message from the program director

The photos on the cover of this issue of The Porchlight remind me that January 3, 2010 will mark our 20th anniversary in the Cooper House. I can’t say that it seems like only yesterday. In fact, as I hope this issue makes clear, our Program lives in the Cooper House and it’s hard for me to imagine what we did before we moved up Ivinson Ave from Hoyt Hall to our current abode. The community that is housed here sustains all of us and makes American Studies at Wyoming — to borrow a theme from the interviews of students and alumni that you’ll find in these pages — unique. Right now the Cooper is illuminated for the holidays – the tree lavishly decorated on one side of the living room and the duck lamp, I am proud to say, standing on its own on the opposite side. Keep us in mind and let us know what you are doing these days. In future issues, we’ll feature some of the many accomplishments of our alumni. Happy holidays.

american studies welcomes andrea graham

Starting this Fall the American Studies Program has a new folklorist, Andrea Graham. Andrea grew up in New York and Pennsylvania and went to the University of Pennsylvania for her Bachelor’s degree in anthropology and her Master’s degree in folklore. She worked in the South for five years and moved to Nevada in 1985 to live in the West. She worked for the Nevada Arts Council for ten years managing their folk arts program, and lived in Idaho for nine years where she was a freelance researcher. As a freelancer she did many fieldwork projects for arts councils across the states of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, South Dakota, and Wyoming. She says she loves the West, and would not go back East. She likes that the West offers a lot of opportunities to do the kind of work she loves the most. Andrea already started with her research in Wyoming last summer. During her welcome reception she gave a presentation “The Art of the Hunt” that summarized the preliminary fieldwork that focused on hunting gear makers in Wyoming.
I wasn’t all that surprised because she does things and doesn’t tell me about them. And when she doesn’t like it she goes…huffs and puffs. I thought it was classic Wyoming, I thought it deserved to be in the building. You can’t throw it away; it’s a good lamp…You’re recording this?

-Yes.
-Well, don’t play it for her.

The duck lamp, restored to its rightful place in the seminar room, is part of the American Studies Program folklore as much or more as the ghost of Mr. Cooper. In fact, the legends of the duck lamp and the ghosts overlap, both involve: the basement, something ugly, and the different opinions Eric and Sophie have about the issue.

By Helis Sikk

On November 9th the American Studies Program hosted Professor Raili Põldsaar, Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Although this is Professor Poldsaar’s first visit to UW, there are well-established links between our Program and the English Department at Tartu dating back to 1995. While in Wyoming she gave a talk on Estonia and the United States, Estonians in the United States, and United States culture in Estonia. Raill is pictured here with two of her former students, now graduate students in our Program. Another curious convergence: Professor Poldsaar and Professor Sandeen are both alumni of Notre Dame.

John Agricola is from Gadsden, Alabama. He received his B.A. in History and American Studies from the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa. After college, he worked for a few years in an American art museum as an Education Coordinator. John was drawn to the program for its reputation in the areas of visual and material culture. He is intrigued by cultural constructions of regional identity, and he hopes to thread together a course of study that examines cross-regional, trans-Mississippi, cultural exchange. He hopes to focus his analysis of identity and regional difference on the myth of the West, and more specifically, on various genres that mythologize frontier violence—especially vigilanism. His interests are eclectic and include: early American mass entertainment, the various ways “last stand” art has been cinematized, Native American representation, 19th-century travel histories, and heritage tourism. John currently is working for the Wyoming Humanities Council, but in his spare time he enjoys the chance to fly-fish in the scenic Snowy Mountain Range.

Emma J. Dodds is from Hertfordshire in the UK. She holds a BA Honors degree in American Studies and spent an exchange year at San Diego State University as a history major. Her research interests lie in the areas of westward migration and settlement, particularly the social history of frontier regions and wider issues of gender. Her previous study of the West focused primarily on California history, and she hopes her time at the University of Wyoming will allow her to expand and develop her interests as well as forming a foundation for comparative work. Emma was drawn to the American Studies M.A. at UW as she believes that the interdisciplinary nature of the program affords the best-suited approach from which to explore such a vast, diverse and contested area as the American West.

