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COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION CONVENTION
1985: A CALL TO CELEBRATE

BY ANN VENTURE YOUNG

President's Address Delivered at the Forty-fifth Annual
CLA Convention in New York City, April 19, 1985

As educators in the fields of language and literature, we are regularly bombarded, occasionally to the point of exhaustion, by the recital and analysis of the problems facing our profession. The current assessment of our profession, as regards student proficiency, curriculum design, teacher survivability, and program integrity, is variously described as "shocking," "deplorable," "critical," and/or "dangerously inadequate."

Presidents and directors of language organizations (not unlike leaders in other fields, I suspect) are notable for their use of militaristic imagery in their annual addresses and reports as they attempt to heighten their colleagues' consciousness and awareness of the problems facing their profession. As likely as not, they identify the enemy or enemies and send forth a call to develop the necessary weaponry and the appropriate strategies to attack and counter-

attack until the battles are won.

Clearly, there are numerous issues and concerns confronting our profession. Who among us would try to deny the existence of real problems such as declining numbers of language majors, increased class sizes, increased instructional loads, retrenchment of teachers (especially foreign language teachers), the elimination of programs, or inadequate support for faculty research and development?

Today, rather than sound another call to arms to combat problems over which we exercise little control, I dare to invite a call to celebration to proclaim the small victories which we have achieved largely in those areas over which we still retain a considerable measure of influence. On a daily basis, we face up to those perennial professional challenges which somehow manage to survive intact changes in school administrations, changes in political climate, changes in budgets, changes in organizational leadership, changes in curriculum design, changes in strategies and priorities, and even changes in battle cries and battlefronts.

Such a call to celebrate does not ignore the constant need to strengthen our programs, hone our teaching and learning skills, collaborate with our colleagues in and out of our own academic disciplines, nor does it ignore our obligation to deepen our commitment to active participation in professional organizations such as the College Language Association. Rather, it is a call to us, as individual professionals, to celebrate our finest efforts to empower our students with acceptable and competitive native and/or foreign language skills; to commend our efforts to develop an appreciation of language and literature; to praise widely our persistent attempts to strengthen and refine our teaching techniques; and to applaud the energies which we exert to reclaim and interpret the voices and experiences of past and present writers and thinkers, especially black writers and thinkers.

Let us commemorate the founders of the College Language Association, among them Hugh M. Gloster and the late W. Edward Farrison, who responded to the need to es-

establish a community of black professionals who value the study and teaching of language skills, who cultivate the appreciation of language and literature, who value scholarly research in black literature and black cultures, and who encourage the teaching of black literature and black cultures. Let us extol the accuracy and durability of our founders' vision.

In the English and foreign language classrooms, let us glorify our attempts to guide our students to realize the goal of language skills adequate for personal and professional needs; let us glorify our attempts to improve their understanding of the target language; let us glorify our correctionist efforts, as we make order out of sometimes disorderly linguistic utterances when we suggest, repair, reason, substitute, and emend, while taking great care to encourage and foster future—hopefully improved—linguistic attempts.

Let us praise our struggles to elicit acceptable speech and writing patterns. Let us rejoice when we bring into being subject-verb agreement, when we generate complete sentences, when we cause topic sentences to evolve and whole paragraphs to emerge, or when we cause a sensitivity to tense considerations to grow and expand.

Let us express approval for the work which constantly demands that we rethink our objectives, that we personalize and individualize course content, and that we analyze, evaluate, and explicate with patience. Let us dignify the best efforts of our students and our own best efforts. And throughout the learning-teaching process, let us hold fast to the vision of a better way and a better day as we plot and scheme, and as we define and redefine our skills and our commitments.

Let us celebrate when we help to produce a Marvin Lewis, an Estelle Archibold, a Karen Becnel Moore, a Keith Walker, or hundreds of others, some of whom have even dared to follow in our professional footsteps.

Let us celebrate even the small successes we achieve in

refining attitudes, improving reading and thinking skills, enhancing interpretive and analytical capabilities—often offering ourselves and our colleagues as models as we seek to orient and reorient our students toward more human values—and as we strive to broaden our own intellectual horizons and those of our co-learners.

Let us rejoice when we succeed in stirring ourselves and each other to increased involvement and productivity in research activities and in creative-writing projects. Let us shout for joy when we throw a new light on a subject, when we resurrect a Zora Neale Hurston, when we discover an Antonio Campobasso, or when we rediscover a Virginia Brindis de Salas.

Let us pat ourselves on the back as we go about satisfying our desire to know and to understand and when we feel compelled to organize and disseminate the newly acquired knowledge and insights. Let us praise ourselves when we are driven by the realization that there is a uniqueness to our own individual patterns of thought, experience, and interpretation and that in sharing these, we perhaps make a small contribution.

And let us proclaim the work and mission of the College Language Association. For just as the individual professional is constantly challenged to guide his/her students to appropriate levels of language competency, to acquaintance with and appreciation of literature, and to insights into other cultures, CLA persistently responds to the challenge to remain a viable and valuable support system to strengthen the learning, teaching, and research efforts of its membership. The association is likewise challenged to remain viable and visible in the larger professional community of language and literature scholars, educators, and writers.

Let us praise widely the inspiration and sense of renewal that CLA provides as it brings us together annually to consider ways to improve the study and teaching of language skills and to cultivate the appreciation of language and

literature by organizing and presenting workshops such as those presented yesterday on "Experimentation in Teaching Language Skills" and "Creating Short Dramatic Pieces of Black Experience" or the one presented this morning on "Integrated Skills Reinforcement." CLA has always encouraged its members to take advantage of these opportunities to share their current thinking on how to enhance the language teaching-learning experience.

