Robert B. Jones was an exemplary colleague. He was a gifted, dedicated teacher who held his students to a very high standard. He had an uncommon commitment to literary study which carried with it the most serious of obligations, both in his teaching and in his writing. As an African-American he felt keenly the need and desire to immerse himself in the fiction and poetry of this tradition. But he was not satisfied with solely engaging the talented novels of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright, with approaching the accomplished verse of Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, and Nikki Giovanni. His favorite writer was indeed William Faulkner; at the time of his death Jones was already well into a book-length examination of the Mississippian's novels, and he taught Faulkner's fiction on a regular basis in his classes. In fact, one can say that Robert Jones was tuned into the rhythms of the modernist generation and identified with its sensibility and literary values. While, as he remarked on one occasion, his own writing demonstrated the attempt "to transcend the polemics of race," he had also recently grown active in various attempts to reshape the institutional frame of such debates. His great efforts to recruit African-American faculty and students for the Department of English and Comparative Literature demonstrated his desire to transform, not simply transcend, the politics of race.

Robert Jones published essays on a variety of subjects and writers, but his main research interest was Jean Toomer. He edited with Margery Toomer Latimer (Toomer's daughter) The Collected Poems
of Jean Toomer (University of North Carolina Press, 1988). His introduction to the volume is a model of concision and finesse. In December of 1993, a month after his death, the University of Massachusetts Press brought out his Jean Toomer and the Prison-House of Thought: A Phenomenology of the Spirit. The dust jacket of this book carries endorsements by three literary critics. One of these states in part: "This is as good a book on Jean Toomer as we are ever likely to get. It covers virtually all aspects of his art and thought. Jones combines close readings of texts (especially poetry) with compelling theoretical judgements. Criticism and scholarship combine in a seamless fashion to produce this most searching and readable study."

At the time of his death Jones had completed a volume which will be published by G.K. Hall under the title Critical Essays on Jean Toomer. This collection of criticism by various hands contains, among other things, a comprehensive examination by Jones of the history and direction of the scholarship written about Toomer's work. He had also assembled for publication by the University of Tennessee Press a book-length collection of Jean Toomer's own essays. When all this appears he will certainly be acknowledged as the world's expert on Toomer.

Jones died in mid-career. Yet because of his encouragement and the example he set, he had a great impact on those around him. His genial presence, professional dedication, and positive attitude will be sorely missed by colleagues, students, and all those who ever encountered his contagious smile and his assured euphoria.

Melvin J. Friedman, Chair
John Goulet
Lynne Joyrich
Christopher Lane