

Digging in Your Own Backyard

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RÉSUMÉ Ce texte présume que les archives sont un entrepôt d'information factuelle tout en étant chargées des relations de pouvoir de nature historique et géographique avec lesquels elles sont impliquées. Les archives peuvent être un dépôt ordinaire, un appareil d'interprétation puissant, une vue épistémologique sur le monde, et souvent les trois à la fois. Cependant, saisir les ramifications théoriques des « archives » problématisées et comprendre ce que cela signifie « sur le terrain » – du moins dans certains cas, dans certains sites et dans certains exemples empiriques – ne sont pas toujours la même chose. Afin d'essayer de corriger cette disjonction qui survient parfois entre la théorie et la pratique, ce texte présente une histoire d'un paysage racialisé qui s'étend à partir d'une incursion dans un centre d'archives historique dans son sens le plus traditionnel – un dépôt local de documents gouvernementaux. Le texte suggère que les questions et problèmes examinés dans ce cas spécifique transcendent ce site, ce qui présente une pertinence savante plus large pour un grand public.

ABSTRACT This article assumes the archive is at once a repository of facts as it also is laden with, and implicated in, historically and geographically constituted webs of power relations. The archive can be a benign repository, a powerful interpretive apparatus, an epistemological frame on the world, and often is all of these at once. But understanding the theoretical implications of a problematized “archive” and knowing what that means “on the ground” – in particular cases and sites and empirical examples – are not always the same thing. In order to help rectify that sometimes-disjuncture between theory and practice, this essay presents a story of a racialized landscape that begins with one foray into an historical archive in a very traditional sense – a local repository of government documents. It suggests that the issues and problems explored in this particular case transcend their site, with broader scholarly relevance for a wider audience.

I am not an archivist. However, as an historical and cultural geographer I have had many occasions to use archives over the past twenty years, and have an interest in the archive's implication in the academic or intellectual project that “the archive” purports to support through its yielding of “data.” That is, I understand that the archive is at once a repository of facts as it also is laden with, and implicated in, historically (and, I would argue, geographically) constituted webs of power relations that work to make the archive central to

social, political, economic, and cultural reproduction. This is not necessarily news to anyone who depends upon records of any sort, and the general idea often is captured, in shorthand, in the admonition that “the powerful keep the records” or by claims that the archive is itself a normative epistemology – a way in which we know and value the wor(l)d(s) of, in my case, the past.¹ But understanding the theoretical implications of a problematized “archive” and knowing what that means “on the ground” – in particular cases and sites and empirical examples – are not always the same thing. In order to help rectify that sometimes-disjuncture between theory and practice, I present below a story of sorts: of one (accidental) foray into *an* historical archive in a very traditional sense – a local repository of government documents – and some of the issues and problems that exercise presented. In effect, I begin by using heuristically the term archive in its most unproblematic manifestation, as a collection of facts. I then move to raise (if not always answer) questions about the assumptions and consequences of relying upon those facts in scholarly practice. It is a simple story, but in its telling perhaps some better grasp of the capabilities and limits of our dependence upon archival *materials* and archivists will be foregrounded in ways that transcend the example to have relevance for a wider audience. It is, at one level, a personal story, and for that I make no apology, for every use of the archive involves someone’s personal story, and one of the lessons of the “post” academic world is that we, the researchers, are ever present in our work – a presence that while inexorable nevertheless needs to somehow be acknowledged if not always accounted for. And, finally, while it is a personal story, and begins with an inevitable (and often hoped for) serendipitous turn that seems to mark most projects reliant upon archival materials, it also moves beyond the personal, or at least holds out hope for such, and into in the realm of the epistemological by asking what kinds of questions might be raised that the “personal” might even preclude through the predilections we bring to any project in the first place. In effect, throughout this paper “archive” means different things – from seemingly benign repository to powerful interpretive apparatus to epistemological frame on the world. Some may balk at this seeming inability to define, but one point of the story is that the archive is all of these things, and often all at once. Understanding that complication should be liberating, allowing us at once to use an archive in our scholarly practice even as we realize its limits not only for answering the questions we ask of it, but in framing, or not, the questions

1 See, for example, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos. 1–2 (March 2002), pp. 1–19; Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos. 3–4 (September 2002), pp. 171–85. For an introduction, of sorts, in my own sub-discipline of historical geography, see *Historical Geography*, vol. 29 (2001), Thematic Issue: Practicing Historical Geography, edited by Richard H. Schein.

in the first place. But this is starting to sound too turgidly theoretical; and the point of this short essay is to tell a story. Here is mine.

