

Newsletter of the Program in American Studies

Vanderbilt University

Fall 2008

American Studies Graduate Workshop and Conference 2008:

Academic*Activist*Community Collaborations

In spring 2008, the first American Studies 300 Graduate Workshop was taught by Dana Nelson (English). Focusing on the subject of “Democracy in Action,” Nelson built the class for those interested in using their learning and knowledge to have an impact on the world “beyond the ivory tower,” with the understanding that making such connections between our intellectual work and our work as citizens is a project that is neither simple nor transparent.

The course was aimed at graduate students committed to using what they learned about democracy to make a difference in their communities both in their role as experts and as citizens. It offered an interdisciplinary approach to democracy theory, policy and practice, and to the cultural knowledge and strategies students need to make an impact in our increasingly diverse communities and workplaces—and to be open to their productive impacts on themselves and their own work as citizens and scholars. The course studied theories and empirical studies of U.S. democracy, activism, volunteerism, and the policy process. It also introduced students to participatory research models, and asked them to consider community perspectives on building partnerships between universities and communities, requiring them to develop their own participatory project with a local Nashville activist or volunteer organization, and to consult with numerous organizers and activists in the Nashville and Middle Tennessee community. Students partnered with such organizations as Nashville Adult Literacy Council, Urban EpiCenter, and the Human Rights Campaign, and their final project for the class was conducted in-service to their chosen partner organization, and evaluated in coordination with that organization.

As part of the class, Nelson, the American Studies Program, and numerous graduate students organized a conference entitled “Academic*Activist*Community Collaborations: A Roundtable.” The two-day event launched with an Activists’ Tour of Nashville—

co-sponsored by Vanderbilt American Studies, Nashville Homeless Power Project, Urban EpiCenter, and Kilowatt Ours—that featured a bus tour of Nashville organized and led by representatives for the groups, and challenged students and faculty to consider possible participatory research partnerships with the various groups.

The second day of the conference concentrated on the challenges and promises of such partnerships, from the perspective of seven nationally prominent speakers who have built successful academic-community partnerships from a variety of disciplinary

perspectives. The speakers—Anna Bartel (Bates, Associate Director, Harvard Center for Community Partnerships), Joy James (Williams, Africana Studies and Political Science), Amy Koritz (Tulane, English), Wolfgang Natter (Virginia Tech, Political Science and Director, ASPECT), William Stott (UNC, Director, Abermarle Field Site), Todd Vogel (International Sustainability Institute, Seattle), Karen Werner (Goddard and UMass, Amherst, Sociology and North Quabbin Time Bank)—addressed such questions as, How do we go about making productive, ethical, responsible connections between our intellectual work and our work as citizens? How do we go about making professional, civically ethical and mutually advantageous partnerships with local organizations and communities? How do we find and/or create conceptual spaces and practices for participatory research and



Scholars, students, and community activists tour downtown Nashville as part of the 2008 Vanderbilt American Studies Conference.

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Director's Note

We've had another exciting year in American Studies as we continue to expand our program. This past year we introduced a number of new initiatives for graduate students. In conjunction with our new graduate certificate in American studies, we offered a graduate workshop titled "Democracy in Action," led by Dana Nelson from the English department, along with a two-day conference on the connections between activist and academic work. We also sponsored our first dissertation fellow at the Robert Penn Warren Center, George Sanders from Sociology, who wrote a dissertation on the American funeral industry (you can read more about his dissertation research on page 4). Over the summer, we sponsored two graduate students (one from English and one from Philosophy) to attend the Dartmouth Institute on "The Futures of American Studies."

At the undergraduate level, we offered an array of courses on topics ranging from Cold War culture and Bob Dylan to the Gilded Age and the social history of dance. We also continued our popular Road Trip Series, which extends the classroom by introducing students to our area's rich cultural resources. On these trips, students, faculty, and staff learned about the role class plays in country music during a visit to the Country Music Hall of Fame; communal living experiments at "The Farm"; the relationship between architecture, religion, and music at a tour of Nashville's Houses of Worship; and the history of slavery on a visit to Belle Meade Mansion. I would like to extend a warm thank you to the faculty who led these trips: Dale Cockrell (Musicology), Susan Kevra (American Studies), Robin Jenson (Divinity), and Richard Blackett (History). If you have an idea for a Road Trip or would like to lead one in conjunction with a course that you are offering, please let me know.

