In T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land,” the speaker observes that “April is the cruellest month.” He’s not talking about academia, but he might as well be. The pace can be grueling in a privileged sort of way: thesis defenses, dissertation defenses, awards ceremonies, farewell parties, the last committee meeting before summer, grading all of the papers I assigned. I always arrive in mid-May breathless and a little bit unsure how I got there. I love the slower pace of summer, of course. But after a while, Barnard Observatory starts to ring hollow. It’s a big building, and it needs people. Professors are off researching and writing, staff are taking much-deserved vacations, and graduate students have scattered to internships and summer fellowships and homes. I start to look forward to new students asking for directions to classrooms and to miscellaneous hallway chatter that is the soundtrack of a busy, vibrant place.

Graduation itself is a salad of joy and sadness. Naturally, we are happy to celebrate the accomplishments of all of our BA, MA, and MFA students, and we are excited to hear about what will come next for them. No matter what that is, we hope they go to it better for the time they spent with us, practicing critical thinking, reading, and writing about both region and nation. We shouldn’t be afraid to teach young people those skills. We should be afraid not to, and we restrict their ability to ask questions at our peril. Classrooms in Southern Studies are rigorous sites of inquiry about both region and nation. We shouldn’t be afraid to approach “the South” from multiple disciplinary angles: history, literature, sociology, anthropology, music, the visual arts. We are not just proud of what our students accomplish in those spaces—we are truly fond of the students themselves, and I don’t exaggerate when I say we often mark their graduations with a heavy heart, because we will miss them so.

In my mind, all of the fabulous graduate students we’ve had over the years somehow know each other. I’m often saying in response to someone’s blank look, “But don’t you remember so-and-so?” only to be reminded that a full decade separates their graduation dates. On the other hand, it’s remarkable how many of our graduates find their way to each other organically, drawn by similar interests or work environments. In anticipation of the Center’s fiftieth anniversary in 2027, in fact, we are renewing our efforts to connect Southern Studies alums to one another through a series of on-site events, beginning this spring in Nashville. If you would like to host a gathering in your area, let us know!

One of the most stalwart supporters of students at all levels of our program has always been Ted Ownby, whose words you read in this column for many years before mine. The third director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and a jointly appointed professor in history and Southern Studies for much longer than that, Ted is retiring this spring. He is adamant about this. I have tried to dissuade him by pointing out that he’s under the expected retirement age even in France where, incidentally, he will be serving in a visiting position in the fall. He is finishing a book, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he wrote more after that one. He’s busy. Still, we will feel Ted’s absence in the rhythms of daily Center life.

In fact, I struggle to imagine my Southern Studies life without Ted in it. We team-taught SST 101 my first semester on campus, and we paired up multiple times in the classroom thereafter, including for one ill-starred workshop about which we still speak with regret. From Ted I learned the rules of engagement for work-related trips out of town: nothing said there is repeated or held against you upon return. I have observed much from his quiet and steady mentorship of my roles as both professor and director—when not to mind small slights, for example, and how to avoid giving them. Neither of us likes conflict, the pretense of entitlement, or fancy food, but the director’s role puts a person in line for a helping of all three, and from Ted I have learned what to leave on the plate. Simply put, I’ll miss him. We all will.

But before Ted begins the next phase of life, we’re having a party in his honor! If you’re in Oxford on June 11, consider coming by Barnard for the afternoon. Ted will give a lecture from his latest work, we’ll have a picnic in front of the building, and the day will culminate with the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council’s Summer Sunset Series in the Grove, featuring a musical showcase performed by Southern Studies alums. That should be just enough to tide us over until fall. Then we can start heading for spring all over again.

Katie McKee
Living Blues News

It has been a rough couple of months down here. We had a string of deadly tornadoes in Mississippi and surrounding states that killed dozens and left homes and lives in shambles. One of the worst storms happened on the night of March 24, nearly destroying the Mississippi towns of Rolling Fork and Silver City. The EF4 (170 mph) twister ripped a path three-quarters of a mile wide and traveled more than sixty miles, damaging or destroying more than two thousand homes. The town of Rolling Fork (population 1,776) is legendary in blues lore as the birthplace of Muddy Waters. Much of the items honoring Muddy, including the Blues Trail marker, were damaged or destroyed. The town of Silver City (population 217) was nearly obliterated. Our thoughts and prayers go out to everyone in those towns and the many others who were affected.

On a personal note, I had emergency major surgery on March 6. A bout of diverticulitis developed an abscess that nearly ruptured and a fistula that had to be operated on as well as a surprise appendectomy. There were a number of other complications and, as my surgeon described it, “It looked like a hand grenade went off inside of you.” Not what you want to hear as you come out of surgery. I am on a very slow path to recovery, and I have a new respect for doctors, hospitals, home healthcare nurses, and what the term “major surgery” really means. I want to say thanks to everyone for all of the well wishes from the blues world. It has meant a lot to me, and they have helped me through some of the rough times.

This issue’s cover artist is Atlanta blues icon Albert White. White has been a mainstay in the local blues scene for more than sixty years, since his earliest days as a member of Dr. Feelgood and the Interns with fellow band members Piano Red, Beverly “Guitar” Watson, and Roy Lee Johnson. At age eighty, White is still gigging several nights a week at local clubs.

