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Sarah Luria

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Secret Histories of the Virginia–North Carolina State Line: A Template for Literary Interventions into Property

Sarah Luria
College of the Holy Cross

This article tests the value of using William Byrd's *Secret History of the Line* (c. 1730s), which chronicles the running of the Virginia–North Carolina boundary, as a guide to the state line today. Byrd's *Secret History* belongs to a special genre of literature instrumental to land survey projects and property making. Byrd wrote both to entertain and to promote settlement. That Byrd's account is so well-written—witty, bawdy, and vividly descriptive—contributes to its lasting influence over the region. Thus Byrd offers a valuable field guide not only to the history but to the entanglement of culture and nature that continues to make this place. Furthermore, Byrd's text inspired Susan Howe's long poem "Secret History of the Dividing Line" ([1978] 1996), which critiques the legacy of Byrd's colonialist landscapes. Both Byrd and Howe expand our understanding of property as a literary genre, shaped by storytelling and graphic representation, and so open up more imaginative and concrete ground for our own intervention into the places where we live. **Key Words: poetry, property, surveying, Susan Howe, William Byrd.**

On a hot day in June 2011 I drive from my home near Boston to the Virginia–North Carolina state line to follow the footsteps—roughly—of William Byrd and his party, who surveyed the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina in 1728 and 1729. William Byrd (1674–1746), a prominent planter in colonial Virginia and man of letters, served as a commissioner on the boundary survey to oversee logistics and supervise the men. I have brought with me Byrd's *Histories of the Dividing Line*, his entertaining accounts of the arduous (and amorous) experiences of the men as they ran the boundary line, dragging their survey chains through the dense woods. Byrd wrote two versions of his story, the more official *History of the Dividing Line*, which he hoped to publish although never did, and his *Secret History of the Line*, a private, tell-all version of the journey and the men's misdeeds, their frolicking with wenches, and their jealous squabbling for power. The "secret history" was a popular genre in Byrd's day that claimed to tell the real story behind a political intrigue or scandal (Berland 2013, 343). At the back of my Dover edition of Byrd's *Histories* is a pull-out copy of the 1728 boundary line that the surveyors produced (Figure 1).[1] It describes a boundary, running westward from the Atlantic Coast at 36°31′00″ North latitude and extending nearly 381 km (237 miles) into the unsettled hinterlands of the colonial interior (Root n.d.).

As I make my long drive south to Virginia, I am aware that this might be a fool's errand. Byrd described a wild and fecund region that was certainly conjured in part by his imagination and his obvious literary aspirations to write an entertaining text. In place of his lush landscape, I will

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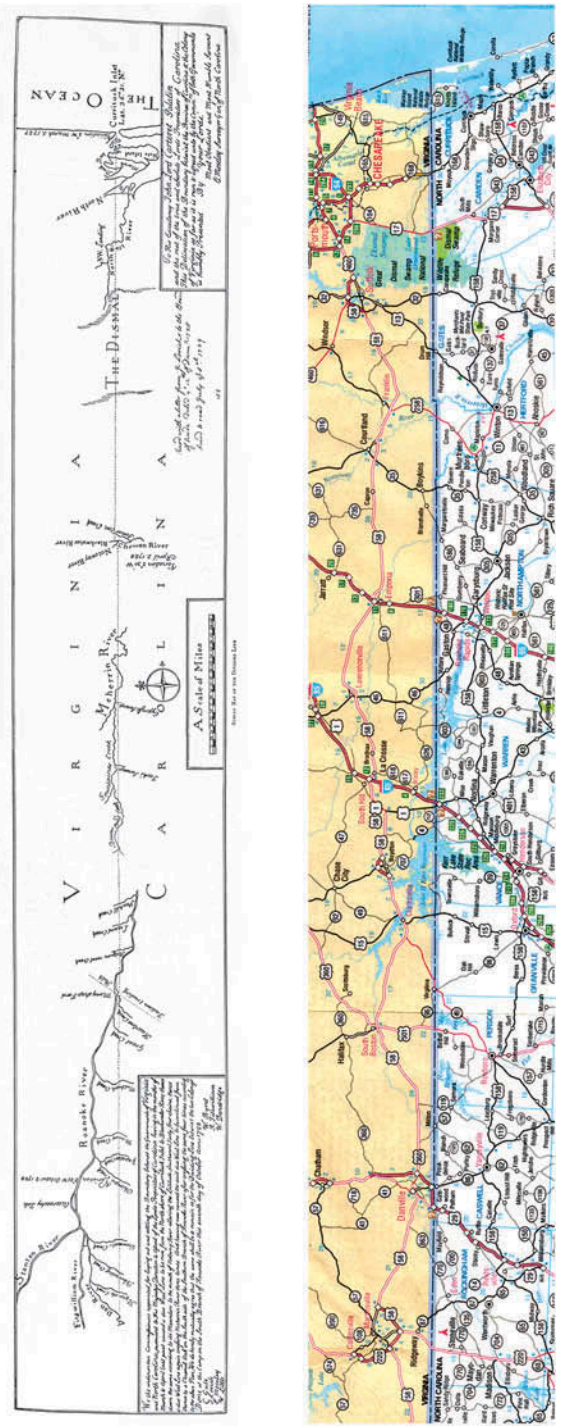

FIGURE 1 *Top*: Survey map of the dividing line, 1728, North Carolina Office of Archives and History. From *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*. 1967. New York: Dover, endpaper. Reproduced by permission of the North Carolina Office of Archives and History. *Bottom*: American Automobile Association, North Carolina, South Carolina, 2004 edition. Reproduced by permission of AAA. (Color figure available online.)

find the four-lane highways, suburban housing developments, older towns, factories, and gas stations that cover the Virginia–North Carolina boundary region today. Lying there incongruously on the passenger seat of my car is William Byrd's *Histories* with his early eighteenth-century portrait on the cover of his text. What could Mr. Byrd possibly have to say about this region that would be of relevance today?

My trip, as I report here, would prove to be more than an example of naive literary tourism. Byrd's texts surpass even the more obvious ways literature can influence place—how Thomas Hardy's novels, for example, help to create "Hardy Country" in England today—because they belong to a special genre of literature instrumental to land survey projects and property making. Byrd served as a commissioner to the boundary survey, helping to manage the elaborate day-to-day logistics of the work, including arranging food and campsites for the party of twenty-two men (Hughes 1979, 143). More important, he served the boundary survey as a gifted writer, reporting on its progress to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations in London (which oversaw the management of the colonies) and advertising the region's potential in his personal and professional correspondence. Byrd's *Histories*, which draw from these texts, thus belong in a spectrum of writings from the more imaginative to the more practical and concrete through which property is made.[2] Byrd is also famous in his region as one of its earliest real estate developers. He recorded and made property through many surveys, amassed close to 180,000 acres of land, created two cities (Richmond and Petersburg) on his own parcels, and engaged in an extensive correspondence to settle them.[3] As such, Byrd's writings offer a surprisingly connected genealogy that that lets us trace the instrumental role the literary imagination can play in the alchemical process by which we turn land into property.

