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American Studies Newsletter

Fall 2017

Spring 2017 Graduates



Christopher Hart

Thesis:
The Transitional and the Transnational: Hollywood and Transnational Chinese Cinemas before 1997.



Susan Lee

Dissertation:
'Gonna Teach Them What's What with a Rope': Reinventing the Western and the Gauchesque, 1900-1939



Kate Piatcheck

Dissertation:
'You're Too Smart for That': The Representation of the American High School Teacher in Postwar Public Policy and Popular Culture



Anna Schmidt

Dissertation:
The Blest Words in Their Best Order: Transcultural Spiritual Practices in American Poetry since 1960

Below: Graduation Day, May 2017

From left: Dr. Emily Lutenski, Susan Nichols, Dr. Maurice Tracy (Dec 16), Drs. Kate Moran, Matt Mancini, Heidi Ardizzone, and Ben Looker, Dr. Anna Schmidt, Christopher Hart and Alicia Jessmon.



Alicia Jessmon and Susan Nichols (pictured right)

both completed their MAs under the non-thesis option. Susan also earns the distinction of being our first double graduate of our new BA-MA. This five-year program allows select undergraduates to begin taking MA classes during their senior year. We hope to have more undergraduate majors take advantage of this opportunity in the near future.

Solar Eclipse



Shown in the photo here: Sister Kolmer operating a homemade pinhole viewer while Dr. Looker gazes skyward.

The total solar eclipse this past August created a lot of excitement in St. Louis, and a perfect viewing spot for maximum solar coverage was right nearby in Ruma, Illinois, the current hometown of American Studies professor emeritus Sister Elizabeth Kolmer. Eclipse day turned into a SLU American Studies mini-gathering. Current faculty member Ben Looker joined Sister Kolmer at a party given at her religious order's Ruma motherhouse, where moon pies and other themed food accompanied the darkening of the sky. Sister Kolmer and Dr. Looker say they're both eager to do it again for the next eclipse in 2024!

A Note from the Dept. Chair

Greetings students, colleagues, and alumni!

2017 has been a year of many changes. Between Fall and Spring we graduated six PhDs and three terminal MAs (see last newsletter for our December graduates). These nine scholars made up more than one quarter of our graduate program, which left our department feeling a little emptier than usual this fall. But of course wonderful new students have joined us, classes and events continue, and the admissions process begins again in December: the life cycle of an academic program.

Our undergraduate numbers are building as well. Ten students have now officially declared American Studies as a major or minor and a few more are working on paperwork. We interviewed some of these BAs on page 3; expect to hear more from them and other students in issues to come.

Students continue to benefit from alumni donations through individual research trips. Graduate students are also using some of the funds to organize a student conference on visual culture in Fall 2018.

Looking ahead to spring: We will have external reviewers visiting us for our regular program review, invited speakers, and more graduations at every level in the spring. We also plan to include a page of alumni updates in our next issue, so please send your news to us at amstdies@slu.edu.

Finally, if you were a student after 2000, you know our administrative assistant, Terri Foster. She will be receiving her BA in the School of Professional Studies at SLU this December. Please join me in congratulating her!

Heidi Ardizzone
November, 2017

Faculty Spotlight: Interview with Dr. Mancini

September 13, 2017



As we announced in our last issue, Dr. Matt Mancini has now retired.

While he continues to serve as Professor Emeritus and work with a few advanced students, he is no longer a daily presence in Adorjan Hall (formerly the Humanities Building). Recently we sat down to interview Matt and include some excerpts here. As the interview was closing, he made a reference to *l'esprit de l'escalier*, that all-too-familiar experience of coming up with the perfect reply too late. Fortunately for all of us, he will continue to be part of our community for some time to come, so we can hear more of his “staircase wit” and deep thoughts.

What is your most memorable research trip or experience?

One was a few years ago when I went to the Library of Congress, kind of on a long shot, looking for some material on this guy Francis Lieber, who I wrote about when I wrote an article about the Laws of War. Francis Lieber wrote the first compilation of the laws of war, during the American Civil War. And I'm just going through his correspondence, in a correspondence book where the letters are pasted, and I'm just going through and how's your mother and all that, and then here is this letter that says here is why I wrote the laws of war. No scholar had ever seen this. And the reason they never saw it was that this document was published by the army in April 1863, so any scholar that was looking for information about the origins of this had stopped in 1863. This letter was written in 1866, and he was writing and said here is why I did this. Everyone else had stopped then, and they just had to go to the next volume, and there it was. That was memorable, because I've had other trips and really not found anything. I've had a trip, and the result of the trip was no, there's nothing.

Do you have any favorite teaching memories or particular moments that you remember?

One of them was earlier in my career, when I taught in the federal prison. I had a bunch of men there. I taught a course in the American novel, and these guys were among the best students I ever had. They were prepared. They had all the best questions. I couldn't wait until I got to class. They'd jump up and say, you know, “What in the hell is Mark Twain doing?”

