

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Study the South

Publications of the Center for the Study of
Southern Culture

3-4-2019

The South of the Mind: American Imaginings of White Southernness, 1960-1980

Zachary J. Lechner
Thomas Nelson Community College

Darren Grem
University of Mississippi

Margaret T. McGehee
Emory University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studythesouth>

Recommended Citation

Lechner, Zachary J.; Grem, Darren; and McGehee, Margaret T., "The South of the Mind: American Imaginings of White Southernness, 1960-1980" (2019). *Study the South*. 12.
<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studythesouth/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Publications of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Study the South by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.



**THE SOUTH OF THE MIND:
AMERICAN IMAGININGS OF WHITE
SOUTHERNNESS, 1960–1980**

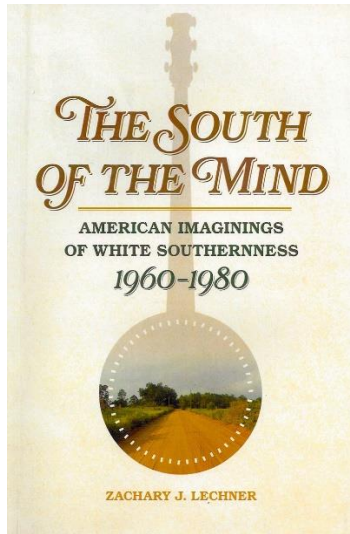
A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION BETWEEN ZACHARY J. LECHNER,
DARREN E. GREM, AND MARGARET T. MCGEHEE

PUBLISHED: MARCH 4, 2019

1 INTRODUCTION

This past summer, *Study the South* issued a call for papers that included a new approach: roundtable discussions on individual books, exhibits, and documentary films about the South in the 1970s. In this roundtable discussion, Darren E. Grem and Margaret T. McGehee pose questions and offer critical perspectives on Zachary J. Lechner’s recent book, *The South of the Mind: American Imaginings of White Southernness, 1960–1980*. Lechner then responds to Grem’s and McGehee’s comments.

The title of Zachary Lechner’s *The South of the Mind: American Imaginings of White Southernness, 1960–1980*, makes reference to W. J. Cash’s 1941 *The Mind of the South*. Lechner uses Cash’s conception that the cultural life of white southerners consists of a competition among several incompatible images. But unlike Cash’s work, Lechner turns the focus away from the white southerners themselves to study the ways Americans outside the South thought and wrote about the region. In the introduction, Lechner makes the goal of the book clear: “Because it analyzes the role of ideas about the South, this book is not a work of southern history, per se, but an investigation of constructions of the white South that illuminates the larger story of postwar American culture and its discontents.” An early chapter uses specific examples of fiction, memoir, journalism, and television to discuss discourses about “The Vicious South,” “The Changing South,” and “The Down-Home South.” The remainder of the volume uses and goes beyond those concepts in discussions of the counter-culture efforts of country-rock music, the masculine Souths of George Wallace, *Walking Tall*, and *Deliverance*, the contrasts between the southern rock bands the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd, and the possibility of healing in Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign and presidency.



2 DARREN E. GREM: A RESPONSE TO *THE SOUTH OF THE MIND*

Zachary J. Lechner's *The South of the Mind* implicates a wide range of journalists, writers, musicians, artists, and politicians in the construction and preservation of whiteness through southernness, and vice-versa, southernness through whiteness. This is the book's major strength. Other scholars have done this work, of course, from Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness*, which historicized the process in the half-century before World War II, to James C. Cobb's *Away Down South*, the most thorough historical examination of southern identity from the colonial era to the present. Lechner privileges the years of 1960 to 1980 as critical for the making of white regionalisms that millions of Americans found worth imitating, lauding, enjoying, purchasing, and politicizing. The end result of all this cultural work was not so much a uniform South of one mind but a smattering of contingent and contradictory white Souths made by many white minds. In capturing the historical contingency and inconsistency of the white Souths imagined, Lechner's book is a model of scholarly interpretation and cultural analysis. *The South of the Mind* is based in solid research and a thought-provoking, entertaining narrative. (It's not every day you run across a book with a chapter inspired by a Lester Bangs dictum: "When in Doubt, Kick Ass.")

