READING L’ENFANT’S STARS: AN ANTIFEDERALIST CRITIQUE OF
WASHINGTON D.C.

By

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We join spokes together in a wheel,
But it is the center hole
That makes the wagon move.
(\textit{Tao Te Ching} 11)

\textit{The hole \& the patch should be commensurate.}
\textit{(Jefferson To Madison, Paris, June 20, 1787)}

By many critical accounts \textit{Crash} was a pretty bad movie, its sweep at the Academy Awards notwithstanding. But it was tremendously popular—despite the critics’ and theorists’ skepticism—because, I contend, it captured our feelings about how cities shape our lives. The film opens on the shots of a disoriented camera panning the interior of any-vehicle-whatever and we hear a disembodied voice: "It's the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something." Cut to a close up of Don Cheadle for an uncomfortable second or two too long; camera sharply focuses—rubbing its metaphorical eyes—and stumbles slowly out of the car to the pavement, up to the dotted lines, up and past the particularity of this crash, finds the city in its sights and stares. And makes us stare too.

Graham, Cheadle’s character, articulates the power of cityscapes to set the course of lives in a contagion carried through to camera, through to audience; this is a visual vignette of an awakening to the ways that cities hold, articulate, embody, and enact the boundaries and intersections between the material and the transcendent, the instrumental and the rhetorical, the political and the aesthetic representations of who a people is, or might become. The filmic stupor the opening scene insists we experience is rooted in a discovery of the too-obvious logic of a correlative relationship between our constructed
geographies and our social interactions. It not only seems right, but *obviously* right. The stupor—capturing both the moment before transformational awakening to a new way of seeing, as well as the tragic absurdity of the once-unrecognized—enters the moment the picture of the city is seen through this transparent truth: if this is so, how could we have built this? Why do we build so much separation into our lives?

But the audience’s imagination was captured in *Crash* because the throughways, parking lots, cul-de-sac housing, and absence of town squares is not unique to L.A.; this architecturally-enhanced isolation is a characteristic of post-industrial urban environments and so begs the question: in whose interest is it that our cities have increasingly less space for heterogeneous, social, non-directed interaction? Spikes on planters and window ledges even prevent the city-dweller from sitting, as both movement and stasis are governed by our environment. This attention to social geography, while reenacted in the film as a personal discovery, is not unique to our age. City planners, architects, and statesmen have drawn on the power of built environments instrumentally and strategically to manage congregation centers and tacit no-trespassing areas for ages (think water cooler and moat) as people for ages have moved the water coolers and climbed over the moats.¹

To recognize this dialectic between the space and its inhabitants within a larger

¹ Individual agency should not, however, gloss over the subtle gradations between guidance and coercion. People can change things, but people can also disappear into the architecture with both benign and terrifying results as Hilde Hein reminds us in “What Is Public Art? Time, Place, and Meaning”: “Nazi architecture, designed by Albert Speer and gorgeously displayed in Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will* compliments the political *bon mot* of Joseph Goebbels: ‘The statesman is an artist too. For him the people is neither more nor less than what stone is for the sculptor.’ The same sentiment, directed toward more benign ends, is in the work of Vito Acconci,…Christo, among many others who strive to arouse and capture the social conscience of a passive public” (3). There are no neutrally designed environments.
political framework is to extend Crash’s meditation on how a city shapes relationships, to this: how does a city re-present relationships? This is not only a contemporary question: in this paper, I will focus on the relationship between urban and political planning as it is born and re-digested by the inhabitants. My question concerning the city’s agency in representation nicely focuses two aspects of the analysis that I am posing in the following paper, which is about neither L.A. nor the 21st century city, but rather about one of the first modern cities in America: Washington D.C. First, my inquiry insists on seeing the city and the people as part of a temporal and reciprocal relationship. They are continuously presenting themselves to the other, and so always potentially on the brink of both ossification and transformation. Second, the frame of representation allows an explicit shift from reading the canonical texts of early American political ideology to a reading of these ideological concepts as they are visually represented in the construction of the nation’s capital. Within this framework my aim is twofold: I want to contextualize the early American conception and the present-day reception of Washington D.C. within Ed White’s theoretical paradigm of synthesizers and megasynthesizers in order to argue the capital, rather than being a coalescence of the ideology of the victors, is an imperialist attempt to materially and physically silence the traces of competing and contestatory voices of the early nation. Second, I argue that if we read the 18th century maps of the capital through an antifederalist critique, those silenced frontiers of conflict might be reclaimed and provide pedagogical tools for rediscovering a pre-national memory of a

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2 Ed White’s germinal text The Backcountry and the City analyzes the imaginative grip the federalist project continues to have on our national imagination. He argues that this monolithic ideology leads us to overlook alternative political, economic, and social paradigms and structures that might allow for more dynamic, authentic, and self-representative communities.
space in which both touching and crashing are democratic requirements.

