

Letters

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Teaching the Holocaust

Few events of the twentieth century pose more urgent questions than the Holocaust. Yet for many students in high schools and universities, the Holocaust is something that happened long ago and has little relevance to our lives in twenty-first century America. How should educators teach about the Holocaust? What is the proper focus of study, and what lessons should be drawn? This year, the Warren Center is hosting "The Holocaust, Genocide, and the Teaching of Ethical Values," an initiative funded by the Zimmerman Foundation and the Tennessee Holocaust Commission. Scholars from six universities and two high schools meet regularly to discuss these questions and to develop curricula for secondary school education in Tennessee. *Letters* met recently with the program's co-directors, Helmut Walser Smith, associate professor of history at Vanderbilt, and Peter Haas, formerly of Vanderbilt, who has recently been named Abba Hillel Silver Professor of Jewish Studies and director of the Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies at Case Western Reserve University. They were joined by John K. Roth, Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, who is serving as a consultant to the program.

LETTERS: How did this program come about? What would you like for it to accomplish?

HELMUT WALSER SMITH: My understanding is that in large measure, this program was an initiative of the former University Chaplain, Beverly Asbury. He wanted not only to consider the



Helmut Walser Smith, John Roth, and Peter Haas

Holocaust in relation to other genocides, but to develop guidelines for teaching about genocide and the questions that it raises in secondary schools throughout Tennessee. Our charge, as I understand it, is to spend a year discussing these matters, and to construct an actual product at the end—a tool that teachers can use to reflect on these questions with their students.

PETER HAAS: I think we would also like to examine the Holocaust not as something entirely unique, but as a general human problem—a problem that has recurred in different forms throughout the twentieth century, most recently in such places as Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and perhaps East Timor. We need to find ways for the next generation to learn about the causes of these various genocides and about how we might prevent them.

JOHN ROTH: I was invited to participate in the seminar as a consultant. I was surprised to be

asked but not surprised about the seminar itself. The surprise was that Peter, Helmut, and the others wanted my involvement, which was a great honor for me. I was not surprised, however, that at Vanderbilt there would be such a program. Vanderbilt has been at the forefront of issues relating to Holocaust education for a long time, and the Tennessee Holocaust Commission is well known as one of the first of its kind in the United States. The Warren Center's initiative reflects a long standing concern and commitment that are to the credit of Vanderbilt and the state of Tennessee.

Two aspects of this initiative make it distinctive. Other programs have focused on the Holocaust; still others have concentrated on what we might broadly call issues of human rights and respect. But insofar as this particular program calls attention to the comparative study of genocide, I think that makes it different and important—be-

cause my own hunch is that while the twentieth century has seen genocide after genocide, the twenty-first may see more rather than less.

The second point is that so many seminars of this kind do not envision a concrete result. This one does, and that makes it exciting.

LETTERS: What are your own specific interests relating to the Holocaust and to this program?

HAAS: When I came to Vanderbilt nineteen years ago, I was not teaching the Holocaust or thinking much about it. My interest was in ethics—specifically, in how ethics and moral discourse come to be. It was Bev Asbury who provoked me into teaching a course on the Holocaust, and I would credit him with the inspiration behind my involvement here.

As I began to teach the Holocaust, I had to ask myself a number of basic questions. Why was I teaching it, and how did it connect with the students of a younger generation? Did I only want to teach them about Jewish victimhood, or was there a larger lesson? Then I considered why the students were there—what motivated them to take a course

Inside

Former Warren Center Fellow Susan Hegeman Publishes Book on Culture and Modernism 6

The Reproduction of Nature: Cultural Origins of America's National Parks 7

SMITH:
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on the Holocaust, rather than something else. I concluded that the Holocaust's lessons speak to everyone, not just Jews, Christians, or Westerners. I struggled in the courses I taught over the next decade or so as to what those lessons might be. I see this seminar as carrying forward that kind of work—trying to find a way to extract meaning from the Holocaust without relativizing it, finding its lessons and becoming able to express them to a broader audience and a different generation.

ROTH: I became interested in the Holocaust almost by accident. I find that instructive, because most of those who will study the Holocaust are not Jewish and may think that this history has little connection to their experience as Americans. Yet I have found that the Holocaust carries all kinds of resonances, implications, and imperatives.

