

Black/Land: Other People's Stories

by Mistinguette Smith © The Black/Land Project 2012



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The Black/Land Project uses themes from interview narratives as a platform for community organizing around urban land use, while integrating the meaning of race as a relationship to land. Interviews conducted through the Black/Land Project have also helped black people define their relationships to land, in terms of authority, autonomy and agency.

While the process of conducting interviews has generated much data, it has also resulted in a number of questions, all related to self-definition. For example, what does it mean to listen to and carry other people's stories? What is the responsibility to do this work well, to not be

exploitative and make sure the story remains about the interviewee (not the interviewer)? At the same time, how do these stories get woven into a collective narrative? What does it mean for the interviewer, a Black woman, to make such decisions? Where is the interviewer in the story? How does naming ones location serve as an act of self-definition?

Black/Land: Other People's Stories

The Black/Land Project stakes a claim in the present. We do not begin with an idea about who black people are, or what their relationships to land should be based on history. Instead, we gather individual and community stories through interviews, and use them to identify and amplify conversations about relationship to land and place that are happening in black communities today. We gather and share these narratives for two reasons:

- To share the powerful traditions of resourcefulness, resilience and regeneration that are contained in these stories, and
- To explore when and whether “race” and “the environment” are useful categories for thinking about relationships between people, land and place.

For two years, Black/Land has been interviewing African-Americans, West Indians, African immigrants, Afro-Latinos and mixed race people who identify as black to ask them about their relationships to land: rural and urban land, home places and business districts; churches and street corners; land that is owned collectively or as a community resource.

These interviews often begin with the participant insisting “I don’t know anything about land.” Often they ask me “*Is this what you mean – like where I live? (often an historically black residential neighborhood.) Is this land?*” In the act of telling me their stories, participants answer this question for themselves. This inquiry is often deep and potent: What does it mean if you say no, where you live doesn’t count as land? What does it mean if you don’t know what your relationship to this place might be? Whose land is it? Does it only belong to the person who holds its deed? Is this land part of what you mean when you think about “the environment?”

Revealing answers to these questions in their own stories helps the black people we interview to stake their individual claim in discussions about land and place. The openness of an unrehearsed oral narrative becomes a space where tellers of story draw fresh boundaries: they create ways to define themselves, and name their relationships to place based on their particular values and traditions. The self-definitions that emerge from these narratives are often more integrated and complex than the definitions used by the environmental or social justice groups who are most interested in Black/Land's work; these self-definitions complicate even the thematic groupings used by Black/Land to do our own

analysis. The narratives that emerge when I am listening to other people's stories often change the way I see my own.

Black/Land does not only listen to other people's stories: we also create structures to share them. We gather narratives in two ways: through individual semi-structured interviews, and through Black/Land Conversations. These Conversations are carefully facilitated structured dialogues where black people talk with each other about the ideas and experiences that shape their current relationship to land and place. We share these narratives, and what we learn from them, through community presentations, at academic conferences, with groups doing narrative based organizing, on our blog, and in print or electronic media-based publications. Black/Land Conversations draw connections between private anecdotes and collective narratives, and then makes a place to tell these stories out loud.

The purpose of all of this work is to increase black people's opportunities to self-define their relationship to land. It matters little to have conversations about lack of authentic diversity in the environmental movement, or a desire for environmental justice and inclusive land use policy, unless these desires are met by communities of color who have a clear idea of what they want out of their relationship to place. Those communities must also define what things they see as the assets they are bringing to the table, so that they can shape a relationship to land and place that supports their desires.

This is why Black/Land starts by facilitating self definition, rather than simply encouraging black people to join in pre-defined "environmental" movements. Taking this position has required Black/Land to do some thinking about the elements of self-determination.



Black/Land has found Deci & Ryan's¹ fundamental work on Self Determination Theory to be a helpful framework for exploring how the narratives from our interviews and conversations support self-definition. Rendered in the broadest strokes, Self-Determination Theory says that self-determined thought and action require three things: a sense of personal autonomy; a measure of competence and authority to act; and enough personal agency to choose voluntary acts of relatedness to others.

¹Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum Publishing Co

Figure 1: Black/Land Self-Determination Theory



We find that Black/Land interviews and dialogues create narratives that support self-definition and self-determination in three related ways:

- They increase the **autonomy** of individuals and communities by helping them to transcend the paralyzing effects of historical trauma. This means more than acknowledging the personal impact of histories of enslavement, forced migration, segregationist policy and land fraud: it also means releasing the current manifestations of this trauma, such as pervasive fear of re-victimization, loyalty to the past to the exclusion of the present, and psychological numbing through substance abuse.
- They increase their **authority** of participants – for participants are literally the authors of their individual or community narratives – to determine what their relationship to land is, and what they would like to be. This includes positive and negative relationships defined by ownership, tenancy, history, rituals of return, and emotional ties.
- They increase the sense of individual and community **agency**. Fully self-defined individuals are free to experience their relatedness to others. They are also free to choose when, with whom, and under what conditions they will share the valuable knowledge they hold.