For a while now people have been making this connection between the social and the geographic in our nation. So too, the builders of the capital—L’Enfant, Jefferson, and Washington in particular—were keenly aware of the ways in which the design was to work as the manifestation of a larger social and political project. The scholarship written on the subject of the capital also marks this connection. Because of this trans-temporal, and, I will argue, fundamentally contemporary and relevant intention to unify and manage a national landscape, I focus on the early American inception of aesthetic and political symbols, while also drawing on texts from other time periods. I do this not to sidestep the very important historical contexts from which my primary materials emerge, but rather to emphasize the periodic digestions, reiterations, reformulations, and re-presentations of the anxiety about national self-identification that adds richness to an ongoing, messy, unresolved—and ideally irresolvable—inquiry of the identity of the nation.

3 Much early American writing, in fact, takes this connection to be a truism. Crevecour’s canonical work, Letters From An American Farmer, insists on cultural characteristics based on the colonial landscape saying, “We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit…” (71) as he sets out to decipher the different social bonds between the islanders of Nantucket, the frontiersmen, the farmers. Paine too, in Agrarian Justice, finds the land to be a source of a “natural” or an embedded and therefore cultivatable justice. Geographies, therefore, affect a people only insofar as a people are able to manipulate, control, and cultivate this land. The religious subtext underpinning this American sensibility is overshadowed in importance as the trajectory of the freedom of man to write his character and his worth moves toward John Dewey’s pragmatism and character based on experience. This American philosophical and literary insistence on place, then, makes a turn from an external to an internal factor. Although this line of thinking strays from the intent of this paper, the ways in which this rhetoric is picked up by the political figures extends this claim to the ways in which the government has emphasized its role as cultivators, a natural and educative authority is says a lot about American conceptions of social geography.

4 My analysis of the plan of D.C. will focus on the design by L’Enfant and will move from its original conception to present-day reception to, finally, an antifederalist critique of this map. To orient the reader, please see Figure 1.
The perimeters of my historical interest, though, are drawn primarily around the last
decade of the 18th century. I focus on the long 1790’s because this is the historical
moment that sees both the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, as well as the initial
plans and concomitant correspondence of these plans between L’Enfant and George
Washington; each man imagining, articulating, and helping to shape a picture of the new
nation. The political framework of the Constitution and the architectural framing of the
capital both bend back toward the federalists’ project to create a “more perfect union”;
each uses the material at hand—patriotic rhetoric or management of geographies—to
engrave the new narratives of the nation in the minds of its citizens. The effects of this
long decade have reached in to the 21st century. Through an investigation of the unifying,
ossifying, and managing of the narrative of the “birth of our nation” during this time, I
uncover some counternarratives, offering possibilities for an alternative understanding of
civic participation within our cities and within the nation.

In order to situate my argument—that Washington D.C.’s early American
conception and present-day reception enacts “an insistence upon a cohesive,
unified…discourse” and in order to find a critical space from which to extract the
silenced “frontiers” of political discourse (White 6)—let me take a moment to lay out
White’s helpful theoretical paradigm of synthesizers, megasynthesizers, and antifederalist
critique.

In The Backcountry and the City, White tries to wrestle free from the grand
historical narratives of a Habermassian conception of communicative reason as well as a
meta-linguistic tidying of unruly stories about early America in order to bring to light the
creative praxis in both history and our story of history. It is within this tension between
the attempted management by historical figures as well as historians and the unmanageable moments, voices, ideas, and creations that White burrows up to read what he terms the “feelings of structure…the vernacular phenomenology of practical ensembles, the collectives in, from, against, and through which people sought to understand, initiate, sidestep, win, co-opt, or manipulate the antagonisms or projects of the time” (White xiv).\(^5\) It is not the American conception of an exceptional individual, he argues, nor is it the monolithic heft of the static institution—a dichotomy he illustrates through the metaphor of Benjamin Franklin’s bifocal lens—that should guide our readings of history. Calling on Walter Benjamin’s phrase “state of emergency”, this “bifocal” reading is, in fact, “a federalist reading, stressing individuals and impersonal systems, [that] is written into the text itself” (White 178).

The synthesizers—Americanist historians including Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J.G.A. Pocock—, according to White, operate at this level of straightening, managing, and untangling the complexities of political issues in order to mobilize a manageable and managed political narrative. The anxiety invoked during the 1787-1788 debates between Publius and Brutus registered the Aristotelian conception of democracy as a corrupt form of rule by the masses; the federalists, within this paradigm, act to smooth and gloss over or to “synthesize, at the discursive level, the conflicts and confusions of popular forces: what they could not solve socially or politically, they