I was trained as a philosopher. Like Peter, I developed an interest in the Holocaust because of my work in the philosophy of religion on the question of how suffering and injustice in the world fit together with Jewish and Christian teachings about reality and God. While those interests remain, the history of the Holocaust became more compelling as I went along. I began to immerse myself in as much detail, as much particularity as possible. I found that sometimes the larger questions of ethics and religion take on specific textures. The responses that people have tended to give to these questions are often too abstract, not closely related enough to what actually took place to be helpful.

So I think that the stories of how people become interested in the Holocaust, and how the encounter with it changes them, are interesting and important. In my case, the encounter has made me more melancholy. I am much less optimistic than I once was. But I have also learned that out of melancholy, and even to some degree out of the despair that this study produces, can spring a deter-

mination to do what one can to forestall future disasters of this kind.

SMITH: I teach German history at Vanderbilt, but I have never actually worked on the Holocaust in the sense of researching details directly associated with it. I have, however, been working for a number of years on a book about the history of anti-Semitism in Germany. For me, this is a historical problem of the first order. At the turn of the century, there was a society in many ways much like our own—a society of highly educated people, people who cultivated the arts and sciences. My first problem was to understand how this society became configured in such a way that the scapegoating of minorities emerged as an essential part of its apparatus. The second problem was to consider how this otherwise



educated, advanced, and modern society came to lose a kind of discriminating sensitivity to the inhumanity that it perpetrated against this group. How could people who thought of themselves as modern and open-minded, who otherwise did not seem to express hatred

outwardly, participate in subtle and not so subtle ways in the persecution of a group whose members were their neighbors?

LETTERS: What sort of things would you like to see happen as a result of bringing different disciplines to bear on the questions you have been raising?

ROTH: I believe that what we call the Holocaust poses questions that necessitate multiple scholarly approaches. This is probably also true of other genocides. History is in on the ground floor, but the findings of history unavoidably lead to other questions. Historical research alone may not explain how these events come about. The answers may involve elements that have to do with human psychology, perhaps even human biology. And certainly they have to do with what people believed—which leads you eventually to religion. So even in going back to the point that Helmut made with his interest in anti-Semitism at the turn of the century, one must become involved with the history of religions, and also the history of race theory. The subject inevitably breaks apart certain of the disciplinary boundaries that we have created in the academy. Such study is challenging, frustrating, fascinating, and problematic all at the same time.

HAAS: To follow up on that, I would say that Holocaust studies have matured to a certain extent. We know, more or less, what happened historically; we have done the psychological studies, literary studies, and so on. Now we need to bring these researchers together and have them talk to each other, so as to produce some cross-pollination. We want to do this with as

many voices at the table as we can rationally manage.

SMITH: I agree that the study of the Holocaust is almost necessarily interdisciplinary. With many historical subjects, a historian can more or less state the problem, find a method for solving it, and propose a solution with the sense that the interpretation is reasonable. Yet it is a much more difficult proposition when one considers even smaller aspects of the Holocaust, because as one draws closer to answers, the problems suddenly loom larger—almost paradoxically so. In my book on anti-Semitism, for instance, I often feel that I have considered now one angle, now another, now a third. At the end, even though I might argue that I have looked at the problem more thoroughly than anyone else, I do not have the sense that I have understood the larger question in such a way that I can close the book and move on. The subject pulls you in, keeps you hankering after new ways to understand it.

ROTH: This has been my experience too. The more you know, the less closure there seems to be. I am not talking about the mystification of the Holocaust—the position that it cannot be understood. You keep trying to understand it, and although you make headway, what you discover seems to defy closure. And even though we all want closure in some way (or at least think that we do), it is not quite clear that we would be more comfortable with it.

SMITH: Yes. For example, there are reigning interpretations even of large events and problems within the field of history. Historians more or less agree about the origins of World War I or the American Revolution, or the collapse of the Weimar Republic. People do not, however, generally agree upon one reigning interpretation of the Holocaust—or even of the history of anti-Semitism in the modern nation. To be sure, some interpretations are better than others, and some are closer to the truth. But

ROTH:
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no one believes that we can fully solve the interpretive problems posed by the Holocaust.

ROTH: Do you think that this difference is a function of lack of distance from the events? Will there be a reigning interpretation in, say, fifty years' time?

SMITH: No, because at bottom one always comes around to the question of what it is to be human. There is no way around this. What does it mean to have a sense of right and wrong? These questions cannot be solved within a single disciplinary community.

