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“The Bottoms” and the Colloquial Language of American City Form

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Most explicitly vertical metaphors place the rich on high ground or the poor on low, and this is historical fact in many cities. Horizontal or lateral figures of speech usually place the rich and poor neighborhoods either on this or that side of, in front or in back of, or near to or far from features of the urban environment that symbolize class divisions. These features are usually a dirty, noisy, or malodorous industrial activity, such as railroad tracks, stockyards, or the gas works... Vertical classifications of rich and poor areas reflect the historical tendency for the rich and powerful to build on high ground, leaving, if not forcing, the poor to live on low ground, such as in bottoms, hollows, and flats, often on the other side of the tracks.

Allen, The City in Slang, 1993: 226

In the colloquial language of American city form, "the bottoms" once meant both alluvial land and the place where poor people lived. Low-lying, poorly drained, and flood-prone, these city districts were often immediately adjacent to hilltop neighborhoods like Quality Hill or The Heights, separated by a tall bluff or steep incline. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, they could be found in dozens of cities around the United States. In addition to "the bottoms," terms like hollow (as in Swede Hollow) and flats (as in Bohemian Flats) were commonly used words for places where poor people lived in the city (Cassidy 1977; Cassidy 1985; Allen 1993; Major 1994; Grandison 2001). These names constituted a new language and a new spatial understanding of the industrial city, an uneven social and physical landscape dotted with slums. They expressed both topography and poverty in one phrase, fusing together cultural associations with people as well as place.

Today, Americans are more likely to talk in terms of ghetto, inner city, inner ring suburbs, outlying areas, and exurbs. Our language of the city, and the places where poor people live, has become remarkably horizontal in orientation. Indeed, "the heights" or "highland park" are now more likely to be considered just other neighborhood names, not necessarily a description of spatial orientation or residential status. Similarly, our language of low places, especially around streams, creeks, and rivers, has been altered by civil engineering interventions, public policy, and many other factors. For more than two hundred years, Americans have settled in, covered up, and made over low places in cities such as marshes, creeks, streams, and swamps. We often talk now of wetlands, instead of swamplands or "poorly-drained lands." Indeed, drainage, which occupied something of an obsession for city builders in many regions, is discouraged and attention is focused now on the protection or promotion of watersheds, river basins, or open space.

Nevertheless, the topographical fact of uneven city terrain remains, as does the continuing association in our speech between "low down" places, poverty, and vice. Also, in the

legacy of past development, still evident in many places, we find reference to these earlier factors and conceptions of city development in the names of natural features, streets, landmarks, and city districts. The bottoms remain a physical part of cities, however much they may have been physically and socially transformed, or renamed. In this paper, I explore the language of up and down, rich and poor, as it relates to low city terrain.

Concentric Cities in Theory

Urban theory has been strongly horizontal in its orientation, neglecting the vertical aspects of urban development on the land. Once called the most famous diagram in social science, Ernest Burgess's concentric city remains a familiar, if discredited, concept (Davis: Smith 1988). Critiqued from many quarters, it nonetheless remains tremendously influential, if for no other reason than its role in the intellectual history of American social science and city planning. In "The Growth of the City" (1925), the University of Chicago sociologist modeled "the typical processes of the expansion of the city" in "an ideal construction" showing the tendency of cities to "expand radially from [the] central business district" (Burgess: 50).

In the expansion of the city a process of distribution takes place which sifts and sorts and relocates individuals and groups by residence and occupation. The resulting differentiation of the cosmopolitan American city into areas is typically all from one pattern, with only interesting minor modifications. Within the central business district or on an adjoining street is the 'main stem' of 'hobohemia,' the teeming Rialto of the homeless migratory man of the Middle West. In the zone of deterioration encircling the central business section are always to be found the so-called 'slums' and 'bad lands,' with their submerged regions of poverty, degradation, and disease, and their underworlds of crime and vice (54-55).

