

## A comment and an interview with filmmaker Minda Martin

# Free Land: American dreams and realities

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Minda Martin's 2010 film *Free Land* appeared at numerous international film festivals (Vienna, Buenos Aires, Athens and more) and received praise wherever it was screened. Such an unusual and sensitive work deserves a wide audience.

(David Walsh of the WSWS spoke to Martin at the Toronto film festival about her segment of *Far From Afghanistan*.)

The 62-minute work, at the same time a documentary-essay and personal memoir, is not simple to describe, as it poetically and evocatively connects a variety of social and personal events.

*Free Land* begins and ends with the circumstances of Martin's immediate family—and through the latter the conditions of millions of Americans. Her father, Robert, held many jobs and tried to make a go of it in various businesses, and the family moved numerous times throughout the Southwest. Now 86, living in Arizona, his weather-beaten face tells us a great deal about a life of hard work and struggle.

Over the film hovers almost continuously the prospect or impossibility of "free land" in America, and the illusions and disappointments this has engendered. Something emerges here that speaks deeply to the psyche strongly shaped by a belief in the US as the land of unlimited opportunity—and, at least by implication, what the loss of that belief will mean.

In *Free Land*'s opening moments, Martin (who serves as narrator) recalls her father saying wistfully decades ago that there had been "no free land [in America] for years." She further notes the comment of her grandfather, of partial Native American descent, when the same issue is raised with him, "I'm not falling for that again." At the film's conclusion, the filmmaker observes that the only land her father will now ever own is his cemetery plot.

On two occasions Martin's father or family actually held property. The first time, under the GI Bill, her father was granted five acres, but had to give the land back because he couldn't do anything with it. Martin's grandparents also offered the family a house for a time, but when a tempting offer came up, in an "act of tough love," threw them out.

This individual story of rootlessness and even homelessness (Martin moved nine times during a two-year period as a child) is linked to the dispossession of the Native American population, through the experiences of two of her mother's ancestors.

A performer reads an 1851 letter from Mary Taylor to her husband, imploring him to return. Martin fictionally imagines the reaction of Taylor, born in 1802 in the Cherokee Nation in Tennessee, to the forced relocation of the Native American population.

The second relative is Martin's great-great-grandmother, Cordelia

Taylor, who married one Henry Freeland, thus giving the film's title and its narrative a further significance. We hear the testimony of Cordelia Taylor Freeland before the federal government's Dawes Commission in 1905, when she was 40 years old.

The commission (established in 1893), officially the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, was an effort to convince or coerce the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole tribes to cede collective title of their lands and accept the policy of individual allotments that had been imposed on other tribes.

As historian Angie Debo noted in *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (1940), Dawes and his confreres based themselves on a belief in "selfishness" as the key to progress and "in the sanctity of private ownership of the land rather than upon any understanding of the Indian nature or any investigation of actual conditions." Debo added, "Unquestionably land hunger [on the part of Dawes and company] was the real motive behind most of the agitation to terminate the tribal regime," although the commission couched its reports and recommendations "in a high moral tone" and painted "glowing descriptions of the deliverance awaiting them [the Native Americans]."

A good deal of painful and even tragic history forms the backdrop to *Free Land*.

The film's imagery is correspondingly haunting, at times the stuff bad dreams are made of. Cordelia's account of her gradual migration westward with Henry, a coal miner for a time, for example, is told over a collage of disturbing pictures of America's rapid and brutal industrial boom. Henry eventually dies of black lung in his wife's arms.

The historical issues are fascinating and complex, but the story of Martin's father (and mother, who died 25 years ago), recounted bit by bit in *Free Land* in a matter of fact and unself-pitying fashion, perhaps makes the deepest emotional impact.

At one point, Martin poses her father in a series of 17 separate shots to represent the different towns or cities in which he strove to make a living and support his family between 1957 and 1999, with titles describing his various undertakings.

In a moving conversation that makes up the last portion of *Free Land*, Martin points out to her father that after he'd lost one job, "You had no income." Yes, he acknowledges evenly, "It was a little rough after that."

This is a beautiful film about the people who don't count at present in America; in other words, the overwhelming majority.

Minda Martin is currently an Associate Professor in the department of communication at California State University, San Marcos (in northern San Diego County). We spoke to her in California by telephone earlier this week.

Joanne Laurier: What was the immediate impetus for this film?

Minda Martin: The *Free Land* story came to me in pieces. I was 18 years old, I had been documenting my family without even knowing why. After collecting footage of family for twenty-something years, I started to see connections. Somewhere in the dialogue between the research of my mother's Native American history and the filming, the project began telling me what to do.

I had never really believed that my family had a Native American background, despite the family lore. Going into that history was very exciting because it told me a lot about American history. It was the history of land displacement and distribution. Through a genealogical online thread of a shared ancestor, I found Mary Taylor's 1851 letter to her husband.

I would also like to make clear, and perhaps it's not clear enough, even though it is acknowledged in the film's credits, that there is a lot of creative writing in the telling of the two ancestors—Mary Taylor and Cordelia Taylor. Except for the Dawes interview, everything Cordelia says is creative writing based on historical research. For Mary Taylor, everything except for the 1851 letter is fictional (although based on real historical events). But all of the material about the Dawes Commission was taken word-for-word from the transcript.

JL: Could you elaborate on the Dawes Commission?

MM: Angie Debo's book, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* was a landmark text that critiques the Dawes Act and the Dawes Commission as legislation and a political operation designed to manipulate and deprive Native Americans of their land resources and tribal sovereignty.

