

**Interview of Jerry W. Ward, Jr.
21 January 2016
Studio C, Music and Communications Complex
Loyola University New Orleans
6363 St. Charles Ave
New Orleans, LA 70118
Interviewed by Cleo Thomas, Jr.
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Documentary and Oral History Studio
Loyola University New Orleans

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[00:00:02.12] Justin Nystrom: Today is the 21st of January 2016. We're here in Studio C of Loyola's Music and Communications Complex. I'm Dr. Justin Nystrom, director of the Documentary and Oral History Studio. We are here with Cleo Thomas, Jr. and Professor Jerry W. Ward, Jr., Jr. Today Mr. Thomas will interview Professor Ward about his life as a man of letters. Thank you gentlemen for joining us. The studio is yours.

[00:00:31.19] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Thank you.

[00:00:32.20] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Dr. Jerry W. Ward, let's start with Trouble the Water.

[00:00:36.09] This anthology is an important part of American literary history. The introductory essay is a classic example of American writing. It's a beautiful, poetic, lyrical, philosophical introduction to this body of work. How did the anthology come to be?

[00:01:02.18] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: I had completed Black Southern Voices, which I co-edited with John Oliver Killens, and we were at that time sharing the same literary agent. That was a kind of accident: Lawrence Jordan. Lawrence said, "Well you need to do another book." So I had been in contact with any number of poets, particularly people here in the South, and elsewhere. And looking at previous anthologies I said, "Well, there needs to be a certain kind of updating"—which I did—not as thoroughly as I might have liked for reasons that have to do with permissions. So I put this together and there is what I call a kind of secret design—which I'm not telling anybody about—in how those poems were selected, and which poems I selected. One of the wonderful things that happened (because you had asked me sometime earlier about Gwendolyn Brooks) is that when I asked for her poems, she said—and I told her, I said I'm not going to use "We Real Cool" because it's been over-anthologized. And she wrote me back and said "you're a very wise man. I will let you publish these poems of mine without cost if you will

put—," and then she specified the ones that she wanted. And I said, "yes." So I pulled this together, compiled it, wrote the introductory essay, and then the problems began, because of permissions. The publishers gave me an operating budget of—I think it was \$12,000. That was hardly enough to pay for five permissions for five poets. So I was scrambling around, calling in chips with people, begging, "Please let me have this without cost, because I'm not trying to make money. You know this is something I want to do so we can have an anthology that students can actually afford." And for many years, until they decided they were losing money on it, this anthology sold for \$6.95. So people could not argue "I can't afford it." Maybe they did not wish to afford it, but they could. So we went through a number of negotiations and I got such wonderful things as people at Thunder's Mouth Press telling me, "Well you can afford to pay all of this money for Henry Dumas's work because your publisher has money." And I said, oh my God, yes, I guess my publisher does have money. I don't have the money. The person who was in charge of Cullen's material got very angry, because he didn't get the money on time, or something...

[00:04:47.21] Cleo Thomas Jr.: This is Cullen.

[00:04:49.20] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Countee Cullen.

[00:04:50.19] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Countee Cullen.

[00:04:51.03] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes. So we went through all of this and I just, after a while, had had it and threw my hands up and told them I'm not gonna do this. So Rosemary Ahern, bless her heart, was an editor there, prevailed and said, "We must go through with this," and I said, "Well I'll tell you what. I'll give you all of the addresses for all of the people in permissions, and

somebody in house has to do it, because I'm too busy teaching and I don't have time. So they did it.

[00:05:21.24] Cleo Thomas Jr.: And so they acquired the permissions.

[00:05:23.20] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: They had to acquire the permissions because, on a budget of \$12,000, [00:05:27.12]you can't do anything. It's like trying to make a feature-length movie for \$100,000.

[00:05:34.10] Cleo Thomas Jr.: I don't think the typical reader like me is aware of the economics and the legal side of creating an anthology.

[00:05:44.05] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: It's quite a bit—a tremendous amount of work, particularly now. And I don't think it's going to get much better. That might be one possible explanation, Mr. Thomas, of why people look at anthologists and say, "Well, you don't have this poem," which might be a favorite poem, or a very well-known poem by somebody. And the reason that you may not have it is that it cost too much.

[00:06:21.22] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You mention in the beautiful introductory essay that the anthology meets an odd demand. You write, "This anthology honors poetry for meeting, in the early years of this century, an odd demand—proof of civilization." Talk about that.

[00:06:42.01] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, one only needs to go back to the prefaces that James Weldon Johnson wrote for *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in the 1920s. It was 1921—was the first preface, and I think 1931, if I've got my dates right, was the second. But as he introduced Negro poetry as it was called at the time, he was very much concerned about language. And he was concerned about the language of his friend Paul Laurence Dunbar. And of course, we know that Dunbar agonized over the fact that his dialect poetry was extremely popular, and it had been

promoted by none other than William Dean Howells and other people, but that his poetry in standard American English, was respected but not beloved by the larger buying audience. And Johnson, who had some very keen insights about language and language usage in America, was a little bit appalled about this notion of using dialect since many of the people who were using dialect were not trained in linguistics, nor were they trained in anthropology—which would have helped a little bit. So they were creating dialects, and if you go back and read some of the so-called plantation poems that were rather popular in the last years of the 19th century, you will notice that the dialect goes in every direction and you don't know... Sometimes it's a way of ridiculing how black people spoke, sometimes it was simply a matter of the person not having a very good ear, and certainly not knowing anything about how to spell outside of the standard spelling system we have. So Johnson was very much concerned that people who were reading this were getting a very bad impression. And it was his notion also, which is rather classic, as I would say almost, not late Victorian because it was something that had to be proven as early as the time of Phillis Wheatley, that you, as an African person who was becoming an American, and had acquired some degree of literacy—you were expected—in certain places—to prove that you were civilized, by using your literacy well, along the lines of whatever was valued in terms of either British or American literature. Johnson did not necessarily object to this and suggested that one of the solutions was not to use dialect, but to catch what he called the racial flavor, the cadence, meter, the rhythm, I suppose even in some ways the diction, that people were using—ordinary people were using. And to present this to the larger reading public as evidence that yes, these emancipated people who were, under the Constitution, now citizens, were indeed civilized, no matter what you thought about field hollers and the blues.

[00:11:44.19] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Well that brings me to the next question I ask. You also note in the essay that variety is a crucial feature around national literature and you've just talked about culture as evidence, as evidence of our civilization, the ability to make some cultural performance. And as you note the divergent approaches or the various genres of the dialect poetry, and then the more formal poetry, you remind us that there is a suggestion that there is almost I guess a culture that is indigenous. You'd almost, I guess, say, vertically acquired, and then culture that you got at college—all culture is acquired, but the suggestion that our dialect is not culture, but if you learn a sonnet, or if you learn some more formalized western structure, that is culture. Talk about variety and talk about how this is parsed. Not really wanting to really accept variety, and not really wanting to value all culture as culture, but making it so hierarchical.