However, the experience of understanding other people's stories through this frame is rarely as tidy and neatly aligned as the diagram above. Here are two examples of how creating individual and community narratives with the Black/Land Project has shifted in black people's self-defined relationships to land and place.



Ingrid Askew: Autonomy

Telling our stories can help us to acknowledge, and to transcend, effects of historical trauma on relationships to land and place. Transcending black people's land based historical trauma is not only acknowledging the wound and the ways our attention remains fixed upon it. Transcending historical trauma re-makes the present, allowing us to redefine on our own terms the most basic relationships to land : home, home place, home land.

Ingrid Askew, founder and leader of the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage began her interview by telling me she didn't know if she had anything to say about land and place. I found this remarkable, considering that Ms. Askew led a group on a two-year journey, by foot and by boat, from the mill towns of New England, along the slave ports of the Atlantic coast to New Orleans, and then to Haiti, Brazil, Senegal and southward to Cape Town, South Africa. Her journey to retrace the route of the Middle Passage was a way of finding, and coming, home.

Ms. Askew had anticipated the Pilgrimage would release grief, and would help her to understand the complex making of African Diaspora identity. But it was not until our interview that she began to articulate the complexity of her personal relationship to land. After the interview, she described her narrative as *integrating* the trauma of leaving the African continent at Gorée Island and the triumph of the African tradition of collective land tenancy that survives in rural Haiti. She experiences these as a single, unbroken relationship to land. Moreover, she finds this relationship to land to be one in which she feels deeply rooted as black woman born in the United States.

Having traveled three continents on her own two feet, Askew has also redefined "home." Though not wealthy, she has chosen to live part of each year in western Massachusetts and part in Cape Town, South Africa. Participating in a Black/Land interview gave her space to create a narrative in which her

consciousness and sense of place are not divided between the African and American continents; instead, she claims them both as her home lands by birthright.

Flint, Michigan: Authority and Agency

Telling our stories to each other, and having each other hear them into being, engenders a sense of **authority**— that is, the power that comes from being the master, the author, of one’s own story.

Black/Land spent six months conducting interviews and facilitating conversations in Flint, Michigan. As a post-industrial city with a majority black population, Flint shares a narrative with other northern cities that boomed during the Great Migration, but who now face the economic and environmental consequences of heavy industry and its decline. Flint has had its story told by many people: filmmaker Michael Moore in “Roger and Me,” and Dan Kildee, who helped to showcase Flint as a national model for land banking vacant urban residential properties through tax foreclosure. Rarely has this story been told from the point of view of the majority of Flint’s residents, who are poor and working class African-Americans.

Interviews and Black/Land Conversations in Flint concluded with a conceptual mapping exercise. Through maps of relationship to land on their immediate block, in their neighborhoods, and in their city, Flintonians authored a shared narrative of what their past relationship to land has been, and what they would like the future of that relationship to look like. This was a conversation about several levels of relationship to land: emotional attachments, relational space, and a very concrete conversation about land use policy.

Authoring this shared narrative provided an experience of collective agency. These conversations became a starting point to engage, as a black community, in the first master land use planning process in Flint in fifty years. Developing a shared narrative about what their community had to offer the future of the city was a new experience for many people. Some were so accustomed to thinking of their relationship to land and place being one of exploitation that they were unable to participate in a discussions about what they desired for their future. Their relationships to land was a deeply rehearsed history of what had been done to them, leaving no room for a new story to emerge. These participants did not have the relationships to land from which a vision for the future is made – longing, hope and desire. For others, identifying the difference between their historical relationship to land and place, and the relationship they wanted to have, helped them to engage in the municipal planning process. Two dozen people volunteered to informally advise the City Planner about the history and desired future of

their blocks. Several of those volunteers confided that they previously thought of such planning processes as something done *to* them or done *for* them; this was the first time they were able to come to the table with the kinds of dreams, plans and desires that required a process that was done *with* them.

This experience of collective authority and agency continues to unfold today, as African-Americans become active participants in Flint's master land use plan.



The ways I have told these two stories about how autonomy, authority and agency emerge from creating individual and collective narratives obscures something important to Black/Land as a narrative based project. What does it mean for me to offer other people's stories? Where does their story end and my work begin? How do I share these stories with respect?