At first glance, Burgess's theory does not seem to account for differences in terrain—other than his metaphorical allusions to the city's hellish regions. But as geographer William Meyer has documented, Burgess considered "hills cities" the exception to this rule (2000). Burgess wrote in "Urban Areas" (1929) that "flat" cities like Chicago should be considered separately from hills cities like Seattle, noting that the rich were more likely to be found on the hilltops.

While the "other Burgess hypothesis" is likely to remain fairly obscure, the concentric ring concept with "flat" Chicago as template continues to inspire fierce responses and alternative concepts. Mike Davis provides a trenchant critique of Burgess, offering up noir L.A. as template in *Ecology of Fear*.

For those unfamiliar with the Chicago school of sociology's canonical study of the 'North American city' (actually, 1920s Chicago generalized as an archetype), Burgess's dartboard represents the spatial hierarchy into which the struggle for the survival of the urban fittest supposedly sorts social classes and their respective housing types. As imagined by academic Social Darwinism, it portrays a 'human ecology' organized by the 'biological' forces of concentration, centralization, segregation, invasion, and succession. My remapping takes Burgess back to the future. It preserves such 'ecological' determinants as income, land value, class, and race but adds a decisive new factor: fear (363).

As Davis sardonically illustrates through imitation in his own diagram, Burgess's rings reflect the author's imagined city more than they explicate anything about urban structure.

In Burgess's time, it was Homer Hoyt that took issue with concentric ring theory, offering up the sectoral model of urban development as an alternative. He also observed, if somewhat indirectly like Burgess, the significance of altitude in American cities. Hoyt argued that there were significant exceptions to the tendency towards the "rich on the hilltops" that Burgess described.

The zone of high rent areas tends to progress toward high ground which is free from the risk of floods and to spread along lake, bay, river, and ocean fronts, where such water fronts are not used for industry. The movement of high grade residential neighborhoods away from river bottoms to higher ground or to wooded hills is illustrated by numerous examples (117).

Hoyt cited San Francisco, Washington D.C., Kansas City, St. Louis, and Cincinnati as examples of places where settlement, especially the "best areas," moved from low to high ground (Hoyt 117).¹

¹ Of course, high elevation, low status places like Poverty Hill and Vinegar Hill represent significant exceptions to the "rule" that the poor always occupied the lowlands (Allen 1993; Meyer 2005). Likewise, low-lying, high-income districts can be found in coastal areas; these areas and other desirable districts are often referred to as "waterfront property." Nevertheless, the association between low and poor is a strong one in cultural conceptions of the city.

Hoyt and Burgess shared a focus on the residential location of the upper classes, positing that the wealthy would choose the best sites first and everyone else would select from the rest. As such, they say little directly about the residential location of the poor. Nevertheless, their theoretical framework is clear: through a process variously described as sifting, sorting, or filtering, the poor would end up in the least desirable locations, usually the bottoms. Roderick McKenzie, another University of Chicago sociologist, explained the phenomenon in highly moralistic and pejorative terms,

This process of population-sifting produces not only increasing mobility with approach from the periphery to the center of the formation, but also different cultural areas representing different mores, attitudes, and degrees of civic interest. The neighborhoods in which the settler type of population resides, with their preponderance of women and children, serve as the custodians of the stabilizing and representative mores. It is in the Seattle neighborhoods, especially those on the hill-tops, that the conservative, law-abiding, civic-minded population elements dwell. The downtown section and the valleys, which are usually industrial sites, are populated by a class of people who are not only more mobile but whose mores and attitudes, as tested by voting habits, are more vagrant and radical (McKenzie 1925: 79).

McKenzie's detailed studies of "The Bottom" in Columbus, Ohio, originally published in a five article series in *The American Journal of Sociology*, offer similar characterizations, steeped in Social Darwinism.