This past year we also welcomed a new administrator to the program, Ashley Crownover. Ashley is an amazing resource for the program and lots of fun to work with. She brings to us her expertise as an editor and web designer. She also recently published her first novel, *Wealthew: Her Telling of Beowulf*.

I would like to thank two faculty members who will be leaving our program. Dean Masullo, who served as our lecturer for two years, brought enthusiastic and innovative teaching to the program. He not only drew many majors to the program, but also served as a model for interdisciplinary teaching. John Stuhr, W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy and a valued member of the American Studies Advisory Board, was instrumental to the program's restructuring in the last few years. We wish John well as he joins the faculty at Emory University.

Looking ahead to this year, we are planning a number of events around the election: a roundtable on the topic of presidentialism this fall and a spring conference on the role identity politics played in the election. We also have Road Trips planned to the Hermitage and Shaker Village. Please check our website (www.vanderbilt.edu/americanstudies) for specifics. We hope you can join us for these and other events.

I am grateful to be part of such a vibrant and vital interdisciplinary community and look forward to working with faculty and students from across the university again this year. Please let me know if you have any ideas or suggestions for the program.

—Teresa Goddu

Academic*Activist*Community Collaborations *continued from page 1*

teaching? How might we use our research and/or teaching to create partnerships grounded in sustainability, interdisciplinarity, and sense of place? How might we move beyond the transmission belt concept of knowledge as power and ask what it will take to translate our thinking and concepts into concrete changes? How do we imagine the public work of academics? How do we create partnerships that manage simultaneously to clarify the aims of academic research/higher education, the aims of activist/community engagement, and the resources that will be needed to responsibly sustain these partnerships? How do we confront police-state challenges to political

activism? How does our orientation toward knowledge creation and definition of expertise—particularly in the humanities—begin to shift, once we start trying to do real-world problem solving?

As an interdisciplinary venture, the conference was a success, drawing scholars from most of the university's units, including Peabody, the Divinity School, the Medical School, and the College of Arts and Science. In addition to encouraging participants to consider the issues at hand, connections were made that will help further collaborative work in American studies at Vanderbilt.

American Studies Road Trip Series 2007-2008

In conjunction with Vanderbilt's new Freshman Commons, the American Studies Program sponsored a series of road trips last year. Visits to the Country Music Hall of Fame, The Farm, Belle Meade Plantation, and a tour of Nashville Houses of Worship introduced Vanderbilt students to the rich cultural resources and pressing issues of our city and region. Each trip was led by a faculty expert and included discussions or workshops along with delicious Southern fare. Below, Professor Robin Jensen profiles the Nashville Houses of Worship road trip.

Nashville Houses of Worship *February 16, 2008*

by Robin Jensen
Professor, Vanderbilt Divinity School

On Saturday, February 16, American Studies joined the Center for the Study of Religion Culture's God in Music City program to offer a road trip to six Nashville houses of worship. A group of forty or so (a combination of Vanderbilt students and folks from the Nashville Community) climbed on a big bus early that morning and set off on a day-long tour that included stops at Downtown Presbyterian Church, Christ Church Cathedral, Corinthian Missionary Baptist Church, Vine Street Christian Church, First Unitarian Church of Nashville, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, and Congregation Micah.

The tour was designed to present the distinctive architectural and musical styles of these six different worshipping communities in Nashville. Downtown Presbyterian (built 1851 and designed by William Strickland, the architect of the Tennessee State Capitol), the first stop, is one of the finest examples of Egyptian Revival style in the US. Today it is a lively inner city church with an active ministry to the homeless as well as a place where a number of Nashville artists have found a welcome. While there the group was treated to an impromptu concert by singer and member Julie Lee, as well as a tour of the artists' studios now housed in several partially renovated and light-filled studios in the church's upper floors. The next stop, a tour of Christ Church Cathedral, the seat of the Episcopal Bishop of Tennessee, provided a dramatic contrast. Within this

Rabbi Philip Rice welcomes the group to Congregation Micah. (Photo by John Brassil)



traditional Victorian Gothic revival building (designed by Francis Hatch Kimball of New York and completed in 1888), the group was

treated to a brief concert of classical music performed on the church's new Lively-Fulcher organ by Jon Johnson. From there the group went to Corinthian Missionary Baptist church, where they were able to sit in on an energetic choir rehearsal, led by music minister Harmon Stockdale and shared a lunch of barbecued pork and southern-fried chicken with the hospitable church members.

