Villa, Village, Vastness:
Monticello, The Academical Village, and Thomas Jefferson's Visions of a Transcontinental Nation

A Voice from Within
A shard of mica in a boy's small hand can reflect and magnify a dwelling as a covenant with the world; the now defunct cavernous Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. first served an adolescent citizen to imagine American cultural history in dialogue with the immensity of a New World arcadia, and a cabinet of curiosities prefaced the geological and archeological origins of Mr. Jefferson's' hobby of old age: the Academical Village as an eschatological vision: Noah's Ark in the Garden of Eden serving as threshold to the vastness of America.

(Footnote 1: There are three italicized sections, as *Notations to the Reader*: beginning with a scalar consciousness of a singular soul, this *Voice from Within*, associated with the Villa as dwelling, onto dialectical *Voices in Dialogue*, as a call and response, and ending with a cacophony of *Voices from Without*)

Villa
I often spread rumors that the elegantly long-limbed adolescent Thomas Jefferson, at the time of his father's death, sat under an immense centennial oak on Mount Alto and gazed down on his dear diminutive Monticello hilltop fingering a shard of mica encrusted gneiss rock. There and then Jefferson dreamed, as here and now I echo, the lens of a 360-degree vision of work as life, both as a gardener and engineer at the thickened edge of both topographic and archeological imaginations, terms I borrow from Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*, depicting his own autobiographical origins in England. These visions were realized by Jefferson over a 50-year period commencing with a villa on a mountaintop plantation, followed by an academical village on the remains of an abandoned agriculturally wasted site, This vast project was to be realized over the next century in advocating the ground rules of the Cartesian grid, first projected in the1785 Land Ordinance across the vastness of a continental territory.

For some decades now, I have remained a stranger, a curious field guide, conjuring up spatial tales of origin in dialogue with this complicated citizen of the New World. At the scales of an un-private dwelling, a public university and a continental conception, Jefferson braids traces of Eden and the promise of the *Aeneid,* which is the heroic project of the new city*,* to the continental immensity of the American imagination.

This speculation might be modeled after books of displacement and resilience, found in either James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and/or William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy*. The former is about *here and there*, *now and then* across vastly displaced continents, and the latter is about the haunted narrative of a small boy, Ulysses McCauley, seeing the world from the modest horizons of his backyard in Ithaca, California.

In my self-designated station as guide to Jefferson's works, I recount my time traveling in the company of seminal characters of this narrative: a Surveyor, a Nomad and a Lunatic:

first emerging from the depths of mica mines in Manhattan, taking my initial self-determined steps from Princeton to Peru, then pausing again and again syncopating between the armatures of Rome and the labyrinths of Venice, accelerating onto the vastness of India, and most recently observing the Towers of Babel resurrected in Dubai. Again, and again captured by Jefferson's Enlightenment mindset, , I attend to whether or not architecture forms a "covenant with the world." In my years as a guide, I repeatedly explore distance and eventual echo, call and response, if not almost cacophony of a perfect (or imperfect) stranger seeking to journey through the congested rooms of a remarkable, larger than life citizen.

When I was coincidentally thirteen, mining mica in Manhattan, I pretended to study for a math test by pulling out *Volume M* of *The World Book Encyclopedia* and came across a photograph of *Monticello,* which I then traced adding seagulls and the inscription *Sunset over Wald Hall*. This factual trace marked a fluid temporal agenda linked to a fictional, if not heuristic, sense of place. I knew of Jefferson from my *Landmark* book series of heroic Americans, but never conceived I would dwell the majority of my adult life in Jefferson's Virginia in a modest shelter excavated deep into the Piedmont condition. Twenty-five years of nourishment by way of consuming Virginia's deep red clay through my Parcel X orchards, I have nurtured both body and soul if not given voice to Jefferson's *Lessons of the Lawn* as I now guide you through Jefferson's whispered echoes, serving as a surrogate hearing device in dialogue with the pace of his hand and the depth of his vision.