Following Hoyt, Ullman described views as an essential component and characterized the pattern of high-status residences and hills as "quite usual in the United States" (Meyer: Ullman 1953). Further theoretical work and quantitative analysis was conducted by urban geographers in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, drawing upon "factorial ecologies" among other approaches and, generally, concluding that "amenities" have assumed increasing importance in the processes of residential selection and location (Meyer 2000).

An extended discussion of other models of urban spatial structure is beyond the scope of this paper. My point here is that the continuing focus on the quality or "amenities" of residential real estate and the horizontal spread of the city has obscured the importance of terrain. Without doubt the increased horizontal reach of the city, and the spread of low-density forms of settlement across an increasingly auto-dependent landscape, is one of the most significant

developments of the twentieth century American city. Indeed, some scholars have asked whether or not we might re-conceptualize all of "urban history" as "suburban history." Perhaps, but we shouldn't forget that cities, and particularly central cities, are places of lived experience, too. On foot, one can see and feel the difference between "the heights" and "the bottoms." Even in a landscape of buried creeks and asphalt-paved surface parking lots, one can often "read" the uneven surface of the land. It was these low points, often the interstitial spaces of today's cities—parts of parkland, acres of sod surrounding urban renewal projects, space under freeways, fenced off streams in culverts—where the nineteenth century's slums once stood.

City Slang and Spatial Metaphor

A century ago, Americans were much more familiar with the ups and downs of city terrain and the social meaning of these spatial differences. In the smaller scale of the walking city, the spatial segregation of the poor, especially the poorest of the poor, was interconnected with the features of the natural landscape. On the edge of the urban grid, in areas that were too difficult or expensive to fill in or cover over, around noisy, odiferous, or dangerous city places, the poorest people rented small houses, erected shacks, and built small communities. Often they were recent immigrants or African Americans. The names given to these places, and Americans way of talking about them, reflect how social, physical, and ethnic/racial labels have informed cultural conceptions of city places.

Place names and city slang evoke images, suggesting and reinforcing notions of who lives where and why. Furthermore, social inequality has been an inescapable component of the dynamic interaction between urban land development and natural systems, and how urban actors exercise power: to shape the land is to advance various political, economic, and social goals. As such, phrases like "the bottoms" both describe and stigmatize.

Metaphors for cities abound, but in the language of city dwellers, in spoken words and phrases that don't always appear on the map, a conceptual framework for understanding city life

is made. Chinatown, for example, is more than simply the place where the Chinese people live. It is both physical reality and historical fact, in built form and social relations, as well as a *concept*: one that has developed in relation to ideas of the city and its component districts. Likewise, "the bottoms" is an idea, as well as a physical and social place.

Major dates the common usage of the phrase "the bottoms" to 1870 to 1930. However, the term remains in use in at least two distinct ways: 1) some places which got their name historically from their combined low-lying character and low-status development/residents continue to be known by the name, and 2) to refer only to a place that is very low status, or as used by the homeless and the very poor, to refer to the worst off, most desperate, and exploitative places. Indeed, in the second instance, "the bottom" or "the bottoms" has transcended any specific sense of low terrain.

L.A.'s downtown boom is a dizzying phenomenon. Seemingly every month or so brings more groundbreaking, new announcements of high-priced, high-income projects. In mid-June, the city unveiled plans for a \$750 million, 1,000-room hotel complex, with a four-star Marriott and a five-star Ritz-Carlton, next to downtown's Convention Center. Meanwhile, a few blocks away, in "The Bottoms" -- the most infamous blocks of skid row -- members of LACAN were videotaping city cleanup crews sweeping up homeless people's blankets and clothes. "The Bottoms," the area of skid row where the missions and the street dwellers are concentrated, is a stunning slice of third-world poverty, a village of souls lost to the bottle and the needle, a depressing testament to human frailties, physical and mental.

In this sense of the term, an allusion is made to personal "low points." For addicts and alcoholics, rehabilitation or "turning one's life around" comes after realizing that you've "hit bottom."