Molly Goldsmith is a 2009 graduate of Saint Mary’s College with a B.A. in History. Hailing from the small town of Princeton, IL, she decided to attend University of Wyoming because of the small town vibe and the openness of the American Studies program. She is interested in many facets of twentieth-century America. Her interests range from the development and evolution of American girlhood to the position of women in an industrial society. She has a strong interest in folk music’s role in changing a
culture for the better. In addition to these, she delights in studying American philosophy and the re-emergence of pragmatism as a popular movement in America and hopes to see it thrive in a more receptive era. Molly avidly follows Phil Mickelson’s golf career and enjoys redesigning vintage clothing.

Joscha Herdt hails from the hills outside of Sheridan, Wyoming. His primary interests are music in American culture, with a specific focus on jazz and blues. He plays the drums, guitar, bass, and dabbling in the keys and singing. As a musician, life includes being involved in performing with a duo/trio, and as a sideman with other collaborators. When not enropped in listening, practicing or performing music, Herdt enjoys cooking a good homemade pizza with a sauce and dough made from scratch. He also enjoys spending time with great friends. As a graduate student, he hopes to continue the exploration and incorporation of his musical passion in the field of American Studies.

Marit Maidla graduated from the University of Tartu, majoring in English language and literature. Although not her major, she managed to dabble in American Studies. She hopes that her background in literature and intercultural studies will enable her to focus on her varied academic interests, which include gender studies, pop culture, and especially the representation of religious rhetoric (and aspect) in political thought in the U.S. culture. She is interested in the intertwining of history, social movements, and pop culture, understanding that the discipline of American Studies entails almost everything. She hopes that her background will enable her to see the USA from a different point of view. Those insights of a ‘legal alien’ could prove interesting to people who have spent their lives inside the phenomenon that she is still discovering.

Brie Richardson grew up in Wyoming, did her undergraduate work in New York and California, and graduated with a B.A. in Religious Studies, concentrating in Philosophy of Religion and Theology. She attended welding school after college to pursue a more pragmatic understanding of materials and process with respect to her avocational interests in sculpture, the visual arts, and material culture. Her graduate interests focus on the intersection between American Studies and Environment and Natural Resources, most specifically, upon the idea of the Autonomous House and how the moorings of this prototypical, both within the modern sense and through the lens of historic preservation (in analyzing the built environment as resources to be conserved and stewarded as alternate forms of environmental resources) draw from Utopian ideals and a certain kind of American Pragmatism. She is well-pleased to be studying and living in Laramie and she is grateful to be a part of the American Studies cohort.

Julia Stuble will be attending the American Studies graduate program part-time as she finishes her thesis for an MA in Environmental Studies from Prescott College. A Wyoming native, Julia completed her undergraduate degree at UW in English and French. She then moved back to her home in the southwest corner’s deserts and mountains to work as an environmental journalist for a weekly newspaper in Pinedale. After a year of writing about environmental issues in one of the largest natural producing counties in the country, she turned to education and completed the Teton Science School’s graduate residency. This program, focused on environmental education, had Julia talking thirty-fifth-graders to high-schoolers into Grand Teton National Park every other week for a year. In between, she took ecology and education classes. Last year, while beginning her Prescott studies, she worked as a graduate assistant in the same program, mentoring graduate students as they became environmental educators. Julia is very pleased to return to Laramie’s idyllic small-town setting, but will continue to travel, write and work in the Pinedale region throughout the year.

the new graduate students continued
Jonas Landes defended his MA thesis on “hippie housing” a year ago and graduated from the American Studies Program this Spring. The Porchlight used the opportunity to talk with him after he had given a presentation in Mary Humstone’s Historic Preservation class. Jonas was one of those people who we heard had got his dream job. The Porchlight was intrigued.

Tell me about your job?
I’m the Endangered Places Manager. That is meshing two jobs. I used to be the Native Places Coordinator, now I am the Historic Core Manager. It’s a brand new initiative to provide service-learning opportunities with preservation on public lands. So restoring, revitalizing, and rehabilitating historic, typically forest service administrative structures, but also other historic buildings for public use.