Since thirteen, I have tried to see the world anew through Monticello, Jefferson's house, transforming from inside out and upside down, inverting recurrent dualities. Jefferson planted seeds of endurance in his thousand-foot long garden to be reviewed again in multiple dome rooms above, which unsurprisingly stored Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, in his attachment to the land, never would have conceded to Walter Lippmann's *Preface to Morals* that America was eventually to become *barren ground*, a rootless nation of city dwellers rather than enduring farmers. He had a pathological optimism for the eschatological capacity for resilience in the name of vastness. After all, as I remind strangers, students, and fellow explorers, this was a man who told William Stephens Smith in 1787 that "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is it's natural manure." But in the same breath, I remind my interlocutors that Jefferson also traveled in the cacophonous company of contemporaries like Thomas Cole and Henry David Thoreau. Weary of overextending my reach, I extrapolate that Jefferson would be equally engaged today with more current speculators on the Arcadian condition such as Robert Pogue Harrison and Simon Schama.

I recently realized on another self-guided tour at a stable altitude of 35,000 feet traveling east somewhere between D.C. and Dubai, that a Nomad can keep pace with the sun on the upper right, as a Surveyor registers continents passing on the lower left, while a Lunatic in syncopation sets back the incessant pace of time, sunrise to sunrise without a moon in sight. I promise myself to pass on these not so random associations the next time

I re-view Jefferson's continental map collection in his vestibule or foyer where time stands still, or accelerates in the face of a vortex.

When students join me to visit Thomas Jefferson at the threshold of his mountain top retreat, *Monticello*, they enter into a perfectly proportioned 20-foot cube. Indeed, it is a cabinet of curiosities filled with the treasures of a towering figure, 6'-3" (Fig. 1). Trans-cultural, trans-chronological memorabilia are framed on each wall with the latest maps of the then-known four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. I point out then that they must lift their gaze to the celestial soffit above to witness an assembled deep frieze studded with life-size contemporary plaster likenesses of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Marquis Lafayette, as well as ancient marble busts of Aristotle, Hannibal, and Homer. This startling constellation, I insist, recalls Raphael's sixteenth century painting, the "School of Athens." I challenge them that James Joyce might be at home here. More often than not these fellow strangers are ready to shuffle along in disbelief.

Look, straight ahead, above the drawing room doors to the west, there is a buffalo hide pictograph of the Mandan Indian Chiefs given to the Jefferson sponsored Lewis & Clark Expedition, mapping the mighty watersheds of the future nation: the Missouri flowing from the Rockies and the Mississippi flowing from the Appalachians to enrich the *great plains;* later figured in *The Lawn*, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, immortalized as *PrairyErth* by William Least Heat-Moon.

I try to enter from the east at sunrise on the Equinox, when one is greeted by a reclining Sphinx, a statue of Ariadne, Hellenic goddess of Architecture, guarding the fireplace beneath a basalt pyramid and flanking obelisks above the mantel on this southern wall. "What could be more Modern than the Archaic?" Sanford Kwinter has remarked. The guests, no longer strangers, are getting used to evidence of disorienting yet recurrent dualities. Opposite, to the north, are cases of pre-historic mastodon fossils and contemporary moose, elk, and white tail deer antlers freshly presented by Louis & Clark in 1805.

Once greeted by this host of heroes and taxidermy, if these guests would look back from whence they came, as if to orient themselves with the known world, into the glare of sunrise before sojourning beyond this cabinet, they would, more often than not, remark on the iridescent glow of the sun illuminating Jefferson's sea, which on frequent foggy days would stretch without an encumbered view. Above this view to the east, hung amid the constellation of busts, is a nineteenth century time machine of a great seven-day clock purchased in Philadelphia. During installation at Monticello, Jefferson was required to cut holes in the floor to accommodate Saturday's pendulum weights. With the Sabbath in the basement, the week could start anew on Sunday by cranking the weights of this great Clock up to the attic to engage the weathervanes of Jefferson's invention. Ariadne, found again reclining as if suspended in the Minitour's Labyrinth, smiles from below looking up to this time machine in a room where one is never alone, never *no-where* at the edge of the frontier, but *now-here* as a covenant with the world, again. Strangers now become conversant as dialogues resonate from both basement and attic.

