

Comments on "Using Applied American Studies"

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Well, I love the passion of Patrick's paper. Love and knowledge are closely connected in this over-flight of the Colorado Plateau, visit to Winslow, Arizona, and glance at a current urban development project, and the guided tour of the La Posada Hotel and Gardens. Patrick is an engaged guide, the sort who keeps nudging, pointing, surprising and overflowing with enthusiasm for his place and his work. He reminds us of Scott Momaday's admonition in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* that one get to know a section of earth very well and the much fine work done on place in American studies and cultural geographical circles. Patrick is a lover of a place, a student of it, an advocate for it, and a full-blown, elbows in the dirt participant and shaper of it. He's doing, as he says, applied American studies; not just field work, but working in a field; not just studying the tourist landscape of America, but creating it; not just describing the machine in the garden, but fixing the machine, turning it on and tilling the garden, or pushing the machine outside and getting out his shovel.

My comments will focus on this idea of applied American studies. PhDs can and do practice their craft in places other than colleges and universities. These other places may extend beyond the usual museums and historic sites that attract academically-trained people and include bodies that govern, decide, and exercise power. In addition, these new locations of engagement can respond to the larger challenge of the discipline to be an active player in reconfiguring America, perhaps changing it, complicating the dialogue about it, or, at least not contributing to the kind of uncritical nationalism running rampant in 2003. Michael Berube's recent article in *PMLA* echoes others when he says that the intellectuals in American studies must figure out how they "can best realize their commitment to the ideal of a vital and contentious public sphere . . . and to the ideal of free society" (112). We might ask a further question: how can American studies thinkers change things for the better?

American studies, as Patrick argues, provides a good set of shovels for digging in these various gardens. I am going to focus less on this and more on the tensions and disconnections between the sort of work that Patrick is doing and some of the current notions and cultures of academically-based American studies. I'll take as cases Patrick's experience, my own work with a regional art museum, and one of my colleague's work on a refinery clean-up and reuse project.

There are a lot of ways to look at the gardens of La Posada. We might think about it in the manner of Frieda Knobloch (1996) as an attempt to do an intelligent, locally appropriate, alternative to the ideology of large-scale agriculture. Or we might follow the lead of John Dorst (1999) and look at La Posada's visual construction as tourist attraction and effective generator of capital. Or we might emulate Hal Rothman (1998) and look at how reconfiguring places as tourist attractions affects the life of the locals. We could be cultural geographers such as Thomas and Geraldine Vale (1989) and read La Posada as the abundant vernacular architecture of Winslow, Arizona. We could also follow Kent Ryden (1993) and read La Posada of how place is constructed and experienced.

In his vivid account of his interactions with La Posada, Patrick moves in the direction of Ryden and also Dan Flores with his focus on the larger environmental and cultural context of the garden. In doing this Patrick certainly favors, or we might say, privileges certain ideas about the place. The La Posada project is a sort of historical effort to recover the vision of Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter, who takes on a large role in this paper and Patrick's daily life. Perhaps some might object to privileging an individual over the matrix of forces at work here, but I must say that Colter becomes something that is often necessary in advancing such a restoration, a sort of norm to which people may refer when they disagree.

Getting over a disdain for hero worship is, I think, one of the trials faced by the American studies PhD who wants not only to work in the public arena, but also be a change agent. Academics have gotten pretty good at making arguments about public policy and getting into the fray of many issues, but the record of successful outcomes is mixed or just plain bad. Patrick, on the other hand, is making things happen—good things, I'd say. What can we learn from his lesson?

Work locally. There are little successes waiting to happen everywhere. Maybe one cannot stop a war, but you might get a greenbelt for your town or better medical care or access to food for the locals. Or start an art museum that promotes doing art and creativity and pushes for more art in schools. Or restore a wonderful garden and connect it to community redevelopment.

Be patient. Such work is work and to be done well, takes a lot of time. This is obvious in Patrick's case. He's working the garden, grant writing, running his organization, meeting with others involved in the project, traveling, researching the history of the garden and hotel, probably doing presentations on the project, and developing a network of supporters and funders. My work with the Nicolaysen Art Museum in Casper, Wyoming happens in meeting after meeting, slowly persuading, cultivating donors, and holding on to a vision of a museum that shows the whole range of Western art today, not just cowboys. To make this happen, you have to be there many hours, help choose the art, know the artists, study the scene, and find staff who can make the vision work. Academics are used to consulting assignments, doing talks for groups, but less concerned with

keeping an institution going and identifying and getting the resources it needs. It's the difference between baby-sitting and raising a child.

Many academics are also used to governance processes in colleges and universities. Work on faculty senates and departments as well as national organizations can provide some sense of the rough and tumble of getting things done in other public arenas. But it's hard to prepare yourself from this context for the board member who bases decisions on his belief that the world is close to its end—she might be right!—another who thinks the art museum staff should work for free, another who loves doll houses and wants them in the museum, another who went to the Met museum store and wishes the Casper store was more like it and so on. There is an art to moving institutions along in the face of great diversity of opinion and belief and immense differences in background and values.