How have your studies at the American Studies contributed to the work you do now?
Well, American Studies is the ultimate interdisciplinary field, and so is Historic Preservation. Historic Preservation would not exist without a basic understanding of identity, economics, buildings and structures. How people interact, and how people work together in partnerships, and all that. All those things wouldn’t be the same without American Studies, or American Studies wouldn’t be that without those things. Just learning to think about the different disciplines, about the different pieces of the puzzle. To look at it not just on a narrow focus but on a broad focus really helps you think and create what an American identity is, but in Historic Preservation it helps me to create potential partners for funding work, or projects, or support, or whatever. So yeah, actually, a lot of holdover.

If you think back a few years, what was it that interested you about the American Studies program here at the UW?
You know, I first developed my passion and then tried to find a place that matched. And there are Historic Preservation master’s degree out there, but there aren’t strong Historic Preservation programs; actually there aren’t any that are accredited in the areas that I really love: the West, especially Wyoming and Colorado. I was thinking that, although I would not walk away with a Historic Preservation degree, I would walk away with the same critical thinking and knowledge, and foundation. Preservation is very site specific, and so to learn about preservation in Vermont is applicable but it’s not perfectly in line than, say, learning about preservation on structures in Wyoming and Colorado, where I ultimately want to be anyways. So that was kind of a directing path, even though it wasn’t a degree in preservation.

What do you see yourself doing in the future? Do you have a dream job right now?
I had my dream job. And then it got better. So where I am right now, first of all saving buildings, but also teaching people traditional log work and traditional building trades, and doing so on public lands, is probably the best thing I could be doing for myself and with myself. That’s the best thing I could be doing with life right now. Who says my vision won’t change, and in five years I’ll be a new home developer, but it’s unlikely.

How does it feel to come back to the Cooper house?
Heard had got his dream job. The Porchlight was intrigued.

The reception following the president’s address at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association is a celebration akin to the Vanity Fair Oscar Party or P. Diddy’s annual White Party on the Fourth of July. Okay, maybe not, but it is about as legendary.

Once a year, American Studies faculty and students from around the nation are invited to let down their (often unusually-styled) hair, purchase an eight-dollar beer, and kick up their heels on the reception’s dance floor. Forget the conference’s sessions or American Quarterly, it is on this dance floor where American Studies legends are made, and this November in Washington D.C. was no exception.

The music, naturally, is provided by bands comprised solely of American Studies faculty, and bigwigs in the field at that. Following a solo-acoustic set by Karen Cardozo band of University of Michigan faculty, including former and current ASA presidents Philip Deloria and Kevin Gaines, respectively. Headlining the night with raucous classic rock covers mixed in with original work, Ohio State’s Barry Shank and University of Virginia’s Eric Lott (and his equally legendary skinny jeans) helmed a band that brought down the house…as far as they could anyway.

A cover of Santana’s “Black Magic Woman” is good, but watching septuagenarians dance to it is even better, from this graduate student’s perspective. The ASA dance usually runs its course in three phases. First, attendees merely observe the music being played, cautiously standing with toes touching the perimeter of the dance floor. Phase two plays out generally like a sophomore grade dance, with friends dragging reluctant friends by the hands to the middle of the dance floor where they timidlybob their heads along to the music. Finally, during phase three, something happens (possibly thanks to the eight dollar beers) where things get crazy. The dancing, oh, the dancing! The hips! The hands in the air! The nametags bouncing in every direction! It is during phase three that new friends are made and the true conference networking occurs.

So, if you ever find yourself at an ASA conference, perhaps next year in San Antonio, come to the reception for the free bruschetta and key lime pie squares and stay for the dance. If anyone wonders what American Studies is at its heart, it is this. By Anna Talley
Sarah McCullough graduated from the American Studies Program in 2007 and is currently doing her PhD in Cultural Studies at UC Davis. At the 2009 ASA meeting, she presented her paper “Making Bodies Like a Rocket: Enhancement and Evolution of Natural Bodies” in the panel “Embodiments of Progress: Technology, Machines and Belonging in Normalcy.” In her busy conference schedule she found some time to answer a few questions for The Porchlight.

What have you been doing in DC?