I'd like to move our discussion toward what Lechner did not write much about in *The South of the Mind*. This is not to sidestep the book but to clarify a few arguments and offer the author the chance to riff about the 1960s and 1970s as an era of cultural and political reformulation among southerners, whether white or not.

There's not much in this book about African American perspectives on the white South that's imagined by Lechner's culture brokers. That's not really a fair critique since, of course, it wasn't Lechner's purpose to analyze black regionalist imaginings. Still, I'd like to hear what Lechner

thinks about how African Americans imagined what whites were doing, especially during the 1970s. Did he find other takes on white southernness from racial minorities that he wished he could have written about but didn't?

I am also curious about gender and the white Souths that Lechner details. This book, like W. J. Cash's classic tome *The Mind of the South*, is an exploration of white masculinity. Unbound from Jim Crow, Lechner suggests, white southern men pursued new forms of being "a southern man," especially when they linked manhood to countercultural "country-ness" via music (e.g., Gram Parsons), "authenticity" via southern rock music (e.g., the Allman Brothers Band), and "regeneration" via stories quaint (*The Andy Griffin Show*), violent (*Walking Tall*), or even foreboding (*Deliverance*). Gendered constructions dictated the boundaries for imagining "the South" and, therefore, granted "southernness" a certain fixation on masculine anxieties and authority. For the sake of discussion, it'd be great if Lechner could speak a bit more about how his book would perhaps come to different conclusions if it examined the "Souths of the mind" vis-à-vis nonmasculine and nonhetero constructions. Again, I recognize that would have made another book for another day. But for comparison's sake, I'd welcome his thoughts.

A final set of questions I have concerns what Lechner considers as the means by which Americans retain a sense of direction and solidarity around regionalized whiteness today? Who are the contemporary equivalents to George Wallace? To Lynyrd Skynyrd? To the Allman Brothers Band? To Buford Pusser? To the Waltons? To the Clampetts? To Jimmy Carter? To *The Dukes of Hazzard*? That also could be a book in and of itself, but I'd like our discussion to come up to the present, not merely as a way to think about the relative import of Lechner's arguments but to tease out what genre of argument he's making. He suggests that, "as the South shed its status as a backwater, many Americans found utility in a version of southernness that was culturally distinctive" and affirmative of "the deep roots of tradition." The Souths of the mind, as expressed in the 1960s and 1970s, had "similar origins but divergent uses." Hence, it seems he is presenting us with an origins story, arguing that the two decades before Ronald Reagan's presidential election were a generative period. If that's the case, then can he tell us more about the relative longevity of certain symbolic figures of both "whiteness" and "southernness"?

All things considered, I think this book is a welcome exploration of what it meant to be "white," "southern," and (more particularly) "masculine" in the immediate post-Jim Crow era. It does an excellent job of showing—as Lechner puts it—"[w]hen Americans imagined the South in the 1970s, they did not think in strictly binary terms. Sometimes these ideas were congruent, and at other times they contrasted sharply." Lechner nails how conflicted racial and regional identity can be, especially in the 1970s when it was not altogether clear exactly what such interrelated identities would mean once the cultural and political ground of Jim Crow gave way. Moreover, one of the unspoken or understated conclusions I took away from *The South of the*

Mind is how critical African American freedom was for the construction of the myriad versions of southern whiteness. Blacks in the 1960s and 1970s exuded broader cultural power at the same time that they fought for and won real political influence at the polls. Indeed, black freedom struggles so disturbed the assumptions of whiteness that whites nationwide had to go in search of new ways of being white. And they did so in such a way that they could side with George Wallace, listen to Gram Parsons, admire Buford Pusser, head-bob to the Allman Brothers, tune in to *The Waltons*, and/or vote for Jimmy Carter and then Ronald Reagan.

It seems clear to me that we've been living in the aftermath of the project of reconstituting white southernness for the better part of a half-century. I don't know if Lechner thinks the same. That turns, again, on whether he sees his book as a momentary episode in recent US history or an origins story. Regardless, he presents the white Souths of white minds as important to consider, if nothing else for how they represent the dreams of those who—to paraphrase James Baldwin—think themselves white and behave as if what they imagine and feel is the past and future's most valuable project.

