

Speaking Up *and Speaking Out*



Working for Social and Environmental Justice
through
Parks, Recreation, and Leisure

Edited by

Karen Paisley, Ph.D. and Daniel Dustin, Ph.D.

What Are You, Anyway?

*From Tea at High Noon to Curry and Masala Dosa:
How Identity and Experience Interact to Challenge the System*

Nina S. Roberts

San Francisco State University
San Francisco, California

We are multi-hued, biracial, many flavors, edge walkers, heirs to many cultures, and products of a great genetic heritage. These oftentimes inexplicable, misjudged, and even glamorous labels are growing more popular by the day. Still, “What are you, anyway?” is not always a pleasant question. Misunderstandings of mixed-race people continue to threaten conventional wisdom. If you add gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status into the mix, the resulting amalgamation is even more confusing.

Exploring the complexity of human beings is fascinating. How do we treat one another based on our social status? How do others identify us in ways that are different from our own self-identity? How does labeling compromise our individuality? How do the politics and power dynamics of our various working relationships shape our decision-making? How can we resist constant pressures to assimilate into a dominant culture? How do we generate the courage to speak up and speak out knowing there could be support, resistance, or even criticism of our unique perspectives? How do we rock the boat, challenge the system, and not fear excessive criticism? And how do we work for change while still respecting human individual differences?

We also need to better understand the changing sociopolitical landscape that characterizes the evolving face of America. I never thought I would live to see the day a biracial man, a self-identified African American, would become president of the United States. This “half-breed” fever has been building for decades, yet as I approach my 50th birthday, it still startles me to realize that nearly seven million biracial/multiracial people in the United States now have political legitimacy. Being mixed race is not new in America. What is new, however, is how hip and trendy it is to be mulatto, Afro-Latino, or, like Tiger Woods, to be “Cablinasian.” What remains old and tiresome is the reality that brown people are still discriminated against despite our best efforts to fit in, “talk white,” and avoid violating White norms or expectations. How ironic that beige or mocha might become the unofficial color of the new millennium.

In this chapter, I share both my personal and professional perspectives on the changing face of America by offering a peek through a multiracial lens with two goals in mind. First, I want to stimulate thought and discussion about the long-term effects of an increase in ethnic diversity for parks, recreation, and tourism. Second, I want to help you understand how the growth of mixed-race participants in our programs, a greater diversity of visitors

to our parks, and a poly-cultural shift of students in our classrooms, will impact the park, recreation, and tourism profession for years to come.

An Uncommon Ancestry

I am multiracial, but I often keep my background simple in racial discourse. My primary identity is East Indian and White based on the cultural contexts of my upbringing. More fully, my father, from Liverpool, England, is White, and my mother is of mixed race. Her mother, my maternal grandmother, is also of mixed race, including East Indian (from Madras) and Cherokee (from mid-western America). My great grandmother immigrated to the United States from India through Ellis Island in New York, and then met my great grandfather, an American Indian. My maternal grandfather was of West Indian heritage from the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. I am a product of what this country will see a whole lot more of by the year 2050. My eclectic and uncommon heritage influences my perspective and opinion on most of what I have to say. For example, it is important to understand that my parents were interracially married in the 1950s when interracial marriage was illegal in many states. Furthermore, I was born in 1960, when people in United States tended to see race largely as a Black and White issue. I learned to find my way in both of those worlds as well as constantly answering the question, "What are you, anyway?" I also had to learn new ways to navigate the social, cultural, educational, and political systems.

To look at me, you would not know one of my parents was White. My brown skin placed me in the social status of ethnic minority and therefore into an "oppressed" position, and subsequently a "target." In addition to being a minority, I am female, another commonly oppressed group in the United States. Yet I still am privileged as middle class and educated. I am also lesbian, although my sexual orientation has not been in the forefront of my social agenda. Nevertheless, when my three primary identity groups surface simultaneously, I see myself not (as many people would assume) as having "three strikes against me," but as being a "triple threat." Given my background, multiculturalism in relation to social justice in parks, recreation, and tourism is very important to me. It is something I live and breathe on a daily basis.

