The 2019-2020 year in American Studies began normally enough, with donuts and coffee on the first day of classes, a festive fall welcome dinner, and a fresh array of students, classes, and programs. As the year opened, we were particularly enthused about the debut of our survey course, “American Cultures: Past, Present, Future,” taught by Alexander Jacobs (see his essay in this issue) and a host of new seminar offerings, taught by faculty from a wide variety of disciplinary vantage points, on topics such as political persuasion, mass incarceration, critical disability studies, and “reading the blues.”

On the programming side, we designed a series of events intended to engage the campus community and deepen our collective understanding of American histories, identities, and cultures. We partnered with the Theatre department to develop a series of “American Studies Nights at the Theatre,” where students could dine with a director of a current production at Neely Auditorium and discuss key elements of its staging, starting with a play rooted in Vanderbilt’s own history of gender discrimination and athletics, Bowling for Beginners. We kicked off a celebration of the centennial of the 19th Amendment with a lively co-sponsored panel on “Struggles for Suffrage,” bringing scholars and activists together to contemplate the long, tortuous, and ongoing pursuit of the vote by different groups in the United States. We hosted a fascinating discussion of the life and work of legendary civil rights worker and Congressman John Lewis, made more poignant by his passing over the summer. And we helped bring a range of speakers to campus, from feminist activist Gloria Steinem to the maker of a documentary film about American medevacs during the Vietnam War.

One of our commitments has been to “do” American Studies not just in Vanderbilt’s classrooms and auditoriums but off campus as well. In this spirit, students, faculty, and staff toured Blackstone Brewery as part of our City Walk series (see Paul Stob’s essay); journeyed to Montgomery, Alabama’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice in a powerful installment of our Road Trip series organized by lecturer Sarah Gorman; and planned, in conjunction with our graduate student HASTAC fellows, Elizabeth Barna and Maren Loveland, a four-site tour of “Native American Nashville.” In the works, too, was a bus tour of Nolensville Road, exploring immigrant entrepreneurship through the many thriving restaurants that dot that thoroughfare.

Of course, not all went according to plan in 2020. Several of these programs had to be adjusted, cancelled, or postponed once students decamped and all campus activities went online.

Our graduates’ reflections, collected here, on how their academic training shaped their understandings of, and response to, the present moment, are a wonderful testament to an education in American Studies.
in mid-March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The same was true for our spring courses, many of which had been organized around intensive local, in-person research and field work and needed to be completely re-thought. Here I want to publicly acknowledge and thank our faculty, staff, and students this spring for their embrace of the challenges and uncertainties that came with the pivot to remote instruction.

I saw this first hand with my students in the Senior Project seminar, the capstone of the American Studies major. The course asks students to build on the interdisciplinary work—and intellectual passions—they have honed across their undergraduate careers, culminating in a public showcase of their capstone research. Halfway through the semester, having embarked on projects ranging from the effects of gentrification on Nashville’s Black-owned businesses to the role of independent cinema in the city, our American Studies students scattered and were forced to regroup virtually. In the wake of the coronavirus, we decided, together, to forego those projects and instead carry on with a second but equally important aim of the capstone seminar. As I’d described it in our syllabus, “We will consider how training in [American Studies] prepares one to enter critically into debates roiling contemporary U.S. political culture.”

The pandemic, and the U.S. response to it, has been an inflection point for those debates. As the second half of a most unusual semester unfolded, our graduating seniors grappled with COVID-19 and their displacement from campus in much the same way that they had delved into a host of defining challenges in contemporary American society around race, poverty, sexuality, law, technology, gender, environment, immigration, geopolitics, and economic inequality.

We often ask how we can bring the lessons of the classroom—in this case, a critical, interpretive, deeply-grounded understanding of the diverse currents of “American culture”—to bear on the “real world.” In their final semester at Vanderbilt, our American Studies seniors proved more than equal to the task. Their reflections, collected here, on how their academic training shaped their understandings of, and response to, the present moment, are a wonderful testament to an education in American Studies. I am delighted to turn over this issue of our annual newsletter to them: Serena Ainslie, Claire Hagney, Lola García, Christie Rentschler, Andy Kunhee Sim, and Deuce Wallace. They do our program proud.

Sarah E. Igo
Director of the Program in American Studies
Andrew Jackson Professor of History
# The Year in American Studies, 2019–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>August</strong></td>
<td>Back-to-School Donuts &amp; Coffee</td>
<td>August 21, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>September</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fall Program Dinner</td>
<td>September 9, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>October</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Symposium: Struggles for Suffrage (with WGS, Comm)</td>
<td>October 7, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Studies Night at the Theater: Bowling for Beginners</td>
<td>October 10, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Greenberg: “From Protest to Politics: John Lewis and the Civil Rights Movement”</td>
<td>October 15, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>November</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gloria Steinem Lecture (co-sponsored with Women’s Center)</td>
<td>November 1, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Road Trip: National Memorial for Peace and Justice &amp; Legacy Museum</td>
<td>November 2, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jonathan Sarna, “That Obnoxious Order: Ulysses S. Grant and the Jews” (co-sponsored with Jewish Studies)</td>
<td>November 7, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“American Medevac” film screening with Morton Dean (co-sponsored with Heard Libraries)</td>
<td>November 11, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sojourn Theatre Civic Dialogue Project (co-sponsored with Theatre Dept)</td>
<td>November 20-21, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>February</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City Walk: Blackstone Brewery</td>
<td>February 13, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>March</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Road Trip: Native American Nashville*</td>
<td>March 28, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>April</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Road Trip: Nolensville Road*</td>
<td>April 4, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Studies Night at the Theater: “We Are Proud to Present a Presentation…”*</td>
<td>April 9, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Research Presentations*</td>
<td>April 15, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior Reception and Student Project Presentations*</td>
<td>April 21, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>End of Year Buttrick celebration*</td>
<td>April 22, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Symposium: Transnationalizing History in an Unequal World (co-sponsored with Global History Seminar)*</td>
<td>April 24, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>June</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dartmouth American Studies Institute*</td>
<td>April 4, 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cancelled due to COVID-19
To Evaluate and Engage the World Around You

