INVISIBLE UNDER OUR FEET:

A COMMUNITY’S HISTORY OF PHYSICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL EXCLUSION

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I. Introduction: On the relationship between history, perception, power, and time.

In darkness, the material world as we know it visually ceases to exist. Objects attain their visual qualities by the light that is shown upon them; they gain their tactile topography through the sensory receptors in our fingertips. Our sensory understanding breathes life into an environment of physicality that cannot exist abstracted from our perception of it. History, too, is not a far-off trove of absolute facts and concrete correctness. Sloughing off faded memories and slanted perceptions does not reveal a sovereign truth. Rather, perception exists not in response to fact, but in its place.

We spend our lives perceiving the perceptions of others, never getting to the bottom because there is no bottom. There is “no underlying reality … accessible to unbiased scholars - only ideas, … subject to challenge and change over time.”¹² Such ideation is not limited to horizontal interaction with that which materially and immaterially surrounds it; rather, perception buries underneath another thought. It crawls inside a vivid memory; it concerns itself with the genealogy of past perceptions; it blends with and alters that which resides in another mind.

But books still contain words, even if these words are composed into ideas, rather than facts. Whose ideas are accessible? Whose ideas are we compelled to attend to? Whose ideas are the compelling force that compels us to intertwine our ideas with those which we seek, and why in the form of books? What other forms? How often do the compelling force and the sought-after ideas form a complete circle, directing the seeker back to the compeller’s own perspective? How distinguishable is the cause from the effect? How distinguishable is the actor from the external compelling force and from the result that he or she seeks?

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¹ French, Scot. "What is Social Memory?", published in Southern Cultures 2, Fall 1995.

If the collective identity is not real because all consciousness is only ideas, rather than facts, and if entirely discrete ideas do not exist within each person absent of constant influence, then perhaps ideas exist as the space between people, both outside and within each of us, as atomized substances in the atmosphere that occupy concentrated areas, that diffuse and combine, overlap and interact with other substances along a dynamic gradient.

Power is found in a high concentration of the substance; in substances that quickly, easily, and widely disperse; in substances that refuse to combine or dilute; in substances that expand, or suffocate all other substances from their presence. Power also exists in the walls that quarantine substances into certain rooms, or prevent substances from leaking into a room. Power exists for the people and institutions that build these walls, and that maintain control over the doors and windows. Those substances that cannot spread to enter breathers’ lungs are devoid of power. Those people that are forced to breathe one kind of air or are kept from breathing another; those people who have not realized, have been written off as being incapable of realizing, or have been disallowed from realizing that their feet will carry them into another room with another type of air to breathe are devoid of power.

Those who are compelled to believe that their specific locus, inclusive of some substances, exclusive of others, and of particular concentrations of each substance that they inhale, is the ideal space in which to reside, are simultaneously completely powerful and completely powerless. Powerful, if their ideas are voluntary, intentional, and uninfluenced. Powerless, if these ideas contain within their chemical composition the desire to think them. And which is it, if intentionality cannot be wholly isolated, and if the line between the breather and the air is indistinct, even nonexistent? In the same breath, we are all wholly powerful and wholly powerless.

However, a shock for an infinitely small measure of time is not a shock at all, for the pain is felt not because of its commencement or its completion, but due to the occasion of elapsed time
between the two. Power attains its weight by maintaining a monopoly on time. Domination as it is expressed fleetingly can only allude to its condition of being extruded into power by the dimension of time.

Thus, fixity, coupled with intentionality, is the expression of power in its purest form. Subversion, conversion; its lasting presence is marked as perceptions and relations bend to accommodate its steadfast authority.

“Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional.”

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II. Communities as landscapes for viewing and interpreting memory, fixity, and access.

Fixity is the product of time. Fixity salutes history; it proves its power through written record, physical record, and memory. However, each of these testimonies to temporal integrity can be both altered and destroyed. Buildings can be demolished or renovated; books can be burned, and new histories can be written. Memories are convinced and re-convinced. History undermines fixity, as “new sources, methodologies, and social concerns allow for constant revision of the stories we tell.”

