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# Feeling Institutional Whiteness

Ethan Hofmayer

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# Feeling Institutional Whiteness

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American Studies 302/303: Senior Project

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## ABSTRACT

The ways we move through the world, the decisions we make, the directions we turn, and the places we end up, depend in part on how we perceive others moving through the world. Our journeys are linked and our paths are crossed. As we share in a common experience of orienting ourselves in our personal lives, we touch and are touched by each other - we bump into one another. “Bodies are shaped by this contact”<sup>1</sup>. The sensations that are produced in these moments of contact are the guiding forces that inform our feelings and future decisions. Where I am now, geographically and emotionally, is a product of where I have been and the people I have interacted with along the way. All of us are a part of this social network and therefore no body is exempt from affecting others. Questions regarding how bodies affect each other are questions of power relations - political questions. Which bodies carry more weight in these moments of contact? Which bodies “take up”<sup>2</sup> more space? How do these bodies’ social positions affect the orientations of those around them? Additionally, these bodily interactions and embodied feelings are questions of phenomenology. They seek to address the ways people orient themselves to one another, both physically and emotionally.

The purpose of my starting with a phenomenological understanding of subjectivity is to foreground the importance of *feeling*. My understanding of power, in this respect, is the force one has to alter another’s feelings and perceptions. I will focus specifically on how institutional power shapes place and how the orientation of an academic institution affects the emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 152

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 150

states of the members of that institution. I will also address how individuals align themselves with the direction the institution has taken so that they are extended a sense of acceptance.

### *BACKGROUND*

In April of 2014 Vassar College Safety and Security called the police to identify four black teenage boys on campus without photo ID. Reportedly, the local teens, ages 12 to 16, had been noisy in the library, and a Vassar student had called security to file a complaint. When security confronted the four outside by the bike rack, only one of them could produce identification. As a result Vassar security called the Poughkeepsie police “to assist in identifying the youths”<sup>3</sup>. Soon thereafter a police officer pulled his squad car up on the library lawn. “The boys were then interrogated individually [for] about an hour and a half”<sup>4</sup>.

In the aftermath of the event it was implied that the security guard believed it was his responsibility to call the police on the four teens. The police officer felt it was necessary to interrogate each teen individually to ascertain their identities. What this incident seemed to indicate, not only to the four youths, but to the bystanders as well, was that Vassar College and its security detail believed the teens were somewhere they should not be. How might this event shape the adolescent boys’ sense of their place in the world? How did they understand the space they had entered when they passed the threshold of the Vassar library? And how did this interaction between authorities acting on behalf the of academic institution and the residents of Poughkeepsie impact the Vassar community? Students, faculty, staff, and administrators continue

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<sup>3</sup> Iovine, Miscellany News, ‘Police Respond to Call from Security’

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to grapple with the perception that Vassar college is a place where racial profiling happens unabashedly. And the four teens are forced to grapple with understanding why a historic institution of higher learning, a landmark in their community, communicated that they were unwelcome, or worse, that they committed a crime simply because they had been noisy in the library.

The phenomenological framework I employ for interpreting *negotiated terms of belonging* links embodied experiences with subjective perceptions of the material environment. Phenomenology's characterization "as a 'turn toward' objects"<sup>5</sup> leaves room for theorizing how individuals approach the world - in the case above that would include the police, the locals, and the Vassar community at large - as well as how the world appears to individuals. It addresses both the aesthetic environment and the agents within it. It is this link that allows me to critique the material environment's aesthetic norms and their relation to subjective feelings of belonging.

I start by composing a working definition of *orientation*. This definition serves to model how people approach each other and the world. Moving onto a description of *sense of place*, I look at how orientations frame the kinds of affective interactions people have with each other and their environs. Following Sara Ahmed's line of thinking on the interpersonal nature of these interactions, I explain how *feelings* that arise during moments of contact between people and their surroundings determine, at least in part, what people 'can do'. This second section looks at how recurrent habits contextualize behavioral norms and inform negotiated terms of belonging in a group setting over time. Specifically, by interrogating whiteness as a colonial ideology that

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 26

nurtures social division - a communal orientation that fosters group cohesion while engendering conceptions of the other - I hope to illuminate how feelings of acceptance are spatially extended or withheld within and around Vassar's campus, citing the example above. By looking at how habits and rituals shape place to serve privileged needs and reserve space for bodies that can inhabit a privileged organizational culture, I link contested terms of community acceptance to their site of negotiation. The third section of my paper addresses how *aesthetic themes* and *collective memory* retain these negotiated terms of belonging. In order to leave space for circumventing normalized power relations I close the paper with a discussion of *alternative somatic practices*, as a means of defining conditional terms that limit group acceptance. This final section looks at *narrative somaesthetics* as a structured praxis for fostering community minded orientations that disrupt habitual practices of discrimination.

## PLACE AND ORIENTATION

The racial profiling incident at the Vassar library sheds light on the concept of welcomeness - belonging - on campus, and consequently, reinforces the image of those who are accepted and those who are not. "Those who are already given a place", who are at home in a place, "are *the ones who are welcoming* rather than welcomed, the ones who are in the structural position of hosts"<sup>6</sup>. The student who called security, the security guard, and the police officer acted as gatekeepers, effectively deciding whether or not is was acceptable for the four adolescents from town to be on campus. When representatives of an institution assume a position of dominance, claiming space by assuming superiority over others, they position those who are

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<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 42

hosted by the institution into a subordinate orientation, welcomed on terms of “conditional hospitality”<sup>7</sup>. The conditions upon which hospitality is extended are the *negotiated terms of belonging* implicitly defined during interactions between people. For this reason the power relation between hosts and guests is powerful for structuring interpersonal encounters; whether or not a person acts as if he or she is at home, or feels like a guest, helps to determine behavior.

Until they were confronted and asked to leave, the teens perceived themselves to be in an accepting place - they were comfortable enough to play, as teenagers do, in a school setting they may even wish to attend, that was so nearby they considered it part of their neighborhood. But once the police intervened, suddenly the four black adolescents had to reconfigure their understanding of Vassar College. What was the meaning of their interaction with the Poughkeepsie Police on the library lawn? They had to reorient their sense of place to understand whether they fit on the Vassar campus. The students, faculty, and staff have to reorient themselves as well.