Lola García, BA’20

When I first read about COVID-19 in early January, I was sitting in the lavender-tinted darkness of my dorm room. With my laptop screen light so familiarly resting on my face, I absorbed information that barely registered. At that time, I never envisioned a global pandemic, and I certainly did not consider that my time at college would be brought to an abrupt end.

On March 10th, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, proclaimed that Americans should halt social gatherings and that as a country we needed “all hands on-deck.” By that time, I knew more. I knew that the state of Tennessee had reported several cases of the novel coronavirus and that about fifty colleges across the country had suspended in-person classes. I knew that I had to pack up my belongings because students were being evicted from my own campus. I knew that the most physically and economically vulnerable people in this country would be at major risk. The very next day, however, hundreds of Vanderbilt students partied on the roof of an apartment complex to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day. I stared blankly at my phone screen—at the exceptional privilege radiating from various social media photos. It was a strange way to refuse to accept reality—doing the exact opposite of what we were told to and having a mass drunken celebration at the expense of others’ wellbeing.

In the American Studies program, we are always encouraged to investigate how our governments, legal systems, and social institutions are plagued by dysfunction. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has further highlighted these structural issues. But, I also realized, our responses to the global pandemic revealed something about our own humanity.

Over the past few months, members of our country’s critical human infrastructure, essential workers, such as those in healthcare, custodians, delivery drivers, grocery store clerks, etc., have remained onsite. It is not enough for me to say that I am thankful for their work—that they are a national inspiration for working in dangerous conditions with vast shortages and unthinkable pressure. For some, it is their only option. Many were already at an economic disadvantage, earning low wages and carrying inadequate health-related insurance, even before the crisis hit. One of my parents and many in my extended family are among this group of workers. I wish deeply that the country had more systems in place for their financial security and physical safety during a time like this, and I wish deeply that they were not disproportionately imperiled. But that is not the case.

White-collar workers and college students, meanwhile, have fully moved life online and indoors. It would be a lie to say I did not grieve the sudden loss of my senior year first, though. I enjoyed a final brunch and dinner with my close friends: interactions filled with frequent hand washing. I called my parents and told them they might not be able to see me walk the stage this May because graduation ceremonies would likely be cancelled (a fear that was later confirmed). I then packed my dorm room and heeded the social-distancing call, restricted to wallowing in anxiety in a 1000-square-foot apartment.

There was a heavy feeling of suspension and displacement. As news accelerated, time seemed to do the opposite. As rain fell outside my window, as sirens wailed, as the streets completely emptied, I started to read everything as symbolism. My uncertainty intensified. The flood of emails opening with “Hope you are staying healthy/safe/sane,” began to read like a challenge. Cautious walks were still an opportunity for fresh air, but the flowering cherry blossoms startled me. Nature nevertheless marched on, indifferent to, if not thriving from, the crisis.
In my apartment, I thought about all the Nashville memories I would never get to make, about specific family and friends particularly vulnerable to the spreading virus, about the plummeting economy and my future. I realized, however, that I spent too much time thinking and reading stories on my screens, just to feel powerless and angry. While dealing with a force that has the power to freeze nations, upend economies, and throw entire lives and systems into disarray, it is easy to lose sight of your individual capacity. To stay afloat, I needed to focus on what I could control.

As I think of the future, one where this health crisis is hopefully settled, I think of the compromises we will all have to make as a result of COVID-19. As an individual, I take it as my responsibility to construct a future where I have the opportunity to empower others. My response to the pandemic is to ensure that I create a safer, more inclusive world with my intended career—especially for groups of people whose lives are unjustly uprooted when crises like this hit.

Reflecting upon my time at Vanderbilt, I am forever grateful to have chosen American Studies because it has given me the ability to explore a wide range of academic fields and to consider interdisciplinarity—something I had wanted to do all my life. I enjoy explaining my major to the many curious souls who ask about it. The best feeling is applying the American Studies approach

As I think of the future, one where this health crisis is hopefully settled, I think of the compromises we will all have to make as a result of COVID-19. As an individual, I take it as my responsibility to construct a future where I have the opportunity to empower others. My response to the pandemic is to ensure that I create a safer, more inclusive world with my intended career—especially for groups of people whose lives are unjustly uprooted when crises like this hit.
Life Does Not Happen As Planned

Christie Rentschler, BA’20

There is a meme going around the internet that every high school student in America is going to write their college essay on the coronavirus epidemic. “And then I heard the word that would change my life forever: quarantine,” it reads, not so subtly poking fun at the flowery, overdramatic language common of flowery, overdramatic high school seniors. I saw the meme again this morning for at least the seventh time, ironically flashing across my screen just as I began thinking about my time as a college senior graduating in a pandemic. High school students know nothing about quarantine changing their lives forever.

