



PORCHLIGHT

AMERICAN STUDIES

Spring 2026
Cooper House
The University of Wyoming



WELCOME

TO SPRING SEMESTER

2026

Dear Porchlight readers,

Academic Year 2025-2026 has been one of our busiest and most exciting yet! This spring, our faculty and students have attended conferences, hosted events, won awards, and brought research projects to fruition. This issue of the Porchlight highlights all the wonderful happenings in and around the Cooper House during Spring 2026.

This semester our academic programming featured many of our faculty's original research, as well as visiting scholars they invited to campus. Robyn Lopez (Native Studies) delivered a lecture on Indigenous language revitalization at the American Heritage Center's "Wyoming Voices: Our Stories of America" exhibit opening reception. Dr. Sam Vandermeade hosted Dr. Katie Oliviero (Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Dickinson College) for a lecture on her upcoming book, *Straightening Out the Nation: Citizenship and LGBTQ Families in the Age of Backlash*. Dr. Oliviero also led a lunchtime discussion with our graduate students focused on her broader research, which explores immigration, gay rights, reproductive justice, backlash politics, and state-sponsored violence. Dr. Trisha Martinez continued her work with the Pathways from Prison initiative—which was recently awarded a \$500,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation to expand access to higher education for incarcerated individuals. And Dr. Steve Dillon participated in the English department's Keyword for the Humanities event on "Empathy" and had some of his photographs displayed in the UW Art Museum's faculty art show, "Outside Office Hours."

Our faculty were not the only ones participating in campus events, however. Our graduate students have been hard at work as well! As founding president of the Vietnamese Scholars and Students Association (VSSA), Hoang T. Nguyen successfully organized the academic-cultural event, "Writing on the Story of Peace," where he and his VSSA team brought together American Studies scholars, Vietnam War veterans, and local community members for a film screening and discussion. Daisy Innes, one of our first-year graduate students with a professional background and research interest in country music, organized a musical event that featured three local singer-songwriters and celebrated music and storytelling born and bred in Wyoming.

Our second-year graduate students had the opportunity to travel to the Neltje Center for Excellence and Creativity in the Arts, a beautiful scholarly and artistic retreat space nestled at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains near Sheridan, WY. During their five-day stay, all six of the students made significant progress on their theses, visited the Brinton Museum, and even made time for some outdoor fun and games.

Most of our graduate students presented original research related to their interdisciplinary interests at conferences held across the country, including the American Studies Association conference, the International Country Music Conference, the American Literature Association conference, the Popular Culture Association conference, the National Association for Chicana and Chicago Studies conference, and the Futures of American Studies Institute conference at Dartmouth College. First-year student Beck Lambert will even be traveling to Switzerland this summer to present their research on African, Afropean, and Afropolitan identities!

Engagement with locally based identities and vibrant storytelling practices seemed to be a theme in the classroom this year as well. In one of Dr. Martinez's Pathways from Prison courses, students collectively wrote a poem that evoked concepts, phrases, and ideas students were learning in class and reminds the poem's readers that we can all be knowledge producers, artists, and scholars in our own communities.

Dr. Vandermeade taught a brand new course, titled “Coal Stories: Wyoming and Appalachia,” which takes an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to two seemingly disparate places, digs deeply into regional histories of extractive industries, and explores coal’s critical role in the construction of community and cultural identity in Wyoming and her home region in Appalachia.

Aside from launching her course on coal, Dr. Vandermeade also achieved two professional milestones this semester: Her co-edited collection, *Transnational Feminist Pedagogies: Meanings, Methods, and Experiences* was released by Routledge in February. She also won the John P. Ellbogen Meritorious Teaching Award, which rewards excellence in classroom teaching at the University of Wyoming.

Dr. Ulrich Adelt has stepped into a larger leadership role in the field of American Studies this semester. In addition to being president of the Rocky Mountain chapter of the American Studies Association, Dr. Adelt is now also a member of the organization's Committee for Programs, Departments, and Centers and helped organize a panel on "American Studies Under Attack Nationally and Locally" for the upcoming November 2026 meeting in Chicago.

One of the highlights of the spring semester each year is our admissions process! The faculty reviewed applications to our master’s program in March, and we are delighted to announce that we are welcoming a cohort of eight new graduate students. Members of the class of 2028 hail from India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Vietnam, and places across the United States, and we are excited to see where their studies take them during their time with us.