Byrd's words and deeds let us theorize more concretely the ongoing dialectic between literature and place: Byrd not only helped to create more properties, he helped to inspire more literature that engages deeply with the work of land surveying.[4] The most important example is contemporary poet Susan Howe's long poem "Secret History of the Dividing Line" ([1978] 1996). Howe is what we might call a critical literary geographer. She clearly builds on Byrd's text; her inventive use of poetic form furthermore blurs the boundary between literature and surveying, in this case, between poetry and property, to show new ways literature can make and unmake place.[5] Howe herself, in an autobiographical essay that introduces her poem, claims that her poetic lines are "certified by surveyors chain-bearers artists and authors walking the world keeping Field Notes" (Howe 1996, 28). Given Howe's critical engagement with Byrd's literary land surveying, I bring her text on my tour as well. Howe's poem, I argue, resurveys Byrd's property-making and gives us new ways to view and enter into Byrd's region and the colonial histories of the propertied landscapes of the United States more broadly. Ultimately, Byrd and Howe reveal property as a literary genre shaped by storytelling and graphic representation. Their work opens up more imaginative and concrete ground for our own intervention into the places where we live.

On that day in June 2011, I follow Virginia Route 62 and drive to where, on 10 October 1728, Byrd's party first crossed the Dan River, the westernmost river marked on the survey.[6] I am about 320 km (200 miles) inland from the coast, near today's city of Danville. I park my car and walk down to the river's edge to read Byrd's entry for that day:

> The Stream, which was perfectly clear, ran down about two Knots, or two Miles an Hour, when the water was at the lowest. The Bottom was cover'd with a coarse Gravel, spangled very thick with a

> shining Substance, that almost dazzled the Eye, and the Sand upon either Shore sparkled with the same splendid Particles.
>
> At first Sight the Sun Beams giving a Yellow cast to these Spangles, made us fancy them to be Gold-Dust, and consequently that all our Fortunes were made. . . . But we soon found our selves mistaken, and our Gold-Dust dwindled into small Flakes of Ising-Glass [i.e., mica]. However tho' this did not make the River so rich as we cou'd wish, yet it made it exceedingly Beautiful. (Berland 2013, 142, 306, note 234)[7]

Lifting my eyes, I note the contrast between Byrd's view of the sparkling water and the murky brown river today. I later discover that many others have visited the Virginia–North Carolina boundary line, Byrd in hand, stood on this spot to read his account, and made this same comparison.[8] Stephen C. Ausband (2002), who traveled the boundary to compare today's environmental conditions with those recorded by Byrd, explained the turbid river: "The Dan River now runs principally through farmland in this area. Farmland does not hold soil as well as virgin forest does, and consequently the river is never clear" (96).

Byrd is a popular guide because he braids together land surveying and literature so thoroughly. Byrd plots his narrative through dated entries made along the boundary, reporting the survey party's location and how far west that day they "carried the line." William Byrd's two histories read like a map with stories attached; indeed, Byrd appears to have intended that his published *History* include a copy of the survey (Berland 2013, 61). A map, Edward S. Casey (2002) noted, makes you want to go to the places it describes (xiv). Byrd's two histories and the boundary survey arguably offer even more allure, as combined they create a "deep ma[p]" of the region, one that weaves together the survey and its human drama, with vivid descriptions of flora, fauna, soils, and waterways, through Byrd's synthetic style (Berland 2013, xi–xii). The *Journals of Lewis and Clark* (DeVoto 1997) and more recently Cheryl Strayed's (2012) *Wild* have inspired readers to follow these authors' treks, reading passages as they go. In a similar way, Byrd's gift as a storyteller has managed to put an ordinary political boundary—not the Mason Dixon line, not the Mexican–U.S. border—so to speak, on the map.

Berland, however, cautioned the reader on the hazards of using Byrd as a field guide in this way. Byrd wrote the *Histories* after the survey ended, in his large library back at his estate, Westover, on the James River, eight miles above Williamsburg. Byrd drew on his field journal but freely added choice passages gleaned from his fabulous collection of books (Berland 2013, x, 21). Byrd's "framing his narratives in the form of dated-entry chronicles" thus creates, Berland (2013) stated, an illusion of "immediacy," but this "ostensibly daily from-the-field reporting masks a great deal of in-the-study artifice" (47). To fill out his description of the Dan River, for example, it seems likely that Byrd "appropriat[ed]" phrases from John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (Smith 1624) where Smith speaks of how men were fooled by the "'washings from the mountains'" with its "'shining stones and spangles'" into thinking they had found gold (Berland 2013, 305–06, note 234). Berland noted that such unacknowledged borrowings were common in Byrd's time (xi, 23). Byrd also appears to draw on Robert Beverley's ([1705] 2013) *The History and Present State of Virginia*, where Beverley reports of the early colonists at Jamestown that "'a yellow sort of Dust-Isinglass [that] lay shining in the Bottom of that limpid Element'" had "'stirr'd up in them an . . . inordinate Desire after Riches'" (Berland 2013, 303, note 231). Thus, when we read Byrd's view of the Dan River while we stand on its bank today, we are viewing the river through words that were used to describe other rivers, as neither Smith nor Beverley was describing the Dan. It is probable that Smith and Beverley's descriptions borrow from other sources as well. The result, as Berland (2013) said, is an

"'accretional text'" in which Byrd brings together a variety of sources to frame the exotic colonial backlands of Virginia in an entertaining yet informative way (xi).

My Byrd tour proves to be more problematic still. Shortly after Byrd returned from the survey, he acquired a 20,000-acre parcel in North Carolina right on the boundary line—the line formed the north border of his plat.[9] Byrd was trying to settle that parcel while he wrote the *History*, and choice phrases from it would later be used to advertise the parcel to Swiss German settlers as the "Land of Eden" (Berland 2013, 50). In a letter to his friend John Perceval, Viscount, an Anglo-Irish statesman and, later, cofounder of the Georgia colony, Byrd explained his "Eden" parcel's name: "I own I was its godfather, and like Adam gave it a name suitable to its nature" (Tinling 1977, 2:521). Ausband (2002, 97) noted that Byrd's descriptions in the *Histories* become particularly enthusiastic after the first crossing of the Dan River, and Royster (1999, 15–18) emphasized Byrd's financial need to sell the Land of Eden parcel quickly to settle a large inherited debt. Thus Byrd's glowing description of the Dan River makes it likely that it doubles surreptitiously as a promotional blurb for his property in the region.

Standing on the shore of the Dan River, reading Byrd, I thus enter a complex geohumanities situation. Berland cautioned us not to naively confuse Byrd's very self-conscious literary performance with actual places. Further evidence warns us to read Byrd's romantic view of the region as colored by his desire to promote his land holdings. These warnings, however, suggest that we can separate literary geography from historic geography. Instead, by imbricating the boundary survey with his library of books through his arch writerly style, Byrd created an imaginary place that has had long-lasting physical effects. Byrd's words helped to shape the region; they still do. His Land of Eden parcel today has been subdivided many times over and now is the city of Eden, North Carolina, which adopted Byrd's name in 1967 (Eden, North Carolina n.d.). Byrd's romanticized discourse of the river's pure sparkling waters is invoked today by local environmental activists and featured on Web sites promoting historic tourism.[10] Byrd's region remains a literary historic geography that we must approach as such.

