

# AMERICAN STUDIES

Vanderbilt University | Fall 2011

## 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-

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**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 speakers, 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](mailto: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.

Teresa A. Goddu  
*Director of the Program in American Studies*

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gist Shaul Kelner's book *Tours that Bind*) and of photographic, literary, and film images of Japanese Americans from the World War II internment camps to the late twentieth century.

The course culminated with a discussion of students' own research projects, each of which focused on a central question related to the theme of "Representing 'America(s).'" Projects ranged from an analysis of representations of intersex identity in contemporary U.S. news media to an examination of nineteenth-century African-American women's travel narratives.

Halfway through the semester, we paused to enrich this conversation with the American Studies Spring Conference: "American Cultures in a Digital Age." Held on Friday, March 18, 2011, at the Vanderbilt Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy, the conference focused on the ways that the representational challenges and possibilities of digital technologies have altered our experiences and understandings of American cultures. We seldom think of technologies as having national or regional valences, but the invited panelists' presentations left no doubt that they do. For example, uses of and responses to MRI technology differ markedly in the United States, Japan, and Great Britain.

Fostering engaged and effective communication across subject areas was foremost in our minds as we designed the conference. Featured speakers included Cara Finnegan (Communication and Art History, University of Illinois), Eszter Hargitai (Communication Studies and Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University), Kelly Joyce (Sociology, College of William and Mary and Program Director for the Science, Technology, and Society Program, National Science Foundation), and Ted Striphas (Communication and Culture, Indiana University). In addition to the myths and realities surrounding MRI

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**American Studies Senior  
Project 2011:  
The Civil War Sesquicentennial**

*By: Katherine Des Prez*

In the last six months or so before I graduated, conversations became fairly predictable. The details might have changed a little, but the crux 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 going on to study Art History, one who wanted to be a museum curator, one who was going into the fashion industry, one hoping to work in public relations, one (me) going off to study pre-med,

technology, we learned about how the algorithms used by online booksellers shape our experience of books and reading; how demographic trends influence internet use, often in ways contrary to widespread stereotypes about age, gender, and race/ethnicity; and how the Obama White House has used online photo albums to cultivate and control its image.

The lively colloquy that ensued, among invited panelists, graduate students from the workshop and beyond, faculty from across campus, and even a few community members, surpassed even our wildest dreams. It built upon the conversations we had been having thus far during the semester and colored all the discussions that came afterward. Ultimately, the AMER seminar and conference were powerful demonstrations that the kind of interdisciplinary interaction American Studies seeks to foster is alive and well.

*Laura M. Carpenter is Associate Professor of Sociology at Vanderbilt University, author of Virginité Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences, and co-editor of Sex for Life: From Virginité to Viagra, How Sexuality Changes Throughout our Lives. Her current research examines how activists, journalists, medical professionals, clergy, and other stakeholders represent and contest infant male circumcision and female genital cutting in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.*

*Bonnie J. Dow is Associate Professor and Chair of Communication Studies and Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970 and co-editor of The Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication and The Aunt Lute Anthology of U.S. Women Writers, Volume One: 17th–19th Centuries. Her current project focuses on television news representations of the second wave of U.S. feminism.*

and one who was perfectly comfortable not knowing exactly what she was going to do in the upcoming year. Even the only somewhat-predictable course of advanced study for American Studies students—law school—somehow fell by the wayside last 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



draws a wide range of interesting and driven students because we recognize the value of having an analytical lens through which to examine our own history and culture early in our college careers. My American Studies degree will be just as valuable to my future in medicine, if not more so, than the dreaded organic chemistry looming on the horizon.

Now that I've moved to a new city and have started a new course of academic study, the question isn't "Where are you going?" but rather "Where did you come from?" Most of my new friends are pre-med like I am, but each of us has a different academic background. When people ask me now what my major in college was, my answer tends to trip people up. I often hear, "Is that one of those interdisciplinary majors? What do you even do in American Studies?"

I understand the attitude behind this question. What my friends are really asking me is how I could possibly spend four years studying the place where I already live—not its history, specifically, but just the idea of it. I always wonder back, "How could I not?"

Our senior project this year, the first year of the Civil War's sesquicentennial (absolutely my new favorite word—the degree was worth just being able to pull that out in conversation), was to study the 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 where she lives. We started out at the Bicentennial Mall, 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 mused, "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/americanstudies/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 lecturers' 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. Aimee Bahng, 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 predominantly 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



## Report from the Dartmouth Futures of American Studies Institute

By: Sarah Tyson, American Studies Futures Fellow [Philosophy]

I rolled my eyes the first time I heard it called American Studies Boot Camp. The Dartmouth Futures of American Studies Institute schedule certainly looked intense, but I thought in actual practice hundreds of academics would not keep up a 20-hour a day schedule of lectures, workshops, and socializing for a week. Maybe the fact that everyone stays in dorms is a contributing factor, but the Institute was even more intense than it looked on paper. And boot camp is perhaps the best name for my experience.

