

On Teaching:

**Introducing American Studies:
The Moral Ecology of Everyday Life**

James J. Farrell

Dear Miss Manners,

What is the proper way to introduce American Studies to students? Which should I introduce first, the studies or the students? Should I introduce the studies one at a time, or all at once? Should I expect the students to be disciplined or undisciplined? What titles should I use? Please respond quickly.

*Sincerely,
Confused*

Introducing American Studies is a difficult question of academic etiquette, a challenge even for the likes of Miss Manners. The field (if it is a field) is amorphous, extensive, eccentric, interdisciplinary and idiosyncratic.

My own introduction to American Studies was not particularly felicitous. Pursuing graduate studies in American History at the University of Illinois, I discovered, to my provincial horror, that the department required doctoral candidates to do one “un-American” field. I also discovered, to my provincial delight, a line in the catalogue that said that students could receive a Ph.D. in American Culture for work in American history, literature, art and music. I had



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no background in literature or art or music, but it never occurred to me that mere ignorance could be problematic. Since the program was administered by the History Department, I proceeded to ask the department chair how American Culture worked. He said that he didn't know, but that I should ask Clark Spence, who had founded the program. I made an appointment with Dr. Spence, and asked him about the American Culture Ph.D. "Oh, do we still have that?" he replied. And I knew that I had found my academic home. For the rest of my lengthy graduate career, I would go in to see my advisor with a list of things I wanted to do. He would ask, "How does this fit with the American Culture Ph.D.?" "Just fine, Fred. Just fine," I would tell him.

I came to St. Olaf College in 1977 as a one-year half-time replacement in American History. Two years later, I was asked to introduce American Studies to our students. A year later, I was the coordinator of American Studies, and I had never taken an American Studies course.

At first, I introduced American Studies to my students via myth and symbol and image. Within a few years, however, a departmental review suggested that we needed to pay more attention to the social sciences, and to the new “paradigm dramas” in American Studies. I revamped the course to provide perspectives on American contemporary culture by way of teaching the theory and method of seven different disciplines in a semester. And it was not good. So I revised again.¹

This third time, I decided to focus more on America than on the studies by focusing on the students as Americans, more on applications of American Studies than on theory and method, more on a pedagogy of “connected learning” than on conventional teaching, more on conversations than on lectures.² My goal has been to complexify students’ lives and their perspectives on the world, by showing them the social construction of reality and the cultural constructions of themselves. My assumption is that students coming into my class already practice all of the disciplines practiced at the college, and that I can help them practice some of those disciplines with more care and acuity.

I also assume that everyday life is an interdisciplinary problem. Driving a car, for example, is an event that requires a biological being to sit in a technological artifact and produce a chemical reaction that occurs in architectural and social spaces that are constructed and regulated by political entities. Cars have conditioned cultural geography, land use, air pollution, domestic architecture, personal psychology, gender roles, courtship patterns, work processes and economic life—among other things—in this country.³

The interdisciplinary method of this inquiry into cars and other aspects of everyday life makes it a work of American Studies, which holds, in the words of Gene Wise, that

In knowledge as in the economy, our root problem now is not *production*, but *ecology*—which means more conscious concern for making fresh connections among existing things; more looking outward to the wider consequences of our information; more serious attention to questioning why we’re doing what we’re doing, and through what forms; more effort given to structuring all this productive activity into humanly manageable forms.⁴

In his essay, “Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies,” Wise offers a method for accomplishing these goals. He asks us, as scholars, to look for “dense facts” in the culture—“facts which both reveal deeper meanings inside themselves, and point outward to other facts, other ideas, other meanings.” He conceptualizes these “dense facts” as the centers of concentric circles that mediate the individual’s experience of culture, and advises us to take a “cultural journey” through these fields by “(a) *focusing* in on an experience in the culture; (b) *identifying* the various *fields* [or cultural institutions] surrounding that experience; (c) learning the distinctive *forms* or *expressive media* of each field;

(d) *connecting* the fields to one another; and (e) trying not to be too assured that when one has it all done, one in fact has it *all* done.”⁵ This is my plan for introducing American Studies; cars and coffee and colleges are among the dense facts of American culture.

