwanted or scoffed at or seen as a disruption of the public sphere, rather than something wanted. So for example, think of the history of graffiti and how graffiti has been received, especially by white, affluent people in neighborhoods that are white and affluent, or think about the history of performers who perform primarily on the street or quote unquote "buskers," people who make money, you know, playing music outside of storefronts, that sort of thing, and whether they are welcomed or not welcomed by the people in power around them, by the citizens around them, and also

by the geography around them. Montgomery's work can open up these kinds of discussions, and honestly in future classes that's the kind of discussion that I would have more of with his work because Montgomery's position as a privileged white art maker means that his art will be received in particular ways. It will be allowed into public spaces in ways that other art, other poetry might not be.

26:53

If you've ever taught with Montgomery's work I would love to hear how and how it went and what happened and what you did. So, if so please drop me a line and let me know:

teachinbookspod@gmail.com.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

27:16

This episode was recorded on Treaty Six territory and the homeland of the Métis. When I was planning this episode I was thinking about my own history and experiences and memories of poetry in public, and some of my earliest public poetry experiences that happened kind of outside of classrooms and official educational contexts were in a series called Tonight It's Poetry which was held for many years, and is still being held, I gather in some COVID sort of COVID-friendly fashion, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, which is where I live. That series would often feature local and also traveling poets, and often spoken word poets like Zoe Roy, who is a Cree, Dene, Métis poet, musician, educator and community leader. She's a member of Peter Ballantine Cree Nation, and she is a longtime resident of Saskatoon, but now I believe, living and working in Ontario. When I think of public poetry, I think of listening to Zoe and other poets like her fill the room, usually fill the bar when I went to when I went to the series, fill the room of Tonight it's Poetry and other readings and festivals that I've listened to poets at. That's poetry completely off the page, poetry that involves body language and sounds and sights and facial expressions. It's public poetry in the way that I approach it in the very last part of my class that I talked about in this episode. Like I said, Because of COVID-19 these events in Tonight it's Poetry aren't happening in the same way, so public poetry for me has meant something a lot different. I've been attending public poetry events online, over Zoom, in YouTube livestreams, that sort of thing. But what I wanted to highlight here today is Zoe Roy's YouTube page, because on that page she has been or a couple of times throughout the pandemic, she has posted performances or I should say poetry videos sort of where she reads poetry and does a kind of verbal performance on top of visuals and shares other kind of creative videos. So I'll put the link to the YouTube page that she has in the show notes, and you should really check out her work at that link and see how public poetry is changing in this time, as we participate in poetry online and from across the social distance.

29:59

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram at [@TeachinBooksPod](https://twitter.com/TeachinBooksPod). Or you can get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. I am thinking about doing a listener q&a episode soon, so please if you have any questions for me, book-related, teaching-related, something else that you think it would be good for me to answer, send me a note at that email or DM me or get in touch however you can, send me your questions or comments. You can be anonymous if you like, that's totally cool. And I would love to do a little listener Q&A episode. All right, thank you so much for listening. Join me next week on Teachin' Books, no "g" in the teachin'.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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