Orientation involves contemplating one’s emplacement, that is to say, it involves making sense of one’s emotional state, geographical location, and social standing. Orientating oneself is a way of understanding personal relationships. Each of us imagines our own place in the world - The stories we tell ourselves about where and who we are in the world are written and rewritten - it is an ongoing process as we orient and reorient ourselves daily. New experiences necessarily alter our sense of place and so we must constantly attune our interiority to match the external world we perceive. This perceptual adjustment can be felt as a shifting of emotions or as an affective reorientation of our inner states.

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 42

This is a basic underpinning of phenomenology: that “the direction you face is not simply casual”<sup>8</sup> but is the result of many perceptions, calculations, and past interactions. In this way, “consciousness is intentional: it is directed toward something”<sup>9</sup>. Always we are reorienting our understanding of the world, turning toward some objects, places, or people - and away from others. “Orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing*”<sup>10</sup>. “Merleau-Ponty makes this point directly when he suggests that ‘the word perception indicates a direction rather than a primitive function’”<sup>11</sup>. What I perceive becomes the place I am in. And because my perception is projected outward and directed inward my sense of place depends on both my physical surroundings and my interiority.

While a physical location may appear unchanged over time, the way a place *feels* is in constant flux. Therefore, places as they are perceived by individuals change as frequently and as consistently as emotions shift. How one approaches the exterior world in response to their ever-changing interiority becomes one’s orientation. Additionally, the way a place feels at a particular moment can be understood on an individual level as a *sense of place*. “Sense of place is a synaesthetic faculty that combines sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, imagination, purpose, and anticipation”<sup>12</sup>. A sense of place collapses what one feels and what one perceives into a single sensation, so while I may perceive the same landmarks in a place overtime, my feelings about where I am are never static. In this way place becomes irrevocably tied to time and

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 42

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 27

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Relph, ‘A Pragmatic Sense of Place’, 3

emotion; a place must be conceived not only as a physical location but also as an affective temporal moment.

When people are in a place together there is an overlapping of perception - a network of directed consciousnesses acting in concert, affecting one another. Each individual interprets his or her surroundings in an effort to make sense of the “spirit of [a] place—the unique environmental ambience and [aesthetic] character of a landscape or place”<sup>13</sup>. Each individual interpretation is then acted upon, compounding the possible aesthetic readings of the spirit of a place. Because this spirit is formed through interactions between people and the constructed environment, the way a place feels is directly related to how individuals approach the world, that is to say how people are orientated toward those around them based on their immediate sense of place.

The spirit of place is also tied to how individuals interpret the physical attributes of a location, including its inhabitants, and so a physical “sense of place is the faculty by which we grasp spirit of place”<sup>14</sup>. The “spirit of place exists primarily outside us (but is experienced through memory and intention), while sense of place lies primarily inside us (but is aroused by the landscapes we encounter)”<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, sense of place “is both an individual and intersubjective attribute, closely connected to community as well as to personal memory and self”<sup>16</sup>. Individuals as a community produce the spirit of place, making places palimpsests of personal histories and stories.

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<sup>13</sup> Relph, ‘A Pragmatic Sense of Place’, 2

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Relph, ‘A Pragmatic Sense of Place’, 3

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Significantly, understanding place in this way highlights the importance of history and memory in formulating a personal orientation. Constructions of who can navigate space, historically justified by colonial ideologies of racial hierarchization and white superiority, have formed over time through transgressive practices that have claimed space for certain bodies. In the following pages I address how disciplinary practices of racial hierarchization have become embedded in the collective memory of Vassar College, influencing how individuals in the community appear to each other.

People who are sensitive to their surroundings and others people's orientations, boast a strong sense of place. "Some people [however] are not much interested in the world around them, and place for them is mostly a lived background"<sup>17</sup>. The degree to which people are mindful of their emplacement is an indicator of their comfort. Those who are constantly working to reorient themselves, who self-consciously attend to their sense of place regularly, are less confident. "To be orientated, or to be at home in the world, is also to feel a certain comfort: we might only notice comfort as an affect when we lose it, when we become [disoriented and] uncomfortable"<sup>18</sup>. When we (re)orient ourselves we are operating from a place of uncertainty. Consequently a feeling of discomfort often accompanies the process of orientation.

In an institutional setting, orientation yields a sense of comfort and belonging within the group. The 'hosts' are not forced to consider the terms upon which they belong - they have already taken their belonging for granted and are comfortably 'at home'. Institutional power is felt when one becomes aware of the conditions upon which an individual is welcome - one may

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<sup>17</sup> Relph, 'A Pragmatic Sense of Place', 3

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', 158

experience an uneasy feeling of *standing out*. Therefore, “to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappear from view”<sup>19</sup>. Bodies that ‘fit in’ appear to be a part of the landscape. In perceiving bodies that ‘stand out’, that do not fit in, one engenders conceptions of “the guest, or the stranger”<sup>20</sup>.

To fit in a place one must appear to meet certain conditions of belonging; when these conditions are met one feels *at ease*. According to Ahmed, when oriented one “fade[s] into the background” and becomes a part of the place one is in, “but sometimes [one can’t or doesn’t]. The moments when the body appears ‘out of place’ are moments of political and personal trouble”<sup>21</sup>. Such was the case for the four black students confronted outside the college library. “When bodies arrive who seem ‘out of place’ in such institutional worlds we have a process of *disorientation*: people blink and look again”<sup>22</sup>. This process of disorientation produces feelings of discomfort for those who perceive bodies out of place and for the people who are presumed to be out of place - emotions are produced, not only within an individual subject, but *between* subjects. When orientations clash, when senses of place conflict, there is a moment of reconciliation or negotiation in order to make sense of the discrepancy. The terms upon which these negotiations take place are already determined, as a consequence of history, and continue to be renegotiated in the present moment. These interpersonal reconciliations are the entry point for individuals’ to affect the communal spirit of place. In the following section I look at how

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<sup>19</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 158

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 164

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 159

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

orientations presupposing ‘whiteness’ impact bodies that do not inhabit whiteness, normalizing racial inequalities as a constitutive part of the spirit of a place.

### *WHITENESS AND ORIENTATION*

Institutions that welcome members on conditional terms of belonging are implicitly organized around disciplinary normalization. The foundation of ‘disciplinary normalization’ is built upon preconceptions people have about each other’s identities—that is to say prejudices about what it means to be a certain race, ethnicity, class, gender—which in turn position, or orient, individuals into behaving in response to these projections. In this paper I focus on ‘whiteness’, as an institutional tool used to effect “what coheres as a world”, to look at the ways institutional power disciplines bodies and establishes norms that influence group belonging. While whiteness is in essence an effect of racial categorization, it intersects with identity in multifaceted and complex ways, making it a reductive lens for looking at social interactions - it does not take into consideration gender or class, for example. For my purposes I will look at the way whiteness is conceived generically as an exclusionary orientation, dividing people along sociocultural lines.