After the cabinet of curiosities, and tracing a labyrinthine route which followed the sun first to the East Study hall, populated now with flattened family silhouettes as opposed to heroic busts, I guide the now reverent students into Jefferson's *sanctum sanctorum*, his library of 6,000 volumes, in six languages, past his seed classification system of both the native and the exotic and his requisite appetites for hybridization, into his shared study and bedchamber where he had a habit of duplicating all his day correspondence while slipping into bed with the darkness of the night with an obsessive assemblage of mirrors for the moon and the ticking of a clock's pendulum to insert regularity even into the night. Celestial presence now multiply here as deep skylights penetrate the attic space for both the rising of the sun to illuminate this chamber and to pierce the dining room on the opposite corner to signal the end of teatime. Jefferson, in his long years as widower, was never alone, clearly and curiously with ever more busts of contemporary correspondents peering down on his private chambers.

Once we turn away from the busts, I remind my interlocutors of the fact that Jefferson lived for 70 years at his plantation, which was inhabited by an extended family along with 500 enslaved peoples. Along with the children he fathered with his wife Martha, he also fathered five children with Sally Hemings, the enslaved half-sister of his wife. From the tearoom, I point out a cabin where it is believed that Sally Hemings lived. At long last, in 2018, an exhibit was dedicated to recounting her lived experiences at Monticello. Prior to this exhibition, there was little to no acknowledgement of her relationship with Jefferson at the plantation. We leave the tearoom and walk to the cabin, where the words of Madison Hemings, the third of the four sons she had with Thomas Jefferson, were used to reconstruct her life. By this time it is just high noon and we take a brisk walk through Jefferson's immense garden, pausing at an observatory pavilion at the edge between the Cartesian forest of orchards of the plantation to the south and the vegetable garden extending east and west terminating as the sun sets to his cemetery, where the Surveyor's Obelisk marks his grave.

We pause to reflect on the complicated history of this Palladian-inspired plantation, and then, after our shadows grow long, we decide to follow these reflections on to the Academical Village. On these occasions of student orientation, I delight in recalling my dialogues with my former-colleague, William Morrish. A fellow traveler and author of *Civilizing Terrains: Mountains, Mounds and Mesas*, William and I both delighted in inaugural events, in a dialog revealing the origins of the construction site:

Voices in Dialogue

What was the site of the Academical Village?
It was to be sure an abandoned agricultural wasteland where successive plantations of tobacco and corn exhausted the land.

But what came before?
We guided one another through a previous dense hardwood forest of flora and fauna, where the first people grew the three sisters of corn, beans and squash in small garden

plot clearings and relocated them regularly in appreciation of fallow ground as pre-conditional to eschatological renewal.

But what came before that immense enduring forest?
We encouraged one another that Jefferson knew his soil as he tasted it regularly, and by digging deep foundations, his geology as well, and believed that 10,000 years ago this New Dominion was at the scarred edge of the last retreating Ice-Age of successive layers of gneiss rock, the sedimentary result of layers of hard granite and soft sandstones.

Village

This is a frictional landscape of aggression and enduring scars. A memory of a vast forest, like the one that haunted the Hellenic Peristyles of the Acropolis, and previous appetites for minotaur as well as mastodons all hark back to geological and archeological imaginations. When my recently red-necked students look out from the rotunda to the south, they can see now the great lawn is framed by both the east and west colonnades, reiterating the southwest mountain ranges to the east and the Blue Ridge of the Appalachians to the west. Then reflexively I ask *Where have you seen such a vast framed landscape before?* They quickly make the connection to Jefferson's three-sided Garden Pavilion seen that day at high noon.

