

25-9-29-1x893

CLS2943921: CLA journal. College Language Association (U.S.)

WR: (ISSN 0007-8549 / College Language Association. /)

Requested: 2016-10-05 12:52

Not needed after:

Pickup at: HU Howard University

WDD: Web Delivery

Citation: Issue: v.57(1) 2013; Article: Fifty Years of CLAJ, 1957-2007 / Williams, Dana; Pages: 2-8

\* WRLC Shared Collections Facility - 31194007133360 - - Charged(2009-04-14)

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Fifty Years of *CLAJ*, 1957-2007

Dana A. Williams

When the 2012-14 CLA Executive Committee resolved to make volume fifty-seven of the journal one of reprints with contextualized introductions to offer a retrospective of the journal over the last fifty years of its history, we did so with a number of goals in mind. High among them was a clear intent to remind some members and to make other members aware of the significant and unparalleled role the journal has played in publishing scholarship by and about people of color and our languages and literatures. We can logically if not optimistically assume that the fields of African American and African Diaspora literary and language studies would have eventually been established as serious fields of study in the academy without the advent of *CLAJ*, but, fortunately, we do not have to wonder how long it would have taken or who would have become "authorities" in the fields had *CLAJ* not emerged and begun publishing in 1957, at a moment when higher education was grappling mightily with its identity, especially in relation to its students and faculty of color.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that *CLAJ* was or is a journal interested exclusively in people of color—their literatures and their languages. Therman O'Daniel, the journal's founding editor, makes this clear in the lead essay of the inaugural issue. The editorial board, he writes, "has no intention of placing any restrictions on the type of scholarly material, pertaining to languages and literature, that it will accept. Articles on most of the languages ... and articles treating the literature of all nations, as well as, studies in the Humanities, will be deemed worthy of careful consideration for publication" (1-2).<sup>2</sup> The lone restriction to be inferred from O'Daniel's introduction was that articles accepted for publication must meet the journal's goal of "providing another medium of scholarly expression for members

<sup>1</sup> The imagined impact of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 outlawing legal discrimination in public education on the basis of race cannot be understated. Making segregation illegal was supposed to foster integration in education, but no one knew how this would play out or even how to adapt to a changing racial reality. CLA's response was to organize its 1957 convention around the theme "The Americanization of the Negro College." Those who suspected that integration would mean wholesale black assimilation into whiteness pushed more for a serious reorganization of American history and culture, one that valued equally black and white contributions to American history and culture. Others believed that any singular academic focus on any aspect of black life violated the spirit of the Brown decision in that such a focus reinscribed a separate but equal pattern of learning and would thus encourage continued separatism.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from essays reprinted in the issue follow the pagination and citation information of the original essay rather than the reprint.

of the College Language Association, and to provide the same expression outlet for *other persons with similar scholarly interests*" (1; italics in original). A review of the journal's index during its formative years underscores the point of scholarly inclusion rather than exclusion. As A. Russell Brooks notes in "The *CLA Journal* as a Mirror of Changing Ethnic and Academic Perspectives," during its first decade, *CLAJ* "carried 155 articles on nonethnic-related subjects by whites and 59 by blacks, and only 63 on ethnic-related subjects, 11 by whites and 52 by blacks. Fewer than half of the articles during this decade were race oriented" (269). But as Brooks also notes, this changes "drastically for the second decade and beyond" (269) when the journal began to reflect more intensely both the interests of its predominantly African American membership and that membership's determination to validate to the academy what it had known all along—that we are heirs to and creators of rich literary traditions and an equally rich heritage of languages.

The articles included in this first issue of the retrospective volume tell *CLAJ* and *CLA*'s story well. Among them are O'Daniel's brief remarks that announce and frame the journal, which he and the founding editorial board could only hope would be well-received and successful; Brooks's article, which chronicles *CLAJ*'s history in relation to published articles with ethnic and nonethnic perspectives specifically but which contextualizes the journal more generally as well; and representative presidential addresses that reflect defining moments in the institution's history. If this were the only issue and these the only retrospective essays in the volume, this issue would still do well the job of highlighting the deft scholarship that has appeared in *CLAJ* over the years under the able editorship of O'Daniel, E. A. Jones, and Cason L. Hill.<sup>3</sup> But as those of us who prepared this volume can attest, the treasure hunt through the journal's archives to find representative essays does not begin to reveal the wealth of information that rests between the pages of the journal over its first 50 years. As the *ad hoc* committee for the retrospective volume, CLA Assistant Treasurer Elizabeth West, *CLAJ* Assistant Editor Kendra Parker, and I reviewed a preliminary draft of the index Barbra Chim unceremoniously but dutifully prepared (which then led us to commission her to develop a cumulative one) to determine how the volume might be best structured conceptually. Then, we began the task of retrieving and reviewing hundreds of essays to determine which ones best fit the cap we had imagined. In at least one instance, we changed course completely for an issue, because some essays that fell outside of our design demanded to be heard and because others we thought would work did not. In this regard, I do not think it exaggeration to say that the selection process was an organic one made possible only by a scholarly curiosity; we were now hooked by

