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Black Faces White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors.

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Carolyn Finney's (UC Berkeley) *Black Faces, White Spaces* critiques the absence of African Americans from mainstream environmental narratives and movements. She argues that popular perceptions of environmentalism fail to recognize the historical role of race and racism in shaping nature, perpetuating a discourse of a "white wilderness" waiting to be conquered (p. 3). The book is much more than an environmental studies text, however. Clearly influenced by Critical Race Theory, Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces* is also a veritable counter-narrative to the dominant notion of environmentalism as a "white space." Analyzing magazine content, park brochures, and catalogs, as well as interviewing Florida citizens, National Parks Service (NPS) employees, and environmentalists, Finney shows that representations of African Americans and their experiences shape collective memory about the environment. Finney's book is an excellent study of how perceptions of the "Great Outdoors" intersect with the African American experience.

Chapter one, "Bamboozled," questions the dominant one-size-fits-all narrative of Americans' relationship to the land, namely the 1862 Homestead Act and western expansion. This view neglects the complexities

of the American experience at that time. Black free men were by and large restricted from Homestead Grants, necessitating a sharecropper livelihood. Finney also explores some of the early narratives of nature and how they largely remain unchanged to the present. Environmentalists such as John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt created a "rhetoric of wilderness conquest, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the belief that humans can either control or destroy nature with technology" (p. 28). These ideals are maintained in magazine advertisements and NPS brochures, reflecting the white-washing of nature.

Finney's second chapter, "Jungle Fever," compares perceptions of African Americans with the White environmental narrative. She argues that American's relations with nature are inherently racialized. One of the major failures of Reconstruction was the restriction of Black land acquisition. Finney also seeks to place some of the racial and evolutionary discourse of the nineteenth century into the environmental narrative. Circus exhibitions of Ota Benga and Sara Baartman epitomize the perception that Blacks were less than human; not *in* nature, but *part of* nature. Therefore, Blacks were considered "unfit for the responsibilities of citizenship," including land ownership (p. 42).

Chapter three, "Forty Acres and a Mule," seeks to understand how collective and personal memory shapes African American environmental attitudes. Finney points out that collective memories and group trauma of slavery and Jim Crow continue to inform Black environmental engagement. For example, Finney mentions how a history of lynching and injustice have led to a suspicious attitude towards "White spaces." These shared experiences and inherited memories shape African Americans' "cognitive map" of the environment and society (p. 56). Throughout slavery and Jim Crow, African Americans were "psychologically divorced" from the environment, working the land but not reaping the fruits of their labor (p. 59). This environmental alienation has maintained to a degree, according to Finney. African Americans' cognitive maps may still read "whites only" even though no signpost is present (p. 62). Finney also puts forth several examples of African Americans engaging in environmental preservation because the locations connoted positive group

memories, such as Virginia Key Beach in Miami.

Finney argues that media and environmental education programs perpetuate African American invisibility. She points out that the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina epitomized this: African Americans were either victims or villains. On a more mundane, yet still significant level, images of African Americans have little role in National Parks Service educational pamphlets and brochures. According to Finney, “representation is both political and formative. It has the power to shape attitudes, beliefs, and practices in part by the emotions that it evokes that feeds on our fears, anxieties, and desires” (p. 70). Finney challenges environmental organizations to find ways to incorporate Black faces and Black historical imagery into national environmental memory and imagination.

Chapter five, “It’s Not Easy Being Green,” discusses the disconnect between White and Black environmentalists about subjects of racism and injustice. White environmentalists, according to Finney, are defensive and hostile to notions of racism, interpreting it as personal rather than systematic. This is consistent with the divergent frameworks of structure and agency which are present in academic debates. Structuralists see systematic discrimination; agency-oriented individuals see only personal responsibility in these situations. Finney argues that reliance upon agency in viewing the environment parallels arguments for a “colorblind” society; agency is seen as universal (p. 105). This makes it particularly difficult for environmental justice groups, acknowledging systematic discrimination, to challenge the mainstream environmental groups, who are relying on agency.

Finney’s final chapter, “The Sanctified Church,” draws on the concept of “post-traumatic slave syndrome” in analyzing the way African Americans interpret and navigate “white spaces.” Finney points out a perceived fear or uneasiness about forests and what they historically represent: lynching, slavery, turpentine labor camps, etc. Thus, in the “Great Outdoors” many Whites may see individualism and freedom; many Blacks may see despotism. That being said, Finney acknowledges that some environmental spaces do not bring about this trepidation because of the historical context and collective memory, such as the Great Dismal Swamp and American Beach. Finney closes her book with examples of ways African Americans are engaging environmental issues that differ from the mainstream movements they feel estranged from. Many of these are urban phenomena, such as Sweet Beginnings, a rooftop honey-bee project.

Carolyn Finney’s *Black Faces, White Spaces* questions many of the assumptions that environmental movements put forth: agency, individualism, and universal values. By engaging with counter-narratives, Finney shows that these assumptions are reflective of a racialized and class-based power structure that excluded people of color from participating in environmental leisure and profit. Thus, African Americans’ early relations with the environment were alienated; they worked another’s land. Finney’s is more than merely an environmental studies text, however; she weaves a contextual narrative about race, racial representation, and agency in America, using the environment as linkage. This sets *Black Faces, White Spaces* apart from many titles. It is worth wondering, however, whether some of Finney’s “collective memories” are as universal and group-specific as she claims. Nevertheless, the book is essential reading for those interested in race relations or environmental policy.

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