These dense facts illuminate the moral ecology of everyday life, a phrase rich in meanings, and essential to understanding this class. According to *Habits of the Heart*, moral ecology is “the web of moral understandings and commitments that tie people together in community.”⁶ Although the term is often presented as “social ecology,” I prefer the focus on *moral* questions, because I want students to be able to consider both the colloquial and the conscientious meanings of “the good life” in America. [Sometimes we use Wendell Berry’s formulation, and ask *What Are People For?*] I like the web metaphor, both because it reminds me of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, and because it suggests the complexity and complicity (from the Latin “complectere,” “to weave together”) woven into the cultural patterns of our lives. When we see the complexity of American culture, we also see our complicity in creating and recreating its patterned behavior. This class is *ecological* in its examination of the relationships between organisms and their environment, and because it goes to the root of ecology, the Greek word “oikos,” meaning household, in its exploration of the interactions of single households with the environment. I’m interested in the *everyday*, the ordinary, the familiar, because familiarity breeds forgetfulness; we do not understand the habits of our hearts, in part because they are so habitual. Finally, this is a study of *life*, in its several meanings: of the interval between birth and death; of human activities, relationships and interests collectively; and of life in its varieties in the biosphere, or sphere of life.⁷

I’d like to begin by outlining the assignments for the course, because I think that, all too often, tests become the tail that wags the dog of American education. In my class, there are no conventional tests. On the first day of class, I tell students that, for the final exam, they need to write a chapter for an edited book with the title *Habits of Our Hearts: A Day in the Life* [See Appendix A]. In that chapter, they need to do a “dense fact” analysis of some aspect of their everyday life—waking up to an alarm clock, brushing their teeth, taking a shower, walking across campus, a particular class session, a meal, a coffee break, a workout, a party, etc. These papers must be more than 20 pages long, and they serve both as the final examination and as a part of a student’s self-examination in the course. Each year, I write an introduction to the essays, and we put them in the library as an introduction to American culture on a particular college campus.⁸

By the time of this final essay (which can be—but seldom is—in process the whole semester), the students have some experience of this “dense fact” analysis, having already written a cultural geography of St. Olaf and prepared an artifact for the American Studies museum. The cultural geography assignment [See Appendix B] is adapted from Pierce Lewis’ “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” and it shows students how their lives are culturally constructed by the spaces they inhabit, as they inquire about the architecture and landscape architec-

ture of St. Olaf College. What are dorms? How are the spaces arranged? What other buildings have similar space arrangements? Why? Why are the dorms where they are? Why are they distanced from the classrooms? How are the classrooms socially constructed? Why are the tables and chairs where they are? Why do I sit here and the students sit there? Why do trees and grass grow in the middle of campus? How does grass work? What is the cultural significance of a lawn? Why do the roads and sidewalks go where they go? What do they tell us about St. Olaf culture? There are no definitive answers to these questions, but students see that they can interpret the world around them, and that they can respond to—and sometimes shape—its structures once they understand what they are.⁹

At the American Studies museum, students collect and interpret artifacts from the college campus—ID cards, shoes, jeans, magazines, condoms, aspirin, notebooks, dolls, balls, posters, etc. [See Appendix C] For me, they write a 10-15 page “dense fact” analysis of their artifact; for the museum, they condense their essay onto one single-spaced page. When we open the museum for public viewing, draping red and blue burlap over tables in the Student Center, we also include analyses of advertisements that hang on the wall, and we play cassette tapes of American music that a student several years ago compiled as a soundtrack for the museum. One of the artifacts each year is my suit, which I wear along with the official American Studies tie of St. Olaf College. The suit comes with an analysis that suggests the sorts of things students might do in their interpretation of artifacts [Appendix D].¹⁰

One student, for example, contemplated his room key as a “telling sign of Usonian [a word we often use in class to distance the Americans from ourselves] and Ole [St. Olaf] culture.” After describing the key, and noting that it is not a status symbol or a form of conspicuous consumption, he notes that the key

is crucial because it helps to protect the American way of individualism; it secures the individual gains people make under the capitalistic system. The inviolacy of private property is at the root of the nation (Stewart 64). It also shows our thoughts on human nature: if we do not believe that human nature is altogether evil, we believe there will always be a few rotten apples in the barrel who will try to improve their material (that is, American) standing at our expense.

But the key is for more than security, he notes:

The key and the lock also provide us with a strict definition of ‘inside,’ which is ours, and ‘outside,’ which belongs to everybody (Solomon 25). St. Olaf students have a great deal of freedom within their rooms—residence hall rooms give the students the deeply desired feeling of autonomy and self-

reliance (Bellah 150-51). Related to the idea of security is privacy. In America, where the individual self is prized, the ability to be alone at some times is something to be desired and pursued. If the door is locked, only a roommate has the power to enter. The key not only allows Americans access to their personal possessions and privacy, but to the atmosphere and personality they have helped create in the room that is exclusively theirs.

After a discussion of the manufacture of keys, and of their transport on key rings, which are a symbol of status, the essay concludes:

We can see the pervasiveness of the key in Usonian culture (and in Ole culture) by the use of the word 'key' in our language. A 'key' event has far-reaching and critically important implications, an answer 'key' gives us all our solutions, and famous personages are presented with 'keys to the city.' The values of security, privacy, authority, technology, and most of all, individuality, in our culture are shown by the St. Olaf room key. Though we only use one specific key that is never really 'ours,' for nine months, we never leave home without it.

