A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR
By David Walker, Professor of English and Creative Writing, Chair of the Oberlin-in-London Program Committee

IN THIS, OUR THIRD ANNUAL NEWSLETTER, I’m pleased to report that the London Program remains in excellent health. Last spring, professors Anu Needham (English) and Steve Volk (history) led a lively and wide-ranging semester that focused on the very timely question of British national identity, as well as seminars exploring museum narratives and contemporary British fiction related to immigration. You can read more about their experiences in this issue. I was particularly happy that the program could benefit from one more infusion of Steve’s teaching before his retirement last June.

Meanwhile, plans are well underway for our 2017 program, when professors Maureen Peters (biology) and Drew Wilburn (classics) will offer courses on the history of medicine; the biology of cancer; and magic, witchcraft, and religion (from Stonehenge to Harry Potter). We are glad to be able to include courses that will count toward the biology major, since science students often find it difficult to study abroad and meet their curricular requirements.

The faculty for 2018 have also been appointed: Scott McMillin (English) and Janet Fiskio (environmental studies) will offer a semester focused on the relation between nature and culture in England, which we expect will have broad appeal. Both programs will take full advantage of the many resources and opportunities of London as a place to live and study.

As always, we’re especially grateful to those who’ve made an annual gift to the London Program endowment. The income provides crucial support for programming in London (theater tickets, guest speakers, field trips, and the like) and allows us to make direct financial grants to high-need students who otherwise would find it difficult to attend. You’ll find the list of donors on our website (www.oberlin.edu/london). Gifts of any amount are most welcome; whatever their size they provide tangible evidence of support, which is so important during yet another bout of austerity at the college. We all remember that the London Program was nearly abolished during the last one, and we never want that to happen again.

LONDON 2016: LONDON, ENGLAND, BRITAIN
By Anu Needham and Steve Volk

THE WORLD WOKE UP on the morning of June 24 to the frankly unexpected news that a majority in the United Kingdom had voted to withdraw (“Brexit”) from the European Union. A map of the areas that voted to stay and those voting to pull out revealed the strongest desire to withdraw in the industrially abandoned areas of the north of England and the “Home Counties” surrounding London—“Little England” it has been called. On the other hand, Scotland, most of Northern Ireland, large parts of Wales, and London voted strongly to remain. If most of the world found it hard to understand what was going on, we’d like to think that our students, at least, had a grip on it. [Editor’s note: Dana Fang certainly did; see her essay on page 3.]

The joint course for the spring 2016 semester looked at the formation of three identities that are most often seen as one: London, England, and Britain. Using tools of narrative and historical analysis, we
examined ways that "Englishness" came to be understood, how such hegemonic definitions were challenged, how the expansion of the British Empire (both into neighboring spaces, Scotland and Ireland, and on to a newly colonialized world map) complicated these identities, and how London as a metropolitan and cosmopolitan center became an identity apart.

Over the course of the semester, we were able to explore standard narratives of English/British identity and the ways in which colonial resistance, immigration, and cultural flows mapped alternative visions of the island nation. Besides class work, we traveled to Bradford and Saltaire in West Yorkshire, vibrant industrial and mill towns when they began receiving immigrants from South Asia in the early 1960s and now among England's most diverse areas. We toured the East London Mosque with community leaders; spoke with an expert studying the recent flow of refugees and migrants from conflict areas into Europe and with a noted scholar who discussed her work on the "Indian Bloomsbury"; and visited numerous museum exhibitions, including a major show at Tate Britain called Artist & Empire.

In addition to the joint course, we taught smaller classes. Anu offered a course on contemporary British multicultural fiction written by migrant writers like Nadeem Aslam, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Neel Mukherjee, Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie, and Zadie Smith. Exploring how, in the words of Rushdie, "migrants impose their needs on the new earth, bringing their own coherence to the new-found land, imagining it afresh," our discussions focused on how migrants must also negotiate the ideological needs and values of their hosts—incorporating as well as challenging and redefining them. Framed by postcolonial theory and scholarship on the African and South Asian diasporas, the class discussions were a source of reciprocal enrichment and excitement for the students and Anu.

