An Interview with Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

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Abstract In my interview with him, Professor Jerry Ward admits that he may be the only person in the United States of America who thinks that no writer is more forceful than Richard Wright in exposing the wounds of history that will not heal. We study Richard Wright, according to Ward, in order to become more honest, to become brave and critical thinkers. Now that his papers are housed and almost completely cataloged at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Ward's life and work become a special legacy that will be treasured by present and future generations in special ways. As a bridge between Chinese and American academic circles, he tries to promote cross-cultural discussions that are very necessary in the twenty-first century. He urges younger scholars to remember that cultural expressions and everyday life exist in symbiotic relationships, to remember that we are dealing with literary or intellectual ecology.
Key Words Professor Jerry Ward; cross-cultural discussions; literary or intellectual ecology

Dr. Jerry W. Ward was a Distinguished Professor of Dillard University, New Orleans. He is a leading scholar in African American literature and literary theory and criticism, and is recognized as one of the leading experts on Richard Wright. He is author or editor of such works as: *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (2011), *Black Southern Voices* (1992), *Redefining American Literary History* (1990), *Trouble the Water: 250 years of African American Poetry* (1997), and *Richard Wright Encyclopedia* (2008). He is also a member of the editorial board of such journals as *African American Review*, *Journal of Ethnic American Literature*, and *Mississippi Quarterly.* He served as Chairman of the Department of English at Tougaloo College from 1979-1986, and assumed the post of Lawrence Durgin Professor of Literature from1988 to 2002. He has been involved with many professional organizations, such as the College Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Modern Language Association, the Southern Conference on African

American Studies, and the Southern Black Cultural Alliance. He played a decisive role in the Mississippi Humanities Council and was recognized for his contributions to that organization by being given the Humanities Teacher Award, the Humanities Scholars Award, and being elevated to an executive position in the Council. Aside from his academic affiliation he served on the Mississippi Advisory Committee to U. S. Commission on Civil Rights. I am very happy to have gotten his permission to interview him during my stay in the United States as a visiting scholar.

Wang Zuyou: Professor Jerry Ward, I am very glad that you granted me an opportunity to interview you. In February, 2013, your papers are housed and almost completely cataloged at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. This magnificent collection of your papers will be heavily used and will transform our understanding of the American South and her people. Your life and work are a special legacy that will be treasured by present and future generations in special ways. Congratulations on the holding of your papers at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History! Will you share with us more inside information of this cultural event?

Jerry Ward: Your comments about my papers are most generous, but we must not say they are treasured at this moment in 2013. Perhaps ten years from now we will know if they are treasured or not. Allow me to provide a few facts. I began donating some of my correspondence and writings to the Tougaloo College Archives in the early 1970s. As an alumnus of the College, I thought it was important to provide items that would enhance the possibility of the Tougaloo College Archive becoming a center for research in Mississippi. The Archive already had a vast amount of material pertaining to the Civil Rights Movement and the history of the college. It did not have much material about people who had served on its faculty or primary documents in the field of literature. My objective was to give my college a small number of such documents to complement its extraordinary collection of books (many of them first-editions in the field of African American literature). My papers were housed in the L. Zenobia Coleman Library at Tougaloo College until they were transferred for processing to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. I am most grateful to Mr. Clarence Hunter, the Tougaloo College archivist, for his dedication and expertise in putting my papers in order and preparing a finding aid for them.

Although it is advertised that my papers span the years 1939-2010, I am baffled by what is there which has anything to do with 1939. I was not born until July 31, 1943. The major focus of my papers is the years 1972-2012, and that focus will be expanded as I continue to produce and donate my works, correspondence and other materials.

To be sure, the MDAH staff will have more to catalog in the future. The collection is divided into the following series: personal matters, consisting of awards, collected items, correspondence, and programs of events; career, consisting of correspondence, documents, and other materials related to my career at Tougaloo, Dillard and other educational institutions; works by me, consisting of the major works I created as a speaker, reviewer, newspaper columnist, and manuscript writer; anthologies, collected works and larger works, consisting of writings that I authored or co-authored; scholar affiliation, consisting of correspondence, documents, and writings of noted scholars; organizational affiliation, consisting of correspondence, documents, and printed materials of professional organizations; collected magazines, newspapers, photographs, and audiotapes.

