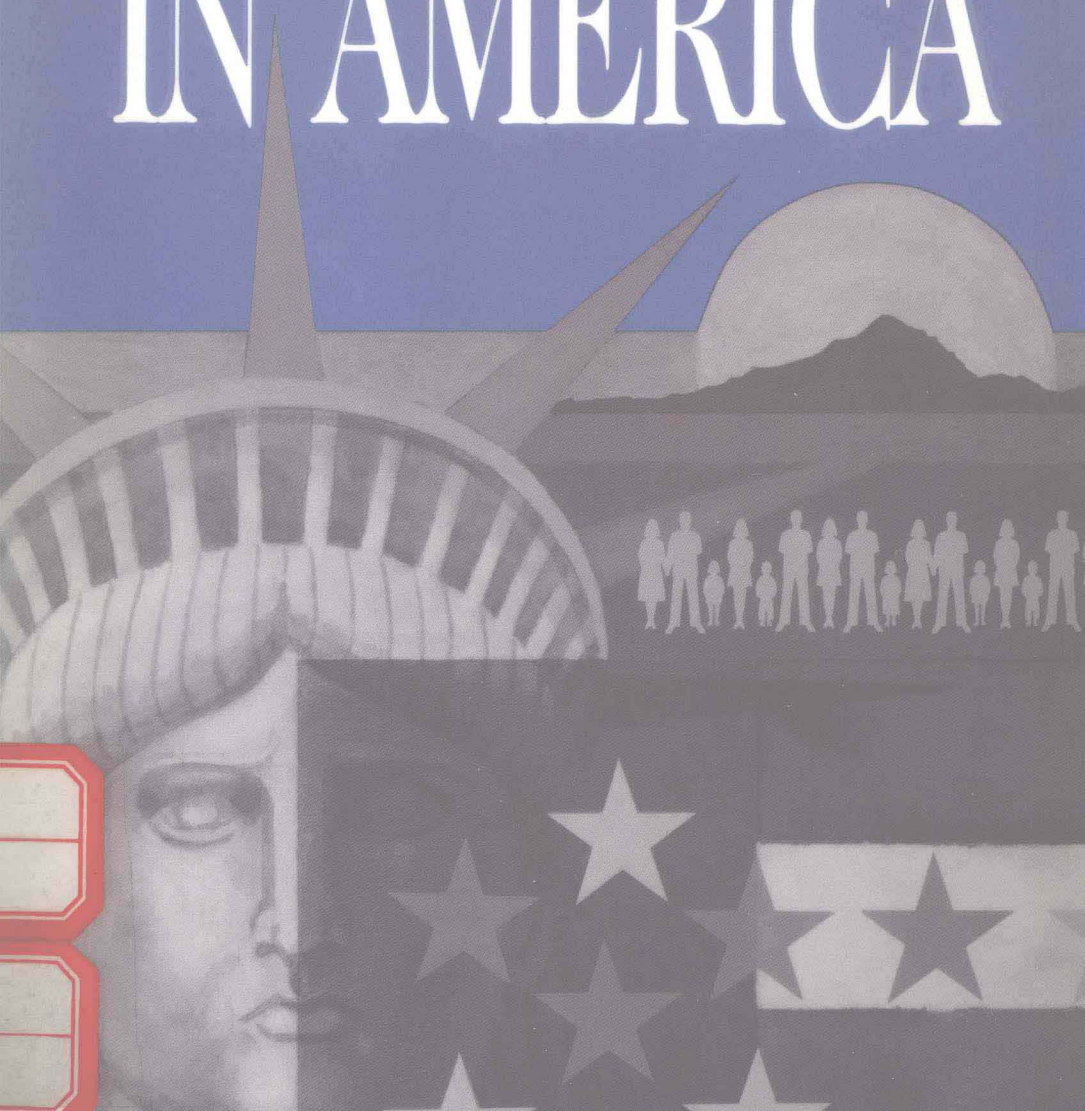


Constance Perin

BELONGING

Reading Between the Lines

IN AMERICA



*Belonging in
America*

READING BETWEEN
THE LINES

Constance Perin

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Belonging in America

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Belonging in America: Reading Between the Lines

Constance Perin

Human society is composed of symbolic processes, in the sense that what we are to ourselves, what others are to us, what we are to them and they to themselves, consist outwardly of words and acts which inwardly are beliefs to which we attach values. In other words, the social relations and entire social organization of any human society consist of evaluated beliefs and their expression in human conduct.

