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What Happened in Harris Neck?: Racism, Resistance, and Futures

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WHAT HAPPENED IN HARRIS NECK?: RACISM, RESISTANCE, AND FUTURES

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky
2021

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

WHAT HAPPENED IN HARRIS NECK?: RACISM, RESISTANCE, AND FUTURES

This project traces the history and legacy of the seizure of Harris Neck, approximately 2,600 acres on the Georgia coast, once largely composed of rice and cotton plantations. After the Civil War, freedmen and women transformed the area into a thriving Black community. The community of approximately a hundred families, a school, a church, a post office, and many small farms and businesses flourished from the late 1800’s until 1942, when the federal government seized Harris Neck for use as an Army airfield.

The procedures used by the federal government to seize and, later, reallocate Harris Neck will be examined, as these processes are grounds for a long struggle for the return of Harris Neck to former owners. Two key elements of the dispute will be examined in depth: the way in which Harris Neck families were notified of eminent domain procedures and associated rights and whether former landowners should have been given the opportunity to repurchase their land after it ceased to be used by the US Army. Ultimately, governmental policies and political maneuvering meant the land and its facilities were offered first to state and local governments, and it is at this point that any path toward repurchasing property was foreclosed to former landowners. This narrative constitutes an important history of a strong Black community in the Jim Crow South.

After Harris Neck’s tenure as an Army airfield, local officials lobbied for and took ownership of Harris Neck. Under an agreement with the Civil Aeronautics Association, the county government committed to utilizing the facilities as an airport. However, the area was instead enrolled in the county’s long history of corruption and race-based oppression. Even after the federal government retracted the deed due to breach of contract, Harris Neck continued to enrich local whites. In 1962, Harris Neck became a National Wildlife Refuge and since has provided recreational opportunities for and added to property values of local, primarily white residents. Today, Harris Neck’s Black community has been largely written out of Harris Neck’s history, as published by its managing agency, the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Tracing the ways in which Harris Neck has continued to exist as a site of loss and oppression connects a seemingly distant initial seizure with a much longer history of indifference to and dismissal of Black communities.
Finally, the project examines efforts by former Harris Neck community members to reclaim their properties. Legal battles have been fruitless, as statutes of limitations and legal principles like *res judica* have stymied suits filed by former Harris Neck community members. Congressional hearings have provided a platform for and validated oral histories of former Harris Neck residents but have failed to bring tangible change. In recent years, Harris Neck Land Trust has emerged as an advocacy organization pursuing various “equitable solutions” to the current struggle over Harris Neck. In the final section of this dissertation, the shifting aims and the tireless efforts of Harris Neck Land Trust will be examined as an instructive example of community organizing and self-advocacy.

**KEYWORDS:** Dispossession, Race, Black Geographies, Afrofuturism, Community Activism, Coastal Georgia
WHAT HAPPENED IN HARRIS NECK?: RACISM, RESISTANCE, AND FUTURES

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02/23/2021
Date
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all those who have walked this long path alongside me.

To the families of Harris Neck: This research allowed me to sit at the feet of your history and your activism. I am inspired, humbled, and thankful.

Jamie and Wyatt: For all the times your love and support carried me through—and for a million other reasons—you have my unending gratitude and love.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following dissertation, while an individual work, benefited from the insights and direction of several people. First, my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Tad Mutersbaugh, offered endless encouragement, guidance, and wisdom, exemplifying the high-quality scholarship and mentorship to which I aspire. In addition, members of the Harris Neck Land Trust provided invaluable insight that made this project possible, and each has my sincerest gratitude. Next, I wish to thank the complete Dissertation Committee, and outside reader, respectively: Dr. Sue Roberts, Dr. Richard Schein, Dr. Rosalind Harris, and Dr Sarah Lyon. Each individual provided insights that guided and challenged my thinking, substantially improving the finished product. I also wish to thank The Graduate School and its faculty and staff, who provided assistance and answers at many critical moments.

In addition to the technical and instrumental assistance above, I received equally important assistance from family and friends. My husband, Dr. James Sharpe, provided on-going support and encouragement throughout the dissertation process, as well as technical assistance critical for completing the project in a timely manner. I also thank my son for his patience an understanding when mom could not play. My mother, Angie Sumner, was also instrumental to the completion of this project and inspired me with her own commitment to being a great mom and a capable student. Finally, I wish to thank my colleagues at Berry College for the myriad support they have provided over the last two years, particularly Dr. David Slade, Dr. Mary Boyd, Kinsey Farmer, Katrina Meehan, and Calli O’Neal, without whom I could not have done this.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. vi

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................... 1
  1.1 In relation to Harris Neck ......................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Mapping This Project ............................................................................................. 6
  1.3 Theoretical Engagements ......................................................................................... 9
  1.4 Before We Begin, Some Context ............................................................................ 13
  1.5 Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 16

CHAPTER 2. THE LONG HISTORY OF HARRIS NECK .................................................. 18
  2.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 18
  2.2 Early History of Harris Neck .................................................................................. 20
  2.3 The World War II Era ............................................................................................ 26
  2.4 Post-World War II Era ........................................................................................ 36
  2.5 Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 49

CHAPTER 3. HARRIS NECK: A DESERT STRANGE AND CHILL .................................... 52
  3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 52
  3.2 From Black Community to Corruption and Development .................................... 53
    3.2.1 Crime and Corruption in McIntosh County .................................................... 53
    3.2.2 New Plantations ............................................................................................ 60
  3.3 Erasure .................................................................................................................. 67
  3.4 Justice Denied ....................................................................................................... 74
  3.5 Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 85

CHAPTER 4. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? ............................................................... 87
  4.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 87
  4.2 The History of Harris Neck Land Trust ................................................................. 90
  4.3 Forcing Answers, Testing Theory ........................................................................ 96
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Antiracism, Interest Convergence the Possibility of Change</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Whiteness and Wilderness</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Progress?</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Black Geographies</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Conclusion</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6. METHODS</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Archival Research</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Discourse Analysis</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Landscape Analysis</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Relationship with Harris Neck Land Trust</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Autoethnography and Participant Observation</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7 Writing the Results</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8 Challenges</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9 Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Property Ownership by Race and Location ...............38
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 View of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge from the South Newport River ................................................................. 2
Figure 1.2 A Gravel Path in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge ................................................................. 3
Figure 1.3: USFWS-Managed Wood Stork Nesting Site in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge ................................................................. 4
Figure 1.4 Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex Map, from the US Fish and Wildlife Service ........................................................................... 5
Figure 1.5 Map of the Coast of Georgia, Green Pin Marks Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, from Google Maps ................................................................. 14
Figure 2.1 A Man Plows a Field in Harris Neck, Undated, from Harris Neck Land Trust ................................................................. 24
Figure 2.2 Map of properties Seized for the Construction of Harris Neck Army Airfield ................................................................. 30
Figure 2.3 Notice of Civil Action 56 in the McIntosh County News, August 26, 1943 ................................................................. 33
Figure 2.4 Photo of Bunker at Harris Neck Army Airfield ........................................................................... 34
Figure 3.1 Entrance to Belvedere Island Plantation, McIntosh County, Georgia ................................................................. 63
Figure 3.2 Entrance to Spring Cove Neighborhood, McIntosh County, Georgia ................................................................. 64
Figure 3.3 Home Adjacent to Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge ........................................................................... 66
Figure 3.4 “Thomas Landing” Marker in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, McIntosh County, Georgia (2020) ........................................................................... 69
Figure 4.1: Harris Neck Land Trust Preservation and Community Development Plan, 2008 ........................................................................... 112
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This is a brutal unforgetting that wants a different future for the unforgettable.

Kathrine McKittrick, “Commentary: Worn Out”

The excavation of the past is essential, for it is from those historical fragments that the data thief or bricoleur constructs versions of what is to come.

Sofia Samatar, “Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism”

In relation to Harris Neck

Harris Neck is an approximately 2,700-acre area at the northern end of Georgia’s coastline, in McIntosh County. It is exceedingly beautiful: moss covered oaks, swaying marsh grass, and a lapping river are backdrop to the slow, quiet lives of alligators, wood storks, and hordes of fiddler crabs. Currently, Harris Neck is a national wildlife refuge under the management of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), part of a complex of refuges along the southeastern coast. Like most protected areas, Harris Neck was not always cordoned off in this way. Harris Neck was once a Black community that had found a way to thrive within a rural county dominated by Jim Crow and Sheriff Poppell (more on the long line of Sherriffs Poppell later).
Figure 1.1 View of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge from the South Newport River
Figure 1.2 A Gravel Path in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge
Figure 1.3: USFWS-Managed Wood Stork Nesting Site in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge
Figure 1.4 Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex Map, from the US Fish and Wildlife Service
Growing up in McIntosh County I have always wondered how it happened that a vibrant Black community was replaced by a national wildlife refuge. It seemed both unjust and on par with what I knew about local politics. This project began with a simple question: What happened in Harris Neck? Everything that follows is in service of answering it.

Of doing research “at home”, Narayan posits, “In some ways, the study of one’s own society involves an inverse process from the study of an alien one. Instead of learning conceptual categories and then, through fieldwork, finding the contexts in which to apply them, those of us who study societies in which we have preexisting experience absorb analytic categories that rename and reframe what is already known . . .” (Narayan 1993, p. 678). This project, indeed, uses a collage of conceptual categories, frameworks and methods—from archival research to Afrofuturism—to answer this central question and its follow-up: Where do we go from here?

1.1 Mapping This Project

In 1941, Harris Neck was home to a thriving Black community of over sixty families spread over approximately 2,700 acres, as well as a small number of white families. Homes, businesses, a church, a school, and a post office sketched out the daily lives of community members, most of whom were descendants of enslaved people who had worked the cotton plantations of Harris Neck in the first half of the 1800’s. The federal government condemned Harris Neck in the early 1940’s for the purposes of building an Army airfield in service of the second World War, and by 1943 the entire Harris Neck community was destroyed. In its second chapter, this project uses the frameworks of historical geography and archival research to trace the bureaucratic machinations that lead to Harris Neck’s seizure during World War II.

The third chapter traces the continued journey of Harris Neck through the bureaucracies of local and federal governments and courts and into the white economy of
northern McIntosh County. Though former landowners had expected the opportunity to repurchase their land after it was decommissioned, government policies with pronounced racialized outcomes meant that when the airfield was deemed surplus property, it was offered first to local governments in exchange for commitments to maintain the airfield as a municipal airport. This chapter continues the use of historical geography and archival research to outline how McIntosh County government shirked its responsibilities, and, instead, leased the land to the county’s powerful white sheriff and his political allies who allegedly used it for illegal gambling and drug-running. Former Harris Neck community members, many of whom had relocated to properties nearby, watched, as over the course of five years, their community was destroyed and their land handed over to their oppressors.

The federal government eventually recognized McIntosh County’s dereliction of duties and repossessed Harris Neck in the early 1960’s. In 1962, Harris Neck was reallocated to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as a refuge and became a protected area where the previously endangered wood stork would be provided sites for nesting. With this designation, Harris Neck became cordoned off and actively managed by the USFWS. The property had been largely inaccessible to former Harris Neck community members for years, and the presence of the USFWS did bring opportunities for increased access. However, this chapter will demonstrate how it also brought an exclusionary conservation regime, rooted in colonial gentleman science and indifferent to the history of the Harris Neck community.

Since becoming a wildlife refuge, Harris Neck has remained a part of this small county’s economy, providing recreation and adding value to the homes of largely white, amenity-based neighborhoods. Walking, jogging, and birdwatching are the most popular recreational activities in the refuge, though there is also a public dock for fishing and small boats. While Harris Neck community members have access to the refuge, they are largely excluded from the economic benefits stemming from the refuge’s existence. Mostly white,
gated, amenity-based neighborhoods are situated on either side of the refuge, and the assurance of an unobstructed view, privacy, and recreational opportunities drive up the property values of those who live there. Through landscape analysis, this chapter will demonstrate how, within the refuge, the former Harris Neck community goes largely unacknowledged, almost wholly erased from historical markers that, instead, feature Harris Neck’s former wealthy white owners wielding guns and dogs, inevitably recalling, for many Black visitors, images of racial violence.

Finding themselves alienated from Harris Neck, in 1979, former community members staged a protest and waged legal battles for the return of Harris Neck under the banner of an organization named People Organized for Equal Rights (POER). This chapter follows these movements, noting the beginning of the community organizing that will be unpacked in detail in the fourth chapter. Emphasizing the questionable ethics and timeline of the initial seizure and the fraudulent claims and actions of local officials, Harris Neck community members argued forcefully for new court proceedings to determine who should be able to occupy Harris Neck. However, the courts dismissed all of POER’s claims, declining to leverage the Civil Rights Act. Finally, the third chapter will use discourse analysis and frameworks from legal geography to point to the circular judicial reasoning that rehearses the positivist logics of systems grounded in colonialism. On the whole, the third chapter seeks to demonstrate how various systems—local governments, federal bureaucracies, local economies, and the legal system—have not only failed to recognize the injustice done to the Harris Neck community but have perpetuated and amplified the impacts of the initial seizure.

Finally, the fourth chapter turns away from Harris Neck’s tragic history of dislocation and displacement and examines, instead, the recent and ongoing work of Harris Neck Land Trust (HNLT). HNLT is a community advocacy organization started in 2006 by former Harris Neck community members and their families. The organization has engaged deeply with lawyers, community planners, career government officials,
politicians, and the media to work toward regaining possession of Harris Neck. Their goal has always been reclaiming property held before the initial government seizure in 1942, and though their proposals for what they call an “equitable solution” have varied over time, this commitment has been unwavering. In the course of their work HNLT has demonstrated the usefulness of grounded advocacy tactics that ask government organizations and officials to answer for both past actions and inaction. They have won an apology from the McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, two congressional hearings, and many meetings with officials key to the potential return of Harris Neck to former community members and their families. Though they have not yet regained property in Harris Neck, the fourth chapter outlines the ways in which they have successfully held the feet of government officials to the fire, forcing answers to tough questions and commitments to work toward a solution. I argue that this work is not only critical to HNLT’s own efforts to reclaim property, but works as an important barometer for gauging the possibility of antiracist policies and outcomes. With an understanding of what happened in Harris Neck, the chapter turns to the work of HNLT to understand where we go from here. Beyond the grounded, tactical work of meetings, negotiations, and planning documents, the fourth chapter reads the work of HNLT, particularly its community development proposals, as an Afrofuturist endeavor, problematizing existing boundaries between past/future and natural/developed and envisioning a thriving future for Harris Neck and the community who once called it home.

1.2 Theoretical Engagements

Though the next two chapters of this project are a history of a community dislocated and disenfranchised, it is not an autopsy. As the final conceptual chapter observes, the Harris Neck community is not dead or dying. Clyde Woods and Kathrine McKittrick have

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1 See Woods (2002).
called for histories and geographies to see beyond the stories that sentence Black bodies and Black communities to perpetual death through the telling and retelling of stories of violence and destruction. In ending with the work of HNLT, I hope to avoid falling into what McKittrick warns against:

\[
\ldots \text{ when racial violence is the central analytical query (in the humanities and social sciences), the dead and dying Black/non-white body becomes the conceptual tool that will undoubtedly complete, and thus prove, the brutalities of racism. This analytical logic can only ‘end’ with Black death which, interestingly, reifies the very colonial structures that research on racial violence is (seemingly) working against . . . (2011, 953)}
\]

McKittrick and Woods’s calls for other possibilities does not eschew the re-telling of histories of exclusion or marginalization, but they rightfully question the usefulness of such narratives in undoing colonial structures and racial hierarchies. They ask us to consider, as McKittrick puts it, “how race, geography, and analytical frameworks, together, can replicate discursive anti-Black violence within some academic studies and geographic research” (2011, p. 955). What good is another teleological rehashing of the history of violence and oppression that does not chart a way forward? Perhaps we have sufficiently demonstrated the sundry and gut-wrenching ways in which systems rooted in colonialism and chattel slavery have worked to oppress and disenfranchise people of color. Perhaps we can instead proceed with narratives that deal with “our common and difficult histories of encounter” (2011, p. 960). McKittrick provides, in her conceptualization of “plantation futures” and in her earlier engagement with Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag*, a way out of this “always dead and dying” framework (2013, p. 11), asking scholars to engage with “a narrative of Black history that is neither celebratory nor dissident but rooted in an

\[\]

3 I use the term re-telling here to acknowledge that most of the stories told alongside, on behalf of, and about Black people and places are not being told for the first time. Black communities, and certainly Harris Neck, have been telling their own stories on their own terms long before white journalists, scholars, or lawyers arrive. These re-tellings may not have been recorded in academe or dominant histories, but they are not new.
articulation of . . . life that accepts that relations of violence and domination have made our existence and presence in the Americas possible as it recasts this knowledge to envision an alternative future” (2013, p. 14).

As we reflect on how to re-tell histories of Black communities in ways that do their lives—past, present, and future—justice, it is worth grappling with the productive tension between Woods and McKittrick’s calls for anticipatory Black geographies and critical race theory’s concept of counterstories. Like McKittrick’s Black geographies, critical race theory (CRT) works to center the narratives of those othered by hegemonic and colonial systems. CRT’s practical approach to bringing awareness and understanding to the material realities of race has been an effective tool for scholars of law, education, and policy analysis. And yet, CRT tells stories within a framework of the history of subjugation in which Black people are always already dichotomized and disadvantaged. Lopez writes,

[t]he counterstories of people of color . . . are those stories that are not told, stories that are consciously and/or unconsciously ignored or downplayed because they do not fit socially acceptable notions of truth. By highlighting these subjugated accounts, CRT hopes to demystify the notion of racially neutral society and tell another story of a highly racialized social order: a story where social institutions and practices serve the interest of White individuals. (2003, p. 84-85)

Narratives in CRT are almost exclusively retrospective, the sorts of autopsies Woods asks us to reconsider.

Black geographies and CRT offer different understandings of how to tell Black stories into academe and into dominant historical narratives, but they are not mutually exclusive. Both seek to bring Black histories to the center and move toward alternatives to current realities. The tension that exists between them—between resisting and

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4 For an alternative definition of Black geographies see Allen, Lawhon and Pierce (2019): “. . . we thus position Black geographies not as a catch-all for all geographies of race but instead as a term encompassing works that emphasize Black experiences, as well as alternative visions and articulations of space drawn from these experiences” (1002). See also Bledsoe, Eaves and Williams (2017) and Bledsoe and Wright (2019).
example narratives ending with violence and loss—is productive, asking academics to always be a bit uncomfortable with their re-tellings and to work between these poles to center the story at hand.

I begin this re-telling of the story of Harris Neck with a narrative of loss and subjugation—a counterstory that needs to be re-told into the academic record because the pain of the Harris Neck community deserves to be recognized and because academics—particularly white scholars like myself—need to bear witness to it and understand the complicity of both racialized and race-neutral systems in the maintenance of race-based oppression. However, that is not where we will end.

The members of Harris Neck Land Trust operationalize McKittrick’s call, as they work to “re-imagine geographies of dispossession and racial violence . . . as sites through which ‘co-operative human efforts’ can take place and have a place” (2011, p. 960). Through their transgressive proposals that trouble boundaries like public-private, natural-built, and past-present, they allow us to see a way forward that fulfills Katherine McKittrick’s call for creative and geographic turns that “imagine Black-life as anticipatory” (2013, p. 11).

This project covers a lot of historical and theoretical ground. We will end up, thanks to HNLT, holding onto an Afrofuturist vision of Harris Neck. Reading their most recent community development plan for a living museum, we find ourselves transported: former Harris Neck community members are once again occupying Harris Neck, engaged in sustainable agriculture and aquaculture, sharing both food and cultivation technologies with the broader community. HNLT, the speculative futurity and audacious creativity of

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5 As will be explained and explored in chapter four, Harris Neck Land Trust is a nonprofit advocacy group comprised of former landowners in Harris Neck and their descendants. Harris Neck Land Trust began their work in 2006 and continues today. They are well organized, with an executive board, legal representation, regular meetings, and an excellent website: [http://www.harrisnecklandtrust.org](http://www.harrisnecklandtrust.org). Their stated mission is: “. . . to reclaim the 2,687 acres of Harris Neck—wrongfully and illegally taken by the Federal government in 1942—and return it to its rightful owners”.

6 See van Veen & Anderson (2018)
their plans, “have an increasing ability to draw us toward them, to command us to make them flesh” (Eshun, 2003, p. 291).

In the meantime, I ask the reader to be patient. To bear witness in the next two chapters to this story of loss and pain, all the while anticipating the creative and generative power of the Harris Neck Land Trust explored in the final conceptual chapter.

1.3 Before We Begin, Some Context

In service of answering our central question, I will provide here some broader geographical and historical context, and then we will turn our gaze toward the specificities of Harris Neck and the community who lived there.
Harris Neck became a contested space in much the same way as many coastal areas in the American South. After the diaspora of indigenous peoples, colonization took hold and enslaved people worked the land, producing mostly rice and cotton on large
plants. On the coast of Georgia, cotton and rice reigned over the plantation economies. In his environmental history of the Georgia coast, Stewart writes, “Rice plantations were empires of mud and water, deeply rooted in the tidewater, and shored up by human hands. Sea Island cotton was a more graceful crop and for a while was the backbone of the Lowcountry plantation belt economy” (2018, p. 29).

After emancipation, large swaths of land on Georgia’s coast were abandoned by plantation owners: bequeathed or sold—both formally and informally—to former slaves, leased to sharecroppers, left in wills to distant family, or given over to local or state governments.8 In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the Freedman’s Bureau held open the possibility for Black property ownership and economic development and autonomy. However, the reach of the Bureau was short-lived, with President Andrew Johnson and many in Congress working against its mission and restoring property rights to former plantation owners. However, as Swanson points out, even as “the promise of acreage for each family of freedpeople fell apart, African Americans still found ways to own or rent land they could farm” (2018, p. 193). Many parcels of coastal land, once plantations and later small-hold farms, have since made long, circuitous paths through history and legal channels to exist today as tourism and housing developments, large estates, and protected areas.

Coastal land, formerly valued for its fertile soil and access to waterways, began to be desirable as vacation destinations in the early twentieth century. Jekyll Island, semi-famous as the birthplace of the Federal Reserve and playground of the Rockefellers, was one of the earliest examples of the gentrification of Georgia’s barrier islands. St. Simons Island—the home of now-private Sea Island, where the median home value is $2.3

7 See also Carney (2009) and Stewart (2002).
8 Stewart, 2018. For histories of the plantation and post-Civil War environments, economies, and people of coastal Georgia and surrounding areas, see also Swanson (2018), Stewart (2002), Pollitzer (1998), Sullivan (2001), and Sutter (2018).
million—Amelia Island, Cumberland Island, and Sapelo Island all followed similar trajectories of working plantations to lavish escapes. The appeal of these areas came, of course, from the natural landscape. Once valued for their agricultural productivity, these spaces began to be valued for projecting just the opposite: a life of leisure. As wealthy families sought refuge in former coastal plantations, the value of the marshes, for example, shifted. Once ideal for growing rice as the water levels ebbed and flowed with the tide, the marshes were no longer an agricultural and economic asset. Instead, their value became bound to their beauty and isolation.

The stories of Georgia’s barrier islands are neither unique nor unpredictable. Sapelo, Ossabaw, Wassaw, St. Simons, Sea Island, and Jekyll—all barrier island along Georgia’s 100 miles of coastline—have essentially the same biography. In the eighteenth century native peoples were displaced by settlers; plantation economies developed then thrived in the early nineteenth century; the Civil War decimated plantation agriculture in the 1860’s; freedpeople worked diligently to find a way forward in Reconstruction-era and Jim Crow socioeconomic systems for a century; along the way, small Black communities carved out spaces for business, community and autonomy even within the strictures of white hegemony; and, slowly at first but accelerating in the 1940’s, tourism, conservation, and development conspired to erode Black communities.

1.4 Conclusion

This project tells a story that belongs to a community I respect very much. I will try to do their history and work justice. I will fail. The story of the Harris Neck community is too rich and sad and beautiful and hopeful to be captured by any voice other than their own:

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10 See Swanson (2018)
11 See Sutter (2018) and Stewart (2018)
From the end of the Civil War until 1942, Harris Neck was home to a prosperous and self-reliant community of 75 African American families. Farmers and fishermen, they lived harmoniously with each other and their natural environment in a manner that would decades later be called ecofriendly and sustainable. A hard working [sic] and resourceful people, they had their own seafood processing plants, schoolhouse, general store, church, Justice of the Peace, and law enforcement. Then, in the summer of 1942, everything changed. (Harris Neck Land Trust, nd, np)  

Indeed, members of the former Harris Neck community have been telling their own stories for a very long time without need of acknowledgment from academe. Their history has not been lost and does not need to be recovered. In fact, the Harris Neck community has been very successful in garnering media attention. While I do hope that writing the story of Harris Neck, making it legible within the academy and legitimized by the trappings of academic work, is helpful to the Harris Neck community’s self-advocacy, they do not need my help. White America needs theirs.

The longue durée of Black history is self-evident to the Harris Neck community. Understanding their story helps white people conceptualize how the tendrils of America’s original sin reach from the transatlantic slave trade to this moment. As Robinson writes, the plantation system “. . . drew together the commercial bourgeoise and the state, implicating them in behaviors and institutions entirely dependent on the existence of slavery and long-distance trade” (2000, p. 114). Those bonds of race, economics and the state still hold, as this project will demonstrate. However, the story of the Harris Neck community also helps us understand the imaginative possibilities of Black geographies written over already written-over landscapes. It is from a sense of gratitude for the Harris Neck community, the stories they have shared, and what we might learn from them that this project proceeds.

12 I encourage you to visit http://www.harrisnecklandtrust.org to access material produced by former Harris Neck community members and their descendants.

