We are excited to welcome Dr. Jervette R. Ward to the department with the start of the 2018-2019 academic year, leaving her position as Associate Professor of English at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

A native Southerner, Professor Ward received her PhD from the University of Memphis in Literary and Cultural Studies, where she did her dissertation on Zora Neale Hurston. She took a position as an Assistant Professor of English at Pine Manor College in Massachusetts in 2011, and moved to the University of Alaska in 2013, where she was tenured and promoted to Associate Professor in 2016. Given the dramatic difference between her roots in the south and the sometimes frigid climate of Alaska, you might imagine her time in Anchorage was an unhappy one, but nothing could be further from the truth. She loved Alaska, she explains: “It’s probably the most beautiful place that I’ve ever encountered. It’s that mixture of ocean and mountain and the far-far wild west.”

Her most recent publications have focused on the representation of African-Americans in Reality TV—including the 2015 collection Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality TV from Rutgers University Press. She is at work on a follow-up volume on Black Men in Reality TV. Although this seems like a shift in her research, Professor Ward explains that each of these projects are far more intertwined than they might initially appear: “Hurston has the fascinating trend of mixing fact and fiction even when she’s talking about things that aren’t supposed to be fiction, like her autobiography.” Professor Ward describes this mix of fact and fiction as “early reality tv. It’s an early book form of a genre that’s become incredibly popular.” Reality is “sometimes loosely scripted based on events that might have happened in the past.” Hurston would have been a fan, she concludes, and was an early trailblazer in the genre.

Professor Ward brings extensive faculty governance, as well as program leadership and community service. She recently stepped down as the President of the Anchorage chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc., one of the oldest Black service organizations in the country; she has been mentoring the new President in Anchorage, and has joined the Jackson chapter here in Mississippi chapter. She is the English Area Representative to the College Language Association. Founded in 1937, CLA is the largest and oldest professional organization for professors of color who teach world languages. Professor Ward will serve two years as the English Area Representative, two years as Vice President, and then will become President in 2022. Since they serve two years, there have only been forty Presidents of CLA, so it’s a tremendous honor for Mississippi State to have Professor Ward on the cycle to become President in a few years.

This semester, among other classes Professor Ward is teaching a graduate seminar, “Food and Identity in Literature.” Reading books about the African-American culinary tradition, the quest for food at the heart of the British empire, and the role of sugar in modern history, this class is a fascinating exploration of a topic in literary culture that we so often overlook. Students reflect on their own relationship with food--especially traditionally Southern food, with its cultural meaning and history. Students will end the semester with an innovative capstone project: The Starkville Table of Culinary Justice. Professor Ward explains, “students will host an event where they present their research from the semester on food, identity, and culture, and have dishes by a local chef that connects with projects.” The event will raise money for The Mississippi Food Network, a local non-profit--a wonderful mixture of service, leadership, and learning.

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DON SHAFFER became the interim Director of African American Studies.

BECKY HAGENSTON and ROBERT WEST were both promoted to Full Professor.

TED ATKINSON published “A Forward Glance: TVA Modernism and the Regional Designs of National Progress” in Reassessing the 1930s South.


PETER DEGABRIELE gave a paper titled “Laputa is a Drone” at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth Century.

LARA DODDS published “Envy, Emulation, and the Problem of Romance in The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania” in English Literary Renaissance and “The Case for a Feminist Return to Form” in Early Modern Women. She also presented at two conferences.

KAYLEIGH FEW is coauthor of “RAD Collaboration in the Writing Center: An Impact Study of Course Embedded Writing Center Support on Student Writing in a Criminological Theory Course,” published in Praxis.

KATHERINE FLOWERS won the 2018-2019 CCCC Emergent Researcher Awards for her project “Making the English-Only Movement: Writing, Scaling, and Resisting Language Policy.” She also presented papers at three conferences, including “Tracing Language Policy Writing across Organizations and Governments” at CCC.

ROBERT WEST was published on the second volume of The Selected Sermons of Robert Rypon; volume one will be published in the Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations series this year (Peeter Press). She also published “Master Robert Rypon and the Making of a Model Sermon Collection” in L’Éloquence de la chaire entre écriture et oralité.

MICHAEL KARDOS published his novel Bluff with Grove Atlantic.

MATT LITTLE published three articles in Comments on Etymology based on his book published last year, The Origin of Kibosh.

RICH LYONS published “Tendrils Don’t Ask” in The Gettysburg Review

KELLY MARSH gave a paper, “Narrating Intertexts in Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones” at the International Conference on Narrative in Montreal. Her book, The Submerged Plot and the Mother’s Pleasure, was just reissued in paperback.