Wang Zuyou: We know that you and Richard Wright's daughter, Julia Wright, were among the founders of the Richard Wright Circle in 1990, an organization dedicated to the study of Wright's life and work. Among your many writings on the subject some of the most significant are: the introduction to the Harper Perennial edition of *Black Boy;* "*Black Boy (American Hunger): Freedom to Remember*," a work you coauthored with Maryemma Graham; "Richard Wright and the Common Reader," written for *Black Magnolias*; and an entry for the *Mississippi Encyclopedia.* Will you please illustrate your main thought on Richard Wright study?

Jerry Ward: Let me begin with a debatable claim. Among twentieth-century American writers, Richard Wright is the one who disturbs readers in a unique way. He forces readers to think. When we read his published works, we find ourselves thinking about the long history of intrusion, resistance, and conquest that pertains to the Americas, to what Europeans called "The New World." It is not the case that other American writers, especially historians, have not addressed those issues. Wright, however, deals with the issues in his fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and essays by asking hard questions, by challenging us with moral imperatives. James Baldwin, Lillian Smith, William Faulkner, Herman Melville, W. E. B. DuBois, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Walt Whitman are other writers who entangle us with moral imperatives, but they seem to be less forceful than Wright in exposing the wounds of history that will not heal. I may be the only person in my country who holds this opinion. Wright fully understood the nature and consequences of the endless suffering human beings must endure. He understood mankind's hunger. As Wright put it, he was not concerned with making people happy, with entertaining them. He was concerned with forcing people to look directly at whatever it is we believe "Truth" to be. His works are unsettling. Wright understood that the primitive instinct of man and woman

to be brutal in their interactions with other men and women is one of the major aspects of human existence on this planet. He knew what material and spiritual poverty is and how such poverty is related to dehumanization, to ethnic or racial hatred, to the psychological grip of religious beliefs and practices, to capitalism and class warfare. His perspectives were not always right, but he was brave enough to have perspectives and to share them with the world. He paid for his pursuit of truth, what Michel Fabre called his unfinished quest, with his life. We study Richard Wright in order to become more honest, to become brave and critical thinkers.

Wang Zuyou: Just now you mentioned that "Wright fully understood the nature and consequences of the endless suffering human beings must endure. …He paid for his pursuit of truth, what Michel Fabre called his unfinished quest, with his life." Will you please discuss the unfinished quest at some length as it is related to your readings of Wright's works?

Jerry Ward: My readings of Wright's works are determined by the special affinity I have with him and by what I find attractive in some iterations of Marxist literary theory, especially in the questions Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin posed about speech act theory and language. I read his works as situated responses, as transactions, with the world he inhabited as an African American male. I summarized my thoughts about affinity, unfinished quest, and my regard for Wright's work from the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) to his last novel *A Father's Law* (2008) in the remarks I made when I accepted the Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award on February 26, 2011. Those remarks answer your question.

"Between Richard Wright and Me"

We both spent our childhood and youth in Mississippi in the twentieth century. Like many American males we were sensitive to how we were socialized by the values and expectations of our families. We were fully aware that law and custom set boundaries for our growth, and we discovered fairly early the peculiar feelings of accomplishment that come from defying limits. We were curious rebels, and the price we had to pay for our lack of meekness shaped and left indelible marks on our personalities.

Our curiosity about the things of this world was notably increased by our uses of literacy. We were avid readers, allowing our imaginations to be much enlarged by words, language, and the lore one can acquire from books and from oral transmission. We were different from our peers. We were *existential* before either of us could pronounce or define that word. Our differentness was at once a blessing and a curse, a paradox within the matrix of Deep South society. We were blessed with inner strength

and will power, with knowing we had the option of refusing to become who and what the less than generous world desired we should become. Even if our bodies gave scant evidence of disobedience, our minds delighted in transgressive explorations; we entertained ideas that neither our immediate families nor our environments were prepared to understand or condone. As we grew into adolescence, our observations and readings prepared us to become exceptionally critical of injustice. And we discovered that the forms of language which so fascinated us could be instruments for effecting change. Literature and our experiences taught us that we did not have to be passive. We had agency; it was our entitlement under natural law to deny the possibility of our being wretched and tragic victims.

Obviously, I have sketched a few parallels between the life experiences that Richard Wright described vividly in his classic autobiography *Black Boy* and my memories of the trajectory of my own life. The epiphany I had upon reading *Black Boy* in my youth created a most powerful affinity between Richard Wright and me. It also created the recognition that we shared, despite the thirty-five years that separate us, similar values and tough-minded perspectives about the dynamics of good and evil that impact the lives of human beings. Although our paths in adulthood took quite different directions ----Wright used his talents to establish himself as a writer of international importance, and I used my talents to forge a career in American higher education, we both dedicated our lives to trying in good faith to speak truth about our world, to find receptive ears for our words, and to shake people out of the dangerous habits of inattention and complacency. Richard Wright has indeed taught me through the full range of his writings about my obligations to humanity.