13 As of the moment of writing, two hundred and fifty-one Black people have been killed by police in 2020.
CHAPTER 2. THE LONG HISTORY OF HARRIS NECK

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat  
Or crust and sugar over—  
Like a syrupy sweet?  

Maybe it just sags  
Like a heavy load.  

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes, Montage of a Dream Deferred

2.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to catalog the major historical events that shaped Harris Neck up to its conversion to an Army airfield in 1942. I take care to trace as carefully as available information allows the events leading up to, during, and shortly after the seizure of property in Harris Neck by the federal government. While gaps remain, this chapter provides a historical foundation both for this project and future academic and advocacy work in Harris Neck. The details of the taking of the 2,700 acres of Harris Neck and, shortly thereafter, its reallocation to the corrupt, racist local government are the basis of a land struggle that continues today. While the historical details provided in this chapter have been alive in archives and in oral and written histories of the former Harris Neck community for decades, this is the first academic work that traces the details salient to the ongoing legal, legislative, and advocacy efforts of former Harris Neck community members.
In addition to the careful tracing of Harris Neck’s path from Black community, through government bureaucracy, and into the hands of corrupt county officials, this chapter provides earlier historical details regarding Harris Neck. While this longer history is rooted deeply in histories given by former Harris Neck community members, it is often ignored in government and legal documents working to understand the struggle for Harris Neck. This omission of the *longue durée* in existing official records has obscured the full context of the land struggle, narrowing the frame like a telephoto lens focused only on the events of 1942 to 1962 and ignoring that, for the Black community of Harris Neck, this twenty-year span is not distinct from the broader historical narratives of enslavement and landlessness as well as uplift and self-determination. This longer history is, at best, glossed over by hyperfocused legal defenses of actions during the 1942-1962 period and largely ignored in the historical narratives curated by the USFWS on its website, informational plaques within the refuge, and brochures.

Neglecting the *longue durée*, I argue, has also perpetuated the legal, political, and community conflicts over who should own Harris Neck. As they make their case that former landowners and descendants have no legal claim to Harris Neck, government officials largely ignore or outright refuse to engage with the painful histories of enslavement, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow and the real impacts these historical moments had on the path of the Harris Neck community—both the place and the people who lived there—through bureaucratic and legal processes. Placing the current struggle for Harris Neck within broader historical and sociopolitical contexts is foundational to this project and to any real understanding of why Harris Neck continues to be a wound for former

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14 Here I use the term *longue durée* as articulated by Armitage and Guldi in their argument for the need to return to the *longue durée* as a unit of historical analysis. I depart here from the original use of the term by Braudel, who emphasized change across millennia. However, Armitage and Guldi remind us that Braudel broadened the use of term later in his career to include “not-quite-so-long durees . . . measured in centuries and . . . discernable in human minds, not just in natural landscapes and human interactions with them” (2015). For a beautiful and exceedingly useful exploration of the *longue durée* of Black history and activism, see the seminal Robinson (2000).
community members. Without an understanding of the long-term, structural history of McIntosh County, Georgia, the plantation, and state and national politics, we cannot understand Harris Neck. What happened in Harris Neck is an indictment of our bureaucratic, legal, and political systems and a stark example of the inadequacy of our nation’s progress toward racial reconciliation and equity. The history provided in this chapter and continued in chapter two is the foundation on which I will build this argument.

2.2 Early History of Harris Neck

Through a large part of the nineteenth century, most of what is now referred to as Harris Neck was home to Peru Plantation as well as parts of other smaller estates (Sullivan, 144). Around 1816, the Thomas family purchased the land from the Demetre-Harris family, who were already successfully cultivating the famous Sea Island Cotton, and gave the plantation its new name (US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Story of Harris Neck). On Peru Plantation, the Thomas family continued producing Sea Island cotton with slave labor. Edward Thomas, in his Memoirs of a Southerner, describes Peru Plantation in the fashion of slavery apologists of the day,

There was on the plantation a trusted and intelligent slave called the Driver, who was directly in charge of all field work, Sea-Island cotton, corn, peas, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, melons, and all garden stuff; another was in charge of the horses, cattle, etc., and a third was foreman of the plows.

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15 See Kobayashi (2017) for recommendations for a historical geography invested in contemporary manifestations of past injustices.
16 The Thomas family was not the only landowner in what has now Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge, however. From the USFWS publication “History of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge” by Les Davenport: “In the 1820s and 1830s the Goulds owned several tracts of land on the upper end of the Neck, on the lower portion of the present wildlife refuge, that were originally owned by the Harris and Demetre families.” Information from the publication was based on Buddy Sullivan’s Early Days in the Georgia Tidewater, cited elsewhere in this text.
17 From the USFWS publication “History of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge” by Les Davenport: “. . . one of the first cultivations of Sea Island Cotton in the U.S. began on the south end of Harris Neck in 1787 in Julianton Plantation belonging to Francis Levett, Sr.”
The fields were all staked off in tasks, a quarter of an acre, and each slave was required to cultivate with hoe or plow a certain amount of these staked fields, and near as possible the same area cultivated in the early spring would be constantly worked by the same person, that he or she might be rewarded for doing the work well in the beginning, as it would be less labor the second hoeing if it was well done at first. In this way the industrious and diligent negro seldom worked after the noon hour.

They were very well housed, in two-room lumber cabins, a chimney to each house, and allowed a garden. Sundays no work was permitted, the slaves attending church. They could raise as many chickens as they pleased, could have boats and go anywhere fishing, so they came home by daylight to resume work. (1923, p. 9)

After the Civil War, Thomas reports that formerly enslaved people returned to Peru Plantation:

I had not as yet, since the slaves were free, visited our old plantation home, Peru, in McIntosh County, but I had heard that a goodly number of our old slaves had returned, and, without leave or license, simply considered it their privilege to come home, after they were scattered by Sherman’s raid.

They had taken up their abode in what cabins were left standing and begun to cultivate the land . . .

That was not long after the war when they had many of the comforts provided them by their masters. (1923, p. 57-58)

Thomas’s description of Peru Plantation is indefensibly sympathetic to the institution of chattel slavery, shaped by his position as a slaveholding man. However, what his description does convey is that Peru Plantation functioned in much the same way as other southern cotton plantations of the day. Many of the eventual residents of the Harris Neck community trace their families back to both the enslaved Black and free white residents of the plantations in Harris Neck.

The Thomas family eventually subdivided the former plantation and sold parcels to former slaves as well as wealthy white families, among them the Lorillards\(^\text{18}\), tobacco

\(^{18}\) While there are three distinct white landowners, the Lorillards, Clapps, and Livingstons, who owned property in the area in the Reconstruction Era, it is important to note that the Eleanor Van Brunt Clapp and
tycoons who “constructed a large mansion, formal gardens, and a deep-water dock” (USFWS, “The Story of Harris Neck”). During the postbellum era, a strong Gullah-Geechee community thrived, owning property and building homes, businesses, small farms and gardens, a church, and Gould Cemetery, among other community amenities. McIntosh County also established a school in Harris Neck in 1875 (USFWS, “History of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge”). More broadly, in McIntosh County, Georgia where Harris Neck is situated, “Between 1845 and 1870 the population of McIntosh County fell by about one thousand people to 1,196 whites and 3,288 Blacks. Very few Blacks owned land” (USFWS, “History of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge”). The Civil War had transformed McIntosh County, which had been partially burned in Sherman’s march to the sea, and Harris Neck had benefitted from this transformation.

The natural landscape of Harris Neck—not quite an island but surrounded by marsh, tidal creeks, and forest—provided a natural barrier from the rest of the county and a sense of self-reliance and insularity within the community. Van Sant writes of the post-Civil War context of freedpeople living on the coasts of the nearby Lowcountry in South Carolina:

. . . enslaved people learned how to subsist off of the Lowcountry land and some were even able to market their bounty . . . over a century and a half of bondage Lowcountry slaves developed a wealth of environmental knowledge and a sustaining moral economy that provided them with more leverage in post-Emancipation struggles than their counterparts across the US South. Once free many drew on these agricultural, environmental and commercial knowledges to develop a hybrid subsistence and market livelihood that supported high rates of land ownership . . . This landed autonomy, while certainly constrained and contested, nevertheless allowed many freedpeople to resist the most exploitative post-Emancipation labor

Lily Livingston were associated with Pierre Lorillard, and the lavish estate on Harris Neck is often referred to as the Lorrillard-Livingston estate. See USFWS “History of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge” for additional information.

19 A white school had been established around 1820 but there is no record of the branch of McIntosh County Academy operating in Harris Neck after the Civil War (USFWS “History of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge”).
arrangements and to develop a relative measure of freedom. (Van Sant 2016, p. 198)

The US Fish and Wildlife Service summarizes the next few decades in Harris Neck’s history:

Through the first third of the 20th century the principal occupations at and around Harris Neck were small farming and gardening, livestockng, seafood (particularly the commercial harvest of oysters), lumbering, pulpwooding, and turpentineing. By the early 1940s some 171 separate tracts of privately owned land existed on the area of the present-day Refuge. Most were small, less than one acre, but some individuals owned enough property to conduct fairly extensive farming. (History of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, n.d., p. 4)

In 1979, Georgia Representative in the US House Bo Ginn described Harris Neck as a community of “small homesteads and agricultural land” where “[r]esidents earned their way in life by working the land, by their skill as fishermen, and through employment in small seafood processing operations in Harris Neck” (Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, 1979, p. 337). Harris Neck Land Trust, the most notable and active advocacy group representing former residents of Harris Neck and their descendants, describes Harris Neck on their website:

Speaking about their lives before 1942, many of the remaining elders who still live in Georgia say, “It was a hard life, but it was a good life.”

People lived off of the land, creeks, rivers, and ocean, and they took their crops, wild game and seafood to market in Savannah and Darien in small sailboats. They lived with nature, not apart from it, in a manner that would decades later come to be known as environmentally friendly and sustainable. They relied on the outside world for very little and preserved much of their African ways—a culture that came to be known as Gullah or Gullah-Geechie. A hard working and resourceful people, they had their own seafood processing plants, schoolhouse, general store and firehouse. (History, nd., np)
First-hand descriptions of Harris Neck in the first half of the twentieth century include memories of peach and pecan trees, small farms, and frequent fishing, abundant deer and other wildlife, and thriving Black businesses including an oyster cannery and shrimp boats. The son of a former Harris Neck community member sums up a general consensus among former Harris Neck community members: “This was a prosperous Black community. If they had never taken it, think what it would have been. We wouldn’t have needed anything from the government or anybody else. We could have been helping the economy of the county and providing jobs” (qtd. in Tucker, 1979). In addition to being home for almost one hundred families, Harris Neck was a site of industry and autonomy.

In *Drums and Shadows: Survival studies among the Georgia coastal negroes*, a book published in 1940 by the Federal Writers Project, Harris Neck is described as “a remote little settlement connected to the mainland by a causeway . . . Narrow, ruffed roads curve and turn unexpectedly through densely wooded area. Set singly or in little clusters of two or three and sometimes almost hidden by the trees and foliage are the houses of the inhabitants.” (2009, p. 248). A stop at one residence reveals a compact brown house that would have been typical in Harris Neck: “The garden planted at the sides and front of the

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20 From the 1979 congressional testimony of Christopher McIntosh and Kenneth Dunham, and a 1979 newspaper article by Cynthia Tucker of *The Atlanta Journal.*
house was enclosed by a low wire fence. Within this enclosure a number of dogs and chickens scuttled about. At a short distance from the house stood an iron pump and an immense rusted iron pot, probably used in the past for boiling clothes” (2009, 253-354). The chapter goes on to give a sense of far more than the physical space called Harris Neck. In the transcription of the story told by Ed Thorpe, it becomes clear Harris Neck was an important site of cultural reproduction. Thorpe describes the tales told by his grandmother, who was brought to Harris Neck as a slave and lived there for the remainder of her life:

Muh gran say deah wuz lots of cunjuh in Africa. Deah wuz some men wut could make a pot bile widout fyuh and deah wuz some wut could fly. She tell me dat deah wuz witches wut rode folks. Dey could take off deah skins and hang um up and go out as cats. Wen dey come back duh nex mawnin, dey would put on duh skins. Deah is folks roun heah tuhday wut says dey caahn sleep nights cuz duh witches rude um.21 (2009, 250)

As they continue to tour Harris Neck, the writers meet a sweetgrass basket-maker; hear about the baptisms of Harris Neck residents in the local river, always held as the tide was going out “so the sins be washed away”; learn about the custom of walking the body of a deceased resident to the graveyard as community members drummed; and are told a bit about the local midwifery practices and memories of the harvest festivals of the plantation days. The brief chapter makes it clear that while the location of Harris Neck—its access to the river and fertile soil—was certainly a part of what kept residents there, the ties that bound the community went far deeper than that. This was an established, vibrant, tight-knit Black community with history and cultural practices both unique to Harris Neck and part of a broader African diaspora. It stood strong, self-sustaining. Then, in the summer of 1942, everything changed. As Van Sant writes, “[t]he dogged—and relatively

21 Drums and Shadows is certainly not without its flaws, chief among them the patronizing and colonialist tones throughout the text. However, the text, created by the Georgia Writers’ Project and commissioned by the Works Progress Administration, does provide one of the few contemporary, written accounts of life in Harris Neck. It acts here as a supplement to the oral histories of former residents and a flawed yet important repository of the stories and histories of the Georgia coast in the 1930s.
successful—efforts of Lowcountry freedpeople to secure control over land and their own
labor was always constrained by the realities of state-supported white supremacy” (Van

2.3 The World War II Era

At the beginning of the 1940’s, World War II was escalating, and in December of 1941 the attack on Pearl Harbor pulled the United States into the Allied Forces. It is this moment that the wheels of bureaucracy began to move to displace Harris Neck residents and landowners. In June of 1941, The Office of the Chief of Engineers in War Department wrote in an interoffice memo, “There is a military necessity for the acquisition of approximately 1,200 acres of land near Harris Neck, Georgia . . . as a site for a Dive Bombardment Operational Training Unit” (Robins, 1942). It remains somewhat unclear in the historical record why Harris Neck was chosen as the site for this new installation, though the most likely reason is that there was already a small Civil Aviation Authority runway at the site. However, local oral histories suggest that there may have been political forces at work here, too. The government of McIntosh County was notoriously corrupt,

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22 Major Robins makes reference in his letter to the “1st Indorsement, dated June 6, 1942”, though it provides little additional detail. It reads, “The Secretary of War directs that you be informed that a military necessity exists for the acquisition of the land referred to in the basic communication,” referencing the memo’s title, “Land Acquisition, Dive Bombardment, Operational Training Unit, Harris Neck, Ga.” A Freedom of Information Act request was filed with the Army Corps of Engineers. However, their reply indicated there were no existing records pertaining to the selection of Harris Neck as the site of this training unit. It is reasonable to speculate that the presence of a small Civil Aviation Authority runway on the site may be one reason for the selection of the location. Additionally, there is correspondence between Major DL Weart of the Corps of Engineers and EM Thorpe, a resident of Harris Neck later displaced by the Army Air Field, as early as 1931. This indicates the property was known to the Army Corps of Engineers office in Savannah, Georgia, about forty miles from Harris Neck, and that familiarity may be another reason for the site’s selection.

23 Harris Neck Land Trust reports that after two German submarines were spotted off of the Georgia coast, Federal agents came to the area seeking a location for training and coastal surveillance. They write on their website, “New research has shown that these agents were led specifically to Harris Neck by the power brokers in McIntosh, a county that was run by a handful of prominent white families, among them the Poppells. As sheriffs of McIntosh County for more than a half a century, the Poppells (father and son) exercised absolute control, on behalf of the power structure. Although there were 3,500 acres of virtually uninhabited land just across Julienton Creek from Harris Neck—land that was owned by one of these power brokers—it was Harris Neck that became the site for the US Army Airfield.” The same narrative is given in congressional testimony from David M. Kelly, Project Coordinator for the Harris Neck Land
which will be addressed in chapter three, and local legend holds that county officials encouraged federal officials to locate the installment here as part of an attempt to drive the Black residents and property owners into the wage-labor economy of the county, which consisted primarily a shrinking timber industry and shrimping and oyster bed cultivation and harvesting. 24

In an undated appraisal conducted by “Division Appraisers” 25, the area and the people living in it were described as follows,

Persons living in this area are mainly negroes who depend almost entirely on taking fish, shrimp, crab and oysters from nearby salt water rivers and the ocean for living. Most of the families grow a few acres of corn and small gardens for home use . . .

The area, with the exception of approximately 50 acres, at present is being used mainly by negroes for home sites in connection with their fishing activities in nearby salt water streams, it being conveniently located for this purpose. An elaborate winter home is located on the fifty acres referred to, this has been the winter home of the present owner for more than fifty years and is desirable and valuable property for this purpose . . . (White and Cowart, nd, p. 2)

This description, undoubtedly written by a white man, seems true enough based on contemporaneous descriptions of the area and does give a sense of the community’s self-sufficiency. However, the appraiser is blind to the industry in the area, as most of it would

Trust. The information provided by Harris Neck Land trust goes on to attribute anachronistic reasoning to why the Poppells would have wanted Harris Neck to be seized. However, narratives like Praying for Sheetrock, a nonfiction work regarding race and power in McIntosh County, supports claims that the Poppells were both extremely powerful and motivated to maintain white supremacy in McIntosh County. I submitted a Freedom of Information Act Request to the Army Corps of Engineers for information regarding the selection of Harris Neck as the site for the US Army Airfield, but the request was answered with a reply indicated no records about the site selection existed in Army Corps of Engineers archives. Neither were records regarding site selection in the National Archives in Atlanta alongside other documents regarding Army Corps of Engineers projects in McIntosh County or regarding the construction of the US Army Airfield in Harris Neck.

24 There were Black-owned businesses in shrimping and oyster cultivation in Harris Neck. The displacement of people from Harris Neck would have driven these skilled fishermen and aquaculturists to work in the largely white-owned businesses of Darien, the county seat.

25 It is unclear in the archival record whether these “division appraisers” were from the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, or another branch of the federal government.
have been conducted informally among friends and neighbors, and there is an undeniable dismissiveness in his tone. For example, anyone who has ever culled fish and oysters from Georgia’s coast knows that “taking” is a poor description of these activities. Fishing the coastal waters takes knowledge and skill, and piles of sharp-shelled oysters harvested in thigh-deep marsh mud are not an easy prize. As the appraisal continues, it becomes clearer that race has informed the assessment—both of the property and its situation—and that this will result in divergent experiences of white landowners and Black landowners in Harris Neck. Appraisers WT White and HH Cowart continue,

From the best information obtainable it appears there will be approximately 90 ownerships within the area. The following are white owners in the area. The additional colored owners will be furnished the Special Attorney handling condemnation, at a later date:

- Davis Thorpe
- Irvin Davis
- EM Thorpe
- Mrs. Lily A. Livingston
- Mrs. Nellie Clapp, et al

While practically all the occupants, within this area are negroes with only meager incomes and means it is believed that only a relatively few of them will be unable to relocate without assistance. (nd., 5)

White and Cowart had taken care to identify white landowners who would be impacted by the condemnation of the 1200 acres and go on to make a case for leasing or altogether excluding the properties of two of them: EM Thorpe and Lily Livingston. The white property owners likely received direct outreach from officials to notify them of condemnation procedures. Meanwhile, Black landowners remain nameless, almost an afterthought. The recommendation that Black landowners could be furnished a special attorney “at a later date” is clearly a contrast to the planned process for white landowners.
Whatever the appraiser had in mind for the special attorney, there is no evidence that such a person ever worked with the Harris Neck community. Declarations of taking were issued in courts, notices were filed in the local newspaper, and law enforcement officials delivered legal notices, but no special attorney is ever referenced in contemporary records or later legal filings.
Figure 2.2 Map of properties Seized for the Construction of Harris Neck Army Airfield
Legal affidavits filed in the 1970’s and 1980’s by several former property owners and their heirs claim that they were never properly served with notices of condemnation.\(^\text{26}\) While the court found that effective service had been rendered in July and August of 1943, the question of how Black land owners were treated in the condemnation process is not so simple. After the above appraisal, the legal process of condemnation began. At this point in Harris Neck’s history, the official timeline becomes disputed. Court filings by the US Attorney’s Office and Department of Justice related to legal action taken in the early 1980s by former residents and landowners claim that the first Petition for Condemnation, \textit{United States v. 1200 Acres, More or less, Civil 56}, was filed in the US District Court of the United States for the Southern District of Georgia on June 6, 1942 (filed June 22, 1981), while the June 1943 \textit{Motion for Modification of Judgment Upon Declaration of Taking No. 8} cites July 6, 1942 as the initial US District Court filing for the petition to condemn land in Harris Neck. This discrepancy is small, however, in a 1985 report to Congress, the Government Accountability Office lists the dates of all nine Declarations of Taking, dating the first as January 14, 1943. If this date is accurate, it indicates a timeline that would have made it all but impossible to give Black residents proper notice of eviction.

In August and September of 1943, petitions for the condemnation to the District Court of the US for the Southern District of Georgia in Brunswick, Georgia were made public in the \textit{McIntosh County News}. These notices informed landowners they could be heard by the court on three dates in August and September of 1943, continuing, “If you or any of you have any rights in the premises or desire to be heard in the matter, you are required then and there to make known your objections, if any, and your claims as to the value of the property or your respective rights therein . . .” (“In the District Court of the United States . . .” August 5, 1943, p. 2). The dates reported by the Army Corps of

\(^{26}\) See \textit{US v 1,200 Acres of Land in McIntosh County, Georgia}, US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia, Brunswick Division, 1981. Affidavits of Evelyn Geer, Edgar Timmons, Sr. and James Campbell.
Engineers and in the papers demonstrate a far more compressed timeline than the one suggested by the US Attorney’s Office and the Department of Justice. Two histories of the Army Airforce, one published by the USAF Historical Division and one by the Office of Air Force History, describe the base at Harris Neck as operational by May of 1943 with Bombardment Squadrons stationed at the base by September of 1943 (Maurer 1969, Craven and Cate 1983). Additionally, an article in The Bulletin, a publication of the Catholic Laymen’s Association of Georgia, reported on a dance in October of 1943 “given in Darien for the girls in war work and for the boys stationed at ‘Georgia’s Guadalcanal’ otherwise known as Blackbeard and Sapaloe [sic] Islands and Harris’ [sic] Neck” (“Parrish in Darien Host to Soliders”, October 23, 1943, p. 19).
Figure 2.3 Notice of Civil Action 56 in the McIntosh County News, August 26, 1943

27 Note the “Important Announcement” and its indication of the contemporaneous national consciousness of sacrifice and devotion to victory.
If the dates cited in these histories are accurate, at least some landowners would have been served eviction papers one week before the airfield became operational. Marshal’s Returns for service of eviction proceedings were dated as late as August 21, 1943. Public testimony and legal filings from former landowners and their heirs claim that properties on Harris Neck were destroyed long before all of the official declarations of taking were filed. Harris Neck Land Trust web content cites July 27, 1942 as the date Harris Neck was, in their words, “destroyed” (“A Movement for Justice: History”, web archive). In her testimony to the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation and the Environment, Evelyn Greer describes the same timeline and tells of her experience of losing her home at fourteen,
In July 1942, I graduated from Harris Neck elementary school, and one afternoon, the Government came in and this man came with a big bulldozer and he pushed over a tree and it fell over on part of our home and he came and he said to my mother, he said, “Have you gotten everything out of your home?”

She said, only a few more items left. He said you have until 6 o’clock in the morning to get them because we will be starting right here in the morning. We had worked all night long back and forth, but that morning about 5 o’clock my mother and myself went, and when we got to where we could see our home, it was in flames. (1979, p. 347)

Failure of the government to properly notify landowners of impending land condemnation is one of the grounds on which Edgar Timmons, Evelyn Greer, and James Campbell filed for relief from judgments rendered through the condemnation proceedings of Civil Action 56. Timmons, Greer and Campbell each swear affidavits in 1981 that their families had no formal notice of government occupation of the land prior to the government taking possession of it. Both Greer and Timmons testify that the government began occupying their family properties in 1942, well before notice of condemnation proceedings were published in August and September of 1943, well before the January through July of 1943 court filings cited by the GAO, well before the court dates set to hear objections to the condemnation proceedings in August and September of 1943, well before their parents signed a claim for funds in the US District Court of the Southern District of Georgia in the months of July, August, and September 1943, respectively, and a full six years before compensation for land seized would be issued.28

One may entertain the possibility that Timmons and Greer are mistaken about when their families’ properties were seized and that the Harris Neck Land Trust may be relying on their faulty narratives. However, if Harris Neck Airfield was operational and home to squadrons by September of 1943, the government must have taken possession of Harris Neck properties well before many of the 1943 condemnation proceedings.

While there are some documents regarding the construction of Harris Neck Army Airfield available in the National Archives in Atlanta, none make clear the timeline of construction. A Freedom of Information Act request was submitted regarding the construction of Harris Neck, but no documents were located in the Army Corps of Engineers archives. The official record may remain silent on this matter. However, there is clear evidence that the Federal Government took possession of land in Harris Neck well before all residents fully understood the proceedings. Equally troubling, though former residents signed claims for funds in 1943, no funds were released until 1948. Former residents were evicted from their homes, stripped of the land that provided sustenance and income, and not compensated in any way until 1948. Five years passed before the government gave them the remuneration they deserved and likely could have put to good use as they relocated and rebuilt their lives.

2.4 Post-World War II Era

There are two periods of time during which Harris Neck was deemed surplus property, and it was these moments that bureaucratic and legal processes could have led to former residents repurchasing their land from the federal government. These two moments are framed by many former residents and their descendants as missed opportunities for justice, moments when the federal government chose to ignore and the local government sought to undermine what was in the best interests of the county’s Black community. The first period was in 1945.