3 MARGARET T. MCGEHEE: A RESPONSE TO *THE SOUTH OF THE MIND*

In *The South of the Mind*, Zachary J. Lechner brings together a rich array of figures (real and imagined) and texts from the 1960s and 1970s to dissect the varieties of what he terms “the South of the Mind.” Employing a clear and engaging writing style, he offers profound insight into the ways in which “popular discourses”—from television shows, the national news, and film, to country-rock and southern rock bands, to the political figures of George Wallace and Jimmy Carter—“positioned the white South as capable of restoring an American culture beset by minority challenges to white male authority, presumed technological overreach, racial and political rancor, and/or feelings of social disconnectedness.” Lechner further unpacks competing, contradictory, yet interrelated representations of the South during that two-decade span (e.g., the Vicious South and the Changing South) and highlights the range of white southern masculinities at work in the South during that time. He covers a great deal of cultural territory—deftly putting John Howard Griffith's *Black Like Me* into conversation with Steinbeck's often forgotten (in terms of his representation of the South) *Travels with Charley* and with national press coverage of civil rights battles in the South, and in chapter 2, engaging in a long overdue analysis of the Band's role in “promis[ing] refuge from a tumultuous America through its imagined white South.”

I did walk away from Lechner's engaging tome with several questions. First, what role did white women (e.g., Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Grace Halsell, Anita Bryant, Lurleen Wallace, and Rosalynn Carter) have in the formation of this “South of the Mind” and its varieties (e.g., the Vicious South, Changing South, Down-Home South, Masculine South)? How did white women

imagine, support, and promote (or possibly challenge)—in image, word/lyric, or actions—the type of white southern masculinity that Lechner highlights? In what ways might Loretta Lynn’s “The Pill” and Dolly Parton’s “Jolene” disrupt and/or reinforce ideals of white southern masculinity displayed in some of the texts/figures considered in this work? While I don’t think anyone would expect Lechner to be exhaustive in his coverage of political and cultural figures of the 1960s and 1970s, white women—who were certainly voices for or representatives of a Vicious, Changing, and/or Down-Home South—are noticeably absent from his discussion.

As are African Americans. Lechner clearly shows the ways in which racial strife figured into the Vicious South and Changing South narratives (and was erased from the Down-Home South imaginary). At the same time, throughout the 1960s and 1970s (and before as well as after), many black Americans actively contributed their own representations of white southernness to American popular culture. From Alex Haley (and the miniseries based on his bestseller, *Roots*) to James Baldwin’s frequent television appearances to Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” to any number of Martin Luther King’s speeches (not to mention his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), African Americans were pointing to a vicious South (and an Inhospitable—at times, Almost Uninhabitable—South) while also being part of changing it. Again, such figures and texts may be beyond the scope of Lechner’s book, but some discussion of the interplay of these figures and their works with the versions of the South of the Mind put forth by white bands, white politicians, or white Hollywood would be worth further consideration. Otherwise, one could argue, nonwhites will continue to remain erased on an historical level from participating in the construction of the South(s) of the Mind(s) (white or otherwise), thus reinscribing the notion of southernness as synonymous with whiteness.

4 ZACHARY J. LECHNER: COMMENTS ON RESPONSES TO *THE SOUTH OF THE MIND*

I appreciate Darren Grem’s and Margaret McGehee’s thoughtful critiques of my book. In *The South of the Mind*, I argue that various conceptions of a tradition-bound, masculine white South shaped Americans’ views of themselves and their society and served as a fantasied refuge from the political and cultural fragmentations of the 1960s and 1970s—namely, the perceived problems associated with “rootlessness.” As the editors suggest in the forum’s introduction, my book is not so much a study of the South as it is an analysis of the cultural work that a particular set of imaginings about the white South performed on behalf of anxious (largely white) Americans. Both Grem and McGehee seem to accept my central argument and assumptions.

The commentators offer ample insights in their responses, many concerning approaches that I did not adopt. Because Grem offers the most substantive engagement with my work, I will address some of his questions—about white southern identity and related imaginings—first

before turning to his and McGehee's dialogue about the book's representations of race and gender.