I started a series of college programs in prisons in Georgia that was very academic. We essentially “hired” part-time per course teachers, but we had an ongoing, regular, solid program in several prisons, and I set those up and then also taught one course every semester.

Have you read or reread anything recently that you would recommend?

The Russian Revolution: A New History by McMokin is very good. Also a Nancy MacLean book called *Democracy in Chains*, which is about the current far-right and its origins in the ideology of John C. Calhoun. Phil DeLoria and Alexander Olsen's new book *American Studies*, which the new students are reading. I read a lot of European stuff lately.

What research are you still doing or still wishing you could do?

Right now, I'm working on an article on two historians. One is Gene Wise, a big star in American Studies in the 1970s. I'm doing a parallel with him and Thomas Haskell, who I mentioned before. I remain interested in Tocqueville and Tocqueville's reception in the United States, that is the way his reputation was shaped and then changed, and the many errors that developed around that question, the commonplace ideas about what Tocqueville's reputation in the United States was were all wrong. The great historian John Lucas once said to me that history, as a discipline, develops through the correction of errors. The historian's job is correcting errors. There's always already a narrative, no matter what happens. There's a pre-existing narrative, and with my Tocqueville research, I found a very rich field of mistakes and errors.

What do you want alumni to know about your career?

Without hyping my career or my resume, I know I've always felt pride in my teachers. He did this, she did that. I had the Salgo Chair, an endowed chair at the University of Budapest for a year in American Studies. It was a great experience to be there. I also had a Fulbright in Hong Kong. Each of these was a full year and had a permanent impact on my teaching. Your teaching is different when you're teaching in a language that's foreign to your students. You have to be clear. Your diction improves. You get a better sense of what you really have to focus on for getting the material across. And I should say, when you're teaching foreign students, you're aware that they're foreign students. But the thing is, American students are just as ignorant. They need those questions. Treating your American students like they're foreigners, in a way, like why should I assume that the U.S. students know their history?

Is there advice that you would give to people entering the field?

Of course, people come into “the field” and do different things as a result. I think the main thing – and I don't want this to come off as “soft” – but the main thing is, you can do it. The things that people are doing now at Stanford or somewhere like that, you could be doing if you were there. It would take you about one semester to get used to it. “Intimidated” is a word I hate, but don't be afraid that everybody else knows more than you. When students first come into graduate school, they think the second year students know all this shit. First of all, they don't know. And second of all, you know things too.

Interviews With Our Undergrads



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**Dominic
Biffignani**

Junior, Double Major Political Science and American Studies

I don't want to give the credit to any one professor, but I was strongly edged and pushed into American Studies by Dr. Ben Looker, who I had for Urban Crisis. It was a wonderful, overarching, and emotionally stimulating class. Dr. Looker decided to meet with me on a February morning to talk about American Studies and our conversation sealed the deal for me that day. I owe a lot of my growth in college to him and the other faculty in American Studies.

Why did you decide to pursue a major or a minor in American Studies?

What do you like best about the department?

How do you plan to use this major or minor in the future?

What would you like to accomplish at SLU?

If you could share any information with the alumni, what would you like them to know?



**Taylor
Schleisman**

Junior, Major American Studies and Psychology; Minor Sociology and Urban Poverty Studies

I took the Urban Crisis class my freshman year and I did not have a major yet, but I thought it was really interesting the way it was taught. I like how the class challenged us to think in different ways and how we could see different angles to examine sources; you could look at it from a social science perspective or a different perspective, which was pretty cool.

I really love the interdisciplinary nature of American Studies. Not just looking at one sort of text, but looking at movies, songs, poems, secondary sources, primary sources, and things of that nature, and molding them together into a narrative. We can say what your history textbook told you wasn't exactly what happened, but we need to look at the overarching themes to see what is really going on and examine how these moments shape the future.

Currently, I work at a law firm downtown..., so I think what I want to go to law school. I don't know what type of litigation I want to do, but I know that American Studies is going to prepare me to pursue civil rights litigation and social justice work. I think that having that interdisciplinary education, where I've been able to look at different sources and mold them together into an argument will help me in the future.

It has definitely influenced me in the leadership positions that I've held as an undergraduate. I really think American Studies has taught me to embrace the melting pot. I think, a lot of times, fraternities look for a cookie-cutter mold and that is not always the best thing. American Studies has taught me to embrace argument, conversations, dialogue, and not to step away from it or shying away when important issues come up.

I am very thankful to have the guidance of the entire faculty. All of them do a fantastic job to push me to be a better scholar, student, and man. I am sincerely thankful for all the hours and effort they've put in to make the classes what they are, graduate students, tenure, or adjunct alike, they've all do a fantastic job and I'm very thankful.

