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CRITIC AT THE PRESENT TIME

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Source: *CLA Journal*, JUNE 2004, Vol. 47, No. 4 (JUNE 2004), pp. 383-390

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44325231>

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*Official Publication on The College Language Association*

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VOLUME XLVII

JUNE 2004

NUMBER 4

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**“KEEPING THE THING GOING WHILE THINGS ARE  
STIRRING”: THE FUNCTION OF THE CRITIC AT THE  
PRESENT TIME**

**BY YAKINI B. KEMP**

**President’s Address Delivered at Plenary Session I of the  
Sixty-Fourth Annual Convention and Sixty-Seventh Anni-  
versary of the College Language Association at Tennessee  
State University, Nashville Tennessee  
Thursday, April 15, 2004, 3:00 p.m.**

As I glanced over this year’s “Signifyin’ Theories” CLA program, I noted that perhaps 95 percent of the papers and discussions examine literature of the African Diaspora. This development occurred perhaps in the late nineteen sixties when Black Studies became hot topics on campuses in the U.S. African Americans, continental Africans, and African Caribbean scholars were fed up with reading about themselves from the critical perspectives of others where they were always analyzed as “other.” This was the same period that black women scholars and writers moved to the forefront to inject their voices and their visions into the contemporary literary canon. The result of these fomentations has been the last thirty years of lit-

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erary study which extends from Black Aesthetics to Post-colonial to Black Queer theoretics. We have seen the shift from sociopolitical emphasis to semiotic and deep structure, with a few purists hanging onto formalist analyses of literary elements. If Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" was prophetic and correct, then we are now past the finish line of theory. We have won that race and now look for new challenges.

I ask, then, what does it mean—what does it take—to be a good critic today? Does one necessarily have to pledge allegiance to an established theoretical outlook to have a significant discussion? (The question is only semi-rhetorical, but to those of you who are in graduate programs, the answer for you is yes. You must have theory.) Other than a few material accoutrements, of course—space, writing equipment, and food—the things that the good critic needs are passion, clarity, and an original perspective, not necessarily a theory. I concluded this from my analysis of my own development as scholar, critic, and teacher. After examining the major influences on my development as scholar and teacher, I know why most often I identify myself, when asked, as a Black Feminist Critic or Africana Feminist. I almost always use the term "feminist" rather than "womanist," even though I see them as interchangeable in most cases. I use the term "feminism" because it denotes the historical movement for equality by women in the Western world. Although women of African descent were not as visible in the formal ranks of this movement, they were there at every step of the struggle for democratic rights and have always been. Sojourner Truth, one of the few black women who actually spoke at the early American women's rights conventions, said of the Fourteenth Amendment: "There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women, it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am keeping the thing going while things are stirring be-

cause if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while for it to get going again" (Truth 130). I am aware of battles on a few predominantly white campuses between feminist studies and womanist studies. Fortunately, I am outside that struggle. Feminism and womanism are inherently part of each other, in my opinion. It is singularly important that the word "womanism" came into being through the vernacular of black women and the invention of a black woman writer, Alice Walker. By proposing the term, Walker was "keeping the thing going while things [were] stirring." Alice Walker taught the first literature course that I took as a college student. To this day, I believe that course in spring 1972 truly influenced my decision to teach literature. Entitled "Black American Literature with Special Emphasis on the Black Woman Writer," Walker's course was one of the first to examine black women's writing as a distinct academic focus. I have not seen or spoken to Ms. Walker since that time, but the course, at Harambee House on Wellesley's campus, was a magical entrance into a world of literature that had been hidden from me before. Imagine the discovery of Teacake and Janie for the first time, the idea that Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Ann Petry existed. I knew Lorraine Hansberry's work from high school study and had even read Leroi Jones' (now Amiri Baraka's) play *Dutchman* in an independent study. But the idea that there were many black women writers out there—was a new one; writers were mostly men, mostly white men. I became conscious of a new sensibility for and an awareness of literature at that time: thus, my first criterion, passion.

Passion of a love of literature is essential for the good critic. It is why we are all here. Audre Lorde's most profound essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic of Power," suggests that it is passion that fuels every major act in our lives and in the interactions of authority and subordinates. Harnessing this passion and using it for creative, inventive, and intellectual production would result in un-

told progressive outpouring, according to Lorde's theory. I forget the number of times in recent years where I read an article in an academic journal or listened to a paper at a conference session where, ultimately, the essayist presented her/his love of the theory or theorist first and foremost over the ideas of the narrative. Perhaps this reflects the ineffectiveness of the essayist's skill or simply a lack of courage to venture forth unarmed with someone else's ideas.