On March 13, I was supposed to fly to New Jersey to spend my last weekend in my childhood home, my last nights in my childhood bed. My parents decided to downsize, they told me early this semester, and they wanted it done before my brother and I moved out of my campus home, the small single in E. Bronson Ingram where I had lived for the past two years. My small corner of the world was evacuated. In a rented minivan, I drove across town to an Airbnb by the river, where I would take refuge with five of my closest friends while we finished classes. My parents asked me to stay in Nashville due to the influx of cases at Vanderbilt and in New Jersey, and because they couldn’t accommodate me in the new house yet. I never said goodbye to the only home I’ve known.

On May 8, I was supposed to walk across a stage on Alumni Lawn in front of friends and family and receive one of the first diplomas signed by a female Chancellor in Vanderbilt’s history. Even worse, on May 7, I was supposed to address my peers and present a check worth over $100,000 to the university, celebrating a completion of a goal that had consumed my entire senior year. Instead, I occupied a house in New Jersey that was not yet my home, in a space that was not mine, watching my name scroll coldly across a laptop screen like credits at the end of a movie. The inconclusive conclusion that nobody wanted.

On July 14, I was supposed to walk into my new office in Hudson Yards in New York City, only an hour or two away from my childhood home. Earlier that month, I was supposed to move into an overpriced one-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side with my boyfriend of nearly four years, another would-be graduate of Vanderbilt University. We’ve been dating since freshman year, when he wanted to be a lawyer and I wanted to be a journalist, when we both thought we knew how to change the world. Over the course of four years, our passions changed constantly, until we both dove headfirst into big tech. This summer, we were both supposed to begin our silicon careers, him in data analysis for a large retail corporation, me in sales and product development for a rapidly growing fintech firm. Both of us pulled in by the allure of big bonuses, corporate culture, and maybe even changing the world. Instead, I stay at the house that is not yet my home in New Jersey while he waits at the other end of the earth in San Jose, California, separated by circumstance and infectious air travel.

In the face of this never-ending uncertainty, I am humbly reminded of every other time in our history when what was supposed to happen did not. The syllabi of endless classes can recount endless historical shortcomings. However, American Studies
teaches us to consider other experiences and perspectives, to remain open-minded to the idea that our truth might not be absolute, to understand our society’s existence as dynamic. It is surreal to graduate into a pandemic from a program that will likely one day study the very same pandemic, dissecting and discussing my suffering as an intellectual exercise. Nevertheless, as I move into this strange new world from the safety of academia, my American Studies training reminds me to seek out the multiple realities surrounding me and to find meaning in each unique voice. The bad doesn’t mean bad, the good doesn’t mean good, but it all means something.

I am also humbly reminded that my chosen path is defined by failing at who I was supposed to be. Like many of my peers, I was swept into the consulting grind my sophomore year, did everything I was supposed to do, and eventually secured a coveted junior summer internship at a prestigious firm. While I should have loved every minute, I hated my time there, feeling pressured into a box of stuffy, outdated “professionalism.” My creativity was shunned in favor of results, and my natural bubbliness was deemed distracting and inappropriate by superiors. I convinced myself that I wanted a return offer, but was ultimately relieved when I was turned away. Failing at what I was supposed to be enabled me to find my passion for technology sales and product development, eventually landing me in a leadership development program at a dream company in a dream city. Even though my start date has been pushed back, my failure in consulting ultimately led me to a perfect life journey that I cannot wait to begin.

Quarantine has changed my life forever. It has taken away countless little moments that I will never get back. Graduating into a world of uncertainty, of extreme economic instability, it is easy to be swept away by what we were supposed to be doing, who we were supposed to be. However, it is also easy to forget how little we are actually impacted compared to many others, how privileged we are. I will eventually graduate, I will eventually begin my adventure in New York City, and I may even eventually have the opportunity to say a proper goodbye to my childhood home. I am heartbroken for myself and for others who were stripped of a thousand important moments, both large and small, but I also understand to let go when life moves beyond my control. I do not know what is going to happen in the future, but I know it is important to remember that there can always be purpose when life does not happen as planned. You just have to find it.

“Graduating into a world of uncertainty, of extreme economic instability, it is easy to be swept away by what we were supposed to be doing, who we were supposed to be. However, it is also easy to forget how little we are actually impacted compared to many others, how privileged we are.”
To Evolve and Grow as a Scholar

Andy Kunhee Sim, BA'20

Often people comment on my interesting choice of majors and career path whenever I mention them in any introduction. “I am an MHS [Medicine, Health, and Society] and American Studies double major on a pre-dental track,” I say. However, when I attempt to answer the questions that typically follow in this conversation, it is not easy to give them a one-word answer. My scholarly and academic interests do not merely stem from one event, nor was there one big epiphany that made me come to my decisions. Instead, my interests came to light through the culmination of years of education, personal experiences, and enlightening conversations with friends and family.

My interest in the dental field came as an evolution during my undergraduate period. I knew that I was definite in my desire to pursue a career in the medical field, but I was open to a lot of different possibilities. Ultimately, there were a couple of events in my undergraduate career that jump-started my interest in becoming a dentist. In my sophomore year of college, I developed a strong toothache that bothered me for weeks on end. However, because the pain came and disappeared for a few weeks before coming back, I endured the pain and attempted to stick it out for as long as I could. My pain became increasingly worse and it got to the point where it was interfering with my daily life. It became hard to sleep, and one night the pain became so unbearable that I went to the emergency room, hoping that the doctors at the hospital could do something to relieve my pain. When the doctor came to me to see if there was something that he could do for me, he informed me that my gum area was severely inflamed because I had developed a tooth abscess, in which a previous root canal surgery went wrong and caused the area to get infected. He told me that there was nothing he could do at the moment except to pop the part of my gum that was swollen with bacteria and relieve the pain temporarily. He warned me that I should schedule a dentist appointment soon and, after popping my severely swollen gum with a needle, sent me on my way.