Rather than understand Byrd's literary and financial objectives as preventing us from mapping his *Histories* onto actual place, therefore, I explore here how we can exploit their apparent magnetism and use them as an effective entrance into it. Berland's warning only confirms the need to develop a more critical literary historical geography to enable Byrders to do so. Byrd's writings represent, in fact, a powerful geohumanities guide to the colonial history of our present-day propertied landscapes. Byrd exemplifies Price's (1995) point that property "reveals nature and culture inextricably entangled" (5). In this article, I combine literary analysis and field study to explicate, and indeed to embody, that rich tangle to suggest how we might use Byrd's texts as captions to today's state line to "animate" our critical theory about the performed nature of landscape (Rose and Wylie 2006, 475–78) and property. Blomley (2014) defined property, following Carol Rose, as a performance, not a stable essence or fact but a "set of relations" that "depen[d] on a continual, active 'doing'" (1303). By following Byrd's imbricated skeins of biotic, cultural, and political history, as well as his footsteps, we can enter into these tangled relations and begin to see, feel, and understand how intricately they combine.

Reading Byrd's vivid descriptions *in situ* helps us summon the ghosts of the past, giving us the uncanny pleasure of seeming to watch the large survey party—the commissioners, the surveyors and chainmen, the game hunters, servants, porters, and Native American guides—pause at the shore, assess the river's depths, and with their teams of horses, carts, and baggage, carry the line across it, dragging the empire in their wake (Berland 2013, 461–74). Byrd gives us a valuable

double vision, shuttling back and forth between the past and present, that helps us to understand ourselves as being a part of the ongoing story of this landscape's making.[11] Blazing trees, determining where Virginia ended and North Carolina began, and so clarifying to which colony the quitrents of future owners would be paid, Byrd and his party performed the next steps that would accelerate settlement and bring this region under firmer colonial control.[12] Held now in our hands, our feet planted on the ground, Byrd's *History* becomes our physical title to a cultural property—the Dan River boundary region—we now, thanks to Byrd's account, feel an interest in. We become the bodily nexus of genealogies physical and cultural. Reading Byrd's "voice" aloud, his voice melds with mine and draws me into his view and his era. Byrd's texts represent a powerful inheritance through which we enter into the story of this place, the ongoing production of this cultural property, as I do by writing about it here.

Standing at the Dan River, then, I am in the midst of a centuries-old literary conversation over land use that reaches from John Smith to Susan Howe. Our landscapes are not only "tasks-capes"—physical records of the ongoing human and natural energies that have shaped them[13]—they are also thoughtscapes—the results of countless ideas and visions, discussions and debates, longings and horrors. That history remains secret; it goes largely unrecorded, but standing at the Dan River, Byrd and Howe in hand, I can at least begin to reconstruct and enter this crucial story as well. Howe is an especially useful guide here because her "Secret History of the Dividing Line" interrogates Byrd's basic colonial landscape-making practices, common throughout the U. S. eastern seaboard, including the establishing of political boundaries and the subdividing of backlands into parcels. Byrd fashioned himself the godfather of this region, but his is a problematic legacy to be sure; Howe helps us think through how it feels to inherit those lands.

This article argues that we require the double vision afforded by the "secret histories" of our propertied landscape recorded in a network of writings that extend from the more practical (survey plats, newspaper clippings) to the more imaginative (letters, diaries, and sketches) and that can be located in any local archive. Such stories turn private property into cultural property, and show our land parcels to be a literary as well as material genre. Understanding property as a literary form opens up more ways for us to enter into the ongoing story of its production by doing our part to keep its secret histories alive, in view, and add our own sequels to them. Howe is so important to this work because she is so experimental with her literary form: She greatly expands how verbal representation can remake our relationship to property.

I ground these theoretical claims here by offering a three-layered view of a small section of today's Virginia–North Carolina state line region seen first through Byrd, then Howe, and, finally, my own compilation of the two. For brevity's sake, I focus this vast genealogy on the power of literary form, or genre, and style. Byrd markets his landscape through his deft encyclopedic eighteenth-century prose. Howe, on the other hand, writing in the late twentieth century, deconstructs our propertied landscapes through the freedom of word play afforded by her modernist style and poetic form. In his study of imperialist geographies, Clayton (2011) pointed out that "colonizing projects" "were built and supported by geographical discourses and practices" (51). Byrd's view reminds us how important literary conventions, such as storytelling and wit, were to those geographical gains; Howe's view shows us the power of literary form to reshape our relationship to the lands we inherit; my view suggests how today's generation of citizen surveyors like myself can draw on Byrd and Howe's methods to more consciously use storytelling and literary representation to enter and help shape the historic geographies in which we all live.

BYRD'S SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE

According to Byrd biographer Pierre Marambaud (1971), Byrd's "style is his greatest asset." Byrd's style shows him to be not so much an original author as a brilliant deployer of literary conventions through which he weaves together satirical wit, detailed naturalist description, and his romantic vision (274–76). Together these strains bridge both sides of Byrd's Atlantic world: They assert Byrd's confident control and identification with London's political elite and they point to the seductive and lucrative lure of the colonial backlands. Byrd frames the wild new world for his audience in enticing yet familiar terms, such as the colonists' belief that they had discovered gold, which Byrd uses in his account of the first Dan River crossing cited earlier. A "close reading" of Byrd's text will allow us to be more critical geographers by exposing his use of literary forms and conventions to draw us into his world.[14]

Byrd makes broad use of the literary device of contrast to entertain his readers with marvelous incongruities between the old world and the new. Through Byrd's pen, the survey team members become "Knights Errant" doing valiant service to the Crown as they slog, for example, through Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp (Berland 2013, 86). He similarly gratifies his London readers by playing up the contrast between their refined cuisine and that of the survey team, who dined on bear grease (delectable by Byrd's account) and "Glue-Broth" (Berland 2013, 178). The efficacy of Byrd's style is registered in his correspondents' praise of his "performances." John Perceval promised Byrd that due to his literary prowess and labors for the Crown, Byrd would "become universally known" and revered (Tinling 1977, 1:391; 1:421).

Byrd's humorous incongruities can border on the ridiculous, but they still help to establish his authority as a British imperialist. Just before coming to the Dan River, the men crossed what they named "Cocquade Creek" because, Byrd reports, "we there began to wear the Beards of the Wild-Turkey-Cocks in our Hats by way of Cocquade" (Berland 2013, 405). A cockade is a ribbon ornament worn to signify rank or office. Byrd puns on the etymology of cockade (from the French for "coq," for rooster) by having theirs be from wild turkey-cock beards rather than ribbons, and creates a ridiculous picture of the men strutting around importantly with turkey beards in their hats. The alliteration of "k" sounds in Cocquade Creek further emphasizes the humorous incongruity of importing this old-world fondness for rank to a small stream in the Virginian wilds. Paradoxically, by mocking the colonists' pretensions, Byrd enhances rather than diminishes his authority. His satirical style voices superiority and confidence. The writer can mock his subject because he is so sure of his control over it; otherwise, the humor would be lost. Byrd's vivid portraits thus entertain his contemporaries while assuring them the colony is in good hands and a safe place to invest. Modern readers today can enjoy Byrd's portraits for the way they humanize that long-ago era and help demystify the abstract work of building empire.