LETTERS: Could you perhaps give some examples of the different interpretations of the Holocaust that scholars now contest?

HAAS: The one that occurs to me immediately might be called the "intentionalist versus functionalist" debate. Was the destruction of European Jews something that was intended from the very beginning? Did the Nazis spend their entire twelve-year reign working through how to do it? Or was the Holocaust as such not particularly intended, but rather something that evolved into a genocide over that period? Was it programmed from the outset, or did the Nazis, as it were, back into it?

ROTH: Everyone would agree that anti-Semitism was a necessary condition for the Holocaust. But in what sense it was, or how it worked—those issues are still, I think, very much open to debate.

HAAS: Before the Nazis came to power, there were countries that were much more anti-Semitic than Germany—countries in which Jews had a much more marginal position. Indeed, German Jewish life was pretty good. So why did this happen there?

ROTH: Perhaps another subject that remains to be explored has to do with what we call "bystanders" in the lexicon of Holocaust studies. What are we to make of those who were not doing the shooting, or forcing people onto trains, but whose presence still involved them somehow in the destruction? This question touches again the point

that Helmut was making, the problem that always swirls in the history of the Holocaust. What are human beings? Why do they do what they do?

HAAS: Here we might consider the diaries of some of the key players, such as Rudolf Höss, who was the commandant of Auschwitz. If you encounter a man directing the very workings of hell, then you expect to find a demonic character. Yet his diary is that of an ordinary person. It talks about his family, about what he should have known and did not know, about his struggle with his own inner turmoil, and about how he did not really like what was happening. He writes as if he were recording another business day. His response to the atrocities he directed seems to be, simply, "What can you do?" Is this really what he was thinking, or is this the man in prison after the war trying to justify himself? Are these people as normal as they sound?

ROTH: Another issue that is frequently debated is the fundamental question of what it is possible to know. For example, there have been voices, some of them coming from Holocaust survivors, who argue that only those who were "there"—in Auschwitz, for example, or as eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, can really understand such places and events. Others counter that if we accept that, then we take this event too much out of the realm of the human and place it into an area of incomprehensibility, which defeats utterly the purpose of studying it. This counter position includes people who think that at least in principle, the Holocaust is completely explainable. Some historians hold that view. And then there are many people in the middle. These debates are fundamentally epistemological. They sound more technical than they really are because the bottom line has to do with what human beings can comprehend.

One of the challenges the Holocaust creates is that you have to

train yourself to hear what is said. If you are listening to a survivor, or opening yourself to what the words on the page say, you have to be careful not to be misled by your own middle-class American assumptions about what people are like, or what they are capable of doing, or what you might expect. This becomes difficult, because the material is so disorienting—it constantly undermines the assumptions that we cling to as we live our everyday lives. You have to learn how to read again; you have to learn how to listen. This problem contributes to the elusiveness of closure.

SMITH: There is a famous passage in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. Someone is killed, and someone else asks one of the guards, "Why did you have to do that?" The guard replies, "*Hier ist kein 'Warum'*"—"There is no 'why' here." In our own lives, we are always asking why particular events happen. It requires an act of the imagination to place oneself in a context where there is no why. And I think that this is deeply, deeply alien to how we live our lives. Even when we think we have good social science data on why certain people commit, endorse, or tacitly support even the most atrocious actions, there is still a lingering sense that until we have fully placed ourselves in that world, we cannot fully understand.

HAAS: It is also disorienting that many of the perpetrators and bystanders and victims were very religious people, and speak of their experiences and actions in religious terms that resonate with us. We perceive a surprising lack of connection between their words



and their deeds, but they did not seem to perceive it. And that raises all sorts of questions for people with strong ties to a religious tradition—for people who hear that tradition quoted by those responsible for Auschwitz.

SMITH: Yes. Sometimes we have to understand that the words we read do not have the meanings or the resonance that we associate with them, that our categories in social science do not have the same kind of applicability that they did in the midst of this event. Again, we need to be interdisciplinary, because we come up so quickly against the limits of our ordinary ways of thinking.

ROTH: We come up against the limits of language, which affect all disciplines. Even the survivors who have tried to communicate through oral histories or memoirs are wrestling with the same problem. How can words begin to express what they have experienced?