Steve offered a course on museum narratives that explored the life and history of museums: their evolution from private ("princely") collections into public spaces, the ways in which design elements are used to frame narratives, the relation of museums to imperial desires and national histories, and how museums saw and interacted with their publics. We visited at least one museum each week, often more, and were able to track how new, critical museum practices are gradually making their way into more established museums. Among the highlights were a visit to a superb exhibit called London, Sugar, & Slavery at the Museum of London Docklands and a trip to Oxford, where we were hosted at the Ashmolean Museum, England’s oldest public gallery, by curator Giovanna Vitelli, and visited the remarkable Pitt Rivers Museum. We discussed community outreach at the Whitechapel Gallery with the director of outreach programs, and we welcomed Tracy Chevalier '84 to our class to discuss her just-opened exhibit at the Brontë Parsonage, marking the 200th anniversary of the Brontë siblings’ birth, beginning with Charlotte’s in 1816. When we traveled to Bradford, we stopped at Haworth to visit the exhibition.

Through it all, we were most ably assisted by resident director Donna Vinter, who not only kept the ship at an even keel, but taught a brilliant course on the London theatre; by Katy Layton-Jones, who teaches a course on the history of London through visits to notable sites; and by Helen Reed, the program’s able assistant.

We have been remarkably privileged to have taught on the London semester four times and will very fondly remember this semester, our last—everything from vibrant discussions to engaging in the life of one of the world’s great cities.

Who voted for Brexit? Areas that voted to stay (blue) and those voting to pull out (red)
**LONDON 2017: A LOOK AHEAD**

By Maureen Peters and Drew Wilburn

**THE SPRING 2017 LONDON PROGRAM** will take students on a “Medical Mystery Tour” of London. After returning from a prospecting trip to scope out museums and sites, we are more excited than ever about our semester. Our joint course, which combines history and biology, will trace the history of medicine, investigating human comprehension of health and sickness from antiquity to the modern period.

We will focus on three different themes: infectious disease, reproduction, and mental health, looking at each in the ancient world, the medieval period, the 18th and 19th centuries, and the contemporary era. London offers a wealth of resources for this course, from archaeological sites and museums to important historical figures and places that have contributed to our understanding of human health. The Wellcome Trust, one of the foremost medical collections in the world, houses both a museum and a library and is steps away from the Oberlin center. We plan to spend numerous hours at various sites, paying visits to the pump where John Snow first traced an outbreak of cholera; the late 17th-century Old Operating Theater, where medical students and professionals learned about surgery; and the Bethlem Museum of the Mind—at the site of the Bethlem Royal Hospital—founded in 1247 to care for the mentally ill.

Two additional courses will allow students to further investigate some of these themes. In Maureen Peters’ Biology of Medicine, investigating human comprehension of health and sickness from antiquity to the modern period.

Cancer course, students will delve into the disease to understand what we know of its causes and treatment options. And, given that London is considered a world leader in medical research, students will have the chance to attend research seminars and investigate cutting-edge techniques evolving in UK labs.

Drew Wilburn will teach Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion from Stonehenge to Harry Potter, a course that grapples with ways people have encountered and attempted to control the natural world, from ancient times to the present. We plan to visit sites reflecting major historical events related to alternative approaches to the unseen world, such as Stonehenge, medieval witch-burnings at Pendle Hill, and London meet-ups of Wiccans, a contemporary Neopagan religion.

This suite of courses is unified by the underlying drive of humans to understand and influence their corporeal and spiritual lives. There is no better place to explore these issues across different historical and technological contexts than in London, where important historical sites, renowned museums, and premier research libraries abound. The broad and interdisciplinary nature of this topic has encouraged an array of students to enroll, ensuring that we will have a diverse group of students who will engage in meaningful discussions within and outside the classroom. Together with 25 students, we will share experiences not paralleled at Oberlin or other study abroad programs.

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**LONDON, THE STRATIFIED CITY OF MULTITUDES**

By Dana Fang ’16

**I CARRIED TO LONDON** a suitcase weighing precisely 50 pounds that contained, among other things, five notebooks, three accordion folders, a plastic bag filled with lotion, three months’ worth of floss (I ran out halfway), and the stuffed bunny that my Baba bought me when we first moved from China to Toronto. I carried to London my body—a Chinese, American, queer, immigrant body—and I came to experience London and the many narratives of London through that mess of contradictions that I refer to colloquially as my “identity.” I carried to London years and years of growing up an outsider in America, learning to belong while simultaneously knowing that I would never belong—an experience that, at Oberlin, I had begun to articulate and process in creative work, theoretical frameworks, and my relationships with people. During my final semester at Oberlin, I came to London and learned what it meant to feel belonging and what it meant to be told—on the tube, on the street, in the news—that you do not belong.