We also cover East Coast singer Robbin Kapsalis of the band Robbin Kapsalis and Vintage #18; California bluesman Bill Magee, who honed his chops in New York with a young left-handed guitarist named Jimmy James (who went on to become Jimi Hendrix); Chicago singer Louisiana Al; John Primer, who talks about his new CD honoring his friend and mentor Magic Slim; and this issue’s “Let It Roll” focuses on one of the most important recording sessions in the history of the blues—Charley Patton, Son House, Willie Brown, and Louise Johnson at Paramount Records in Grafton, Wisconsin, in August 1930.

This issue also includes our big 2023 Living Blues Festival Guide. It is great to see so many festivals coming back strong after the pandemic. Check out this year’s offerings in this issue. You can also go to livingblues.com for even more information, including a list of international blues festivals.

And make sure to vote for your favorite blues artists in the 2023 Living Blues Awards. A sample ballot can be found in the issue, and you can go to livingblues.com to cast your votes.

Brett J. Bonner
Lillith Camille Gray, originally from Oxford, Mississippi, is graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Southern Studies and an environmental studies minor.

Grace Ferguson, originally from Athens, Georgia, is graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Southern Studies and a geology minor.

Lily-Pearl Benn graduated with a Master of Arts in Southern Studies in December 2022. From Hull, UK, she came to the University of Mississippi as the British Association of American Studies 2021 Graduate Assistant.

Elise-Joelle Denoulet was born in Lille, France, where she received her Bachelor of Arts in English. She moved to Mississippi in 2020, earning a Master of Arts in journalism at the University of Mississippi. Elise-Joelle is graduating with a Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression.

Bethany Fitts is a writer, director, and filmmaker whose work centers young folks as they navigate intergenerational narratives, selfhood, trauma, and technology in the twenty-first century. She explores themes of existentialism, isolation, connection, and intimacy while pushing the boundaries of the documentary form. She is graduating with a Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression.

An Open Letter to Our Graduates

Congratulations to Southern Studies graduates at every level: BA, MA, and MFA. Whether you’ve been with us for four years or three or two, your time hasn’t been easy. Under the best of circumstances, college is hard and graduate school is harder. But these weren’t the best of circumstances. They were years filled with the challenges of a worldwide pandemic brought down to the everyday rhythms of your life: masks and social distancing, anxieties about virus spikes, and the uneasiness characterizing our efforts to go back to the lives we remember from before. Now you begin anew, facing the challenge of what comes next. We’re waiting with you to see what that will be, and we can’t wait for you to come back and tell us all about it.

In few cases do people reach graduation truly alone. Along the way, someone believed in you when you doubted yourself. A well-placed phone call from a family member; a long, heartfelt conversation with a friend; a word of encouragement from a professor—these moments did for you something you couldn’t do for yourself. They pulled you back up and gave you a push. So, as we celebrate you, spread the joy of accomplishment to someone else who may not even realize the role they played in your success. Thank them. Feeling grateful is a good start on writing the next chapter.

Kathryn McKee
Center Director
Lucy Gaines is a writer and filmmaker who will go on to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression after earning her Master of Arts in Southern Studies. She graduated from Rhodes College in 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts in English literature and Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art. While working in marketing as a creative director and writer, she found her voice advocating for the stories of those who inspired her and now channels that strength into documentary work.

Greta Koshenina is a photographer and documentarian from Water Valley, Mississippi. In May of 2020, she graduated from the University of Mississippi’s Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College with a Bachelor of Arts in classics and minors in mathematics and Italian. Her master’s thesis focuses on collected oral histories with her mother and photographs that explore themes of motherhood, memory, and home. She is graduating with a Master of Arts.

Sandip Rai, from Nepal, is completing a Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression. He is a graduate assistant in the Southern Documentary Project and is known for his leadership as the President of the Nepalese Student Association (NEPSA), where he fosters a sense of community among fellow Nepalese students. He is also serving as an Ambassador for the Graduate School at the University of Mississippi.

Lilly Slaughter is graduating with a Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression. From Louisville, Kentucky, Lilly has focused her work on migrant agricultural labor, identity, and placemaking across borders.

Originally from Magee, Mississippi, Kallye Smith is graduating with a Master of Arts in Southern Studies. Always fascinated with the gothic and haunted nature of the South, Kallye’s primary interest has directed her toward pondering questions that are less about whether ghosts are real and more about how perceptions and preconceived notions about hauntings affect how people see a space.

Jai Williams is graduating with a Master of Arts in Southern Studies and will continue her studies as a Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression student at UM this fall. A Nathalie Dupree Fellow for the Southern Foodways Alliance (2021–23) and a Fullerton Fellow (2022–23), Jai’s focus includes Black landownership and foodways in the South, as well as documenting Mississippi’s rich history through visual media.

Prizes in Southern Studies

Each year at graduation the Center presents several awards for papers and documentary projects following the graduation ceremony on campus. Those awards are announced at the Southern Studies graduation luncheon in Barnard Observatory. The luncheon this year was on Friday, May 12.

