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CLA'S SECOND HALF-CENTURY: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE BLACK DIASPORA

BY MARIE H. BUNCOMBE

President's Address Delivered at the Fifty-First Anniversary Convention of the CLA in Greensboro, N.C., April 1, 1988

On an enormous estate on the Maryland Eastern Shore sits Wye Plantation's Manor House, built during the 1930s, its architecture evoking nostalgia for the antebellum South while updated to accommodate the tastes and sensibilities of conferees anticipating the twenty-first century: Rooms with walk-in closets the size of some New York City apartments; private baths with gold-plated, dolphin-shaped fixtures; well-stocked pantries, larders, and liquor cabinets; carpeted, upholstered libraries and meeting rooms equipped with word processors and television sets. Amidst formal gardens; tennis courts; an Olympic-size swimming pool; former horse stables converted into single- or double-occupancy rooms with Victorian furniture, private baths, and an Oriental-carpeted, air-conditioned sittingroom, the Big

House, Janus-like, simultaneously looks backward and forward in time.

In a separate part of the plantation in a wooded area five miles away from the Manor is the modern-designed, red-wood convention complex built along the shores of the Wye River with a boardwalk leading to private rooms, a dining hall, an exercise room, and another swimming pool, even larger than the first. Down the graveled paths a short distance away is a cluster of cabins converted into additional suites of rooms with comparable amenities. The meals are elegant, room services efficient; and all the maids, cooks, and servers are white.

It is in this same Talbot County, Maryland, on a similar plantation that Frederick Douglass was born and lived as a slave, where he painstakingly and surreptitiously taught himself to read and write, gained his freedom, and later conducted clandestine schools to teach these skills to other blacks in the county. In the town of St. Michaels, a seaport tourist resort a few miles away from the Wye Woods Conference Center, stands a prominently displayed bronze plaque in the middle of town attesting to Douglass' extraordinary accomplishments.

Ironically, it was also here that the English Coalition Conference of 1987 met July 6-23 at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies to discuss, debate, and plan the best methods for teaching all students to read, write, and speak in order to prepare them for citizenship and leadership in the twenty-first century. Modeled after two earlier conferences on the teaching of English—the Basic Issues Conference (1958) and the Dartmouth Conference (1966)—an informal coalition of English associations, including the Modern Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the College Language Association, met together and separately with primary, secondary, and college classroom teachers from all over the country for three long hot weeks (with one and a half Sundays off) composed and revised on word processors and actually wore

out three Xerox machines, trying to reach a consensus on models for teaching and learning English from kindergarten through graduate school and beyond. Alarmed that non-professionals are setting the national agenda for educational reform in the United States on such issues as who and what should be taught and tested as well as who should teach and be tested—all major concerns of politicians, governors, state legislatures, and business corporations—the Coalition decided that it is time for those of us in the profession to speak out on these topics of literacy and literature, skills in communication, language arts, and the art of language. As teachers and educational researchers, we not only should know the students, but also what is supposed to work and why.

Why the urgency about these matters now? At this time in the nation's history, America's primary position in the post-World War II era is rapidly declining, and the Western alliance is fast losing its edge in the power struggle in the post-Industrial Age. After many soul-searching questions, there is the final realization that in the twenty-first century the officially designated and mostly neglected "minorities" will make up the bulk of the labor force, and they must be educated to make them competitive in a global economy. Therefore, nothing less than a total reform of the American school system can begin to address the problems of such poorly prepared workers. Even the predominantly white middle-class suburban schools (designed like their nearby shopping malls, often to serve similar purposes) fail miserably in their mission of educating their students for effective, productive citizenship in the nation and leadership in the world. Thus it is that the power brokers, out of self-interest rather than altruism, have turned their attention belatedly to everybody's education at all levels of schooling everywhere.

Suddenly, inner city public schools, which have been allowed to fall into disrepair and disrepute, are getting the headlines. The damaged products of these schools are now

the subjects of research studies; television news documentaries and talk-shows; cover stories of weekly magazines; editorials; and educational reform proposals. The questions now become what must the schools do to make these students cultured, literate, educated, and thus employable for now and into the next century; what is the most effective means for teaching them; how do we assess that knowledge? Obviously, those who determine the answers to these questions will control not only the schools but also those the schools produce. If we listen attentively to the discussions on reforming American education, most of the proposals are designed to perpetuate the ruling powers as masters and owners of production with blacks and others as underpaid, exploited toilers in a competitive, highly technological service economy. It turned out this past summer that the Wye Plantation, indeed, was quite an appropriate setting for the ruling class to map out the destiny of those who produce the labor. True, we have come a long way since Frederick Douglass, but obviously not far enough despite all of the recently acquired amenities.

The language and curriculum used in our schools, in our government, and in our marketplace are set by the powerful white males of European descent who determine the content and context for all schooling in America—almost to the total exclusion of all other cultures. Lists found in *Cultural Literacy* by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (whom I and others challenged at the Conference), and the jeremiad of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the America Mind* seek to define "culture," "literacy," and "American" in terms of their own exclusive cultural fraternity, denying, dismissing, or acknowledging only grudgingly the validity of the histories and experiences of their female counterparts or those they designate "minorities" (the code name for the "disadvantaged," "illiterate," "uncultured" non-Europeans). When I hear a dean of one of the schools in the City University of New York say, "Ninety-six percent of our students are minorities," I wonder by what process she calculates four percent to be a ma-

jority. She quite plainly is not talking about *numbers* here; she is talking about *power*.

