

**Transcript for  
Pondering Skies Podcast  
Episode 4 – Carolyn Finney  
ponderingskies.org**

**Matthew Bryant**

Welcome to Pondering Skies, a podcast featuring interviews with those who are working in thinking about and doing sustainability, whatever form that takes. I'm your host Matthew Bryant. Today I'm Pondering Skies we are visiting with Dr. Carolyn Finney, Scholar in Residence for Environmental Affairs in the Environmental Studies Program at Middlebury College and Vermont. Carolyn is a storyteller, author, and cultural geographer. Her work looks to develop greater cultural competency within environmental organizations and institutions, challenge media outlets on their representation of difference, and increase awareness of how privilege shapes who gets to speak to environmental issues and determine policy and action. Her work is grounded in both artistic and intellectual ways of knowing. She pursued an acting career for 11 years, spent five years backpacking through Africa and Asia and living in Nepal, and eventually returned to school after a 15-year absence to complete her Bachelor and master's degrees and eventually a PhD. She has been a Fulbright Scholar, a Canon National Parks Science Scholar. She has worked with media in various capacities, including the Tavis Smiley show, MSNBC, and Vice News Tonight. She's written op-eds for Outside Magazine and Newsweek, was a guest editor and contributor for a special section on race and the national parks in Orion Magazine, participated in a roundtable conversation hosted by REI and The Atlantic magazine, and has appeared in interviews with NPR, Sierra Club, the Boston Globe, and National Geographic, and she served on the US National Parks Advisory Board for eight years. Her first book, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, was released in 2014. Carolyn, welcome to the show. It's so great to have you here.

**Carolyn Finney**

Thanks, Matt. It's really great to be here.

**Matthew Bryant**

I feel that I can't get to my very first question on the show without first mentioning a few important things. It's crucial to note right up front that this conversation is happening within two epic, ongoing historical moments in America, and in the world for that matter: The COVID-19 pandemic, and a massive amount of heightened civil unrest prompted by a series of racially charged interactions between African Americans and whites, all of which have involved police in some form, even to the point of being fatal. The pandemic seems to have come out of nowhere and changed everything, whereas the other is a combination of something that has been with us since the beginnings of this country, but this week has reached a new boiling point. It's crucial that we keep these contexts in mind as we talk with Dr. Finney about issues around sustainability.

Carolyn, I first became aware of you and your work through your book, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, and it started me thinking about the topics you discuss and advocate for through the lens and theme of

the show, which is sustainability, especially thinking of sustainability as relationships, reconciliation, history, and possible futures and not just thinking about material culture, waste, economics, or business practices. All those things clearly are intertwined, but your work in particular got me to thinking about sustainability in those ways. So I'd like to start there. I'd like to pose the big question to you first, which is: what does sustainability mean to you?

**Carolyn Finney**

Ha, yeah, you started big!

What does sustainability mean to me. Well, you know, I spend a lot of time – well I used to before COVID-19 – I was usually on a plane most weeks and standing in front of some group to have this conversation. And I often would put up a slide, and the slide that I will put up was of two images. One was an image of an older white man named Ian Gibson in his 50s, who was a sport hunter who used to like to hunt wild elephants in Africa, and the other was a young African American boy who lived in Flint, Michigan, and is holding a bottle of water. And I put it up there and I tell them, they're two stories both that I've read about I don't know them personally, how I read about Gibson a few years ago who was hunting elephants in Africa, and he got too close to a young bull elephant that gorged him to death. By the end of the comments, I was actually in tears. And I would explain, I said, you know, first of all, I just don't understand why anybody would sport hunt. I just I mean, personally I can't understand a why would you want to kill a live elephant? Here's this old this white man I seemingly don't have very much in common with and most of the comments said things like, you know, he got what he deserved one for the elephant. They were brutal, brutal comments. There was only one comment that actually had some compassion for him. And that's what I would tell audience I said, you know, the thing is for me, I have to work at it. But I want to have compassion for this man, he died a horrible death. He probably had a family, he came from a community, I can't believe what he must have been going through those last moments of his death. And if I can have compassion for him, and also push back on and hold him accountable for what he's doing so that we have a discussion. How is that we sustain a potential relationship between two people from two very different experiences, points of views, and places of standing in the community? I put it up against a little black boy in Flint, Michigan, because I say to people: Well, for me, I don't have to do a lot of work when it comes to this here little African American boy. You know what happened to him in Flint, Michigan, with a lead in the water, you know, had nothing to do with him. You know, it wasn't at fault at all. So for me, there's not a lot of work for me to do over in this section. But I got some work to do over here. And so I'm essentially asking the audience and saying, you know, what is it that we're trying to sustain? I don't know that we ever really talk about that, except in broad terms. What do we mean by that? You know, it's one thing to say, well, we want to protect that river or that piece of land. And that's important, but who's the we in that conversation? And how are we going to work together to do that? So if you have a river that a native tribe has been living on, since, you know, time immortal, but it's had that land taken away from them, they understand that river in a particular way, they engage with a particular way. But then you also have a community of non-native people that say, to make it easy, some white folks and black folks who live together in a town nearby who understand that river differently and then maybe let's throw in some Latinx folks, some other folks in the mix as well, who actually understand that river differently. And I'm being really broad and general, because it actually is really hard to get at what's nuanced about what does that mean? So now what do we mean about sustaining that river? Oh, let's throw in a few government agencies while