SMITH: This problem also affects how we teach, because we are also faced with the difficulties of words. To write, after all, is to address the question of what is behind silence. Elie Wiesel's *Night*, for instance, is not just another book. We cannot simply extract its thesis, or ask a series of basic ques-

tions about it, or make a list of its fundamental points. As a work, it is tremendously difficult to discuss. Sometimes I tell students to go somewhere, to cut themselves a block of five or six hours, and do nothing but read the text. Even if we do not discuss the book in class, I want the students to have that time with it, because the silence after reading may be more important than any discussion generated by it.

LETTERS: Some people have argued that the attempt to explain the Holocaust, to draw lessons from it, will result in justifications for it. Is this a reasonable fear?

HAAS: It is a problem. Once, when I was teaching the Holocaust, I began by saying that the Holocaust did not happen a long time ago in a country populated by strange people, but in a place very much like our own society. The Germans were not from Mars. If we approach the Holocaust simply as a historical problem, then there are many possible paths to pursue, but this approach tends to disconnect it from our experience and to foreclose the moral lessons that one might draw. But on the other hand, if we want to emphasize how human and ordinary it was, how much it connects to our lives, then we relativize it, and take away some of its uniqueness and impact. As a teacher, I feel myself caught between those two poles of trying to make it familiar and yet to preserve it as some kind of awesome event.

ROTH: There is also the fear that we might trivialize the Holocaust, so that all kinds of specious analogies between its events and what happens in our ordinary lives appear. But then if the Holocaust becomes too unique, too special, it moves towards incomprehensibility—and the reasons for studying it become harder to identify.

The question, though, focused on another area of concern. Would it be dangerous to under-

stand or explain the perpetrators? Would doing so suggest some kind of sympathy or empathy for them? This question is debated back and forth. One of the books we will read in this seminar is *Reading the Holocaust*, by the Australian scholar Inga Clendinnen. She makes a strong and persuasive argument that one should distinguish between understanding and condoning, or even understanding and sympathizing. She maintains that we should try to understand the perpetrators as much as we can, because otherwise we will lose some of the greatest insight that a study of genocide ought to give to us. I think that she is right: we must press for as much understanding as we can get, while underscoring that doing so does not even implicitly condone what took place.

SMITH: At some level I have never really understood this problem. Those who maintain that the perpetrators are demons beyond understanding take an extremely comfortable position. It exonerates them from having to think that they or their loved ones could ever be involved in something like this. Here I am a partisan of Christopher Browning, a historian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has written on this subject in a book called *Ordinary Men*. To understand the perpetrators as all too human is not to exonerate them. In fact, I think that doing so makes the Holocaust still more unsettling.

In the 1950s and the early 1960s, relatively little was known about the Holocaust in scholarly work. The explosion of scholarship is really a product of the 1970s and the 1980s. In the earlier decades, people were much more comfortable arguing what might be called the “radical evil” thesis. Since the explosion of research on the Holocaust has rendered these questions infinitely more complex, the drive to understand has become much more evident, and the lessons offered

have also become more complex. In university classrooms, the situation has changed dramatically.

LETTERS: Many students today absorb much of what they know about the Holocaust from popular culture—for example, through films such as *Schindler's List* or *Life is Beautiful*. How do these representations affect the way you teach the subject?

ROTH: This will be an issue that the seminar must confront. When Helmut says that our knowledge of the Holocaust has expanded, one of those changes is that for good or ill, the Holocaust has entered popular culture in ways that would have been unthinkable in the 1950s or even the 1960s. It has found its way there not just through film, but also through institutionalized memory in the form of memorials and museums, and publication—even Art Spiegelman's comic book format. I used to have students who knew hardly anything about this history. Now I have students who still know relatively little about it, but think they know a great deal because, for example, they have watched *Schindler's List* or a documentary on television. Certainly there are aspects of this popularization that are good, but it does increase the challenge of figuring out how to contextualize and decode the popular representations of the Holocaust that students have seen. *Schindler's List* is a film about the Holocaust, but it is only a tiny sliver. The complexity and the enormity of the period have to be emphasized in order to combat the tendency of people to think that they know more than they actually do.

HAAS: What struck me when you mentioned those two films is that they reflect the change we have been discussing. Unlike earlier films, they do not represent the Holocaust in black and white terms; they capture more of the complex way we look at the Holocaust now. But I also agree with what John said about stu-

dents who come to class with certain images of the Holocaust. People come in more informed, and therefore less informed.

