
NOTES ON A DREAM DEFERRED: A POSITION PAPER ON THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

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NOTES ON A DREAM DEFERRED: A POSITION
PAPER ON THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE
ASSOCIATION¹

By CHARLES H. CURL

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*²

When Nick Aaron Ford delivered his presidential message at the opening of the Twenty-second Annual Conference of the College Language Association at Johnson C. Smith Uni-

¹ President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Twenty-Eight Annual Convention, North Carolina College at Durham, Durham, North Carolina, Thursday morning, April 18, 1968.

² Langston Hughes, "Harlem," *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (New York, 1951), p. 71.

versity, April 26, 1962, he cited the need for periodic examinations of the role of this organization. Declaring that CLA is serving as a "temporary" bridge between the segregated and integrated, he said, "It [CLA] must never lose sight of the temporary nature of its existence. Its aims must forever be to destroy itself or transform itself into something new and different as soon as its bridge-like mission is over."³ My position today—six years later—is that a transformation is now in order.

After the 1954 Supreme Court decision and the passing of subsequent civil rights legislation, those of us who are extreme optimists, in the words of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., had a dream—a dream that seemed not too far from fulfillment. Counted in this dream, perhaps, was the eventual elimination of the bridge-like mission of the College Language Association. However, time and events have led us to realize that, though that dream has not vanished, it has certainly been deferred.

But as Langston Hughes put it, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Do we let "it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

It is my firm belief that the College Language Association today faces an even greater challenge than it did six years ago. In spite of tokenism in selected spots, our schools and colleges which in the beginning were "Negro" institutions remain segregated; and our clientele, for all intents and purposes, remains the Negro student.

Both the *Coleman Report* and the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* point up evidence that a large number of our elementary and high schools are still rigidly segregated. The *Kerner Report* further predicts that by 1975 ". . . if current policies and trends persist, 80% of all Negro pupils in the twenty largest cities, comprising nearly one half of the nation's Negro population, will be attending 90 to 100 percent Negro schools."⁴ The startling fact seems to be that "while the proportion of Negroes attending all-Negro schools in Southern and border states has declined in the 14

³ "Whither CLA?"

⁴ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, compiled by Otto Kerner, et al. (New York, 1968), p. 426. This report hereafter will be referred to as the *Kerner Report*.

years since the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision, the number of Negro students attending schools with all or nearly all Negro enrollments has risen."⁵

Remaining institutions of, by, and for Negro people, we are obliged continually to face the customary prevailing stereotypes. Our students are labelled as culturally deprived, our professors are labelled Middle Class snobs, and our colleges—except for the often cited few are labelled inferior. I need only cite the highly publicized Jencks and Riesman's sixty-page discourse in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Winter, 1967) as a composite statement of these stereotypes. I have chosen a few examples:

. . . Negro colleges are almost never academically selective by white standards.⁶

We know no Southern white college . . . which could match the atmosphere of Ralph Ellison's Negro College in *Invisible Man*. We have known Negro colleges of which this fictional image was a not entirely inaccurate reflection.⁷

The essays such students write as freshmen [Negro college students] are even less literate than in unselective white colleges.⁸

(For a rebuttal to these allegations—since rebutting the stereotypes is not my purpose here—I refer you to the *Harvard Educational Review* (Summer, 1967) for statements made by Benjamin E. Mays, Hugh M. Gloster, and others.)

Meanwhile, as the debate continues, our students—aroused out of their "sub-culture" at least by the pressures and realities of the outside world—have begun to demand "a piece of the action." They are bargaining for, demanding and—by the grace of God—getting a new day and a new college experience. And our faculties are torn by the frustration: the new, liberal breed in tune with student sentiment; and all the rest, over thirty, who daily undergo involuntary in-service training.

Robert Rankin, of the Danforth Foundation, says that present-day students "demand attention while their predecessors

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, "The American Negro College," *Harvard Educational Review*, XXXVII (Winter, 1967), 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

of the 50's were the silent generation." He calls students "a new power" in academic affairs and "a fourth estate which is taking its place beside the traditional estates of faculty, administration, and trustees."⁹ Writing in the *AAHE Bulletin*, Professor Richard Axen of San Francisco State College credits "student militancy for exposing many fundamental flaws in our academic establishment and our broader society, flaws we have all been aware of but have blithely condoned because corrective action threatened our status quo and its accompanying prerogatives."¹⁰

Our students reflect the mood of campuses all over the world—wanting more participation in curriculum planning, demanding courses in the culture and contributions of black people, wanting a curriculum relevant to their real world, wanting more freedom in determining the flavor of their campus life. With reference to unrest and activism, I believe it is safe to assert that no college represented in this body would deny the presence of a new atmosphere among its students.

