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## An Interview with Jesmyn Ward

By Cora Boyd

Jesmyn Ward joined the faculty in 2014 as the Paul and Debra Gibbons Professor of Creative Writing. She was the recipient of the National Book Award in 2011 for her second novel *Salvage the Bones*. She turned her attention to creative nonfiction with *Men We Reaped*, a National Book Critics' Circle Award finalist that chronicles the deaths of five young men. Professor Ward

will be teaching an advanced workshop in creative nonfiction this Spring. Undergraduate student Cora Boyd sat down with her for an interview.

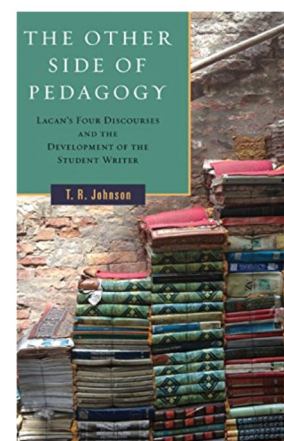
This year the English Department is happy to welcome Jesmyn Ward as a new member of the creative writing faculty. When I sat down with Professor Ward I was surprised at how easy it was to talk to her. Aside from her thoughtfulness on every topic we broached, I was taken by her engaging speaking voice and poise- and her refreshing honesty. There is no artifice about her; she spoke with a rare candidness and comfort about her brother's death, her struggle with confidence in the writing process, and her experience as a woman of color in the world of literature.

Professor Ward's first book *Where the Line Bleeds* came out in 2008. Her second book *Salvage the Bones*, a chronicling of one Mississippi family's experience with a devastating hurricane, won the 2011 National Book Award. She is currently promoting her recently publicized memoir *Men We Reaped* and working on a new novel in addition to raising a toddler, teaching two courses at Tulane, and commuting to New Orleans from her hometown DeLisle, Mississippi.

DeLisle, Mississippi is about an hour and fifteen-minute drive from New Orleans. Professor Ward describes the town as primarily working class and black. She was the first in her family to go to college. She attended Stanford University.

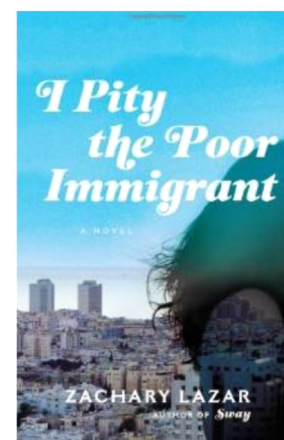
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## New Books by Faculty



T.R. Johnson

*The Other Side of Pedagogy:  
Lacan's Four Discourses and the  
Development of the Student Writer*



Zachary Lazar

*I Pity the Poor Immigrant: A Novel*

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## Spotlight on Gaurav Desai

By Mitch Therieau

Gaurav Desai's 2013 book *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India and the Afrasian Imagination* received the Rene Wellek Book Prize from the American Comparative Literature Association in 2014. The book was also a finalist for the African Studies Association's Bethwell Ogot Prize presented to the best book published in East African Studies in the previous calendar year. He is currently editing an upcoming volume of the *Minnesota Review* on the legacy of Katrina on the eve of its 10th anniversary. Undergraduate Mitch Therieau sat down with him to discuss his work.

