



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

Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative

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ESO Leadership History: Member of the founding ESO Executive Council

Specializations: American literature and film; southern studies; Appalachian studies; environmental studies

Undergraduate Alma Mater: B.A. in English, Clemson University

Graduate Alma Mater(s): M.A. in English, North Carolina State University
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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?

As an undergraduate, there was never any question about whether I would major in English. I've been an obsessive reader since childhood, and I did not even consider majoring in anything else. However, as an undergraduate, becoming an academic never entered my imagination; actually, I don't think any sort of profession ever entered my mind. I only wanted to be a writer, so my focus throughout undergrad was on creative writing, specifically fiction writing. At that point, I was still harboring a romantic idealization of what my writerly, if also poverty-stricken, life was going to look like.

So, I initially came to love southern literature as a wannabe writer rather than a scholar. Something in my brain just clicked, some synapses fired, when I read southern literature. In particular, I remember my brain being all fireworks when I read Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Lewis Nordan's *The Music of the Swamp*, and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. This happened with non-southern writers, too—Denis Johnson, Marilynne Robinson, and Walt

Whitman, for example—but southern writers resonated with me in terms of both content and style. In speaking about the South, I felt like they were speaking to and about me. I know it’s a cliché, but I’ve always identified with Quentin Compson. I love and hate the South very intensely. I still haven’t gotten over the difficulties of my childhood that stemmed from strict racial divisions, harsh heteronormative mores, one-party politics, and, worst of all for me and contributing to all the aforementioned, a regressive, anti-intellectual brand of Christianity. As an undergraduate, I wrote numerous bad stories and two very bad novels about how I felt like I never fit in, like I was a square peg being forced into a round hole. While this sense of cultural conflict can inspire dramatic and perhaps even meaningful work, my fiction remained sophomore; I was never able to move beyond a rather feeble articulation of the rage that I felt toward religious conservatism in the South.

Southern literature communicated to young me that I could be from this place but still bridle at its conventions. As I took literature classes in college, particularly southern literature classes, I wanted to examine—as objectively as possible—whether one can reconcile this conflicted state of mind.

The other part of my childhood that made me want to study the South has to do with my best friend. I was raised in Pawleys Island, on the coast of South Carolina, by a pretty typical lower-middle-class family. But my best friend was from an unfathomably wealthy family—a family name I’ll omit but one that everyone would undoubtedly recognize. This family came to my area of the South Carolina coast during the Great Depression and bought a series of connected properties that had been largely abandoned since the Civil War. The family acquired these properties to be their fishing and hunting grounds. On the land, there was at least one antebellum plantation, featuring a “big house,” rice paddies, horse stables, and several surprisingly well preserved slave quarters. As a kid, we had the run of all of this, and it was, at least until I realized otherwise, a carefree childhood. All that changed, though, during my freshman year of college, when I took an American history course that focused on the antebellum South. I vividly remember learning about the horrors of the institution of slavery and feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt; I understood for the first time just how problematic it was that as children we played hide-and-seek in and around an actual slave cabin.

I study the South because I think about that kid in that slave cabin—so unaware of where he was and what atrocities had surely transpired there.

By the time that I decided I wanted to go to grad school, my struggle was whether I would try to write southern literature (pursuing an M.F.A.) or whether I would study southern literature (pursuing a Ph.D.). I wish I had some profound reason for choosing the latter, but I think at the time I just assumed that the Ph.D. was the safer career path. I had no idea then how bleak the job market is for English Ph.D.’s, and I think I may have used the word “practical” to describe to my family my desire for a Ph.D.

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?)

Without a doubt, the most rewarding part of my job is working with students. I love being in the classroom, and I look forward to each and every day that I get to go into class and talk with bright students about my favorite pieces of literature. It really is a dreamy job. I also adore working with engaged, dedicated students on their own individual projects. One significant challenge to teaching year after year in the same department, though, is that more students want to work with you on these out-of-class projects. Each year that I'm at Appalachian State University I work with more and more students on senior capstone projects, honors theses, and Master's theses. Don't get me wrong; I love this kind of work. Assisting students with advanced projects is actually my favorite kind of interaction with them. But, it does require a lot of time and effort beyond the classroom that I never anticipated before being in this position.

