Reading Wright in the Twenty-First Century

Dr. Jerry W. Ward, Jr., Dillard University

Two questions engendered this meditation on reading Wright in the twenty-first century. “Who is Richard Wright?” an elderly white woman asked me at the public library in Brandon, Mississippi two years ago. She had seen a sign announcing that someone would speak about him at noon. Her plain question deserved an honest answer, which I readily supplied. Her plain question was something more, in my mind, than a request for information, because it was asked in the state of which Richard Wright is a native son. It signaled an absence of local knowledge, the ordinary citizen’s blissful freedom not to know much about a major figure in the literature of the United States.

Those who profess literature do not have that freedom, but they do have a freedom to enter a writer’s mindscape. I did as much when I became Richard Wright in a Mississippi Humanities Council Chautauqua series. Wright and I possessed one another, and I began to read him in what I suppose is a transgressive way—walking in the underground of his language where his motives lived. “Are you still,” someone asked my young colleague Howard Rambsy II, “interested in Richard Wright?” This is a frustrating question, almost an instance of black-baiting. I assume the person who asked it may have been afflicted by the anxieties of the postmodern condition. The accusatory tone suggests that one ought to invest intellectual energy in unstructuring the new rather than squabder it in reconstruction of the old. I am dumb to say why one should not still be interested in Richard Wright.

The two questions initiate, for me, inquiry into how reading Richard Wright in the twenty-first century (and in some anticipated future) is an act of practiced history, of willing to engage his writings much in the way R.G. Collingwood recommended his fellow historians should engage their subjects by re inhabiting the subjects’ minds. Wright’s commitment to understanding his world, insofar as I can inhabit his mind, depended much on his invoking histories to situate his perspectives. His perspectives are obviously always the past for his current readers, and those perspectives may seem to be imprisoned by the discursive limitations of the twentieth century, especially

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his ideas about international politics. These limitations must be acknowledged, but they need not retard efforts to grasp the surgical consciousness Wright developed, in part, through his reading and incorporation of the past in his fiction and non-fiction. Due respect must be accorded those who question the relevance of Wright's works, because they may indeed be questioning the reliability of history as narrative rather than its validity as a process. Thus, I would argue that the relevance of Wright's words (like the relevance of any dead writer's words) is socially constructed both by referentiality and by the process of self-conscious reading. Our close reading of his works, his ideas, is complicated by our ideological baggage and it does seem to influence our use of literacy as we analyze and seek to make sense (find patterns) of our world now. If aesthetic distance is displaced by aesthetic intimacy, we begin to think with Wright, to sense how his flexible Marxism strengthens belief that the past enlightens the present, and to discern how applicable to our lives are his major themes: capitalism's dependency on radicalized inequity, the permanence of colonial and neo-colonial enterprises, the non-essential nature of identity, and the immanence of terrorism in the-world order. *12 Million Black Voices, The Outsider,* and *White Man, Listen!* are touchstones. I confine my remarks to the theme of terrorism, because terrorism ranks high on the list of current global agonies. In this presentation, a sampling of passages replaces extensive discussions of texts.

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These books prompt us to think critically about the promise of terrorism that induces mental anguish and the deeds which constitute terrorism and counter-terrorism American style. Wright understood that terrorism does have a researchable, rather odd history; that its various manifestations may operate either in concert with one another or in a singular fashion at any given time; that the formation of many modern nation-states throughout the world is anchored in combinations of political and economic terrorism; that human personality is not immune to the transmogrifying force of terrorism.

Wright’s 12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States (1941), a photodocumentary, was constructed with a certain long view of history. In Wright’s words, his text accepted as basic and centrally historical those materials of Negro life identified with the countless black millions who made up the bulk of the slave population during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; those teeming black millions who endured the physical and spiritual ravages of serfdom; those legions of nameless blacks who felt the shock and hope of sudden emancipation; those terrified black folk who with stood the brutal wrath of the Ku Klux Klan, and those who fled the cotton and tobacco plantations to seek refuge in northern and southern cities coincident with the decline of the cotton culture of the Old South (6).

Wright weaves a poetic tale of slave trade //slavery, institutions of enslavement//Reconstruction terror and the Ku Klux Klan //and atmosphere of terror and economic change that energized the Great Migrations of the early twentieth century around Farm Security Administration and other photographs. Wright’s use of the first-person plural makes the tale resonate oral testimony. Insofar as terrorism is concerned, Wright sends my mind back to Puritan theocracy of which traces recur in contemporary American democracy and forward to Islamic theocracy and the many problems it poses for international development. Revisiting the colonial history of the Americas necessitates remembering forms of terrorism used against indigenous populations to create Lebensraum for various Europeans and their terrified (though often resistant) items of property.