[00:13:12.06] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, why don't we suggest, using your notion of the vertical and the horizontal, that we have culture which can manifest itself diachronically, and we have aspects of culture which are indeed vertical, because you're taking a smaller slice, as it were, of duration, that's synchronic. Those motions of culture at once complement and contradict one another, depending on who is in the position of moving or being in motion. So in our evolving of what we today call an American literature, we have to remember that for a considerable portion of our country's history, American writers, colonial and post-colonial, felt that they were somehow not quite as good as the British. That's their language heritage, unless they happened to be here in New Orleans and were using French or Spanish and that's another story, which is usually minimized in our accounting for American literary history. The effort of American writers was to use the experience of being in the New World, of committing genocide, and

enslaving another important population, to forge an American idiom, and of course, by the mid-nineteenth century, you have marvelous essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson on the American scholar, the poet, the thinker, and on not social responsibility but, something akin to that, where he's trying to suggest, you know, there are ways if you are very observant, of reaching this goal, of creating an American literature. What we have to be very aware of is that what was considered legitimate as literature excluded orature, excluded any kinds of cultural expressions that were not in print. And those cultural expressions certainly were there for indigenous peoples in this country, and for African peoples, and a few probably for immigrants of other origins. That was not literature. Literature was what was printed and could be discriminated, or distinguished, from certain kinds of discourse like newspapers and histories that were not at the time literary. I mean there were genres of literature, fiction, poetry, and drama, that were respected and always it was part of what the American who expatriated himself very early—T.S. Elliot—called tradition and individual talent. So where does this place the African American person who is making creative expressions and many of whom had acquired literacy, because what we need to be aware of in this total process of having variety in American literature is a disconnect in terms of literacy and ability to create in print between those blacks who lived north of the Mason-Dixon line and those who were in the South. And that doesn't mean that you didn't have people in both sectors of the country that were able to write and read, despite the fact that it was quite illegal in certain states to allow blacks to read or to have letters, and of course we go to Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography to understand exactly what that was about. But the notion of variety was always, as I began to work through this problem with the help of other scholars, a matter of who was excluded. Now you had exclusions that were based upon ethnicity, and you had exclusions that

were based upon gender. And the gender issue certainly was dramatically articulated by Nathaniel Hawthorne who talked about those "damned women writers"—because the fiction, the novel, there were many women writers who were, I mean they were selling their novels very well in the nineteenth century. They were after the emancipation and the Civil War...there were any number of black women who were investing quite a bit of energy in writing novels to bring a certain kind of civilization, this is pre-Talented Tenth...bring a certain kind of civilization. When one looked at the kind of work that had been done by Robert Spiller and others in writing a literary history of the United States, with the exception—and I don't want to give you information that I don't remember too well, but I will say—with the exception of Emily Dickinson, and maybe Ann Bradford, the women were not represented as authors.

[00:21:19.25] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Right well that brings me to, in talking about variety, and culture the question of audience, and to the extent that, as you mentioned, this anthology meets an odd demand, proof of civilization, that we're called upon to prove that we are civilized that we're not just locked in some lower class of people not able to acquire culture, how does audience factor into that? How does the pressure to manufacture this proof potentially distort, and even make comic—when you think about Amos 'n' Andy, and somebody misusing big words, that is suggestive of the need to try to show off, and show, "look I have culture, I have a big vocabulary." How does audience and interlocutors, factor into variety and the formation of the cultural artifact, and working through finding a voice, and finding a real means of some authentic expression?

[00:22:46.27] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, you have put it, as a good Marxist would, by compelling me to suggest that the total process is a matter of economy, of various kinds of economy. When

you ask about audience, how are audiences created? Audiences are created through education. Their tastes are created through various kinds of training that people have, or their tastes may be acquired quite independent of education, by word of mouth or oral transmission. If someone says to you, "you know you really should look at this because it's really good," or people in your community have a way of expressing themselves, which is treasured. It's a very complicated matter which only now do I think scholars are beginning to really grapple with in the most serious way by trying to supplement the myth of creativity with some very practical examination of what happened and is still happening with publishing. How important are publishing—were publishing houses—in terms of working with authors and trying to present the best possible work that they could of a particular author. And you had some very powerful and very good editors. Today we have these kids who are fresh out of somewhere, who haven't the slightest idea of what an editor should be. They need instruction. So it's a very—people who are now doing work with print histories, for example, and they will soon have to do the same thing and it's going to be, overwhelmingly difficult with digital material, so we're now talking about print-centric and digital-centric materials. We have to look at any number of factors and how that is part of a cultural economy, and I'm not using cultural economy, oh well I am, in a way, that's metaphoric, however I'm also thinking about the real matter of dollars and cents. How were certain instances of literature which are considered high-cultural items produced as pulp fiction or more popular forms were bringing in the money that allowed the publishers to print and distribute books that would have smaller readerships. There's a great difference between reading books, let's say by James Michener, and novels by Donna Tartt, or Toni Morrison.

[00:26:51.24] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You are a chief purveyor of African American culture, a curator of African American culture, a producer of African American high culture, a zealous and proud advocate of that culture. Yet you are also a prime example of classic and classical American education and values and you're almost something of an interloper, and I say that in the stereotypical way that people would receive an advocate for advanced black culture as not the button-down fellow that you are, and what sticks in my mind is, in the writing somewhere, you mention being seized by trying to recall the pluperfect form of some verb, and that reminded me, and really encapsulates the very traditional, a very rigid, and you're Catholic, formal education that you have. And that's almost counterintuitive when people think about black culture and black writing, particularly modern writing. They think of a unguided, completely liberated genre, unconstricted—not just unconstrained by rules—but unaware of them. And there's something mildly insulting about that when you think about it. But comment on that.

[00:29:07.07] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well I think what you're addressing is how little investment late twentieth century and certainly early twenty-first century Americans make in trying to understand what does it mean to be an American. There have been several attempts, usually by people who have been chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities, to encourage a conversation on the topic of what does it mean to be an American, and each time the more conservative right-wing forces have prevailed and said, you're not even going to have this conversation because we're not going to allow you to have the money that it takes to do it. So to address your question and your concern, I'm saying if we understood American life a little better, there would be absolutely nothing surprising about who I am. When you speak about my, in quotation marks, classical education, which suggests that I'm akin to W.B. DuBois—

[00:30:35.15] Cleo Thomas Jr.: And T.S. Elliot.

[00:30:37.27] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: And T.S. Elliot, and Henry James and his brother William. We must not forget that I did not ever embrace a narrow definition of what an education was. My entire life has been an education, of one kind or another, and it continues to be. So that there were things that I learned and all of us learn, outside of any box, outside of any classroom, outside of an institution that is called the school or the university or college or whatever. We learn things and, according to our individual proclivities or talents, we use them. So—I'll take you out drinking with me sometime.

[00:31:42.20] Cleo Thomas Jr.: I accept.

