

---

*Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South* by William E. O'Brien. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. vii + 191 pp.; illustrations, notes, index; clothbound, \$39.95.

“Why are our parks so white?” This was the headline for a 2015 *New York Times* article and a question that has been reverberating in park communities for the last five years. Recent studies of national parks have reported very low visitation by people of color compared to the regional and national demographic. The author of the *Times* article concludes, “We need to demolish the notion that the national parks and the rest of nature are an exclusive club where minorities are unwelcome.”<sup>1</sup> As historians know, parks have not always welcomed people of color. Environmental studies professor William E. O'Brien sheds important new light on this issue in his book *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South*. In this volume, published in association with the Library of American Landscape History, the author takes a “comprehensive, region-wide look at how the institution of Jim Crow shaped the deprivation of black southerners of the scenic parks that whites took for granted” (xiv). This first major publication focusing on the topic makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the history of American parks and provides insights for public historians.

O'Brien, who holds a PhD in environmental design and planning, specializes in the intersection of environment and race. Noting the dearth of scholarship on the history of state parks in general, O'Brien combed through a wide array of archival sources, from federal repositories to archives in all of the southern states included in the study. The wealth of his extensive research is revealed in richly detailed case studies of states and parks, utilizing contemporary accounts to describe the arguments both for and against park integration.

*Landscapes of Exclusion* traces this history chronologically, beginning with patterns of recreation in the Jim Crow South and the early development of state parks in the region. O'Brien illustrates how the National Park Service and federal agencies guided the state parks through a tremendous period of expansion during the New Deal era. Still, NPS faced strong resistance in its efforts to convince recalcitrant southern states to include facilities for African Americans. State legislators argued that “local custom” dictated the creation of segregated facilities, and they reserved the most scenic and historic park locations for whites. By World War II, most southern states still offered no facilities for African Americans. As racial tensions escalated after the war, state parks faced additional challenges to open parks for black residents. In response, they began to plan segregated “separate but equal” facilities for African Americans to avoid integration, but these were always inferior and often only small, day-use facilities. O'Brien traces the slow pace of these efforts, many of which were never realized. At the same time, African Americans were no

1 Glenn Nelson, “Why Are Our Parks So White?,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2015.

longer satisfied with segregated parks, and organizations from the NAACP to local groups began pressing for integrated parks through federal courts and public protests. Even after a 1955 Supreme Court decision ruled segregated state parks unconstitutional, southern states and white residents still continued to resist integration. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, court cases fought segregation until the 1964 Civil Rights Act legally ended it, and southern states were forced to work out plans to integrate their parks.

The book's last chapter is one of the most compelling for public historians. Although brief, it explores what happened to formerly segregated facilities. O'Brien argues that the silence surrounding this story of segregation has led to very little interpretation of this history at these sites, all of which he visited. Many of these facilities are no longer functioning as parks, and the land has reverted to other uses. Public historians might wish for more discussion here about state and local efforts to tell these stories. The author writes that many of the individual parks he documented need further analysis incorporating "more localized accounts and oral histories," and he hopes that his work will inspire such studies (xvi).

O'Brien provides a valuable historical context for park development at the state, local, and national level in the twentieth century, one that is useful for those writing park histories or preparing National Register nominations as well as those working in the parks to develop exhibits, interpretive signage, and programs. The book will inspire those who manage these facilities to consider preservation of the landscapes that do survive, particularly those entities that own the land of African American parks now closed. *Landscapes of Exclusion* is also accessible to the public; the writing style is enjoyable and the author provides the necessary historical context for nonacademic readers. State and national parks should consider adding this volume to their gift shops and bookstores.

O'Brien contributes to an active, ongoing dialogue in park communities. When we ask why so few people of color visit parks today, the book illustrates the pattern of development that has led many to feel unwelcome in the parks, not just national, but also state parks. Hopefully, this work will raise issues for public historians to consider in making our parks more accessible to a wider public.

Ann E. McCleary, University of West Georgia

---

*Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* by Carolyn Finney. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 194 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; paperbound, \$24.95; eBook, \$22.99.

In *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, Carolyn Finney succinctly yet attentively studies the tangled and multifarious relationship of people of color to the environment. In doing so, the author draws upon important concepts from the fields of history, law, and