Finally, we’d like to extend our heartfelt congratulations to Joseph Egungbemi, Benny Pallares, and Max Umurzakov for completing their theses on the political economy of prisons, conspiracy theories and cultural meaning making, and Chicano theater, respectively. The rest of the 2026 cohort—Cara Barclay, Harper Pachel, and Lynnea Rivera—will spend the summer wrapping up their theses on Indigenous art and desert landscapes, quilting and community building, and Indigenous fire management and ecology. We can’t wait to read them!

We are excited for all our graduates and looking forward to seeing how they utilize their American Studies master’s degrees as they move into the next stage of their professional lives. We hope each and every member of our American Cultural Studies community has a wonderful summer, and we can’t wait for a new academic year full of fresh faces, new accomplishments, and continued community this fall!

Warmly,

Sam Vandermeade
Assistant Professor, American Cultural Studies

Congratulations, 2026 Graduates!



Congratulations to our 2026 American studies MA Graduates!

We had six students walk together at this year's commencement. We are so proud of their hard work and wish them all the best in their future work and ambitions.

American Studies Theses, 2026

Joseph Egungbemi

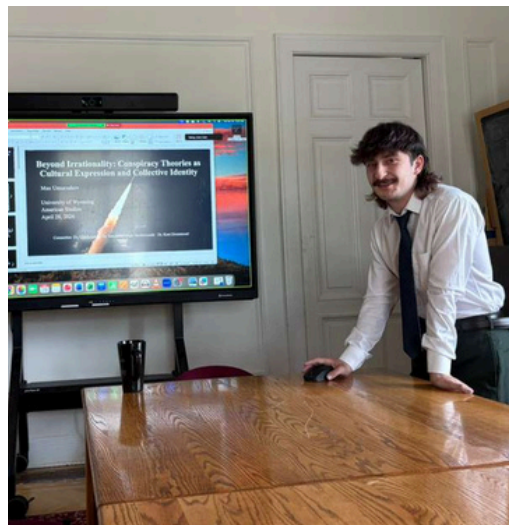
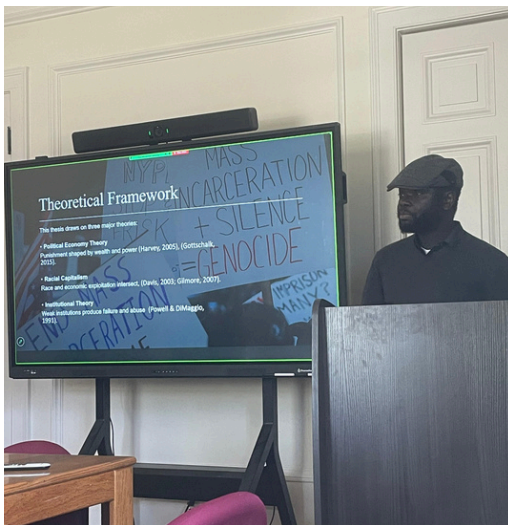
“Profit and Punishment: The Political Economy of Prisons in the U.S. and Nigeria”

Max Umurzakov

“Beyond Irrationality: Conspiracy Theories as Cultural Expression and Collective Identity”

Benny Pallares

“Prickly Pear Politics: Performing the Unapologetic Brown Body Through Identity and Resistance in the Play *Nopal Boy* by Mecedonio Arteaga, Jr. of Teatro Izcalli”



Grad Student Conferences

Daisy Innes

Daisy was accepted to present at the International Country Music Conference in Nashville, TN. Her paper was titled “Life, Legacy and Luke: the social environment of Wyoming through the life of Luke Bell” and will act as the basis of her thesis.

Beck Lambert

Beck has been accepted to present at two conferences during the summer. At the American Literature Association in Chicago, they'll be on a panel titled “The Harlem Renaissance: songs and Letters”. They will also be traveling to Switzerland to the sgas-vad with a paper titled “Futures Beyond Boundaries: (Re)imagining African, Afropean and Afropolitan Identities in Navigating Cultures and Belongingness”.

Benny Pallares

Benny travelled to San Antonio, TX, to present at the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies conference with a paper titled “Resistance in Chicanx Teatro”.

Hoang T. Nguyen

Hoang will be attending the 26th iteration of the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. With a theme of “The US at 250”, Hoang's paper is titled “Rethinking American Studies in Vietnam: Potentials and Challenges”.