Another aspect of the job that I did not anticipate is the amount of committee work I do. In the fall semester of this year, for example, I was on six different committees. Some of these committees require a lot of work and some very little, but regardless, serving on six committees is too much. The problem for pre-tenure, tenure-track faculty is that all too often we feel like we can't say "no" to requests from senior colleagues to join this or that committee. And sometimes, as has been the case for me, we genuinely want to be on these committees because we're invested in the long-term health of the department.

As is the case with everyone in our profession, I never have enough time to devote to the three responsibilities specified in my contract: teaching, service, and research. Unfortunately, it is always the research component that gets sacrificed. I would never want to detract from the time I devote to students, and I feel like I can't pull away from service obligations. Therefore, scholarship is always on the chopping block, the first to get axed from my schedule.

To be clear, I should say that I am not complaining. I realize how incredibly fortunate I am to be in a tenure-track position at a university and in a place that I love wholeheartedly. At the same time, though, I wish I had known as a grad student that I needed to recalibrate my expectations for what life as a professor was going to be like. I assumed that, once I got a tenure-track job, I would have time not only to produce scholarship but also to return to writing fiction. The truth is, I average teaching about 90 students per semester, and any writing that I get done happens in manic bursts during weekends or during winter and summer breaks.

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

Despite the fact that "southern literature" was featured prominently in the job ad for my current position, I rarely get to teach courses devoted solely to southern literature. In fact, there was not a single southern literature course at Appalachian State until I created one, and even now I only get to teach that course once every four semesters. The only other course I periodically teach that has a lot of overlap with southern studies is an Appalachian literature course, which I focus on contemporary southern Appalachian writers like Lee Smith, Ron Rash, Ann Pancake, and Robert Gipe. Sometimes I can also focus upper-level undergraduate or M.A.-level courses on southern literature and culture. For instance, I'm currently teaching a class, rather generically called "The

Novel,” in which we are solely reading William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. We begin with John Duvall’s article “Toni Morrison and the Anxiety of Faulknerian Influence,” and I encourage students to read intertextually and anachronistically, thus examining Morrison through Faulkner *and* Faulkner through Morrison, in order to understand how and why each writer approaches issues of race and racism in such divergent ways.

The majority of the time I teach American literature courses. My favorite of these and probably my favorite course overall is the sophomore-level, post-1865 American literature survey for English majors. This is a pretty standard survey course in which we read canonical American writers. The students in this class, because they are all English majors, are enthusiastic readers, but in general they haven’t read many canonical works. It’s pure joy to be able to expose students for the first time to writers ranging from Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain to Junot Díaz and Jhumpa Lahiri. I always begin this class by teaching Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” We spend about three full weeks on this poem. At first, students are often not excited about it, and they struggle to see just how radical the poem is both in terms of style and content. But with a bit of contextual information and a lot of close reading, students begin to see how delightfully profane and profound “Song of Myself” is, and by the end of the semester there tends to be a lot of Whitman fans in the class.

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

It seems to me that people, regardless of where they’re from, are often fascinated with the U.S. South. This is true of all artistic expression that comes out of the region; southern music, cinema, and literature seem perennially popular. The trick in academia is to convince scholars that these popular cultural expressions are worthy of serious academic inquiry. To take Faulkner or O’Connor seriously is usually not too much of a stretch for scholars outside of southern studies, but to study Burt Reynolds or Dolly Parton may raise some eyebrows.

Studying the U.S. South can and should always be immediately relevant to contemporary culture and politics. Topics ranging from class and gender to the environment and racism all too often have roots in the South. In particular, I cannot imagine examining race and racism on a local, national, or global scale without careful consideration of the institution of slavery and its lingering, insidious legacy. That’s not to say that issues involving American racism are somehow exclusive to South, but southern slavocracy should certainly be analyzed in conjunction with wider networks, both national and global, that are similarly implicated and culpable.

In addition, it’s always important for southern studies to combat stereotypical depictions of the South—either positive or negative, ennobling or demeaning—and instead to present a more complex understanding of the region that celebrates when appropriate, while also critiquing and condemning the region’s many past and present cultural pathologies.

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.?

