American Studies Graduate Workshop and Conference 2011: “Representing ‘America(s)’” and “American Cultures in a Digital Age”

By Laura Carpenter, Associate Professor of Sociology, and Bonnie Dow, Associate Professor of Communication Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies

The Stars and Stripes waving from a flagpole. Mark Twain’s comic novel *Innocents Abroad* (1869). Dorothea Lange’s black-and-white photographs of migrant farmers in the 1930s. Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel’s haunting 1972 single, “America,” recounting a young couple’s adventures on the road. The 2011 film, Captain America: The First Avenger, featuring the 1940s comic book character. These items all share the aim of representing America and Americans. Yet, despite—or perhaps because of—that shared purpose, they encompass a range of viewpoints that is wide as well as conflicting.

We sought to capture this diversity of perspectives and of media when we designed the American Studies Graduate Workshop (AMER 300) for spring 2011. By naming the workshop “Representing ‘America(s),’” we hoped to draw attention to historical and contemporary contests over the concepts and practices of *America, Americans,* and *American-ness,* particularly as they are represented in verbal and visual public discourses. We intended the quotation marks and parenthetical “s” as a reminder that there is no unitary notion of “America;” indeed, notions of what constitutes national identity are multiple, complicated, and contradictory.

As a humanist (Dow) and social scientist (Carpenter) who both work across traditional disciplines, we sought to model interdisciplinary inquiry for our students, encouraging them to create and explore links between their own home disciplines (history, literature, and sociology), the themes of the seminar, and American Studies generally. How different disciplines understand and approach the same issue/topic was a perennial topic of discussion during our weekly meetings.

We began the semester by investigating the nature, identity, and practices of American Studies, focusing on how scholars in the discipline have understood and represented themselves over time, especially in *American Quarterly,* the flagship journal of the American Studies Association. From there, we proceeded to investigate four broad themes, each week reading a scholarly book and a related essay from *AQ.* In our examination of “Representing American Identities/Citizenship,” we considered not only the survey research pioneered by twentieth-century American social scientists (as discussed in Vanderbilt historian Sarah Igo’s book *The Averaged American*), but also queer U.S. rural youth’s engagement (or lack thereof) with diverse mass media, including social media. We discussed our second theme, “Representing Crisis in America,” in relation to the Farm Security Administration’s photographic documentation of the Great Depression as well as the role of U.S. television in representing Black civil rights activism. In a unit on “Representing American Bodies,” we focused on the rise of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology in U.S. health care and on changes wrought by the women’s health movement during U.S. feminism’s second wave. We rounded out the semester with a section on “Representing America(ns) Abroad and the ‘Other’ at Home,” using case studies of Israeli Birthright tourism targeted at U.S. Jews (as discussed in Vanderbilt sociolo-
DIRECTOR’S NOTE

I hope you enjoy reading about the various projects that the American Studies Program has accomplished in the past year in this newsletter. From an amazing conference on "American Cultures in the Digital Age," organized by Bonnie Dow and Laura Carpenter, to accounts from undergraduate and graduate students of the programs they have been involved with, the newsletter gives you a snapshot of the initiatives that make American Studies a distinct interdisciplinary program.

This year, American Studies will be leading a campus-wide conversation on the topic of sustainability. Titled, "The Sustainability Project," our program consists of courses, eminent speaker series, a documentary film series, road trips, and many other collaborative events. We will kick off the project with our keynote speaker, Bill McKibben, on September 22 at 5pm at Ingram Hall, Blair School of Music. We hope you can join us for this and many other events. Please see our website and the back page of this newsletter for more details. You can also find us on Facebook or sign up for our weekly email blasts (by emailing americanstudies@vanderbilt.edu) that highlight upcoming events.

One of the key initiatives of this project is to increase the curricular offerings at Vanderbilt on the issue of sustainability. In collaboration with the Center for Teaching, American Studies held a cross-disciplinary faculty development program in May 2011 to engage faculty in integrating sustainability into their courses. You can read more about this workshop in this issue on page 6. The workshop will be held again in May 2012 and we encourage all interested faculty to attend.

