

## TRANSFORMING THE ORDINARY

### Background and Context

*If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either.*

-Thich Nhat Hanh (Peace is Every Step)

Earlier in these explorations, we discussed how seemingly separate things in the natural world in fact relate, coexist and depend on one another. Here we will endeavor to integrate our knowledge of natural systems in order to get a picture of this interconnectedness and its impacts. We are not separate from natural systems—all of our daily choices are connected to the natural world. This exercise is a search for our connection to the natural world, a search for origins. We will explore an everyday object—its composition, history, realms of impact, everything about it—and, through our collective knowledge, produce a “collaborative story” of sorts. We will be reminded that seemingly simple objects are in fact related to a “web” of other things. We are going to transform the ordinary.

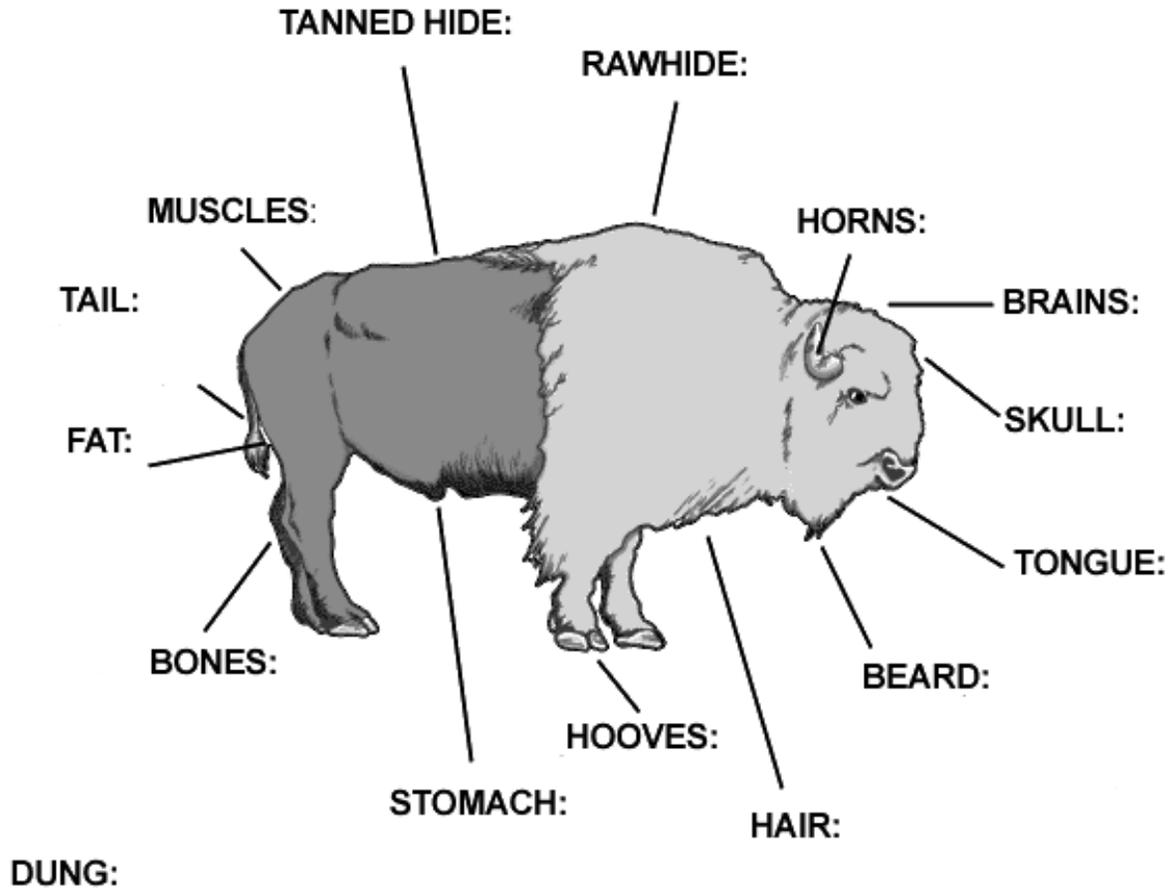
### Check In

Please tell a quick story about an object in your possession here today—your clothes, your pack, your watch, even objects such as your "hair"—that no one would be able to know about just by looking at it. For example, "This watch was a gift on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. It has an engraving on the back of it saying as much. It doesn't work, yet I continue to wear it because my twin sister got the same watch on her sixteenth birthday—we opened them together—and it reminds me of her."