Irelynn Holland

Irelynn travelled to San Francisco, CA, to present at the Popular Culture Association conference with a paper titled “Celebrating Charles Freeman: The Life of a Beatles Troubadour,” co-authored with Kent Drummond, Allison Bumsted, and Jake Cowan.



Many of our American Studies Grad students were accepted to present at conferences relating to their fields during the semester and into the summer months.

Graduate Writing Retreat at the Neltje Center



Dr. Ulli Adelt and Dr. Sam Vandermeade accompanied six of our second-year American Studies graduate students to the Neltje Center for Excellence and Creativity in the Arts from March 25th-29th for a writing retreat. The Neltje Center is named after Neltje, a renowned artist, philanthropist, and patron of the arts, who donated her home to the University of Wyoming upon her death in the hope that it would foster future generations' scholarship, artistic endeavors, and creative impact in Wyoming and beyond. The Neltje Center "provides a sanctuary for UW students, faculty, and other creatives to unleash their imagination in one of the most scenic areas of Wyoming, near the Bighorns just south of Sheridan."

During our five-day stay, the graduate students spent time amidst Neltje's art collection and the beautiful outdoor spaces surrounding the property, working on their theses, bouncing ideas off each other and their faculty mentors, and even engaging in some rousing rounds of tag and hide-and-seek! Balancing fun and relaxation with hard work and intellectual rigor, each of the students produced at least one new component to their projects and strengthened already robust theses.

Those five days were not only productive and generative; they also provided a chance to unplug, spend a few days enjoying one another's company, and to put some last-minute touches on friendships that will outlast the students' two short years in the American Studies department. We look forward to making this thesis writing retreat an annual tradition!

What did our students think?

"My thesis ties together art history and ecology, so the house and landscape directly impacted me. I was surrounded by an immense amount of art with the mountains in the background. This co-existence is inspiring. It is a living representation of the ways humans can live in relation to the natural environment, using art as a tool to express and shape this relationship."

"Time slowed down here because it was like nothing I have ever experienced before. I will have memories of everything about my stay for a long time after I leave."

