

# THE SOUTHERN REGISTER

A Publication of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture

The University of Mississippi

OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI, U.S.A.

FALL 2023





*At the end of July, I offered opening remarks to the Southern Writers, Southern Writing graduate student conference, held in Barnard Observatory and organized by the UM Department of English in collaboration with the Southern Studies program. An excerpt from that welcome reappears here as my invitation to the 2023–24 academic year. We're excited to get the fall semester underway!*

Studying “the South”—Southern Studies—has changed in important ways since I first came to the Southern Writers, Southern Writing conference as a new faculty member in the summer of 1998. I showed up in Oxford from Chapel Hill with some plastic overhead projector sheets that listed definitively the Agrarian-inflected characteristics of southern literature that I had learned: a preoccupation with the past, a sense of place, an attachment to the land. My heart was never much in that rhetoric, and I struggled for a vocabulary that more nearly aligned with my own experiences.

Since the days of those overheads, we have witnessed a paradigm shift that we already discuss in the past tense—the new Southern Studies—but I remain convinced of the bedrock to that approach: the region’s situatedness within a nation, a hemisphere, and a globe that continually shapes life for its residents. Of late, scholars have talked again of place, but this time not as something imbued with the mystical exceptionalism of region. Instead, we have figured place as granular and specific, with structural and environmental particularities: the western hemisphere, the United States, Mississippi, Oxford, UM, Barnard Observatory.

So, let’s talk about where we’re holding this conference: on a campus wrought Sutpen-like out of the Old Southwest to educate the sons of wealth, but scarcely of polish, given the rawness of their surroundings. A campus situated on the ancestral home of the roughly dispossessed Chickasaw nation. A campus that, paradoxically, began admitting women in the 1880s, but served as the fiery crucible of racially integrating higher education in the South in 1962. This building, constructed with enslaved labor, was meant to fulfill Chancellor Frederick Barnard’s vision of what higher

education could be: not a finishing school for gentlemen, but an institution dedicated to science, to understanding the world beyond this patch of soil. This was to be Barnard Observatory, and the structure has the three towers to prove that it was built for stargazing. Completed in 1859, the building went on to primarily serve nonstellar functions: offering classrooms for assorted subjects, serving as home to the UM Chancellor, housing the ROTC.

Since the 1980s, Barnard Observatory has been home to the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, where our mission is “to document, interpret, and teach about the US South through critical research and public engagement.” To that end, we offer an undergraduate interdisciplinary degree in Southern Studies, an MA in Southern Studies, and an MFA in Documentary Expression. This fall we will enroll 238 undergraduate majors and 33 graduate students. In addition to our curriculum, we offer regular public programming through our SouthTalks lecture series, documentary photography exhibitions in the Gammill Gallery, and the annual Oxford Conference for the Book. We have three affiliated institutes: *Living Blues* magazine, the Southern Documentary Project, and the Southern Foodways Alliance. In addition to *Living Blues*, we publish a news magazine called the *Southern Register*, an academic online journal called *Study the South*, and the SFA’s *Gravy*, as well as a podcast of the same name. We are BUSY.

But that we do all that work from Barnard Observatory, on the campus of the University of Mississippi, matters. Location shapes how we see the world and how we talk about our past and our future. Founded in 1977, the Center will turn fifty in 2027. As we approach that anniversary, we imagine using our Future of the South lecture series to ask questions relevant to a personal anniversary because of their relevance to larger issues:

- What role does “the South” serve in interpreting and historicizing this currently charged moment in American history and politics?
- How does the academy best access contemporary intersections of place and identity?
- How does the idea of a “South” matter to questions of hemispheric and global citizenship?
- How does Southern Studies as a discipline depend upon the continuation of certain “Souths” and the dismantling of others?
- How does the idea of place function in a world literally melting down? In Mississippi, where we regularly bump 100 degrees in July, what do we have to say about how to cool things down?

Despite Barnard’s lofty goals for his Observatory, the people who inhabit it now have their feet on the ground, in this place that shapes what and how we see.

Katie McKee

## THE SOUTHERN REGISTER

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On the cover: Photo by James G. Thomas, Jr.

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# Living Blues News

“Hey get up brothers, don’t sit there with your head hangin’ down. Hey get up brothers, I know the ghetto’s got you down.” Thus begins one of the classic blues funk songs of New Orleans. “Dap Walk” was released in 1972 by this issue’s cover artist, Ernie Vincent, and has become part of the pantheon of Crescent City tunes that define the sound of New Orleans. While anyone from New Orleans knows of Vincent through his decades of live shows, many outsiders do not. Hopefully his excellent new release earlier this year, *Original Dap King*, and this *Living Blues* cover can help change that.

We also feature Massachusetts-based vocalist and guitarist Gina Coleman, who fronts the band Misty Blues; the King and Queen of the Miami blues scene, Mojo Ike Woods and Lady Val; and another New Orleans artist, keyboard player Kevin Gullage, who is the son of renowned bass player Tony Gullage and fronts Kevin and the Blues Groovers. This issue’s edition of “Let It Roll” takes a look at one of the great live albums of all time, the Allman Brothers Band’s *At Fillmore East*, and takes a look at the band’s deep blues roots. We also present our review of one of the most anticipated books in blues history, Mack McCormick’s posthumously published look at Robert Johnson (sans the “fourth” Robert Johnson photo, which he had possession of), as well as the box set of his field recordings.

Congratulations to the *Living Blues* Awards winners for 2023. It is amazing to me that this is the thirtieth annual awards. They have certainly grown in significance and size over the years—from the old days of voting by hand and then mailing the ballot, to modern times when voting takes just minutes online and has grown from a few hundred votes to now thousands each year. It is always nice when perennial winners like Buddy Guy receive awards but it may be more satisfying to see artists like Shardé Thomas, Jimi “Prime Time” Smith, and Dylan Triplett win for the first



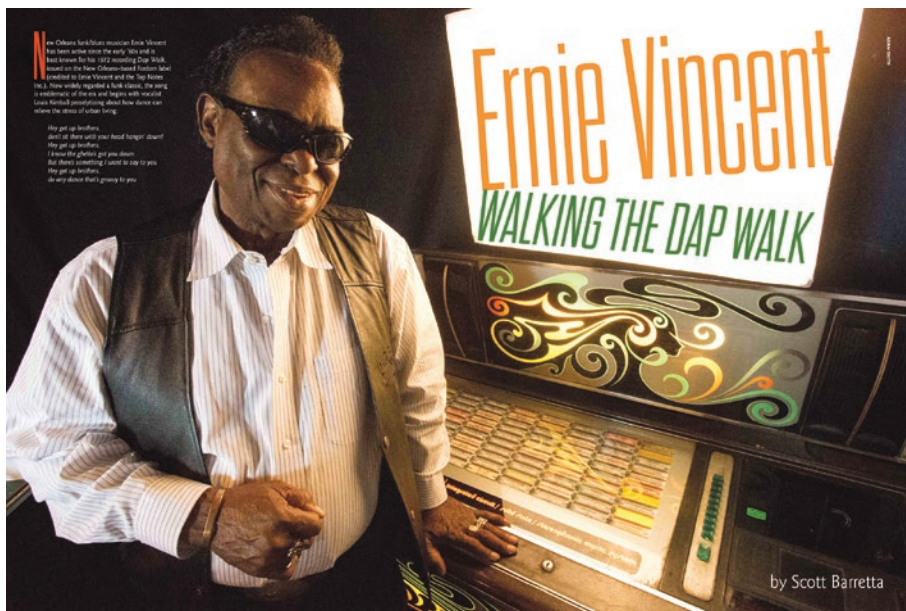
time. Thanks to everyone who took the time to vote.

In May we lost one of the pioneering figures in postwar blues and folk recordings, Chris Strachwitz. He founded Arhoolie Records in 1960 and recorded his first record, *Texas Sharecropper and Songster* by Mance Lipscomb. Across six decades, he released more than four hundred albums that ranged from blues to Tejano, to Cajun, zydeco, bluegrass, gospel, and more. Throughout those years, he recorded for the first-time artists like Lipscomb, Mississippi Fred McDowell,

John Jackson, the Rebirth Brass Band, and the Campbell Brothers, while making records by artists like Clifton Chenier, Flaco Jiménez, BeauSoleil, the Hackberry Ramblers, and many, many others more widely known. In 1976 he founded the Down Home Music Store in El Cerrito, California, one of the finest roots music stores in the world. Strachwitz died on May 5 at age ninety-one.

Lastly, while I enjoy all forms of blues, I am a traditionalist at heart. I’ve got to say that seeing new recordings by Boo Boo Davis, Lil’ Jimmy Reed, Rip Lee Pryor, Kyle Roussel, and Clarence “Bluesman” Davis all come across my desk for review for this issue was a delightful surprise.

Brett J. Bonner



# southtalks

SERIES

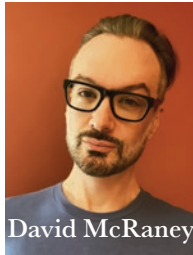
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOUTHERN CULTURE

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, AT NOON**

Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

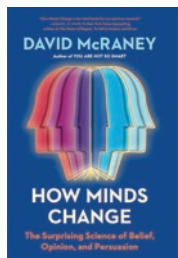
“How I Changed My Mind about How Minds Change”

David McRaney



David McRaney

In these strange, contentious times, McRaney takes us through how writing a book about the science of why it’s so hard to change people’s minds changed his own mind about how minds change. In this talk you will not only learn about what works when it comes to persuading people to accept new policies, new courses of action, and new ideas that challenge previous conventions,



but why it is so hard to change people’s minds *about how to change minds*.

David McRaney is a science journalist fascinated with brains, minds, and culture. He created the podcast *You Are Not So Smart* based on his internationally bestselling book of the same name and its follow-up, *You Are Now Less Dumb*.

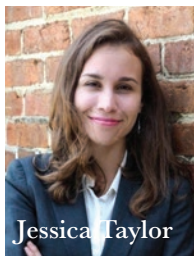
This event is a partnership with the University of Mississippi Department of Writing and Rhetoric and the Department of Philosophy and Religion.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, AT NOON**

Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

“Running Away from Early America”

Jessica Taylor



Jessica Taylor

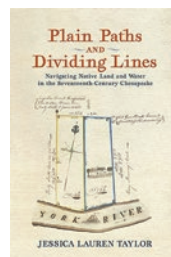
Escaping servitude and slavery in the seventeenth-century English colonies demanded creativity in the face of surveillance and threats of violence. How did runaways seek freedom in seventeenth-century Virginia, and with whom? Where did they go, and what strategies actually worked? How did they imagine life beyond bondage? And, how did their imaginings in turn endanger colonial authority? Taylor will discuss ongoing efforts to

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*SouthTalks* is a series of events (including lectures, performances, film screenings, and panel discussions) that explores the interdisciplinary nature of Southern Studies. This series is free and open to the public, and typically takes place in the Tupelo Room of Barnard Observatory unless otherwise noted. Visit the Center’s website for up-to-date information about all Center events.

During the 2023–24 academic year, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture turns to “Creativity in the South” as our programming focus. The US South is a region of profound contrast. Extreme poverty exists uneasily alongside extreme wealth. Political and social conservatism digs into the same place that rooted the civil rights movement. Chronically underfunded school districts populate the very landscape that nurtures internationally renowned writers and artists and painters. This semester we explore creativity in the South by asking how place shapes—and sometimes even requires—the creative expression linked to it. We define *creativity* broadly to include the processes of making and remaking “the South” over time and through different mediums.

If you require special assistance relating to a disability, please contact Afton Thomas at amthoma4@olemiss.edu or call 662-915-5993.



Jessica Lauren Taylor

document glimpses of conspiracies and plots found in court records, and what they can teach researchers and our students.

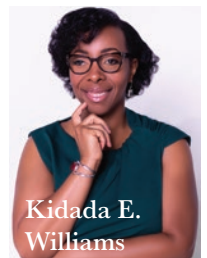
Taylor is an assistant professor in the history department at Virginia Tech. As a public historian, she collaborates on projects across the Southeast as diverse as oral histories with boatbuilders, augmented reality tours of historic sites, and reconstructed maps of precolonial landscapes.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, AT 6:00 P.M.**

David H. Nutt Auditorium (542 University Ave.)

Gilder-Jordan Lecture

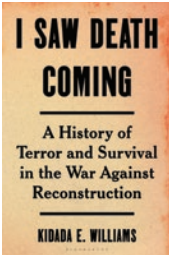
Kidada E. Williams



Kidada E. Williams

Reconstruction is one of the most significant eras in American history. This presentation focuses on the misunderstood and misrepresented aspects of Black people’s experiences in that era. Williams will discuss what Black southerners did with their freedom, the price white southerners made them pay for their success, and the ways Reconstruction was violently overthrown.