The idea of Jefferson's *Academical Village* as ideogram of a Continental Nation, from the east range of the Appalachians on the Atlantic coast to the west range of the Rockies on the Pacific, frames *The Lawn as the Great Plains,* and opens up to Rebecca Solnit's advocacy of "The Blue of Distance" (Fig. 2). This vision of measuring immensity inspired Jefferson first to sponsor the Lewis & Clark Expedition and second to support the subsequent Louisiana Purchase during his second Presidential term.

In one day the students turned explorers realize that Jefferson had a vast sense of temporal distinction, on the one hand living with uncertainties as a slave-holding farmer, and on the other giving voice to the unalienable certainties of gravity and orientation found in the belief in the utility of a vast encyclopedia in the age of Enlightenment, some call *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*. The Academical Village is a vast temporal project where the Surveyor, Nomad and Lunatic are not only still relevant, but also pragmatic agents. Evening is coming on and I leave them, now dear collaborators, with one more synopsis of numbers and names of fellow travelers because the science of elective affinities on arcadian immensity never pauses for daydreams.

It is here, at the village, where we see today McKim, Meade and White's project initiated at the time of the Fire of 1895, which commenced the closure of the distant view at the height of American imperialism. With the construction of Cabell, Rouse and Cocke Halls, we observe the destruction of Jefferson's vision of openness to the blue of distance as a measure of immensity.

This spatial transformation of Jefferson's once open frame to an enclosure, counters the wide diversity of aspirations for exploratory growth echoed a century before in the Cabinet of Curiosities found in the entry hall of the Villa. Jefferson's practical, unpretentious self-evident material palette of red clay and river run gravel created a colorful arcadian palette for the first seven decades of the Lawn. The Lawn of Jefferson was *Never White*. In addition, these architects transformed the character reference of the Jefferson project from the local to the mythic as they camouflaged this regionally sourced construction site by establishing a white-washed mask over the river bottom sand derived stucco Colonnades and monumental Temple fronts, as well as initiating a tradition to repaint the Dome of the Rotunda regularly over the previously oxidizing copper roof. Such a "corrective measure" was undertaken to project an image of the Imperial projects of Roman Classicism. This was simultaneously culturally initiated with the commencement of the Jim Crow era, which attempted to rewrite the history of the Civil War as "The Lost Cause." Witnessed shortly thereafter by the erections of statues to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, the Jefferson project was to be illuminated recently by the tiki torches of the Charlottesville Demonstrations of White Supremacy of August 2017.

Vastness

All alone, now returning to the darkened interior of the Rotunda's Dome Room, in this reconstructed forest edge, I look up and imagine the astronomical planetarium Jefferson had projected dark blue as Bramante's *Tempietto* with etched and gilded astrological observations through the magic lantern of a *camera obscura*. I realize I have failed to give some essential historical facts, ground rules, which they no doubt were expecting at the start of this tour. I email the following facts and contextual frame:

1. At the age of thirteen, adolescent Jefferson was bequeathed at his father's death the following: the tools of a Surveyor to measure and to mark, 5,000 acres of wild and pastoral landscapes, 365/6 enslaved peoples and 256 books including an English translation of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture*.

2. Thereafter, Jefferson went off to study Law at William & Mary, where he acquired, no doubt from library manuscripts, two engravings which he treasured all his long life: one was of Hadrian's Pantheon with colonnaded forecourt as a spatial treatise on the immensity of the Universe of Imperial Rome, and the transformative project of Michelangelo's Il Campidoglio, re-orienting the Ancient Roman Forum in Ruins to the East to the new Vatican City to the West in dialogue with civic authority.

3. At the time of his death, July 4, 1826, Jefferson left instructions for his tombstone epithet describing himself first as the Author of the Declaration of Independence, then second as Author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and last as father of the University of Virginia.