we're at it, you know, whether it's the Park Service, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife, oh, and why don't we throw in? And it just keeps going – some corporations who have a business nearby who rely on that river in order to do what it is they do. It gets complicated.

So if our relationships aren't intact, our relationships with each other, that river isn't going to save us. And actually, there's a little bit of hubris in there, in my opinion, in my opinion, to think that by focusing on the river, we can avoid dealing with what we deal with since the founding of this country about what, you know, the differences of opinion, the differences in what we value, how we see life, how we frame it, even how we are each individually valued in that community of people. I just being really general. So sustainability means to me it's something about relationship, and not just relationship with that piece of non-human nature. It's also about our relationship with each other, and we cannot have one without the other, in my opinion, does that make sense?

### **Matthew Bryant**

Thank you for that. That's great. I'm always curious what my guests think about sustainability, how they define it, or how do they think about it and approach it in their work and their personal lives. So thank you. With that, I'd like to ask about your journey to thinking about things like environment, sustainability, nature – how did you get there? What about your background or your journey got you to thinking about these things and making these things part of your work?

### **Carolyn Finney**

Yeah, I can speak to that a lot.

I would say, you know, the short answer is: yes, it's all those things. You know, I often tell people that I'm privileged enough to be able to do what I love and make a living off of that. And so some of this is professional, but that is so far down the list of why I do this. It's really personal, which is at the top. It's personal. It's intimate. It's political. One of the stories that I tell folks, you know, if I was standing in front of your listeners, I would say that everyone here has an environmental story. Why don't we take the time? You know, if everybody had to write three pages about what their environmental story is, it would be really interesting to hear what everyone had to say. And I have one as well. You know, I call myself an accidental environmentalist. I did not wake up when I was eight years old, or you know, whatever and say, I want to be an environmentalist, actually, I was pretty clear as a teenager that I wanted to be in the arts and actually, it's where my heart stands.

What remains true is where I grew up and how I was impacted by that a lot, which I didn't realize until I got older. I grew up about 30 minutes outside of New York City in Westchester County. My parents, Henry and Rose Finney, African Americans, came from the South back in the 50s. They grew up poor. They had a high school education. They came to New York because they thought they might have a better job opportunity. And the job my father got offered was to take care of this estate that belonged to a very wealthy Jewish family. It's a 12-acre estate, 30 minutes outside of the city. It had a lake, a swimming pool, vegetable gardens, and fruit trees. And my father was going to be the chauffeur, the landscape gardener, my mom was going to be sometimes housekeeper because there was a gardener's cottage on that property that my family lived in full time. And there was a bigger house that

the owners came up on weekends and holidays. So my parents moved in their beautiful place in a very wealthy white neighborhood and wanted to have kids, though they couldn't have kids and so adopted me. And then once they adopted me, I always make a joke and say they relaxed a little bit and had my first brother they relaxed more and had my second brother.

So my brothers and my parents and I were the only family of color in that neighborhood until the 90s. And in the 90s, a Japanese American woman moved in she was there for a few years and moved out. I tell people when I say very wealthy, you know at the time Harry Winston had property down the street Shaffer of Shaper Bureau live next door, we had golf clubs around the corner. I want people to understand the kind of wealth that was there in the neighborhood. My brothers and I, it was like we had our own private park during the week because the owners weren't there. And we learned to swim – all we all knew how to swim by the time we were seven because we had water on that property. And my parents wanted to be sure that if we were to fall in and they weren't around, that we could save ourselves. We played outside all the time learned how to ride our bikes, there were woods nearby that we were walking in. So the outdoors was always there all the time.