ELIZABETH MILLER published “Remembering Freedom Songs: Repurposing an Activist Genre” in College English, and presented at two conferences, including “Student Revision and Reflection: Rethinking Relationships” at CCC.

BONNIE O’NEILL won the Arts and Sciences Humanities Research Award. She presented “Transcendentalist Intersections: Literature, Philosophy, Religion, “Feeling Impersonally: Universal Law and the Power of Affect” at the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society in Heidelberg, Germany.

CATHERINE PIERCE has her poem, “I Kept Getting Books About Birds” selected for the Pushcart Prize XLIII. She also published seven poems, and an essay “I Dreaded Winter Until My Newborn Taught Me to Embrace It” in The New York Times. She also won the college’s Eminent Scholar award.


ANDREA SPAIN presented on “Infrastructural Unconscious & Crisis of Masculinity in Lauren Beukes’ Broken Monsters” at the Mississippi Philological Association.

ERIC VIVIER presented “A Couple of Beggars: Thomas Nashe, Gabriel Harvey, and the Satirical Production of Similarity” at Thomas Nashe and His Contemporaries in Newcastle, and “Renaissance Anti-Satirical Satire and Why It Matters Now” at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry.

JERVETTE WARD presented on “Teaching in the Age of Trump and Black Lives Matter: Possibility, Pedagogy, and Positionality” at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASAALH).

ROBERT WEST published four poems, presented “Do not let me hear /Of the wisdom of old men’: Teaching T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets to Twenty-First-Century Students” at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association.

By coincidence, MSU English emeritus faculty RICH RAYMOND and NANCY HARGROVE both published articles in the same issue of the South Atlantic Review.

T. PRICE CALDWELL’s Discourse, Structure, and Linguistic Choice: A Theory and Applications of Molecular Sememics was published posthumously by Springer.

KELLY MARSH and DAN PUNDAY will be organizing the 2020 International Society for the Study of Narrative conference in New Orleans, with Mississippi State as the host.
Faculty and Students Contribute Research for the Mississippi Writer’s Trail

Mississippi writers have long been a part of the state’s rich cultural heritage, and now their works will be celebrated in the new Mississippi Writer’s Trail. The Writer’s Trail is modeled on the pre-existing Mississippi Freedom Trail and Mississippi Blues Trail and is funded by the Mississippi Arts Commission and the Mississippi Humanity’s Council. Among the individuals working to make this literary trail a reality is Mississippi State’s own Dr. Donald Shaffer. Dr. Shaffer, an associate professor of English and African American Studies who currently serves as interim director of African American studies, works alongside two other individuals to decide which writers will be awarded markers. Two of the markers (Welty and Ward) have already been designated and were unveiled in August during the Mississippi Book Festival. As part of his work, Dr. Shaffer gets to work alongside some of MSU’s undergraduate English majors, an experience he says is especially rewarding because they bring fresh ideas and excitement to the project. Maeve Rigney, a freshman, is one of those students working alongside Dr. Shaffer. “I feel really honored to be involved in this project!” says Rigney. “There is obviously a lot of great writing talent in Mississippi, and the Writer’s Trail will make the relics of our great authors come alive.”

Like the Freedom Trail and Blues Trail, the markers for the Writer’s Trail will be scattered throughout the state, which could prove especially beneficial for smaller towns when it comes to boosting tourism. When asked how he thought that the Writer’s Trail would benefit the state, Dr. Shaffer said he believes it could be beneficial because Mississippi is in desperate need of counter-narratives. While it may be a state with a painful past, and sometimes a painful present, it is also the state that has produced a Poet Laureate, a Nobel Prize winner, a National Book Award Recipient, and a Pulitzer recipient. While it may be a state that has dealt with its fair share of pain and struggle, this trail can help us to remember that out of pain and struggle comes beauty.
When I tell people that I’m currently in the Air National Guard, waiting for my dates to go to Officer Training School and then on to flight school, their next question is almost always about my bachelor’s degree (a requirement to go straight into OTS). The look of genuine surprise and confusion on their faces when I tell them I actually have a master’s degree in English is almost universal. To most people, “pilot” and “English major” don’t seem to have much in common and they have a hard time figuring out how I got from one to the other.

