den at home but at the office as well. It's a neat bit of production design, immediately signaling to viewers under thirty: See how old-timey this show is? *People actually still owned globes!* Convincing someone today that geography, of all things, is a serious and important field sounds a little like pushing a typewriter or phonograph repair class on them.

Geography seems to be a struggle for Americans, specifically. In 2002, National Geographic conducted a survey of college-aged people in nine different countries, testing place-name knowledge, current events geography, and map skills. No country aced the test, but the top scorers—Sweden, Germany, and Italy—answered around 70 percent of the questions correctly. U.S. students, with a dreary 41 percent, were next to last. (Thank you, Mexico!) These results are similar to what researchers see when they stack American students up against the rest of the world in other subjects, like math and science, so maybe they're just a symptom of our dumbed-down curricula in general. "Geography is just a subset of Americans not knowing *anything*," says David Helgren with a shrug. "I hate to say that."

But it isn't hard to imagine that there might be some peculiarly geographic reasons why Americans lag in global knowledge. One is our isolation—drive east from France for ten hours, and you might cross five different nations. Drive east from El Paso, Texas, and ten hours later you won't even be in Houston yet. Americans don't know much about other nations because we can so easily pretend that they don't even exist, the way Rosencrantz says he doesn't believe in England in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. ("Just a conspiracy of cartographers, then?" asks his friend Guildenstern acidly.) If Americans want to go to the mountains or the desert or the beach, we don't need to hop on an international flight: everything's right here. Our isolation isn't just a geographic accident; it was practically a mission statement when America was founded. The first people who settled here came to break connections with the rest of the world, so the American approach to geography has always been to expand our reach into new frontiers, not study up on old ones. The global interconnectedness of the modern world hasn't come easily to us.

There are international factors for the decline as well. For much of the twentieth century, the Communist threat of the Cold War era

made geopolitics seem sexy and urgent: university geography departments couldn't keep up with the flood of applicants, and Kennedy's Peace Corps was staffed largely by geography students. Many U.S. embassies even had "geographic attachés" on staff, whose job was to monitor local maps.* The collapse of the Soviet Union killed that Risk-board view of the world with shocking suddenness, and the post-2001 rise in world tension, interestingly, hasn't led to a corresponding Cold War–style boom in geography interest. Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, a professor of political science at Rutgers University, has argued that geography seems less relevant than ever in a world where nonstate actors—malleable entities like ethnicities, for example—are as powerful and important as the ones with governments and borders. Where on a map can you point to al-Qaeda? Or Google, or Wal-Mart? Everywhere and nowhere.

Another reason for sagging geographic knowledge may strike closer to home. Today's kids live increasingly in a world without place—without personal exploration through real-life geographies of any kind. In one of the great ironies of the last century, many Americans moved from overcrowded cities out to the suburbs in order to "reconnect with nature," but those dreams of carefree country life didn't materialize; there's little that's carefree or natural about the soulless sprawl of modern suburbia. We've chosen insulated lifestyles—insulated by car, by TV, by iPod or Internet or cell phone—that distance us from our surroundings, that treat *any* kind of navigation through or interaction with our environment as a necessary evil.

And children have it worst of all. It's not just technology holding them back—it's us, their well-meaning parents. Seventy-one percent of us walked or rode a bike to school as children, but only 22 percent of our kids today do. The radius around home where kids are allowed to play has shrunk to a ninth of what it was in 1970. Not that we leave them time to explore in their overscheduled lives anyway;

* This may seem a little silly, but local maps have often provided crucial intelligence. In the late 1980s, for example, maps in Iraq started labeling Kuwait as the nineteenth Iraqi province, an early warning sign of trouble years before the tanks actually rolled in.

between 1981 and 2003, kids' free time dropped by nine hours per week. And why don't we let them wander? American parents often cite "stranger danger," without seeming aware that only 115 U.S. children are abducted by strangers every year—almost a one-in-a-million occurrence, not something to base a lifestyle on. Yet 82 percent of U.S. moms cite safety concerns as a reason to bar their kids from even leaving the house. Dear Abby recently urged parents to take a picture of their kids *every morning* before they head to school, so they'll always have an up-to-the-minute photo in case of abduction. That's not just helicopter parenting. That's, like, *Airwolf* parenting.

I'm part of the problem myself—this particular paragraph is getting written only because I plopped my young daughter down in front of the TV to watch *Yo Gabba Gabba!*, whereas thirty years ago my mom probably would have told me, "Go play outside." But I worry about what my two children are missing, living in this unbrave new world where kids can't spend a summer day out building forts and climbing trees. A mom in Columbus, Mississippi, made headlines in 2009 when cops threatened her with child endangerment charges just for letting her ten-year-old son walk a third of a mile to soccer practice. If letting your kids walk alone for fifteen minutes is a criminal act, I wonder how many concurrent life sentences my parents would be serving. My siblings and I ran around pretty freely even in Seoul, kings of the city at eight or nine years old. We knew the back-alley shortcuts, the bus and subway routes, the local shops that sold the weirdest hand-lotion-tasting chewing gums and squid-based snack foods, the best places to hail cabs in a downpour. I credit my Seoul upbringing with the proud, Batman-like sense of ownership and mastery I've felt in the many cities where I've lived since then.