I live in The South, a part of the US where race, as the stereotype goes, is so much closer to the surface of everyday life. And so it may be. The title of this essay is meant to be metaphorical, but a former student of mine also is an archaeologist, and he always wanted to dig in my backyard, literally, with a pick and shovel and toothbrush. He claimed to see good spots, and the archival record bears him out. My house is quite large, and dates to the antebellum period. Later maps indicate the presence of several small, one-storey, unremarkable and un-remarked upon dwellings about the property, possibly remnant slave quarters.² Additionally, the will of the man who had the house built in 1849 included “property” in the form of almost a dozen slaves.³

These facts are not just historical ephemera or minutiae, for the little village where I live is in Woodford County, Kentucky, a county that was a majority black/slave holding county in Kentucky on the eve of the Civil War, and it not-so-long-ago had two sides to Main street, one White – one Black, and segregation is still evident in the town. And there are some recorded oral histories of the town in my local library that are about ten years old, and in them, one of my African-American neighbours could still, as late as 1992, note that one of my White neighbour’s “people” owned her “people”; and she joked about teasing that very prominent White woman whenever she saw her, about the fact that they probably are related.⁴ Things really are quite close to the surface where I live.

But while I am keen to establish at least a sense of the long durée of local racial formation, my intent here is not to draw attention to the structural imperatives of race and racism (at least not yet). I do that elsewhere.⁵ And, after all, for our purposes here, “race relations” as they are so often and so euphemistically called are actually quite good in my town. At least on the surface.

So this short beginning presents a brief context, and as a scholar and aca-

2 Sanborn Map Company, *Midway, Kentucky* (New York, 1886): one map on two sheets; Sanborn-Perris Map Company, *Midway, Woodford County, Kentucky* (New York, 1891): one map on two sheets.

3 County Clerk’s office, Versailles, Woodford County, Kentucky, *Will Books N:413 (will) and N:465 (appraisal)* of R.H. Davis, 1850.

4 Transcribed oral interviews (typescript) with African-American residents of Midway, Kentucky, conducted under the supervision of Kristina Minister and funded by the Kentucky Heritage Council, conducted between 1990 and 1992 and housed in the collection of the Midway Free Library, Midway, Kentucky (hereafter *Minister Interviews*).

5 Richard H. Schein, “Introduction” to Focus Section: Race, Racism, and Geography, *The Professional Geographer*, vol. 54, no.1 (2002), pp. 1–5; Richard H. Schein, “The Normative Dimensions of Landscape,” in C. Wilson and P. Groth, eds., *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Study after J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 199–218.

demically I have been interested in these things. But the story I want to start with here was, so I thought, not about these things. It started rather innocuously as a household matter, of sorts, and serendipitously led to this essay. The following story may raise more questions than it answers, but I am of the opinion that can be a good thing, given the uncertainty of historical geographical research and the inevitable “leaps of faith” we constantly and consistently employ in our seemingly confident and all-knowing conclusions (at least on the pages of academic journals).

There is an empty lot next to my house – legally comprising four separate parcels – that is also adjacent to, and owned by, a small women’s college that started out in the nineteenth century as the Kentucky Female Orphans School (Figure 1). I was approached by the college president, who asked if I was interested in buying them. I was. After further discussion, it turned out that the college could not locate the deeds or identify the property lines, and as a sometimes-historical geographer I volunteered my skills and drove to the county seat to look at some deed records in the courthouse.⁶ The lots were easy enough to find in the indices by their address and the name of their current owners, my neighbours, and they contained the necessary survey information to determine ownership and the lot lines (which was all I was really after). But something drew me to trace the deeds back (Figure 2). The first couple of transfers, working backwards, were easy enough.⁷ Then the deeds disappeared in the 1980s – for about fifty years. It took some doing, but I picked them up again in the 1930s. What I discovered was that while the houses on the street behind me are all owned by White folks now, that has not always been the case. Around the 1930s it appears that ownership was transferred to some African-American buyers from White sellers, and the street then appeared as an African-American enclave. Let me elaborate a bit, and bear with me on the detail. The houses and lots in question were sold by the

6 And I did so by broadening my search from the original property (four parcels) to the entire small city block of land of which my house is a part.