The other major assignment for the course is a journal. In introducing the journal assignment, I tell students that education is a process in which students learn to make their own meanings, to answer the question "what does it mean to me?" A journal provides a regular opportunity to reflect on that question, to see how course readings and discussions relate to our individual life experiences, to our own aims and assumptions, to other things that are going on in our lives. A journal should allow us to integrate life and learning, to connect the texts and contexts of our lives. It should also reflect and affect the quality of our class discussions. In a class, the professor necessarily *teaches* the same thing to all students, but each student *learns* differently. The journal is the place where those different and diverse learnings can first take shape.

Students try to write in their journals daily (the word "journal" comes from the French word "jour," or day). The idea is to get in the habit of perception and of analyzing perception. Although I suggest some topics that students may want to write about, they can write about anything that interests them—class reading, other reading, events in the news, events of their own day. For purposes of this class, students are a "dense fact" of American culture, and the more they understand why they do what they do, the more they understand American culture, and vice versa.

Since students are examining their own feelings and ideas, I ask them to write in their own voice. I suggest that they start entries with reactions to readings or

events like “I really don’t understand _____ because . . .” or “This makes me think about _____ because . . .” or “I think the relationship between _____ and _____ is interesting because . . .” or “These ideas remind me of the ideas in [another reading] because . . .” or “This event or reading reminds me of something in my own life, the time when . . .” I try to make them comfortable with the courage of their own confusions (a word that, serendipitously, comes from the Latin “confundere,” “to pour together”). The journal, therefore, is not a research paper; students “probe” rather than “prove” their thoughts. It is a place to play with ideas, a place for what Daniel Noel calls “serendipping.”¹¹

The journals keep the course from being merely “academic,” because they allow students to take academic ideas personally. For example, after reading some of Laurel Richardson’s *Dynamics of Sex and Gender*, one student wrote that

I was basically floored by some of the ways in which women are acted upon so as to make them considerably less powerful in American society. I was particularly interested in the idea of personal space. As a woman I find that I need a lot of personal space. I feel uncomfortable when someone is standing very close to me [and I wonder if they are uncomfortable too]. Now I ask myself why is it my responsibility to make sure other people have enough space. . . . Perhaps that is just one more thing society has socialized women into acting a certain way, making women feel as if they need to be in tune with everyone’s feelings, being a mother to all. I think that’s where the idea of taking advantage of women’s personal space first develops, between the mother and child. It is usually the mother who allows the child to come into her space and partake of everyday activities, unlike the father who doesn’t feel bad when he tells the child to play somewhere else because he is busy working in his office. I remember when I was little my dad had his chair and his desk and no one was allowed to enter either area. My mom’s place, I guess you could say, was the kitchen, a place where there was constant action. I didn’t feel bad about bugging my mom anytime or anyplace, whereas with my dad I understood that I wasn’t to bother him when he retreated to one of his spots. Now today when I have to ask a favor I go to my mom first because I know every realm of hers is open for my benefit. The fact that my dad has had his ‘own’ [space] in our house has given him a great amount of authority even today.

When I stop to think about it rather than accepting that this is the way things are in every American household, the notion is absurd. What is it that makes the father so much better (for lack of a better word) that he can claim certain areas for himself

and even have the nerve to make his wife get out of his chair simply by walking and standing next to it?

This is just one small everyday occurrence which keeps women from gaining mutual respect from their male counterparts and society as a whole. Think about how many other things there are: how the man always drives if the family goes anywhere, the woman is the one who carries a purse large enough to fit all the family's necessities into it, and thus assumes all of the responsibility for caring for the family during an outing. What's wrong with a man carrying a bag?

I read the journals and write back every once in a while. In evaluating the journal, I look for a focus on culture, and for connections, comprehensiveness, complexity and care.

The class is structured to help students complete these assignments. As the title of our anthology suggests, the central reading for the course is *Habits of the Heart*, which we use to probe the habits of our own hearts. Laurel Richardson counterbalances the predominantly male focus of Bellah's book with her *Dynamics of Sex and Gender*. Edward Stewart's brief *American Cultural Patterns* gives us a cross-cultural perspective on the habits of American hearts, and enough conceptual framing to draw a preliminary cognitive map of the American mind. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* provides a literary example of gender politics, as well as a way of exploring issues of race and class in the class. And Jack Solomon's *Signs of Our Time* asks students to read the cultural signs surrounding them (including advertising, television, toys, domestic architecture, meals, clothes and postmodernism). Along with a packet of other readings, these books allow us to practice the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, semiotics, political science, history and literature.¹²