You told me that you had something else going on in addition to the ASA?

Along with attending ASA, I presented at 4S (Society for the Social Studies of Science). This conference was my first as a PhD student in Cultural Studies, and it was a great opportunity to network and present my work. I also attended a workshop on qualitative research methods, which was very helpful.

I was always interested in doing an internship, but never had any concrete plans or ideas about what, where, when, or how I should accomplish that. So, before the beginning of the summer break in 2009, I was clueless as well in terms of what to do for the long summer months. That quickly changed when I met with Mary Humstone to talk about a class for the fall 2009 semester. Mary asked me if I was interested in internships and when I said yes, she recommended a small museum in Powell, WY to me. I was excited to be actually doing something productive during the summer and applying my conducted studies to that point to a field that I am really interested in for my future.

I started my internship at the Homesteader Museum on May 19 and worked there for the following four weeks. I enjoyed every day of it and am so thankful for this opportunity. Rowene Weems, the director and curator, along with the other three staff members, warmly welcomed me and I always had the feeling that I was not “just” a temporary intern, but a full staff member with equal responsibilities. The museum mainly concentrates on the time period before the 1950s-1960s and contains exhibits and pieces from the foundation and development of the town of Powell. An important aspect, as the name already suggests, is the role that homesteading and also the development of irrigation systems in this western town played.

I was fully incorporated in the daily activities and tasks of the museum and explored all kinds of fields that are important in order to keep a museum going. My duties included work in the archives, cataloging and researching exhibits, opening and closing the museum, greet visitors and answer the phone, help to prepare upcoming special exhibits, participate in the decision-making processes in terms of certain aspects of the exhibits, and learning a lot about the roles of the different staff members (curator, registrar, director, etc.). I also worked on refining and correcting an existing exhibit and I enjoyed the trust that was put into me in terms of doing all the research and preparing the information for the public myself.

During my (unfortunately only) four weeks, I learned so many things and explored so many different aspects of the work at a museum, that I feel more confirmed in terms of my future now. I can definitely see myself working for a museum later on or doing more internships for different institutions to gather more experience. Especially since my American Studies theme is based on the different aspects of the American West, I would love to incorporate my knowledge collected during my studies into the work closely related to museum’s work or a similar field. By Judith Kempe
This summer we had a wonderful opportunity to put ourselves to the test in more ways than we had expected. We did a summer internship in the Grand Teton National Park to evaluate if Jenny Lake Lodge and Cabins were eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Above all, this internship experience walked us through the process of evaluating a multi-structure property and preparing it for nomination to the National Register. In other words, it was a big 6-week project during the course of which we learned a lot.

We were first struck by the obvious: log buildings are not all the same. In fact, they can be all very different to the minutest detail. The next step was starting to see the patterns and similarities between them. Doing such a project meant gathering and organizing tons of bits and pieces of information, and often finding missing pieces in places you would never expect. However, in Jackson Hole, tracking down the origins of certain cabins was like solving a crime in NYC: sometimes we really could not solve it due to the “extreme makeover” or “surgery” the cabins underwent and also due to the cabins’ vicarious “traveling.” Thus, sometimes the mystery remained unsolved.

We also talked to a lot of people in the area in order to solve the puzzling origins of some of the cabins. This included talking to business people like Jenny Lake Lodge manager, Scott Greene; chatting with the guests and the employees; and getting a taste of bureaucracy at the National Park Service (with guidance and help from the Park Historian, Kathryn Mallander). These interactions really made us think how to “sell” historic preservation to people from very different walks of life.

Getting Diversity, Ecology of Knowledge, and Literary Evidence: Documentary prepared me well for the internship in the Tetons. The National Park Service is a great site for the historical and the environmental. These two are not always easy to put together, but we had the fortune to work on both. You can go out and look at a building and see its historical significance as a part of the corridor of migration between the east and the west, or you can go in and look at it and see its significance in the light of the changing climate.

The experience has some great crossover conversation with the Science & Technology caucus of ASA, though not too many people attended both. My paper there was on embodied writing practices. I wondered if we as scholars embodied our own belief in the dissolution of the mind/body divide in our practice as scholars. It turns out we often do not, and that writing involves a lot of pain.

