

American Culture News

The Program in American Culture
at the University of Michigan

Spring 2010

In this issue we pay tribute to our students and to a community partner that has provided a rich array of experiences for our students and faculty: The Arab American National Museum. From internships to research opportunities, the AANM has been a valued community partner.



IN THIS ISSUE

From the Director.....	2
Recognizing a Key Community Partner.....	3
Student Interns at the AANM.....	3
Breaking the News.....	4
A Student Reflects on NAS Minor.....	5
AC Curriculum Highlights.....	5
AC Essay Award Winners.....	6
Student Scholarship.....	7
Congratulations, Graduates.....	8
Where Are They Now?.....	8

Dear Alumni, Students, Faculty, and Friends of the Program in American Culture,



The first point on our American Culture (AC) mission statement (2006) addresses undergraduate education. It states that "we strive to explore and communicate effectively the complexity of the struggles and creativity that have produced the culture and society of the entity we call 'America.'" As AC heads toward its 60th anniversary in 2012, we retain this commitment. Today I write about it under the heading: public and community engagement, which we celebrate, among AC's many other facets, in this term's newsletter.

Working in public and community settings, whether they are heritage museums or teen groups at public libraries, many of our students

participate, first-hand, in America's cultural production. Such students often report to us their terrific learning experience. Research on teaching and learning backs up these anecdotal reports. Working together to explore the nation's big questions in real-world settings has proven to be mutually inspiring for students and faculty; it also inspires those of us whose teaching remains more bounded by the classroom walls.

We have outstanding public scholars on the faculty, and their range of activities and interests can be suggested by some examples. Professor **Joseph P. Gone**, who holds a joint appointment in Psychology and who achieved tenure this year, is deeply engaged in seeking to improve the delivery of mental health care to American Indian reservation and urban communities from Detroit to Montana through his research on American Indian medical practices and understandings. **Philip Deloria** has taken students annually to Jackson Hole Wyoming to study the environmental history of the Rockies.

In the other direction, **Penny Von Eschen** has set up exhibits in the political heart of our republic, the Capitol Building itself. More locally, **Julie Ellison**, our undergraduate director, has this year had students assist Ann Arbor teens facing the challenge of college applications through a course titled "Getting In." Detroit is a focus of **Scott Kurashige**'s undergraduate

teaching and his scholarly research. Dearborn, a near neighbor to Ann Arbor and home to the largest Arab-American community in the United States, is also home to the Arab American National Museum, where students under the direction of **Evelyn Alsultany** regularly intern. These are just a few examples of the kind of community-based work that is currently going on in AC. Our students visit Ojibwe communities "up north," they opt, in some of their courses, to write up community-based research projects in lieu of those drawing on the resources of our terrific libraries.

Our graduate students, though they must climb "Mount Dissertation," also have opportunities for such public work through a year in the Museum Studies Program—a frequent experience for AC's Ph.D. students—or through a summer in the Public Humanities Institute at the Rackham School of Graduate Studies. Many of our students, graduate and undergraduate, take their passion for public engagement into the work they do after graduation, some even making careers out of engaging the public directly: as mayors, as state historians, and as Pulitzer-Prize winning journalists.

AC has a long relationship with the University of Michigan's Arts of Citizenship Program, which "sees community collaboration as a civic responsibility as well as a means to develop new ways to research and teach." AC's **Matthew Countryman** is the current director; **Julie Ellison**, and **Kristin Hass**, an AC professor who achieved tenure this year, have served on its executive committee. Professor Hass carries this public focus into her research. She has written a widely praised book on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, and will soon publish a work on the several war memorials that have since appeared on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

This year we turn our attention, then, to scholarship that engages the public and the community. In keeping with the theme, we will honor the Arab American National Museum at our commencement luncheon. I hope this newsletter provides you with insight into one vibrant aspect of AC, and continuing insight into the program's vitality.

- Greg Dowd

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) in Dearborn has been selected for special recognition as a key community partner of the Program in American Culture. For the first time, we are using the occasion of our end-of-term luncheon, a celebration of graduating seniors and their families, to recognize a community organization that has worked with faculty and students in the Program for many years.

Director **Greg Dowd** notes that this occasion gives the Program a chance to recognize an organization that has "truly served as a partner in the positive development of our diverse region." The AANM embodies the Program's values of diversity, excellence, and collaboration, Dowd observes, "making it a natural choice" to inaugurate this honor.

"Whether we are talking about community service learning, public scholarship, or any other form of civic engagement, campuses are not doing the work alone. It takes strong partnerships, such as those the Program enjoys with the AANM."

The AANM is a resource for American Culture's emerging Arab American Studies unit. Students pursuing Arab American Studies have the opportunity to intern in the Museum. Some have worked in the education department, learning how to give tours. Others participated in developing the "Connecting Communities" exhibit, for which they conducted oral histories with Arab, Polish, and Colombian immigrants in the Detroit area. Internships helped students to imagine careers in museums and education.