Being multiracial in a racially splintered world has been both fabulous and frustrating. For example, growing up I was called "half-breed, mixed up, oreo, and confused." When I was a child, my hair was long, wavy, and softer in texture than that of Black girls. Additionally, my skin color was a tone of brown they were not used to seeing, and my lighter color was troublesome to them. I was harassed in a junior high school physical education class when a group of girls, who I thought were my friends, shoved me against the locker-room wall. "You got good hair. How did you get such nice hair? Where did you get such fine brown skin? I wish I had hair like yours."

Over the years, I grew into a stage of my life where others' impressions or labels of me don't have more power than self-knowledge. My appearance has still placed me in a position of always having to explain who I am ethnically and culturally. But what I find fascinating is that friends and colleagues still occasionally say to me, "I don't see you as a minority," or "You don't act like a minority," or "You don't act like a minority when I'm around you," or "You are mixed, but sometimes you act Black."

All my life I have been able to traverse back and forth across cultural boundaries. As an adolescent in a predominantly Black/White community, my Black friends would ask, "Why are you hangin' out with those White girls?" And my White friends would ask, "How come you keep hangin' out with those Black girls?" Having many ethnic identities congregated in one spirit is not confusing to me, but it has created some uncertainty or even conflict with what others are used to. The message multiracial people have often heard,

directly or indirectly, is, “If you’re with us, you need to be completely with us. You can’t also be with them.” Fortunately, this mindset has slowly dissipated as a social stigma.

In sum, there is tension between internally truthful and externally imposed ways of defining one’s self. Park, recreation, and leisure professionals must learn that the biracial experience includes negating conventional racial formations as well as abandoning what may be considered typical development of race relations. There is nothing “typical” about being biracial or multiracial in America, nor is there anything universal about it.

My Professional Background

My professional background consists of experience as a high school athletic coach, outdoor educator, youth leader, adventure recreation guide, program director, park manager, and college professor. I’ve worked for public and private non-profit organizations, a county park system, a national youth organization, and a federal land management agency. Given my racial and cultural heritage, I owe my professional success (in part) to the steps I’ve taken to shape and manage my reactions to an assortment of injustices I have experienced first-hand or observed in recreation and park settings throughout my career. My mentors have been faithful in providing guidance as needed, yet I have also been criticized for speaking out against injustices and for my attempts to create change as well as to right what feels wrong. Many prominent leaders have inspired my life’s work across races. Minority leaders, in particular, including Maya Angelou, Julian Bond, Harry Belafonte, Alice Walker, John Lewis, Wangari Maathai, John Hope Franklin, Charles Jordan, Minniejean Brown-Trickey, and Robert Stanton, to name just a few, have offered great encouragement.

I want to share some stories from my professional background with you that have left an indelible imprint on my mind and heart. My hope is that these stories will stimulate new ways of thinking about, and interacting with, biracial people. In some cases, it may be hard to differentiate whether any given occurrence was based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, unless they were overt. Regarding socioeconomic status, my middle-class status is a common thread across my experiences, so it is less of an issue for me. As I have been the target of racial ignorance, sometimes blatant, I share a few examples of my journey. My intent is to invite you into my world, once silent and invisible, but now more vocal than ever as you prepare to navigate your own way into an increasingly multiracial and multicultural future.

Twelve Miles West of Boston

My first job after college was as an assistant director of a brand-new community center built and managed by a local YMCA. This was a three-quarter-time entry-level position with benefits. My interview took place at a large conference room table with seven professionals from the YMCA, consisting of six White males and one White female. Because I completed my undergraduate senior internship full-time with the YMCA, this was an ideal place for me to begin my career.

After one year, however, I noticed that working constantly with a predominantly White staff was uncomplicated, yet not always comforting; I longed for a more multicultural work environment. I also realized I wasn’t making enough money, so I embarked on a new journey to seek full-time employment that would be a stepping-stone in my professional development.