I want to sort of jump ahead into the 90s. So I've long since – me and my brothers, we've moved out we're moving around in the world. But now at this point, my parents have cared for that land for nearly 40 years and one of the original owners had already died. The other was pretty sick at this point. And she wanted to be sure my parents are going to be cared for and she even considered for a moment maybe there's a way to keep them on this property. But the property is worth at the time over \$3 million. The property taxes were over \$125,000 a year. It wasn't gonna work out that my parents found this property. So she had a house built for them in Leesburg, Virginia. She passed away, a new owner came on, and my parents stayed on this property until 2003. Because they needed to find a new family to move into the gardener's cottage who could take care of that property full time. And they ended up finding a family I believe who was from the Dominican Republic.

When my parents left in 2003 – this is when I had returned to school at this point, I was working on my PhD, they moved to their house in Leesburg, Virginia. It's a beautiful house, and it's on about a half an acre of land. And I watched my father in particular get incredibly depressed and talk about missing the land back in New York. And soon after they moved. They also received a letter – they received a letter from one of our neighbors and the letter was from the Westchester Conservation Land Trust and it was to let all the neighbors in the old neighborhood know that a conservation easement was now going to be placed on this piece of land and land I grew up on. And that means that in perpetuity, nothing can be changed on this piece of property. Well, in the letter, they had pictures about the property. They talked about all the environmental values of that property, where it sits in the watershed, the wildlife, the reason why it was really good to protect this piece of land, and at the end of the letter, it thanked the new owner for his conservation mindedness. And he had been on the land at that point about three years. There was nothing in the letter thanking or acknowledging my parents who cared for that land for 50 years. And I just saw them get erased like that.

So our whole family was erased. My parents labor was erased, their place in that environmental history was erased. And that's when I start really looking at it first from an academic perspective, but really what it was a personal journey for me as well to recognize that how many people in this country, stories

of the environment, their engagement, their care, their love for their labor has been erased in the larger story in this country. When we start to think of what is nature writing, what environmental stories count, when we look at an environmental movement that is still predominantly white, when we look at environmental nonprofits whose leadership is still predominantly white, and I want to be really clear here – white isn't a bad thing. It's not about whiteness being bad or blackness being good. It actually isn't about any of that. But it's understanding that within the context of this country, as James Baldwin put it, whiteness is about power, and how stories and narratives and opportunities and institutions and organizations get built up around particular mission statements that don't include a whole lot of people who've always been there. We're not just talking about African Americans, we can be talking about the Chinese who largely built the railroad. We're gonna be talking about the Japanese who were farmers in California, but got that taken off that land when they had to be interned. We are always talking about American Indians who were here first who were removed and are still and are still having that fight about who's right to be here.

And we're not just talking about land, right? This is the other piece of it, right – land is not simply about the environment in the loosest of terms. It's not just the supermarket of resources for our use. It's not just about recreation. Right? It is understanding it is also about economic and political power. It is also about legacy. It's also about who gets to say they belong here. So what happens when you erase people from that history? I'm not saying that people at the Westchester Conservation Land Trust are bad people. That's not what I'm saying. My guess is, it didn't even occur to them, because privilege has the privilege of not seeing itself. It doesn't make the people bad, it's just people's own bias. You know, that's not their experience. It didn't even occur to them, I bet, to think that well, who's actually been doing the work of caring for that land? Not just who owned it, because they had the money to own it, but who did the work? And what do we all lose when we leave somebody out of the conversation? So you want to go back to sustainability? How do you think we're actually going to change anything? If we've only got some of the people at the table, calling some of the shots? What happens to everybody else? I'm revved up now!

### **Matthew Bryant**

Carolyn, now that we've heard some of your background and what kinds of things influenced you to start thinking about environments and place and sustainability in nature. I'd like to talk a bit about your approach in your work. One of the things that stood out to me or that struck me when I started reading about your research in your book was that it's clear that you like to work both inside and outside of academia to find different ways of understanding, connecting, of going below the paper record, as you've said, or getting your hands dirty. And a piece I read by you and Harvard Design Magazine, you state, "when I consider the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries as a way to go below the intellectual paper record, I have to look elsewhere and invite other forms of knowing to the table." That really resonates with me. I personally have always been a strong fan and proponent of working across boundaries, working in different modes, intellectual and otherwise, and creative processes are clearly an important part of your work. I'm wondering if you could talk about how you tap into both formal and informal networks to inform your research and your practice how that helps your understanding and being able to connect with others and to go deeper into the work.