SMITH: Around both *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful* there has been a great deal of scholarly controversy. *Schindler's List* may have won many awards and much popular acclaim, but among scholars it has provoked heavy criticism. This criticism is fine, but it raises the issue of how to promote interest in the Holocaust most effectively. After all, these films are not about the Holocaust per se, but about the lives of people during the time frame of the Holocaust.

Many people criticized *Life is Beautiful*, for instance, because it was a comedy about the Holocaust. How can anyone laugh when confronted with this subject? For me, though, it was a tremendously wrenching film about a father-son relationship. This approach moves people to think about the Holocaust in a way that other approaches might not. We need to consider, then, whether it is effective or legitimate to use these very ordinary ways of understanding to lead us toward understanding the Holocaust.

ROTH: The popularization of the Holocaust is also evident in teaching about the Holocaust. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were relatively few courses taught in American colleges and universities; there probably was not a Tennessee Holocaust Commission; and there would have been few incentives to discuss Holocaust education in secondary schools. But partly because of this popularization, some people have become skeptical about whether all this attention is a good thing. Some would argue that this very seminar is a dubious enterprise. In the Jewish community there are voices saying that the future of Jewish identity is not well served by dwelling on this subject too much. Others—most notably Peter Novick, who has published

HAAS: The Holocaust did not happen a long time ago in a country populated by strange people.



a book on the Americanization of the Holocaust—argue that contrary to many expectations, too much attention to the Holocaust can actually diminish moral sensibility and distract us from more urgent events. There is a cultural debate, then, about the place of Holocaust education that deserves attention. Novick, for one, is very skeptical about “lessons” drawn from the Holocaust.

HAAS: I find it remarkable that one of the most popular museums in Washington, DC is the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Both the United States as a whole and the American Jewish community were only tangentially involved. It did not happen here. Why, then, do we have a premier museum about it?

SMITH: And there is no comparable museum in Berlin, for example.

HAAS: Which would seem to be a more relevant location.

SMITH: But there is the argument to be made that these events are universal. I would not neces-

sarily say that Holocaust memorials belong in Berlin more than in Washington. I do not find Peter Novick's conclusions convincing. It does not follow that a person, a nation, or a group that spends a great deal of time thinking about a complex event does not have the space or time to consider other important issues.

ROTH: I would agree, and this perhaps comes back to something about

what our lessons are. My experience with students—and my experience of immersing myself in the history—suggests that this study expands my moral awareness, rather than constricting it. Of course, it is debatable whether I put that awareness into practice as I should, but I perceive this awareness in myself and in my students. What they learn is not so much some concrete lesson, but a change in their disposition, their mentality, their priorities, that carries moral significance.

SMITH: Right. I do think that they become reflective in new ways, especially about the various kinds of inhumane treatment that continue on such a large scale in the world today. Having considered the Holocaust, it becomes natural to think of comparisons and connections in the present.

HAAS: I like what you just said about moral awareness, because that is what I try to instill in my students. It is not simply a matter of right versus wrong, good ver-

sus evil. Those choices would be easy. But those oppositions are so less clear here. The results were horrific, but the people were people. I hope that students emerge with more of a sense of how messy reality is and how difficult choices sometimes are.

ROTH: At some point in courses about the Holocaust, there needs to be discussion of the people who acted well—those who rescued Jews, for example. Such behavior is almost as disorienting as the murderous acts that took place. Although you cannot mystify that behavior either, it is important to recognize that some people, against all odds, did remarkable and good things. One would have to be morally tone deaf not to recognize these instances of virtue and goodness.

LETTERS: If one result of learning about the Holocaust is a kind of expanded moral awareness, then how does this awareness translate into more specific lessons? How can we apply the lessons of the Holocaust to, say, Rwanda or Yugoslavia?

ROTH: I think that American involvement in Kosovo—and to some extent in Bosnia—was provoked by awareness of the Holocaust. Whatever his flaws may be, I think that Bill Clinton has taken to heart the notion that what happened in the Third Reich cannot be repeated, and that it involves responsibility on the part of the United States to do what can be done. But then what we find in that intervention is the messiness—to use Peter's phrase—of the decision: which policies, how to act upon them, what the ambiguous implications of almost any course of action would be. I do not really think that one could extract a set of definite foreign policy applications from the study of the Holocaust, as if it were a map or a recipe.