Their most common question after hearing I’m an English major is, “Oh so you’re like the grammar police?” Honestly, I didn’t take a single grammar class the entire six years I studied English. Language was for linguists, I’d say. Instead, I had to study history, philosophy, socioeconomics, gender dynamics, and psychoanalysis before I could even begin to understand what Virginia Woolf was on about in To The Lighthouse. Then, I had to become familiar with logical discourse, pacing, tone, and verbal clarity in order to explain what I understood effectively to another person in formal writing. Interestingly enough, this exact ability is highly sought by the military. As part of the application process, the Air Force gives all officer candidates a handout to pass along to the writers of the letters of recommendation in which they outline four main skills they are looking for in an officer: interpersonal skills and leadership potential, personal achievements, industry and self-discipline, and ability to communicate. They break this last point down to specifically ask, “Is the candidate an effective writer? Does his/her written word show a mastery of the conventions of English? Is the written expression clear, well organized, and forceful?” It doesn’t matter how smart you are or what you know if you cannot effectively communicate it to the next guy, or the flight under you, or your commander. They want to know that you have been taught to do exactly that.

After I explain all this, they usually ask me, “But what will you do exactly?” Why, I’ll fly planes. Specifically, I was hired to fly the C-17 with the 172nd Airlift Wing. Most of these missions will be humanitarian missions, both foreign and domestic, with a significant portion of the flights involving transporting wounded soldiers back to the states. Then, I really throw them off when I tell them that a career in military aviation is just a step along the path to eventually finding my way to space. Of course, I have to explain that the third party privatization of the space industry opens up more opportunities for space travel beyond the astronaut positions that NASA offers, including opportunities for hydroponic farmers, blue collar miners, and yes, even English majors.

In the words of one of my favorite authors, Carl Sagan, eventually they’ll realize “they should’ve sent a poet” (Contact, 1997). In short, I believe this as well, because forging a new era of human understanding has almost always been at the hands of poets and writers.

The collection of data points is all very well and good, but someone will eventually have to tell us what it all means. One of my favorite skills that the study of English literature has given me, and the one I find the most valuable to my future position as a military pilot, is the ability to know what it is that I don’t know. That is, the ability to critically analyze one’s own understanding of a subject and find the pieces that need further explanation. In fact, I believe an English major can be taught anything, because they have learned how to learn. They gain the ability to find the exact point that things stop making sense and are adept enough to know what questions to ask in order to find the answer. And of course, when they do find their answer, they not only know what they think but why they think it. This process creates a more confident worldview that, while constantly undergoing revision, leads to a stronger sense of self and purpose.

Specifically, working with the English program at Mississippi State gave me the confidence to pursue this path. I’ve always known I wanted to the Air Force as a career option because of the opportunities it provided for eventual space exploration, but I wasn’t sure how to get there. I had considered just enlisting and “starting from the bottom” as it were, but after a talk with one of my professors, I started to see another path. On hearing my previous plans, she pulled me aside and basically chastised me for this decision. At first I was shocked that she felt so strongly, but over time her arguments started to make sense. I was highly educated and I was a strong powerful woman and, perhaps, I was good enough to ask for a pilot slot which would get me closer to achieving my dreams. Honestly, I hadn’t even considered getting my masters in the program. I knew I didn’t want to teach English, so I didn’t understand why I needed to go further in that direction. I had gotten my bachelors and as far as I knew all the necessary skills I would need. Fatefully, another of my professors pushed me to apply and I’m so glad she did because what happened next probably changed my life. In graduate school I started to gain more of an appreciation for what I could achieve, more confidence in my own abilities, and the real world experience of being responsible for the students in my classes. As it turns out, my masters degree was a high selling point during my interview. Not just the degree itself, the teaching experience, or the highest possible score on both the thesis defense and exam (although these points certainly helped make my case), but also on what the program had given me, which was the ability to clearly articulate my purpose and justify my right to be in that room. I had previously done my research and knew ahead of time what type of questions they might ask. At the end of the meeting, the interviewer, visibly impressed, stated that I had given an unusually well thought out answers, to which I replied, “Well sir, I was an English major.”
Howell and Elizabeth Gwin Scholarship Winners: Joy Carino, Frances Crawford, Emma Moffett, and Theophilus Okunlola
Eugene Butler Creative Writing Award: Ross Rodgers
Roger LeMayne Dabbs Memorial Scholarship: De’Aris Rhymes
Helen W. Skelton Endowed Scholarship: Anna Claire Tucker
Ann Pittman Andrews Memorial Endowed Scholarship: Avery Ferguson
Peyton Ward Williams, Jr. Distinguished Writing Award: Meredith Hilliard
Brasher-Dazey Paper Award: Lily Hebert
Stacey Goff Endowed Scholarship: Taylar Anderson
William H. Magruder Memorial Scholarship: William Textor and Kristopher Witcher
Roger LeMayne Dabbs Memorial Scholarship: Anna Claire Tucker
Rebekah Bisson, Lily Hebert, and Gentry Burkes were inducted into MSU’s Society of Scholars.
Anna Bills published an essay in the Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association (POMPA).
Vanessa Beeson won the Kullman Award for first place in creative writing at the 24th Annual Southern Writers/Southern Writing Conference.
Gentry Burkes won the undergraduate Gender Studies Paper competition.
Joy Carino took second place in the humanities presentation category at the State Honors Conference of Mississippi.
English MA student Caroline Brandon won the 2018 Eudora Welty Fellow. The $2000 prize allowed her to work at the Eudora Welty Collection at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson last summer.
Jessica Dulaney (BA 2018) was accepted into Florida State University’s Literary and Cultural Studies Ph.D. program with a teaching assistantship.
Meredith Hilliard (BA 2018) with a linguistics minor and TESOL certificate, was accepted into CUNY’s Linguistics PhD Program with a five year fellowship.
Erica Harville, an English and Spanish major (BA 2018), has accepted a position as a Spanish teacher at Starkville Academy.
Caitlin Pate (BA 2016) started teaching 7th grade at Armstrong Middle School.
Kelsey Norris (MSU BA and Vanderbilt MFA) English major who went on to earn her MFA from Vanderbilt, is mentioned in this “New York Times” short piece about new literary writing platforms in a young, new literary south.
Lauren Shook (BA 2008, MA 2010) received a Folger Fellowship to participate in the Folger Library’s “Before Farm to Table” program.
Michelle Aucoin (BA 2015, MA 2017) was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Kudos for our Students, Alumni, and Supporters