The next job introduced me to a wonderful 1,200-acre outdoor education center that was known as the “largest day camp in the country” 12 miles west of Boston. The center served thousands of children each day. This was possible because multiple agencies from

across the Boston area leased individual parcels of land to manage and operate their own day camp sessions throughout the summer. This private, non-profit facility was also a haven for outdoor recreation enthusiasts in the community (e.g., anglers, boaters, hikers) as well as home to many local youth who participated in after school programs during the academic year. Programs also included community sailing, environmental and conservation education, adventure education (ropes course on site), family memberships, and special events.

I was hired as the bookkeeper. Given my educational background and goals of becoming an outdoor recreation professional, I worked my way up into program leadership and curriculum development within the organization. I led groups on the ropes course, taught a variety of boating activities, guided hikes, coordinated special events at the family recreation area, and more. I worked closely with the treasurer of the board, attended financial management training, and eventually became the principal administrator who managed the finances in tandem with the executive director. Over the course of my employment, I also shadowed the director, learning fundraising skills and gaining an appreciation for what goes on behind the scenes to effectively manage a remarkable combination of natural resources and array of programs.

I was the only ethnic minority staff member. The director, a White man, became a strong mentor for me. He was one of the kindest and most warm-hearted people I have ever had the pleasure to know and work with. There were many other staff members I enjoyed and appreciated. Unfortunately, I also had recurring issues with the center's secretary/receptionist. She was in her 50s and I was in my 20s. Despite my best efforts, I found it impossible to communicate effectively with her, to get along with her, and to get what I needed to carry out my duties without bearing the brunt of her ageist, racist, and homophobic comments. The looks, the stares, the glares, and the insidious body language also spoke volumes about her attitude toward me. Some people defended her or dismissed her behavior as merely reflective of a "generation gap," but her overt prejudice caused me to question whether parks and recreation was where I belonged. "If this is how I will get treated, then I don't want to do this any more," I thought to myself. Although I was committed to change, I was obviously not going to change this woman's attitude, and I grew more disturbed with her perpetual disrespect. I tried to remain positive and engaged, but my feelings were getting constantly bruised. In the end, after six years of service, I resigned because of her.

Following the Dream: Learning the Hard Way

I left Boston to pursue a master's degree in outdoor recreation and resource management at the University of Maryland. I loved the possibilities in this field too much to give up based on discord with one individual at one organization. Nevertheless, my confidence in my potential was being challenged, and my vulnerability associated with being lesbian and a minority of mixed-race heritage was prompting me to undertake a bit of soul searching. What was I, anyway? Raised to be a strong woman, provided with the tools to be a powerful minority in a world dominated by White decision-makers (keep this in mind when reading Cheryl's chapter following mine), and given advice on how to make my way professionally and respectfully within an unaccepting system, graduate school and continued great mentoring prepared me for the next challenge.

Upon completion of my master's degree in 1992, my life dream was to work for the National Park Service (NPS). I was 31 years old, a female with an advanced degree in outdoor recreation resource management (summa cum laude), ten years experience in the field, and an ethnic minority with the requisite credentials and competencies to secure a job with the

NPS. Over a 10-year span, I applied for eight different positions, but I was never granted an interview. I made cold calls, met face to face with superintendents across the country, wrote letters, and made myself visible at conferences and workshops with NPS staff members that had decision-making power. I began to develop new allies, yet time and time again my efforts seemed futile. Was I experiencing institutional racism or a form of patriarchy that was too pronounced for me to penetrate? I didn't know.

In 1995, I was recruited to work for a national non-profit conservation organization. I thought this might be my ticket into the NPS. As the largest non-profit partner of the NPS, this organization provided me with a memorable seesaw experience for nearly seven years. There were occasional gender wars and race-based conflicts, but we stuck together and usually figured out a way to work out the tensions. In 1998, with incredible support of my supervisor, I reduced my standing to part-time status and moved to Colorado to begin a doctoral program.

