



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: Tougaloo College

Graduate Alma Mater(s): Columbia University

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

Like Richard Wright, I am a native son of Mississippi, but I came to southern studies rather accidentally. I had written about the blues in my senior thesis as an undergraduate student at Tougaloo College, as well as in my MA thesis at Columbia University, but never through a strictly southernist lens, per se. In my second year of graduate school, I took a class with Farah Jasmine Griffin entitled “The Black South” that drew on hemispheric American Studies and the new southern studies to resituate the U.S. South within a broader hemispheric framework, rendering its borders more porous and taking seriously its cultural and geographic proximity to the Caribbean and Latin America. I had been interested in diaspora studies and black transnationalism as an undergraduate, but this course introduced me to a new geography for interrogating such questions. As such, it utterly shifted my views on the South, inaugurated my engagement with southern studies, and ultimately reintroduced me to the richness of my native region. I suppose I had a rather Hurstonian experience, where I had to leave the South (and move to New York) to see it more clearly; in fact, it was through my encounters with Hurston’s writings and peering through her “spyglass of anthropology” in works like *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* that I, too, was “called” home to view the (Black) South anew.

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 anticipate doing when you were a student?)

The most rewarding aspect of my work is that I get to teach and mentor really smart, dedicated students about black diasporic literature and culture, and that I get to write and think alongside brilliant colleagues whose work challenges and teaches me in the most generative ways. On the other hand, as a new assistant professor, I've been surprised by how much there is still to learn and the fact that earning the PhD is just the beginning! For instance, in my first year on the tenure track, I talked to my mother—who spent 31 years as a K-12 educator—weekly, and sometimes multiple times a week, about how to cultivate and refine my teaching praxis. Through those conversations, I arrived at a new appreciation for her life's work, in particular, as well as a deeper understanding of my role as a teacher and educator, more broadly. I've also been coming to terms with what it means to be a writer by actively embracing that identity head on. I'm working on honing my craft by writing daily and in different modes for both academic and public audiences. I'm grateful for generous friends, colleagues, and mentors who continue to advise me on all of the new demands and expectations that come with starting a tenure track position and who model the kind of scholar and teacher I'm striving to become.

Finally, I should add that come to academia by way of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, a program that prepares undergraduates from underrepresented backgrounds to pursue careers in the professoriate in order to diversify and democratize higher education. I remain fundamentally committed to this project, largely through Black Studies. As a new faculty member, I've been surprised by the small numbers of black and POC faculty and students in higher education and thus how much work there is still to do to ensure that our institutions better reflect the country's demographics. So, it is equally exciting and daunting to finally be on the other side of the table, working to create a more diverse and equitable academy, both in terms of representation and the kinds of knowledges that are produced and valued.

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

I am still in the process of building my teaching portfolio, but I typically enjoy teaching courses that encourage students to think and write comparatively across aesthetic modalities and media (e.g., music, sound, and literature) and black diasporic geographies. I have been teaching a course entitled, "Conjuring the Americas" for the last two semesters, which explores African-derived religious, healing, and spiritual practices in African American and Caribbean literature and culture to map a hemispheric conception of diaspora. I also teach a course entitled, "Sonic Fugitivities: The Soundscapes of African-American literature" that focuses on how music and sound have functioned as alternative conduits for articulating black freedom, citizenship, and subjectivity and disrupt the ways in which literacy is deemed the primary modality of Western rationality, knowledge production, and modern subjectivity. In the spring of 2018, I will teach a graduate course entitled, "Black Mobilities: Cartographies of Black Transnationalism and Diaspora," and next academic year, I will teach a single-author course on the black woman maverick of the South, Zora Neale Hurston, that focuses on the intersections of race, gender, region, and diaspora. I also plan to teach a course soon on representations of the Black South in contemporary literature, music, television, and possibly film.

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

Perhaps the most obvious reason is that the South is a major cultural, economic, and political force, both in the United States and the world. So, it's important to engage the region critically—with all of its ugliness and beauty—not just as some backward region, some abscess or malignant tumor on the larger and more “progressive” body politic, but as a key player in American culture and identity writ large. Ironically, like blackness, the South is the “constitutive-supplement”¹ of the US nation-state, at once integral and marginal to its understanding of itself. So, one cannot adequately understand the U.S. in all of its contradictions if one does not grapple and attempt to come to terms with the South.

Within the last 15-20 years, the new southern studies and its offshoots have begun to create the tools to do this work, largely by opening itself up to postcolonial, African Diaspora, Indigenous, gender and sexuality, and cultural studies. I think southern studies has much to offer these fields too. For instance, one cannot understand U.S. imperialism or the school-to-prison pipeline without contending with slavery and Jim Crow, or the Dakota Access Pipeline without contending with settler colonialism and the plantation. But the field still bears traces of its former identity as an insular, white-dominated field that gave space to slavery and confederate apologists and sympathizers and largely ignored racial terror and violence. This perception of the field—what I understand to have been its identity for most of its existence—is slowly eroding through the efforts of organizations like SSSL and the ESO, and Sharon Holland's important work at *south* journal, just to name a few. But as we know, change is infinitesimally slow in the academy as well as in the South for that matter. So, it will take time.

