



Episode 32: Reimagining Nature and Belonging with Carolyn Finney, PhD

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

[00:00:00] Roxy Manning:

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning.

[00:00:18] Sarah Peyton:

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're the hosts of the Fierce Compassion podcast.

[00:00:24] Roxy Manning:

In this episode of Fierce Compassion, we're honored to welcome Carolyn Finney, a cultural geographer, author, storyteller, and self-described accidental environmentalist, who brings a unique perspective to the intersection of race, nature, and belonging.

[00:00:41] Sarah Peyton:

Carolyn takes us on a journey from her early days as an actor to her groundbreaking work in environmental justice. Her book, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, has been instrumental in reshaping conversations and challenging us to rethink our relationship with the environment and each other.

[00:01:02] Roxy Manning:

Carolyn shares how she uses her vulnerability and humor to connect with diverse audiences and tackle challenging topics. We dive into some of her innovative projects, including her performance piece, *The N Word: Nature Revisited*, which reimagines John Muir's writings from a black woman's perspective.

[00:01:22] Sarah Peyton:

Our conversation touches on the complexities of belonging, the importance of self-compassion in justice work, and how we can reframe our understanding of nature beyond just outdoor recreation or resource extraction.

[00:01:39] Roxy Manning:

Join us for this rich and thought-provoking discussion as we explore how each of us can contribute to building a truly beloved community that includes all people and the natural world around us. Welcome Carolyn.

[00:02:08] Carolyn Finney:

Thank you! Thank you for having me.

[00:02:12] Roxy Manning:

We're going to start this conversation, and the question that we ask every guest is what does self-compassion mean to you? especially as you navigate all of the complexities of the work that you do in environmental and social justice, but also in these moments when the world is just kind of going all biffy.

[00:02:29] Carolyn Finney:

Yeah. Well, you know, I've been having a time, actually, lately. And no one has actually asked me about self-compassion. I've actually never heard it framed that way. I think about... you would ask me what do I think about compassion? There's a lot of things I could say because I think about what does it mean to feel for someone else that's not me? And not only feel for another human, but even, something more than human, other than human, as well. What does it mean to kind of show up with feeling and authenticity and vulnerability?

I could give you the thing. I was like, I could give you the thing. But when I saw the self-compassion, I called up a friend and I went, I can't believe they're asking me this today. Because I've been in a little beat, beat-up, self-beat-up mode, a little bit of... I've been in that mode a little bit around my, oh my God, I can't believe I'm going to say this, but my sense of worthiness and, you know, why am I doing this work? And who am I in this world at this time? And what is my value and what I could be doing better? And it's been particularly loud, you know.

Another friend of mine calls it, you know, your little beastie. If you have a little beastie inside who's just another version of you, right, at least for myself, I should say, is just another version of me, has been particularly loud these past few months. And it could be because of where I am in my life, around my age, coming up against a world where it appears to be more complicated and complex than ever. What does it mean to be getting older as a person, as a somebody who identifies as a woman? What is the expectation society has for me? What is the expectation friends and family have for me? And what is the expectation I have for myself?

And I realized the last one is probably the hardest one. What is the expectation I have for myself? And how do I, as a person, who's always imagined, you know, I moved through the world and in part by... You know, I have dreams. I have dreams for the world and dreams for myself. And then I've hit a certain place where certain things aren't necessarily going to ever be true, aren't going to come true in the way that I expected. And how much of that is my own fault and/or my own responsibility.

And so the question of self-compassion, you see where I am, there was no way I could give you a simple answer on this. I would have absolutely no problem giving compassion to someone else around any of these issues. The problem I have and the challenge I have is what does it mean to give it to myself? And I talk about grace a lot. I find self-compassion and grace actually to be close cousins. They're very similar to me, you know, or, you know, grace. How do I allow myself to be okay?

So I'm going to give you an example. This is going to seem really silly because it just happened this week and it's going to sound, it's not going to be deep. But it's having such an effect on me the way that I responded to it.

So, I had to rent a car on Monday, and I don't own a car and I've never owned a car, but I use car shares and borrow cars and that's its own conversation. But I was going to be driving to do a gig. I was giving a talk and engaging with people and it's only a four-hour drive. So I picked up the rental car and you get your little key fob, and I did my thing.

So, Tuesday, I'm getting all my stuff together to walk out the door and realize I can't find the key fob. What ensues for the next four hours - I live in a small apartment - is I can't find it anywhere, right? I mean, I looked in the freezer, you know, I'm looking in every place. I have never lost a key in my life. I have never lost any key in my life. Well, this is not life threatening, but I talked to a friend of mine, and she had to help me breathe because I had gone into panic mode. It's like I thought I'm going to die.

But the voice in my head was my father, who was very strict, and you know, his way was to toughen you up. So it was just, you should never make a mistake. And I couldn't blame anybody for this. This wasn't like there was bad weather happened, I couldn't drive, or the car didn't start because something was broken. I lost the key. There was no one to blame but me. And I could not, I mean, I just felt terrible about myself as a person.

And I got another car, and I went and did my thing, and when I got home, the car had been towed, and yes, I'm gonna have to pay for that new key fob, which could cost me between 500 and 1500 dollars. It was an expensive mistake, I know. Not about that. But there was no compassion. I gave myself absolutely no compassion. You know, people were saying, you're really busy. I said, I know, and I could hear myself and go, what is happening? And then I couldn't give myself-compassion for being so hard on myself. Like, it just snowballed down the mountain in this moment of like, you know, what's wrong with you because you can't even be kind to yourself because you wouldn't treat another friend that way?