Having said that, Sara Ahmed reminds us:

“It can be problematic to describe whiteness as something we ‘[belong to]’: such an argument could make whiteness into something substantive, as if whiteness has an ontological force of its own, which compels us, and even ‘drives’ action. It is important to

remember that whiteness is not reducible to white skin, or even to ‘something’ we can have or be”<sup>23</sup>.

Whiteness merely becomes the mindset or orientation one adopts in order to not stand out in particular ways or to blend into certain environments. To understand this mode of inhabiting a place, where members of an institution are required to meet certain appearances in order to belong, one must take into consideration what Sara Ahmed refers to as a “phenomenology of whiteness”<sup>24</sup>. A phenomenology of whiteness describes “how whiteness is lived as a background to experience”<sup>25</sup>. How does whiteness structure how bodies “take up space”? How does whiteness affect what bodies “can do”, and draw attention to “the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others”<sup>26</sup>? Which bodies are comfortable inhabiting whiteness?

Vassar College’s institutional orientation towards whiteness has been visibly enacted in ongoing racial profiling incidences on campus. Students, faculty, and Poughkeepsie residents of color have experienced a phenomenology of whiteness as a “phenomenology of ‘being stopped’”<sup>27</sup>. Habitual encounters where security officers stop and question people of color about the legitimacy of their right to be on campus - encounters in which people are questioned because of the pigment of their skin - normalize uneven relationships between the institution and people of color. These moments of contact have residual effects lasting long after the event itself. “Through the very repetition of the action of ‘being stopped’” black and brown bodies are

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<sup>23</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 159

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 150

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 161

perpetually positioned as suspect. In the process of ‘stopping people’ “what is repeated is a very style of embodiment, a way of inhabiting space, which claims space by the accumulation of gestures of ‘sinking’ into that space”<sup>28</sup>. When an institution repeatedly treats black and brown people like they do not belong, the space that the institution occupies becomes oriented toward and around whiteness - the institution reifies in the collective memory the notion that people of color do not ‘fit in’. To be clear, whiteness is not an organizing influence in itself, but the effect of disciplinary orientations that compel bodies to fit into a “common organizational culture”<sup>29</sup>.

If whiteness is what allows “bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space”<sup>30</sup>. Bodies that are not oriented toward an organizational culture complicit with racial hierarchization must constantly be attuned to their sense of place so that they can navigate a world in which they are afforded less space and are perpetually subject to potential discrimination. “People of color in white organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else’s home (...) welcomed *on condition* they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture”<sup>31</sup>. To be treated as a guest, as a stranger, as “the one who receives hospitality, allows an act of inclusion to maintain [a] form of exclusion”<sup>32</sup>. In this way, whiteness, as an anchoring end of an imagined racial stratification, affects bodies who are perceived to be ‘outside’ of whiteness by imposing restrictive terms of belonging.

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<sup>28</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 159

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 43

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 159

<sup>31</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 43

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Vassar's orientation toward privileging white bodies has created a space of racial hierarchization. Fitting into the Vassar College community necessarily involves, at times, maybe most of the time, inhabiting whiteness - fitting into the stratified social structure. People who assume whiteness as an orientation are free to take up space without fear of being stopped and questioned, but under the logic of racial stratification, people of color are at risk of being victimized and harassed. This relationship in which the mobility of black and brown bodies is "diminished as an effect of the bodily extension of others"<sup>33</sup> is a form of institutional discipline. When "whiteness is what the institution is oriented 'around' (...) even bodies that might not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness, if they are to [fit in]"<sup>34</sup>. The difference between 'fitting in' and 'belonging' is a difference in mobility. *Fitting* in an institution offers a privileged mobility insofar as space is extended to match the needs of those whom the institution is oriented around; bodies that fit can 'do more'. Conversely, there is a sense in which all members of an institution *belong* to the collective - that is to say that everyone has an institutional place - despite different accepted terms of belonging which invariably limit the experiences of bodies who do not fit in.

These negotiated terms of belonging are what determine how a sense of place is experienced. "The effect of [the College's orientation] 'around whiteness' is the institutionalization of a certain 'likeness', which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, and different, when they take up space"<sup>35</sup>. It is important for us now to

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<sup>33</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', 161

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', 158

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', 157

“examine not only how bodies become white, or fail to do so, but also how spaces can take on the very ‘qualities’ that are given to such bodies”<sup>36</sup>.

## HABIT AND RITUAL

The theorization of phenomenology I have discussed above addresses how people make sense of their identities in relation to others. People orient themselves to other individuals and their material surroundings. They take into consideration their embodiment and emplacement, thereby engendering a personal sense of place. When people act on their relationship to the world they impress their orientation onto other people and the surrounding environment. These interpersonal interactions affectively produce feelings and emotions not only within individuals, but between individuals. The quality of these interpersonal feelings - be they feelings of empowerment or disenfranchisement - effects future behaviors and future orientations. In this section I look at how these behaviors and orientations accumulate over time to produce a common organizational culture- the spirit of a place. Specifically I look at how the desire to assimilate into a common organizational culture constituted by racial hierarchies leads to habitual practices of discrimination. I focus on whiteness as a function of this racially stratified culture in order to address the ways people assume orientations of superiority.

In “A Phenomenology of Whiteness”, Sara Ahmed outlines the process of racial naturalization: the process by which race becomes *real* through patterns of lived experiences. Ahmed makes clear that she does not want to assume “whiteness as an ontological given”<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 156

<sup>37</sup>Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 150

Rather, she interrogates the ways “whiteness becomes ‘worldly’” by taking up the question of “how whiteness is lived as [an aesthetic] background to experience”<sup>38</sup>.

She begins by asserting that “whiteness is an effect of what coheres rather than the origin of coherence”<sup>39</sup> - the perceived norms of accepted behavior rather than ‘the normal’ set of behaviors. Defining whiteness as a reflection of how things are organized, not as an organizing force in itself, allows us to treat whiteness as a product of interpersonal interactions and encounters. Whiteness is reified in the everyday as a result of individuals’ orientation towards whiteness, through their adoption of an outlook that naturalizes a particular mode of belonging and being that validates racial stratification. Whiteness offers the promise of ‘fitting in’, but in the negotiation of what *fits* there is always the fabrication of that which does not belong - the other, the stranger, the outsider. Whiteness becomes worldly by naturalizing the relationship between the ‘white subject’ and the ‘other’, normalizing interactions between people who act superior and people who are treated as subordinate.