Just when I thought my life would move beyond the "check one" syndrome, the following year ended with uncaring remarks from the director of human resources (HR) that disappointed me greatly. All staff received a memo with a government form pertaining to a request for equal employment opportunity information. I completed the form and promptly returned it. I soon received a message back that reflected insensitivity and a lack of awareness among the senior leadership. The caveat to my submission had been that, given the standard government racial categories at the time (i.e., non-Hispanic White, African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino), I created my own box, and wrote in "biracial", as I had often done throughout my life. The HR director left a voice message at my home office saying, "I understand you are mixed race, but you must choose one." Imagine being forced to repeatedly deny part of your heritage on forms requiring that you "check only one race." And people wondered why I was annoyed with a government that still did not acknowledge biracial people. Consequently, it infuriated me that the HR director did not offer support or other options, and I sent a memo to the entire senior staff including the president/CEO telling them so. I planted a seed and, as I anticipated, was both commended and criticized for my efforts.

A few years later, after the 9-11 tragedy, and while still in graduate school, I was among thousands of people across the country laid off from work. This was one of the most disconcerting experiences I had ever had; yet I also knew my work had shifted to year by year, contingent on funding. As the saying goes, "when one door closes, another opens," and this turned out to be the case for me. Since I was still in the process of completing a Ph.D., a friend and mentor, who also supervised my research fellowship at Rocky Mountain National Park, brought me into the NPS through the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP). This program was established with an expressed purpose of recruiting underrepresented populations to help diversify the NPS workforce. I was about to become another "success story" as my SCEP opportunity led me to a full-time permanent position with the NPS. My dream career had finally been realized. Why had it taken ten years? I'm not sure. My first encounters in a variety of job pursuits were largely with White professionals (both females and males). In the end, Bill Gwaltney, an African American man with a heart of gold, an inspiring intellect, and a pure agent of change, put me under his wing and gave me the opportunity of a lifetime that I had waited so long for.

While I never gave up, I'm not alone in my speculation that racism was likely involved. Yes, I finally made it into the "club" (including a three-month detail with former NPS Director, Fran Mainella), but it took what seemed to me like a disproportionately long time. "Most minorities will tell you that they think they still have to be several times as good as a white man to be considered for a job."¹ Racism is hard to prove, and some attitudes and behaviors are unintentional, some completely intentional despite denial, and many more

even presumptuous. For decades, federal agencies have established divisions and dedicated staff to recruit people of color and women to fill gaps in the ranks. And while some success has been achieved, large numbers of ethnic minorities and women still have not obtained positions for which they are duly qualified. There are many sources to substantiate this conjecture, including NPS workforce statistics.² Such “active recruitment” of underrepresented groups by land managers does not often pan out, and the growing myth that “minorities get preference in federal hiring” has proven not to be the case.

Environmental Education: The Gap between Knowledge and Action

In the early 1990s, prior to my employment with the NPS, I was a program manager for an urban environmental education program with a mission to mentor high school students about natural resources and environmental sciences. During the course of this yearlong program, the students also had an opportunity to participate in various outdoor recreation activities with professional mentors from the field. Each spring, the program culminated in a major science fair where the students had a chance to showcase their science projects for family and friends as well as parks and protected area dignitaries, philanthropists, and politicians.

The founder and former executive director of the program was wealthy, White, and Jewish. As a former corporate executive, he left his work in telecommunications to start this small non-profit in Washington DC with a covert intent to “help poor Black city kids.” Conceptually, the program was great; operationally, leadership and cultural competency were lacking. I lasted one year and, because the probability of change was doubtful from within, I left because I had had enough. The program assistant was a young African American male in his 20s who heavily identified with his Black heritage and had been a great role model for the students. Given his Afrocentrism, he wanted to wear his traditional African garb to the annual science fair. As a Black man, such attire is perfectly appropriate, and considering the youth we worked with, perfectly acceptable. The executive director would not allow this. He instructed him to wear a “suit and tie” and further advised him that he would not be allowed to attend the event unless he complied. In this instance, cultural insensitivity was pervasive and demonstrated that well-intentioned, well-meaning White people in leadership positions do not automatically promote change. Many people are not accepting despite their claims and lack the cultural competency to move talk into action.