So. When I saw that bullet point of your question about self-compassion, I said, this is how the universe works. You're going to have to confront this head on, with people who think about this. So I imagine there's, self-compassion is also about there's healing that has to take place. Even if you're already doing the work of your own personal healing, about whatever those hurts are - and I step back from using the word trauma because I think it gets overused - but just, you know, for me, just the hurts in life, to if you're doing work that you're talking about that, you know. I always use a quote that I heard the civil rights activist, the black civil rights activist, and lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, who's just an incredible human being, I think. And when I sort of discovered him a few years ago watching this documentary and saw how much we had in common just because we're the same age and born a day apart and there were a lot of things, you know, and I just thought, ooh, and ooh, we need to meet, you know, like I was feeling a way. But when the interviewer asked him, why do you do what you do? Because he doesn't have a partner. And I was like, neither do I. No kids, neither do I. And I was thinking, oh my God, and he said, well, I do what I do because the system is broken. And then paused and said, I do what I do because people are broken. And then the last thing he said, his voice got kind of soft. He said, I do what I do because I'm broken too. And it laid me out, and I tend to say it.

So I'm like, oh my gosh, he both, for me, made it all right to know that we operate, you know, if we're doing a kind of work where we're into and I don't mean to sound grandiose, but, you know, I like to say thinking about how we can be better as people, how can we be better. And what work, you know, what is the work that we need to do? How do we need to do that better together, et cetera, et cetera. That place in there, I love that he says that we are not just an object or a form of delivery of information, at least that's not how I think about it, but part of that, which means that I have to be thinking about my own healing without it being all about me. And that's the tension for me all the time is just like, it's not all about me, but if I don't tell you the truth of where I'm standing, I don't believe I can engage truthfully in the conversation.

So self-compassion for me in there is how do I - I can intellectualize and say, I imagine it's, you know, what's the space I give myself for, you know, allowing growth and understanding to apply to myself as much as I would make space for it to allow that for someone else. And some of that I figured out and some of that I absolutely have not figured out because you know the stuff that's buried in the sediment of who we are and the foundations of who we are, and we carry it around a whole life, and I've been digging down into to that stuff this past year. Man, I think that's why I've been kind of, you know, playing in the shadows with myself around that.

[00:10:50] Sarah Peyton:

How do you bring this shadow exploration into your work? Where does it show up for you?

[00:10:58] Carolyn Finney:

Oh, like right now?

[00:11:00] Sarah Peyton:

Yeah.

[00:11:04] Carolyn Finney:

I think about, oh man, I could say a number of things. I think about the practice of being present. You know, and, you know, paying attention, being clear about my intentions in any given moment, sometimes because I'm a talker and because people ask me either to talk about or write about this work in very particular ways, is how I authentically bring that piece of myself into the conversation,

You know, how, you know, this idea of radical vulnerability. You know, I say to people, not everyone may deserve your truth, and that's true, and I think we all have to be selective about what we share at any given time. And also, what does it mean to be radically vulnerable and, say a thing that's true? and It's hard for me to be fearless around that because it made me know people, I'm going to be worried. They don't, she doesn't really know what she's talking about or look, she's not as strong as she was and all the things. It's like trying to be as real as I can be and be upright in that realness.

[00:12:08] Sarah Peyton:

And the baggage that comes with professional reputations and things

[00:12:12] Carolyn Finney:

That! Yes, well, when it's connected also to the way you make a living.

[00:12:20] Sarah Peyton:

Yeah.

[00:12:20] Carolyn Finney:

I'm privileged and grateful I, get to pay my rent by doing work that I care about and believe in. And I'm also, there's a lot of emotional labor, I'm exhausted. There's the professional piece. There's the disappointments about, you know, I would like to be able to say to you both, oh, I don't need that external affirmation or validation, but I'd be lying like a rug. So...

[00:12:46] Sarah Peyton:

We're starting to touch your work life. You have a rich background in performing arts and in cultural geography. Tell us about that movement. Are you an actress or actor and, cultural geography?

[00:12:59] Carolyn Finney:

Yes. So, you know, growing up when I was a teenager, I mean, acting was it. I wanted to do it. And I think when I was in ninth grade, when I got to high school and I, on the spur, just went, oh, I'm going to go. There was some period piece, I remember. And there was some small part in there of a French maid. And it was like a comedy of errors. And I just can't remember the name of it at this, moment. And I said, let me go audition. And it was between me and another woman. And the other woman got it. But even the director said, well, we have to give it to her. She's a senior and you're a freshman, but you need to keep coming back. Right. And so what I discovered also was how that I could make people laugh, the emotional response and the energy that I got, how, full that made me feel. That the light and that changed. I said, oh, this is where I want to be.

You know, I wasn't thinking at the time I could tell story, but you know, now I will tell you. That I could tell a story in a way where I could be fully present, even if I'm present by inhabiting another person's life, which then is connected back to this idea of compassion and empathy, and how do we understand another human being that is not us, with all their faults, right.

But yeah, so the acting piece was always there, but my family was not going to allow, my father was not going to allow me to do it. I was the first in the family to go to college. And so it was a, it was an outright no. And so when I went to, I didn't care then where I went to college. I applied to six schools in New York state.