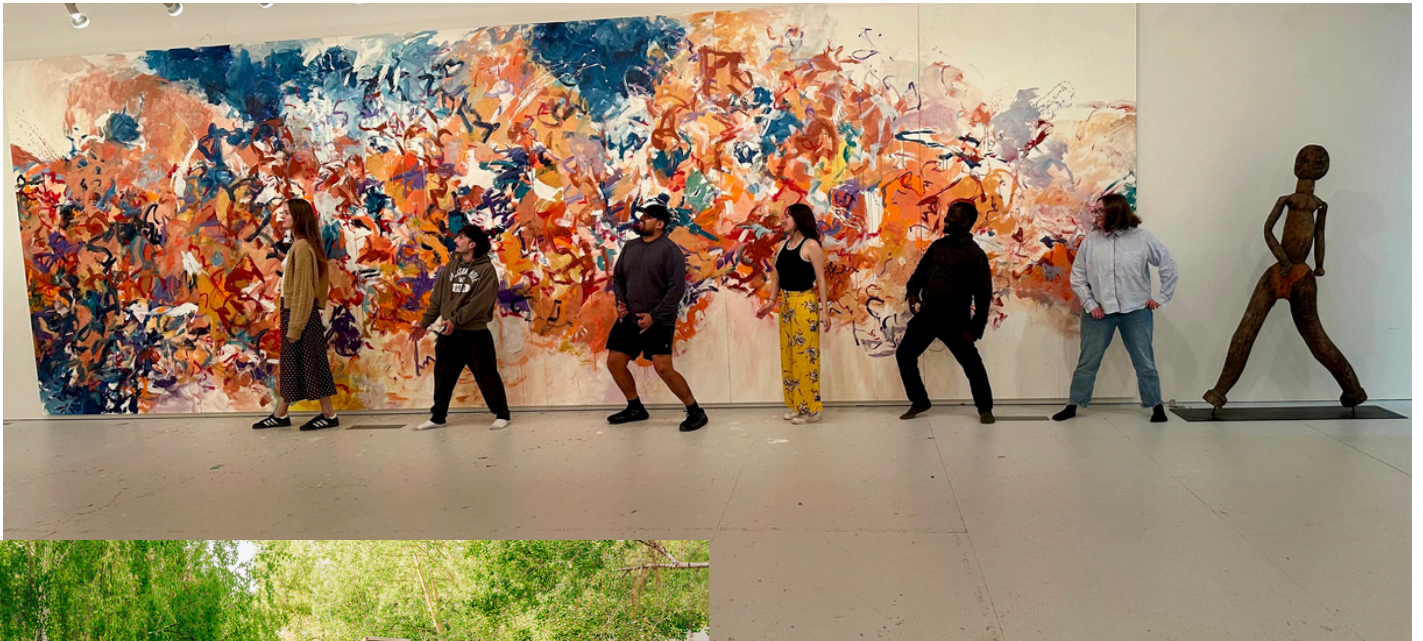


Image courtesy of the UW Neltje Center

"This creative space has helped me think clearly, more freely, and personally outside the academic scope and without limits."

"I accomplished a lot while staying at the Neltje Center. Some things that I had been stuck on with my writing for weeks suddenly made sense after getting here."

American Studies Inside: Hope is the Message

Each course in the Wyoming Pathways from Prison Program is both intellectually engaging and deeply inspiring. As students strive toward completing their bachelor's degrees, they contribute above and beyond in intentional, thoughtful, and creative ways. In the 2025-2026 academic year, students shared powerful forms of creative expression, which were featured in the University of Wyoming Prison Art Symposium and Paño Connections Prison Art Exhibition, and contributed written works to the Pathways from Prison Journal, hosted by UW's Writing Center.

A highlight from this semester in Dr. Martinez's Introduction to American Studies course was the meaningful engagement and weighted dialogue between students from WMCI, Dr. Rob Jackson (English Department), and Kendra Cowley (UW/WPFP Librarian). The conversation allowed students to deeply engage in questions related to Black aesthetics, refusal, and sociality through Arthur Jafa's film *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*. What emerged from this dialogue—and from the course more broadly—was a powerful reminder that students in the program are not only learners eager to make sense of this world and its happenings, but also knowledge producers, artists, and scholars whose contributions and impact extend far beyond the classroom setting.

In the class we did a collective poetry exercise where students were asked to fill in the black with concepts, phrases, or ideas that resonated with them from the week's readings.

-----is the message, the message is -----

Money is the message, the message is money

The point is the message, the message is sharp

Culture is the message, the message is aesthetic

Love is the message, the message is freedom

Communication is the message, the message is understanding

Hope is the message, the message is life

Beauty is the message, the message is pain

Truth is the message, the message is contagious

Art is the message, the message is creativity

Reality is the message, the message is now

Unity is the message, the message is suffering

Love is the message, the message is defiance

Knowledge is the message, the message is enlightenment

Perception is the message, the message is action

Truth is the message, the message is hidden

The solution is the message, the message is indecipherable

Rebellion is the message, the message is resistance

Hope is the message, the message is you

Coal Stories: Wyoming and Appalachia



As part of her 2025-2026 Clay Fellowship with the Honors College, which funds faculty members from across the university to develop and deliver new and interdisciplinary courses, Dr. Sam Vandermeade designed and taught Honors 4152: Coal Stories: Wyoming and Appalachia during Spring 2026. This new course takes an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to two seemingly disparate locales, digs deeply into the histories of extraction that link them, and explores coal's critical role in the construction of community and cultural identity in both places. Dr. Vandermeade and her students considered regional histories of class, labor, and environmentalism that shape the lives and livelihoods of everyday citizens, and they delved into a broad diversity of cultural productions created by those same everyday Wyomingites and Appalachians about coal and its impact in their lives, including novels, short stories, poetry, film, oral histories, and art.



The course raises questions such as: How do people understand their labor, their land, and their livelihoods in relationship to coal production? How does coal production shape communities in ways beyond its economic impact? What happens when we ask people to choose between financial security and environmental safety? What stories do the people most affected by coal tell about it? By taking a place-based approach, the course asks students to think critically about the many different factors that shape place and our relationship to it, while also recognizing the shared struggles of working-class people in two much mythologized places: Appalachia and the West.