In May of 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allied Forces. On November 15, 1945, Adjutant General to the Secretary of War notified government agencies that Harris Neck Army Air Field had been declared surplus. That base had, according to Airforce historians, been operational for around two years. The declaration of surplus property

happened only five months after the US Attorney General ruled that the “condemnation proceedings were regularly conducted” and over two years before “final US District Court judgments compensating former landowners”\textsuperscript{30}. The life of Harris Neck Army Air Field was short, and the process through which former landowners had been compensated was long. This meant that though two years had passed, the loss of property still felt fresh for many, and it did not take long for local residents and county officials to make known their designs for the future of Harris Neck.

In the process of declaring Harris Neck surplus property, the area was broken into two plots: 969 acres of airport property offered through the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) and 1717 acres of farmland offered by the Farm Credit Administration. McIntosh County expressed interest in and was granted permission to acquire the airport property very early in the property disposal process, committing to operate the airfield as a municipal airport. Federal holdings deemed airport property and offered through the CAA were offered first to federal agencies and then to local and state governments at no cost. As a result, McIntosh County readily accepted this gift of 969 acres and the accompanying airport facilities.

Later, McIntosh County officials sought to obtain the remaining 1717 acres declared non-airport property through the Farm Credit Association. Though federal, state and local governments were again given first right of refusal of non-airport property, the bar for demonstrating a need for this property was much higher. Additionally, if government entities could not demonstrate a legitimate need for the property, former residents were given priority to repurchase their land at the value at which they sold it. As the War Assets Administration sorted out the bureaucratic details of property disposal,

former landowners and the local government began to work to understand their opportunities to obtain the remaining 1717 acres.

To better understand who stood to gain and lose from sale of the remaining non-airport property, table one provides some descriptive statistics by property designation and race.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Former Owners</th>
<th>Black Former Owners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Acres</td>
<td>Acres Owned by White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airport Property</td>
<td>973.9</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Airport Property</td>
<td>1730</td>
<td>873</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Many families owned multiple properties in both the airport and non-airport areas. In total, there were 64 Black families and fifteen white families who owned property in Harris Neck in 1943. In the columns above, owners were counted only once in each category.

As the table demonstrates, in the area designated as airport property, a large number of families held mostly small tracts of land. Forty-eight Black families\(^{32}\) had called a total

\(^{31}\) There are also about five acres owned by public services included in these totals, 1.5 acres listed as airport property and 3.4 acres listed as non-airport property. Also, note the discrepancy between the War Assets Administration’s total of 969 and the total here of 973. The total acreage listed in the table was calculated using a map titled “Final Ownership”, dated May of 1945 and published by the War Department Construction Division and cross-checked against a November 1947 letter of intent from Paul J. Varner and McIntosh County Officials to the War Assets Administration. Tracts listed on the map and in the letter were cross-checked with Harris Neck Army Airfield acquisition data compiled by Friends of Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges and against Army Corps of Engineers tract maps. It is unclear why discrepancies exist between official WAA totals of airport and non-airport property and the above totals calculated using tract lists. However, as the discrepancies are relatively small, it is unlikely they significantly impact this contextualization of the struggle over Harris Neck.

\(^{32}\) Here, I define a “family” as a family unit identifiable within the record by a single person or a (generally) married couple. For example, a woman may be listed as a property holder with her brothers for property inherited from parents as well as with her husband. Though there is one family member consistent to both households, two families would be counted. Additionally, for properties owned by multiple
of 344 acres home, with most owning tract sizes under four acres. Of those 48, 37 only held land the airport area of Harris Neck, meaning eleven families had another chance to reacquire formerly held property in the process for disposal of non-airport property. Ten white families also held property in the airport area of Harris Neck, though the vast majority of those 628 acres were held by Irvin Davis and EM Thorpe, who owned 376 and 173 acres, respectively, and who also held 35 and 397 acres of non-airport property, respectively. Of the remaining eight white families, five only held airport property, meaning they were no longer eligible to repurchase land in Harris Neck.

Because Federal, State, and Local governments were given first right of refusal of airport property early on in the property disposal process, the majority of both Black and white families lost the opportunity to repurchase some or all of the land they formerly owned. Though airport property represented only roughly a third of the total acreage, 58 of the 79 families who held property in Harris Neck were represented across the 104 tracts designated airport property. Tracts in the non-airport property were larger, on average, and only 37 families stood to regain land through the property disposal process for non-airport property. Both Black and white families suffered losses as the process for Harris Neck property disposal was adjudicated. However, Black families were overrepresented in the group who never stood to regain their land: 58% of Black families and only 33% of white families only owned property in the airport area and thus no longer had the opportunity to repurchase any formerly held land. For the remaining families, while opaque, the process to reacquire land in Harris Neck left the door open to hope.

The first former landowner to reach out to the Federal government regarding repurchasing land in Harris Neck was Irvin Davis. Davis, a white former landowner who sold approximately 411 acres to the Federal government in 1943, had local attorney Paul J. Varner reach out to the War Assets Administration (WAA) in April of 1946. In this first families, each family would be counted. Families are not counted multiple times for multiple owned properties.
letter, Varner acknowledges that McIntosh County “may exercise its priority in acquiring this property but these former owners desire to institute proceedings at this time on behalf of themselves to that they may acquire this property in the event the County does not exercise its priority” (archived communication, April 18, 1947). Varner will later play a major role in Harris Neck’s pathway through the bureaucratic inner workings of the Federal Government: he will pen the letter that leads to the very mundane process of reclassifying all non-airport land in Harris Neck as airport property instead of farm property. It is that seemingly innocuous process that prevents Harris Neck from being offered to its former owners.

In October of 1946, Varner wrote again to the War Assets Administration about the future of Harris Neck, writing this time, “I represent a number of former Owners of the land involved and am writing to ascertain the rights of these former owners to re-purchase it” (archived communication, 1946). The racial climate of southern Georgia in the mid 1940’s suggests that Varner likely represented Davis and some number of other white former owners, who made up a small fraction of the more than eighty families who owned property in Harris Neck. Varner, a friend, employee, and legal counsel to both Howard Coffin and RJ Reynolds, business tycoons who owned large estates on Georgia’s barrier islands, and clerk of the corrupt McIntosh Board of County Commissioners, would have been an unlikely ally to local Black families.33

Less than six months later, Varner’s allegiance evolves again, and he writes once more to the War Assets Administration, this time claiming to represent both “McIntosh County and a majority of the former owners” of Harris Neck (archived communication, March 10, 1947). Enclosed with Varner’s correspondence was a letter addressed to WB Fudger, an administrator in the War Assets Administration, from the Board of County Commissioners of McIntosh County.

33 Additionally, Varner would have, in RJ Reynolds, shared a close mutual friend with corrupt Sheriff Tom Poppell. Poppell’s role in the struggle over Harris Neck and corruption of the Board of County Commissioners will be explored in-depth in chapter two. See Sullivan’s Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater for a thorough treatment of the politics of coastal Georgia through 1970.
Commissioners authorizing Varner to conduct negotiations for the return of the land. Finally, by May of 1947, Varner seems to be representing only McIntosh County. Varner writes to an administrator at the Farm Credit Association:

McIntosh County has acquired the airport property and will acquire the war housing and utilities located on the airport property.

McIntosh County is interested in acquiring the non-airport land from you and desire to exercise its priority in purchasing same.

I am writing you at this time so you will be advised of McIntosh’s County’s intentions in this connection . . . (Varner, archived letter, 15 May 1947)

These letters trace Varner’s evolving allegiance, first to Davis; then to some of the landowners, though he never identifies who; then to former residents and local officials’; and finally, only to McIntosh County as it exercises its priority in purchasing property in Harris Neck.

By June of 1947, Varner and McIntosh County officials had crafted a plan to use the part of the property for public benefit and resell other portions to former residents. In a letter to District Supervisor of the Surplus Property Disposal division of the Farm Credit Administration, HC Leaman, Varner clarifies,

It is McIntosh County’s plan to purchase this property and reserve certain areas for roads, public landings and other public facilities and to dispose of the remaining parts to certain institutions and industries which would be of benefit to the public. The plan also includes that all remaining lands not disposed of will be sold to the former landowners, each former landowner having the right to purchase a part of the remaining property in proportion to his original acreage. A majority of the former landowners have approved of this procedure. (Leaman, archived communication, 23 May 1947)

Varner’s final assertion, that “a majority of the former landowners have approved of this procedure”, is likely untrue. Sometime in August or September of 1947 at least 41
Black former landowners sent a letter to the County Commissioners of McIntosh County, written as follows:

We, the undersigned, formerly property owners at Harris Neck respectfully ask this Board to accept only the run ways or airport property of the Harris Neck Air Field form the W.A.A. and that all other property outside the Air strip be deeded direct by the Government to us.

We have been advised that McIntosh County might be interested in purchasing the non-airport property or property on Harris Neck outside the air strips. We’re unalterably opposed to this and consider this a violation of moral obligation to us in that the Government promised this land back to us at the end of Hostilities. (“To the County Commissioners of McIntosh County”, 1947, Campbell, et al.)

The letter makes clear that as early as 1947, former landowners were asking for the return of previously held property based on the perception of a promise by the federal government to return the land at the conclusion of World War II. It also makes clear that Varner was not representing the majority of former landowners. Their best interests were not represented by anyone, until a midlevel bureaucrat in the War Assets Administration, James A. Mollison, answered Varner’s letter.

In Varner’s June 1947 letter, he acknowledges a potential problem with McIntosh County’s plan for the non-airport property, writing, “We understand that McIntosh County will not be allowed to sell any of this property for a period of three years after date of purchase. It is requested that this regulation be waived as it would be impracticable for McIntosh County to purchase with this restriction” (Varner, archived letter, 24 June 1947). He adds, “It is believed that it is in the interest of all parties concerned that McIntosh County acquire this property but this can not [sic] be done if McIntosh County is restricted from disposing of any of the property for three years. This restriction defeats the purpose of the acquisition . . . “ (Varner, archived communication, 24 June 1947).

Varner’s request takes a circuitous path to the person who will ultimately answer him. Georgia Congressional Representative Prince H. Preston writes to General Robert
Littlejohn, the War Assets Administrator, on June 26, 1947 supporting Varner’s request and seeking the same waiver of a three-year embargo on land sales. It is worth pausing to note that Representative Preston is most notable for being a signatory to the Southern Manifesto, a response to the Supreme Court’s historic decision in Brown v. Board of Education in 1956. The manifesto’s rebuttal to the ruling is brief, but its argument is clear: ample legal precedent exists for segregation, and the Supreme Court’s ruling vastly oversteps into congressional and state rights. Toward the end, the manifesto takes a brief detour away from citations of precedent and interpretation of the Constitution and predicts the collapse of positive race relations: “This unwarranted exercise of power by the Court . . . is destroying the amicable relations between the white and Negro races that have been created through 90 years of patient effort by the good people of both races” (The Southern Manifesto, 1956). Those ninety years were not, of course, as amicable for Black residents of Georgia, and that Representative Preston was elected by and served the people of McIntosh and surrounding counties from 1947 until his passing in 1961 should inform the backdrop against which we view the historical record and the county’s seemingly benign bureaucratic interactions within it.

Representative Preston’s letter was answered by Associate Administrator of the War Assets Administration, James A. Mollison, and forwarded to Varner. Mollison’s reply could not have been clearer on several important points:

1. “The priority accorded to State and local governments in the Surplus Property Act is restricted to their acquisition of surplus property in order to ‘fulfill, in the public interest, their legitimate needs’”

2. “In numerous instances . . . it has been held by this administration that a State or local government could not legally exercise its priority to acquire surplus real property for resale, lease, or donation to, or use by, a third party”

3. “[I]n the event no State or local government exercises its priority to acquire the property in order to fulfill its own legitimate needs, the former owners will be
entitled to exercise their priorities,” with Mollison going on to note that the property could be repurchased by former owners for what the government paid them or current market value, whichever was less, while the County Commission would need to repurchase the land for fair market value.

4. “It would appear, therefore, that in any event it would be more advantageous for the former owners if they are permitted to exercise their priorities individually, rather than by purchasing the lands which they formerly owned from the County at a price equivalent to the fair value of the property.”

5. In donating, leasing, or selling the land to a third party, Mollison points out that these actions “would be to do indirectly that which could not be done directly pursuant to the Surplus Property Act inasmuch as the Church would not be entitled to a priority to acquire surplus property in its own right under the Act. In addition, former owners, tenants of former owners, veterans, owner-operators, and eligible non-profit institutions would be denied the priorities established for them in the Act to acquire surplus farm land.”

6. “It is regretted that this Administration cannot, under the Surplus Property Act, comply with your request that the County be allowed to exercise its priority for the purposes indicated.” (Mollison, archived letter, 10 July 1947)

Each of these points is critical for understanding how the opportunity to repurchase land was foreclosed to former residents, particularly those in the Black community who did not have legal representation in the process. At the outset of the property disposal process, the Georgia and McIntosh County governments had the advantage of priority status in acquiring the Harris Neck. However, McIntosh County had to commit to utilizing the 1717 acres of Harris Neck designated as farmland to “fulfill, in the public interest, their legitimate needs” (US Code: Surplus Property Act 1944, p. 1612). Mollison’s assertions,

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34 What is referred to today as Harris Neck is comprised of two tracts of land offered by the Federal government through two different processes which happened in parallel to one another in 1942-1943. The
which I have numbered one and two above, make these conditions clear. The third and fourth statements from Mollison indicate that though McIntosh County has the priority, should they not be willing or able to abide by the requirements of the Surplus Property Act of 1944, the priority status shifts to former owners, who can purchase the land at a lower price than that available to the County. Mollison states directly that for the former owners, “it would be more advantageous . . . if they are permitted to exercise their priorities individually . . .” (Mollison, archived communication, 10 July 1947). Finally, Mollison makes it clear in the last two statements listed above that McIntosh County’s plan for utilizing the 1717 acres does not meet the requirements of the Federal government and, in fact, violates the intent of the Surplus Property Act as long as the land was classified as farmland.

Even so, HC Leaman writes to Varner later in July of 1947, referring to Mollison’s letter and requesting an update: “In view of the ruling by the War Assets Administration, it will be appreciated if you will advise us whether or not it is still the intention of McIntosh County to exercise its right of priority to purchase this property” (archived communication, July 18, 1947). Varner’s reply consists of two sentences: “I refer to your letter of July 18th. McIntosh County still intends to exercise its right of priority to purchase this property” (Varner, archived communication, 22 July 1947).

In August of 1947, Varner composes a letter to the War Assets Administration’s Chief of the non-Industrial Division, James B. Abbott. Therein, Varner asserts, in part,

It was, and is the County’s desire to acquire the entire reservation, including airport property and the non-airport property with buildings and utilities, for public purposes, including the operation of an airport, the establishment of a village with city utilities nearby for the use of those desiring to live and work at this location. The County can not operate an airport at this isolated area of Harris Neck on which the Army airfield was located was designated airport property, and McIntosh County, in order to purchase the land from the Civil Aeronautics Administration, had to commit to operating it as such. This represents 970 acres of the total 2687 acres condemned by the Federal government.
location without the ownership of now existing highways across the property, presently installed utilities, the opening up of the riverfronts for the public and otherwise making the place accessible and livable for employees and the public. It is also desired to create industries and places of employment for the negro families who were evicted from this land and who live nearby needing and desiring employment.

The general public in this section, practically all of the former owners and other priority holders are in favor of McIntosh County acquiring this entire property so that it may be put to its best use.

If WAA wants to see the property put to its best use from a public standpoint, McIntosh County should be allowed to acquire the entire property. If WAA desires the separate the properties as now planned it would not be in the public interest and a two million dollar establishment with vast future possibilities for use by the Government, as well as private interests, will be destroyed, and land not fit for agricultural purposes will be in the hand of a few small farmers who have never in the past made a living on the land and can not now do so.

We do not know what else we can say, and if WAA insists on carrying out the impractical and wasteful decisions that have been made, McIntosh County of course will be forced to withdraw from the entire matter and let it take its course, but we can not do so and allow this great property to become worthless and of no benefit to the Government and public without the strongest protest we are capable of making.

. . . Under McIntosh County’s plan, any part of the non-airport property not needed for public purpose would be offered to all of the former owners in proportion to their former holdings and subdivided to suit their needs, at cost. Therefore, we can not agree with your statement that it would be more advantageous for the former owners to exercise their priorities than to purchase through the County, as approximately 75% had their lands in the airport property and thus would have no priorities to exercise.

. . . Under this plan the nation and aviation interests will be assured of the continuation of the operation of a large airport which is directly on the line of North-South travel along the Eastern Seaboard.

. . . For your information, for many years prior to the acquisition of this land by the War Department, it was owned, occupied and used exclusively by negroes, except for three or four white families. The land was used by these people for residential purposes and for patching and gardening. It was not used as farm land and no actual bona-fide garming was ever conducted on the land for at least thirty years prior to the time it was acquired by the Government. The owners and occupants of this land made their
living by trapping, fishing, hunting, crabbing and oystering and these same people now living nearby still pursue this method of earning a living. None of them want the land back for farming purposes as they never used it for such, only subsistence gardening. It is not farm land. (Varner, archived communication, 4 August 1947)

In this letter, Varner vigorously makes his case for McIntosh County’s acquisition of the non-airport property. The central thrust of his argument is that McIntosh County is best situated to use the land and its resources for the benefit of all. The land will be wasted, he says outright, in the hands of its former owners. The historical record does not reveal Abbot’s reaction to Varner’s letter; there is neither a response to Varner nor internal communication regarding Varner’s argument in the boxes of documents in the National Archives in Atlanta. However, in November of 1947, Leaman writes to Abbott,

Pursuant to instructions from the Farm Credit Administration we are now contacting all political subdivisions which have heretofore acquired airports in connection with which lands have been assigned to Federal Farm Mortgage Corporation for disposal, to determine whether such political subdivisions intend to apply for such lands under Public Law 289. (Leaman, archived communication, November 4, 1947)

Leaman later writes to Varner that Public Law 289, written to expedite the disposal of surplus property, authorizes the Federal government to convey to State and local government property “which, in the determination of the administration or Civil Aeronautics, is essential, suitable, or desirable for the development, improvement, operation, or maintenance of a public airport . . . We assume from your letter that McIntosh County probably would like to make application to acquire the property under Public Law 289” (Leaman, archived communication, 14 November 1947). On April 20, 1948, Varner supplies an official at the Civil Aeronautics Authority with information about how McIntosh County would use and support the use of the additional, nonairport property. McIntosh County Clerk George Cowart writes, in part,
. . . all income produced by properties transferred to the County under Public Law 289 will be allocated and used to the extent legally possible in operation and maintenance of the Airfield and in furthering the interests of aviation in the sphere of operations of the County . . . [and] that all real and personal property conveyed to the County will not be used, sold, salvaged, or disposed of for other than Airport purposes without the written consent of the Administrator of Civil Aeronautics. (Cowart, 1948, np)

According to a Federal Aviation Administration publication related to Public Law 289, “as a precondition to a land conveyance, the WAA and later the GSA, needed to determine that such surplus nonairport property was needed by the airport and would be used as a source of revenue to defray the cost of operation, maintenance, and development of the public use airport” (“FAA Airport Compliance Manual, Order 5190.6B”, 2009, chapter 3, pg 4). McIntosh County officials cited “Rental of non-airport buildings”, “Trapping and fishing rights”, “Grazing”, “Farming”, and “Rental of residential sites” as sources of revenue for airport operation. In total, McIntosh County expected to spend approximately $10,900 per year to operate and maintain the airport and to receive approximately $8,600 in revenue from the sources above. An attached signed contract commits McIntosh County to using the property for purposes related to aviation and to maintaining the property and the airport in good working order, among other things.

McIntosh County’s documents were received by the War Assets Administration’s Airports Branch, and on April 23, 1948, the Acting Superintendent wrote to the Real Property Division, “Disposal should be made to McIntosh County, Georgia, as grantee, but subject to all conditions, reservations and restrictions imposed on such dispositions by law” (Mills, archived communication, 23 April 1948). On April 30, 1948, Chief of the Property Management Division of the War Assets Administration informs the McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, “In accordance with provisions of Section 7 of your application, War Assets Administration hereby transfers all land, buildings, utilities, and equipment comprising Harris Neck AAF to McIntosh County, effective 12:01 a.m. Saturday, May 8, 1948” (archived communication, April 30, 1948).
2.5 Conclusion

It is at this moment that the possibility of reacquiring the land is foreclosed to former residents. The letters referenced above, in their bureaucratic mundaneness, obscure a critical moment in the conflict over the future of Harris Neck. Varner begins his engagement with the War Assets Administration in October of 1946 representing former landowners. In March of 1947, he claimed to represent both McIntosh County and the majority of former landowners. By May of 1947, Varner reports he is representing McIntosh County alone. The letters provide a window into the evolving understanding of who had priority to (re)purchase property in Harris Neck and the bureaucratic machinations that would, in the end, preclude former residents from repurchasing any property.

Based on Mollison’s reply to Varner, had the property remained classified as farmland, McIntosh County would have been unlikely to receive priority in purchasing it. While many of Varner’s concerns about being able to maintain the property without being able to lease or sell parts of it go unaddressed by the CAA, they were able to receive the property at a 100% discount, offsetting the costs of acquiring and maintaining the land. McIntosh County’s bureaucratic maneuvering through Varner was, at its core, a land grab at the expense of Black residents. McIntosh County officials knew that their gain came at the cost of its Black citizens, yet they were undeterred. Varner’s words reveal a paternalistic reasoning: that the land would be wasted in the hands of former owners, who only used it for subsistence farming. This vastly understates the strength of the former Harris Neck community and plays to old colonialist tropes painting people of color as both unambitious and poor stewards of natural resources.

Against the backdrop of McIntosh County’s Jim Crow politics, and the corruption detailed in the next chapter, it becomes clear that county officials were indifferent to a Black community who lost their homes and livelihoods, privileging what would ultimately be a mirage of local development over the needs of the Harris Neck community. County
officials were more than happy to allow the thriving Black community of Harris Neck to pay the price for the hope of developing a municipal airport and the businesses that would support it.

This is a generous reading of the motivations behind the impassioned pleas for Harris Neck. As we will learn in chapter two, none of the business endeavors, save grazing, were ever realized in Harris Neck. The land was ultimately leased to corrupt local officials who, far from seeking to develop businesses that would fund the maintenance of the airport, pillaged and destroyed the structures and allowed the infrastructure of the airfield to crumble.

Certainly, there is wrongdoing in the disregard of local officials for both the local Black community and its agreement with the federal government. However, the federal government also bears responsibility for taking Harris Neck out of the hands of the Black community who, within the context of the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow South, had heroically developed it into a thriving township. When the site was selected, officials knew they would displace many Black families and chose to continue with the site. Perhaps we can excuse this decision within the context of the fog of war and the convenience of the existing airstrip. However, it should be pointed out, that the permanent loss of Harris Neck resulted from the policies of the CAA and the Farm Credit Administration. The privileging of local governments in the land reallocation process always meant that, with the exception of Freedmen’s Towns, property that left the Black community and would come under the control of whites through their overwhelming control of local, state, and national governments. The policy may not have been racist by design but its ends certainly worked to maintain the racial hierarchy of the 1940’s.

Perhaps it is a revisionist reading to project the antiracist expectations of today onto the scene of 1940’s land reallocation. However, it remains important to point out the moments at which our governments have been complicit in the creation and maintenance of racism and racial hierarchy. As Atwood and Lopez write,
It is important to note that policy is much more than a written set of rules or procedures that shape and guide human behavior. Rather, policies are both visible and invisible, simultaneously textual and discursive. . . . Policies not only shape our world but reflect the world around us; they structure our daily experiences while producing intended effects. In this regard, policy is precisely the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ . . . –values that produce and reify particular class and racial interests . . . (2014, 1136)

Scholars and activists must continue shining a light on the racist work of government in the hope that the need for redemption through actively antiracist policies becomes clear to those in power. Throughout the twentieth century, government agencies, most notably the Federal Housing Association, Federal Home Loan Banks and Home Owners Loan Corporation as well as the US Department of Agriculture, were responsible for the displacement of Black families through racist lending policies (Van Sant, 2016; Daniel, 2013; Hannah-Jones, 2019; Jackson, 1987; Rothstein, 2017; and eds. Reid and Bennett, 2012).\(^{35}\)

The factors that shaped Harris Neck’s path out of the Black community and into the hands of white hegemony remain at work. Additionally, the fundamentally racist nature of the land reallocation process demonstrates one of the central theses of the Harris Neck Land Trust: that the government’s current possession of Harris Neck represents the fruits of racism and racist power structures. As mentioned in the outset of this chapter, this story bears witness to the loss and destruction of a community and, thus, deserves to be told. However, this history also provides a foundation for current claims to Harris Neck by the Harris Neck Land Trust.

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\(^{35}\) See the following for examples and analyses of: blatantly racist laws, policies, and programs (Van Sant, 2016; Daniel, 2013; Kosek, 2006; Savoy and Deming, 2011; Copeland, 1984; Atkinson, 1998; Mogk, 2005; Delaney, 1998, Chakraverty and de Silva, 2012; Woods, 1998; Alderman & Brown, 2011), interstates (Connerly, 2002; Golub, Marcantonio, & Sanchez, 2013; Karas, 2015; Retzlaff, 2019; Biles, 2014; DiMento, 2009) urban renewal (Fullilove, 2001; Newman & Safransky, 2014; Safransky 2014), industrial development (Wylie, 1989), and the environmental disasters they cause (Harris and Hyden, 2017; Barron, 2017; Cole and Foster, 2001; Bullard, 1993); continue to displace and disenfranchise communities of color.
Exclusion entails more than just displacement and loss of livelihoods, but also the loss of homes and places of spiritual, emotional and cultural importance. The takeover of territory, and the usurpation of power and authority to manage and inhabit the landscape, renders once-familiar places “a desert strange and chill.”