I got in the. All of them. And I chose the one that was farthest away from home. And I flunked out my first year, and I dropped out my second. And I moved to New York, and I went right into acting. Right. And so it was really, that was end of the 70s, early 80s. And that's when I, that's when I, and I

pursued it, you know, and got real. I had a lot of survival jobs. I took a serious acting class for two years. I got an agent. I got multiple agents actually. I had a manager. I did commercials. I mean, I really leaned into the world of it. and there's a lot I can say about, you know, what I loved about the world, but not about the business of it, particularly 1980s. That it was the reason I stepped back.

So in between all of that, right. So I, cause then I spent the better part of five years backpacking around the world. Then I'm living in Nepal, and I kept, I fell in love with that kind of travel and being out there and challenging, my sense of self in the world because I had become a person I felt that had been a little too afraid and also very focused on what it is that I look like. And I said, I'm going to be, I don't want to be a woman who as she ages is so focused on that. And a lot of that has been in the acting world and I had done a little modeling and all of that. I could see how that was negatively impacting me.

When I came, decided to go back to school in my mid-thirties to finish my undergrad and then got a master's and then a PhD, it was 1994 and I saw the wonderful actress and playwright, Anna Deavere Smith, the black actress and playwright, Anna Deavere Smith, on Broadway, do her one woman show, Twilight Los Angeles, where she played approximately 44 different characters based on the interviews she had done of people who were affected by the L. A. riots. And I had been living in L. A. and had moved out three days before the riots, right?

So, when I saw her do that's when I went, that's what I want to do. And what I meant was, yes, some of it was performance, some of it was research, but it was the way she told stories from various points of view where one story isn't better than the other, but they're in conversation with each other that it became this rich tapestry of experience, whether she was playing a Korean grocer, whether she was playing a young Black teenager, it was that. And I said, there's a way to talk about it, and it brought up all the issues of race and difference and place and identity, like all this stuff was in the room. And I said, that's what I want to do.

So when I think about the way that acting and the arts comes together with geography. I didn't even know I was getting a doctorate. It was a professor said, you know, I loved school. I chose not to study. I had thought about going the creative writing the humanities route, but since I had that kind of background in acting and I felt was didn't have a lot of confidence in my ability, right? I had wanted to write. I had kept all these journals from all that backpacking. I was going to write my own version of Eat, Pray, Love that hadn't even come out yet, the Black version. And I love me some Liz Gilbert, so Liz, if you're listening, love it. And, you know, 10 years earlier, but I had no confidence to do it.

So going back to school was part like, you know, I don't have any confidence. Let me learn more about what's out there in the world. And by the time I started thinking about a PhD, because a professor said it, they looked at my transcript and said, do you realize you have a lot of, you know, areas cross listed with geography? And I was like, what is geography? Because I've been thinking anthropology. Right. Because I thought culture, people. I didn't even know there was a geography. I always loved maps, but I didn't know anything beyond that. And geography is why we do what we do, where we do it. It's about human environment, relationships, people in place, things like that.

And that's how those two things come together. So there's a way within which as a social science, and we like to say everything's geographical, you know, you could be anywhere on that spectrum in geography to, you could do feminist geography. You could be way over here, which is kind of where I am, like way over on that end, but you could do physical geography, actually looking at and understanding changes in place on the land and everything in between. You know, everything in between.

And I love the idea of marrying the theater, the arts, the artistic heart, you know. Because for me, I believe I have an artistic heart. I'm not trying to be like, you know, like I'm all that. I'm just saying that my heart is kind of bohemian that way. Like that's like, you know, everything can kind of tell you something and there's a lot of freedom in that. And I find something liberating about it, outside of the business of it. Just the... anybody can do it. Everybody has a story. Everybody can be, everybody is creative in their day-to-day life.

And there's also something about geography to really understand the history of who we are here in the United States, how we categorize certain kinds of knowledge and information, how we think about ourselves in place rightly and wrongly, you know, and sort of showing up, marrying those two things together to be able to have conversations with people.

If I guess, you know, I was doing this just the other day in Rhode Island. I said, you know, and somebody said, do you do that thing? You kind of talk about some history and facts, but then you put the personal and then you bring in some television show. And I'm like, yeah, that, because that is exactly it. It's all of our experiences are operating at different levels. And I want to get better at tagging them because then everybody has access. If I simply have a straightforward academic conversation, a whole lot of people don't have access to that.

[00:20:14] Roxy Manning:

Absolutely. I want to kind of build on this because I think I read that you're working on a performance piece that seems to like really exemplify what you're talking about, *The N Word: Nature Revisited*. And I wonder if you can talk about that as an example of, you know, like this blending activism, the artistic practice, and the scholarly knowledge.

[00:20:38] Carolyn Finney:

Yes, look at you asking the good questions. I'm clapping my hands like Hercules, Hercules, Hercules! Okay, so, in 2016... so I served on the National Parks Advisory Board for eight years, and that was kind of an amazing experience, and I got to understand a lot about the National Parks, how we make policy. And I was, out of everybody on the committee, I was the only African American there. I was the least experienced. There were some serious scientists and policymakers and media folks who just, I mean, were incredible in thinking about, you know, what stories do we want to tell in parks? What do we want to emphasize?

In 2016, and I was still in academia full time at this point. It was the hundredth-year anniversary for the National Parks. And so the Geography Conference, which happens every year, you get anywhere from six to ten thousand people come to the Geography Conference. It's spread over five days. The president said, we're going to have a plenary session. There's always a special plenary session. They choose the faculty or the professors to be on it. They asked about seven or eight of us. And they asked me, they said, we'd like you all to be in the session. And what we want you to think about is how you would answer the question, is John Muir still relevant? And for your listeners who don't know who he is, considered to be the father of conservation, founded the Sierra Club, helped to found and create the National Park Service. And his impact and his love of nature. is, you know, we still feel it, even if you don't know it. Know that you feel it that way. But the way we think about it and manage nature and even recreate in it, in part, has been influenced by him here in the United States.