### **Carolyn Finney**

Oh, man, that's such a great question, Matthew, thank you. So you mentioned in my introduction, you know, I spent 11 years as an actor, and my heart is in the arts. And when I left acting, and I was traveling, decided to go back to school, it wasn't because I was interested in becoming an academic. I was never interested in that. I knew that what I wanted to do was use my arts background and knowledge gained in an academic context to actually think about how do we tell stories? How do we bridge conversations across difference? What does it mean? I didn't even know this at the time. What does it mean to think about change? And how do we do that kind of work together in the broadest sense? My residency at Middlebury has been great, but it's actually part time. When they came to me about coming there, I did not want a full time academic position not because I didn't need the money. My experience of academia has been when I'm in it full time, the institution doesn't know how to allow for difference, whether it is different in the way that I identify, whether it's a different way of thinking, whether it's within their own – and this is just my opinion – limited understanding of what rigor actually means.

And that I am interested in emergent, what is emergent, what is new, innovative, what has always been there that we've never seen? How can my thinking evolve? How can we actually evolve? So I come to it, you know, from a practical place, and I love that you used the word 'my practice' – that was beautiful, because that's actually what I think about it, as it's like, you know, I'm like most people I got to work and make a living and I got to figure that out. I also like to work across difference, so I loved working with people in academia. I've gotten my degrees and had jobs. You know where I am, I've learned and grown and met some incredible people there. And I also know I'm really comfortable in the art space, because I spent many years in that space. And that's probably where I'm – in many ways, even more comfortable.

There was a teacher – I had him when I was doing my PhD, he was British. One of the things he said in one of the very first classes, he talked about theory, and I was really intimidated by theory, because I thought, "Oh my god, you've got to speak in all these really big words and sound like you know what you're saying." And he understood it, because that's where he operated. But he would never say it in a fancy way. And he said, once to the class, he says, "I believe if you can't say it in a way that anybody can understand it, then you don't really understand it yourself." And I thought, wow, that's really powerful. I need to be able to have the same conversation with my parents who have a high school education, and not be talking down to them. I need to be able to have this conversation with them as much as a room full of PhDs. And so for me, that's where the creative piece comes in, you know, about how all the different ways we know and feel and show up in the world, the intellect, we often privilege but many of us know, the intellect isn't always doesn't always get it right. It can often get in the way of our emotional intelligence, our spiritual intelligence, all the things that we can't see that we don't know the mystery of who we are and how we are here. How do we make space for that? The other thing that I want to say is when I was looking at African Americans in the environment as a dissertation, what was so hard for me in the early 2000s was that I go to the library doing what you do – you look for books to read about it. And I rarely found anything on the shelves about African Americans in the environment. So part of it was just, I was like, What am I gonna do because there's hardly anything here. There were some stuff on environmental justice, which was really important, I swallowed it whole, but black people have had really bad things that happened to them. I want to really expand how black people have thought about and engaged issues that are related to the environment over time. And I said, well, just

because we haven't been allowed historically, to be producing that knowledge and in very particular spaces, doesn't mean we haven't been producing that knowledge. You can look at music, you can look at art, you can look at newsletters and all the places like a lot of other people out there who've told stories and created knowledge about our own experience of this place. And in this case, as it relates to the environment. I love again that you said practice because practice implies it's always in process, and I have to always pay attention to it.

My greatest intention in any group of people is meeting people where they are. And I was having this conversation the other day online and with a group of people and one of the folks online said, "Well, how can we do that?" They were talking about communication, you know, how can you do that with a room of people you often don't know to get there? I said, well, at the most fundamental level, you do know one thing. You always know one thing about a person or a group of people, that they're a human being. So even if that's all you know, what does it mean to meet a human being where they are as a human being in a space? I know at this moment, I can walk into a room with someone that I've never met. And here's what I already know: that we both been living during the time of the pandemic. If we're here in the United States, there are other things going on, that may be impacting us, like the racial unrest that's always happening in seems. I know that there's a human that's in that room with me at that time. So there's a certain amount of respect and thoughtfulness that I'm going to bring in, even though I'm prepared to say some really hard things, but the way that I frame it, the way that I come at that – I want there to be an opening for that person to show up whole.

I'm asking as I human being as a black woman, I want to be seen as whole, I want to be respected, I want to be welcomed, I want to feel like I belong. And so what I need to do is do that for others. You know, I can't control how others react to me. As a friend of mine likes to say, it's none of my business what you think about me. But what I can control is the way that I come in and the choices I make in my intention. You can't talk about race in America, in America, without there being tension in the room. And I don't care how diverse the room is, right? It's just there's a lot of emotion behind that – there's trauma behind that. There's history behind that. And we have to have the conversation, we have to pull that carpet all the way back and get out the route. Because if we're not really ready to acknowledge, be held accountable, to apologize, to think about what redemption looks like and to move forward to reconcile – if we're not ready to do that, for me, we can't do the work of sustainability in the way that I believe we have a capacity for. So I'm always coming in with that.