7 In keeping with common US deed practice, property records in Woodford County, Kentucky are kept in large ledgers in a vault in the County Clerk’s office. Property is most easily traced backwards, starting with the current owner, who is locatable in the deed transfer index. Once the owner is located in the index, reference is given to the deed book and page number of the most recent transfer. That deed book is readily accessible, and by reading that deed transfer, reference can be gleaned to the penultimate deed transfer that preceded the one in question (usually in the form of “... as transferred to John Smith by Mary and Joseph Jones on ... as recorded in deed book ... page ...”). In this manner deeds can (theoretically) be traced backwards to the first legally recorded owner (and in my part of the country that usually means a post-Revolutionary land-grant made after Native American titles had been “extinguished”). Of course, one can “break into” the sequence at any point with knowledge of one or another of the transfer parties (and provided the county courthouse didn’t have a fire destroy records at some point). It was this general procedure that I undertook, starting with four different properties and working backwards, for the story being told here.

widely scattered heirs of W.T. Risk about 1935 (there were fourteen heirs listed, grouped into what appeared to be seven married couples). W.T. Risk was the sole heir of N.B. Risk, and I found his 1896 will that included an inventory of property, debts, and creditors. In that will, N.B. Risk listed quite a few pieces of real property in and around Midway. Most of the properties were identified not only by address, but were also associated with a name – apparently either of a tenant or of the person who sold Risk the property in the first place – except the lots I was interested in, listed simply as “A tract of land near the female orphan school, bought of James R. Pates upon which are situated 7 tenant houses containing about 2 acres” (the tenants being unnamed).⁸ Here the deed record converged with other archival evidence – namely a fire insurance map from 1903 (Figure 3) that noted, just off the map from my own house, “75’ to Negro Dwg,” [75 feet to Negro dwellings], presumably the “tenant houses” of N.B. Risk’s property portfolio.⁹ The difference between the turn of the twentieth century – as evidenced in Risk’s 1896 will and the 1903 map – and about 1935 was that in 1900 African-American presence was marginal, their race a hint, just below the surface. As tenants African-Americans were unnamed but noted; their houses were not mapped, but were located. By 1935, at least, some African-Americans in Midway had been brought into the archive, through the prospect of freehold land tenure – property ownership. And this possibility led me to consider how African-Americans got land in this town after the Civil War.

Now, the prospect of insight into land transfer, African-American ownership, and the creation of Black rural hamlets and urban enclaves after the Civil War is a subject of long-standing regional interest. It was certainly a contemporary topic among newly manumitted (freed) slaves in the nineteenth century, as found in the proclamation of Bayley Wyatt, who wrote:

... Our wives, our children, our husbands has been sold over and over again to purchase the land we now locate upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land. ... And then didn't we clear the land and raise the crops of corn, of cotton, of tobacco, of rice, of sugar, of everything. And then didn't them large cities in the North grow up on the cotton and the sugars and the rice that we make? Yes! I appeal to the South and the North if I hasn't spoken the words of truth. I say they have grown rich, and my people is poor.¹⁰

8 County Clerk's office, Versailles, Woodford County, Kentucky, *Will Books 3:421 (will) and 4:317 (appraisal)* of N.B. Risk, 1896.

9 Sanborn Map Company, *Midway, Woodford County, Kentucky* (Sanborn Map Company, 1903); one map on three sheets.

10 Bayley Wyatt, “A Right to the Land,” in Roy E. Finkenbine, ed., *Sources of the African-American Past* (New York, 1997), p. 88. Original reprinted (and corrected) in Bayley Wyatt, *A Freedman's Speech* (Philadelphia, 1867).



Figure 1: *An apparently empty lot, adjacent to my house in Midway, Kentucky.*

There also is a long-standing scholarly literature that deals with these things. In the case of rural lands, the stories are mostly of the promise of reconstruction and the thirteenth amendment, the claims of manumitted slaves to land after the Civil War, and the success, or failure through court-ordered decisions, of that rural component of post-bellum, southern rural life. Not as well documented, but of equal interest in my part of the Upper South are the numerous all-Black villages and urban enclaves, some of which still persist, many of which were generational way stations in the first leg of the Great Migration to the north and west.¹¹ Perhaps in this little deed-tracing exercise was the opportunity to glimpse not just the creation of African-American enclaves in at least one small southern town, but also the mechanisms by which this property transfer actually took place. I had seen archival evidence of that process in another project in St. Louis dealing with the same early twentieth-century time period, a certain scheme where White-owned realty companies advertised in

11 John Kellogg, "Negro Urban Clusters in the Post-bellum South," *Geographical Review*, vol. 67 no. 3 (1977), pp. 310–21; John Kellogg, "The Formation of Black Residential Areas in Lexington, Kentucky, 1865–1887," *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1982), pp. 21–52; Karl B. Raitz and Peter C. Smith, "Negro Hamlets and Agricultural Estates in Kentucky's Inner Bluegrass," *Geographical Review*, vol. 64, no. 2 (1974), pp. 217–34.