Kidada E. Williams is a professor of history at Wayne State University in Detroit who studies African American victims of racist violence. She is the author of *I Saw Death Coming* and *They Left Great Marks on Me*, coeditor of #CharlestonSyllabus, host



and coproducer of *Seizing Freedom*, a podcast docudrama that covers the epic story of African Americans’ fight for freedom during the Civil War era.

The Gilder-Jordan Lecture is organized through the Center for the Study of Southern Culture in partnership with the African American Studies Program, the Center for Civil War Research, and

the Department of History. The Gilder-Jordan Speaker Series is made possible through the generosity of the Gilder Foundation, Inc. The series honors the late Richard Gilder of New York and his family, as well as University of Mississippi alumni Dan and Lou Jordan of Virginia.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, AT NOON**  
Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

*(Un)Known Legacies*

T. Harlan Bozeman



T. Harlan Bozeman

Researching American history can lead you into a pit of hopelessness, but choosing to acknowledge the atrocities and subjugation that Black people have endured can introduce strategies for coping and maneuvering through this world. Through working within the expanded field of photography, T. Harlan Bozeman uses the camera as a tool to recontextualize known and unknown Black legacies against his encounters working in the American South. In this talk, Bozeman will present his project based in Elaine, Arkansas, and other photo-based artworks that were created in response to his experience working in the Arkansas Delta.

Harlan Bozeman is a photo-based artist living in Central Arkansas. His research-driven practice focuses on the erasure of Black legacies in the American South and how this exploration influences one’s personhood.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, AT 4:00 P.M.**  
Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

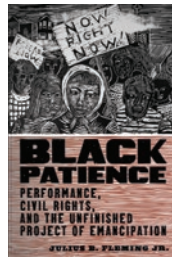
“Go Slow, Now’: The Free Southern Theater, Civil Rights, and the Racial Project of Black Patience”

Julius Fleming Jr.

This talk considers how theater was vital to the civil rights movement. It explores how Black artists and activists in the US South, namely the Free Southern Theater, used theatrical performance to stage a radical challenge to a violent racial project that Fleming calls “Black patience” — a project that has historically insisted that Black people wait for freedom. Mounting and repurposing plays



Julius Fleming Jr.



like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Ossie Davis’s *Purlie Victorious*, these cultural workers used theatre as a way to demand “freedom now.” Founded on the storied grounds of Mississippi—the United States’ most iconic geography of Black patience—this Black southern theatre transformed theatrical performance into a radical tool of civil rights protest.

Fleming is an associate professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he also serves as director of the English Honors Program. He is the author of *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 5, AT 4:00 P.M.**  
Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

“Jonesland: A Legacy of Extraction and Survival”

Jazmin Miller and Anya Groner

Jonesland is one of many historic Black communities along the lower Mississippi River, and like many free towns, Jonesland’s future, and remarkable past, is at risk. Southeast Louisiana, sometimes called Cancer Alley, is home to a quarter of the nation’s petrochemical industries. As one resident puts it, “They took our air. They took our land. They’ve taken our water. We can’t even worship in the river.” Join filmmaker Jazmin Miller and reporter Anya Groner to learn about the history of extraction, the survival of an extended Black family, and the remarkable secret they kept for over a century.

Anya Groner is a journalist, fiction writer, and essayist. Her audio reporting is featured in Monument Lab’s podcast *Plot of Land*, which explores how land ownership and housing in the United States have been shaped by the entrenched interplay of power, public memory, and privatization. She lives in New Orleans and teaches creative writing at the New Orleans Center for Creative Art and the



Anya Groner

New Orleans Writers Workshop.



Jazmin Miller

Jazmin Miller is a theatre artist, filmmaker, and the executive director of the non-profit Carpenter Art Garden. She is currently working on a forthcoming documentary film, *Jonesland*, and is also featured on two episodes of Monument Lab’s podcast *Plot of Land*. Jazmin lives in Memphis,

and is passionate about equity, youth development, and education and spends a majority of her time serving on nonprofit boards and other volunteer efforts.

This event is cosponsored by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the Department of English.

**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, AT 4:00 P.M.**

Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

“Whiteness in Crisis?”

James M. Thomas

In *The History of White People*, historian Nell Painter wrote, “Being White these days isn’t what it used to be.”

What, then, does it mean to be White today? Through in-depth interviews with White people living in the American South—a region where the nation’s color line has arguably been drawn brighter than anywhere else—this project examines how White people are making sense of both race and region in the twenty-first century.

James M. Thomas (JT) is associate professor of sociology at the University of Mississippi, and coeditor of *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. He is the author or coauthor of five books, and over thirty peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and invited essays on the causes and consequences of race and racism in America and abroad.

This SouthTalk is cosponsored by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the envisioned Center for the Study of Race and racism.



**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, AT NOON**

Tupelo Room, Barnard Observatory

“Introducing the Southern Music Research Center”

Burgin Mathews

Earlier this year, the nonprofit Southern Music Research Center (SMRC) launched its online archive: a searchable public repository of rare photos, rescued recordings, oral history interviews, and ephemera reflecting a deep diversity of music communities, expressions, and experiences across the American South. In this talk, SMRC director Burgin Mathews will offer a virtual tour of the archive’s initial holdings, exploring images from Birmingham, Alabama’s influential but unsung jazz history; lost-and-found tapes from Mississippi hymn singings; a cache of southern punk flyers; recordings, photos, and film from historic, music-rich Beech Mountain, North Carolina; and more.

Burgin Mathews is founding director of the Southern Music Research Center, host of *The Lost Child* roots music radio show, and author of the forthcoming *Magic City: How the Birmingham Jazz Tradition Shaped the Sound of America*.



**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, AT 5:30 P.M.**

Paris-Yates Chapel

“‘Jews, Heathens, and Other Dissenters’: New Perspectives on Race and Religion in the American South”

Shari Rabin

The 1669 Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina anticipated the arrival of Jews alongside “heathens, and other dissenters from the purity of the Christian religion.” Meanwhile, the Code Noir, which governed French Louisiana, banned Jewish settlement altogether. Nevertheless, by the middle of the eighteenth-century Jews came to settle in both places, and by 1749 and 1828, respectively, they had formed Jewish congregations. This talk will explore how Jews fit into the complex power relations of the colonial South and the broader Atlantic world; what the extant evidence tells us about the religious lives they created; and why these histories are important for understanding broader dynamics of race and religion in the region.

Shari Rabin is associate professor of Jewish studies and religion and chair of Jewish studies at Oberlin College. She is the author of *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-century America*.

This event is cosponsored by the Jewish Federation of Oxford.



**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, AT NOON**

Speaker’s Gallery, University Museum  
(University Ave. & 5th St.)

“Southern Light, Southern Landscape”

William Dunlap and  
W. Ralph Eubanks

In his essay “The Power of Place in Art and Literature,” the artist William Dunlap writes, “The one constant in American art and life is the land.” In this talk, William Dunlap and Ralph Eubanks will discuss the connection between the landscape of the American South and the ways light and landscape connect with his art and literature.

William Dunlap is an artist, arts advocate, writer, and 1969 graduate of the University of Mississippi. The American landscape, its flora and fauna, are essential elements in



Dunlap’s art, as are certain iconic Old Masters, such as Rembrandt’s series of self-portraits, from which he quotes in paintings and constructions.

W. Ralph Eubanks is the Black Power at Ole Miss Faculty Fellow at



the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. He is the author of *A Place Like Mississippi: A Journey through a Real and Imagined Literary Landscape*, as well as two other works of nonfiction.

This SouthTalk is cosponsored by the University Museum.

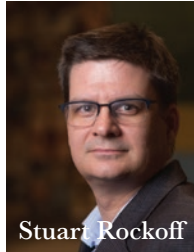
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**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9, AT 5:30 P.M.**

Paris-Yates Chapel

**“Shalom Y’all: The History of Jews in Mississippi”**

Stuart Rockoff



Stuart Rockoff

In the early nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants from Europe began to arrive in the Magnolia State, settling initially in towns along the Mississippi River.

Concentrating in retail trade, these Jews became visible symbols of economic modernity and market capitalism in Mississippi. Throughout much of their history, Mississippi Jews have worked to lessen the cultural differences between themselves and their neighbors. In recent decades, due to regionwide economic and demographic trends, the Jewish population of Mississippi has declined and become concentrated in the state’s population centers.

Stuart Rockoff received his PhD in US history from the University of Texas at Austin with a special emphasis on race, immigration, and American Jewish history. He has taught courses in American and ethnic history at such schools as the University of Texas and Millsaps College and has published numerous articles and essays on southern Jewish history. Rockoff is currently the executive director of the Mississippi Humanities Council.

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**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, AT 5:30 P.M.**

Off Square Books (129 Courthouse Square)

***In the Pines: A Lynching, a Lie, a Reckoning***

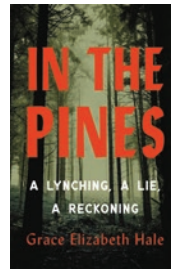
Grace Elizabeth Hale

An award-winning scholar of white supremacy tackles her toughest research assignment yet: the unsolved murder of a Black man in rural Mississippi while her grandfather was the local sheriff—a cold case that sheds new light on the hidden legacy of racial terror in America. A story of obsession, injustice, and the ties that bind, *In the Pines* casts an unsparring eye over this intimate terrain, driven by a deep desire to set straight the historical record and to understand and subvert white racism, along with its structures, costs, and consequences—and the lies that sustain it.

Grace Elizabeth Hale is the Commonwealth Professor



Grace Elizabeth Hale



of American Studies and History at the University of Virginia and an internationally recognized expert on modern American culture and the regional culture of the US South. Her previous books include *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940*, and *Cool Town: How Athens, Georgia, Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture*.

This event is cosponsored by Square Books.

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**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 16, AT 5:00 P.M.**

Gammill Gallery, Barnard

Observatory

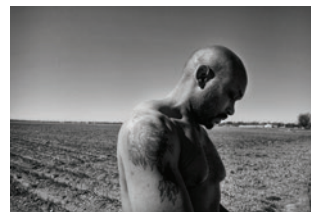
***Down in the Delta***

Vanessa Charlot



The complicated histories of Black life in the American South, laden with cotton fields and the remnants of Jim Crow, has imprinted itself upon the hauntingly beautiful contemporary landscape of the Mississippi Delta. The project, *Down in the Delta*, is a visual archive of the lived experiences and legacy of Roosevelt Davenport (b. 1937), a former sharecropper, and his family, who all worked and now own a piece of the land on the Quito Plantation in Morgan City, where their ancestors were once kept as enslaved people. This project sheds light on Black American roots and those who chose to stay in the Delta and create family, home, and community.

Vanessa Charlot is an award-winning photographer, filmmaker, and an assistant professor of creative multimedia at the University of Mississippi School of Journalism and New Media. Her work focuses on the intersectionality of race, politics, culture, and sexual/gender expression in order to explore the collective human experience.



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**FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1, AT 6:00 P.M.**

Gammill Gallery and Tupelo Room, Barnard

Observatory

**Fall Documentary Showcase**

The Fall Documentary Showcase is a celebration of the work by our documentary students. Each artist will present their work, followed by a Q&A session with questions from the audience.

# Fall 2023 Southern Studies Course Offerings

**This fall the Southern Studies classes focus, as usual, on a wide variety of topics—from gender and sexuality to food culture and regional identity.**

## **SST 107: Intro to Gender & Sexuality in the South** **Instructor: Andy Donnelly**

This course will explore the South, southern history, and southern culture through the study of gender and sexuality. We will think about the role that gender has played in constructing southern identity, how the meanings of masculinity, femininity, and gender have changed over time, and how this history has intersected with that of marriage, race and racism, nationalism, family, religion, and class. The course will also examine sexuality and its history, including the regulation of sex, the expression of sexual identity, and queer experience in the South.

## **SST 109: Rights and Southern Activism** **Instructor: Ralph Eubanks**

The history of protest at the University of Mississippi will be a central part of this class, yet connections between the university's history of protest and other southern movements, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the civil rights movement more broadly, will be explored. Given the connection between race and protest in the South, a foundational text for this course will be C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. This class will not only explore activism, but also the nature of movement power dynamics, connections among activists, the strategies they used, and the opposition they faced.

## **SST 118: Intro Topics in Southern Music: The Blues** **Instructor: Adam Gussow**

This course is designed as a fun, wide-ranging introduction to one of the South's best-known forms of cultural expression. "The blues" is more than music: it's a lyric archive indexing and pronouncing judgment on the twentieth-century South's history from an African American perspective—a register of trauma, tribulation, and survival; an ethos of resilience grounded in improvisatory leaps and a tragicomic attitude. The blues has become a global phenomenon—the principal way, arguably, in which the US South is known around the world: as a wailing, groove-centered sound, a mythological landscape of crossroads and rambling bluesmen, a hoodoo-inflected vernacular in which African spirituality lingers on.