Interpreting these negotiated terms of belonging requires that one be attuned to his or her environment - that one has a sense of place. The unspoken rules that dictate behavior are coded in naturalized mannerisms and habits. We pick up on the implicit social norms that structure interactions in a particular place by *directing our perception* toward the actions of others. I have divided actions and behaviors that accumulate and constitute the spirit of a place into two categories - habits and rituals, terms that allude to recurrent and reflexive patterns of interaction between people and their environment.

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<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 150

<sup>39</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 159

When people inhabit places they repeatedly perform habitual behaviors that establish the limits of ‘normal’ interactions. In this way, “spaces extend bodies and bodies extend spaces”<sup>40</sup>: habits accumulate over time, constructing the aesthetic spirit of a place, which in turn shapes peoples’ experiences and future habits. Additionally, actions and habits have residual effects extending in time and space, affecting other people after we have moved on; this line of thinking explains how “colonialism has made the world white”<sup>41</sup>, and why we are still grappling with ongoing historical injustices.

Habits stemming from presuppositions of whiteness and racial hierarchization manifest themselves in the everyday - in racial profiling which criminalizes black and brown bodies to racial erasure which renders invisible those same bodies. Because whiteness is a shifting category that excludes different people at different times, the habits of whiteness are likewise always shifting. To try and define them here, to pin down the transient habits that structure whiteness, would indeed be a futile task. But a constitutive component of a phenomenology of whiteness is that it allows people to assume an orientation of superiority. This orientation, which I have discussed above, positions bodies who do not assume an orientation toward whiteness in a subordinate position, where they are welcomed into “a common organizational culture”<sup>42</sup> based on negotiated terms of acceptance.

An example of these negotiated terms of belonging is found in the language of ‘diversity’ and ‘access’ - expressions commonly toted around college campuses. For students of color the conditions of hospitality upon which they are welcomed revolve around notions of diversity.

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<sup>40</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 158

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 43

When “diversity becomes a form of hospitality”, in which the host organization “receives as guests those who embody diversity”, then the requirement for belonging becomes “‘being’ diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate [that] diversity”<sup>43</sup>. But to be welcomed on conditions that require altered states of ‘being’ vehemently reorients one’s self-perception. This reorientation is felt as an extension of institutional discipline. Framing institutional access as something people should feel privileged to have, as opposed to something they deserve, “allows an act of inclusion to maintain [a] form of exclusion”<sup>44</sup>. ‘Diverse’ students are separated from the ‘non-diverse’ students, treated as guests or as “the one who receives hospitality”<sup>45</sup>. When being diverse is the required condition to belong, a condition dependent on conceptions of a racial hierarchy, then “whiteness” as the normalized status of ‘non-diversity’ “is produced as host, as that which is already in place or at home”<sup>46</sup>.

This habit of thought, that people of color engender the diverse positions within the college, leads to habitual behaviors that treat people of color dissimilarly to those who are *not* diverse, namely people who appear to possess whiteness. Unlike students who sustain the diversity presupposed by the college, “white bodies do not have to face their [relation to] whiteness; they are not orientated ‘towards’ it”<sup>47</sup>. There is no institutional pressure on students assuming whiteness to reconsider behaviors that marginalize fellow students. The abundance of comfort in white institutions, for students oriented toward whiteness, creates an environment

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<sup>43</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 43

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 156

where these students do not have to consider how they take up space. “This ‘not’ is what allows whiteness to cohere”<sup>48</sup> and go unchecked. Habits that presuppose the value of racialized bodies have been normalized and so gestures that reify these notions of racial hierarchies set the parameters for normalized behavior. Indeed, they naturalize and have become the naturalized behaviors that structure relationships and determine how a place feels and operates.

When these habits move beyond the background of experience, when they are foregrounded and made a spectacle of, then these habits take on a quality of ritualization. If ‘habits’ are what reinforce and reify racialized conditions for belonging, then ‘rituals’ are spectacular performances used to justify and validate those habits.

Rituals of “racial naturalization”<sup>49</sup> are systematized actions that structure the uneven relationships between people of color and people who claim whiteness. These rituals are performative displays of racial naturalization, akin to the incident on the front lawn of Vassar’s library when the four adolescents from Poughkeepsie were questioned by the police, which was itself a display of public discipline. Devon Carbado describes a similar situation in which he and his brothers were stopped by police and publicly disciplined. He recounts the experience as being a “naturalization ceremony”, that he and his brothers were “unwillingly” participating in, which “made [them] socially indelible via racial categorization”<sup>50</sup>:

“Passersby comfortably engaged in conspicuous racial consumption. [It] (...) was a familiar public spectacle: white law enforcement officers disciplining black men. The currency of their stares purchased for them precisely what it took away from us: race pleasure and a sense of racial

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<sup>48</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 156

<sup>49</sup> Carbado, ‘Racial Naturalization’, 633

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

comfort and safety (...) No doubt, our policed presence confirmed what the onlooking racial interpellators already 'knew': that we were criminals."<sup>51</sup>

Carbado exemplifies in his personal account how rituals of racial naturalization are performed under the presupposition that race corresponds with a social value or status. The police and the bystanders watching the encounter in effect "already 'knew'"<sup>52</sup> the criminal status of the black men - their prejudiced orientations were then validated by the disciplinary spectacle.

Additionally, by acting on orientations that criminalized blackness, the "white law enforcement officers"<sup>53</sup> reified their authority while localizing a disciplinary demonstration. Racial naturalization rituals reinforce racial hierarchies, incriminating blackness while vindicating whiteness. It is the effect of this exchange that is crucial for whiteness to extend beyond its borders into the collective. Whiteness becomes worldly through violation. In this way whiteness is a colonizing force that perpetuates itself through normalized habits and rituals, repeated periodically and consistently. The *familiarity* of this public spectacle further speaks to the extent these encounters produce residual trauma.

Furthermore, the sites where these racial naturalization rituals are performed are not arbitrary - they are a constitutive part of the ritual itself. How individuals interpret the aesthetic spirit of a place are irrevocably tied to their memories of past actions and transgressions within the space. Memories of racial trauma, specifically of moments that naturalize the unjust relationships between bodies who claim whiteness and bodies of color, are especially salient, in that when we act on these traumatic memories we engage with the disciplinary character of

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<sup>51</sup> Carbado, 'Racial Naturalization', 635

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

whiteness in whatever space we inhabit. People link these memories to their surroundings; these memories accumulate and organize themselves into the spirit of the place.

