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**New Novel from the Star of Ken Burns' *The National Parks*  
Celebrates Role of "Buffalo Soldiers" in Yosemite**

On September 14, Sierra Club Books will publish *Gloryland*, a novel by Shelton Johnson, the African-American park ranger who is gaining nationwide visibility for his featured role in the forthcoming Ken Burns film for public television *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*.

*Gloryland* is the fictional memoir of a buffalo soldier – a black U.S. cavalryman and the son of slaves, who finds true freedom when he is posted to patrol the newly created Yosemite National Park in 1903.

This month's visit by President Obama and his family to Grand Canyon and Yellowstone highlights the need for greater diversity in the national parks, an ongoing initiative of the Sierra Club. Less than one percent of visitors to Yosemite are African-American, but Johnson, one of the few black rangers employed by the National Park Service, has long been an ambassador for the parks to communities of color.

Johnson acknowledges that many black Americans feel disconnected from nature, but he believes this is a legacy of the pain their ancestors endured in rural America during slavery. And he is on a mission to heal that breach. "Our parks are for all of us," he says. "We're all going home when we come here."

Born and raised in Detroit, Johnson has worked in Yosemite for the past 15 of his 22 years in the Park Service, but he is not the typical park ranger. He graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in English literature, won a Major Hopwood Award in poetry, taught school in Liberia with the Peace Corps, and has performed at the International Storytelling Center in Tennessee. He first visited Yosemite as a youth, and is determined to inspire young inner-city African-Americans to experience what he says transformed his life. "The parks, they tell the story of us as Americans, they tell the story of us as human beings on this planet."

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An interpretive specialist at Yosemite, Johnson made a life-changing discovery in 2001. Deep in the park's archives he found a faded 1899 photograph of U.S. Army cavalry troopers in the Yosemite backcountry. The soldiers were African-American. He soon learned that these and other buffalo soldiers – troops from San Francisco's Presidio – had patrolled Yosemite and Sequoia national parks at the turn of the 20th century.

Taking on the persona of one such soldier, Johnson developed a living-history presentation to dramatize the forgotten story of these men, who were essentially America's first national park rangers. He has performed it for countless Yosemite visitors and at venues around the country, and received many honors and awards for this work.

On his own time, the literary Shelton Johnson distilled this historical snapshot into the draft of a novel, which also draws heavily on his own family history: like his protagonist, Elijah Yancy, Johnson's parents have Native American (Cherokee and Seminole) as well as African ancestry. In 2006, he sent the manuscript to Sierra Club Books, believing that "they would understand what I was trying to do—the idea that Elijah, who is an exile from his birthplace in South Carolina, could find a spiritual home in the mountain wilderness." Three years later, the finished work is being published to coincide with the September release of the Ken Burns film, of which Johnson is the acknowledged "star."

Once *Gloryland* is published, Johnson hopes to become better known as an author than as a ranger. But the central theme of his novel, he points out, is the same message he tries to convey about parks and wilderness today: that they can be a spiritual home. "The buffalo soldier history is a way of reconnecting African-Americans to the land that shaped our consciousness," he says. "You don't have to go back to Africa to reconnect with nature, to understand its value and to know that it is an essential part of our shared history. It is right here."

**GLORYLAND**

*A Novel*

By Shelton Johnson

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