It was not until the New Deal that some of the land was restored. At that point my ancestor that I am basing the story on [Cordelia Taylor] was dead and the ties to the Cherokee culture had basically been severed. Henry Dawes [1816-1903, Republican congressman and senator from Massachusetts] was a corrupt politician, although in general, that seems to be the rule for politicians. He had stock in the railroads, which for the longest time wanted to run their tracks through Oklahoma. His motives were about profit, not his stated aim of helping Native Americans.

JL: This ancestry was your mother's?

MM: Yes. Cordelia Taylor Freeland was my great-great grandmother and Mary Taylor was three "greats" away. It was exciting to discover this history because when you grow up in poverty and move around as much as my family did, you don't realize you have these ties. The lineage explains much about how one's family acts. I felt it was an important history to put in my film particularly for audience members who are disenfranchised.

JL: Your film is very dense and touches on many questions. I would like to focus on the aspect that deals with the notion of "free land" in America.

MM: I was thinking about this throughout the interweaving of the stories. And this prompted me to go back as far as the founding of the country and make the ties to today. There was so much of the framework of free land and Manifest Destiny and all the problems and illusions that were engendered. That is something I was very conscious about in terms of crafting the film.

JL: Could you speak about the cultural-educational opportunities for people like Mary and her granddaughter Cordelia?

MM: The Taylors came from money on the Cherokee reservation. They had land and some wealth. The letter from Mary Taylor to her husband, which I'm assuming is authentic, was very eloquent. Cherokee women in the 1700s and 1800s were educators and leaders in their community and at home. They farmed, raised their children, made important decisions in the tribe, and they were very active. There were many problems in their relationships with European men, who were not used to women who were in control of their lives. Laws were then created to change the privileges that these women had.

JL: Although it is common in America to relocate frequently, your

family was ~~exceptional~~ exceptional on this score. In the film, you describe the dozens and dozens of times you moved.

MM: I was born when my parents were moving around. At that time, they had a trailer and a small property. My parents had been really struggling with getting a home and some consistency, when my grandmother gave them a house in rural Tucson, Arizona. Eventually the property was sold and we had to move, which was a contributing factor in my mother's escalating alcoholism.

This was at the height of the Reagan period—when the prevalent attitude was "stand on your own two feet," and so forth. So my grandparents believed they were giving my parents a lesson in tough love when they took the house away.

JL: In the film, you describe your childhood: "Life out of focus, like a flickering strip of film."

MM: Well, I could not see very well because I did not have glasses. We did not have the money or know about local agencies, if they even existed, that could help. And I might not have complained a lot because I got used to it.

JL: In your father's lined face one sees the marks of a difficult life as well as much humanity. It is a face—and bent-over body—that expresses something more general. Many people in this country work so hard and yet end up with nothing.

MM: Many people have had similar lives. They may not wear it in their faces like my dad does, but they wear it in their legs standing as waiters and waitresses, in their arms holding dishes and other things. There is the destruction of the body over time from hard labor. And sometimes the dignity can then disappear.

JL: Your film is significant because it shows lives that are rarely seen in films today.

MM: I believe this is because the media is so consolidated. There is pretty much an oligarchy in media. Today in America the cultural landscape does not celebrate art or expression of any kind, just brands. Any time there are budget cuts, the first to be cut is the arts. Even today there are artists doing important work, but they are just not seen or heard. Some of my filmmaker friends and students will make incredible little films that will never go anywhere.

For *Free Land*, I worked very hard in the first year to get it out there, but in America, no one would take it. It was, however, appreciated and celebrated in Europe, particularly at film festivals. So far it's had the biggest bang abroad, and that's sad because it's a film about America.

JL: Could you speak more about your childhood?

MM: You don't really know how poor you are until you are standing next to someone with wealth. Then it's humiliating. You are embarrassed and ashamed. And I should not have been. Unfortunately, these feelings were a product of the myths that were sold to me as a kid—that everyone has equal opportunity and anybody can be anything in America. So those who don't become something are seen as failures. The individual is blamed rather than the structure. One should see the larger structure and see that poverty is not one's parents' fault.

JL: I wanted to ask about where you derived your artistic impulses. You do make clear that your father was creative in his many endeavors and jobs.

MM: My mother was an artist and thought very artistically. Her mother would not let her pursue a singing career, wanting her instead to go into business. She was therefore attracted to my dad because he was a dreamer. They were two dreamers, two artists.

Growing up I watched a lot of films and went to art galleries and photography exhibits on my own. My education really started as a college undergraduate. I really loved the European personal films, including [Belgian filmmaker] Chantal Akerman and [Andrei] Tarkovsky, and Russian cinema. I fell in love with classic silent films and documentaries. I was also exposed to the experimental cinema of Sadie Benning, James

Benning, Marlon Riggs, Su Friedrich and many others.

JL: How do you feel about the post-election commitment by both major parties to destroy social programs upon which so many people depend?

MM: My father's social security is not much. If that were to go, we, his children, would find a way to help him. But so many people will be left out in the cold. It will be a very dark day. I don't think Americans realize how bad it will become. Even though many people don't get very much, they need whatever they get, no matter how little that is. It's not a Ponzi scheme, as some politicians claim.

I cannot express to you how afraid and angry I am about the changes this administration is carrying out. The Democrats used to be on the side of the poor. The Clinton administration cut the legs off the poor and continued the policies of the Reagan administration. And I was hoping that the Obama administration would change that. I care a lot about each election. I go out and vote and encourage people to vote. I have canvassed for politicians that I think represent the interests of the American poor. But things are worse and I'm not happy to say that.

Barack Obama is not really different. You can say that he's different, but his actions say something else. I read your perspective about the huge abstention vote. If there ever was a time when a third party could make headway, it was during this election.

We really need a party of the working class, and we don't have that.

*Free Land* is available for purchase or rental through distributor VTAPE



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