The class is a part of what Robert Holsworth calls "political personalism," because it shows the ways in which students—by their ideas and assumptions, by their everyday activities and inactivity—produce and reproduce the culture that they have inherited from their parents and their past. In *Let Your Life Speak: A Study of Politics, Religion, and Antinuclear Weapons Activism*, Holsworth describes the personalist political vision of the antinuclear activists of the 1980s [Appendix E]. While this class does not espouse the political activism of Holsworth's personalists, it does adapt aspects of their political analysis, as students begin to see the political implications of their everyday lives.¹³

The response to this class has been encouraging. The quality of work that students do when they are engaged in a search—instead of re-search—is remarkable. Discussions are lively and immediate. Journals are personal and often passionate. Essays are really essays—attempts to figure something out. Papers are not written in "academic prose" (which my students always describe to me in mechanical metaphors), but in a simple and direct fashion that suggests students finding their own voice.¹⁴

Even better, the collateral learning from the course is substantial. Students bring me more essays and articles than I get in any other class. They tell me about conversations with friends about issues that arise in class discussions. And, best of all, they think about the meanings of their own lives. One of my students told me that I had screwed up his life, because he couldn't take things for granted any more. Another student wrote that "when [American Studies] class ends, the issues are still very much alive in the world and your mind." She acknowledged that she "kind of" resented the class:

I don't want to learn that I, being white and upper-class, am oppressing others. I don't want to learn that because I am a woman I am more vulnerable and will face more obstacles than men in this world. I leave class FRUSTRATED. I want to snap my fingers and change this into a just world. . . . but the more I learn, the more I realize how hard, nearly impossible a task that is.

Frustrations and all, however, she immediately demonstrated that she had learned to think critically about the moral ecology of everyday life:

The other day, after American Studies, I was thinking so hard that I walked into the Men's Room (don't worry, no one was in there). And when I pull out my Bright Red lipstick—I think, "Why am I wearing this lipstick? What message am I sending when I wear Red lipstick? Do I really like Red lipstick, do I need it? Or am I wearing it because girls wear lipstick? It's pretty. Red is daring, you think (like to think), you're daring, Carolyn. Wear Red." Gosh—that bugs me. It used to take me 39 seconds to put on lipstick, now it takes 15 minutes while I rationalize. But, you know, I *do* like Red lipstick.

When asked how the class met initial expectations, yet another student reported that "I had not expected to learn so much about our culture. I had never thought about society viewed in the way I do now. My eyes have been opened to the good, bad & ugly in our culture. It was probably the most practical course I have ever taken. I think it taught me to think more fairly and carefully about the repercussions of my thoughts, deeds, actions & opinions."

This seems to me a pretty good definition of the purposes of liberal arts education, and a fairly good aim for American Studies. Like Virginia Woolf, in her classic *Three Guineas*, I hope that my students will "never cease from thinking—what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us?"¹⁵

Notes

1. For an account of the “paradigm dramas” of American Studies, see Gene Wise, “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional Study of the Movement,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Bibliography Issue 1979), 293-337; and Wise, “From ‘American Studies’ to ‘American Culture Studies’: A Dialogue Across Generations,” *Prospects* 8 (1983), 1-10.
2. On connected learning, see Mary Belenky et. al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (New York, 1986). On student-centered learning, see Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York, 1969).
3. On cars, see, for example, James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, 1988) and “The Automobile and American Culture,” a special issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Fall 1980/Winter 1981).
4. Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations* (Homewood, Illinois, 1973), xv.
5. Gene Wise, “Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies,” *Prospects* (1979), 517-47.
6. Robert Bellah et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, 1985), 335.
7. Wendell Berry probes the moral ecology of everyday life in his *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco, 1977); *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco, 1981); *Home Economics* (San Francisco, 1987); *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, 1990). See also David W. Orr, “The Liberal Arts, the Campus, and the Biosphere,” *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (May 1990), 205-16.
8. See Michael Moffatt, *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1989) for a lively discussion of a another college culture.
9. Pierce F. Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” in D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York, 1979).
10. The artifact assignment is adapted from Charles F. Montgomery’s “The Connoisseurship of Artifacts” and other articles in Thomas Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America*, (Nashville, 1982).
11. Daniel Noel, *Approaching Earth: A Search for the Mythic Significance of the Space Age* (Amity, New York, 1986), vii.
12. Laurel Richardson, *The Dynamics of Sex and Gender* (New York 1988); Edward C. Stewart, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Yarmouth, Maine, 1972); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, 1982); Jack Solomon, *The Signs of Our Time: Semiotics, the Hidden Messages of Environments, Objects, and Cultural Images* (Los Angeles, 1988). Another excellent book of this sort is Robert Holsworth and J. Harry Wray, *American Politics and Everyday Life* (New York, 1987).
13. Robert D. Holsworth, *Let Your Life Speak: A Study of Politics, Religion, and Antinuclear Activism* (Madison, 1989), 7-9.
14. On essays, and especially on exploratory essays, see William Zeiger, “The Exploratory Essay: Enfranchising the Spirit of Inquiry in College Composition,” *College English* 47 (September 1985), 454-66.