<sup>3</sup> O'Daniel served as editor from 1957-1977, Jones from 1978-1979, and Hill from 1979-2013. Former CLA President Warren Carson served briefly as acting editor until Sandra G. Shannon assumed the editorship in 2014.

the presence of our forbears and resolved to be worthy keepers of their lineage. But we also discovered the frustration of trying to secure some of the essays since few libraries had uninterrupted collections available on-site or otherwise, and the limit to the number of essays a researcher can request from consortium libraries from a single journal without violating copyright laws is for the faint of heart, not for the incorrigible group we had become. That led us to resolve to begin to digitize *CLAJ* and to make the full journal archive available to the financially active membership.<sup>4</sup> Following our report to the Executive Committee and the lament that there were as many wonderful things left out of the volume as were included, we also committed to holding a plenary session to highlight *CLAJ*'s archive and to promote digitization projects to the membership in earnest.

Obstacles to be surmounted notwithstanding, what was clear was that the richness of *CLA*'s history in general and then as evidenced in the journal in particular was worth sharing with any willing (or unsuspecting) listener. Even O'Daniel's short essay introducing the journal reminds us that it was the third stage in *CLA*'s publishing history—the first being the *Newsletter* and the second being the *Bulletin*. Similarly, Brooks's essay, as well as Marie Buncombe's, which was the 1987 Presidential Address and is a good companion piece to Brooks's, reminds us that the moniker "College Language Association" is the organization's third. *CLA*, in its earliest iteration, Buncombe retells, was founded as the "Association of Teachers of English in Negro Colleges" in 1937 when Hugh M. Gloster invited faculty to LeMoyné College in Memphis, Tennessee. The name was changed to the "Association of Teachers of Languages in Negro Colleges" in 1941 when the scope expanded to include languages other than English and then again in 1949 to the "College Language Association" to avoid the stigma of racial exclusiveness and to make the organization national in scope" (qtd in Brooks 266). The essays included herein and elsewhere in the journal's archives are no substitute for Carolyn Fowler's *College Language Association: A Social History*, but with that monograph out of print and in need of an update, members new to *CLA* will be well-served by these essays in their exploration into *CLA*'s history.

Presidential addresses (those reprinted here and those in other issues) are similarly informative since they tend to assess the current state of the institution, envision its future, and/or contextualize it among pressing issues in higher education. The latter is the case with the Darwin T. Turner essay included in this issue. One of the journal's most frequent contributors between 1958-75, Turner was a prolific scholar and a *CLA* loyalist. His 1964 Presidential Address, "The Status of Humanists and the Humanities," calling for a re-examination of the humanities and how we teach it, is as relevant today as the address must have been when he

delivered it. His interrogation of a faculty's role in the decline of the prestige of the humanities following Sputnik I and the ensuing claims of the impracticality of the study of languages and literatures reminds us that there has always been and may always be a "crisis in the humanities," that there will always be an obsession with "the new" that makes traditional literary study seem passé, and that the non-practitioner or vocational driven disciplines will constantly be under assault. More important than his foreshadowing of the current humanities crisis conversations, however, is his charting of how humanities faculty must respond to the crisis (as an internal reality and an external construct) to be the guardians of our cultural heritages. My future syllabi will be smarter and more focused having encountered Turner's sage advice, and I hope yours will be too after reading his essay.

If Turner's essay engenders a quintessential humanist spirit we can all appreciate, James J. Davis's 1994 Presidential Address, "Redefining and Assessing the Pedagogy of Humanism," helps us reconsider how we might best foster in students a real appreciation of the humanities by assessing them differently. While we can all understand the empirical requirement that students demonstrate competency in some concrete and measurable way, Davis makes a compelling case for the use of intrepid short-term practicums in humanism to see just how effective we have been in teaching students what it means "to be human" in addition to teaching them how to interpret the humanities. Read together, the essays offer an insightful path to rethinking how we approach humanistic study as a teaching and learning enterprise. Fifty years after Turner's address and twenty years after Davis's, contemporary conversations about humanities pedagogy could still benefit from their thoughtfulness on the subject; and, I could argue (convincingly, too) that few, if any, exposés on the humanities published since theirs, in *CLAJ* or elsewhere, exceed the judiciousness of their critique or the forethought of their understanding.

As he walks us through the journal's representation of ethnic perspectives, Brooks also maps the organization's history in important ways, especially in relation to its reluctant and then overt coming to terms with race. In his 1962 address, Nick Aaron Ford, Brooks tells us, "declared that the Association could contribute to the 'worthy goal' of racial integration in every area of American life"; but he complained that ... eight years after 1954, we were far from that goal, still isolated, still unaffiliated with the mainstream of American professional life" (qtd in Brooks 270). That isolation is lessened by 1970, when "CLA members ... along with other black delegates," as Buncombe notes, "organized a black caucus at the 1970 Conference on College Composition and Communication" (7) and when the MLA Committee on the Education of Minority Groups is formed and "composed entirely of CLA members" (8). Around this same time, an *ad hoc* committee on Black Studies was formed, and the 1971 convention theme was "The Future of

<sup>4</sup> We hope to begin and complete the digitization project in 2015.