Before Wright sends my mind either forward or backward, he forces me to deal with his conception of a folk history. He stops me abruptly with the opening paragraph of his “Foreword”:

This text, while purporting to render a broad picture of the processes of Negro life in the United States intentionally does not include in its considerations those areas of Negro life which comprise the so-called “talented tenth,” or the isolated island of mulatto leadership which are still to be found in many parts of the South, or

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the growing and influential Negro middle-class professional and business men of the North who have, for the past thirty years or more, formed a sort of liaison corps between the whites and the blacks. Their exclusion from these pages does not imply any invidious judgment, nor does it stem from any desire to underestimate their progress and contributions; they are omitted in an effort to simplify a depiction of a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization (5).

Wright’s disclaimer is deceptive. It asserts what it denies. His intentional exclusion of a class to simplify a depiction is tantamount to a historian’s excluding a caste to amplify a depiction of a people. To the extent that Wright and I occupy the plural pronoun, we conspire in folk history as a form of propaganda; we both know that exclusion for dramatic effect constitutes ironic representation. For the twenty-first century reader who can not or will not occupy the pronoun, 12 Million Black Voices teaches that historical narratives exclude something, often in ways that have dangerous rather than dramatic consequences.

The Outsider and White Man, Listen! challenge us to re-examine the relentless issues of freedom and terrorism. Do acts of terrorism stem from the desire to be free of something? Do they come from a dread of the responsibilities that freedom might impose? Do they arise as delayed responses to the trauma of having been crushed by power? Wright did not have answers to such questions, but he did urge readers to begin seeking in historical process.

In his depiction of Cross Damon, the alienated main character in The Outsider, Wright portrays a person we would recognize more as a murderer than as a terrorist. What links him with terrorists is moral disengagement, a psychological avoidance of remorse regarding acts of murder. Damon does not wish to be encumbered with responsibilities; he desires an absolute control of his life; his mind is existential. Wright’s sustained exposition of disengagement provides a template of the modern mind that violates and discredits belief in the value of human life. It is unfortunate that often in our new century the fiction is the fact. As an instance of the new man who had emerging on the world scene, Damon can proclaim with authority that “men hate themselves and it makes them hate others” (404). Just as Bigger Thomas serves as the metaphor for the disturbed American adolescent, Cross Damon is one model for the necessary study of highly intelligent terrorists who emerge from what the West had spawned.

In one of the more interesting passages from White Man, Listen!, Wright noted that a new “literature dealing with colonial and post-colonial facts” was beginning to reveal

A universe of menacing shadows where disparate images coalesce -- white turning into black, the dead coming to life, the top becoming

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the bottom -- until you think you are seeing Biblical beasts with seven heads and ten horns rising out of the sea. Imperialism turns out to have been much more morally foul a piece of business than even Marx and Lenin imagined! (26)

Wright hinted that the history of Western imperialism might be usefully examined as surreal, irrational, and effective immoral acts in the service of power. In terms of historical process, a twenty-first century reader immediately recognizes that the poetry of Wright's accusation draws attention to roles played by those he called the African and Asian tragic elite. *Hotel Rwanda* is the supplement that may force a reader to see what a bloody constellation is formed by imperialism, terrorism and genocide and to see reciprocal responsibility for global tragedy in the reactions of the oppressed and the oppressor. The reader who wants to explore the consequences of Wright's instigations can now access the Internet, following the branching links of cyberspace which eventually cast light on the appropriateness of returning to the past and experiencing the uncanny shock of Wright's recognitions. Wright prompts the reader to be historical.

 Perhaps I have really tried to say that reading Wright in the twenty-first century fosters our more active "readings" of contemporary life. Therein is the warrant for interest.

**Works Cited**


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**Towards the Richard Wright Centennial**

As a prelude to its 2008 Richard Wright Centennial, the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration will sponsor a year-long discussion series on Wright's fiction, poetry, and nonfiction for the citizens of Natchez, Mississippi in 2007. Dr. Jerry W. Ward, Jr., Professor of English and African World Studies at Dillard University, will conduct a book chat once each month on a text by Wright. For each text, Ward will provide five discussion questions and a short list of further readings; this material will be distributed in late 2006.

