

**Sunshine Dempsey**

English – American Literature

**Tentative Title of Dissertation:**

Aesthetic Activism: (Re)defining Southerness through Contemporary Poetics

**Dissertation Abstract:**

Poetry from the U.S. South has always been contained within a system of aesthetic and cultural limitation. For a century, any poetry that is in anyway invested in the region has had to undergo an evaluative process of inclusion or exclusion. Because this discourse is already entrenched in our thinking about poetry from the U.S. South, any poet that deliberately engages with "Southern" culture--whether through the use of vernacular, aesthetic form, artifact or origin--is also necessarily either reinforcing or interrogating those exclusionary systems, making them more visible.

Beginning with the understanding that poetry reacts to the historical and cultural contexts within which it participates, a closer examination of how recent poets within the U.S. South adapt, resist, and converse with these "inheritances" has the potential to significantly enhance readings of their work. Further exploration of works that engage with this cultural material can also expand the study of southern poetry in a generative way--allowing us to understand southern poetics as a process that questions the original limitations imposed by origin and destination, monovocality, and historical narrative. This project situates the study of southern poetry historically and introduces a new kind of formalist methodology that illuminates the ways in which four contemporary poets – Natasha Trethewey, Fred Moten, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, and C.D. Wright – incorporate southern literary traditions into their work, redefining essentialist notions of "southerness" by highlighting points of disjunction in these textual markers of identity.