Grem asks me to ponder "the contemporary equivalents" of a host of figures—from George Wallace to Buford Pusser to Jimmy Carter—that I feature in the book, in an effort to determine whether my narrative constitutes "an origins story." The question of equivalents is an interesting one, although I will sidestep it somewhat to make the seemingly paradoxical point that such people were both inextricably of their time *and* somewhat timeless. On the one hand, the specific politics that, say, Wallace and Carter, espoused, which were based on wildly different versions of white southernness, were inextricably linked to their historical moment. That is why making a comparison between Wallace and Donald Trump, as a number of scholars did during the 2016 presidential campaign, is not fully sufficient—or historically accurate. Certainly, Trump borrows from Wallace's rhetorical playbook of racial resentment, and in some respects, though not a southerner himself, he holds up white southern masculinity as an ideal: reactionary, but not quite as openly racist.

Importantly, Trump, unlike Wallace, operates as an even more popular—and viable—national political figure. Of course, Trump has proved to be perfectly capable of espousing racist views throughout his adult life without the guidance of southern bigots. He also does not portray himself as a defender of the white South like Wallace did. Nevertheless, since he announced his presidential candidacy in 2015, Trump's hateful brand of white southernness has been an essential ingredient in his politics of backlash, à la Wallace. In contrast to Wallace, however, I would argue that part of the reason that Trump has been able to more effectively dodge (legitimate) charges of racism during the last few years is because the Vicious South narrative (i.e. white southerners as snarling bigots) that Wallace lionized in so many respects, especially during his 1968 presidential campaign, has faded from the public spotlight over the past fifty years. Trump's politics—and his preferred version of white southernness—is no less hateful than Wallace's, but the white South's rehabilitation in the public imagination during the post-civil rights era works to Trump's advantage, obscuring the extent to which both his support in the Southland and his invocation of white southernness is tied up, on a national level, with feelings of kinship with Trump's white supremacist attitudes. That gradual, restorative process dates to the 1960s era; it made the white South safer for emulation, and it forms the backdrop to many of the key events and imaginings in my book.

On the other hand, the imaginings of the sixties and seventies that I detail are timeless because the Vicious South, the Changing South, and the Down-Home South did not pop up suddenly in 1960. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass were writing about the Vicious South in the mid-nineteenth century; Henry Grady's New South speech was essentially a Changing South narrative that claimed that the region was changing its ways for the better; and the long-lived icon of the hillbilly, as historian Anthony Harkins has demonstrated, bore the markings of the

Down-Home South, exhibiting folksy, traditionalist white southern mountain people as a defense against the onslaught of modernity. In short, I do not see an origins story for imaginings of white southernness emerging between 1960 and 1980. Rather, I would contend that the period involved the application of old, well-worn—even comfortable—tropes to a rapidly changing political and cultural context. These concepts made the imaginings I have explicated especially powerful and useful for many, mostly white, Americans. As I argue in the book, because Americans had long been content thinking about the South in contradictory ways, various fantasied versions of the region were available to suit their diverse political and cultural needs in the sixties and seventies. In that sense, then, the story I tell presents less of an origins story than, as has been the case historically, a reshuffling of existing ideas about the white South in order to address the anxieties of the time.

As Grem acknowledges, it would be necessary to write another book to trace the post-1980 role of the imagined Souths that I underscore and the similarities and differences between contemporary narratives and their counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s. I suspect that we would find vestiges of the white southernness that I describe in icons like Bill Clinton. As a white southern politician, Clinton's background and politics echoed Jimmy Carter's. Plus, Clinton was both a product of the South's rehabilitation in the national consciousness—and of the Changing South and Down-Home South discourses—while serving, for a number of Americans, as the personification of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s against which they had defensively invoked an imagined white South.