While the questions we ask in our interviews are not particularly emotional, they are revealing. Participants in Black/Land interviews often share things they have never told anyone, including themselves. The trust with which people share their narratives can be a strong source of stress for me as an interviewer: I want to be accurate and non-exploitative as I put these stories into the world, even as I also seek to be critical and analytical. I want seek out and to make meaning of these narratives collectively, while honoring the individuality of the precious stories I have been given in trust.

One way I have responded to that stress has been to make an ethical commitment: I never share with the general public any analysis of Black/Land interviews until I have first returned my learnings to the community that offered its stories to me. This commitment helped me to reframe the nature of my work. I initially thought of carrying other people's stories as bearing a gift that was sometimes burdensome to carry: I have now come to understand my relationship to these stories and the people who share them with me as a relationship based on exchange.

Self-determined terms of reciprocity are the fundament of a relationship based on exchange instead of exploitation. This is also the basis of trust. Exchange now informs every aspect of Black/Land's work. We go only where we are invited, and when know that have something to offer in return. We offer opportunities to learn with us, not from us. We offer the telling and retelling of these narratives as acts of shared empowerment rather than expertise. We consider Black/Land a vehicle for sharing the post-resistance practice of self-defining black relationship to land and place as free people.

Still, doing this work raises more questions about my own identity than it answers. I wrestle with what it means to have chosen to collect narratives rather than some other (easier, tidier) form of representing agency. I struggle with which interview voices to include, which stories are most salient, how to weave these individual stories into a collective narrative. Who am I to make these decisions? Where, in this tangle of individual and collective narratives, power and authority, where am I, a black person, in this story?

In many places, on other panels, to have an authoritative voice requires me to speak of this work as if I am telling other people's stories – not my own. I often feel obligated to present the ethical commitments to exchange, reciprocity, *onè ak respé* as creations of professional distance, as if they originate in some authority other than my own heart. My seat here on this panel today suggests that I have achieved some completeness, some mastery of at least my own narrative about who I am on this land and in this place. Yet, my truth is that my own relationship to land and place is emergent and unstable: it changes every time I bear another person's story.

Who am I in this story? I am both teller and told. I am also a part of the story: not only am I a black woman with my own relationship to land and place, I am fully alive and in ongoing relationship with every person who has offered their intimate black land story to me. I am someone who carries the debt of reciprocity for each narrative I hear: I must celebrate Dr. Hardin's doctoral defense, and mourn Mr. Whidbee's death, and share my thrill at discovering Mr. Ross and I both have ancestors from the same tiny hamlet in Alabama. What I think of as "land" has been expanded by these stories, as has my capacity to tell my own truth: the interview participant who defined her relationship to land by saying "I. Hate. Dirt." gave me the courage to say that my own relationship to land includes distaste for the current meme, the black back-to-the-land pastoral. Defining who I am in this story is important. As I learn my own individual story, I become increasingly conscious of every moment when I might define or inflect a story differently than its teller intended. I become someone able to ask hard questions about what is illumination and what is exploitation; who are these stories for and whom do they serve? I am someone who works hard to earn the trust of the tellers over and over again by offering sense-making of their stories, whether their sensibility is the same as, or different from, my own.

When seeking to define my role in the Black/Land Project, I often turn to this photograph: a vine-thatched porch of an inhabited house in New Orleans. My own narrative relationship to blackness, land, and place has woven together with other people's stories just as surely as these creeper vines. My individual black land story is just a tiny leaf on that vine. Each story I hear is just one tendril, but where

they weave together, they become a purposeful force. The winding vine in the photograph has grown strong enough to break down a house, uproot its foundations, redefine its function, punch holes in its porch roof to admit light and rain.

I once thought of myself as standing outside of these stories, acting simply as a support and place for them to be told. But I become present in every Black/Land story that I listen into being, and I become entwined in every story I retell. At some point, like this house, I become inextricable from the other people's stories I have heard. My illusion of "otherness" is overgrown, and I acknowledge that I am part of the insurgent life that is our body of shared story. Slowly and infinitesimally, each act of honest listening and the inevitably imperfect re-telling wind their way around each other, becoming something stronger than the structure upon which it leans. I may have begun by offering a shelter for reflection and re-telling, but I have become part of the deep, black narrative in which these individual stories sink root just as I am the balusters around which they wind, climbing upward. I yield to the ways these stories have reconfigured my notions of "self" and "other" as I watch this work grow and seek its own purpose; I yield to the ways it is transforming me to let in the rain, to reach for more light.