Moreover, the tentacles of discrimination still reach out from an ocean of doubt and mistrust. We still do not see many Blacks or Latinos, for example, working for environmental education programs, public land management agencies, or outdoor recreation organizations despite the fact that these entities will tell you “we really want to employ more people of color.” There is a serious disconnect between good intentions and good behavior. In addition, tokenism sometimes supersedes genuine desire or interest and this does not lead to sustainability of employment or relationships. Workforce diversity issues and inter-agency constraints are a reality we face daily within the NPS, other public land managing agencies, and outdoor recreation organizations, in general. Lack of a racially and ethnically diverse staff hurts all of us—both the service providers and the visitors or program participants.

This leads to an important question. Should we diversify or should we simply assimilate? There is a difference. Some believe that in order for cultures to survive, they must assimilate with a host society. In the United States, this is often referred to as “Anglo-conformity.”³ However, this does not mean that a culture must lose itself or its values, especially if there are no advantages to be gained by the process of assimilation. Acculturation may thus be seen as a selective process.

In the context of leisure, the pressure toward assimilation and acculturation is eased as the social limitations decrease. In leisure, people feel free to express their culture beyond the restrictions of environments such as work or school. The ethnic essence of an individual or family is preserved more strongly when people choose to associate with people with whom they can more easily identify and share a cultural identity. However, there are still barriers to this ideal. There is often a certain stigma related to ethnic minorities recreating in the outdoors. It is often stated, for instance, that Blacks “do not do that kind of activity.” There can be an element of social permission that surfaces when an individual is respected only if she or he conforms to a certain set of standards and lifestyle.⁴ If minorities do something that is non-traditional in their community, they may be labeled as having less of an identity, or of attempting to reject their identity.

Cultures and norms of different races are nuances that make us who we are within our own worlds in relation to historical, social, religious, economic, and political contexts. These factors, and others, contribute to our differences, and we should celebrate and embrace those differences. At the same time, we cannot deny or reject those differences and we should also recognize them as sources of conflict. Racial issues become important not only within their own limited context, but within a global framework of difference as well. They may get lost in the dissonance of other problems, such as gender and poverty issues. If, in this process, they become less relevant or important, there is the fear that people of color will not be seen or heard, and that their perception of inferiority will increase with the tide that engulfs them. Especially when viewed through a historical lens, many people of color have various wounds to heal, and it becomes imperative to avoid misusing circumstances of the past because the failure to improve a tainted personal and racial perception is a serious threat to the health of a racial group that is non-White. Reaching for equality of treatment would mean refusing to be a mere “token,” but where this happens, as it so often does in the corporate and government arena, or even in some social milieus, the voice of the token individual must be loud and compelling enough to drown all others. If not, inferiority is no longer a concept, but becomes a reality. This kind of reality must be avoided.

We must understand the dynamics of power, for where power works against us, we must regroup and strengthen our strategy as individuals and as a collective. It is important to understand how power can so easily shift from one person to another by way of the right words or actions, or even the wrong ones. The concept of whiteness—and the dominance of whiteness—is a subconsciously pervasive one. It has infiltrated our culture and is silently accepted. Toni Morrison reminds us that: “American means White and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.”⁵ Many White Americans do not relate closely to their ethnic background because they are usually far removed from that ethnicity and because it often does not really mean anything to say that they are German-American or Irish-American. There is typically a lack of pride attached to being Euro-American versus being African-American or Latino-American because being White and American is taken for granted, and having that White privilege is something that White people don’t acknowledge on a daily basis like people of color do. Whites do not have to think of themselves as a minority in America (at least not yet). When they think of themselves from a race-based perspective, they often think in terms of existing as a human being or as an American citizen. However, minorities have a very different mindset. When they think of themselves, there is often some connection in terms of race and/or ethnicity.

While great progress has been made over several decades on this front, the history of the dominant White culture in the United States has proceeded with the creation of various institutions, and making essential decisions for this country, largely without the involvement of ethnic minorities. The dominant cultural pattern has revolved around Eurocentric

ways of thinking and doing and has therefore been an expression of racial dominance by White people. Despite the ethnic heritage of our new president, the dominant cultural pattern in America is still White and, in many ways, continues to diminish the cultural impact of subordinate, or oppressed, racial groups. This all reminds me of the ever-so-popular “melting pot” concept that suggested people with differing nationalities would soon blend nicely into one “American” culture. If we think about it, this would require our society to create a new and potentially distinctive culture stemming from the diverse experiences of all our varying ethnic groups. Unfortunately, what has happened is that our cultures have not “melted” together; rather, there has been transition into a hierarchy of ethnic cultures characterized by both racial and gender dominance. Despite the dawning of multiculturalism and more women in power, Eurocentrism and the decision processes of men continue to dominate this country as well as our field of parks, recreation, and leisure. We will see a monumental shift in this paradigm in years to come.

