

## In Their Own Words: On Being an English Major at MSU—and a Rhodes Scholar

**Dr. Thomas Anderson's sixth installment in a series of profiles of our English majors**

*Donald Mayfield ("Field") Brown is the Department of English's first Rhodes Scholar and the first at Mississippi State University in over 100 years. After graduating in the spring of 2014, Field will attend Oxford University, where he will continue his research on race and American literature and culture. Field has received prestigious research scholarships to attend the University of Iowa and Stanford University, and he spent a summer in the Shackouls Honors College Oxford Study Abroad Program. I asked Field to share with us how his experience in English prepared him for the Rhodes Scholarship.*

The Department of English gave me confidence from the first day I got on campus. Professors were always willing to spend time with me, letting me work out my ideas about literature and race. I was encouraged to pursue those ideas, and the Department gave me both intellectual and financial support to develop my ideas into a coherent project. Whether I was brainstorming ideas for an essay, studying for the GRE, preparing a CV, or writing a statement of purpose, I could always meet with a professor. My academic advisors always seemed to be able to visualize a future for me in ways that I simply could not. That is to say, I might have wanted to become a Rhodes Scholar, but it was only a vague idea in my mind. The Department of English gave me concrete plans for how to



**Donald "Field" Brown**

get there, such as going to important conferences, presenting papers, doing research during the summer, and studying abroad.

After the Rhodes experience at Oxford, I hope to complete my PhD in English literature. My specialty will be African-American literature. As of now, I am trying to understand which African-American authors get canonized and which ones do not. The development of the American literary canon has so many complex political and economic threads to it. I hope to write my dissertation on the way black authors relate to the canon of literature that we read everyday in class. My degree in English from MSU has prepared me to be—and I say this with full confidence—one of the best literary critics in the world if I continue to build on the foundation the department has given me. It is precisely this foundation that instilled in me the confidence to apply for the Rhodes Scholarship and pursue a degree from arguably the most prestigious university in the English-speaking world, the University of Oxford.

But the journey began rather inauspiciously. I can remember meeting with Dr. Anderson near the end of my sophomore year. I was applying for a summer research program, and we were relaying information back and forth through email. Dr. Anderson was attaching his comments to the email, but I wasn't reading his notes because I didn't know how to access the attached notes. I had only been reading his brief comments in the general email, but not the detailed notes in the margin of the electronic document. I really wanted to get accepted into the summer research program, and I was confident that I was prepared, with good grades, a solid personal statement and good letters of support. When I discovered that I wasn't even reading the attached emails properly, I knew that I still had a lot to learn about how to professionalize myself. However, Dr. Anderson and I worked on my research materials in person, and I began to make sure to always read attachments! I suppose the point is that even when I made youthful mistakes that no college student should make, I wasn't discouraged. The English faculty instead nourished my growth and supported my work based upon where I was at unique points in my development. That is special, and I believe that it allowed me to compete for the Rhodes.

William Butler Yeats once said, "It takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your soul than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield." For me, the English major fosters that type of courage, and I am a better scholar for it. Reading books that span human history and that tell stories from the perspective of different people across the globe allows us to deal with the deep issues of human nature in serious ways that many people never dare to do. I look forward to discovering more about those deep issues in my studies at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.

## **Portrait of a Rhodes Scholar as a Young Man:**

### **An Excerpt from Field Brown's Rhodes Personal Statement**

I was born and raised in the poorest state in America and the state that historically is considered by many the most racially prejudiced: Mississippi. Richard Wright's autobiography about growing up in a small town in Mississippi, *Black Boy*, is intimately familiar to me. I had heard versions of Wright's story countless times from family and friends before I read the book. One of those storytellers was my grandfather. A long-time preacher and father of thirteen children, he epitomizes the dreams and experiences found in Wright's novel. I remain in awe of his leadership to fifty blacks in the small town of Vicksburg during Jim Crow America. His life's accomplishments will eclipse anything that I might ever do. However, the legacy my grandfather created during Jim Crow America inspires me to expand his influence through my formal education.

While describing modern African-American community, Ralph Ellison writes, "the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx." Last summer I left Mississippi to study for the Trinity term at Christ Church College, Oxford. As I bid my grandfather farewell, I went from listening to his childhood stories about picking cotton to sitting in lectures at Oxford's Rothermere American Institute discussing Rousseau. After studying Postcolonial literature at Oxford I spent the rest of my summer on fellowship at Stanford University. After presenting research on the New York Intellectuals there, I returned

home to see my grandfather under his old wooden gazebo to tell him about my summer. Under that gazebo, the big words fail to impress my audience. It only matters that I impact change for everyday people. This precise mixture of formal education and informal experience gives me a different perspective on my research than many others who pursue a graduate degree at one of the world's most prestigious institutions. I am determined to have my research in African-American postwar literature matter for people like the ones in my grandfather's congregation [...]

Focusing on Ralph Ellison's perceived commitment to American individualism, critics often miss an opportunity to explore a larger point related to the impact of Ellison's privileged position in the literary canon. Analyzing Ellison without considering broader connections to the literary forces of the period is a critical mistake. The more pressing question that informs my research involves the nature of the literary developments that enabled Ellison's ascension to fame. By what terms do marginalized minorities become visible in the Western world, and is it worth the compromise? Ellison's ascension is a product of the rise of New Criticism and the emergence of American Cold War politics.

Ellison's legacy emphasizes a bourgeois aesthetic over and against his lineage as a black Marxist. His perceived aesthetic posture was most likely a political move to distance himself from controversial black politics during the Cold War. In return, the literary establishment celebrated his novel's embodiment of the new liberal left's cultural criticism. These critics sought

to convince the American public that the proletarian novels of the Great Depression and early 40s were not artistic works. They were seen, instead, as overtly political and thus not sufficiently complex like important modernist novels. With Ellison as a primary point of departure, my project will explore how politically radical novelists during high modernism have been forced to mute their political ideas in order to become visible and artistically respected. The universal-particular and modernist-proletarian dichotomies exclude proletarian fiction, yet that fiction offers a robust aesthetic informed by viable political options.

I'll never forget the day that I realized art's power. Not yet a teenager, I walked into my parents' room and saw my stoic father crying as *To Kill a Mockingbird* sat on his lap. He said four simple words: "They just killed Tom." After realizing literature's transformative effect, I knew I wanted to research and teach literature. Having already studied at Oxford, I realize that returning there is a logical extension of my two summer research projects at the University of Iowa and Stanford. At these two institutions, I was exposed to intellectuals, but at Oxford I was exposed to an intellectual community. As a college-bound student I chose to remain in my home state's land grant university, to stay close to my grandfather's legacy. By studying English, graduating from the Honors College and pursuing an advanced degree at Oxford, I hope to extend that legacy by making the world of my grandfather's gazebo not so far removed from the university.