

This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land: People and Public Lands Redux

Carolyn Finney

“THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND, THIS LAND IS MY LAND. . . .” Woody Guthrie wrote a pretty powerful song back in 1940. He had an idea about what he thought America was and what it means to be an American. Born in Oklahoma in 1912, he lived with a father who fancied himself a cowboy and a mother who was a Kansas-born housewife who simply loved music. Growing up in Okemah, a farm town, Guthrie experienced loss at an early age with the death of his sister, the institutionalization of his mother, and his family’s financial ruin as a result of an oil boom gone bust. But Guthrie’s family wasn’t the only one to suffer. Guthrie watched as many families in Okemah suffered financial and personal loss. Then along came the Great Depression. During this period, Guthrie got married and had three children. But like hundreds of other “Dust Bowl refugees,” Guthrie found it difficult to support his family and so he hit the road, trying to find work. During his travels by train and hitchhiking, Guthrie cultivated a strong dislike of greed and a deep appreciation for the diversity of America’s everyday people.¹ In February of 1940, he wrote “This Land is Your Land,” in response to Irving Berlin’s song “God Bless America,” which he heard repeatedly throughout his travels. He couldn’t abide by the way that song seemed to obscure the “lopsided distribution of land and wealth” that he had seen and experienced his whole life.² And so, an anthem was born.

The most amazing thing about this song is its staying power—over the years many singers have recorded this song, and, at the inauguration of our first Black president, Bruce Springsteen and Pete Seeger carried on the tradition. What I like about the song is that it highlights the tensions within the United States over land, wealth, access, mobility, naming, and claiming ownership over many things, including this place and all its natural resources.

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And that differences aren't always about race or ethnicity: Guthrie was a white man who had suffered through the Depression and from his experience, his standpoint, wrote a song about what he saw as the American experience on the landscape, one that included the tensions between different groups of people and our natural resources.

Like the song, the issues between people and public lands have been talked about and fought over since the “founding” of this country. According to Webster’s dictionary, the word “redux” means to revisit something “that has been brought back, revived, restored.”

I would like to take this opportunity to revisit this relationship between people and public lands and challenge us to “seed a new conversation.”²³ But first, I need to revisit a piece of my own history. I am interested in how difference (race, gender, class, etc.), identity, representation, and privilege mediate the way individuals and communities are able to participate in environmental decision-making. How does who we are, who we think we are, and how others think of us influence what we do in relationship to the environment? Who gets to decide who has access to land? Who gets to own it? Whose knowledge counts and whose doesn't? I came to these ideas because I've spent a lot of time thinking about my parents.

I grew up in a gardener’s cottage outside of New York City—12 acres of scenic, naturally wooded footage, a large pond, all kinds of trees, including fruit trees—in Westchester County. The estate was owned by a wealthy family of contractors who were well known in New York (their name even graces a large building in New York City). In the late 1950s my father returned from the Korean War with his young wife and needed to find a job. For a Black man who had grown up poor in rural Virginia (together with my mother), opportunities were sparse, particularly if you only had a high school education. But family connections proved helpful—he had a sister who had become a nurse and was living in New York. Her husband, a small-time contractor, had heard about a potential job opportunity. A very wealthy Jewish family was looking for a young couple to live on their estate and tend to the property full time. The couple would be provided with a home, and there would be additional duties, including chauffeuring the owners to and from various locations, and doing some occasional housekeeping. My parents considered their options; the only other job opportunity my father was offered was to be a janitor in Syracuse, New York. So my parents packed their few belongings and drove from Floyd, Virginia, to Mamaroneck, New York, where they became the caretakers for this piece of property for the next fifty years.

Adjusting to life on this property was no easy feat; while the land was beautiful to look at, it was far away from all that was familiar to them both. The neighborhood we lived in was affluent and white—we were the only non-white family living (and working) in that area. My parents had grown up in a predominantly segregated southern town where nearly everyone they knew and interacted with was Black and poor. While both my parents were proud and capable individuals, they were constantly reminded that the only reason they were living in this privileged piece of geography was that they worked there.