After lunch the group headed south to Vine Street Christian church, built in the late 1950's by the noted Nashville architect Edwin Keeble (designer of many well-known Nashville churches) where they heard the men's cappella quintet Schola Pacis presenting selections of Palestrina, Gregorian chant, and Sacred Harp music. From Vine Street the bus veered over to Green Hills to the site of the First Unitarian Church, a 1960s building modeled on Frank Lloyd Wright's Unitarian Church in Madison Wisconsin. Met there by music minister Jason Shelton, bus riders joined the choir for a lively hymn sing. The day continued with visits to Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church with an explanation of its architecture and icons and a demonstration of Greek chant by cantor Leonidas Kotsiris. The tour ended with a special Havdalah service marking the end of Sabbath at Congregation Micah led by Rabbi Philip Rice and Education Director Julie



Tour participants listen in on choir rehearsal at Corinthian Missionary Baptist Church. (Photo by John Brassil)

Greenberg. Congregation Micah's splendid contemporary building, built in 1992 and designed by Michael Landau Associates, has won many architectural awards for its tree of life design.

The day was long, but the experiences were rich, and the communities exceptionally warm and welcoming. The intersections among worship practices, music, sacred space, and theology were rich. The only problem was keeping the group on schedule, and the visits always seemed too short!

Exploring
the American
funeral industry

Dissertation Research: Marketing Death

by George Sanders, *American Studies Dissertation Fellow (Sociology)*

With the help of the American Studies program, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, and the Department of Sociology, I have been able to engage in some truly fascinating fieldwork. Attending funeral trade shows, enrolling in an embalming course, traveling to museums, and notable funeral homes and cemeteries were just some of the things that I have been able to do. My dissertation research into the contemporary American funeral industry has left me bewildered by two seemingly incompatible impressions. First, everything truly can, in fact, be commodified. Second, in spite of that fact, marking the death of someone is still incredibly painful and is continues to be terrifying for me.

My research also included quite a few interviews and one such interviewee was a funeral director I'll call "Randy." Like nearly every one of my respondents, Randy defied the common stereotype that depicts morticians as somber, reticent, inward, and a tad peculiar. Randy is animated to the point of exuberance, charming, and outgoing. And, maybe he is just a little peculiar (his pre-arranged funeral has a Liberace theme), but only in a good way. Randy also happens to be incredibly genuine and compassionate. I knew he had formerly been employed as the pastor of a church in a small, Tennessee town so one day I asked him how he got to be in the funeral profession. He explained that the funeral director in town was a member of his church and had asked Randy for his help one day with some bereaved clients. "Afterwards," Randy told me, "The funeral director said, 'You need to come work for me.' And I said, 'You're crazy.' I told him, 'I don't like dead people—they make me nervous!! And I don't like cemeteries either, and hearses, well, they put me in a fetal position. So, no thank you!'"

Much later, Randy did come to work for that funeral director and has remained in the "dismal trade" ever since. Randy's initial fears resonated with the dread I experience to this day when it comes death, dead bodies, and funerals—the recognition of which contributes to the enormous respect I have for the individuals who are able to do funeral work. It's a tough job. The chemicals are carcinogenic, and the transportation of lifeless bodies is physically demanding, sometimes even backbreaking work.

And then there's the work that goes on with the living—people who might be more accurately described as the living dead—bereft, overwhelmed, afraid, and paralyzed with grief. The tragedy of their circumstances sometimes leave them wishing that they themselves were dead.

Funeral workers are indeed quite special. They seem to maintain stores of existential and emotional capital that the rest of us likely lack. They also have to contend with the forces of "McDonaldization," which routinizes their work, makes them more expendable, and oftentimes elides their statuses as community caretakers. Also, they must face a public that is all too familiar with mortuarial mishaps and underhanded undertakers that on occasion become the foci of popular media.