The character of our colleges is changing also because we are admitting not only more students and more activist students but also more "risks" students. Institutions all over the country are accepting students who chose college as an alternative to Vietnam. And, as an editorial in the April 15, 1967, issue of *Saturday Review* suggests, many of these young people have little academic interest. Moreover, our institutions will and must continue to accept students whose resources for academic excellence still remain untapped. Larger and more prestigious institutions accept government and foundation sponsored programs in compensatory education for the poor or the "disadvantaged" student. But, as data reported in Upward Bound releases indicate, a small minority of these institutions admit students graduating from their own programs. Rather, project directors and counsellors arrange to place these students in smaller Southern "Negro" institutions. At the other end of the spectrum is pirating. While the "risk" student is rejected, the Ivy Leagues and the "Big 10"—using

⁹ Robert Rankin, "The Mood of Students and the Mouse at Miniwanca," *Danforth Association Newsletter*, XI (May, 1967), 1.

¹⁰ *College and University AAHE Bulletin*, XX (March 15-April 1, 1968), 4.

grants among other things as their bait—siphon off the cream of our potential student body in order to meet their minimum “color” requirements. We have on our campuses, therefore, not only a new mood but also a new student body.

If the character and content of the Negro college has been transformed—and the main function of CLA is to serve these colleges—then, I call for a transformation in the character and content of CLA. The functions of this organization must be faithful to its unique purposes and relevant to the microcosm it serves.

Now is the time for transformation: We, as an organization and as individual members, should capitalize on our newly-acquired advantages. Funds, more than ever before, are available to us, for we qualify according to OEO guidelines as “the poor and the disadvantaged”; we are the “developing institutions” that according to HEW and the Higher Education Act need “strengthening.” We have the experience; we have the subjects (our students) and we have the setting.

Given a mandate to transform or fade out, CLA must meet the challenge to change. And I venture to suggest a course of action. The first is a mechanical consideration: Let us seek for the College Language Association a permanent address. As long as the organization remains a paper-box operation, it exists everywhere in general but nowhere in particular. Let us investigate resources for office space and equipment, and funds for a part-time staff. Then, aside from the obvious advantages of record-keeping, the Association can assume a year-around operation. It could develop into a vital information retrieval center or clearing house for pooling and disseminating materials and ideas. At this point it might be well to say in high praise of the Editor of our *CLA Journal*, that the *CLA Journal* has served as the heart of this organization and has as much as any thing else kept our organization alive and moving in the right direction.

Perhaps CLA needs to assume a more prominent role in the political affairs of the “academic market place.” Is it enough for us to engage in polite representation at college convocations and presidential inaugurations? Is it enough for us to secure a spot in the program of the National Council of Teachers of English? Should CLA take positions on the controversial and

damaging laws and practices which affect us and our own students?

Let us recruit more members. How can we reach those of our colleagues who would rather serve as doorkeepers in the larger organizations than to dwell in the tents of CLA? The language and literature professors in the predominantly Negro college still operate on the periphery of our national professional organizations and even then we perform in a circumscribed arena. And when we are invited to serve in the associations' seminars and task forces, we are either analyzing dialects or dissecting the disadvantaged. A case in point: the Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching of English (or the Dartmouth Seminar of 1966) sponsored by the Modern Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council of Teachers of English (United Kingdom) reported "The roster of participants at the conference reflected a definite attempt on the part of the planners toward broad representation."¹¹ Ironically, even though the avowed purpose of the seminar was to deal with "a series of critical problems facing English as a school subject," no one represented us. We must have equal participation in the organizations we support with our persons and our funds. CLA is not the least among them.

Now for some professional considerations. First of all, in CLA is the spring for creative productiveness. Our students have the feeling and the imagination of a Watts improviser and we have the skills of polishing their language and literary techniques. Does it not appear ridiculous, then, that in this day of a surge of young writers responding to impetus of the Negro revolt¹² that the CLA Creative Writing project would suffer because of lack of participation of member schools? Who is more sensitive to the feelings, conditions, aspirations of black Americans than black Americans?