[00:31:43.13] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: So you can understand the other kind of person I can be. But it's not what you said, necessarily. It's what is thought in this country—that if a person tries to speak well or occasionally uses a word that has thirteen letters in it, that person is being pretentious. We have a tremendous vein of anti-intellectualism that seems to be a part of the changing definition of what it is to be an American. To be an American is to not be interested in other languages. To be an American is to be suspicious of foreign cultures and of anyone who has any respect for foreign cultures. You must not have too global a vision unless it is in matters of business and then you are romping off to various parts of the world to make fortunes. So we have a country in which the very process of history allows you to say what you said. But when we begin to look at why is it that someone would think because I happen to be a black male of a certain age, I am not fulfilling the norm, as they would create a norm in terms of Shaq or Dennis Rodman, or Jay-Z, or Lil Wayne, or somebody in the entertainment or sports industry. And those are the figures that are supposed to be black. Well, I guess, Drew Brees is the ideal white figure. But it's amazing to me

that we're supposed to be very intelligent, advanced people in the twenty-first century and—don't get me talking about politics or I'll incriminate myself—but I think it is very fair to ask, have Americans descended into peculiar forms of stupidity?

[00:34:40.06] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Well it seems to me the assumption about African American artists, in particular African American poetry, or certain African American writing is an assumption similar to that made by common viewers of abstract art—"my third grader could have done that." And the fact that it does not conform to a certain historic standard or meter they deny that there could be choice or artistic value to that. That it is your ability to reproduce some form to follow this standard. And in *The Katrina Papers*, you really explain yourself and it's a charming story of your education, of teachers that teach you, first of all of a father that teaches you that t-e-h is not "the," but t-h-e is "the." But then you go on into the classroom and you have teachers that teach you these words and expand your vocabulary, and then clobber you and then say you're too wordy and verbose, when you deploy the vocabulary they have worked zealously to give you. And you see them pushing you toward some refinement, that these are tools, but they are not just displayed, and your beautiful, lyrical writing style shows you have hewed to that directive of working toward the ultimate refinement of literature. And not just the acquisition of parts, you acquire a knowledge of structure and form and vocabulary but with that, it's just a pile of supplies. It has to be individually, if you are a writer, and I guess you have to find that out, by seeing if you can do anything with those parts you've been given. And you tell us how, particularly in the Katrina papers, you came to do that, to be the writer, the poet that you are.

[00:37:15.28] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Right. It's a very interesting development. And I would certainly want to say for the record that anything I have done since I began my life as a teacher in

1970 was always done on behalf of my students. I was raised to believe that since I had somehow accidentally got a little more intelligence than some people, I was supposed to use it wisely. And there were a number of people in my family that were interested in teaching. So it came as something that you could do. And I remember very vividly—with some kids in my neighborhood—when I was very small, I had—it wasn't a blackboard, maybe it was just black paper or something. And I said, "we're going to have school today." And so I decide on my front porch that I'm going to be teaching. I'm the teacher of course. Because you need to know how to spell, you need to know how to add and subtract, because you seem not to be doing it too well. And it was really a great deal of fun. That became a very serious matter for me when I took my first full time teaching job back at my alma mater Tougaloo College in 1970. And I said, "Oh I had such a wonderful four years here, I'll give four years back, and then move on to something else." And my students kept saying each year, "But you can't leave until I graduate!" So I got suckered into staying there for thirty-two years with this whole excuse that I could not leave because they had not yet graduated. I'm very pleased of having invested that kind of effort in teaching and also in another part of being a professional. I wasn't just simply a teacher. I thought that if I were going to be successful in teaching students something about language and literature, I had to also demonstrate my own skills. And at the same time I had to be a fairly decent role model especially for English majors in terms of "What is the profession about?" So I was a member of College Language Association, Modern Language Association, and most importantly, National Council of Teachers of English. And some other smaller groups. And I would write, let's say, book reviews for the *Jackson Advocate*, the local black newspaper in Jackson, because I thought that was what one was supposed to do. I would publish book reviews and other kinds of

things because I wanted my students to know well, yes I'm in the classroom and I'm doing this, but I also have to have another kind of life. And I have to develop as a teacher a certain network that will be of use to you later, because when my students wanted to go to graduate schools and I was trying to give them advice, I would say, "Well let's see, what do you think you want to work on?" And they would tell me, and then they'd probably give me all these schools that they thought they were going to and I would say "No, you're not going there. I'm going to contact Professor X, who is interested in this subject, and ask Professor X, whom I've met at several professional meetings if she or he would be willing to direct your dissertation." You use this kind of networking and you put forth that kind of effort as a teacher, because I had another goal in mind. I wanted to produce students, and I tell some of my students who were my mentees through the UNCF/Mellon Programs, time and again, that I always wanted to help to educate students so that at some point in their lives they would become my teachers. If you do not educate your students so that they can teach you something, you have failed.

[00:42:58.18] Cleo Thomas Jr.: There is a modesty in your evaluation of yourself and education and in a recent essay you wrote you talked about how all your students taught you something, even the dullest. And perhaps your long years in the classroom, everybody in there was a student, including you—according to you, and that everybody in there was also a teacher, and your takeaway, it's really a touching assessment of even the dullest student. Talk about that.

[00:43:43.18] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well one of the amusements, I suppose, I would occasionally produce in my classroom, was I would walk in, and I would sit down. And people would be looking around saying, "What's wrong with him today?" And I would point to a student and say "You're teaching today. What's our lesson?" Students were momentarily in a state of shock that

they should have to teach. Especially, and I would sometimes suspect that the person I chose had not done his or her homework. So that person had to stand at the front of the room, and they would create all kinds of things and I would say, "But sir, or mam, I came to learn," and what I'm doing is I'm giving them this lesson, but I'm playing the role of the student who is really not the student, but the student who is very smart and is going to ask the tough question that I, in my real role as a teacher, should be able to answer. So I think that the whole notion of modesty, which I will accept, comes out of a very deep sense of something that I find despicable about the academic world, and that is pretense. If we are teachers, and we knew—or maybe we didn't but we should have known—that we were not going to become extremely wealthy or important people because we are teachers, then we would always make sacrifices, as many of my teachers did, for my sake. And I had to do that for many of my students. And I never liked the notion that still prevails in higher education that colleagues in various disciplines have to be highly competitive and back-biting and always creating some kind of animosity among themselves that goes beyond simple disagreement of positions or theories. It becomes a very personal matter. And it's gotten me into a number of uncomfortable situations when I had acquaintanceships or friendships with people who were at odds with each other, and I refused to take sides. I said, "You know, I like both of you, and I'm not going to talk about X with Y, or Y with X," and furthermore, I think our job, our mission, in terms of trying to understand something, to build, to make contributions or whatever we're doing, requires more cooperation than one-to-one competition. We're not playing certain kinds of sports. This is not a sport. So I suppose that from some angles seems to be modest, and I guess what you're calling modesty is just a part of my personality. I never wanted fame. I wanted respect, and I had to earn that from my students and

from other people. But I did not want to be famous and I did not want to become what is now called a public intellectual because all of our public intellectuals of whatever background are playing in a circus.

[00:48:06.19] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You, in your splendid introduction to *Trouble the Water*, talked about the priestly prejudices of the academy, the priestly prejudices of the academy. An appropriate topic to mention in the Loyola laboratory.