Most important, Byrd's colorful accounts exhibit his knowledge of nature so as to be able to identify resources that could be turned to the Empire's financial gain. Byrd introduces the picturesque description of the gold spangles in the Dan River with a more scientific discourse describing the riverscape:

> [The Dan River] was about 200 Yards wide, where we forded it, and when we came over to the West Side we found the Banks lin'd with a Forest of Tall Canes, that grew more than a Furlong in depth. So that it cost us abundance of time and Labour to cut a Passage thro' them wide enough for our Baggage. In the mean time we had Leizure to take a full view of this charming River. (Berland 2013, 142)

Byrd skillfully weaves the aesthetic "charms" of this beautiful river with his more prosaic assessment of its resources: the "Forest of Tall Canes" (probably *Arundinaria gigantean;* Berland 2013, 306, note 236) introduced in passing here would be pivotal to the next phase of colonial settlement. In a letter to his friend Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery, Byrd describes the Dan as "the most beautifull river I ever saw" and notes that the abundant cane would make "excellent forage for horses and cattle" (Tinling 1977, 1:395). The cane could supply a free crop of fodder for livestock that would be essential to successfully establish European-style husbandry to the region, and thus serve as a cornerstone for the colonial economy. Byrd's botanical acumen (he was a member of the British Royal Society) leads him to record the specific makeup of the cane, which "grows commonly from 12 to 16 feet High," and their dense root structure, and to conclude, correctly, that the plants could be used to construct canoes and planted along river banks to avoid erosion by livestock (Berland 2013, 144).[15] Byrd knew it was agricultural products like cane, and not gold, that would be most essential to the colony's expansion. In this passage, then, Byrd subtly corrects conventional imperialist dreams of discovering gold, born from inexperience, with the practical know-how of the local colonist. Byrd's account further whets the British imperial imaginary by showing its social order already in place, as the porters and other servants labored to cut the cane while the commissioners enjoyed the leisure to take in the river and scheme about its profitable use. These important messages, versions of which he included in the survey's report to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations and his correspondence to his friends and associates in Great Britain, give tangible evidence of Byrd's *Histories* as important links in the political network of correspondence and reports that helped establish the Empire's expanding "cultural landscapes, spatial systems, and social geography" (Meinig 1978, 1190–94). When we read Byrd on the Dan River, therefore, we should imagine not only the porters hacking at the cane to carry the line, but the way that line helped pave the way to our own standing here today.

Standing on this spot, we look at land that in 1728 was more than fifty miles beyond the last colonial settlement or farm (Ausband 2002, 12–13). The 20,000-acre parcel that Byrd would dub and try to develop as the Land of Eden is about twenty miles west of here. Byrd's name for his parcel remained a shelved paradisiacal metaphor for 200 years. Despite his tireless promotion, Byrd had inordinate trouble settling the land; eventually, it was sold by his son and heir William Byrd III (1728–1777). By the twentieth century, it included several towns, which, as a Web site describing "Eden's Heritage Tour!" notes, decided to consolidate and rebrand themselves in the 1960s:

> More than 250 years of history have left their mark in the beautiful hilly area between the Smith and Dan Rivers that William Byrd II described as "The Land of Eden" in 1728. The citizens appropriated his estimation of their gracious Piedmont home when they consolidated the towns of Leaksville, Spray and Draper and central "Meadows" in 1967, and named the resulting city Eden. (Explore Eden, N.C. n.d.)

Adopting not only Byrd's name but his shrewd romanticism, Eden, North Carolina now advertises itself as "the Land of Two Rivers" "Where Promise Flows" (Eden, North Carolina n.d.). Interestingly, Mesopotamia, often thought to be the historical Eden, is known as the "Land Between Two Rivers." It is possible that Eden, North Carolina makes this further move on Byrd's idea of a real-life paradise and so offers a marvelously entangled example of the geohumanities at play.[16]

Recently, an environmental accident opened Eden's moniker up to some Byrdian satire. On 2 February 2014 the ash pits of the Eden coal station owned by Duke Power on the Dan River broke, and for the next several months Eden was the place where 82,000 tons of coal ash, rather than promise, flowed (Weiss and Biesecker 2014). Local river activists pointed to the stark contrast of the river's degradation with how "pure … it was when William Byrd of Westover

first surveyed the Virginia–North Carolina border in 1728" (Editorial Board 2014), but to use Byrd as an environmental benchmark of how a once "pure" Eden has fallen forgets the colonialist pragmatism contained within Byrd's paradisiacal discourse. Byrd touted the prospect of mining and went to some length to confirm the presence of minerals as one way to lure settlers to Eden (Tinling 1977, 2:451; Royster 1999, 16). In this way Byrd signaled the arrival of an aggressive market-driven use of natural resources, a genealogy Duke Power continues.

Byrd is an important guide to this region because as a planter, a slave owner, and agent for the British Empire, he revivifies for today's readers the political and economic relations that helped to shape this place. Perhaps even more fascinating, he shows us that similar needs, desires, manipulations, and literary strategies are still active here. As a result, his writings put us into an extremely complicated legacy that is difficult but important to keep in mind. Howe's contemporary poetic resurvey of Byrd in her "Secret History of the Dividing Line" ([1978] 1996) provides us with some concrete ways to conceptualize and bridge that temporal, cultural, and emotional gap.

SUSAN HOWE'S SECRET HISTORY OF THE DIVIDING LINE

Howe's poem "Secret History of the Dividing Line" and her essay "Frame Structures," which serves as a preface to it, offer a profound literary intervention into our property histories. Like a land surveyor who draws lines on the ground from point to point, Howe connects words, sometimes through sound rather than meaning, into graphic pictures on the blank terrain of her page. Howe's text plots an extended analogy between property and poetry, between using lines to shape property parcels on the land and poetic verses on the page (Joyce 2010, 63).

In "Frame Structures," Howe uses prose to tell her autobiography in terms of place. She begins with memories of her early childhood in Buffalo, New York, and then, later, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We learn, too, that her father's family owned a farm in Bristol, Rhode Island, called Weetamoo, named for the sister-in-law of the Narragansett sachem Metacomet who died in King Phillip's War and whose body washed up, Howe claims, on the shore of their property (Howe 1996, 21–22). These memories help take us into the poetic landscape of her "Secret History of the Dividing Line," which explores Howe's identity in the context of the history of Anglo-American colonization and property inheritance.

Howe's long poem (it runs thirty-five pages) is an extended meditation on the meaning of property from colonial America to the present-day United States. It moves nonlinearly through different historic moments including precontact Native America, the colonial invasion, and the American Civil War. Running through the poem, although only intermittently, is a vocabulary suggestive of property making—"boundary," "border," "land," "tract," "fences," "compass," "went out to mark some trees," and so on (Howe [1978] 1996, 105). One strain of argument through the poem renders the propertied landscape as embodying a violent yet creative history that present-day dwellers are obliged to inherit, remember, and build on.

The "Secret History of the Dividing Line" makes an extended and brilliant analogy between poetry and property on many levels. Howe's poem is difficult to comprehend, but that is essential to its argument, which focuses on form as much as meaning. She uses her sometimes seemingly nonsensical lines (in particular her rigid square blocks of verse and use of horizontal lines or boundaries to mark sections of her poem) to comment on the often nonsensical (in terms of topographical facts) property lines created by a land survey.