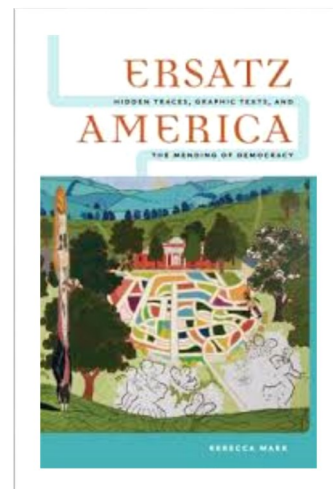


Gaurav Desai is a busy man, to say the least. As a professor, he splits his time between the English Department and the African and African Diaspora Studies Program here at Tulane. As a writer and editor, he has an MLA volume on the works of criminally underrated Bengali author Amitav Ghosh currently in development, an editorship on an upcoming *Minnesota Review* special issue on the legacy of Katrina on the eve of its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary – and not to mention a wildly successful 2013 book, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*, which recently won the 2014 René Wellek Prize from the American Comparative Literature Association. With all of this and a great deal more going on, Professor Desai still found the time to sit down and talk with me about literature, the universe, and everything, and like most conversations that take place around here, it didn't take long before the topic turned to New Orleans. Professor Desai is intensely interested in the literary and cultural dynamics of post-colonial sites, and when I asked him if his scholarship on New Orleans is at all informed by this perspective, he offered that “all of the US is post-colonial, but this area carries the mark of that history very visibly.” This notion of visibility is a sticking point in Professor Desai's work: a large part of the impetus behind *Commerce with the Universe* is, as he puts it, “opening a multiracial and multicultural discourse” on Africa that includes its longstanding – yet consistently overlooked – Asian immigrant communities.

Still, as a literary scholar, Professor Desai is quick to point out the common intellectual pitfalls in the conversation on African culture. Chief among these is what he terms “approaching African literature ethnographically” – taking the text first and foremost as a testament to culture, and second as, well, a text. So how can we learn to talk about Africa and literature in general in a more meaningful way? For Professor Desai, it is a simple matter of education. In both his English and African Studies courses, he focuses on the “scholarly *and* pedagogical aspects” of the material, and I was lucky enough to witness this philosophy in action over the course of our rainy Friday afternoon discussion. Somehow the conversation had turned to *Heart of Darkness* and the question of whether we have an obligation to cater to moral concerns in establishing and curating a literary canon, and I asked Professor Desai if he thought Conrad's novel should be struck from the canon because of its problematic treatment of Africa. His answer? “*Heart of Darkness* is a teachable text. It makes us ask all the right questions.” The spirit of instruction through questioning is a cornerstone of Professor Desai's multidisciplinary approach – an approach that extends beyond academia and into his passion for service. His honors colloquium, “Legacies of

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## New Books by Faculty



Rebecca Mark  
*Ersatz America: Hidden Traces, Graphic Texts, and the Mending of Democracy*

## Faculty Awards

### Gaurav Desai

American Comparative Literature Association's Rene Wellek Book Prize recipient and finalist for the African Studies Association's Bethwell Ogot Prize for his book *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India and the Afrasian Imagination*

### Zachary Lazar

Editor's Choice in the New York Times Book Review for his novel *I Pity the Poor Immigrant*

### Rebecca Mark

School of Liberal Arts  
Greenberg Family Professor in Social Entrepreneurship

### Molly Rothenberg

Fullbright Award Recipient:  
two-year Fellowship to Edinburgh University, Scotland, UK

## Student Awards

Class of 1903 Shakespeare Prize for Best Shakespearean Essay by a Woman  
Lucy K. Stratton

Henry Clay Stier Award in English  
Megan Ashley Alfonso

Pierce Butler Prize for Excellence in English  
Jamie Lynne Bertel

Donald Pizer Award in American Literature  
David L. Barenholtz

Virginia Gleaves Lazarus Award for Best Essay Written by a Junior or Senior Woman  
Laura E. Decuir

A Studio in the Woods Residency for an Outstanding Senior in Creative Writing  
Connor Crawford

Dale Edmonds Prize for Best Short Story by an Undergraduate  
Elly Howard

The Quarante Club Prize for Best Short Story Written by a Woman  
Marie-Claire Serou

The Senior Achievement Prize for Excellence in Creative Writing  
Connor Crawford

The Award for Service to the Literary Community  
Sarah Monson

Molly Anne Rothenberg **Spotlight on**  
is in Edinburgh on a two-year Fulbright Fellowship, where she is researching materials concerning dramatic adaptations of Walter Scott's novels in preparation for the bicentennial of *Waverly*, which was published anonymously in 1814.

