

An Essay that concerns environmental and community justice. Based on a two year project in an urban green area in Washington, D.C.

**A Green Man and the making of a Conservation Photographer**  
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I have disheartening news. A good friend and ally of urban park development was recently arrested and imprisoned here in Washington, DC. I believe it is wrongful, unjust, and a symptom of a grave problem. His recent letter describing the incident is below, following some comments which are meant to serve as testimony on his behalf. Forgive me, I have not been as brief as intended. But for those who know how words and images often fail to save—and work--- and better this world—you understand. Together, I still believe, we have a voice.

“This is a good place to harvest souls,” the darkskinned man said to me under the shade of a tree. He whispered, and whether the whisper was due to the hot and harsh noon sun or the respite of one of the only trees nearby or because he spoke some degree of truth, I do not know. The Reverend J.C. Melvin from a Maryland mission framed himself behind the doorway of a minivan. His helpers stationed themselves to hand out brown bags of food.

I have a photograph of this image; it haunts me. It is significant because it was taken well over a year ago and just before I met Steve Coleman in Watts-Branch Park.

In every culture there is a green man. A Gilgamesh. Characters who symbolize the conflicts between identity, culture, and the environment. Someone who articulates alternative, sustainable views. Someone who helps sort out multiple truths. Someone who thinks different. Steve Coleman is one of these people. He is a hero. Steve has constructed much of his life around understanding community interaction in and around urban parks.

“You have to go inside to bring the people outside,” he ruminated to me this summer. “Landscapes of crime, and the inaccessibility of parks—this park—has driven the community aside.”

It is this basic premise that I developed as I set about documenting the development and change of Watts-Branch Park for a year. On the edges of the park, I rode the metro bus east of the Anacostia and met strangers. Some of these people I talked to further, and some of them took me into their homes. When darkness fell, and I would find myself in unfamiliar territory, I would sometimes be shuffled into unfamiliar apartments, away from the street. Later, when I got to know some of the drug dealers and prostitutes, I learned about the hope and change the cleaning of the park inspired. For a gang I walked the streets with one afternoon, the idea of community change were a rallying point. A lifeforce. We walked about the edges of the park opening fire hydrants for

kids to play in. With junk collected from vacant lots kids funneled the water back into the Watts-Branch tributary. These were some the people Steve introduced me.

One afternoon I spent sitting in a local barbershop and watched the kids come out of a backroom, enthralled by the stream life studies the barber setup for the students. Later, this past fall, I listened to stories of environmental racism my students gathered from interviews conducted in the park.

When things of this magnitude and nature occur in a landscape, it is important to know how they come to pass, are encouraged, and thrive.

On several occasions Steve and I would walk through the trail network of the park itself, which connects to the larger network of urban trail buffers throughout the District of Columbia, and attempts to link habitat.

“But it also links the people,” he would tell me. So we would walk, collected oral histories and community assessments.

“I don’t know any other way to conduct community assessments,” he would tell me.

Those were wistful days. Boy scout troop 587 would describe the details of the playground they wanted to build. An old woman with sparkling eyes would speak about the different trees, community picnics taking place in 1968, fruiting-bearing pear and cherry trees that picnickers would eat out of. We would hear about a local store, and the legendary man named Bubbles who ran it.

“He sold chickens. People would buy five or ten a piece, raise them for food, raise them for eggs; anyone could make it,” a woman told us.

In a building known as the Crystal Lounge you could dance all night and have breakfast in the morning. Marvin Gaye would go outside nearby and sit in the park.

The mystic thing about this place is this: if you walk this path any day, or know the right place to go, intimate and unexpected moments are found.

They jump out of the landscape, from kids who are relearning to hide behind trees and run in streams free of needles to young lovers who now sit on the grass. A father and son, who go to the park to rectify differences. It was these people, not to mention the group of horseshoe playing-men, pushers and dealers, ex-police men, drug clinic success stories and wash-outs who gave me a window into their lives. Even my students who I nearly cursed this fall, I am indebted to. Many of these individuals I photographed. They composed the park, its essence, and edges.

Throughout this time, Steve as a friend and director of Parks and People has supported and encouraged all of my efforts. On Saturday mornings he would

call me, with the excitement in his voice rallying me to come and photograph. The National Youth Volunteer day at the park; a garden workday; community celebrations; the last tree planting of the year. It was during these events, and through my formal work at National Geographic with local youth, that Steve became an ally and someone whom I could communicate seriously with on issues of urban development, sense of place, park corridors, and community habitat. The time was intense, and if anyone could not always keep up, it was me.

I was enthralled by the man, what he was attempting to represent, and the place.

This was manifested at the end of an Indian summer day months ago. I sat in the park with a slide projector facing a large screen near the old music hall. Facing the large group that I had come to know, I told them that this project had become their project. They had given it life. The slide projector turned on and images fell one after another. A silence fell, you could hear the crickets. Then, slowly at first, you could hear some of the men begin to laugh, deep bass voices shaking the earth. Kids pointed and some of the women rocked back in their lawn chairs.

Later, the movie Shrek showed. I went for a walk as shadows of monsters danced on the canopy. I took a breath, and as monsters sounded and the creek gurgled something gave way. Emotion welled up inside me, and under the cover of a willow tree, I wept. I felt at home, at ease, without fear, and understood.

But campaigning for urban parks is a silent and dark battle.

A friend recently explained her perception of a Washington park.

'They are dangerous places; and across the river-- that is worse,' she explained in detail. That is what someone had told her when she first arrived in Washington; it seemed easy to believe. Out of this mythos, we can propagate either fear or hope.

One possibility is this: through the people who live in urban parks and around their edges we can find solutions. We can raise awareness and echo community sentiments. Within a place of cultural and natural history, we can find peace and calm within these natural spaces. They might help us articulate difference through events, arts, and solace which occurs within their bounds. We can celebrate the individuals and organizations which catalyze and help articulate these dreams.

Alternatively, I am told that there may of those in the environmental crimes unit that stay away from parks. Fear of those who entwine their lives within them. Fear of those who question environmental pollution data; fear of those who demand a better life within our city; fear of potential monsters, some catalyst rising up, raising his voice, arms and ideals surrounding the community.

Souls can be harvested. In the coming days, as Steve's trial approaches and passes, I do not doubt that the park will eventually prevail. Yet I take the fate of this man as a case study in environmental injustice inflicted in this misunderstood urban park. I fear that the hope and motivation—core community sentiments--will be paved under by another decade of continued repression, silence, and miscommunication. As a witness to the change which has occurred, I offer this testimony and any of the 1200 images from this project to further the cause of urban park development and appropriate enforcement, overview, community consultations, and third-party monitoring of environmental crimes and their enforcement.