I walked away from the emergency room, relieved from immediate pain and with a new sense of respect for dentists. Before this situation, I had viewed dentistry as more of a maintenance job, with someone going to the dentist's office for yearly checkups or to discover that something had gone wrong with their teeth. However, through this event, I became aware of how painful tooth-related problems could be. Having a first-hand experience of this pain myself, a heart to serve other people through the dentistry field began to form inside of me. This heart expanded through several hours of shadowing under dentists and going on a dental-focused mission trip in which I served as a dental assistant in El Salvador to people who were lacking proper dental care.

One of my undergraduate majors, MHS (Medicine, Health, and Society), comes into direct play with my pre-dental track. MHS is a major that encompasses not only the clinical aspect of the medical field, but also the parts of medicine that impact the general society and its overall health. I became interested in this major late in my undergraduate career, I decided to add an American Studies major as a double major. The further I delved into my interests in healthcare and specifically the field of dentistry, the more I was struck by the specifics of the American culture and how it related to dentistry. For instance, I became interested in why American citizens had a vague fear of the dentist's office and how dental insurance policies in America impacted citizens'
avoidance of the dentist’s office. In my Independent Studies course led by Dr. Torres, I explored these questions. Through surveys and research, I was able to find that financial status primarily drove citizens to either willingly or unwillingly go to the dentist’s office. Those who were underprivileged often lacked dental insurance, and therefore lacked the financial means that guaranteed regular check-ups with the dentist. Those who did not lack dental insurance did not avoid going to the dentist’s office. Therefore, the general “fear” surrounding the dental office in American culture seems to be mainly correlated with financial status and the lack of dental insurance. Through the American Studies major, I was able to explore specific topics that related to my final goal of becoming a dentist and put them into the context of the country in which I live and plan to practice—America.

I also added American Studies as a double major to analyze and comprehend America’s culture and customs as an immigrant. I was born in South Korea and moved to the United States at the tender age of eight. Although I have lived in America for a significant time now, there is so much to ponder and learn about America, and I believe that my perspective as an immigrant is valuable. For example, although I have learned English from a young age, there are many colloquial expressions to which I struggled to relate. Specifically, when I was young, my elementary school teacher once said to me, “I’ll miss you.” At the time, I didn’t understand the double meaning behind the word “miss” and I understood the word “miss” as “to avoid” or “fail to notice.” And so, automatically, I replied, “But, I won’t miss you.”

There are endless nuances and cultural components that make America a unique and distinct country. My American Studies major has aided me in learning about a number of diverse avenues that my interests take, something that other, more strictly-defined majors are unable to do. I believe that one person is not defined by their primary career goal and that my American Studies major exemplifies this thinking.

All of my different interests have culminated to make the person who I am today and who I will be in the future. My pre-dental track points toward my future career and the schooling I will go through to get there. My MHS major also directs me toward my future dental career and has educated me in the many different ways that health can take form. My American Studies major has also influenced some of my dentistry interests and has also allowed me to delve into interests that I have developed on my own that help me evolve and grow as a scholar. All of these different tracks and interests have not only given me direction for a future career, but have equipped me with the proper skills to tackle my future. From the analytical skills that I have obtained from my American Studies classes to the empathic and humane development that I have gone through in my pre-dental track, all of the different interests I have pursued have made a significant impact on my life today and will continue to shape my future.

There are endless nuances and cultural components that make America a unique and distinct country. My American Studies major has aided me in learning about a number of diverse avenues that my interests take.
I’ve taken a truly unconventional path to getting my college degree. I began my journey to higher education at Emory University as a music major, specifically vocal performance. Because I had been singing my entire life, I saw this as the logical next step. However, I knew in the back of my mind that I didn’t want to be a vocalist for the rest of my life. I wasn’t exactly sure what career I wanted to pursue, but I knew I wanted the stability that a singing career cannot provide. Furthermore, once I got to school, I realized that I wasn’t enthusiastic about my classes and didn’t want to be a music major after all. Being forced to sing all the time took the enjoyment out of it and I no longer wanted to do it.

Luckily, I realized this quickly enough to change my first semester classes to mostly psychology-related ones. I had always had an interest in psychology and thought it would be a good path to follow. As the semester progressed, I really enjoyed my classes and did well academically, doing extra research on the side. As for a potential career path, I was pretty sure that I wanted to go to graduate school for psychology and become a clinical psychologist. However, I ended up taking one class that year that was not about psychology and instead focused on American society from the end of World War I until the 2000s. This class was fascinating to me and made me question my major. I noticed that I had a keen interest in American society and culture and wanted somehow to incorporate that into my studies.

Simultaneously, while grappling with what educational path I wanted to pursue, I was also struggling to adjust to the school itself. I knew pretty early on that Emory wasn’t the right fit for me and that I wanted to transfer colleges. However, sticking out that whole year at a school that I didn’t enjoy was really difficult, and the only thing getting me through was the motivation to transfer to a school where I knew I would have a better experience. I applied to Vanderbilt University fairly early and was thrilled to find out that I was accepted during my second semester freshman year. My intention was to go into Vanderbilt as a psychology major, despite discovering an interest in American culture. Overall, I was really looking forward to a positive change in my life and seeing what Vanderbilt had in store for me.