## Molly Rothenberg

By Mitch Therieau



Professor Rothenberg's work will be part of an online exhibit at the Folger Shakespeare Library. She is also finishing her book on Jane Austen. Undergraduate Mitch Therieau sat down with her for an interview.

Situated at the junction of continental philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, Molly Rothenberg's scholarship employs a set of shifting academic lenses. Professor Rothenberg, who was kind enough to meet with me this past month, has had more training in each of these fields than the average expert in any one of them. She has studied under Foucault and Derrida, spearheaded groundbreaking archival research at the Folger Shakespeare Library's Henderson Collection, and she is a fully certified psychoanalyst – and not to mention the author of several books and essays on her diverse array of interests. Despite (or maybe because of) all these varied threads of scholarly curiosity, it became clear to me from my chat with Professor Rothenberg that her biggest passion is not any one of these disciplines in and of itself – it is teaching them. Over the course of our conversation, Professor Rothenberg offered insights on classroom dynamics, different ways of approaching literature theoretically, and several other classroom curiosities.

These are no mere pedagogical nuts and bolts, though. For Professor Rothenberg, the best way to understand a text is to look closely at the way we engage it, a variable that is often bound up in the particularities of our respective academic fields. "Because literature portrays human situations," she says, "students in our classes tend to respond emotionally before they engage analytically. Literary theory and philosophy texts enhance analytical power, but they are less immediately accessible. When we teach literature and theory together, the two disciplines work synergistically to deepen our capacities for understanding and valuing these texts."

Shifting perspectives and multiple levels of engagement are themes not just in Professor Rothenberg's teaching, but also in her scholarly work. As a critic both of literature and philosophical theory (among numerous other things), she uses broad theoretical work "to understand what is at stake in current philosophical writings," looking for "something [she] can add, and these new perspectives inform the way [she thinks] about literature." One such critical lens is post-Freudian psychoanalysis – a discipline that, as she is quick to caution, is not '-post' Freud in the sense that it has moved completely beyond his work. To the contrary, it is '-post' in the sense that it uses

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sity, where she received a BA in English and a terminal degree in communications. Feeling that she didn't belong haunted her every day of her college years, Professor Ward says. Although she had an interest in creative writing, her low confidence compounded with the pressure to take a pre-professional career path prevented her from taking any writing classes. In fact, she didn't seriously consider creative writing as a viable option until her brother died six months after she graduated. In light of this tragedy, the pressures and expectations that had held Professor Ward back from pursuing a career in writing seemed negligible. Freshly aware of the finite and unstable capacity of time, she left her job at a publishing house in New York and completed her MFA at University of Michigan.

Living in so many different parts of the country, Professor Ward says, fed her interest in writing about the south and all its racial, sexual, and class-related tensions. Experiencing life on the East and West coast and in the far North revealed to Professor Ward that "history lives in the present in the South." In her writing, Professor Ward not only explores the dynamics of the Southern United States, she also gives voice to people, namely poor Southern people (and women) of color who haven't had the opportunity to

share their stories and therefore have not been part of the greater literary conversation.

At Tulane, Professor Ward is excited to be a resource for diversity and to offer a different experience based on her background as a Southern woman of color. She is looking forward to bringing authors she cares about to campus readings, including authors of color and women authors, and introducing them to a new audience. Additionally, she will be working in conjunction with the Newcomb College Institute to foster larger visibility for women writers on campus. This semester Professor Ward is teaching an introduction to creative writing course and an advanced fiction workshop. She loves reading student work because, she says, at this age most students don't have a lot of experience being told what not to write about and what stylistic and thematic choices to avoid and so they break the "rules" of creative writing in original and courageous ways. Reading student work teaches her to be less complacent and more innovative in her own work.

Next semester Professor Ward will teach a creative non-fiction workshop and another introduction to creative writing course. ♦

Desai - Cont. from page 2

Katrina," features a service learning component in which students interview people in the community who lived through Katrina, eventually documenting the stories they collect on Media NOLA's Katrina Memories Journal webpage. From his scholarly work on post-Katrina New Orleans, to his award-winning writings on the line between commerce and colonialism, to the seminar on Amitav Ghosh he will be teaching this upcoming Fall 2014 semester, Professor Desai makes it his business to ask all the right questions – questions which, he cautions, might not always be comfortable ones.