Figure 2: Deed indices in the Woodford County courthouse, Versailles, Kentucky, 2004.

the newspapers for White investors to buy lots for immediate “flipping” to African-American purchasers. White investors could take advantage of certain legal restrictions on Black property purchase to make a 100% profit on suburbanizing African-Americans in twenty-four hours. This case promised to add to my understanding of these processes in a wider field.

No longer concerned with simple questions of twenty-first-century property lines, but with African-American land ownership of the previous two centuries, I began to make up a working hypothesis about the seven tenant houses on that two-acre lot. That lot, on Higgins Street, includes the site of the first house in Midway, home of the antebellum farmer who sold the land to the railroad company that platted the town in the 1830s (and is marked with a stone historical tablet stating those very facts; another archival marker of a different sort). The fact of widely scattered heirs dividing up and selling off the property, the fact that the tenant houses clearly were occupied at least thirty years prior to the transfer of ownership from White to African-American owners, and the fact that the lots and houses in question were very small, even by rural working class standards in central Kentucky, led me to wonder if this was a small pocket of post-bellum White-Black social relations where former slaves still lived adjacent to the old big house, or at least in close proximity to former masters who employed those tenants in town or on nearby farms. There is evi-

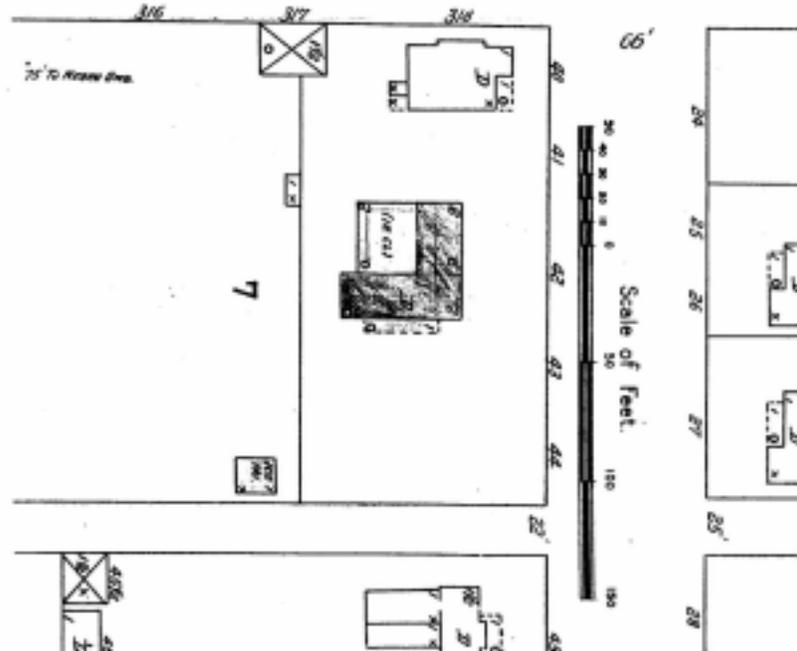


Figure 3: A Sanborn fire insurance map of my house, 1903.

dence in the oral history archives that former masters bought or helped to buy houses for former slaves in town – a fact that could, I suppose, be variously interpreted from altruism to paternalism to just another way to maintain the obligation of a manumitted labour force after slavery had been dissolved. Geneva Lee Hawkins, one of those interviewed, noted of her African-American ancestors and their post-Civil War contemporaries that “... they all owned property as they came into Midway from slavery ... The owners ... helped ‘em to get that ... I can’t remember anyone renting.”¹²

There also is evidence that, like their rural share-cropping counterparts who were still entangled in socio-spatial relations redolent of the antebellum economy, African-Americans “in town” still worked for the same families for years, even generations, after the end of the Civil War. I have begun to ask around, for as you might guess, memories run deep in my little village, and I will continue to prosecute the story through whatever means I can, for it appears as one small part of Reconstruction and the eventual Jim Crow South, lived through land occupation and ownership, and made manifest in racial res-

¹² *Minister Interviews*: Geneva Lee Hawkins, October 1990, pp. 85–87.

idential apartheid. In short, a seemingly innocuous trip to the archive led, serendipitously, to another chapter, perhaps, in a long-standing interest in racial formation and racialized landscapes in Kentucky and the South. In effect, I found that the archives fed some intellectual and scholarly interests I already had, and simply had not anticipated in that particular trip to the county courthouse.