Emerging out of the Rotunda under the darkness of a new moon, and glancing at Homer, I suddenly realize I have something in common with Virgil in service of Dante. Displaced, I had slowly become a citizen of this commonwealth as *a field guide* to

Jefferson's cabinet of curiosities. I was indeed once another instance of Thomas Pynchon's *Slow Learner* from Manhattan, dwelling halfway between the Central Park Zoo and the Museum of Natural History, then part of my life in Princeton and then another part in exile in Cincinnati and Houston. One day in 1985, I trespassed across the Mason-Dixon Line into the vast Galleries of the Corcoran Gallery of (American) Art. This great treasure house had a specific exhibit: *Dialogue with Nature*: *Landscape and Literature in nineteenth Century America* framed by Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt. I realized I had never witnessed the edge of the wild to the north and far west of this nation inspired by Jefferson's launch of the Lewis & Clark Expedition. This self-guided exhibit made me aware of a broader view of American art as cultural history in relationship to the nation's ever-expansive territories. This exhibit traced the early eighteenth century preoccupation with the intimacies and rituals of everyday domestic life "down on the farm" through to the nineteenth century's awe-inspired documentation of American landscapes of immensity and celestial engagement- a theater of trans-cultural and trans-chronological imagination also revealed early on in Raphael's "School of Athens". (Fig. 9). Jefferson's imagination, full of friction and contradictions, exists at both the scale of his ten digits and in the vast Corcoran collections of this New World. Perhaps, the necessary sensibilities of Surveyors, Nomads, and Lunatics now assume for me, no now for us, the names of Cole, Church and Bierstadt as they guide us through the manifest destiny of American cultural landscapes. *How big is BIG?* David said to Goliath with a small pebble, or was it mica, in his slingshot?

Voices from Without

Thomas Cole's "Course of the Empire" (1833-36) serves a Surveyor's Five Finger exercise systematically envisioning Genesis to Exodus.
Is there, even in diminished, depleted water and sky, an eschatological leitmotiv found in Desolation in the resistive column of light and fragile vine, which connects heaven to earth?

Frederic Edwin Church's "Niagara Falls" (1857) is a Nomad's reductive oasis reducing the world into descending Water and tempestuous Sky (Fig. 10).
Do we not see Jefferson's inverted Attic oculus where God's countenance was on the face of the earth, or is it the reason why Enlightenment's fascination with the forces of Natural Science are explored specifically in the basement of the Rotunda?

Albert Bierstadt's "Mount Corcoran" *(1877)* is perhaps the most immense vision.
Now is this the vision of a Lunatic taking us far, far west, to a luminous clearing, not a human in sight, pre-Edenic, with just a hungry bear and a fleshy fish in a still clear shallow mountain lake in the foreground and the distant armature of an immense tumultuous waterfall grasping prismatic light (Fig. 11).

The Last Word
I pause here, no longer as a guide but as *testigo*, bearing witness as a gerund, as Corcoran did when he was assembling his private collection as a contemplative explorer of

American cultural histories. Corcoran in Washington, D.C. dwelt not so far, far away from Mount Alto where once an adolescent dreamed of a national imagination through the lens of a mere shard of mica pivoting as a prism in his fingertips. Jefferson then, it is rumored, impatiently hit the ground to see the high noon sun multiplied in the immensity of dusty red clay particles reflecting heavenly light.

Post-Script

This essay was written in the summer of 2016, months before the catalytic national elections, and one year before the Charlottesville Rally and Response as a prescient theater for Landscapes of Aggression commencing 8/11/2017 and continuing today. This essay commenced with a subjective dialogue by the author with the adolescent mind of the yet to be heroic Jefferson somewhere self-consciously between Diana Agrest's concept of *memory and amnesia*. Today, I must recount more critically these heuristic interpretations.

In the recently occupied promising New World of Arcadia, the very virgin ground this university was founded on was not only a wasteland caused by the poor agricultural practices of the fifth president of the United States, James Monroe. By seeking short term gain, Monroe destroyed the settlement patterns of First Peoples who persisted in great hardwood forests for ten thousand years. These forests were preceded by millions of years of profound geological sequences yielding the Edenic evolutionary sovereignty of flora and fauna before European and African encounter. The Jefferson projects, in all their vulnerabilities, are complex heaps of compost generating fragmentary oracles, hallucinations. The ground we share is but a temporal Ark along the way.

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