

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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dedicated to the movement for economic justice,  
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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**Tales of the Hunt:  
Ken Burn's National Parks -  
Truly "America's Best Idea!"  
Represent Our Resistance  
By Dr. Lenore J. Daniels, PhD  
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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Until lions have their historians, their tales of the hunt shall glorify the hunter.

-African proverb

Chris Hedges has it right again. In his article, "The War on Language," September 28, 2009, Hedges writes: "those who seek to dominate our behavior first seek to dominate our speech."

This emptiness of language is a gift to demagogues and the corporations that saturate the landscape with manipulated images and the idiom of mass culture. Manufactured phrases inflame passions and distort reality. The collective chants, jargon and epithets permit people to surrender their moral autonomy to the heady excitement of the crowd. 'The crowd doesn't have to know,' Mussolini often said. 'It must believe. ... If only we can give them faith that mountains can be moved, they will accept the illusion that mountains are moveable, and thus an illusion may become reality.' Always, he said, be 'electric and explosive.' Belief can triumph over knowledge. Emotion can vanquish thought...The more illiterate a society becomes, the more power those who speak in this corrupted form of speech amass, the more music and images replace words and

thought. We are cursed not by a cultural divide but by mutual cultural self-destruction.

"Infantile slogans" and "clichés" are hallowed to the literate, writes Hedges, but invested with power, they are heard everywhere around the planet until they seem to become the driving force of human existence.

I read Hedges' article after viewing the first episode of Ken Burns' 12-hour PBS presentation, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. "The Scripture of Nature: Part One 1851-1890" aired Sunday, September 27, 2009. It will be the only episode I can stand to watch and hear.

According to the PR surrounding Burns' film, the production team is preparing several events across the country in hope of drawing more visitors to the national parks. David Rockefeller, Jr., Vice Chairman Emeritus of the National Park Foundation, the National Parks Conservation Association, and Friends of Acadia sponsored events in August. As an honored guest, Burns attended the event in formal attire. His usually blue jeans were left hanging in the closet! He is a man of the people, out of place among the big corporate boys!

Ten years in the making, the PR gang for *America's Best Idea* informs us that, for Burns, this film is an "unabashed love letter."

"America's Best Idea" is more than a love letter - unabashed or not. It is another example of what neoliberals do best for the Empire: they manipulate images and idioms to glorify the hunters.

These parks are for the people! "Our national parks belong to all of us." The parks, the waterfalls, trees, animals - need protection! In the background is the faint sound of Indian American music.

The first few minutes of the opening, I guess, seems intended to make U.S. citizens feel good! Go to your windows and yell as loud as you can: I just love this great country! Don't worry. That little business with the indigenous people in the Yosemite Valley has been resolved! The 8,000 years the Ahwahneechee lived there and protected the lands before the white man came and burned their homes, before the white man came and killed many and forced thousands onto reservations - it is a footnote! The driving theme of this documentary is the great treasure that belongs to the people thanks to the great *American* minds and bodies who fought to preserve and protect the land!

*In passing*, we hear of Chief Joseph and the Nez Pez Indians hunted down by the cavalry while - the main point - *Americans were touring the area!* The *American visitors*, in particular a couple, were trying to enjoy the scene when these Indians appeared! Imagine that! The man was shot in the head by a stray bullet, but he survived. His wife had the right to record this story, to put into the history of Yellowstone Park, the day their tour was interrupted by *Indians* - who, what - should have been removed to reservations already? And, too, *in passing*, the voice tells us that 90 Nez Pez Perce, mainly women and children were killed while they *slept* in the Battle of the Big Hole! That is, the people were asleep! Fred Hampton and Mark Clarke were sleeping too when a supposed *gun battle* took place between them and the Chicago Police! (I knew then, at this point in Episode One, that it would be impossible

for me to watch two seconds of another episode). Also, *in passing*, trash (cans and bottles) showed up behind the *American* visitors to Yosemite! Strange! The Ahwahneechee lived in the region for some 8,000 years, and the first "visitors" to the area described a beautiful and a well-kept region! Trash, however, meant more protection. "Nationalize" the parks! A good thing! American's best idea, right?