But that is not the end of the story – in fact it is the more mundane part. It appears as a classic story of serendipity supported by an archival record that deepens our understanding of long-standing processes of urban settlement. In the end, I learned something I did not already know, but it did not really shake my epistemological faith in the archive and the stories I could get out of it. But I am only halfway through my story. Let me tell you the rest. Recall those deeds that were transferred into African-American ownership from White ownership in the 1930s. They disappeared from the archival record for the next fifty years; and reappeared only when the land was sold back to White owners. On the one hand, this might fit the story told so far, for there is and has been concern throughout the twentieth century about the decline of local Black communities as younger folks get more education and move to the cities; and this process is and has been region wide for a century at least. But I was troubled by the deeds' "disappearance" in the 1930s. The Black folks who bought the land in the 1930s were not the same folks (or their heirs) who sold it in the 1980s. It appeared that plenty of land transfers took place without official record, and that only when there was a White party involved were the deeds brought into the official record.

I am pretty good at tracing deeds, and this process stumped me. I got at some of the transfers by perusing the will books. But I still was hitting dead ends. Finally, in exasperation, and much like asking for directions when lost on the road, I related my problem to the (White) clerk working in the deed office that afternoon: I could not find a bunch of transfers I said to her. She responded by lowering her eyes, looking furtively toward the door, and asking me "were they coloured properties?" Her explanation was that "those folks" did not know well enough to register their property, and so did not. I suggested to the clerk that I could think of at least a couple of other plausible explanations besides ignorance – one being a reticence to take land finally obtained, after two hundred years, and register it with the very government apparatus that had kept you from owning it in the first place, or maybe it was something as simple as taxation concerns. She thought about this, and then responded with another story – about how in the 1960s there were three judges who sat on the county circuit court, and that whenever one of them in particular was sitting, all the African-Americans from the county who had legal business would come to have their cases heard by him, instead of by one of the other two. This suggested to me two things. First, her story suggested that African-Americans living in Woodford County, at least, were not ignorant of the power

and place of the law in everyday life, and had worked out an accommodation that gave them a voice in legal process. More disconcerting, to me at least, was the possibility of differential access to the law; of differences in the way that individuals interacted with the law and were constituted by the law. Now, I know it is no surprise to American (USA) history that citizenship has been constructed differentially according to class, race, and gender. But there had been a moment of optimism. “Negroes” off the map, unnamed tenants, had been brought into the archive – into the center from the margins, through land ownership into citizenship; at least that is what I assumed. And I must admit I saw this as a good thing. As David Delaney has written:

We live, after all, in a sea of property, a dense grid of spatialized power. Consider the legal meaning contributed to the landscape by the specific deeds, leases, contracts, and licenses drawn up with references to these spaces. Now add in the jurisdictional spaces, the municipality, county, and state spaces ... This suggests that rights are often contingent upon space. What rights we feel we have or feel obliged to recognize others as having often depend upon our location in the legal landscape.¹³

Property in the United States is a fundamental post-European, post-feudal right. It is central to post-Enlightenment definitions of the universal subject: the autonomous individual-as-citizen, with standing equal to all others in the laws of a democracy. And that universal subjectivity, as bell hooks, among others, has pointed out, eradicates difference, and asserts that racism will disappear.¹⁴ Well, at least in theory. But the momentary possibility of universal subjectivity through property ownership in little Woodford County was shattered, perhaps once again, by the fact that official archival presence required a White presence; and legal access was strategically denied. Or was it?