And I rely on my own personality, is what I tell other people. You know, humor is not just a great equalizer, but it's a great way to make people laugh. I mean, I make mistakes. You know, I talk about it all the time, the way that I'm learning to think about gender fluidity, for instance, you know, as an older person, I'm 60, right. And so, as an older person, I didn't grow up with that front and center in my life, and I'm doing my own education, because it's not anybody's job to tell me what that is. I have to do that for myself. And so I occasionally make mistakes. I can say that I like to start conversations about the environment and first acknowledge the native presence where I am, and sometimes I forget to do it. Sometimes I do it and it sounds like it doesn't mean anything. But if I don't have any authentic relationship with that the native peoples that I'm calling out. I don't always get it right. It is not about getting it right. Not at first. Sometimes we have to just show up and be willing to take the risk, right? So I like to bring all of that in my work.

My performance background allows me to tell a story, make it personal. I always start personally, and I bring other stories in whether they're historical narratives or other individuals I've spoken to. So weave together both as a way to show how we're all connected within this histories. It's not meant to be a trick. It's a strategy. If I show up vulnerable, if I decide I'm going to make myself vulnerable, It's always a risk. It's also to remind people first and foremost, I'm human. That's not about denying my race or denying my other differences. That's not what I'm saying. But I remind you of that, right. I remind you of that to say, oh, she just told her...I felt embarrassed before or I've also been afraid before or, you know, I felt that kind of joy before. It gives people a place to connect. So then I can talk about more specific and harder things and I say words like white supremacy or if I say words like segregation, or slavery, or native removal, I mean, the subjects that are a lot harder to grasp on to people might be a little more open to hearing it. So, ultimately, again, it's about I always have to revisit what my intention is and what I'm saying, what is my intention? How do I practice what I preach? Literally, what does it mean to be in the moment and be willing to make a mistake and then change right there in the moment? It's not about a perfect performance, you know, it's actually about yes, I do my homework, I'm always thinking about these things. I'm writing about them. I come into something as prepared as I can be. And then I have to, as we say in acting – you have to throw it out and you have to trust and it's about being with everybody in that moment to have the conversation that I would really like us to have.

### **Matthew Bryant**

One of the things I've noticed that is a recurring theme in your work is that of storytelling. And it's also clearly important when it comes to making public spaces more accessible and meaningful. When I think about exhibits, history museums, or just simply encountering information and graphics when you're somewhere site-specific like a national park, those things give context and meaning to place. Details about the history of how the place came about or what's happened there before. And you were part of a roundtable discussion that I was reading about that was sponsored by REI called Re:Think and it was featured in The Atlantic magazine. And at the end of that article, there was a list of actionable items that came out as a result, items that were suggestions on how to make places like national parks more accessible and more inclusive of everyone, including African Americans and others. And the top few items in that list were all about storytelling, even explicitly I think the number one item referenced. Earlier in this podcast you mentioned that when you're giving a talk how you'll sometimes use humor, especially when you're discussing difficult or sensitive subjects, talking from the heart, talking from personal experience. So this idea of storytelling, I'm wondering if you could talk about that and how it plays into your work and your practice.

### **Carolyn Finney**

Yeah, thank you. I love storytelling. So I'll say a couple of different things. And they may not be... it may not go into a linear order, but it's kind of as it's popping into my head about storytelling. You know, part of it is personal for me since I was a kid, you know, I loved books. I used to pretend and write my own stories that I would make up. I'm not going to share here. I'm a little embarrassed, but I would make up these stories. I love the space of story. How story can allow for anything to happen. I'm an avid fan of all things, science fiction. The primary reason I love science fiction so much, because it's in part, it's based upon some truths that we understand about the world and our lives. But the fiction piece is the imagination and how story can take us on a journey and the journey of the imagination, which I think is



the ultimate journey in many senses, because that's where possibility lives. So I love the idea of story as a place of possibility. I believe everybody has a story. Everybody has multiple stories, right? It's democratic in that way, in terms of, you know, it's not like one person has a story and another person doesn't. People may not know how to access their stories or aren't sure how to share their stories. But everybody has stories.

