



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

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1) How did you become involved in southern studies? Did you enter graduate school with an interest in the south? Did you come into the field during your Ph.D. program or afterward?

In retrospect I suppose I was always interested in Southern Studies. You don't grow up in a state with governors like Huey Long and works like Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and not have a sense of the uniqueness of your state. Wayne Parent didn't name his 2006 book on Louisiana politics "Inside the Carnival" for no reason. Yet David Duke's run for the governorship in the 1990s recalled the violence and hatred of a pre-Civil Rights South that spread throughout the region, a world that Ernest Gaines's work implicitly contends. My first encounter with Gaines, and my first academic encounter with Southern Studies, began the moment I entered John Lowe's sophomore level African American Literature class, where we read *Up From Slavery*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*. Lowe's work, on humor in Hurston, or the Global South, or as the leading expert on Gaines, consistently made connections between African American and Southern Studies seem natural to me. I found it genuinely shocking to imagine a vision of Southern literature or history or folklore without the presence of black voices and stories. When I began teaching graduate school, I read Faulkner through the lens of Gaines and I read Flannery O'Connor through the lens of Alice Walker and Mark Twain's contested status as a Southern writer through Morrison's tale set in Ohio that nevertheless clearly invoked the trauma and spectre of the

South. Kentucky's own ambivalence about its heritage made me think more explicitly about the ways in which notions of race and culture are shaped by place. My experiences with the Appalachian poets like Frank X. Walker, Nikki Finney, and Crystal Wilkinson allowed me to bear witness to artists intervening to prevent a narrative of Kentucky emerging that erased its own history of slavery and racist oppression in favor of a more romantic vision filled with bluegrass, basketball, and mountain. I began to think about my own identity as a Southerner and the simplistic, monolithic portrait of the South that ignored the claims that so many others had to the land. So when I began attending conferences that focused on Southern literature, after being encouraged by one of my colleagues, I felt quite at home.

2) What is the most rewarding aspect of your current position? What is the most challenging? What has been surprising? (For example, have you attained skills that you would not have expected during graduate study?)

As the coordinator of the African American literature concentration the most rewarding aspect is getting students to connect the work we do in class to events on campus or in the community. I have a lot of first generation students and students from other disciplines wrestling with where literature fits in their lives. Whether it means building courses around Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* to coincide with her visit or hosting a film viewing and a panel discussion on *When the Levees Broke* to help add context to Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* I am always interested in getting students to understand how literature informs the world around them in ways that often do not anticipate. While as scholars we understand that films, speeches, and policy are frequently chronicled in and influenced by literature, students often assume that literature is a leisurely activity for which they have no time. Yet when they walk into a speech by Rankine having read her work or when they can refer back to moments in Ward's novel while watching Spike Lee's documentary or listening to a panel discussion, they feel empowered not just to follow the conversation but also to participate in and help shape the conversations. Students come to see how much more fully realized their understanding of the world around them can be with a range of tools at their disposal. I am in a department where we have multiple professors who specialize in African American literature. Aside from providing me with a supportive environment where I know my field will be properly valued and where colleagues can just walk in and begin conversations about race theory and the newest work by contemporary writers, we are able to coordinate events to extend our classes beyond the classroom. Here we get to help students find the language to articulate their own experiences, frustrations, and anxieties but how to apply them in settings outside the classroom. Getting them to understand the significance of literature, writing, and critical thinking as something that should permeate their daily lives, whether as a career or as something to inform a non-humanities career can be thrilling. Oddly the last 10 years of teaching, with claims of a post-racial America and then shocking repudiation of that idea, students come to class more seeking ways to resist, negotiate, and survive the energies that have been renewed and are actively trying to impose themselves in their lives. It is a teachable

moment that is made easier by the collective work my colleagues and I get to do together.

3) What classes do you typically teach? Which classes do you enjoy teaching the most?

I typically teach African American literature from sophomore level to the graduate level. Usually those classes are 1945-present. I like to organize those classes around certain themes: authenticity, community, resistance. Recently I have focused my attention on the “The South in African American Literature” which explores the roots and evolution of black portraits of the South and its impact on the larger community. The class also details the central role of black Southern writers in shaping southern literature and Southern Studies in the 21st century. In the fall I will be teaching a graduate class on African American literature 1989-present that will include discussions of post-Soul African American literature, Afrofuturism, and popular black literature and film. The class will also feature prominent black southern authors like Tayari Jones and Jesmyn Ward both of whom have positioned over the last two years at the center of the Black Southern Literary Tradition. What that tradition looks like with them along with television shows like *Queen Sugar*, *Greenleaf*, and *Atlanta* is a veritable explosion of black creative work chronicling black life in the South that have reached the public imagination and openly challenge traditional portraits of the South and one-dimensional depictions of black existence.

4) Why do you think southern studies is useful to people outside of the field?