The AANM has partnered with faculty, too. As a 2008-2009 Ford Fellow, Professor **Nadine Naber** was housed at the Museum. Professor **Evelyn Alsultany** is a guest curator for the forthcoming exhibit "DisOrientation: Arabs and Arab Americans in the U.S. Imagination."

The AANM was also a collaborator on residencies by the late poet and theater artist, Sekou Sundiata, later documented in a Ford Foundation-funded DVD project, *Finding the 51st (dream) State*. The Museum's Global Thursdays program presented "Checkpoints: A Concert of Poets" in December 2005. The evening featured a dozen Detroit poets, along with Sundiata, and drew on the organizing talents of students in Ellison's senior seminar.

All of these projects have fostered a high level of reflective learning, new research, innovative cultural production, and opportunities for civic dialogue on complex, sometimes controversial, issues. In sum, the AANM gives faculty and students the opportunity to make our scholarship meaningful to the larger community.



Dr. Anan Ameri
AANM Founding Director



Professor Evelyn
Alsultany encourages
student internships at
the AANM.

Student Interns at the AANM

Four UM undergrads participated in creating an exhibit at the AANM called "Connecting Communities." They visited with immigrants in Detroit, collected oral histories, and assisted in the organization and construction of the exhibit.

Visit the exhibit online:

<http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/connectingcommunities>

Breaking the News.....

When I Told My Father I Was Majoring in American Culture

“What the hell?” he wanted to know. “What the hell kind of major is ‘American Culture?’”

Now, to be fair, my dad was a great fan of a liberal arts education. He was not telling me to go to the engineering school or get a business degree.

Sociology, he could deal with.

History, he liked.

Anthropology, he knew what that was.

English, even, would be OK: I might have trouble finding a job but at least I’d be reading good books.

But American Culture, he couldn’t get his head around. What was it? It was so ordinary and so obscure, at the same time.

I tried to explain. It’s what we produce and what we consume and why we produce it and consume it. It’s what we see on TV and hear on the radio, it’s the games we play and the cities we build and the people that inhabit them. It’s about dominant cultures and subcultures and how groups of people behave and what really motivates them. It’s all around us. It’s the life we live.

“I’m paying for college so you can learn about THAT?” he asked. We were sitting at the dining room table in his apartment, and he was kind of banging his fist on it, as he often did when he got excited -- or incensed.

Yes, dad, you’re paying for that.

Well, as it happened, shortly after graduating, I found a way to get paid reasonably well for something that I love to do – namely, writing about that obvious, ordinary, every-day thing called American culture. And I’m still doing it. And when my dad’s law partners and his friends read some of these stories on the front page of the New York Times, and when they hear I got a Pulitzer, and they ask him, ‘how does your daughter get her ideas?’ he tells them, “Well, she majored in American Culture.”

* * * *

Just in case, on this triumphant day, you feel, as I did when I was sitting in your place, a few butterflies in your stomach. Just in case anyone here is second-guessing the choices they made when they were in college, or experiencing some trepidation about what is to come now that they are leaving it, I bring you good news. You are among the lucky ones.

If the American Culture program is anything like it was when I attended, you have been inculcated with a skill that is sorely needed at this juncture in our cultural evolution: critical thinking. You have been taught to look at your own culture as an ethnographer, and to interpret it for others. You have been taught to synthesize the personal and the sociological. You have been taught to question the standard interpretations of historical and contemporary events, and to offer alternatives.

Those are rare skills, and they will come in handy. They will come in handy whether you find your way into a job in high finance or community organizing. They will come in handy whether you pursue a career in law or sports or academia or politics or, as I hope some of you will, in forging the next generation of American journalism. - Amy Harmon

Amy Harmon is a national correspondent for the *New York Times*. She won a 2008 Pulitzer Prize for her series, "The DNA Age," which examines the burdens and benefits of new genetic technology on American life. This is excerpted from her American Culture commencement address, 2009. To read the complete text, visit our website at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ac>

A Student Reflects on NAS Minor

Jonathan Tenezapf

Class of 2010

Major in Biology and Minor in Native American Studies

As a freshman entering the University of Michigan, little did I know that I would eventually declare a minor in Native American Studies. During my sophomore year, I decided to take a course on a religion other than my own and ended up enrolling in Religion 267--Native Religious Spiritual Traditions--with absolutely no idea what to expect. After reading an unbelievably powerful text in this course--*God is Red* by Vine Deloria, Jr.--I was shocked to see the perils that Euro-Americans had brought to Native America through the imposition of Christianity and Western world views. Over the course of this class, I began to become enlightened about parts of the history of this country I had never come across in any history course in the past. Ultimately, it triggered my interest in learning more.