### Warmup: The Buffalo

We begin our investigation by traveling across this country to the Great Plains and back in time and to visit *the* locus of spiritual, ornamental, functional, and necessary purpose for the Plains Indians. Specifically, let's explore the buffalo and its multifaceted intersection in the everyday life of the Plains Indians, a people who “wasted” very little. This image will function as a juxtaposition to the everyday objects of our time, one of which will be the main focus of today's lab (see below). We will see in this comparison how the buffalo embodies sustainability and how our contemporary patterns of production and consumption are, in a sense, the inverse of the buffalo model. That is, the Plains Indians used one source to make many products, whereas today's civilization uses many sources to make one product. To be sure, we cannot be too simplistic in forming this relation, as it is evident that the economic bottom line in our culture yields great imagination in the transformation of "waste" into money. That is, we can find as many uses for the Buffalo as did the Plains Indians, but our uses would be products of means, not ends.

(Graphic courtesy of South Dakota State Historical Society)



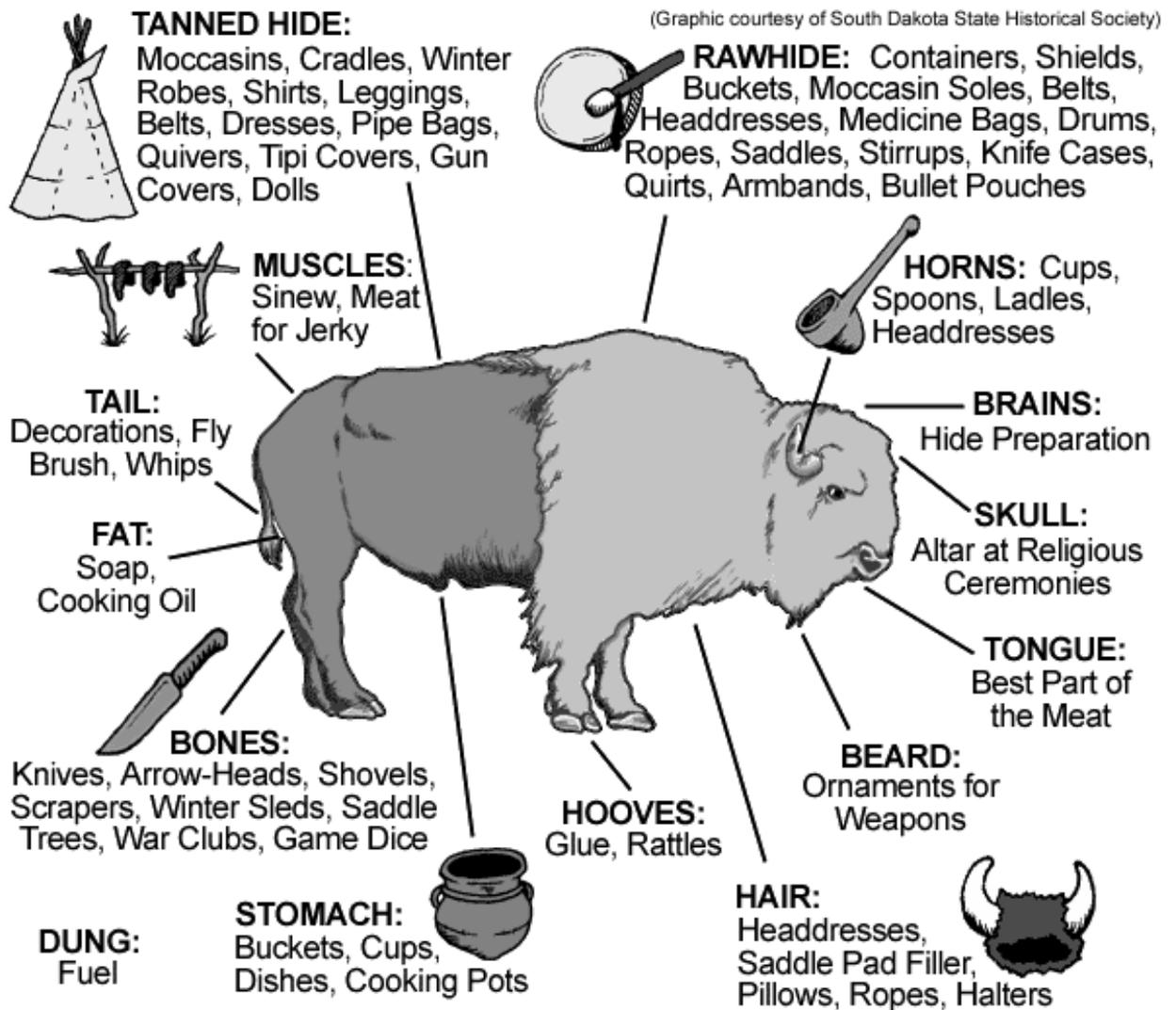
\* the image above outlines the anatomical features of the buffalo.