HAAS: Then there is the problem that many people in the Holocaust who were good-hearted and had the right inten-

tions ended up becoming collaborators in the very process of trying to do the right thing and to mitigate what was taking place. On the other hand, many people who effected great deeds of rescue and became heroes were working out of very ambiguous, even selfish motivations. This makes it much harder to say: here is the lesson. It also makes it harder not to promote a kind of fatalism, so you become caught in a dilemma.

SMITH: Yes, it is difficult to talk about specific lessons, because if we want students to come away with a deeper, more discriminating sensitivity to others, then it is not clear how we can lay that out in a lesson plan. My own view is that promoting this sensitivity, this awareness, is more central to what I am doing than a set of specific lessons.

ROTH: I think, though, that we can articulate to some extent what the lessons might be. But when we simply state them, they seem either commonplace or not particularly insightful. What we must do is draw them so that they are richly infused with context and history. Then what might seem like clichés gain a depth of meaning. I would submit that after you study Primo Levi or Charlotte Delbo or read Chris Browning's book about murderous policy actions in Poland, phrases that appear to be platitudes—for instance, never take anything good for granted—take on nuance and coloration, depth and intensity.

I would also emphasize that there must be commitment to study with some seriousness and some length of time. I am skeptical about how much moral capital is produced by a brief visit to a museum, or even by a couple of classes in a secondary school devoted to the Holocaust. This issue will certainly come up in the course of the seminar. And I would argue that teaching the Holocaust must involve more than a quick exposure.

Former Warren Center Fellow Susan Hegeman Publishes Book on Culture and Modernism

Susan Hegeman, now an associate professor of English at the University of Florida, was the William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow for the 1996/97 Fellows Program, "The Question of Culture." Her recently published book, completed during her tenure at the Warren Center, offers a compelling account of how the term "culture" has been deployed in the discourses of anthropology, literature, and popular culture in the twentieth-century United States.

In her acknowledgments, Hegeman thanks the Warren Center and calls her year here "especially important": "[It] allowed me the time, space, and ideal collegial environment for finishing this book the way I wanted."

Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture (Princeton University Press, 1999) traces a number of shifts in the meaning of the word "culture" that took place between 1900 and 1950. It argues first that during this period, "culture" changed from a term used primarily by anthropologists to a common word that denoted the whole range of a people's beliefs and practices. At the same time, culture came to be understood in comparative rather than evolutionary terms. Whereas for earlier thinkers culture had been a yardstick for measuring the "advancement" of different peoples along a single axis of development (and thus for making judgments about these peoples' superiority or inferiority), the newer conception of the word was more relativistic,



and emphasized the fundamental difference of individual cultures. Differences among cultures were often categorized in geographic and spatial terms, so that given places—the United States as a whole, or more specific locales such as Chicago or the lands of the Zuñi—came to signify not just the places themselves, but a set of practices and beliefs. Thus, when people in the mid-twentieth century spoke of an "American" culture or way of life, their understanding of the term conveyed geographical particularity, distinctness from other cultures, and self-estrangement in ways that earlier uses of the term had not. In Hegeman's words, "'culture' may have hit home to many Americans, but it left them thinking about themselves and their allegiances in a newly relational, contextual, and often critical way."

Hegeman argues that these shifts coincided with the rise of

literary modernism and helped to inform some of American modernism's deployments of culture as a term. Many of her most striking analyses juxtapose developments in anthropology and literature. Franz Boas's emphasis on anthropological fieldwork (and the attention to the local that such fieldwork demands), for example, is used to illuminate T.S. Eliot's use of place and artifact as metaphor in his poem "The Dry Salvages." Similarly, the turn toward the distinctness of separate cultures exemplified by such anthropological texts as Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* finds its analogue in the work of artists who portrayed the culture of highly distinct regions—Sherwood Anderson's fictional Winesburg, Ohio; Jean Toomer's Georgia; and Thomas Hart Benton's Midwest. Indeed, the modernist preoccupation with the provincial and the primitive reflects this change in an understanding of culture: regional and marginal cultures became seen as "authentic" precisely because of their differentiation from larger and more heterogeneous cultures.