[00:48:24.21] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes, it certainly is, because we're very priestly over here as opposed to those Protestants across the way at Tulane.

[00:48:35.20] Cleo Thomas Jr.: But you're speaking about, I take it, hoping that the anthology would make available to people a wide variety of reading that might be foreclosed, going back to what you were just talking about, about some of the narrow turf battles in the academy about who is canonical and not?

[00:49:07.11] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Right because there are many saints who are uncanonized, and there are some saints who are canonized that need to be cleansed from the list because they haven't produced any miracles for over a thousand years and I'm wondering what is the usefulness of them and the archbishop will not excommunicate me for saying that. But the point is that the academy has half-seriously tried to be priestly, given that the church was a repository for learning for many years, and that's why when you read Chaucer you read about the scholars. And in Europe of course, we have to remember that it was the church that was trying to preserve certain kinds of things and making judgements but that other kinds of things were being preserved even better including items of Greek culture by the Muslims who were in Spain on the Iberian Peninsula. And so it is through Arab intellectual traditions that much that might have

been lost is now saved. Let us not forget that. There's a certain point at which the usefulness of pretending that we have canons has to confront the fact that if people have not been to university they may also have canons. And this goes back to your question about creativity, cultural expression, and marketplaces. The best sellers, and I'm thinking of someone from Mississippi, John Grisham, who belongs to your profession. I mean the man has made millions of dollars. He is not canonized. You're not going to find, except in a course, an odd course—odd I say because it would be so infrequently awkward—on literature and the law. Or novels, not about detective work but about the issue of law and how does that play out in corruption, for example. You're not going to find him taught, but he is very well read. One of the best-selling authors in this country is Stephen King. You cannot mention Stephen King in the academy in the same sentence in which you talk about Edgar Allen Poe for example, or Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Ernest Hemingway. It's like, you're getting things all mixed up. Those other people are great writers. Stephen King is just a popular writer. Well, yes. Popularity has given him a fairly large audience. So I'm saying I enjoy reading some of Stephen King, and also his book on writing. People don't realize that he did invest a bit of time in trying to help other people to write and to suggest what it is that makes a good story. A number of well-placed writers do this and there are various collections where they talk about writing and what it means and what kind of investments they have. So my work now, in going back to *Trouble the Water*, to what John Oliver Killens and I tried to do in *Black Southern Voices*, my blogs, which you are a little bit familiar with. I'm trying to always bring in works of literature that are not necessarily canonical because I think there is something of value there. This week I am every excited by the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish. Why is his poetry, which is world-class, so important? Some of it has to do with the fact that he

was a Palestinian. And that I wrote at one point a poem, "I did not ask to be a Palestinian" for a person who was from Lebanon. So I'm looking at his work and I'm getting very excited about it and probably in a day or so I'll have a blog about one particular poem in his most recently published collection which is called "The Red Indian's Penultimate Message to the White Man," which actually echoes for me, as you might guess, something about *White Man Listen* by Richard Wright. But it's amazing to me that this Arab writer should have sat and listened to American Indian chants, and used this—and he has to say Red Indian because part of what he's doing in this piece is to chastise Columbus for thinking that he had the right to find India anywhere in any sea, and ultimately telling him to go back home and go find the real India, you know. And then of course we have the problem of saying, "Well, Louisiana had an Indian governor." Oh yes, but he wasn't Houma. You know, he was of India, he wasn't that kind of Indian. So I'm really very interested in how writers throughout the world are trying to deal with what has been made a very difficult subject, and that is the matter of identity, and how that matter of identity is not just simply a matter of how you construct a taxonomy. It's much more serious than that. It's really gotten into matters of economy and the military and life and death and terrorism. And international politics which is very exciting at the present time because it's in so many fragments, and you don't know exactly what you're doing when you try to talk about international politics. So what's happening in Sri Lanka? And how is that related to China? And why is it that certain aspects of the Chinese economy caused the Dow to go down on Wall Street. And why is Wal-Mart, which I swear, is headquartered in China, cancelling approximately sixteen thousand American jobs, alright, as they close stores around this country. But the

products, if you go to Wal-Mart, with the exception what is made in Japan, and that's less than one percent, everything's made in China.

[00:58:16.04] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You mentioned Richard Wright. You are the leading American scholar on Richard Wright--

[00:58:21.13] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: I am one, let me correct you. I am one of many Richard Wright scholars in this country.

[00:58:28.14] Cleo Thomas Jr.: No definitive word would be made on Richard Wright without your being consulted. Talk about your study and devotion to Richard Wright and his work.

[00:58:44.24] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: I discovered Wright's work as an undergraduate. First book was a collection of stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*. I was fascinated by that. I spent time between reading James Baldwin and other people, trying to read some Richard Wright. But I became--and of course when I started my graduate work I thought I was going to be an English Renaissance scholar who was going to be an expert on Edmund Spenser. But I finally decided that no that's not what I'm going to do and when I was doing my degree at the University of Virginia and specializing in literary theory and criticism, I said, "Oh, this is exactly what I need to do with Richard Wright, with whom I feel this deep affinity," so I wrote my dissertation on Wright and his American critics between 1938 and 1960. That is, from his first earliest publications to the date of his death. And I felt that the kinship, as it were, between Richard Wright and me, was based on the fact that we both grew up in Mississippi. We very early on felt we were oddities, we were not like other people. And we had an unusual appetite for reading. In a documentary that Mississippi ETV did on Richard Wright called *Richard Wright: Black Boy*, one of his childhood friends said, "He was always reading. I'm surprised he didn't lose his eyesight because he was

reading so much." You know, and I really just smiled behind this because some of my cousins would always say "Why are you reading?" And they'd look at what I was reading and they would just like turn their noses up at it. You know here I'm reading about Roman history or reading something in the sciences that I was interested in. And all of that was just too much for them, so they just dismissed me and said, "He's just one of the oddballs of the family. We'll just accommodate him, but you know you got to watch that Jerry W. Ward, Jr. because something is not right there." And so I just happily went along doing what I wanted to do, just as Richard Wright defied in many ways his family's expectations and certainly the grandmother who was a Second Day Adventist and reading all this fiction and that was the devil's work. And what really I suppose secured, as it were, my affinity with Richard Wright was the discovery of how interestingly political he was as a writer. He was not the person who wanted to be out with placards. And he didn't like community organizing work. He wanted to use words. And believe me, he used them very well. So as I have suggested, in March, when *Indonesian Notebook: Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* comes out from Duke University Press, we're going to have a great deal of attention being given at least, I hope, to that book, which is the work of Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher. And the whole notion that the Cold War is over—so I'm kind of interested in 1955, the Bandung conference, what happened there? Why did the United States kind of dismiss the importance of that, or did it? And what was it that Wright recognized about this conference of non-aligned nations where people were supposed to be making a decision between, as Padmore had it, Pan-Africanism or communism, or pan-something-or-other-ism, and communism. And it wasn't democracy necessarily. But that we may now understand something else happened and that we have a new crusade in process. Wright

