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The National Park Service (NPS) struggles, as it has for decades, to become a fully equitable and inclusive agency. Neither its employees nor its visitors are representative of the U.S. population. Despite the initiation of multiple programs and partnerships, progress towards making these beautiful spaces more inclusive and welcoming for people from communities of color (COCs) has been slow. Curious about why that is, I began this investigation with my candidacy paper in 2014, just as the NPS ramped up plans for its 2016 Centennial celebration. At that point, barely scratching the surface, I discovered this to be a deeply complex and highly nuanced area of study. At the heart lies the NPS’s unfortunate history of racism and displacement at its inception. Some of that racism continues to pervade, just as it does in our entire culture and society.

Unequal access to these awe-inspiring spaces can be seen as environmental or representational injustice, since exposure to nature and green spaces is fundamentally necessary to human mental and physical health. Moreover, the NPS must be accessible to all Americans to remain relevant in a country with rapidly changing demographics and recreation habits.

Since racism, whether blatant or in the form of implicit bias, appears to be at the core of the park service’s struggle, I turned to Critical Race Theory (CRT) as theoretical grounding for this research. Furthermore, I chose Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to attempt to dig deeper into why progress in this arena has been so slow and to seek solutions from relevant stakeholders. The PAR approach enables this project to be as collaborative as the parks themselves ought to become. I interviewed forty participants, who shared their stories, ideas for solutions, and also offered direction and feedback at all stages of the project. The participants come from three major stakeholder groups: people from COCs with some connection to the outdoors, NPS employees, and staff from organizations or agencies that partner with the NPS. Among those I interviewed were leading figures in this field, including Carolyn Finney, author of *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the relationship of African Americans to the great outdoors*, and Robert Stanton, the first black director of the NPS who served in that role during the last four years of the Clinton administration. Many of the participants are less well-known people, many from COCs whose stories are often not heard—traditionally shut out from the dominant narratives perpetuated by our culture and by many of the parks’ interpretive approaches. These personal counter-narratives play a vital role in changing the system, and have the potential to help shift attitudes both within and beyond the NPS.