Hegeman maintains, however, that while the newer conception of culture may have been relativistic, it did not necessarily reject hierarchy or standards of value. Indeed, one group of writ-

ers that Hegeman examines—the "culture critics" who included Waldo Frank, Randolph Bourne, and Van Wyck Brooks—attempted, in ways often reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's famous promotion of culture as a means to "sweetness and light," to define a national culture, diagnose its problems and contradictions, and resolve them. In some cases, a previous moral standard of culture was replaced by an aesthetic standard. Thus, Hegeman's later chapters point to the way that the dichotomy between modern centers and "primitive" peripheries helped to establish not only the notion of a specifically "American" culture, but also the division of culture into the aesthetically defined categories of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. The fascination with the regional and the middlebrow evinced by some leading modernists gave way in the years after the Second World War to a new "highbrow" assault on what was seen as a degraded culture, described by such terms as "kitsch," "masscult," and "Kulchur." At this point, literary and anthropological definitions of culture diverged sharply. The ensuing confusion as to what constitutes culture—which continues in our current debates surrounding the uses, viability, and future of the term—can be traced to this point in time.

Jay Clayton, professor of English at Vanderbilt and a co-director of the 1996/97 Fellows Program, says of Hegeman, "Susan was the ideal visiting fellow—a dream seminar participant! She has marvelously wide-ranging interests and an engaging, even vivacious mind. I miss the lively give-and-take of those afternoons very much, but having Susan's book in hand helps to restore some of what we lost when our Fellows' year came to an end."

—By Thomas Haddox

The Reproduction of Nature: Cultural Origins of America's National Parks

What do we think of when we think of America's national parks? Most of us, I imagine, would think of large tracts of unspoiled wilderness—majestic mountains, spectacular waterfalls, or undisturbed forests. If asked, many of us would describe the goal of our national parks in terms not very different from those adopted in 1963 by the National Park Service, which insisted that “the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man.” In other words, the origins of America's national parks are generally thought to consist in the desire to withdraw or preserve particularly spectacular natural areas from social, political, and economic development. For most of us, national parks are natural parks.

The construction of American national identity has always been inseparable from nature. Unlike European nations, whose identity derived from a common language, ethnic or racial heritage, religion, or cultural history, the identity of the United States of America as “nature's nation” was grounded in large part in the land itself. Because of this centrality of nature to American self-identity, questions of environmentalism in America have invariably taken on ideological and national significance. In America, the preservation of natural spaces has involved not only the creation of an alternative to the nation's cultural space, but also the creation of America itself.

Whereas the turn to landscape painting in early nineteenth-century France, for example, was seen as a move away from the more elevated subjects of historical painting, in America the representation of landscape by Hudson River School painters was itself understood as a form of historical painting in which the landscape was imbued with culturally rich iconographic and symbolic meaning.

Contending in an “Essay on American Scenery” (1835) that “the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness,” Thomas Cole exalts American scenery over European, “because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified.” Similarly, in “Letters on Landscape Painting” (1855), Asher Durand urges American painters to paint American landscapes, arguing that the persistence of many “forms of nature yet spared from the pollutions of civilization,” combined with the “principle of self-government,” should furnish the conditions for the American landscape painter “boldly [to] originate a high and independent style, based on his native resources.” For both Cole and Durand, although America's untouched wilderness offers the opportunity for a distinctly American landscape painting, the westward “progress” of civilization across the continent ensures that this opportunity will not last forever.

At the end of the twentieth century, the ideal of untouched wilderness advocated by Cole and Durand has been reconsidered. Environmental historians and eco-

critics now generally agree that nature and wilderness are cultural constructions. For environmental historian William Cronon, wilderness reproduces the cultural values its advocates seek to escape: there is “nothing natural about the concept of wilderness.” As ecocritic Lawrence Buell has noted, it has become almost a truism that the “nineteenth-century American romantic representation of the West was built on an ideology of conquest.” For these scholars, as for environmental history and ecocriticism more generally, the American cultural ideal of nature or wilderness preservation has been demystified, has been revealed to harbor within it the very will to power it would set out to escape. Recent work in environmental history disputes a less critical body of scholarship that often took at face value the claims of early preservationists that nature offered an escape from the cultural ideologies of progress and development that fueled American expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This reconsideration of the origins of environmentalism in America has been motivated largely by the widespread acceptance of arguments for the social or cultural construction of knowledge. Historians have thus begun

to rewrite the history of American environmentalism, rejecting the received account in which Americans are seen to recognize the intrinsic value of nature or wilderness in the face of its increasing destruction. Instead, environmental historians and ecocritics have begun to tell a different story—of the increased use of the idea of nature's intrinsic value to further the social, cultural, or political interests of a dominant race, class, gender, or institutional formation.