As Joyce (2010, 63) argued, Howe turns her page into a field, as a surveyor does, where she creates textual landscapes with words, lines, and blank space. Specifically, Howe commandeers Byrd's method of an accretional text, that weaves writings from the past into his landscape so as to facilitate our appropriation of it. Like Byrd, Howe makes unacknowledged use of many sources, including Byrd's *Histories*, William Carlos William's *American Grain*, and letters written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Howe repurposes Byrd's multivocal style to construct graphic landscapes that transform today's privatized terrain into a cultural property inherited by all. Howe's poetic landscapes fulfill her claim, quoted earlier, that her lines are "certified by surveyors chain-bearers artists and authors walking the world keeping Field Notes" (Howe 1996, 28). The associative freedom of Howe's modernist style asserts a direct progression (uninterrupted in her quote even by commas) from land surveyors to poets, from property to poetry.[17] The poem is, of course, by virtue of its copyright, her property as well.

Like a land surveyor who turns a continuous landscape into geometric blocks of property, Howe objectifies the first two verses of her poem into neat rows and blocks, separated by their own dividing line of blank space (Selby 2005, 56; see Figure 2). Any poem is an arrangement of words on a page, but Howe pushes this fact to an extreme by prioritizing shape over sense. Howe's unnatural blocks of verse, with their truncated words such as *nucle* separated from its suffix, perhaps *ar* in the line above (to form *nucle-ar*), suggest a visual allusion to the American grid used to quickly colonize the lands of the west.[18] The grid was laid out regardless of the actual topography. Howe similarly suppresses the usual serpentine right edge of a poem, whose line lengths naturally vary, even when they contain the same number of syllables. Like the grid, Howe favors the rigor of the preordained geometric shape over content.

Howe's experiments with poetic form shapes a cutting critique of our property making, while also identifying her with it.[19] Her verse blocks show her to be, like Byrd, a "boundary manic," too (line 1). Howe starts her poem with the same word, and act, that begins and ends Byrd's survey. Byrd writes in his *History* "The last Tree, we markt was a Red Oak, growing on the Bank of the River, and

mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a
tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval
free also event starting the slightly position of
O about both or don't something INDICATION Americ

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ar in teacher duct excellent figure MARK lead be
knife knows his hogs dogs a boundary model nucle
hearted land land land district boundary times un

FIGURE 2 "Secret History of the Dividing Line" by Susan Howe, p. 89, from FRAME STRUCTURES, copyright © 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1996 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

to make the place more remarkable we blaz'd all the Trees around it" (Berland 2013, 168). The first two lines of Howe's poem look like this (it is difficult to reproduce the spacing):

> mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a
> tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval
>
> (Howe [1978] 1996, 89)

The lines are hard to read, either quietly or aloud, much less understand, but there is in fact a hidden logic and secret history to these two strange blocks of text. Howe constructed these blocks from two columns of the entry in *Webster's Third Dictionary* for the word *mark*, which descends from "words indicating boundary (the Old High German *marha*), land, forest, wilderness (the Old Norse *mork*), edges and borders (the Gothic *marka*)" (Back 2002, 21). By selecting pieces of words from the dictionary entry's edges, Howe reads down the columns rather than across them; she ignores the middle sections of the lines to construct her blocks (Back 2002, 37). In these two first blocks, then, Howe resurveys the borders of a common cultural property, the dictionary. Reading Howe is less a matter of comprehending the words on her page than of retracing her footsteps through the dictionary's landscape formed by its neat columns, and locating the connections she makes from line to line. Again, an analogy can be drawn to Byrd's survey, for example, of his Land of Eden parcel, which paced out of the "wilderness" from point to point, or tree to tree, a strange parallelogram (Figure 3). Like the Dan River's meandering topography,

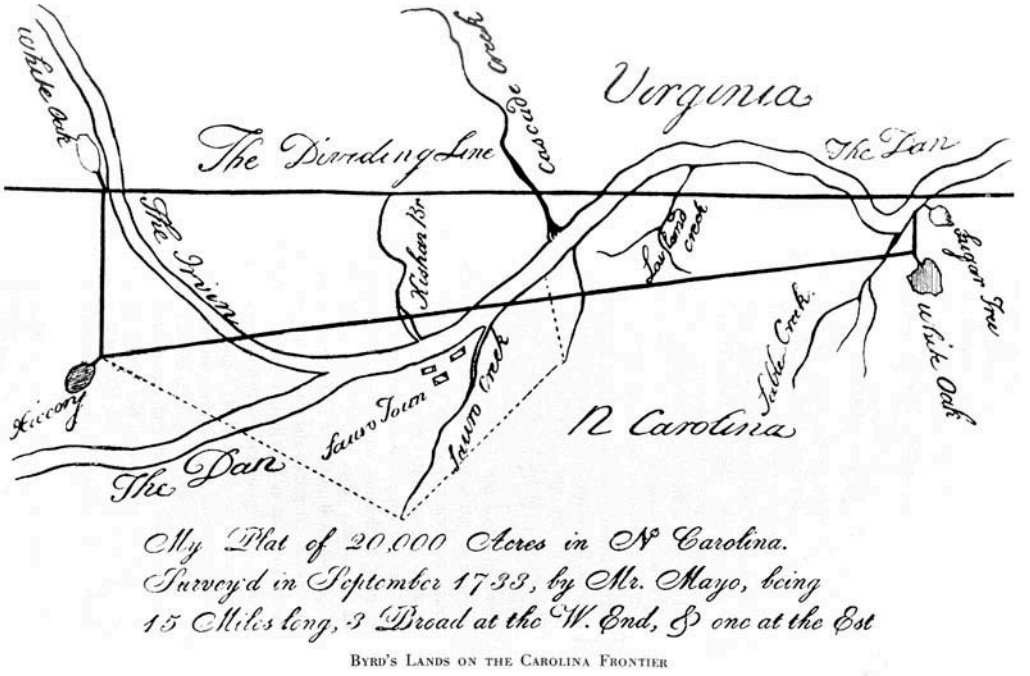

FIGURE 3 Survey of "Land of Eden" parcel. From "Byrd's Lands on the Carolina Frontier." *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*. 1967. New York: Dover, 270A. Reproduced by permission of the North Carolina Office of Archives and History.

which Byrd's survey cuts with its straight lines, the sense and meaning of the dictionary definition in Howe's verbal landscape is butchered due to her own obsession with rectilinear form.

Remarkably, though, creative and meaningful results occur as well. Howe's wonderfully apt phrase "boundary manic" comes from reading down the left edge of the dictionary's original definition:

> 1 a. (1): MARCH 1 (2) [G, fr. OHG *marha* boundary, boundary land]: a tract of land held in common by a Germanic village community in primitive or medieval times
>
> (Back 2002, Figure 2.1, 22)

Howe's method takes the second syllable of "Ger-manic" to form its own noun, a person who is manic. The second syllable is separated because of the dictionary's customary use of justified columns. If the dictionary were allowed to be more unruly, the word Germanic would not need to be divided. Note that it is this desire for straight-edged columns that also necessitates extra spaces within the line. Thus Howe's choppy words, her block form, and its weird spacing derive from, are *justified* by, her source text. She has simply taken the property of *Webster's Dictionary* and built on it. Howe's verses make such practice seem bizarre, but they also show that although arbitrary rules shape space in strange "unnatural" forms, they can create new profound meanings. Howe's method paces out and links new word combinations—"boundary manics"—and the phrase seems a happy invention indeed as a fitting metaphor for land surveyors.