Dan Brockington, *Fortress conservation: the preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania, 2002*

To the axe of the spoiler and self interest fell prey
And cross berry way and old round oaks narrow land
With its hollow trees like pulpits I shall never see again
Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain

John Clare, “Remembrances”

3.1 Introduction

For former residents, the seizure of Harris Neck in 1942 and 1943 was not an isolated event. In a clearly tracible historical timeline that includes slavery, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow South, it is easy to chart the long history of oppression, within which the seizing of Harris Neck was only a single painful chapter. Additionally, most former landowners feel they lost Harris Neck a second time in the late 1940’s, when Harris Neck was leased by McIntosh County officials to powerful whites. Later, even after the Federal government had sought to remove Harris Neck from the mismanagement of local officials, former residents were done the mighty injustice of being made invisible. When the USFWS assumed ownership of the property, the community saw their history ignored as Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge constructed itself as a site long home to upper-class whites seeking respite and recreation. Finally, as former residents have waged legal battles to reclaim their property, the court system has demonstrated how ill equipped it is to right racial wrongs. These have reinforced the legacy of the loss of Harris Neck, extending the traumas associated with this event well into the 20th century and beyond.
Events deemed legal hardly pass as ethical. Land once the source of so much pride is now all but void of the history or legacy of a once-thriving community. A legal system has denied cries for social justice on terms that are legalistic and transparent about the impossibility of considering right and wrong in the adjudication of matters fraught with issues of race and power. For former Harris Neck community members and their families, the wrongdoing did not begin and end in 1942 but rather is part of a longer history and a lived present. These wrongs and the ways in which they extend far beyond the initial moment of cultural trauma warrant dissecting as America grapples with its racial past and present.

Beyond the initial seizure of Harris Neck by the federal government, former landowners and their families have faced additional disenfranchisements and traumas. This chapter tells the story of Harris Neck after its closure as a military base, and, in doing that, traces the continued wrongs perpetrated against the former Harris Neck community. This community has continued to face loss, erasure and disenfranchisement long after experiencing the initial seizure of Harris Neck. In some cases, they have experienced these wrongs as a direct result of oppression and discrimination. However, at other turns, it has not been active racism, but rather a failure of systems and processes to account for and address racism and its attendant power dynamics that has wronged this community. These layers of willful disregard for this Black community must be acknowledged if progress is to be made toward reconciliation.

3.2 From Black Community to Corruption and Development

3.2.1 Crime and Corruption in McIntosh County

Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield write of the role of the state in reproducing power structures, even when the reproduction of those structures is not a stated goal: “The state commonly tends to lend its power to dominant groups and classes, and thus may
reinforce the tendency for accumulation by these dominant groups and marginalization of the losers, through such actions as taxation, food policy, land tenure policy, and the allocation of resources” (1987, p. 17). In the case of Harris Neck, though the CAA followed all applicable processes and procedures, the outcome was just as Blaikie and Brookfield might have predicted. In giving McIntosh County the first right of refusal to purchase the Harris Neck property, the state lent its power to local white powerbrokers who immediately enrolled Harris Neck into the corrupt system of politics and economic dealings of McIntosh County.

Within two years of Harris Neck’s being deeded to McIntosh County, it had become part of the county’s history of political and economic corruption. E.M. Thorpe writes to Senator Richard B. Russell in July of 1950:

I am writing you in Ref Air Base at Harris Neck. Whoever controls the base now has let it go to pieces and don’t keep anything in shape in fact they have taken down and sold the Telephone line from Jones Station to Harris Neck, a distance of 10 or 12 miles, the line should have been left here to be used by the people. In fact whoever has been and is in charge of our good base had just about ruined it.

Can’t you have the government take it over and re-activate the base. It has good runways, buildings could be fixed, the artisan [sic] wells are sufficient to take care of any service that might be installed on the property.

It is a shame for a wonderful air base like this to be thrown away. Our County officers have not looked after the base and cared for it. In fact they have and are still using it for a cow pasture. It was never advertised to the highest bidder.

I wish you would have the base taken over and keep it. You, I am sure would be interested in taking care of such a nice field and buildings. Please do what you can for us. This is worth looking after. (Thorpe, archived letter, July 7, 1950)

In the just over two years since McIntosh had taken possession of Harris Neck, it had fallen into disrepair and into the hands of corrupt local officials. Eight years later, a CAA official confirmed that,
(1) the County has disregarded its obligation to operate the property as a public airport as provided for by the terms of the deed; (2) that over fifty of the buildings transferred to the County as airport property have been disposed of without the consent of the Civil Aeronautics Administration; (3) the buildings which remain and the runways have been neglected and are in need of repair; (4) Building No. 211 has been stripped of all furnishings and considerable damage has been done to the building; and (5) the outstanding lease to Sheriff Tom Poppell has not received consent of Civil Aeronautics Administration, as required . . . (Regional Administrator, Region 2, archived memoranda, February 25 and 27, 1958)

Much of the land as well as the former Livingston Mansion, which had served as the Officers’ Quarters during the operation of Harris Neck Army Airfield, had been leased to McIntosh County Sheriff Tom Poppell. Melissa Faye Greene’s *Praying for Sheetrock*, a work of historical nonfiction tracing the political history of McIntosh County in the 1960’s and 1970’s, paints Sheriff Tom Poppell as a talented local politician who easily held McIntosh County and its residents under his thumb. In the book, a local lawyer describes Poppell: “. . . back then the sheriff was judge, jury, and monarch. He’d help a young man out of trouble the first time. But then a lot of people he flat run out of the county because they wouldn’t abide by his law. We lived under Poppell’s Law, I guess you’d say. He just wrote his own law” (Greene, 6). Greene goes on to say that “Georgia State Troopers, Georgia Bureau of Investigation agents, FBI agents, DEA agents, and US Customs agents up and down the southern coast all agreed with the words of a Brunswick police detective: “The only crime that existed in McIntosh County was Tom Poppell’s . . .’” (Greene, 6). Sherriff Poppell, and his family, controlled the whole of McIntosh County for 59 years (Sullivan, 1990, p. 747). Sheriff Tom Poppell’s tenure as sheriff ran from the late 1940’s until his death in 1979, coming on the heels of his father’s time as Sheriff of McIntosh from 1920 to 1948.

Local legend contends that it was the Poppell family that led Army Corps of Engineers staff to Harris Neck and that Tom Poppell had designs all along to eventually
take possession of Harris Neck. There is reason to doubt this narrative, as surplus property law prior to the end of World War II may have given former property owners the first right of refusal to repurchase land. However, it is plausible that Sheriff Poppell saw the base as an opportunity to break up a largely cloistered, self-sufficient Black community in the harder-to-control northern part of McIntosh located far from the county seat. He may also have anticipated that Harris Neck’s residents would not be able to adequately save the funds they were paid for their lands, as they were given no additional funds to cover the cost of relocating to new temporary or permanent housing. Whether it was by design, good fortune, timely political posturing after WWII, or a combination of all three, in 1951, Sheriff Poppell did take possession of 102 acres of Harris Neck as well as its most valuable buildings.

Tom Poppell also had established connections to Paul Varner, the lawyer who brokered the transfer of Harris Neck to McIntosh County. The men were two of tobacco tycoon and local property owner RJ Reynolds’ closest friends in McIntosh County (Sullivan, 1990, p. 684). In addition to his role as clerk in the early 1940’s, Varner was appointed one of a three-person commission to oversee Harris Neck in 1948 (County Commission proceedings, May 4, 1948). Additionally, Varner, in his role as publisher of and frequent contributor to the McIntosh County News, reported with outrage on the 1949 thefts of building fixtures and equipment at Harris Neck. However, his reporting likely obscures the actual events surrounding the thefts. While three arrest warrants were eventually issued for burglary at the former Livingston Mansion, it is widely accepted that Tom Poppell, the county’s newly elected Sheriff, was responsible for most of the stripping of the Livingston Mansion. In 1958, McIntosh County brought suit against Tom Poppell for the looting of the former Livingston Mansion of most all items of value, which amounted to an estimated $18,000 at the time (Sullivan, 1990, p. 751).

Paul Varner continued to decry the state of Harris Neck, urging the County Commission to develop the property for public use (Sullivan, 1990, 747, quoting McIntosh
County News, July 14, 1949). Despite his own apparent outrage and position of power as an appointed committee member to oversee use of Harris Neck, Varner went on to be complicit in the misuse and disuse of Harris Neck. In March of 1949, then Mayor of McIntosh County, Mose Edenfield, and Mr. JS Geiger both approved to lease land on Harris Neck (Board of Commissioners Resolution, March 23, 1949). These leases were in addition to the existing lease to Irvin Davis for grazing rights to a large portion of the property. None of these individuals went on to open businesses, operate an airfield on Harris Neck, or open it for any public uses as had been promised by both Varner and the County Commission.

In 1951, Sheriff Tom Poppell “told the county commission that he wanted to lease the old Lorrillard-Livingston mansion at Harris Neck to run as an exclusive club” (Sullivan 1990, 748). The time between May 8, 1951, when Tom Poppell was issued a lease for the Livingston Mansion, and when the lease was revoked in December of 1957, Sheriff Poppell is accused of using the site for prostitution, gambling, and drug-running. By the 1980’s, Sheriff Poppell had been accused of “. . . being involved with prostitution rings, drug smuggling, gambling operations; and constant rumors of murders and of drugs coming in on the shrimp boats, and Poppell sanctioning it, all of it” (Greene, 1991, p. 186).36 Scholar-activist Chini summarized in 1979 what is broadly accepted by local residents: “Soon after county takeover of the land, local government officials and businessmen came in and looted the government property. Tom Poppell, former McIntosh County sheriff, obtained a lease for 102 acres of the land at a cost of $10 per year. Poppell, later accused by the federal government of using adjacent lands for ‘importation of marijuana’, surrendered his lease in 1957 because of alleged improprieties in obtaining the land”37 (Chini, 1979, p. 16).

36 These are the words of Thomas Affleck, lawyer on behalf of McIntosh resident in the Equal Protection case filed in US District Court of Brunswick in September of 1975, quoted in Greene.
37 Local historian Buddy Sullivan and archival documents actually demonstrate that the McIntosh County Commission terminated the lease, rather than Sheriff Poppell forfeiting it. I also cannot confirm Chini’s
Harris Neck was usurped by McIntosh County’s powerful white residents, including elected officials, and Black residents were all but powerless to push back. McIntosh County was squarely situated in the Jim Crow South, and the town was small and often able to operate without interference from outsiders. These factors, along with the Poppell family’s domination of local law, life, and politics, led to largescale oppression of the county’s Black residents. During Tom Poppell’s thirty years as sheriff, spanning the whole of the Civil Rights Movement, his brother, A.S. Poppell served as chairman of the jury commission (Greene, 1991, p. 182). It was during the Poppell family’s tenure in power that suit was brought in federal court by the Georgia Legal Services Program. Lawyers worked with local Black community leaders to uncover evidence that jury lists were composed along racial lines, almost ensuring all white juries and grand juries. As Greene reports,

The voting-age population in McIntosh was 4,251 . . . The registered-voter lists (from which trial jury and grand jury members were supposed to be chosen were 56 percent white and 44 percent Black . . . But the 1973 biennial traverse jury list—the list created by the McIntosh County jury commissioners from the voter-registration rolls—contained the names of only 398 persons, of which 87 percent were white and 13 percent Black . . . And the grand jury list, also compiled by the jury commissioners from the voter-registration rolls, contained only 156 names, of which 90 percent were white and 10 percent Black . . . (Greene, 1991, p. 177-8)

The equal protection and due process suit that followed, filed in US District Court in Brunswick, Georgia in September of 1975, lent credence to the stories of the county’s Black residents: “a sheriff sitting in on the county commission meetings, appointing and dismissing Black officeholders at the wave of his hand, vetoing county business issues with figure of $10 for the lease of the land, but it is largely accepted that the land was leased far below what would have been an appropriate price.

38 The county seat, Darien, only had 1,380 residents in 1950 (Sullivan, 1990, 749)
39 See Roberts (2015) for an excellent summary of the Civil Rights era in McIntosh County, Georgia and the Georgia Legal Services Project’s collaboration with local Black residents to file suit in US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia in Brunswick on September 9, 1975. Also see McIntosh County Branch of the NAACP v. City of Darien, 605 F. 2d 753, 759 (5th Circuit 1979).
a slight shake of his head, collecting titles to Black-held land by dropping criminal charges, and delivering county votes to statewide and national candidates” (Greene, 1991, p. 177).

The Poppells’ reign was plagued by corruption and racial subjugation at the hands of the county’s powerful white officials. Harris Neck is part of that history. In full view of former residents, Harris Neck had gone from a thriving Black community to an Army airfield to a haven for crime and vehicle for re-entrenching the economic and political supremacy of powerful local whites. For former Harris Neck residents, what had once been theirs—bought with the bodies and blood of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents—now belonged to their oppressors. It is difficult to imagine the pain this must have caused those who had once called Harris Neck home—those who had buried their dead, built their homes, and raised their families there.

Neil Smelser defines cultural trauma as, “a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation that is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening an society’s existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions” (Smelser, 2004, p. 44). Certainly, by this widely-accepted definition, the former residents of Harris Neck experienced a deep cultural trauma in the initial loss of Harris Neck. However, for former residents, the loss of Harris Neck in 1942 is neither their first trauma nor their last—after building a thriving community on the land many of their families once worked as enslaved people, they have lost Harris Neck over and over. The enrolling of once-beloved land into the racial, political, economic power dynamics of McIntosh County defines a second loss of Harris Neck. The land they once owned was no longer sacrificed to the broader national effort to defeat Nazis; it was, like so many other things, lost to powerful whites and their ability to wield legal and political systems to their advantage.
3.2.2 New Plantations

In 1962, the CAA revoked McIntosh County’s deed to Harris Neck, citing mismanagement and unfulfilled commitments to operate the former base as a municipal airport. In keeping with federal regulations, the CAA offered Harris Neck to federal agencies. The USFWS was the first and only organization to demonstrate both a desire and legitimate need for Harris Neck. They determined the area could be an important part of a patchwork of refuges along the Georgia coast, the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex. In 1962, they were officially granted possession of Harris Neck as a wildlife management area. Since then, Harris Neck has been actively managed as a nesting site and rest area for local and migratory birds. The conservation of Harris Neck will be the subject of further discussion in the following section as well as in the fourth chapter of this project.

Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, as it is now known, consists of saltmarshes, manmade freshwater ponds, fields, forests, and paved and unpaved trails. Deer, alligators, wood storks, heron, ibis, egrets, turtles, snakes, and thousands of fiddler crabs can regularly be seen around the refuge. For the foreseeable future, the 2,824 acres will remain undeveloped and devoted to preservation and public recreation. To say the area is beautiful hardly does it justice. Mossy oaks bend and bow over trails while marsh grass trembles in the ocean breeze blowing in from the South Newport River. Birds with long legs adapted for wading through shallow water and marsh mud suddenly jerk to life after long minutes of perfect stillness. Alligators slide lazily into rivers as you approach, and fiddler crabs crunch underfoot no matter how hard you try not to step on them. This land, both plentiful and giving as well as dangerous and unforgiving, cannot be forgotten by those who have spent any amount of time here. It is no wonder that in the last thirty years, development has found and left its mark on this place.⁴⁰

⁴⁰See Van Sant (2016) for additional regional context: “Today, however, [in the Lowcountry] the population is majority white. Nearly all of the large landholdings are white owned and the rest of the island is undergoing suburban and resort-style development (again, almost exclusively white). Thus the white
By the mid-1990’s, the first of many gated neighborhoods began to crop up in northern McIntosh County. Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge currently sits sandwiched between Belvedere Island Plantation and Spring Cove, both gated, waterfront communities. Spring Cove uses its proximity to Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge as a selling point. One advertisement for property for sale in Spring Cove reads, “[n]earby 2,700 acre National Wildlife Preserve” while another similarly reads “[l]ocated close to Harris Neck Wildlife Reserve with fishing, hiking, [and] biking.” Belvedere Island Plantation was the first amenity-based neighborhood in the area and remains today a private neighborhood with robust amenities and home prices starting around $350,000. One of the most successful developments in the area, Belvedere Island Plantation now has well over a hundred homes. On the community’s website, they describe themselves:

monopolization of land continues, even in what was once briefly the heart of African American landed autonomy” (204).

41 Martin Phillips, in his “Landscapes of Defense, Exclusivity and Leisure: Rural private communities in North Carolina”, outlines the types and commonalities of exclusive, amenity-based neighborhoods across the United States, in both rural and urban areas. He writes, “[a]ll these communities can be seen to be landscapes of defense in that they seek to construct some boundary between themselves and their surrounding environments” (131). Here, Phillips’s use of the word environment does not refer to the “natural” environment, as environmental barriers like trees, dunes, and—in the case of Belvedere Island Plantation—marshes and waterways often create natural, desirable boundaries that also give the developments their character. Instead, what Phillips indicates is the fundamental desire, across all private communities, to keep out those beyond the gates. In rural northern McIntosh County, the people outside the gates are the largely lower-middle-class and poor residents living in small fishing cabins and mobile homes nearby. McIntosh County is exceptionally safe, with only thirty violent crimes in 2017, the most recent year of available data from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. This amounts to a violent crime rate of 214 per 100,000, well below the state-wide violent crime rate of 352 per 100,000. While in northern McIntosh County gates are likely a deterrent to any outsider seeking to use the neighborhoods’ amenities (a constant concern of Homeowners Associations tasked with maintaining expensive boat lifts, for example), threat of violence is either only an imagined threat or not the reason for the cordonning off of these neighborhoods. Having spent extensive time in McIntosh County, it is my perception that the gates serve not as a protective feature but as a sign of privilege in opposition to the modest dwellings and people who occupied McIntosh County long before it became a vacation destination. Phillips outlines, too, the “symbolic, legislative and economic mechanisms of exclusion” commonly used to establish and maintain private neighborhoods (131). In coastal Georgia, this often means purchasing and privatizing entire small barrier islands. Belvedere Island Plantation is an example of this, too, modeled after islands like Sea Island and Tolomato Island, which are entirely private and maintain their own roads, though they are tied into local sewage and waste management services. In short, the tourism development and cordonning off of communities happening in Harris Neck is happening up and down the eastern seaboard. See Phillips (2000) and Van Sant (2016) for apt analyses.
Our community encompasses over 400 acres of wooded lands and salt marshes and is close to Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge just 5 miles east of I95. For the golfer, Belvedere is within 5 miles of Sapelo Hammock Golf Club and a short 30 minute drive to several other exceptional courses. Some of our wild neighbors include turkeys, deer, and many species of birds, not to mention an alligator or two.

Belvedere Island Plantation amenities include a Clubhouse, Community Dock, Tennis Court, Swimming Pool, and Equestrian Center. Come Enjoy the Charm of Southern Comfort and friendly neighbors all nestled within a gated community. (“Welcome to Belvedere Island Plantation!, 2020)

These brief sentences perfectly encapsulate the next phase of Harris Neck’s enrollment in the continued socioeconomic privilege of local whites. Even after being repossessed by the federal government and devoted to preservation and public use, Harris Neck could not escape the systems that maintain the racial and economic status quo in McIntosh County.
Figure 3.1 Entrance to Belvedere Island Plantation, McIntosh County, Georgia
Harris Neck is a living example of Smith’s assertion: “In the production of nature we can see how nature itself . . . becomes a strategy for accumulation. These new natures frequently have capitalist goals and logics bound up within them” (2007, p. 29). In addition to now being an “important resource for migratory birds”, Harris Neck is an amenity. Its beauty, walking and biking trails, and abundant bird watching make it an important selling point for the gated, almost entirely white neighborhoods nearby. Featured in the first sentence of Belvedere Island Plantation’s description of their community and held in parallel with another local amenity—Sapelo Hammock Golf Course—it is clear that Harris Neck is a part of both the local appeal and housing market.

In addition to its recreational opportunities, Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge plays a part in maintaining a particular aesthetic among these neighborhoods and the
housing prices they command. Neighborhoods in northern McIntosh County often create and locate themselves within landscapes that evoke a white aesthetic reminiscent of the plantation. In describing a typical rice plantation, Dennis writes, “... the rice plantation had always been a world apart—a lonely place far from civilization surrounded by wild nature, visited infrequently for hunting trips, perhaps during the holidays and summer vacations. On the other hand, of course, this landscape had been inhabited by African American families for generations” (2006, p. 76). Dennis describes the winding roadway to Hampton Plantation that, in the plantation and Reconstruction eras, wound past slave quarters and past the parts of the plantation surest to impress, including rice fields and barns (2006, 79). Arriving at Belvedere Island Plantation’s large community clubhouse feels eerily similar. Belvedere Island Plantation features a stately white clubhouse; long, meandering driveways; stables and a large horse pasture; a dry dock for large boats; a pool and tennis courts; and, importantly, the seemingly untouched nature of Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge nearby, all situated in the relative isolation of rural McIntosh County. The landscape is felt all the more keenly when one learns that Belvedere Island Plantation is located on the former site of Belvedere Plantation, an active cotton plantation held in slavery many of the ancestors of Harris Neck residents.

Beyond the symbolic power of Harris Neck’s re-enrollment in plantation landscapes, Harris Neck contributes to the economic enrichment of whites, whose property values benefit from the presence of the wildlife refuge and assurances that it will remain undeveloped for the foreseeable future.

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42 The landscape is felt all the more keenly when one learns that Belvedere Island Plantation is located on the former site of Belvedere Plantation, an active cotton plantation held in slavery many of the ancestors of Harris Neck residents.
Harris Neck as a new plantation landscape is at once a new loss and an old story. Harris Neck’s former residents worked for decades to turn a former plantation economy into a thriving, self-sufficient Black community. No longer a site of chattel slavery and a bustling anthesis to its current state, the Harris Neck of the early 1900’s stands in stark contrast to what Harris Neck was and is. The brief historical moment from 1870 to 1942 stands outside of what is generally true about Harris Neck: its natural resources have served the economic interests of whites since the late 1700’s.
Today, meetings of the Harris Neck Land Trust take place at the Baptist church that sits squarely between the prominent gates of Belvedere Island Plantation and Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Former residents and their families have literally had a front row seat to Harris Neck’s return to the economic purview of whites. They have watched wealthy whites move in around them, gaining easy access to the marsh-front property and deep-water access they lost decades ago. They have watched Harris Neck sit largely dormant, valued now for the absence of people and industry. This constitutes an additional trauma that has, as will be demonstrated in chapter three, galvanized the former Harris Neck community in its efforts to have Harris Neck returned to its former owners and their heirs.

3.3 Erasure

Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge is not just a context for nearby neighborhoods—it is a site in and of itself with remnants and markings and postings that create a world—and a narrative—within its bounds. As Schein writes,

> Each seemingly individual decision behind any particular U.S. landscape is embedded within a discourse. When the action results in a tangible landscape element, or total ensemble, the cultural landscape becomes the discourse materialized . . . As a material component of a particular discourse or set of intersecting discourses, ‘the cultural landscape’ at once captures the intent and ideology of the discourse as a whole and is a constitutive part of its ongoing development and reinforcement. (1997, 663)

In the case of Harris Neck, the landscape privileges wealthy whites engaged in leisure and obscures the Black history of Harris Neck to create a whitewashed cultural landscape, comfortable and inviting to white visitors—an extension of the plantation aesthetic. The rice and cotton fields that once dominated the landscape are, of course, long gone. But gone, too, in Harris Neck are the towers, cabins, mansions, barns and other structures that survive in other former plantation landscapes. A school, post office, church,
and cemetery where enslaved people had been buried in the antebellum era were all bulldozed during the construction of Harris Neck. A fountain stands and the only remnant of Harris Neck’s stately mansions, and airstrips are the only sign of a military base ever having existed there. With the help of the wholesale destruction that preceded the construction of Harris Neck Army Airfield, the USFWS has largely succeeded in constructing Harris Neck as a natural site, despite the intensive management of manmade freshwater ponds and prescribed burning regimens. There is almost nothing in the seen landscape that suggests Harris Neck’s long, troubling history of racial violence and the demolition of a prosperous Black community.

To understand both the ecological and cultural landscapes of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, visitors are invited to reference a series of five markers that dot the nature trails of the refuge. The plaques that feature the ecology of Harris Neck are informative and transparent about the active hand of USFWS and their staff in managing the ecology of the area. Longleaf pines feature prominently in one, highlighting a national restoration project for longleaf pine ecosystems. Another marker explains the necessity for prescribed burns to manage wildfire threats. A final plaque outlines the success of managed waterfowl and wading bird habitats through the creation of freshwater pools. Understandably, and in keeping with the mission of the USFWS, the ecology of the site is the clear headliner in USFWS communication about and on Harris Neck.

Within the landscape of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, the history of Harris Neck is told by two historical markers positioned along the same nature trails. In these markers, Harris Neck’s history of plantation slavery is kept at the margins and the legacy of Black community who once lived in Harris Neck is all but erased. Instead, privileged are the narratives of wealthy whites who constructed fortunes and mansions on the backs of slaves and, later, tenant farmers. Historical markers in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge tell a version of history that keeps at the margins the lives of the hundreds of Black slaves and freedmen and women who worked and lived and died there, creating a cultural
landscape that is familiar and palatable to the generally white visitors who come to birdwatch and bike.

![Figure 3.4 “Thomas Landing” Marker in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, McIntosh County, Georgia (2020)](image)

The marker titled “Thomas Landing”, tells a story of Harris Neck from the antebellum era forward. Before reading a word of the marker, an astute observer would likely guess how the history will be framed. At center are sketches of delicate botanicals, and surrounding those are a series of photos: a William de Leftwhich Dodge painting of the Lorillard estate in Harris Neck featuring a woman wearing a delicate pink dress in the front garden; a photo of Lily Livingston in hunting garb pointing her rifle at something beyond the scene; a photo of one of the only architectural remnants from pre-World War II structures, a fountain once on the grounds of the Lorillard estate; and, finally a photo of Pierre Lorillard, the tobacco tycoon who in 1890 purchased part of Peru Plantation and turned it into the Lorillard estate.