We look forward to an exciting year as we engage the campus community on the most fundamental and challenging issue of our time—sustainability.

Teressa Goddu
Director of the Program in American Studies

American Studies Senior Project 2011:
The Civil War Sesquicentennial

By: Katherine Do Perez

In the last six months or so before I graduated, conversations became fairly predictable. The details might have changed a little, but the core of the conversation was always, "What are you doing next year?", which is really a more subtle way of saying, "What are you doing with your life?" Somehow the former question is supposed to sound less daunting than the latter.

In some circles the answer to this question falls within a narrow range. American Studies majors are harder to figure out. In a 2011 graduating class of fewer than ten, there was a student who was perfectly comfortable not knowing exactly what she was going to do in the upcoming year. Even the only one who was perfectly comfortable not knowing exactly what she was going to do in the upcoming year, but next year’s class is just as likely to have a future lawyer as to have a future art historian. Given this range of paths, it might sound as if American Studies were an erratic kind of major for people who just don’t know what they want to do with themselves. The opposite is true, though. American Studies
I Report from the Dartmouth Futures of American Studies
By: Sarah Tyson, American Studies Futures Fellow [Philosophy]

20-hour a day schedule of lectures, workshops, and socializing over by the Institute’s Director and prime mover, CONTINUED

ate students and junior faculty from different disci-

it looked on paper. And boot camp is perhaps the best name for

in actual practice hundreds of academics would not keep up a

monuments in Middle Tennessee related to the

Civil War. This course and the capstone road trip (and also the

fantastic posters we made for it) are the perfect example of why

a person would bother to study the idea of a place, much less the

place itself. We started staubly by making our way to a site with which many Nashvillians are familiar, and learned about the intentionality of the words carved out in the granite along the “Pathway of History.” We drove past the Battle of Nashville Monument on Granny White, of which most of us moosed, “I never even noticed that before”—often followed by a comment like, “It’s ugly.”

These monuments didn’t just grow up out of the ground overnight, but many of us had never taken the time to really look at them. Our road trip is just one example of how American Studies helped us to question the landscape around us—both physical and conceptual—and the cultural context from which it emerged. Now I can’t go to a historical marker without “reading” it. I’m sure it annoys my friends, but it’s part of what I gained from American Studies at Vanderbilt. American Studies helped me learn the power of narrative, and how narrative builds the country around us.

You can view a short video of the American Studies road trip on the American Studies website at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/ameri-
canstudies/videos.php.

At the Institute I attend, the morning and evening lectures given by the leading scholars of American Studies covered a vast territory. Some nodes of common interest emerged during the course of the lectures—the Haitian Revolution, for instance. Even then, however, the lectures’ approaches to the subject were diverse. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, one of the Institute’s co-directors and professor of English at Northeastern University, treated period drawings of slaves on sugar plantations in Saint Domingue. Kaiser Bahn, professor of English at Dartmouth, treated contemporary Caribbean science fiction, such as Midnight Robber. Both, however, illuminated how representations of Haiti have been shaped by and shape how we imagine the Americas. And, as was the norm at the Institute, both engaged in lively conversation with the audience after their lectures until Pease had to intercede and introduce the next speaker.

As a philosophy student, I was in the minority, surrounded predominately by scholars and students of English. Although, Nancy Fraser, professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, gave one of the evening lectures, offering a feminist re-reading of Karl Polanyi’s ‘The Great Transformation.’ Neither Fraser nor I were made to feel out of place, however, at the intellectually vigorous and engaged Institute. Not only was my interest in American Studies deepened by the experience and my base of knowledge greatly expanded, I also received substantial and formative feedback on my work. That feedback came during

Creative Work: Tattooing in the American Service Economy
By: Sarah Glynn, American Studies Dissertation Fellow [Sociology]

T he service sector is undeniably one of the most important components of the modern American economy. In the wake of the Great Recession, the majority of new jobs created have been service jobs; these are workers who all of us routinely encounter in our daily lives. Yet, when one thinks of service work, we tend to think of the jobs with the lowest wages, and the lowest prestige. A hefty chunk of the service industry is made up of these types of jobs—the baristas who makes your morning coffee, the restaurant server who brings you your meal, the sales associate who refolds the clothes you just tried on. Work scholars have also tended to focus on these jobs when studying the service economy; but it does not tell us the entire story. Service jobs are those that are based in interactions with customers, rather than the manufacturing of products. This encompasses a broad range of occupations, from fast food workers to physi-
cians. Yet, more highly skilled service providers have been largely ignored in academic research.