Today, after more than four decades, we are irrevocably and steadily moving toward a society where racial pigeonholing is increasingly more difficult and undesirable. People of mixed race are growing more vocal, and stereotypes, while still in existence, are beginning to fall by the wayside. Yet, it is often frustrating to think of oneself as an “edgewalker” or an “outsider.” Multiracial people often get caught in a type of cultural crossfire. But, increasingly, we are also the ones helping to create a demilitarized zone, trying to forge a bridge out of our own life experiences. What we have learned, however, is that the “melting pot” or “salad bowl” are not useful metaphors for dealing effectively with diversity or social justice. “Experimenting with edges and finding new models is the challenge.”⁶

Crossing the Color Lines

The year 2000 began with a Census report that put another spotlight on diversity, showing the present U.S. population as it is, with its rainbow colors shining bright. These dramatic changing demographics brought with them professional and political validation. It was one of the most empowering turns of racial events I have ever experienced. Today, I find myself in a much different place from where I stood a quarter century ago at the start of my career. To me, it is vital to acknowledge that I have a mission to fulfill, yet, I am constantly aware that my mission is not completed and may never be. The continued lack of awareness about multiracial issues creates much more than a mere inconvenience for the millions of Americans who identify with multiple races. Given that the 2010 Census is projected to result in even greater numbers of mixed-race people, communicating my beliefs and striving to dismantle cultural and ethnic barriers are, and always will be, works in progress.

I remember feeling this engagement, this call to action, more than ever when the human resources director of that national non-profit organization sent me an article that was later passed along by the president/CEO for the two of us to read and make amends with one another. The article from the *L.A. Times*, titled “Census Counts ‘Multiracial’ America,” was timely, yet it did not alleviate my angst over what felt like a lack of support from my employer at the time. In the article, the results of the 2000 Census had not yet been analyzed. It was a speculative projection of what was to come. While the article was mostly well-written and made sense to me, at the end I lost faith yet again. The following statement was particularly troubling: “The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has outlined several tactics for its agencies to make sense of this. They include assigning multiple-race responses to single-race categories and recording multiracial people as racial fractions.”⁷ “Great,” I said to myself. “Now we’re a fraction!” Nevertheless, the ethnocrats at OMB

who developed the categories for the 2000 Census sparked thousands of news articles and commentaries not just in America, but also around the globe.

So now that we have this wonderful assortment of colors to live, work, and play with, what do we do? As the number of racial and ethnic minorities continues to increase, we are also growing as an economic force. And there is an increasing sense of urgency to “diversify the workforce.” Yet as long as White men reign in leadership and positions of decision-making power, little change is likely to occur with the exception of action by our White allies. Minority applicants continue to be denied opportunities and those that are hired are sometimes not given responsibilities that meet their skill base or talents. Without proper mentoring and feeling welcome within an agency, or having proper opportunities for professional development and advancement, minority employees may leave an agency in the wake of their supervisors or managers saying, “See, they couldn’t make it here anyway.” What is not likely to be understood is why they departed the agency in the first place.

Workforce diversity efforts are often coupled with outreach that may or may not be successful depending on commitment and level of intentionality. Furthermore, our field needs to broaden the language of “outreach” toward the language of community engagement. This view is just beginning to take shape across disciplines. Ultimately, public involvement and community engagement will work only if agencies and organizations keep an open mind about how to reach desired ends. Business as usual mindsets that resist change, innovation, and increasing inclusiveness will continue to make decisions that impede our ability to move beyond color lines.