The tentative schedule for the discussion is:

January --- *Uncle Tom's Children*; February --- *Laud Today*; March --- *Native Son* and *Rite of Passage* plus a special lecture on the novel, stage, and film versions of

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Native Son; April ---Black Boy; May ----12 Million Black Voices; June ---Eight Men; July ---This Other World; Haiku; August ---Black Power; September ---The Color Curtain; October ---Pagan Spain; November ---White Man, Listen!; December ---The Long Dream.

The Richard Wright Circle encourages those who teach Wright’s works in public schools and colleges or universities to create partnerships with libraries and community organizations and to conduct a similar series during 2007. The overwhelming success of the Langston Hughes National Poetry Project inspires confidence that a larger number of Americans do find cross-generational discussions of a single author to be intellectually stimulating. Americans do need to prepare themselves for the Wright Centennial celebrations with more than surface information about the importance of Wright’s legacy.

Review of “Long Black Song”: The HBO Version
Tara T. Green, Northern Arizona University

Richard Wright’s “Long Black Song” made it to the small screen thanks to HBO in 1995. According to the short description on the back cover of the video box, the film is about “a hard-working farmer (Danny Glover) [who] invests what little he has in a gift for his wife, while back home she falls for the advances of a traveling salesman.” In contrast to the concern of this film, Wright’s concern was with telling the story of a Mississippi Black woman:

I took a very simple Negro woman living in the North hills of Mississippi and tried to construct a story about her. In order to make an implied social comment about her, I tried to conceive of a simple peasant women, whose outlook upon life was influenced by natural things, and to contrast her with a white salesman selling phonographs and records.

(Richard Wright Reader, 257)

Preceding this passage he asks the question: “how could we [other writers in his writing group] write about social problems and use a simple style?” (Richard Wright Reader, 257). Though Wright is not specific about the “implied social comment” he intends to make with Sarah, he had been clear in other essays (e.g. “Blueprint for Negro Writing”) and certainly suggests in this passage that the social comment is the social problem of racism. Wright felt that Black writers should “address the Negro himself, the needs, his sufferings, his aspirations” (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 38). Putting theory in to practice, Sarah’s personal experiences become a metaphor for the continued on page  seven
boader Black experience.

While Wright intends "to make an implied social comment about [Sarah]" the screen writers, Ron Stacker Thompson and Ashley Tyler succeed in simplifying a rather complex situation. In the film vignette, race is an issue for Silas, but Sarah seems unaware of the existence of racism. Consequently, Sarah of the film, unlike Sarah of Wright's short story, lacks complexity and her critical decision to have sex with a white salesman proves to be simply an act of infidelity.

Wright's short story, set in the Jim Crow South, is a complex narrative featuring a married couple, Sarah and Silas who live on an isolated farm outside of town. The events are told from Sarah's point of view; she is the center of all the events that occur in the story. In brief, Sarah, an American American woman has sex in the couple's bed with a white male graphophone salesman for debatable reasons. As a result of feeling betrayed by his wife and disrespected in his home by a white man, Silas shoots one of two white men (whether the salesman or his companion is shot is not clear) when he and his companion come to collect the payment for the graphophone he leaves with Sarah. Although he knows there will be retaliation from white townsfolk, Silas does not flee, but awaits an angry mob of men who come to kill him. Following a shoot-out with the men, Silas, outnumbered and outgunned, is burned alive in his house by the angry mob. With their baby Ruth in her arms, Sarah escapes to the town.

HBO's adaptation of the short story is significantly different as it moves from parallel scenes of Sarah at the homestead and Silas in the town. The film's story is a touching and simple one. Viewers are introduced to what will be the dominating source of conflict with a quote from the short story, "loneliness aches within her," which appears in the movie's preceding frame. The first scene features Silas playing with the couple's baby and speaking affectionately to his wife before leaving for town to sell his cotton. She asks to accompany him, but he says no. While Silas battles the white buyer's racially motivated treatment of him in the town, a kind, handsome young white college student respectfully approaches Sarah to sell his goods. Unlike the salesman in Wright's story, he compliments her and does not address her by the derogatory "Aunty" as does Wright's white salesman. He makes advances towards her and she resists, at first, but she then turns and takes his hand and kisses him. After they laugh and dance-some more to the music of the record player he has taken out, Sarah and the man make passionate love on the rim of the well. They dress and he leaves. When Silas returns with a ring he has purchased for Sarah, he notices the man's personal articles and correctly realizes what has happened. Consequently, he is justifiably angered by his wife's blatant betrayal of him and he whips the salesman when he boldly returns to retrieve the phonograph he only incidentally left behind. Silas stops whipping the man when his wife tells him not to sing that "long black song" about racism because she is the one at fault. Sarah is unquestioningly culpable

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for her behavior and audiences likely sympathize with Silas’s pain, for he is undeniably disrespected by both the whites of his town and by his wife.