Just as scholars and laypeople imagine the industry as being composed of low skill occupations, the tattoo industry tends to be similarly marginalized.

On the one hand, an ever-increasing number of reality shows based in tattoo shops present tattooists as skilled artists.

Yet in the popular imagination, and often in academic literature, there are still lingering associations to “deviant” groups like bikers, punks, gang and others who live in the margins. The place of tattooing in American society is further complicated by tattooer’s ever increasing popularity: nearly half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 40 have at least one tattoo. Tattooing is an increasingly popular industry within an ever-growing sector of our economy, yet very rarely has it been analyzed as a form of work.

In my dissertation research, I have sought to understand how the work of tattooing happens, both for artists and the clients they work with. The dominant literature on the service industry has tended to assume that service provision occurs within highly-bureaucratized, hierarchically-organized firms where workers are caught between the demands of management and the needs of their clients. Management expects them to quickly serve as many people as possible in order to maximize profits, while customers often expect ever more involved forms of emotional labor. Service workers are thought to be caught in the middle of this triangle, torn between the competing demands of quantity versus quality, within a framework where “the customer is always right.”

This is certainly true for many service occupations, but there are an increasing number of entrepreneurial service professionals whose work is creative, collaborative, time-intensive, and highly personal. Tattoo artists are part of this group, as are photographers, and graphic designers among other professions.

Tattooing as an occupation is neither hierarchical nor bureaucratic, and the services that tattooists individualized and often deeply personal—worlds away from the standardized and routinized interactions and products produced in many other service occupa-
tions. Clients come into their encounters with tattooists seeking to have some aspect of their identity reflected back to them through the interaction, whether it be their artistic nature, their rebellious spirit, or the commemoration of a significant life event. And artists understand their work through the lens of their clients’ needs, while simul-
taneously seeking to affirm their own unique and individ-
ual personalities and aesthetics. In tattoo-
ing, the customer is always right, except when the tattooist is more right.

Tattooing is a highly-skilled profession that required years of training to master, and indeed, like all art forms, is never fully perfected, but occurs within a culture that is ambiguous at best regarding its reception and esteem. Because of this, tattoo-
ists find themselves struggling to establish themselves as experts within their own domain. Their lack of widely acknowledged pro-
fessional prestige, combined with the collaborative nature of their work that required tattooists to place a premium on their desires of their clients, can produce tension-filled encounters that have to be delicately navigated. Part of developing a reputation as a successful tattooist depends upon learning to traverse these potentially prob-
lematic interactions. The work of tattooing is thus about far more than artfully injecting ink under someone’s skin, but also about learning to read people, anticipate their needs, unpick their often ill-defined aesthetic desires, and manage their emotions, while simultaneously striving to gain their respect and establish authority.

It is still service work, but it is about as far away from the world of McDonalds as one could get. This case study illustrates that the academic study of work still has a long way to go in under-
standing the service industry, and the complex range of occupa-
tions within it.
one of the afternoon workshops, in which students and junior scholars share their work. With each participant granted an hour, there is time for each person to present his or her work in some detail and for in-depth discussion of it. My advice: Be ready to think about your own project in new ways when your turn comes.

The scholars who give main program lectures are asked to stay for at least two days of the Institute so that students and junior scholars can invite them to their workshop sessions. Also, the afternoon sessions are each led by a scholar who has participated in several past Institutes. The result is, therefore, not only do workshop participants receive excellent feedback from their peers. At least one and, if you’re bold enough to ask, several of the leading scholars in American Studies will constructively respond to your work in progress. And, one does not actually have to be bold enough to ask. Pease is so committed to intergenerational exchange and supporting early career work, he is glad to take a moment from his duties as ring master to ask for you, as are the workshop leaders. In other words, the Institute really is committed to supporting the development of American Studies, and participants directly benefit from that commitment.