Negative associations with low or down are a common part of American speech, such as "low status." Lakoff and Johnson argue that this concept in particular reflects a case where "spatialization is so essential a part of a concept that is difficult for us to imagine any alternative metaphor that might structure the concept (1980: 18)." They provide several examples:

HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN

He has a *lofty* position. She'll *rise* to the *top*. He's at the *peak* of his career. He's *climbing* the ladder. He has little *upward* mobility. He's at the *bottom* of the social hierarchy. She *fell* in status.

Social and physical basis: Status is correlated with (social) power and (physical) power is up.

GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN

Things are looking *up*. We hit a *peak* last year, but it's been *downhill* ever since. Things are at an all-time *low*. He does *high*-quality work.

Physical basis for personal well-being: Happiness, health, life, and control—the things that principally characterize what is good for a person—are all UP.

VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN

He is *high*-minded. She has *high* standards. She is *upright*. She is an *upstanding* citizen. That was a *low* trick. Don't be *underhanded*. I wouldn't *stoop* to that. That would be *beneath* me. He *fell* into the *abyss* of depravity. That was a *low-down* thing to do.

Physical and social basis: GOOD IS UP for a person (physical basis), together with a metaphor that we will discuss below, SOCIETY IS A PERSON (in the version where you are not identifying with your society). To be virtuous is to act in accordance with the standards set by the society/person to maintain its well-being. VIRTUE IS UP because virtuous actions correlate with social well-being from the society/person's point of view. Since socially based metaphors are part of the culture, it's the society/person's point of view that counts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 16, emphasis in the original).

As we shall see, many of the negative associations the authors describe with low or down in general are reflected in ways city dwellers have regarded low-lying urban districts.

Americans have generally regarded swamps, bogs, marshes, and other lowlands with suspicion: associating them with mystery, marginality, disease, death, and decay (Nelson 2002; Vileisis 1997). These cultural attitudes, forged primarily in rural or "wilderness" contexts, were recast in urban terms to describe and label spatial aspects of the new urban landscape of the industrial city. Low-lying urban districts became known as places of cheap housing, cultural or behavioral separateness, industry, racial mixing and ethnic difference, flood danger, poor access, and crime. The lower section of the city could threaten property values or excite concerns about racial mixing and sexual practices. The bottoms have been condemned and feared, but also, often at same time, tolerated and allowed to exist—reinforcing in the minds of the middle and upper classes the idea that such spatial separation was "natural" and supporting the social

Darwinist notion that the people who lived there belonged there due to their race, religion, genetics, behavior, or other personal factors.

Most of all, these places were understood as a place apart, separate from the rest of the city, segregated by topography. It is perhaps this "separateness" that terms like bottom, hollow, and flat convey most powerfully. In many cases, the lower sections were isolated or partially hidden from the rest of the city.

The hierarchy of altitude was especially strong in the Twin Cities in the late nineteenth century. While the rich resided in their mansions on Summit Hill in St. Paul and Lowry Hill in Minneapolis, the poorest Twin Citians were tucked away—out of sight and mind—in deep holes like Swede Hollow or on the floodplains below the river bluffs. Isolated from the city by barriers of language, culture, and geography, these enclaves were often identified with a particular ethnic group, although most were actually quite diverse in their makeup (Millet: 82).

But as Millet explains, often the reasons for settlement had more to do with access to work and affordability in an industrial city with a rapidly growing population. Along the Mississippi River, he writes, "land was so cheap that even the poorest families could build homes of their own (Millet: 82)."

Barred from the middle and upper class districts of the city, the poorest people often, but not always, were relegated to the lowest, most flood-prone areas. They settled downstream from mills, slaughterhouses, and tanneries or alongside the railroad tracks at the river's edge. Elsewhere they occupied steep hillsides, rocky terrain, or other undesirable lands. As property owners of rental housing, factory owners and managers, and city leaders facilitated these patterns of settlement, and discouraged or prevented settlement in other areas of the city, city dwellers adopted new ways of talking about the emerging "ethnic" slums with pejorative labels and place names. Allen explains how city language has changed over time, and the origins of the word "slum."