It is within in this framework—both literally and figuratively—of whiteness that the marker goes on to give a written narrative of the history of Harris Neck from the 1740’s to present. The plaque begins, “Various plantations occupied this site from the 1740s
through the 1870s.” It goes on to trace land ownership and the lineage of the Dickinson, Rutledge, Harris, Demetre, and Thomas families. The word slave or slavery does not appear until later. “The plantation produced,” it continues, “sizeable cotton crops.” The plaque fails to mention chattel slavery and employs rhetorical hand-waving, attributing cotton production to the plantation itself and not to the humans who lived and died growing and picking it. Black people and slave labor are effectively erased until the marker is able to talk about slavery in the past tense: “Many small tracts were sold to former slaves or their descendants.”

The marker goes on to blandly describe what was, by all accounts, a thriving, progressive Black community in a sea of racial oppression: “From the 1870s through the 1930s a community of primarily African American landowners developed on and near the current refuge land.” This sentence is all the space the former Harris Neck community is given on the marker and in the whole of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Neither plantation slavery nor the Black community of Harris Neck are mentioned anywhere else within Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. This paltry single sentence, beyond being less than effusive about the community, again obscures the time, energy, and bravery it took for a Black community to build itself in the Reconstruction era and Jim Crow South. To say that “a community developed” is quite different than saying “former slaves worked small farms, fished, owned business, and built schools and churches, all in service of building their community.” The latter acknowledges the agency, power, and flourishing of Harris Neck’s former residents, while the former, once again, ensures that the historical narrative remains centered on wealthy white planters and tycoons.

The only named historical figures on either historical marker in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge are white people. In addition to the families mentioned above, the second historical marker, titled “Harris Neck Army Airfield” mentions Maj. Bill Snead, a pilot instructor stationed at Harris Neck Army Airfield. On this marker, there is a brief
timeline of Harris Neck’s becoming a “permanent auxiliary-base”, but there is no mention of the sacrifice made by the Harris Neck Community to enable the building of the base.

That the experiences of enslaved people and former residents of the Harris Neck community receive only a passing mention is unconscionable, as both a failure to acknowledge important and painful period in the area’s history but also because the experiences of Black people comprise the overwhelming majority of lived experiences in Harris Neck in the last three hundred years. Yet, simply including their stories would be a failure of another kind. In the words of Paul Gilroy, advocating for the centering of Black experiences, “Using the memory of slavery as an interpretive device suggests that this humanism cannot simply be repaired by introducing the figures of Black folks who had previously been confined to the intermediate category between animal and human that Du Bois identifies as a ‘tertium quid’” (1993, p. 55). If we interpret the telling of our histories as an outgrowth of modern humanism, we can be skeptical of what it might mean to simply include the narratives of slaves and freedmen and women in existing markers. Rather, Gilroy would favor “... the primal history of modernity to be reconstructed from slaves’ points of view” (1993, p. 55). The environment of a former rice plantation, for former slaves and their descendants, is neither delicate nor benign, as the sketches of snowbells and lantana might suggest. Stately mansions and white people with guns, through a lens of modern Blackness, are symbols of oppression and terror. Adding the experiences of Black former residents to the existing framework of whiteness can never achieve a recentering of the historical narrative in the Black experience, something desperately needed in present-day Harris Neck if the area’s history is to be equitably and ethically told.

Speaking specifically about the tourism industry in the American South, Alderman, Butler, and Hanna assert that,

Engaging slavery heritage is not simply about adding another history to the mix of narratives presented and performed at tourist destinations. Rather, recovery and representation of these painful histories are often fraught with
debate and thus involve the politics of bringing long repressed and suppressed histories and marginalized identities into dialogue with a tourism industry that until recently had been content with ignoring if not denying these very stories . . . (2015, 1-2)

With both Gilroy and McKittrick’s scholarship in mind, I would push back on the characterization and advocate for the need to also include narratives of strength, resilience, pride, and celebration of Black people and communities. However, their point remains, that it is critical to do the difficult work of bringing these complex histories into dialogue with more widely known and palatable histories often marketed in southern tourist destinations.

The marginalization, obscuration, and erasure of Black history, Black people, and Black achievement on Harris Neck is tragedy, both for former Harris Neck community members, who deserve to have their stories told, and for anyone seeking to truly understand the physical, historical, and cultural landscape of Harris Neck. The scene/seen is not innocent, to create a mashup of concepts from Richard Schein. The way history is and, importantly, is not depicted in Harris Neck sends an undeniable message: Black people and Black history are not important here. The landscape, in turn, does real work. White visitors will find representations of whiteness that are comfortable and resonate with their own desires to find a place of respite along the quiet coast of Georgia and that obscure the real, complex history of Harris Neck’s enslaved people and Black community. Former residents of Harris Neck and their descendants, as well as other Black visitors, will find it impossible to see themselves represented within a landscape shaped by hundreds of years of Black history. This undoubtedly has a direct impact on who feels wanted in this landscape.43

It is well established that environmental conservation, especially as it relates to ecotourism, has been the domain of the white upper and middle classes. In her Black Faces, 43 See O’Brien’s Landscapes of Exclusion (2015) for a treatment of experiences of Black people in the state parks of the American South. See also Finney (2014).
White Spaces, Carolyn Finney asks, “How does the past illuminate our understanding of the present as it relates to environmental engagement?” (2014, 24). She goes on to provide an answer, asserting, “[w]e can be duped into wishful thinking that our common past shares the same characters and circumstances producing similar outcomes, making it easier to ignore the tensions in which we presently stand” (2014, 24). Finney unpacks the history and legacy of race and the environmental movement, tracing these factors to a paucity of representation of Black people in nature and a lack of participation in outdoor activities among Black people. She concludes, “. . . national parks and forests can unintentionally become sites where African Americans experience insecurity, exclusion, and fear born out of historical precedent, collective memory, and contemporary concerns” (Finney, 2014, 28).

As Robert Fletcher succinctly explains, “While prior to the Civil War, the idea of wilderness had held for many enslaved Africans the promise of escape from the oppression of white society . . . systematic terror perpetrated by whites following emancipation transformed it into a place of fear and foreboding, associated with such atrocities as lynching and rape” (2014, p. 122). Rather than working to make Black visitors feel more at home in Harris Neck, the absence of Black stories almost certainly reinforces the sense that the wilderness of Harris Neck is a white space and the very racial hierarchies that produced Harris Neck’s past (at least part of it) and present. In this, Harris Neck community members and their descendants lose Harris Neck again—erased from its history and alienated from the landscape.

“Pristine” is an oft-used concept in the marketing literature produced by government agencies and resorts who now have a stake in the beauty and health of Georgia’s barrier islands. This claim—the landscape as untouched, virgin, primeval—is, of course, patently false. The toil of Black bodies made and remade the marshes and tidal areas at the whims of owners and overseers. Yet the idea of “pristine” is bound up tightly
with the appeal and beauty of the thickets of marsh grass, moss-covered oaks, and driftwood-strewn beaches. As Stewart writes,

Georgia’s ‘golden’ islands have become coastal Georgia’s wilderness, a universalized ‘nature’ . . . They are touted as pristine places that step outside of time and history and are yardsticks of the natural. Tourists are incited repeatedly in the advertisements of coastal tourist vendors to enjoy pristine white beaches, slat marsh vistas, quiet retreats on islands unhitched from the main . . . (2018, 37)

To maintain this farce, two things must be achieved: protection and erasure. The seemingly untouched beauty of the coast must be protected from threats, both real and perceived, like development (at least the undesirable kind), misuse, pollution, and outright destruction. Even more importantly, the not-so-distant history of the land must be erased. The displacement and massacre of native peoples, the inhumanity of slavery, the breaking of Black bodies from toil and abuse and malaria, the wholesale disenfranchisement of a people must be made invisible in order to maintain the landscape’s mythology of purity. We will return to this cordoning off of nature in chapter four. For now, we turn to the cordoning off of the legal system.

3.4 Justice Denied

While former Harris Neck community members have certainly been subject to wrongdoing by local and federal officials, it would be inaccurate and unfair to cast them as passive victims. Former Harris Neck community members have taken active steps to recover property in Harris Neck through both legal and political channels. This section marks a turn away from the narrative of loss and begins to unpack legal and advocacy actions involving former community members and their descendants. The first wave of

44 A notable exception is the environmental toll of the tourism industry itself. See, as an example, Miles (2018) and his description of the wastewater management crisis in Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island, Georgia.
this work began in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s with a protest followed by extensive legal filings stemming from arrests and an attempt to reopen the civil filings closed in the 1940’s. Ultimately, these legal challenges failed, with courts time and again affirming that residents were served with the appropriate notices and compensated adequately for their land. The indifference and hyper-focused nature of these rulings are characteristic of a legal system ill-equipped to deal with injustices like Harris Neck—historical moments when the government followed all the rules even as it made grave ethical mistakes. The legal system is a flawed platform for the acknowledgement of wrongdoing needed in the case of Harris Neck: that a strong Black community was dismantled, that the selection of that plot of land represents either targeted destruction of or cold indifference to a Black community, and that the land that might have been sold back to them was misused by a local government that, at the same time, sought to oppress them.

On April 27, 1979, People Organized for Equal Rights (POER) staged a civil protest in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. The group, composed of former Harris Neck community members and their descendants and led by a local Deacon, set up campsites, began talking about building permanent structures, and prayed. On April 30, 1979, the United States filed a complaint in ejectment, and on the evening of May 1, 1979, four protesters were arrested for not complying with the court order to vacate the refuge. In testimony to the court in reference to the arrests and injunction against POER, the group’s leader, Edgar Timmons, Jr. tells the court,

We were praying, asking God that he would fix this thing, because we felt that it is an adjustment to us. This is our home, our ark and our heritage, and it meant our life. My grandfather had worked, he had slaved, he had bled from day one to day sixty some years in his life to accumulate something for us as we would grow. And, we were—they were treated like dogs and hogs, and driven away from what they had worked for all the days of their lives, to be crowded up on a little twenty acres. And, we felt that

45 See Transcript of proceedings *US Vs. Edgar Timmons, etc.*, May 4, 1979, US District Court, Southern District of Georgia, Savannah, Georgia for a full account of the civil protest.
this was something terrible for the United States to do. I myself am a Veteran, I served my country proudly, and I have sung my national anthem with all my being. I felt that this was something terrible to impress upon us as a people. (US v Edgar Timmons, etc., 4 May 1979, p. 47)

This sense that an injustice had been perpetrated on the people of Harris Neck and that the wrong should be righted motivated legal action in the months ahead. In response to the US government’s complaint for ejectment, POER and its attorneys filed an extensive list of counterclaims that took the long view of the history of Harris Neck and its people.46

The counterclaims are both a list of grievances and a timeline. POER and its attorneys alleged the following particulars of the case:

1. Residents of Harris Neck in 1942 were given less than 48 hours of notice to vacate the property “under threat and duress of physical removal” (US v Edgar Timmons, etc., 12 June 1979, par 18).
2. Due process was violated when residents were not properly served in the initial condemnation process as well as when six years passed between initial declarations of taking and final judgments issued in 1948.
3. Residents of Harris Neck in 1942 were assured that “lands would be returned upon conclusion of World War II”, perpetrating a fraud on the residents (par 20 and 47).
4. Landowners were compensated “well-below and in no relationship to existing market values” (par 20) and “compensated whites and Blacks dissimilarly for properties taken” (par 21) also (par 35).
5. “... McIntosh County was wrongfully placed in possession...” of Harris Neck in 1948 (par 3).

46 US v Edgar Timmons, Jr., the group known as People Organized for Equal Rights and other unknown individuals (1979)
6. Former landowners should have been given the opportunity to reclaim land in 1961, when it became clear that McIntosh County could not fulfill its commitments to operate a municipal airport. As we dig into POER’s claims and how these were framed and ruled on by the courts, it is worth reviewing them through the lens of the historical record on Harris Neck, illuminated in chapter one.

As demonstrated in chapter one, it is widely reported and accepted that former residents had very little time to vacate their property. Even as many acres were only annexed to provide a buffer around the airport, bulldozing of structures happened almost immediately, according to numerous accounts. Documents from the condemnation proceedings demonstrate that, for legal purposes, residents were served in keeping with state law. Notwithstanding the distinct likelihood that residents were asked to vacate their properties on very little notice, possibly before being served, the notifications they eventually received do satisfy legal standards for due process. Additionally, it is likely that residents were, in accordance with property disposal laws at the time, told they would be given the opportunity to repurchase their property after the war.47 Though this commitment is not written anywhere in archival documents reviewed, it can be assumed that residents were advised of existing policies prior to the end of World War II. Though those policies were a patchwork created by federal agencies disposing of their own property, it is reasonable that a government official could have said, in good faith, that the property owners would likely have the chance to repurchase their properties.

Whether Harris Neck residents were deceived, misinformed, or simply on the wrong side of changing laws matters little in their claim of violation of due process. Any insight given by federal or local officials at the time was not binding. Despite these

47 See Dobney (1974) for information regarding surplus property disposal policies before 1944.
hardships, former Harris Neck community members do not have firm grounds for claiming violation of due process.

Whether or not landowners in Harris Neck were paid fairly for their land is, by in large, an unanswerable question. Martin, a lawyer representing many of the former landowners in Harris Neck questions these claims in his House testimony:

First of all, there may or may not have been some disparity in the payment of the property in 1942. We understand that there is some evidence that other properties in the area were acquired for the same dollar value, be that white or Black. However, our contention, and of course I am a lawyer representing them from the legal standpoint, is that inequality perhaps did not occur in 1942, but occurred between 1946 and 1948. (Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge—HR 4018, December 7, 1979: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation and the Environment, p. 350)

Later, between August of 1984 and January of 1985, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted a review of the Federal Government’s acquisition of Harris Neck and cited several obstacles to concluding whether or not the compensation of property owners was handled ethically. They describe these obstacles in a letter summarizing their findings:

(1) documentation was destroyed or unsupported, (2) many former landowners are now deceased, and (3) a 1981 fire destroyed Harris Neck 1920 to 1979 land and property tax assessment records. These obstacles limited the availability and verification of information that could be obtained to address your questions on fair compensation and racial discrimination. (Peach, 1985, p. 2)

Despite these obstacles, the GAO did submit official findings, summarizing them as follows:

We found nothing in the government’s existing Harris Neck land acquisition records indicating that any irregularity in the land acquisition occurred, or that any repurchase commitments were made by the
government to the former landowners. As a result of the absence of complete land acquisition and property assessment records, we were unable to evaluate the acquisition payments to the former Harris Neck landowners for their land, including improvements such as houses, fences, and crops, with land and property tax assessment records. (Peach, p. 2)

Based on condemnation records, the GAO does calculate averages for price paid for acre based on the race of the landowner. Black landowners were paid an average of $26.90 per acre while white landowners were paid an average of $37.31 per acre. There is clearly a disparity here, but how much of that is owed to disparities in improvements to the land—like homes, barns, fences, etc.—and how much is owed to racial discrimination, is hard to know. Comparing property tax assessments for the years prior to 1942 to appraisals completed by the Army Corps of Engineers would help determine if the land was valuated accurately. However, as stated in the GAO report, property tax records from this era for all of McIntosh County were lost to a fire in 1981.

It should not be surprising that most of the white landowners in this area were more economically stable, owned more property, and owned property of greater value due to its location and improvements. Across the US, structural racism prevented many Black families and landowners from accessing lines of credit and footholds in industries available to white landowners (Daniel, 2013; eds. Reid and Bennett, 2012). The Livingston Mansion, built with gains from the tobacco industry, and E.M. Thorpe’s seafood business increased greatly the value of their properties, inflating the disparity between price per acre paid to white and Black landowners. Far from being a separate issue, these disparities in resources, opportunities, and access were only highlighted and magnified by the US Government’s seizure of Harris Neck. The sums of money paid to Black landowners could not sustain their quality of life in the same way ownership of their former property had and could. The average of acres owned by Black landowners was nineteen. Compensated at the average of $26.90 per acre, the average Black family was paid just over $511 for their land. This works out to approximately $8,056 in today’s currency (calculation based on
the Bureau of Labor and Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator). This was not a life-changing sum of money. Even if former residents of Harris Neck could purchase comparable land for the same price, gone still would be their community, heritage, and, in all likelihood, their access to the area’s waterways, which provided opportunities for fishing, shrimping, crabbing, and harvesting oysters. Thus, even if the compensation paid to Black property owners was in keeping with property assessments, it was hardly sufficient to compensate residents for the community, history, and access to natural resources they lost along with their property.

Chapter two digs into the historical record of how McIntosh County officials managed to convince federal officials that they should be entrusted with the airport and its land and facilities, so that history will not be rehashed here. The transfer of the property in 1961 to the USFWS was in clear keeping with federal law. What would happen to the land after it was revoked from McIntosh County was likely opaque to residents of McIntosh County, Black and white alike. However, both the Surplus Property Act of 1944 and Public Law 537 of 80th Congress would have worked against any attempts by former property owners to reclaim the land in the 1960’s. Both of these laws would have given federal agencies primacy over former property owners, the latter specifically privileging preservation and wildlife conservation. As a result, this final claim never gained traction in the legal battles or public discourse around the loss of Harris Neck.

In addition to these particulars of the case, POER and its attorneys worked to put the events around the taking of Harris Neck into the broader context of the Jim Crow South. They write:

Until the last decade, the plaintiff condoned and acquiesced [sic] in established practices of racial discrimination fostered by the Federal Government by states and private individuals as evidence by recent judicial and legislative action declaring such practices as unconstitutional and contrary to public policy all of which this court should take judicial cognizance.
Since 1872, Blacks in Southeast Georgia, and especially those residing in McIntosh County have endured exclusion from the social, political and economic life of the area, including but not limited to the relegation to the lowest level of economic standing in the county.

As further evidence of the above, Blacks comprise approximately 50% of the total population of McIntosh County. Blacks were not accorded their basic civil rights nor gained access to the political process until the successful litigation of McIntosh County Local Branch of the NAACP, et al v McIntosh County, CV 277-70 (SD Georgia 1978) and Nathaniel Govener, et al v S A Poppell, et al, CV 275-71 (SD Georgia 1977). (*US v Edgar Timmons, Jr, the group known as People Organized for Equal Rights and other unknown individuals*, 12 June 1979, par 12-14)

For former Harris Neck community members and their descendants, the seizure and misuse of Harris Neck is part of a longer history of racial oppression and corruption. That Harris Neck was taken and misused within the context of the Jim Crow South cannot be ignored by any reasonable person working to understand these events. Assuming that the rampant bigotry and institutionalized racism in the United States and in McIntosh County had no effect on Harris Neck’s selection as a site, nor its seizure, nor its misuse would be naïve. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stafancic write in their recent primer on Critical Race Theory, “. . . racism is ordinary, not aberrational—‘normal science,’ the usual way society does business, the common everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (2017, p. 8). And yet, these claims gained no traction in the US District Court of Brunswick.

In June of 1980, the US District Court for the Southern District of Georgia ruled, “I have thoroughly analyzed defendants’ arguments and find no legal support for their position. Title has vested in the United States and cannot be returned to the original owners without Congressional authorization . . . There is no remedy for defendants in the courts” (*US v Edgar Timmons, Jr, the group known as People Organized for Equal Rights and other unknown individuals*, 23 June, p. 10). The judge cited several reasons for the impossibility of re-conveying land to former Harris Neck property owners. Among those is the concept of *res judica*. This is the legal principle that issues property decided by the
courts cannot be relitigated, except under very specific circumstances. In a later ruling in Civil Action 56—whose proceedings regarding Harris Neck in 1980 were largely a rehashing of those that contained in CV279-50—the same judge writes of the futility of relitigating court proceedings closed since 1948: “These last two grounds, that the taking was unlawful use of eminent domain and that the Black owners received less in compensation than the white owners, are not grounds which no matter how strongly supported by facts would render the judgment void. A judgment is not void merely because it is erroneous” (United States of America v. 1,200 Acres of Land in McIntosh County, Georgia, January 1981, pg 2).

What must be so plain to lawyers and judges is striking to those of us who are less familiar with the way the laws of our nation are applied. The judge says so simply that it is not the purpose of the law to achieve justice in this case, but rather to protect the legal system by upholding prior rulings, setting aside facts and error if need be. This concept and its application here get at the heart of why former Harris Neck community members have found little solace in the justice system. The legal system is not built to privilege what is right—only what is allowed or disallowed under law. Delaney writes,

Much of the doing of law, in the service of undoing partialities of injustice, is technical and procedural. Lawyers working on behalf of (or in opposition to) those seeking spatial justice or, as I have called them, nomospheric technicians . . . have to navigate a complex, high stakes and expensive institutionalized language game with skill and not a little luck. (2016, 269)

These narrow lines of reasoning continue in the US District Court rulings. The June 1980 Order goes on to cite the statute of limitations on claims as an additional reason that the case cannot be relitigated. The Order does so without addressing POER attorneys’ claims that institutionalized racism, sanctioned by the US government, along with active racial oppression at the local level made it nearly impossible for former Harris Neck community members to bring their claims before now. The courts answer to the lawyers’
The invocation of the Equal Protection Act was that it, too, has a statute of limitations. The judge writes,

... a ruling that defendants’ claims are cognizable at this date would fly in the face of firmly established authority. That claims arising under [the Civil Rights Acts] are not perpetually viable is a well-accepted premise of law recently explicitly affirmed by the Supreme Court ... the claim is clearly beyond the reach of any of the possibly applicable State statutes [of limitations]. (United States of America v. Edgar Timmons, etc., 23 June 1980, pg 5).

The judge, in fact, rules that the defendants’ argument that they did not receive equal protection under the law during the Jim Crow era and thus should be exempt from statutes of limitations is invalid due to a statute of limitations. The internal logic seems both consistent and deeply flawed. Statutes of limitations interrupt any argument—even a valid one—from being considered, and that includes arguments that institutional racism prevented timely filing of claims.

Perhaps even more infuriating for former Harris Neck community members, the June 1980 Order goes as far as to admit that there was likely fraud, noting, “It appears likely that an attempt was made to mislead the United States into conveying the property to McIntosh County instead of to other priority holders” (United States of America v. Edgar Timmons, etc., 23 June 1980, p. 2-3). However, it goes on to foreclose any possibility of seeking redress for this, adding, “the wrongful conduct alleged occurred on the part of county officials who are not named in this suit” (United States of America v. Edgar Timmons, etc., 23 June 1980, pg. 9). When POER lawyers seek a joinder to the existing suit naming McIntosh County Commissioner Irving Davis and Sheriff Tom Poppell, the court seems to move the goalpost, ruling, “Any conspiracy by or fraudulent representations on the part of McIntosh County and its officials involves distinct factual and legal issues. The decision of the United States to turn the land into a wildlife refuge is unrelated to the actions of McIntosh County officials” (United States of America v. Edgar Timmons, and
the group known as People Organized for Equal Rights of Harris Neck, and other unknown individuals, August 21, 1980, pg 3). Though POER’s attorneys could have gone on to file suit against McIntosh County, it was no longer in possession of the thing they sought to remedy the injustice: their land.48

Since the 1990’s, Critical Race Theorists and those embracing its tenants have worked to demonstrate the ways in which the law falls short of its promise of justice equally applied. Caprice L. Roberts, a legal scholar, writes of the role of legal remedies in securing civil rights,

The law sometimes offers inadequate protections for redressing injuries. This shortfall is especially true for civil rights. Barriers—from immunity doctrines to constitutional limitations on monetary awards—block redress for civil rights. Such obstacles and gaps are not rare but flow with ease like the waters along the Georgia coast where aggrieved Blacks have lived this shortfall from the time slave ships docked in 1755. (2015, 73-74).

The Orders and rulings in POER’s two court cases demonstrate this reality.49 Final Orders in Civil Action 56 and CV279-50 make it clear that former Harris Neck community members and their descendants have no legal pathway to redress. Statutes of limitations, legal principles upholding legal proceedings that may have been deeply flawed, and a failure to incorporate into jurisprudence any real conceptualization of the experiences of

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48 Interestingly, just after the conclusion of POER’s legal battles, a court case established a precedent that could provide hope for future suits: See Roy Copeland, 1984: “In Earnest v. Lowentritt a Black family asserted a Section 1983 civil rights claim arising from the foreclosure of their mortgage in 1940. They contended that ‘their pleadings should be construed to allege a conspiracy between the judge and the defendant sufficient enough to satisfy the state action requirement of SS 1983 . . . ’ The court stated that '[p]rivate acts or conduct may incur liability under SS 1983 if the individual is a ‘willful participation joint action with the State or its agents’’ This case applied to the judiciary, Copeland points out, ‘The Earnest case appears to offer a glimmer of hope for those deprived of property by local officials or by private individuals in collusion with local officials who are acting under the “color of law”. Earnest seems to say that if the plaintiff can prove collusion or corruption by a public official . . . with a private litigant a Section 1983 action may provide them with a remedy’.”

49 Deeply flawed legal proceedings in land restoration suits are certainly not unique to Harris Neck or the Black community. See Atkinson (1998) for a full accounting of how legislative and legal initiatives have often lead to a miscarriage of justice in attempts at land restoration or restitution for Native Americans.
Black people in the Jim Crow South prevent the courts from fully considering the question of what justice might look like in Harris Neck.

These narrowly focused rulings represent another more recent chapter in the book of injuries endured by former Harris Neck community members and their families. In looking to the justice system for justice, they have been told, they are looking in the wrong place. Demonstrating fraud is not enough. Wielding legislation meant to ensure equal protection under the law is not enough. These considerations are less important, the rulings say without saying, than bolstering a court system pitifully unable to see a forest of wrongdoing through the trees.

