

Dr. Catherine Waggoner on Sabbatical



Dr. Catherine Waggoner, Professor of Communication, grew up in the Mississippi Delta, which has definitely shaped her past and current research. She got an undergraduate degree in English from the University of Southern Mississippi and her PhD in Communication at The Ohio State University. After working at a few different universities, she found herself at Wittenberg in 1995, before students could major in Communication. She was vital to the creation of the Communication department, and all the hard work she and the faculty put in paid off in 2000 when the department was fully up and running.

Dr. Waggoner describes herself as a rhetorician and critical/cultural scholar, which means she is interested in how symbols systems frame our experiences and shape our lives in terms of power and race/gender/class. Since coming to Wittenberg, Dr. Waggoner has seen the publication of two books. First, in 2008, she published *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*. This book, written in conjunction with Dr. Helene Shugart, examined female popular culture icons with campy aesthetics. Her second book, *Realizing Our Place: Real Southern Women in a Mythologized Land*, published in 2018, took her deeper toward her roots. Her and her sister/co-author talked to 51 women from the Mississippi Delta with all different backgrounds about what it's like to be from the south and how powerful myths of the south like the Southern Belle affect their identities.

Dr. Waggoner spent the Fall semester of 2019 on sabbatical working on a few different projects. The first project, “Recycling White Trash: Southern ‘Tack’ as Rhetorics of Place and Affect”, is an examination of two popular Tennessee attractions, Graceland and Dollywood. For this project, she is working again with Dr. Shugart of the University of Utah. Their goal with this analysis is to explain how tackiness functions rhetorically for different cultures. They geared their focus on a poor, white Southern culture. She spent time doing field work in both Graceland and Dollywood to feel the sense of place they both offer. Dr. Waggoner found that Graceland, a mansion that once belonged to Elvis Presley, exuded a more masculine energy that wasn’t present in Dollywood. Dollywood had a sincere feeling, like it was full of good southern people. Dr. Shugart and Dr. Waggoner had the opportunity to present this at the National Communication Association convention in late 2019, and plan on submitting it for publication.



The second project, “Dirt Cheap: Rhetorics of Revalorization in the Tacky South”, looked into the Shack Up Inn in Mississippi, which was once a cotton plantation but now serves as a place where tourists can spend the night. The authenticity of the Shack Up Inn can be found in Black culture and its status of the birthplace of Blues music. However, some would say that an aesthetic of tackiness is present as people pay to stay in a shotgun shack surrounding a cotton

gin, in what seems like a celebration of poverty. Dr. Waggoner studied the relationship between the tackiness of the Shack Up Inn and authenticity, exploring how authenticity might be used to compensate for the tackiness. This piece will be published in a book called *The Tacky South* later this year.



Pictured above: Dr. Waggoner visits the Shack Up Inn in Clarksdale, Mississippi, a popular tourist site she is studying in her sabbatical research on *rhetoric, place, and affect*.