The Gray Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Work
Lillith Gray

The Coterie Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Work
Will Zook

Rose Cailiff Scholarship
Feagin Hardy and Abigail Stewart

James Timothy Jones Scholarship
Jaden McClutchen

Ann Abadie Prize for the Best Documentary Project
Olivia Whittington

Peter Aschoff Award for the Best Paper in Southern Music
Sandip Rai

Lucille and Motee Daniels Award for the Best Paper or Project by a First-Year Southern Studies Graduate Student
free feral

Sue Hart Award for the Best Project at the Intersection of Gender Studies and Southern Studies
Greta Koshenina

Sarah Dixon Pegues Award in Southern Music
Lillian Slaughter

Lucille and Motee Daniels Award for the Best Master of Arts Thesis
Matthew Streets

Outstanding Master of Fine Arts Thesis
Ellie Campbell

College of Liberal Arts Graduate Student Achievement Award
Jai Williams

Taylor Medal, University of Mississippi
Feagin Hardy
As a teenager, Ted Ownby had a job at the Putnam County Herald Citizen in Cookeville, Tennessee. While taking a break from inserting advertisements into the feature section, an article about the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi intrigued him. Although he didn’t realize it then, eventually he would end up spending most of his time at the Center as a scholar, a professor, and as director, and now that time will come to a close as he retires July 1.

When Ownby was trying to choose the direction his life would take, he knew early on that history mattered. In high school, he stayed up one night to finish reading Robert Palmer’s Deep Blues and took inspiration from Palmer’s writing. There was also a process of elimination, as he knew he did not enjoy arguing, so law school was out.

When he arrived on the University of Mississippi campus in 1988, Ownby knew very little about the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. By coincidence, he arrived at the same time as the first large graduate class of master’s students.

“My own specialty to that point was primarily my dissertation, which relied on history and also some reading in anthropology,” said Ownby, who earned his BA from Vanderbilt University and his PhD from Johns Hopkins University. “Coming to an interdisciplinary program was exciting, but not something I felt prepared to do. I’ve gotten to learn from my colleagues and from other students, and I’ve gotten to learn from the freedom that the program gives. In coming in and immediately team-teaching with colleagues who study literature and folklife and sociology and anthropology, it meant I was learning outside my field from the very beginning of being here.”

Some of those learning experiences took place with faculty like Charles Reagan Wilson, Nancy Bercaw, Bob Brinkmeyer, and Bill Ferris, where they all encouraged each other to think about the possibilities of interdisciplinary work. “Students have so much freedom in an interdisciplinary program that our job as faculty is to push them to do excellent work with whatever choices they make,” he said.

More recently, he taught with current director Katie McKee, who said everyone at the Center will miss Ownby’s presence. “We can take solace in knowing that he will continue doing what he loves: researching and writing about the complexities of ‘the South,’ however anyone defines it,” McKee said. “Ted leaves a legacy of serious, scholarly engagement, not only with abstract ideas about region, but also with people and the stories they tell themselves and others about...
“We can take solace in knowing that he will continue doing what he loves: researching and writing about the complexities of ‘the South,’ however anyone defines it.”

who they are. Students love Ted for his steady support of their ambitions, faculty and staff love him for his steady presence in even the most aggravating of situations, and we all love him for his steadfast commitment to the Center.”

One of Ted’s roles for eleven years was as director of the Center (2008–19), during which time the Center published the award-winning **Mississippi Encyclopedia**. “It was a pleasure making friends and making connections with friends to work up the articles in the **Mississippi Encyclopedia,**” Ownby said. “It was fun within the building working with Jimmy and Odie and Charles and Ann and many former students and the press.”

It is a recurring theme that Ownby discusses his fondness for former students, which is why on Sunday, June 11, the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council’s Summer Sunset Series is hosting a Southern Studies Alumni Showcase in his honor. The event is organized by Jamison Hollister, and Southern Studies alumni Tyler Keith, Kell Kellum, and Bryan Ledford will perform on the Grove stage at 6:00 p.m. Prior to the concert, Ownby will give a lecture at 3:00 p.m. in Barnard Observatory, followed by a picnic on the lawn, all of which are open to the public.

“What I love is seeing all of those alumni doing creative things in academia and far beyond academia,” Ownby said. “It’s not like the faculty and administrators got together and said, let’s create an environment in which we will stimulate creativity, but it just happened, and it is impressive to see.”

Chuck Ross, a History Department colleague of Ownby’s since 1995, has served on more graduate committees with him than any other faculty member, as Ownby directed more than fifty MA theses and more than thirty PhD dissertations. Ownby also served as a graduate committee member for one hundred other graduate committees in Southern Studies and history. He has taught courses at the graduate and undergraduate level, including classes in southern religious history, southern cultural history, American intellectual history, Mississippi history, the US history survey, and seminars on methods, identity, autobiography, violence and peace, and the contemporary South.

“Ted has been an invaluable faculty member when it comes to mentoring students,” Ross said. “Outside of the classroom, I’ve had the opportunity to play hundreds of rounds of golf with Ted, and his distinctive sense of humor and ability to stay calm during difficult holes makes him unique in our group of golfers. He is also one of our consistent drivers of the golf ball in the Oxford Golf Association, the 2019 champ of our tournament, and a great friend.”

One of Ownby’s recent accolades was being named the William F. Winter Professor of History in 2018. He said being connected with Winter is an honor in itself, as well as because the two prior individuals with that role were Charles Eagles and Winthrop Jordan.

“William Winter was so impressive in his work as a governor and so welcoming and kind as an individual,” Ownby said. “Having an endowed chair allowed research trips. Beyond the name, it allowed me to do research without having to ration or limit or rush my work.”

