

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION: 1983—1984 AND BEYOND

Author(s): Eleanor Q. Tignor

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BY ELEANOR Q. TIGNOR

President's Address Delivered at the Forty-fourth Annual
CLA Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, April 20, 1984

This talk might have been entitled "The College Language Association and the Profession of Languages and Literature, Part Two," for it is a continuation of last year's thinking about the Association, but instead I have titled these remarks "The College Language Association: 1983-1984 and Beyond." Last year, my talk included a strong appeal for more involvement and a long list of goals, set against what we had already accomplished or were beginning to accomplish. This year, it is a statement of thanks and a report of our past year's accomplishments and of new beginnings which should make us even stronger in the future.

Many educators are very conscious of the year 2000 (whole issues of journals have been devoted to predictions about the life or death or nature of colleges and college curricula by that year); predictions even go through 2010. I am very conscious of that time, too, but even more so of a

much closer year—1987—when this organization will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. As in an individual's life the half century mark is a time of reflection, when one feels he/she should have achieved certain goals or considers modifying his/her directions, so it is with an organization such as ours. That year for us will—and should—be a time of even greater pride and strength. The work of the past years and of this is building toward that—and beyond, maybe to 2000 or 2010.

Today, we will amend our Constitution to provide for clearer definitions of certain roles and functions and to make for smoother administration, but our goals—what is termed constitutionally our “object”—will remain the same, but I believe with a broader interpretation than was intended when this document was drafted.¹ The Constitution, in part, reads: “The object of this Association shall be to bring together in conferences . . . college and university teachers of language and literature, with a view to (1) improving the study and teaching of language skills, (2) cultivating the appreciation of language and literature, (3) sharing with each other work of interest to the group, and (4) encouraging research in the teaching of black literatures and cultures as necessary aspects of higher education. The Association shall also publish a journal” (p. 1). I interpret “conferences” now to mean not only conventions but also frequent letters and telephone calls, and soon to mean teleconferencing and other forms of communication of our electronic age. The many letters and calls which we exchanged over the past two years, I believe, stimulated the growth of and interest in the Association; we shared information and ideas, we did committee work, and we have come to know and understand each other better. We have not reached the point of regional conferences, but we do now have several regional-centered committees so that CLA

¹ This version of our Constitution was ratified in 1974. Hereafter cited in the text by page reference only.

members may meet in “conferences” throughout the year to do the work of the organization. Also, for the strength of the body, more members are working in their home areas, for and in the name of the CLA. Some of us have been working in cooperation with other language organizations, and I have recommended CLA members for national boards.

We of course have not accomplished all of our goals in a single year, and some of your concerns have not been met. To have done so would have been Herculean. But let me highlight some of what has been done and the implications.

Our goals of improving the study and teaching of language skills and cultivating the appreciation of language and literature naturally fall to each of us who teaches, but for the Association, the carrying out of these goals is primarily the work of the English and Foreign Language Area Curriculum Committees, of the Teacher Education Committee, and the new Ad Hoc Committee on the CLA’s Cooperation with Elementary and Secondary Schools. Over the past year, in attempting to create a regional balance of committees and to fill vacancies, I made changes in both curriculum committees, keeping members who desired to be continued and appointing new members and a new chair from the same geographical region. Last year’s committee goals/activities for curriculum numbered seventeen, and I felt strongly that the committees needed to begin working on them. Since then, Tennessee State and Fisk agreed to assume the responsibility for the English Area—Johnanna Grimes is chair—with the understanding, however, that most of the work would follow this convention since most of this year’s energies would go into hosting. The Foreign Language Area Curriculum responsibilities were even more recently assumed by Virginia State and Virginia Union CLA members; the chair is Judith Farmer. This committee’s goal for 1984-1985 is to disseminate, to CLA faculty, bibliographies of current (since 1980) publications treating innovative curriculum developments; teaching strategies and

materials; and the use of foreign languages in nontraditional and skills-oriented programs.

If you have been reading the education books and reports of the past year—among them John I. Goodlad's *A Place Called School*; Theodore R.Sizer's *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*; Ernest L. Boyer's *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*; James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore's *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared*; *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education); *Action for Excellence* (report of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth); *Making the Grade* (report of the Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy); and *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do* (pamphlet of the College Board)—you know that as college and university English and foreign language teachers, our concerns cannot be only what we do from day to day in our classes and in our research, for some of these publications are already having an impact on American education. Some school systems are implementing certain recommendations, and some states have already taken legislative action. What is bothersome is that these sources implicitly or explicitly define what the central issues of English and foreign language study should be, without having consulted the national language organizations, and most make recommendations which ignore our humanistic tradition. One researcher among them who understands the role of language in the curriculum recommends that English not be a distinct school discipline but that it be the base of the whole curriculum. If this recommendation is implemented by school systems, how will our preparation of teachers change? In what ways will our own teaching and course offerings be affected? One report calls upon college professors to become more involved in writing *challenging* textbooks for use in schools. Will we want to

put more of our research energies into this area of our disciplines?