\* Imagine yourself "stranded" in the middle of the plains with nothing but a primitive weapon (rifle, bow-and-arrow, spear). This hypothetical daydream may sound something like this: "You are hungry, and have been wandering in search of food for several days. The stash of dried chokecherries and wild-turnips in your pack is running out. Winter is coming soon. You know that in order for you and your family to survive you must find the buffalo herd you have been searching for. There is a sense of desperation. Then, in the distance, the sound of thunder, then clouds of dust. . . . then, you see them, the buffalo. You are a good hunter, and before you know it, you are sitting around a campfire with your family after a delicious meal of buffalo steak. Most of the buffalo, however, you have not used. You know you must be thankful for the gift of the buffalo and use it wisely. You cannot waste any of it. What do you do with the rest of the buffalo?"

\* Some possibilities. For example, "We can carve the bones into knives," or "We can smoke the remaining meat into pemmican or jerky," or "I know that the brain can be used as a bleach for the hide."

\* This brainstorm is meant to be oral—a dynamic discussion that will prepare us for the main exercise. Have fun with this brainstorm and keep options open. No answer is a wrong answer. Creativity is key.

\* Now, here is what the Plains Indians did with Buffalo in situations similar to yours:



## **Central Exercise: Transforming the Ordinary**

(inspired by M. Thomashow, *Ecological Identity*)

### ***The Activity***

- \* Break into groups of 3 to 4 people.
- \* Each group should have some drawing utensils and paper.
- \* Each group also has a box of commercial French Fries or another similarly contemporary food object.
- \* In the center of your drawing space, draw the given object, then take a few moments to explore and think about the object itself. Think about its origins and how it was produced, its current use and form, its destiny. The emphasis here is on OBSERVATION and QUESTIONS!
- \* Now we're ready to create this object's story. The central question at this point is: ***What did it take to get this object to the place where it sits in front of you.*** Don't leave anything out! Begin by drawing some aspect of the object's story and connecting it to the object with a line.
- \* It's often easiest to first break the object down into components (i.e. the box, salt, and French Fries) and then to trace the origins of each component and how they were assembled. For instance, we might begin by examining the components separately. In looking at the French Fries themselves, we might begin by drawing a potato and connecting it to the Fries. Then we might connect the potato to a field and farmer. The field could be connected to potato plants, sun, water, the soil, a tractor, etc. We might then connect the tractor to gasoline, steel, a factory, rubber, etc.
- \* Continue tracing the object's origins, current use and possible destiny. Be thorough. Think about all the inputs. Don't forget to include all the energy that goes into transportation of individual ingredients to centralized locations where cooking, packaging, etc., occur...nor all the on-farm inputs—pesticides, fertilizers—and their manufacture and transport to the farmer's fields. Remember, everything must come from and return to somewhere. Pool the knowledge of the group to make the connections. Try not to write words in this exercise
- \* After about 20-25 minutes, you will have the opportunity to present and explain your diagram to the entire group.

### ***Discussion Questions***

- \* How did each of our diagrams differ? How did we get the knowledge of the object that we have?
- \* What is the destiny of this object after it leaves our hands?
- \* What is the value of the study object while we consume it: Is it functional? Is it indulgent? Is it necessary? Is it sacred?
- \* How different is this object from any other in our culture?
- \* There are now 300 million (U.S.) Americans; in 2040 there will be 9 billion humans on this planet. Notice that each line drawn on our diagram represents the utilization of energy and/or matter. Recognize that: 1) this matter and energy comes from somewhere, 2) it goes somewhere, and 3) both 1 and 2 have an ecological impact. Simply put, everything we do and consume in our civilization is intricately woven into the fabric (thus, health) of the planet. Two questions: 1) Do you think our planet is

healthy? 2) Do you think our civilization (that is, in essence, all these lines on our diagram) impacts the health of the planet to any significant extent?

