

THE BOUND OF UNCERTAINTY

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THE BOUND OF UNCERTAINTY

By THELMA D. CURL

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Convention in Washington D. C., April 26, 1979

Certain modern scientists dealing with nuclear physics often employ in their research a principle commonly known as "The Bound of Uncertainty." In effect, it is a principle which permits the investigator to estimate and theorize and then conclude that his estimate or theory may not be correct. In deference to this theorem, I shall attempt to agitate your thoughtful concern about a subject for which once again the time is ripe: the College Language Association, the present state of this union and its prospects for the future. As I proceed to theorize and prognosticate, if I falter, I shall invoke the "Bound-of-Uncertainty" concept as my disclaimer.

By definition, the College Language Association is like NCTE and MLA: a community of teachers of foreign languages and English who share basic concerns in higher education. However, our history—fragmented and scattered among the archives of past presidents and long-term officers—indicates that CLA has served primarily as a forum for black scholars who have been systematically excluded from active participation in national white-controlled organizations. Yet, even from

the beginning, the Association has battled periodic waves of sentiment which questioned the need for the organization—especially, since the late 1960s when MLA and NCTE and others found it expedient (even fashionable) to include black scholars on their printed convention agenda—as recorders, chairmen and, only rarely, as presenters. And now that we serve on boards of directors and even get elected as chief officers of these organizations, again too large a percentage of our black professionals view CLA as a small-time enclave which has little or no relevancy in modern America.

If indeed the future can be predicted from past history, the need for the College Language Association will be greater in the 1980's than it was when the Association was founded in 1937. The aftermath of the 1960s lulled us into a slumber. We have ingested a placebo which, bringing a quietus to our restlessness, opened up the floodgates to neo-conservatism and re-enslavement—often too subtle to recognize.

While the College Language Association is *prima facie* a professional rather than political organization, we do perforce operate within a political reality (politics, as aptly defined by Sidney Hillman as “the science of how who gets what, when and why”). The political realities which impinge most dramatically upon the lifeblood of CLA and its members are, basically, the civil rights issues and their satellites. That is to say, the backlash from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the attending economic squeeze relate both directly and indirectly to the future of CLA in the 1980s.

It seems to be general consensus that, if we were to tally our score cards accurately, the latest half decade was not a banner time for blacks in America. Human rights movements are cyclical. And it seems that we are about to emerge full circle back into Reconstruction time, once again. The same decision which declared that public schools with “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” threatens to destroy the identity and autonomy of the black college. The black power which hastened the birth of Black Studies on college campuses failed to garner a power base to sustain the movement, which was inherently weakened by the lack of academic status on those campuses, by a low funding priority, and by a low profile on the employment market.

Affirmative-action legislation opened academic doors for black professors and students, but here also some disturbing trends are emerging. An increased number of black scholars have found satisfactory employment in white institutions, but evidence suggests that this number is decreasing.<sup>1</sup>

During the pre-Bakke era, college admission policies ushered in yet another set of significant trends: (1) More students in the high-school-age black population are receiving high-school diplomas—75 percent in 1977 compared to 20 percent in 1950. (2) More black students are enrolling in college. (Since 1970, enrollment has doubled.) (3) More black students are enrolling in white colleges, but fewer are graduating from these colleges. In 1965 most black students attended black colleges; by 1970, 75 percent of the nation's black college students were enrolled in white colleges. Yet, in 1974, approximately 40 percent of the black students who earned degrees earned them at black schools. And in 1976, 69 percent of all black students earning bachelor's degrees received them from black colleges. It is estimated that 70 percent of the black students who attend white universities do not graduate from these institutions.<sup>2</sup> Such evidence suggests that the well-known "revolving door" policy is a devastating reality. And, in some cases, the adverse effects of desegregation have forced us to resegregate.

The de-escalation of Black Studies, with an accompanying versely to the discrepancy between the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization: the "organizational productivity factor." The needs of this organization are centered in the needs of its members as governed by the political and social realities out of which they operate. For us, educational affairs are indeed a major concern, but the recurrent waves of persistent denial and academic deprivation create larger demands that cannot be denied. One of them is the preservation of our heritage.

The deescalation of Black Studies, with an accompanying

<sup>1</sup> John Wideman, "Publish and Still Perish: The Dilemma of Black Educators on White Campuses," *Black Enterprise*, 9 (September, 1978), 45.

<sup>2</sup> See Lorenzo Middleton, "Enrollment of Blacks Doubled Since 1970," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 (January 29, 1979), 2. See also Southern Regional Education Board reports *Black Enrollment in Higher Education and Degree Output in the South, 1975-76*.

drop-off in related publications, forces us to intensify our production of documents on black culture. In this regard, the *CLA Journal* is one of our greatest assets. Having grown from a mimeographed newsletter in the 1940s, the publication now reaches out to five continents. And, having a strong potential for even greater vitality and growth, it must continue to win the fight against rising freight and printing costs, low capital gains and manpower shortages. The *Journal* is a scholarly publication whose articles are replicated nationwide as definitive resources on black literature and culture. To lose its impact would be a step backwards.