3.5 Conclusion

In the time immediately following the closure of the base, powerful white residents of McIntosh were allowed to use Harris Neck for stock grazing, gambling, and other illegal activities to enrich themselves. After the Federal government reclaimed Harris Neck, the area was redefined as a nature preserve, largely erasing the history of the Harris Neck community. Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge continues to enrich white developers and residents and provide outdoor recreation opportunities that subscribe to bourgeois white conceptualizations of nature. All the while, court battles waged by former landowners and their descendants have been unsuccessful in the face of rulings that fail to incorporate in their jurisprudence the realities of race and power in the Jim Crow South. This continued narrative of disregard and displacement has added insult to injury for the families of the Harris Neck community. Erasure from the land and its history and a front-row seat to the continued enrichment of whites hardly makes Harris Neck’s story unique, but it does make it archetypal and important. These layers of willful disregard for this Black community must be acknowledged if progress is to be made toward reconciliation. Courts and legislative action have failed as platforms for acknowledging wrongdoing and for taking
steps toward resolution. As readily and aptly acknowledged by Critical Race Theorists for
decades, the court system is not built to right racial wrongs.

This chapter has sought to trace how the initial seizure of Harris Neck has resulted
in decades of continued injustice and wrongdoing. So far, these wrongs have gone
unaddressed. While the McIntosh County Board of Commissioners issued a formal
apology in 2007 for its role in preventing the sale of Harris Neck back to its former owners,
no officials involved in the process of reallocating Harris Neck to McIntosh County have
issued personal apologies or publically admitted wrongdoing. No legal proceedings have
acknowledged the sacrifice, trauma, and disenfranchisement experienced by former Harris
Neck community members as a result of the seizure of their land. Two House
subcommittee hearings were held to acknowledge the struggle over Harris Neck, and one
Georgia legislator, Bo Ginn, did speak passionately about the need to redress wrongs.
However, no bill was ever entered into committee, let alone brought to the floor of the US
House of Representatives. While in recent years, the USFWS has engaged with members
of Harris Neck Land Trust, an advocacy group representing former landowners and their
descendants, no progress has been made since the partnership was announced in 2009.
USFWS officials asked Harris Neck Land Trust members to create a proposal for how they
might alternately use Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, but, at least from the
perspective of this researcher, the exercise seems to be one designed to generate work for
the group and quietude for USFWS administrators, rather than one designed to come to a
real solution.

If the courts could not offer a remedy, former Harris Neck community members
would need to take a different path—a path shaped by a desire to both unmask the wrongs
of the past and find a way forward.
CHAPTER 4. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here?" that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. (Yes) There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. (Yes) And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society . . . we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future.

--Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where do we go from here?”

4.1 Introduction

In 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech to the eleventh annual SCLC convention celebrating the progress made by the organization and the broader civil rights movement in the preceding decade. As he traces meaningful progress in voting rights and segregation, King’s speech makes clear the importance of grounded work and the courage to imagine a different future. Before launching into a list of the tangible gains made by practical, grounded work—including increasing access to lending and employment opportunities—King speaks to the aspirations of the movement: “We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us. We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights” (1967, np).

King’s speech is an example of the ways in which racial justice movements have worked in two ways: tactical approaches and aspirational futures. Leaders of organizations like SCLC have long known that affecting meaningful change requires negotiating
increased small business lending in Black communities in parallel with subpoenaing a national conscience.

King’s speech is also a fitting place to begin this chapter because he asks the important questions: *Where do we go from here? With notable progress but far to go, what is next?* He asks his audience to, in his words, “be dissatisfied” with persistent inequality and to have an “audacious faith in the future”. This bifurcated approach—to sit down at the tables of those in power and work through negotiations toward change and, at the same time, to continue to be dissatisfied and maintain a bold vision of equality is the same approach taken by the Harris Neck Land Trust.

This chapter will give a history of the advocacy work of Harris Neck Land Trust, the community organization that picked up where POER left off. Next, I will work to demonstrate how their tactical approaches to fighting for the return of Harris Neck have been nimble and have created opportunities for government officials and agencies to demonstrate a commitment to antiracist policies—or not. These decision-points are critically important. Not only have they served as opportunities for the return of Harris Neck, they have also acted as natural experiments, the results of which tell us something about progress toward racial equity and the commitment of those in power to antiracist policies. Without groups like Harris Neck Land Trust giving us data points to chart the trends, it might be tempting to believe teleological narratives of progress in the US toward racial equity. While government officials and agencies have largely failed to demonstrate a commitment to antiracism, their failures must not be construed with failures on the part of HNLT. As Kelley reminds us,

> Unfortunately, our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they “succeed” in realizing their visions rather than on the merits of power or the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely
these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change. (2002, ix)

After Kelley, I will argue that Harris Neck’s community plans can be instructively read through the lens of McKittrick’s calls for Black-life and as a sort of grounded Afrofuturism. Characterized by adaptive, creative remixes and troublings, Afrofuturism’s speculative futurity addresses Black-life with urgency and creativity\textsuperscript{50}. Its central themes include technology; an irreverence to spatiotemporal fixedness; challenges to hierarchies of race, gender, and other axes of identity; African diasporic culture and stories; attentiveness to the future; and alienation and reclamation.\textsuperscript{51} Reading the community plans as an exercise in Afrofuturism brings the advantage of a critical lens through which to attend to the role of audacious creativity and speculative futurity in bringing to fruition alternative futures that move us beyond the oppressive structures that maintain racial inequity. As Eshun writes, in our virtual present, “successful or powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards them, to command us to make them flesh” (2003, 291). If legal filings and legislative negotiations cannot remake Harris Neck, perhaps the alchemy of Black imagination can.\textsuperscript{52}

This is important for seeing the work of HNLT for what it is: both grounded maneuverings and creative imaginings, both with the potential to remake and re-place Harris Neck. This chapter seeks to examine and learn from both approaches taken by HNLT and offer a way of understanding their work that recognizes and holds space for audacious hope to bring material change.

\textsuperscript{50} The use of the term “speculative futurity” here follows Van Veen and Anderson (2018). 
\textsuperscript{52} Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination was an Afrofuturist art exhibit on display at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in 2015 and 2016, curated by John Jennings and Reynaldo Anderson. See also R. Anderson’s “Afrofuturism 2.0 & the Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a manifesto” (2016).
4.2 The History of Harris Neck Land Trust

The end of the appeals process in the US Court of Appeals Fifth Circuit in 1979 and in the US Court of Appeals Eleventh Circuit in 1982 largely spelled the end of People Organized for Equal Rights. Evelyn Greer, a HNLT member and secretary of POER, testified to Congress, “we just couldn’t get no financial help. And that is why, at that point, it kind of went away. You know, it didn’t completely die, but we just didn’t have the finances, you know, to do what we wanted and desired to do. So it died down for a while” (Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge . . ., 2011, p. 33). After this long period of dormancy, former Harris Neck community members reorganized, forming the HNLT in late 2005. Envisioned as the next chapter in the struggle for justice, HNLT is recognized widely as representing the majority of families who once owned property in Harris Neck, both Black and white (“Chronology”, 2020).

HNLT meets regularly in a small church near the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, hosts events to raise money and awareness, and corresponds with researchers and both elected officials and career government employees. Since its outset, the stated mission of HNLT has been to “reclaim the 2,687 acres of Harris Neck—wrongfully and illegally taken by the federal government in 1982—and return it to its rightful owners” (“Our Mission”, nd). Having learned from previous court battles and conducted extensive historical research and environmental analyses, HNLT achieved early successes. Among them, HNLT leaders and members worked with the McIntosh Board of Commissioners to pass a resolution acknowledging past wrongdoing. The resolution affirms the longstanding claims of former Harris Neck community members, admitting “certain residents of McIntosh County conspired to gain control of the land of Harris Neck from the Federal government at the end of World War II” and that “McIntosh County violated [the Civil Aeronautics Administration] contract in numerous illegal ways” (McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, January 9, 2007). In the same resolution, the county commissioners
acknowledge and support Harris Neck Land Trust and its efforts to “regain these 2,687 acres of Harris Neck” (McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, January 9, 2007). These statements are a major achievement, especially given the continued presence of the Poppell family in the political life of McIntosh County.\textsuperscript{53} However, McIntosh County, no longer in possession of Harris Neck, was powerless to do more than apologize for its prior role in dispossessing former residents of their land.

Soon after the success of securing an acknowledgment of wrongdoing from the County Commissioners, and with the help of a planning firm, HNLT began drafting a “Preservation and Community Development Plan for a new Harris Neck Community” (“Chronology”, 2020). For HNLT, land reclamation has, until recently, meant working to reclaim the property rights of families and rebuild the residential community that once called Harris Neck home, and their first community plan worked toward that end. The plan, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, was cognizant of conservation efforts and set aside hundreds of acres for continued management by USFWS even as it worked to promote local businesses and tourism.

However sustainably planned the proposed community might have been, reinstating private ownership runs contrary to USFWS objectives for Harris Neck, which include habitat protection and management, promotion of wildlife diversity, and increasing bird populations (“Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge”, nd). Though number of visitors and the positive financial impact of the refuge on the local economy are metrics tracked and sometimes touted by USFWS, the refuge’s success is largely measured in numbers of nesting sites, active species, and other environmental metrics.

Since beginning talks about what is referred to by many as “an equitable solution” in Harris Neck, USFWS has offered modest actions to acknowledge the former Harris Neck

\textsuperscript{53} Adam Poppell III, Son of Tom Poppell, has been a lawyer in Darien, Georgia for years. He now serves as the McIntosh County Attorney and “was appointed by Governor Zell Miller as the first Solicitor of the McIntosh County State Court” (See “Administration Staff”, 2000, www.mcintoshcountyga.com).
community and satisfy HNLT members. USFWS officials have suggested, for example, that Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge could host a homecoming day and provide information regarding the Harris Neck community at designated locations in the park. However, these proposals fell flat among HNTL members ("Chronology", 2020). USFWS writes on their website that in June of 2010, “[t]he Trust receives a letter from the SE Regional Director of FWS, regarding the called-for ‘equitable solution’ in which FWS offers to ‘explore the possibility’ of having an annual homecoming day for the people of Harris Neck and a small information kiosk on the Harris Neck Refuge. The Trust chooses not to respond to what it considers an insulting offer” ("Chronology, 2020). HNLT’s bold mission for restoration of lost property stood at odds with this modest gesture from USFWS.

After HNLT’s first community plan stalled and the USFWS proposed the poorly received homecoming and kiosk, local and government officials worked together to introduce to a congressional subcommittee a bill advocating for the return of Harris Neck to former community members. As part of the bill’s review, the US House of Representatives held a hearing in December of 2011, the second in the history of the struggle over Harris Neck.54 However, the hearings and the bill amounted to little. In 2012, after little tangible progress over the last six years, HNLT decided to enlist the help of legal counsel, and Atlanta law firm Holland & Knight took on their case pro bono.55

In their own words, a recognition of the “realities of a dysfunctional Congress, the Trust, with advice of Holland & Knight and Congressman Jack Kingston, [HNLT] decides to change strategies. Instead of pursuing title to all of Harris Neck, it is decided that a long-term renewable lease of a small portion of Harris Neck will better serve the Trust’s mission and objectives” ("Chronology”, 2020). This shift in strategy was significant. Instead of

54 The first hearing was in 1979.  
55 Holland and Knight is the same firm that represented members of the Rosewood community in Florida, who, after racial violence from local whites fled their community. Holland and Knight successfully won compensation from the state of Florida through state-level legislation. See “25 years ago, Florida compensated survivors of Rosewood racial violence” for a brief description of the firm’s involvement.
seeking permanent return of the land, community members sought the opportunity to lease it; however, what remained the same was HNLT’s intent to use land for residential neighborhoods. In parallel, HNLT proposed a “Living Museum on the Refuge, as well as the incorporation of several other cultural elements” (“Chronology”, 2020). According to an HNLT account of meetings among HNLT, Holland & Knight, USFWS, and Department of Interior in summer of 2013, USFWS again quickly dismisses the notion of constructing residences on Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge but leaves the door open to the idea of a living museum on a smaller tract of land.

In 2014, HNLT members met with Sally Jewell, Secretary of Department of Interior to “briefly outline the history of Harris Neck and the Harris Neck Justice Movement . . . and discuss the partnership the Trust seeks with FWS in the creation of a new Harris Neck community on the Refuge. Ms. Jewell asks the Trust to develop and submit a site plan for the proposed community” (“Chronology”, 2020). In February of 2015, HNLT follows through, submitting a General Special Use Permit Application and Preliminary Site Plan to the Department of Interior and USFWS, “requesting a long-term, renewable lease to the most eastern portion of the Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge” (Chronology, 2020). Later that same month, HNLT board members and at least one Holland & Knight attorney meet in Washington, DC with Department of Interior staffers and a Deputy Director of USFWS, and the application is denied. However, in the words of HNLT,

Director, Dan Ashe offers two possible paths forward to achieving an equitable solution for the people of Harris Neck. One path is that of a land transfer, the other is to prove the uniqueness of everything that has happened in Harris Neck since the summer of 1942. Director Ashe says

56 There is precedent for this on the coast of Georgia. Jekyll Island is owned by the state of Georgia, and private property there is leased to holders for 99 years. Leases have, so far, been renewable. Though for many years this arrangement resulted in less development on Jekyll Island than on other islands with more traditional private property arrangements, Jekyll Island has recently undergone extensive development, with large investments from both the Georgia state government and the hospitality industry.
that "If you prove the uniqueness, we (FWS) will support legislation" for the return of Harris Neck. (“Chronology”, 2020)

Nearly a year later, there is another meeting, but the tone is decidedly different according to HNLT members present. As reported on the HNLT website,

Members of the Trust and attorneys from Holland & Knight meet again in DC with FWS Director, Dan Ashe and other FWS staff to discuss a possible land transfer and the Uniqueness document that the Trust submitted months earlier. With no explanation and barely any discussion, whatsoever, Dan Ashe closes the door on the uniqueness path to resolution. (“Chronology”, 2020)

A uniqueness claim supported by the USFWS would have opened the door to USFWS support for legislation for the direct return of Harris Neck. After defeat in federal courts and little progress made in generating legislation without USFWS support, a uniqueness argument was Harris Neck’s last best hope for the return of Harris Neck to former landowners and their descendants for use as a private community. This refusal on the part of USFWS to support a uniqueness claim marks a turning point in HNLT’s goals. After this meeting, and on the advice of special advisors to the Trump administration and Secretary of Interior, HNLT ceases pursuing a residential community in Harris Neck. Over a decade of lobbying and planning under a new banner of racial and social justice had brought no progress toward a return to Harris Neck for former community members and their descendants.

HNLT has now turned most of its attention toward a proposal to the USFWS for a living museum on approximately 500 acres in Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Careful to propose a location far removed from nesting sites and other key habitats, HNLT has described the museum complex as consisting of a few small buildings and support structures with a structural footprint of fewer than 20 acres. Those plans were formally submitted in December of 2018, and follow up meetings took place in August and October of 2019 (“Chronology”, 2020).
recent interview with *The Darien News*, Dave Kelly, the executive director of HNLT states, “‘The Harris Neck Land Trust’s efforts continue to achieve some justice for the Harris Neck people. There hasn’t been any news from Harris Neck in quite a while, but we are still working with Fish & Wildlife to reach an equitable solution, something that Fish & Wildlife agreed to way back in 2009’” (Merkerson & Russell, 2020, p. 2).

The USFWS has neither formally denied nor granted the request for the living museum. Continuing conversations while avoiding commitments and asking for more information and proposals has been the modus operandi of the USFWS. While US Representative for the coastal region of Georgia, Buddy Carter, has facilitated continued conversations, much as Rep. Kingston had before him, his office has not responded to a request for an update on ongoing negotiations between USFWS and HNLT.

Although HNLT found allies in local representatives and a small number of other congressmen, by in large, their engagement with courts and the federal government has been characterized by inaction and an unwillingness to even acknowledge the racist polices and politics that resulted in the loss of their land. These denials of justice have been felt keenly by those in the community. In the absence of tangible progress toward the return of Harris Neck to former community members and their descendants, optimism hardly seems warranted. Yet there is reason to celebrate the work of HNLT, as well as its predecessor, POER. They garnered media attention and demanded platforms, not only to tell their own story but to call attention to the maintenance of racial hegemony.

In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how, by forcing congressional testimony by a USFWS official, HNLT successfully gets USFWS on the record illuminating the injustice they have suffered but also requiring USFWS to answer for its possession of the land and take a stance on its future. Ultimately, the testimony demonstrates that Bell’s time-tested interest convergence thesis remains true and that USFWS is, at best, working against antiracist ends. It also brings to light ontological structures that act as the frame over which the canvas of the environmental protectionist
regime of the USFWS is stretched. POER and HNLT both managed to get the government to go on the record. Even as courts and subcommittees and government organizations have failed to act, HNLT has succeeded in illuminating the major issues here: not only their own story of loss and injustice, but the maintenance of racial injustice through inaction.

4.3 Forcing Answers, Testing Theory

4.3.1 Antiracism, Interest Convergence the Possibility of Change

Authors and activists like Robin DiAngelo, Ibram X. Kendi, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, on the forefront of public scholarship around antiracism, indict inaction as the maintenance of racial hierarchy and call for active confrontation of racial inequity.\textsuperscript{57} Kendi provides a very simple contrast:

A racist policy is any measure that produces \textit{or sustains} racial inequity between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and

\textsuperscript{57} In addition to the public voices calling for a broad antiracist agenda, there have been geographers on the forefront of antiracist scholarship. Woods’s (2002) “Life after death”, though it does not use the term, is a call for an antiracist agenda within geography. The article, both an indictment of past research and a call to action, offers multiple specific ways forward for an antiracist geography. In the same year, Peake and Kobayashi (2002) outline “Policies and Practices for an Antiracist Geography at the Millennium” and identify many avenues for productive research to that end. Nash (2003) outlines the need for anti-racist geographies within cultural geography, challenging the boundaries of cultural geography and posing questions for an antiracist geography focused on identity and the self. In 2003, Mitchell calls for a landscape geography “able to respond to and intervene in . . . the destruction of landscape and livelihood that is everyday life for most African Americans in the USA . . . “ and names “a normative commitment to antiracism” as a necessary condition for such work. Mitchell goes on to offer other tenants for an antiracist geography, many of which this project as strived to meet, including tracing the flow of real estate development as a grounded example of uneven development, engaging deeply with the “social-historical, refusing to [be satisfied] with surface readings of the landscape and delving instead into the . . . social history of specific places”, basing research on “records, documents, interviews, and empirical evidence and on a means to integrate that evidence”, and a desire to understand “how the histories and geographies of particular places and landscapes cannot be understood outside an analysis of processes working at smaller and larger scales” (2003, 791). Also, see Berman and Paradies (2010) tracing of the various definitions of anti-racism in academic scholarship. Also, see Antiracism (2000), Bonnett’s book-length treatment of the theoretical lineage of antiracism, tracing its roots in both Marxism and anti-colonial/postcolonial scholarship, as well as his later text, Radicalism, Anti-Racism, and Representation (2013). See also Bakan and Dua (2014) for a thorough but briefer treatment of Marxist and, in contrast, socioculturally-grounded bodies of scholarship with antiracist scholarship more broadly and the opening of possibilities if the two are brought into dialogue with one another. More recently, see Nelson and Dunn (2017) and Hopkins (2020).
guidelines that govern people. There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups. (emphasis added) (Kendi, 2019, p. 18)

In Kendi’s framework, we find ourselves constantly at a crossroads, always either maintaining or disrupting racial inequity. In the case of Harris Neck, governing policies and practices have both produced and sustained racial inequity: federal policies and procedures and local race-politics led to the destruction of Harris Neck as a thriving Black community and the enrollment of Harris Neck, with all its natural beauty and resources, in coastal Georgia’s white economies of Jim Crow corruption, gated middle-class neighborhoods, and nature conservation. A flawed legal system and bureaucratic self-preservationism has maintained that inequity.

Is our nation capable of or interested in actively pursuing antiracism? If so, how will that work be done? Is racial progress still subject to the whims of hegemonic white power structures, with possibilities for progress still explained by Derrick Bell’s time-tested theory of interest convergence? Is there the possibility of an antiracist agenda even when it is not a benefit to whites? These are important and worthwhile questions for those working on the frontlines of advocacy and community organizations. Social scientists and other scholars might theorize possibilities and conduct hindsight analyses, but it remains the work of organizations like HNLT to become the testcases for what arguments, lines of reasoning, and strategies are effective in advancing racial equity.

In 1980, Derrick Bell suggested a simple and troubling unified theory about when racial progress is possible. In his seminal work, he wrote of the Brown v Board of Education ruling and criticism of it, acknowledging the material difference between the legitimating powers of law and of public opinion: “The interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, pg 523). Using the framework of Brown v. Board to further elucidate his thesis, he continues, “. . . the fourteenth amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a
judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for Blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523).

The legal battle over Harris Neck, analyzed in chapter three, bears out this thesis. It is hardly disputed, even by the courts, that fraud occurred and that Black people in McIntosh County were actively oppressed by a racist white local government until at least the late 1970’s, hardly able to serve on juries let alone file law suits. Yet, district courts refused to wield the Civil Rights Act as grounds to set aside statutes of limitations and revisit the circumstances around the allocation of Harris Neck to McIntosh County authorities. Not in the interest of legal principles or the federal government to rule otherwise, the courts determined that the facts of the case were immaterial to current legal claims and upheld prior court rulings.

Battles like those waged by former Harris Neck community members, even when they are not successful, put on display the failures of our legal systems and philosophies to address racism. As Delaney concludes, “[p]art of how law works is to affect a spatialization of violence by authorizing acts of exclusion, expulsion, and confinement—or not.” (1998, 184). POER’s legal battles asked courts to lay bare the reasoning underpinning who would need to suffer exclusion and expulsion, opening it up to acknowledgment, criticism and, perhaps eventually, the opportunity for other readings and rulings. Though former Harris Neck community members did not regain their land, they were successful in demonstrating the shortcomings of our legal system’s attempts to address racial inequity. In asking the courts to make a decision, to go on the record re-authorizing the spatial violence in Harris Neck, POER created a data point, for themselves and for other organizations working against racial and spatial violence.

The 2011 Congressional testimony regarding Harris Neck provides another apt example of how the work of HNLT has forced our systems of government to speak to its
unwillingness to address racial inequity. After five years of working with local legislators and officials as well as career governmental employees, HNLT was successful in lobbying Georgia Representative Jack Kingston to introduce a draft bill advocating for the return of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge to former owners and their descendants. Though the bill never made it to the floor of the US House of Representatives, as part of the bill’s consideration, in December of 2011, the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans, and Insular Affairs of the Committee on Natural Resources held a hearing regarding the Harris Neck land struggle.

The hearing opens with testimony from Cynthia Dohner, Southeast Regional Director for US Fish and Wildlife Service. In her opening statement, she makes a case for the importance of Harris Neck to wildlife conservation. The utility of the refuge to migratory birds, to visitors, and to the local system is, predictably, emphasized. However, Dohner goes further, speaking not only to her understanding of the ecological value and history of Harris Neck but also to the ethical issues of its seizure. She writes in her prepared statement,

I would like to conclude by saying the condemnation of private property sometimes presents difficult issues, especially in wartime. Some may see these situations and decisions as unfair. However, it does not mean that that people were not fairly compensated or that laws and regulations were not followed appropriately. The Service is not aware of any unfair treatment or unlawful activity related to the condemnation. (Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck . . ., 2011, np)

There is much to unpack in this brief concluding statement. Dohner first invokes the wartime context of the seizure, lending the legitimacy of national interests and international crisis to initial proceedings that were, at best, poorly conducted, with funds issued to former property owners a full six years after their land was seized. She then takes

58 While HNLT proposals to and negotiations with the USFWS are not of the same legal nature as Bell’s original assertions, in the years since Bell first introduced the concept, interest convergence has become a thesis applied to international law, education, and race studies more broadly.
care to make a distinction between unfair and unlawful, emphasizing the potential for an event to feel and be unfair even as it remains legal. It may seem at this point in her statement that she is poised to acknowledge that while the seizure was legal, it was also unfair to the community who experienced hardship and displacement. However, her final sentence indicates quite the opposite: that it is her opinion that the Harris Neck community experienced neither illegal nor unfair treatment. This statement stands in stark contrast to the historical record as well as testimony given by descendants of Harris Neck community members later in the hearing.

Dohner takes care to point out that the reasons Harris Neck should remain a wildlife refuge go beyond its value as a site of conservation and recreation. Implicit in Dohner’s assertion is, while Harris Neck and its animal inhabitants are worthy of advocacy and protection, its former residents are not. For Dohner, court sanction and compensation meant that the issues of justice and fairness are settled, even if the community was worse off in the end. While Dohner considers encroachment and relocation unacceptable compromises for Harris Neck’s bird population, she is content to accept this as the just end of the Harris Neck community.

Dohner’s contention that former Harris Neck community members were treated legally and fairly was not lost on Representative Fleming of Louisiana. Later in the proceeding, after having heard the testimony of HNLT board members, he presses Dohner:

On December 7, 1979, Director Greenwalt of the Fish and Wildlife Service stated that, and I quote, “It is premature to make a judgment or talk in terms of support or nonsupport. We prefer to withhold our recommendation the preferable remedy.”

Ms. Dohner, that has been 32 years. Is the Service ready to share its opinion? (Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck . . ., 2011, np)

Dohner answers first by reinforcing USFWS deference to federal rulings and the GAO report mentioned in chapter two, both of which find that the proceedings in the taking
of Harris Neck were legal and due process was not violated. Notably, though, neither courts nor the GAO report rules out unethical practices or fraud. She continues, affirming that the USFWS would “be open to future dialogue and working together if new information is brought forward” (Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck . . ., 2011, np). Representative Fleming rightly interprets Dohner’s answer to mean that, based on their current understanding of facts, the USFWS stance is that no remedy is needed, and he pushes repeatedly for Dohner to confirm this.