[Sam Bass] Warner first calls our attention to the period between 1850 and 1880 when single images of the city, such as the city as 'destroyer of virtue,' gave way to multiple images, reflecting the growing diversity of classes, ethnicity, and land uses. Abusive names were soon attached to social groups in their diversity, especially to the poor and the ethnically unassimilated, and to the areas of the city in which they lived. The names reflected and accommodated the class and ethnic divisions of the new industrial order.

Slum, a slang word of most journalistic impetus, was another response to changing economic facts and ideological climates [emphasis in original] (Allen: 230).

Indeed, ideas of assimilation, or the lack thereof, played a major role in labeling districts.

As names like Swede Hollow and Bohemian Flats make clear, these districts were also commonly given ethnically ascribed names, even when the population was mixed or changed over time (as was the case in both Swede Hollow in St. Paul and Bohemian Flats in Minneapolis). In this way, a name like Swede Hollow could be understood two ways: as the place where Swedes lived or belonged (perhaps an attitude prevalent among the city's existing middle and upper classes at the time of immigration), or as the place where the poorest Swedes lived (an attitude more likely to be adopted by Swedish immigrants themselves, emphasizing the class differences among their group and the potential for assimilation and upward mobility in their adopted country).

Sometimes these places took on animal names, suggesting an association with swampy places, hills, or agriculture: Frog Hollow and Skunk Hollow, and Cow Hollow are a few examples. Less ethnically specific, these labels nevertheless communicated a distinctly non-urban image, reinforcing the idea of a place apart, separated from the civilized, or developed, area of the city.

Perhaps most common, though, was racial labeling, specifically a reference to African Americans. Dozens of "Black Bottom" communities could be found in cities and towns across the United States. The phrase was used by blacks and whites alike from about the time of Emancipation to the early 1950s, but rarely is used today. Most local historians tend to agree that the phrase originates in a description of both the physical qualities of the land (low, wet, flood-prone, etc.) *and* the presence of a poor African American settlement. Notably, these phenomena are linked historically, especially in southern and border state cities, as low land was the only land that blacks were able to or allowed to settle. Although promised "forty acres and a mule," many African Americans ended up with something much less pastoral, equitable, and

potentially wealth-generating: shared accommodation in a small, crowded rental house in a flood-prone district on the near-edge of downtown.

Some Examples

One of the earliest documented examples of an urban "Black Bottom" is in Nashville, Tennessee. In the 1880s, a district of small homes, a haymarket, stables, beer joints, churches, and river- and railroad-related warehouses immediately south of downtown became known as Black Bottom. According to local histories, it had previously been a poor Irish settlement connected to the wharfs along the Cumberland River waterfront. It was one of several "slums" drawing the attention of reformers and enforcers.

For some time past the citizens of this city have been exasperated over the frequent crimes committed in Black Bottom, Hell's Half Acre, Rolling Mill Hill, and other portions of the city. Determined to put a stop to acts of lawlessness Law and Order Leagues have been organized, and considerable money has been contributed to carry out the objects of the organizations. The leagues purpose waging a vigorous warfare against all lawbreakers, and the Grand Jury will promptly investigate all complaints brought before them. It is said that all property owners who have disreputable characters as tenants will be forced to turn them out or submit to prosecution (*New York Times*, September 16, 1886).

Calls for reform went mostly unheeded, but moral outrage continued. Many of these districts maintained their notorious reputations into the early twentieth century. In 1905, the *Nashville American* editorialized:

No city in America or Europe can present a more disgraceful or sickening aspect of modern civilization than that part of Fourth Avenue that runs through the hideous heart of Black Bottom. If a conglomeration of dives, brothels, pawnshops, second-hand clothing stores, filthy habitations and the like—accompanied by the daily display of lewdness and drunkenness on the sidewalks and redolent with the stench of every vile odor—can make a 'hell-hole' then Black Bottom is that place (Summerville: 182).