I like that all the classes aren't very big, which allows me to get to know the professors very well. Since I've been in the department, I've had the opportunity to get to know them one-on-one. I've had a couple of them more than once so I've developed an understanding of their teaching styles.

I want to go to grad school, but I'm not sure if I want to go for Psychology or American Studies. For a week I wanted to go to law school, but I really don't know what I want. The knowledge that I've gained from American Studies is versatile and will allow me to pursue additional schooling after undergrad.



**Caroline
Rectenwal**

Senior, Minor in American Studies

I like how American Studies encompasses everything, I have been exposed to all kinds of cultures within American culture. American Studies explores all the things I never thought of. I really like how passionate and approachable the faculty is. They always have their doors open and even if you wanted to get coffee and talk about life they are willing to do it. I'm planning on going into public policy or some type of law. I think that what I've learned about different cultures and the disenfranchised will help me to promote the welfare of every person.

International Research with American Studies



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Under the intellectual influence of our newest faculty member, Dr. Kate Moran, and with financial support from our Alumni Research funds and the College of Arts and Sciences, American Studies students have begun to travel far beyond the U.S. borders for their research. Here we highlight two students whose transnational research interests have sent them across disciplinary and national borders.



Christopher Hart

M.A. American Studies,
Graduated 2017

In Spring 2017 Christopher Hart graduated from St. Louis University with a Master's of Arts from the department of American Studies. Throughout his two years at SLU, he developed research interests by turning the lens of transnationalism toward China to look at the historical, cultural, and ideological interactions between it and the U.S. over time. He focused mainly on cultural production "looking at translations of Chinese poetry and their importance for Ezra Pound and the advent of literary modernism or the sphere of mutual economic and cultural influence that has drawn U.S. and Chinese filmmaking industries together over the last decades," as he puts it. Hart also received an American Studies Alumni research grant to travel to China over the summer after his first year.

“ It’s a phenomenal amount of work, but a great experience. I would strongly encourage anyone to apply (and to do so early!). ”

Although his research focused more on cultural production, the Fulbright Commission recognized a more historical research project. This project was originally drafted as a paper for Heidi Ardizzone's Civil Rights class, with focus on the influence of Maoist thinking on the Black Power movement. As he discovered the influence was not just one-sided. Robert F. Williams, the recently recovered black power leader and subject of Timothy B. Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* (2001), had lived in China where his manifesto of armed self-defense was translated into Chinese and disseminated throughout the country. Under Kate Moran's "insistence and assistance," Hart developed a research proposal. Later in the year, he was awarded a fourteen-month Fulbright research fellowship, as well as a three-month Critical Language Enhancement Award (CLEA). For his research fellowship, he will be working with Wang Zhenping, film scholar in American Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University, to dissect the propaganda films surrounding the nascence of the Chinese nuclear program and Williams' time in China from the Beijing Film Archive.



Amelia Flood

Ph.D. American Studies,
Currently Enrolled

Amelia Flood traveled to the U.S. Virgin Islands in April 2016. She says that the iguanas were a sign that she was outside her comfort zone. "I was embarking on a hunt, not for pirate treasure, but for the remnants left behind by a man, scholars have considered 'a shadowy figure' haunting the Harlem Renaissance." She visited the islands' Von Scholten Collection in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, and the St. Croix Landmark Society's research library at the Estate Whim Museum. Her visit was part of an on-going research project Flood began as a paper in Emily Lutenski's class, "The Harlem Renaissance." She had completed a paper on Casper A. Holstein, a notorious but little-studied figure who bankrolled many programs related to the New Negro Movement including the Opportunity literary awards and Marcus Garvey's UNIA movement among other causes. Flood's project is recovering Holstein's lifelong crusade to secure citizenship and civil rights for Virgin Islanders. Since her visit, she has presented twice on Holstein - once at SLU's Graduate Student Association Research Symposium and at a symposium hosted by the Center for Transnational American Studies at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark.

“ While source materials are important to any researcher, it's the human connections one can form through travel beyond the archive that truly get at the heart of research. ”

As Flood puts it: "the generosity of my Department's alumni, through the American Studies Alumni Travel Grant, helped to offset my time hopping puddle-jumper planes and careening on the islands' safaris from archive to archive." She returned from the islands with two invaluable gifts. The first were previously unconsidered columns Holstein wrote and published in number of Virgin Islands newspapers and other archival records. These have never been available on the mainland and shed incredible light on Holstein's political dimensions and his biography, a story that has been shrouded in mystery and rumor. More importantly - and more poignantly, given the devastation the islands currently face in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria - she has developed relationships with several people in the islands. "Without their help and guidance, my work would not have reached its current stage. As American Studies scholars, we are called to connect with others, through and beyond our work."

Amelia is also working to help raise funds and provide needed materials to archives she visited that were in the Hurricanes' path.