

Becca Zajac

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity

Op-Ed

## **Reconsidering the Power Structures of Green Space: Nature is Not Neutral**

Government agencies, large conservation organizations, and corporate interests control green spaces such that they are not truly public and mostly exist to obtain profit. While privatization proliferates in urban and rural areas to leverage green spaces (habitats that remain intact and gardens) for monetary gain, even public green space remains inaccessible to minorities and antithetical to traditional sustainable land use practices. The allocation of land ownership must be rethought to allow inclusive and sustainable occupancy of the land.

Practices associated with land preservation can be predatory and lead to race-based exclusion. Governmental and non-governmental enterprises both contribute to this issue. For example, the U.S. Forest Service's land in northern New Mexico is the result of U.S. conquest of Mexican land in the 1840s. The intent of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which was to recognize the property rights of Mexican people who were living there, was largely dishonored. Albert Ponce explains in "Racialization, Resistance, and the Migrant Rights Movement," "While the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was a supposed guarantee of citizenship and rights to Mexicans, in practice their domination became essential in maintaining white supremacy." During the land grant adjudication process, community lands were declared public domain or privatized and later sold to the government. Land taxes and permits made the area unaffordable to live in. These conditions drove out Mexican people. Indigenous Pueblos had been driven out or converted by Spanish explorers hundreds of years prior. During and after World War II, the U.S. enlisted individuals in the protection of its forests through the Smokey Bear advertisement

campaign originating in New Mexico. The messaging, “*only you can prevent forest fires!*” was targeted towards white middle class people, encouraged individual responsibility to police “public” land, and further antagonized nonwhite occupation and use of forests such as farming and controlled burns.

Conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy also contribute to this issue. In Pembroke, Illinois, property has been bought up under Black farmers to expand a wildlife reserve against the residents’ wishes. Pembroke is populated by Black southerners who fled during Jim Crow, able to settle there because the landscape was deemed barren. The residents learned to grow specialty crops in the sandy soil, establishing cultural traditions such as hiking, hunting, and horseback riding in the process. Structural lack of support for small scale farms leave many Black farmers defaulting on taxes and losing their property. The Nature Conservancy collected hundreds of deeds in Pembroke at tax sales and sold the land to the Fish and Wildlife Service. As the landscape became a target for preservation, occupation and cultural traditions were prohibited.

These events in New Mexico and Illinois illustrate that projects for the public good often only benefit the white public. In such circumstances, private ownership by communities would be a better alternative than turning land over to private conservation entities or having it become public domain to be overseen by the government. On the other hand, in cities, privatization of unclaimed lots disempowers locals from sustaining themselves on the leftover land. There was a movement in the 1970s and 80s to reclaim empty lots as community gardens. “Guerilla gardeners” recognized the potential cities had for communal spaces. However, once grassroots organizations and unhoused people revealed the capacity for these spaces, they became bulldozed, rebuilt, and privatized.

These situations prompt a reconsideration of land use, notions of private versus public property, and green spaces. There is a widely held belief that public spaces are valuable because they allow mutual benefit of common resources and representative management by the populations they serve. However, as James Quilligan articulates in *The Wealth of the Commons*, “‘Public’ no longer signifies a community’s authority to manage its local resources and express its own social or ecological demands; ‘public’ now means the central governing authority to whom we have surrendered the control of these resources.” Should public land still be sought? Private property can be empowering in the hands of Indigenous folks and POC, but we should not settle for control by adhering to individualistic structures. People must reclaim the public. Let us imagine and establish spaces that are truly held common. Such land has no need to turn a profit. It exists for subsistence, recreation, and residency.

A deep investigation is warranted of any government agency that holds jurisdiction over large swaths of land in the U.S. Look deeply at the land or green spaces they hold. Why is it reserved, and for whom or what project? How much of it is deemed public? Who is excluded in the process? Similar questions should be asked of large-scale conservation organizations. How are humans hurt in the process of environmental rejuvenation? Question conservation as a reliable solution to the climate crisis and favor strategies that care for humans and nonhumans. Finally, investigate green spaces in cities. Who owns community gardens? Are the requirements for participation exclusive based on class? Was there a neighborhood that was bulldozed to build a park? Who is sacrificed and who benefits?

Wherever equitable land distribution and responsible sustainable practices are not present, a reallocation of power and management is necessary. Humans have a right to exist within nature and know how to transform it with mutually beneficial strategies. The Black

farmers in Pembroke have a right to farm the land. The POC in northern New Mexico have a right to live in the forest. Homeless people and low income communities have a right to access gardens and parks. Furthermore, Indigenous people have a right to enact their practices off of reservation borders. Comanagement between Indigenous nations and the U.S., described by Thomas Biolsi in “Imagined Geographies” as sharing jurisdiction over land and expanding native practices off-reservation, should be sought and encouraged. Green spaces are strongest when they are open to all and managed by those who have the greatest personal history at stake. The inhabitants of various geographies flourish when white control of space is relinquished to favor diverse land use practices and voices of agency.

### Works Referenced

Biolsi, Thomas. "Imagined Geographies: Sovereignty, Indigenous Space, and American Indian

Struggle." *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 2 (2005): 245–47.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2005.32.2.239>.

Briscoe, Tony, and Rashod Taylor. "Conservationists See Rare Nature Sanctuaries. Black

Farmers See a Legacy Bought out from under Them." ProPublica, October 14, 2021.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/conservationists-see-rare-nature-sanctuaries-black-farmers-see-a-legacy-bought-out-from-under-them>.

Graf, Jody, Elena Gonzalez, Gordon Matta Klark, and Margaret Morthon. "Life Between

Buildings." Brooklyn, New York, June 2, 2022.

Kosek, Jake. "Chapter 5: Smokey Bear Is a White Racist Pig." Essay. In *Understories the*

*Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*, 194–227. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Ponce, Albert. "Racialization, Resistance, and the Migrant Rights Movement: A Historical

Analysis." *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2012): 9–27.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920512465210>.

Quilligan, James. "The Wealth of the Commons." Why Distinguish Common Goods from Public

Goods? | The Wealth of the Commons. Accessed December 4, 2022.

<https://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/why-distinguish-common-goods-public-goods>.