Also, we have fertile ground necessary for special types of research. For example, what about Negro dialect? Judging from the growing volume of papers and reports, this is a phenomenon that has just been discovered. John Dixon in

¹¹ John Dixon, *Growth Through English* (London, 1967), p. vii.

¹² Allan Morrison, "A New Surge in the Arts," *Ebony* (August, 1967), 134.

Growth Through English (a report on the Dartmouth Seminar) asserts that "unless the white community shows an active will to accept and integrate Negro citizens, they cannot possibly have a full scale motivation for learning standard English." "Those who learn standard English," he continues, "have put in a great deal of effort to lose their Negro identity yet they have still failed to acquire a white identity."¹³ What effect, if any, does the study of grammar and composition in our colleges have on our student's racial identity?

If American Standard English Language is for our students a second language or if they speak a social dialect which should be replaced by a more acceptable dialect, then what is the role of grammar in freshman composition? What is remedial English and how should it be taught? Should it be taught in college? Does it do more damage to the ego than help the students achieve? How reliable are IQ scores, CEEB results and standardized tests, in general, in predicting our students' success, in determining course content, or in sectioning students? Are there any sex differences in learning English or a foreign language? What can our colleges do to insure a reasonable degree of proficiency in languages among students beyond the sophomore year? In teaching language, how does size or the use of electronic aids affect learning among our students? Research areas peculiar to our setting are plentiful.

Moreover, we have the intellectual resources and the obligation to fill the need for appropriate teaching materials on Negro life and literature. Perhaps we should garner the unwritten folklore, the treasured letters and personal documents which are hidden among us so that we who know the story best will give accurate accounts of our noble heritage.

Likewise, we have the resources for developing consortia—within our colleges, between colleges. Can CLA member institutions within close proximity of each other cooperate in securing lecturers and artists, in arranging simultaneous telelectures, in exchanging audio and video tapes? Can we, in short, function cooperatively to maintain greater bargaining strength and to benefit from each other's personnel, facilities, and techniques?

¹³ John Dixon, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

What can CLA do to get departments to talk to each other? If English should or can be taught as a foreign language to non-standard speakers, how can English and foreign language reciprocate? If drama is, as the Dartmouth Seminar suggests, an untapped source for making the English and language classroom alive, can we cooperate with drama and speech teachers to the enrichment of several allied disciplines?

Can we team with the psychologists, the sociologists, the historian in interdepartmental efforts, individually and severally, to get at the truth, conduct the kind of impassioned and unbiased research that will point out our strengths and suggest what course to take in years ahead? Membership in CLA represents the best of the writers and organizers of writing in American education. Perhaps this would in some way be a partial answer to the challenge to make education relevant to the real world as our graduates live it.

The theme of our Convention, "Toward a Bridge from Theory to Practice," suggests a thrust toward accenting the relevance of education to what will be the real experience of those whom we educate.

Relevance is the *raison d'être* for higher education, suggests the Kerner Report on civil disorders, relevance to "the needs and aspirations of youth" and preparation of these students "for full participation in American society."¹⁴ Jencks and Riesman say that "Howard offers courses in Swahili and Yoruba, Atlanta University in African studies," and suggest that "such matters . . . mean no more to young Negroes than Dante to street-corner Italians . . ." ¹⁵ Do we set as our goals the subject matter and the standards of excellence prescribed by what these two authors called "national universities?" Perhaps Thoreau gives the best answer in his *Walden*: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, it is because he hears a different drummer. . . . Let him step to the music he hears, however, measured or far away. . . ." ¹⁶

Although my use of the title, "A Dream Deferred," may remind some of Jonathan Swift's use of the title, *A Tale of a*

¹⁴ Kerner Report, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

¹⁵ Jencks and Riesman, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 290.

Tub, I am convinced that member colleges in the College Language Association are faced with a great and unique challenge. If we do not meet this challenge head-on, the dreams of thousands upon thousands of black and disadvantaged Americans will fade. It is we who can help bring these dreams to reality. But we must respond to the call forth-rightly and we must approach our task with diligence.

What happens to a dream deferred?

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Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
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Or crust and sugar over—
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