the porchlight

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message from the program director eric sandeen

This has been another productive year for American Studies. In August we welcomed Lilia Soto as a new Assistant Professor in American Studies and Chicano Studies and became the home for a new cohort of students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Despite the evidence of snow displayed in this newsletter, truth in advertising compels me to mention that we have had one of the warmest Fall seasons that I can remember. So, our Homecoming float paraded down the street in fine autumnal surroundings and, for at least a month, we had to persuade new students that it really DOES snow in Wyoming. In the future, we hope to be able to reach you more often, so stay tuned for newsletter developments! In the meantime, my best wishes for you during the upcoming holiday season.

adelt publishes book on blues in black and white

American Studies Assistant Professor Ulrich Adelt has published his first book: *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (Rutgers University Press 2010) and is pleased to have this adaptation of his dissertation finished. Of these six case studies, in which Adelt addresses race relations, rock music, the folk revival and the music business, Kip Lornell from George Washington University stated, “I have been waiting for [this book] since the 1980s.” While teaching in the American Studies and African American and Diaspora Studies, Adelt is continuing his publishing career as he develops a work based on his studies of Krautrock, a genre of German popular music in the 1970s.

the homecoming duck

Regular readers of *Porchlight* will remember the almost-tragedy of the infamous duck lamp. Rescued from the maw of the dumpster, the duck lamp’s reputation was restored by Director Eric Sandeen and a letter in the lamp’s defense published in a previous edition. Renamed “Richard,” the duck lamp made significant progress in grabbing the hearts and minds of American Studies students and faculty alike this semester, launching his own Facebook page and modeling for the 2010 Homecoming Parade American Studies float. Enjoy these photos of the program’s newest celebrity.
Soto noted that the interviewing process was very emotional for her and the interviewee, and that the necessary disconnect between interviewer and interviewee was draining. “I kept wanting to tell them it would all be fine,” she explained. Soto noted that true interdisciplinary work, such as hers, has few good models to follow and told the graduate class as one looks for supposedly “interdisciplinary” jobs that are really disciplined, she finds that if one used a method well, “then your training is reflected,” and varying posts can be filled. For her own work, Soto was proud to report a reviewer for one of her articles called it “very humane.” While another reviewer, a sociologist, griped that the sample size (40) was too small to publish the piece in social science journals, Soto pointed out that in her dissertation she strove to tell the participants’ stories and not to make definitive statements. She pointedly exempted her own similar story from the work itself, adding footnotes as were relevant.

In a very American Studies and heartening way, for the graduate class, Soto stated that she does her work, “as it makes sense to me.” Noting that establishing her place in American Studies, with her ethnic studies and oral history training, allows her “to play with ideas more.” Soto said American Studies was exciting as a field, lately, where “cutting edge work” is taking place. The earnest questions with which the graduate class plied Soto, at the end of her introduction, were a kind of welcome to the University of Wyoming’s American Studies discussions about the field, its methodologies and its culture of interdisciplinary work.
After graduation, Maggie stayed in Fremont County and worked as the Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist for Fremont County for three years and then became the Director of the Shoshoni Lights On! Afterschool Program. After much thought, Maggie joined the Peace Corps and spent the last two years living in rural Romania doing youth development activities. She returned to Wyoming this summer and is interested in studying how American and Wyoming values influence political change.

January Nachtigall’s history lies in medical anthropology, art and paramedicine. She seeks to spread education about the simple ways we choose to allow illness to pervade our lifestyles through our own actions. Voicing her opinion through different mediums of art and explicitly through sculpture, Jan allows others to experience an image that outlasts words and statistics. It is here in American Studies that she feels she can effectively utilize and combine her talents.

Alliance for Historic Wyoming hires AMST graduate

This fall, Hilery Walker (MA 2010) was hired as the Alliance for Historic Wyoming’s Executive Director. Founded in 2005, Alliance for Historic Wyoming is a leading voice for the protection of Wyoming’s built environment and cultural landscapes. As executive director, Hilery will be helping to streamline AHW’s advocacy and education endeavors, develop and implement a fundraising plan, and raise awareness of the organization throughout the state. Throughout her American Studies career, Hilery took built environment classes from Research Scientist Mary Humstone and completed a summer field study in historic preservation in Grand Teton National Park. While completing her MA, Hilery also finished a BFA at University of Wyoming, presenting her work “Redeeming Casper: ‘Just a Boom and Bust Town’ No Longer” a photographic exhibit of historic buildings in Casper, Wyoming. Congratulations Hilery!

American Studies welcomes Lilia Soto

Mid-semester, new faculty member Lilia Soto introduced herself to the American Studies graduate classes with the very candid statement that she has “more questions than answers.” To a group of graduate students freshly sprung from a critical theory segment and grappling with the reflexivity and identity struggles of American Studies as a field and a discipline, Soto’s words were simultaneously refreshing and comforting. Soto arrived in Laramie in August to take a dual post as assistant professor in American Studies and Chicano Studies. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley two years ago with a Ph.D. in Comparative Ethnic Studies, which complemented her undergraduate studies in Ethnic Studies and Latin American Studies from U.C. San Diego. She has also taught at U.C. Santa Barbara in Feminist Studies. Before coming to Laramie, Soto was awarded two years as a University of California President’s Post-Doctoral Fellow at U.C. Los Angeles in the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies. Soto used the time as a fellow to work on two articles based on her dissertation; both are now in the revision stages of publication.