Thus, it is with profound humility that I accept the Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award and express my gratitude to the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration for deciding that I am worthy of such a distinguished honor. This honor entails an obligation to think and write in ways that pay tribute to the model of excellence that Richard Wright set for us all and to continue my commitment to ensuring that future generations of writers and thinkers never forget how essentially valuable is Richard Wright's legacy to the world.

Wang Zuyou: Richard Wright is one of the most important African American writers. He is also one of the most prolific. Best known as the author of *Native Son* (1940), he wrote 7 novels; 2 collections of short fiction; an autobiography; more than 250 newspaper articles, book reviews, and occasional essays; some 4,000 verses; a photo-documentary; and 3 travel books. By attacking the taboos and hypocrisy that other writers had failed to address, Richard Wright revolutionized American literature and created a disturbing and realistic portrait of the African American experience. *The*

Richard Wright Encyclopedia (Greenwood Press, 2008), of which you and Robert J. Butler are co-editors, is a guide to his vast and influential body of works. What prompted you into undertaking such a giant project?

Jerry Ward: Robert Butler and I undertook the project because it was necessary to provide a reference book for students, teachers, and the general public. We wanted people to have a resource for discovering basic facts about Wright and his works, and we believe that good critical work on writers must start with facts rather than with theoretical speculations. Like Keneth Kinnamon's two magnificent bibliographies of critical responses to Wright, the *Richard Wright Encyclopedia* is an integral part of what the Richard Wright Circle was established to accomplish. I should mention that I have another big, ongoing project. I am writing *Richard Wright: One Reader's Responses*, a study of Wright's mind and his writings. I am not certain that I shall ever finish that project.

Wang Zuyou: Your numerous works are expressions of your endless love of literature, especially African American literature. Besides Richard Wright, who are those writers that absorb your passion and devotion?

Jerry Ward: To use your words, I am passionately devoted to many writers, particularly to writers other critics may have chosen to overlook--Asili Ya Nadhiri, James E. Cherry, Sterling D. Plumpp, Harold Clark, Julius E. Thompson, Eugene Redmond, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Tom Dent come immediately to mind. Ishmael Reed and Lance Jeffers are at the top of my list. I am passionately interested in writers who share all or a significant portion of my commitment to struggling with whatever "Truth" might be.

Wang Zuyou: Will you expound upon them respectively?

Jerry Ward: That is impossible for me to do in this interview. I would need to write several essays to expound. I will say a little about Reed and Jeffers to give you a preview of my thinking. I first read Reed when I was a soldier in Vietnam. I later had the privilege of serving with him on the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines and of conducting extensive interviews with him in the early 1980s. In his own way, Ishmael Reed continues and takes to a new level the work Richard Wright did. I reject the idea which circulates like HIV/AIDS and cancer among American intellectuals that Wright and Reed are "protest writers." All American writers protest something. I value Reed for his sustained efforts since the late 1960s to promote

genuine multiculturalism in our discussions of the literature and culture of the United States. His efforts as a novelist, poet, dramatist, musician, essayist and cultural critic, publisher and editor are special and unsurpassed. He is dedicated to providing the grounds or the rich, always expanding matrix for the delayed conversation about what it means to be an American. He does not merely give lip-service to multiculturalism and diversity. He is profoundly engaged in the practice of inclusiveness. For this reason Reginald Martin (University of Memphis) and I have begun to work on a book to be entitled *Ishmael Reed's Conversation with America*. Lance Jeffers, with whom I enjoyed a most rewarding friendship during the last decade (1975-1985) of his life, was an excellent poet and critical thinker. He was a man who had absorbed what Jean-Paul Sartre was talking about in *Qu'est-ce que la literature?* (1947). He was *engagé*. Engaged. Committed. For him, as for Reed, writing is an act of social responsibility. I learned much from him about poetry, cultural nationalism, and how to be a responsible person. I wrote the introduction for his novel *Witherspoon*, a novel that John Oliver Killens commended highly. One of my former students, Howard Rambsy II, published a most thoughtful essay on Jeffers and the Black Aesthetic in Kevin Powell's anthology *Step Into A World* (2000). I intend to revise and expand a paper I wrote many years ago on "Racialized Morality in Lance Jeffers's *Witherspoon*." You remind me that I have so much work to do in fitting the writers for whom I have a passionate devotion into literary history.