\(^5\) In this sense, White’s work runs the same race as Ruttenburg’s Democratic Personalities; both attempting to retrieve the “unmanageable” voices and to read the early American political and cultural stage—to steal Ruttenburg’s theatrical metaphor—against the totalizing grain. What significantly sets them apart, however, is the agency and emotional and cognitive “rationality” White gives his actors, which Democratic Personality strips in its opening lines by declaring the unheard voices as “irrational”. This insight by Dana Nelson has been central to my re-reading of Ed White.
solved rhetorically...[to put the] practices of democracy...into a more controlled, controllable, and controlling order” (9). In other words, the synthesizers are a mise-en-abyme of a federalist ideology, they are the rhetorical (and I will argue architectural) magicians creating a unified and connected whole where once there were merely competing and heterogeneous social bonds and forces: let there be a United States of America. And there was. The birth of the nation, the new citizen pledging allegiance, and the flag itself are all extensions of the federalist project to organize and subsume “expressions of colonial nationality...the “nation” is a development within a federalism with roots in the top-down managerial project of colonization” (White 11).6 Out of this conception of a synthesizing federalist project, White explores the backcountry-city divide as an ideologically manipulated terrain: the backcountry—as periphery, as frontier, as boundary—becomes the place practical ensembles and voices of dissent take shape. There, implicitly for White, a site of something that might look like authenticity is allowed to have a fleeting moment of autonomy before its absorption into the normalizing management of the federalist synthesis.

I want to borrow White’s conceptual paradigm of what would reductively be called outside/inside or frontier/center, but I want to dissolve it of any specific spatial referent. That is, while the synthesizers worked to fold aberration in, to unify the diversity and contradictions, I will maintain that this project, and its creative counterpart of rural re-imagining and un-tidying, are not unique to their symbolic loci: politically and practically

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6 Although White and other historians insist on maintaining the distinction between the federalists and the synthesizing historians, the twinned ideological projects both engage in make this distinction hinge on just the temporality of the acts; the federalists and the synthesizers, in my reading, are cut from the same cloth and so nominally interchangeable.
speaking, the city contains the backcountry, as the backcountry—“the ongoing problem of conquest and agrarian colonization, the continuing imperative to organize and administer”—contains the city (White xiii). This emphasis, while taking White for all he’s worth, is a move to read the fringe, the dissent, the contestation within Washington D.C. itself; to allow the city to contain the “city” and the “backcountry” of White’s paradigm. My re-spatialization of White’s theoretical map draws energy from the dialectical argument of Saul Cornell who maintains that the nation is a product of both the federalists and the anti-federalists; there is no wholly “federalist” arguments, nor are there wholly “synthesizer” or “megasynthesizer” figures; they all become gerunds and tendencies, not ossified meaningful wholes: federalizing, synthesizing, megasynthesizing.

To move, then, from synthesizing to megasynthesizing is a move in degree, not a move in kind by which White means the synthesizer’s suppression of inassimilable political difference becomes narrowed solely to federalist discourse analysis as the basis of the revolutions’ interpretive community. White claims that this generation’s literary-historical megasynthesizers—he references influential work by Michael Warner, Bruce Burgett and Chris Looby—have “simultaneously reinforced the marginality of the sociological, the inarticulate, and specifically the backcountry. Inasmuch as the project of the megasynthesis has been discourse analysis, it implicitly privileges the most articulate…forms of discourse almost invariably found in the cities” (12-13). His

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7 Although White’s text invites the former conclusion it does not invite the latter.
8 Ed White, I would imagine, would not disagree. This is not to challenge his rich theoretical conception, it is only to emphasize the inherent incompleteness and openness in any person, idea, or place; it is to insist on the I-am-what-I-am-not-yet insistence of thinkers like Maxine Greene.
rejection of the megasynthesis takes aim at a line of actors: the literary historians, the historians (in the broadest understanding of this word) as well as the historical figures that aim to order, silence, or speak for the masses (13). The messenger, responsible for analysis and an ethical treatment of the story of a people, has just brought the same-old, elitist, and expurgated message and by doing so has become the mouthpiece for an ongoing, amnestic federalizing project.

To remedy the federalizing tendencies, White calls for an antifederalist critique entailing: 1. An analysis “grounded in a hermeneutics of practical ensembles, attuned to the feelings of structure that shape the use of language,” 2. A situational analysis reading linguistic slippages and assumptions as a situational gesture, and, 3. A commitment to understand “situational praxis that seeks creative extensions and freedom” (208-209). In other words, he asks us to look beyond the individual and the system, to the colonial “obsession” of collective forms and to watch closely what work they perform.

To begin to understand Washington D.C. within this theoretical paradigm, I will begin with its 18th century conception as a physical metonymy of the federalist project. While there were a number of designs—by L’Enfant, Jefferson, Ellicot, and Dermott—the L’Enfant plan, because of the explicit ideological justifications of the design in the correspondence between L’Enfant, Jefferson, and Washington as well as the fact the city has, more or less, remained variations on L’Enfant’s design will serve as the primary “text” for this analysis. All these men understood the symbolic work they were undertaking and the ways that this city would act as a three dimensional counterpart to the political rhetoric of the 1780’s and 1790’s. L’Enfant, a portraitist whose military prominence allowed him the professional mobility to establish himself as an architect,
worked in New York to redesign the old city hall on Wall Street and the Federal Banquet Pavilion which “serve[d] marchers in a Federal procession supporting the new Constitution” (Miller 21). During his commission to work on the capital, L’Enfant worried it would take a while to build the capital “in such a manner as to give an idea of the greatness of the empire as well as to engrave in every mind that sense of respect that is due to a place which is the seat of a supreme sovereignty” (qtd. in Bowling 6). He also understood the United States was in a unique position to choose a location and imbue it with intentionality that might both reflect the spirit of the new nation and leave it room to grow, a geographic reflection of the nation’s growing reputation, wealth, and strength.

