

Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

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A Message from the Professor

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A Message from the Professor

Welcome to Volume 9 of *Tapestries*, a digital publication originating out of the American Studies department of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. This volume features voices from the Class of 2020, a group who entered their first year of undergraduate study the same semester that Donald Trump took office as 45th president of the United States. Eight semesters later (fingers crossed and god willing), each one of these young scholars will walk across the stage to receive a well-earned diploma for the Bachelor of Arts degree.

At the time of this writing, that exuberant and celebratory moment seems impossibly far away. Tonight we are still frantically writing and formatting our essays, and tomorrow we will be uploading each of the essays and all the associated bits and pieces—titles, abstracts, keywords, biographies, and so on—into a digital folder that will then be massaged and primed and polished so it can be presented to you, our dear reader, as an intact and completed document. Once our research librarians push the magic button to release our work into the digital universe, all of our thoughts and musings will be frozen on the screen. It is exciting and frightening for all of us to work toward that imagined end-state.

Who could know from reading these Senior Capstone essays all that has transpired in the minds and hearts of their authors over the past four years? It is of course impossible to define an experience, and above all we are talking about journeys of self-discovery which by definition are non-linear, surprisingly complex, and unique to every individual. Yet in their last year at Macalester, the authors did share a significant common experience called “Senior Seminar.” The

overarching purpose of Senior Seminar has been to provide a scaffolded structure for the emergence of new American Studies scholarship. That scaffolding has involved six mini-writing workshops to explore questions of positionality, method, relevance, consequence and implications regarding the Capstone topics. Once a proposal for research was submitted, the students organized into peer review groups, reading and commenting on each other's work. Looking for potential search terms through which a reader might eventually find this work created another level of awareness in the research process.

Woven into the research and writing processes of the Senior Seminar were conversations grounded and guided by existing scholarship in American Studies. We read Simon J. Bronner's controversial essay "The Death of American Studies?" and paired it with Sunaina Maira and Julie Sze's essay "Dispatches from Pepper Spray University" to unfold a discussion about dissent in academia. In the midterm essay exam, each student was faced with the question: "When is it necessary to express a dissenting view? What circumstances prevent--or punish--oppositional thought?" Then we turned to the valuable interactive collection of print and web essays titled "Keywords in American Cultural Studies." In pairs, students chose these keywords for discussion:

- white
- space
- affect
- community
- liberalism

- neoliberalism

This powerful and provocative list of concepts enabled a critical awareness to emerge. On one level, these exact terms describe Macalester today: a predominantly white space where community is assumed to be safe and welcoming, even when its affective norms estrange and alienate many who live within its boundaries. Feelings of despair or anxiety are by and large medicalized by college administrators, rather than tied to their potential underlying social and systemic causes. Liberalism shapes the campus culture, with all of its assumptions about individual achievement, success and failure together with its neoliberal, market-based metrics for choice and possibility.

On another level, these keywords facilitate the surfacing of big questions about this particular historical moment in the United States. As one student observed in class, instead of “postwar optimism” there is “overstimulated numbness.” Far from a natural or inevitable psychic state, this shared social feeling is most likely a manifestation of unexpressed moral distress. Perhaps this Tapestries volume will produce a sense of connection for the many readers who also inhabit this difficult and negative feeling state. In times like these, connection is crucial.

With hopes for a just society and safe planet,

Karín Aguilar-San Juan

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