Recent work by Steven Hahn and Dylan Penningroth suggest an alternative approach to the subject and land; if not a challenge to the problematic of universal subjectivity and land and citizenship, at least a prizing open of the question and the avenues by which we assume their historical and geographical relationships.¹⁵ Penningroth explores attempts by the Reconstruction federal government to replace the uncertainties of the plantation with the “even-handed formalism” of the law. White northerners expecting to teach southern African-Americans about the rights of property found that slaves and ex-

13 David Delaney, *Race, Place, and the Law 1836–1948* (Austin, 1998), pp. 13–14.

14 bell hooks, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in David Roediger, ed., *Black on White* (New York, 1998), pp. 38–53. See also Warren Montag, “The Universalization of Whiteness: Racism and Enlightenment,” in Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York, 1997), pp. 281–93.

15 Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

slaves already owned property, and that simply opening up courts did not push aside long-standing extra-legal practices and public display to maintain assurance of ownership. Family meetings, church meetings, “committees of coloured people,” and other “informal” mechanisms of community membership stood instead of or alongside more formalized legal proceedings.

Steven Hahn’s work claims that citizenship was achieved through means other than land, and that much contemporary scholarship either misses that point altogether, or demeans alternative pathways to citizenship as aberrations. He writes about slavery and its aftermath in a search for what he calls “socially meaningful power” in order to shake us from the complacency of dominant interpretive practice:

Most of the relevant scholarship has been governed by a liberal integrationist framework. It is a framework of analysis that does not really incorporate slaves as political beings, that measures politicization chiefly by what came to freed people from the outside, and that privileges and lends legitimacy to certain sets of aspirations (inclusion and assimilation, the pursuit of individual rights) while presenting other sets of aspirations (separatism and community development, the pursuit of collective rights, proto-nationalism) as the response to failures and defeats.¹⁶

In short, Penningroth tells us that property was guaranteed by extra-legal social networks and mechanisms; and Hahn that there were legitimate avenues to citizenship beyond property. So, absence in the deed record is not necessarily catastrophic. And, in the process, we are prompted to look at that little African-American enclave from beyond the archive. Or, as Penningroth, a historian, puts it: understanding Black life in the 1800s may mean looking outside the assumptions and interpretive frameworks of American history altogether. Which is not so surprising, for up to this point, I have presented the primary material from the archive within frameworks of inquiry that I brought to the project, or I have let the archive itself, to the extent that such a thing is possible, dictate the questions I asked of it (the archive); that is the archive’s prerogative, for after all, it is not an inert and inactive thing, but the coalescence of very real legal and social intentions made manifest in material record. I began with an archive as a repository of facts, deed records, and will books. But the collection of those records is not a neutral practice. It is one vested in the ideology of free-hold land tenure, central to American ideas of citizenship, and as such inevitably sways the questions we ask and the answers we seek.

We are left with a realization that “the archive” is a powerful and complicated thing, or more accurately, set of practices. And we are left with the question of how we move beyond the archive, while still acknowledging its central

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

presence in our lives. What clues do we then follow if we are to move from the archive to the simple fact of a small, African-American enclave, grown from “7 tenant houses,” and which still resides in the popular imagination as somehow part of the town’s variegated socio-spatial relations and ongoing processes of racial formation. Once again, bell hooks provides insight:

Nowadays it has become fashionable for white and black folks alike to act like they do not have the slightest clue as to why black folks might want to separate, to be together in some corner, or neighborhood, or even at some dining table in a world where we are surrounded by whiteness. It is not a mystery. Those of us who remember living in the middle of racial apartheid know that the separate spaces, the times apart from whiteness were for sanctuary, for re-imagining and re-membering ourselves. In the past separate space meant down time to dream resistance, time to theorize, plan, create strategies, and go forward.¹⁷

We move, then, from the archive to the neighbourhood. But what can we glean from the neighbourhood that we cannot from the archive? What different questions can we ask of the neighbourhood, and how do we know what they might be? What was the place of that neighbourhood, if it even was a neighbourhood with all of that term’s connotations, in the everyday lives of the people who lived there? One of the local oral histories laments the passing of these little streets. Was that lamenting merely the nostalgia of an old man, or was it a hint at the importance of those neighbourhoods in wider social formations? And why can’t it be both? Here the archive fails us. This is not news to most of you. Most recently, perhaps, Mona Domosh and Karen Morin have written about our dependence as historical geographers upon archives, and the failure of the archive especially when interrogating historical geographies of difference.¹⁸ They ask “how one might read the silences or hidden spaces in the archives” and take us beyond consideration only of how to squeeze information from the archive to the kinds of questions we might ask whose answers are not there in the first place. Their call to incorporate feminist methodologies (as well as different subjects) into historical geography is well made; and they raise the central problematic of incorporating ethnography into a sub-discipline whose subjects usually are long dead. If only we could talk to the residents of Higgins Street, the lament goes.

