



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

**Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative**

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Undergraduate Alma Mater: Centenary College of Louisiana

Graduate Alma Mater(s): University of Virginia (Ph.D.), University of Florida (MA)

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?

The last time I mentioned this in public, Gina started sharpening her pitchfork, but here's the truth: I did not know a thing about southern studies or consider my work in relation to it at all until I wrote my application letter for the job I now have. I had thought of myself as someone who worked in American studies, African American studies, and popular culture. I saw Auburn's ad for a southern lit job and figured that I had dissertation chapters on country music and Faulkner, so I should give it a shot. It turns out that I was hired to fill Bert Hitchcock's sizable shoes, but fortunately at the time I was too ignorant to be daunted by that fact, so I just showed up and did my own thing. I attended my first SSSL conference during my first year on the job, and things just sort of clicked into place. At this point it is difficult for me to imagine what my professional identity would be without the relationships that have stemmed from my involvement in southern studies. I consider SSSL my intellectual home, my book just came out as part of the University of Georgia's New Southern Studies series, and I'm looking forward to presenting work alongside my friends and colleagues in southern studies in New Orleans in the fall.

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?)

Since I live in Atlanta and commute to Auburn, I spend a hell of a lot of time in the car. That's definitely not something I would have anticipated or hoped for. On the other hand, I love my neighborhood (Cabbagetown, a historic mill village in intown Atlanta), and living there has brought me into contact with people and experiences that constantly inform and improve my scholarship and teaching. Southern studies appeals to non-academics in a way that few other subfields in our discipline do, and increasingly I find myself drawn to projects that help translate the kinds of questions we're concerned with to interested non-academic audiences. At the same time, it's easy for us as academics to suffer from tunnel vision, and engaging with folks whose training, interests, and expertise lie outside academia keeps me honest.

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

I teach a bunch of different classes: graduate seminars, upper-division courses for English majors, and core literature courses for non-majors. My graduate seminars are rewarding in that they most closely reflect my own intellectual work and afford the most freedom in terms of materials (I'm screening *Mandingo* in a graduate seminar as I type this). At the same time I've had good experiences teaching courses like the intro to theory course for undergraduates, which forces me to think about reading in fundamental ways. Also, if it weren't for the challenge of devising engaging undergraduate literature classes, I would probably never read any contemporary fiction.

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

Again, I think that southern studies is useful not only to students and professors outside the field, but also—maybe even especially—to folks outside of academia. The recent tragedy in Charleston and subsequent conversations about the confederate battle flag are recent negative examples, but there are lots of positive ones as well. Nearly every day I have the opportunity to talk to people about stuff that falls within my (admittedly rather expansive and maybe eccentric) understanding of southern studies, from music to film and television to the labor history of my neighborhood.

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.?

You mean aside from “don't do it”? I think the watchword is flexibility. The academic job market collapsed the year I went on the market in earnest the first time, but it hadn't yet become the *Blood Meridian*-esque hellscape that faces our current students. I have found, though, that

my current students—undergraduate and graduate—for the most part seem savvier and better-informed than I was when I was in their shoes. I recall my advisor telling me that I would either get a research-oriented job or none at all, and that I needed to be prepared for that eventuality. I've taken a different tack with my own students; I try to encourage them to prepare themselves for academic jobs while also keeping their options open and their eyes open to other opportunities. It would be negligent of me to encourage students to focus all their energy on trying to get one of the tiny number of southern studies jobs open at any given time. At the risk of repeating myself, one of the benefits of southern studies is that plenty of people outside of the field proper are interested in much of the same stuff we are. We and our students should work on opportunities to talk to them.