

Will Spector

Dr. Sample

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“The Deed of Transformation” and its Impact

Michel-Rolph Trouillot states in “The Power of the Story” that “only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others” (Trouillot 25). Here, Trouillot refers to the intermingling of realist and constructivist ideas that makes possible an understanding of why historical narratives exist how they do. Davidson College’s full history is one that has been silenced over time by that power differential. Davidson has a complex and deep history of slavery. The school received gifts from prominent supporters of the Confederacy and its board was filled with slaveholders in the 19th century. Hillary Green’s “Maxwell Chambers and His Complicated Connections to Davidson College” explores the relationship between the school and Maxwell Chambers, the namesake of Davidson’s most prominent building and who, according to Green, “derived his wealth, power and reputation through his involvement in the institution of slavery and the slave trade” (Green 2). The college has taken a series of actions over the last decade to begin to confront its history regarding the institution of slavery. One of these actions was the commissioning in 2022 of a piece of art titled “The Deed of Transformation” by Charlotte-based artist Nellie Ashford Rawls that highlights the role of enslaved persons in the construction of the college. This piece of art, through its collage medium that allows for the juxtaposition of different images and styles, seeks to highlight the forgotten history of Davidson’s involvement in slavery.

At the end of her report, Green offers several recommendations for the school moving forward. She summarizes her suggestions with the statement “I am, therefore, recommending the addition of history and appropriate contextualization” (Green 10). Located on the first floor of E.H. Little Library, “The Deed of Transformation” begins to address the need for this additional history and contextualization throughout Davidson. In particular, the medium of visual art placed strategically in a space used widely by the student body forces students to, at least subconsciously, acknowledge the history present under their feet. The piece features a large tree with an American flag, around which are collaged images of individuals enslaved by an original trustee of Davidson. Also featured in the piece are images of Elm and Oak row, two campus buildings constructed by enslaved people using bricks from nearby plantations.

Because the explanation of “The Deed of Transformation” is so limited, much of the piece is left up to interpretation by the viewer. Some ambiguities that I encountered in the viewing process include the tree centerpiece with an American flag and the deed collaged in the middle, presumably for which the piece is named. These aspects are interesting to examine in light of Green’s article. The tree is steeped in symbolism—it is a symbol of the growth of the college as it works to reconcile with its past and represents the artist’s intention to strengthen student knowledge of Davidson’s history. The tree may also represent the names of the two buildings featured in the piece that were constructed using enslaved labor on Davidson’s campus—Elm and Oak row. These buildings are two direct connections to Davidson’s history of slavery, along with the Chambers building name written about in detail in Green’s report. The American flag could be placed in the center of the tree’s branches to indicate the need for growth not just within the Davidson community, but in the larger United States. This flag also serves as a symbol for the deep embeddedness of slavery within the country. The deed itself appears to be

the property deed for an enslaved person, presumably Robert (the great grandfather of Ashford Rawls and featured in the piece). This deed, a document, is also reminiscent of Chambers' will, written about by Green. The will left Davidson a gift of \$250,000 (though the school did not collect the full sum) and, as mentioned in Davidson's 2023 video "Davidson College's Painful History and a Path Forward," five enslaved persons, among other things. Through these connections present within the piece, the power differential is disrupted and the previously silenced history is brought to light.

Trouillot's article also examines different interpretations of "history"—two prominent ones were history based on facts and history based on what we, as humans, pass down. The article highlights that the perspective of the history writer plays a significant role in what we understand to be the history of the world. This primary source is created by the descendent of an enslaved individual on the Davidson campus. It feels both emotional and informational, presenting the viewer with images of people who were enslaved at Davidson. Because it is a visual medium that uses photographs, the art piece aligns more closely with the first definition of history—as facts. The artist does not have grammar to manipulate, nor can the pictures portray the people other than how they actually were. What the artist does have control over is the placement of the images and the painted aspects of the piece. It is also useful to consider the title of the painting in this light—the use of the word "transformation" not only refers to the deed itself, but could also be a reference to the painting's status as a transformative force to address the college's history. The use of the word "deed" in the title contains a double-meaning—it alludes to both to the deed pictured in the center of the collage and to the greater deed that the painting represents: the intentional action on the behalf of Davidson College to address its history. The word also

provides a connection to Chambers himself, whom Green said “executed a variety of mortgages and deeds that show he loaned money to prominent citizens in Rowan County” (Green 4).

Both the 2023 video and Green’s article address the decision of the college to keep the building name “Chambers” despite its association with slavery and, later, the confederacy. Green’s article sums up the college’s conversation with descendants of those enslaved by Chambers: “They want meaningful inclusion in campus narratives about the building’s namesake and any updates made in how that is presented... acknowledgement means updating the campus narrative on Chambers and campus history” (Green 7). This piece of art, while not directly about Chambers, is fulfilling this suggestion by infusing that narrative into the Davidson student body. The emphasis in the video on building “a just and humane college community” is another indicator that projects like this one are necessary to engage students in the history of the school. Not only does this piece teach about the history of slavery at Davidson, it represents further engagement by descendants of enslaved persons at Davidson with the college in order to acknowledge the painful history of the school. “The Deed of Transformation” is an important step forward in the history of Davidson, and more engagement like it will continue to involve students in the narrative of the school by bringing to light Davidson’s silenced history.

Works Cited

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