3. How would Momaday respond to the next-to-last sentence of this essay, especially the idea of ancestors?

KEN BURNS

Our Best Selves

Ken Burns (b. 1953), who was born in Brooklyn, New York, is perhaps the best-known documentary producer and director in America. His nine-episode television documentary The Civil War *(1990) is considered a masterpiece.* The Brooklyn Bridge *(1982) and* The Statue of Liberty *(1986) were nominated for Academy Awards. He has won seven Emmys, mostly for* The Civil War *and* Baseball *(1994). In the following excerpt from the preface to* The National Parks: America's Best Idea *(2009), Burns explains how the beautifully illustrated book was inspired by his documentary on the parks. Both were highly praised as celebrations "of an essential expression of American democracy."*

Over the course of our film and this book, you will meet several dozen people, most of them unsung or unfamiliar, who found in the parks salvation of one kind or another. They include a talented but troubled alcoholic who fell in love with the wildwoods of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee, rehabilitated himself in the isolation of nature, and then sacrificed everything to see the region transformed into a park. He was aided by an equally dedicated Japanese immigrant who would with his camera help insure the preservation of the wildnerness that was so close to and so threatened by the major population centers of the east. They include a family of Colorado cowboys, Quakers, who transformed themselves into archaeologists and helped save the dwindling and often vandalized relics of ancient American cultures, and a Minnesota boy who stepped off a train in Alaska, near the nation's highest peak, and became one of the fiercest protectors of predators nearly everyone else wanted eradicated.

They include the millionaire businessman with seemingly limitless enthusiasm for the expansion of parkland in America, who would spearhead the creation of the National Park Service and then benefit from its calming and peaceful resources as perhaps no one else has; and his young assistant, who would be forced to take over during his boss's mysterious absences, and who would also help an invalid president expand the very notion of what a national park could be. They include an iconoclastic crusader from Florida, a woman with her own unique relationship to the swamp at her doorstep, who would help lead the fight to save that swamp from a relentless tide of development and commercial exploitation.

And they also include a Scottish-born wanderer who walked clear across California and into the Ahwahneechees' magical valley in the middle of the high Sierras and was utterly transformed, finding in Nature's exquisite lessons an alternative to the harsh religious discipline of his father, and who would

articulate his new creed of Nature in writings so transcendent that millions of Americans are still beguiled and inspirited by the rapture flowing from his words. For John Muir, Yosemite, indeed any wild place, revealed a design and an intelligence more permanent, more valuable than anything made by man, and man would be wise to submit to that natural world. He was certain, too, that a genuine and authentic relationship with Nature would help to forge a special "kinship" between all lovers of the mountains, and this kinship, in turn, required us — each of us within ourselves — to work to become better people. For this new human evolution to take place, Muir insisted that we had to go out into nature. But by going out, he said, we were "really going in." This is the journey, the journey of self-discovery, we all can make as we embrace our national parks. "This is still," John Muir wrote assuredly, "the morning of creation."

In many ways, they are hard to get to. The siren call of civilization is nearly impossible to resist; its enervating rhythms discordant yet seductive; the promise of wealth or position too engrained a reward for most of us to ignore. Though human *beings*, we seem compelled relentlessly to *do*. Yet we are beset by discontinuity; people quarrel, get sick, die, fall away. Rarely does the momentum of things permit repair or reconciliation; rarely do we throttle back. Even in nature, even in our beloved national parks, that momentum has a way of distracting us. We are now used to and come to expect a windshield experience, a quick drive through, and anything else is a bit frightening, time-consuming, other. The intimate specificity of nature, seen in the highest of mountains or a speck of lichen on a rock, its ever-enlarging vastness, is lost in the control we seek to superimpose over the chaos, the random chaos, of events. For many of us, we just don't have the time to submit, to enroll, as it were, as students in the great classroom our natural world provides, its curriculum endless and varied, sustaining and vital. In short, we have ignored the extraordinary commonwealth that is waiting just outside the city limits, ready to end the poverty of spirit that afflicts us all from time to time.