The issues taken up by these authors and commissions are so significant that a new English coalition, composed of key officers/executives of the MLA, ADE, CEA, NCTE, CCCC, and CLA, made a decision to examine these issues when we had our organizational coalition meeting in December 1983 (at MLA) and began to identify them at a recent post-CCCC meeting. This coalition will spend three days in Urbana (at the NCTE headquarters) this summer analyzing the issues in detail, in readiness to make *our own* statement. This work will lead to more joint action on the part of the coalition, which plans to meet biannually in conjunction with the conventions of the language organizations. I will extend a CLA invitation for 1985, in New York.

Last year, your statements of concern regarding the interconnectedness of language and literature education at all levels led to the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee on the CLA's Cooperation with Elementary and Secondary Schools, chaired by Thelma Thompson. Her committee last April set for itself the goal of "beginning dialogue with public school teachers, planning cooperative ventures, and conducting workshops and seminars for public school teachers and students." Since then, Committee members and the CLA president have conducted training sessions, given lectures and workshops, and/or worked with teachers in curriculum development and in the preparation of instructional materials, as part of establishing a relationship with the public school systems of Washington, D. C.; Baltimore, Maryland; and Hamden, Connecticut. In addition, the chair nominated the English-Language Arts Supervisor of the District of Columbia Public Schools for a University of the District of Columbia Appreciation of Service Award. This committee invites you to volunteer to work in your geographical area. So far, our efforts have been made only in English, but I am sure that the Committee would also welcome foreign language participation since there are the im-

portant questions of when foreign language education should begin and what number of years or hours or what level of proficiency should be required for high school graduation and college entrance.

The work of the Creative Writing Committee also comes under the first two CLA goals and the third: what Sandra Govan's committee wishes to do is to improve the language skills of students, to cultivate their appreciation of the nature and power of language and of literature, and to share what has been written. Some of you have asked in recent years: Why do we not have more student participation at conventions? Why do we not give recognition to student creative writing in the form of publication and awards? This committee wants to respond to those two concerns by sponsoring a student creative writing contest and providing a forum for presenting the award-winning works. Another goal is to establish an award for CLA members who make significant contributions to creative writing.

Our other two goals—sharing with each other work of interest to the group and the encouragement of research in black literature and culture—are the responsibility of the Program, Black Studies, Research, and Awards Committees and, of course, of the *CLA Journal*, which excellently represents us in every state and in nineteen foreign countries and territories. The extraordinarily outstanding work of our Program Committee, with Vice President Ann Venture Young as chair and Members-at-Large Marie Buncombe and Marian Musgrave, assisted this year by hosts Gloria Johnson and Marcellus Brooks, speaks for itself. The diversity and the richness of the research at this conference go unchallenged. Also, the Program and Host Committees this year invited each of us to exhibit our publications—in order to give recognition and as a means of sharing research. The Black Studies Committee, chaired by R. Baxter Miller, wishes to publish a series of pamphlets aimed at influencing the teaching and criticism of black literature (the titles: *Great Black American Teachers and Literary Scholars*,

1937-1982; *Literary Resources and Repositories at Predominantly Black Institutions*; *Theory and Practice in the Fiction of Black American Women*; *Critical Methods: Interfaces in Comparative Approaches for Literature of the Diaspora*), and it will urge the continued printing and reprinting of significant Afro-American texts. Robert P. Smith, Jr., new chair of the Research Committee, and his members are now compiling the first of their annual bibliographies of scholarly publications and creative projects by CLA members, for publication in the *Journal*. This list, as well as giving recognition and serving as a research tool, is an aid to the Awards Committee. This committee, chaired by Ruthe Sheffey, works very quietly; the annual recipients are announced at the convention banquet. The 1983 CLA Awards went to Mariann Russell for her book *Melvin B. Tolson's Harlem Gallery: A Literary Analysis* and to Martha Cobb for *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana: A Comparative Critical Study of Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and Nicolas Guillen*.

Our focus on black literatures and culture and our founding leave no question as to why the Ad Hoc Committee on the CLA and Historically Black Colleges came into being. Karen Becnel Moore and her committee offer an impressive list of short and long-range recommendations. The ones which they recommend be given priority are (1) that the CLA sponsor or co-sponsor an exemplary language event on the campus of an historically black college or university, for example, a language festival, film festival, or lecture series; (2) that the CLA provide at its annual meeting a pedagogical forum where classroom problems can be discussed and solutions sought; (3) that the CLA cooperate with historically black colleges and universities to provide a stimulus for study and research opportunities for its members; (4) that the CLA present a position statement to the presidents of these institutions to announce its stand on the teaching of modern languages and its continued support of black

writers and black literature;² and (5) that CLA members work with historically black colleges and universities to secure their affirmation and support for CLA and its activities.