I remember the first time I became aware of how my presence on this stunning piece of property was seen by others. With homes owned by folks such as Harry Winston and the CEO of Schaefer Beer, police patrolled this neighborhood with regularity. One day, they stopped me as I walked home from elementary school. I was in the fourth grade and was pretty unimpressive-looking: kind of a skinny girl with short hair, lugging her book bag up

the tree-lined hill. The policeman wanted to know where I was going. I pointed down the street and gave him the address. He asked me, “Do you work there?” I remember feeling a bit confused and replied, “No, I live there.” I was only nine years old. What kind of “work” would I be doing? From that moment on, two things were happening for me. As I was developing an active appreciation for the natural environment, I was also learning that my presence in certain places and spaces was not expected, welcome, or “natural.”⁴

My father mowed the grass (12 acres), tended to the fruit trees (apple, peach, plum, and pear, which had plenty of insect issues and leaves to rake), was responsible for planting the flower beds (there were at least five or six), caring for the garden (my parents grew all kinds of vegetables which we ate on a regular basis), and monitoring the fish pond and swimming pool. My parents, with their 12th-grade education, knew more about that land than the actual owners. But, no matter their knowledge and commitment to this land, this place, their attachment did not result in legal ownership of the land. The original owners passed on and, to their credit, they tried to arrange it so that my parents could stay on the land, but the presence of their children and the reality that my parents could never afford the property taxes (amounting to something like \$125,000 a year) meant they could not stay. So today, my parents live in a lovely home in Leesburg, Virginia, with a half-acre of land. While the home is theirs, they often feel depressed, longing for something it seems they can never have. My father in particular, who believes that land is wealth and having land to give to your children is so important, seems so angry and sad. In looking to my parents and their story I began to think about land and ownership—whose land is this, anyway? And is ownership only about a piece of paper, or can it mean something more?

I’ll come back to that story in a bit. First, I want to talk about vision and the power in seeing differently. We don’t always see the inspiration right in front of us—creativity, innovation, new possibility—because we might not recognize it, value it, or even think it has anything to do with our interests and concerns. Or sometimes we start with what we believe is possible (defined by our limitations) and then try to construct a “vision.” Which leaves little room for creativity to spread its wings. Let me give you some examples of what I mean. I spent the last six years or so doing research on African-Americans and the environment. I was interested in broadening our understanding of African-Americans and environment interactions by exploring how the attitudes and perceptions of African-Americans are influenced by racialized constructions and representations, informing how African-Americans participate in the use and management of national forests and parks. What are the linkages between how the Great Outdoors is represented, the “African-American experience” in the United States, and African-American attitudes, beliefs, and interactions pertaining to the environment? I focused on three areas: environment, memory, and place; representation; and racism and diversity. Since I am talking about vision, I want to focus on the representation piece: what we see, what we imagine, and how what we don’t or can’t see stunts our ability to vision anew.⁵

When I say “representation,” I’m talking about the visual representation of African-Americans in popular magazines that focus on environmental issues and/or the Great Outdoors, national park exhibits and materials, and textual representation in these spaces—stories/narratives that shape and support our understanding of these green spaces (and each

other). So—whose stories are being told? Whose pictures do we see? What messages are being given? Who is being targeted? Through what processes are these meanings and representations channeled to the public? The “possibility to make visible” is a concrete form of power. What about what is made invisible?

In the May 2006 issue of *Vanity Fair*, a monthly magazine with national distribution, special focus was placed on environmental issues. Labeled the “green issue,” celebrities such as Julia Roberts and George Clooney, resplendent in green, graced the cover alongside politicians Al Gore and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Inside this special issue, Al Gore outlined the global warming “crisis” and then shared the “good news” that “we can solve this crisis, and as we finally do accept the truth of our situation and turn to boldly face down the danger that is stalking us, we will find that it is also bringing us a unprecedented opportunity.”⁶ What followed his optimistic proclamation were twenty-eight pages of photos and text reflecting the voices of well-known eco-activists, environmental organizations, and celebrities who are considered to be proactive in combating the world’s environmental crisis. But in the sixty-three pictures of people, only two pictures of African-Americans (and one African—Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai) could be found.⁷

