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Source: *CLA Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (SEPTEMBER 2013), pp. 43-50

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44325847>

Accessed: 24-10-2020 05:36 UTC

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Marie H. Buncombe

President's Address Delivered at the Fiftieth Anniversary
Convention of the CLA in Washington, D. C., April 24, 1987

During the Great Depression in 1935 a significant literary event took place in the South. On the Baton Rouge campus of Louisiana State University, three of its faculty members—Charles W. Pipkin, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren—founded the *Southern Review*, which was launched at a meeting called the “Conference on Literature and Reading in the South and the Southwest.” With its new school of poetry, New Criticism (most notably championed by T. S. Eliot), agrarian sympathies, and such contributors as Eudora Welty, W. H. Auden, Allen Tate, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, the journal became one of the most prestigious and influential literary magazines in modern British and American letters. Though promoting American regionalism, the editors, in order to avoid any charges of parochialism, did not wish to restrict their Southern magazine to Southern writers—only to good writers, good white writers. For nowhere among the list of early contributors was there a single black writer, Southern or otherwise.

It was also in 1935 that Alain Locke's *The New Negro* was published, followed two years later by Sterling Brown's *Negro Poetry and Drama* and *The Negro in American Fiction*. Noted Locke in the editorial foreword to Brown's critical volumes, Brown's *Southern Road* in 1932 placed him in the “advance-guard of younger Negro poets and, as well, the then new school of American regionalist literature.”¹

It was in such a race-conscious American society that another group of college English teachers in the South was to mark another historic occasion by turning its attention to the concerns of Negro professors, scholars, students, and writers, with special emphasis on black literary and cultural experiences. Indeed, the College Language Association (CLA) was founded fifty years ago precisely because of the exclusionary racial policy of professional organizations like the Modern Language Association and literary journals like the *Southern Review*. Today I wish to recall briefly some of the significant players, politics, and policies from CLA's most impressive history.

¹ Alain Locke, Foreword, *Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction*, by Sterling Brown (New York): Atheneum, 1969).

With both cultural and physical segregation an entrenched fact of life, Hugh M. Gloster, an instructor of English at LeMoyné College in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1937 founded and invited the Association of Teachers of English in Negro Colleges to convene on his campus its first annual meeting. Because of the racist policy of the hotels and cities of the South, the Association members deemed it an honor to host the annual conventions at their institutions, providing classrooms and auditoriums for sessions and programs, affordable meals and lodging, as well as gracious hospitality and great entertainment. The stimulating panels, gala banquets, and prominent guest speakers provided excitement and prestige for the entire college community, on and off campus. It was not until 1973 in Columbia, South Carolina, that the conference was held in a major hotel in a Southern city; 1982 marked the first time a predominantly white institution (the University of North Carolina at Charlotte) hosted the convention; and 1983—in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—was the first time it ever met in a Northern city. Thus, for five decades the Association has reflected and adapted to the *Zeitgeist* of the American scene. As A. Russell Brooks observed in a paper presented at the 1982 CLA convention, “As goes our milieu, so goes the Association and, in turn, the *Journal*.”²

Since the first two conventions emphasized instruction in composition for students deficient in basic language skills, the eminent literary agent-publisher-editor-critic, William Stanley Braithwaite, was asked to chair a session at the 1938 Atlanta convention on “Cultivating the Writer in Everyman,” whose invited panelists originally were to be Lorenzo Turner and James Weldon Johnson of Fisk University and W. E. B. Du Bois of Atlanta University, but later included Emma C. W. Gray and Cecil Blue. Credited at the time by Sterling Brown as “one of the pioneers in the poetry revival in America”³ and now a faculty member at Talladega College and Atlanta University twenty years earlier, the sixty-year-old Braithwaite flatly refused an invitation to join the organization, noting in his memoirs:

Always in an institution of that sort your colleagues are interested to know where you got your education and where you got your degrees, and I told them frankly I had no earned degrees, not even a high school diploma. I don’t know just what they thought, but sometimes their action was a puzzlement. They had a conference there of English teachers from Negro colleges. I’m not much for conferences. The man who was the head of the English Department at Morehouse

² A. Russell Brooks, “*The CLA Journal as a Mirror of Changing Ethnic and Academic Perspectives*,” Annual Convention, Charlotte, N.C., 23 April 1982, p. 1. Hereafter cited in the text.

³ Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama* and *The Negro in American Fiction* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 49.