As an actor... when I was acting, it's all about telling a story. You get up in front of people, you're reading somebody else's script, and you're bringing your own story to that script. So stories colliding and coming together. I think about maybe 10 or 15 years ago, when I started to do this as work, this work that I do with a group called Center for Whole Communities here in Vermont. One of the first experiences I had was part of spending time together with 19 other people over the course of a week to really talk about race, land, and privilege, was to think about storytelling as an actual skill. Well, how it builds connection, how it builds community, how we learn from that, how we build trust. The story is also about trust. Yes, we come in and tell stories. You think about comedians, the really good ones. They're always telling stories, right? They're making us laugh. Oh, no, we often come to it like, Oh, god, I'm gonna laugh tonight. This is what I want. And you're really listening to them. They're telling you stories, tidbits from their lives, things that they've experienced what they've seen and heard. The power of stories to shift how we see the world and how we show up in the world. And there are so many for me, there's no end to... there's no end to stories, right. They're everywhere.

Some of the best things storytellers that I've ever seen – I didn't know this before I served on the National Parks Advisory Board – are some of the interpreters who work in national parks. And if anybody – whether you're at a park that's in a national historic site in a city or you get to go to somewhere like that... the best ones, they're telling stories – I mean telling stories with no notes. We met a few times, every year at Wildwood, I served on the National Parks Advisory Board and we'd meet for two to three days. And part of that time would be sitting at a table and having discussions about new potential park sites and all these other issues. But part of the time was always spent in the park. So I got to go to so many parks over the years around the country and listening to and seeing people who work at these parks and what they do. And one of them was following the park rangers who would be telling stories. I learned so much. I said those are some of the best storytellers because they're doing this day in and day out. People show up and they take you on a tour of the park and they're telling you a story. How powerful that is. It can feel, I think, it's a tricky little thing, a story, you know. I'm just going to tell you a story. So you just think, wow, great, I'm going to be entertained. And you can decide whether or not that's all you're going to allow in, which you know, the story can really suddenly... you found that you were moved. Suddenly you find that you learned something new. You didn't know you were coming here to learn something new. Look what happened. Suddenly, it changes your mind about something and they never told you that was going to happen. They were just going to tell you a story. Because my only job is to tell you the story. I can't make you do anything. But the story in and of itself is like a beautiful present, waiting to be open. And you can open it and you can do with it as you please. But there's something really powerful about that.

### **Matthew Bryant**

You've talked about having difficult conversations and talking about things that are complex. One of the things I've been thinking more about lately and reading more about is environmental justice. I know

there's a history there and that phrase or approach or movement means different things to different people. What are your thoughts on it both as a way of describing a movement or an approach? And what's your relationship to it? What is your current thinking on environmental justice?

### **Carolyn Finney**

Wow, this is always a harder question for me. I know there are some amazing people, such as Robert Bullard, who many would consider is almost the founding father, coining the phrase “environmental justice,” really understanding that the mainstream environmental movement in the United States historically wasn't looking at what was happening to black and brown and poor communities, particularly in cities, when it came to toxic waste dumps, when it came to breathing bad air, to understanding food deserts. There were a lot of other things about the environment, and what happens in relation to non-human nature in the environment, that aren't pretty and who bears the brunt of that and we find it's usually black and brown and poor communities that bear the brunt of that. And they're not pretty – they don't make for the great pretty story to tell. That environmental organization, mainstream environmental movement, doesn't want to put that front and center on its website to get you excited to join up, right? So what I appreciate and what I support and what I feel that I am engaged with around the environmental justice movement is understanding.

I kind of go to a quote that I'm gonna paraphrase, and it was what I heard Cornel West say that “love is justice made public” to understand more broadly what justice means. When I heard him say that a few years ago, it really moved me because I said in the broadest and deepest sense, it's about the love, the respect, our ability to see someone else who is different from us to recognize their life, to go beyond empathy and compassion, to standing with them to be willing to give up and let go of some of our own privilege. You know, because we believe that everyone should be able to have some dignity in their life and how they live in place with the environment with themselves and their family. So, my understanding of environmental justice is, it's all of it actually. I understand how it was created in response to the mainstream environmental movement. And sometimes it means the environmental movement, you know, kind of looks for that over there, like it's, you know, it's cousin. But actually, for me, it's all about environmental justice, all of it, whether or not you're interested in protecting that piece of land, whether or not you're looking at a community that's a food desert, all of its environmental justice.

Back in the 2000s, when I started this work as a dissertation, my pushback was not on environmental justice. It was that I found that often at the time, and I'm just gonna say it, if somebody white asked me Well, so what are you doing? What's your work on? And I would say, you know, well, I'm looking at African Americans and the environment. I really want to understand, historically, you know what African Americans have been doing and how resilient they are. I'd say all these things, I would never say, justice, and there was a purpose. And inevitably, they come back at me saying, oh, you're doing environmental justice. And what they often were implying was, oh, you want to talk about all the bad things that have happened to black people. That's why I would say, you know, that's not what I said. Actually, there's not a single group of people I've ever heard of that like to be defined by all the bad things that happened to them, which doesn't mean that bad things haven't happened to them. But I also want to point to that resilience. I also want to point to the ways in which in spite of and despite what's been happening in this case, with black people historically there, we're still here and doing the good work all the time.