[Appendix A] A Day in the Life: Habits of My Heart

This essay, which should be a substantial analysis, is the final examination for the course. It is a self-examination and an examination of American culture, an exploratory essay in which you use yourself as a way of understanding American culture. In the essay, you describe and analyze one aspect of a day in your own life, using course readings and other resources to put the activity in a cultural framework. Detailed description is important, but analysis is more important. (For each action, the most important question is probably “Why? Why do people in this culture do these things? How does it fit with other American cultural patterns? Why do we act like Americans?”)

Because the essay is a final examination, it's where you get to show me what you learned in this course by applying it in a particular case study. Therefore, the essay should demonstrate your ability to use the interdisciplinary perspectives of American Studies (anthropology, sociology, history, political science, economics, literature, and art) and the concepts and questions which come from course readings. It should also utilize the heuristic devices offered by Gene Wise, Jack Solomon, and Postman and Weingartner, and the many feminist critics we have read.

Other questions that might be confronted are the following: What does it mean (individually and culturally) to be a gendered person? a person of a particular race? a person with a particular sexual preference? a rich person (at least in terms of the distribution of world resources)? Which American artifacts are associated with this particular activity? What do those artifacts mean?

Because the essay concerns the habits of our hearts, it necessarily entails an examination of values. What do we value and why? How are those values expressed in our everyday lives, and in our commitments to communities? In what ways do we live the "good" life?

Two clean copies of each paper (one for grading, one for the bound anthology) should be submitted at or before the time of the final exam. Please proofread carefully, and make sure that your citations follow a consistent form.

[Appendix B] Cultural Geography

"Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form. We rarely think of a landscape in that way, and so the cultural record we have 'written' in the landscape is liable to be more truthful because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves."

Pierce F. Lewis

"Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies."

Henri Lefebvre

* * * * *

In this essay, we will explore the cultural geography of St. Olaf college, in order to understand both the culture of the college, and the culture of the United States. According to Jack Solomon, the "built environment" is not a space *in* which people act, but also a space *to* which they react. Buildings and sidewalks

and roads and fences and plants all create “bounded territory, a human habitat that comes complete with its own written and unwritten codes of permitted and unpermitted behavior.” We will try to discover those codes at the college.

Pierce Lewis provides “Axioms for Reading the Landscape” that can help to structure this inquiry:

I. Landscape as a clue to culture

What clues does St. Olaf’s landscape give us about American culture? about St. Olaf culture? What are the main features of this landscape? Why? What’s *not* here? Why? How do the exterior and interior spaces of the college give us a clue to culture? How does the landscape shape the behavior of women and men differently at St. Olaf?

a) The Corollary of Cultural Change

How has the St. Olaf landscape changed over time? Why? How is Manitou Hall different from earlier dorms? The administration building from earlier administrative buildings? Mel’s house from earlier residences? The Science Center from Old Main? How have cultural changes like the women’s movement and the sexual revolution changed the landscape of the college?

b) The Regional Corollary

Is it a regional landscape? Why or why not?

c) The Corollary of Convergence

Has there been convergence? Does it look like standardized American landscapes? Which ones? Why? What standard features does it share with American commercial and residential landscapes? Why?

d) The Corollary of Diffusion

Is there evidence of diffusion? Is St. Olaf imitating something with this landscape? Why?

e) The Corollary of Taste

What “tastes” do we see in the St. Olaf landscape? Why these tastes and not others? How do these tastes reflect power relations (including gender relations) in the society?

II. The Axiom of Cultural Unity and Landscape Equality

What other tips of the cultural iceberg might give us clues to culture?

III. The Axiom of Common Things

What are the “common” landscapes that we might overlook here? What about parking lots, sidewalks, lamps, fire hydrants, garbage cans, layout, athletic fields, entrances, water tower, classroom chairs, professors’ offices and desks, men’s and women’s dorm rooms and furniture, rest rooms, caf layout, etc.?

a) The Corollary of Nonacademic Literature

Where might we find more about St. Olaf’s landscape? How is it represented in college publications, yearbooks, brochures, and ads? What about student

photographs, or postcards in the bookstore? How are women and men presented and represented in this literature?