said, noting because he was very suspicious of the opiate of religion, said "we should not dismiss the possibility that some of the religious fanatics from some of the countries that participated in the Bandung Conference might lead efforts or crusades or what we now call jihads. Well the jihads had gotten out of hand because they are not strictly in accord with the dictates of the Quran. And we have many people who are just plain out and out barbaric thugs operating in the name of Allah and they're going to be justly punished for that. But not on this earth. The important thing to realize here about Wright—and that's why I make a most unusual and debatable claim about him—is that among twentieth century writers, when we look at them very coldly, what we recognize about Richard Wright, was that his mind seemed to move in concentric circles, ever widening. So he would write early on about the South and things from Mississippi. And then later about the United States in such a book as *Native Son*, which obviously caused a great stir and was very popular. But then having chosen to remove himself and his family to Paris, he became much more interested in international affairs and his friendships with say, C.L.R. James and Padmore and getting a great introduction to Kwame Nkrumah that allowed him to go and spend time in the Gold Coast, in Ghana, and to write *Black Power*. To become very interested in Franco's Spain and to write *Pagan Spain* as he's trying to deal with the, as best he could, with what was the relationship which is very obscured now, between paganism and Catholicism. Because we have to remember that Catholicism as an heir to what we may call Judeo-Christian traditions, has to always look back to what forms of paganism got incorporated into our liturgy, our rituals. Those things, the roots are very deep because even if we're talking about Judaism, let us not forget that there are certain aspects of Jewish belief and ritual which did not come down like manna from heaven. It was a part of the cultural process in

that part of the world. And that there were some borrowings and adaptations and transformations of things from the Assyrians and Canaanites and everyone else in that region.

[01:08:43.22] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You draw attention to one of Richard Wright's short stories concerning a flooding in Mississippi with Katrina. Do I not remember in *The Outsider*, there is a subway or some sort of wreck that allows somebody to kind of

[01:09:08.20] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes, there is a--

[01:09:13.07] Cleo Thomas Jr.: In his novel *The Outsider*.

[01:09:15.18] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: The novel *The Outsider*. There is the L. The L is wrecked. And Cross Damon can use this as an occasion to do precisely what he wants to do, and that is to change his identity and to leave because of some problems he's created with his wife and his girlfriend and whatnot, to become a new man and not to have certain kinds of responsibilities. So he can be—you know, it's like a rebirth for him. But that's very different from a flood.

[01:09:56.14] Cleo Thomas Jr.: It is different from a flood. But for some reason, the power that Wright has over his readers, when I think of one of the aspects of the flood, and maybe this is kind of from a reader of Grisham-mystery-type mindset, you also see it as an opportunity for escape for somebody perhaps. They just came to mind. The Wright writing that came to mind to me after Katrina was that.

[01:10:29.05] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes, but let us remember, there are two stories: a very short one which was called "Silt," when it was first published, and then it appeared in *Eight Men*—it was called "The Man Who Saw the Flood." And then the more famous story "Down By the Riverside." In both, the flood does not present an opportunity for a new or better life. In the instance of "Down by the Riverside," Mann, and the name is highly symbolic, makes certain

choices and that involves theft of a boat, and he murders the owner of the boat even as he is saving the family of this owner. And of course it leads to his death because everything's going on. You have to read the history of levees, the history of floods of the Mississippi to understand what kind of situation he was in. So he's going to be given some kind of summary justice by these military forces that are there to keep order and to also keep these guys working. And so he runs away and is shot and dies in the river. In the shorter piece, the family comes back to what's left of their farmland in the Delta. And they have to start over. So you realize that the cycle, the flood has not freed them from the cycle of poverty and being chained to an agricultural process, chained to the land as it were. And that was, if you go back to *Black Boy*, and read a very hurtful comment that Wright makes about his father and his father's being "just a sharecropper." So Wright is, and I guess he had his own reasons which I will not try to explain right now... But Wright is very unkind in saying well "I've made some achievement but my father is just like a part of nature." It's almost the way—he stops just short of dehumanizing his father, but makes it very clear that his father is representative of those people who never escaped in the South from whatever cycles of poverty and being always enslaved to the land meant.

[01:14:01.15] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Gwendolyn Brooks. Tell us about her significance to our national literature and about her significance to you personally.

[01:14:10.00] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, Gwendolyn Brooks was for me always a model of the very accomplished writer. The person who always used language with extreme precision. And when I thought of her poetry, I would think of the sculpture of Elizabeth Catlett and of the drawings of Charles White. I mean these are very accomplished artists. Following Margaret Walker's having won the Yale prize in 1942 with *For My People*, Gwendolyn Brooks won the

Pulitzer for *Annie Allen*. So she was already at that time, and this is in the 1950s, and 1940s—there are women writers who are very accomplished and are then going to be looked at as models in some way. Gwendolyn Brooks always had a very strong investment in writing about Chicago, urban life, and certain kinds of--how should I put it nicely--class and color distinctions that were being made.

[01:16:03.03] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Within the black community.

[01:16:04.29] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes. And of course, she wasn't of the right color. She wasn't Etta Moten Barnett. She wasn't Lena Horne, right? So she had a disadvantage from that class and color conscious angle. But that did not prevent her from writing a large number of really excellent poems and to do something quite well with sonnet and ballad. She was quite a craftsperson. Partially as a result of attending a 1967 conference of black writers which Killens headed at Fisk University, her interests already in certain younger writers who were being nurtured by Hoyt Fuller of *Negro Digest/Black World*, she began to make some remarkable changes in her work—not in terms of the quality but how she wanted to address things. So even in what I suppose someone might recklessly call her "new militant poetry," you're going to find very fine craftsmanship. So I've always held her in very high regard and now we have, at James Madison University, the Furious Flower Poetry Center, which is named from lines in one of her poems. That's where that title "Furious Flower" comes from. And so her legacy, which we will obviously have to celebrate in 2017, because that will mark the 100th year of her birth, her legacy is still very very important. And it's hard to take a single writer or a single poet especially, and to say what that person means for a certain genre, because I'm not sure that if you just had listed out women writers and you put Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Bishop, and perhaps Muriel

Rukeyser together, and Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker—I mean, how are you going to say who, among those five women I've named, has greater importance? No, that's not the way writing, that's not the way poetry operates in our country. We have people who appeal, their work appeals, to various segments of a reading population, of a literate population. And a people who like the poetry of Nathaniel Mackey or Robert Hayden or Michael Harper may not necessarily like the poetry of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, or of certain other poets who practice what I call the aesthetics of abrasion. So each of these people will either have a large or not so large audience. And this is the way it happens for fiction. For poetry. And well, drama is very hard to talk about now because that's no longer simply stage plays. We've got to deal with stage plays as they're competing with video, they're competing with television, they're competing with cinema, so you know certain audience still wants to go to a play because as someone said, the distinction between a play and a film is that there is community when you go to a play. There is no community when you go to a film. You're locked in that dark cave or cavern that Baldwin talked about in *The Devil Finds Work*.