In the midst of the repeated prompts from Representative Fleming, Dohner begins to construe the questions regarding the need for a remedy with what the USFWS has the authority to offer as a remedy. She tries to turn questioning away from her original argument—that there is no need for remedy—and toward the bureaucratic problems of achieving a remedy. These are separate questions, but Dohner chooses to treat them as one and the same, avoiding speaking to the justness question and constricting her own answers to what federal policy allows instead of what is right or just. She states at one point, “Again, sir, based on the law and the records and the court rulings and the GAO report, the further remedies that I can offer are things that I can do within the bounds of those laws” (Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck . . ., 2011, np). Again, the ethical need of a remedy and the remedies USFWS can provide are unrelated, and Dohner has been asked about the former but chooses to address the latter, taking another opportunity to shift away from considering what is right, defer to the official record and, in doing so, refuse to recognize the suffering of the Harris Neck community any possibility of the need for a remedy.

Representative Fleming pushes once more, himself validating the narratives of HNLT members and asking directly, “We hear where people lost their land, they lost their livelihood. Do you find that a compelling case on a human level rather than on a legal level?” Dohner replies, “Sir, I would tell you that on a human level I believe that justice has to be served. And I would tell you that the Service believes that we have evaluated –
and, again, the court rulings—that what was done in the 1940s followed the proper procedures” (Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck . . . , 2011, np).

Dohner, in an effort to lobby for the interests of the USFWS and forestall the possibility of Harris Neck’s restoration to former landowners, rejects outright the premise of HNLTs claims for the return of the land. From her opening statement, extolling the importance of Harris Neck as “an important link in the chain of refuges along the Atlantic seaboard”, to her closing statement affirming that justice was achieved, both legally and ethically, Dohner makes every available rhetorical move to advocate not only for Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge but also against recognizing injustice in the history of Harris Neck. Even in the face of clear evidence of flawed legal proceedings, displaced people and communities, and local fraud, the USFWS refuses to acknowledge racial injustice, let alone entertain possible remedies. To admit that an injustice took place would open the door to asking, is it just to return Harris Neck to the former landowners?, and that is not a question Dohner is willing to address.59

In some ways, this stance is an understandable strategy for self-preservation: transferring property to private ownership would be generally undesirable for a government entity tasked with preservation for the public good. Yet the trouble lies with how we define and evaluate “the public good.” Allowing former Harris Neck community members and their families to reclaim property in the name of racial justice would not serve the interests of whites and, in addition, would require the “surrender of racism-granted privileges” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). Since Bell’s 1980 assertion, the United States has seen the rise and ultimate weakening of affirmative action, the Voting Rights Act, and other protections for racial and ethnic minorities. The ultimate refusal of the USFWS to support the return of Harris Neck to former owners is one in a long line of signals that, despite an often-teleological national narrative around racial progress, tangible gains for Black communities have been

59 Dohner retired from the US Fish and Wildlife Service two years ago. One of her former direct-reports now occupies her former role.
few and far between. As Delgado famously notes, “Those in power sleep well at night; their conduct does not seem to them like oppression” (1989, 71-72).

Since the initial introduction of HNL’T’s Preservation and Community Development Plan, USFWS has repeatedly refused to entertain the idea of ceding the refuge or endorsing its return to former property holders. In a lengthy and detailed timeline published on their website, HNLT details the many engagements they have had with government officials associated with the USFWS and Department of the Interior, both elected and career bureaucrats, beginning in 2007.60 For HNLT and its supporters, justice for former Harris Neck community members means being given the opportunity to reestablish a community there.61 However, there is no disputing that this remedy would come at a cost. Lands and species now protected from the impacts of human habitation would be less so—even if USFWS remained to manage the site, the physical and logistical scope of their power would be significantly smaller. Animal habitats would be lost, or at least altered, as a result of the construction of homes and other structures. Whether we act or not, then, tells us what our officials and governing organizations value more: environmental conservation or racial equity.

60 USFWS has offered several reasons for not supporting the return of Harris Neck. In addition to maintaining that the taking of Harris Neck was both just and fair and that the site is a critical part of the string of refuges along the eastern seaboard, the USFWS has argued that even if it wanted to return Harris Neck, it does not have the authority to do so. Though USFWS cannot singlehandedly return Harris Neck to former landowners, it could support the efforts of HNLT. The Obama administration, during which the initial HNLT plan was proposed, was instrumental in compensating Native American tribes for the mismanagement of resources. In a release issued by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch regarding the settlements, Lynch notes, “‘These historical grievances were a barrier to our shared progress toward a brighter future . . . With today’s announcement, those barriers have been removed and decades of contention have been ended honorably and fairly’” (US Department of Interior, 2016). USFWS support for the HNLT plan had the potential, at least, to elevate the struggle for Harris Neck to the attention of federal officials with the power to decommission Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. USFWS officials have made it clear at many points, though, that they have no intention of making such an endorsement. See Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck . . . (2011) for testimony regarding USFWS understanding of their latitude to return Harris Neck to its former owners.

61 The two primary community development plans produced by HNL’T have charted different visions for this, but the commonality across plans is to reestablish some element of the former community of Harris Neck. In the first plan, private residences were the primary focus. While in the second plan, museums and exhibits, a farm, and a market work to reestablish the industry and memory of the community.
Bell writes of the prospect of harm to the interests of dominant groups and policymakers:

Racial remedies may instead be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites. Racial justice—or its appearance—may, from time to time, be counted among the interests deemed important by the courts and by society’s policymakers. (1980, p. 523).

Under Bell’s thesis, for racial progress to be realized, the losses incurred to remedy a racial wrong need to be deemed acceptable by those in power. In this case, the USFWS, whose staff and priorities are defined by whiteness, would need to make their peace with giving up the environmental management regime in (at least a large portion of) Harris Neck. So far, Bell’s thesis has proven correct, and the USFWS has privileged the largely middle and upper class, white interests of habitat conservation over remedy of racial wrongdoing.

4.3.2 Whiteness and Wilderness

The USFWS participates in the same traditions of British colonial “gentleman science” that scholars like Levi Van Sant (2016) and Mona Domosh (2015) have traced through the history of the USDA. The USFWS pursues a regime of preservation-as-development at home informed by the paternalistic instincts of the colonialism in which it is rooted, seeking to civilize rural and Black and brown bodies by enforcing the protection and conservation of wildlife.

62 For additional examples of the exclusion of Black people from natural spaces, see O’Brien’s exploration of the history and legacy of segregated state parks in the Jim Crow South (2015).
63 For useful engagements with the history of the construction of “wilderness” and the environmental movement’s engagement with race and class, see DeLuca and Demo (2001).
It is well-established that environmental conservation has largely been the domain of whites in the middle and upper classes. Carolyn Finney writes of the evolution of the environmental movement in the 1980s and 1990s,

... environmentalism continued to be defined from a white, middle-class perspective ... At the Second National People of Color environmental Leadership Summit in 2002, environmental justice leaders and mainstream environmental representatives agreed that there had been little progress in increasing ethnic and racial diversity on the staff and boards of the mainstream environmental organizations ... (2014, 26)

This remains true for the USFWS. As of 2019, only 5% of USFWS permanent staff identified as “Black or African American” while 82 percent identified as “White” (Fiscal Year 2019 Equal Employment Opportunity Report, 2019, p. 79). Even more tellingly, as of 2013 (in the midst of HNLT negotiations with USFWS), the Southeastern Region of the USFWS employed 1287 permanent staff members, only 9% of whom identified as “Black or African American” despite the region being home to 55% of the nation’s Black citizens (Fiscal Year 2019 Equal Employment Opportunity Report, 2013, p. 76).

Beyond representation within the staff of USFWS, the recreational activities encouraged in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge continue to be aligned with largely Euro-American interests and ideals. Chavez writes that as of 2000, “[d]espite population growth in urban areas and increasing diversity nationwide, there appears to be little diversity among wilderness visitors in the United States. Frequent users are almost exclusively white . . .” (2000, 10). Additionally, as Robert Fletcher points out, “While prior to the Civil War, the idea of wilderness had held for many enslaved Africans the promise of escape from the oppression of white society . . . systematic terror perpetrated by whites following emancipation transformed it into a place of fear and foreboding, associated with such atrocities as lynching and rape” (2014, 123). Particularly in the deep
south, sandwiched between gated neighborhoods mimicking plantation landscapes, Harris Neck is a white space.64

Sarah Whatmore makes a compelling argument in her Hybrid Geographies for the role of conceptualizations of wildlife in the persistence of racial binaries. Whatmore argues that as long as human/animal or subject/object binaries exist, people will be able to justify injustice and even genocide by designating groups of people as less than human. She writes, “To re-place the wild topologically is to recognize that the heterogeneous social performance of wildlife configures ‘human’ as much as ‘animal’ categories and lives in intimate and precarious ways” (2002, 32). She continues, if certain animals,

are deemed not to matter . . . belonging to the species *home sapiens* will prove small comfort against the abuses sanctioned towards such “non-persons.” This is a faultline that no amount of reinforcement of universalist notions of human rights will heal over and which, as we have been reminded with sanguine regularity throughout the genocidal twentieth century, will always be prised open as long as the monstrous category of the animal can be mobilized as grounds enough for treating someone as “less than human” (2002, 32).

Whatmore makes a compelling argument for the ease with which humans can slip into categories such as “wild” or “natural” or “valueless”, a connection Whatmore explores within the context of Aborigines in Australia. Likewise, if we stretch this concept a bit, animals can perhaps just as easily slip into categories like “endangered” or “threatened”, as in the case of Harris Neck’s wood storks, affording them protections not given to local human populations.65

64 For a thorough treatment of the multi-scalar politics of race and nature, see Moore, Pandian, and Kosek (2003).

65 Katherine McKittrick asserts a similar calculus as she unpacks what it means for Blackness to have been invented—not coming from and place: “The impossibility [of a located Blackness] thus leads to the invention of Black nonpersonhood, and the accompanying biocentric codes that naturalize racial hierarchies, all of which are coupled with ongoing Black struggles to assert and reinvent Black humanity as fantastic. Unjust and inequitable social systems, like racial capitalism. Are underwritten by a refusal of Black humanity and a refusal to recognize the struggle to assert Black humanity; this is a refusal, then, of both Black humanness and the praxis of being human” (2017, 98).
Joining the ideas of racial hierarchies and the bounding of the wilderness draws attention to the potential ways in which race and wilderness are tied together. As long as there is a wilderness, there will be a political interior and an exterior, variously defined by one’s positionality. Some humans and animals will belong “in here” and others “out there”. In Harris Neck this “cordon” off of the wilderness, as Whatmore terms it, is ultimately responsible for the (over)protection of the nature and wildlife and, more tacitly, for the devaluation of Black culture and history. By the in here/out there logic, migratory and wading birds and other wildlife belong in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge (HNNWR) and the Black community belongs outside its borders. By the same logic, bird needs are more pressing than human ones, at least insomuch as these needs pertain to HNNWR.66 And, racial issues that permeate life out there, beyond the confines of the refuge, ought not cross the boundary into the purely ecologically focused mission of the USFWS within its borders.

Similarly, McKittrick writes of colonialism’s designation of the “lands of no one” (2013, p. 7). For McKittrick, these are not spaces reserved for nature, rather they are, “. . . spaces of otherness have hardened through time, often with Black, ‘wretched’ bodies occupying or residing outside the lowest rung of humanness and thus inhabiting what most consider inhuman or uninhabitable geographies” (2013, p. 7). These are spaces uninhabitable not because they are deserving of protection but because they are sites of inhumanity, of racial condemnation. I pause here to hold in tension Whatmore and McKittrick’s contrasting yet complimentary constructions of cordonning off. If these two

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66 According to the US Census 2018 American Community Survey, nearly 30% of Black residents of McIntosh County live in poverty, compared with 20.5% of Black Georgians on the state level. For further comparison, 15% of Whites in McIntosh County live below the poverty line, still above the state-wide average of 11% but by a lesser margin. The displacement of one hundred families in a county with a population of only 5292 people in 1940 was a significant displacement of people and families, made more impactful by the failure of the government to compensate families until 1948. These historical events have undoubtedly impacted the economic wellbeing of Harris Neck families for generations, likely borne out in the troubling statistics above. Given an opportunity to make right a historical injustice that persists with real, lived consequences today, courts, USFWS, and Congress have each declined to employ antiracist policy to right these wrongs.
types of uninhabitable spaces can exist at the same time, occupying different material and ontological categories, then it follows that there is an inherent incompatibility between the places chosen to be uninhabitable because of their beauty and bounty and people who belong in “. . . geographies . . . rendered . . . inhuman, dead, and dying” (2013, p. 7). In the maintenance of racial hierarchy, Black histories, Black geographies, and Black bodies must be kept out of Edenic spaces like Harris Neck. As long as racialized ontological categories police boundaries of any kind, the wretched will always be antithetical to the garden. Antiracism will never the business of the USFWS.

4.3.3 Progress?

Scholars like Bell and Whatmore might have predicted that the USFWS, whose conservation aims largely represent the interests of middle- and upper-class whites, would not yield to the interests of HNLT. However, it is the advocacy work of organizations like HNLT that prove it. Scholars, lawyers, and other organizations depend on the willingness of organizations like HNLT to force these conversations about what is just or fair or legal or right into the open through on-the-record meetings, legal proceedings, legislation, and other public discourses to gauge where we are in the circuitous, halting path toward racial equity. What lines of reasoning or advocacy are proving effective? How are courts or government agencies responding to facts, oral histories, and other methods of counter-storytelling? When efforts fail, what did we learn? Without groups willing to act as testcases, these questions remain unanswered or purely theoretical. As Kelley reminds us, the emotional and intellectual labor that goes into pushing racial equity agendas is no less when those efforts fail. And often, it is in those failures that we learn just where we are as a nation, what our organizing bodies and government agencies are willing or unwilling to give up in pursuit of a more just world. The efforts or groups like HNLT hold a mirror up, and their work is only wasted if we fail to pause and peer into it.
After such foreclosures of possibility by the USFWS and the seemingly immutable ontological categories that make sense of racialization, it is worth pausing to consider King’s question once more, where do we go from here? Looking to Kelley again, we are reminded, “[s]truggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won’t bring about our liberation” (2002, p. 198).

4.4 Black Geographies

There are already frameworks, as McKittrick and Whatmore explain, within which sense can be made of cordonning off Harris Neck from Blackness. This has meant that imagining what re-placing the Harris Neck community could look like falls to HNLT. The community redevelopment plans generated by HNLT between 2006 and 2020 can be characterized as nothing less than ambitious. But they may also be characterized as imaginative, anticipatory futures. In acts of creative unforgetting, HNLT has developed plans that imagine Black futures in ways that call to an Afrofuturist framework, operationalizing McKittrick’s call for projects that anticipate Black-life (2013, 11).

Unafraid to ask for a version of justice willing to question legal principle and reallocate land in ways that problematize existing assignments of value, HNLT points to an aspirational Black geography for themselves that re-places their community in a past/future remix that disrupts current arrangements of places, bodies, and histories. These ends are largely accomplished through the community plans developed by HNLT over the last fourteen years. Modest in presentation yet ambitious and creative, the plans present a recovery of both past and future.

The first HNLT community development plan, developed in 2007, works to re-place the residential community lost in 1942. Homesteads would, according to the plan,
sit alongside conservation easements managed by the USFWS. The second community development plan, developed in 2019, moves away from a residential community, advocating instead for a living museum as well as space for farming and a market for local goods. Though the plans differ, both are reclamation projects at heart that ask us to consider what a re-placed Harris Neck—that is a Harris Neck recovered from the past and placed in the future—would look like.

Imagine a future that resurrects the past is truly an Afrofuturist endeavor. As Capers writes, “Afrofuturism is both future looking and backward looking, committed to reclaiming approaches, methodologies, and ways of thinking that predate slavery and colonization . . . [and] by engaging in reclamation, by valorizing a range of cultural traditions, it offers a vision of what could be in the future” (2019, p. 16-17).

HNLT, grounded as it is in the realities of bureaucratic processes and legislative negotiations, engages in what Eshun calls speculative futurity not as “a utopian project for imagining alternative social realities” but with an eye to “engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present” (Eshun, 2003, 290). Creative, bold futures imagined by HNLT members in the form of community development plans map just where we could go from here.

The first community plan developed by HNLT sought to balance their goals for the community’s return to Harris Neck alongside USFWS goals for conservation and public use. On a now defunct website, HNLT published their first plans for a development that combined four-acre plots for families, environmental conservation easements, and infrastructure for alternative energy. In their summary of the plan, HNLT wrote,

In effect, what this plan should accomplish is the protection of all wildlife in Harris Neck, especially the migratory wading birds and endangered and threatened species such as the Wood Stork. At the same time the plan will permit the people of Harris Neck to return home and recreate—in modern terms and with new technologies—the thriving and self-reliant community they once had. Homes will be built; green businesses will be
created. Some families will live in Harris Neck permanently; others will just visit. The
wildlife and natural beauty will be forever preserved and protected, the general public will
still have access, and a model of sustainable development will be created. Long-deferred
justice will finally be achieved, and nothing in the present Harris Neck National Wildlife
Refuge will be displaced or adversely impacted (Preservation & Community Development
Plan, 2008).

This description itself echoes many of Afrofuturism’s themes: returning home, lost
communities/cultures, technology, environment, and justice. It is also utopian vision,
imagining the possibility of a resurrected community living in harmony with the natural
world—a possibility foreclosed by the fortress conservation approach of USFWS.

An accompanying map, recreated below, designates areas as wetlands and ponds,
residential sites, greenspace, commercial or other public sites, a community center, and
USFWS property. The plan, as a whole, returns Harris Neck to private ownership and the
stewardship of former landowners. Though in the text of the plan, USFWS would remain
to tend to both natural and manmade habitats, it would be former residents and their
descendants who, as private property owners, would shape the culture and landscape of
Harris Neck.
The plan was both well considered and radical. Careful work with a planning company yielded a cohesive vision for a residential development that would have a minimal environmental impact and have tangible benefits for the local community. The new homes and the prospect of many of them being used as family vacation homes would provide property tax income at the local level, continued development of the local tourism economy\textsuperscript{67}, as well as economic advancement and renewed sense of community and place for former Harris Neck community members and their families. For HNLT, reclaiming a

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\textsuperscript{67} Some families sought to use homes here as family vacation homes and rent out the homes weekly to tourists when not in use by family members.

112
piece of Harris Neck would mean the opportunity to own land and homes, easy access to waterways for personal use as well as for cultivating oyster beds and shrimping, and other tangible benefits. However, it also reclaims from the past a vision of people living together as a community in Harris Neck.

The plan imagines a reality in which many of the existing boundaries that cordon off Harris Neck are troubled: past becomes present, a white space belongs to Black people, and the wilderness becomes someone’s hearth. The plan imagines what it may be like to re-place the community and does so unconstrained by the limits that have been imposed by “anti-Black colonial . . . terms” and positivist cartographies (McKittrick, 98). To truly appreciate the courage of this proposal, it is useful to imagine alongside HNLT and within the context of the history provided by this project what that really would mean. A mostly Black community would be rebuilt in the midst of a row of mostly white, gated, amenity-based neighborhoods. It would stand on land that passed from slaveholdrers to freedpeople to corrupt local officials to the federal government and then back to the descendants of those freedpeople. Black people would emerge from the struggle possessing something once owned by whites, turning the quintessential colonial trope on its head. The wildlife now protected by USFWS would frame the community geographically but would not limit the possibility of its existence. A Black community would thrive again in Harris Neck, squarely planted in nature, uprooting the ontological categories to which Whatmore and McKittrick point. What a different reality this would be. That it will be difficult to achieve or violates “crass positivist cartographies” and the policies and laws that hold them in place matters little to HNLT. Right alongside waging grounded legal battles, garnering media attention, and navigating the bureaucratic government agencies, HNLT engages in a speculative futurity that has the potential to bring to fruition their vision for Harris Neck.

Nimble and responsive to criticisms by the USFWS, HNLT’s second plan takes a different approach. Instead of advocating for the reinstitution of private property and residential development, the community development plan developed in 2019 works under
the assumption that interest convergence is necessary. Seeking to find common ground with USFWS while still accomplishing the stated goal of HNLT to reinstate a community in Harris Neck, HNLT developed a complex plan aimed at educating both tourists and local residents and supporting the local community. However, in many of the same ways as HNLT’s first proposal, this plan seeks to “imagine the production of space . . . as a project that . . . engenders relations of uncertainty” (2017, p. 98-99).

The plan consists of a living museum complex that includes,

1. A welcome center with a space to host lectures and events
2. The homestead, one part of a living museum complex consisting of a house and working farm and featuring activities like net making and sweetgrass bask making
3. A museum featuring a working oyster house and seafood processing area as well as “displays and videos of interviews with Harris Neck elder and other community members”
4. An “Education/Research/Community Center”
5. A replica of the former Harris Neck community’s one-room schoolhouse
6. Up to 20 acres of agricultural land for organic farming (no pesticides have ever been used on Harris Neck)
7. “History, Cultural, Nature Trails (with signage)”
8. An outdoor performance area
9. An open-air market for seafood and locally produced agriculture
10. “Gullah Geechee and Seafood Café”
11. And visitor lodging consisting of five cottages and a camping and RV park 68

The museum complex would be owned and managed by HNLT and its members and located on land leased from the USFWS. Within those five hundred acres, HNLT

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would be able to rebuild parts of their community, gain a foothold and facilities for community gatherings and small business within the refuge, and share the history and richness of their community with visitors.

The proposed living museum complex remains a great departure from the conservationist regime of the USFWS. However, it seeks to connect with USFWS stated goals of increasing environmental tourism and educating visitors about environmental stewardship. In a cooperative agreement developed in conjunction with the second community redevelopment plan and written by HNLT executive board members, HNLT commits to working to, “encourage the exploration of the natural, historical and cultural resources of the Refuge” while committing to “[a]bide by the special status of the underlying and adjoining lands (Cooperative Agreement between US Fish and Wildlife Service . . ., 2019, p. 2). As explored in the previous section, interactions with USFWS officials had demonstrated clearly that interest convergence likely remains the only potential pathway to HNLT having a presence in Harris Neck. The plan is a savvy turn toward what that point of interest convergence might look like: USFWS is able to continue conservation practices on the vast majority of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge while HNLT develops low-impact structures and programs that draw in both local visitors and tourists and advance shared goals of environmental, cultural, and historic preservation.\(^{69}\)

In addition to creating a plan that would provide material benefits to the local community, even beyond former Harris Neck community members, the proposal engages in the same speculative futurity as the first plan, troubling boundaries carefully maintained by white hegemony. At its core, the second plan asks readers and potential future visitors to image a Black-life as extant and grounded in Harris Neck, not dead or dying, but living right in front of their eyes. As Eshun writes, an Afrofuturist lens works, in part, “[b]y creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of

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\(^{69}\) I want to be clear that this is my framing of this turn and does not represent how the member of HNLT’s board of directors, with their diversity of perspectives and opinions, frames this turn.
progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned Black subjects to prehistory” (2003, p. 297). The plan, and the future it imagines, work against the impossibility of Black-life.

That a resurrected Harris Neck would exist in the future/present is disruptive on its own, but HNLT’s portrayal of the fullness of the Harris Neck community does not just replace Harris Neck as a community with a past/future, it depicts it in a state of vibrancy. Homes, businesses, a school, a market and other community components represent the robustness of past/present/future Harris Neck community. As Capers asserts, “Afrofuturists insist that people of color do more than simply exist in the future. They thrive” (2019, p. 13).

Showcasing sustainable, organic farming and aquaculture also positions Harris Neck as a thriving community, offering expertise and technology. In many Afrofuturist works, and for HNLT, technology features as a contribution made by Africa or the African diaspora to the greater good. The blockbuster Black Panther is an apt example, with Wakanda positioned to share its wealth and knowledge with the world in the closing scenes of the film. In the HNLT plan, a commitment to organic farming and sustainable aquaculture bring technology to the forefront. These practices, foundational to the Harris Neck community of the first half of the twentieth century, are recast as past/future technologies the Harris Neck community seeks to share with the broader culture in pursuit of a different, more sustainable future for all of us. As Samatar writes, “[a] focus on the past as an instrument for survival in the future distinguishes the futurism of Africa and the diaspora” (2017, p. 187).

In speaking with HNLT board members, there is a sense of pride in what HNLT can offer through this small farm. According to one board member, pesticides have never been applied to Harris Neck, and organic farm certification could be quickly obtained by members invested in the farm’s success. From classes and workshops for locals and visitors to selling fresh produce not on offer at the nearest grocer—Dollar General—the
farm provides tangible benefits to the community and calls forward pesticide-free farming from Harris Neck’s past to make it part of a shared sustainable future. In doing this, the farm also upends conceptualizations of the USFWS as experts and HNLT members as interlopers, instead positioning Harris Neck community members as knowledgeable stewards of natural environments.70

In addition to imagining a different future for Harris Neck and its former community members, the living museum complex imagines a different way of engaging with Black history at tourism sites and sites of remembrance. This is important not only for community members as they recover a piece of their past and create a space for the community they have managed to maintain, but to our broader national histories that obscure, erase, or underappreciate the histories of Black people and communities in the US.

HNLT’s community development plans can be usefully read as Afrofuturist documents, that serve, through creativity and a refusal to be bounded to present organizations of power, space, and time, to provide “alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change” (2002, ix). This is more important than ever. With most the current board of directors at retirement-age, a new generation of Harris Neck family members will need to take up the struggle in the years to come. Additionally, like all works of Afrofuturism, the plans, in their troubling of boundaries and arrangements of space, time and relations, call us to bring to fruition a version of the future unfettered by colonial sense- and space-making. These plans constitute a creative, audacious answer to, where do we go from here?