It's hard for me, then, not to celebrate what seems like a newfound euphoria that is beginning to make its way into the charge of these

workers. Though often lampooned in the press, "fun" funerals are becoming more popular. Funerals can be recast as parties complete with various outlets of revelry. Some funeral homes specialize in themed funerals. Other companies launch cremated ashes into space, and some mix them with gunpowder and create a fireworks display.

Some firms that have traditionally been associated with death-care-related services are expanding their scope. There are funeral homes that bill themselves as "events centers" where you can hold anything from weddings to business meetings. There are cemeteries that offer \$100-a-plate dinners for special events, and others have regular movie nights, musical performances, costume parties, and yet another one offers an annual "Gravediggers' Ball." Last summer, I visited Forest Lawn, a cemetery just down the road from Hollywood, California, which had a museum complete with the requisite museum shop, neither of which displayed nor sold anything the slightest bit funereal. Its "chapel" had a cathedral-like façade but its interior resembled a cinema, sans sticky concrete floors.

Increasing numbers of entrepreneurs are utilizing new technologies that allow them to process dead bodies in previously unheard of ways. Dead bodies, for example, can be transformed into wearable jewelry, paintings, fireworks, artificial ocean reefs, crystal stemware, candles, charcoal pencils, furniture, and various forms of décor for one's domicile, among other things.

The American funeral industry generated revenues of a little more than \$15 billion in 2006 and its investors foresee a "boom" in profits as the baby boomers begin to go bust. Its marketing sector itself is gargantuan and as a result there are now products and services available to nearly every confluence of niche imaginable. Self-identified member of the hipoisie? They've got you covered. DaVinci Code fan? Check. Is your zip code 37205 (Belle Meade) and do you like horses, want an eco-friendly casket, a non-sectarian, professional eulogist, and an exclusively-vegan dinner reception and dance party after the burial? Someone can arrange it.

One might imagine that these funerals can be vacuous, vapid, and insincere and I'm sure some are. Some are also mawkish, maudlin affairs and others are boisterous, festive parties. In spite of the fact that funeral directors consistently tell me that their customers laugh more than they cry at funerals these days, funeral attendees still mourn and they still hurt. As Virginia Ironside writes, funerals will always be about "bring[ing] home to all of us that we will never see the dead person ever, ever again. Caput. Finito. End of story. And once you accept that, then you either feel a great peace coming over you, or you feel nothing, or you feel overcome with grief and sadness. Or you feel a cold chill running up and down your spine" (1996: 29). As much as the funeral industry has changed and as much as Americans' sacred rites of passage have been affected by these changes, loss seems to have remained just as terrifying as ever. So, funerals are still painful and sometimes aggravating (but rarely boring), yet almost always crushing and heartbreaking. And I am still, in equal parts, amazed by funeral workers, and unnerved by funeral homes because of all that.

"Funeral directors consistently tell me that their customers laugh more than they cry."

Course Profile: A Dance with History

by Susan Kevra, Lecturer in American Studies; Senior Lecturer in French

AMER 100W:
Social History
of Dance

In American Studies 100W, students study American history, not through battles or infamous uprisings, presidents or political speeches, but through the dances danced on American soil and those who danced them. From Native American tribal dances, replete with spiritual significance, to the muscular in-your-face exuberance of the locking and popping of today's hip hop street performers in South Central LA, dance can explain a great deal about American identity.

At first glance, dance may seem a narrow focus for a semester-long class, but before long, students find spread out before them a vast expanse of historical inquiry with lessons about race, class and gender. The Lindy Hop – which Joel Dinerstein describes as “a mix of skyscraper aspiration and locomotive power” becomes a bodily translation of the Industrial Age, its aerials and leaps not unlike Lindbergh's first trans-Atlantic flight from which the dance's name is allegedly derived. Just as it challenged gravity with its exuberance and athleticism, it also challenged racial attitudes, with Harlem's Savoy Ballroom being one of the first racially integrated social venues in the country.

The class is organized chronologically. A representative sample of topics includes Native American dance, colonial dances in the North and South, religious opposition to dance, the waltz, ragtime dances and Jazz age, the Lindy Hop, Square Dancing, Rock and Roll Dancing and the end of couple dancing, The Contra Dance Revival amongst Back to the Land hippies in the 60s, Disco, Break Dancing and Hip Hop.

