



Letter from Woodstock
Rolf Diamant

For the Betterment of Everyone

THE ALARMING SURGE IN AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS in countries around the world has prompted a widespread, sometimes anguished re-examination of how democratic states work and of institutions that reinforce fundamental democratic values. For example, journalist Jessica Kiang recently praised special places where “people of every social class, ethnicity and race can go,” places that are “a benevolent force in public life.” Kiang described “a grand, extravagantly humane concept ... an idea that represents the very best of civilized society, and as such it is something we need desperately right now when so much evidence abounds of the worst of us.”

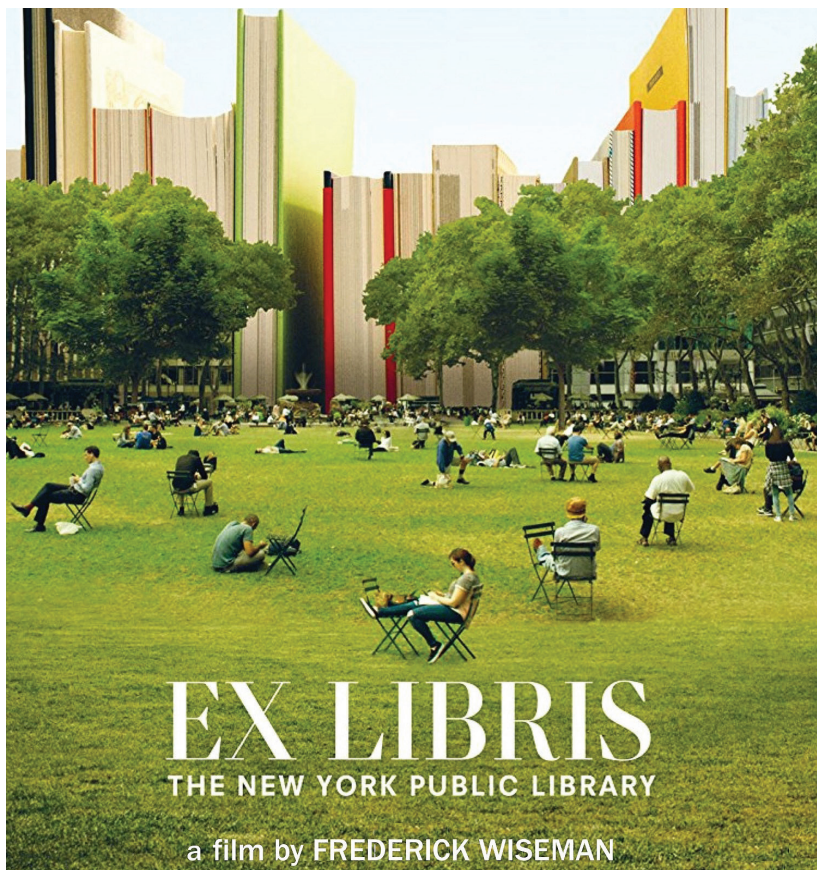
No, Kiang was not writing about America’s national park system, though she could well have been. Rather, she was reviewing award-winning documentarian Frederick Wiseman’s latest film, “Ex Libris,” an immersion into the parallel universe of the New York Public Library (NYPL). The film, made without narration, takes the viewer on a sequential journey through the workings of a vast information ecosystem, with 88 branch libraries in New York City that serve more than 17 million patrons a year. With over 55 million items and offering 100,000 public programs a year, the NYPL is exceeded in size only by the Library of Congress. But Wiseman’s film is not about statistics. His lens is focused on people: both those tasked with administering the library system and the multitudes who make use of it every single day.