Parting Thoughts

Like other people of mixed race, moving through life with such a distinctive background has taught me how to survive and how to accept the fact that the change I fight for is not the type of change that can be accomplished overnight. Fortunately, I now realize the power, not the hopelessness, in this reality. What I uphold and advocate for in my professional and personal life is a call to action, a plea for multiracial masses to strive for recognition and fairness. In this shifting world, patience is needed. Yet, there is also a need for leadership excellence, sure-footed guidance, and sharp sightedness that will propel us into the kind of future we want to build for ourselves.

As a biracial/multicultural individual, my ethnic background has gone mostly unrecognized for nearly 50 years of my life. I’ve also been reading about and exploring biracial and multicultural identity development for over 20 years. It is high time our field delves into what this means for the programs and services we offer. We must employ more sophisticated ways of measuring race if we really want to understand a growing multiracial population. At the same time, we must conduct research that explores what multiracial experiences are like in all of their manifestations.

I know there are allies who are change agents among us. Nevertheless, the aspect of this field that frustrates me the most is that many people in leadership/management positions lack the cultural competency, or sometimes authenticity, to turn talk into action. Resisting diversity stems from privilege, the power to maintain the status quo, fear of change, and a reluctance to step outside the proverbial comfort zone. While there has been some progress, if this wasn’t the case, we would have seen more racial and ethnic diversity in outdoor recreation and natural resource agencies by now. There has been a history of subtle and subconscious, oftentimes stealthy, and occasionally deliberate attempts to “keep us down.”

In the field of parks and outdoor recreation, where I have had most of my professional experience, I find that it is resistance from many land managers who continue to create barriers and remain closed-minded to change that constitutes the crux of the problem. It is

much easier to be complacent than to meet the recreational needs and desires of a changing America, or even attend to the growing challenges of a more diverse workforce. Park and recreation service providers appear set on a divided society of “haves” and “have nots” while maintaining the status quo. Many do not truly embrace diversity because dominance, power, and safeguarding privilege speak louder than the need to change.

Parks, recreation, and leisure all have special meaning when examined through the broad lens of cultural diversity. Yes, disproportionately fewer people of color visit national parks and natural areas, but after nearly 50 years of research we have a better understanding why. Strategies to engage diverse communities in outdoor recreation participation have existed for some time,^{8, 9, 10, 11} yet for the last 15 to 20 years, people have continued to ask the “why” question rather than step into the “action” phase. Traditional managers operate traditional parks for traditional users. Meanwhile, the world is changing all around them.

Multiculturalism is an extremely complex phenomenon, one that I have been living, studying, and following for over two decades. I feel very strongly about what I’ve seen, experienced, and learned from my minority friends, colleagues, and people of color I’ve met socially and professionally over the years. I am also aware of, and applaud, the many positive changes that have taken place throughout my life. Nonetheless, much more progress is needed. The issue is not as simple as “Black and White” any more. We are faced with a more complex amalgam of issues as the colors of our cultural heritage make themselves ever more apparent. Today, we irrevocably feel how multiracial people have struggled against the pressure to “pick one” of their mothers, fathers, grandparents on their family trees. And in our triumph over that struggle, we have become an increasingly outspoken force in moving beyond racial divisions as we continue to reject exclusive and outdated notions of race. I see my work as part of a larger movement to end discrimination and inequality on individual and systemic levels in order to build more compassionate and inclusive communities for all people.

Discussion Questions

1. We are becoming an increasingly multicultural citizenry. As Nina observes, mocha or beige may supplant white as the color of the day. Do you find this impending change inviting or threatening? Why do you feel the way you do?
2. Nina grapples with questions of identity, race, and class. She asks, “What am I, anyway?” Well, then, what are you, anyway? How do you define yourself? What is it about you that we should know? What is it about you that really matters?
3. Nina has had to learn to deal with prejudice and racism. Have you ever been subjected to prejudice or racism? How did it feel? How did you deal with it?
4. Do you think you may have prejudicial or racist tendencies? If so, what are the origins of your feelings? Do you think there are good grounds for your feelings? Have you been able to overcome them? If so, how? If not, what obstacles are in your way?
5. Rather than being defeated by prejudice and racism, Nina has been empowered to speak up and speak out about her treatment. What do you think is the source of Nina’s strength?