



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

Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative

Name: Michael Bibler

Title: Associate Professor of Southern Studies

Affiliation: Louisiana State University

Specializations: 19th/20th century southern literature, queer studies

Undergraduate Alma Mater: The Johns Hopkins University

Graduate Alma Mater(s): Tulane University

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 knew I wanted to study southern literature when I applied to graduate schools in the early nineties. I spent most of my undergraduate English major taking classes in British literature, mainly because I felt like I wanted to get a lot of exposure to the wider canon of literature in English. But once I made up my mind to go to graduate school, I knew that I wanted to focus on American literature and southern literature—especially about race and race relations. Though I had read James T. Sears's *Growing Up Gay in the South* in my senior year in college, I don't think I initially planned to concentrate on queer readings of the South until later in graduate school—especially when I saw that it was, at that time, a rather open field and an opportunity.

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?)

Over the years I have found that I enjoy researching and writing more than I expected. Writing is difficult and never feels like it's finished, and I'm a slow writer (and for that matter, a slow reader). But I feel like there's still so much out there I want to know and say, and I do take pleasure in trying to get my ideas across as clearly as possible. I also know that I'm lucky to be

in a position where I have the opportunity to work on those ideas, so I want to make the most of it. My trouble is that I am still trying to figure out how to find greater balance so that doing one thing doesn't feel like sacrificing something else. I love getting to talk about ideas with colleagues, and I really love when I my students get me thinking in new ways. So I don't want teaching to feel like a drag on my writing, or vice versa. I sure wouldn't mind having to write fewer emails, though. I suppose some of the challenges I wasn't expecting (or was in denial about) involve the business-side of higher education. I'm not good with numbers, and even less so with percentages and statistics. I don't know if I even make a good organizer in terms of the many small details one must attend to. So I'm slightly dreading those bigger administrative jobs that may (will) eventually come to me down the line.

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

Well, I've taught a range of things over the years. But at LSU I came up with a new upper-level undergraduate class on "Old South Sexualities" which I loved and will definitely repeat. At University of Manchester I taught a class called "Bad Romance in American Literature" which was a lot of fun as well. I also enjoy teaching survey courses when they let me read or teach things I wouldn't normally teach (The Puritans! Barthelme!) and because I love thinking about literary history—what it looks like, how it changed, why it exists. I'm going to try a new course next year for sophomores and non-majors called "The Whole South," where we'll be confronting the question of literary history head-on. The basic idea is that the "traditional" canon of southern literature used to look pretty white and conservative (and male)—right? But what if we take a wider look at the literary landscape and explore the diversity of southern writing from a particular historical moment? For example, what if we look at questions of modernism and southern rural poverty by putting the Agrarians next to the proletariat Gastonia novels next to Richard Wright and Arna Bontemps and Ellen Glasgow and William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell and more? Maybe not that radical a collection when you think about it. But when we read them next to each other, the influential Agrarians might seem to have less gravity. Or try the same thing with pre-Civil War writing: reading pro-slavery plantation fiction next to Old Southwest humor, Native American writing and oral traditions, ex-slave narratives, white sentimental fiction, Martin Delany and Nat Turner, *Les Cenelles*, and more. It's an experiment. We'll see if anything happens, or even if it's feasible in the logistics of a lecture course. For my next graduate seminar I'm looking for something new. I used to teach various approaches to the plantation, but I'm tired of that. Any suggestions?

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

I kind of feel like Don Quixote sometimes when I try to tell people outside southern studies (really, outside the South) why they should be thinking about the South and southern literature. Or, more accurately, I probably sound like a broken record. I think southern literature is very useful for thinking about the United States and "America" more broadly because the relations of power are sometimes more visible and readable in the South than in other U.S. contexts, and yet also more complex than national clichés would lead us to believe. I resent having to explain to others sometimes that I "do more than just the South." In another way, because I do queer

studies, I find southern literature and culture useful for thinking about the intersectionalities between race, gender, sex, class, and sexuality. If you talk about female sexuality in the South, for example, it's impossible to do (or at least do well) if you don't also talk about race.

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.?

One thing to never forget about the job market: It's not actually as personal as it feels. There are a lot of things you don't have any control over. But still, in the face of the daunting prospect of the market, be tenacious about your own ideas and don't lose faith in yourself. If you're thinking of pursuing a Ph.D., don't go into debt doing it. If you want to write a dissertation about southern literature and culture, start practicing how you will talk about it to non-southernists.