The place on the Potomac, then, while certainly a geographical compromise between the north and south, a financial landfall for the new president⁹, and a strategic waterway which registered in popular speech as America’s new “emporium”, may also productively be seen as a symbolic cultivation of the “backcountry”, “swamp”, and “virgin land” of the United States as well as a real cultivation of the undeveloped land on the Potomac. This demonstration of the transformative power of the United States government was to “engrave in every mind” not just what the federal government stood for, but how and to what extent it was able to incorporate the backcountry into the city.¹⁰

This intent to synthesize, though, was not only born out of an optimistic evangelism

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⁹ Luria’s treatment of the “speculative” overlapping of both real estate and politics and specifically the ways in which George Washington’s landholdings impacted the placement of the federal city treats this claim in greater depth.

¹⁰ That the land was neither “virgin” nor a “swamp” has been established, but the popular contemporary perceptions considered it both. This fact is important to the argument because the erasure of indigenous or pre-existing settlements of the area in the tabula rasa rhetoric of both “virgin” and “swamp” reinforces the federalist project of writing a manageable history; if the land is thought to be previously untouched or untouchable, the federalist cultivators are able to author the history from the birth of not just the nation, but of the “virgin” land.
to spread the good word of a strong central government, but also—as seen through the
eyes of the federalists—was born out of a strong distrust of insurgency. Washington
writes to David Stuart, “To sow the Seeds of dissension, jealousy, and distrust, are among
the means that will be practiced. There is a current in this City which sets so strongly
against every thing that relates to the Federal district that it is next to impossible to stem
it. To this cause is to be ascribed the backwardness of the engraving. Danger from them is
to be apprehended; and, in my opinion, from no other” (1). “Them” remains ambiguous
in the letter and might refer to those generally who, as the rest of the letter suggests,
oppose a large and commanding open space for the presidential house because of the
monarchical tenor it might set; or, it could refer specifically to Thomas Jefferson whose
action Washington says a few lines earlier “surprises me exceedingly”. In either case,
Washington knows the federal city is a site of contestation between the federalist and
anti-federalist ideologies. The physical construction of the city is the material ground
from which Washington intends to fuse the private interests of the commissioners of the
city to that which the nation, to the president, represents. In this way he attempts to stem
the “sideblows and indirect attack[s]” as “who are so much interested in the success, and
progress of the measure as they [the commissioners and others who have invested in the
city]?”. This “boosterism”—the methodological extension of Ed White’s synthesis which
“is the corrected opposite of sectarianism: it is the extension of fusion from an
institutional framework, the boosting of a systems through the creation of a peripheral,
ephemeral groups,”—creates Washington D.C. as the “text” which is used to extend an
“already established infrastructure” (White 197) which for President Washington is the
federalist plan for the nation. Washington, in correspondence with John Jay, makes this
project of boosterism more explicit, “We have errors to correct; we have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation. Experience has taught us, that men will not adopt and carry into execution measures the best calculated for their own good, without the intervention of a coercive power” (1). The president now uses the federal city itself, by aligning private interests to its success, as the means by which to carry out a symbolic and practical unification of national and personal interests; a bifocal unification wedding the investing men to the political investment of the United States government. He elaborates to his federalist partner, “I do not conceive we can exist long as a nation without having lodged some where a power which will pervade the whole Union in as energetic a manner, as the authority of the State Government extends over the several States” (1). In a later letter Washington ties this project of providing a pervasive and unifying power directly to the pedagogical potential of the capital wherein a national university, located within the federal city, might provide a space in which “an intermixture with our people, they, or their descendants, get assimilated to our customs, measures, and law: in a word, soon become one people” (1). And although the president is speaking specifically of assimilating foreigners, seen within the trajectory of his federalist synthesis, the capital is the place wherein the nation itself might “become one people”. Washington’s plan is clear: tie private and national interests together through the physical and ideological construction of the capital and make it a gateway for a unified patriotism; the capital becomes both the booster text and, in Washington’s rhetoric, an agential accomplice.

The federalist synthesis George Washington aimed for was not lost on his audience, the citizens and visiting foreigners. Henry Wansey, an Englishman touring the United
States, writes of his impression of the city in 1794,

The first street was formed upon an exact meridian line, drawn for the purpose by a Mr. Ellicot, which passes through the Capitol, the seat of the legislature, on an eminence, from whence the streets diverge into radii in every direction. It has, therefore, the full command of every quarter of the city. From it you can see every vessel that comes in or goes out of the harbour, and every carriage or horseman that enters the city by the bridge…(11).