The work continues, as the fiftieth anniversary of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture approaches in 2027, and Ownby said he is intrigued to see what will happen in the next fifty years. “There was a lot of scholarship, journalistic writing, scholarly writing, in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s along the lines of yes or no questions: does the South still exist or not?” Ownby said. “I got to see how uninterested graduate and undergraduate students were with that question, but if we talked about multiple meanings of the South and multiple directions and multiple stories within the South, then those can take all sorts of shapes. It’s exciting to see people with their own sets of questions.”

Besides spending his days playing golf and drinking his beloved Mountain Dew, Ownby is writing a new book. “I will concentrate on writing the book without all the other stuff like grading and deadlines and email that I may or may not be interested in,” Ownby laughed. “Being able to control your own time is extraordinary and, I hope, is a kind of freedom that I am looking forward to.”

At Ownby’s final Southern Studies faculty meeting last month, he arrived to see a white cake in the Barnard Observatory conference room, frosted in green with the words, Make History, Ted. Those words shouldn’t be too difficult to fulfill.

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

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**Celebrating Ted Ownby**

On Sunday, June 11, we celebrate the career of Ted Ownby. Events begin at 3:00 p.m. with a lecture by Ownby in Barnard Observatory, followed by a picnic on the lawn. At 6:00, Tyler Keith, Kell Kellum, and Bryan Ledford will perform in a Southern Studies Alumni Showcase in Ownby’s honor on the Grove stage. All events are open to the but please RSVP to csc@olemiss.edu if you plan to attend the picnic.

**The Rough South of Larry Brown**

An additional Center event this summer includes a screening of the film **The Rough South of Larry Brown** and panel conversation with filmmaker Gary Hawkins, archivist Greg Johnson, and photographer Tom Rankin. The screening will take place on Wednesday, July 12, at 7:30 p.m. at Proud Larry’s (211 S. Lamar Blvd). The event is cosponsored by the UM Archives & Special Collections and is free and open to the public.
Exploring the Diverse Identities of the American South

CHARLES REAGAN WILSON EXPLORES THE SOUTHERN WAY OF LIFE IN NEW BOOK

On Tuesday, January 17, at Square Books in Oxford, retired Center director and historian Charles Reagan Wilson and current Center director Katie McKee had a conversation about Wilson’s latest book, *The Southern Way of Life*. The book asks the question, how does one begin to understand the idea of a distinctive southern way of life—a concept as enduring as it is disputed? In his examination of the American South in national and global contexts, Wilson assesses how diverse communities of southerners have sought to define the region’s identity. Surveying three centuries of southern regional consciousness across many genres, disciplines, and cultural strains, he considers and challenges prior presentations of the region, advancing a vision of southern culture that has always been plural, dynamic, and complicated by race and class.

Structured in three parts, Wilson’s *The Southern Way of Life* takes readers on a journey from the colonial era to the present, from when complex ideas of “southern civilization” rooted in slaveholding and agrarianism dominated to the twenty-first-century rise of a modern, multicultural “southern living.” As Wilson shows, there is no singular or essential South but rather a rich tapestry woven with contestations, contingencies, and change.

Here is an edited portion of Wilson and McKee’s discussion:

**McKee:** Can you talk to us a little bit about the journey the book has been on from the time it was first an inkling in your mind until today?

**Wilson:** The book began in the 1980s when I was working on *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, which we published in 1989. I had a sabbatical, and I wrote three chapters on a topic, and I said something about how what we have is the southern way...
of life. I thought I might synthesize the Encyclopedia and make a historical narrative. I dug deeper in research and in thinking, and it was on my mind for years.

McKee: Tell us about this idea of the “southern way of life.”

Wilson: That phrase “the southern way” has a long genealogy, and that’s what the book is about: a genealogy of the term “southern way of life” and all the different configurations it has taken. South Carolina native Pat Conroy is one of many modern southerners who has written about the region’s ways, and joking and crying are somehow both involved. After a career spent reflecting on and writing about the South and its regional consciousness, which is what this is about, it’s about people who think about the South. I’ve come to believe that that idea of the southern consciousness has evolved around three concepts: southern civilization, southern way of life, and southern living. Each grew out of changing context with both people in the American South and outsiders contributing to the concepts. Mostly it’s about what southerners have thought about the South, but there is a lot about what people outside the region have thought, because they have written a lot about the South.

McKee: Tell us what is a conceptual history versus regular history?

Wilson: Conceptual history is a distinctive field that has its own theories. But basically, it’s looking at ideas and linguistic practices and behaviors and material expressions over a very long period of time and how they evolve and change. Intellectual history fell out of favor a little bit because it was just on the ideas and not on the context so I provide the context. It’s the ideas and the concepts but what I’m doing is looking at the material expressions, the attitudes, the behavioral manifestations. Performance is an important part of Southern Studies. We can look at Dizzy Dean, one of my favorite examples. You don’t think of him as an intellectual because he wasn’t. But he had the idea of the South in his head, and he performed southern identity whenever he spoke, when he told his outrageous stories. People perform southern identities, and so that’s what conceptual history is as I practice it.

McKee: So how do all the years of teaching interdisciplinary classes fit in?