Today, we're starting to see the effects on society as the first generation of acutely overparented children reaches adulthood. We know that their sedentary lifestyle has led to spikes in obesity and other health problems. We know they're technology addicts, spending every free waking hour—nine hours a day, on average!—staring at little glowing screens. We know that they're not exactly models of self-sufficiency—in fact, employers like Merrill Lynch and Ernst & Young now provide

job information packets and seminars for their adult recruits' parents, who are increasingly involved in hiring negotiations.

But this generation's collective geo-awareness is in just as much jeopardy as its emotional independence or its body mass index. Today's stuck-inside kids feel little connection to nature and landscape. In 2002, one study found that eight-year-old kids could identify more varieties of Pokémon than real native species in their area. Meanwhile, most measures of outdoor activity—camping, fishing, hiking, visits to national parks and forests—are steadily declining by about 1 percent a year. The boomers are still going outside, say park rangers and pollsters, but not their kids and grandkids. Never having been given free rein to explore an area and then find their way home, these kids' responses to real-world navigation range somewhere between discomfort and abject terror. A *Harvard Magazine* article on the 2009 freshman class related the story of a new student who ventured into Boston by subway but panicked at a downtown intersection. Not sure whether to turn left or right, she called—who else?—her father in Chicago, who supplied the answer.

And they'll pass their geographical ineptness on to their children. A recent study at England's Hertfordshire University found that British moms now refuse to let their children explore the countryside because they themselves feel so clueless about geography. "None of the mothers I spoke to could read a map," said the study's author. "They did not know how to make up circular walks or work out where it might be safe to go cycling." If, as Peirce Lewis claimed, a love of place is what turns young people on to geography, then the discipline is in trouble. We're becoming a society not of topophiles but of topophobes.

But maybe the discipline of geography would be in trouble anyway. For centuries, it was considered one of the pillars of a good liberal education, as illustrated by the philosopher Edmund Burke's famous observation, "Geography is an earthly subject, but a heavenly science." No poetry or history "can be read with profit . . . without the helpe and knowledge of this most Noble Science," Wye Saltonstall enthused in the preface to his 1653 English translation of Mercator's atlas. But today, only one of *U.S. News & World Report*'s ten

top-ranked U.S. colleges even has a geography department. (There's still an eight-person "committee" at the University of Chicago.) This trend dates back to 1948, when Harvard president James Conant proclaimed, "Geography is not a university subject!" and abolished his department. Most other campuses followed in short order.

The decline of geography in academia is easy to understand: we live in an age of ever-increasing specialization, and geography is a generalist's discipline. Imagine the poor geographer trying to explain to someone at a campus cocktail party (or even to an unsympathetic administrator) exactly what it is he or she studies.

"'Geography' is Greek for 'writing about the Earth.' We study the Earth."

"Right, like geologists."

"Well, yes, but we're interested in the whole world, not just the rocky bits. Geographers also study oceans, lakes, the water cycle . . ."

"So it's like oceanography or hydrology."

"And the atmosphere."

"Meteorology, climatology . . ."

"It's broader than just physical geography. We're also interested in how humans relate to their planet."

"How is that different from ecology or environmental science?"

"Well, it encompasses them. Aspects of them. But we also study the social and economic and cultural and geopolitical sides of—"

"Sociology, economics, cultural studies, poli sci."

"Some geographers specialize in different world regions."

"Ah, right, we have Asian and African and Latin American studies programs here. But I didn't know they were part of the geography department."

"They're not."

(Long pause.)

"So, uh, what is it you *do* study, then?"

And . . . scene.

It's misleading to think of geography as a single discipline at all. Instead it's the ultimate interdisciplinary study, because it's made up of *every other discipline* viewed spatially, through the lens of place. Language, history, biology, public health, paleontology, urban planning—there are geographers studying all these subjects and aspects of geography taught in all of them. In one sense, geography's ubiquity is an argument for its importance, but it's also the very thing that makes it so hard to define to administrators and so easy for universities to defund and divvy up into other departments.

In fact, the little one-act play above is probably too optimistic. The real cocktail party conversation would probably go something like this:

"Actually, I have a degree in geography."

"Geography? Wow, I'm terrible with maps. I bet *you* know all your state capitals, though!"

(Geographer's smile freezes, left eye starts to twitch uncontrollably.)