Related to the work of this committee is an NEH special program, part of President Reagan's Initiative for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to encourage more teachers/scholars at these institutions to offer summer seminars for college teachers. As a result of this Initiative, three historically black colleges/universities will host NEH 1984 summer seminars on black literature and culture.³ The directors are all CLA members: Richard Long of Atlanta University, a Past President of CLA who has directed other NEH summer seminars, this summer will offer "Africa to America: Diaspora, Continuum, and Creolization"; Jerry Ward, Jr., of Tougaloo College, will direct "Black South: Opening the Text," and Lynn Sadler of Bennett College will direct "The Novel of Slave Unrest." The deadline for summer 1985 directorship proposals has passed, but the intent of the Initiative is to promote a continuing interest. CLA member David Dorsey, whose proposal was submitted independent of the Initiative, will direct "Approaches to African Fiction," at Atlanta University. Another NEH summer seminar program for which some of us may wish to apply as directors for 1986 or later is the newer Summer Seminars for Secondary School Teachers, begun in the summer of 1983 and significantly expanded for 1984 and 1985; since these focus on "seminal works in the humanities,"⁴ this program provides an excellent opportunity for us to share our knowledge and research in literature and culture of the Black Diaspora and in other literatures which we teach, in

² A draft of this statement has been prepared by the Committee.

³ Seminars in two other disciplines will be offered at Howard University and Hampton Institute, respectively: "A History of Afro-American Music, 1880-1980," directed by Doris McGinty, and "History of Education for Blacks, 1865-1954," co-directed by Wilma Hunter and Robert Engs.

⁴ *1985 Seminars for Secondary School Teachers*, p. 1.

English or in one of the modern languages.

Some of our research was shared this past year with other language associations. At NCTE (Denver, November 1983), Joyce Johnson, Margaret Reid, and I read papers on a panel chaired by Marie Buncombe, entitled "A Sense of Place and Circumstance in Afro-American Literature." At MLA (New York, December 1983), Robert P. Smith, Jr., chaired our panel "The 'Unknown' Black Writers—Pushkin, Dumas, Ortiz"; Marian Musgrave and Heanon Wilkins were the presenters. At CCCC (New York, March 1984), the CLA-sponsored panel was "The Caribbean Writer's Language and Style," with papers prepared by Enid Bogle, Regine Latortue, and Joyce Johnson; I chaired this panel, which was planned by Thelma Curl. We will also participate in the conferences of these organizations in 1984-85. As a member of the Minority Affairs Committee of CCCC, I invite panel proposals on a language or literature topic related to teaching minority students, for CCCC receives only a minimal number of proposals in this category. (The conference will be held in Minneapolis, March 21-23, 1985.)

By the nature of CLA's goals and by the way we have defined ourselves as an organization, we are part of a liberal arts tradition: a tradition that examines and shares ideas, that encourages critical thinking and reflection, that recognizes a variety of human perspectives, that believes in the interconnectedness of the human community, and that understands that the past shapes both the present and the future and thus cannot be ignored. Therefore, as we approach our fiftieth year, I believe we can be justly proud that during the past year, CLA established its Archives at the Robert Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center. Our first acquisition was long-time CLA Treasurer John Matheus' papers, contributed by his widow, Ellen Matheus. We owe an immense debt of gratitude to A. Russell Brooks, Acting Chair of the Archives Committee, for his assistance in securing the Matheus papers and to Lucy Grigsby and

Carolyn Fowler for formally accepting them for us in Atlanta. Carolyn has sorted these materials and secured others as she researches the history of the Association. I have written to Past Presidents or their families requesting records and memorabilia. The Archives Committee is asking each of us to contribute items which will help make possible a comprehensive account of the CLA. Future scholars need to know our history and our tradition, for from this knowledge, new ideas will flower. We cannot allow our history to be lost or strayed, for through it flow the truths of our growth and accomplishments, of our literature, and of our culture.

As scholars and teachers of languages and literature, we are committed to the pursuit of truth, to its dissemination, and to its preservation. This is our mission, which we are carrying out through our own conferences and committees and through our work with other language groups. Last year, I closed with the hope that the CLA would, in the words of John Milton's "Lycidas," "turn to [some] fresh Woods and Pastures new." Over the past year, we have begun that and are now ready to grow and flower until we reach an even fuller maturation. Now, to paraphrase one of the old spirituals: just like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved—but shall remain steadfast in our efforts, for we are readying ourselves as we look and work toward our half-decade—1987—and many years ahead, assumedly 2000, 2010, and somewhat beyond.

*La Guardia Community College (CUNY)
Long Island City, New York*