

**Tentative Title of Dissertation:**

Backwards Banditry and Brawling Boatmen: Crime and Social Disorder in Early U.S. Frontier Literature (1800 – 1860)

**Dissertation Abstract:**

U.S. audiences have long been fascinated by criminal characters in literature and film, especially the Wild West outlaw, a staple of U.S. popular culture from the late nineteenth century up to the present day. Less celebrated and often overlooked is the figure that I refer to as the early frontier bandit, a specific type of outlaw that transcends national boundaries and constitutes a violent masculinity, one that is softened and nationalized later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My dissertation, “Backwoods Banditry and Brawling Boatmen: Crime and Social Disorder in Early U.S. Frontier Literature (1800 – 1860),” focuses on the early prototypes of the frontier bandit. A heterogeneous group of novels written by William Gilmore Simms (*Border Beagles*, 1840), H.R. Howard (*The Life and Adventures of John Murrell*, 1848), Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*, 1851), and John Rollin Ridge (*The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, 1854), I want to suggest, introduced this new character type to U.S. fiction. Scholarly treatments of American frontier banditry tend to focus on the West of 1865 – 1900 and exclude earlier eras, leaving many of the original bandits critically underexamined. I argue that these early bandit figures served as the basis of a new criminal archetype that performed varied and often contradictory cultural work. For example, their transnational travels and violent masculinity served as imperial fantasy for U.S. audiences yet also inspired fear across regions, particularly those on the nation’s borders. Acting both as civilizing agents and agents of chaos, sources of national pride and threats to national security, these frontier bandits grew increasingly foundational to conceptions of nationhood, masculinity, and citizenship in the antebellum United States.