It is through this process that we have inherited the consequences of past violences in our present time. “Bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white’, a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival. This is the familiar world, the world of whiteness, as a world we know implicitly”<sup>54</sup>. The implicit world is a world organized by racialized terms of acceptance - terms that make race socially legible. These terms have been constructed throughout history. It is in this way that the habits and rituals of the past are carried through to the current moment, just as the habits and rituals that naturalize racial belonging today will carry into the future. It is important to acknowledge that terms of acceptance affect each of us uniquely, as they act on the many intersections of our varied personalities.

The following section outlines how habits and rituals not only connect disparate temporalities, but also bridge multiple locations. Specifically, I will look at how the racial profiling incident in front of Vassar’s library relates to other rituals performed by Vassar administrators and how these rituals extend ‘whiteness’ into the neighborhood surrounding the college.

#### EXTENDING ORIENTATIONS: Vassar College and Arlington Central Business District

The theoretical framework I have explored above addresses how ‘place’ functions phenomenologically, as a marker, of geographic location and of the current emotional state one

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 153

inhabits. In making meaning out of emotional states one engages with what I am referring to as a sense of place - a subjective reading of one's relationship to people and objects in the world. How a sense of place is integrated into one's sense of self is influenced by one's approach, or orientation, toward the world. Orientations frame how people experience their feelings about where they are at a particular time. Personal orientations and senses of place become interpersonal through engagement with other people and the environment. Therefore, our stake in the spirit of a place connects us to the perceptions and orientations of others; I intuit how other people are oriented in order to infer the terms upon which we interact. Simply put, we must contend with the actions and emotions of each other. Notably, however, the inherited grounds upon which we interact are not necessarily even.

Historical violence, including the advent of racial hierarchy, has shaped the world. "Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface"<sup>55</sup>, thereby endowing outward appearances with historically coded semantic meaning. "Race then does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we *receive* from others as an inheritance of this history"<sup>56</sup>. People who "take up"<sup>57</sup> more space, who maintain a orientation toward whiteness, have been historically afforded political privileges through the colonial process of claiming space. Decidedly, people with the inherited power and jurisdiction to materially shape the physical environment - in other words those who own and manage land - have the ability to heavily influence terms of inclusion and exclusion within a given territory. They have a greater impact in establishing the aesthetic spirit of a place and, therefore, a great authority over individuals' sense of place.

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<sup>55</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', 154

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', 149

Landlords take a very different approach toward the world than do those who are merely residents. “Those who are already given a place”, the proprietors who are at home in a place, “are the ones who are welcoming rather than welcomed, the ones who are in the structural position of hosts”<sup>58</sup>. The people who supervise places, who have more say in designing the built environment, are the ones with the ability to “conceptualize space”: “planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers”<sup>59</sup>. These groups define the uses of a place through “a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs” and are the arbiters of the “dominant space in any society”<sup>60</sup>. In zoning codes and district regulations they define in writing the operative uses of a space, and thereby assert command over an area.

When representatives from a well-endowed institution, such as Vassar College, influence the conceptualized uses of a public space - that is, when people acting on behalf of a private institution invest in the design of public places - they conflate the institution’s orientations with that space. The institution’s orientations effect how inhabitants experience the public space, making it an arena for negotiating conditional terms of belonging.

In the past two decades Vassar College has done precisely this, extending itself into the surrounding neighborhood, the Arlington Central Business (ACB) District, by purchasing properties and funding place-making projects. While Vassar does not proclaim governance over the neighborhood it has aligned the uses of the neighborhood with the needs of the college. The college and the Arlington Central Business district have adopted a common orientation and therefore operate symbiotically as two parts of the same community. Consequently, Vassar’s

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<sup>58</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 42

<sup>59</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

history of ‘stopping’ people of color on campus does not exist independently from Vassar’s investment in the ACB District. The relevance of this symbiotic relationship, as it relates to how individuals experience the public space, is how Vassar’s orientation around whiteness extends into the Arlington neighborhood. This section addresses the way collective memory links racial hierarchization to the aesthetic themes of the ACB District via institutionalized habits and rituals.

It is relevant to look at the historical relationship between Vassar and Arlington to see how it differs from recent investment in the neighborhood. It is also important to examine how this new relationship extends implicit ideologies of disciplinary normalization.

#### *HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP: Arlington and Vassar College*

Vassar College and the village of Arlington, “an approximately one-square mile neighborhood in the Town of Poughkeepsie”<sup>61</sup>, have existed coevally since the founding of the college in the mid-19th century; local shops and businesses have historically served the needs of the students and faculty, acting as off-campus leisure and shopping outlets. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Vassar College secured its partnership with the Arlington neighborhood. It opened the Vassar Bank on Raymond Avenue in 1924 and in that same year founded “a student group called the Township Committee”, organized “to increase involvement in local affairs and ‘create a more real community spirit’ between the college and the community”<sup>62</sup>. The Vassar Encyclopedia describes the following period of Arlington's history:

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<sup>61</sup> Vassar Encyclopedia, ‘Arlington’

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

“Several small businesses were established along Collegeview Avenue, followed by the a branch of the stylish Peck and Peck clothing stores on Raymond in the 1940s, beginning an era of relative economic prosperity for Arlington. Many of the new establishments, particularly the College Drug Store, were frequented by Vassar students. However, in the 1970s, when students gained the right to keep cars on campus and the South Hills Mall opened its doors, Arlington businesses experienced a considerable drop in sales, which only worsened with the advent of the Galleria Mall in the mid-1980s”<sup>63</sup>.

The relative economic hardships in Arlington during the 1980’s and 90’s prompted Vassar to take a more active role in the area.

“An Arlington Business Council had been established by 1980 to revitalize local commerce, but Vassar was not as yet involved. However, in 1999, Vassar funded an intensive study of the conditions and needs of the Arlington area, which was conducted by the Project for Public Spaces [PPS], a New York City-based non-profit consultation group. At the same time, Vassar purchased several properties in the Arlington area in order to head the effort to remodel buildings and revive commerce”<sup>64</sup>.