## **SST 540: Photographing Place in the US South** **Instructor: Brooke White**

Southern Studies 540 will focus on the relationship between local cultures and the physical world(s) such cultures

create using the medium of still photography. Students will examine the idea of "place," review the visual landscape tradition, consider various examples of "cultural landscape" photography, and discuss student-made photographs culminating in an exhibition. Additional in-class activities include idea development, technical demonstrations related to digital photographic practices, and critiques that focus on the development of student photographic work. Late-semester class sessions will be devoted to editing and curating student photographs for an exhibition focusing on the idea of "place" in the American South.

## **SST 555: Foodways** **Instructor: Catarina Passidomo**

In this course, we'll use southern food culture to explore deeper questions about ownership and access; inclusion and exclusion; and what it means to grow, cook and eat in the twenty-first century South. In that sense, we will examine southern food culture from a critical perspective. Some themes we will encounter include the region's culinary history—considering the crucial importance of climate and both voluntary and involuntary migration for shaping southern food, the trenchant but evolving relationship between food and regional identity, and the ways in which food can be understood as indicative of a changing South.

## **SST 598: "The Mississippi Delta: Exploring the South's South"**

### **Instructor: Jimmy Thomas**

This course introduces students to the fabled yet complicated Mississippi Delta through interdisciplinary engagement: investigations into historical studies, ethnographic fieldwork, memoir, fiction, photography, and documentary film. We will look at the Mississippi Delta through the lenses of the Jim Crow era, the civil rights movement, and the contemporary South as a way of placing it within the broader context of the state, the region, and the world, and we will work to complicate the cultural expressions that have come to define Mississippi's most mythologized region.

## **English 359: Women in the South** **Instructor: Katie McKee**

This course begins in the late nineteenth-century with pairings of contemporaneous Black and white writers, moves through core texts of the twentieth century, and concludes with twenty-first-century authors writing about the multifaceted, multiethnic "South" they are helping to define. With particular attention to the intersecting power and fluid definitions of gender, race, and place, we will work in multiple genres, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



# Matt O’Neal Joins Southern Studies and History Faculty

As the son of a Southern Baptist pastor, Matt O’Neal is used to moving around. O’Neal grew up in several towns, including Knoxville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky. He also toured the SEC for several years while earning his degrees—his BA from the University of Kentucky, his MA from Auburn, and doctorate from the University of Georgia. This fall, he will move once again, this time to Oxford as visiting assistant professor of history and Southern Studies.

“I caught the history bug early, consuming popular history about World War II, Abraham Lincoln, the *Titanic*, all the hits,” O’Neal said. “I always loved reading, and the feeling that I could escape into the past. At UK, I had some great professors who encouraged me to think seriously about scholarship and the work of being a historian. I thought about politics, too, and did a few internships in DC, but soon learned I wasn’t cut out for that kind of job.” When he applied to Auburn and they granted him an assistantship, he realized his path would be down the academic road.

When O’Neal was a child, his grandfather shared stories about his hometown of Corbin, Kentucky, a sundown town located in the southeastern portion of the state. Then in graduate school, O’Neal studied labor history and books that emphasized the history of African Americans in Appalachia and their roles in an interracial working-class union movement. “The dissertation is my attempt to make sense out of how similar circumstances could bring Black and white people together in one place, but drive them apart in another,” O’Neal said. His dissertation, “Home and Hell: The Great Migration and the Making of Sundown Towns in Appalachia” explores why the Great Migration to the Appalachian South



Matt O’Neal

held both promise and peril for African Americans. “I argue that the racial violence of the Long Red Summer of 1917–1922, and the formation of sundown towns in its aftermath, can be best understood by putting a consideration of labor back into labor history,” O’Neal said. “In other words, the kind of work people did, who they worked with, and how and where they lived, also affected how they thought about race. I compare the industries of railroading and coal mining to show how workers then acted in different ways in the midst of the Great Migration and how the legacy of what happened one hundred years ago continues to define these places in the present day.”

O’Neal jumped at the chance to apply for his new position. “I was already familiar with the Center, mostly through things like the Southern Foodways Alliance and the work of some of the people that have been and are still involved with it. I feel honored to be a part of a place that is doing really important work on the

South.” This fall he will be teaching a section of Southern Studies 101 as well as HST 131: US History since 1877. “I’m looking forward to getting outside of my comfort zone and helping students explore what a variety of disciplines have to say about the South,” O’Neal said. “I can’t resist doing a crash course in southern history, and I’m also taking the opportunity to plan days around things I’ve always wanted to talk about—depictions of the South in TV and film, bourbon, and why the SEC ‘just means more.’”

O’Neal’s wife and infant son will join him on this new journey. “We love to explore and learn about wherever we live, so we will definitely be taking trips to historic sites in the area and things like that,” he said. “We will have our three-month-old son with us wherever we go. He will be a little history buff by the time all is said and done. We are excited to move to Oxford and to join the community.”

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

# Follow Your Spirit

## *Zaire Love Wins \$30,000 Prize at Micheaux Film Festival*

Zaire Love's *SLICE* keeps racking up awards. *SLICE* won the Panavision Award for Outstanding Short and the award for Outstanding Editing in a Short at the fifth annual Micheaux Film Festival in Los Angeles in July. Additionally, *SLICE* also received the Best Documentary Short at the Oxford Film Festival in March. Noel Braham and Courtney L. Branch started the Micheaux Film Festival in 2018 with a goal of inspiring, educating, and entertaining the unseen and unheard.

*SLICE* is about how Black men in Memphis deal with the complexities of summer by submerging themselves in a swimming art form of athleticism, creativity, and joy called "slicing."

Love, the Pihakis Documentary Filmmaker for the Southern Foodways Alliance, learned that *SLICE* made it into the festival, but was conflicted about attending. Her summers are a busy time of year due to her managing the Prototype Film Residency, her work as SFA filmmaker, and her own artistic work. But after deciding not to attend, the Friday before the festival Love received an email that *SLICE* had received two nominations.

"When I got the news, I saw it as a sign to attend, but I didn't make a decision until the following Tuesday. I booked my flight and hotel and was off to LA at six a.m.

that Thursday," Love said. "I had an amazing time from start to finish, and I am so grateful I went."

The Panavision Outstanding Short Award, which is the highest award given at the festival, comes with a \$30,000 prize, which Love will use to create future projects.

"Winning both awards was amazing, but winning the Panavision Award was



Zaire Love



ZAIRE LOVE

so exhilarating," Love said. "In my acceptance speech, I told the audience that I do this work to honor, amplify, and immortalize the Black South and that there's so much pride that I take in that. Also, the Black men and boys in Memphis were gonna be so excited that WE WON!"

Love says she learned a great deal from the opportunity. "The overall

lesson that I received from this experience was to follow your spirit," Love said. "Your mind and logic are scared cats. Your spirit is a warrior that will protect you and lead you to victory every time."

Love is a multidisciplinary artist, filmmaker, and speaker whose work is a quest to honor and amplify the stories of the Black South through creative storytelling, documentary, and music. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in drama from Spelman College, a master's in education from Houston Baptist University, and a Master of Fine Arts in documentary expression from the University of Mississippi.

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

# Homecoming Provides Moment to Celebrate and Come Together

## *Documentary on Local Writer Larry Brown Screened in Oxford*

In *Billy Ray's Farm*, Larry Brown's book of nonfiction essays, Brown writes, "You just had to keep writing with blind faith, and hope, and trust in yourself that you would eventually find your way, that the world would one day accept your work." The world has indeed accepted Brown's work, and this summer, people gathered a few days after what would have

been his seventy-second birthday to reminisce about his legacy.

On July 12, Oxonians and out-of-towners packed Proud Larry's on the Oxford Square for a special screening of *The Rough South of Larry Brown* followed by a discussion with the film's director, Gary Hawkins; photographer, Tom Rankin; and head of the UM library's special collections, Greg Johnson.

John Rash, filmmaker and assistant professor in film production and Southern Studies, welcomed everyone and explained how this gathering in Oxford had come to be. A friend of Rash's from North Carolina had reached out to him to say she had fallen in love with southern literature and inquired how she could see Hawkins's documentary. After a fruitless attempt to track down a copy of *The Rough South of Larry Brown*, Rash contacted Hawkins, whom he had known while a student at Duke University. "We started to talk about what it might look like to have the film come back to the archives and live at the university forever," Rash said, just before the screening of the film. "And Gary was generous enough to donate the film and a lot of the behind-the-scenes material that he had stored away in a closet. That brought Greg Johnson into the conversation. Greg shepherded us through the process of receiving Gary's materials. And that is why we're here tonight to see the film and to hear this story about the importance of the archive, the importance of Larry Brown's story, and why this homecoming really is a moment for us to celebrate and come together."

Johnson reminded the crowd that Brown's arc as a writer is one of determination and perseverance. "Larry Brown said there's no such thing as a born writer," Johnson said. "He was always honing his skills as a writer, looking through other literary collections that we had in archives and special collections like William Faulkner's manuscripts, Willie Morris,



Gary Hawkins (left) and Larry Brown during the filming of *The Rough South of Larry Brown*

Caroline Haynes, and Barry Hannah." Johnson thanked Karlie Herndon for creating the finding aid for the collection, which is online now. "People can also see the entire contents of the collection listed there and come by and see the collection," Johnson said.

Johnson also thanked those involved in processing the collection. "It's a lot of boxes, a lot of materials, a

lot of the process of revision and you can see that through these manuscripts," Johnson said. "That's what's fascinating about these archival collections. Sometimes when we see a book, we just see the finished product. But through these manuscript collections, you can see initial drafts of a book sometimes written on a napkin, or just scribbling on the back of whatever they have at hand."

Tom Rankin and Larry Brown's relationship goes back decades. Rankin met Brown when Brown needed an author portrait, and they quickly became friends. "I'm so glad that oftentimes I just took pictures of the most mundane things we were doing," Rankin said. "You know, a lot of pictures don't matter until they matter. And I keep finding little pictures that I would never have printed if Larry were sitting here with us."

Hawkins recalled how he wanted to tell the story of a working-class author, combined with a dramatization of one of their stories. In the documentary, Hawkins examines Brown in a unique format that incorporates narrative film adaptations of three of his short stories: "Samaritans," "Wild Thing," and "Boy & Dog."

For Rankin, *The Rough South of Larry Brown* was ahead of its time. "One of the great things about this film is Larry, but it's also Gary. This film blends documentary and fiction film. He made this before that was done a lot, and Gary put things together that don't seem to belong. Is it a documentary? Is it fiction? In 2023 that's not as big a question, but when this was made, that was a much bigger question, and Gary was brilliant to go that way. That's also a lasting part of this film."

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

# Year of Wandering

Text and photos by Brooke C. White

In 2020 we saw the pandemic upend so many lives and create the anxiety, isolation, and mourning that led many people, including my family, back to nature. Every day during the pandemic, my partner, a frontline healthcare worker, went to work, and my daughter and I spent hours finding solace and refuge by walking in the woods. During those walks, we contemplated life, death, and loss, but that time together was also a source of creativity and hope, and a photographic collaboration between the two of us developed.

*Year of Wandering* provides an intimate and personal archive of my life as my role as mother and artist blurred into one. Every morning, following my daughter's remote learning sessions, we would head outdoors to reconnect with the natural world. My daughter would lead the way as I wobbled awkwardly through the woods, ducking and weaving around trees with a thirty-pound view camera strapped on my back and while trying to stay cool amidst the hot, humid, environs of north Mississippi. The heavy camera, long exposures, and toxic chemicals—combined with working outdoors in a portable darkroom—provided its own set of challenges but allowed for experimentation, rawness, and a little luck to enter the work.

The images featured in this exhibition describe the tension between life and death, and they serve as visual reminders of the impact the pandemic has had on so many lives. *Covid Hug I* began as a conversation discussing the importance of nature in our lives, especially during challenging times, and resulted in what would begin our collaborative journey over this past year. *Grasping* shows my daughter's



*Covid Hug I*

hand, emerging from the bottom of the frame, clinging to a tree. While photographing, we discussed our mutual feelings of desperation and isolation felt during the pandemic, and the resulting image expresses the emotional and psychological weight of the year. On the surface, *Drown* shows a playful moment where my daughter covered her body in seaweed to resemble a mermaid, but the underlying tone, seen in the stillness of a shrouded body, address issues surrounding life and death all within the same frame.

As an artist and mother, the past few years have taught me a lot about my creative process and what drives me to make work. Working collaboratively

with my daughter, nothing was preplanned; images developed through conversation and observation. This process was not something I could have predicted, but it was an essential creative outlet for us both, allowing for new work to evolve at a slower pace, during an extremely challenging time. These days, my daughter and collaborator are back at school, so for now, *Year of Wandering* is taking a break, but I look forward to new adventures that we will share in the wild.

