

A Walk Through Weelaunee Forest



32 Mayor Dickens responded by abruptly leaving the room, not commenting on the letter, and refusing to appoint anyone of Native American heritage to the South River Forest Public Safety Training Center Community Task Force.

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through
weelaunee
forest

Alexandra Edwards

*For Tortuguita, who I never met,
but whose presence echoes through the forest*

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[php?entry=SO003](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/may/04/cop-city-atlanta-manuel-paez-teran-death-autopsy>
- 2 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-south/the-new-fight-over-an-old-forest-in-atlanta>
- 3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_Park_\(Berkeley\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_Park_(Berkeley))
- 4 <https://atlprescollective.com/2022/12/22/under-the-rubble-the-dance-floor-a-report-back-from-last-nights-solstice-party-at-wee-launce-peoples-park/>
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author's note: I wrote this essay on the traditional homeland of the Wichita, Waco, Tawakoni, Kichai (Keechi), Iscani, Taovaya and others who were removed through the violence of settler-colonialism, as were the Mvskoke on whose homeland I previously lived. In both of these places (and throughout Turtle Island), settler-colonialism has destroyed the lives of countless human and more-than-human beings. I wrote this essay to commemorate what has been lost, to fight for what must be remade by giving the land back to its indigenous caretakers, and, as the great-granddaughter of settlers, to practice being in right relationship with the beings around me. I am grateful to Alex Ip and the staff at *The Xylom* for inviting me to create this essay, and I encourage everyone reading this to support their crucial work at www.thexylom.com.

Writing for and to Defend the Atlanta Forest, philosopher Frédéric Neyrat said, “Cutting down trees, killing activists, producing a void in order to fill it with images: such is the aesthetic-political program of the forest-clearers, the depopulators of the world.”³¹ Yet the forest, this living, breathing abolitionist world, teaches us that what has been unmade can be remade.

The majestic chestnuts may never fully return, but the Mvskoke have already begun to, even attempting to deliver a letter of eviction to Mayor Dickens.³² Their songs can echo through the forest again. Old fields worked by enslaved people can become soft pine needle carpets that cushion the bodies of freedom fighters. The stones of former worlds can be overgrown.

A week after my walk, Tortuguita’s family came and spread their ashes on the ground of Weelaunee Forest.³³ The trees, the birds, the fungi, and the dirt—none of them care if the Mayor of Atlanta denies they exist. They welcome Tortuguita, ready to be remade.

At the edge of one of the two ponds that could be contaminated by construction and runoff from Cop City, native pines and hardwoods intermingle with non-native Bradford pears (*Pyrus calleryana*) in bloom. The water flows into a stream that has fed Intrenchment Creek since time immemorial.



Here, towards the north of the remaining forest, the stones of old Atlanta Prison Farm buildings are being reclaimed, just like the Carnegie library facade. In the herbaceous layer below the trees, non-native species like leatherleaf mahonia (*Berberis bealei*) fill ecological niches alongside natives like butterweed (*Packera glabella*) and common blue violet (*Viola sororia*). Non-native hairy vetch (*Vicia villosa*), most likely planted as a forage crop³⁰ during the prison farm era, persists.

Of all the injustices perpetrated against the Defend the Atlanta Forest movement, two weigh on me most heavily. Both are acts of negation, of attempted world-unmaking.

First, and perhaps most obviously, there was the January 18th murder of Manuel Esteban Paez Teran, who was known in the forest as Tortuguita. Georgia State Police unmade Tortuguita with at least 14 bullets, as the young, queer, Afro-Venezuelan anarchist sat cross-legged, with their hands raised, alone.¹

The cops hoped, in doing so, to likewise unmake a radical, autonomous, decentralized community movement that has fought for almost two years to protect hundreds of acres of urban forest. The City of Atlanta wants to destroy what officials themselves called “a massive green lung” just a little more than five years ago, so they can build a \$90 million police training facility.