In Nashville, as elsewhere, low-lying slums became a cause for great excitement and concern as municipal reform and ideas of the City Beautiful came to prominence. And while overcrowded tenement districts, which have received much more attention from urban historians as the places of the poor, were identified for housing reform efforts, low-lying slums attracted the interest of park builders, civil engineers, and urban planners as well. Designers, developers, and

downtown boosters each had their own ideas about how to remake an urban landscape that had come to be defined by "factory, railroad, and slum" (Mumford 1961).

Perhaps the most well-known "bottom" is in Washington D.C., the area between Georgetown and the Capitol, near the confluence of Rock Creek and the Potomac River. It became known as Foggy Bottom by at least 1884, probably earlier.

An affray, which assumed serious proportions, took place late on Saturday night in that part of the city called "Foggy Bottom," inhabited principally by the lower classes of white and colored people. It appears that during the past week several men have been discharged from Dyer's planing mill, and on Saturday night these men, accompanied by a crowd of roughs, attacked and severely beat... the foreman of the mill.

Only a few years later, in 1887, race receives greater emphasis in this neighborhood description, as does the hiding places that swampy ground provides.

Foggy Bottom, that section of the city lying below E street and west of Nineteenth street northwest, peopled principally by colored people and notorious in police annals for fights and drunken brawls, was the scene of another murder last night. ...The murderer... reached the very center of the flats, and was entirely concealed by the grass and weeds. The ground too, was so soft that the officers found themselves sinking up to their knees at every step. In addition to this it was growing very dark, and the chase in consequence had to be practically abandoned. Several of the officers were stationed about the swamp... but up to midnight he had not been seen. (Washington Post August 28, 1887)

In Foggy Bottom, city blended into swamplands, a refuge for the marginal and criminal in nineteenth century thinking.

Built Form and "The Bottoms" Today

While Nashville and Washington represent relatively large urban districts, elsewhere "The Bottoms" might refer to a linear stretch of small wooden shacks alongside a creek or on a steep hillside. The physical form of these communities varied considerably. In some areas, larger and more substantial houses, sometimes well-maintained and in good condition, could be found within the neighborhood boundaries. Some communities were home to hundreds, even thousands of people, others only a few dozen.

The physical dimensions, slope, and other characteristics of "site" also varied considerably from community to community. On the west side of the Scioto River across from downtown Columbus, Ohio, for instance, The Bottoms occupies a very large land area. Also known as Franklinton, this area was settled in the late eighteenth century, well before Columbus was established. In Alexandria, Virginia, the Bottoms was the name given to a low-lying area settled by free blacks in the 1790s. In contrast to Franklinton, it is only a few square blocks in size.

Thus the Bottoms were primarily a descriptor of perceived land quality and socio-economic status. In this sense they served as a sort of reference point: the metaphorical "low point," if not always the physical nadir.

The tendency to develop poorly-drained or flood-prone, industrial-use, urban lowlands as places for low-paid African Americans and recent immigrants was recognized by city dwellers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It informed a new language describing the social and spatial segregation of urban districts. In many ways, these communities are "lost landscapes" today: as urban renewal, highway projects, public housing, suburbanization, and other factors transformed the "central city," the places where poor people lived and racial segregation in particular took on new forms, such as large, inner city "ghettos." But, the traces of the past have not entirely disappeared. While some low places like Swede Hollow in St. Paul became parks, and others like the Cincinnati riverfront bottoms have become the location of mega-projects like sports stadiums and museums, in "The Bottoms" in Columbus, Ohio or "Davis Bottom" in Lexington, Kentucky, public housing projects and trailer parks now sit astride century-plus old wood bungalows and shotgun houses. And in Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, "The Bottoms" continue define the local landscape of up and down in the city.

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