College, Nathaniel P. Tillman, invited me to become a member, and I said, "I don't want to become a member."⁴

He nevertheless agreed to chair the panel on composition.

At the 1939 meeting at Knoxville College in Tennessee, one committee report urged the colleges to include in their curricula, whenever possible, an elective on the Negro in American Literature,⁵ an irony that can hardly go unnoticed in today's climate. Though in 1941 the organization expanded its membership to include teachers of languages other than English and became the Association of Teachers of Language in Negro Colleges,⁶ a declining enrollment, restrictions on travel, and the casualties of war during the years 1939-1945 resulted in the cancellation of the annual meetings for three years.

During the postwar period, obviously intent on being equal, though separate, the organization devoted itself to emulating the high standards of scholarship and professionalism of the Modern Language Association with its interests reaching beyond the regional confines of Negro colleges in the South to national and even international audiences and concerns. In 1949, therefore, it dropped the word "Negro" from its name to become the College Language Association.⁷ Thus in its first decade and a half the Association focused its attention on defining its purpose and developing its objectives.

The landmark 1954 U. S. Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, however, caused a shift in CLA's perspectives and called for a new assessment of its goals. Was the Association's current mission still appropriate or even adequate? What effect would the Court's decision have on Negro students, Negro colleges, Negro organizations? How should we prepare our students for clearly the best of times and the worst of times? CLA President Billie Geter Thomas sent out a letter to the membership in the summer of 1956, stating that integration would eliminate "our special problems" found in Negro institutions and the organization now could "channel ... [its] energies to the achieving of goals that should motivate any American teacher" (Brooks, p. 2). The CLA Executive Committee consequently announced its policy for the Association as an integrated body (which it has always been) concerning itself with "problems of illiteracy and changing cultural values facing all Americans" (Brooks, p. 2).

⁴ William S. Braithwaite, *The Reminiscences of William S. Braithwaite* (Columbia Univ., Oral History Research Office, 1959), pp. 215-16, quoted in Philip Butcher, "William Stanley Braithwaite and the College Language Association," *CLA Journal* 15 (Dec. 1971), 117.

⁵ Philip Butcher, "William Stanley Braithwaite and the College Language Association," *CLA Journal* 15 (Dec. 1971), 124.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

It was at this juncture that the *CLA Journal* made its debut. At the 1957 convention in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, its theme—"The Americanization of the Negro College," with Professor Thomas presiding—Therman B. O'Daniel of Morgan State College was elected editor of the Association's official publication, the *CLA Bulletin*, which he had edited previously in 1951 and 1952 and which usually published convention proceedings, minutes of committees, and membership news. Again a name change seemed appropriate. The *Bulletin* became the *CLA Journal*, a truly scholarly publication as the official organ befitting the College Language Association, now a national scholarly organization. The first two issues of the *Journal* (November 1957 and March 1958), growing out of the theme of the 1957 convention, carried articles by Billie Geter Thomas, newly elected President Blyden Jackson, Albert Berrian, Herman Long, and Anne Campbell, variously calling for assimilating the Negro experience in America, for seizing the opportunity to share in both black and white American cultures, and for preparing black students for the new demands of an integrated society.⁸ Therman O'Daniel served as the esteemed editor of the *Journal* from 1957 to 1977. Shortly before his death in June 1986 he performed one of the final official acts for CLA by publishing the *Twenty-Five-Year Author-Title Cumulative Index of the CLA Journal (1957-1982)*. After a brief editorship by E. A. Jones from 1978 to 1979, Cason L. Hill followed as the *Journal's* editor and has served in that capacity ever since.

An examination of convention themes and programs, minutes and reports, presidential addresses and *Journal* articles reveals the consistency with which the Association reflected the concerns of the times and continued to evolve. With the speed of integration moving ever so deliberately, the years of optimism after the 1954 decision soon faded into years of disenchantment. President Nick Aaron Ford in his 1962 address complained that eight years after the integration law, we were still unaffiliated with the mainstream of American professional life. CLA's function was to be "a TEMPORARY bridge between the segregated and the integrated," whose aim "must forever be to destroy itself or transform itself into something new and different as soon as its bridge-like mission is over" (Brooks, p. 4). Darwin Turner, lamenting the ever-increasing scarcity of black scholars, observed in his President's report to the 1964 convention that more white scholars than black ones were interested in black literature and that the most recent black literary criticism and anthology of black literature were published by whites; he also noted the sparsity [sic] of blacks earning doctorates in English and foreign languages while many of the faculties of historically black colleges were becoming increasingly

⁸ Therman B. O'Daniel, *A Twenty-Five Year Author-Title Cumulative Index to the CLA Journal (1957-1982)* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst Company, 1985), pp xix-xxv.

white. President Milton G. Hardiman's 1967 address continued to express alarm over CLA's lack of affiliation with mainstream professional groups and the "slow pace of our educational involvement" in national organizations (Brooks, p. 5).