A traveler leaving San Francisco's airport by car and heading east out of the Bay Area has to negotiate a maze of interstate highway exchanges, and it is easy to forget, despite the "progress" one sees everywhere — the random overlap and seeming endlessness of our built environment — that it was and still is a beautiful place. Unlike a walk, which makes every place infinitely big, air travel makes the country small, impersonal, a few hours to get from one side to the other. As a result, we become impatient; even in a car after a flight, the sameness of things, whether man-made or natural, can erode our precious but often squandered attention. 5

But civilization does relent and the highways become less crowded, the multilane swaths of the city turn into smaller two-lane ribbons that cut through rather than consume landscape. If you are heading to John Muir's Yosemite, as I was near the beginning of this project, to catch up with my partners for several days of filming, I–80, I–580, I–205, and I–5 eventually yield, west of Manteca in the vast inland valley, into California Route 120. Now the

shopping centers and malls give way to smaller towns and farms and fields and orchards. The land reclaims its primacy, but all of that is just preliminary, decompression, compared to what awaits the traveler on his first visit to Yosemite. The road begins to climb, even the farms now fall away, and 120 becomes Big Oak Flat Road, and eventually California Route 140, which leads the traveler (in the car now nearly as long as in the plane) into Yosemite National Park.

There is no preparation for it. A turn in the road and suddenly the valley unfolds before you. I have never in my life felt the way I felt at that moment. The crisp air and high altitude made the mountains and waterfalls, trees and road look almost like a backdrop you could roll up and store away. But it was something more. Like Muir, though I was physically outside, I was actually going in, transforming the old generic question once again into "Who am I?" The view was an anchor and a beacon; it held me gently but firmly in its grip (a grip I don't think I have ever completely lost) and it pulled me directly into the heart of the park.

When I caught up with the rest of our crew, who had all been to Yosemite before, they grinned when they saw my face. Like the loss of one's virginity or the fresh intimacy of parenthood, I had entered a new world, one I would find hard to forget or relinquish. For the next few days, we worked dawn to dusk filming the surrounding valley floor, hiking up past Vernal and Nevada falls to spend a night outdoors, each step a further surrender to the forces that had held John Muir so closely, to the forces that were changing my life. Each of us felt it, especially my co-producer and writer Dayton Duncan (whose love of the parks had initiated this project and this journey for me), and it only took a sideways glance or a quick exchanged smile to realize that each of us felt the same, each of us was hearing the same great symphony. The Park Service sells a small booklet they call a passport to those who wish to keep a permanent record of their trips into the parks; you can get this passport stamped with the date and location of each park you enter. The symbolism then was not lost on me. I had been permitted entry into a new country, not just a country of physical space and time, but of meaning and memory. I felt born again as we walked back into the valley.

That last night before we would head back to San Francisco and our busy, compelling lives, I lay awake unable to sleep. Memories were stirring and I suddenly realized that this was not the first natural national park I had ever been to, as I had thought and as I had confessed to my friends and colleagues. And then it all rushed back, a memory so long forgotten that it had ceased to be a part of my "history." In 1959, as a six-year-old boy, my father had taken me on our first and last road trip together. My mother was slowly dying of cancer and our household was a grim and demoralized place. And he had not been the best father, either; baseball catches in the backyard were few and far between, attendance at my games nonexistent. He was moody and distracted by my mother's illness and by inner demons none of us — my mother, younger brother, or me — fully understood, demons that would consume him for most of his too-short life.