Howe's critical self-reflexivity toward the poem she makes is especially instructive for our own surveying. Howe eschews a superior position, looking down from our enlightened present onto a racist colonialist past and the warped values of capitalism's commoditization of land (Back 2002, 28–31). Numerous moments in Howe's poem display the futility and violence of surveying and war, but she implicitly identifies with and takes responsibility for that violence.[20] Howe's landscapes represent a fortune, mixed with bloody violence and creative toil, that present dwellers inherit and enjoy. The first word of Howe's poem, "mark," from whose definition the rest of the words in the first two blocks descend, is also the name of Howe's father and her son. This is another "secret" behind her "Secret History of the Dividing Line," which she reveals two pages later at the end of the poem's long first section, "*for Mark my father, and Mark my son*" (Howe [1978] 1996, 91, italics in original). Such a dedication would normally go at the start of a poem, but Howe creates more depth of feeling by holding it back it until now, where it gains the weight of at least a momentary revelation, as if to announce this is what this poem is ultimately about. One secret she does not reveal is the fact that her father had recently died, and just before her son was born, to whom she gave her father's name (Howe 1978). The sound "Mark" perfectly elides the violence of cutting the first blaze from which all lines on the survey will follow and Howe's love for her father and son—property lines and genealogical lines. The entanglement of the two gets a further twist from the fact that one of the texts Howe borrows liberally from is the collection of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s Civil War letters edited by her father (Howe 1947).[21] This text is again part of her literary inheritance from which she fashions her new poem. Howe's connection with the word "mark" dramatizes property as destructive and affective—an act of domination and ownership passed on, often, through families. With her very first word, then, Howe signals that American property is about theft but it is also about love.[22]

These complex themes of identification and reflection are condensed in a powerful graphic five pages into the "Secret History of the Dividing Line." There, Howe inserts into her poem a blank page cut in the middle by a line with her poem's title written on a mirror-axis above and below and running in opposite directions (Figure 4). Howe's graphic gesture functions as a literal dividing

FIGURE 4 "Secret History of the Dividing Line" by Susan Howe, p. 94. From FRAME STRUCTURES, copyright ©1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1996 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

line on the otherwise blank page and between two sections of her poem. It also "secretly" alludes to both Byrd's actual boundary line and his *Histories*, which she does not mention in the poem but instead only references eighty-nine pages earlier in the small print of the copyright page of her volume. The words of Howe's title descend directly from, and wed into one name, Byrd's two titles for his *Histories* (*The History of the Dividing Line* and *The Secret History of the Line*). Howe's minimalist graphic thus becomes a timeline to show how the literature of the twentieth century rests upon that of its forbears, here a text from the eighteenth century. It becomes a spatial line, too, an image of the ground with Howe's more recent title resting atop Byrd's buried title of the past. Howe's graphic implies that the past creates properties, both cultural properties like Byrd's *Histories* and physical properties—the land belonging to North Carolina, for example, or Virginia. We inherit these properties; they are now ours to build on.

Howe's graphic maps powerfully onto today's Virginia–North Carolina state line as well.[23] If we see Howe's line as a timeline dividing the present (top) from the past (bottom), then to read its reflected title, we need to turn the page 180° and view it from the "past" so we can read it correctly from left to right. If we see the line as a dividing line on the ground, then turning the page 180° places us on the North Carolina side of the line. The fact that Howe's words remain the same when seen either from the "north" or "south" side of the line exposes the artificiality of boundary lines: They assert a difference when topographically the land is continuous. Howe's graphic asks us to adopt a double vision, to identify with not only the present landscape but its past, and to be able to adopt an opposite point of view, both in time and space. We have to acknowledge our inheritance from Byrd, and all those he lived among—the Native Americans and enslaved peoples, the colonials both rich and poor—who, however invisibly, have left their trace in this place. We should try to imagine what the Dan River was before the Europeans and Native Americans arrived, and we should use this history to understand the historic significance of today's state line shown, for instance, on an American Automobile Association road map (Figure 1, bottom). In Figure 1, I loosely adapt Howe's dividing line and mirror axis as a graphic template through which to construct my own double vision to relate today's present-day map to its buried history in that initial arduous and portentous boundary survey.

Howe's verse reveals the depth, both physical and conceptual, of the extended metaphor Howe makes between poetic and cadastral forms. Powerful metaphors have an ontological force—saying the "ship plowed the water" deconstructs the binary opposition we assume between land (plow) and sea (ship). Howe treats language as a common property from which to make new properties, both metaphorical and physical. If property "shows nature and culture inextricably entangled" (Price 1995, 5), then Howe shows poetic space can be a place of property's conceptual, even

physical, remaking. Ultimately, her poem suggests how the conscious arrangement of words on a page—which is what a poem is—could reframe our experience of any space.

MY SECRET HISTORY OF CANE CREEK

Virginia is for history lovers: this much is clear from the state's roadsides, where sometimes eight or nine historic markers clamor for our attention at once. No small number of these markers commemorate Byrd and the 1728 boundary survey (Figure 5). Such markers almost always limit themselves to the factual and not the literary side of Byrd's work. That bias is regrettable because, as I have argued here, Byrd's storytelling can do much to deepen our appreciation of just what that boundary survey meant. Howe's mirror-axis graphic (Figure 4) suggests to me a way one might build on the historic marker tradition to juxtapose the literary geographical past and present in a provocative way.

Once you start reading Byrd on site, you can see subtle signs of him everywhere. En route to the boundary line's first crossing of the Dan River, I idle at a traffic light on Route 56 where it

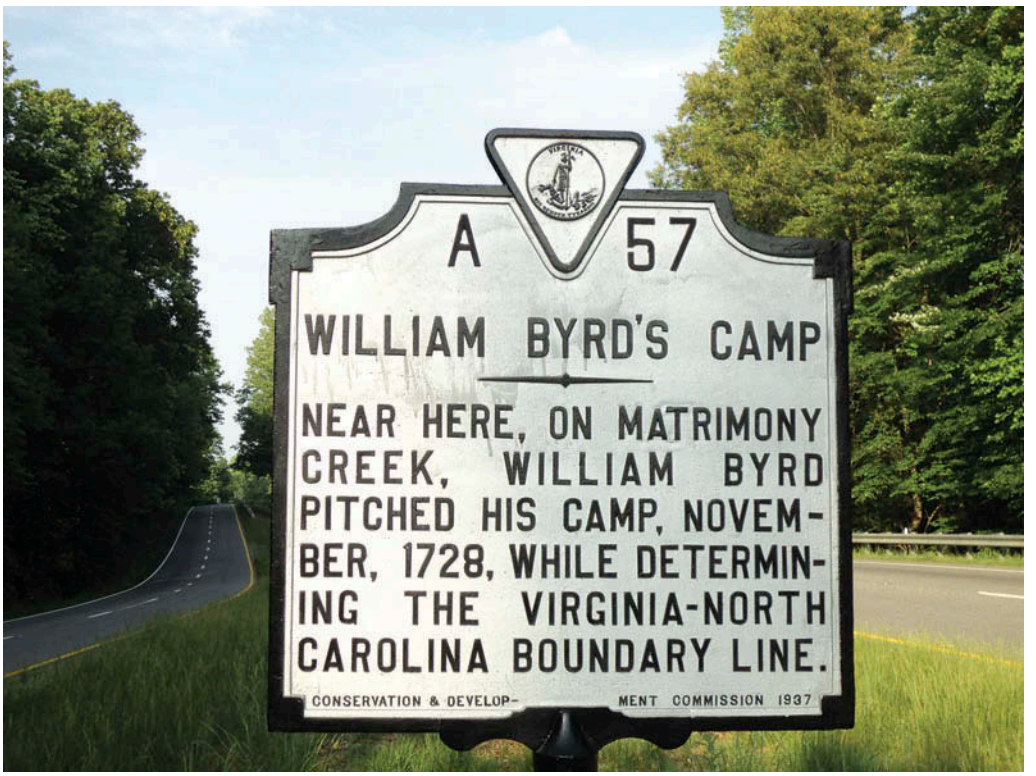

FIGURE 5 Byrd historic marker, Virginia. Photo by Marmaduke Percy. Wikimedia Commons. (Color figure available online.)