Readers of Wright’s short story and viewers of this movie will recognize that several major changes have been made by the filmmakers. Both Silas and Sarah appear more realistic as opposed to the characters of Wright’s story, probably to appease the general audience of HBO who may not be interested in deciphering the motives and symbolic “comments” of Wright. Thus, the lives of the African American couple are what many are willing to accept in a film set in 1938, Alabama, not Mississippi. In contrast to the facts of Wright’s story, Ruth breaks a clock that her father, according to Sarah, plans to fix, showing their interest in modern Western concepts. In Wright’s story, Ruth plays with a clock that has already been broken and the salesman is amazed that the family has no use for a clock and no desire to own one. HBO’s Silas owns and drives a car, while Wright’s Silas travels in a horse-drawn buggy. Further, HBO’s Silas is a compassionate, loving man who plays with his daughter, while Wright’s Silas has no contact with her.

The film’s Sarah hardly resembles Wright’s Sarah at all. Sarah of the film is less trusting than the one imagined by Wright. When the salesman in the film appears on Sarah’s porch she acts apprehensive and suspicious of his presence. Specifically, she fastens the top buttons of her dress which she had unbuttoned as a result of the summer heat. Further, when the salesman asks Sarah when her husband will return, she asks him why he wants to know. In contrast, Wright’s Sarah gives him a direct answer. This Sarah is bolder and more aware, and we cannot question the reason she chooses to have sex with this man any more than we would question the behavior of a soap opera character. Yet her suspicions of him seem motivated by the fact that he is a stranger, for we will see no racial tension between these two, even though she is in a secluded area with a stranger—a white man—in 1938.

How Sarah is changed in the movie changes the outcome of the movie. As the opening quote strongly suggests, the film’s dominant concern is with Sarah as a lonely housewife, not as a “peasant Negro woman.” (italics mine) Although the film makes prominent the effects of Sarah’s confinement on the homestead, it underscores the effects as amounting to mere loneliness. Before Silas leaves, she tells him that she wants to go with him to town to “see what the folks are doing, what they’re saying.” Clearly, she craves companionship and community. Although Silas denies her request, it is possible that he wants to shield her from the degrading experiences he will endure in town. After Sarah is denied by her husband for whatever his reasons, the salesman approaches her and treats her like an equal. He calls her smart, asks her to dance, and speaks softly to her. This story is not original: the lonely housewife is seduced by the charms of the traveling salesman.

Though Sarah may be unaware of racism, she is radicalized. Sarah of this short
film is a character reminiscent of the Jezebel characters of early twentieth century films. In the 1935 film *Porgy and Bess*, Bess is known for being an amoral woman. Though she moves in with Porgy, a beggar and a gambler, she later finds herself back with her ex-husband, Crown. Porgy, in an attempt to keep Crown away from Bess, kills Crown and is jailed. Porgy returns from jail a few years later to find that Bess is dating Sportin’ Life. Another well-known Jezebel is that of *Carmen Jones*. In the musical starring Dorothy Dandridge as Carmen and Harry Belafonte as Joe, a soldier, Joe does not marry the “good-girl” Cindy Lou, but instead deserts the army after hitting a superior officer and runs off to Chicago with Carmen. Eventually, Carmen cheats on him with Husky and an angry Joe kills Carmen. Lisa A. Anderson appropriately describes the root of Joe’s evil: “Carmen’s insatiable sexual drive has destroyed her life and his as well” *Mammies No More* (93). Filmmakers have created, and continue to create, Black women who are intent on destroying Black men, by driving them to commit acts of violence.