And so, I was going to have 10 minutes, and I had a couple of weeks to prepare, and I initially was just going to do, oh, you know, you gave a few remarks. And I thought, no, you know, because I'm right at the edge. I said, I'm going to do something a little different. And I call this the N word *Nature Revisits*, so this is where it started.

There's a Black writer named Alice Randall, and in 2000, 2001, she was at Harvard at the time. I'll back up even farther. Your readers probably know *Gone with the Wind*, either the book by Margaret Mitchell. It was turned into a big movie with, you know, I forgot her name, who played Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler and, you know, a set. Vivian Leigh, that's right. It was set right after, during Reconstruction and how this very wealthy Southern white family who had slaves, you

know, suddenly, it was the fall of their sort of mini empire and slavery was always kind of the backdrop, and we can have conversations about the racist implications of that film at that time, but it was a very powerful story.

Alice Randall thought, well, what if I told that story from the perspective of a Black woman? So, she wrote a book, and she called it *The Windun Gone*. And it was from the point of view of Sayonara, Scarlett O'Hara's mulatto half-sister. It's fabulous. So, I'm reading this book, and I'm like, oh my God. Well, when it came out, the Margaret Mitchell estate went crazy. They tried to stop it. When you try to buy the book now, it has to say a parody on it, even though for her, it wasn't a parody. It was a New York Times bestseller, the book. It was, you know, and I thought about that. And I thought. Oh, I love what she did.

So I decided for the first five minutes of my 10-minute presentation, I would take one of John Muir's books, which was *A Thousand Mile Walk Through the Gulf*, *A Thousand Mile Walk Through the Gulf* in 1867. He took over a year to walk through the southern states and Cuba because he wanted to see the impact of war on the landscape. And I wanted to imagine, what if a black woman wrote it? So, I created a character, Sojourner Washington Douglas, and yeah, you know, you had to get all the names up in there, and I called it, *A Thousand Mile Walk Was Rough* in 1867. And then, I took real quotes from John Muir's book and read them to the audiences, and I picked ones where he was kind of racist. He wasn't racist. in all the book, but he talked a lot about Negroes in a very particular way. So he would say things were gorgeous about a sunset, and then he would talk about, you know, Negroes. Like, I would particularly say those quotes.

And after I said that I had some made-up quotes for this made-up character, Sojourner Washington Douglas, where I talked about the plantation she was born on in Louisiana, where she, you know, 1862, there's the Homestead Act. And, you know, your white folks are getting free land, black folks are dreaming of being free. Understanding that when she did escape that plantation, she was too dark to pass for white. So she had to use the back roads and live off nature's bounty because she's trying to make it north. And I used real facts of lynchings that were happening at that time where she was, and I was balancing it, right? So that the audience heard about the first fact, here's was John Muir's experience, here's Sojourner Washington Douglas experience.

When I finally hit 1880, and I'd say Jim Crow was the man, and then I said 1890, Jim Crow was the man. 1900 Jim Crow was the man, 1910 Jim Crow was the man, 19, and I kept going till about 1930. When I, the, you know, I say the editor interrupts at this point and says that Sojourner Washington

Douglass did that, made it to Boston, but she died, I believe at the ripe old age of 90. And then I look at the audience and say, and Jim Crow was still the man.

That's the first five minutes. And then the second five minutes, which I won't play out the whole thing for you is I thought of the book Rap on Race. And Wrap on Race is transcribed conversation between James Baldwin and the anthropologist Margaret Mead. It's amazing. And so I imagine, because I was serving on the park's advisory board, what if I could have a conversation with John Muir? And I wrote a funny scene that lasted five minutes of me inviting, I lived in Kentucky at the time, inviting him over, having this scene, talking to each other. And at the end of it, when he leaves, you know, he says, he's writing, taking all these notes and you can see he's confused. But he says, nature calls. And I said. I don't know if he means he has to go to the bathroom or he's about to go. And then I turn to the audience and I say some things and I say, at the end of the day, I don't know if he has my back, but I have his. Because the point I wanted to make is the agency in, you know, and I don't have to cancel him out to see there's some value in what he did.

So by the time I got to 2021, George Floyd was murdered and there was this broader interest in elevating these conversations about race on the landscape, I'd always wanted to do a one woman show. And I got a residency at the New York Botanical Garden for a summer. And they said, why don't you work on that? And so the short version was, it was workshop. It was not a full performance. I said, I want to workshop an idea where I'm telling stories of myself within a larger context of both when I travel, there's questions of place, read little snippets of poetry I've written - I don't know what it is, but I would tell the audience and say, I'm workshopping an idea here. So this isn't the performance, but so I want to get your feedback. And that's what I was doing.

At the end of it, you know, there was a program for all of them on their seats. And there was a pullout, and at the top it just said love notes, and at the very end, I say, so they all had pencils, I said, I'd love for you all, you know, is there a land, a piece of land, a place that you love or feel very strongly about, and if you feel inspired to do so, leave me something, write something down about it, draw a picture, sign your name, don't sign your name, but leave it for me. And I have over a hundred of those.