As we have witnessed in the past ten years, gains in ethnic studies on white campuses as well as in the populations of black college students and faculty on all campuses have steadily eroded. The curriculum reform movement spearheaded by the Black Student Union at Stanford University for balancing the undergraduate core requirements for race, gender, ethnicity, and class has aroused vehement reactions not only from students, faculty, administrators, and alumni of Stanford, but also from the national media, such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The sensation-seeking Education Secretary William J. Bennett accuses Stanford's faculty of submitting to "intimidation" and "pressure politics" and replacing the traditional Western canon of noted white male authors with "nonsense" promoted by "trendy lightweights." Almost daily the white males of academe, the media, state and federal offices, foundations, and big businesses defend the Eurocentric tradition from any infusion of other world cultures represented by the very students sitting in the nation's classrooms or the very competitors these students are expected to confront in the world marketplace. One writer is quoted as saying that he had never heard of "the Tolstoy of the Zulus, the Proust of the Papuans," while another observed, "When we get to the point of having black Shakespeares—as August Wilson seems to be approaching—then we can include them in the canon of the classics."

At the English Coalition Conference it was immediately apparent to Eleanor Tignor and me, the official CLA representatives, that our presence as both an organization and as individual members was essential to help set that agenda which, in fact, was being set for us, whether we liked it or not. Of the sixty delegates at the Conference, eight were blacks (five CLA members), one Hispanic, and two Japanese-Americans. We indeed made a significant difference by

insisting that vague language and theoretical jargon should not obscure our clearly stated concerns about our students; that the Conference should question in greater detail issues about the traditional canon in terms of what gets in and what is left out and why. In other words, we saw to it that the vested interests of curriculum designers at all levels of schooling—from preschool to graduate school—are compatible with those interests espoused by CLA.

In its final document on the very last day, the Conference adopted as its theme, “Democracy Through Language,” stating that “the teaching of the language arts is in the national interest; without effective instruction in them the social fabric will tear apart.” Language arts instruction, it reasoned, is especially important in a pluralistic postindustrial society. In an age when the membership of the community is becoming more and more linguistically, culturally, and socially diverse, an interactive classroom which focuses on each student individually is a practical necessity because students, both in and out of the classroom, no longer conform to a single type. The increased heterogeneity of our society gives new urgency to developing every student’s capability of appreciating cultural diversity and multiple ways of reading and thinking. The Coalition Conference, therefore, proposes that the subject matter at all levels of instruction reflect the variety of experiences of a multicultural student population and the world at large. Students must study the histories, worldviews, and artistic expressions of different cultures, which coexist in varying degrees of compatibility and competition. Texts must be studied within the context of their times, for no people, text, teaching, or learning exists in a vacuum.

Thus the nature of educational reform as well as the reformers is crucial. CLA must continue to monitor the curriculum revisers to assure that all students learn about the histories, achievements, and contributions of black people and all others to world civilizations. Whether in historically black or predominantly white institutions, all students

should be literate in their own culture in order to give credence and validation to their own lives, to the lives of their ancestors, and to future generations. They should learn about other cultures in order to understand and appreciate their place in the world. Their knowledge of foreign languages (ancient and modern) as well as English will give them access to their past and a key to their future. We must teach them that Africa is the acknowledged birthplace of the entire human family, whose offspring share a common mother, no matter where they reside around the globe. To do otherwise is dishonest and a disservice to those we teach.

In my own experience of teaching the African component of the non-Western course in Brooklyn College's core curriculum, the vastly outnumbered students from Africa or from the African Diaspora view with pride and a sense of curiosity and ownership the subject they are learning. As they compare the values, beliefs, and practices of their own families with contemporary and ancient African tribal rituals, a sense of continuity and history is introduced to most of them for the first time when they study about Africa's warriors, kings, queens, wealth, and yes, slaves centuries before Europeans had developed any civilizations of their own.

At this turning point in the history of American education and in the history of black people in the nation (as noted by Jesse Jackson's phenomenal showing in his presidential campaign), CLA in its fifty-first year also has reached a significant point in its own evolution. While continuing our traditional focus on literary history, criticism, and creative writing, we must give even more emphasis than we do now to the concerns of pedagogy and curriculum development, the focus of so much of the current educational discourse. To reverse the trend of the decline in the overall black student population in both public and private schools, we need to review old and new theories of learning and teaching language arts in order to analyze their valid-

ity, relevance, and applicability to black experiences, male and female. When necessary, we must challenge the hegemony of the traditional canon by insisting upon expanding the undergraduate general education requirements to balance the curriculum with Western and non-Western studies of men and women. We must join the debate and challenge the theories of the Blooms, the Hirsches, the Bennetts, and others who, in their guise of maintaining "standards," are really limiting the potential and options of our students.

More specifically, CLA needs to explore more opportunities for collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to learning, teaching, and scholarship among its own members as well as with others. The Association, for example, could start with a very small gesture by eliminating the artificial, separate labeling of the sessions at CLA conventions as "English" and "Foreign Language" since all of the sessions are given in English and, indeed, all of the foreign language panels and many of the English ones already are interdisciplinary and cross-cultural. Even more joint conference programming, joint student recruitment and retention efforts, as well as cross-cultural research in critical theories and interpretations of the literatures and cultures of Africa and the Black Diaspora would be especially productive. Finally, the Executive Committee would like to explore with CLA members the possibilities of forming a small, but representative cross-disciplinary coalition of black academic professional organizations to address the problem of the decline of black students and faculty in higher education.

In CLA's second half century, these surely are good times and blues times; for though we have come a long way, we still have a long way to go. Although we are not part of the process whereby we can and do make a difference, we have to be ever vigilant. Our very survival, as always, is at stake. Language and literature, literacy and culture are the tools of power and empowerment. Those who are in control of these tools control lives, control heritage. CLA must see to it that these tools are available and accessible; we must see

to it that they fall into the right hands. To do less is suicidal.

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