Dr. Vandermeade writes, "I approached the design of this course as an Appalachian at heart, a Wyomingite by choice, and an interdisciplinary scholar by training. Although I am well grounded in critical rurality studies, and I study community identity formation among other populations, I had not focused exclusively on coal before designing this course. What surprised me most was how generative it was to discuss coal, identity formation, and cultural production with a small-but-mighty group of students from majors as diverse as environmental and natural resources, music performance, international studies, and business economics. Other scholars in the UW community—including Dan Auerbach, Brie Blasi, Matt Henry, and Shelby Shadwell—were kind enough to share their expertise with the class, enriching the course as we explored coal and its continued relevance to Wyoming and Appalachia together."

As part of the course, Dr. Vandermeade and her students visited the Laramie River Station, a coal-fired power plant in Wheatland, Wyoming. During the field trip, students learned about and discussed the history, politics, mechanics, technological developments, and environmental impact of coal mining and coal-powered electricity generation with the plant manager, an electrical engineer, and an environmental specialist. They also toured the site, where they got to look inside a coal-fired boiler; watch the cleaning, repair, and replacement of the turbines that work to generate electricity; and see the entire operation, and its centrality to the community, from the roof of the plant.

After the field trip, students wrote thank you notes to the management and staff. One wrote, "we've spent the semester exploring academic perspectives of the communities built around the coal industry and getting to witness this firsthand has helped connect intangible theories to physical realities in invaluable ways." Another student—an Environment and Natural Resources major—wrote, "This tour was very helpful for me as a student, not only in the Coal Stories class, but for my overall academic career." In one way or another, each student expressed their deep gratitude to the plant management and staff for, as one student wrote, "showing us the reason we're able to turn on our lights and charge our phones."



Dr. Vandermeade plans to offer Coal Stories: Wyoming and Appalachia again as a combined upper-division undergraduate/graduate course in the near future, so stay tuned!

DR. SAMANTHA L. VANDERMEADE

Technology and Language Revitalization at the University of Wyoming

Some readers might remember Dr. Phineas Kelly and Dr. Caskey Russell's work using virtual reality (VR) technology to contribute to Arapaho language revitalization by allowing Arapaho speakers to experience and comment on places they were unable to visit in real life. Researchers in the University of Wyoming's Computer Science and Native American & Indigenous Studies departments are now collaborating with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's Iyápi Language Program to develop a virtual environment where language learners can get real experience hearing and using the Lakota language no matter their physical location. The Lakota language, once spoken from Wyoming across the Great Plains all the way north to Canada, is now spoken mostly by a few thousand elderly speakers. If younger generations do not take up the language in greater numbers, it may be severely endangered within only a few decades. Lakota language learners are often unable to travel to where the language is more widely spoken and struggle to study the language largely on their own. Using a virtual reality headset, they are able to hear the language while navigating within an interactive digital world.

A LAKOTA LANGUAGE
STUDENT TESTS THE
INITIAL VIRTUAL
ENVIRONMENT AT
UW'S NATIVE
AMERICAN
EDUCATION
RESEARCH AND
CULTURAL CENTER
(NAERCC).



Originally an idea formed by Dr. Jessica Nelson, a professor in Native American & Indigenous Studies who specializes in language revitalization, and Milan Wolff, a doctoral student in Computer Science, the project soon expanded to include Dr. Amy Banić, a professor in Computer Science specialized in virtual and augmented realities, as well as Nacole Walker, director of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's Iyápi Language Program, and Elliot Bannister, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's digital humanities specialist. Plans evolved from a simple environment in which learners could hear Lakota "travel verbs" while navigating on a short trip between a house and a boulder, to a forest path that learners travel while accompanied by a virtual, Lakota-speaking "dog companion." Future plans include developing this expanded environment into an interactive game. Students in Dr. Nelson's Lakota language class were able to test an early version of the environment and were unanimously enthusiastic about the experience.

To stay updated on this project, including participating in tests of the virtual environment, or if you are interested in studying the Lakota language at UW, please contact Dr. Nelson at jessica.nelson@uwyo.edu. For information about Arapaho language classes at UW, please contact Robyn Lopez, ABD, at rlopez@uwyo.edu. The department also hopes to offer Shoshone language lessons soon, too!

