

Multiple Truths in the National Parks

Rock Creek Park Superintendent Julia Washburn shares about Racism at Historic Sites

For a moment, there is only Julia and the Tulip tree. “Technically, it’s dead,” she says, “but I leave it here because it’s alive in other ways. A family of woodpeckers made their home in it and raised their babies there.” I see the tulip tree through Julia’s eyes; it gazes back at us, listening intently to its life being told. Julia is my godmother.

I have known Julia for most of my life. This is the first time I am directly asking her about working for the National Park Service (NPS). As the Superintendent of Rock Creek National Park in Washington D.C. and as the former Associate Director of Education and Interpretation for the US National Park Service (NPS), Julia aims to fundamentally change the way the NPS interprets historical spaces. Her mission is to dismantle systemic racism within the national parks by embedding the voices and opinions of marginalized communities in the storytelling of historic sites, while also forging pathways for traditionally excluded communities to access those spaces now.

“What this means,” Julia says, “is overhauling everything about how the park service depicts, takes care of, and utilizes land...herein lies my life’s work.”

Julia’s workday starts by 6:30 a.m. and often ends at 8 pm. Yesterday, she was working to resolve a case made by a black employee who was let go from his position after racist encounters with his supervisor. The case will be under investigation for months. She is supporting his case

and exploring ways to provide him with financial support in the meantime. Today, she is dealing with the results of the Trump Administration's [September 4th memo](#) prohibiting training teaching "critical race theory."

Following the memo, the Administration sent out a list of NPS trainings that were banned or required reframing to continue. Many of the trainings that Julia helped develop are now on hold, such as *Creating a Culture of Inclusion, Overcoming Unconscious Bias, and Tribal Consultation and the NPS*. Julia hosts weekly anti-racism training and affinity group sessions for superintendents across the region. Establishing these groups took years. Recent political energy spurred a major breakthrough; "now all of our local leaders are meeting and talking about anti-racism on a regular basis. I have never seen a group of leaders so determined."

The memo is a major obstacle to continuing anti-racism work in the NPS, but my godmother is fierce in a way I do not usually see. "If we have to go underground with these affinity groups, we will." She clasps her hands into fists.

[Rock Creek Park](#) is a poignant place to practice anti-racism work. The creek border is a [dividing line](#), separating primarily white neighborhoods in the northwest such as Georgetown and Cathedral Heights, from [historically black neighborhoods on upper 16th Street](#) and in middle-income and poorer areas to the south and east. The creek line also marks a stark division in how resources are distributed. [The Rock Creek East Livability Study](#) notes that things such as traffic lights, protected bike lanes, and road maintenance are lacking in many neighborhoods. Even the impacts of climate change differ depending on which side of the creek you live on.

After measuring [75,000 temperature points](#), scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) found that Northwest D.C. was within the 84-94 degree zone, while Northeast and parts of Southeast measured between 94–102-degrees.

“The impact of climate change in the east more than the west is intentional. The west has more open, green areas, and houses are spread farther apart. While in the east, housing is closer together, there are more dumpster trucks that run through the area, decreasing air quality, because families on the west issue complaints. The east side even has less entrances into Rock Creek Park. Creating more pathways into the park is one of my current projects.”

From its beginnings in [1916](#) under President Woodrow Wilson, the national park system has upheld white supremacist history. It is rare to find narratives within the parks from the perspective of Native communities, people of color, and black people who were enslaved. According to the [National Parks Conservation Association](#) (NPCA), there are more than 6,000 markers, monuments, and tablets on Civil War battlefields, but only one Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, established by President Obama in 2017.

Julia works with Native groups across the United States to gain greater understanding of how they want their stories to be told. She is currently working on a “Trail Map to Equity” which will be a series of pathways in the park that examine Rock Creek’s racial history. Additionally, she is spearheading efforts to engage DC residents to tell their own stories and has created a series of talks to highlight local voices.

The NPS mission is to “preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.” Yet, the whiteness of the parks undermines this mission for many people of color throughout the U.S. A 2009 University of Wyoming and NPS survey showed that white people accounted for 78% of the national parks’ visitors from 2008 to 2009. 79% of full-time permanent employees are white and 62% of all employees are male. The lack of diversity in race, gender and socioeconomic status is one of the major issues that Julia is tackling. Except for some Native American tribes, all other groups of color are underrepresented relative to their population in the U.S.

“It is very hard to qualify for positions at the park service. It requires years of unpaid or low paid work before you can move up. Many of the positions require moving to rural towns, where abject racism is often an issue. So, if you’re a person of color interested in working at the parks, it might mean being given a position in an area where your identity is threatened. And there is little institutional support.”

Julia aims to change the qualifications to work at Rock Creek Park so more emphasis is placed on an applicants’ passion and work ethic, and less on how many unpaid internships they have completed. She is also working to create an easier path for employees to request assignments in parks where they feel safe to live and work.

As Julia speaks, her passion for the work is evident, and so is the strain. Wringing her fingers, she says, “we can’t get to reconciliation without hearing multiple truths. If we refuse to listen, or

we obscure and leave out the truth, then we just can't get there." She pauses. For a moment, I see Julia my godmother again. The leader's voice falls away and the color under her eyes blooms purple like crocuses.

"For me, care and love for both the earth and the people on the earth goes together and it's not just about our people, it's about all people, it's about the whole earth. And I love the critters just as much as I love the people. I think it's an act of love, and that's why I can't let go of it."