Wilson: First of all, it comes out of my work at the Center and teaching Southern Studies and southern history. I think of all the conferences, all the symposia, all the visiting lecturers, the southern writers who have been at Square Books and on campus, and I’ve absorbed all of that. I began with a quote not from a historian but from a southern author. There are not only political figures that I write about, they are not only historians, but there are lots of writers and musicians, so that my research materials are interdisciplinary. To understand the region, to understand the South, you have to look at all these different meanings and not just what southerners themselves say, but what other people in other parts of the country and the world say about the South. That’s a part of regional consciousness too, and all of that comes out of my understanding of regionalism and how you do regionalism as a kind of academic project.

McKee: I like that you mentioned Oxford there, and all of the things you’ve been able to see, because I do feel like Oxford is in the book and the place of Oxford comes up literally but also you sort of feel that the place in which the book happened is also a part of its shape.

Wilson: One of the first readers of the manuscript was Richard King, and he said, “Charles, you need to put more of your voice in there.” I realized I had a draft and I had the facts down, but my voice wasn’t really in there, so that’s what I’ve been revising and trying to put in, [to] evaluate things and assess things and say what I think. That came out of my experiences in Oxford with all of the things I had learned from writers and all of my wonderful colleagues in Southern Studies and history. So I think Oxford made an impression on me in that way because of the whole context of what Oxford gave me.

McKee: Let’s talk about how to tackle this book as a reader. We’ve got the three different parts: southern civilization, southern way of life, and southern living. Within the chapters there are lots of subheadings. How do you picture the reader interacting with your book?

Wilson: The idea of subheadings came from Ted Ownby, who was another reader. And at that point the chapters were sprawling, and they were very long chapters. Ted suggested including subheadings, and that was reader-friendly advice, because it divides it up into manageable segments. Even though this is a long book, it’s manageable in segments. You can see what you’re interested in from the subheadings.

To watch the full interview, visit the Square Books website.
A Home Away from Home

Sandip Rai’s Creative Journey Brings Stories to Life on the Screen

When Sandip Rai made a list of possible graduate schools, his factors included location, program courses, community, and eligibility. After a Zoom meeting with staff at the University of Mississippi’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture, Rai felt the support and hospitality win him over.

“The courses offered were unique compared to other programs I had applied to, which were more focused on technical aspects of filmmaking,” Rai said. “The MFA in Documentary Expression was a program that I had never seen offered by other universities. I knew it would be a challenge, but that’s what intrigued me the most to pursue this program and further my career in documentary filmmaking.”

A native of Nepal who earned a bachelor’s degree in film studies and a master’s in psychology from Tribhuvan University, Rai also worked at a prestigious international film festival in Nepal that focused on documentary filmmaking. He will graduate this summer after completing his documentary thesis film, Living with ART (Mississippi Edition), which is an extension of his MFA class projects, part of a two-year (thirty-hour) graduate program that combines coursework in Southern Studies with advanced training in photography, film, and audio production.

“I had the opportunity to create a short documentary that focuses on the life and music of Andrew Bryant, a talented musician and singer from Mississippi,” Rai said. “During my interactions with him, I was captivated by his artistic journey and creative process. I thoroughly enjoyed working with him and documenting his unique story.”

Rai expanded the scope of the documentary to include three more Mississippi-based artists, creating separate films for each one. Despite these changes, the theme of the project—to shine a light on talented artists—has remained constant.

“The passion that ignited the project in the beginning has continued to drive me forward, and I am grateful for the opportunity to bring their stories to life on screen,” he said. “I am driven by a deep curiosity to learn about their stories, processes, struggles, and achievements, and to share their narratives with a wider audience. Through this project, I am constantly learning and striving to improve my storytelling skills, and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to embark on this creative journey.”

Several professors have also provided guidance and expertise for Rai, including his thesis committee of Andy Harper, John Rash, Melanie Ho, and Rex Jones, who have offered him mentorship and support, listened to his concerns, and provided guidance not just on academic matters, but also on personal challenges.

“I am aware of how fortunate I am to have such a dedicated and supportive thesis committee,” Rai said. “Their commitment to my success has been evident in their actions and words, and I am grateful for their guidance. They have not helped me simply because they had to, but because they genuinely wanted to see me thrive. Their unwavering support has been a driving force behind my thesis journey, and I am truly thankful for their presence in my academic life.”

He also spent time with his committee as a graduate assistant at the Southern Documentary Project (SouthDocs), and he is grateful for the memories and experiences, as well...
as the camaraderie and the sense of community there.

“We engage in lively discussions and exchange recommendations, constantly feeding our creative minds,” Rai said. “To add a dash of excitement, we have our very own fried chicken competition every semester, which brings laughter and friendly competition to our home away from home. SouthDocs has been a haven for me during my time at the university because it’s a place where I can talk about my work all day long, enjoy the company of like-minded individuals, and have fun while pursuing my passion for filmmaking.”

Harper, his thesis adviser and the director of the Southern Documentary Project, knows that Rai will soon be sharing his stories with the world.

“Sandip Rai has been a joy to work with since joining us last year as our graduate assistant,” he said. “Not only is Sandip bright, curious, engaging, and technically savvy, he is one of the most positive humans I have ever been around. Even on days when things aren’t going well Sandip finds a way to bring light to the room. He has excelled in the classroom even while taking difficult classes in a second language, and his creative work is outstanding.”