So I've workshopped this idea about eight times, and then I stopped because it can't go farther without other people being interested in helping me do it. I can't make it. Like, there's got to be somebody to help direct me or just take, you know, lighting. There's got to be an idea of how would this turn into a full-fledged performance.

So I've set it down. It's just sitting there. It's sitting there going, what about me? And I'm saying, it was great. I got to practice some ideas and there's some things I would change. So now, I've been working on the book, which tells a more personal story of my life within this larger context to get at some of these issues. Right. And I've been working with that idea. So that's where I am. I'm sorry, that was not a short answer because there is no short answer.

[00:29:07] Sarah Peyton:

It's so fun just to be in the flow of it. But so in 2020, you wrote this article in *The Guardian* called *The Perils of Being Black in Public: We are all Christian Cooper and George Floyd*. So is this, like the beginning? Is this part of the book or is this a different thing?

[00:29:25] Carolyn Finney:

Well, first I would say because I'm sort of the common denominator. So, you know, so I think about, oh my God, there's so many things you can tell. My brain is going faster than my mouth can move. You know, 2020 was interesting time, right? I do this part time residency at Middlebury, so I can do this kind of stuff the rest of the time out in the world. I've been here six months and all of a sudden COVID hit. And I was like, suddenly everything got canceled for a brief moment for like two months. Then George Floyd was murdered, you know, 24 hours or so later Christian Cooper had his skin weaponized against him when he walked into Central Park.

The *Guardian* reached out to me, and what they actually reached out to me was to write a piece about Christian Cooper. And what was really interesting, this is what I noticed, and other friends of mine who are doing work where racial justice and environmental justice cross in very particular ways, they were getting asked to do things too. The environmental field was... seemed to throw open their doors more to that conversation. I said to the folks at *The Guardian*, I can only write a piece to you that actually considers how George Floyd, what happened to George Floyd and Christian Cooper are connected. That's why I said they're on a continuum. And they went, Oh, that piece, right?

So, and then the floodgates opened. I mean, I was virtual for everything, but that's all the opportunities, including the New York Botanical Gardens, including the film by Irene Taylor, the documentary for HBO, all the things. Cause you had all these people wanting to engage, in different ways. And I love that. It was exhausting and challenging and exciting all at the same time. The way *The N Word* is connected, in part, is because it was happening to me, but I've been thinking about, in the book that I was writing and in that, how there's always a larger context we all are operating in. And really, at least in the book, and actually even in *The N Word*, and actually even in all my work, it's about a question of belonging. I use the "I" because I don't like to speak for anybody else. I guess I could safely say, so many of us are thinking about how we belong in the

world. It's about relationship. And so I'm using my story in a way within this larger context of events, which can completely affect, you know, what opportunity you have to kind of try these things out and play these things out. Because I can also tell you in 2023, 2020, there was over \$7.5 billion for DEI work and 2023, so many places got rid of their positions, they're not having that conversation anymore. You know, it changed. It doesn't change the work that the way that we show up, but I've noticed the difference. I'm like, Ooh, not good. Not getting the same invitations in the same way. And what hasn't changed for me is the question of belonging and connection. And, you know, we're seeing a rise in the sense of loneliness, particularly in Americans and the people who live in the United States, in particular. We're seeing a rise in, you know, the antagonism, and I'm just being gentle, you know, towards each other, to anything else that's different, that feels threatening, and it, for me, it sort of begs the question, what do we have to go back to?

We started this conversation maybe before we even taped this idea of what's in our sediment. So I think about that, what's in the bedrock of who we are, both as individuals, but also as a collective. What is there that needs to be healed? Right? And how do we get better at having, as something that President Obama said, I believe, in the New Yorker when he was leaving the presidency. He said about the art of common conversation, that we lost the ability to have a common conversation. I am deeply frustrated by how, even with what happened with Christian Cooper, which I just, you know, my heart goes out to him. But what happened to Amy Cooper after that, my heart goes out to her. Because what changed ultimately by just throwing her out? Yes. And vilifying her for all the racial inequities that ever have ever happened in the United States in the last 400 years.

[00:33:44] Roxy Manning:

And in some ways, it's this recognition that is a strategy, that move to like put all of the blame on one person is a strategy that lets us avoid having the conversation about the larger systems.

[00:33:55] Carolyn Finney:

Yes, and we, and I believe we all, lose in terms of the opportunity to actually get better from wherever we stand on that circle, right?

This week I'm teaching a new class and I've been reading this book; it's called *The Dawn of History*, I don't know if you've heard this book and the two authors; it's deep because it plays with looking at the history of the United States and of knowledge in general and just how we've been quite wrong about it.

But one of the things that says, you know, if we, and what we have done is impoverish history, we also impoverish our sense of possibility. So, I've been playing with the idea of, you know, I'm often saying things, how do we elevate stories that we either ignored, erased, we didn't know that we were there, and talking about how we've come to who we are on this land at this time, right? There's a lot of stories we don't talk about, you know, so we talk about how the United States was created, with Christopher Columbus getting lost, and Manifest Destiny, and all that stuff isn't wrong, but it is so highly incomplete, and it leaves out so many people's experience, right, of who they are.

It actually colors, that pun intended, the way everybody is thought about and talked about in that story. Even the people who seem to have been elevated in a very particular way. There's no nuance. There's no room for imperfection, making mistakes, getting it wrong, which means there's no room to get better, be accountable, be responsible, redemption, reconciliation, all of that for me is directly connected to healing.

And so now I go... yeah, go ahead, jump in, got to jump in and cut me off because I'm going to roll more.