70 See McCutcheon’s work on Black farming and food (2013, 2014, 2019)
4.5 Conclusion

HNLT has told their counterstory, making their case in the courts of law, public opinion and the US Congress and given the government the opportunity to take up an antiracist agenda. It has not. Organizations like HNLT have worked hard to give the government a chance to do the right thing: legal systems, Congress, USFWS and others along the way have failed to remedy this situation. This natural experiment, as I referred to it earlier, tells advocates, scholars, and people of color where we are—and are not—in progress toward not just racial equity but establishing the achievement of racial equity as a worthwhile goal that, sometimes, must be prioritized above other competing aims. In 1942, national security interests outweighed private property rights, resulting in the seizure of Harris Neck. If there will ever be a moment that racial equity might outweigh legal principles (like res judica and statutes of limitations), conservation efforts, or the interests of the white hegemony, we now know, thanks to the work of HNLT, that we are not there yet. The work of HNLT must continue.

As Harris and Hyden write of their work with the Black Belt Initiative, “[r]ecommendations based on life rather than death are revealed as they impassion and empower the reader. This is not just another example of resistance to the dominant development discourse . . . They are multiple and vibrant—and cannot be maintained as invisible. Such work demonstrates the praxis power of Black geographies” (2017, 60). Projects like those of Harris and Hyden, Bates et al, Wachira, and—hopefully—this one, bring us toward an understanding of an Afrofuturist praxis that creates space to imagine into exitance alternative, more just futures.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

This project focuses on the *longue durée* of a single place, and in doing that, covers a lot of ground. Appropriately, we have traveled through time, from Peru Plantation to Harris Neck of 1940 to the stunning quiet of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Working through these moments has required a breadth of methods and frameworks. As I close, it seems daunting to recount them. And perhaps this is the trouble with the *longue durée*—it is simply too much.

As I bring this project to a close, in my mind is a constant refrain: this is *all over the place*. At first, this thought was frightening. This project ought to be focused, tight, with clear connections all pointing in the same direction. Yet, here I am, with this project pointing both backwards and forwards, having made my way from the early days of Peru Plantation to *The Last Angel of History*. However, as I have sat with this anxiety, the refrain has changed a bit: this is *all over the place*. This project called for methodological and theoretical opportunism, neatly labeled collage in another chapter. Understanding the central question, *what happened in Harris Neck?*, required that I be nimble with methods and frameworks because racism is nimble, too. Understanding where we go from here meant jumping through space, time, and genre. What unites this project, though, is a desire to lay out a long history of dispossession and disenfranchisement but not stop there. HNLT is not stuck in the past—they are not even bound to the present, as the last chapter indicates. I had to try and keep up. But pinning down racism and keeping up with the organizing and intellectual work of HNLT, it turns out, is no easy task. Perhaps the most useful thing I can do here is recount what Harris Neck has taught us:

*What happened in Harris Neck is indictment of our bureaucratic, legal, and political systems and a stark example of the inadequacy of our nation’s progress toward racial reconciliation and equity.* The federal government knew, or should have known,
that in the context of the race politics of the 1940’s, land seized from a Black community and returned to local governments would, very likely, cease to benefit the Black community in any meaningful way. Even if we might forgive the initial taking of Harris Neck, granting that the existing airstrip necessitated the taking of this particular place in the name of national security, we cannot excuse the federal government’s blindness to the repercussions of how it reallocated the property after World War II. Additionally, the federal government bears responsibility for the manner in which the land was seized, the delayed compensation, and the failure to consider the gap left between funds paid and the loss of access to subsistence farming and fishing. Though courts refuse to acknowledge it, the federal government perpetrated an injustice on the residents of Harris Neck.

The local government of McIntosh County, Georgia has taken responsibility for its part in ensuring Harris Neck could not be sold back to former community members. Fraud, corrupt officials, and local politics rife with race politics were commonplace in the McIntosh County of the twentieth century. The apology, though a positive step, has no material impact on Harris Neck residents. The actions of the county in the 1940’s cannot be undone, and no official involved in the failure to use and maintain Harris Neck ever issued a public, formal apology for his or her role.

Our legal system has failed to address the claims of the former Harris Neck community. Failing to create space within interpretation of the law for the longue durée of oppression, disenfranchisement, and displacement in Harris Neck, courts have instead looked to statutes of limitations and legal principles like res judica to close to door to the community’s claims. How to right wrongs perpetrated legally remains an open question.71

Though the USFWS bears no responsibility in the initial seizure of Harris Neck or in the flawed surplus property disposal process, it brings its own flawed history and framework to the goings-on of the struggle for Harris Neck. The politics of fortress

conservation, with its reliance on bounding and cordoning, cannot help but reinforce well-rehearsed ontological categories of human/animal, in here/out there, wretched/pure. In Harris Neck, erased history, dismissals of community histories and grievances, and bureaucratic foot-dragging help maintain these boundaries and work against the return of Harris Neck to the community who once called it home.

There is a cognitive dissonance between national narratives of progress toward racial equity and the actions and inactions of our systems, our selves, and those we put in power. Perhaps the last hear has disabused many Americans of the myth of progress toward racial equity. The Black Lives Matter movement has become mainstream and brought with it a renewed understanding of the myriad ways in which race still works to structure the lives of every American, granting privilege and disadvantage based on a deeply flawed biopolitics of deservedness. However, lest any of us feel tempted to believe that our nation and the systems it has built are making real progress toward an antiracist agenda, the work of POER and HNLT deprive us of that illusion. Beyond that, Harris Neck shows us the violence not of police officers or verbally abusive white women but of mundane systems and practices like statutes of limitations and property disposal policies. Racial violence permeates our systems, and so far, courts, career government bureaucrats, and politicians have declined to rectify this in 2,700 acres on the coast of Georgia. If we cannot start to materially right wrongs in this small place, totally uninhabited so as to make what is asked for—its return to the community who was robbed of it—that much simpler, where can we start? Perhaps, we do not have the will to start at all.

POER and HNLT have the courage to ask for what is right. Our government, courts, elected officials have the courage to continue to deny it. What this tells us is that the maintenance of racial inequity is still an acceptable alternative to racial equity. Antiracism is not yet a mandate from the people—or at least enough of them, or the right ones.
An audacious faith in the future animated by “powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards the, to command us to make them flesh.”\textsuperscript{72} HNLT powerfully envisions a future in Harris Neck, one that re-palaces the past, positions. Reading their most recent community development plan for a living museum, we find ourselves transported: former Harris Neck community members are once again occupying Harris Neck, engaged in sustainable agriculture and aquaculture, sharing both food and cultivation technologies with the broader community. This vision aligns with USFWS aims for community education and ecotourism even as it problematizes many of the boundaries policed by USFWS policy and practice in Harris Neck. Its creative power, drawn in part from its remixings and troublings, calls it to life. The proposals beg the question, \textit{why not}? Why shouldn’t this be the future of Harris Neck? What are the reasons or barriers that should prevent this future from materializing? How can we overcome them?

\textit{Harris Neck could happen again, right now.} Harris Neck is not unique among stories of dispossession and could \textit{absolutely} happen again: there are no antiracist eminent domain policies to protect communities of color; court rulings continue to chip away at landmark legislation and rulings on issues of race, like voting rights and affirmative action; and there are no federal efforts to systematically review claims of racial injustice that fall beyond the power—or interest—of courts to adjudicate. There is nothing preventing the same set of circumstances from conspiring to displace another community of color.

\textsuperscript{72} Eshun, 2003, p. 291
CHAPTER 6. METHODS

In some ways, the study of one’s own society involves an inverse process from the study of an alien one. Instead of learning conceptual categories and then, through fieldwork, finding the contexts in which to apply them, those of us who study societies in which we have preexisting experience absorb analytic categories that rename and reframe what is already known . . . Yet, given the diversity within cultural domains and across groups, even the most experienced of ‘native’ anthropologists cannot know everything about his or her own society . . . In fact, by opening up access to hidden stores of research materials, the study of anthropology can also lead to the discovery of many strange and unfamiliar aspects of one’s own society.

--Kirin Narayan, “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?”

6.1 Introduction

Though Narayan is working within a notably different context, her observations about working within one’s own society are readily applicable to this researcher. My grandmother has lived and owned businesses in McIntosh County, Georgia for more than thirty years. At times I have lived with her and at other times in neighboring Glynn County. My mother has lived in McIntosh County since 2004, when I was a senior in high school, and, since then, I have spent significant amounts of time there. In the summer of 2015, I lived with her and reacquainted myself with McIntosh County, exploring the area’s neighborhoods, golf courses, marina, and the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge as well as the more southward St. Simons and Jekyll Islands. Since then, I have visited the coast of Georgia dozens of times and consider Glynn and McIntosh Counties my home, though I live in Rome, Georgia for the majority of the year. The entirety of my family as well as my partner’s family live in these two counties and have lived there for generations. Our families have owned businesses, been involved in local politics, been educated, and created
whole lives in these places. It is not a question of if my partner and our child will move back to the coast of Georgia but when.

I am tied to coastal Georgia—often referred to at the Golden Isles on billboards and other tourism advertisements. I love this place and my community. I am far from unbiased, and I have an admittedly complex relationship with my “field”. When I’m there, I boat frequently, participating in one of the characteristically white, upper-middleclass tourist activities that has remade northern McIntosh County into a site for tourism and amenity-based neighborhood development. It is in northern McIntosh County that I feel most keenly the privilege of my race and my family’s economic status. There is little question that my positionality as a white woman has shaped my own experiences of McIntosh County and my perceptions of the people and places there. My appearance allows me to pass feely into and out of sites—with their hangings together of people, animals, items—like marinas, backyards, and wooded nature walks, often unnoticed or greeted as an insider. I have never felt in danger in McIntosh County, and this is absolutely a function of my racial and economic privilege. One only need read Melissa Fay Greene’s notable nonfiction text, *Praying for Sheetrock*, to understand that McIntosh County has always been a notoriously dangerous place for Black people. Likewise, economic privilege has allowed me unmitigated access to the neighborhoods which, in chapter two, I criticize as employing a plantation aesthetic and benefiting from the continued maintenance of Harris Neck as a protected area. I have also had consistent access to a boat, allowing me to explore from the water Harris Neck’s landscape.

Aside from my social identity, my personal history in the area has shaped this project as well. Community connections allowed me an early introduction to an executive board member of the Harris Neck Land Trust, which in turn helped determine the trajectory of this project. I began engaging with Harris Neck Land Trust in early 2014, and preliminary discussions with various members informed my research questions and methods. However, I soon realized three things: first, the interviews were taking an
emotional toll on those with whom I spoke; second, the time I was asking of HNLT members was time they could otherwise be spending on tasks related to their self-advocacy work; and, third, that while I wanted to be an advocate for HNLT, I simply did not know enough to be helpful. For these reasons, I stepped back from active engagement with HNLT for some time, watching and respecting their work from afar, conducting archival research, and feeling eager to reengage when I had something to offer. In 2020, I have had the opportunity to reengage in this way, having regular conversations with HNLT board members and taking on my first task as an active advocate for HNLT (submitting FOIA requests for government records). Being from this community both spurred my early engagement and made me feel compelled not to overtax HNLT with my own research agenda.

Knowing the history of the area, as passed down in oral histories by family and friends, helps me navigate the complex political climate of McIntosh County. In the moments I have been an outsider—primarily in the preliminary research phase of this project—I have been able to lean into my role as a researcher, establishing a common interest and exempting myself from some measure of suspicion while also gaining access to people and places as a function of my role. For me, Fletcher’s assertion about the value of “insider” fieldwork holds true: “While [the study of one’s own society] remains controversial, it offers a potentially valuable source of insight into the lived experience of a phenomenon that an outsider—even one with many years’ experience in a given context—would be hard-pressed to duplicate . . .” (2014, p. 19).

Having extensive ties to my research site and beginning this project with some foundational knowledge about the area and its history and politics has also meant that my fieldwork does not fit within neat descriptions of timelines and neither did it begin with an envisagement of a prescribed set of methods. Foremost, I sought to understand, “How

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73 For example, Adam S. Poppell III, grandson of Sheriff Ad Poppell, is currently County Attorney for McIntosh County, Georgia. Along with his other duties, he oversees operations of the County Clerk.
did we get here?” Form, I knew, would need to follow function. Freeman writes of her own research and her need to work in a “... spontaneous way to be open to a wide range of sources and information...” (2020, 1). She proposes the term collage to explain this approach and the ways in which it “allows the researcher to use multiple methods, not to neatly compare theoretical or methodological perspectives, but to work through the rich and messy patchwork of fragments that arise from research...” (2020, 2-3). Characterized by attention to a broad research area and the ability to be nimble in the face of new information, Freeman’s recent contribution of this concept helps me frame and validate my own willingness to employ the methods needed to understand the history and legacy of the struggle over Harris Neck. Like Freeman, my project traces a lineage of conflict from the first half of the twentieth century to the present. While methods derived from historical geography provided a solid foundation, additional methods would be needed to understand the more recent history and present significance of the ongoing conflict. The need for a collage of methods was even more pronounced given the absence of formal research regarding Harris Neck in the academe. Ultimately, this project combines archival research, landscape analysis, and discourse analysis to understand the historical facts of the initial seizure of Harris Neck; the legacy of the struggle for its return to former Harris Neck community members; and the ways in which this place has been enrolled in the maintenance of the legal, political, environmental, and economic interests of whites.

6.2 Archival Research

Between August 2019 and May of 2020, I conducted archival research. The bulk of this research was conducted in person at the National Archives in Atlanta, Georgia during the fall of 2019. During this time, I was able to maintain residence and employment in Rome, Georgia. Over the course of several months, I was able to spend full days in the archives working through documents associated with Harris Neck. The bulk of the records
were generated by the War Assets Administration and the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the federal court system. Correspondence, reports, legal filings, photos, appraisals, and maps constitute the bulk of the documents reproduced and collected both electronically and in print.

In addition to obtaining documents in person in the National Archives in Atlanta, I corresponded with the National Archives in Baltimore, Maryland and Seattle, Washington and submitted Freedom of Information Act requests for records held by the Army Corps of Engineers and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. While these official records have been integral to establishing many of the historical events in Harris Neck’s past, they are neither an infallible source of truth nor a complete record. Mills warns that each archive is “. . . still essentially one version of the past, and issues of power and representation are central to archives and their construction” (2013, p. 703). This is, indeed, true regarding Harris Neck’s history. The bulk of the archival record is from the Jim Crow era, thus its status as “official” in a time of openly racist institutionalized policies renders it immediately suspect. My background in postcolonial literature and literary theory was helpful in reading from the margins, attentive to silences, absences, and fissures in official records.

In addition to seeking silenced voices in official archives, I sought out alternative source of history and information. Mills goes on to encourage researchers to “use as many fragments as possible”, and, in this project, those included accessing online repositories and archives that included oral histories from former Harris Neck community members and historical documents produced at the local level. This includes oral testimony and documents provided to Congress in 1979 and 2011 as well as the Harris Neck Land Trusts websites. Congressional hearings and the HNLT website have provided platforms for former Harris Neck community members to share their stories, provide documents not

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74 The researcher has a printed copy of Harris Neck Land Trust’s now defunct website from 2016. There is a consistently updated version of a new website available at http://harrisnecklandtrust.org.
otherwise included in the official historical record, and centralize the expansive media coverage of the Harris Neck land struggle. This publicly available information provided directly by former Harris Neck community members allowed me to include their histories and perspectives without asking community members to relive painful events or use their time and emotional energy in service of this project. I felt strongly that I should shoulder as much of the intellectual labor as possible by collecting existing oral histories and only seeking interviews or additional oral histories if needed. Ultimately, I determined that these less traditional archives provided ample material for this project. However, oral histories and interviews stand out as clear next steps as I continue this project.

6.3 Discourse Analysis

In seeking to understand the role of discourse in shaping and in undoing racism, I lean heavily on training I received through my BA and MA in English. The traditional method of close reading combined with a focus on postcolonial literature and theory guides my work. Fairclough defines and operationalizes the term discourse in his *Social, discourse, and text analysis*:

... discourse figures in the representations which are always part of social practices—representations of the material world, of other social practices, reflexive self-representations of the practice in question. Representation is clearly a discoursal matter, and we can distinguish different discourses, which may represent the same area of the world from different perspectives or positions. Notice that ‘discourse’ is being used here in two senses: abstractly, as an abstract noun, meaning language and other types of semiosis as elements of social life; more concretely, as a count noun, meaning particular ways of representing part of the world.” (1992, 26)

This definition gives meaning to the rift between a semiotic textual analysis and discursive analysis, often portrayed as divergent methods for textual analysis. However, this project combines to two, demonstrating the value of discourse analysis attentive both
to the words on the page and the broader conversations of which they are a part. Equally important, discourse analysis must consider what is not said or what only exists along the margins. Examining the margins, being attentive to what is excluded, and seeking connections to cultural referents from a broad range of possibilities all point to postcolonial methods of discourse analysis informed by postcolonial literary scholars like Fanon (1965, 1952) Said (2012, 1979), and Bhabha (1994).

Items collected for discourse analysis include markers and signs in Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge, brochures, reports, webpages, testimony to Congress and to federal courts, correspondence, legal filings and rulings, and real-estate advertisements. For each document, I conducted a close reading and then worked to connect the words on the page with broader discourses. Additionally, each document was read from the margins, attentive to what was left out, actively silenced, or pushed aside.

6.4 Landscape Analysis

Discourse analysis and landscape analysis are intimately related. Just as the spoken or written word reveals ideas, priorities, and existing hegemonic structures, so does the landscape. As Schein points out,

> Each seemingly individual decision behind any particular U.S. landscape is embedded within a discourse. When the action results in a tangible landscape element, or total ensemble, the cultural landscape becomes the discourse materialized. Examples of such discourses might include zoning theory and practice, architectural design trends, economic consumption patterns, and others. As a material component of a particular discourse or set of intersecting discourses, ‘the cultural landscape’ at once captures the intent and ideology of the discourse as a whole and is a constitutive part of its ongoing development and reinforcement.” (1997: 663)

Schein encourages here an attentiveness to both the parts and the whole in much the same way that I advocate above. In this project, I apply Schein’s understanding of reading the landscape and bring to it the same attentiveness to silences and margins
discussed above. This lens mitigates the tendency of landscape analysis to privilege what is seen while also working to amplify the stories of those without the “... social, political, and economic capital to make their societal visions visible in the landscape” (Allen, Lawhon and Pierce 2019, 1002).

I visited Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge at least five times between 2014 and 2020. In 2017 and 2020, I experienced and photographed the landscape in and around Harris Neck. Additionally, between 2014 and 2020, I made frequent trips home/in the field, observing the slow rebound of speculative real estate and gated neighborhoods after the Great Recession and the modest growth of restaurants and shops in the area. Additionally, maps were collected through archival work outlined above, visits to Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge where large posted maps and brochures with maps are available, via Harris Neck Land Trust web materials, and through contacts in HNLT. In 2020, these photographs and maps were analyzed using the methods outlined above.

6.5 Relationship with Harris Neck Land Trust

I determined in 2017 that interviews would not be part of my methods, though I had originally intended to rely heavily on them to tell the story of Harris Neck. Conversations with former Harris Neck community members during preliminary research yielded narratives very similar to those already published by HNLT through their website and publicly available testimony. Additionally, these conversations revealed the richness of the existing historical record and the need for this researcher to do extensive work to fully understand the historical context of the struggle for Harris Neck. As a result, I decided that interviews were not necessary for the scope of this project, though they are a natural extension of what has been done here.

What was needed, however, was continued conversation with Harris Neck Land Trust members regarding the developments and progress of the organization. In
2020, I requested and was granted a Nonhuman Research designation by University of Kentucky’s Institutional Review Board, allowing me to make inquiries to Harris Neck Land Trust board members so long as these questions focus solely on matters pertaining to the Harris Neck Land Trust. In October and November of 2020, I had several conversations with Harris Neck Land Trust board members regarding the future direction of the organization and its work to restore land to former Harris Neck Community members. These conversations are included in this project unattributed to a single board member. Rather, the information and impressions gathered in these conversations are presented in aggregate. These conversations provided information that was not otherwise available and was integral to presenting a complete picture of HNLT’s progress.

Likely due in part to my insider status and family connections, board members shared with me personal opinions and information that are not included in this project. These omissions are necessary to protect the integrity of this research and my relationships with members of my community.

6.6 Autoethnography and Participant Observation

Falling somewhere between autoethnography and participant observation, the extensive time spent in McIntosh County, Georgia has provided indispensable cultural, historical, and political context without which I could not have told this story. Being on the Georgia’s coast, one is immediately struck by its beauty. Mossy oaks with bowing limbs stretch lazily over dirt roads. Oyster beds jut up from dark waterways. Algae-covered alligators slink into ponds. Wood storks stand motionless until they jab the water almost too quickly to see. The beauty is stunning. One must spend enough time here, soaking in this beauty and the richness of the land and waters and people, to begin to understand the heartache that Harris Neck community members must have felt. I love this place in a deep and abiding way, and, still, I cannot bridge the gap of history and privilege
to empathize. That gap would be even wider, though, if I had not spent extensive time in northern McIntosh County.

Additionally, experiencing the surroundings of amenity-based neighborhoods allows me to understand the appeal of the area as a vacation and retirement destination. Boating. Watching the rhythms of life—fishing off of bridges, selling shrimp out of coolers, waving at absolutely everyone.

6.7 Writing the Results

Analysis of documents collected through archival research began in the winter of 2019. I applied the discourse analysis methods discussed above, working through the full set of collected documents multiple times, as what I learned from the record informed my readings of these texts. As a result, I often toggled between analysis of archival documents and writing. Creating a full, cohesive timeline of events that incorporated narratives from various groups was time consuming and required meticulous attention to detail, so this phase of writing was significantly longer than others.

In the summer of 2020, I began to write the second conceptual chapter and revisited more contemporary records and photos, including those collected by this researcher and recent publications from People Organized for Equal Rights, Harris Neck Land Trust, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Additionally, court records and documents from congressional hearings were analyzed. Discourse analysis continued to be a key method while landscape analysis was also applied to understand the current landscape and context of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Again, I moved between analysis and writing fluidly, while also revisiting relevant literature.

Finally, in early fall of 2020 I focused more intensely on the Harris Neck Land Trust and US Fish and Wildlife Service and began composing the third and final conceptual chapter. I filed an additional Freedom of Information Act request, corresponded with
congressional representatives for comment, and analyzed published materials from both groups. Additionally, I spend significant time speaking with Harris Neck Land Trust board members about the current status of the organization and negotiations with the USFWS. In working with contemporaneous happenings, this phase of writing was particularly complex, requiring me to rewrite entire sections as new developments changed the landscape of this struggle.

6.8 Challenges

One early challenge was the very large amount of archival material available regarding Harris Neck. There were more than a dozen boxes of material available, each full to the brim with documents, maps, photos, and the like. The boxes were generated by various government agencies, so there were duplicates of many records, meaning that the volume of paper did not necessarily reflect the volume of information available. Additionally, key information was missing from the archive, including records from the Army Corps of Engineers regarding the selection of the site for Harris Neck Army Airfield. A FOIA request to the Army Corps of Engineers was returned, stating there were no available records providing information about how Harris Neck was selected. This gap in the archive is notable because former Harris Neck community members allege collusion among McIntosh County officials who, they say, were motivated to take control of land held by a thriving Black community and drive the community into the county’s wage-labor system.

Obtaining court records also presented challenges. I have limited access to databases like LexisNexis because I am not a law student or legal scholar. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted my ability to reach the staff in the National

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75 There are two types of access to LexisNexis and Westlaw, academic and law. Students enrolled outside of University of Kentucky’s School of Law only have access to the academic version, which provides more limited access to records.
Archives holding federal court records. While I was able to obtain the text of many filings and rulings, I was not able to obtain exhibits submitted by POER lawyers in 1979 and 1980. Additionally, there are some records regarding suits filed against Sheriff Tom Poppell held at the county-level in McIntosh County that I have not yet been able to access.

Another challenge was determining the right amount and timing of collaboration with Harris Neck Land Trust. This project makes my own position clear with regard to the struggle for Harris Neck, and collaborating with the Harris Neck Land Trust seems a natural extension of this work. However, HNLT members are busy—with their own lives, with advocacy on behalf of the group, in collaboration with their legal team and other scholars. Additionally, with the lack of established facts in the historical and academic record, I was aware that much of the work of this project would focus on my learning and demonstrating things HLNT members knew to be true from their own research and memories. It was without question that collaborating with HNLT could benefit my project, but what was less clear is what I could provide in return—the lynchpin of true collaboration. Additionally, without utilizing interviews as a method and without IRB approval for interviews, I wanted to ensure that I proceeded ethically and in line with University of Kentucky guidelines. For these reasons, I decided that after the initial phase of preliminary research, I would step back from frequent communication with HNLT until I was in a position to be a contributing member of a true partnership. In fall of 2020, I resumed contact with HNLT members, able to share archival records, offer thoughts, and ask questions based on a shared knowledge of the full history of Harris Neck. While on a personal level, I wish I could have nurtured these relationships more fully in the interim, I feel confident that I am now better positioned to accept their contributions to and feedback on my project and contribute to their efforts. A HNLT board member recently shared a piece of wisdom his mother shared with him, “Never come to a party without a gift.” This validated my decision, as have my recent, vibrant conversations with HNLT members about next steps.
6.9 Concluding Thoughts

This project ultimately represents a foundation on which I will build continued research regarding the relationship between race, power, and place on Georgia’s coast and additional work with the Harris Neck Land Trust, both within and beyond the academy. I look forward to working with HNLT more closely in the next phases of this research, in which I plan to conduct interviews to better understand the varying perspectives of HNLT members on proposed community plans. Research in this vein will allow me to continue pursuing a research agenda oriented toward an Afrofuturist/Black geographies praxis but will also give HNLT useful information about consensus and disagreement regarding next steps in their community organizing and self-advocacy.
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