When I got to Vanderbilt the beginning of my sophomore year, adjusting to a new school wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be. Although I was doing well in my classes, all of which were psychology courses, I wasn’t really captivated by the material in any way. Even though I had loved my psychology classes at Emory, for some reason I wasn’t loving them at Vanderbilt. Additionally, I knew no one there and was struggling with feeling lonely and out of place. Everyone seemed to already have their friend groups and I felt really left out and isolated, missing my friends at my old school. So I made the decision to leave at mid-semester and go back home to take the rest of the semester off. During that time, I did a lot of thinking about what would make me happy and make college a good experience. I decided that I no longer wanted to study psychology and instead wanted to study American society and culture. After doing research, I found out about the American Studies major, which encapsulates these topics. I also looked at other schools to potentially transfer again. However, in the end, I decided to come back to Vanderbilt and take mostly American Studies classes.

That change in majors improved my experience at Vanderbilt because it resulted in me being more engaged in my school work and in Vanderbilt in general. I also met some really great professors
Looking back now as a graduating senior, my time in American Studies has really shaped my Vanderbilt experience. Not only this, but I discovered through some classes on the American criminal justice system that I have a deep interest in crime. Going forward, I have multiple offers to attend law school, and recently have created my own true crime podcast series. I don’t know if I would have fully explored this passion had I not gone into the Vanderbilt American Studies program.
Training for an Interdisciplinary World

Serena Ainslie, BA’20

At the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester, my final semester at Vanderbilt, the six seniors in the American Studies senior-project class were asked to answer the question, “What is American Studies?” It’s a seemingly simple question to ask a group of students who have been majoring in the field for at least two years. But a definition of American Studies is notoriously hard to pin down, and it makes for an interesting class discussion. After comparing definitions, the most common word that emerged across them all was “interdisciplinary.” Rather than approaching problems from a single lens, American Studies majors are tasked to make sense of America as an idea forged at the intersection of micro and macro aspects of life experiences influenced by the history, culture, and social currents of the present and the past. Above all, American Studies scholars learn that nothing exists in a vacuum. We are taught to approach problems with open minds, to consider the different cultures, systems, histories, and identities that make up American society and the problems within it that we wish to address.

My American Studies journey epitomized this interdisciplinary approach to learning. I created a concentration in Racial and Environmental Justice, a path that challenged me to find the connections between societal problems and to form a deeper understanding of how climate change and environmental degradation will continue to alter the lives of Americans, particularly communities of color. Within this concentration, I studied topics like the history of slavery in the United States, America’s prison industrial complex, and the varying levels of effectiveness of business, governmental, and non-governmental responses to climate change. These topics may seem to exist independently of each other, but when studied in tandem, they reveal how our country’s racial history amplifies the impacts of climate change and environmental hazards on different groups of people. While moments of catastrophe and natural disaster exemplify these racial disparities, the unequal impact of environmental hazards are felt intensely by marginalized groups on a daily basis. As my familiarity with interdisciplinary learning grew over my time in the major, I felt myself naturally finding connections between other seemingly separate issues in the world and coming to a deeper understanding of the complexities of these topics. My concentration is just one example of the countless paths students of American Studies can pursue, but all share the common thread of interdisciplinary learning.

The interdisciplinary nature of this field leads me to believe there has never been a more appropriate time than the COVID-19 pandemic to be an American Studies major. Over the final weeks of the Spring 2020 semester, I spent hours watching the news, reading research articles and business newsletters, and speaking with friends and family about the impact the pandemic has had on our society and the scars it will leave. From all of these perspectives—governmental, economic, societal, and individual—it is clear that there isn’t an industry, system, or aspect of daily life
that hasn’t been touched by this virus in some way. Industries that have nothing to do with public health—music, for example—were upended in a matter of weeks. This virus has left airports deserted, athletic stadiums empty, and concert halls silent. Corporations with no vested interest in public health have transitioned thousands of employees to a work-from-home model and let go thousands upon thousands more. People are trapped in their apartments, unable to see friends and loved ones, save on a video call. Individuals on opposite sides of the globe are experiencing the same symptoms as they battle for their health. Income disparities widen as unemployment soars. Race becomes a major indicator of the likelihood of recovery once diagnosed. The power, prestige, and global leadership of America, the country with the world’s largest economy, have come into question as the U.S. is the country with the highest number of coronavirus cases in the world.

Any one of these changes could be the subject of an American Studies concentration, as they all require a nuanced understanding of American systems and culture, history and power. As the previously translucent threads that connect every country, industry, system, and individual become visible, our world is being forced to grapple with its interdependence and to rethink the way society operates. Those who will lead the charge towards an improved world on the other side of this pandemic are those who acknowledge these threads and innovate with them in mind.

An interdisciplinary and creative approach to problem solving has become more imperative than ever for businesses, systems, and governments to stay afloat. Being comfortable grappling with multifaceted issues is invaluable, and American Studies is the perfect training ground to flex these muscles. American Studies majors spend their time at Vanderbilt studying an incredible array of different topics ranging from politics to popular music, but all will graduate with experience in identifying connections, thinking creatively, and solving complex problems. This eclectic crew will leave Vanderbilt and go into a plethora of different fields: law, tech, consulting, and medicine, to name a few. Regardless of industry, we will all graduate into an unprecedented world. We must be agile, open-minded, and resilient. We must understand the past—how we got to this point, the way things were done before, the mistakes and the successes that emerged during this time—and find solutions that improve upon it. With a deep understanding of the interconnectedness, the interdisciplinary nature of our world, we must use our training to challenge leaders to remove their blinders and constantly consider the implications of a truly globalized world.