As a minor, I have taken courses in religion, literature, anthropology, history, and writing--all over the map.

Every NAS professor I have taken a course with has been extremely kind, approachable, and stimulating. They bring their passion into the classroom. They are teaching these courses because they love the material --a huge incentive for students to want to be in the class as well.

Jonathan's Picks

AMCULT 205 *Native American Literature: Great Lakes Ojibwe Tales* (Dr. Meg Noori)

Students encounter both written and oral literature by Native people in the Great Lakes Region, in particular the Anishinaabeg. The fun and relaxed atmosphere in this class helps create a great learning environment, and the stories and texts chosen were some of the best I've read at the University. I've kept them all.

AMCULT 338/HISTORY 338 *Native American Women's History* (Professor Tiya Miles)

This course breaks down the history of interactions between the Euro-American and Native American people from the perspective of women. In this course, we try to wrestle with primary sources to learn about the lives of Native women. A combination of lecture, discussion, videos, and visits by guest lecturers all help to bring forth ideas about Native American women's history.

AMCULT 496 *Amerindians and the Lettered City: Rewriting History Against the Grain* (Professor Gustavo Verdesio)

Students get to learn about indigenous people not only in North America but also in Central and South America. The course emphasizes the writing systems and forms of communication used by Native people. The small class size allows the students and Professor Verdesio to get to know each other and gives the opportunity for everyone's voice to be heard.

AC Curriculum Highlight: Community-Based Courses

AMCULT 213: Introduction to Latina/o Studies (Prof. Maria Cotera)

AMCULT 301: Detroit Politics and Community Organizing (Prof. Scott Kurashige)

AMCULT 496: Feminist Practice of Oral History (Prof. Emily Lawsin)

AMCULT 498: Getting In: What College Means in America (Prof. Julie Ellison)

AC Essay Award Winners

Each year, the Program in American Culture awards two prizes to American Culture and/or Latina/o Studies concentrators for the best essays on a topic related to the field of American Studies/Ethnic Studies. Congratulations to our 2009-10 winners, **Christina A. Carter** and **Eli Hager**.

"The Underground Railroad Quilt Code: Fact or Folklore?"

by Christina A. Carter

Major in American Culture with a focus on Urban and Community Studies

Carter sympathetically examines the ongoing debate over whether quilts containing coded messages guided slaves on the Underground Railroad. Weighing the evidence offered by advocates and critics, she asks, "Were the stories of hidden signals in quilts true or false?" Her exceptionally fair-minded analysis begins with an assessment of publications on both sides of the issue, then focuses on the Underground Railroad in Michigan. Carter presents findings from her interviews of museum staff in Ann Arbor, Detroit, Ypsilanti, and East Lansing, giving the paper a compelling Museum Studies angle. An interview with the distinguished Curator of Folk Arts and the Michigan State University Museum, Marsha MacDowell, ultimately leads Carter to conclude that "the Underground Railroad Code was a myth," though she honors the desire to believe in it.

"American Music: Sonic and Social Citizenship"

by Eli Hager

Double Major in American Culture and English

This essay looks at how citizens enter into the "musical life" of America. How do certain definitions of what counts as American music "sonically exclude some citizens," Hager inquires? His argument is motivated by the conviction that "morally engaged" citizenship should challenge restrictive notions of American music. He appreciates the need for 'sonic spaces' that respect cultural "interaction, competition, and change." Hager thoughtfully weighs the pros and cons of three framings of American music--as "melting pot," as a story of "roots-routes-scenes," and as a zone of "audiotopias." One of his test cases is Van Morrison, whose songs reveal "the interaction (or antagonisms) of musics from separate races and cultural contexts." Hager draws on the work of Adelaida Reyes to insist that "democratic diversities" enable us to understand "the shared social process of making music."

Program in American Culture

Director: Gregory Dowd

Ethnic Studies Directors:

Vince Diaz, Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies

Maria Coter, Latina/o Studies

Tiya Miles, Native American Studies

Mission:

The Program in American Culture promotes publicly engaged and socially committed scholarship and teaching aimed at understanding the struggles and creativity that have produced the societies and cultures of America. In particular, we seek to illuminate the significance, the lived experience, and the relation among race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and class, both within and beyond national borders. The Program brings the history and interpretive strategies of ethnic studies into conversation with critical approaches to literature, history, cultural studies, and social sciences, as well as with knowledge produced outside the boundaries of the university.

American Culture News

Graphic Design and Layout:

Veronica Garcia/Judith Gray

Editor:

Julie Ellison

Please submit any changes, corrections, letters, updates, and/or suggestions to Judith Gray.
judygray@umich.edu.