[00:35:45] Roxy Manning:

When I hear you, like part of what I'm hearing you do, and I kind of want to weave it back to something you do, it's like you're complexifying the narrative, right? You're finding a way to bring in those stories that have been lost, erased, whatever. And I'm actually wondering, like, as we connect with both the environmental work you do, how do you see storytelling as, like, what are the ways that you can see using storytelling to... what's the word that I want? Amplify some of the lost narratives. Like, what are the ways that you can see this happening?

[00:36:18] Carolyn Finney:

Well, you know, first, in no particular order, but what pops in my head first is the fact that everybody has a story. And everybody can tell a story. I don't mean you have to use your voice to do it. We've been doing it throughout human history. So, what it does for me is open it up to everyone can participate in that, however it works for them. And I love that idea. So, for me, story isn't highfalutin. It just is. It's just a way to communicate and bring yourself in connection with life right as it is. I think that it can be something that I know that it's story.

So as a geographer, if I think about scale, which we often do. So there's, you know, the personal, the body, and then it kind of goes out like this, the collective, the community, you know, you kind of go out, the national, the international, the world, the global, the universe. You can think all those things. There's a way that you can tell, talk about a thing using various stories at different

places on that scale and drawing connections between them, which opens up a... you know, I love this idea of opening up our sense of possibility about who we can become and who we are. There's also the question of, sometimes I walk into a room. So say that I get invited to, and this happens quite a bit, a room that is predominantly white. You know, and they want me to talk about the experience of being Black and or the question of race in the United States in particular. And I'm going to say some things.

So how can I get us there in a way that's going to meet people where they are, but also have them lean in? You know, for me, I can't walk in the room the first thing out of my mouth is not going to be all this land was stolen. Now I'm probably going to say it at some point, but I gotta, you know, I gotta, I knead it a little bit. Knead, with a "k", you know, knead it with your hand, like knead a story. Part of the reason I tell my story or some aspect of it and put myself in it is not because I want to talk about myself, but it is a strategy. I understand that, number one, if I'm vulnerable, if I'm funny, authentically so, right? If I put that out there, the thing that you will most get is that I'm human like you. I'm just trying to get you to remember it because I'm scared to death. I do not want people to start, you know, yelling at me, you know, so I'll tell you some story in my childhood. So you might not have had the experience of being stopped by the police because of the color of your skin, but you might've had the experience of a parent who was overbearing or you might've had a funny experience of something happening now, you know, when you were in the woods or just whatever that is, there's, they're human, it's a human story. And yes, what I'm trying to do is also tap into people's heart more than their head because as I've been told a hundred times, you can tell people all the statistics you want, but what people will remember is how you made them feel. If I set it up like that with that story, then I am going to talk about the Homestead Act. Let's talk about what was going on. They're Black and brown people and Indigenous people at the same time. And I don't have to diminish your people of European descent in order to do it. Because I also understand that something like 60 percent of them died. And compassion means I understand that many of them didn't even want to leave where they were in order to, oh, what a risk to come over here and do that.

And still it's problematic because all those Indigenous people that had to be removed and or killed for them to have the experience. That's the complexity I want us to stand in with each other. So let's be honest about that. Let's be honest about that. It's not about being bad or good, but it's just having our eyes wide open so we can see who we've been, who we can be, who we are, what's possible. All the things, the nuance, right? The shadow world that we operate in all the time and don't necessarily, if I'm kind and generous, know how to bring into the world clearly and shine a light upon it. If I'm not so kind and generous and say we choose to ignore because it's too hard, right, to reconcile or, you know, what we may have done.

And I say we, the collective we. And I know we all stand in different places in that circle of experience with respect to that. But I have to also be responsible and accountable for any pain that has come before that has made it possible for me to stand here right now and be who I am and, have or reach for any freedoms that I dare wish for.

[00:40:55] Sarah Peyton:

There's so much about Beloved Community that's just kind of woven into what you're talking about. And I just wonder if you'd like to say anything explicit about it, how it's touched you or informed you.

[00:41:05] Carolyn Finney:

Well, I'm still Working with that idea. I love the idea, and so I'm not going to be quite as articulate about it because I love the idea that we are all... I want to be responsible and accountable to other people and that I don't actually need to know them well. They may be further out in the circle because I don't know them, and I don't want to make any assumptions or have any expectations about who they are they are. And it doesn't stop me from trying to figure out how to be a better person.

Maybe it's about a year and a half ago, the philosopher Cornel West came to Burlington, Vermont and gave a fabulous - I love Cornel West. I just love his... the way his mind works. And he had no notes. The dude was talking about everything, and he had us all mesmerized. But the question he asked at the beginning that I've often repeated now is, what kind of human do you choose to be? And you know, it implies a kind of agency, it's a reminder that it's a human, not even person. Just there's something that was universal about it.

So when I think of Beloved Community, there's something in that idea that I'm reminded I'm part of. I'm more than my, I'm If I'm lucky, a hundred-year increment, you know, if I get to have a hundred years on this earth. I'm part of something larger over time, of a species, and I'm part of a larger ecosystem. So when I think of Beloved Community, I mean, I'm trying to think of this larger ecosystem that is not just about humans over time, but it's about a planet over time. It's about planets and world over time. It is about something it is really hard for me to grasp. So I'm, in no, I'm no way there. But I look at it as sort of an aspiration to say that, you know, I love Carl Sagan, and one of the reasons I loved Carl Sagan because I believe he had the ability to envision that, and he had the willingness to kind of look at it and figure out where am I in that. And it actually frightens me to death because when I look at the... I'm worried I'm going to get lost in the universe. I'm going to get lost. A friend, an artist, a friend of mine who's also an artist...