Silas and Sarah relive the roles of Porgy and Bess and Joe and Carmen. As the sexual aggressor, Sarah is directly responsible for the anger and pain her husband, a good man, suffers when he returns and finds that his wife has egregiously betrayed him with not just another man, but a white man. As a result, he acts violently. Undoubtedly, Sarah chooses to be with this stranger. The young man’s attractiveness is similar to that of the men for whom Bess and Carmen leave their men. The “other men” offer the women passage into a world that differs significantly from their own. In *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen Jones*, Crown and Husky offer “their women” a glamorous life filled with excitement; the salesman’s phonograph, much to Sarah’s surprise and delight, causes her to want to give herself to him sexually in an effort to indulge in the excitement of his world. This is a world that she can only access through sex, as one would find with a call-girl who dates a doctor or business man. It is not enough that Porgy, Joe, and Silas are supportive men who love these women or that they are honest and are hard workers. The characterizations in these films blatantly suggest that African American women cannot be satisfied with a healthy, loving relationship. In her analysis of the Jezebel representation, Anderson notes, “Her self-sufficiency makes it seem that her only need for men must be sexual. She is also envisioned as a destroyer of black men and manhood, which she accomplishes by pulling men down from their ‘proper’ role as patriarch within the family” (88).

HBO’s Sarah is an accomplice of the white salesman and his uncle, the buyer who mistreats Silas in town, in destroying her husband’s only hope of receiving respect and love at home.

If the setting impacts the social treatment of Silas, it should for Sarah as well. Wright’s choice of a setting, which places Sarah alone on an isolated homestead in the South in 1938 when an unknown white man appears, is of utmost importance.

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when examining the literary text. One of the reasons why the short story is still taught in university classrooms and still discussed by scholars is the lingering question: Was Sarah raped by the white salesman or did she consent? Ultimately, the implication of this question causes us to reexamine our definition of rape as not being only an issue of consent, particularly when the surrounding circumstances themselves leave a Black woman powerless. As a result of the filmmakers answering the question for us, or not posing it all, gone is the question about who is to blame for Sarah’s sexual liaison; gone is the specter of racism that invades this isolated plot of land. And also gone is the complexity of the short story as Wright intended.

Despite these issues, there is one major change to Wright’s tale that may please feminist critics of Wright: Sarah has a voice. In Wright’s short story, Sarah’s voice is not recognized by the men as being either valuable or important. Wright’s Sarah resists the salesman and he ignores her protestations. When Silas returns, it is clear that she must remain a defendant in her own home as he acts on his suspicions and accusations and not on any confession from her. In contrast to the experiences of Wright’s Sarah, at the end of the film, it is Sarah who calms the raging fury of her husband by admitting her act of infidelity and, in effect, admitting to her husband that she understands his pain as she warns him not to sing that “long black song, telling you, you ain’t nothing.” Consequently, not only does Silas put down the whip, but when she tells the white salesman to leave, he does. She possesses and exhibits a conscious power of persuasion her that is respected and thereby acknowledged by both men.

Another notable change is the location of the act of infidelity. Sarah and the salesman make love outside, and not in the couple’s (Silas and Sarah) bedroom. The act as it occurs in the bedroom suggests Sarah’s subconscious desire to sever the relationship with her husband and to be free to move outside the realms of the homestead and Silas’s grasp. Wright’s Silas proves to be an abusive husband who threatens his wife with physical abuse. In the film, Sarah does not possess a subconscious desire to leave her home or her husband. Why should she? The film’s Silas is a thoughtful loving husband and father. There appear to be no problems between the two. Sarah confirms her desire to be with her husband when she chooses to stay with him and tells the salesman, “This is my home. Go to yours.” Silas, in turn, does not prevent her from returning.

Certainly the filmmakers have a right to interpret the text as they please. Even Wright changed the script of Native Son when it was made into a movie. The major problem here is that if the setting remains 1938, the issues of the day are still in effect for both the Black man and the Black woman. Why then are we to believe that race was not a determining factor in how both Silas and Sarah interacted with white men?

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In this case, the implied social comment is that Sarah represents the experiences of lonely Black women who would rather betray their husbands than to love and respect them.

Works Cited

OBITUARY
Lorenzo Thomas, Professor and Poet
He was longtime Houston literary icon, social critic
By Fritz Lanhem
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Lorenzo Thomas, a much-respected fixture on Houston's literary scene and a poet who married bluesy lyricism with a social conscience, died Monday [July 4, 2005]. He was 60.

Thomas died at the Texas Medical Center Hospice. Cause of death was emphysema, according to his companion, Karen Luik.