Patrick does not tell us what happened behind the scenes at La Posada or how he handles disagreements about, say, what to plant in the garden. My friend Maggi Murdock, now Vice President and Dean of Outreach at the University of Wyoming, jumped into applied political science—her field—by starting a group to make a vast wasteland of a refinery a plus to Casper. The story is very long by now and worthy of its own book, but ultimately resulted in Maggi heading a Joint Powers Board to guide and administer the reinvention of a vast hunk of polluted land in the middle of the city and the \$20 million promised by the oil company to spend on public improvements. The arguments and dealings have been fierce and the results not always reasonable. The first project will be a golf course (in an desert area that already has two golf courses) though the Board did vote money to a group I'm associated with to build a civic auditorium/concert hall. I have been to meetings of this Joint Powers Board, and they can be truly odd with excessive discussion of peculiar pet projects of different board members and some delicate maneuvering between the county, city, and oil company.

The clarity of working through your own wonderful project, teaching your own wonderful class in your own wonderful way gives way to the murky compromises and emotionally demanding life among the pompous, quirky, ill-informed or money-obsessed folks with whom you must work to have the project go forward. Well, maybe work in a university does prepare one for this.

You also need to get and manage money, money, money, money. American studies scholars have done wonderful work analyzing the development of commodity culture and its permutations. A hotel as a place on the railroad and Route 66 is part of the commodified tourist round; in Dorstian terms the hotel/garden is the visually dominant element connecting the transportation infrastructure and the town for the creation of money for the hotel and, perhaps, Winslow. Patrick does not do an analysis of the commodity culture at work at La Posada, nor should he. He is deep in the commodity culture. He's the guy who has got to find the money: he's got \$500,000 and needs another \$500,000

more to complete the garden. Fortunately, he still seems enraptured with the garden itself, though the day may come when he stops seeing plants and starts seeing dollars. I hope not. This has happened to me with art museums. I used to love and respond to the art; now I see mainly costs. It costs us \$30,000 a month to keep our Casper Museum open and right now we can count on about \$5,000 a month, so we have to raise about \$1,000 a day in a city of less than 50,000 people. This will get better when the stock market does, but for now I wake every morning wondering how we will do it. I have gotten comfortable making pitches and taking money. Does the money compromise us? We ask that question all the time, but we also take the money. When I walk through galleries and museums now I don't see art objects, but insurance costs, light bills, staff salaries, shipping fees. This is, I am sure, a kind of insight, but it's also a narrow construction of the world. I am told that this obsession with money will leave sometime after I go off the board on, appropriately, April 15. I wonder.

The largest challenge, though, may be sort of epistemological. American studies teaches the generation of multiple meanings and the treatment of regions, objects, localities, spaces as contested and sometimes virtual sites. The academic need not choose among the contestants or the meanings (though they may have and indicate a preference). Sometimes the very process of choosing, or "privileging" can seem suspect. Nonetheless, on the ground, at La Posada, Patrick has got to choose what will grow in the garden. He has decided to privilege "native" plants (in quotes because we might want to probe and question that word as well) that do well in the region. He has also chosen to privilege the ideas of Colter. Neither choice, though, is absolute. There will be non-native plants that have done well and look good and Colter will not be followed exactly. To do so would be to museumify/mummify the place, not build a living, growing entity.

At our Casper museum, we choose to show some art and not others. In my head, I have a general principle: I want compelling and strong art that tells a rich, diverse story of the Rocky Mountains and does not simply repeat the clichés of the Cowboy Art Association. We make decisions about what expresses the region, what does not. But other values come into play, and decisions are influenced by money. We dropped a nice show of bronze sculpture because of high shipping expenses. And we will drop the mission if something really great comes our way. Whatever we do, we privilege what we show and exclude others; but we make decisions, lots of them. Dave Hickey (1997) has written that the critic and the museum vote for the art they write about or show. They become a sort of decision-making body and actively shape what is thought to be art and worthy of attention. In our case, we are casting votes for our idea of the place and voting against some other visions. Regions are zones where people promote their own definitions and try to suppress others. When I promote abstract art incorporating Native American signs, or an epic painting of polluted Elko, Nevada, or photos of women's scarves on the landscape I am voting for an idea

of the region that I am willing to argue is more compelling, inclusive, interesting, and accurate than the *City Slickers* version. This is serious business here in Wyoming, which has trademarked the rodeo cowboy on a bucking bronco. A bill was introduced in the last legislature to make rodeo the state sport. (The legislature has already voted the Triceritops the state dinosaur and an extinct herring fish, the state fossil.) A Casper legislator, Keith Goodenough, introduced a substitute motion to make dance the state sport. Well, then we would have to have a ballerina on the license plates, responded another. Keith's motion lost.

So for the Ph.D.s who wish to get into the public life: get on the board, get to the meeting, and be ready to choose, privilege, decide, and defend your choices. In the end, though, I share Patrick's optimistic account of the value of research and American studies perspectives for those who work outside academe. Effectiveness depends on many things, but one cannot exaggerate the importance of knowledge in making choices, persuading, and doing the work that needs doing. I imagine that Patrick, who has chosen compellingly, will then be a good subject for a dissertation about the rise of his version of regionalism and how it won the day, got the grants, and drew the tourists, until something else rumbled through.

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