Modern literary theory *is* an interesting conglomerate which taken seriously in some quarters can confound the spirit and befuddle the brain. My reading of modern literary theory also necessitates my inclusion of the criterion clarity for the good critic. Clarity is not to be confused with simplicity. As academicians we have vast vocabularies, Latinate etymologies, and each other as resources for interpretation. My use of the term "clarity" may actually be more aesthetic than practical. The first year I assigned Mae Gwen Henderson's essay "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," a student in my Literary Criticism course at Talladega asked me, "Dr. Kemp, are you angry at us?" She was responding to Henderson's heavy use of Bakhtin's notion "dialogism" and to the employment of many wonderful, obscure, and strange-sounding words in the essay. Of course, Henderson's thesis is very clear and very appropriate: through their art, black women writers are modern-day scribes who speak "diverse known languages" because of their "positionality that enables them to speak in dialogically racial and gendered voices to the other(s) both within and without" (19). Henderson states, "If the psyche functions as an internalization of the heterogeneous social voices, black women's speech/writing becomes at once a dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche" (19). In her discussion of *Dessa Rose* and *Sula*, Henderson makes the connections clearly; my students comprehended also, after submerging the initial

language shock. Some even enjoyed the newness of the language; a couple have called over the years to tell me that they read the essay again in graduate school.

I have no doubt that literary criticism can and probably should be beautiful writing also. Reading Karla Hollo-way's *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (1922 Rutgers) demonstrates to me that literary theory, critical study, and the narrative themselves can be rendered in cerebral and enlightening ways. For years I have marveled at the perfection of Houston Baker's style in his essay "Racial Wisdom and Richard Wright's *Native Son*," which is included in his 1972 collection *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (UP VA).

French feminist theorists have been my focus in recent years and for a reason. I am reading every work I find by Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi for inclusion in my study of African women writers. I thought that combining the gaze of the French feminists fascinating. The concept of "feminine writing, *l'écriture féminine*" is original and is applicable on various levels of investigation. Yet, overall, the French feminists appear self-absorbed; that becomes tiresome, and much of the writing is contradictory. However, my Africana feminist perspective says that I can use what is relevant and what offers a greater vision. This leads to my third criterion for the good critic, which is to have an original perspective, not necessarily a theory. The heavy-handed use of theory can get in the way of the "work" of the essay. The late South African writer Bessie Head once said that she wanted the story in her second novel, *Maru*, to be so beautiful that the reader would not recognize the "work" that the novel was doing, the work being the elimination of prejudiced and discriminatory practices against the Masarwa (Bushmen) in Botswana. I believe that apt use of theory in criticism should evolve similarly. The popularity of cultural criticism today provides a much needed outlet for the syncretism of many

theories and practices. Although maligned by the purists as light scholarship, these same accusers are hard pressed to prove their mean-spirited missives. As one whose critical perspective still begins with the interlocking factors of race, class, and gender, I find that my own literary critical practice is evolving also. Having my scholarship labeled essentialist would not be a high condemnation from my perspective; being labeled dull would. One of the sharpest and most interesting overviews of black women's use and abuse in literary critical study is Ann DuCille's "The Occult of True Black Womanhood." DuCille takes on many of the critics and writers (mostly established white women critics and Houston Baker) who treat black women and black women's writing as if they own property rights to them. A very lively essay, but what I find equally amusing is that DuCille, while throwing darts at white critics (and Baker), has to duck her own words. She wants to remain nonessentialist while making what many would label an essentialist argument. She does pretty well in escaping her own trap; maybe a toe was snagged. Sometimes you have to get theory out of your own way.

You will note that I have not required that the good critic have a sense of social purpose or a mission to right historical wrongs. Some critics do have that purpose. Recall the historic critical debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke over the issue of the artist's sense of purpose and allegiance to art itself. Du Bois rightfully resides as the ground stone of African American intellectual and political vision, but on this issue Du Bois was wrong. We cannot mandate an artist's social consciousness or her purpose. If an artist has political and social acuity, it will pervade his/her art in some way. So, too, with the critic. Many of us have always kept in mind that we were entrusted with the mission of recovering and re-visioning a well-kept secret—our literary legacy. Beverly Sheftall and Roseann Bell were both my professors when I transferred to Spelman College. They were two of the editors and con-

tributors to that important black women's studies collection, *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. They were among young black women professors who taught Morrison's *Bluest Eye* and *Sula* during the 1970s—"keeping the thing going while things were stirring."

I have used formative moments in my academic history to demonstrate influences on my own development as critic and teacher. It seems that I was destined to be a black feminist critic with a sense of purpose. Consequently, I believe that all critics and all right-minded critical theory should have some basic feminist ideals embedded in their corpus. I do not view this as being prescriptive since, as Molaria Ogunjide declares in her essay on "Feminism in an African Context," all types of feminisms exist—"right-wing, left-wing, centrist, left of center, right of center, reformist, separatist, liberal, socialist, Marxist, non-aligned, Islamic, indigenous" (222). The one commonality among these feminisms may reside in the perspective which gives the life, art, and work of over half of humankind equal footing in some way. I also know that some black male writers and critics have always exemplified feminist perspectives in their work. ("And no, you do not have to call yourself one, to be one.")

So in this era, where the "Race for Theory" no longer exists as a competition, the good critic employs theory or an original perspective, clarity, and his/her passion for the literature to continue "keeping the thing going" because there is so much left to be discovered in the worlds of literature. I end with a quote from Barbara Christian that embodies passion, clarity, and original perspective: "I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense" (850).



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