parallels today's border (Figure 6). I look up and read the name of the cross street: Cane Creek, named after the nearby stream. I think back to a manuscript of Byrd's *Secret History of the Line*, pages of which I held and photographed at the Williamsburg Archives, including the very passage where Byrd extols the abundance of cane. Viewed through the lenses of Byrd and Howe, the moment inspires my own graphic reflection on the boundary line by juxtaposing Byrd's handwriting from his eighteenth-century manuscript with the lettering of today's street sign (Figure 7). The old–new juxtaposition expands the time frame of the present; it includes Byrd's written network that helped establish this place; it makes today's street sign more eloquent. The meanings behind our names for streets and places are often unacknowledged or lost. They are like dead metaphors—so commonplace we no longer see the powerful images

FIGURE 6 Route 52, Danville, Virginia, 1 July 2011. Photo © Charlotte R. Murphy. Reproduced by permission of Charlotte R. Murphy. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online.)

FIGURE 7 *Top*: Detail, "Over Cane Creek," from William Byrd, *The Secret History of the Line*, William Byrd II Papers, MS 1940.2. *Bottom*: Photo by Sarah Luria with the permission of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. (Color figure available online.)

behind them. My graphic offers one way to supply that lost image. Byrd's own handwriting here, his physical trace, shows this street's name importantly advertises that the creek has canes, a free source of fodder for European-style husbandry that would help force out local Native tribes and secure this region for accelerated colonial settlement. A caption along with the graphic could make that point, thus proving that place names, as Basso (1996) noted, offer a way of "speaking and writing in potent shorthand, for communicating much while saying very little" (77). Happily historic markers are indeed becoming much more creative and eye-catching, making good use of documents from the archives (Figure 8). "We pass each other pieces of paper," Howe writes (1996, "Frame Structures," 27)—property titles and town plats, diaries and letters. It is our obligation to receive them, and to remember and improve on the stories they tell as best we can.

We can bring this double vision to our own home places as well. Concerned about people's lack of engagement with their cities and their democratic obligation to tend to the health of their landscapes, Mumford ([1938] 1970) once called for an "army" of "urban surveyors" who would construct a "collective understanding of where they live."[24] In an essay titled "Survey and Plan as Communal Education," Mumford preached that city dwellers should consider their entire community as their private garden and cultivate it with the same love and concern (Mumford [1938] 1970, 381–86). Mumford's army is in some sense mobilized today through amateur mappers, empowered by their geographic information system tagging iPhone cameras, and busily recording their places on their Facebook pages or through more organized neighborhood activist efforts to influence local decisions on planning and development (Kimmelman 2013, 17). How to coordinate and build on all that engagement, though? Powerful examples of this local mapping might be curated into an evolving local atlas, a Wikistreet, to participate more self-consciously and constructively in the making of place. Most important, a deeper historical

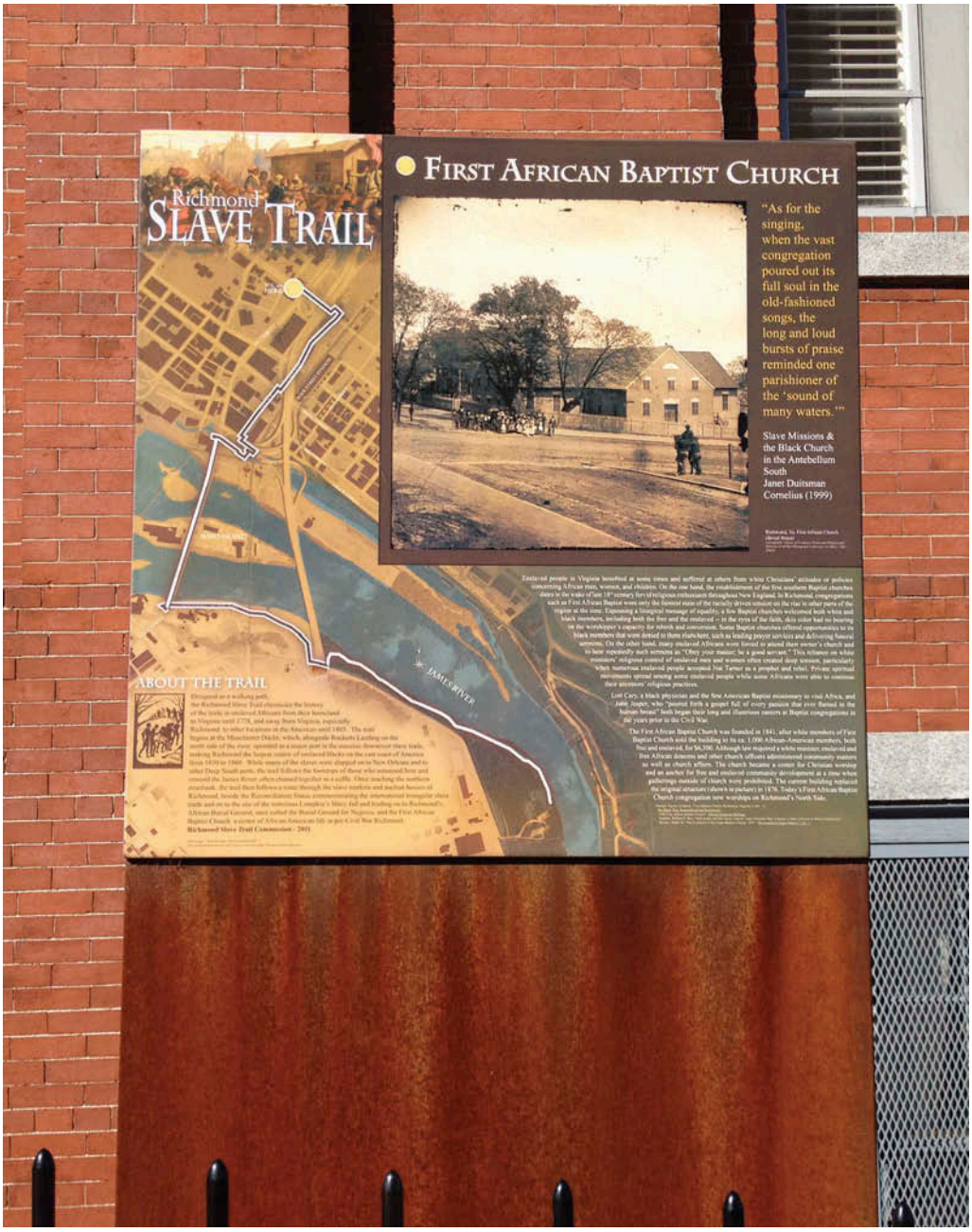

FIGURE 8 Richmond Slave Trail marker. Photo by author. (Color figure available online.)

consciousness could be fostered by drawing on not just the visual but the verbal record, quotable quotes from promotional blurbs and reminiscences, as well as related literary works (as I have used Howe) that speak powerfully to particular geographical situations. It is one thing to be told that William Byrd slept here. It is another thing to know what that, in fact, might mean.