Wansey gets some of the details wrong: it was, in fact, Benjamin Banneker, a freed slave and astronomer, who is believed to have developed the position of the true north meridian (Miller 38). But the feel of the city gets precisely the reception Washington intended; it is understood to be a naturalized, commanding, and all-seeing entity and, reading Banneker’s omission as an intentional slip, Wansey now narrows the city to be also a necessarily white entity. These receptional categories become more important reading the rest of Mr. Wansey’s approbation of the Potomac site as he says it is the best place for the federal city as “[it] runs more directly east and west, than any river besides, by which means it will connect the back country with the Atlantic States, and preserve their federal union. In point of trade also, it will unite them by interest…. This will consolidate the strength and union of the government” (12). And although he concludes his travel narrative noting the city, like much of the American enterprise, lacks the substance and soul of the European counterparts and has “the appearance every where of a vast outline with much to fill up” (American Memory 13), the federalist/synthesizers have succeeded in at least limning the edges of a federalist nation capable of controlling the unruly backcountry populations.

Washington D.C., in its conception and contemporary reception, has staked out land that symbolically will serve as a model for cultivating, taming, and organizing the
early nation. The city will also, because of its previously undeveloped state and its geographical reach into the backcountry, serve physically to lay claim to and fold in these contestatory tendencies. This implicit and explicit political aim shows up in much of the travel literature of the period, and most tellingly in the popular habit of favorably comparing the new city to Rome, its supposed imperial ancestral brother. Indeed, stories circulated that the Potomac’s shores were earlier called Rome, a branch of the river hugging the city was named the Tiber, and many made comparisons to the spoked network of Rome-like streets. It is this mythical sentiment, the vernacular word-on-the-street public relations of the founders, which both is a testimony to the power of the synthesizer’s narrative and, more importantly, serves as the bridge to the megasynthesizers.

Ed White points to the literary-historical project of discourse analysis which “implicitly privileges the most articulate (and, generally, written) forms of discourse, almost invariably found in the cities” as that which necessarily “will carry with it a commitment to the federalist view of the unruly back populations” (13). As I have noted, by importing White into this analysis of the federal city, I extend his concern that historical analysis gets reduced to the analysis of federalist print literature to urban historians’ tendencies to read the federal city as a fait accompli political project, and not just an aesthetic design for the city.

11 This, then, is the geographical extension of the rhetorical and nominal gesture to Rome of the federalists and anti-federalists. Publius, though not Brutus, is resurrected in many early writings (see Weld’s 1795 and Salisbury’s 1801 accounts in particular) with such enthusiasm and conviction that Salisbury even writes the Tiber might have “received that name from the Indians…and hence is prophesied the magnificence of the city which at some future day is to be a second Rome” (American Memory 45). And who am I to say this might not be so?
Kenneth Bowling’s argument, in *The Creation of Washington, D.C.: The Idea and Location of the American Capital*, is that the birth of the federal city mirrors the debates about federalism: the location of the capital, the purpose and population of the city, and the political compromises balancing state and national interests are played out within the pages of Publius and Brutus. He notes the reservations concerning a center of national power held by subscribers to republicanism in Patrick Henry’s advice that if the government turned tyrannical, its citizens would be better off on the frontier, far from the locus of power. Bowling catalogues early debates concerning the “threats which the capital posed to republicanism” (7): people feared mobs, monarchical ideas, and the importation of aristocratic manners. Because of these objections to the federal city, many wanted to reject the European precedent of putting governmental capitals in cities, feeling the political integrity would best be preserved outside the locus of “commerce, local politics, luxury, and mobs” (10). Instead, the opposition insisted, the capital should be housed away from the cities, in the country. Washington D.C., these republicans feared, could potentially reverse Paine’s injunction that in America “the king is not law, law is king” by building a grand, imposing, and royal city which would be the first step toward a grand, imposing, and royal leader. But, significantly, Bowling’s analysis places the contestation of ideologies prior to the first stone being laid, and so his history of the material capital becomes a built narrative of the victors, the federalists. There were competing ideologies, he acknowledges, but as each street was forged and each building erected, the dialogue was silenced and the capital became a monologic presentation of a federalized unification.

Pamela Scott and James Sterling Young do not read the process of the capital’s
inception as a reflection of federalist ideology as Bowling does, rather they, in separate and complimentary studies, argue the *product* of these early decisions—that is the capital itself—can be read as an iteration of federalism. Sarah Luria, in *Capital Speculations*, efficiently encapsulates their arguments: “Pamela Scott has argued, the street plan for Washington ‘embodied…the early organization of the federal government,’ [while] James Sterling Young has gone so far as to suggest that the city’s plan translates the Constitution into physical space; the capital ‘render[s] in a different language…the constitutional prescriptions for the structure and functions of the national government” (xxi). In other words, both the city and the constitution are the same federalist message, written in different tongues. In these readings, L’Enfant’s avenues become an aestheticized and yet instrumentally pedagogic model for the paths between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government and the avenues simultaneously highlight the political branches’ symbiosis; the streets model the necessary separation as well as the concomitant connection of the functions of the government. Further, these studies call attention to L’Enfant’s street names (each of the fifteen was named for a state in the union) that symbolized the respect for the distinct characters of the states, while also insisting on their interrelated function within the federation.