[00:43:28] Roxy Manning:

Can I jump in for a second? Cause as I'm hearing you speak, there are a couple of things that really touched me. Like one of them is around this piece around vulnerability. Like when you talk about telling a story and people telling their stories, it's like you're telling your personal story as a way to both like touch people and get them to see our shared humanity, and also as a strategy to kind of make it more likely that you're going to be safe and that they're going to hear your message.

So this vulnerability is huge in terms of being able to create bridges. And it's also kind of scary. You know, I think about, you know, part of how I see your work is creating opportunities for people who look like me to, like, be in public spaces, in public parks, in nature, to like really benefit from like this bounty that our world... to be part of Mother Nature, to experience it in a way that lets us know that we belong. You talked about belonging earlier.

So I'm actually curious around, like, what are some of the ways, some of the strategies that you would offer for people, you know, Black, Brown, Indigenous folks who are wanting to access these spaces in a time when the narrative is beginning to kind of be like, you don't belong. You don't, you're not part of this. What are some of the strategies you'd offer to folks like us?

[00:44:48] Carolyn Finney:

Well, so I'm going to reframe your question a little bit for me. I just had a conversation with someone. This is so funny. I don't come to the conversation about the great outdoors and Black, Brown, and Indigenous accessing it in quite the same way as some people.

Because it assumes we don't already have access and experience of it, right? And so one of the first things that I point to, and it started when I was work on *Black Faces, White Spaces* as a dissertation, was all the stories - everybody has experiences of nature. That's just for real, because we're all part of nature, right? And a lot of those stories get lost. Right. So the, you know, so there's that issue. So I'm going to come back to that. There's the issue of that when we talk about connection to nature here in the United States, we reframe it in largely two ways. We either think about it, nature, that nature outside of ourselves as a supermarket of resources, or we think about it in terms of outdoor recreation. We don't often talk about it in terms of labor, spiritual connection, again, that we're a part of that already. And many in the indigenous community would always say we don't even frame it that way at all.

So, you know, all those things would change the idea of accessing and accessing those spaces that... I've come to a place where, yes, I, in terms of policy and legislation and talking about people who run parks and who run botanical gardens and nature centers and, dominantly white, groups who are really thinking and are thoughtful about, you know, what can we do differently so that Black and Brown folks feel comfortable when they're here. That's the conversation I would have

with them in one way and part it's based on their own internal capacity and where they are in that journey and what they really want to do as opposed to what they're saying they want to do. But that's not necessarily the same conversation I would have with Black and brown people.

[00:46:51] Roxy Manning:

Yeah, so what's the conversation you would have with us?

[00:46:54] Carolyn Finney:

I know, look at you, I see you, Roxanne. And that depends too, because I think in this very specific conversation about access to the outdoors, that might be the first thing I would say. I would not make the assumption they don't have the access. I would want to ask, so tell me your story. There's a wonderful book that came out last year and I wrote the forward for it, but it is called *Been Outside: Adventures of Black Women, Non-Binary and Gender Non-Conforming People in Nature*, right?

Yes. And the, and all the people in here aren't, there are no, you know, famous writers in here. This is people from, Black and brown people who are scientists, who are students, who are artists, who just like to be in the outdoors, who wrote personal essays about their experience, right? And what I found so powerful about it- they've all, they all have experience. It doesn't mean that some of it isn't challenging about how they are perceived. Because a lot of it is perception. Opportunities that, you know, people have assumptions about what they don't know, what they need, who they are, you know, which kind of creates this, you know, policy and behavior on those in charge to feel like they're being exclusive about the experience.

We're also grounded in the history that up until 1964, it was segregated. And I always say it doesn't make a difference if it was a park and nice trees, right? We still have a history within which there are neighborhoods people aren't going to feel comfortable in. Where in certain parts of the country, the big, green, open, beautiful areas are largely in well to do areas. So if you've got a lot of money in your pocket, you can live there and if you don't, that's where a lot of the good schools are. I mean, we're still embedded in that way. So not feeling as though you have access to nature is in part because you have been told that, first of all, this is what nature is. The nature is not your grandmother's garden. I'm sorry, honey. that's not nature. Nature is fill in the blanks, right? So it's dispelling that notion. So that we care. You know, so when you think about money that goes and I'm all about -I love Yosemite, Grand Canyon, big, beautiful forests and woods and lakes and beaches. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. And also, a lot of people don't live near any of that and simply don't have access from a practical manner. You know, you know, including doesn't mean you can always get there, or you have the time, or you have the money, right? It's not any, it's not actually about race specifically, indifference, right?

Yeah. But to understand that right outside your window is money being poured into the local park on the street corner? Because that's the access that people have to every day. What about lining streets with trees so people can walk and enjoy the shade? What about having attention paid to where we are right now? That is nature too. Urban nature isn't less than some kind of rule, nature, you know, pristine nature. So, so much of it, this is the conversation I would have.

So, I would start off with, what's your story? When I say nature, what does it mean to you? I say environment, what does it mean to you? When I ask Black people those questions, especially older ones would say, nobody's ever asked me that before. That was really telling. You know, and then, or I don't have a story to tell because they'd feel somewhat intimidated by the question. And then the next thing you know, they're telling you some amazing story of the first time they did X in the outdoors. Because I said, that's the human experience. I knew it was in there, but I also I stepped back and said, I don't want to make an assumption, you know, that is that all we have to do is get a bus and bus these people to the park and make sure we give them, make the cost really low so they can get in. That in and of itself is not enough. And that assumes that the nature where they live is not equally as important to maintain and upkeep. You know, you take care of a place tells you and tells a person how much you feel about that community. That's the thing, right? And so when it isn't upkept and cared for, when you want to talk about Beloved Community, it also tells them you don't care much about who they are either.