*White's Year of Wandering will be exhibited in the Gammill Gallery in Barnard Observatory until September 16.*



Above: *Grasping*. Right: *Offering I*. Below: *Drown*



*Brooke White lives in Oxford, Mississippi, where she is professor of art and head of Imaging Arts at the University of Mississippi.*

*As an artist, White embraces a cross-disciplinary lens-based approach to image making that combines traditional analog techniques alongside digital strategies. For the past twenty years she has made work about the landscape, nature, and our response to place. She sees the landscape as a place of refuge and her projects investigate concepts surrounding place, memory, time, and the role they play in establishing identity.*

*White's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most notably at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Georgia, the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, and the Mamiya Bretesche Gallery in Arles, Marseilles, and Paris. She has been a Senior Fulbright Scholar in Bangalore, India and her work has been published in Give and Take: Motherhood and the Creative Process, Aint Bad Magazine, Southern Cultures, Reckonings and Reconstructions: Southern Photographs from the Do Good Collection, and the Oxford American.*

## Gammill Gallery Upcoming Fall Exhibitions

**October 4–26, 2023**  
Southern Foodways Alliance  
Illustrations Exhibition

**November 1–28, 2023**  
Vanessa Charlot  
*Down in the Delta*

**December 1–January 5, 2024**  
Southern Studies Documentary  
Student Work

# Travel Nightmare or Dream Come True?

## *A Summer of Art, Photography, and Antiracism Work*

When you are working hours from home and learn you are accepted to a prestigious transatlantic program—and you don't have a current passport—you hop on a plane to Washington, DC, stand in line at the passport agency, and hope you can make your flight to Germany. For Lucy Gaines, this was not a travel nightmare, but instead, it was the reality of being accepted to take part in an antiracism group working with the Alluvial Collective. It turned out to be more like a dream come true.

The Alluvial Collective, which changed its name from the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation in 2022, is based in Jackson and works to end inequity based on difference by cultivating belonging and wholeness in the world. "I applied for a program designed for civil society workers and law enforcement to foster conversations around power dynamics and histories of racism, which took place in Germany," said Gaines, who also defended her thesis in July. "We had very intensive programming, and I definitely learned the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to getting to know one another and to creating an understanding of where we all came from."



Lucy Gaines at the Fernsehturm in Berlin, where she spent a week with the Alluvial Collective and a group from Germany discussing power dynamics and histories of racism.

COURTESY LUCY GAINES



Gaines at work this summer at the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs

Ten Americans and ten Germans participated in the program, facilitated by April Grayson, director of community and capacity building at the Alluvial Collective. The first part of the trip took place at the Gustav Stresemann Institut in Bad Bevensen, then finished in Berlin and Hamburg. The group will reconvene this October in Jackson. “What stuck with me most is that it made me think about how I record oral histories and documentaries and work with the people who are outside the bubble of academia,” Gaines said. “It showed me how little books and terms mean when you’re on the ground. We were put in some confrontational spaces and forced to work it out, and I started thinking about the role of art and making change and how to think differently about how I can impact a story for a different audience.”

Gaines, who is part of the incoming MFA in Documentary Expression cohort, found out she had been selected to go to Germany while she was doing

wholly unconnected work: making photographs at the Walter Anderson Museum of Art (WAMA) in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. “The cottage where Walter Anderson would retreat and work is not open to the public, and Julian Rankin had an idea to document the space as a day-in-the-life of how Walter Anderson would be,” said Gaines, who spent seven days there photographing and writing. She also was incredibly lucky to spend a day with Mary Anderson Pickard, Anderson’s daughter and her new friend, sharing stories and inspiration.

Although it seems this opportunity fell into her lap, Gaines has also been studying Walter Anderson since she was a little girl and attended summer camp at WAMA. “As a young artist learning from my grandmother, also a Mississippi artist, I was totally enthralled by the folklore behind Walter’s secluded cottage—the floor-to-ceiling murals and the fact that he generated such a wildly prolific body of work there,” Gaines said.

“Behind the mythology, I was surprised by the simple, functional space, it allowed my focus to gravitate towards nature and the movement of light. It felt like tracing the places where Walter wanted his mindset to stay.”

Gaines took photographs and is tasked with representing the sense of place of the artist’s cottage and write about her impressions. It will be part of *The Traveler*, a building for community engagement in a new section of the museum that will allow the town of Ocean Springs to feel more connected with their most famous artist. “It’s a cool, creative fellowship that will be accessible to the public,” Gaines said.

As both a graduating MA Southern Studies student and an incoming MFA Southern Studies student, Gaines’s summer work has been a seamless transition between programs—shaping a new understanding of how documentary work and bridge building overlap.

Rebecca Lauck Cleary



VICKIE D. KING/MISSISSIPPI TODAY

*Mississippi Today* staffers during a Pulitzer Prize watch party held at Hal & Mal's, Thursday, May 9, 2023, in Jackson. Investigative reporter Anna Wolfe awaits the announcement of winners with her parents (far left).

# “The Backchannel” Earns Pulitzer Prize

*Two Southern Studies Alumna at Mississippi Today Thrilled for Win*

*Mississippi Today* reporter Anna Wolfe won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting for her incredible investigation “The Backchannel,” which uncovered a \$77 million welfare scandal. Wolfe spent more than five years investigating and reporting on the scandal after she realized that only a small number of Mississippians who applied for assistance were receiving it, even though the state was spending millions in federal grant money.

Two Southern Studies alumna, Mary Margaret Miller White and Lauchlin Fields, hold top roles at *Mississippi Today* and are ecstatic about the recognition. “Before Anna joined our newsroom at *Mississippi Today*, she pitched an idea: What if she joined the team as an investigative reporter on poverty, specifically exploring why so many Mississippians were living

on the margins and what was being done (or not done) to change that reality? The editor knew her potential, and her grit, and said yes,” said White, chief executive officer. “From there, with her shoe-leather reporting with families on public assistance, paired with her unmatched ability to wade through and discern dense data, public records, and state policy, she began to piece together what is now known as the largest misspending of federal funds in Mississippi history.”

Founded in 2016, *Mississippi Today* covers a myriad of beats, including politics, education, public health, justice, environment, equity, and sports. It is the only fully staffed, member-supported, digital-first, nonprofit, nonpartisan newsroom in the state. White took the helm as CEO in 2020 and manages a team of twenty-two. She is also an



# “Colleagues from across the nation were telling me they felt like we had a true chance at winning a Pulitzer for ‘The Backchannel.’”

—Mary Margaret Miller White

advisory board member for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, and earned her BA in English and journalism and MA in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi. She said winning a Pulitzer Prize is an incredible honor for Wolfe and for the team at *Mississippi Today*, but it is also tremendous recognition of the growing field of nonprofit news. “This is a win for everyone working in mission-driven newsrooms like ours,” White said. “We can’t do this work without the support of our readers and donors, so this prize truly belongs to everyone who has championed our newsroom over the past seven years.”

The week before the prizes were announced, White attended the American Journalism Project in Cleveland, Ohio. “Colleagues from across the nation were telling me they felt like we had a true chance at winning a Pulitzer for ‘The Backchannel,’” White said. “It was

starting to feel like a real possibility, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up too high. Nonetheless, our editor Adam Ganucheau and I decided that win, lose, or draw, we were going to plan a big staff luncheon for everyone to watch the Pulitzer announcements together. We all gathered at Hal & Mal’s in downtown Jackson for lunch and before long we were popping champagne.”

Fields, audience development director at *Mississippi Today*, leads a dedicated audience team and works closely with all staff to foster an audience engagement mindset across the organization. She was “beyond thrilled” when she first heard the news about the Pulitzer. “From the very beginning of working with Anna to help present and distribute this series, I’ve been so proud of the work she did to shine a light on the welfare scandal and her tenacity to continue following it,” said Fields, who earned a BA in Southern Studies. “It’s so crucial that our state leaders be held to account,

and Anna’s reporting did just that.”

Being able to be with the *Mississippi Today* staff at Hal & Mal’s when the award was announced was a special moment for Fields. “Anna’s family came from Washington to be with her for the announcement,” she said. “It’s an amazing honor for *Mississippi Today*, and I was proud to also have my family—my wife, Olivia, and our two sons, Grady and Henry—there to witness such a rare and monumental event.”

Additionally, Fields and her team of audience engagement specialists won a big prize for their behind-the-scenes work on ‘The Backchannel’ investigation. The Local Media Association awarded them first-place in the Best Reader Revenue Strategy category of the 2022 Local Media Digital Innovation Awards. The award recognizes “exceptional strategy and execution of a new consumer revenue initiative.” “Our strategy was focused on building loyalty and reader revenue from ‘The Backchannel’ series,” Fields said. “I lead a small team of audience professionals who are focused on distributing news, engaging with readers and building loyalty and membership. We were able to help showcase the significance of Anna’s reporting through a full-funnel distribution and engagement plan that led to a significant increase in members and donations (revenue from readers). Our successful approach and subsequent recognition showcases the importance of using innovation and cross-departmental collaboration to reach readers.”

Rebecca Lauck Cleary



Lauchlin Fields (left) and Anna Wolfe on the day of the Pulitzer announcement.

# Using Lessons Learned

*Molly McMillan Applies Her Southern Studies Experience to Work at Humanities Council*

Molly Conway McMillan moved to from Michigan to the South in 2007 and acquired a special interest in Mississippi history and culture. After graduating from Mississippi College in 2015 with a degree in history and communication, she decided to further her education by enrolling in Southern Studies's MA program.

For the past few years, she has worked at the Mississippi Humanities Council (MHC) in Jackson as a program officer, overseeing and developing council-conducted programs, such as the Speakers Bureau, Luciérnagas, Great Stories Club, and Museum on Main Street, in partnership with the Smithsonian Institute's Traveling Exhibition Services. "My program areas have kind of naturally fallen into a category of family and community programming," McMillan said. In 2023 they revamped the program with new partners including schools, public libraries, churches, and community centers.

"Luciérnagas, a seven-week Spanish-English program developed by the

MHC, is designed for lower elementary-aged children and their parents or guardians," McMillan said. "During each weekly session, a trained storyteller engages the families with award-winning children's books. Following the readings, a skilled discussion leader guides the families through humanities-themed dialog about the books, focusing on topics like bravery, fairness, community, and identity. Families then take home their own set of books to read, discuss, and keep."

McMillan is also involved with the Great Stories Club, a literature-based library outreach program that gives underserved youth the opportunity to read, reflect, and share ideas on topics that resonate with them, which is new to MHC and something McMillan is excited about. "Some of the goals include engaging youth with powerful works of young adult literature as they face difficult circumstances, facilitating personal exploration of universal humanities themes, inspiring teens to consider big questions about the world around them and their place in it, and

affecting how they view themselves as thinkers and creators," McMillan said.

The American Library Association (ALA) put together an amazing set of resources, which McMillan found extremely helpful. "Earlier this year, we wrapped up a session of the Great Stories Club at the Youthful Offenders Unit at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. That program was a huge success," she said. "We have three additional programs planned for 2023–24, and we even received a grant from the ALA to better support these sites as they pilot the programs at their schools and libraries."

McMillan's favorite aspect of her job is seeing the impact on the communities through the work MHC supports. "We can provide funding, logistical support, and be a catalyst, but seeing an organization put together a successful program and realize they have the capacity to do so is the best," she said. "The folks in these Mississippi communities are doing the hard work, and there is a hungry audience for the kind of programs we can support." One such example is Museum on Main Street, which brings

# “The folks in these Mississippi communities are doing the hard work, and there is a hungry audience for the kind of programs we can support.”

a traveling Smithsonian exhibit to some of Mississippi’s most rural areas. McMillan takes the mission statement of MHC to heart: creating opportunities for Mississippians to learn about themselves and the larger world and enriches communities through civil conversations about history and culture.

McMillan’s work with MHC began

in 2017, when she started as office administrator. Although she did not know much about the nonprofit world at that point, she was excited about the opportunity to work at an organization that has a part in so many projects around the state. She learned about grant processes, regulations, and all that cultural organizations have to offer

in the state. In 2021 she moved up to program officer.

While a Southern Studies graduate student, McMillan had her eyes opened to the fact that the South and Mississippi are not monolithic: “In our state, there are so many different ethnicities, religions, political beliefs, etc. that we could never run out of programs to conduct or topics to discuss about southern culture,” she said. She credits Jodi Skipper’s Southern Studies class on heritage tourism and historical memory, saying it resonated with her. “I knew early into that class that I wanted my career to be involved with that work in some capacity, and I got lucky enough that it happened,” McMillan said. “Many programs that we support through our grants program take on the idea of telling a more accurate story of our state and its history.”

