



Emerging Scholars Organization (ESO)
An Affiliate of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature
Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative

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Questions:

- 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 dropped out of school after my first couple of years of undergrad at the University of Cincinnati; I finally earned my B.A. at UT-K seventeen years after I started at UC. In the meantime, much of my pleasure reading were southern women writers. This was at least in part because my family moved away from the South when I was in high school; reading authors like Ellen Gilchrist and Lee Smith reminded me of the South. I even read the entire collection of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in one sitting when I was about 19—O'Connor reminded me of the weirdness of Georgia.

When I returned to college, I had the opportunity to take Tom Haddock's southern literature course. I was overjoyed that "southern literature" actually existed as a class and field of study; I imagine I was a bit much, sitting in the front row (while on my lunch hour from my day job as a secretary at UT-K law school) with SO MANY QUESTIONS. I had read *Wise Blood* on my own, for example, and was relieved to have someone to ask about the weirder parts of the novel, like the gorilla and the mummy.

I knew in graduate school that I wanted to focus on southern writers and gender, as those were my two biggest academic interests in general. It was in a critical theory class that I had the assignment to identify a topic I was interested in and find out the scholarly discussion about topic. I started out investigating the queerness of Miss Rosa in *Absalom, Absalom!* This brought me to Sarah Gleeson-White's article "The Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor." Reading this as well as Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire* led me to the topic of ugly women, which fascinated me. I took this fascination with me to LSU, where it was the topic of my dissertation and subsequent book.

- 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 appreciate how valued teaching is at MGA and how much encouragement there is to pursue the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as experimentation in teaching. Even in my two years here, I've been able to teach students in multiple classes; I value being able to watch students grown and learn over a period of time.

It's surprising how much of a role faculty plays in enrollment, recruitment and retention. I didn't expect how much faculty is involved in helping all students—not just majors—with advising and registration. I appreciate how there is a feeling of “all hands on deck” when it comes to student retention—everyone is expected to pitch in.

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

In addition to undergraduate classes in American literature, I also teach in the undergraduate and graduate programs in Professional and Technical Communication. Since I started at MGA, we have grown this program into an undergraduate minor and a graduate master's degree (our first master's degree in English). Teaching in this program, I've been able to work with a talented cohort of students. I've especially enjoyed designing the advanced professional communication course into an experiential learning course, which partnered with the Tubman Museum in Macon this past fall. I was in awe of the stellar level of work these students produced, which strengthened my commitment to experiential learning. This has led to my developing an experiential learning-based course for my first-year composition students this coming fall, which will have King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” at its center and will have the Washington Memorial Library archives as its community partner.

- 4. What do you think southern studies is useful to students and professors outside of the field? What about for individuals outside of academia?**

If ever there was a time that we needed southern studies, it's now. Certainly, the rise in white nationalism and retrogressive public policies means that there is much that can be learned from southern studies, both in the academy as well as in institutions such as the Highlander Center. Certainly, the directions that southern studies are taking right now, including the Anthropocene and the island South, are ones which could be seen as having a broad appeal, both inside and outside of the academy.

- 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.?**

There is no right answer for the job market. People desperately try to make it make sense, but in the end, it really does end up seeming like a sort of alchemy. What helped me was having skills and experience outside the academy—ultimately, it was a combination of my teaching ability, scholarship, and administrative abilities which helped me land the job I have now. But just know from the outset that the advice you get is going to be contradictory; it's incredibly frustrating.

When I've talked to undergraduates about the academic job market, I have emphasized the numbers—the data is quite clear about the chances of getting a permanent job. However, if you are going into a PhD program with the primary goal of learning—with the knowledge going in that you should be working to diversify your skills and open to a wide range of career paths—it can be a rewarding experience.

For students in graduate school, my biggest piece of advice is to interact with people outside of academia. When I was in graduate school, I went to Jazzercise so devotedly that I started training to be an instructor myself. Not only was the physical activity important for my well-being, but equally important was having social interactions with people who had nothing to do with my dissertation or the academic job market.

- 6. In your monograph, *Being Ugly*, you explore issues of prettiness and ugliness relating to depictions of southern womanhood. Recently, I believe you've begun work on an edited collection focusing on the “the tacky south.” What connections do you see between ugliness and tackiness and what might those connections reveal about the South?**

Just as “ugliness” has a regionally-specific meaning—meaning being rebellious or inappropriate—so does tackiness have southern etymological roots—class-based etymological roots—in the “tack-horses” of South Carolina and the so-called “tackies” who tended them. In both ugliness and tackiness, it's about missing the mark, often being too much—whether inadvertently or on purpose. There seems to be something failing to meet or even flaunting expectations, even taking pride in failing to meet outside expectations. And while this can manifest in negative ways, such as clinging to Confederate statues, it can also manifest in positive ways, such as the wonder that is Dolly Parton.