Memory acts as the arbiter of the relationship between the present and the non-present, between the here and the not-here, and between the me and the not-me. Memory is a negotiation between that which is forced and that which is voluntary, if this distinction is even allowed to exist. The present is born out of its own memory, for identity must have both a past and a direction. However, the traces of causality are cyclic, often web-like, rather than unidirectional. As much as the present is commanded by one’s perceptions of the past, the past, too, is perpetually re-cast in the hands of the present.

“When a group is introduced into a part of a space, it transforms it to its image, but that the same time, it yields and adapts itself to certain material things which resist it. It encloses


6 French, Scot. "What is Social Memory?," published in Southern Cultures 2, Fall 1995. 10.


8 French, Scot. "What is Social Memory?," published in Southern Cultures 2, Fall 1995.

itself in the framework that it has constructed. The image of the exterior environment and
the stable relationships that it maintains with it pass into the realm of the idea that it has of
itself.”

This re-casting takes on a variety of forms, including both direct modification of physical
spaces, objects, and records, and re-interpreting the meaning of an old landscape or entity. In a
sense, the difference is modifying one’s ability to remember by effacing the record that would recall
the memory, and modifying the memories themselves that interpret these records. The corollary to
Halbwach’s musing pertains to questions of agency. Why the group is introduced into a foreign
space, why they are compelled to accommodate this new environment, and why these external
forces are successful in reshaping the group’s identity are questions that require consideration.

A sensitive attentiveness to community relations reveals that these questions of memory and
agency are large contributors to the politics and dynamics of the social microcosm. Keith Schall
recounts the founding of Hampton University, and details the debate between “educating the
hands” and “educating the mind” that took place within all historically black colleges and
universities at their inception. We take for granted that the mission of a university is to excite the
intellect of its students, but in the minds of white university founders, the children and
grandchildren of slaves were only worthy, and also perhaps only capable, of technical, trade-based
education. And so they accommodated. In order to stay open, the public mission of Hampton
University was to educate one’s hands, and students were instructed not to carry too many books, so
as to disguise their true mission.

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11 Schall, Keith L. Stony the Road: Chapters in the History of Hampton University, 53.
Such an example illustrates the undeniable influence of power on the material shape of the world. Universities are often constructed as monuments to preserve an individual’s historical legacy, influence and material prestige. Those who make use of the institution are immediately and inescapably indebted; to forsake the foundational ideology of the university is to relinquish that small step toward institutional equality that attending college initially promised. This constructed hierarchy is both instigated and reinforced by materiality. The book, the democratic multiple, the marker of access and equality and achievement, was the very object that these students were forced to conceal.
III. Physical landscapes: the ascription of significance to the built and natural topography.

“A whole history remains to be written of spaces- which would at the same time be a history of powers...from the greatest strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.”12,13

Marie Frank’s article published in the Magazine of Albemarle County History, “It Took An Academical Village: Jefferson’s Hotels at the University of Virginia,” is rich with both textual and visual mappings of the land and structures of the University of Virginia’s campus in its earliest years as an institution. The most striking depictions of the University at this time are two maps of the academical village, included as appendices at the end of this essay. The Maverick Plan (Appendix A), commissioned by Jefferson in 1820, details the university- scape very similarly to the way that one would experience it today: ten pavilions, 54 lawn dormitories, six hotels, their accompanying range dormitories, and the Rotunda at the campus’ apex. Frank’s overlay (Appendix B), however, shows the same aerial view of the academical village, but dotted across the University’s grounds are numerous smaller buildings, which, according to Frank, numbered as many as 25.14,15

The selective historicity of the disparity between the Maverick Plan and life as it was experienced at the University’s inception will be reserved for section V of this essay. This section will focus on these omitted buildings as critical components of the physical landscape of the University.