We inducted 13 majors into our Xi Chapter of the English Honorary Society, Sigma Tau Delta: Jasmine Avery-McGuire, Grace Gilman, Hannah Phillips, Alyssa Avila, Dakota Ivy, Claire Schwartz, Avery Ferguson, Lyndsi Naron, and Kris Witcher.

STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS
Mississippi State University hosted the celebrated Joy Harjo as the Spring 2019 Writer in Residence. A member of the Muscogee nation, she was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and began her studies at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She earned her undergraduate degree from the University of New Mexico and later an MFA at the University of Iowa.

Joy Harjo is a renowned poet and musician, as well as a playwright, author, activist, and teacher. She has a long list of accolades to back her incredible achievements. She is most known for her poetry and received several fellowships including the National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship in 1978 and 1998. In 1990, she was selected for The American Indian Distinguished Achievement in the Arts Award. In 1991, In Mad Love and War won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, and The Woman Who Fell From the Sky won the Oklahoma Book Award in 1995. Harjo took the Oklahoma Book Award again in 2003 with How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems 1975 – 2001. She was the 2017 recipient of the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in the literary field. She has also released 5 albums of original compositions and has won several awards throughout her career in music. Harjo has taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Arizona State University, The University of Colorado, The University of Arizona, the University of New Mexico, and currently holds the Chair of Excellence in English at University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Throughout her life and work, Harjo has championed social justice, advocating for and bringing a voice to Native American rights and women’s equality.

Harjo engaged the Mississippi State University campus in dynamic ways during her stay here. She was available for lunches and office hours for students to discuss her work as well as their own. She also joined in classes and answered questions from creative writing students. The main event was Harjo’s public reading, which was graciously made free to the public. Harjo engaged the crowd in conversation, music, poetry recitation, and displayed the strong oral storytelling tradition of her ancestors.
TO OUR ALUMNI & FRIENDS

Over the past 13 years, our generous alumni and friends have donated over $370,000 to support our scholarships and awards as well as the English Advancement Fund, which helps to fund travel and equipment needs for faculty and students. In the last year, we have received more than $21,000 in gifts and pledges to department scholarships and other funds, including large gifts to the Richard F. Patteson Endowed Scholarship, the Price Caldwell Memorial Endowment, and the Cecil Hunter and Ann Pittman Andrews Memorial Endowed Scholarships. Most of the donations that we receive are much smaller, however: $250, $100, $50, and even $25. They all add up, though, and help to support programs and scholarships for our students.

If you’re interested in making a tax-deductible donation to help us meet our needs, please contact Sara Frederick, Director of Development for the College of Arts & Sciences at MSU. You can reach her at her office number, 662-325-3240, or by email, sfrederic@foundation.msstate.edu.