Although the humanities seem to be under fire, McMillan cites a Valerie Strauss article in the *Washington Post* to sum up why people should be encouraged to appreciate the humanities. “It isn’t so important to define the humanities, or what field is or isn’t part of the humanities; what’s important is what studying a humanities discipline does for the person experiencing it. Studying a humanities field involves moving beyond the search for the immediate and pragmatic; it opens one to the examination of the entirety of the human condition and encourages one to grapple with complex moral issues ever-present in life. It encourages reflection and provides one with an appreciation and empathy for humanity. This is why critical thinking done in the humanities goes beyond problem solving.”

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

To be featured In *The Courtyard*, contact [rebeccac@olemiss.edu](mailto:rebeccac@olemiss.edu).



PHOTO COURTESY MOLLY MCMILLAN

Molly McMillan

# Steve Holland: *Jesus Was a Democrat*

## Rex Jones Focuses on Loss in New Documentary Film

It seems appropriate that Rex Jones's final film as a producer-director at the Southern Documentary Project should be centered around the topic of leaving. Jones, who left the University of Mississippi in August for a tenure-track position in the Mississippi State University Communications Department, produced a film about politician and funeral director Steve Holland, as Holland was leaving the legislature.

Holland, who lives in Nettleton, is a Democrat-turned-Independent who represented the 16th District from 1983 to 2019. President of Holland Funeral Directors in Tupelo, he is a fifth-generation Lee Countian who graduated from Nettleton High School and earned a BA from Mississippi State University, a mortuary science degree from Northwest Community College, and his MA in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi.

Jones became interested in Holland while making a film about the Sun-n-Sand Motor Hotel, a fixture of downtown Jackson near the state capitol building since its opening in 1960. According to lore, more legislation was passed at the Sun-n-Sand than under the dome of the capitol. The motel, shuttered in 2001, was to be demolished, despite the efforts of the Mississippi Heritage Trust and other advocates. As fate would have it, Jones happened to be in Jackson to film the Sun-n-Sand at the same time Holland was moving out of his office. Jones knew it would be history in the making as three decades of legislative knowledge walked out with Holland. Jones knew that Holland would have many stories to share.

"It was a golden opportunity for me, and Steve is so interesting on his own, he deserves his own film," Jones

Steve Holland in the House Chamber



COURTESY REX JONES

Steve Holland and filmmaker Rex Jones in the Sand-n-Sun in Jackson



COURTESY REX JONES

said. “After we toured the vacant Sun-n-Sand we went to the capitol building, and I recorded him moving all his stuff out. It was a great experience, a real privileged moment.” As he later watched the footage and saw Holland’s interactions with people and how emotional he was, Jones’s focus crystalized and *Jesus Was a Democrat* began to take shape. He knew spotlighting the idiosyncrasies of Holland instead of offering a political retrospective would be a different approach for a film about someone who had had a legislative job for more than three decades.

“It was a little risky, but Steve has the personality to pull it off, and I always try to wring out as much emotion as possible,” Jones said. “I started building the film around this loss he had suffered, this political defeat that had ended his legislative career, and this theme of loss came forward for me, and obviously professionally Steve deals with loss every day. I wondered if I could make a political movie without having much politics in it, and it’s really a character study of a man who happened to be a politician for thirty-six years. I tried to capture the spirit of Steve Holland, which is this incredible contradiction between the sacred and the profane, and he’s very sincere in both those regards.”

In the film, Holland says he believes

that Jesus would be a Democrat because he redeems people instead of punishing them, so Jones used that as the title. “People are messy, people are full of contradictions, but Steve Holland is absolutely genuine and sincere in his desire to help people, and he really does live by that ‘red letter part of the Bible,’ as he puts it, which are the words that Jesus spoke.”

The film’s theme of loss is continued with Holland’s late mother, Sadie, who is featured prominently. She was the first woman in Mississippi to serve as a public school bus driver, the first female court administrator in Tupelo, the first female mayor of Nettleton, and the first woman elected justice court judge in Lee County. “She was obviously a big influence on Steve, they were very close, and that’s reflected in the film and in his approach to not only political and civic duty but in the way he treats people in his professional life with the funeral home,” Jones said. “He treats people with the utmost dignity and respect, and I think it all stems from the influence his mother had on him.”

One especially poignant part of the film is when Jones captures Holland saying, “You know, I specialize in saying goodbyes, and that’s the reason they don’t bother me so much,” as he loads the contents of his legislative office into his truck on a cold

November night with Christmas lights twinkling in the background. “He tries to put on a brave face and says he’s not sad, he’s thankful, but you can tell he is a little conflicted,” Jones said.

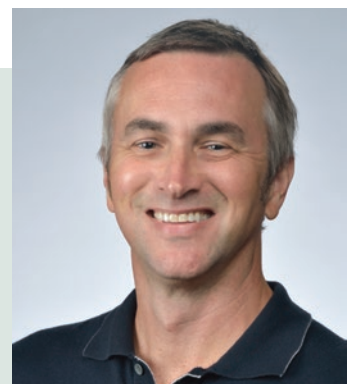
As viewers will see, Holland holds a weekly Sunday night gathering at his farm. Recently, Jones had a private screening of the film for Holland—who had never seen the finished product—and 130 of his friends. “It was the best movie experience I’ve ever had,” Jones said. “I’m getting goosebumps thinking about it. People laughed, people cried, they shouted ‘amen,’ and at the end we got a standing ovation. It was incredible. I’ve had some great movie experiences but that was the best.”

Jones is pleased because he knows Holland will be in the annals of history and this will be part of the historical record. “It underscored the mission of the Southern Documentary Project, which is that we are beholden to get these stories before there’s not a chance to get them anymore, and that’s why the work is so important,” Jones said. “People come and go, and nothing lasts forever, but I feel good that my body of work, including this Steve Holland film, will have some sort of lasting legacy.”

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

I have enjoyed my run with the Southern Documentary Project and will miss my friends there. I thank them all for their support over the last twelve years, but I am much obliged to Andy Harper for giving me the opportunity to build a significant body of creative work and gain the teaching experience I needed for this move. I will also miss the faculty and students in Southern Studies and the MFA in Documentary Expression program, all of whom made me a better instructor and storyteller. —Rex Jones

To see a trailer for *Steve Holland: Jesus Was a Democrat*, follow this QR:





The harmonicas students took lessons on during class breaks.

# PARCHMAN BLUES:

## A Teacher Becomes the Student in the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program

By Adam Gussow

“What I wanna know,” he said in a low growl, eyeing me skeptically as he leaned in, “is what can a white man *possibly* teach me about the blues?”

Chris, short but solidly built, had drifted in my direction soon after entering the classroom with the other men, all of them wearing the same green-and-white-striped pants and bulky dark grey coats with “MDOC CONVICT” stenciled on the back. We were standing face to face in the Education and Pre-Release building, a one-story structure next door to Unit 25, three miles inside the front gates of the Mississippi

State Penitentiary. It was a few minutes before the bell on the first day of class: English 367, *The Blues Tradition in American Literature*, the first time I’d been given a chance to participate in the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program (PTCPP) that my English Department colleague and supervisor, Dr. Patrick Alexander, had helped usher into being a decade earlier. Patrick had schooled me in the weeks leading up to my debut: we don’t say convict, we don’t say inmate. Those words are designed to dehumanize. These men are our students.

As Chris and I eyed each other quietly, eyes locked, I was disinclined to back down. I'd been teaching this particular course for twenty-five years—at The New School, Vassar College, the University of Mississippi—and I'd written five books about the blues: its cultural and historical underpinnings, its literary extensions. In the late 1980s I'd spent four years as a Harlem street musician, playing blues harmonica with an older Black Mississippian, Sterling “Mr. Satan” Magee, a partnership that endured for more than thirty years. I'd paid my dues, or hoped I had. Still, this was Chris's world, not mine. I'd already lost half a dozen students since the previous week's get-acquainted session, an introduction to the class open to all potential enrollees. From eighteen down to twelve. I couldn't afford to lose many more.

“I, ah. . .,” I started to say.

He winked, his face relaxing as he bumped my elbow gently with his. “Just testing,” he said.

“You got me.” I chuckled, relieved. Surprised but also, somehow, not surprised. “You got me.”

“I got you, Doc.”

“Yes, you did.”

That was how the term began, in late January 2023. By the time it was over in mid-May, a month after we were profiled on NPR's *Weekend Edition* and *All Things Considered*, I would find myself telling anybody willing to listen that this class, the ten men I'd been given a chance to spend time with at Parchman, had been the most meaningful teaching experience of my life. When I finally worked up the nerve to look at the course evaluations that Patrick asked me to have students fill out before the final exam, the only criticism that they—including Chris—offered was, “The course ended too soon.”

My normal course evals, the ones tendered by nonincarcerated students on the University of Mississippi campus, tend to hover in B+/A- territory. No nonincarcerated student ever wished that our time together could continue beyond the end of the term. But this past spring was different.

Something profound had happened in that classroom. I've been trying to figure out what it was.

Patrick's guidance played a huge role. I've never been supervised more closely, skillfully, or compassionately. Patrick knew that I wasn't a prison studies scholar, like him. I'm not an activist—a prison abolitionist with fist raised. One of my mentors, historian Marcus Rediker, falls into that category. He visited Mumia Abu-Jamal in his cell. I'm not that guy. I'm just a blues scholar and blues musician: a skeptical liberal, you might call me, questing for our common humanity. Patrick took me as I was. He was there to introduce and vouch for me on Day One—the preliminary meeting with prospective students, which included our superb teaching assistant, Morgan McComb, a PhD candidate in English. (Morgan had taken my graduate seminar in blues lit two years earlier, in Covid/Zoom format, and was a specialist in the Black Arts Movement.)

When the men first drifted into the room, in single file, they shook Patrick's hand, then mine, establishing a baseline intimacy that continued for the rest of the term, deepening week by week. That first day, as I held each man's hand and looked

into his eyes, I was conscious of a shadow that hung between us, a question produced by my own unfamiliarity with this space and its residents: what had this person done to end up here? As the term continued and we got to know each other as individuals, this question faded, then disappeared, unneeded. It was irrelevant to the purpose that confronted us. Yet it was also, without being uttered in so many words, a burden each man carried within him: a core element of his personal blues.

I remember being offended, on that very first day, by the needlessness of the stenciling on each man's coat. MDOC CONVICT? Wasn't that obvious from the green and white striped pants? Did they really need to be *labeled*? This slap in the face, in spiritual terms, seemed like a calculated administrative insult. I bridled on my students' behalf, and not for the last time. (Mississippi, I found out later, is the only state that still stripes and labels its convicts.)

“One thing we do,” Patrick had counseled me, “is give our incarcerated students a chance to help shape the course by weighing in on a specific course element or two. We do this because the prison doesn't give them much chance to exercise agency in the rest of their lives.”

Professors are accustomed to exercising full control in the matter of what we teach, but I was game. The wisdom of Patrick's advisory only became clear later on, when I got a better sense of how capricious the governing powers could be. Two things, in any case, needed deciding at the intro session. The first—should we read B. B. King's autobiography, or Honeyboy Edwards's?—resolved itself in favor of the latter. *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing*, I'd told them, offered a somewhat grittier view of Depression-era Mississippi than King's *Blues All Around Me*, and more direct confrontations with the criminal justice system: vagrancy laws, prison farms, lynching. I'd taught Honeyboy many times over the years, especially in Southern Studies 101, but never in this blues lit class. King was my go-to, a natural fit. Honeyboy was who they wanted, though; the raised hands made that clear. So, he was in.

The second decision concerned harmonicas. I was an official endorser for Hohner; the company, at my request, had offered to supply every student with a free harmonica. I was happy to give the men a lesson during the twenty-minute break in our weekly three-and-a-half-hour class. But there was a catch: prison administrators would not allow anybody to bring their harmonica back to Unit 25. I would have to schlep a box of them with me each time class met, hand them out, teach a quick-hit lesson, then collect them before I left and cart them home. That was the deal. Was it worth accepting? A free instrument, a few licks, but no practice time outside class.

Nobody had to spell out the rationale behind the policy: harmonicas can be disassembled and the cover plates sharpened into shivs. We all got that. The men voted yes regardless. Later in the term, after we'd had a lot of call-and-response fun with the instruments, we'd laugh off the no-harmonicas-in-the-unit policy.

“Can you imagine what would happen if ten bad harmonica players went back to the unit and put in a lot of practice time?” I joked. “You'd drive everybody crazy. You'd have a riot.”



Students in Gussow's "Blues Tradition in American Literature" class discuss Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

"Man, I'm telling you," laughed Mitch, one of our best students. He'd spoken more than once in class about having been a gangbanger twenty years earlier. "I did stupid things back then. We all did." But that was then; this was now. "I'm getting the hang of this thing, Dr. Gussow," he'd say, holding up the harp. "I really think if I had a chance to practice, I could play for real."