The vociferous black militant manifestos of the sixties and seventies, however, were ready either to speed up the pace of integration or resist it entirely. Instead of the Americanization of blacks and black institutions, the demands were for a greater knowledge and appreciation of our African heritage, not only in the United States, the Caribbean, and the rest of the world, but at its source in Africa itself. Creative writers and scholars, black men and women around the globe, marched to the head of the line and the attention of the literary public. The effect on CLA's sense of mission was immediate. The dramatic increase in the number of conventions devoted primarily to black themes and the works of black authors reflected the proliferation of Black Studies departments and programs in institutions around the country. Indeed, the Association, reacting to so many of the hastily established programs and "professors," issued an official position statement at the 1969 convention, stating in part: "We are distressed at the apparent ease with which ill-conceived programs, directed by persons with limited experience with black people and their history and often prompted by questionable academic and social motives, seem to receive ready approval..." (Brooks, p. 8). Under the leadership of Marianna Davis, CLA members Harold Alexander, Anne Campbell, James Hill, Rosentine Purnell, and Sophia Nelson, along with other black delegates, organized a black caucus at the 1970 Conference on College Composition and Communication, demanded high quality scholarship in Black Studies by competent black scholars on CCCC programs, and called for the adoption of the 1969 CLA position statement as a resolution by CCCC, which voted unanimously to do so.⁹ It should be noted here that three of those CLA members (Davis, Hill, and Purnell) were later elected to the presidency of that organization. Richard Long, in his presidential address at the 1970 Atlanta convention, recommended firm handling of "scoffers and exploiters of Black Studies" (Brooks, p. 8) and presided the following year at the conference in Tallahassee, whose theme was "The Future of Black Studies."

Refusing any longer to be mere spectators or polite guests at the academic community's national smorgasbord, CLA members decided to become either party-crashers or party organizers. Since the MLA Committee on the Education of Minority Groups was composed entirely of CLA members, President Long designated Darwin Turner, Juanita Williamson, Robert P. Smith, Jr., and Hoyt W. Fuller as the CLA Committee on CLA-MLA Cooperation, with Therman B. O'Daniel and Ruth Horry as ex officio members. In the June 1970 issue of the *Journal*, W. Edward Farrison's "What American Negro Literature Exists and Who Should

⁹ "CLA News," *CLA Journal*, 13 (June 1970), 439.

Teach It” sought, paradoxically, to inform a whole new generation of “instant” scholars and professors of Black Studies about the canon of black literature long before the New Black Arts Movement.¹⁰ In the same issue Arthur P. Davis, seeking, as usual, to keep everybody honest, assessed the new black poetry and criticism in terms of their originality and seriousness, observing that the “newness [in the poetry], except for the hate motivation, is about as meaningful as the change from a ‘konked head’ to a ‘bush.’”¹¹ It was at this time that the CLA Ad Hoc Committee on Black Studies was formed with George Kent as chair and Eugenia Collier, Naomi Garrett, Stephen Henderson, and Darwin Turner as members. Shortly thereafter, *CLAJ* published several special issues dealing almost exclusively with an aspect of Black Studies, covering such authors as Langston Hughes, Charles W. Chestnutt [sic], Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jean Toomer, James Baldwin, and William Wells Brown; and exploring such themes as “Afro-American Prose Fiction and Verse,” “Black Studies: International Dimensions,” and “Before, During, and After the Harlem Renaissance.” In addition, “An Annual Bibliography of Afro-American Literature, with Selected Bibliographies of African and Caribbean Literature” was introduced (Brooks, p. 7).