Although it sounds like Rai just spends his time between Kinard Hall and Barnard Observatory, he has been involved on campus as a graduate student ambassador and as president of the Nepalese Students’ Association.

“Being an international student, I hold a deep appreciation for the importance of community, and I wanted to create more events and programs that would highlight my country and its culture within the university community,” Rai said. “Through my experiences as a senator and a graduate ambassador, I have learned invaluable lessons about organization, leadership, and responsibility toward those I work with. These experiences have helped shape me into a better person, fostering my growth as a leader who understands the importance of being accountable to my team.”

After graduation later this summer, Rai isn’t sure yet where his next path will take him and is considering gaining more filmmaking-industry experience or joining another graduate program to further hone his craft.

“I am immensely appreciative of the invaluable relationships and experiences I have gained during my time at the Center, and I will carry these memories with me as I move forward in my filmmaking journey,” he said.

Rebecca Lauck Cleary
Growing Interest in Southern Textiles

Some people may think about clothes as just something they put on in the morning, while others are obsessed with fashion. But what about the stories behind the clothes and the textiles? Recently, Southern Studies alumna Olivia Terenzio took the helm as executive director of Project Threadways, a nonprofit organization in Florence, Alabama, that...
records oral histories and explores the history and impact of textiles. They help to tell the larger story of textile culture in the South, and create a future for the industry based on mutual success. Project Threadways also stages events that serve as centers for conversation, exploring the connection between community and the evolving region through the lens of material culture.

One such event, the third annual Project Threadways Symposium, was held last month and explored the theme “The Collective: Textiles as Community.” “Our group of in-person and virtual attendees—around fifty total—explored the power of small groups to create big changes through the everyday act of making,” Terenzio said. “Speakers shared stories of those who have gathered to weave, craft, sew, and tuft—creating economic opportunity, organizing resistance, and achieving self-determination from their work.”

This fits in seamlessly with the mission statement of Project Threadways, which was founded in 2019 by Alabama Chanin founder and creative director Natalie Chanin. The organization seeks to understand the impact that textiles and their creation—from raw material to finished good—has on the local community, the American South, the nation, and the world—connecting people, places, and materials.

The symposium kicked off Thursday, April 20, with a dinner prepared by Nicole Mills, Chef de Cuisine at Pêche in New Orleans. Friday and Saturday followed with full days of presentations, exhibitions, and conversations. Speakers included Katie Knowles, a historian of textiles, clothing, and US slavery; Aleia Brown, Whichard Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at East Carolina University; Valerie Pratt, a scholar of Georgia chenille; Diana Weymar of the Tiny Pricks Project; artist Donna Mintz of the Hambridge Center; Annie Bryant and Viola Ratcliffe of Birmingham’s Bib & Tucker Sew-Op; and more.

“We saw warm reactions from guests, who were inspired by the presentations and conversations,” Terenzio said. “To name a few: Dr. Brown spoke on Black textile traditions, Dr. Knowles on the material legacy of a once-enslaved woman, and Pratt on the woman-led cottage industry that sprung up around chenille in Dalton, Georgia. Attendees also loved sewing with Diana Weymar, who brought more than three hundred pieces from her public art project, Interwoven Stories, to exhibit throughout the weekend.”

Terenzio found Project Threadways through her time at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, and specifically through the Southern Foodways Alliance, who she has worked with since 2018 as a graduate assistant when she started the Southern Studies master’s program. She defended her thesis, “Feijoada and Hoppin’ John: Foodways, Collective Identity, and Belonging in Brazil and the American South,” and SFA asked her to stay on as their communications strategist.

“For SFA, I oversee audience growth, manage social media accounts with our PR team, nurture partnerships, and work with the internal team and external producers to edit, produce, and promote the Grazey podcast, which is to say that my responsibilities span marketing and editorial,” Terenzio said.

Her role at SFA also helped with her additional role at Project Threadways. “As executive director, I manage the day-to-day operations of Project Threadways, seek out donors and grant sources to support our mission, look for opportunities to grow the audience, and execute programs such as the symposium,” Terenzio said.

Although Terenzio is new to the study of textiles and said she can hardly sew, her Southern Studies degree and her work experience at SFA are her qualifications for this new role, and she is grateful to be able to bring a critical, scholarly lens to the study of fashion and textiles, examining how race, class, and gender play out in stories of the industry.

“I have spent my career working and studying food, specifically the foodways of the American South, and from a scholarly perspective, food and fashion have a lot in common: both are agricultural products, both involve histories of enslavement and exploitative labor practices, and both are creative pursuits born out of necessity,” she said. “Every day, we eat, and every day, we get dressed. We pull covers over our beds. But while it’s common practice now to talk about where our food comes from, who made it, and under what conditions, most people have only recently started to ask these questions about textiles. What excites me about this work is its potential to shape some of the most basic choices we make as humans.”

Terenzio lives in Birmingham and travels regularly to Oxford and Florence for work with SFA and Project Threadways. She hopes to continue growing Project Threadways’ audience and programs, and introducing their work to new communities in the South and beyond. “We are also interested in the possibilities of public art projects to interpret historical moments through a communal, restorative process,” she said. “My goal is for Project Threadways to facilitate conversation about the roles of fashion and textiles in making our society, and to envision a more equitable and sustainable future for the industry.”