Finally, in a more recent article, the capital-as-victory narrative is brought to its pinnacle as C.M. Harris makes a case for understanding Washington D.C. as not merely the physical articulation of the federalist project, but rather as a transformation from the *tabula rasa* of the Potomac’s virgin land into a scripted space of diffused patriotism and iconographic nationalism. Harris’ article, “Washington’s Gamble, L’Enfant’s Dream:
Politics, Design, and the Founding of the National Capital” argues George Washington pushed his agenda to the point of almost gambling away the newly won federalist victory in Philadelphia because of his conviction to use this blank slate of land on the Potomac “for the ordering of the new nation” (527). The point of the most contention (not surprisingly there was unanimous support for a neoclassical style of architecture) was the scale of the city—Washington, never having had visited Europe, wanted to emulate the grand spirit of places like London and Paris. His vision outpaced both the simple language of the constitution as well as the purse of the new nation, but he insisted on grandeur for his new nation. Harris argues the materialization of this vision was a transubstantiation of sorts in which George Washington the man came to embody—through the proliferation of rhetoric and popular art—the cultural space of the capital as pater patriae. In other words, Washington literally and figuratively poured himself into the designs of the capital and emerged posthumously as our great founding father.12 Washington’s rhetorical and architectural ossification and sterilization of the messy, contested early national consciousness was, Harris infers, Washington’s gamble in building so grand a capital; and he won. So much so, Harris notes, that by 1811 “[George Washington’s] widespread bipartisan appeal had become ‘so popular’…Benjamin Rush observed…, ’It is hardly safe to speak’” (564). The capital’s synthesis of the federalist project was complete, and the president’s rhetorical and architectural unification of this symbol for the nation had secured his transformation into the “central icon for the founding” (564).

12 Although Washington’s body remained at Mount Vernon, Harris cites evidence the president made plans for a capitol tomb and argues the outpouring of eulogies and commemorative poetry in response to the first president’s death were another kind of monument “diffused in rhetoric and popular art, rather than shaped in stone” (564).
I want to read Harris’ megasynthesizing argument as extending, by an orchestrated political transitive property, to the later capital itself. The temporal framework of Harris’ argument sees the apotheosis of George Washington gradually building until the partisan debates and competing ideologies were forgotten in favor of a closed and digestible patriotic narrative of a founding father. So too did the physical city harden, Harris argues, to later become a “city of monuments” (564) reflecting the founding father’s parallel transubstantiation. It is in this light, by noting the trajectory of scholarship from Bowling to Young and Scott and on through to Harris, that the megasynthesizing project reads the city—in more tightly drawn narratives—as a physical presence of the victors, the federalists. There is, in the script re-presented by the megasynthesizers, no credence or space given to an alternative to the unified, clean, and whole story of the federalists.

This federalist-triumphalist reading of the city’s plan extends beyond academia. Robert Lowell’s “July in Washington”, the poet’s counterpart to Mailer’s *Armies of the Night*, begins, “The stiff spokes of this wheel/touch the sore spots of the earth,” as he reads the symbolic and material influences of Washington D.C. during the 1967 march to the Pentagon. In the poem, the colonial reach of the capital’s re-presentation assumes the most sinister of all the megasynthesizing readings, as it extends to those “sore spots of the earth” which are outside of its reciprocal representation: the international community and the national dissent. The spokes (a mirror of L’Enfant’s original design for the city) are the manifestation of an exported and expurgated fixed narrative of democracy, which only touch, they are not touched. The capital, in Lowell’s reading is not only the

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13 This proliferation of didactic and heavily scripted images taking over a city or taking over a man is, it seems, what *Citizen Kane* plays with in the last scene of a man defined by accumulated objects as the camera pans the room (which has become a city of sorts) of statues and goods.
manifestation of the federalist, and all subsequent unifying national projects, it is now so
divorced from the early national contestations and multi-voiced struggles that the
possibility of an otherwise, an other way has receded from our public imagination: “we
wish the river had another shore,” he writes. The federalists’ unification is complete;
Washington D.C., according to this trajectory of megasynthesizing scholarship and art,
has swept away all voices of dissent, monumentalizing the nation as a single voice. This
megasynthesis diachronically moves in lock step with the federalist synthesis. Both have
dissolved into the mythic form of Barthes’ terms, “taking the conflicted signs of everyday
language and rendering them a second-order signification,” writes White, but instead of
the obvious metonymy of the Constitution, the materially constructed geography of the
nation’s capital—Washington D.C. itself—has become the stand-in for a patriotic (or in
Lowell’s case an imperial) “structuring, crystallizing, and mobilizing [which attempts] to
comprehend and reshape the social antagonisms of the moment” (White 9).