In addition to the Ghosh seminar, he will be teaching an introductory course to African and African Diaspora Studies next fall. ♦

Rothenberg - Cont. from page 3

Freud's ideas – ideas that shifted focus and valence throughout the man's life – as a foundation to explore an ever-expanding palate of issues in the human mind. Rather than taking the strict Freudian tack of psychoanalyzing literary characters in her work, Professor Rothenberg uses thinkers like Lacan as a way into the text in a more general sense. For Professor Rothenberg, theories matter, and this is perhaps best encapsulated in her assessment of continental philosophy: "Any time you're looking at people and writing," she says, "these theories turn out to be relevant." Perhaps, then, we are all continental philosophers in the English Department – a somewhat comforting thought on the eve of Finals Week. ♦

## upcoming events

Mar

26 - New Salon Poetry Reading feat. Kevin Young

Apr

9 - 26th annual Ferguson Lecture with Prof. Lisa Ruddick of the University of Chicago

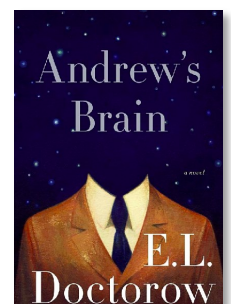
## What We're Reading

Michael Kuczynski: *Andrew's Brain* by E.L. Doctorow

Supriya Nair: *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by William Deresiewicz

Rebecca Mark: *March* by Geraldine Brooks

Hope Barnard: *An Untamed State* by Roxane Gay





The study of literature concerns life's most important themes: love and death. Hearing or reading a play like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or the lyrics of Emily Dickinson enhances our pleasure in life's bright moments and helps us to bear the pain of its darker ones. On November 3, the English Department hosted a first-of-its-kind group reading by our four tenured creative writers: Tom Beller, Peter Cooley, Zach Lazar, and Jesmyn Ward. The event drew a full house of faculty, students,

words of one of our writers, Thomas Gray—we move "along the cool sequester'd vale of life."

April 2016 marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare. The English Department, collaborating with SLA Dean Carole Haber, the Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane Special Collections, the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, and the New Orleans Public Library, has applied to bring a copy of the *First Folio* of Shakespeare's plays to Tulane and New Orleans. Published seven years after the Bard's death, the *First Folio* is one of the most important books ever printed. We won't know until January if we've won the *First Folio* competition, which is being hosted by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. and the American Library Association. Whether or not we do, we plan in 2016 to join with other local universities—Loyola, Xavier, UNO, and LSU—to celebrate Shakespeare's mortal anniversary as a sign of his immortal, imaginative vitality.

Led by Irvin Mayfield, the Grammy Award-winning jazz trumpeter, we plan to have a jazz funeral and second line for William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare lives!—as do many other British, American, and Anglophone writers, here at the Tulane English Department. Come and join us, as a major, minor, or even occasional student in our classes. If you're interested in the great themes of love and death, you'll find in Norman Mayer many kindred and entirely kindly spirits. ♦

Best Wishes,

Mike Kuczynski,

Chair, Tulane/English



and local people who heard four very different authors reflect on their and our common humanity—the eternal mysteries of love and death.

This year, I serve as faculty fellow to the Books and Reading Society in Butler Dorm. (Along with other freshman societies, this one is sponsored by the Tulane Honors Program.) Recently, we took the streetcar to Lafayette Cemetery No. 1 across from Commander's Palace Restaurant, to visit the graves and to read the inscriptions on some of their stone books. While wandering through the cemetery, we recited verses by the 18<sup>th</sup> c. Graveyard Poets, who specialized in mortality. We fell in with the other tourists: some looked at us with interest, others with dismay. The event taught us something about the power of poetry to draw people closer as—in the



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