Ironically, in spite of (or maybe because of) this fermentation within the organization, it became fashionable among a large segment of black scholars and writers, as President Thelma D. Curl noted at the 1979 Washington, D.C. convention, to “view CLA as a small-time enclave which has little or no relevancy in modern America.”¹² With the onset, however, of what she called a new Reconstruction for blacks—with alleged reverse discrimination against whites and failed affirmative action programs leading to smaller numbers of Black Studies, black scholars and black students on white campuses—the necessity for CLA became more apparent. Indeed, she reminded the delegates, we need more publications on black culture in order to preserve our heritage; more political action that lobbies for our special interests and forms coalitions with other professional organizations which address similar issues as testing, literacy, foreign language requirements, and declining student populations.¹³

As we progress through the eighties, we see that CLA has proved remarkably responsive and prophetic over time. Edward B. Fiske’s lead story on the front page of a recent edition of *The New York Times* announced that the latest Federal figures show blacks to have a smaller presence in American campuses than they did six years

¹⁰ W. Edward Farrison, “What American Negro Literature Exists and Who Should Teach It?” *CLA Journal* 13, (June 1970), 374-81.

¹¹ Arthur P. Davis, “The New Poetry of Black Hate.” *CLA Journal*, 13 (June 1970), 390.

¹² Thelma D. Curl, “The Bound of Uncertainty,” *CLA Journal*, 22 (June 1979), 298.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 298-303.

ago, “both in absolute terms and as a percentage of all undergraduates.”¹⁴ Cited as some of the major causes for this alarming situation are a cutback in financial aid amid escalating costs for higher education, less social and political pressure for affirmative action, and increasing racial tensions and abuses on traditionally white campuses. Among those who are enrolled in the nation’s colleges, there are far too few majors in the humanities, especially languages and literatures; and the best and the brightest students are opting not to join the teaching profession as they heed the siren calls of more lucrative vocations with more prestigious titles.

Looking forward to CLA’s golden anniversary and reflecting on the Association’s objectives and accomplishments, President Eleanor Tignor in the 1984 Nashville convention expanded on the meaning of the word “conference” to refer not only to the annual convention, but also the revitalized work of the committees; regional cooperation among the membership; and coalitions with other national organizations to define the central issues of English and foreign-language study,¹⁵ as exemplified by CLA’s meeting for three weeks this summer at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies with the English Coalition that also includes, among others, the Modern Language Association, Conference on College Composition and Communication Conference on English Education, and National Council of Teachers of English. At the 1985 convention President Ann Young rightfully noted that we have much cause for celebrating CLA as a viable, vital, and increasingly visible organization.¹⁶

What then is the agenda for CLA in the future? I say CLA’s agenda for the future is its legacy from the past. What CLA has always done well it should continue to do, namely;

1. Offer a forum for black scholars, creative writers, and college teachers of languages and literatures to exchange ideas and promote their professional concerns.
2. Raise standards of literacy among all readers and writers throughout the nation.
3. Serve as a national network linking black academicians and those in the traditional mainstream of the profession.

¹⁴ Edward B. Fiske, “Enrollment of Minorities in Colleges Stagnating,” *The New York Times*, 19 Apr. 1987, pp. 1, 24.

¹⁵ Eleanor Q. Tignor, “The College Language Association and the Profession of Languages and Literatures,” *CLA Journal*, 26 (June 1983), 367-83.

¹⁶ Ann Venture Young, “College Language Association Convention 1985: A Call to Celebrate,” *CLA Journal*, 29 (Sept. 1985), 1-8.

4. Promote standards of excellence in all critical and creative writings, with special attention to those covering Black Studies.
5. Focus world attention on the black cultural and literary traditions.
6. Maintain an open nonracial policy in membership and scholarship.
7. Publish a first-rate journal no serious scholar in the field of black literary studies can possibly ignore.

Seeking redemption for its original sin of omitting the African-American literary heritage from the regional literature of the South, the *Southern Review* devoted its summer 1985 golden anniversary issue exclusively to black writers, with its editor James Olney predicting that black writing may be “the spark that revitalizes American literature.”¹⁷ Featured among its readers this time at its commemorative conference on “Southern Letters and Modern Literature” was Ernest J. Gaines along with Eudora Welty and Robert Penn Warren; among its panelists Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and Gloria Naylor. I truly believe and think it only fair to say that the extraordinary contributions of the College Language Association over the past fifty years have played a major role in the long overdue recognition of the black presence in the world of humane letters. In reflecting history and recording it, CLA has been making history for half a century. In salute, let us proudly lift the torch, keep it lit, and pass it on.

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¹⁷ Marc K. Stengel, “Modernism on the Mississippi: The Southern Review, 1935-85,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 24 Nov. 1985, p. 35.