But Hilde Hein, in “What Is Public Art? Time, Place, and Meaning”, reminds us
“[t]he supposition that a visual form, an anthem, or a text might express [a people’s]
deepest values or unify a coherent social group has become a relic of romantic history”
(2). 14 The federalists may have won the debates but the backcountry and urban

14 This, however, does not prevent leaders, regardless of the age or intellectual milieu
from trying to do just this. A fascinating look at a more recent national self-representation
is Loeffler’s The Architecture of Diplomacy in which he traces the history of United
States self-representation through the post-1926 embassy building program, part of a
national effort to define the country abroad. He notes the strong ties—both intentionally
highlighted by the architects as well as perceived by the international audiences—
between modernist architecture and the “openness of public diplomacy” (3). I will later
argue this aesthetic and political dialectic can be located as early as L’Enfant’s plans for
Washington D.C., but here it is interesting to note Loeffler’s argument’s implications for
the early nation’s conspicuous absence abroad. The U.S. poured most of its resources into
building the capital, while skimping dramatically on international representation: there
contestations of the anti-federalist project entered Plubius’ rhetoric, the national imagination, and the early designs of Washington D.C. Hein understands, in art or in politics, there is a tending toward synthesis, unification, and closure but she insists the door is always held open by an imagining otherwise, a dialectical relationship, a necessarily incompleteness in any human endeavor. In her argument about *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, this opening prevents it from turning from a site of multiple meanings of exchange and dialogic interaction to merely a tombstone; openings and contingency prevent art from becoming a bauble, an object. We can usefully extend her insights to a reading of Washington D.C.’s development, considering how such dialogical openness ensures that a living and complex city will find access for preserving moments and spaces of contingency against the intentions of its founders that it function simply as a unified patriotic ornament.

L’Enfant’s plan (Figure 1), read through the lens of an antifederalist critique, becomes a space for this contingency, openness, and creative praxis of meaning. First, though, it must be seen how his plans apparently build on the federalist agenda. L’Enfant’s plan, for example, includes a number of directions in the margins. For the thoroughfares: “Lines or Avenues of direct communication have been devised to connect the separate and most distant objects with the principal, and to preserve through the whole a reciprocity of sight at the same time.” For the public walks: “through which

was no U.S. architecture abroad (until Morocco gave us our first overseas building in 1821), the “ambassadors” insisted on the simpler role and title of “ministers”, and even Jefferson said the cost-effective national strategy was producing diplomats carrying the “lowest grade admissible” (qtd. in Loeffler 12). While this is outside the scope of this paper, I want to just quickly draw attention to the differences—in both sequence and strategy—between the ways in which the nation attempts to define itself for itself and for others.
carriages may ascend to the upper Square of the Federal house.” Of the state squares which are to house monuments reflecting the character of each of the states of the union he writes they are to be made so that they are “advantageously and reciprocally seen from each other, and as equally distributed over the whole City district, and connected by spacious Avenues round the grand Federal Improvements, and as contiguous to them, and at the same time as equally distant from each other, as circumstance would admit” (qtd. in Miller 38). These all carry the federalist tone of a scripted fusion, wherein the citizens are transported through streets and squares and back to the “principal”, or the capitol sitting atop the highest point among the “amphitheater” of hills. And certainly the language of reciprocity suggests a strategic means by which the individual citizen is tied (either by the heartstrings or the purse depending on whether you listen to L’Enfant or Washington) to the institution of the political system, each working for the betterment—and within the sight—of the other. But though the plan’s conception and reception is laced with the moral, spiritual, and political enlightenment this “reciprocal” relation with the citizens might impart (“[it] espoused the purity and reconstruction of society in a universe reminiscent of the Golden Age of Rome” (Miller 15)), the dispersal and serialization of both the people and the symbolic states of the union, must also be read as a manifestation of the early nation’s—George Washington’s in particular—anxiety concerning the formation of what White, following Sartre, terms practical ensembles.15 It

15 Sartre’s last major book, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: The Theory of Practical Groups*, was an attempt to shift the intellectual landscape of the 1960’s from questions pertaining to structures toward questions pertaining to the “dynamics of human interaction” (McGee 2). In this work, Sartre catalogues eleven complex—and intrinsically determined—groups and relationships ranging from the barebones fact of togetherness to the internal dynamics that cohere and disrupt the group formation. It is this attention to collective forms that Ed White uses to adjust the scale of inquiry from the
must not be overlooked that the language L’Enfant used imbued the institution with stasis (“seat” of the government) and the people with energetic movement; energy is being pulled to the heart-center as all radii necessarily pull inward. This directed movement and internal magnetic structure of L’Enfant’s plan must have been some comfort to the man who begins many letters with the fear, “the self-created Societies, wch. (sic) have spread themselves over this country, have been laboring incessantly to sow the seeds of distrust, jealousy, and of course discontent; thereby hoping to effect some revolution in the government…” (Washington to Jay 1) and ends many speeches with the rhetoric calling for “one people”. L’Enfant’s plan is both a strategic fusion and dispersal—that is, a physical orchestration of the bringing together and the separation—of the real practical ensembles dictating the new city’s structure.