JESSICA FAE NELSON

Dr. Katie Oliviero at UW



In April, Dr. Katie Oliviero (Associate Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Dickinson College) visited the University of Wyoming at the invitation of Dr. Sam Vandermeade and the American Cultural Studies program and delivered her lecture, "Straightening Out the Nation: Citizenship Policies and the Contemporary Backlash Against LGBTQ Families." Based on her latest book, Dr. Oliviero's lecture addressed how historical and contemporary changes to U.S. citizenship policies—such as those surrounding children born abroad, surrogacy and adoption, naturalization, and birthright citizenship—have affected queer families and their children. Her lecture demonstrated that despite the 2015 Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which cemented nation-wide marriage equality for LGBTQ citizens, exclusions and inequities in citizenship rights based on sexuality still persist today and have detrimental impacts on LGBTQ Americans and their children.

Dr. Oliviero also joined faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences and our American Studies graduate students for lunch and a discussion of her broader scholarship, which explores how social movements leverage nationalist, gendered, racialized, and sexualized narratives of risk to influence the law in controversies over immigration, gay rights, reproductive justice, and state-sponsored violence.



Dr. Oliviero has written about queer marriage, stand your ground laws, the murder of Trayvon Martin, and the Dreamers, and her published works include two monographs: *Vulnerability Politics: The Uses and Abuses of Precarity in Political Debate* (NYU Press, 2018) and *Straightening Out the Nation: Citizenship and LGBTQ Families in the Age of Backlash* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026). Both the lecture and the lunch discussion attracted folks from across the university and sparked rich and ongoing conversations about the analysis of citizenship in American Studies.

ROBYN LOPEZ:

‘Repositories of Knowledge: Archiving Indigenous Language and Culture for Preservation and Revitalization’

At the University of Wyoming, Native American and Indigenous Studies faculty member Robyn Lopez specializes in language and culture revitalization and has been teaching the Arapaho language for over 20 years.

At the opening reception for the “Wyoming Voices: Our Stories of America” exhibition at the American Heritage Center, Robyn gave a guest lecture titled “Repositories of Knowledge: Archiving Indigenous Language and Culture for Preservation and Revitalization.”

The presentation explored the links between academic researchers and Indigenous communities through archival collections and looked at the relationships between these communities through time. Robyn discussed ways in which these relationships have functioned with a focus on the language and culture revitalization movement. It acted as a wonderful introduction to the exhibition that celebrates the diverse voices that make up Wyoming.

“WYOMING VOICES: OUR
STORIES OF AMERICA”
IS ON DISPLAY AT THE
AHC THROUGH
FEBRUARY 26, 2027



CELEBRATE AMERICA'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY WITH AN EXHIBIT
ABOUT THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION IN THE WEST



Photographing America: the edge of sight

In addition to writing about U.S. based feminist, queer, and anti-racist social movements, Department Chair and Associate Professor Stephen Dillon has also been photographing them for the last fifteen years.

Two of his photos are on display at the University of Wyoming Museum of Art as part of their juried show, “Outside Office Hours.” They will be on display until September, 12th. Along with Dr. Vandemeade, Dr. Dillon teaches “Social Justice in the 21st Century.”



The room is red, like ourselves. Dr. Stephen Dillon

His artist statement reads: My approach to photographing people and landscapes is in dialogue with theoretical questions in feminist and queer studies, black studies, and Native studies concerning how political, legal, and cultural visibility can function as forms of control and capture. The camera has been a primary means to catalog, record, and contain people and places by making them legible and visible to state, colonial, scientific, and institutional power. Inside but against this history, I am interested in how the camera and photograph can create alternative ways to know and feel the present, past, and future by engaging what theorist Shawn Michelle Smith calls the “unconscious perception that lives at the edge of sight.”

Tales from Wyoming

A CELEBRATION OF MUSIC AND STORIES



ALCES
COMMUNITY | WORKS

WESTERN  AF



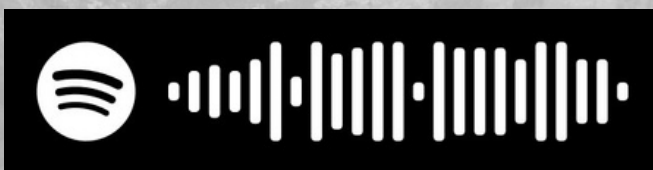
First year MA student, Daisy Innes, specialises in the study of country music, and on May 10, she held her first music event. Featuring three local singer-songwriters, 'Tales from Wyoming' was intended to celebrate the music and storytelling of the state.