At the heart of our term's work was a series of classic blues texts, many of which I'd been working with since the beginning: *Father of the Blues* by W. C. Handy, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, plus poems by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Sterling Plumpp, critical works by Kalamu ya Salaam and Angela Davis, blues stories collected by Barry Lee Pearson, and the 1986 film *Crossroads* starring Joe Seneca and Ralph Macchio. I brought along a flash drive, and every week I plugged it into a laptop provided to me by the education unit's supervisor. The computer was connected to a projector that we aimed at the white cinder-block wall.

Recorded music and downloaded video clips were critically important to the loose, inquisitive, free-swinging vibe I hoped to create—but also to a lesson I hoped to teach about the blues ethos: the way in which blues, grounded in setbacks, pain, and despair, fostered resilience and enabled moments of triumph. Blues could snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat.

Music, according to Patrick, had never been part of a PTCPP course at Parchman; that element alone distinguished our class. Yet when one utters the words *Parchman* and *blues* in the same sentence, one is forced to confront a long and uncomfortable history. It's the story of white men,

especially song collectors like Alan Lomax and his father John Lomax, who entered carceral spaces like Parchman Farm and Louisiana's Angola Prison, hungry for premodern song forms uncorrupted by contemporary pop trends, and, with the help of wardens, overseers, and other powerful white men, extracted those songs and stories from the inmates, then vanished into the big wide world.

I was intimately familiar with this history. I was determined to evade it, subverting its prerogatives. Sometimes this meant that I played the harmonica when the men demanded it—like the day I tossed off the beginning of the *Sanford and Son* theme at the end of class in response to a request, and the men hooted and swarmed my desk shouting, "Go, doc!"

Sometimes it meant that I threw out the lesson plan—my concept-heavy lectures at the board rarely worked—and let five men speak at the same time, or in sequence, or both, about a specific set of lines in a poem, like "Double Clutch Lover," Eugene Redmond's double-entendre-laced praise song to an oversexed femme fatale:

Funk-junction lady with a jack-knife jump!  
I said funk-junction lady with a jack-knife jump!  
If you cain't sprout your tree before she counts to three  
She might leave you with a stump

It's a long and uproariously raunchy poem that Redmond, the late poet laureate of East St. Louis, was fond of reading live; I keep in the course pack of assigned readings but have never dared to explore it in depth in University of Mississippi classrooms, skittish about running afoul of sexual harassment statutes. Not a problem at Parchman. The men took it apart with great gusto and brilliant insight, leaving it quivering on the floor. All-male classrooms have their advantages.

I've had some terrific students over the years. But I've never had a group of students who worked together, as a community, to go deeper and more dynamically into the material we covered than those ten men. Yet even as I use that word "material," I'm stopped short. Material suggests an object, something "out there" that is not me. I/it. But we were I/though all the way, in theologian Martin Buber's terms, once we got rolling. The conceptual distance that separates professor from students and students from texts broke down in our classroom. The songs and stories we were investigating—the hardships they contained, the paradoxes they crystalized, the spiritual journeys they narrated—were the stuff of my students' lives. Objectivity was impossible. So, we



let it go. We ran with whatever came up. We freed ourselves and each other for the space of an afternoon, week after week.

The day that remains etched in memory is the day I played a recording of Bukka White's "Parchman Farm Blues" as we read along with the lyrics I'd transcribed and handed out. White, a Mississippi native, spent two years at Parchman in the early 1940s. His song cuts painfully close to the bone. He sings about how the judge gave him "life," and how he left his wife back home to mourn. "Oh, listen you men," he sings, "I don't mean no harm / If you wanna do good / You better stay off old Parchman farm." He talks about having to start work "just at dawn of day," and how "work is done" when you "see the setting sun."

When the recording finished playing, the feeling in our classroom was deep, heavy, impossible to deny. I didn't know what to say. We had passed far beyond the usual classroom mode. But where were we? I didn't know. I took a deep breath, struggling to find the right words.

"Where are you guys right now?" I finally asked.

Chris pointed at the boombox out of which White's song had just emerged. "I'm with him."

Then Chris and the other long-timers, those who had been inside for twenty or thirty or forty years, began to talk about how life was back in the day. What it was like to get

up before dawn and ride out to the fields to chop and pick cotton until dusk.

"I *remember* the first day they took me out to those fields," Chris said, jerking his head toward the window of our classroom. "Oh, man. No way no way no *way* did I want to be out there. I threw a carrot across the field. And everybody started laughing." He rolled his eyes over his shoulder at Mitch, Joe, Arthur: the other long-timers.

"Why did they laugh?" I asked.

"Because they knew what I was in for when the men on the horses came over."

"We were still doing this until 2006," somebody said.

"That's when they finally put a stop to it."

"That's right," somebody responded.

"2006?" I said, incredulous. "Look, tell me about it.

Educate me. I've read the books, but that's not something I knew about. 2006?"

And then my students started to share stories about life back then, which wasn't that long ago—angry, rueful stories filled with remembered details. Being woken up by a supervisor before dawn. Pulling on clothes, grabbing breakfast before the second bell rang. Climbing into the carts and being towed into the fields behind the tractors. The guards on horses, watching over them. Blues stories. They bore witness. They bounced it around the room. They were gracious enough to share their knowledge with the professor, who was more than willing to be a student. And by sharing the stories with each other, and with me, they took ownership of a way of life, back then, that had tried to own *them*. They threw it off and put it in its place. And that was inspiring.

So, we schooled each other. We learned from each other. However you look at it, that's a gift.

***Students read from their work at Parchman graduation in May. The following is the poem Mitch Price read during the ceremony.***

"Straight State of Mind (Undiluted)"

By Mitch Price

When the darkness turns to day  
Don't linger here in this place I stay.  
The Africans' slave ships, whips and chains,  
Cotton fields, labor camps, they're all the same.

Where does this darkness come from?  
Dimly lit streets and ghetto slums?  
Could it be from the dances of my ancestry  
Or maybe it was created in me?  
Jail house, courthouse, lawyers and judges,  
They wrote a constitution with only white hands' smudges.

Oppression, depression, recession,  
Could these occurrences be a plan?  
When the darkness creeps into the corners  
Of my consciousness, it projects pictures of  
Hurt, hunger, and pain that approaches  
With the gravity of blame.

It is said that this was the way it's meant to be,  
An asinine people with no belief or shame.  
My lineage was conceived in the jungles of Africa's heat.  
I will, in no way, bow out, bend down,  
Or submit to defeat.



Mitch Price

PHOTO COURTESY ADAM GUSSON

# Rooted in Sand

A Reflection on Teaching and Tomatoes

By Catarina Passidomo

I don't remember being a picky eater as a kid growing up in south Florida. But I had strong feelings about tomatoes. They were the everyday food I most detested, the food most likely to show up in a meal and offend me with their presence. I hated them. When I was about ten, my aunt offered me a tomato slice for my hamburger.

"I HATE tomatoes!" I said.

"Hate is a strong word, Katie. We say, 'I don't care for tomatoes.'"

"I know it's a strong word," I said. "That's why I chose it."

Conversations like this led to bargaining and whataboutism: "What about ketchup? Ketchup is made from tomatoes!" This sort of gotcha never worked. Ketchup is also made from sugar.

At some point, my repulsion toward tomatoes softened. I slowly grew to tolerate them, even like them. Eventually, my feelings were as strong in favor of tomatoes as they'd once been in opposition. When I was pregnant, I craved tomatoes. I slurped tomato soup, chugged tomato juice, spooned salsa straight into my mouth. I bought Bloody Mary mix and drank



ILLUSTRATION BY DISHA SHARMA

it neat. I couldn't get enough. What the hell happened? I guess taste buds, like the rest of us, change.

Yet my relationship with tomatoes remains complex. The fruit forces me to confront the place I'm from and my complicated relationship with it, particularly in this moment of Florida's political and social history. I fell in love with tomatoes after leaving home for college, around the same time I came to think more critically about their origins; college taught me to think more critically about everything I thought I knew. When I was growing up, most of the winter tomatoes Americans ate grew in the nutrient-poor sand of south Florida, about fifty miles from where I was cultivated in the extraordinarily valuable sand of Naples, home to some of the country's most expensive coastal real estate. Tomatoes are not Florida's most iconic crop, but they help me draw connections among food, labor, politics, and history—connections that feel especially resonant right now.

I have been thinking a lot lately about efforts to restrict what we teach about the past and how it informs our present. From 2022's "Stop WOKE Act" and the removal of library books deemed offensive to restrictions on the content of K-12 curriculum and eliminating state funding for DEI efforts in higher education, Florida has been particularly egregious in its attempts to contort diverse and nuanced histories, people, and narratives into a single, simplistic story. Mostly, I think about these efforts as a teacher and a parent and as someone who is personally committed to truth-telling. But I am also in the unique and occasionally thorny position of being those things while also being the daughter of the current Republican president of the Florida Senate. In that role, my mother has been known to work across the aisle on conservation and affordable housing issues and to listen to alternative viewpoints (even my own). Still, if the personal is political, the inverse can also be true.

I teach Southern Studies, anthropology, geography, and food studies classes at the University of Mississippi. I also research and write about food's relationship to place, race, and power. Teaching and writing about food necessarily means grappling with culture and history; food is embedded in both. Tomatoes, for example, make me think of the modern industrial fruit's wild ancestors that grew on the slopes of the Peruvian Andes and then, through forces of colonization and culinary experimentation, became a staple ingredient in the Italian cuisine of my ancestors, and then, eventually, the most ubiquitous and popular "vegetable" in the whole damn world. Connecting our ketchup or the red wedges studding our salads to colonization, empire, and a massive industrial food regime is not an attempt to stir up controversy. It is an earnest effort to better understand the world around us and the meaningful and often unseen connections we have to other people, places, and times.

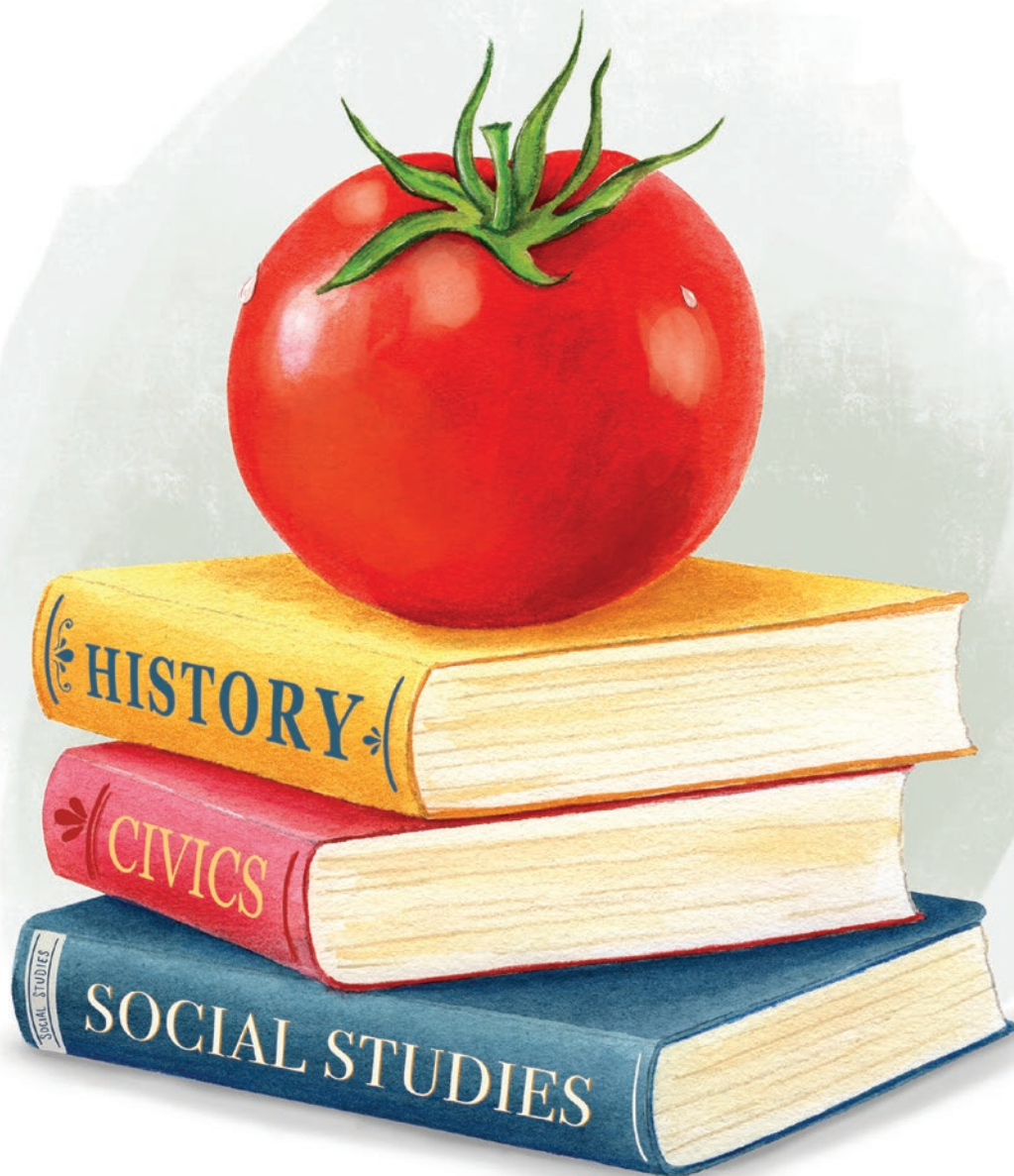
Of course, I didn't really think about these things as a child. I didn't even know that tomatoes were big business in Florida, despite the fact that I had some very formative experiences in the place where they grew. Every Thanksgiving when I was a kid, my dad and I would drive from our home in Naples fifty or so miles to the town of Immokalee to assist with a local faith community's effort to provide a hearty meal to people living in poverty there. Suspecting this may have been an attempt to extract himself (and me) from the food labor happening at home, I asked my dad recently why he felt called to make this annual pilgrimage. "To expose you to another perspective, obviously," he responded. My dad knew it was important for me to understand that our rarefied existence in Naples was just that.