How do you like the ASA?
I find ASA a very stimulating and fun experience every time I go. I leave with many new ideas and always meet people doing interesting work. I have been to ASA three times now (Oakland, Albuquerque and DC). This was the first time I presented a paper. I found my panel quite productive, even though two panelists dropped due to illness, and we were at 8 a.m. on the last day! Each of our papers explored how technologies affect what constitutes a “natural” body, and what that body has to do with belonging to the nation-state.

Which panels have you been going to?
I tried to attend a lot of the Science & Technology related panels, since these conversations relate well to my research. I also enjoyed attending a few panels on embodiment, particularly around movement and sport.

How is Davis? How do you like going to school there?
Davis is a great place to do graduate work. I live in a very supportive community, and can eat fresh fruit and veggies year round! There’s enough going on to keep me entertained, though not too much to distract when I want to do work. The classes offered are quite diverse, and they have some outstanding faculty. Right now, being in the UC system is quite an adventure and a lesson in activism. I’ve been involved in two protest movements since arriving, first in an effort to keep the local bike repair collective from getting evicted from campus (we ended up moving off campus and becoming an independent entity—it’s been quite successful), and now to protest for change in the UC system and higher education funding. I helped with the September walk-out, stood in support of the 52 students who got arrested in November, and continue to participate in conversations and protests around how we can change higher education to give more people a voice in the administration and foster a more participatory, radical democracy.

You taught a class this summer...How do you think it went?
I taught Cultural Diversity in America this summer at UW. I think it went well; the students really seemed to gel, and apply the lessons learned in class to their lives. I’m always impressed with the students at UW. In my experience, the students in the American Studies courses exhibit an open attitude toward learning and engaging the world differently than they may be used to doing. I like to apply the concepts I teach to everyday life and objects, since these mundane subjects embed new ways of seeing and being into the world we think we know.

How well do you feel your studies at UW prepared you for doing a PhD in Davis?
My experience at UW prepared us quite well for my Ph.D. program at UC-Davis. The knowledge I gained at UW about material culture gave me a skill set unique in my cohort. Classes such as Theorizing Diversity, Ecology of Knowledge, and Literary Evidence: Documentary prepared me well for the theoretical approaches I would be steeped in at Davis. I also learned methodologies that would provide a strong foundation for beginning my dissertation research. However, most important to my preparation and continual development as a scholar is the mentorship provided by the faculty at UW.

When is the next time we can see you in Laramie?
I hope to visit Laramie again this summer, perhaps to teach again! It is always such a comfort to be back in the Cooper House, see familiar faces, talk with Sophia, and meet the new grad students. Even though I’m happy to be continuing my work at Davis, coming back to UW still feels like home.
Some of you might remember him from last issue of The Porchlight: a Brit with a massive mustache, writing in first-person narrative. So it was perfectly understandable when asked to be interviewed by The Porchlight he expressed doubt: “What are you going to write about me? I’m a bit worried.” Despite the traumatizing memories from his last appearance in The Porchlight, he was persuaded to answer a few questions about his presentation at the ASA, life in Columbus, and homelessness.

You just gave your paper in the panel “Bad Citizenship and Good Games: Video Gaming, Criminality, and Citizenship.” How do you think your presentation went?

Video gaming. I don’t know anything about video gaming. I wanted to talk about homelessness and the only way to do that was use one of the mediums in which I’m looking at it. Video gaming was an obvious thing. I think it’s sad that there’s not very much being talked about inequality in America, in terms of just a racial, a gendered homeless population. I think it would be quite hard to form a panel like that in those big conferences, where you would get to talk about inequality from a cultural studies standpoint. All in all, I think video gaming worked out quite well. Thank you for your support Wyoming.

How does the application process work to get into ASA? Would you recommend it to the readers of the Porchlight?

I recommend getting into a panel, especially if the panel is sponsored by one of the caucuses because that would be your bet of getting in. And start early, and try to make connections. I guess not a lot of people got on; I guess I was quite lucky to get on this year. I probably won’t apply for a couple of years now. I think it’s all about networking. Conferences are worth doing. I was doing the regional conferences when I was in Wyoming.