Thomas' poetry collections included Chances Are Few (1979, expanded second edition in 2003), The Bathers (2003) and most recently Dancing on Main Street (2004). About the last, the Chronicle wrote: “Taken together, the poems in this collection exhibit that equipoise that comes with age and experience. Sorrow and joy find their balance.” Poetry, Thomas once wrote, “attempts to knock the mind out of the rut of commonplace thinking.”

For more than two decades a professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown, Thomas also made important contributions to the study of African-American literature. In 2000, the University of Alabama Press published Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and 20th Century American Poetry, his overview of the poetry of James Fenton, Amiri Baraka, and other important black writers. It was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Book for the year. A longtime contributor to the Chronicle’s book review pages, he was a generous and thoughtful critic.

He became ‘extrafluent’
Thomas was born in Panama in 1944. Four years later the family immigrated to New York City, where Thomas grew up. Spanish was his first language, and he strove to master English to escape getting beaten up by other kids for “talking funny.”

“Never forgot it,” he once said. “Went way, way, way, away out of my way to become extra fluent in English.”

His study of English fed an early interest in creative writing. Further nurturing his literary ambitions was “the whole business of being black and from a home full of race-conscious people and the idea that if you are black you had to be more qualified than necessary,” he said. During his years at Queens College, Thomas joined the

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Umbra Workshop, a collective that met on the Lower East Side and served as a crucible for emerging black poets, among them Ishmael Reed, David Henderson and Calvin Hernton. The workshop was one of the currents that fed the Black Arts Movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s, the first major African-American artistic movement after the Harlem Renaissance.

Predictably, the civil rights struggle and the rise of cultural black nationalism had a big influence on Thomas and many of his generation.

“He is not, however, a racial protest poet but a critic of the Western world writing from the perspective of Afro-America, with inherited and acquired attitudes of an Afro-Caribbean,” poet and playwright, Tom Dent wrote of Thomas.

“His sympathies are with ‘the people,’ the folk, the poor, the dispossessed, of which people of Africa descent happen to be card-carrying members in the Western world.”

Served in Vietnam

After graduating from college Thomas joined the Navy, serving as a military advisor in Vietnam in 1971. In 1973 he moved to Houston as writer-in-residence at Texas Southern University. At TSU he helped edit the journal *Roots*. Later he conducted writing workshops at the newly formed Black Arts Center. He joined UH-Downtown in 1984.

References to American popular culture—music especially—abound in Thomas work. He cited as influences such blues legends as Robert Johnson, Houston native Lightnin’ Hopkins and the Houston poet-singer Juke Boy Bonner, whom Thomas eulogized in the journal *Callaloo*. Thomas helped organize Juneteenth Blues Festivals in Houston and other Texas cities.

“I write poems because I can’t sing,” he once said.

Charles Rowell, professor of English at Texas A& M University and editor of *Callaloo*, cited Thomas’ role as a cultural critic as his most important achievement, in particular the essays on writers and musicians. Through writing workshops Thomas influenced young black writers not only in Houston but elsewhere. “His passing will be a major loss to African-American letters and to writing in Texas, period,” Rowell said.

How to be a Texas Poet

Haryette Mullen, a poet who got to know Thomas in the late 1970s when both worked in the Writers in the Schools program in Houston, said she showed her how to be a Texas poet without being parochial.

“It is poetry that is humorous but that makes serious points about our culture,” she

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said of his work.

“There’s a critical aspect to it. It’s not just entertaining but it can also be entertaining.”

The poet Anne Waldman, who published one of Thomas’ early chapbooks in 1972, said his poetry “could be quiet, fierce, public, scholarly, sometimes within one poem.”

He was also “one of the most well-read people I know in poetry,” Waldman said.

“He had a real grasp of the English literary tradition as well as the African American tradition, the African court tradition, what is so exciting here in the last century.”

Thomas contributed his time to cultural organizations in Houston. He served on the boards of Cultural Arts Council of Houston and the literary journal Gulf Coast. and on the advisory board of Imprint, Inc.

He was a member of Texas Institute of Letters. Affable, even self-effacing, he nonetheless was the type of man who commanded attention when he spoke in public forums....
Renewal Notice

As you receive this issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter, we want to remind you to renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle. The yearly $10 membership fee runs for one calendar year and entitles you to one double issue of the Newsletter: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. In order to continue your membership, you need to fill out and send us the form below (to ensure that we have your latest address and relevant information) along with a $10 check or money order (made out to the Richard Wright Circle). Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and Newsletter is greatly appreciated.

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