

Religion in the American South

REL 415—Fall 2022

Mondays 3:30-5:50, PRH 210

Professor: K. Merinda Simmons (she/her/hers)

Email: merinda.simmons@ua.edu

Office: PRH 300 (348-9911)

Office Hours: by appointment

REL Main Office: PRH 212 (348-5271)

“To accept one’s past—one’s history is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life, like clay in a season of drought.”

—James Baldwin

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

—William Faulkner

Course Overview/Description:

This Writing course will look at the forms and functions of myth-making in the American South. In particular, we will think about how notions of “the past” come to be invented in different ways for different social purposes through narrative practice—specifically, memorials and monuments. While some readings will focus on specific religious groups and practices that find their homes in the region, we will emphasize analytical classifications and contestations of “the South” as an identifiable geographical and cultural space. Because the course carries the Core “W” designation, an important component of the seminar is the culminating term paper, which we will take through the writing process throughout the semester. This includes brainstorming, drafting, peer editing, and revising.

Student Learning Outcomes:

Students in REL 415 will

- Identify broad critical trends and debates within southern studies.
- Contextualize the relationship between “religion” and the American South.
- Develop professional and analytical writing skills in relation to research, grammar, style, and clarity.
- Work collaboratively to improve writing and hone editing skills.
- Draft critical prose at various stages of the writing process and revise drafts based on peer (and professorial) review
- Conduct archival and scholarly research.

Texts/Web Resources:

Blackboard: Course readings will be available through Blackboard.

Recommended Reading: *Religion in the American South*, Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews, eds. (not required, but recommended if interested in various traditions and/or time periods)

**note: The schedule below provides a list of the readings that you will be responsible for on any given day. Doing all of your assigned readings well in advance of class is important because our lectures and discussions all presume that you have the necessary background knowledge provided by these readings. Although regular attendance is mandatory, alone it will not suffice. Regular attendance and informed class participation are necessary for a satisfactory grade in this course.

Requirements and Assessments:

Attendance and Participation:

Each student is expected to attend every class meeting, to be on time, to have read completely and with care all assignments, and to engage actively and intelligently in our discussions. After one absence, the student's final grade will be reduced by one half-letter for each additional absence. In other words, if your grade average was A at the end of the semester but you had three absences, your final grade for the course would be B+. If the absences are beyond your control due to health or family reasons, let me know *as soon as possible*. You remain responsible for anything that you miss in class, including announcements. Your positive participation in the class is also vital. I expect everyone to do the readings and to speak up during classes. Be prepared to ask questions about the readings and class material and/or contribute your own ideas.

**quick note on readings:* As you read the essays assigned, read/think about them on two different levels

1. content: the argument/topic, its main themes, what it contributes to the scholarly conversation, etc.
2. writing style: does the essay make its points clearly and articulately even if you disagree with them? Was the thesis easy to locate? Does the essay's progression make sense? Etc.

Leading class discussion in pairs:

Twice in the semester, discussion leaders (groups of 2) are expected to open the class with brief comments (~10 minutes, give or take) that introduce the text(s) and its author(s), draw out key themes, contributions, and concerns, and link the reading to the wider issues of the course. They must conclude their introduction by offering a set of questions (3-4) to be taken up in discussion. I will assign pairs/dates.

Critical Archival Assignment: This writing assignment will be a 5-7 page critical essay related to an archival piece of data about UA and/or Tuscaloosa that you find in some research in the digital collections of Gorgas Library (<http://www.lib.ua.edu/libraries/gorgas/>) or the Hoole Special Collections (<http://www.lib.ua.edu/libraries/hoole/>). I will hand out general writing guidelines early in the semester that you will use in the course for its duration. I will also hand out specific guidelines for this assignment when we discuss it in class. Those guidelines will include the possible themes/questions from which you will choose your own direction.

Final Paper Proposal: This abstract will outline your project and detail your direction. These will be approved before you begin writing.

Final Paper Outline and Reading List: The outline will be a substantive one that articulates the points to be made in the final paper. The reading list does not have to be exhaustive but does need to demonstrate quality academic research and offer a developed sense of your research and writing trajectory.

Peer Edit Exercise: At a strategic phase of your paper construction, you will edit someone's work and have yours edited. I will give you guidelines, etc., as that draws closer. It will be an out-of-class venture, as I want you to be thorough and spend a good amount of time with the paper(s) and your own comments so as to be as helpful to your colleagues as possible.

Final Paper: Your final paper will serve as the on-going and culminating project for the course. It will also serve in place of a final exam. Your work on the paper will progress throughout the semester, with time spent on each of the stages of the writing process. It should be approximately 10 pages.

Grading:

Your grade is comprised of a total of 1000 possible points, broken down as follows:

Participation	5% (50 points)
Leading Class Discussion	10% (100 points)
Critical Archival Assignment	30% (300 points)
Seminar Paper/Writing Process	55% (550 points)
Final Paper Proposal	100 points
Final Paper Outline and Reading List	100 points
Peer Edit	100 points
Final Paper	250 points

Final grades will be based on the following ranges: 970-1000=A+; 920-969=A; 900-919=A-; 870- 899=B+; 820-869=B; 800-819=B-; 770-799=C+; 720-769=C; 700-719=C-; 600-699=D; 0-599 = F

Make-up Work Policy:

As a general rule, you are not able to make up work in this course. If exceptional circumstances arise that keep you from finishing and turning in an assignment by the time of its due date, you must let me know in advance, and I will determine whether or not a later deadline is appropriate.