Maps, see, are a huge part of geography's ongoing identity crisis today. As late as the end of the eighteenth century, geography and cartography were synonymous—interchangeable words for the same science. The world was still being charted and explored, and geographers were the ones drawing the maps. But then geography began to grow into a holistic scholarly discipline, and a funny thing happened on the way to the symposium: it lost maps as its center.

This happened for many reasons. Most obviously, the world got pretty thoroughly mapped; making maps wasn't at the brave frontier of anything anymore. As a result, geographers began to see cartographers as mere technicians, not scientists or scholars. Second, once digital tools like geographic information systems, or GIS, began to be used to manage spatial data, focusing on maps felt old-fashioned. Finally, there's been an academic trend toward emphasizing the unreliability of maps: their cultural baggage, their selectivity, the agendas that drive them. "All maps distort reality" is the moral of Mark Monmonier's 1991 classic *How to Lie with Maps*. They're artifacts to be deconstructed, like literary texts. It's not fashionable to see them as the authoritative bedrock of a science anymore.

Without maps, we lose our way, and some people have argued that in its new, less cartographic incarnation, academic geography has done exactly that. "Here's the leading journal of American academic geography," says David Helgren, tossing me the latest issue of *Annals*

of the Association of American Geographers, which is sitting on his dining room table, "and it is boring. It is terrible. You can look at those titles, and they just put you to sleep."

I flip through it. I consider myself a reasonably literate guy and a geography buff to boot. But I can't really muster up too much enthusiasm for "Cognitively Inspired and Perceptually Salient Graphic Displays for Efficient Spatial Inference Making" or "A Top-Down Approach to the State Factor Paradigm for Use in Macroscale Soil Analysis." Or even "Spaces of Priority: The Geography of Soviet Housing Construction in Daugavpils, Latvia." So many choices—where to begin?

"See? You can't even read it. They invent new words along the way. But that's the paragon of world academic geography. I'm proud to say I've published in it twice, which makes me somewhat of a star. But I was never a good member of the culture. Instead of the *Annals,* I refer to it as the 'anals.' I always had a bad attitude toward some of this stuff, because it wasn't making the world better. It wasn't even making the world more interesting."

Lay readers tend to be befuddled by academic writing in many subjects, of course, but geography has an additional image problem: people seek it out expecting to find out about maps. When parents tell you their child is into geography, what they mean is "she really likes looking at maps," not "she's oddly curious about housing construction in Soviet-era Latvia." When a news anchor reports that American children are failing geography, all that means is that they couldn't match place-names to locations on a map. David Helgren's account of his own media circus in the July 1983 *Journal of Geography* is careful never to call his quiz a geography quiz: it's a "place-name quiz." He never uses the phrase "geographical illiteracy," preferring "place-name ignorance."

This was of course intentional; geographers don't like to see their field of study reduced to a list of facts that children can master. "If I told you I was a professor of literature, you wouldn't ask me if I knew how to spell," says Doug Oetter, a geography professor at Georgia College & State University. "But people find out I teach geography, and they ask, 'What's the capital of Texas?'"

It's an understandable concern, and one motivated by, frankly, a century of pretty crappy geography instruction. For many years, when schoolkids were made to study geography, they were just memorizing long lists of names: all fifty states in alphabetical order, the world's tallest mountains. "You think you are teaching him what the world is like; he is only learning the map," wrote the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his novel *Émile*. "He is taught the names of towns, countries, rivers, which have no existence for him except on the paper before him. I remember seeing a geography somewhere which began with: 'What is the world?'—'A sphere of cardboard.' That is the child's geography." Who wouldn't want to rebel against that, to insist that geography should be something more? Even as recently as 2002, Rick Bein's Indiana study showed that students were actually better at identifying place-names than they were at basic map skills. In linguistic terms, we're still teaching them the words but not the grammar and then being surprised that they can't speak the language.

But I wonder if geographers haven't brought some of their marginalization on themselves by shunning maps—the only thing that laypeople know about their discipline—so thoroughly. You'd never be able to attract respect (or students or funding) to a college literature program if the prevailing attitude there to books was "Oh, those old things? We never look at *them* anymore." Peirce Lewis warned in 1985 that geographers were pooh-poohing the public's love for maps and landscapes at their own peril: "I know of no other science worth the name that denigrates its basic data by calling them 'mere description,'" he said. Many academic geographers entered the field because of a childhood love of maps; now they should embrace them again, as a gateway drug if nothing else. Once a student is looking at a map, you can dive into how geography *explains* the map: why this city is on this river, why this canyon is deeper than that one, why the language spoken here is related to the one spoken there—even, perhaps, why this nation is rich and that one is poor.

Media coverage of geographic illiteracy tends to take it as a self-evident article of faith that schoolchildren not being able to find Canada is a biblical sign of the Apocalypse. Amid all the hand-wringing, one question is never asked: could the Miami pool hunk be right? Does