The Brexit referendum passed on June 23, 2016. It is still unclear what exactly will happen to the economy of the UK, to the British people whose jobs relied on Britain’s continued affiliation with the EU, to the immigrants—from East Europe, the former British colonies, and Syria, to name just a few—in the near future of British “sovereignty.” But what is clear is that Brexit was fueled, in a large part, by a fear and, indeed, supposed crisis of immigration that caused the British once again to close the doors to their “shining” isles. The xenophobic sentiment was intense and palpable during the months that I attended the London Program.

We journeyed as a class to Bradford, West Yorkshire, to visit its large community of Pakistani immigrants, most of whom are Muslim. Professors Needham and Volk had arranged for us to meet with members of the community who would guide us around the city. I saw it as an opportunity to listen to the voices of immigrants we’d been studying and reading about in class: an insular Muslim community that has received criticism in the British press for being “isolated” and “backwards”—essentially for not being integrated. (A truly terrifying fact that points up the way the victims are blamed: search Google for “Bradford England,” and one of your first hits is “Bare Naked Islam,” an

*continued on page 4*
Our driver also revealed that he was a British army veteran, adding another dimension to an already complex situation: his xenophobia seemed a strange manifestation of his patriotism. It was clear that he loved his nation and saw himself as a dedicated soldier serving to his country. But I saw how the country he loved was only a narrow sliver of the country at large. The whole event illustrated a myriad of national narratives: who are the people who are allowed to claim certain definitions of Britishness? Who is excluded from them? Nationalistic fervor demanded certain criteria for being “British,” including looking and acting a bygone version of the part. London’s narrative as a multicultural city is juxtaposed with a Housing and Planning Act that would essentially eradicate Council (Social) Housing altogether, paired with an immigration bill that would make it easier than ever to police the bodies and rights of refugees and other migrants. But of course Brits who do not “look and act the part” are not passively resigning themselves to a life of partial citizenship or perpetual foreignness. If I learned anything during my time as a student on the London Program, it is how the national narratives shaped by those in power are satirized, bastardized, resisted, and rewritten, often by the very people whom those narratives and practices seek to exclude. Underneath one national narrative is a rich, textured history of migrants to the British Isles working, living, and effecting profound change. From the South Asian intellectuals in Bloomsbury to the Indian soldiers who fought in World War II, these communities have rewritten the terms of belonging for themselves and for the nation that they have made—reluctantly or not—into their home.

I traveled to London knowing none of this. I had little idea of the city I was walking through and looking at. It was through the careful work of Professors Needham and Volk that I began to see London and the British Isles in their many historical layers, so that their carefully constructed outer layer was peeled off to give way to each subsequent under layer. The blessing of the London Program is living in London while learning about it, so that as the three months pass by, the city and its neighborhoods become illuminated differently, like a beast that slowly turns to expose its soft, protected belly. I am a scholar of English, but I am also a scholar of stories and people. And for the last four years at Oberlin, I have been obsessed with different iterations of one question: what makes a place a home? Is it exchanging greetings with the cashier at the convenience store? Is it knowing which backstreets to wander at night? Is it being safe? Owning a flat or a house? What are the ways that we belong to the world? I don’t think I’ll be certain anytime soon. During my short time in London and the careful prodding of my professors, I learned to be comfortable with the idea of multiple narratives existing at once among one another. Just as you want to declare one story the definite one, you must account for yet another, contradictory one. This is one thing that did not add any weight to my suitcase on my flight back, and yet I feel settled heavy and deeply in my chest. I will be carrying it with me for quite a while longer.

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WE WENT ROUND THE ROOM in the last class of The London Stage to vote on our favorite play of the 12 we saw during the term. Broadly speaking, it came down to a three-way tie: Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, at the small indoor Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare’s Globe; Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* at the Almeida Theatre; and August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* on the National Theatre’s Lyttelton stage. I’ll recap some of our class conversations.