Statement on Writing:

As stated in the course description and as is probably clear by the kinds of assignments outlined above, writing proficiency is required for a passing grade in this course. Papers will be evaluated according to the standards of excellence established in the first-year sequence of composition classes at the University of Alabama. You are encouraged to discuss writing issues with me during my office hours and to make use of the UA Writing Center (<https://writingcenter.ua.edu/>).

Statement on Academic Misconduct:

All academic work must be the product of the student submitting it. Plagiarizing the work of someone else (quoting or summarizing another person’s ideas or intellectual labor without giving them credit through proper quotations, citations, and acknowledgment) is a serious offense and is taken very seriously in this class. Suspected cases of plagiarism, cheating, or other forms of academic misconduct will be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. You are bound by [UA’s Honor Code](#) in this class.

Classroom Environment:

In this small group setting, students are responsible for contributing to both their own learning experiences and the learning experiences of others. Because the contribution of ideas from each student is critical to the learning process, any behavior that creates an uncomfortable learning environment will not be tolerated. This includes interrupting others while they are talking, carrying on conversations separate from the class discussion, or making comments that could be perceived as offensive in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, disability, etc. Please make every effort to maintain an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable sharing and responding to ideas.

Consultations/Safe Zone:

All students are encouraged to email and set up an appointment to meet with me, and/or contact me by phone or email for assistance or with any questions. Please speak with me well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course’s requirements on time or if you anticipate routine absences. Although I cannot guarantee that accommodations can be made, speaking with me before a problem arises will greatly enhance my ability to address the situation in a way that is both fair to your classmates and beneficial to you. Keep in mind that I have set aside my office hour specifically for meeting with students, so feel free to show up during that time or make an appointment via email for a different time slot. Also, please note that I am a Safe Zone Ally, one of many resource people on campus who provide an open door for individuals seeking information or assistance regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, harassment, and/or discrimination. Feel free to talk to me any time if you or someone you know has questions or concerns.

The University of Alabama is committed to an ethical, inclusive community defined by respect and civility. The UAct website (www.ua.edu/uact) provides a list of reporting channels that can be used to report incidences of illegal discrimination, harassment, sexual assault, sexual violence, retaliation, threat assessment or fraud.

Names & Pronouns: (Adapted from [Wooster College, Sample Syllabus Statements](#))

All people have the right to be addressed and referred to in accordance with their personal identity. I include pronoun introductions, recognizing that our own identifications do not always correspond to how we are perceived or read by others. I will do my best to address and refer to all students by the names and pronouns that they share in class, regardless of what is listed on the roster.

Disability Accommodation:

If you are registered with the Office of Disability Services, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss any course accommodations that may be necessary. If you have a disability, but have not contacted the Office of Disability Services, please call 348-4285 or visit Houser Hall, Suite 1000, to register for services.

UA Severe Weather Protocol:

UA's primary communication tool for sending out information is through its web site at www.ua.edu. In the event of an emergency, students should consult this site for further directions. In the event of an emergency, I will provide additional course information via email. If you have not done so already, please set up your weather advisory through myBama. When West Alabama is under a severe weather advisory, conditions can change rapidly. It is imperative to get to where you can receive information from the National Weather Service and to follow the instructions provided. Personal safety should dictate the actions that faculty, staff and students take. The Office of Public Relations will distribute the latest information regarding conditions on campus in the following ways:

Weather advisory posted on the UA homepage

Weather advisory sent out through Connect-ED--faculty, staff and students (sign up at myBama)

Weather advisory broadcast over WVUA at 90.7 FM

Weather advisory broadcast over Alabama Public Radio (WUAL) at 91.5 FM

Weather advisory broadcast over WVUA 7.

WVUA 7 Storm Watch provides a free service you can subscribe to that allows you to receive weather warnings for Tuscaloosa via e-mail, pager or cell phone. Check <http://www.wvua7.com/stormwatch.html> for details.

Calendar

(subject to change based on the directions that our discussions take)

August

- 22 Telling Stories about the South: What's in a Tour?
Prof. Hilary Green's "[Hallowed Grounds](#)" tour
[Crimson White](#) article on campus monuments/memorials
*discuss first assignment: hometown tour
- 29 Michael A. Elliott, "Our Memorials, Ourselves" (from *American Quarterly*)
*discuss hometown tours
*discuss steps of writing process and general writing guidelines

September

- 5 Labor Day (no class)
- 12 Tara McPherson, Introduction to *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*
*case study: [Azalea Trail Maids NPR photography story](#)
*discuss Archival Assignment
- 19 Review <https://civilrightstrail.com/>
*Visit to/with Hoole Special Collections
- 26 Craig Martin, "How Society Works: Habitus," from *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*

October

- 3 Micki McElya, "Commemorating the Color Line: The National Mammy Monument Controversy of the 1920s"
Atlantic piece on the Mammy monument
*Final Paper Proposal Due
- 10 Jon Sensbach, "Early Southern Religions in a Global Age," from *The American South and the Atlantic World*
*Archival Assignment Due
- 17 case study: *Bitter Southerner* podcast
*Final Paper Outline & Reading List Due
- 24 Grace Elizabeth Hale, "Granite Stopped Time: Stone Mountain Memorial and the Representation of White Southern Identity"
- 31 Final paper discussion/workshop

November

- 7 Paul Harvey, "'A Servant of Servants Shall He Be': The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies"
*Rough Draft Due
- 14 Case study: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (James Agee and Walker Evans)
*Before class: "Of Poor Farmers and 'Famous Men'" "Hale County Revisited"

*In class: *LUNPFM* photos

Film: *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*

RaMell Ross interviews: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9L_6BaJ0no

21 No class: Thanksgiving break

28 Final discussion

**final papers due in my faculty mailbox by 4:30pm on Monday, Dec. 9.*