W. Lloyd Warner

American Life: Dream and Reality (1953)

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Belonging in America

Introduction

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Too early one morning several years ago barking cut through my sleep. From my fifth-story bedroom window I could see in the garden of the house next door the same pair of cocker spaniels who had been serving as my second alarm clock—but at about half-past seven, not just after six. Their usual routine didn't even include barking. About five minutes after being let out the back door, they'd announce they were ready to come back in, speaking with throaty, polite yelps. I'd lived comfortably on this schedule for about a year, and now, after these six o'clock alarms on a second, then a third, morning (I kept waiting for someone else to complain), I was bewildered and thoroughly put out. On the fourth day, I decided I had to do something.

Never having met these neighbors, I didn't know their names and couldn't telephone. Sitting down at my desk to write them a note, the right words wouldn't come; I tore up draft after draft. How in the world to tell perfect strangers, yet neighbors, that they were annoying me? I agonized over whether I was being too forward, or a patsy for their lack of consideration. I worried over putting them on the defensive and making them mad. Still another day passed, and again the dogs woke me too early and barked too long. I finally put down just four ideas: that I was a dog-lover, that I admired the way they had trained theirs, that I hadn't been bothered before this, and that surely it was some temporary aberration. I wrote on some stationery with my name on it, and yet, still shy about the whole thing, I dropped the note into their mail slot without ringing the bell.

The next morning I answered my phone to hear, "This is Susan Morris, your next-door neighbor. I'm terribly sorry you've had to live with that ruckus—my husband and I just got back from a trip. My daughter and son-in-law were staying here to take care of the dogs—but letting them out much earlier than we do, and then going back to sleep! I hadn't told them what our routine was." I was hugely relieved at such a civilized response, and said so. I was about to say, "Thanks very much for calling," when Mrs. Morris said: "That's not all. I want very much to meet you—I want to meet anybody who could send me such a note and sign their name. I feel that I'm ready to like you!" I was amazed: "You mean to say that you've had anonymous complaints about your dogs?" "Oh, yes. They're

the usual kind.” As much difficulty as I’d had fetching up the social skills to deal diplomatically with so simple (and common) a situation, it never occurred to me not to sign my name, even though I avoided a face-to-face conversation.

Brooding about the meanings of her experience and my own, as anthropologists will, I began to feel that there might be more to them than met the eye. The whole idea of *neighbor* became a first preoccupation. If we choose to acknowledge neighbors, we can’t be sure anything good will come of it, and if we ignore them nothing bad will necessarily happen—nothing like the scoldings of friends and relatives. Of all the relationships we have, those with neighbors probably have the least clear lines around them. Those ambiguities became the starting place of this study of American culture: American ways of defining the many lines of life and what may lie between them. I’m speaking of such lines as those we draw between business and pleasure, home and work, relatives and friends, between the things we do for love and those we do for money, between what is private and public, between good and evil . . . and, as well, those between family and community, between the genders, between the species, between adults and children, between the races, between body and spirit, even between city and suburb.

Whether definite or dotted, faint or unmistakable, however drawn or however welcome, every line is in the service of giving shape to the many ambiguities of our common life. Chafe as we may at some and try as we will to redraw them, the ideas they represent tend to be stable. The chief reason for their existence and persistence is that we wouldn’t know how to act without our ideas about individualism and independence, honor and dishonor, reputation and respectability, choice and duty, cooperation and competition, spontaneity and control, trust and suspicion, shame and pride . . .