CLA supports its members by providing a relaxed convention atmosphere which is conducive to the formation of small discussion groups among colleagues who share similar interests and concerns. Let us be pleased that the CLA convention has sometimes been the birthplace and/or meeting place of other allied groups such as the Advisory Board of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, the Executive Committee of the Mid-Atlantic Writers Association, and the Langston Hughes Society, which, since its founding in 1981, has consistently enriched the CLA convention programs.

Let us laud the fact that CLA was represented this year at meetings of other related professional organizations. Eleanor Tignor, our immediate past president, and Thelma Curl, our liaison officer, attended the meetings of the Coalition of English Associations last August in Urbana, Illinois, and they continue to be a part of the Coalition which is working toward the reform of English studies from kindergarten to graduate school. Eleanor Tignor also represented CLA at the recent convention of the National Council of Teachers of English. Last month, at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition, CLA sponsored the panel "Testing: Implications for Minorities," which was organized by Thelma Curl. Other CLA members participating in the CCC panel were Thelma Thompson, W. Maurice Shipley, and Hobart Jarrett.

Let us applaud also those members who represented CLA on two panels presented at the MLA convention in Washington, D.C. One panel, on the topic "The Art and Artistry of Nelson Estupinan Bass," included papers by Martha

Cobb, Miriam DeCosta-Willis, and Marvin Lewis; the other panel, on the subject "Literary Masks: Imitation and Influence," included panelists Thelma Thompson, Cordell Briggs, Estelle Taylor, Judith Nembhard, and Paul Logan.

Let us commend the standing and ad hoc committees which form an essential part of the CLA support structure, undergirding as they do our individual efforts. Let us praise the English Curriculum Committee, chaired by Johnanna Grimes, which is currently involved in a project to create and fund innovative programs in English studies; and the Foreign Language Curriculum Committee, chaired by Judith Farmer, which is compiling a bibliography of current publications on trends in the foreign language curriculum; and the Creative Writing Committee, spearheaded by Sandra Govan, which is exploring the feasibility of establishing a national repository for black collegiate literary journals; and the Teacher Training Committee, under the leadership of Barbara Dease, which is examining ways to strengthening the teacher-training component of the profession to make it more responsive to current trends and needs.

Let us commend CLA's encouragement of scholarly research, especially in the fields of black literature and cultures, and its annual forum, which provides a clearinghouse for the dissemination of these findings. Let us praise the *CLA Journal*, edited by Cason L. Hill, which supports these individual research endeavors. Let us proclaim the good work of the Black Studies Committee, until recently chaired by R. Baxter Miller, which has proposed research and publication projects on the topics "Black Teachers and Scholars," "Research Repositories at Historically Black Institutions," and "The Prose of Black Women." Let us likewise praise the successful undertakings of the CLA Research Committee, guided by Robert P. Smith, Jr., which compiled a bibliography of publications by CLA members for the period 1982-1983 which appeared in the December 1984 issue of *CLAJ*. This committee plans to compile and publish an annual bibliography.

Let us recognize and acclaim the devotion to the advancement of black writers and black writing of our Special Projects Editor, Therman O'Daniel, who currently has several projects underway, among them a book on Jean Toomer, which will be published by the Howard University Press, a critical essay collection on Charles Chesnutt, and a cumulative index of *CLAJ*. Let us express our gratitude to the Awards Committee, chaired by Ruthe Sheffey, which regularly honors outstanding creative writing and scholarly works produced by association members.

Let us salute the efforts of our treasurer, Robert A. Smith, in the areas of recruiting new members and reclaiming former members. Let us praise loudly Robert P. Smith, Jr., who during the illness of our treasurer has ably discharged the myriad duties and responsibilities of that office.

Let us express our approval of the work being carried out by the Archives Committee, whose chair, pro tempore, is A. Russell Books. The Brooks Committee has been active in soliciting, collecting, sorting, and depositing CLA documents and papers in the Atlanta University Center's Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Department. Let us laud the valuable service rendered in this effort by Lucy C. Grigsby, CLA secretary and member of the Archives Committee. Let us applaud the work of Carolyn Fowler, active member of the Archives Committee, who is now engaged in writing a history of CLA.

Let us make known publicly our appreciation of the labor performed on our behalf by our placement officer, Earle Clowney, by Harry Jones and the Nominations Committee, by Carol Marsh and the Membership Committee, and by Alma C. Allen and the Constitution Committee, which has the painstaking charge of making an annual review of the Constitution.

Further, let us applaud the accomplishments of Karen Becnel Moore's Ad Hoc Committee on the CLA and Historically Black Colleges, which has developed a position state-

ment which presents the organization's stand on the teaching of modern languages and its support of black writers and black writing. Likewise, let us applaud the achievements of Thelma Thompson and the Committee on Cooperation between Public School and College Level Teachers of Language, which has set forth as its major goal "beginning dialogue with public school teachers, planning cooperative ventures, and conducting workshops and seminars for public school teachers and students."

Let us acknowledge with praise and sincere thanks the contribution of nearly eighty of our colleagues who are participating in the convention program as presenters and chairs in twenty-three English and foreign language panels and workshops.

And finally, let us lionize Eleanor Tignor, Host Committee chair, and Marie Buncombe, Program Committee chair, and members of their committees, all of whom have brought us together here in New York, not to belabor and bemoan the current state of our profession but rather that we might gather in individual and collective strength during this great regenerative celebration to be known for all times as the 1985 CLA Convention.

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