The Institute is a week-long program for graduate students and junior faculty from different disciplines who are interested in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. It begins on Monday night with the first three lectures and a reception presided over by the Institute's Director and prime mover, Donald Pease. The schedule for the rest of the week consists of lectures in the morning, workshops in the afternoon, lectures in the evening, and a social event each evening. There is, luckily, a constant supply of coffee and pastries to sustain participants throughout.

## Creative Work: Tattooing in the American Service Economy

By: Sarah Glynn, American Studies Dissertation Fellow [Sociology]

The 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 barista 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 physicians. Yet, more highly skilled service providers have been largely ignored in academic research.

Just as scholars and laypeople imagine the service industry as being composed of low skill occupations, the tattoo industry tends to be similarly miscategorized. 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, convicts, gangs and others who live in the margins. The place of tattooing in American society is further complicated by tattoo'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 hair stylists, 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 occupations. Clients come into their encounters with tattoo artists 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 simultaneously seeking to affirm their own unique and individual personalities and aesthetics. In tattooing, 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, tattooists find themselves struggling to establish themselves as experts within their own domain. Their lack of widely acknowledged professional 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 problematic 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, unpack 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 working at McDonalds as one could get. This case study illustrates that the academic study of work still has a long way to go in understanding the service industry, and the complex range of occupations 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 is 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.

Participants also committed to various follow-up activities:

- ★ Developing courses with units or projects on sustainability
- ★ Embracing more interdisciplinary and experiential forms of teaching
- ★ Building community with one another through continued collaboration
- ★ Further discussion of sustainability education through a Cumberland Project Working Group that meets regularly in 2011-12
- ★ Incorporating sustainability into other areas of campus life
- ★ Helping Cumberland Project facilitators and participants develop further resources for effective sustainability education

“The 2011 Cumberland Project was an inspiring two days that ended with a great promise of growth and development of sustainability education at Vanderbilt. We look forward to facilitating this development over the following year and having an even better Cumberland Project in 2012.”

## Cumberland Project

By: Joe Bandy, Assistant Director, Center for Teaching

On May 9th and 10th of 2011, American Studies and the Center for Teaching convened the inaugural Cumberland Project, a series of discussions among twelve faculty about multiple dimensions of sustainability in higher education. The primary goal was to inform and support the development of a curriculum on sustainability at Vanderbilt, with the goal being to help Vanderbilt students achieve a critical understanding of social-environmental issues and problems. A secondary goal was to further develop a community of scholars among Vanderbilt faculty around inquiry into sustainability.

The twelve participating faculty represented seven different departments, including Civil and Environmental Engineering, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, English, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Spanish and Portuguese, as well as the Vanderbilt Institute for Global Health, the Ingram Commons, and the Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement (VISAGE).

The discussions were organized into four main areas: teaching sustainability, connecting to place, interdisciplinarity, 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 environmental art, and Jonathan Gilligan (Earth and Environmental Sciences) and Mike Vandenberg (School of Law) on the promise of interdisciplinarity in sustainability education and research. In addition, they heard presentations from a Vanderbilt student, Naveed Nanjee ('11), on student interest in a sustainability curriculum;

the Director of Vanderbilt's Sustainability and Environmental Management Office, Andrea George, on opportunities to incorporate campus sustainability issues into courses; and David Padgett, Associate Professor of Geography at Tennessee State University, on challenges to sustainability and social equality in Nashville. The two days also included time for individual and group reflection, as well as moments of experiential learning as the participants learned from each other about elements of the Vanderbilt campus and the Dyer Observatory.

The two days resulted in many fruitful discussions about such topics as:

- ★ The difficulties of defining and teaching complex issues of sustainability, especially the challenges of connecting social and ecological dimensions, and addressing ethically difficult questions, and attending to the negative affective elements of environmental problems
- ★ The many ways to connect with issues of sustainability in course projects
- ★ The potentials and challenges of place-based or community engagement pedagogies, including possible community partnerships, experiential learning opportunities on campus and in Nashville, in-class simulations of real-world problems, and increasing their own awareness of the city and bioregion
- ★ 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





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## 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/>

Find us on Facebook: "American Studies at Vanderbilt University"

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