Vanity Fair’s “oversight” in highlighting hardly any African-Americans or other people of color in their “green issue” speaks volumes about how Americans think, see, and talk about “the environment” in the United States. The representation of the environmental issues and the narrative supporting the visual images provides insight into *who* Americans actually imagine cares about and actively participates in environmental management. In addition, how the environmental narrative is portrayed is an indicator of who is actually being engaged in the larger conversation.⁸

But invisibility and marginalization are not the only challenges to envisioning a more expansive conversation concerning the environment. In 2005, the Gulf Coast of the U.S. experienced the wrath of Hurricane Katrina, an environmental and human disaster that many are still recovering from. For weeks, the media inundated our homes and minds with painful images of a people and place under siege. In particular, the words and images of Black people as refugees instead of citizens, and “looting” and “shooting” during this desperate time, were recorded and shown worldwide, providing an explicit image with an implicit meaning—something that one scholar calls the “logics constructed in visual images that define blackness.”⁹ These “logics”—the idea that there is an essential and fixed quality to blackness (in the case of Katrina, criminality and poverty)—is indicated as natural and normative by simply showing images of Black people. The power that images and words have in stigmatizing a people or community can have far-reaching psychological and material consequences. How one’s identity is constructed through representations calls into question the social realities that are maintained and sustained by such representations, and who benefits from the perpetuation of these depictions. Equally disturbing is how one perspective of an experience, a person, or a place—in this case, African-Americans or the Lower Ninth Ward—can become so embedded in our consciousness through representational acts that we cannot imagine, and therefore do not act on, other possibilities for those phenomena we seek to understand.¹⁰

In these two examples it is Black people who are invisible, marginalized, or stereotyped. But we often do this to any group of people we see as “different” from us—those we don’t notice and who don’t fit into some narrowly defined idea of who we think has the most to offer in any given situation. So I want to share with you some examples of two people whose vision went beyond expected boundaries, illustrating that if we see differently, we have the chance to *do* differently.

In 1971, two oil tankers collided beneath the Golden Gate Bridge in California. John Francis, a young African-American man living in the area at the time, decided he had to take a stand against the lifestyle that he believed brought those two tankers together. So he decided that he would not take any kind of motorized transport anywhere for a while. If he needed to get somewhere, he would just walk or ride his bike. At first this wasn’t easy. He was continually getting in arguments with well-meaning friends and neighbors about his choice. So he decided to stop talking—period. For the next 22 years, John walked across the U.S. and Latin America to raise environmental awareness, and for 17 of those years, he did it without talking. During this period, he decided to go back to school and he got undergraduate and Master’s degrees in science and environmental studies and his Ph.D. in land resources at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. *Without talking*. His dissertation research focused on oil spills, and when the *Exxon Valdez* flooded our waters and our environmental conversations, Francis was the only Ph.D. in the country who had written a dissertation on oil spills. As a result, he worked with the U.S. Coast Guard to create legislation concerning the management of oil spills.

In his sixties now, John travels the world sharing his story and his belief that you can change the world one step at a time. He has written a book, *Planetwalker*, and his story has been optioned by Universal Studios in California and is slated to become a big-screen movie, potentially starring Will Smith. Now I want to pause, because I imagine some of you are thinking, “Ugh—Hollywood is going to ruin this story!” But I want to offer you another perspective. As an African-American, I have so rarely seen a face that reflects my own cultural experience actively engaged in creative and courageous environmental acts. While we are all human (and therefore given some common ground of experience) one would be hard pressed to deny the power of seeing a face that looks like yours engaged in something you never imagined for yourself. *Now* imagine a mainstream, Hollywood movie about a Black man walking across the U.S. and Latin America to raise environmental awareness. Without talking. Starring Will Smith. Imagine all the young men and women, of various hues and shades, that flock to the film to see Will Smith. And imagine their surprise at the truth of the story: that one human being, who looks like them, can make a difference. Visions come in all shapes and sizes—we’ve just got to learn to recognize and grab hold of them when we get the opportunity.