I want to close by acknowledging an obvious but important sentiment: being a college student during this time is heartbreaking. Seniors have lost the opportunity to appreciate the last classes of our academic career, to say goodbye to our friends and thank our professors in person, to walk across Alumni Lawn and receive our diplomas. Younger students will lose months of priceless memories with lifelong friends as universities consider online learning for the foreseeable future. As upsetting as this all is, we are also in a uniquely fortunate position. We have the opportunity to observe the world changing around us, to study these changes deeply, to collaborate with others, and to create original solutions to problems unknown to the world before. With these opportunities, American Studies scholars will thrive.

“We must understand the past—how we got to this point, the way things were done before, the mistakes and the successes that emerged during this time—and find solutions that improve upon it.”
Never Take Anything for Granted

Deuce Wallace, BA’20

First off, I want to congratulate my fellow classmates and fellow seniors at Vanderbilt for reaching this milestone in our careers. This adventure has been nothing short of a constant grind, but it feels good to say we finally made it. I know some of us have jobs lined up and are ready to attack this thing we call life with full speed, while others are still trying to figure out exactly what we want to do. I would fall into that last category, but it takes a little bit of pressure off knowing we have this Vanderbilt degree in our back pockets. It is safe to say we are truly blessed.

Now, as we talk about this, we are in the midst of a pandemic. I do not think any of us saw this coming, but I think we can all agree this has been a crazy last few months of our college careers. This has been tragic for some, but a blessing for a few as well. For the most part, I have been trying to look at the positives through all of this, but that is hard to do when you think about what some people and businesses have lost. Fortunately for me, my family and I have been pretty lucky throughout this whole pandemic. My parents have still been able to work, for the most part. My dad and step-mom are in insurance, so they are doing a lot of enrollments over the phone, and my mom is in real estate. That goes on for a couple of hours out of the day, and I am pretty sure you can take a guess what happens for the remainder: eating and Netflix. That seems to be what most of us are doing while stuck at home all day. It’s tough to say anyone saw this coming, but I guess we should have bought some stock in the food delivery services as well as services like Netflix and Hulu.

Something else that I have done while I have been home, and this might blow your mind since I am an American Studies major, but please hear me out: I have been watching the news almost every single day on TV. Now, I am a big sports person, and all I watch on television are either sports or movies. We all know sports have been postponed, so I have been stuck with watching the news with my parents every single day. I usually use social media to see what is going on in the world, but now I see it all on Fox News. It is a crazy thing, to be honest. Every day I wake up, grab some coffee, and watch the morning news with my parents to see what is going on with this pandemic. I can definitely look at that as a positive throughout all of this.

One of the most important things I think we can all agree on while going through this is to never take anything for granted. Like I said before, I know a lot of people did not see this coming, and some people took for granted what all they had, and unfortunately, some people lost a lot when we had to make the decision as a country to go into quarantine. I have watched and listened to countless athletes talk about how they will never complain about the game anymore, whether it is practice, referees, games, or otherwise. They miss the game so much, and I think we can all agree that we miss our daily lives as well.

But I have to acknowledge that finishing the last semester of college was not as easy as I thought it was going to be. The work was not hard, because most professors took a step off of the gas when all of this went down. But having to experience this, I am so happy that we do not have online classes normally. I’m happy that we are forced to go to class every day. It is hard to wake up and go to class while you are at home; your motivation levels are at an all-time low. Other than that, it has been enjoyable to hang with my family through this time, although they can drive you crazy at times when you are stuck in a house with them for 15 hours a day. But for the most part, my family and I have tried to make the best out of this situation. Yes, it is hard because this is my last semester at school, but in times like this, you just have to make the best out of the cards you are dealt, and that is what we are doing over here in the Wallace residence. Go ’Dores!
to modern issues and creating ways to analyze and address them. The courses I took related to my concentration in art and identity. Thus, I've studied how various art forms—visual, audio, literary, and performance works—relate to the identity construction of institutions and marginalized Americans. In addition to this, I have built a strong skill set in the spheres of creativity, problem-solving, persuasive arguing, and qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. The global landscape is dynamic and complex; I do not think there is a major better suited to give you the tools to evaluate and engage the world around you.

In a few months, I will be taking my toolkit with me to a marketing strategy position at Google in Silicon Valley. As someone without a technical background, one of the most important dimensions of American Studies that I believe makes me particularly well equipped for tech is my study of human nature, communities, and larger societies. Apart from learning how to navigate the obvious lack of diversity and representation in the modern industry, my studies have taught me that there are endless examples of the intertwined histories of art, science, and technology—all existing within sociopolitical contexts. Art, science, and tech have never been created or used by a monolithic group of Americans. Various ethnic, gender, ability, and class differences always have a role in who gets to build and make decisions. So, tech is not at its full potential, and it can be simultaneously harmful, since it is not accounting for all those excluded from its development process.

As I've mentioned, American Studies has instilled in me a great interest in identity formation, and so I cannot help but also notice how, through online dating, blogging, social media, and public playlists, Americans often use technology to define themselves. Since tech is becoming even more central to everyday life, the industry needs structural evolution. Tech needs leaders and teams that understand the systems of power at play in its corporate structures, algorithms, market exchanges, and cultural impact. Tech needs leaders and teams that will tackle the issues it poses for current and future users with diverse backgrounds. Someone needs to be there to constantly ask if a product is accessible for people of varying abilities, ages, education levels, ethnicities, and geographic locations, among other considerations. Tech needs leaders and teams covering the broadest scope of diversity to ensure these perspectives.