In our discussion of *The Winter’s Tale*, the two students doing the initial post-play presentation spoke perceptively about many aspects of the production, including the way that movement across the stage and gesture (especially with hands) were used to create powerful visual moments. They loved the strong female characters and the mix of heartbreak and comedy. The original playing conditions at this venue, including lighting by candlelight only, were new. Students appreciated the intimacy of the space and commented on the way that the rogue Autolycus could exist in performance both inside and outside the play (literally sitting on one audience member’s lap, and later stashing his stolen goods with another).

*Uncle Vanya* was shorn of a lot of historical context in a new translation and a contemporary setting. Again, students were thoughtful about the degree to which this did and didn’t work, and several found they couldn’t love Chekhov’s “narcissistic and self-involved characters.” But they also enjoyed (or some did: there was debate!) how physical and sexual the production made the play, with very strongly played emotions at points: Vanya, for example, reduced a bouquet of roses to pieces at one point by beating it furiously against a sofa. Or, there was the memorable final image, as the lights dimmed, of Vanya’s face contorted in a silent scream of agony. The set very slowly rotated through the entire production: a sense of “people moving through their lives but getting nowhere.” Perhaps the play that generated the liveliest class dynamic was *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Set in 1927, it concerns a band of four black musicians gathered to support Ma Rainey’s recording of songs for a white-owned Chicago recording studio. The play is about the frontier between art and money, about white appropriation of black culture, and particularly about the bitter legacy of slavery and omnipresent racism and the blues music that so toughly and achingly voices those realities. One student gave an excellent presentation about the history and culture of the blues to kick off our discussion, quoting Wilson’s observation that “we need to know who we are in relation to our historical presence in America.” In the band’s practice room—pointedly located in this production on the bottom level of a set horizontally divided into three significant levels—where most of the action takes place, we participate in the play of ideas as the four musicians joke, spar, agree with, and contradict each other’s ideas about life. No one’s position goes unchallenged. They each also tell long, technically demanding stories. Students commented on the way in which Wilson, by using such extended storytelling, emphasized the importance of orality in the cultural world he was portraying. There was so much to say about this play, which engaged and moved everyone profoundly, that discussion spilled over into a subsequent class session.

We also saw Caryl Churchill’s new play, *Escaped Alone*, at the Royal Court. This is set in a tranquil suburban garden where three female neighbours, all post-retirement age, chat seemingly inconsequentially, but with growing hints of private pain and fear. A fourth character, Mrs. Jarrett, who has arrived to join in at the beginning of the play, periodically steps out of this picture to the front of a now-dark stage framed in a sizzling red light, to speak of apocalypse in bizarre but matter-of-factly, even smilingly, delivered monologues. Is she a revenant from some future time, come to tell stories such as how “the chemicals leaked through cracks in the money” and “smartphones were distributed by charities when rice ran out, so the dying could watch cooking”? Possibly—one student was reminded of the dystopian science fiction of Margaret Atwood. In any case we felt it was utterly original and unforgettable. It left us all a bit baffled, but compelled.

That last sentence also applies to the final production we saw: a new version of Jean Genet’s *The Maids* at the Trafalgar Studios, given a strikingly expressionistic staging by director Jamie Lloyd. (We’d seen his production of Pinter’s *The Homecoming* too, and students enjoyed noting aspects of what they felt was his personal style.) Two maids ritualistically act out fantasy roles of exploitation and revolt and rehearse the murder of their narcissistic and patronizing mistress. In this production, notionally set in America, the maids were played by black actors (including Uzo Aduba from *Orange is the New Black*) and the mistress by a white actor, so that the theme of class oppression had an added racial component. The stage set resembled a gigantic four-poster bed, strewn with hundreds of rose petals that one of the maids swept up, only for new ones to descend again upon the mid-play catwalk-style entrance of the mistress. Dream-like lighting effects and hallucinatory sound contributed to a powerful sense of the characters’ entrapment in a lurid and damaging subjective-objective world. Students responded intelligently to the mix of fantasy and reality in Genet’s world and had strong insights about the idea of identity as performative and about the theme of reclaiming power.

The above does not begin to account for the sparkiness and variety of students’ reactions and insights. Suffice to say that Oberlin trademark critical intelligence was on display in discussions of lively agreement and disagreement—the welcome other 50 percent of the experience of going to the theatre in London.