- \* Here's a big question. Is a box of French Fries *inherently* toxic to the planet? Why or why not?
- \* Compare the diagram of the fries to the diagram of the buffalo. How do these examples compare to and/or contradict one another?

### ***The Central Message***

It is mentally and emotionally difficult to begin a discussion of the impact that humans have on the earth. The topic is just so overwhelming. The connections diagram we drew today is a useful tool because it allows us to break down everyday objects or activities into manageable bits. It gives us a way to focus our thought. The diagram makes visible the dependencies we often don't have the opportunity to see, yet even think about. Using the commercial French Fries example, we can witness our dependence on energy-intensive agriculture, pesticide and herbicide use, fossil-fuel-dependent transport systems, refrigeration units, waste disposal, and many other things we depend on when we buy a box of fries. In order to increase the amount of null and positive impacts that humans have on the earth and decrease the amount of negative ones, we must first *become aware* of our current impacts—all of them. Through utilizing a connections diagram, we make the invisible visible and in doing so become more mindful. *That* is transforming the ordinary.

### **Take-Away Quote**

*We are involved now in a profound failure of imagination. Most of us cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. Most people cannot imagine the forest and the forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams, and the weather that fill their pitchers and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money for these things they have entirely met their obligations.*

—Wendell Berry, "In Distrust of Movements"

## OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: TRANSFORMING THE ORDINARY

### Option 1: Where will it go?

In "transforming the ordinary," you have seen the great amounts of energy, material, distance, and ingenuity embedded in the everyday objects of our civilization. To a certain extent, you can look around here, find an ordinary object, and say, "This comes from everywhere." What next? Here are the twin questions of this field study: *Where will it go? What will it become?* The task is rather simple: Spend a day asking this question to everything that you encounter: to your bedroom walls, your house or hall, the sidewalk, your shoes, the bus or car or bike you ride, to everything. Ask the question of the thing, then try to answer it yourself. Where will it go? What will it become? **Compose a response piece to this exercise**, being sure to include what you feel, what you think, what you know and what you don't know, and what questions this raises for you.

### Option 2: Our "Yeses" and "Nos"

It has been said that our 'yeses' and our 'nos' create the world. In other words, what we say 'yes' to and what we say 'no' have far-ranging impacts. To explore this idea, let's suppose that you buy a bag of Frito-Lay Corn Chips after class today. With that purchase, ask yourself, "what are three things I am saying 'yes' to, and what are three things I am saying 'no' to?" Now, what are the VALUES implicit in your 3 yeses and your 3 nos. In other words, with those yeses and nos, what are you saying is important to you. What are you saying that you value?

Over the next week, you might have occasion to spend money shopping. If you are like most people, you buy in a rush ... which is to say that you don't pause very long before making your purchases.... which means that you probably don't allow time to consider how your personal values might be affirmed (supported) or violated (contradicted) by the individual purchases you are about to make.

For this option, we ask that you break this pattern by PAUSING on **two separate occasions** before you purchase something. After "pausing," actually consider what values are being affirmed or violated in the purchase you are about to make. Specifically, for this assignment we ask that you literally STOP after picking out something that you intend to buy—**STOP** when you literally have the desired object in your hand—and, then, BEFORE making your purchase consider three things you would be saying 'yes' to and three things you would be saying 'no' should you proceed ahead with your purchase? Consider, as well, the degree to which your choice to purchase this item will either support or violate one or more of the five core sustainability values listed in the below. After your deliberation, depending on what you arrive at, go ahead and buy (or don't buy) the item in your hands.

### **The Five Values of Sustainability**

1. *Life on Earth supports us.*
2. *There are limits that we must live within.*
3. *The market is amoral—it is not a good guide.*
4. *We must accord respect to the local*
5. *We must share power and wealth.*

**Compose a response piece** summarizing what you learned through this "slowing down" process, and how you did it.