15 Please See Marie Frank’s essay for a thorough account of the farmland and outbuilding landscape at the University.
Many of the small buildings omitted from the Maverick plan were slaves’ quarters. These structures were most frequently constructed in the garden space between the pavilions and the hotels. The pavilions were designed for the dual purposes of acting as a lecture hall on the first floor, and also as a professor’s residence on the second floor. The hotels originally served as small dining halls for university students. Logically, the slaves would reside somewhere between their two workplaces.\(^\text{16,17}\) While they were not included in the Maverick Plan, Jefferson had a meticulous hand in the incorporation of these buildings into the landscape of the University, and in their precise spatial positioning in relation to other nearby structures. In a letter to George Ticknor in 1819, Jefferson wrote that, “To each [pavilion] is annexed a garden and other conveniences.”\(^\text{18,19}\)

Furthermore, Jefferson’s communications with Proctor Brockenbrough indicate that his planned physical placement of these small buildings was rational, functional, and aesthetic.\(^\text{20,21}\)

Another interesting feature of the University’s physical landscape is the proximity, albeit separateness, of different spheres of university life. At his Monticello home, Jefferson built the slave quarters into the foundation of his balcony, so that his outward-directed gaze would skim directly over the top of this unsightly necessity. The same was once true at the University: the basements of each hotel and pavilion were home to both the kitchen and the slaves of the household. To require

\(^{16}\) Neale, Catherine S. *Enslaved People and the Early Life of the University of Virginia*. Undergraduate thesis. University of Virginia, 2006.

\(^{17}\) Please see Catherine Neale’s essay for a thorough account of slave life and accommodations at the University.


their services, but to disallow their visibility in the university community speaks to Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “space of appearance.”22,23 To be denied visibility is to be symbolically denied agency, limiting the accessibility of their perspectives, and restricting their ability to established a fixed physical presence in the community. And what about those who clean our rooms and work in our dining halls today? For whom living in the same community in which they labor is cost-prohibitive? Certainly, Jefferson’s gaze would be cast far beyond the tops of their heads as well.

“I am an invisible. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible...”24

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IV. Ideological landscapes: the art and style of underwritten and superimposed meaning.

In part, Jefferson’s plan for the academical village was in response to his experience as a student at William and Mary. The Christopher Wren building, home to students and professors, as well as a space for dining halls and lecture halls, seemed dangerous to Jefferson, both practically and ideologically. If the building burned down, which it physically did, several times, then all was lost in every respect. Jefferson’s decentralized plan for the University of Virginia was his solution to this problem.  

This ideologically-sound blueprint for the academical village was mirrored by an equally-sound structural plan. Quite conscious of the gravity of his influence, Jefferson wrote copious notes, arguably metaphorical, on the importance of building durable structures:

“A country whose buildings are of wood, can never increase in its improvements to any considerable degree. Their duration is highly estimated at 50 years. Every half century then our country becomes a tabula rasa, whereon we have to set out anew, as in the first moment of seating it. Whereas when buildings are of durable materials, every new edifice is an actual and permanent acquisition to the state, adding to its value as well as to its ornament.”  

Jefferson acknowledged the need for outbuildings in addition to the prominent buildings included in the Maverick Plan. He acknowledged the need for slavery in the construction and


maintenance of the University. In a letter to John Holmes in 1820, Jefferson embraces the imbalances and inconsistencies, namely of slavery, within the University:

“But as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”

In addition to the moral and structural contradictions embedded in the academical village, Jefferson both planned for and tolerated any number of architectural variances in his design. Allowing design to reference eclectic, yet complimentary styles, as is the case of the architectural variance of the ten pavilions, Jefferson’s designs pay homage to the ideology of decentralization that he held so dearly. In fact, many of these irregularities have been regularized over time as an expression of the presence of a greater degree of centralized power within the University. As is the case with the effacement of all but very few of the two dozen outbuildings around the University, the historical architecture of the academical village has been modified in accordance with the changing institutional ideology.

“[The] concept of memory provides an important bond between culture and landscape, because human modifications of the environment are often related to the way societies wish to sustain or efface memories.”