Thinking further about the potential for positive change in tech, I consider its growing role in America's legal and governmental systems. Initiatives like smart cities, e-governance, and e-law enforcement can provide technological advancements for uplifting justice and creating equity—but they can also lead to unprecedented risks to civil liberties and incorrect criminalization of marginalized groups. For reasons like this, inclusive-minded teams working on tech development are crucial. Even with regulations and legal thresholds on the tech itself, there will be more questions to ask. Widely distributed technology can be altered to be abused and to create a non-transparent, surveillant, discriminatory state, and so the focus must always be on human empowerment.

Another component of my American Studies degree involved exploring how public and private institutions, economies, and even our own families could operate better. This is another application I am bringing with me to big tech. As I noted before, many of the social and political issues related to inequality in our country have become increasingly relevant during COVID-19. I think that the greatest opportunities for innovating in tech lie in seeking ways to solve political corruption, better educate children, improve working conditions, reduce poverty, improve healthcare access, and the like. To approach these questions, I believe improving digital education and digital access for the public is imperative. Open data, or the free access and release of government data, must also happen. Perhaps my future also includes continuing my education to further understand power structures, technology, culture, and how they influence politics. I hope to gather all the resources necessary to be thoughtful in my future career. With all of these questions and ideas posed, I realize there are various civic interests that can help shape tech innovation and government. I truly hope to contribute to the creation of easy-to-use tech platforms that can leverage social good and give power to the people.

Meaningful, impactful technology has never been more important (and possible) than now. I believe that tech's promise is great, but, moving forward, it requires collaborative and inclusive thinking in pursuit of shared human goals. No matter what field or what job you are in, there will always be a way to use your position to help others. You will always be looking at large amounts of information, assessing what type of story it tells, and communicating that message to others. American Studies provides the blueprint to do exactly that, and thus I think it is one of the most practical and rewarding majors. I thank the Vanderbilt American Studies program and all the essential workers during the global pandemic for the continuous support in my daily life and for inspiring me towards a career that empowers citizens, governments, and communities.
Kent Taylor loves beer. He also loves talking about beer. And that’s a good thing, because the Program in American Studies loves hearing about beer.

On February 13, 2020, eighteen students and faculty associated with American Studies set off on foot from Buttrick Hall to Blackstone Brewing Co. The one-mile jaunt was yet another American Studies City Walk, which gets students off campus to explore nearby areas of the city they might not otherwise visit.

At Blackstone, CEO Kent Taylor led the group on a tour of his facilities and answered questions from Vanderbilt faculty and students. After gathering in the brewery’s rather shabby office space—shabby because, as Kent insisted, they invest in making better beer, and cushy office space doesn’t make better beer—he showed off Blackstone’s fully automated brewing process. That process begins with a computer command, which combines the grains for the recipe, then boils and mashes the beer wort in massive stainless-steel containers, before sending the resulting liquid into carefully sanitized fermenters. After two weeks or so, the beer is carbonated and bottled.

In addition to explaining the brewing process, Kent answered various questions about styles of beer, the brewery’s distribution, and the fickle tastes of beer consumers. Especially intriguing to faculty and students of American Studies was Kent’s take on the history and culture of craft beer in Nashville. Founded in 1994 as a restaurant and brew pub, Blackstone is Nashville’s oldest craft brewery still in operation. As a result, Blackstone has witnessed the prodigious rise of craft beer in the city and across the country. During the late 1990s and 2000s, craft breweries were relatively few and far between. But that changed during the 2010s as Nashvillians developed a taste for rich stouts, dark porters, hoppy ales, fruity sours, and crisp lagers. Now, in 2020, Nashville boasts over 18 craft breweries.

The explosion in the Nashville craft beer scene tracks with what has happened across America. In the early 1990s, there were fewer than 500 craft breweries and brewpubs, according to the Brewers Association. Today there are over 7,400 craft breweries and brewpubs. Retail sales of craft beer total over $27 billion, which accounts for 24 percent of the total U.S. beer market. In addition, craft breweries and brew pubs produce 26 million barrels of beer every year. That’s around 18 pints for every person in the country. Through sales, employment, supplies, and infrastructure,
craft breweries contribute an estimated $68 billion to the national economy.

While craft breweries have brought good beer to more people, they have also transformed neighborhoods, social spaces, and local economies. Brewery crawls are popular for locals and tourists alike. Groups of friends and coworkers gather at local breweries in the evenings for ale and conversation. Even parents and children regularly make the trip to the nearby craft brewery, which is often outfitted with toys, games, and family-friendly entertainment. By offering good food, plenty of seating, and, of course, beer, craft breweries have become some of the most important neighborhood destinations.

The rise of craft beer in Nashville has been good for Kent Taylor and Blackstone. More people interested in craft beer means more potential customers. Although, Kent is quick to point out that he wouldn't mind a little less competition; that would mean even more customers for him.

Regardless, Blackstone Brewing, the original Nashville craft brewery, has the expertise, facilities, and desire to meet the city's current and future craft obsession. Blackstone also has a new cadre of devotees—the faculty and students of American Studies who were able to take a walk and hear Kent talk about the beer he loves.
When you teach for long enough, you inevitably face what I call the can-kicking problem, which basically boils down to this: Contemporary undergraduates have spent their entire lives as subjects of various educational experiments aimed at liberating them from archaic modes of instruction. Many of these experiments are necessary and salutary, but nevertheless tend to assume that certain parts of education will be gained by osmosis. We will always learn certain things, it is supposed, regardless of how the educational process is configured and reconfigured.