Purchasing these local properties and funding the revitalization plan proposed by the Project for Public Spaces marked a definite shift in Vassar’s relation to Arlington. In order to stimulate the

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<sup>63</sup> Vassar Encyclopedia, ‘Arlington’

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



The Arlington Central Business District has been a place for student shopping habits since the founding of Vassar College. Above, two young women stand out front of *Peck & Peck* clothing on Raymond Avenue.

struggling economy and revive the neighborhood, which has historically served the needs of Vassar students, the college saw fit to invest in the immediate community in ways it had not done before.

“In 1998 college administrators began meeting informally with property owners, business people, and residents. An informal public/private partnership called the Arlington Revitalization Steering Committee resulted, bringing on board representatives of the Town of Poughkeepsie, the Dutchess County Economic Development Corporation, and the Dutchess County Planning Department”<sup>65</sup>. This informal partnership between the college and the business district paved the way for official relations between Vassar and Arlington. In 2002 “a new organization called the Arlington Business Improvement District [Arlington BID], consisting of local political,

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<sup>65</sup> Hyde, *Vassar, The Alumna/i Quarterly*, ‘Revealing Arlington’

educational, and business leaders as well as representatives from the Vassar administration, was established”<sup>66</sup> to oversee the economic vitality of the district.

This BID effectively bridges Arlington, a semi-autonomous business district, and the private college’s financial offices. Vassar personnel serving on the BID extend the college’s financial orientations into the surrounding community, resulting in “a campus-community partnership (...) based on economic development”<sup>67</sup>. In this way Vassar College has staked “exclusionary claims” on public space, expending “spatial capital”<sup>68</sup> to redesign Arlington so that it is conceptually part of the college campus. “The effect of expending spatial capital is thus a formation of place, in this case especially through practices [and habits] of privileged consumption”<sup>69</sup>. In asserting its influence over the local area Vassar College has demonstrated its “ability to commodify space”<sup>70</sup>, making Arlington an integrated resource for the Vassar community.

In addition to investing in infrastructural improvements that make the Arlington Central Business District more accessible and pedestrian friendly, Vassar College has purchased several properties in the area. In August of 2001 Vassar College purchased the Juliet building, on the corner of Raymond Avenue and College Avenue, “which include[d] Juliet Billiards Cafe, Foreign Affairs clothing shop, Three Arts Bookstore, Stimpson's House of Nutrition, Cobbablu, Beech Tree Grill, and one vacant space”<sup>71</sup>, for \$925,000. “In 1999 the College purchased 46 and 48

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<sup>66</sup> Hyde, *Vassar, The Alumna/i Quarterly*, ‘Revealing Arlington’

<sup>67</sup> Angelo, ‘Thinking Outside the Walls’, 9

<sup>68</sup> Centner, ‘Places of Privileged Consumption Practices’, 194

<sup>69</sup> Centner, ‘Places of Privileged Consumption Practices’, 194

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Clyne, *Miscellany News*, ‘College purchases Juliet Cafe and other property’

Raymond Avenue”<sup>72</sup>, and additionally, Vassar owns a long term lease on the ‘Romeo’ building, which houses a small grocery mart and a handful of restaurants, across the street from the Juliet. “The College has purchased the properties through its company College Properties L.L.C., a private real estate holding corporation owned by the College”<sup>73</sup>. These properties tangibly link Vassar College to the financial success of the shopping district, securing Vassar’s investment in the neighborhood. “By purchasing real estate under College Properties, the College pays real estate taxes like any other private landlord, which helps bridge the gap between Arlington’s private real estate owners and the College”<sup>74</sup>.

The decision to move the college bookstore, which opened in 2014, to the historic Juliet movie theater, a building PPS identified as a “target (...) for redevelopment as the anchor of the district”<sup>75</sup>, was a significant step in bridging the college campus with Arlington. According to the revitalization plan put forth by the Project for Public Spaces, “this [move] is not just a matter of sentiment” but an essential development that “reinforces the district’s association with Vassar”<sup>76</sup>. With the Vassar College Bookstore acting as an ‘anchor’ for the district, Arlington and Vassar have become intimately connected in their economic pursuits.

As another part of the revitalization project funded by the college, the New York State Department of Transportation [DOT] reduced the main thoroughfare in the neighborhood, Raymond Avenue, to a two-lane street from a busy four-lane highway. Roundabouts were installed to keep traffic flowing and street lamps that resemble gas lamps from past centuries

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<sup>72</sup> Clyne, Miscellany News, ‘College purchases Juliet Cafe and other property’

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Clyne, Miscellany News, ‘College purchases Juliet Cafe and other property’

<sup>75</sup> Project for Public Spaces, ‘Arlington District: A Revitalization Plan [DRAFT]’, 16

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

were installed along the sidewalks. While these alterations have increased pedestrian access to the space they have also positioned Arlington as a constitutive part of Vassar College. The changes in the neighborhood's aesthetics and consumption practices have separated the area of Arlington that is nearest to Vassar College from the City of Poughkeepsie, which did not receive the same monetary support following the city's economic decline at the end of the last century. Keeping in line with the "upscale retail theme [PPS] proposed for the district"<sup>77</sup> the posh shops and restaurants in Arlington are markedly more manicured and expensive than the establishments only a few blocks away. This is not surprising considering Arlington's proximity to Vassar College, an undoubtedly wealthy institution.

"The economic connections shared between the college and the city have long been promoted as the strongest union between the two"<sup>78</sup>. The ongoing accumulation of repeated consumption patterns has naturalized a "certain set of practical dispositions"<sup>79</sup>, centered around the economic demands of the college and the business district, which determine the valid usage of the ACB District. "Participation [in the Arlington neighborhood] is wholly a correlation of specific social entertainment, economic-material needs, and academic study purposes"<sup>80</sup>. The Arlington neighborhood has been habitually oriented to serve Vassar students and faculty. Vassar College is not, however, the only university to stake exclusionary claims on its surrounding neighborhood. Since the early 1980's there has been a nationwide "dramatic increase in university engagement in local community building"<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> Project for Public Spaces, 'Arlington District: A Revitalization Plan [DRAFT]', 16

<sup>78</sup> Angelo, 'Thinking Outside the Walls', 9

<sup>79</sup> Centner, 'Places of Privileged Consumption Practices', 194

<sup>80</sup> Angelo, 'Thinking Outside the Walls', 9

<sup>81</sup> Hyde, *Vassar, The Alumna/i Quarterly*, 'Revealing Arlington'

## FEELING COLLECTIVE MEMORY

I would now like to consider the relationship between the Arlington revitalization effort and the racial profiling incident in front of the Vassar College library. How can these two realities be read in conversation with each other and what do they say about practices of disciplinary normalization on and around campus? I do not want to imply that Arlington's revitalization should exclusively be read in light of disciplinary normalization on Vassar's campus. "The benefits of community [and college] partnerships flow in both directions"<sup>82</sup> and for many students, faculty, shopkeepers, and Arlington residents the Vassar funded revitalization has fostered a more pedestrian friendly environment, a healthier business district, and overall, a more accessible shopping street. I will make the case, however, that one must take into consideration practices of stopping people of color on Vassar's campus if one is to more fully comprehend the terms of fitting into the Arlington neighborhood. It is important to acknowledge these terms of belonging if one is to take seriously Sharon Zukin's assertion that "local shopping streets are not just sites of economic transactions, they are social spaces where cultural identities are formed, learned, and reproduced"<sup>83</sup>.