Wang Zuyou: In *The Katrina Papers: A Journal of Trauma and Recovery*, you fuse autobiography, politics, spirituality, history, and poetry in a highly inventive and unusual trip through the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Your house and the university campus where you worked as a professor were both flooded in the storm. It is from this trauma that you scramble to find hope and sanity in a world ruled by the fact that thousands have been abused by Nature and revenge is impossible. What is the mission that you seem to try to fulfill in this memoir?

Jerry Ward: I do not think *The Katrina Papers* has a mission. The book has purpose. The initial purpose was to examine and document my mind as I dealt with the trauma of loss. I wrote the book as a journal, but if people wish to call it a memoir I do not object. It is journal about what was happening in my mind. The first publisher to whom I submitted the manuscript said I needed to revise it to incorporate a narrative arc. I did not want to include a narrative arc. If my readers find one, that is an accident, a fortunate accident. The ultimate purpose of the book is to inform readers that they too can write their own stories and account to some extemt for their historicity, their participation in the making of social history. All of us have to deal

with the wounds of history that cannot be healed. What I tried to do in *The Katrina Papers* was to minimize the agony of the wounds.

Wang Zuyou: I know that you also write poems, which you may have forgotten, though you have a good memory. Do you think we should give special attention to your poem "Jazz to Jackson to John"?

Jerry Ward: Yes, you should. "Jazz to Jackson to John" is my signature poem. Of all the poems I have written, it represents best my interests in history, music, and state of existence. It addresses what I think the function of memory should be.

Wang Zuyou: In discussing the poetry of Natasha Trethewey, you call our attention to Trethewey's strategies for recovering history in *Domestic Work*, *Bellocq's Ophelia*, and *Native Guard* and how her poems are aesthetic warnings against post-racial delusions. To put Trethewey's being named Poet Laureate of the United States in proper perspective, one must read Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's brilliant essay "The Subjective Briar Patch: Contemporary American Poetry." What is its special use in understanding contemporary American poetry?

Jerry Ward: Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's essay is infused with honesty and integrity. It is a generous, scholarly and civilizing statement about internal struggles within the field of contemporary American poetry. Jeffers challenges us to be logical and sober about how those struggles or negotiations among poets, critics, and readers of poetry are so frequently racist, sexist, and, to be extremely candid, "bitchy." Her essay bids us to meditate on poetry and modernism as an asymmetrical affair, an affair that is saturated with conflicts, taste and discrimination, desperate measures to protect privilege and maintain hegemony and the mountains poets must conquer as they practice their craft. Jeffers illuminates the conflicts, and her essay can be used as a powerful guide for moving through the combat zone. Her essay helps us to discern how political the position of Poet Laureate of the United States might actually be. In an indirect way, the essay also can be useful when we read Trethewey's most recent collection *Thrall* (2012) and Brenda Marie Osbey's *History and Other Poems* (2012). Osbey's is a rare book that secures our participation in and control of the dialogic imagination.

Wang Zuyou: Your commentary "*The Cambridge History of African American Literature and the Limits of Literary History*" seeks to explain the inevitable absence in literary historical narratives of writers who are of equal merit with and sometimes

of greater importance than those who are discussed. Why do you believe this is true?

Jerry Ward: No literary history can account for all of a nation's writers or for all of the writers who have contributed something valuable to an ethnic tradition within a larger national tradition of literary production. A definitive accounting would be nothing more than an enormous listing of names, a literary telephone directory. The population of people who can make some legitimate claim to be writers has grown exponentially within the last thirty years. Population size is one reason for absence. Another reason has to do with how literary histories are constructed and with the choices made by people selected to write chapters of a literary history. In the United States, most of the scholars and critics who write literary history work at colleges and universities. Although some well-informed literary historical comments might appear in blogs or in social networks, it would be indeed rare to find any of those comments in a literary history sponsored by a prestigious university press or a first-rate commercial publisher. Academic circles in the United States tend to be conservative and unwilling to take risks. Tenure and promotion depend greatly on one's publishing articles in the right peer-reviewed journals, publishing books with the leading presses in one's field, and publishing chapters in books that are deemed to have great merit. Excellent writers who are not canonized or strong candidates for canonization tend to be ignored. The tyranny of the academy is powerful.