So do we play upon ambiguities, yet ambiguities also play upon us. In personal life, we’re apt to talk them out; in work life, we map them out; but in social life, we’re more likely to act them out, mutely coping with uncertainties and confusions, contradictions and ironies that inevitably escape our nets of meaning. Not always allusions whose layers of connotation can lead to the pleasures of discovery, ambiguities can bring on painful, disappointing encounters with social paradoxes and unreliable understandings. For when lines do not hold and people are confused about what their experiences mean, their most socially divisive, destructive, and estranging impulses can be revealed.

Listening for meanings with which we interpret and act in our daily worlds of neighbors, friends, and relatives, of men, women, children, and dogs, each of these five essays is a variation upon that single theme: what

Americans make of their encounters with ambiguities, and what those encounters then make of Americans' hopes for a clearer sense of community and a higher quality of justice. In charting both the ambiguities and the meanings, we may better understand, so to change, the reasons why belonging in America is more problematic for some than for others.

I began by listening to suburbanites all around the country talk about their neighboring experiences. Wanting to hear "American ideas," I listened to men and women living in what is generally regarded as the "mainstream," those who have at least reached the suburban, single-family-detached episode of the American Dream. The "American middle class": not knowing what it is any more precisely than anyone else does, I've relied on this indigenous ideal of suburban residence and homeownership, which immediately implies another defining characteristic, namely, white race. The populations of most suburbs are white; suburban zoning and real estate practices are likely either to discriminate against nonwhites or to "steer" each race into separate enclaves; the cultural sources of those residential patterns are the subjects of my last book (Perin 1977). I took this widespread pattern of segregation and of prejudice to be one among many important facts about the mainstream which dominates the drawing of so many American lines.

I sought out suburbs not obviously rich or poor, where the greatest range of people by occupation, education, and income might be likeliest. I taped interviews with white Americans who own single-family-detached houses in the commuting suburbs of Minneapolis, San Francisco, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Of course they spoke of previous experiences elsewhere—I heard about Philadelphia in Minneapolis, Chicago in San Francisco, Palo Alto in Houston. Every interview was graciously given; neither the persons nor the specific suburb are identified. We discussed the ways they think about neighbors and what they do when things somehow go wrong between them. When neighbors are noisy or their children get into mischief, when dogs on the block knock over garbage cans or mess up the garden, I asked them, what do you do? I also listened to building inspectors and dog officers, policemen and police chiefs, professional managers of apartments and condominiums, ministers and social workers, members of the League of Women Voters and of New Neighbors. I've watched the daily press ("Neighbors Help Out in Blizzard"), monitored television, listened to tales told by my friends and to those of perfect strangers. When answering anybody's questions about what I've been writing over the last several years, I've heard story after story after story.

These discussions with about 100 handpicked people obviously were never intended to be a representative sample: they were meant as yeast for

raising still more questions in my mind about the ways in which Americans interpret many aspects of their lives. I've also drawn on newspaper reports of single events, popularized social science, testimony at congressional hearings, not for reliable facts or principles, but as texts of this culture to be puzzled over for what they say yet leave unsaid. The estimable research of scholars in many fields has also been essential to the understandings I've arrived at. To help me see between the lines by which I also live, before setting out for the field I tried to defamiliarize myself by visiting countries having high residential densities, where relations with neighbors were likely to be salient. I spent several weeks in Holland, the United Kingdom, and Japan, hearing about their concepts and practices from the most expert informants I could find, namely, colleagues in anthropology, sociology, law—English-speakers all. I wasn't trying to develop an ethnography of their neighbor relationships, but only to listen for issues that I might not have thought to consider, as well as for sheer differences in their lines and concepts. In turn, their experiences in, observations of, and questions about American concepts and practices were equally valuable in disorienting me. These travels were whetstones for sharpening my observations at home, and I make no cross-cultural comparisons on the basis of them; they were methodological, not substantive, forays.