With a food truck coming over from Cheyenne, and drinks set up at the historic bar of the Alice Hardie Stevens Center, the evening was a well-attended and much enjoyed night of local entertainment.



Daisy made an introductory speech, talking about her place in the Wyoming music scene as a international student from the UK, her appreciation for the artists and stories that have come from Wyoming, and her thanks to the sponsors and partners that made the night possible.

J Shogren then took to the stage, followed by Hillery Lynn and a closing set from Shawn Hess. With the event feeling like a success, Daisy hopes that Tales from Wyoming might happen again next year with a brand new line-up of local musicians.



Listen to the Tales from Wyoming playlist here

Writing on the Story of Peace

Hoang T. Nguyen—our first-year M.A. student in American Studies, a member of the Graduate Council, and President of the Vietnamese Scholars and Students Association—together with his team, successfully organized the academic-cultural event on Vietnam–U.S. history, “Writing on the Story of Peace.” Held on April 29 at the Alice Hardie Stevens Center, the event drew over 100 attendees, including UW faculty, staff, students, and members of the public and made a meaningful impact across academic, cultural, and community dimensions.



At its core, the screening of the Vietnamese film “The Scent of Burning Grass” (2012) followed by a panel discussion, opened up space for critical conversations on war, memory, representation, and bilateral perspectives on history. By bringing together Vietnam veterans, faculty members, students, and members of the local community into a shared space of conversation, the event also functioned as a form of grassroots diplomacy that fosters mutual understanding and meaningful exchange across historical and cultural differences.

Remarkably, rather than avoiding difficult historical questions or approaching them in a confrontational manner, the event created space for discussion that acknowledged the past while maintaining a forward-looking and constructive tone. In addition, it required not only presenting a Vietnamese narrative, but also translating that narrative in ways that resonate within an American academic and cultural context. This was done without imposing a singular viewpoint, instead encouraging public engagement and fostering cross-cultural dialogue.

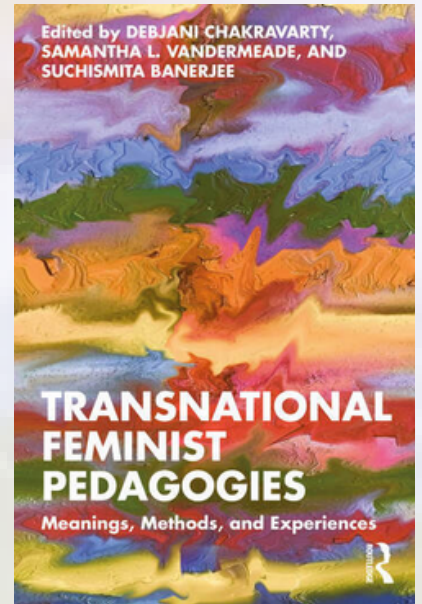
Finally, “Writing on the Story of Peace” also aligns closely with Vietnam’s current approach to foreign relations. The event foregrounded themes of reconciliation, cooperation, and the forward-looking spirit of “setting aside the past to move toward the future”—a message that strongly resonates with the country’s broader diplomatic approach, particularly in their evolving relationship with the United States.



With thank to ASUW, American Studies, the Center for Global Studies, Albany County America 250th Fund Committee, the Milward L. Simpson Fund Committee

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES:

MEANINGS, METHODS, AND EXPERIENCES



This interdisciplinary volume, co-edited by Debjani Chakravarty, Samantha L. Vandermeade, and Suchismita Banerjee, brings together a rich collection of contributions that examine the evolving terrain of higher education through the lens of transnational and decolonial feminist theories. The book addresses pressing issues including the corporatization of higher education, censorship, and the negotiation of identity within institutional frameworks. Contributors from across the globe offer strategies for teaching under political and institutional duress, while centering collaboration, social movements, and marginalized voices. Through case studies, curricula, and reflections on learning and unlearning, the book provides concrete pedagogical tools that respond to the challenges of teaching in a time of heightened surveillance, precarity, and resistance.

Ideal for students and educators in women's and gender studies, sociology, education, and related fields, *Transnational Feminist Pedagogies: Meanings, Methods, and Experiences* will resonate with those committed to critical pedagogy, intersectional analysis, and transnational collaboration in both theory and practice.



PURCHASE HERE

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A huge thanks to Daisy Innes for all her creativity and hard work designing this edition of the *Porchlight*!