Wang Zuyou: As an overseas professor at Huazhong Normal University (Central China Normal University) in Wuhan, you have deep interest in exchanges between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, in promoting the mutual destruction of stereotypes. A lecture you gave there on "American Literature and Digital Humanities" involves a series of speculations on how new technologies may change the study and teaching of literature, especially of African American literature. Right?

Jerry Ward: That is correct. Digital humanities is not a panacea or cure-all, but it is a crucial element in how literature and culture will be written about and evaluated in the future. There are still well-founded reservations about what digital humanities can achieve. I think for some time we will continue to combine traditional methods with those emerging in the field of digital humanities. Ultimately, our scholarly practices as well as our scholarly questions will be altered by new technologies.

Wang Zuyou: You have been involved with many professional organizations, such as the College Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of

English, the Modern Language Association, the Southern Conference on African American Studies, and the Southern Black Cultural Alliance. You have played a decisive role in the Mississippi Humanities Council and were recognized for your contributions to that organization by being given the Humanities Teacher Award, the Humanities Scholars Award, and being elevated to an executive position in the Council. Aside from your academic affiliation you served on the Mississippi Advisory Committee to U. S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Jerry Ward: I have profited intellectually from my diverse professional involvements, because they have enabled me to have exchanges with leading scholars, writers, and artists. Many of these people are more than names on a page. I have had long-term correspondence with some of them; others have become friends; some of the younger people have chosen me to be an informal mentor. During my career as a teacher from 1970 to 2012, working with professional organizations and such cultural organizations as the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration and the Zora Neale Hurston Festival in Florida has been meaningful. And I have worked with the Project on the History of Black Writing since its inception in 1983.

Wang Zuyou: You received numerous honors and awards throughout your career. What are your most cherished awards? Why?

Jerry Ward: My most cherished awards are the Darwin T. Turner Award of Excellence for Contributions in Research, Scholarship and Mentoring; the "Teacher of the Year" award from Tougaloo College in 1992; the Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award from the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration; my induction as Honored Girot and Lifetime Member of the International Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent; and my induction into the Tougaloo Hall of Fame. In January 2013, Tougaloo College designated me Professor Emeritus. From 2002 to 2012, I was the Distinguished Eminent Scholar and Professor of English at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana. I retired from Dillard in August 2012 and now enjoy the life of an independent scholar. I appreciate the awards, and I thank the people who thought I deserved them. I admit, however, that awards frighten me. They are reminders that what I have done in the past is less important than what I am doing in the present. Making worthwhile contributions depends on my continuing efforts to work harder and better. I do hope some of my accomplishments provide ideas and models for invested behavior for younger generations. I do remind myself daily that if I stopped to admire accomplishments, I would become either a failure or an arrogant fool.

Wang Zuyou: We know that African American Studies is an interdisciplinary academic field devoted to the study of the history, culture, and politics of Black Americans. Taken broadly, the field studies not only the cultures of people of African descent in the United States, but the cultures of the entire African diaspora. The field includes scholars of African-American literature, history, politics, religion and religious studies, sociology, and many other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. As an expert in African American studies and as a bridge between American and Chinese academic circles, what are your suggestions for the younger generation of scholars concerning their research and publications in the realm of African American Studies?

Jerry Ward: You are referring to the broadest field, to the one called Black Studies or Africana Studies or African Diaspora Studies. African American Studies is an ally to the larger field, but it focuses more precisely on studies of work produced in the United States. All of these studies are like the threads of a spider's web. They are part of a larger design. As a bridge between Chinese and American academic circles, I try to promote cross-cultural discussions that are very necessary in the twenty-first century. I am also something of an iconoclast. I like to knock down the false idols of the mind that Sir Francis Bacon identified centuries ago. I have the onus of providing viable alternatives to what I virtually destroy. Be wary of people who talk stridently about revolutions and who have no rational programs to replace what they would eradicate. They do more harm than good. I advise the younger generation of Chinese scholars who do work in African American and American literatures and cultures to arm themselves with in-depth knowledge about the history of the United States. They must know that history to prevent their being misled and mis-educated by either Eurocentric or Afrocentric extremes. They should develop skills in making sharp critiques of African American Studies. If they want to publish their work in the United States or other countries outside of China, they have to master the rhetoric and protocols of scholarship that may be vastly different from scholarship published in Chinese. I urge these younger scholars to remember that cultural expressions and everyday life exist in symbiotic relationships, to remember that we are dealing with literary or intellectual ecology.

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