But one Friday after school, he and I drove from our home in Newark, Delaware, to my grandparents' house, the place he had grown up in, in Baltimore. We went to bed late (I slept in his old bedroom, in his old bed under his old chenille comforter) and it seemed like only a second later that my father was leaning over me in the dark, gently touching my shoulder, urging me to get up quickly. I had never been up so early in my life. It was still dark as we left the house and I can still remember nearly fifty years later all the things we talked about (butterflies and baseball, the route we were taking, the battlefield of the Civil War we passed) as the sun came up and we made our way, pre–interstate system, to Front Royal, Virginia, and the north entrance of Shenandoah National Park. 10

The Skyline Drive runs along the spine of the ridge that makes up the relatively small park and that morning there was still fog and mist and cloud hugging the road. I had never been in a cloud before. We went through short tunnels carved through the mountains (!) and we saw a handful of deer standing stock-still before us on the road before my dad scattered them with his car horn. After what seemed like hours in this new world, we turned off the drive and checked into a small cabin just big enough for the two of us. It was chilly and my dad insisted on my putting on a jeans jacket with red lining we had just bought and we set off down a trail that led eventually to a waterfall. It was an impossibly long hike for my young legs — probably all of a mile and a half — but I held my father's hand and I can still remember his grip to this day.

We saw a bear, I think. We turned over rotting logs and caught a bright-red salamander and my father named every butterfly and tree we saw. I don't remember what or even where we ate that night, but I do remember lying awake, as I would do years later alone in Yosemite, thinking how great this was to be in this magical place, with memory and emotion attached so securely, this time with my dad. The next day we had more hikes and more adventures before we headed home; my dad sang to me songs like "Wolverton Mountain," "Silver Threads and Golden Needles," "Scarlet Ribbons," and other folk songs that are permanently on my hard drive, though when I had later sung them to my children I had forgotten when I learned them. Later, after my epiphany at Yosemite, my then thirteen-year-old middle daughter, Lilly, was dragged down the same Skyline Drive, as I attempted to re-create what a distracted father and his desperately young son had experienced as the 1950s came to a close. This time we most definitely saw bears.

When that memory-stirred night in Yosemite came in May of 2003, my father had been gone for more than a year and a half, and I suppose it is reasonable to ask, confronting such an epic story as that of the national parks, what purpose these personal stories serve. But the narrative of the parks is not just in their spectacular scenery, the waterfalls and big trees and wildlife, or even the complicated sagas of the charismatic individuals who saved these places. It is also about who we see these sacred places with, whose hand we are holding at the rim of the Grand Canyon (or in Shenandoah National Park), what intimate transmissions, as [the historian William] Cronon would say, occur between the generations as we instill this love of the parks, our parks, to our

posterity. We *are* beset by discontinuity; people do quarrel, get sick, die, fall away. Rarely does the momentum of things permit repair or reconciliation. But I have found, in places where the narrative of human lives and those of their "brotherly" rocks seem just as important, that some inexpressible something is retained, repairs are made, and we are all, as John Muir so fervently wished, kindred spirits.

[2009]

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. Do you agree with John Muir that being in the wilderness inspires us to be better people? Why, or why not?
2. Explain what you think Burns means when he says that "the siren call of civilization is nearly impossible to resist" (para. 4).
3. Describe Burns's epiphany when he first sees Yosemite valley.
4. Do you think Burns's anecdote about his journey with his father is effective? Why, or why not? What purpose do his personal stories serve?
5. What does Burns mean by "kindred spirits" (para. 13)? Have you ever had such a feeling?

MAKING COMPARISONS

1. How would Momaday and Lopez respond to John Muir's idea that by going out into nature, we are "really going in" (para. 3)?
2. Compare the effectiveness of the endings to all three essays.
3. What ideas about wild places do all three essays have in common?

WRITING ABOUT ISSUES

1. Argue that our culture does or does not appreciate the value of wild places.
2. Write a personal narrative like Ken Burns's in which you describe an early outing in nature and what you thought then and now about that experience.
3. Write an essay that answers Lopez's question, "Why preserve these [wild] areas?" (para. 10).
4. Research the ideas of the early environmentalist John Muir, and then write a report on your findings.