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

If you are a Southern Studies alum and would like to be featured in “In The Courtyard,” email rebeccac@olemss.edu.
Complicating the Badman

Xavier E. Sivels Named Study the South Research Fellow

Xavier E. Sivels, a doctoral student studying at Mississippi State University, is this year’s Study the South Research Fellow. He visited the university in March in order to conduct research for his dissertation, “‘Sissy Man Blues: The Queering of Stagger Lee.’” His areas of study are African American history, queer studies, and popular music studies, and his research looks at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual identity in African American popular music.

“I have always been drawn to themes of queerness in Black pop culture,” said Sivels, who is originally from Smithfield, Virginia. “Growing up, I remember watching an episode of Sesame Street where Little Richard performed a version of ‘Rubber Duckie.’ At the time, I was drawn to the way he sung the song—as opposed to Ernie. Of course, the fact that Little Richard’s duck was gold made it all the more exciting.”

Sivels remembers being a little confused about his parents’ reaction to the song. “My parents told me to mind that I did not end up ‘funny’ like he was,” Sivels said. “As I grew older and became aware of what Richard’s being ‘funny’ was, I became confused as to why his queerness was unacceptable,
but it was okay for someone like Tyler Perry and Martin Lawrence to perform in drag.”

Besides looking at Stagger Lee (both the man, Lee Shelton, and the multiple songs he inspired), Sivels is looking at songs like Ma Rainey’s “Sissy Blues” and George Hannah’s “Freakish Man Blues,” as well as more explicit songs like the Harlem Hamfats’ “Garbage Man Blues” and Frankie Jaxon’s “My Daddy Rocks Me.”

“Stagger Lee, as an iteration of the badman, does not directly deal with queerness. If anything, it’s all about hyper-masculinity. I am interested in its relationship to more decidedly queer discourses in the early twentieth century,” Sivels said. “One thing I hope to address is how the badman and wider Black, working-class culture was used by queer Blacks to express their own identities.”

Sivels divided his efforts during the fellowship between conducting research trips to archives associated with the musical origins of the “badman” and those relating to early twentieth-century queerness in the South—including the Blues Archive, the Hubert Creekmore Collection, the William Alexander Percy Small Manuscripts, and the Evans B. Harrington Collection in the J. D. Williams Library, some of which he has already explored.

“The Blues Archive was instrumental in allowing me the opportunity to access a lot of the early Lomax recordings,” Sivels said. “In particular, the extensive interviews of inmates at Parchman gave me a better understanding of the deeper significance of badman narratives. Though the ultimate focus of my work is Black queerness in the early twentieth century, the archive helped fill in some of the wider cultural arch of my research.”

His dissertation committee includes Southern Studies alum Joseph Thompson as chair, along with Mark Hersey, Leigh Soares, and Alexandra Hui, and his research aims to document and explain the creation of racialized and class queer identities at a time and place when queerness was rarely discussed openly, while attempting to make a claim for the importance of pop culture in forming identity.

Sivels’s work so far has earned him the 2022 Society of Mississippi Archivists Distinguished Student Presentation Award and the 2021 William E. Parrish Outstanding Graduate Teaching Award in the Department of History at Mississippi State University.

He said the most challenging aspect of his research is the lack of primary sources. “On one hand, this has been amazing, as other scholars have looked at the sources and discussed similar themes,” Sivels said. “One downside to the lack of sources is that it leaves a lot of things unanswered. A lot of my information comes from ads for club performances or articles detailing early drag balls, police raids, and arrests. For me, that is what made songs like Ma Rainey’s ‘Sissy Blues’ vital. They gave voice to groups largely silenced in mainstream discourses.”

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

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Abadie and Library Lecturers Set for Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference

Plans are now finalized for a pair of keynote events at this summer’s “Queer Faulkner” conference (July 23–27) at the University of Mississippi. Noted scholar and performer E. Patrick Johnson will deliver the third annual Ann J. Abadie Lecture in Southern Studies, and historian John Marszalek III is slated for the annual Library Lecture. Both events are free and open to the general public.

Johnson, whose keynote is scheduled for Sunday, July 23, at 7:30 p.m. in Nutt Auditorium, is Dean of the School of Communication and Annenberg University Professor of Performance Studies and African American Studies at Northwestern University. His many works include Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity (2003), Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History (2008), Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History (2018), Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women (2019), and Sweet Tea: A Play (2020), which offers a stage adaptation of the oral history work in his 2008 study. His scholarship has received the Lilla A. Heston Award, the Errol Hill Book Award, the Randy Majors Memorial Award for Outstanding Contributions to LGBT Scholarship in Communication, and the Stonewall Honor Book Award, and he has been a finalist for numerous other honors. His performance projects have garnered the Leslie Irene Coger Award for Outstanding Contributions to Performance from the National Communication Association, the Bert Williams Award for Best Solo Performance from the Chicago Black Theater Alliance, and the René Castillo Otto Award for Political Theater. A 2020 inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Johnson is also a member of the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame. His keynote, “Put a Little Honey in My Sweet Tea,” is a performance piece based on the oral histories of LGBTQ southerners he has collected over his distinguished career.