Drawing out some of the implications of my book more fully, Grem goes on to speculate that the “black freedom struggles so disturbed the assumptions of whiteness that whites nationwide had to go in search of new ways of being white.” That is a fascinating observation worthy of additional scholarly investigation. At first glance, white Americans' investment in white southernness looks like an ironic attempt to locate a nonracist basis for whiteness in the most apartheid-ravaged region of what historian Elizabeth Gillespie McRae calls “Jim Crow Nation.” As I argue in the book, it was crucial for Americans to deal with the southern race issue, the region's Achilles heel, in some way. For most Americans, though, other than for a number of Wallace voters, perhaps, adopting the South whole hog, including its racist traditions, was problematic. More commonly, once public commentators and consumers of popular and political culture could explain away southern racism via the Changing South discourse or largely ignore it through the Down-Home South of programs like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the South came to embody an acceptable model of whiteness, disconnected not only from racism, but possibly from racial concerns entirely, at a time when the rest of the nation seemed increasingly consumed by black/white discord, from African American urban uprisings to controversies surrounding busing. We must remember, though, that the desire to hold up a deracialized—or at least nonracist—South as an ideal did not necessarily undermine the prejudiced assumptions of the whites engaged in this endeavor.

Both McGehee and Grem devote sustained attention to my representation of women and African American voices in the book. They critique, in different ways, the space that I assign to white women. McGehee asks about the role played by white women in constructing the South of the Mind and their work to “imagine, support, and promote (or possibly challenge)—in image, word/lyric, or actions—the type of white southern masculinity that Lechner highlights.”

McGehee’s questions seem to suggest that I have simply left out white women’s voices. There is no doubt that my analysis features men more prominently than women. Having said that, though, I show repeatedly that white women, as commentators, were key shapers of imagined white southernness. As journalists, southern rock fans, Wallace supporters, and so on, I showcase white women performing this role alongside white men. There is Elizabeth Hardwick, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, about the events in Selma in 1965, littering her commentary on violent white southern resisters to black civil rights demands with virtually every southern literary cliché one can call to mind. I also feature *Village Voice* contributor Lorraine O’Grady’s praising of Gregg Allman’s ability to capture the essence of the blues without “affecting blackness.” In a chapter on the appeal of what I call Jimmy Carter’s “healing southernness,” I discuss Betty Ford speechwriter and Tennessee native Kaye Pullen’s insightful memo to the staff of President Gerald Ford’s reelection campaign, in which she argued that “Carter is playing upon two essentially conflicting myths—the ‘good ole boy’ rural South and the ‘black and white together’ new South.” And I relate the violent hatred of a white female Wallace fan, who, presidential campaign watcher Theodore White recounted, assaulted an anti-Wallace protester at a late 1960s rally before screaming, “You nigger-loving homosexual!” thus demonstrating her approval of Wallace’s racist politics.

It is clear, as she continues in her critique, that McGehee would like to see more white southern women as objects of scholarly examination. Certainly, my discussions of white female southernness, through individuals like Harper Lee and Lillian Carter, for instance, are rare. And so, to an extent, I see the validity of McGehee’s point. Grem seems more comfortable accepting that my work, in his words, “is an exploration of white masculinity.” Indeed, I make that focus clear, although Grem does raise intriguing questions about how my analysis would change if I included “non-masculine and non-hetero constructions.” In regard to the latter, delving into a topic like Truman Capote’s gay white southernness, which the famed writer displayed in public during the period that I consider, would make for a stimulating foil to the equally unapologetic heterosexuality of the southern rockers of the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd. Such an addition would definitely serve to underline further the dubious nature of much of the positive imagery of white southern masculinity that Americans utilized during the sixties and seventies, as well as such imaginings’ overt acceptance of white patriarchy, something that second-wave feminists would have reasonably decried.

McGehee makes a more explicit call than Grem to include a wider array of white women in *The South of the Mind*. It is an understandable request, and I am glad that McGehee raised this

issue. I would point out, though, that I make no claims that my book attempts to deal with the full range of imaginings of white southernness; in fact, I state the opposite. As a result, my book's title, in the tradition of W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, might overpromise a bit. But *The South of the Mind* explicitly notes its emphasis on a collection of imaginings of white southernness—of which masculinity was a central component—that were extremely popular and utilitarian for Americans intent on relieving their political and cultural worries in the 1960s and 1970s. That is not to say, of course, that competing fantasies invoked by and about very different white southern women, including Anita Bryant, Dolly Parton, and Loretta Lynn (all named by McGehee), were not popular and useful for Americans, or that they would not help to tell a more expansive and complicated story than the one I offer; they were, and they would. Lynn, for example, may not have called herself a feminist, and yet many of her hit songs, such as “Rated X” (1972) and “The Pill” (1975), showed the unfairness of women having to accept the constraints of life in a misogynistic world. And Parton, like Lynn, extolled the virtues of her hardscrabble rural southern upbringing, while wielding it, in contrast to male artists like Gram Parsons, in the service of female empowerment. Most certainly, discourses about white southern women that challenged the societal expectations for southern and American women were numerous and often popular. Including them would have made for a longer, and quite possibly, better piece of scholarship.