Another person “doing differently” is Brenda Palms Barber, executive director of Sweet Beginnings in Chicago, Illinois. In 1999, she moved from Denver to Chicago to become the executive director of the Northlawn Employment Network, where she thought her primary focus would be to help build a consortium that focused on job readiness by addressing capacity challenges. What she discovered is that the community wanted a direct service

agency—someone who could help them find jobs. She realized that many of the men and women had been previously incarcerated for low-level crimes and most were African-Americans suffering from skill shortages and the stigma of being ex-offenders. So Brenda focused on creating a job readiness program she called U-turn Permitted to address the needs of formerly incarcerated men and women. While her program was initially successful, after 9/11 and the passing of the Patriot Act, potential employers, motivated by the fear of terrorism, began conducting background checks. Consequently, many of the formerly incarcerated lost their jobs. “I felt at that moment, I had to do something” to help create jobs for people, Palms Barber admitted. What was going to make Palms Barber different? She realized that in order to honor her commitment to the community, she was going to have to build a business that generated income to support the non-profit. She needed to diversify her funding stream in order to be able to stay in North Lawndale for the long haul. “I personally felt an obligation.”¹¹

So Palms Barber considered a number of ideas: a temp agency, a landscaping company, and a delivery service. But while all of these ideas were good, Palms Barber was looking for a *great* idea. One day, she was talking to a friend who told her a story about someone who was a beekeeper. And a light bulb exploded in Palms Barber’s mind. She was going to start a honey-making business and train previously incarcerated men and women in Chicago to care for bees and make the honey! There were many who met Palms Barber’s proclamation with incredulity. But Palms Barber had vision: she saw the links between skill development possibilities unhampered by the need to have a college degree and building self-esteem for those she believed deserved a second chance. So she worked with beekeepers, corrections officers, and those knowledgeable about business to start Sweet Beginnings, a company that makes urban honey and honey-related products in the Chicago area. What she also got was an added bonus—she became an accidental “greenie.” Now she intentionally infuses green business principles into the work that she does: the product they produce is local, African-Americans can reclaim their relationship to the earth through beekeeping, and she believes that “through green” people can become empowered. Sweet Beginning products are sold at Whole Foods and other high-end stores in the Chicago area, and you can buy the products online. “People need to be reminded that they are important and can make a positive contribution,” says Palms Barber.¹²

Many of you reading this article work in the National Park Service and may be wondering how “seeing differently” and taking creative risks translate to instilling a sense of ownership in individuals and communities concerning the national parks. I recently had the pleasure to meet a young, talented African-American teenager named Aisha who had participated in a program sponsored by NPS and the Latino American Youth Center in Washington, D.C., called Second Nature. This past summer, through a program focused on the arts, African-American and Latino teenagers were taken out on camping trips to national parks in the D.C. area, many for this first time. They learned how to set up tents, sleep outside, and slog through mud and rain, while still having a good time. Afterwards, the young women and men were prodded to share what they had experienced through music and painting. Some participated in a mural project at the National Zoo. Some wrote powerful slam poetry about climate change. And others, such as Aisha, wrote songs about their relationship to the natural

environment. One young man, who rapped about his experiences, also spoke about getting his family and friends out to the park. Another was provoked to think about recycling differently—a piece of trash on *his* city street took on a whole new meaning. Their visions of the world expressed through painting, spoken word, and song were painful, funny, hopeful, and real. While I can only speak for myself, I had a feeling that the other adults in the room were also inspired by the thoughtfulness and possibility inherent in what we heard—these are the new stewards, the caretakers of our natural places. Vision belongs to us all—we just need to be able to recognize and support it. Fourteen-year-old Aisha, in all her youthful wisdom summed it up best: “Nature is cool, now. We have to keep thinking of tomorrow, today.”¹³