Aside from the vibrancy of the multidisciplinary work that emerges from Southern Studies, the influence of the South on the rest of the nation provides Southern Studies with an urgency and a relevance that is at times unmatched in other fields. If Malcolm X is right and everything “South of the Canadian border” is the South, then Southern Studies comes to embody the nation itself. It frequently, unintentionally or not, holds up a mirror both to itself and the other regions of the country of how far we have yet to go. It signals the presence of anti-democratic forces that, while often associated solely with the South, are embedded in the other regions just as deeply. In other fields, Southern Studies models a multi-disciplinarity that allows students to engage the humanities in the best tradition of the university experience. Instead of succumbing to the notion of college as merely a site for job training, Southern Studies demands its students become fully realized intellectual subjects. Yet the potential for Southern Studies is far greater than we might realize and, to my mind, substantially dependent on a willingness to embrace multiracial, multiethnic influences, it directly challenges perceptions of the North, especially New York, as the primary site of the “melting pot” for which America is celebrated. It also must sustain a willingness to interrogate itself, and has consistently challenged the country’s self-portrait of the land of the land of the free.

5) What is the best advice that you received about the job market? What advice do you frequently or emphatically give to your students? What do you tell undergraduate students who want to pursue a Ph.D.?

There were several bits of advice I got about the job market, like having two and a half chapters done before you go on the market, but I suspect the best was that if you get in the room, you can get the job. Conferences, publications, book reviews, guest lectures, and fellowships should not wait until you are ABD. You want to produce a C.V. that demonstrates intellectual curiosity, diversity, and productivity but most of all one that gets you into the room. Interviews and campus visit can have much more of an impact on a committee's decision than a school's pedigree. We spend a lot of time worrying about whether one attends the right school or has "the one" right professor as your advocate, but what will matter the most is the work you put in to position yourself for an opportunity to get the interview. Beyond that you should apply for as many jobs as you reasonably can. So, having work that might allow you teach in multiple departments, English and American literature, African American Studies, American Studies, and Southern Studies, will be the most beneficial when you start thinking about where you'd like to start your career. The market is unpredictable and "the perfect job" is not always what you think it is. Your research and teaching interests will migrate in unexpected ways – across time, genre, and even discipline – so you shouldn't dismiss jobs out of hand.

6) When engaging with your scholarship, an attentive reader finds dimensions of identity (e.g. socioeconomic status, social class, and age) that are sometimes elided in popular discussions of intersectionality, which tend to stress the relationship between race and gender. Do age, class, dis/ability, and other aspects of identity fracture the notion of a "solid" South or, for that matter, myths of a monolithic African-American identity?

This is a truly interesting question. The manuscript on which I am currently working focuses on representations of the African American elite, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. One of the aims is to rethink the white master/black slave dynamic by focusing on the lives of free blacks in the South. Along with free blacks in the North and the house slaves, who often became more educated than field slaves, free blacks eventually formed the core of the black elite that has been alternately ignored, vilified, and envied throughout the next century and a half.

I am not sure that it fractures the myths of a monolithic African American community because, in the South, one always had to face the reality that the enforcement of racist hierarchies would take priority over any class solidarity that the black elite might want to pursue. What it does do is open opportunities to view the attempts of the black elite to erect spaces that distinguished them socially from the black working class. Creoles in Louisiana are an example of this, as are Jack and Jill clubs, black debutante balls, and religious denominations. So Calvin White's *The*

Rise of Respectability: Race, Religion, and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) becomes incredibly useful in chronicling the class politics at play as the founders of COGIC explicitly construct the denomination in opposition to the black bourgeois stoicism and respectability of the Methodists and Baptists in the South. We think about intersections of race, class, and gender, in relation to poverty. This is necessary work and I support it. But I would also ask us to consider that when we refer to class we consider the lives of those in the upper classes, who are often charged with a lack of authenticity – one that associates whiteness with success or education – or are resented by some whites because black success is often thought to be undeserved or the result of affirmative action.

Charges that race acts as merely a cover for robust critique of capitalism and class exploitation fail to recognize how central race remains in the construction and maintenance of American national identity. The election of President Obama and the declaration of a post-racial America – however misguided – threw parts the country into an existential crisis as opposed to a class revolution. This was especially the case in southern states like Virginia and North Carolina that Obama won because it signaled the possibility of a South breaking free from the its Confederate legacy. Moreover, my interest in the remigration of blacks to the South over the last twenty years, which was a significant factor in Obama’s previously mentioned southern wins, the tensions between these often highly educated, professional blacks and the black underclass that increasingly find themselves displaced by gentrification – or still suffering from the effects of deindustrialization – that emerge are critical to understanding a South wrestling with its identity in the face of changing demographics, politics, and culture. So I would say that explorations of class in conjunction with those of race and gender has the potential to disrupt the white subject/black object binary while interrupting the alienation within the black community among class lines in order to articulate a more nuanced critique of the displacement of African Americans simultaneously experiencing white flight and gentrification in cities throughout the South.