I wasn’t sure, preparing for the Institute, if I really belonged in American Studies. I knew my work was heading in that direction, but I felt I was taking a chance by attending the Institute. Maybe it was the inevitable outcome of boot-camp training, but after a week at the Institute, those worries fell away. I left Dartmouth with new friends and colleagues across the country and a multi-page reading list rivaled only by my Netflix queue. The Institute welcomes even the faint of heart, just don’t expect to leave that way.

The discussions were organized into four main areas: teaching sustainability, connecting to place, interdisciplinary, and institutional transformation. Within these areas, the participants had group discussions facilitated by American Studies and Center for Teaching staff. They also heard from various presentations by resource faculty, including Vanderbilt’s Beth Conklin (Anthropology) on teaching social dimensions of sustainability; Steve Baskauf (Biological Sciences) and the trees and ecology of the Vanderbilt campus; David Wood (Philosophy) on teaching social dimensions of sustainability, connecting to place, interdisciplinary, and being courageous in developing “participatory fluency” with disciplines that are not one’s own; and Jonathan Gilligan (Earth and Environmental Sciences) and Andrea George, on opportunities to further institutionalize sustainability education.

The many ways to connect with issues of sustainability in course projects

The many unique and complementary contributions our disciplines make to the study of sustainability

The need for and challenges of interdisciplinarity in sustainability education, including overcoming disciplinary languages and perspectives, and being courageous in developing “participatory fluency” with disciplines that are not one’s own

Visions for Vanderbilt sustainability initiatives and their integration into all of the university’s living and learning environments

Next steps for creating a more sustainable Vanderbilt by building on existing resources and further institutionalizing critical thinking about sustainability.
The Sustainability Project, 2011-12

Join us for a year-long series of programs that will engage the campus community on the issue of sustainability in multiple and creative ways. Our ultimate goal for this year of programming is to create a campus-wide conversation that will embolden Vanderbilt’s efforts toward sustainability while deepening our understanding of what we are working toward.

FALL 2011

**Bill McKibben**, author of *The End of Nature* and *Eaarth*
“Global and Local: Reports from the Fight for a Working Planet”
September 22, 2011, 5:00 p.m. • Ingram Hall, Blair School of Music

**Laura Dassow Walls**, William P. and Hazel B. White, Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame
“Alexander von Humboldt’s American Horizons”
September 29, 2011, 4:10 p.m.

**Gabriel Warren**, Landscape Sculptor
Sponsored by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, College of Arts and Science Dean’s Office, the Department of English, and Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery
October 13, 2011, 5:00 p.m.

**Van Jones**, author of *The Green Collar Economy*
“Rebuild The American Dream: Green Jobs & Beyond”
2011/2012 Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture, Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities
October 19, 2011, 4:10 p.m. • Sarratt Cinema, Sarratt Student Center

**Karl Dean**, Mayor of Nashville
Fall 2011

**Amanda Little**, author of *Power Trip*
Fall 2011

SPRING 2012

**Lewis Hyde**, Richard L. Thomas Professor of Creative Writing at Kenyon College and author of *Common as Air*
“Defending the Cultural Commons”
January 19, 2012, 4:10 p.m.

**Peter Gleick**, Co-founder and President of the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security in Oakland, CA
February 9, 2012, 4:10 p.m.

**Elinor Ostrom**, Nobel Laureate in Economics and Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at Indiana University
“Updating the Theory of Collective Action and the Commons”
March 1, 2012, 4:10 p.m.

**David Bollier**, Senior Fellow at the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication
“The Commons as a Counterpoint to the Market/State Duopoly”
March 29, 2012, 4:10 p.m.

See our website for other programming: A Green Bag Lunch Series, “Green Screen”—a documentary film series, road trips, and more!

Visit our website: [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/americanstudies/sustainability/](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/americanstudies/sustainability/)
Find us on Facebook: “American Studies at Vanderbilt University”

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