Now that you’re at Ohio State, how do you like Ohio so far?

The place is flat, nobody is interested in football [ed: soccer], it’s not as beautiful as Laramie but there are a lot of homeless people – it’s exactly what I was looking for! Well, actually it’s fine. It’s just that Laramie is a hard place to leave. Maybe because it’s such a small program and I think we get a rather archetypal graduate school experience. So you leave from a place like, as someone said, a mom and pop department. We have our own little house with a living room, and a kitchen, and a secretary who looks after everybody. The chances of finding another place like that if you go to grad school or get a job somewhere are very slim. In a big institution like Ohio State you have to fight for your identity and research territory all the time. And that was a bit of a shock at first.

It has been a big transition for me for moving from our department to the Midwest. Suddenly coming from west to east and people expecting that I’m coming from the east to west. So people are expecting because of my accent that I’m coming to Ohio as a Brit but I have come to Ohio as a Westerner really. That’s been quite identity crisis for me in the first couple of months. But it’s been interesting and it has forced me to look at America in different ways. I really do advocate a more intellectually, if not personally, because there are a very few places that are as unique as Wyoming. But I’m coming back next summer.

What are you working on right now?

I’m trying take the ideas from my MA thesis and move them into an ethnographic methodology. I’m trying to think about the stories people tell about their local homeless individuals and homeless populations and how their stories are linked very much to the place or region or the history or the cultural memory of the house people live in. So far I have been just kind of getting a feel for how people think about homelessness differently in the Midwest which is in many ways an old and more settled type of America. It seems to me at the moment that the stories people tell have less to do with mobility, and have less to do with this romantic idea of homelessness and have more to do with authenticity and public performance and making these claims that the homeless aren’t really homeless, or that the panhandlers make so much money everyday that they could really have a house, and have a car. So they kind of pathologize it in quite different ways.

What lessons do you take from Wyoming that you’re bringing to your new career?

Um… nostalgia for Wyoming? I think it prepared me really well and this is something that we were talking about last night with Nate [Young]. We are not told to think in set ways. It’s very nice to come from an American Studies department like Wyoming where you are encouraged to think outside the box. And I think coming to the ASA from Wyoming is always interesting. We have a very generalist department, whereas a lot of places don’t. We don’t maybe find a lot of presentations at the ASA on the things we traditionally look at in Wyoming.

We were thinking why is that so. Is it that Wyoming is more progressive? We get to do pretty much anything we want. It’s interesting to be moving from that scenario to a department that I’m in right now, that despite all the lip service it pays to interdisciplinarity, it’s still got quite traditional ways of thinking. At least when looking at the things that people do. I mean you are either in religious studies or Near-Eastern languages or cultures, or you might be looking at culture and you’ll probably might be a Marxist. Whereas in our department is different. I mean, it’s very much the product of people who teach there, and specifically when it comes to theory it’s Frieda. It’s like when you get introduced to someone like Gregory Bateson, you can’t unlearn that and it problematizes pretty much everything you do afterwards. I mean problematizes in a good way. But it makes it quite hard to go back to this department where you have people who can’t have these conversations with you. So I have been trying to introduce other people to the theory readings that I have grown to know and love. But people aren’t interested in them, and of course they are not interested in them because they are all Marxists and post-Marxist, and they are into psychoanalysis, and I’m not. It’s nice, but we can’t have the same conversations as in our small little department. You’ve got to fight a lot more for your kind of interdisciplinary turf.

In terms of just personal development I think Wyoming was just fantastic. It is was an intimate department and we had exemplary professors. You could not ask for better mentors, I don’t think. And I like that the department is not super career-driven because then you have a little bit more of the c’est la vie attitude towards fighting for jobs and fighting for funding and fighting for everything else. But we also have kind of this understanding that American Studies can be applied and you can actually engage with the community. But suddenly you’re in a place where people don’t think like that, where people are very career oriented. That’s been a bit of a leap for me as well.

When will we see you again in Laramie?

I don’t know. I’ll definitely be there in the summer to work with high school kids, that’s my favorite job.