We can be nature writers, right? It doesn't have to be environmental justice as narrowly defined by some. Actually, we can also be nature writers which can influence the way other people think about this, maybe policymakers, you never know. We also go skiing, we also do some of the other things, we've climbed mountains as well. There's all of these things we do. We're just as diverse, we have just as much capacity, we have just as much potential and possibility as anyone else. That's actually what I was trying to get at. I wanted to grow the ledge of who we are, and open the eyes of others who can't see us – not kind of narrow it down to one way of seeing us. And at the end of the day, for me, it's always about justice, because justice for me is fundamentally about love and respect. People will have their own opinion and definition for that. And so I just want to be clear that, you know, this is how I come to it and it's always evolving. Nature is to connect. I always want to be in relationship to and connect with. So even those points of view that may be really far away from mine...I got people who know me, know I have no problem saying "What? I don't think so." And again, the intention is still is there, a way to connect and relate. And so how do I open up the space of that without losing my own integrity and wholeness. But I don't denigrate somebody else's either, right? So it's always attention to the struggle around that.

### **Matthew Bryant**

As we come to the end of the show, I'd like to talk about your current and upcoming projects. Two in particular that I'm curious to learn and hear more about. The first is a performance piece that you're working on called "The N-Word: Nature Revisited," which I understand is a dialogue with you and John Muir. And the other is, I believe you're working on a new upcoming creative nonfiction book. Could you talk about those projects?

### **Carolyn Finney**

Well, pre COVID-19. But what was happening was just what you said. The first was, it was 2016, when it was the centennial for the National Parks, and I was at a conference for geography and there was a panel and about eight geographers from different parts of the field. And for those of your listeners who wonder what geographers look at, very generally, it's about the human-environment relationship, why people do what they do, where they do it, as an old professor of mine used to say. And so we were from different ends of that spectrum. And we had 10 minutes to respond. And I ended up writing a piece about, you know, I started to think about, you know, we always talk about John Muir. The thing that's also true about John Mueller as a very committed individual, as a person who really spent a lot of time thinking about and influencing the way we think about conservation preservation, the great outdoors – he was also a racist. And that's just – I'm not being dramatic. You can read it in his own words. And can we hold that complexity of who he is because I actually don't want to denigrate his commitment to nature. And he was a racist. So that makes it really complicated. And so what I wanted to imagine was, how do we hold those truths of let's say, John Muir's experience and my own, we're both are born at different times, our privileges are very, very different, both because of the way we identify in the world. and when we showed up in the world. And how we speak to and think about all things environment, and wouldn't it be interesting to have both those stories in a very particular way in a room so people could see those things interact? I will tell you that I ended up writing up this little piece and it is about to be published. Actually, just the piece that I want to turn into a performance, it's going to be published. It's an arts nonprofit, it's called Leaf Litter. I think it's going to be coming out next month, like I don't even

know what month we are at now. So there's that and I would like to make it a performance piece. And so what that means is that I need to find someone like a dramaturg, somebody willing to work with me to help me out, put that together as a performance.

The book is something that I've known that I'm doing for the last six or seven years. And I actually have a title for it. And people always say to me, until you have a contract, you shouldn't say what the title is. So I won't say it at this point. But what I started doing was interviewing my parents. My parents are both 88. My dad's got early-stage Alzheimer's, both of them you know, they're 88 years old with health issues. And so I wanted to start to hear more about their experience of living on that land in New York. Because oftentimes, the story I most get asked to talk about is the story of what it was like to grow up at that estate that we didn't belong, you know, we didn't own. And so I wanted to learn more about that. And basically, I want this to be a story about their stories, my stories, all the years that I spent backpacking and back before the 80s and 90s. Often the only ones who looked like me, I'd be somewhere in another country, and I cannot tell you how many times when somebody asked me where I'm from, especially if it was American, they just assumed I wasn't American. And I want to have these conversations to think about the black imagination here in the United States. When we think about the role of land and place and belonging, and identity, and how the trajectory of my parents, my own trajectory in my life, that my potential, what am I trying to say that my world is so much bigger than their world was able to be because of the time that they grew up, you know, during segregation, and the choices that they had to make, you know. My way of imagining the world, there's so much more space and freedom for me to imagine it even though that is also limited in some way. I want to talk about that a little bit. I want to talk about the issue of identity because I was adopted. So I started to sort of pursue that angle about everything from DNA to the question of adoption, which is another way of belonging and being connected and in relationship to all these conversations, the question of place and land and environment that non-human nature the nature that is not us is always in the picture there. So I know that sounds, it's all kind of swirling together. And I've been collecting things for a long time, artifacts and ways to sort of speak to and speak with those artifacts to tell a bigger and fuller story. That's not an academic story, but more of a personal one. And so that I can really explore that fully without feeling the limitations of often what academic writing demands. But being no less rigorous about the story, I want to tell if that makes sense.