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macro statistical data of class, toward a nuanced understanding of the ways people come together; the in-between-ness, rather than the individual and structurally determined encasement of class, race, and gender, allow both men to explore the ebbs and flows of communities. Practical ensembles, in these formulations, are the manifestations of praxis and are in direct opposition to institutions: the intermediate ground of the collective trumps both the individual and the system. Ed White, in the footsteps of Sartre, tries to enrich our vocabularies for collectives because he writes, “[i]t is within, through, around, and against the practical ensemble that early American cultural praxis occurred, took shape, and acquired meaning” (16).
But even though the president’s rhetoric insists on a disregard “to any local concern or interest whatever” in favor of a “comprehensive view” and “general expectation of the community at large” (Washington to Stoddart 1), L’Enfant’s plan permits a reading of something which might look like an open democratic space for a counterpublics. Miller writes of the original plan,

Throughout, an infusion of diagonals is apparent; they intersect to form *carrefours*—a sequence of open spaces in the pattern of stars—a pattern extolled by abbe Antoine Marc Laugier on the embellishment of towns. Inspiration and beauty, Laugier suggested in his writings, come not from perfect alignments of excessive regularity, but rather from a variety and imagination, bizarre connections, streets entering squares at many angles, a bit of chaos and surprise within a sense of order. (34)

L’Enfant’s attention to natural forms is important in both his political ideology and his cartography. He, unlike others who were to draw plans of the city, notably places the city within a centered illustration of the Potomac; the river, and the subsequent naturalizing of his design, becomes the stage on which he will set the city. His design suggests a reliance
and appeal to a natural order; the water, the stars, the “bit of chaos” are a necessary part of the intent to not cultivate it all, not wall it off, not insist on a regular and imposing grid. But more, his stars afford a space that necessarily cannot direct movement; a person is free to exit at any angle or to walk aimless, round and round—in fact must walk inefficiently around and not directly to the destination. The “surprise”, “variety”, and “imagination” invite an unmanaged and unmanageable experience within the city as well as a space that acknowledges the energy of the counterpublics. His design, read as a situational gesture, accounts for and anticipates the feelings of structure of these real and acutely felt counterpublics. Or mobs, as it were.

16 This is in stark contrast to Jefferson’s plan (Figure 2) that insists on the city, not the river, being centered, managed, and cultivated.

Figure 2: Thomas Jefferson’s sketch of his plan for the federal city
L’Enfant’s stars, then, are both an attempt to “develop a suitable institutional structure that might manage disruptive groups and serial human resources, two challenges aptly captured in that favored elite metaphor of the Hydra head, a monstrously fused mass that is simultaneously hideously dispersed” (White 210) as well as, and most importantly, a space—if reclaimed by an antifederalist critique—that might be understood to carry the seeds of its own subversion. In other words, the “bizarre connections” and open spaces of the stars might be used to promote the reciprocity of, not an individual to an institution, but rather a direct participation between practical ensembles. If, as urban design theorists such as David Fleming now insist, “the ‘good city [must be seen] as both a spatial and a discursive entity…[and] good public discourse is dependent, at least in part, on good public space; and good public space is defined, at least in part, as a context conducive to good public discourse,” the federal city might be reclaimed as a re-presentation of the creative antifederalizing space it was intended to silence (147). L’Enfant’s stars allow the frontier its own space within the city. Within these openings Crash’s audience might turn from the screen to face each other; civic participation might be found to be engraved in the streets of our nation’s federalist capital.
Time Line of Relevant Events\textsuperscript{17}

1781 Articles of Confederation take effect

1786 Annapolis Convention calls for revision of Articles
Shay’s Rebellion

1788 Virginia and Maryland offer land for development of Federal District

1789 Constitution ratified

1790 Act to establish D.C. by Congress

1790’s Jefferson in close correspondence with both L’Enfant and George Washington by providing reading material for the designer as well as making many notes in private journals and miscellaneous correspondence concerning the construction of the capital.

1791 Pierre Charles L’Enfant creates Plan of Washington; disputes arise between artist and president.

1792 Ellicot, a surveyor, replaces L’Enfant; plan of the city remains very similar although Ellicot is accused of not being as sensitive to topographical changes and nuances as the French designer was.

1800 United States government moves from Philadelphia to Washington D.C.; Adams is first president to occupy White House; population 3,000.

\textsuperscript{17} Time line a compilation of many sources, primarily Ball’s edition of \textit{The Federalist Papers} and Miller’s \textit{Washington In Maps}.
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