Soto’s research interests and her dissertation are centered around issues of gender, race and migration. Specifically her dissertation centered on the oral histories of Mexican adolescent girls who migrated to the Napa Valley. Herself a migrant, Soto wanted to focus her work on time and space factors of the migration process; for example, how adolescent girls whose father’s work in Napa Valley perceive their disconnected family and distant father and how they think about the rights of passage when their turn to immigrate arrives in adolescence. Soto noted that the girls she interviewed, “grew up waiting to come to the United States, so how does that alter the way we understand the journeys of transnational families?” Soto said she’s interested not just how these girls live in interesting families that stretch across international boundaries but also how that affects their present. Soto’s Ethnic Studies training, she said, allowed her to focus on crucial differences, instead of just looking for similarities in the narratives she analyzed.

Soto’s perspective on one of the identity struggles within American Studies, that of the differences (crucial or not) between humanities research and social sciences research was also illuminating for the graduate class. She noted that her work was not ethnographic, although it was subjectively so, in a way, as Soto intimately knew Napa Valley and the migration experience. She had also immigrated to Napa Valley and often found that the girls she interviewed had stories very similar to her own. Commenting that “there is no such thing as objectivity,” Soto said she chose oral history as a method of using unstructured interviewing and valued training in this methodology that gave her perspectives on dealing and working with the emotions that were revealed in her interviews.

Continued on next page
Rachel: Sometimes I find it really difficult to separate the work life from home life. Plants, animals, air, water... all these things I teach about surround me every day because I include them in my life. There is a reason why I studied the environment. But what's more surprising for me is how the agricultural aspect of my work is affecting my life and vice versa. I'm a farm girl! I approach agriculture from environmental and cultural perspectives. But I am an active participant in our nation's agricultural system—every time I eat. As I taught the unit on sustainable agriculture, I realized there is a shared interest to have increased access to foods and enhanced knowledge of where our foods come from. Students suggested that the land grant program could be better at growing vegetables and that we should offer community opportunities for Farmers Markets. I am all over that! But until then, I have to wait, a minute, my purchase habits affect the inventory the supermarket chooses to carry? I am certain there are not many others in the community who see going to the grocery store as an opportunity to actively express their agency.

Rachel: I don't know if I can say “haunt.” It makes me think of critical theorists who come back to haunt you?

Rachel: You're welcome Julia. What I want to say is that I don't think a scholar can really understand advice for current and prospective UW AMST grads?

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Julia: It does seem that being adaptable would be essential in your position. You talk about research, how important it is to be adaptable; after all, nothing is concrete.

Rachel: Yes, I really think it did. American Studies is with me all the time, it has become my lens to see the world. And now that I am operating in a culture that is vastly different than my own, this lens is indispensable. There are so many times that I find myself in positions that I am not entirely comfortable with, positions that either felt too much like positions of power or positions that were too far outside of my interdisciplinary comfort zone of knowledge. During my fifth week of work, the college president delegated me to meet with representatives from the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration who were on the climate change task force for the region. Just recently, I attended a short course on Natural Resource Management see themselves going in so many directions. I spent a lot of time in the first weeks getting to know my students, where they came from, and where they wanted to go. The way I see it, my program in natural resources and agriculture could be for anyone in the community, no matter where they wanted to go with it. The class I am teaching on Native Plants is a key example. We talk some biology, some botany, ecology, ethnobotany, oral traditions, Dakota language, and anthropology and so on. One of my students in that class is a Dakota elder. She knows many plants and what they were used for, but she only knows them by their Dakota names. What she wants to learn is the English names! She, like many others in that class, is not studying natural resources, but instead Indian Studies. This class is alive every day. It doesn't take much to convince these students that the scientific data that might be found in a book on ethnobotany are only cold and lonely facts stripped from the culture, stories, and names that define how Dakota people experienced each plant. That kind of talk is American Studies.

Julia: I love it that you say your classrooms are alive! Do you find you can place activism in your teaching?

Rachel: This one is tricky because my presence in the classroom is a form of activism. In my studies I witnessed an overwhelming presence of dominator culture, hegemony, one-mindedness, exclusion, throughout the environmental sciences and applications. The way I see it, my program in natural resources and agriculture could be for anyone in the community, no matter where they wanted to go with it. The class I am teaching on Native Plants is a key example. We talk some biology, some botany, ecology, ethnobotany, oral traditions, Dakota language, and anthropology and so on. One of my students in that class is a Dakota elder. She knows many plants and what they were used for, but she only knows them by their Dakota names. What she wants to learn is the English names! She, like many others in that class, is not studying natural resources, but instead Indian Studies. This class is alive every day. It doesn't take much to convince these students that the scientific data that might be found in a book on ethnobotany are only cold and lonely facts stripped from the culture, stories, and names that define how Dakota people experienced each plant. That kind of talk is American Studies.

Julia: Wow, Rachel you really have experienced a lot in the past six months. I imagine there were times that this amount of responsibility was a little intimidating. And even now, as you “come up for air,” the task of finding your bearings must be a lot to deal with. Do you feel like your work in American Studies prepared you for your job?

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