David Harvey notes that "the character of public space counts for little or nothing politically unless it connects symbiotically with the organization of institutional...and private spaces"<sup>84</sup>. He makes clear that "it is the relational connectivity between public, quasi-public and

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<sup>82</sup> Hyde, *Vassar; The Alumna/i Quarterly*, 'Revealing Arlington'

<sup>83</sup> Zukin, 'The Social Production of Urban Cultural Heritage', 282

<sup>84</sup> Harvey, *The Political Economy of Public Space*, 13

private spaces which counts when it comes to politics [of belonging] in the public sphere”<sup>85</sup>.

When the character of public space does align with the organization of an institution, as is the case with Arlington and Vassar College, then terms of belonging that apply to the private institution are shared with the quasi-public space. In funding an aesthetic redevelopment of the ACB District, Vassar College has redesigned the area of Arlington closest to campus in the image



Arlington’s aesthetic transformation, funded by Vassar College, has turned the neighborhood’s “dilapidated and disheveled appearance” [Project for Public Spaces, ‘Arlington District: A Revitalization Plan’, 18] into the image of an upscale urban village, which matches the upscale aesthetic of the elite private college.

of the elite private college. Through co-determinate habitual behaviors and uniform appearances Vassar College and the ACB District share a *spirit of place*. Student shopping habits secure Arlington as a necessary part of the Vassar community; the phenomenological framework explored above outlines how habits shape space, and orient places around those who inhabit it. The relocation of the college bookstore to the corner of Raymond Avenue and College Avenue further enforces the connection between the college and shopping district. Therefore, one’s sense of place on Vassar’s campus, specifically feelings about the conditional terms of belonging that

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<sup>85</sup> Harvey, *The Political Economy of Public Space*, 13

must be adhered to in order to fit in, extend into Arlington through common aesthetics and habits.

The Vassar and Arlington community coheres precisely as a result of these overlapping habits and aesthetics, “the effect of [which] (...) is the institutionalization of a certain ‘likeness’”<sup>86</sup> or common organizational culture. This ‘likeness’ in turn aids “the production of cultural heritage through collective memory, [which] depends on both spatial and social continuity”<sup>87</sup>. Because the aesthetic themes mobilized on Raymond Avenue associate the shopping street to Vassar College, the collective memory referenced by these aesthetic themes, I will argue, is not separate from practices of racial profiling on campus.

Naturalization rituals that limit the mobility of people of color on Vassar College’s campus, rituals of ‘stopping and questioning’, do not exist independently from the area surrounding campus, which has been oriented around bodies who can inhabit the organizational culture of the college. Publicly disciplining the four students of color in front of the library, in addition to other incidents in which Vassar students and faculty of color were stopped and questioned about their legitimacy to be on campus, clarified the college’s orientation toward students of color - they were treated as guests. The intentionally unspecified terms required to ‘fit in’ allows these encounters to be dismissed as routine precautions necessary for securing a comfortable campus environment. Implicitly, however, these encounters clearly speak to underlying racial prejudices held by members of Vassar College. Encounters that naturalize this relationship between the college and people of color factor into an individual’s sense of place,

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<sup>86</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, 157

<sup>87</sup> Zukin, ‘The Social Production of Urban Cultural Heritage’, 286

and are therefore held in the community's *collective memory*. In this way the psychological effects of these encounters extend beyond the moment of the encounter; feelings about these encounters inform future thoughts and actions. The emotional trauma produced in rituals of racial naturalization extends into the community through what Ahmed calls "the rippling effect of emotions"<sup>88</sup>. This rippling effects how people experience their sense of place and their orientation to others.

How individuals interpret the aesthetic spirit of a place is irrevocably tied to memories of past actions and interactions. Memories of racial trauma, specifically of disciplinary rituals that normalize the unjust relationships between people who claim whiteness and people of color, are especially salient. When we act on these traumatic memories we engage with the disciplinary character of whiteness in whatever space we are in. The collective memory engendered by the Vassar community links habits of racial profiling to the space ideologically occupied by the campus, which includes the area of Arlington in the shadow of the college. Therefore, the conditional terms of belonging required to fit in Arlington, since it has been aesthetically transformed to match the aesthetic feel of Vassar, are at least in part determined by memories of disciplinary normalization and racial hierarchization. The shared spirit of place between Vassar and the ACB District extends common terms of acceptance. It is not that Vassar College administrators have written discriminatory practices into the codes and documents that conceptualize the uses of Arlington, but it is that the same administrators who conceptualize the uses and aesthetic appearances of the ACB District are also the governing institutional body that allows discriminatory practices of stopping people to happen on Vassar's campus.

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<sup>88</sup> Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', 120



These naturalization rituals are linked spatially through common aesthetic themes and temporally through the community's collective memory. On the left, police question four black students from the Town of Poughkeepsie about their legitimacy on campus. On the right, Vassar College President Cappy Hill inaugurates the college bookstore as a constitutive part of the Arlington Central Business District.

Consequently, the conditional terms of belonging that are imposed by the college on campus must also be considered in the adjacent Arlington neighborhood.