[01:21:15.18] Cleo Thomas Jr.: A couple of other people, since we're talking about poets Lorenzo Thomas. Then I want to ask you about Charles Rowell and Callaloo. Lorenzo Thomas, the poet.

[01:21:26.02] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Lorenzo Thomas and I, partially as a result of an introduction that must have been made by my late friend Tom Dent, became friends. When Lorenzo left the CCLM, the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, he suggested that I should replace him on that council, which I did. And we had more than two decades of correspondence and wonderful times together. We both went to—what year was it? '95 I believe. We both went to a conference on the Black Aesthetic in Munich and had a wonderful time there together.

[01:22:29.20] Cleo Thomas Jr.: I just think he's one of the greatest poets in the world, ever.

[01:22:35.16] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, yes I suppose one could say that. I would say that with a great deal of caution because I think we have many many great poets in the world, and he is one of them.

[01:22:47.05] Cleo Thomas Jr.: He is, but an individual gets to choose.

[01:22:49.26] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well you have made your choice and I have made my diplomatic choice, and so that's how things are.

[01:22:57.07] Cleo Thomas Jr.: And you're an anthologist so you have to be diplomatic.

[01:23:01.03] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Of course I--well, not necessarily. Not necessarily. But I think Lorenzo is a person whose work will be reexamined. It's not been examined thoroughly enough despite the fact that the Project on the History of Black Writing had two seminars called "Don't Deny My Voice," which is a take-off on a title that Aldon Nielsen chose for a post-humous anthology of writing on black music by Lorenzo. During those two seminars, and I participated as a faculty member in both of them, his work was mentioned but there was no—and there probably wasn't time really given everything we were trying to accomplish—to really examine who was Lorenzo Thomas and what was he about and why was he--what does it mean that Lorenzo Thomas was really the baby in Umbra, the group that formed in New York in the '60s, that included people like Tom Dent and the Patterson Brothers and Ishmael Reed and Askia Touré who was Ronald Snellings. And other interesting people. But Lorenzo was the young guy and you had the older character who really gave some creative direction I suppose to all of them and that was Calvin Hernton. But Lorenzo was very curious. He told me once about going to Andy Warhol's studio and hanging out with that particular bohemian crowd as well as the people

in Umbra and other people throughout. So Lorenzo was one of our earliest and most cosmopolitan poets. And I think that is maybe something that you find extremely attractive about his work and he was fiercely independent and did not necessarily fall into certain traps that it was very easy for other people to fall into of spouting a party line. No, Lorenzo was always Lorenzo.

[01:25:53.21] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Charles Rowell and *Callaloo*.

[01:25:57.22] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes. Well that is also a very interesting story and I have begun to write something on the first seven issues of *Callaloo*. *Callaloo* is an outgrowth of some very interesting discussions from the very early 1970s. Mainly discussions about publishing, creativity, writing, in the Southern Black Cultural Alliance. It actually grew out of a group that was interested in community theater, but involved a lot of people who were interested in other forms of writing as well. So I remember in 1975 a meeting that we had in Birmingham, that was where the group met that particular year, and we had this very long and intense discussion involving Rowell, Tom Dent, a lot of other people and me about what we might possibly do. And obviously Rowell said we need to have a publication, and of course Tom Dent and I agreed with that. So Dent, Rowell, and Ward became the earliest editors, co-editors of this. But I want to make it very clear that the great force behind this was Charles Rowell, because Tom was doing things that would lead to his writing his *Southern Journey*. And he was very interested in doing this oral history work and at the same time he was thinking about trying to do a book with Andy Young. I was finishing up my Ph.D. at University of Virginia and I did not have very much time to devote to *Callaloo* except to write a few things for it. So the matter of raising the funds, getting people to contribute the money that would allow for publication, all of that belongs to Charles. So the one thing that has been very intriguing to people is how is it that by the time we

got to issue number seven of *Callaloo*, Dent and I were no longer the co-editors but we had been relegated to a lesser status. Well, it was Charles's choice, which I think he had every right to make, that we were not progressive enough for him because we believed in publishing all of these little people, and he wanted a magazine that was going to get national if not international attention. And his dream has now been fulfilled, because that's precisely what *Callaloo* is. It is an international magazine.

[01:29:23.06] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Professor Ward, I ordered a book of essays I saw Robert Boyers, editor, *Salmagundi* had published. I ordered the book. The book arrives, it says it's dedicated to Orlando Patterson, and his wife, that's the sociologist. I order Professor Jerry W. Ward, Jr.'s book *Katrina Papers* and I look on the back and the long blurb is from Hank Lazer who is the distinguished English professor and associate provost for many years at the University of Alabama. Those are both interracial encounters, as you pick up a book by one leading scholar, dedicated to another scholar, but an African-American scholar. You pick up a book by leading scholar Professor Ward and it's much admired by another leading scholar. Going back to a comment you made earlier, if American life was better understood. You are the great scholar of Richard Wright who could not remain, certainly not in Mississippi but hardly even in America. What is the life of the African American intellectual like now? What is the community in which you live and move and have your being? Tell us about that.

[01:30:51.29] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: I think if we're going to talk about the African American intellectual as a kind of category we will find that there's a tremendous amount of diversity in that category. There are people who are not attached to universities necessarily, who are doing wonderful things. Or maybe not so wonderful things. There are obviously professors, people in

the professoriate. And they—you have to look at where are they located, what kinds of schools. Are they at research one institutions? They're at community colleges, or wherever they are. So I think it would be a big mistake to try to make a generalization about African American intellectuals in the twenty-first century. I just think that we are so different among ourselves and that we do so many different things so one almost has to be very specific about what is it that you think this intellectual does. Does she or he do hard sciences? Astrophysics? Microbiology or biochemistry? Or philosophy as it might be the case with a number of people who are of interest to me? Or does this person write? Or just what is it that the person does? Or maybe it's a person who's in business can also be an intellectual and obviously there are some people even in the entertainment industry who are very intelligent and they express their intelligence very differently. And I would contrast, let's say, Spike Lee, with Tyler Perry. Both very successful, and of course Oprah is the ultimate success story. And these are all very smart people, whether one wants to call them intellectuals or not, that is a choice that one has to make. And in fact, I have in mind doing a piece on the crisis, which I want to call, "The Crisis of the Intellect," as opposed to the crisis of the intellectual.

[01:33:44.10] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You have remained in Mississippi and contiguous states, Mississippi and Louisiana, and you have remained at historically black colleges with countless encounters of visiting professorships at Grinnell and a zillion other places.

[01:34:07.05] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: No I didn't go to a zillion other places.

[01:34:09.10] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Well, many other places.

[01:34:10.20] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Okay.