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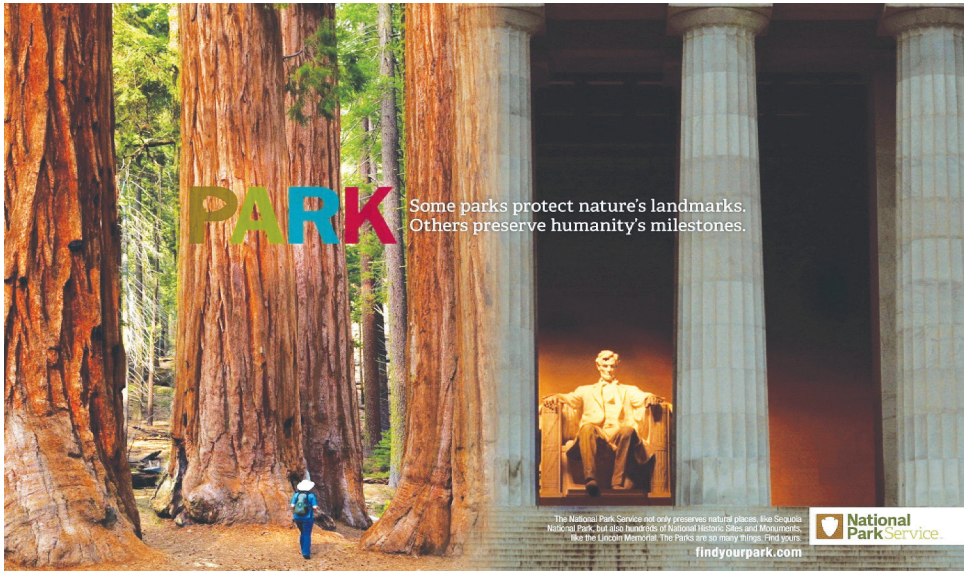
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In one scene after another, the film illustrates the extraordinary efforts NYPL leadership and employees make to, in effect, leave no one behind, regardless of their special needs and circumstances. The film introduces us to a municipal bureaucracy that is surprising nimble, empathetic, and self-aware. “They are understandably humbled,” Jordan Hoffman of the *Guardian* writes in his review of the film, “by the responsibility of allocating funds to best serve an enormous and diverse group of people.” The library facilities visited by the filmmaker are venues for all manner of programs that make city life more meaningful, and, for many, just a little bit more manageable. These libraries fill familiar roles as student study centers and places for reading groups, lectures, and concerts. But the film shows us how libraries function as neighborhood hubs for child care, senior care, immigrant services, job fairs, and, in our wired age, vital access to the internet. Wiseman films the inauguration of a program that enables people who cannot afford internet service at home to check out a mobile hot spot with their library card. At the mid-town Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library staff instructors patiently train sightless library users to read Braille. It takes a few moments for the film viewer to realize that the instructors are themselves vision impaired.



NYPL's community service is one indicator of a functional democratic society. As Richard Brody points out, writing in the *New Yorker*, the library preserves and disseminates knowledge “that enables ordinary people to make reasonable decisions about their lives and about the country at large.” Brody perceives the essential connection between “the nuts and bolts of universal education” and our capacity for representative self-government.

So, what does this have to do with national parks? In a word, *everything*. Writing for rogerebert.com, Matt Zoller Seitz describes the NYPL system, “and by extension all such systems”—here I would certainly include the national park system—“as a benevolent force in public life, pushing back against anti-intellectual attitudes, breaking down social barriers, and fostering a sense of community in a time of technologically induced loneliness and narcissism.” Seitz goes on to say, “More than any other civic institution, it is a place for the betterment of everyone in every conceivable way.”

I am particularly struck by the words *for the betterment of everyone in every conceivable way*, which also resonate so well with the mission of national parks. *For the betterment of everyone* is by no means a new goal of good government. In his 1865 report on Yosemite, Frederick Law Olmsted wrote that it was a basic duty of government to provide “protection for all its citizens in the pursuit of happiness against . . . obstacles, otherwise insurmountable.” For many citizens seeking affordable opportunities for lifelong learning, libraries and parks offer a lot more than books and scenery.

With this in mind, I would like to use this 20th Letter from Woodstock to share some thoughts, inspired in part by the Wiseman film, that have a direct bearing on the function and meaning of our contemporary American national park system. I will also share some ideas on the inadequacy of language that has been used in the past, and is still being used, to explain the national park system's high purposes.