In this limited ethnography of ambiguities and meanings I have two aims: to have illuminated general human processes involved in constituting cultures and to point to some American cultural particularities. Concerned mainly with identifying ambiguities and meanings, I haven't also suggested how they might vary by class, ethnicity, race, religion, and region. Ignoring these differences says only that this work is but a beginning of another way of studying cultures. The very notion of culture has conjured coherence, clarity, and configuration: culture seen as a tapestry of legible, predictable patterns—a design for living. But we know now that those seamless connotations do only partial justice to cultures. From their incoherencies, confusions, contradictions, enigmas, paradoxes, and conflicts, and the meanings behind them, social orders both endure and change.

Some meanings are more audible than others: some we speak of in whispers, some hardly at all. What we take entirely for granted we are likely to speak least about: a culture's silences are the most familiar to its members, in this and every culture. Only by putting words to those meanings that go without saying do they stand a chance of being explicitly considered and reconsidered. What is left unsaid remains undiscussible and nonnegotiable; thus does culture coerce. Putting words to them allows us to hear their meanings more clearly, to recognize the ambiguities they cannot contain and sometimes create, and to observe what we do with our discomfort.

These five essays move from speaking of the more to the less acknowledged, from more readily negotiable experiences to those that are less so, and from matters specifically American to those more generally human. The earlier essays discuss more familiar experiences and insights; those pleasures of recognition may cushion later discomforts at hearing about matters Americans might prefer remain undiscussed. The first two essays consider themes Americans tend to speak of only *sotto voce*, as it were: the frictional undersides of everyday relationships with neighbors that may make for less of a sense of community than some might like. "The Invisible Neighborhood" lays out some of the conflicting paths by which we pick our way through the incongruities of individualism and interdependence, community and family, and between the single-family ideal and the realities of housing prices, divorce, a mobile population, and suburban isolation. The second essay, "Properties of Community," speaks of ways that homeownership, the real estate market, and a sense of community can intersect one another and juxtapose personal and economic relationships with national and local understandings of reputation and respectability. From their encounters with these ambiguities, men, women, and children come to see differing meanings in community.

The third essay sits on a middle ground between meanings we do and do not acknowledge. "Perfect Dogs" takes up the peculiar and astonishing powers of American dogs to blur species lines to become our "best friends" and "members of the family." Dogs can also erase property lines, and members of the family on the loose can become the bane of neighborhood gardeners and joggers. Unleashed dogs are also vulnerable to injury, straying, and death. In trying to understand the apparent ambivalence of many dog-lovers whose pets roam, I found another way of speaking of the trust that makes society possible.

The last two essays approach matters about which this and many other cultures are more likely to be mute. Whatever a society regards as taboo is likely to be disquieting and, in that, all the more absolute and non-negotiable; I expect that to be true of these essays. "Imperfect People" examines social prejudices of various kinds as arising partly from how we understand *difference* per se and partly from ideas about what it means to be a human, yet animal, being. Why are many unmistakably human beings treated culturally as though they belong to another species and put into the least favorable places, socially, economically, politically?

The final essay, "The Constitution of Men and Women," suggests why women continue to be susceptible to being the second sex. It speaks of Western civilization's most deeply held beliefs about a universal way that this species draws the line between itself and every other: cleanliness training. That training relies on moral concepts of shame, disgust, and control, and it affects every person's capacity for self-esteem and expectations of

social respect. In trying to be members of this species in good standing, human strategies take on the appearance of male superiority and female subordination, and jeopardize fundamental justice for both sexes.