IV. The Historic Axiom

Landscapes are inherited from the past, and embody many past meanings; we need to understand those cultural contexts.

a) The Corollary of Historic Lumpiness

What are the signs of rapid historical change? When did the landscape change most quickly? Why?

b) The Mechanical (or Technological) Corollary

We need to know, not just what things look like, but how they work. What mechanical and technological inventions are necessary to the smooth functioning of the campus? Where are they located? Why?

V. The Geographic (or Ecologic) Axiom

Lewis advises us to pay attention to locational context. To make sense of things, one must observe them in context: what is St. Olaf's ecological context, and what does that tell us about the culture?

VI. The Axiom of Environmental Control

How is the St. Olaf landscape adapted (or not) to the local physical environment? Why?

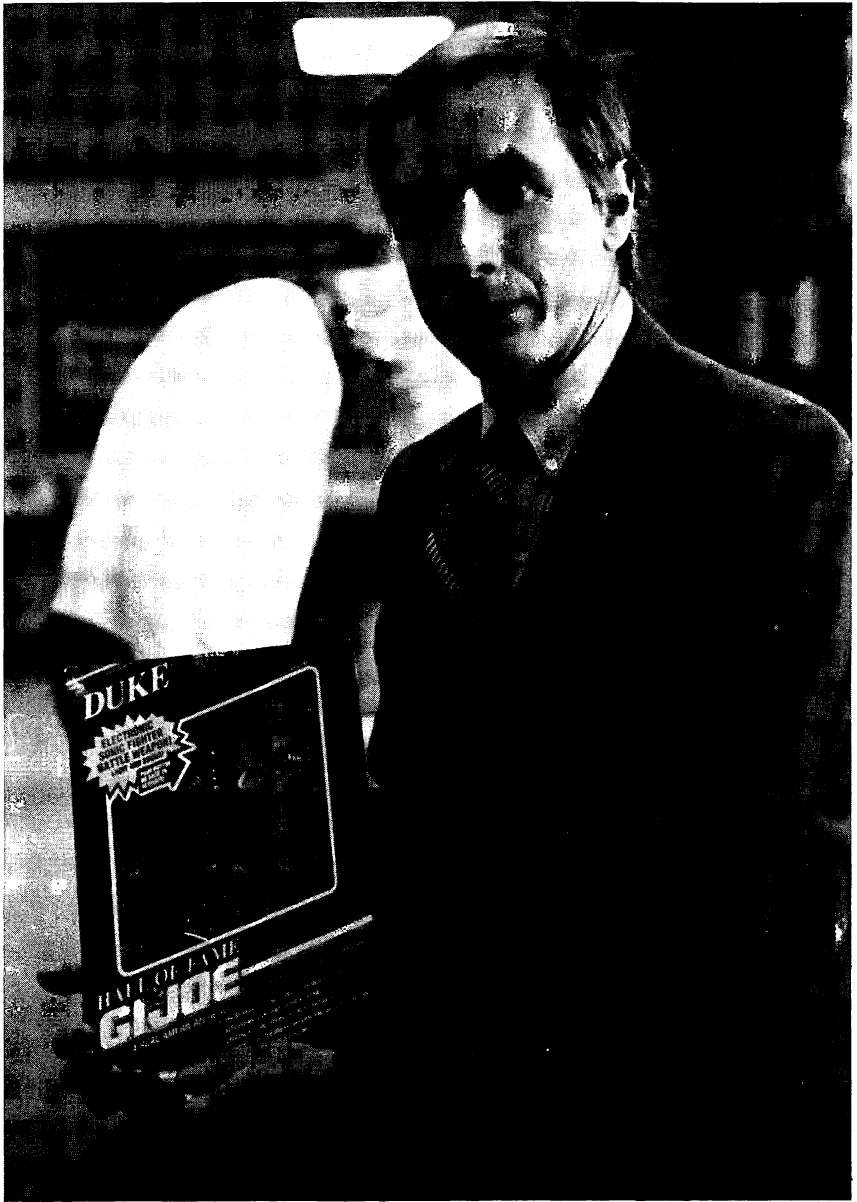
VII. The Axiom of Landscape Obscurity

Landscapes don't give up their messages in any obvious way, so we have to ask pointed questions: "What does it look like? How does it work? Who designed it? Why? When? What does it tell us about the way our society works?"

[Appendix C] Gray Three-Piece Men's Suit

"Clothes make the man," said Mark Twain. "Naked people have little or no influence in society." Nor do men who do not wear a suit. It is the standard uniform for men in business (a word which suggests the "busy-ness" of American culture), and it is a "dense fact" (Wise, 529) that reveals many important American cultural patterns. "A suit of clothes . . .," says semiotician Jack Solomon, "is more than a mere covering; it is a signalling system, a language with which we communicate to one another our feelings, our political beliefs, and, perhaps most importantly of all, our sense of group identity."