Freeman Tilden once described the National Park Service (NPS) as an “institution ... engaged in a field essentially of morality.” Former NPS Director Newton Drury wrote that national parks give us “an opportunity to grow mentally and spiritually.” The pronouncement that “national parks are the best idea we ever had,” widely attributed to Wallace Stegner, was abbreviated into the title of Ken Burns’ epic television series “America’s Best Idea.” Historian Robin Winks metaphorically pronounced the national park system to be “the world’s greatest outdoor university—one with over 300 branch campuses, each with a unique and compelling curriculum.”

However, all of these statements, though well-intentioned and worthy efforts to place the mission of the National Park Service in a larger context, go back nearly 30 years or more. They relate to a national park system that has since changed physically and thematically in profound ways. The system, in fact, has been steadily evolving from its earliest days and over the last several decades it has become significantly more representative of the nation as whole. As it expanded, the system also diversified and broadened its geographies, narratives, and constituencies. The last spurt of growth, during the Obama administration, brought more than a dozen new areas into the system. César E. Chávez, Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad, Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers, Honouliuli, Pullman, Birmingham Civil Rights, Belmont–Paul Women’s Equality, Reconstruction Era, Stonewall, and Freedom Rider national monuments all add a measure of badly needed clarity to the nation’s ongoing dialogue on race, civil rights, social and environmental justice—the struggle to create “a more perfect union.” Though most of these parks are relatively small and still financially undernourished, I believe that, with time, they will find their footing and have a meaningful impact on how the park system is perceived and utilized.

The idea of *parks as classrooms* and the national park system as *the world’s greatest outdoor university* are still very useful, but we also need language that recognizes the power of educational experiences rooted in places that more inclusively tap into public memories and historical truths that are sometimes painful to acknowledge. These experiences are needed, now more than ever, to separate facts from fictions and provide a national moral compass. The national park system is both Independence Hall and Manzanar Internment Camp: one representing ideals of freedom and justice for all, and the other the hard lessons learned when both are denied to any group of Americans.

In an era of xenophobia, border walls, and slashed immigration quotas, I was recently reminded that national parks, including Fort McHenry and Brown v. Board of Education, have been used in the past as venues for citizenship swearing-in ceremonies, and that NPS once produced a *National Parks Owner’s Manual for New Citizens of the United States*. The manual included a certificate signed by the director of the National Park Service congratulating every newly minted citizen, stating, “As of this day, you are an owner and caretaker of the national parks of the United States of America.”

The Institute at the Golden Gate, referencing their “healthy parks, healthy people” initiatives, have re-imagined national parks as “catalysts for social good.” Programs encouraging physical activity and linking medical professionals with national parks, have potential to mitigate chronic threats to public health. Though often overlooked, there are also a wide

variety of NPS programs, operating outside of the national parks themselves, that provide conservation and historic preservation grants and technical assistance to communities across the country, making a good case for finding a better way to underscore the *service* component in the agency's name.

All of these NPS activities dealing with inclusion and social equity, citizenship and civic cohesion, and public health and community well-being suggest a need to search for new language that better explains this expanded portfolio of public benefits. In its report entitled *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (2000), the National Park System Advisory Board described our nation's history as "our civic glue." However, this civic glue would eventually dissolve were it not for such keystone American institutions as national parks and public libraries. They provide essential scaffolding for the stewardship of historical memory and for the preservation of so many other national treasures. Most importantly, they play a critical role in the survival of a democratic society, helping to build scientific and historical literacy and an informed citizenry.

Jessica Kiang concluded her "Ex Libris" review with this final observation: "We cannot, as a species, be so very terrible after all if we can conceive of and execute any idea as unapologetically intellectual, purposefully decent, and improbably democratic...."

Perhaps, if such an eloquent declaration can be amended to apply to national parks as well as to libraries, we will be a step closer to describing a 21st-century national park system committed to *the betterment of everyone*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ray Dammant". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "R" and a long, sweeping underline.