In the conclusion, "Silence as *The Other*," I draw out several implications of having considered a closer relationship between human biology and culture and of having articulated some of Americans' least ventilated presuppositions and perceptions. In all, I am speaking of disappointments with an often thin sense of community and a diluted quality of justice. The better to realize our practical hopes and our constitutional ideals, we can at least try to decipher both the ambiguities and the meanings standing in the way. Americans have silently drawn these many lines; we can discuss how to redraw them.

DIGGING FOR MEANINGS

Three tools of my anthropological trade have been indispensable in searching out these silences: doubt, attention to symbols, and the inseparability of human biology from behavior. Doubt is the crowbar with which cultural anthropology unboxes received and unexamined notions—here, both popular and professional definitions of community and the people who populate it. To see community not only as a local system of family, political party, and social club, but to acknowledge it as also being constituted by ideas about such intangible properties as trust, honor, and reputation; and to recast our ways of thinking about men, women, and children to consider instead the ideas and beliefs through which their social places and rewards come to differ—these are the aims of this doubt.

Second, questing for American meanings includes the obligation to follow their symbols and signs wherever they point. Men, women, children, and dogs are literally themselves, to be sure, but each also represents beliefs about the stages of life, for example, or about domestic versus political roles. To relate symbols to their referents, I speak to a wide range of topics—but even so, that may not suffice to clarify what are irreducibly complex human experiences and behaviors. Any single sign is likely to be the consequence of intricate chains of presupposition, belief, history, and myth. For all that they address, these essays trace out only a few of these links.

The third tool of my trade is license to acknowledge the social significance of human biology alongside every other influence on behavior. I kept wondering about my lack of spontaneity in that experience with my neighbors' barking dogs. Why couldn't I have rung their bell on the very first morning or dashed off a note without giving it a single second thought? I realized that I felt caught up in a situation with no clear lines

around it: I had no certain map of meanings for dealing with them. For me, the situation was socially ambiguous, and as I studied what natural scientists have learned about human responses to ambiguity, I discovered that they appear to be entwined with anxiety and fear, feelings that can result in paralysis, avoidance, and attack. Those findings certainly matched my behaviors up to a point: I delayed, couldn't write, and I didn't ring my neighbors' bell.

"Intolerance for ambiguity" is not merely a personal trait; it has the social sources and aggrandizing consequences that these essays try to document. When shared systems of meanings become unreliable, how to act becomes uncertain. With those meanings, we define our social expectations. Whatever is believed to dismantle meaning and thereby disable action evokes both curiosity and fear; whatever calls certainty into question comes under the headings of novelty, incongruity, confusion, sheer difference, and discrepancy. On the one hand, humans socialize curiosity and arousal as learning and development and, on the other, these essays suggest, humans socialize fear responses of freezing, flight, and fighting as social discrimination, stigmatization, and withdrawal. As I discuss in more detail shortly, fear and anxiety are neurophysiologically autonomic responses which I propose to be as biologically significant in ordering human affairs as are sex and subsistence. How fear and anxiety are socially transformed depends no less than sex and subsistence do on particular belief systems and particular ecological and historical contexts.

As provisional as the understandings of the neurosciences and behavioral biology are today, they suggest significant subtleties that are generally overlooked in accounts of social alienation and social hostilities. Throughout these essays, I call on these subtleties to shed light on puzzling aspects of common social practices and patterns. As background for my interpretations, I provide in the following section a sketch of natural scientists' understandings of human experiences of ambiguity, anxiety, and fear and how I see these understandings as being helpful to cultural analysis. None of these theories is radically new, but it is fair to say, I think, that they have not been widely incorporated into a literature that tends to rely on models of intellectual rather than affective processes.

Why so explicit a move toward modern biology from a cultural anthropologist? The answer is not a detour but a short story that weaves together some earlier and more recent strands of my thinking about the constitution of social order. In *Everything in Its Place: Social Order and Land Use in America*, published at the end of 1977, I introduced the possibility that the study of culture in its own right could add to our understandings of patterns of metropolitan development. The ethnography documented the prevalence of prejudice toward those who are seen to be interstitial