What did the Ahwahneechee have to say about this? They were not asked. Work on making Yellowstone available to all Americans was in full progress. That is what matters in this episode!

It is all about good old American thought and ingenuity! Burns and his team of writers offer the words of the *founders* of the national parks *without question*. Since the *founders* of the parks described their activity as examples of the *Lord's work*, the footage in the first episode presents beautiful images of the Sequoia trees and the voice over equates these images to nature's "cathedral." In turn, these *founders*, good and thoughtful people, believed the national parks would come to symbolize a "refuge for human beings seeking to replenish their spirit." (This must be some kind of "peace" time activity!). And the voiceover offers this summation: the national parks will be "geographies of memories and hope" for countless American families who will come to "forge an intimate connection to their land" and pass these memories and hopes "along to their children."

And the Ahwahneechee and the Nez Pez Perce? What of their memories and hopes? What will they pass along to their children? Are the Ahwahneechee and the Nez Pez Perce even *American* for Burns and his writing team? You would never know that millions of indigenous people inhabited not only the regions of these national parks - but all of the Americas - long before the European *discovered* the Americas.

The "story of the national parks is the story of people," the film's narrative tells us. *People*, like you the viewer - the *American* viewer - willing to save "some portion of the land they love."

It is a capitalist venture - from the removal of the indigenous populations to the establishment of riverboat cruises, giant-screen movies, tram rides, and concession stands. When the first "tourists" came to the inhabited land, they asked the *typical* American question: How to make money from this land. Thus, the *great idea* was born - again! In other words, it is not cheap to take the family to a national park that "belongs to you." The national parks are a capitalist gold mine! But the narrative speaks of a great American idea! You cannot see or hear the cash registers, but they are there - thousands of them ringing up the profits!

And what would one great American idea be without its evil twin? Burns and his writing team, like any good U.S. cultural production, provide a few images of the happy indigenous and Black American. The team recruit the historically removed indigenous and the Black American to speak on behalf of the greatness of the *best* American idea! I watched two preview clips, one featuring a Native American and the other a Black American, both working as national park rangers. In the first, the Native American is greeting a group of predominately white tourists in front of Mount Rushmore. He speaks of "we" - meaning Americans. He is proud to be a park ranger and *educate* the American visitor about *American* history. Worse is the Black park ranger. He is made to

recall the day he came across an old black and white photo of several Black soldiers on horses. These, he informs the PBS viewers, were the Buffalo Soldiers. In his research, he discovers that Buffalo Soldiers were assigned to kill *Indians!* Black people were there! *Black people* were part of the history of clearing the west for civilization! The park ranger is proud to know that he, as a Black American, is in possession of *this* history! He is a proud Black national park ranger!

What cowardly and ignorant lions! The hunters not only know how to hunt, but also how to use the remains of the carcass to fuel the U.S. body politics.

It is enough to make you sick if you know American history - the reality of the U.S.'s violent foundation. But it is worse to know you are witnessing a form of enslavement and genocide of the mind! But for the average *American* viewer of *America's Best Idea*, the message is clear: You can rest assure, *American* viewers. The indigenous and Black Americans are with us, the conservation movement and not with the "conservation refugees," as Rebecca Adamson calls those displaced by the capitalist take over of the land now called *national parks*.

It is all for you - the national parks and the whole narrative of American greatness for the small price of your mind!

Rebecca Adamson (Cherokee) is a braver woman; she managed to watch two additional episodes of Burns' documentary. I, on the other hand, had not planned to watch *America's Best Idea* until I spoke with Adamson for the first time last month. For this article, Adamson and I talked, as she noted, about the "stark difference of worldviews" between the indigenous people's silent story of genocide and Ken Burns' *American* story of ingenuity. It was all about establishing the Northern Pacific Railroad, said founder of [First Peoples Worldwide.org](http://FirstPeoplesWorldwide.org). President Teddy Roosevelt (a great hunter) thought of the Yosemite Valley as a good place to come and shoot buffalo, Adamson said.