Ultimately, I hope that students and scholars outside of the field will find in this newer iteration of southern studies and its offshoots a set of tools and methodologies for interrogating the South as a unique “problem-space”² for rigorous thought. I think this best describes my own relationship to the field and how it animates my work. It has helped me to grapple with how black southern life, culture, and identity fits within a larger diasporic narrative, particularly in relation to black peoples in the former plantation regions of the Caribbean and Latin America. If, as Walter Rodney notes, the American South and the West Indies are the “breeding ground of world racialism,” then it is to these regions that we must return to think through and work out the sordid history we've inherited and to try to arrive at something like equality and justice, redress and repair.³

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.?

¹ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness” in *Criticism* 50.2 (2008): 180. Print.

² David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 4. Print.

³ Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with my Brothers*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 2001. 25. Print.

Given that there are so many unknowns in the job application process, I encourage graduate students to focus on what they *can* control—the quality of the work they produce, building a network within their field or subfield, and preparing strong written application materials and oral interview and presentation skills. The academic job market is an incredibly arbitrary and subjective enterprise, shot through with several doses of luck and chance. One can land zero interviews one year, and a host of interviews the very next year, with virtually the same project or materials. So, it's best to *try* not to fret over the myriad of factors that are outside of one's control. This is not to be dismissive of the very material concerns of job security, but rather to help students approach what can be a very harrowing process from a position of self-care and healthiness. Most importantly, I try to remind students that their personal and intellectual value is *not* based on the vagaries of the academic job market.

6. Your expertise is in African-American literature and literatures of the African diaspora instead of southern literature. How does that cross section inform your work? What advice do you have for young scholars who are training for a subfield other than southern literature? Where do you see southern studies going in the future as it relates to the diaspora and African-American literature?

If being black and southern is a peculiar conundrum, then being a black southerner from Mississippi—the scapegoat for white supremacy and anti-blackness in the United States—can only be described as occupying a state of constant vertigo. It is both burden and blessing. I am burdened by the weight of the state's history of anti-black violence and the ways in which race continues to undercut its social, political, educational, and economic advancement. Yet, I feel incredibly blessed to be heir to such a rich legacy of black political resistance and cultural fecundity that resonates around the globe, from the blues to Fannie Lou Hamer's fearless civil rights activism. Currently, there's a renaissance afoot among young, black Mississippians. In 2017 alone, Chokwe Antar Lumumba was elected mayor of Jackson, MS, which Robin D.G. Kelley recently named "America's most radical city."⁴ Jesymn Ward was named a MacArthur "Genius" Fellow *and* made history as the first woman to receive two National Book Awards. All of this makes me proud and excited about the state's future.

Ward, Natasha Trethewey, and Kiese Laymon—all Mississippians—are at the forefront of what can only be described as a renaissance among black southern writers, artists, and scholars, including Regina Bradley, Allison Janae Hamilton, and Zandria F. Robinson, among others. Their success is a testament to the fact that the local or regional is a microcosm of the universal, and the ability to effectively capture this principle is the mark of great literature, art, and scholarship. One of the goals of my research, for instance, is to elucidate how the regional concerns of the "Global Black South"—i.e., the hemispheric networks between the former plantation regions of the US South, the Caribbean, and the Caribbean coast of Latin America—intervene in the cultural and geo-politics of black transnationalism and diaspora. Ultimately, my hope is that our collective work will invite more critical attention to the South in African American and African Diaspora Studies—not simply as a scapegoat for racial oppression and domination, but as a site of black vitality that is both local and global, rural and urban, and still has a thing or two to teach the nation and the world.

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, "Coates and West in Jackson." *Boston Review*.

<http://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-coates-and-west-jackson>. 22 December 2017. Web.

For young scholars working in and around southern studies, I think it's important that we embrace the region's myriad contradictions. Each day when I sit down to write, I am confronted with some irreconcilable tension: the co-presence of beauty and violence, freedom and incarceration, immense wealth and stark poverty, radicalism and conservatism, love and hate, black futures and black death. I've had to learn to sit with these contradictions and accept that I cannot resolve them. If they could be resolved, then much greater minds than mine would have done so a long time ago. Yet, it's because of these very contradictions that the South and southern studies have so much to teach us. We can both critique the region's violence and grotesqueness *and* celebrate its beauty, and more importantly, the revolutionary potential embedded therein. These are not mutually exclusive projects. For instance, the annual Tuskegee Farmer's Conference—the longest running black farmer's conference in the country—has much to teach us about the intersections of race, region, and food and environmental justice. Caribbean and Latin American migrant laborers working along the Gulf Coast have much to teach us not only about the South's ethnic diversity, but also about the afterlives of slavery and the plantation. And Rev. William J. Barber's Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina has much to teach us about the future of intersectional political organizing and allyship. In short, we must seek out, reside in, mine, and appreciate the region's nuances. This is how we can produce exciting and cutting-edge scholarship and begin to generate answers to some of the country's and our generation's most pressing and urgent problems.