The meal service was massive in scope—dozens and dozens of turkeys! Hundreds of pounds of potatoes! Over a thousand people to feed. In the early days, when I was so little I could

only be trusted with the empty plate, which I handed to my dad to pile with turkey (an important job in which he took considerable pride), nearly all the people who came to eat were men who had come from Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala to work in Florida's tomato fields for a portion of the year. Before the meal service began, a priest led us in prayer, and reminded the volunteers that we were here on this one day to feed the community that fed us all year long—the farmworkers. He switched languages to thank those gathered for their labor in the fields surrounding Immokalee, where they spent the winter months harvesting tomatoes.

As far as we both can remember, my dad and I kept this tradition for over a decade, stopping only when the number of volunteers became so great that we felt obsolete and unhelpful. At some point, my Spanish proficiency had moved beyond the rudimentary vocabulary we learned and relearned in school each year. I must have been in high school when I graduated from my spot at the beginning of the Styrofoam plate assembly line. No longer in charge of the empty plates, I was entrusted with full ones, which I handed through a window to people who had waited hours in line to receive them. We exchanged *holas* and *gracias* and awkward smiles.

When I was in high school handing out those Thanksgiving plates, I did not yet know about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and their efforts to make consumers aware of the conditions in Florida's tomato fields, where wage theft and debt peonage were common, where women workers endured sexual violence, and where at least one worker was severely beaten by a crew boss. I don't recall ever seeing members of the CIW marching or protesting outside of Publix, our beloved Florida supermarket chain "where shopping is a pleasure." When did I begin to contemplate all the things that happen before the shopping, prior to the pleasure of encountering bountiful mounds of colorful



produce comprising a postmodern Garden of Eden?

I don't know. Memory is so slippery. This is just one reason we need history—it offers a corrective to our reliance on own muddled memories as a way to make sense of the world. I have some impressions of standing on one side of the food line, but I did not really appreciate or understand the experiences of people on the other side.

Here is what I know now. The

Coalition of Immokalee Workers began organizing for better wages and working conditions in the 1990s, when I was in middle and high school. The demographics of agricultural labor are constantly shifting, as commercial agriculture replicates the logics of the plantation—that is, its reliance on un- or underpaid labor performed by racial and ethnic minorities. The historian Cindy Hahamovitch writes that the first paid farmworkers in

south Florida were the Seminoles, whose ancestors first fled to the Everglades from the upper South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Next came Bahamians, who, by the 1920s, migrated to south Florida at the rate of about 6,000 per year, as wartime labor constraints compelled the federal government to relax immigration restrictions. And as Jim Crow laws and racial terror swept the South between the last decades of the

# “We are, after all, products of our distinct place and time, but we do not live exclusively in the here and now.”

nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Black Americans migrated north, west, and, yes, south, where they came to comprise a majority of the agricultural workforce in south Florida through World War II. Some of their enslaved ancestors had labored throughout the South for centuries, including those who arrived with Hernando de Soto in 1539 and those who helped construct the first permanent European settlement at Saint Augustine.

Of course, north and south Florida feel worlds apart, even today; while north Florida is an extension of the South, south Florida feels more like an extension of the Caribbean, creolized with a hefty dose of New Jersey. Before the advent of canal dredging and mosquito control, not to mention air conditioning, south Florida from Lake Okeechobee to Key West was mostly uninhabitable swampland. But it held high commercial potential in the form of agriculture. The draining of the Everglades in the early 1900s opened up south Florida to commercial agriculture on a large scale and drew large pools of migrant laborers who were willing to travel south each year for the winter harvest of beans, tomatoes, potatoes, and sugarcane.

The 1960 CBS documentary *Harvest of Shame* traces the desperate living and working conditions of the migrant farmworkers of that era—the pitiful wages, the hopelessness, the generational poverty, the instability of a life spent following the harvest, the government’s consistent failure to protect contingent workers. The film begins and ends in the fields of Belle Glade, Florida, about seventy miles across south Florida scrubland and swamp from Immokalee. At one point,

a farmer quips, “We used to own our slaves. Now, we just rent them.”

When I show this film in my college class, I don’t imagine I am indoctrinating students into a woke ideology; they are smart and thoughtful enough to understand the relevance of this particular documentation of history, social attitudes, and food production to how we eat and treat people today.

In 1960 nearly all East Coast fieldworkers were Black. Half a century later, the documentary film *Food Chains* highlights the work of the CIW but includes a clip from *Harvest of Shame*, suggesting both progress and continuity. Same place, same backbreaking work, different people doing it. And a few very hard-earned improvements in working conditions and wages, thanks largely to the success of the CIW’s Fair Food Program.

As a college teacher, one of my jobs is to provide context for students, so that they might better understand the increasingly confusing and complicated world they are navigating. Sometimes this means reflecting on their own histories and situating them within broader social histories; we are, after all, products of our distinct place and time, but we do not live exclusively in the here and now.

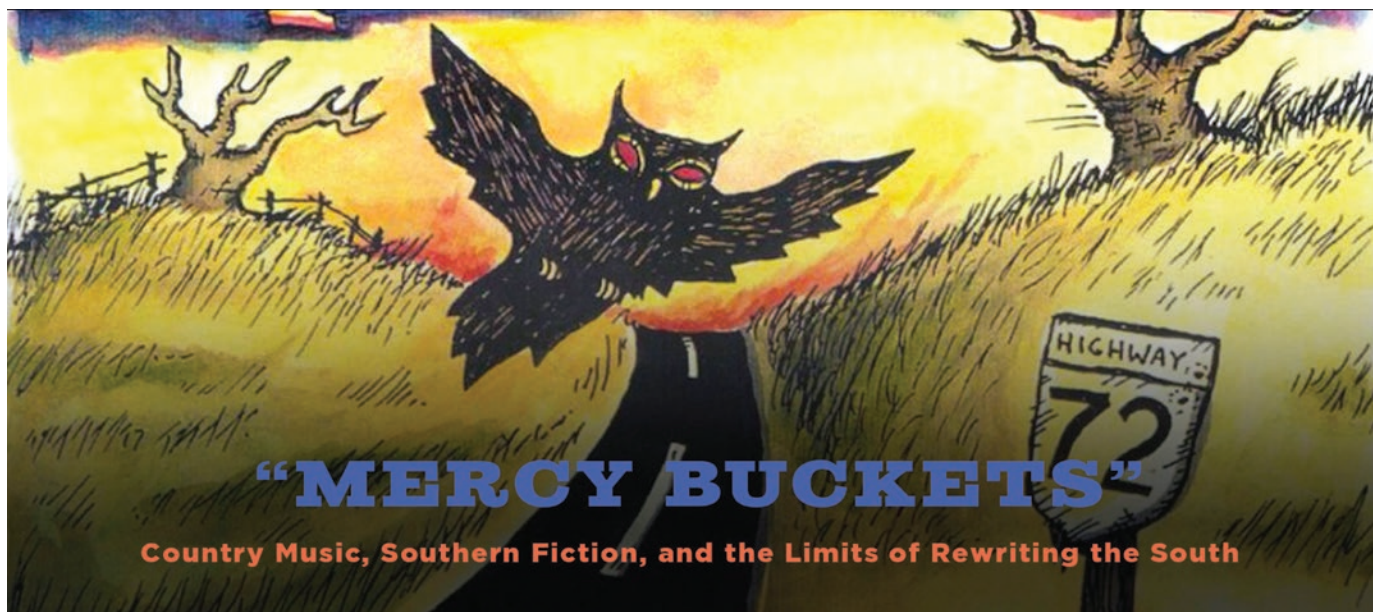
In some places, history is easily discernable. In others, it has been nearly erased. Obscuring those histories we find uncomfortable leaves us with an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of ourselves and one another. If we refuse to study the history of agricultural labor in the United States, beginning with indentured servitude and race-based slavery, it is more difficult to understand contemporary connections between labor, migration, and our food system.

It is easy and expedient to dehumanize those people and histories we choose not to understand.

Acknowledging that we inhabit just one thread of a richly woven tapestry that spans space and time should humble and awe us. Some of our ancestors endured and survived tremendous suffering, and some other of our ancestors inflicted it. Some of our contemporaries are enduring and surviving tremendous suffering, and some other of our contemporaries are inflicting it. I’m not saying it’s easy, but we are capable of holding all these truths in our head at once. In fact, it is our obligation to do so.

Ultimately, cultivating curiosity about our connection to places, people, and times unknown to us can only serve to deepen our reserves of empathy. We can remember our own pasts with nostalgia, sadness, pride, anger, or any combination of those. The maligned tomatoes of our childhood can make way for adult adoration. My own memories of those Thanksgiving forays away from the familiar and the comfortable suggest that my dad’s efforts to expose me to another perspective were successful and deeply formative. I also have some conflicted feelings about the impulse toward charity, given what I now know about structural inequality. But we can and should also scour the past for clues to our present and seek out even and especially the truths that challenge us. We may be surprised by our capacity to learn something new, just like taste buds do.

*This essay was first published in the Summer 2023 issue of Gravy, the Southern Foodways Alliance’s journal.*



## A New *Study the South* Essay Explores the Truth in Southern Storytelling

During World War II, GIs began saying “mercy buckets” as an intentional, joking mispronunciation of the French “merci beaucoup.” In the 2011 song “Mercy Buckets,” the southern rock and alt-country band Drive-By Truckers rewrite the phrase’s origin by treating it as an idiom of the American South, explaining what it would mean if bringing someone “buckets of mercy” were a recognized part of southern culture.

In this new *Study the South* essay, “Mercy Buckets: Country Music, Southern Fiction, and the Limits of Rewriting the South,” Andy Oler investigates a strand of southern storytelling that pretends the truth of an acknowledged lie. The texts investigated in his essay respond to a self-consciously pluralistic cultural moment, so it follows that interpreters of southern history work across media and within multiple genres. Because the texts that Oler explores—by Lewis Nordan, Dorothy Allison, and Jason Michael Carroll—deliver their characters only very constricted mercies, the merciful lie serves less as a successful reimagining of southern

culture and more like a method for audiences to nurture their own compassionate communities.

Andy Oler is the author of *Old-Fashioned Modernism: Rural Masculinity and Midwestern Literature* (LSU Press, 2019), the co-editor of *Michigan Salvage: The Fiction of Bonnie Jo Campbell* (Michigan State University Press, 2023), and the editor of *Pieces of the Heartland: Representing Midwestern Spaces* (Hastings College Press, 2018). He is departments editor for the *New Territory* magazine, where he curates the online series *Literary Landscapes*. He teaches at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida.

*Study the South* is a peer-reviewed, multimedia, online journal, published and managed by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Founded in 2014, *Study the South* ([www.StudytheSouth.org](http://www.StudytheSouth.org)) exists to encourage interdisciplinary academic thought and discourse on the American South, particularly through the lenses of social justice, history, anthropology,

sociology, music, literature, documentary studies, gender studies, religion, geography, media studies, race studies, ethnicity, folklife, and visual art.

*Study the South* publishes a variety of works by institutionally affiliated and independent scholars. Like the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, *Study the South* embraces a diversity of media, including written essays with accompanying audio, video, and photography components; documentary photography; interviews with scholars and artists; video projects; and book reviews.