I want to come back to the idea of ownership and the story about my parents. A while back, I was visiting my parents and they told me about a letter they had recently received from one of their old neighbors in Mamaroneck. The letter was from the Westchester Land Trust. The trust had determined that the property has “extensive scenic, naturally wooded frontage” and because it’s in the Mamaroneck River Watershed—the river is subject to flooding—preservation could help prevent further flooding. They also determined that the large, permanent pond on the property is a significant habitat for fish, turtles and waterfowl. There are also mallards, blue herons, wild turkeys, and deer. The trust had sent the letter out to let neighbors know that the new owner had generously donated a conservation easement on the land to the Westchester Land Trust. Which means that although the property contains the new owner’s home, the land will never be further developed and the trust will ensure that its conservation values are protected. In the letter, the trust thanks the current owner for his “generosity and conservation-mindedness.”

But something was missing. There was nothing about my parents, who loved and cared for that land for fifty years. This got me thinking about all the people who have been invisible in the story of this land. Of all the people, because of their “difference,” that have gone unseen, uncounted, devalued, and dismissed in the larger process of creating an American environmental narrative that reflects who we are and who we can be. For me, ownership and vision are inextricably linked; when Guthrie wrote “This land is your land, this land is my land,” he acknowledges that not only do we all have the right to belong to this place and call it home, but he also possesses a vision that is wide enough and deep enough to *see* us all in the larger story of this land.

Recently we celebrated the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1787. I started thinking about “We the People.” The Constitution represents powerful ideals, but the men who wrote the Constitution, the “founding fathers,” had limited vision. They couldn’t always see the other fathers working the land, sowing the seed, fishing the seas. They couldn’t always see the mothers’ hands in the dirt, preparing and sharing the food. They couldn’t see my father’s grandfather with no last name, but present nevertheless. They couldn’t see the American Indians who hunted and fished and gathered and prayed; they couldn’t imagine the many Asian peoples who came to this soil: the Chinese who built the railroad, the Japanese who farmed and later were forced to walk away from their land; the Hispanos in New Mexico whose connection to the forests is handed down through generations. They couldn’t see the Brenda Palms Barbers, the John Francis. And they didn’t know how to see my father and my mother, who had given their life to the land for their family, for the future.

But *we* can see differently. We the people must be willing to stand in the tension of our differences and accept the pain and loss that influences human–environment interactions today. Clean air and water, good food, our mental and spiritual health relies on our vision—our ability to see beyond the barriers of our fear, our power, and our privilege. It is our responsibility to love this land. We the people will not go down in history saying that we didn’t fight for this land, for our right, for our privilege to be part of the change that is needed. The founding fathers couldn’t see this. But they were “we the people” then. You and I are “we the people” now.

Endnotes

1. From woodyguthrie.org.
2. From the Library of Congress website.
3. As worded by my friend, public lands advocate Audrey Peterman.
4. Partially excerpted from an essay I wrote for the upcoming anthology, *Companions in Wonder: Reflections on Children and Adults Exploring Nature*, J. Dunlap and S. Kellert, eds. MIT Press.
5. These examples are taking from my forthcoming book, *Black Faces, White Spaces: African Americans and the Great Outdoors*, based on my dissertation research.
6. *Vanity Fair*, May 2006, p. 172.
7. Excerpted from *Black Faces, White Spaces*.
8. Ibid.
9. P.A. Rogers, “Hard Core Poverty,” in *Picturing Us: African-American Identity in Photography* (New York: The New Press, 1994), p. 160.
10. Excerpted from *Black Faces, White Spaces*.
11. Ibid.
12. Interview with Brenda Palms Barber, May 22, 2009.
13. Partially excerpted from *Black Faces, White Spaces*.

Carolyn Finney is assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy & Management of the College of Natural Resources at the University of California–Berkeley. Her focus as a geographer is to explore how issues of difference impact participation in decision-making processes designed to address environmental issues. The aim of her work is to develop greater cultural competency within environmental organizations and institutions, challenge media outlets on the (mis- or non-) representation of “different” folks, and increase awareness of how privilege shapes who gets to speak to environmental issues and determine policy and action. She served on the National Parks Second Century Commission.