"To be fair to Ken Burns, he does mention the evictions of the indigenous people," Adamson said. But "the history of the parks is a war story, a war of world views."

And Ken Burns, an awarded hunter, cannot tell that story, but he can pull together "manipulated images and idioms," to satisfy the capitalists behind the conservationist movement. He is a master at cultural warfare. Make it seems as if it is all about *nature*.

Burns "missed the plot," Adamson said. "People think you can take nature and put it over there and go make a profit."

Bottom line, it is about capitalism, Adamson reiterated. The park industry only considered the indigenous animals after someone noted that people were mistreating the animals. "They turned to something called 'wild life management'" which then turned the parks into "amusement parks."

*America's Best Idea*, Adamson said, is "an infomercial for the national parks." In turn, the parks are "a commodity" for the wealthy class. "It's about assets. The wealthy class knows it. They want the land and that is what's behind killing us." Indigenous populations, Adamson explains, live on 80 percent of the Earth's natural resources, and the capitalists have their eyes on the profits! They do not care about the land or the

people they uproot, the lives or land they destroy in the process.

If it is not outright removal of the indigenous population, it is encroachment that threatens indigenous way of life. Slowly, people are forcibly removed from the land so the wealthy can develop unsustainable conditions for the whole planet. Yet when the Cherokee in Oklahoma asked the government to set aside the Trail of Tears, Adamson said, as a park to remember the history of this violence against the people, "the conservationists have refused because they claim that Indians can't take care of the land!"

Ken Burns and the writing team of *America's Best Idea!* speak for the hunters!

There is a film Ken Burns will not produce for PBS or any media outlet. But it, too, is guided by the narrative of Manifest Destiny. On the hunting grounds of Benton Harbor, Michigan where the people, led by Rev. Edward Pinkney, are battling, the story of the hunted has become the target of Whirlpool Inc. and of U.S. Representative Fred Upton's determination to convert a predominately Black city into a paradise for the wealthy. Take jobs out of the community, limit city services, health and educational resources, fence the community behind a wall of angry police, instigate *Black violence*, and then announce to the world that Black Americans, too, cannot take care of their community, and the corporations hear what is *code* for one more step toward the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny for the wealthy! Condos, hotels, lakefront beach area for *Americans* and a reservation area - a toxic reservation area - for the Black survivors of America's best idea! (See [bhbanco.blogspot.com](http://bhbanco.blogspot.com)). But the lions in Benton Harbor are not asleep!

But we have so few of the hunted awake, and a Ken Burns or Fred Upton can count on that!

It is no secret that Black America's house is divided. Too many are trapped to their desire for gold and power. In turn, their desires are wedded to the language of Manifest Destiny. You and me, Master, "we" is fighting the "enemy"! That element of the Black and Brown community in the U.S. is but a caricature of the capitalist and serves as the Empire's stable of politicians, civic and religious leaders, and academics on call for the capitalists. "Mutual cultural self-destruction" - indeed! But let them be!

While, as Tiokasin Ghosthorse states, the ingenious people in the U.S. are only 3 million, they are a 3 million more determined to fight for their traditional beliefs, which includes an equalitarian worldview that recognizes the significance of nature for the survival of humanity. Here, the language is simple and *universal* - return the land to the people! The *young ones* have had their day at playing god, and it has resulted in bringing the Earth and its people to hell on Earth - not paradise. If this planet is to survive, if we are truly heeding the language of the Earth, then the hunted and those of good conscious must forge alliances with indigenous struggles in the U.S. and around the global.

We will work to put an end to the hunter's narrative!

**BlackCommentator.com** Editorial Board member, Lenore Jean Daniels, PhD, has been a writer, for over thirty years of commentary, resistance criticism and cultural theory, and short stories with a Marxist sensibility to the impact of cultural narrative

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