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Octavio Paz writes that “architecture is society’s un bri table witness,” but the issue is much more complex than the structure of the physical building. The basements of the pavilions, once slave quarters, are now rented to young professors who enjoy living in a simple apartment within the lavish context of the Lawn. The architecture has not changed, but the interpretation and usage of the space has been wholly reconceptualized. History is recreated, again and again, in the same architectural image. Contrary to Paz’s assertion, the fixity of architecture is inconsequential when abstracted from the fixity of its accompanying perceptions. These perceptions are the sole authors of history, as is evidenced in the story of Lewis Commodore, a slave who worked in the academical village.

In 1832, “[Lewis Commodore] was probably housed in the ‘room upon the ground floor of the Rotunda, near the Chemical Laboratory’ … Two years later, however, the Board of Visitors ruled that, ‘those rooms after being properly cleansed, [need] to be locked up, or put to other desirable uses.’”


35 University of Virginia Board of Visitors Minutes, Page 350, July 8, 1834.
It is clear from the minutes of the Board of Visitors meeting that Lewis Commodore was not removed from his residence in the Rotunda due to a critical need for the space. The Board would rather have that room completely unoccupied than permit slaves to live in the sacred territory of the Rotunda. And what of the urban renewal area of Main Street that demolished the Vinegar Hill neighborhood, yet is still left fallow, many years later?
V. Historical landscapes: the relationship between preservation, commemoration, renovation, and eradication.

Perceptive change and the remaking of history appear to be daunting tasks that might take decades or centuries, at first thought. However, the textual rewriting of scenarios can happen almost overnight. Take, for example, the case of the “Pavilion Gardens” brochures that are designed to inform visitors of the history of the university gardens, and direct them physically through the landscape. Until recently, a pamphlet was published in hard copy, and presently, a digital incarnation of the same guide exists online.\(^{36,37}\)

1993: “Other gardens were used for predominantly utilitarian purposes and included smokehouses, quarters for servants, and sheds for small animals.”

1998: “Other gardens were used for predominantly utilitarian purposes and included smokehouses, and sheds for small animals.”

2011: “The upper gardens are called Pavilion Gardens and are more formal and contemplative. The lower gardens are called Hotel Gardens as they correspond to the former dining halls on the range, called hotels, and are interpreted as utilitarian gardens and orchards for kitchen use.”

Slight modifications of word inclusion can have large impacts on the perceptions of historical situations. It is vital to consider the person responsible for this task of “updating” this


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brochure literature. What is the connection between the omission of the mention of slave quarters, and the inclusion of the suggested dichotomy between contemplation and utility? It is notable that, in one sweeping gesture, a large sector of the community can be rendered invisible, and can also have their mental capacity symbolically damned to the level of utility. For what reason are we compelled to believe that contemplation was absent from the activities of farming and tending to small animals?

“We have … by libel, innuendo, and silence, so completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government that today it is almost unknown.”

Indistinct or isolated, influenced or independent, the perception of agency - rooted in the agency of perception - firmly exists in the realm of social relation. Influence, both tacit and overt, informs our faculties that create and modify our perceptions. Influence overwhelms these faculties; in fact, it is the only sustenance for the perceptions that we form. The debate is no longer about accuracy, but rather, authenticity. As scholars, it is our responsibility not to make the same mistake that we critique: we must historicize different perceptions, backgrounds, and memories, rather than extol or defame.

38 French, Scot. "What is Social Memory?,” published in Southern Cultures 2, Fall 1995.


40 French, Scot. "What is Social Memory?,” published in Southern Cultures 2, Fall 1995.

“Students of social memory acknowledge the selectivity of subject matter, the manipulation of evidence, and changing definitions of ‘truth’ as problematic - yet, for rhetorical purposes, necessary - conditions of historical writing...students of social memory burst the boundaries of traditional historiography and expose all forms of historical memory to social and cultural analysis.”

42 French, Scot. "What is Social Memory?," published in Southern Cultures 2, Fall 1995. 16-17.
APPENDIX A: THE MAVERICK PLAN
APPENDIX B: THE MAVERICK PLAN WITH OVERLAY
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