The wearer of this suit uses a language that dates back more than three hundred years to the Puritans, who preferred drab dress to colorful attire to establish their serious sense of the Protestant work ethic (Solomon, 176-77). The



Museum curator Jim Farrell, in gray three piece suit (with official American Studies tie), holding artifact reintroduced to the toy market in 1991 by a St. Olaf American Studies graduate.

pants (which differentiate it from a women's suit, and which make it part of the dynamics of sex and gender) and jacket, worn in all weather, declare that feelings will not get in the way of work, and connote a conformity to the demands of business and bureaucracy. The details (pinstripes, vest, tie) may be statements of individuality within a culture of conformity. The vest (once called a waistcoat), still has the vestiges of a watch pocket, indicating the importance of time to the businessman. The pinstripes, which always travel vertically on men's suits, emphasize the wearer's height, which is a measure of authority in the culture. It is, in every sense of the word, a "power suit" because it associates its inhabitant with the power of corporate culture in a land where "the business of America is business."

The man who wears this suit is "dressed for success," a core value in American culture. The suit allows him to use his clothing "as a tool and as a weapon" (Molloy, *Dress for Success*), to "sell himself" in the world of corporate capitalism; it is an advertisement for a self that aims to please, and it reveals the wearer's acceptance of the market metaphor that dominates American culture (the marriage market, the marketplace of ideas, etc.), and of the value of competition. According to Edward Stewart, the American man sees himself as an individual whose actions provide external markings of his worth, markings which determine his self-worth as well. The suit is, therefore, a sign of his striving for social mobility, a mythic sense that individuals can work their way up the social ladder, but an actual structure that allows Americans to justify the immense inequalities in the culture.

Made of wool shorn from sheep in someplace, tailored in China, imported to America for sale under the brand name of Foreman and Clark (brand names are the heraldic devices of Usonian culture), and purchased by its current owner at a suburban garage sale, the suit also signifies the patterns of international commerce and exchange that constitute the contemporary world (North, 9). Although he never thinks of it, this American depends on poorly-paid laborers to help him enjoy the affluence of "the American way of life." The suit is, therefore, a suitable sign of "the culture of consumption."

[Appendix D] Facts and Artifacts

"Artifacts and useful objects are part of all recorded history. They are devised and made as adjuncts to the human being's ability to accomplish work or enjoy pleasure. A close examination of any object is a graphic description of the level of intelligence, manual dexterity, and artistic comprehension of the civilization that produced it. It can reflect, as well, the

climate, the religious beliefs, form of government, the natural materials at hand, the structure of commerce, and the extent of man's scientific and emotional sophistication."

Richard S. Latham

1. APPEARANCE

What does the artifact look like? What is it?

2. FORM

What size is it? How heavy? How does that compare to other objects of the same sort? What shape is the artifact? Why? Does it move? How and why? Do the formal qualities have different meanings for men and women in American culture?

3. ORNAMENT

Is the object ornamented? Why is the ornament there? Does it accomplish its purpose? Is the effect of the artifact enhanced by the ornament? What does the ornament *mean* to women and men in the culture? Is there writing on the object? In what style? Why? What does it say? What does it mean?

4. COLOR

What color is the artifact? Why these colors? Are the colors traditional on objects of this sort? Or are they functional? Or both? What do these colors mean to men and women of this culture?

5. MATERIALS

What materials make up this artifact? What do they tell us about the culture? Where did the materials come from? What trade practices are revealed in tracing the progress from raw material to finished product? What materials could this culture control? What trade relations are necessary to get this material? What sorts of gender relations were a part of those trade relations?

6. MANUFACTURING

How was this artifact made? Who made it? Men or women or both? How were they organized? Why did they make it? How much were they paid? How does the making of the artifact (both physical and cultural) tell us something about the culture? Where did the techniques of manufacture come from, and how are they passed on? How did construction and/or design traits change? What does the artifact tell us about the technological level of the culture?

7. TRADE PRACTICES

To what extent were the techniques a part of general trade practices? Were there laws governing the trade practices of manufacture? What did the artifact cost to

make? How was it paid for? How did the artifact get from producer to consumer? What do these transactions tell us about the culture and its gender relations?

8. STYLE

Does form follow function? How does it fit in the history of art or artifacts? How is the style diffused in the culture?

9. HISTORY OF THE OBJECT AND ITS OWNERSHIP

Where was the object purchased? Why? By whom? Was this purchase typical of the division of labor by gender in this society? How long had the owner had it before it was “uncovered” for this museum?

10. FUNCTION

Why was the object made? What were the limiting conditions imposed by materials, techniques, skills, or economics? What was the intention of the maker? Who made it for whom and why?