Tortuguita’s murder was a horrific escalation of the other negation—the one committed by Atlanta mayor Andre Dickens in the pages of the *New Yorker* six months earlier, when he claimed that there was no forest to be defended. “It’s just not a forest where this is right now,” he said.²

The mayor is wrong. I know because I’ve walked the forest.

I set out on a Sunday morning in March. I began where the previous day's protest march had ended: at the parking lot for Intrenchment Creek Park, dubbed "Weelaunee People's Park" by organizers paying homage to both the original Mvskoke (Creek) inhabitants of this place and the 1960s radical political movement that reclaimed public space in Berkeley, California.³



The parking lot and its trailhead are part of a land swap deal between Dekalb County and former Blackhall Studios CEO Ryan Millsap. Despite a pending lawsuit against the swap, and before the county had granted land disturbance permits, Millsap hired contractors to destroy about half a mile of accessible trail and other park amenities.⁴ He has gotten cover from Dekalb County CEO Michael Thurmond, who put out an executive order closing the park in open defiance of a judge's order to keep it open during litigation. Felled trees and a ruined gazebo, twisted beyond

It felt surreal to wander and find these barricades—signs of resistance to the world-unmaking projects of policing and prisons. Maybe it shouldn't; as one forest defender has written, the forest itself is "a breathing barricade."²⁶



Trees, Amelie Daigle writes, are abolitionist allies.²⁷ I would add that forests are abolitionist worlds. Standing where the city dumped the columns and entablatures of the old Carnegie library after it closed in 1977,²⁸ I was struck by the beauty of the native forest reclaiming this former monument to capital and white supremacist literacies. Dewberry brambles (KVCO) crawl over the stones; their white flowers will produce fruits that feed the birds and deer.

A Field Guide to Eastern Forests tells me that "each forest has a history and a future and what you observe is but a moment in its lifetime."²⁹ I know much of this forest's history, and I dream about its future. Left to develop, the forest would eventually cross the prison fence, seeds spread by birds who simply disregard chainlink and razor wire.

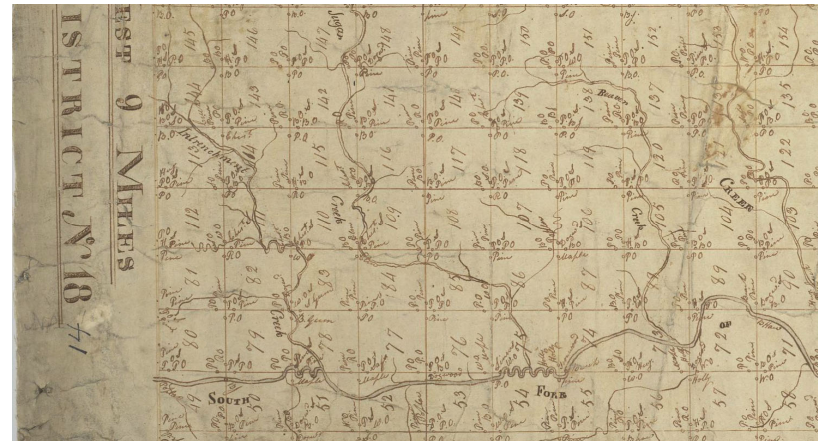
hawk shrieked above me. When I lost the path, I followed deer tracks in the red clay mud.

The Weelaunee Forest is not pristine. Atlanta reporter John Ruch explains, “For decades, the area has literally been a toilet and garbage pail for much of the city and county, with landfills aplenty and raw sewage pouring into the waterways by accident or on purpose as emergency overflows.”²⁵ Plastic waste, old tires, and bullet casings don’t break down like leaves and pine needles, nor will the burned-out or smashed cars the forest defenders previously used to block access roads. And while the cops cleared protesters out of the forest in January, they left the damaged cars and the trash, and the tents they cut to pieces.



recognition, mark the entrance to the park. The contractors broke the paved trail installed by Georgia’s PATH Foundation⁵ into chunks and left it heaped like rubble. One pile has since been turned into a memorial for Tortuguita, with candles and offerings.