This is something I think about constantly, and it's an ongoing source of anxiety for me. At Appalachian State, I work with a lot of Master's-level students, both in the English Department and in the Appalachian Studies Department, but we don't have any Ph.D. programs. Thus, while I don't have to worry about my students on the job market, I do routinely meet with undergraduate and graduate students to help them determine whether pursuing a Ph.D. is the right option for them. Unlike some of my colleagues here and elsewhere, I don't ever tell students that they shouldn't get a Ph.D. I don't feel like it's my place to do so. I would have been devastated if a professor had said that to me. I love my job, and, furthermore, I have no other skills that are in any way useful to the world. So, I don't discourage students from pursuing graduate school or even trying to enter academia. Instead, what is crucial to convey to students is the reality of the job market. I also don't think the only thing one can do with a Ph.D. is to become an academic. Some of the most interesting southernists to come out the Ph.D. program at UNC—for instance, Bryan Giemza and Patrick Horn—have landed fantastic “alt-ac” jobs that are still very much engaged with the field of southern studies.

So, my advice is first and foremost to know that the chances are good that you won't land a top-tier research-focused position and that you probably won't be able to replicate the professional life of your dissertation director. Therefore, it's fundamentally important to be open to lots of different kinds of careers, such as working in alt-ac jobs at presses, centers, libraries, and museums, or teaching in a high school or in some sort of non-tenure-track university position.

For those students who really want to pursue a tenure-track academic position, my advice is to never pigeonhole oneself in just one field. This is particularly true for students in southern studies. The simple truth is that there are few jobs devoted to regional studies, and unfortunately it seems like these jobs—despite tremendous interest among students in southern literature, film, and culture—are becoming rarer and rarer. Therefore, it's necessary to be able to apply for as many jobs as possible. This doesn't mean that you should pretend to be involved in fields you aren't, but rather that you should plan your teaching and publishing in such a way that you can be competitive for a range of jobs. For graduate students, the dissertation is key in this regard. At UNC, I pitched a proposal for a dissertation devoted entirely to southern literature, and my advisors, Fred Hobson and Minrose Gwin, required me to rework the project for the sake of marketability. They told me repeatedly that I must “nationalize” the project, which I did, and, as a result, I was able to apply for about a hundred Americanist jobs rather than just the two southernist jobs that appeared the year I got my current position.

In addition to nationalizing or even trans-nationalizing your research, it also seems like a good idea to have a focus other than literary studies. I have friends from graduate school who were able to get jobs that required teaching in film, gender studies, creative writing, or composition in addition to literature.

The final thing I would say to people on the job market is that—and I realize this is probably impossible to do—you shouldn't take it personally if you don't get a particular job. I've been on two hiring committees here at Appalachian State, and I've realized that there are far more factors

that go into these decisions than I ever understood. Being on these committees has been a deeply humbling experience, as I've realized how many truly astounding candidates apply for each open position. If someone doesn't get an interview, it absolutely does not mean that that person is not an amazing candidate; in my experience, committees tend to be overwhelmed by the high volume of excellent candidates, many of whom could undoubtedly be successful in the position.

6. Ecocriticism and sustainability are central themes of your scholarship. Do you incorporate your environmental advocacy and/or methodology in your pedagogy? If so, what challenges do you encounter, and how do you overcome them? What is your primary challenge in this endeavor?

I've had nothing but positive experiences thus far teaching environmentally oriented courses at Appalachian State. This is likely because the student population here tends to be keenly interested in issues involving social and environmental justice. This is particularly true for our English majors who are generally quite engaged and progressive, but in my experience, this has been true for non-majors as well. For example, several times I have taught a sophomore-level Gen Ed course in which we read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and then study various literary and cinematic works that update and extend Thoreau's experiment. In this course, my students, who are majoring in a range of far-flung fields and disciplines, are almost universally excited to explore how books and films—from Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* to Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* and Sean Penn's *Into the Wild*—have interrogated the ever-evolving definition of nature in the American imaginary.

I believe firmly that the humanities should play a central role whenever students are learning about environmental issues. Without the arts, it is often difficult for students to make the necessary imaginative leap that humanizes and personalizes serious issues facing the biosphere. For these issues to appear real and pressing, students often need to think in an anthropocentric manner, even though ecocritics often critique such thinking. For example, most students, even here in western North Carolina, have never seen the ways in which mountaintop removal and strip-mining ravage the landscape and catalyze vast detrimental impacts on human communities. Reading scientific and even social scientific research on these impacts often does not impress on students the serious need for reform. However, students change their minds when they witness, in films like Chad A. Stevens' *Overburden* or in novels like Robert Gipe's *Trampoline*, how acutely individuals and families suffer from devastating health issues and from the deterioration of various cultural traditions that depend on certain interdependencies between communities and local ecosystems. In other words, the arts can engender environmental and cultural sensitivities, and even empathetic capacities, that can then hopefully lead to various forms of social and environmental justice.