[01:34:11.20] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Many other places. And when not in visiting professorships, certainly in appearances. But you were able to do what was impossible for Richard Wright to do, which was to remain in America. And I guess let me ask you this. Is there, you speak of in your Katrina Papers experience, you speak of exile. Often, or perhaps, typically we characterize Richard Wright's years in France as expatriation, but in many ways wasn't he pretty much exiled? I mean, he was certainly exiled from Mississippi, it was inhospitable. And in many ways, was American much better? The communist party was so hostile. Talk about exile and expatriation and Wright. Was it a bit of both? And then your triumphant continuing residence in Mississippi, and I'm going on too long, because I would like to almost make the provocative assertion that in a way, you're kind of, we talk about Ellison, and Baldwin being the, killing the father, and in a way, your just unsurpassed success as a scholar and a writer and an intellectual in Mississippi and Louisiana is almost a mild reproach to Wright and everybody else--Let me finish my question professor. There is nothing that you have not accomplished. There is no literary feat that you have undertaken that you really have not successfully done, and as you talk about Wright's, really almost insulting his father, there's almost something of a reproach to everybody, in that you can stay here, you can serve your community, this cost me nothing. I gained everything. There's nothing that you haven't done, there's nothing that you haven't achieved, you've done it all from Mississippi and Louisiana, mainly from Tougaloo and Dillard, and for all of your fake modesty, it's a reproach! You are thumbing your nose at everybody because of this tremendous achievement in these, what some people might think are unlikely places!

[01:37:18.23] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, let me gently correct you. I have not achieved everything. I have not gotten a call from the MacArthur Foundation yet.

[01:37:29.26] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Well, keep living.

[01:37:33.04] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well I don't have that much time. And my modesty is not fake, sir. It's authentic. And I appreciate your esteem for me, but let's go back to the matter of exile, expatriation, and Richard Wright. I'm going to take it that for you, exile is an involuntary action. Expatriation is a choice, for whatever reason or rationale one wants to provide. And I think we need to talk about Wright in terms of expatriation more than exile, although the conditions of being removed from one's homeland, whether you went away because you were forced to or whether it was your choice, might be rather similar because you're trying to negotiate now a new cultural space, a new language, a new history, you know, which may be somewhat alien, not in a necessarily bad sense but it's going to be alien to you. And I think that's what Wright faced. I think there's a difference in what drove Baldwin into exile, and why he said he had to leave because I would have killed someone. Or, a lesser-known artist, Allen Polite, who is mentioned briefly in Baraka's autobiography. Early on he was a poet and I think he was published in some of the little magazines that Leroi Jones and Hettie Cohen were doing. But his major work is in art and he chose to go to Scandinavia. And there are a number, I discovered when we were doing some checking on him, that there was a rather large--well, large, not overwhelming but--a significant number of African American artists who went to Sweden or Norway or Denmark or someplace like that. Finland, even. And they would, some of them got to know each other and they have things. So you had a Northern European expatriation as well as a few people like Ollie Harrington being in Germany and of course everyone who managed to get into Paris at one point or another. And of course Baldwin living for some time in Turkey which I find intriguing—that he should have chosen that place. So with Wright, I think it was a matter of being in an

interracial marriage and having what I call interracial children. And his daughters...well, Rachel was born in Paris but Julia was born in New York. So the insults that he knew even in the most liberal city of New York that she would face, because of her mixed race background, was a bit much. And he had achieved a certain degree of success and was invited the year before he actually made a firm decision to go and live in Paris, to spend some time in France as a special guest. And I suppose he liked the conversations he was having with the existentialists and the chance that he had to—excuse me—have some communication with Gertrude Stein and other people that were living abroad. So I don't think that we can make a special case for his being abroad. Maybe you would make a different case for Baldwin, but I see Wright as being abroad more in the same sense that we speak of Ezra Pound or some other Americans who spent time in Europe, Hemingway, obviously, and Hemingway in Cuba. These people wanted certain kinds of adventures. Now the nuance that you have to bring to the case of Richard Wright is that many of these other people were not black. So what does it mean for an African American man to move to Paris less than three years after the end of World War II, who has a kind of Marxist background which he's rejected but certainly has a very strong feeling about pan-Africanism, and nationalism itself, being unable to talk about French colonialism? Fanon can do that. He was nobody's guest, you know, he wasn't a guest of the French government. Richard Wright was a guest of the French government and also, let us not forget, that as a former communist, Wright was under FBI surveillance and under the surveillance of several other agencies. The State Department was quite interested in what he was doing. And Hazel Rowley, who was one of Wright's biographers, shared a State Department document with me because she wanted to know if Wright had written it. And I read it many times and told her "No, he did not write this. This was written by the

Department of State." But a certain kind of pressure was put on him, and this is in 1954 in the Gold Coast. And he had to sign it, because you see, we must not be so naive as to think that the American intelligence community has not used many of the same strategies that you would expect from the KGB. And there are certain things that you do in this country and you are given offers that you cannot refuse. Our intelligence community can be as cruel as the Mafia. And "You better sign this, or would you like to see your daughter's body floating somewhere. Or your wife's head in a box."

[01:46:34.26] Cleo Thomas Jr.: So Wright was an expat?

[01:46:39.03] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes. And the document they asked him to sign was one to build a case against his primary host, Kwame Nkrumah and the Secret Seven. Well these were Nkrumah's comrades, who really rather non-violently I would say, engineered the independence of the Gold Coast. Within, still within the British Commonwealth but independence and this was a problem for the British, it was a problem for the Americans, it was a problem for everybody. And Wright was never able to—he wanted to move to Great Britain but the foreign office there found excuse after excuse to deny him.

[01:47:48.16] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Was in Great Britain when he died?

[01:47:50.15] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes, yes. His daughter Julia had come back from Cambridge and was with him in Paris. I guess she had been there a month or so before he died but the wife was still abroad and you know, they were not divorced, they were kind of separated and leading rather different lives and Wright was having a number of problems at the time, both with health and with dwindling income so that he had to sell the magnificent apartment on rue Monsieur LePrince and get a smaller apartment. You know, so he had to be much more frugal than he had

ever been in his life. This was not easy for a person who had his reputation and his fame. What is this downfall that you've suddenly faced. But it had to do with what we began with much earlier and that is the, how the wind is blowing in the publishing world and what is selling and what is not selling. Also remember that after 1953 there were two people competing for Wright's space in the imagination: Baldwin and Ellison. And the publishers were promoting them against each other. It was a kind of battle royale scene out of *Invisible Man*. Let's have these people fight each other. And of course, Baldwin, in his naiveté, wrote a piece that was very offensive to Richard Wright, and it was published in a magazine that was backed by our CIA, so of course—

[01:50:07.08] Cleo Thomas Jr.: *Encounter*.

[01:50:08.05] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yes. And Stephen Spender was involved with all of that. It is very interesting how our non-literary agencies somehow find it in their interest to invest some money in culture.

[01:50:28.17] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Absolutely.

[01:50:29.17] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: And how they do it is another matter but it's really very interesting. And I think William J. Maxwell's book *F.B.Eyes*, which is about the surveillance of American writers, primarily of African American writers [and other books, Mary Helen Washington on the black left] and earlier books that deal with surveillance help us to begin to develop a sharper view of what has been happening with literature in America and in particular with African American literature. Or I would suppose increasingly Hispanic literature is, you know, you ramp up all of your concerns about who's legit or illegitimate and what difference do you make between those descendants of the Spanish in the Southwest who were always there and

never lived in Mexico, and you might have a person like Rudolfo Anaya who will say, you know there is a real difference between me and Mexicans or Chicanos, because my family is older.