Robert Raisch, who owns the John Lane Gallery in Arlington and has worked there since 1958, believes that the image of the Arlington area influences whether prospective students choose Vassar. "Vassar has a beautiful campus and is a highly regarded educational institution," he observed, "but people have choices [of where to go to school]. Parents want to be confident that they're leaving their kids in a safe and comfortable place."<sup>89</sup>

While the appearance of a revitalized Arlington does seem more comfortable to some, it does not secure comfort for all. As noted, securing comfort for some bodies can have the effect of denying comfort to others. By stretching its political reach into the Arlington neighborhood, Vassar College ideologically extends its position on securing comfort for people possessing

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<sup>89</sup> Hyde, *Vassar, The Alumna/i Quarterly*, 'Revealing Arlington'

whiteness at the expense of people of color, thereby expanding the area of latent discomfort for bodies who do not inhabit whiteness. As a result, one way in which institutional power is experienced and extended is by linking memories of trauma to the aesthetics of a place. These memories, which factor into individuals' sense of place, in turn effect the types of behavior people are willing to engage in, thereby limiting the potential life experiences people can have.

But contentious places such as Arlington and Vassar College are never oriented in one particular way - they are meeting points for many perceptions and dispositions. While Vassar's governing elite may define the dominant uses of the off-campus district, they do not control lived experiences in the neighborhood. Each of us brings something different to the spaces we inhabit. As our habits form, so too does the place. For this reason, the prerequisite terms and conditions for belonging are always shifting. In order to pin down the particular terms required to fit into a place at a particular moment we must "seek out what powers and dynamics influence the contentedness of place"<sup>90</sup>. We can implement what Marjorie Jolles calls "narrative somaesthetics"<sup>91</sup> to aid us in this process.

#### SHIFTING ORIENTATIONS: Narrative Somaesthetics and Terms of Belonging

How do people affectively experience the place they are in? What do people perceive to be normalized habits of behavior? And how do they see themselves fitting into those norms? The process of disciplinary normalization I have outlined above is merely one approach to answering

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<sup>90</sup> Centner, 'Places of Privileged Consumption Practices', 197

<sup>91</sup> Jolles, 'Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 301

these questions. In linking memories of trauma to aesthetic themes I attempted to demonstrate how disciplinary rituals influence perceptions, feelings, and behaviors long after the moment of the disciplinary encounter. Of course people experience the world in innumerable ways, and this approach is only one facet of experience, which is in fact specific to my personal experience. In order to develop a more complete understanding of community belonging one must engage in conversation with others. The transformative power of discussing the phenomenological aspects of how one experiences belonging lies in conversation's ability to broaden perspectives. The new perspectives that arise in conversation open possibilities for altering normalized behavior dictated in disciplinary encounters, by giving individuals a more complete sense of place. In turn, this more complete sense of place has the power to change the orientations people have toward one another.

Originally a discipline proposed by Richard Shusterman, somaesthetics “offers a way of understanding how complex hierarchies of power can be widely exercised and reproduced without any need to make them explicit”<sup>92</sup>. Shusterman makes the case that “entire ideologies of domination can (...) be covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms that, as bodily habits, typically get taken for granted and escape critical consciousness”<sup>93</sup>. At its core, somaesthetics addresses the phenomenological experiences that are felt in social interactions, specifically in experiences of uneven power relations. Shusterman argues that if “oppressive power relations can impose onerous identities that get encoded and sustained in our

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<sup>92</sup> Shusterman, ‘Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal’, 303

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

bodies, these oppressive relations can themselves be challenged by alternative somatic practices [and unorthodox habits of being]”<sup>94</sup>.

Marjorie Jolles builds on Shusterman’s understanding of how “alternative somatic practices” can upset dominant power relations with her concept of narrative somaesthetics. Narrative somaesthetics provides the necessary structure for implementing alternative somatic practices, or at least, the structure for identifying which somatic practices might be effective in disrupting dominant power structures. The process of narrative somaesthetics is described as “consciousness-raising” in that it can reveal “the subjective and objective features of experiences under conditions of domination”<sup>95</sup>.

Narrative somaesthetics is an analytic praxis which involves “*tell[ing] narratives of [one’s] own self-overcoming through somatic practice*”<sup>96</sup>. It requires that we verbalize our embodied experiences of identity formation, that we narrate our engagement with naturalization rituals, and that we articulate habits of normalization. Jolles theorizes that if the stories we tell ourselves about our location in life, that is our ongoing understandings of our sense of place, “are part of the machinery of normalization”, then “one way to disrupt normalization is to disrupt the very narratives that normalization tells and pry open spaces for new narratives”<sup>97</sup>. By talking with each other in this structured way, we engage in “consciousness-raising” processes that give us a broader understanding of how we experience each other’s presence.

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<sup>94</sup> Shusterman, ‘Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal’, 304

<sup>95</sup> Jolles, ‘Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 310

<sup>96</sup> Jolles, ‘Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 308

<sup>97</sup> Jolles, ‘Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 308

“Essential to (...) narrative somaesthetics (...) is an understanding that narratives must be open to the contestation and conflict that arise dialectically in a group setting”<sup>98</sup>. These contestations bring into relief differences in phenomenological experiences and help us reveal “the edges of normalization”<sup>99</sup>. Importantly, Jolles’s description of narrative somaesthetics makes clear that the “dualism of norm/anti-norm” is a flawed conception of normalization. The norm is not something we can get out of or escape. Moreover, in imagining “norms as only repressive” we foreclose any possibility of transcendence. “We are better suited to imagine normalization (...) as something to be (...) maneuvered around, through, and with”<sup>100</sup>. Narrative somaesthetics can illuminate normalized exclusionary habits and offer the space to imagine new ways of belonging. Jolles argues that “a deliberate, collective practice of telling and contesting narratives of embodiment can disrupt the dualistic logic of norm/anti-norm that keeps normalization intact”<sup>101</sup>.

The shifting borders of normality are equivalent to the shifting terms of belonging - that is the terms of belonging are always changing. The practice of collectively exploring how we share space can shed light on how people claim space or are spatially disenfranchised, and can clarify the terms upon which these negations take place. Significantly, this practice focuses on “discontinuities rather than similarities” in each of our affective experiences. By engaging with “group heterogeneity” and “narrative conflict” in a collective setting, one can open up new outlets for interpersonal engagement.

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<sup>98</sup> Jolles, ‘Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 309

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Jolles, ‘Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 305

<sup>101</sup> Jolles, ‘Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics, 303

I do not mean to suggest that dialogue alone is the panacea to a history of colonialism - without action we will not be able to effectively confront processes of disciplinary normalization. But if “modern feelings of identity and belonging reflect an acknowledgment of worth in a complex social system”<sup>102</sup> then we need to start by acknowledging the worth of all people. In practicing this acknowledgement we are indeed taking action of a sort.

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<sup>102</sup> Zukin, ‘The Social Production of Urban Cultural Heritage’, 286

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