What needs of men and/or women does the object satisfy? What does it do? Does it extend physical and/or psychological power over nature? How does it fit with the human constitution, the physical settings in which we find it, and human ideas and institutions?

What were the intended and unintended functions of the object? What are the concrete and abstract functions of the object? How does the object serve to reinforce or challenge gender relations in the society?

What other sources tell us about the object? What kinds of primary and secondary verbal sources can help us interpret its cultural meaning? What about advertising, for example?

Where is the object found and how is it used in different places? How do women and men behave around this artifact? What are the social structures (including gender roles) in which that behavior occurs? What particular types of people bought and/or used the artifact? Was its use restricted by class, gender, race, age, ethnicity, or subculture?

Does the artifact communicate status, roles, ideas, values, feelings, and/or meaning? If so, how? How does the artifact relate to religious beliefs, ideas, standards of living, politics, etc.? How does it fit with the institutionalization of work, the home, leisure, education, politics, or religion?

What does the artifact tell us about lifestyles, popular culture, social mobility, nationalism, urbanization or suburbanization, ecology, democracy, freedom, black power, women’s liberation, American exceptionalism?

How does the culture leave its mark on the artifact, and how does the artifact leave its mark on the culture?

[Appendix E] Political Personalism

In *Let Your Life Speak: A Study of Politics, Religion, and Antinuclear Weapons Activism*, Robert D. Holsworth describes the personalist political vision of the antinuclear activists of the 1980s. First espoused by Emmanuel Mounier during the 1930s as a synthesis of Christianity and socialism, personalism had evolved by the 1980s, according to Holsworth, so that it was characterized by six main features:*

1). **PERSONAL OBLIGATION** - Individuals must assume responsibility for the problems that they see in the world. This duty is not lessened by the magnitude of the task to be confronted or the difficulty of its successful completion. Apathy and inaction with respect to the nuclear arms race cannot be justified by referring to the odds against disarmament because the demands of morality are not grounded in mathematical calculations. The witness furnished by faithful action has a value that is partially independent of its immediate effectiveness.

2). **THE HARMONY OF POLITICAL BELIEF AND PERSONAL LIFE** The commitment to creating a peaceful world on a global level should be reflected in the manner that one's personal life is conducted. Individuals should examine their own character, temperament and lifestyle to see if these are consistent with their professed support for peace and disarmament. They should look at their interaction with friends, their family relationships, their consumption of resources and their occupational goals. They should be open to the possibility of making significant changes in their manner of living. While a sense of personal wholeness can never be perfectly achieved it is a goal toward which individuals should strive.

3). **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCAL ACTION** - Activists must work locally as well as nationally and internationally on behalf of their cause. Significant and enduring change of national policy will necessarily be related to cultural changes that take place as a result of grassroots organizing. Peacemaking is a face to face activity with neighbors and townspeople and not only a relatively anonymous process conducted by

diplomatic exchanges between governments. It is local action that will provide the foundational support for the changes in national policy that will reflect a genuine commitment to disarmament.

4). THE IMPERATIVE OF COMMUNITY - Although working for change can be a risky and lonely task, it should be embedded within a communal context. Such a community serves a therapeutic function as it helps to alleviate the loneliness and disappointment that will inevitably be experienced. It enables individuals to maintain their commitment and it provides the emotional resources that can sustain it. More importantly, communities serve as living examples of the changes that can be made in the larger world. By transforming their own lives, activists show that faithful communities are possible and that there are realistic alternatives for individuals dissatisfied with the quality of contemporary life.

5). THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF POLITICAL AND CULTURAL REFORM - Political issues cannot be examined or adequately addressed in isolation. In American society, some of the obstacles to stopping the arms race include the general direction of the nation's foreign policy, its economic priorities and its excessively materialistic culture. Peace activists should build coalitions with groups who share their general assessment of these issues and they should work to illuminate the connections between the threat of nuclear war, intervention in the Third World and social justice at home. In the 1980s, this entails involvement in efforts to oppose American policy in Central America and an attempt to broaden the movement beyond its traditional white, middle-class base.

6). THE RELEVANCE OF HOUSEHOLD VALUES TO THE POLITICAL WORLD - There are many values that are normally excluded from public life and relegated to the household and private relationships that should be made politically relevant. Politics has become an activity defined by the pursuit of material advantage and the acquisition of power for socially irresponsible purposes. Citizens need to think how hope, trust, friendship, compassion, reconciliation, love and faithfulness can be incorporated in public life. The prevention of nuclear war and the creation of a more humane society are dependent, to a large extent, on the capacity to bring these themes to bear

on the conduct of life. What is called realism in the political world is increasingly becoming a prescription for brutality, injustice and perhaps global annihilation.

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