I have used Byrd and Howe as literary captions for the Dan River region, but their insights and views can be exported more widely: Together they animate a story of European imperialism whose westering impulse, already embodied by Byrd's survey, forms the understory to propertied landscapes across the United States. My Figure 7 loosely builds on Howe's mirror-axis graphic, which itself recalls Byrd's powerful incongruous Old World–New World juxtapositions, to offer just one simple template for how we might caption our own present-day maps and photographs with salient pieces of paper from our local archives and related literary works to reflect on the particular past that any U.S. property embodies.

Professional surveyors must be concerned with creating accurate maps to define boundaries and property, but citizen surveyors can deploy any creative means, including archival texts and images, to reframe the land to construct "a . . . present past" and build our own sense of a "lived topograph[y]." Such resurveying offers "a kind of imaginative experience, . . . a way of *appropriating* portions of the earth" (Basso 1996, 104, 111, 143 italics in original). Byrd and Howe's carefully arranged literary surveys model ways that through our own performances of marking and entitling we can help shape and preserve our physical landscapes as cultural properties we inherit, value, and own. The fact that "new worlds are made out of old texts" (Barnes and Duncan [1992] 2011, 3) remains as true today as it was for William Byrd.

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NOTES

1. The 1967 Dover edition of Byrd's *Histories* (Boyd 1967) publishes the pages of Byrd's two versions of his histories side by side and includes a facsimile of the boundary survey at the end.
2. On the relation of Byrd's *Histories* to his correspondence and the Commissioners' Journal see Berland (2013, 49–52).

3. On Byrd's landholdings see Boyd (1967, ix) and Royster (1999, 46). In addition to the *Histories*, Byrd wrote two more travel narratives, *A Journey to the Land of Eden* and *A Progress to the Mines*, that included vivid descriptions of the landscape's attractiveness and its resources (Wright 1966). Although neither these nor the *Histories* were published in Byrd's lifetime, they were circulated among his friends and after his death. They influenced both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington in schemes for Virginia's development (Royster 1999, 82, 300). Today Byrd's oeuvre exists in print and attracts much scholarly interest.
4. The most extensive study of the relationship of Byrd's work to geographical theory and the practice of land surveying is Brückner (2006, Chapter 1). Byrd's *Histories* can be seen as a predecessor of Pynchon's survey novel and intellectual masterpiece *Mason & Dixon*, which mentions Byrd's text by name (Pynchon 1997, 396).
5. The most extensive study of Howe's work in relation to Byrd's survey, geographical theory, and the practice of land surveying is Joyce (2010; see especially 58–67).
6. Today's state line is "about 550 feet south of the original boundary in 1728" (Beamon 2010). The 1728 Boundary line at the first Dan River crossing point was at about 36°32.′ Standing at Route 62 I was a few yards from where Byrd and his party likely stood (Stephen C. Ausband, personal communication, 27 May 2017).
7. All quotes from Byrd's *Histories* are from Berland's (2013) authoritative edition.
8. I was helped on my trip by Henry H. Mitchell's (n.d.) self-guided tour guide ("Col. William Byrd's Observations, 1728–33"). Local schools have brought their classes there to learn about Byrd and the survey (Mitchell 1989).
9. Byrd acquired his patent for the 20,000-acre parcel on 9 December 1728. See Johnston (1942, 168–72) and Tinling (1977, 2:449).
10. See Editorial Board (2015) and "Colonel William Byrd" (n.d.).
11. See Ingold's (1993) description of the landscape as a "story" of ongoing nature and human "interactivity" (152–53, 163).
12. Byrd argued that the boundary should be extended far westward so "that the King's Lands . . . may be taken up the faster" (Wright 1966, 333). For the importance of the boundary line to the development of colonial Virginia see Hughes (1979, 1–4, 84–87, 141–43, 155).
13. See Note 11.
14. For a persuasive analysis of how Byrd's colonial, "creole" status makes him need to prove himself equal to native Britons and how Byrd can also be read to satirize the imperialist confidence of eighteenth-century scientific discourse, see Parrish (2009).
15. The U.S. Forest Service confirms the use of cane for grazing: "Extensive monotypic stands of cane known as canebrakes were a dominant landscape feature in the southeastern United States at the time of European settlement. Historical accounts indicated that hundreds of thousands of acres were characterized by this ecosystem. Canebrakes disappeared rapidly following European settlement because of a combination of overgrazing, altered burning regimes, and agricultural land clearing [7,73,74,88]" (Taylor 2006).
    On the importance of free fodder as a condition for the successful establishment of European-style husbandry in the colonies, see Donahue (2004, 54–59, 171).
16. I am grateful to Christine Coch for pointing out this possible connection to Mesopotamia. Byrd, who loved puns, might have also been playing here on the name of Governor Charles Eden (1673–1722), who served as the second governor to North Carolina (1714–1722). Governor Eden cosigned a proposal with Virginia Governor Colonel Alexander Spotswood in 1716 to settle the long-disputed boundary between their two colonies (Berland 2013, 76, 255, note 32). See also http://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/charles-eden-1673–1722/ (last accessed 13 May 2017).
17. In "Frame Structures," Howe recalls growing up in Cambridge Massachusetts, near Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's house. Her childlike imagination moves seamlessly between the propertied landscape and Longfellow's poem "Evangeline": "there were footpaths we used as shortcuts going from home to school and home again. 'This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks . . .,' half-forgotten neighboring backlands recover breaks and zigzags, ranges of feeling, little maneuvers in distance perception" (Howe 1996, 10).
18. My reading in this paragraph of these first two verses draws on Selby (2005, 56–57) and Joyce (2010, 65–70).
19. I am indebted to Back's (2002) reading here and concur with her point that "the poet's positioning of herself within the telling and within the tale is an ethical stand": "Howe collapses the time spectrum and places herself among the conquering forces, enjoying none of the distance of self-righteousness of [William Carlos] Williams' narrator," whose *American Grain* Howe draws from in her poem (28–31).
20. See Joyce and Selby for interpretations of the way Howe exposes the "failure" of surveying and the fantasy of solidifying control over land (Selby 2005, 59; Joyce 2010, 65, 69).
21. Howe (1996) cited her father's text as a source for her poem in the copyright page of *Frame Structures*.

22. I draw here from Lott's (1995) well-known study of minstrel culture.
23. Given the length and complexity of Howe's poem, and work in general, she eludes summation. Joyce (2010) argued in a more deconstructionist vein that Howe rejects dualism for "third" "interstitial spaces" (23–24).
24. I am grateful to Aaron Sachs (2017), leading me to Mumford's ([1938] 1970) vision of citizen surveying, which strikes me as very resonant with more recent calls for similar engagement (see, e.g., Ingold 1993; Stilgoe 1998).

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SARAH LURIA is an Associate Professor in the English Department at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA 01610. E-mail: sluria@holycross.edu. Her current book project, *The Art of Surveying*, studies writers and photographers who have been instrumental to land survey projects and the creation of property.