As powerful as these revisionist narratives are, however, they run the risk of stripping nature of any specificity whatsoever—of transforming nature so completely into culture that the preservation of nature as a natural park, for example, becomes indistinguishable from its transformation into a ranch or a mine or a private resort. In making this claim about the particularity of nature, however, I would not propose that we undo the hard-earned insights offered by proponents of the cultural construction of knowledge, but that we undertake the challenging task of pursuing these insights more fully. Granted that nature is culturally constructed, we need to ask how the cultural construction of nature differs from (and intersects with) other culturally constructed entities. Further, we need to ask how the cultural construction of nature varies historically and how it remains constant both through time and across different geographical locations. In other words, we need to pursue locally the more global insights of the cultural construction of nature. We need a truly ecological criticism, one which understands that the cultural construction of nature circulates within what we could call a discursive ecosystem. The task of such criticism would be to trace the connections among the scientific, technological, and cultural networks within which both American environmentalism and the national parks idea emerge, for it is through such interrelations



Eadweard Muybridge, Mirror Lake, Valley of the Yosemite. (Reflection of Mount Waiya) “Pine Mountain.” No. 25, 1872, *Yosemite National Park*

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that the particularity of nature can be understood.

In the project which I am undertaking this year as the William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, I am trying to exemplify such a critical practice. I set out to understand the origins of America's national parks not simply as instances of the preservation of nature, but rather as complex cultural representations or reproductions of nature according to the cultural assumptions, beliefs, and practices of mid-nineteenth century America. To do so is not to deny the matter-of-fact sense in which establishing a national park involves preserving an area of land as "natural" as opposed to developing it as a farm, a ranch, a mine, a subdivision, a shopping mall, or an amusement park. Rather, it is to insist that the preservation of nature entailed in establishing Yellowstone as the world's first national park, for example, be understood as the preservation of culture as well—more specifically as the preservation of a complex set of scientific, technological, aesthetic, social, eco-

nomie, and other practices that makes up what we call "culture" at any particular moment. From this perspective, the origins of America's national parks not only define America's culture at a particular historical moment, but also make visible aspects of that culture and its ideas of nature that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Consequently, my project takes up the origins of our three "major" national parks—Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon—as sites whose particularity and specificity emerge from the diverse cultural practices and beliefs of nineteenth-century America. Each of my project's three main sections traces out a particular cultural logic that enabled our nation to think through the creation of national parks as representations or reproductions of nature. In the first section I look at the preservation of Yosemite Valley in 1864 in terms of the relation between aesthetic and natural agency in painting, photography, neurology, geology, landscape architecture, and urban reform. In the second, I take up the 1872 establishment of Yellowstone as a national park in

terms of the notion of fidelity to nature as it manifested itself in nineteenth-century geology, cartography, painting, photography, stenography, and aesthetics. In the final section I ask why it took until 1919 to make the Grand Canyon a national park, focusing on the way in which the sublimity of the canyon's scenery generates a proliferation of attempts to comprehend the canyon, each of which dramatizes the inadequacy of any single scientific, technological, or cultural mode of representation to depict it.

My project is not in any strict sense composed of essays in the history of ideas of conservation, preservation, environmentalism, or biocentrism; the history of landscape art and aesthetics; or the history of the social, technological, economic, or political development of the American West. Rather, it is made up of interdisciplinary essays in what I have elsewhere called cultural historicism. The project operates from the assumption that science and technology need to be understood not simply by explaining how they are culturally constructed, but also by

looking at how certain fundamental ideas or metaphors about nature are worked out at the same historical moment in different cultural practices. In taking up the idea of America as it both defines and is defined by the relations among science, technology, and culture, I will trace certain myths of American environmentalist origins as they are played out across a number of diverse discourses and different technologies of representation and reproduction. In so doing, I hope to illuminate the way in which American cultural origins are simultaneously constructed and destabilized through the "construction, destruction, and deconstruction of nature"—the theme of this year's seminar at the Warren Center.

—By Richard Grusin

Richard Grusin is William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow at the Warren Center, visiting associate professor of English at Vanderbilt, and associate professor of the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

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