In a sense, the material covered does indeed prompt discussion of battles, uprisings, presidents and political speeches, though discussion of these topics happens in more oblique ways. Presidents, for instance, have their place in this course. Thomas Jefferson saw the virtues of daughters learning to dance in an age when social grace would be demonstrated on the dance floor, when physical education took the form of dance. And the study of dance often centers on rebellion and protest, some in the form of social protest, like the rejection of more staid European dances popular at the end of the 19th century in favor of wild, jazz based dances like the Charleston. But dance sometimes finds its way into more contentious arenas. The Ghost dance, devised by the Paiute leader, Wovoka in the late 19th century, was performed by tribes across the American West. More than a simple ceremonial circle dance, it galvanized its participants who believed it would bring about the downfall of the white man and the subsequent return to power of Native Americans. It was also purportedly what instigated the Wounded Knee Massacre.

The materials for the course include books, articles, film, video clips, and works of fiction describing dance. But for students to really

understand the message behind the words they read and images they view, they are also required to dance. The object is not to become an expert dancer, but rather to attempt through their bodies to understand, for example, how the figures in a square dance say something about agrarian ideals of cooperation and conformity. Or how the movements of West African dances resurface on Vanderbilt's Rand Terrace when Black fraternity and sorority members gather to step.

Approximately five times during the school year, the class meets in Alumni Hall to dance with instruction by me or a guest speaker. At our first “dance” class, I teach them a few simple English Country Dances (think Jane Austen films: a line of bright faced young women across from their dapper male counterparts, vigorously capering about to the sound of violins.) The session begins with students predictably

glued to their seats. Forced to surrender the security of immobility, they chose partners, and within about 10 minutes are smiling, cracking up, with the requisite clowning around that Austen herself would have enjoyed. They experience first hand how the dance floor would have allowed prospective mates the only un-chaperoned place to speak freely and touch. And they also come to see how even these seemingly innocent dances would have provoked the ire of conservative colonial leaders, such as Increase Mather, prompting him to write his pamphlet, “An Arrow against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of Scripture.”

Dancing also has a number of benefits that go beyond a better appreciation of the subjects studied. When students have to ask each other to dance, agree to dance, or touch each other, wonderful

side effects occur. They learn each other's names. They see other as human because dancing in front of your peers makes you vulnerable. The risks involved—stepping on someone's toe, stiffly attempting a swing dance move—lead to an openness which carries over into the traditional classroom, with students regularly referencing each other by name in class, treating each other's writing with respect and candor during peer review, and bringing very personal insights and anecdotes to the table.

There's no guarantee that any of my students will go on and become great dancers. But that's not the point. What I want them to take from the class is an ability to think critically about the world they inhabit, to see dance (or fashion or architecture or music) as more than just something in the background, but as cultural productions arising from a response to particular historical moment. And with any luck, this unconventional “hands-on” approach will imprint upon them that the most meaningful learning comes by rolling up your sleeves (or kicking up your heels!)



Students learn to square dance in Alumni Hall.
(Photo by Vanderbilt Photography)

New American Studies Initiatives at Vanderbilt

Graduate Certificate in American Studies

The Program in American Studies is happy to announce a new certificate in American Studies for students enrolled in graduate study at Vanderbilt. Designed to complement students' disciplinary training, expose them to interdisciplinary trends in the academy, and broaden their career possibilities, the American Studies Certificate provides graduate students with training across an array of American Studies disciplines as well as training in interdisciplinary methodology. It teaches students to do innovative and original research as well as to produce scholarship that can reach outside the boundaries of the University and make a contribution to the communities in which they work and live. Further, the American Studies Certificate provides students with a valuable professional credential and strengthens their ability to compete for jobs as well as national fellowships and postdoctoral awards. For more information, contact Teresa Goddu at 615-343-8725 or teresa.a.goddu@vanderbilt.edu.

Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life

The American Studies Program and the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities are co-sponsoring a monthly seminar to provide opportunities for exchange among faculty members who are interested in or who are currently involved in projects that engage public scholarship. The national



organization "Imagining America" is a consortium of colleges and universities committed to public scholarship in the arts, humanities, and design that may be of interest to Vanderbilt faculty. For more information, contact Teresa Goddu (615-343-8725; teresa.a.goddu@vanderbilt.edu) or visit www.imaginingamerica.org.

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