These are not the first acts of attempted world-unmaking committed on this land.



The forest was once home to the Mvskoke people, who gave the nearby South River the name forest defenders now use: Weelaunee, meaning “brown (LANE) water (ue)”. Intrenchment Creek flows into the Weelaunee River, just as it did in January 1821 when the First Treaty of Indian Springs pushed the Mvskoke west, out of the forest.⁶ The newly-expanded state of Georgia surveyed the land, cutting it up into 202.5-acre squares that were given to whites in the 1821 land lottery.⁷ Where Mvskoke people had lived for 13,000 years became District 15 of Henry County⁸ (in 1822, Henry was split and the area became part of Dekalb County). The forest became the property of men like Uriah Brown and Samuel Philbrick.

This fragmentation is still written onto the land today. The straight-line edge of District 15 is Moreland Avenue—the demarcation between DeKalb County to the east and Fulton to the west. The line that separated Plots 81-84 from Plots 77-80 is Constitution Road SE. A red oak that marked the boundary between Plots 81 and 82, or its descendant, still stands—one of several huge specimen trees now threatened by the proposed construction of “Cop City.” [The premise of constructing the facility was based on a legal quirk that a governmental entity operating within the jurisdiction of another governmental entity is exempt from zoning laws. In this case, the City of Atlanta, which is mostly based in Fulton County, could hence bypass the residential zoning (R75) of the South River Forest by DeKalb County.]

In Muskogean languages, which are still spoken and taught today, red oaks are LÓKCVPE, acorn (LAKCV) tree (VPE).⁹ The indigenous inhabitants of the Weelaunee Forest processed red oak acorns into flour for bread and oil. The hickories that grew alongside those oaks are OTCHE, and they provided food, medicine, wood for tools, and dyes.¹⁰ Chestnut trees are OTO or OTOWÓSKE, but those marked on the map died off by the time the blight reached the state in the 1940s, completely changing—remaking—the composition of eastern American forests.¹¹

To the west of the destroyed trail turned memorial altar, there’s a cut-through into a small wooded area, where people had set up camp for March’s Defend the Atlanta Forest Week of Action. That morning, roughly eight hours before the cops stormed into those campsites and arrested 23 people for having mud on their shoes,¹² I watched as several campers stopped to admire a fringed iris (*Iris japonica*) blooming up out of the pine needle carpet underfoot.

I wondered who had lived in that tree-sit, where they were now, and if the titmouses missed screaming at them.

Still heading west, I reached the power line easement that runs through the forest and scrambled over the construction fencing. I felt exposed crossing the open space, as the deer whose tracks crisscross the area must feel. I planned out what I would say if I was detained while hiking. I decided I would pretend to be lost, like I had wandered too far from the park in search of a secluded place to relieve myself. I thought the safest thing would be to fawn in the face of the cops. “Oh, thank god you found me!” I practiced saying it in my head. “I was starting to panic.” I didn’t think I could be convincing; I don’t do well with cops.

I passed the back side of the Metro Regional Youth Detention Facility, where the state cages children who are “mostly male and mostly black.”²³ It’s separated from the trees by a chainlink fence topped with razor wire. In the 90s, the federal Department of Justice conducted an investigation into the Facility and found inadequate mental health care, abusive disciplinary practices, and use of excessive force against juveniles that was “unconstitutional.”²⁴ My heart ached for the kids locked inside the buildings on the other side of that fence. I wished they could walk through the forest with me, and listen to the Carolina wrens (CULIHKV) singing *teakettle-teakettle-teakettle*, the Eastern phoebes calling *phoe-BEE*, the downy woodpeckers (TUSKE) tap-tap-tapping at the trees.