John Marszalek, who received his BA, MA, and PhD from Mississippi State University, is a clinical faculty member in the online clinical mental health counseling program at Southern New Hampshire University. He is the author of Coming out of the Magnolia Closet: Same-Sex Couples in Mississippi, published by the University Press of Mississippi in 2020. His Library Lecture is scheduled for Wednesday, July 26, at 12:30 p.m. in the Faulkner Room of the Department of Archives and Special Collections at the J. D. Williams Library on the UM campus.

There has also been a change to the lineup of remaining keynoters. LaMonda Horton-Stallings has unfortunately had to withdraw from the conference. We’re pleased to report, however, that Heidi Siegrist will join Michael Bibler, Phillip Gordon, and Jaime Harker to complete the roster of keynoters. Siegrist, who recently received her PhD in American literature from the University of Virginia, is currently visiting assistant professor of English at the University of the South, where she teaches the literature of the queer South and is at work...

This year’s keynoters will be joined on the program by more than two dozen panel speakers selected through the conference call for papers. Those presenting at the conference for the first time include Haley Albert-Tate (Cave City High School, Arkansas), Luke Anderson (Louisiana State University), Davina Bell (University of North Dakota), Taylor Bryant (Cape Central High School, Cape Girardeau, Missouri), Margarita Cepele (Louisiana State University), Solveig Dunkel (University Paris Ouest, Nanterre), Gabriel Fiandeiro (University of Wisconsin), Amy A. Foley (Providence College), Cathereine R. Freise (Millsaps College), Jonathan Hayes (Southeast Missouri State University), Astrid Maes (University of Picardy Jules Vernes, France) Kacee McKinney (University of Mississippi), Nikki Magazine Mills (St. Albans School, Washington, D.C.), and Renee Wehrle (University of Michigan).

Returning to the conference are John N. Duvall (Purdue University), Michael Gleason (Millsaps College), Lisa Hinrichsen (University of Arkansas), Ahmed Honeini (Royal Hollowell, University of London), Peter J. Ingrao (University of Texas, Dallas), Robert Jackson (University of Tulsa), Bernard Joy (University of Glasgow), Pen-Wei Kao (National Chengchi University, Taiwan), Anne MacMaster (Millsaps College), Rebecca Nisetich (University of Southern Maine), Jenna Sciuto (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts), and Laura Wilson (independent scholar).

More information and a link to the registration portal and conference store can be found at the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha website, https://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/events/faulkner/. Contact Mary Leach, Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, at mleach@olemiss.edu for questions about conference registration and logistics. For other inquiries, contact Jay Watson, director, at jwatson@olemiss.edu.
Vibrantly red, perfectly crunchy, and an impeccable balance of sweet and sour: the koolickle is a famed Mississippi Delta invention. Known in some circles as the “pickoola,” this local invention is exactly what it sounds like: a pickle soaked in Kool-Aid, thereby tinting the pickle bright red and providing it with a tangy crunch.

While no one knows exactly how the koolickle came to be, there are some logical origin points. The South has long been in the habit of pickling—everything from peaches to okra to watermelon rind—likely because of its long history of backyard gardens and food preservation. Some theories posit that the humid southern climate required more sugar in the preservation process. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the tradition of pickling, particularly with such added sweetness, would continue to evolve as the generations continue.

The tradition of the koolickle likely also has ties to the southern practice of inserting a peppermint stick into the middle of a pickle, creating a sweet-meets-sour effect. More closely tied to the koolickle is the tradition of the SnoCo Pickle, in which a pickle is soaked in snow cone syrup. In similar fashion, some southerners recall inserting a Jolly Rancher or other sour candy into a pickle, creating a similar effect to that of the koolickle. Still others have been known to sprinkle Pixie Stix sugar or Kool-Aid powder straight onto the pickle.

Koolickles have risen to relative prominence in the last twenty years, having been featured in the New York Times, Southern Living, and across a wide range of online cooking sites. Their origin, however, lies in the Mississippi Delta, where they can be found in a variety of locations, provided you know where to look. Many associate koolickles with the southern convenience-store chain Double Quick, which sells the salty sweet treats at their counters across the region and has even trademarked the name. In most gas stations, they have been homemade by an owner or employee of the store and remain in their gallon-size pickle jars, suspended in their syrupy red liquid. Koolickles can also be found at school fundraisers and sporting events, and at neighborhood house stores, in which community members sell snacks (both homemade and store-bought) out of their kitchens.

To make a hearty batch of koolickles requires very little—a normal batch of dill pickles, Kool-Aid powder, and sugar. Most practitioners follow a simple set of instructions: slice the dill pickles into halves and add to a batch of Kool-Aid (extra strength, most agree). Next, add extra sugar, combine, shake, and refrigerate. Some cooks opt for leaving the pickles whole rather than slicing them, but this risks the vibrant red color not seeping all the way into the center of the pickle. After a week of refrigeration, the koolickles are ready to see the light of day—be that at the local gas station, at a neighborhood house of treats, for one’s own household, or behind the counter at a high school basketball game. While most koolickles use red Kool-Aid, technically the fruit punch variety, some practitioners opt for green apple or even grape Kool-Aid flavoring, thus turning the pickles neon green or bright purple.

While children in particular seem to love the sweetness of Koolickles, it would be a mistake to believe this treat is enjoyed only by young people. The treat is for young and old, sometimes shared through the generations for its complementary mix of flavors.

Mattie Ford
University of Mississippi
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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