The problem with this assumption is that it rests upon an image of the humanities as it existed in the 1960s and 1970s, a moment when old regimes of traditional training unhappily coexisted with new regimes of experimental training in the same institutions. This stalemate placed enormous demands on college students’ cognitive bandwidth, but it had an interesting side-effect. “We had tradition and transgression,” as the late historian Tony Judt put it. They had to read Hegel and engage the cutting edge of current research. In the long run, the actual Hegel-reading has mostly fallen away, but the expectation of Hegel-familiarity remains. The result is a strange dance that occurs among contemporary students and their teachers. Everyone must nervously pretend to know things that they do not know, even though the fact they don’t know them isn’t even remotely their fault.

The can-kicking problem takes a particular form in the teaching of American history. The standard practice for narrating the history of the United States at both the secondary and higher levels involves breaking the story into parts—usually dividing it in half, thirds, or even fourths. This allows instructors to delve into historical topics at a fair degree of detail—the two New Deals, the midwestern meatpacking industry, the agonizingly slow unravelling of the Watergate conspiracy. The less-happy consequence of this arrangement is that only history majors are ever challenged to consider the big picture of American history.

It is in the spirit of remedying the can-kicking problem that I developed a new course, American Cultures: Past, Present, and Future. The class is designed as a single-semester trip through American cultural history from the era before contact to the present day and even beyond. It sets the political narrative to one side and instead focuses on the grand sweep of cultural change—the transformations of ideas, art, science, and folkways in the North American continent. Sessions focus on the details of Puritan theology, the origins of anti-black racism, the contents of the Victorian parlor, and the reordering of time during the second
industrial revolution. We also read classics of American social criticism: Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and Albert Murray’s *The Omni-Americans*. The goal is to have students walk away with a picture of American history enriched by figures like the indigenous social critic Charles Eastman and the evangelical preacher Jarena Lee, and an analytical toolkit enlarged by concepts such as the Protestant Ethic and Pragmatism.

My hope with American Cultures is to provide students in American Studies with an experience both foundational and expansive. Students should come away with a technical vocabulary that will help them thrive in more advanced courses in the humanities and social sciences as well as benefit anyone with an interest in understanding the evolution and interaction of America’s many cultures. At the same time, it should give students a big-picture story about how the United States arrived at this strange, bewildering moment, and offer some small amount of guidance as to how we might successfully navigate our way to the other side.

“The class is designed as a single-semester trip through American cultural history from the era before contact to the present day and even beyond. . . . My hope with American Cultures is to provide students in American Studies with an experience both foundational and expansive.”
A Year—or More—of Transition

Paul Stob, Interim Director, Program in American Studies

The past year has been one for the history books, to say the least. As students rushed to move out of their dorms in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, faculty tried to figure out how to move their classes online. Sports were cancelled. Celebrations were cancelled. Commencement was cancelled. We tried to figure out how to live in unfamiliar times, and we tried to understand what these changes meant for our interconnected lives.

Just when we thought we might be getting a handle on these unfamiliar times, just when COVID-19 cases seemed to be declining, George Floyd was brutally murdered in Minneapolis. People in countries across the world took to the streets in protest. In cities across America, hundreds of thousands of individuals marched shoulder-to-shoulder to demand justice and to demonstrate that Black Lives Matter. Then Vanderbilt University announced it would bring students back to campus for the Fall 2020 semester—albeit with very different rules, norms, and expectations.

What do these events have in common? Besides the fact that they all happened in 2020, they are events that students and faculty in American Studies are perfectly positioned to explicate.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about the Program in American Studies, which I now have the honoring of serving as interim director for the 2020–2021 academic year, is the breadth and depth of topics that scholars of American Studies get to engage. American Studies is the place where students and faculty explore such issues as community in times of pandemics, traditions in moments of change, sport and play amid a global crisis, justice and protest in the wake of brutality, the present and future of education at a top research university. Truth be told, these are not separate questions for separate research projects; they are interconnected questions that demand to be considered together, from the kind of interdisciplinary perspective American Studies affords.

I assumed the role of interim director of American Studies from the regular director, Professor Sarah Igo, who has now begun a much-deserved research sabbatical. Over the years, she has been a tireless, brilliant leader for this program, breathing new life into it and growing the number of student majors along the way. I speak for myself and for the other faculty members associated with American Studies when I say that Professor Igo has made the program what it deserves to be—an innovative, exciting, top-notch major that brings students and faculty together in a lively scholarly community.

A simple look back at the past few years shows what Professor Igo has accomplished. In addition to growing the number of majors, she has instituted regular events that engage students in their community and world. These events include City Walks, which get students off campus to explore the rich, diverse reality within walking distance of campus. (See the article earlier in this newsletter about a recent City Walk to Blackstone Brewing Company.) Another event is the American Studies Road Trips, which take students to significant historical and cultural sites around Tennessee and even further. Last year, American Studies students took a road trip to Montgomery, Alabama, a pivotal site of the Civil Rights Movement and home to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Still another regular event of American Studies programming is the Beyond the Headlines panels, which feature faculty and community members discussing headline-grabbing topics in a systematic, scholarly way that goes beyond typical news reports.

I could go on about the countless other ways Professor Igo has advanced the Program in American Studies. She has turned the program into one of the most exciting places on campus, and I am fortunate to step into the role of director at a time filled with possibilities.

What are those possibilities? Right now, it’s hard to say what exactly American Studies will look like this coming year. The pandemic has made planning for City Walks, Road Trips, and other events difficult. But in our classes and in our conversations—whether in-person or online—we will continue to probe the American experience in all its richness, pain, and potential.

I look forward to thinking with all of you about what these times of transition mean for America and for us.