Still, I want to make clear, that is not the book I set out to write; attempting to survey perceptions of female southernness in depth would have confused my argument about the clear appeal of a set of specific, distinct, masculine-aligned narratives about the white South. Regardless, throughout the text, I could have reminded readers of the narrow scope of the imaginings under review. And, without appearing tokenistic, I might have been more imaginative about finding opportunities to play ideas about white southern manhood and womanhood off of each other in a way that further underscored my arguments.

Although Grem writes that it is “not really a fair critique,” both he and McGehee wonder whether I might have also drawn on more black voices. I agree that invoking the assessments of a larger collection of black political and cultural notables like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nina Simone would have only strengthened my treatment of the Vicious South during the civil rights era. I am less convinced, however, that the Changing South idea held much allure for African Americans, though. After all, this narrative laid the groundwork to make the white South worthy of emulation, usually concentrating, in such works as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and in various news reports, on the noble stances of “good” (read: nonracist) white southerners. The Changing South, then, was most relevant to white Americans. I suspect that blacks would have been less likely to find paternalistic, albeit more racially enlightened, imagined white southerners capable of addressing the problems of African Americans and those of the rest of the country. Similarly, the Down-Home South, which relied so heavily on racial erasure to achieve its idyllic brand of white southernness, held little appeal for blacks. As I write in the

book, *The Andy Griffith Show* faced criticism from African Americans, who objected to Mayberry's (nearly) lily-white composition.

Indeed, as I point out in the book's introduction, "These cultural imaginings of the South as white, working-class, rural, masculine, and anachronistic were largely constructed by and for white Americans." Still, it might have been helpful to remind readers that the "Americans" I invoke throughout the text—people who fashioned and were beguiled by a largely rural, masculine, out-of-time white South—were almost uniformly white themselves. Regarding my focus on white American perceptions of the white South, McGehee writes that "[southern African American] figures and texts may be beyond the scope of Lechner's book," before claiming that failing to put them in conversation with white commentators' and texts may lead to a situation in which "nonwhites will continue to remain erased on an historical level from participating in the construction of the South(s) of the Mind(s) (white or otherwise), thus reinscribing the notion of southernness as synonymous with whiteness." I would argue that this is a heavy burden to place on my book, and, of course, I welcome other scholars to build on my work by exploring non-whites' interactions with and shaping of various imagined Souths. Nevertheless, I appreciate McGehee's recommendation that I offer more of an interplay between white and black voices. While staying focused on white people's constructions of white southernness, I can see how it would have been useful for me to allude to other, non-white fantasies to drive home the fact that, while extremely popular—and arguably dominant—the constructions of white southernness that I elucidate had plenty of competition in the marketplace of ideas in 1960s and 1970s America.

In total, Grem and McGehee have offered a solid framework through which to analyze some of *The South of the Mind's* strengths and possible areas for elaboration. While the book was not easy to research and write, I am satisfied that it brings much-needed attention to perceptions of race, region, and identity during an era of unprecedented change in the United States. I hope that other readers will find the book a probing, provocative, and valuable contribution not only to southern history but to the history of modern America as a whole.

Darren E. Grem is an associate professor of history and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. In the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History and at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, Darren teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in twentieth-century US history, southern history and southern studies, and modern politics and culture.

Margaret T. McGehee is an associate professor of English and American studies at Oxford College of Emory University.

Zachary J. Lechner is an assistant professor of history at Thomas Nelson Community College. He

earned his PhD from Temple University in 2012. *The South of the Mind: American Imaginings of White Southernness, 1960–1980* is his first book.



[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.