Another demand: CLA members need a forceful political instrument for clarifying issues on education by and for black students. Global definitions and classifications have so polluted the mainstream of black issues that now the corporate mentality of this country equates "minority" with alcoholism and drug addiction. Persistent stereotypes, calculated research statistics, misplaced priorities, and unadulterated neglect still play havoc in the education of black students. A case in point is the latest wave of denigration and denial which comes out of competency testing spawned by the "Back to the Basics" movement. Test results and related "research" statistics are potential propellers of a backlash which threatens to take us back to the "leopard's spots" of the 1830's, to the cranial measurements of Combe and Morton, who concluded that the phrenological character of the Negro rendered his brain "inferior in size" to that of the Anglo-Saxon (brain size having a direct relationship to mental capacity). CLA must move to the cutting edge of decision-making as it relates to the teaching and learning skills of black students.

Strong political power requires the unity of an informed membership; an effective internal information flow is what we need. We must, therefore, make *CLA Notes* the self-supporting newsletter it is intended to be—providing information on the job market and on professional trends, on publications and issues affecting the membership, on funding sources, on relevant legislation, on projects meriting our support, on the political and social action that surrounds us. We must build an information bank and strengthen our network of information services.

Unaccustomed as we are to so doing, we must nevertheless develop techniques for lobbying. We must lobby in the seats of national and local governments where education policy is forged, in offices where funds are allocated, in formal and informal settings where bargaining on civil rights takes place; lobby in other national professional organizations to gain support of CLA's basic concerns and purposes.

As an organization, CLA can strengthen its power by a supportive coalition with other professional organizations with similar goals; by formal endorsement of programs which enhance our objectives; by resolutions and position papers on relevant issues. Professional organizations such as ours are cogs in the systems alliance of all of the educational, social, and political components of the black microcosm.

The power and influence of an organization can be quickly corroded by an uninvolved membership. For example, the CLA standing committees are the task forces which carry on the nuts-and-bolts work of the organization; and these committees can be only as successful as the membership wants them to be.

Written between the lines of our constitution, for each committee there is an implied mandate: for the Resolutions Committee, a mandate to analyze and address the crucial issues confronting black higher education, make position statements, and bring them to this body for endorsement. The Curriculum Committee could examine implications and make recommendations regarding such concerns as the decline in literacy, in the academic quality of students, in enrollments, in academic positions; and analyze the significance of the new emphasis on monolingualism and the degradation of humanistic studies. The Placement Committee, maintaining its momentum in searching out and publicizing employment opportunities and needs, could expand its scope to deal with trends regarding tenure, rank, and promotion. Is the black professor in white institutions of higher learning a threatened minority, for example? What are the implications of alleged reverse discrimination in black colleges?

A mandate for the Committee on Publishers is not only to continue efforts to get publishing companies to exhibit at CLA Conventions and to advertize in our publications but also to

devise ways to apply the financial pressure we know we can exert. A survey of companies which supply our institutions with textbooks should be initiated—starting perhaps with just the publishers that supply freshman English texts for schools with the largest enrollments, say ten institutions with enrollments over 5,000. There is little doubt that we are spending big money but getting less in return for our dollar.

The Membership Committee might appoint field representatives for reclamation and for tapping new resources; for identifying new markets and devising effective techniques for developing them. To illustrate, since forty-one percent of the black students in higher education are matriculating in community colleges, professors in these institutions should be for CLA a prime target group. While affiliation must remain non-discriminatory and nonexclusionary, all teachers and administrators who are charged with the language and literature instruction of non-white students in higher education should be tapped for membership. By extending personal invitations and by referrals to the Membership Committee, we all can become committees of the whole for membership.

There is a precedent in CLA to commission special task forces which address themselves to emergencies. There is a need for two such emergency commissions now: a task force on finance and one on public relations. The finance commission would investigate the feasibility of income-producing projects, such as the production of tapes and the publication of conference proceedings. The commission would look at advertising campaigns and financial investments. CLA must attract soft money as revenue earmarked for emergency funds and for long-term income-producing capital.

The task force on public relations would plan and execute a campaign to communicate with, influence the opinion of, and elicit favorable responses from the clientele of our selected publics. The credibility of CLA has been established, but our visibility is low. Difficult though it may be, we must get past "the gatekeepers" and take our message to people. For example, as an organization, CLA must stay on the calendars of the *Chronicle Of Higher Education* and *PMLA*; must continue to hold program slots at MLA and CCCC Conventions;

continue to be represented in the pages of Eric documents, in TESOL and in selected conferences such as those dealing with Women's Studies, the Basics Movement, and the Humanities. *CLA Journal* must be listed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and other references which index scholarly publications and cross-reference their articles and their scholars.

As CLA members, we must flaunt our affiliation with the organization as we serve on local and national committees; when we serve as consultants and readers for prestigious corporations. Whatever professional publications we produce, whatever presentations we make should boldly identify our relationship with CLA. We must make a concerted effort to maintain what Elias Blake calls "a national black presence" and make it a forceful and haunting reminder that "We, Too, Sing America."

It is Reconstruction time once again. And this is not the time for CLA to abdicate nor even falter in its responsibility to the black youth on the "Talley's Corners" of America.

In the words of Dickens, in *David Copperfield*, we must

"Ride on! Rough-shod if need be, smooth-shod if that will do, but ride on! Ride on over all obstacles, and win the race!"