Domosh and Morin are also quick to remind those of us doing historical geography (at least) to take another lesson; namely to ask for whom our research is conducted. They scorn the notion that because our subject is somehow in the past that it is not relevant to a contemporary politics of change. The

17 bell hooks, *Killing Rage* (New York, 1995), pp. 5–6.

18 Mona Domosh and Karen M. Morin, “Travels with Feminist Historical Geography,” *Gender, Place, and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2003), pp. 257–64.

trick, then, is not only to somehow hear the distant voices of the past, but also to somehow listen to them as well, to let them have a say in deciding what questions to ask, and to connect all of that to the present. Perhaps the way to begin is with the present, and ask what place that little street had in local racial formation; what meaning it still has in the geographical and social imaginations of contemporary Midway residents.

In the end, we need to acknowledge basic epistemological differences in knowledge and knowledge production that may or may not come from the archive. Or, as bell hooks writes: “we seek to uncover, restore, and deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys are possible.¹⁹ So how do I get out of this story that has taken me down at least three paths? A simple trip to the county seat got me speculating in at least three realms. First, questions were prompted about the rise of Black land ownership after the Civil War in a small Kentucky town. Clues in county archives might help answer some longstanding questions about land transfer, land ownership, residential apartheid, and the socio-spatial transformation of racialized landscapes in the American South. Second, it got me speculating about the place of that land in Reconstruction and reconstructed notions of citizenship and the enlightenment subject. “75 feet to Negro dwellings” looks like a cartographic manifestation of Toni Morrison’s “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.” Morrison has challenged a view of the American literary canon as “free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States.” Instead, she supposes an Africanist presence that “shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture ... [t]he contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.” To explore this Africanist presence, how it functioned, and what it was for is also to ask “[w]hat parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’?”²⁰ And the story told me by the White clerk about the Black folks who didn’t know better might be seen as establishing one of those societal aberrations from the norm that help define the universal subject, in this case as White and owning property in just the right way. Third, it got me thinking about questions to be asked of Higgins Street, in the past, today, and, most importantly linking the two, that I probably cannot raise, but need to somehow recover or discover in voices that may not exist anymore. But they do need to be raised – in order to move out of the ruts of scholarly-inquiry-as-usual toward a progressive scholarly politics, which is, after all, not just one of my goals, but also an obligation, if one believes that scholarly sto-

19 bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in Ruth Frankenberg, ed., *Displacing Whiteness* (Durham, 1997), pp. 165–79, quotation on p. 172.

20 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 4–8.

ries are always, at some level, personal. James Baldwin certainly had an inkling of this notion when he wrote:

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do ... People who imagine that history flatters them (as it does indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world ... This is the place in which it seems to me most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.²¹

I am quick to admit a certain fascination, if not outright fetish, for tracing deeds and constructing historical geographical stories of my neighbourhood. It is, however, important also to realize that this has been a story of a racialized landscape, which stands as the mediator of, and entrée into, other discourses which transcend place and scale all at once – about local land and life, speculations on racial formation, on the archive and methodology in historical geography, and these things – as in theory and empirics – should not be held apart in tension.²² Practising historical geography – scholarship of any sort – is not an exercise in antiquarianism, but is about today and here. The simple lesson is that the archive is not innocent, and is implicated in the very stories we tell and the reasons we tell them. The not-so-simple lesson is that critique of “the archive” is not so simple either; and that not only are there questions to be answered by our records and questions to be asked of our record-keeping, there are also questions that might escape (some of) us altogether without a critical take on what it means to rely upon something called “the archive” for, at least, our historical and geographical scholarship (for that is all I can even begin to speak for).

Finally, a brief post-script: the college decided not to sell the land right now, and the lot still sits empty next to my house. But I must admit that I look for ghosts even more often than I used to, when I walk by it everyday with my kids and my dogs and my cup of coffee in the morning and when I talk to my neighbours in town about the way things are, the way things used to be, and the way they might be.

21 James Baldwin, “White Man’s Guilt,” in Roediger, ed., *Black on White*, p. 321.

22 Richard H. Schein, “The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* vol. 87, no. 4 (1997), pp. 660–80.