[00:51:23] Sarah Peyton:

Wow. Well, here we are coming towards an end, even though we don't want to be, and for those who are listening today who want to support equity and justice in the environmental field, what practical steps can folks take to make a difference?

[00:51:40] Carolyn Finney:

Oh, that's always, you know, I'm always challenged by that question because I think it depends on context. But having said that, I would say, you know, wherever you are, look at where you are, you know, get to know people in your community, the ones you don't already know. Pay attention to that more than human, other than human nature that's out there. Yes, I could say what you read, what you watch, what you do, how you vote, what you chew. If you have the privilege to have choice in terms of what you eat, you know, and a lot of people don't have that choice. It would be really particular to where you live and what you do.

Take a risk. And I mean, take a risk in order to gain something, not because you're afraid of losing something. And when it feels uncomfortable, you're on the right path. And it's not the same as

worry. I'm not talking about be unsafe. I'm talking about, don't worry about being comfortable. A lot of us are never comfortable.

You know, I would also say when you're making these... because you're going to push back on - this is a long-embedded history. Meeting new people, having conversations. What does it mean to talk about things like reparations or giving the land back to Indigenous people? I'm not saying you should do it. I'm not saying you have to come to any agreement. Like, are you able to have the conversation, to hear what's up, to see someone else's life? And if you feel bad, which is what I hear a lot, how are you supported in that? What are you feeling bad about? What does that look like? What does self-care look like? How can you articulate that? Don't let that stop you. If you choose to be silent, why? So let's go back to giving yourself compassion. You know what?

If you are white and you're worried about making a mistake, and I've heard that often, the thing that I say is, you will make a mistake. You will probably make a lot of them, but not because you're white, but because you're human. And it's what you do after you've made the mistake, right? So, I say to anybody, as I say to myself, lean into that moment. Give yourself some grace. Take a break sometimes because you got to, because you're human and how it is, but then get up and keep doing it again because it's a long game. It isn't an end game. It's a long game. And this is the time we got with these are the people.

I was watching and wasting my time, but it was funny. I was on Instagram looking at reels and this white dude came on and he was so funny and he's like, isn't it amazing? Like these are the 8 billion people you're on earth with right now. Like it'll never be like this again, with this group of people. And it blew my mind, cause I was like, he's right. That's right. Right now I'm here with these people, right? Even if I don't know most of them. And so what are the opportunities in that and how you might show up for yourself, for your own healing, for your community,

[00:54:45] Roxy Manning:

So it's really about showing up for each other, listening to each other, and extending grace. Well, as we wrap up, I'd love to have you say a few words. How can people stay connected with your work and support you?

[00:55:00] Carolyn Finney:

Oh, yes. My website, carolynfinney.com, is there. I write a lot of essays and do a lot of things, and that's often where I'm posting. There's a calendar on there. So I try to stay a few months ahead of the game and say, oh, I'll be here doing this or virtually doing this.

I'm a scholar and an artist in residence at Middlebury College, part-time. So often people, you know, may look at me through Middlebury, it's probably the best way to do it. I pop up here and there. I'm not great at being really organized around it, but I'm moving all the time, right? So the website usually gives you the best idea and, you know, reach out by email. I can't always respond because I get overwhelmed, but I try to at the very least. And if I end up being somewhere and you're there come up and say hello. I like to meet new people.

[00:55:52] Sarah Peyton:

Wow, it's been such a delight talking with you today. There's so many more questions that we had, but we will look forward to more following of you and more hearing of your thoughts. And yes, thank you so much.

[00:56:06] Carolyn Finney:

Well thank you. Thank you both for the work that you do for the space that you create for this conversation. And I can feel my tears are like right here in my throat because I've just been feeling a way about things. So, I realize that sometimes the universe gives you the conversation that you need to have. And so, I really appreciate you inviting me on today to have this conversation. It reminded me of who I am in relationship.

[00:56:32] Roxy Manning:

Oh, thank you.

[00:56:34] Carolyn Finney:

You're welcome. Oh, Carolyn's getting a little emotional.

[00:56:40] Roxy Manning:

That is part of being real, right? Like we need to let this energy flow.

[00:56:45] Carolyn Finney:

Yeah.

[00:56:51] Sarah Peyton:

Thank you for being with us. If you enjoyed this episode and are finding value in these conversations, please help us spread fierce compassion by taking a moment to share this episode with a friend and rate and review the podcast on your podcast app. This helps others find us and helps make sure these conversations reach everyone who might benefit.

[00:57:15] Roxy Manning:

If you would like to receive live one on one coaching from Sarah or me on a special episode of the podcast, or you want to find out more, follow the link in the show notes or visit our website. You can find our books, *How to Have Antiracist Conversations* and *The Antiracist Heart*, and learn about our podcast guests and new classes on our website, antiracistconversations.com.

[00:57:41] Sarah Peyton:

And Roxy and I love teaching and we're always offering new classes, courses, and other opportunities for learning. in our own individual work. You can visit us at roxannemanning.com and at sarahpeyton.com to learn more about our individual offerings. We hope to see you.