



Emerging Scholars Organization (ESO)
An Affiliate of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature

Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative

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Title: Assistant Professor

Affiliation: U of Alabama

Specializations: American literature and culture, especially southern; theories of sexuality and gender; African American studies; drama/film studies.

Undergraduate Alma Mater: Washington University in St. Louis

Graduate Alma Mater(s): University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

1. How did you become involved in southern studies? Did you enter graduate school knowing exactly what you wanted to investigate or did you come to the field during your Ph.D. program or afterward?

I think like a lot of scholars in my field, I sort of stumbled into southern studies. I actually came to UNC thinking I would major in both Renaissance Drama and southern literature, but that all changed as soon as I had some competent mentors explain to me about the practicalities of the job market. You just can't *do* both of those and expect to be employable. So, I made a hard turn from both fields (with a nice push from senior folks). I ended up studying 20th century American/African American literature. But I found – as I got out on the job market – I had pretty well signaled (through my dissertation and publications) that I was invested in southern studies. And it became quickly apparent to me that I would be most attractive as a candidate for those kinds of jobs.

2. What is the most rewarding aspect of your current position? What is the most challenging, or what has been surprising? (For example, do you spend a lot of time doing something that you did not foresee when you went on the market?)

I think what is most rewarding about the work at UA are the number of opportunities available to me. Having come from another institution that was smaller than and not as well-funded as UA, I

think I am more keenly aware (and appreciative) of resources that maybe a first-time professor out of graduate school might take for granted. In some ways, after 6 years at a third-tier public university (with some difficult funding issues), I feel like a kid in a candy store at Alabama. I guess the challenging aspect of the profession is finding balance. You want to do all this good work, and you want to excel with your students and in your field. And you want to be able to serve your department, college, and university. You want to do all of these things, and at some point, you have to do a kind of professional triage: how do you accomplish all of these things and not just sustain them, but excel at them? That is a difficult balance to strike, and I don't think we ever really work it out for ourselves.

3. What classes do you typically teach (undergraduate or graduate)? Which classes do you enjoy teaching the most?

Here, I typically teach an upper division undergraduate class and a graduate class each semester. This can vary depending on the needs of the department, but there is such a need for southern studies classes at UA, that I pretty much can count on those classes being my load for the foreseeable future. In some ways, the very advanced undergraduate seminars and the graduate seminars share a similar ethos/reading list, so the prep can be similar if not exact. I would say, in addition to the classes I teach on regional identity/southern studies, I have really enjoyed the opportunity to teach theory/methodology, especially as it relates to sexual identity. I've taught a kind of "service course" that is "Intro to Theory" to undergraduates here, and I taught a course on "Queer South" last fall that seemed to be successful. I like to integrate theory/cultural studies/literary/cultural texts into the classroom. And I like to bring in music/film/comics/small screen stuff to classes. I'm all over the place.

4. Why do you think southern studies is useful to students and professors outside of the field?

I think the value of our work is contextual, and in some ways, it's up to us to define its usefulness to a broader field. One of the best ways to do that is to recognize why it seems worthless to a number of people outside of the field who might read this kind of regional obsession as reactionary or outdated or neo-Agrarian caterwauling or whatever is the case: their perspective is based on truth of our field that predates our employment. The best way to change that viewpoint is to do good work that doesn't try to invest itself in old arguments about authenticity and place, for example, and instead to get involved in projects that complicate the traditional essentialist perspective on the South and "southern identity," and take to task the implicit assumptions about what southern studies is and what it can do. Once we start to produce that kind of work – the kind of which is more and more prevalent recently, by the way – the value of it will be evident to the field.

5. What is the best advice that you received about the job market? Or what is the advice that you most frequently or emphatically give to your graduate students on the market or to your undergraduate students who want to pursue a Ph.D.?

I guess the best advice is really that stupid saying about a good defense is the best offense. You have to think about all of this stuff really early; the model is shifting. I try to explain to my

graduate students the truth about where we are and how it's not pretty. The sooner you start thinking about positioning yourself and/or thinking broadly about what your value may be to a future English/CS department, the better. Everything you do in graduate school can and should signal a kind of value that you can use when you market yourself later. The worst thing to do is to have no plan and to just grab projects as they come. That used to be the old model: just wait for things to fall in your lap or benefit from relationships and networking. Those kinds of models don't exist anymore: you have to be proactive and fight to declare your value. In some ways, you have to look at yourself and your moves critically, reflexively, and realize how they might be interpreted. The dissertation project is a huge signal to future employers, but so is your coursework and your investment with certain fields and even author societies. Everything is fair game.