West of the easement and north of the youth prison, older patches of forest are evident. The trees are bigger and cast more shade. Wood ferns nestle among their roots, and in one place, a fungus called dead man’s fingers (*Xylaria polymorpha*) poked up out of the ground. In a forest ecosystem, everything that dies feeds the soil and the fungi, which feed the plants whose leaves, nuts, and fruits feed the insects, songbirds, and mammals, who in turn feed the forest carnivores. As I explored, a red-shouldered



brushed my ankles, and two daffodils nodded as I passed. I startled a family of white-tailed deer (ECO), who led me to one of the tree sits abandoned in January after Tortuguita's murder. I wondered if one of those deer might have been the fawn seen by forest defenders last year.²²



The native loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*),¹³ here and throughout the area, signify disturbed land that is becoming forest once again. A folk name for *Pinus taeda* is oldfield pine, because the trees quickly establish on former agricultural sites. While pines were marked on the 1821 survey map, these trees are young and skinny. If the forest is left to heal, the loblollies will eventually be shaded out by oaks, sweetgums (HELOK-VPE), and tulip trees.¹⁴

In the meantime, oldfield pine is a particularly appropriate name for these trees. By 1849, Uriah Brown and Samuel Philbrick had sold their combined 405 acres to William Morris, who counted 12 enslaved people among his taxable assets. By 1860, the land had been sold again to George P. Key; 19 people enslaved by Key worked 150 acres of "improved" land (that is, farmland). To this day, the forest is bounded to the north by

Key Road SE. When Key's son William died in the early 20th century, the city of Atlanta bought the land and turned it into a prison farm.¹⁵

The Mvskoke people who lived in or near the Weelaunee Forest almost certainly farmed some of the land. They grew corn, which they processed into hominy and grits. Mixed with hickory nut meat, corn became a dish called OCE NEHV OSAFKE (OCE, hickory, NEHV, fat, OSAFKE, sofkey¹⁶). Native dogwoods (VTVPHV) in flower indicated to the Mvskoke when to plant corn in spring. Indeed, as the Weelaunee Web Collective writes, "The Mvskoke's main religious ceremony is Pvsketv (Green Corn), a millennia-old multi-ritual revolving around the harvest of new corn at the height of summer. Pvsketv aims at the renewal and balancing of relationships between humans, land, animals, spaces that humans inhabit, and spirit."¹⁷ Mvskoke people likely celebrated Pvsketv in the forest; various Native American tribes continue to celebrate it in the present day across the Southern states.

But Mvskoke farming historically took place on land that was held communally.¹⁸ The carving up of land into private property that can be bought, sold, leased to police, and run as a prison is a settler-colonial imposition.

In the same years as the city of Atlanta was turning the former Key plantation into a prison farm, the United States coerced the Mvskoke and others into dissolving their own tribal governments¹⁹ and forced a policy of "allotment" on the reservation lands to which they had been forcibly removed.²⁰ The Dawes Act replicated what the state of Georgia had done in 1821, carving up communal land into plots that would be privately owned.

Many Mvskoke people resisted, forming protest groups like the Snakes and the Four Mothers Nation/Four Mothers Society. As Jonita Mullins recounts for the *Muskogee Phoenix*, "Many of these Society members

resisted allotment by refusing to enroll with the Dawes Commission. They refused to choose land – even land on which they had built their homes – and saw it given to other enrollees. They fled to the hills, becoming impoverished, and in many instances were arrested and jailed. Enrolling and accepting an allotment was the condition for their release from prison."²¹



Around noon, as tufted titmouses (HVSKATĒCUCE) screamed from the trees, I took off my shoes and socks and crossed Intrenchment Creek at a shallow point so I could explore the western side—the side slated to become "Cop City." It's a successional forest here, younger in some places than others, but it is certainly not "not forest," as Mayor Dickens has claimed. Sugar hackberries (KVPOOCKV, from the Muskogee word for "to crunch") greeted me with their warty bark. Soft spring grasses