President of the University of Michigan: Mary Sue Coleman

Regents of the University of Michigan:

Julia Donovan Darlow
Laurence B. Deitch
Denise Ilitch
Olivia P. Maynard
Andrea Fischer Newman
Andrew C. Richner
S. Martin Taylor
Katherine E. White

The University of Michigan is an equal-opportunity, affirmative-action employer.

What's on Concentrators' Minds? Research Topics in AC350 Approaches to American Culture

Fall 2009

Wade Brill

"The Texting Game"

Caitlin Connor

"Looking at Diana Ross:

The Points of Convergence in Sexuality and Blackness"

Lisa DeCanio

"Identity and Culture in Study Abroad Programs for US Students"

Will Gonzalez

"Latinos' Role in The Film Industry: *Crash*"

Dana Hill

"Higher Education at San Quentin Prison"

Ezra Levine

"Rhetorical Analysis of Local Newspaper Political Endorsements for the 2009 New York City Democratic Primaries: The Race for City Comptroller"

Elise McGowan

"Developments in Ojibwe Language Preservation and Pedagogy"

Brian Merlos

"The Decade in Indie: *Changes in Culture, Technology, and the Business of Music in the 21st Century*"

Alexandra Nish

"The Convergence of Contemporary Art and the Hipster Subculture: Polaroid Revival"

Matt Stehney

"Speaking to the Audience: Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Engagement in the Discussion of Race"

Patricia White

"Support the troops' Discourse: Making Sense of Two Men's Stories"

Winter 2010

Alys Alley

"White Privilege and Bay Mills Band Fishing Rights"

Amanda Caldwell

"Airports Now Requesting Your Help: Reporting Suspicious Behavior and Racial Profiling"

Emma Landgraf

"Abstinence-Only Education: How Politics, Religion, Marriage, Gender and Character Relate to Morality"

Brittany Matson

"An Ugly Truth in *The Ugly Truth*: Woman's Struggle for Success and Happiness"

Ben Verdi

"The Edu-taining Truth: What the Film *An Inconvenient Truth*'s Construction Says About How Our Society Learns"

James Ridgeway

"Viagra, An American Lifestyle"

Matthew Wollack

"Marijuana, Masculinity, and HBO's *Entourage*: An Examination of American Television's Representation of Current Culture"

Below: Tilework at the Arab American National Museum (AANM Annual Report 2005-2007)



Congratulations, Graduates!

Recipients, Arab American Studies Certificate

Ryah Aqel
Ben Jerue
Fiona Ruddy
Eliot Truesdell

Minors, Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies

Veronica Garcia
Rachel Yung

Minors, Native American Studies

Ryan Anson
Katherine Carlton
Katharine Helegda
Casie Kelly
Sarah Mintz
Joshua Pool
John Roberts
Jonathan Tenenzapf
Joshua Voss
Ardella Williams

Minors, Latina/o Studies Cristina Juarbe Santaliz

Bachelor Degrees, Latina/o Studies Frank Alcala Marisol Blanco

Bachelor Degrees, American Culture

Christine Barrera
Eric Beaudin
Alexandra Briske
Christina Carter
Francesca Darvish
Lisa Decanio
Melissa Eichstead
Samantha Fugate
William Gonzalez
Miles Jackson
Joshua Kildea
Victoria Le
Rachel Lesser
Ezra Levine

Bachelor Degrees, American Culture (cont.)

Joseph Levine
Elise McGowan
Richard Mitteer
Sarah Mosher
Alexandra Nish
Kiersten Quilliams
Christine Schepeler
Anne Thomas
Cadence Timm
Megan Westenberg
Jolillian Zwerdling

M.A.s, American Culture

Joseph Cialdella
Paul Farber
Margot Finn

Ph.D.s, American Culture

Shanesha Brooks Tatum
Maritza Cardenas
Samuel Erman
Matthew Wittmann

Where Are They Now?

AC Grad Works in Detroit Schools through City Year Program

Caitlin Kelly, originally from Grand Rapids, Michigan, transferred to the University of Michigan from Arizona State University. She graduated in May 2008 with a BA in American Culture. Program Academic Advisor Richard Meisler recently invited Caitlin to visit his class. "She is an intensely curious and intellectually alive person," Meisler comments. "It was exciting for me to see her pursue her interest in social change following her undergraduate years here."

When choosing American Culture as her concentration, Caitlin reports that her decision was made easier when she realized that there was not a single American Culture course that she didn't want to take. Paul Anderson's "The Culture of Jazz" and Meisler's "American Politics and Society" were among her favorites.

Following graduation, Caitlin had a strong desire to remain in the state of Michigan. She is presently working for City Year Detroit. City Year, supported by AmeriCorps, is a national organization with programs in 19 U.S. cities and Johannesburg. The Detroit team provides tutoring and mentoring to students in Detroit Public Schools four days a week and also participates in physical service projects. Caitlin has helped to organize a community garden and paint murals within Detroit Public Schools.

-Brooklyn Posler