To submit work for consideration to *Study the South*, please email a completed manuscript as a Word document, along with any available illustrations, graphics, video, or audio, to editor James G. Thomas Jr. at [jgthomas@olemiss.edu](mailto:jgthomas@olemiss.edu).

Final manuscripts and projects must attempt to build upon and expand the understanding of the American South in order to be considered for publication. Copyright for essays published in *Study the South* is retained by the authors.

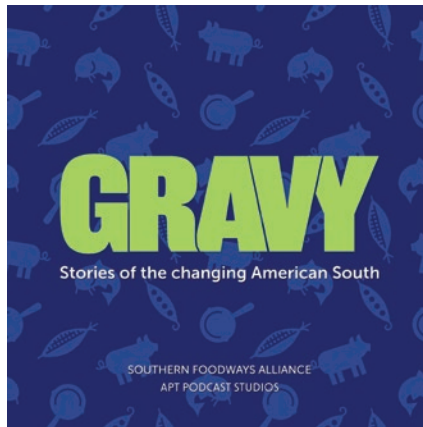
# SFA's *Gravy* Podcast Joins APT Podcast Studios

*Gravy* podcast has joined APT Podcast Studios, a new venture of American Public Television that distributes new original and acquired podcast productions.

Since 2014, *Gravy* has told true stories of the changing American South. Produced by the Southern Foodways Alliance, the award-winning podcast showcases a South that is constantly evolving, using food as a means to dig into lesser-known corners of the region, to complicate stereotypes, to document new dynamics, and to give voice to the unsung folk who grow, cook, and serve our daily meals.

Launched in November 2022, APT Podcast Studios also presents the original production *If This Food Could Talk*, a food and culture exploration from producer Claudia Hanna, and *Armchair Explorer*, hosted and produced by Aaron Millar.

"APT is proud to launch APT Podcast Studios with these



first three podcasts. Building on our strong travel and food portfolio, our podcast content will offer unique storytelling experiences," notes Jim Dunford, president and CEO of APT. "No matter the platform, this objective is a core principle of what we do for audiences and our public media stations."

APT is the leading syndicator of high-quality, top-rated programming to the nation's public television stations. Founded in 1961, APT distributes 250 new program titles per year and more than one-third of the one hundred

highest-rated public television titles in the US. APT's diverse catalog includes prominent documentaries, performance, dramas, how-to programs, classic movies, children's series, and news and current affairs programs.

Listeners can find *Gravy* on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever they get their podcasts.

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*Dr. Holditch was one of the original consultants for the Clarksdale festival and served as the keynote speaker for many years as well. We are grateful for his commitment and service as a devoted advisor and friend.*

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For more information, go to  
[DeltaWilliamsFestival.com](http://DeltaWilliamsFestival.com) or contact  
Jen Waller at 662-645-3555 or at  
[jwaller@coahomacc.edu](mailto:jwaller@coahomacc.edu)

The editors of the online Mississippi Encyclopedia have recently added new entries on dancer and performer Marie Bryant, the Desegregation of the Mississippi University for Women, and the state's Republican National Committeeman from 1924 to 1960, Perry Wilbon Howard II. Here's another recent addition, this one on a much-beloved restaurant near the capitol building in Jackson.

You can find this and other work about life in Mississippi, past and present, online by going to [www.mississippiencyclopedia.org](http://www.mississippiencyclopedia.org).



Welcome to the

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## “Mayflower Cafe”

The Mayflower Cafe was founded in 1935 and is located on 123 W. Capital St. in Jackson. It is one of the oldest restaurants in Mississippi and was created by two Greek immigrants from the island of Patmos, George Kountouris and John Gouras. The restaurant has received statewide acclaim as “a must go to” restaurant in Jackson and was featured in films such as *The Help* and *Ghosts of Mississippi*.

Beginning as a hamburger joint during the Great Depression, the Mayflower featured a beer garden before Kountouris and Gouras expanded it into a full-service restaurant. The restaurant's decor is old-school café with tile floors, glass mosaics, and leather booths. The owners chose the name the Mayflower Cafe as a result of a poll taken in the *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, and locals often comment that the neon sign above the awning is a landmark that welcomes them back every visit.

The Mayflower has a varied menu, calling upon the owners' Greek history and connection to fresh seafood, which has become a staple with southern seafood classics such as broiled red fish and Mayflower Greek salad with lump crab meat. By combining southern comfort food with dishes that connect to their Greek roots, such as baklava and the “Akropolis Special,” the Mayflower has created a unique experience that has drawn in locals, national celebrities, and politicians from the capitol for generations.

Legend has it the Greek owners created the popular and now-famous “comeback sauce” as their own version of Thousand Island dressing. The sauce received national recognition through the “Best Thing I Ever Ate” episode of the Food Network's *Sauced*. Returning again and again for menu staples, Mayflower's regulars often have eaten there for generations, resulting in the restaurant being one of the most recognizable features of downtown Jackson.

The Mayflower Cafe has continued operations through troubled times, including the Great Depression and the Great Recession of 2008. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Mayflower Cafe adapted to provide curbside service and limited-capacity seating to continue to serve southern comfort food to their local customers. It is currently operated by Jerry Kountouris, the grandson of George Kountouris.

The reputation of Mayflower Cafe continues to draw visitors from across the state and country to sample the restaurant's fresh southern seafood and to experience a Jacksonian landmark that has stood for nearly ninety years.

Bennett Matson  
University of Mississippi



PHOTO BY RIEN FERTEL

Mayflower Cafe in Jackson



# New Volume in the Faulkner & Yoknapatawpha Series Published

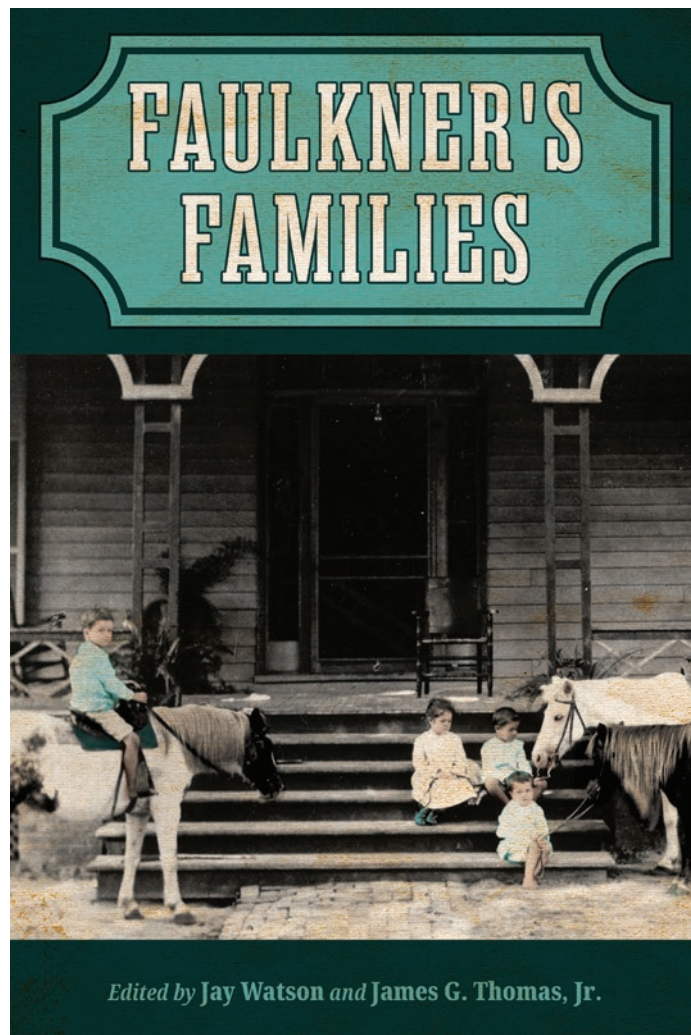
## *Faulkner's Families* Offers Insight into the Man, His Work, and His World

If it seems outrageous to suggest that one of the twentieth century's most important literary cartographers of the private recesses of consciousness is also among its great novelists of family, William Faulkner nonetheless fits the bill on both counts. Family played an outsized role in both his life and his writings, often in deeply problematic ways, surfacing across his oeuvre in a dazzling range of distorted, defamiliarized, and transgressive forms, while on other occasions serving as a crucible for crushing forces of conformity, convention, and tradition. The dozen essays featured in this new volume in the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Series, *Faulkner's Families*, approach Faulkner's many families—actual and imagined—as especially revealing windows to his work and his world.

Contributors explore the role of the child in Faulkner's vision of family and regional society; sibling relations throughout the author's body of work; the extension of family networks beyond blood lineage and across racial lines; the undutiful daughters of Yoknapatawpha County; the critical power of family estrangement and subversive genealogies in Faulkner's imagination; forms of queer and interspecies kinship; the epidemiological imagination of Faulkner's notorious Snopes family as social contagion; the experiences of the African American families who worked on the writer's Greenfield Farm property; and Faulkner's role in promoting a Cold War-era ideology of “the family of man” in

post-World War II Japan. Contributors to this volume include Josephine Adams, Jeff Allred, Garry Bertholf, Maxwell Cassity, John N. Duvall, Katherine Henninger, Maude Hines, Robert Jackson, Julie Beth Napolin, Rebecca Nisetich, George Porter Thomas, Jay Watson, and Yuko Yamamoto. The series is published by the University Press of Mississippi.

Jay Watson is Howry Professor of Faulkner Studies and Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Mississippi. He is author of many publications, including *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity*, *Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner*, and *Fossil-Fuel Faulkner: Energy, Modernity, and the US South*. He is also coeditor of multiple volumes in University Press of Mississippi's *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Series*. James G. Thomas, Jr. is associate director for publications for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. He is an editor of the twenty-four-volume *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* and *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*; coeditor (with Jay Watson) of *Faulkner and Print Culture*, *Faulkner and History*, *Faulkner and the Native South*, *Faulkner and Money*, and *Faulkner and the Black Literatures of the Americas*; and editor of *Conversations with Barry Hannah*. His work has appeared in *Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi: The Twentieth Century*; *Southern Cultures*; *Southern Quarterly*; and *Living Blues*.



# Eudora Welty Awards Announced Opening Night of Faulkner Conference

Each year the Center presents the Eudora Welty Awards in Creative Writing to Mississippi high school students during the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference.

Established and endowed by the late Frances Patterson of Tupelo, the awards are given for creative writing in either prose or poem form. In addition to a cash prize, each winner also receives

a copy of the *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, a project that began at the Center in 2003, concluded with publication in 2017, and also has an online component: [MississippiEncyclopedia.com](http://MississippiEncyclopedia.com).

This year's first-place winner is Elliott Nix from the Mississippi School of the Arts in Brookhaven for the short story "Icing on Top." The judges said the poignant story employed a clever use of a baking recipe to describe coming into his own in a heavily religious community, and they appreciated its happy resolution of self-actualization.

This year's second-place winner is Joshua Clark, also from the Mississippi School of the Arts in Brookhaven for the short story "Jeremiah." The judges felt Joshua's prose exhibits a maturity well beyond his years. The story weaves a tale of bleakness and despair without tipping over into melodrama—a balance that is difficult even for seasoned authors. The words he chose paint a stark reality of a hard-lived life.

This year there is also an honorable mention, awarded to Erin Erter for the

poem "Overgrowth." The judges felt the poem balanced its investigation of larger issues with specific references to the material world and suggested an interesting and sophisticated use of language.

The Center for the Study of Southern Culture congratulates this year's winners on their success and encourages them to continue writing.

Elliott Nix



COURTESY ELLIOTT NIX



Joshua Clark

COURTESY JOSHUA CLARK



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Brett J. Bonner** is editor of *Living Blues*.

**Rebecca Lauck Cleary** is the Center's communications specialist. She received a BA in journalism from the University of Mississippi and her MA in Southern Studies.

**Adam Gussow** has a joint appointment in English and Southern Studies. Recent themes in his seminars have included "Southern Musicians' Autobiographies," "Freedom Summer 1964: Mississippi's Civil Rights Watershed," and "Robert Johnson, the Devil's Music, and the Blues."

**Bennett Matson** is a recent graduate from the University of Mississippi. His major was public policy leadership.

**Katie McKee** is the director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and McMullan Professor of Southern Studies and English.

**Catarina Passidomo** is the Southern Foodways Alliance Associate Professor of Southern Studies and Anthropology at the University of Mississippi. She is at work on a book manuscript called "Gastroimaginaries: Dreams of Food and Place in Peru and the American South."

**Brooke White** lives in Oxford, Mississippi, where she is professor of art and head of Imaging Arts at the University of Mississippi.



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The Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, located in Barnard Observatory, is the home of *Living Blues* magazine, the Southern Documentary Project, and the Southern Foodways Alliance.

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