The other thing that I want to say what's happening, what's happened since COVID started was I just started to get asked to write more and more essays. So I've got two things. One thing is coming out in a Canadian magazine called *Beside* and it's coming out, I think, now. They had a black photographer who had gone to New York City and done portraits, individual portraits of black people in the outdoors in the environment. So maybe one of them just standing in the Botanical Garden, or one of them standing Prospect Park, and as a portrait as opposed to a picture. So people are looking serious, but just the individual African Americans standing outside, and they wanted me to look at those pictures. They didn't want me to talk about those images. They just wanted me to write a personal essay about what does that evoke, for me personally to see those images, and I call that piece "Self Evident," about really understanding the way that the black presence gets written out of environmental history. And what does it mean for us to open her eyes and see more broadly more expansively?

Lastly, I want to say, and I believe this will be out on Monday or Tuesday, is that The Guardian had asked me to write a piece about what has happened with Christian Cooper and Amy Cooper in the park in New York City. So I've been working on that the last two days to have a sort of broader conversation. One of the things that I've been working with the editor to say – he wanted me to talk a lot about nature and the role of black people in nature, and I do some of that, but my larger intention, I told him, he says he's got a lot of other stuff in here that happens with black people in space. I said, because it's all on the same continuum, what happened to Christian Cooper walking in the park and Amy Cooper weaponizing, whether it was intentional or not, the very idea down in our collective consciousness that you could actually weaponize the African America race in a very particular way to use it as a threat, or whether we're talking at the other end of the spectrum, you know, George Floyd publicly being killed by a police officer while begging for his life. Those are all for me on the same continuum. But underneath all of that systemic racism, you know, what's embedded in our consciousness, the things that are hard for us to look at that we're unwilling to do. It's all there. I kind of laugh you know, nature abhors a vacuum. And guess what? systemic racism doesn't stop because you went to the park. And that's one of the things we found out. So it's really about understanding that wow, all of these things are connected. I'm not going to place the same value on them, you know, losing a life versus being challenged in a park, but man, they are definitely on the same continuum, and so what is it about how they're connected, and what's underneath that, that we need to be looking at that, we need to reconcile with that, we need to be held accountable for that, we need to heal. So we can think about how we're going to collectively move forward differently.

### **Matthew Bryant**

Thanks so much for giving us a peek into your current and upcoming projects. I always love hearing about what people are working on, even if the work is unfinished or untitled. So thanks very much for letting us know what you're up to.

### **Carolyn Finney**

But I also want to say I'm not grounded full time in academia. 70% of the time I'm not in academia, actually. And so the other thing that I've been doing, I was doing it before in person – I work with a variety of groups who invite me in to design workshops around this to give talks around this. I'm doing something in a couple of weeks with a National Historic Site out in Kansas who wants to work with their staff around diversity. I did something early this week with leaders of 25 nonprofits around strategic communication around this. This challenges me to be flexible about who I'm engaging with and how, what it is they need really, build my own skill set with my ability to meet that, and also learn while I'm doing that as well. And that actually takes up a significant amount of my time.

### **Matthew Bryant**

Carolyn, thank you so much for being on Pondering Skies, I know you have a very busy week with a lot of engagements and commitments and deadlines. So thanks for taking the time out to be on the show. There's a lot to reflect on here with all the things that we've discussed and that you've brought up. I really appreciate you talking about the hard stuff and tying it all into all things sustainability, and I wish you the best on all of your upcoming projects.

### **Carolyn Finney**

Matthew, thank you for having me. This is also part of the work – and I mean that in the best way, you know, these conversations afford me an opportunity to sort of think out loud and process, they afford opportunity to meet new people, they afford me an opportunity to just be heard. I still get moved by the fact that people might want to hear me and sort of in the deepest recesses of my person thinking like, people really want to hear what I have to say, okay, you know, and how important that is to actually make space for someone else's story and you've made space for mine today, and I'm really grateful.

**Matthew Bryant**

You're very welcome. That's partly what this show is about, giving people the space to do just that. It's been great talking to you. Take care Carolyn, stay safe.