[01:51:57.15] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You've mentioned Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson, and you note in your introduction about women writers, that African American women writers have perhaps had a very particular sense of audience, giving rise to a voice at once modulated and unforgettable. And in thinking of the audience and you have personally developed a literary voice that is modulated and personal, what's your perspective on the audience as perceived by the African American woman writer, and your own sense of audience and how, if at all, it affects your voice.

[01:52:52.09] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well I think if, and I would go back to two people: Phillis Wheatley and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. Phillis Wheatley was one of those proof-giving people, right—the evidence that we began talking about. So she's writing very neoclassical poetry but she also had a sense of the need to give certain instructions to American audiences and I remarked on this in a piece I did for the *Journal of Ethnic American Literature* most recently on abrasion. So her audience was always going to be overwhelmingly white, and the better part of her audience would have been people who were interested in abolition. Obviously, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was a champion of the abolition of the institution of slavery and wrote endlessly, and lectured, and spoke and read her poetry, so she had also a really strong sense of her audience being those who would support the liberation of—excuse me—of enslaved African American people in this country. So when we look at the commitment and interests of women writers and artists, I think you look at the women writers of the late 19th century, the women writers of the 19-teens, the 1920s, you look at Zora Neale Hurston, you move forward to Ann Petry. Obviously

the two women we've talked about, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker, but you also have people like May Miller, who comes out of the Renaissance period. You had Jesse Fauset. All of these women writers were always at a little bit of a disadvantage no matter how well they wrote, no matter if they were as brilliant as Anna Julia Cooper, because the industry was not going to have that. You know, they had to take second place to Edna Ferber and some other women writers who were supposed to be supported and advertised, and these were just black women writers but they did have their audiences and their audiences were developed through the pages of crisis and opportunity and even—excuse me—certain black world newspaper for Garvey. In the '50s more of them were able to write, and of course there was a breakthrough in the theater with Lorraine Hansberry coming out with *A Raisin in the Sun* and that had overwhelming popularity. And so you've got more things being done and the work of Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis of course, the theater couple. Which could do something with literature, or bring a certain to attention. But and of course what we have happening, at a certain stage of the very long Civil Rights movement, is a resurgence of the women's liberation movement in the early seventies, and this time, you don't have in women's liberation, the ignoring of black women who had to petition, Ida B. Wells, and all these people, to even be a part of the women's movement in the 19th century, because Susan Anthony and other folks were not necessarily lacking in racism, but in the seventies you have these, a new feminist assertion, which is supposed to be multi-racial. But then when you look at a Toni Cade Bambara book, you see something different. When you look at the work of Angela Davis, you see something different. You look at some of the women who were in OBAC, the Organization of Black American Culture, which was a Chicago group, or women writers who participated in the 1973 Phyllis Wheatley conference at Jackson State

which was the brainchild of Margaret Walker. And you get a great deal of variety and of course a new kind of feminist politics coming from Sonia Sanchez, from Toni Cade Bambara, from Nikki Giovanni.

[01:59:30.19] Cleo Thomas Jr.: And it's interesting I read a book on Junior Year Abroad, of Jacqueline Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis. And Angela Davis was in Paris—was in France, I don't think she quite made it to Paris—in 1963, during the church bombing. And of course one of the little girls lived directly behind her and was a friend. But as you mentioned Wright in Paris, it's interesting to think that Angela Davis was in Paris when there was the Birmingham church bombing.

[02:00:05.11] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Yeah but you have to remember Angela Davis was headed for a very special kind of academic career because she was an academic protege, I guess it's safe to say that--

[02:00:18.20] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Marcuse?

[02:00:19.19] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: of Marcuse.

[02:00:20.17] Cleo Thomas Jr.: You know there was a wonderful—and I bid on it—there was a wonderful letter of recommendation from Marcuse that was auctioned at Swan, but the wonderful thing about it since it was in the catalogue, you can always go back and read it. I don't need to own it. And the book on it talked about, of all the people featured there, Angela Davis, spoke idiomatic French. And they loved her as no junior year abroad student had been loved before. And of course the book went on, much of that piece talked about the devotion of the French people to her, during her travails. But her connection with France is kind of deep and real. You remind us when you give the breadth of your response on women writers reminds us

that it's hard to do anything without your anthology before us because typically we have such a narrow timeframe. In our small minds, we would start with Toni Cade Bambara's anthology, and you start, you know, 200 years before then.

[02:01:42.20] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well I suppose it has to do with my sense of what responsible literary history is. And responsible literary history did not begin in the 20th century. And of course there are other anthologies available, mine, which is out of print now, much to my, well it's not to my dismay because I refuse to be dismayed by it. But it stayed in print for ten years, which is quite a good run. But then there were new anthologies coming out and the publishers decided that if we're going to keep this at seven dollars, this is a losing... I mean it's not making any money when the ordinary anthology of the same size is commanding anywhere between fifteen and twenty-five dollars so you know, Ward, you're out of the game and I said okay.

[02:02:37.10] Cleo Thomas Jr.: I think we're drawing to the conclusion of the interview. Professor Ward, I want to leave the final observation to you. Yours has been such a brilliant career. And what inspires is your devotion to the institutions of the community that have been in no way limiting. Because as I read *The Katrina Papers* and talk to you about your life as a reproach to anybody that would leave Mississippi or Louisiana, there is something continental about your style, about the literary flavor of your work. And I don't mean the American continent. It is so obviously cosmopolitan and European. You have achieved what your preparatory teachers taught you to achieve, which is a distinctive style without pretense. And just in your closing comment, just a word about that. About your service here, about developing that at home when so many others have not been able to, or who would use geography as an excuse for being provincial.

[02:04:18.14] Jerry W. Ward, Jr.: Well, I'm going to be very arrogant and tell you that when you belong to the aristocracy you can do what peasants don't do. And my aristocracy has to do with my awareness that [unlike many people in this country], I belong to three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. And I feel that that's very special. And what has really, I suppose, hardened my commitment to not expatriate myself or seek exile or anything of the kind, has to do with my service in the U.S. Army and being in Vietnam, and reading in the *U.S. Army Times* about Kent State and Jackson State, at which point I had to say, "What am I doing in Vietnam?" The fight is not in Vietnam. The Vietnamese had never done anything to me that I could think of. And I'm trying to be patriotic, like soldiers, uncles who were in World War I, relatives who were in World War II, black soldiers who were very patriotic to the extent of being like Colin Powell, in a country that has no respect for you when you come home with a uniform, okay? Let us not forget the number of black soldiers who were abused because they wore uniforms. You know, "Nigger take that uniform off," okay. Or one man being told, "you can't work here anymore cause your son's running around with his uniform on" and he thinks he's one of these uppity people. So you know, it's like why would I want to leave this? I belong to this country and the country belongs to me. It's my property. And that's why if a pit bull who wears Prada thinks she can become vice president I have news for her.

[02:06:59.01] Cleo Thomas Jr.: Thank you, Doctor. Thank you.