Black Studies.<sup>5</sup>

Charles H. Curl's 1969 Presidential Address clearly maps the need for this change in direction. He asks questions similar to the line of inquiry W.E.B. DuBois had initiated in "The Field and Function of the Negro College," "Whither Now and Why," and elsewhere thirty years earlier. Curl asks:

Who shall have the final control of our institutions?... Is the black college... essentially a step-child of the American system of white racism and bigotry rather than a product of humanism and philanthropy?... And is the black college so hopelessly held by the tentacles of the mentality of white American (and its pocketbook) that it can hardly rise above its original ennobling mission, which was in effect to provide a token, middle class education for the sons and daughters of slaves who are still confined within the walls of segregation? (1-2)

Curl then explores the value and limitations of black studies curricula and its potential impact of black faculty and students. He makes the familiar case that black studies can generate self-identity and invigorate waning interests in academia, that it can enhance racial understanding, and that it can help eradicate racial stereotypes. He also raises a key concern that still has not been addressed fully—the question of disciplinary (its definition and scope) and its relation to methodology. How should black studies be taught, and where does isolation end and correlation begin? And he also foreshadows the "who should teach and publish in the field" debate that has yet to be resolved. Thelma D. Curl picks up the conversation ten years later in her Presidential Address "The Bound of Uncertainty," reminding scholars to avoid the misstep of thinking of CLA as a "small-time enclave" (298) now that it has become expedient and fashionable for larger organizations to include black scholars on their programs and in their midst. The question of who teaches, by then, was not a racial one; rather, it had become a question of who was committed to the tradition *versus* who saw the tradition as a way to advance their personal careers. The floodgates to neo-conservatism and re-enslavement were opened, Curl argued, and, having ingested the placebo, those self-interested scholars especially made it possible.

Sadly, her commentary on the cyclical nature of human rights movements is relevant today. When she writes that "it seems that we are about to emerge full circle back into Reconstruction time, once again" and that the identity and autonomy of the black college are again under threat (298), she could have easily been referring to conversations about the relevance of the HBCU in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or to the

<sup>5</sup> The committee included George Kent (chair), Eugenia Collier, Naomi Garrett, Stephen Henderson, and Darwin Turner.

economic conditions and backlash that fostered the recent uprisings in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray and the constant assault on black bodies by police. The question today is whether black studies has finally gained a significant enough power base in academia and otherwise to contribute meaningfully to the calls for real equality in all areas of life for U.S. citizens and for citizen of the world, for that matter. In 1979, black studies had not yet established that base, and to obviate this, she calls for CLA members to establish a "forceful political instrument for clarifying issues on education by and for black students" (300). That call is relevant today, too. The numbers she cites for faculty employment, for black students enrolling in white and black colleges and universities, and for black students' graduation rates remain largely unchanged, and only a deliberate effort to explore this reality will help us to understand how black students best achieve academic excellence and attain their graduation goals.

Indeed, CLA has always been fully aware of present realities, all the while looking to the future. Nowhere is this better evidenced than in Dolan Hubbard's 1996 address, "Slipping into Darkness: CLA and Black Intellectual Formation." Summarizing Hubbard's essay would do it a great disservice, so I will avoid even the attempt here. It is one to be read carefully. What I will say, however, is it duteously chronicles contemporary black intellectual formations and puts CLA in that context. It is as clear of a meditation on the role of the black scholar of languages and literatures and its attending challenges as I have ever read.

With such rich source material in these essays, the tempting thing to do in contextualizing them here is to imagine what they would tell us if they were updated or to talk back to them point by point. But that is the work of the membership and not of the issue editor. The principal task of introducing the issue, instead, is simply to put the essays in conversation with those discourses and histories they were in conversation with and then to have them dialogue imaginatively with each other and with our contemporary discussions of similar interests and import. In his remarks introducing the journal, O'Daniel suggested that *CLAJ* needed three things to determine its fate—a trial run to work out the kinks, a philanthropic angel to fund it, and courage to face the possibility of its failing or succeeding. We can say with confidence that its trial run quickly worked out the kinks, the membership was and continues to be its philanthropic angel, and this cursory review of its first fifty years removes all doubt that *CLAJ* has done so much more than enjoyed the much hoped for long run. It hit its stride and perpetually reached for higher heights. Here's to the next 50 years....

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The *CLA Journal*

Therman B. O'Daniel, Editor

The *CLA Journal* was founded in order to provide another medium of scholarly expression for members of the College Language Association, and to provide the same expression outlet for other persons with similar scholarly interests, who, though not members of the Association, might wish, from time to time, to make acceptable contributions to its official publication. We purposely describe our *Journal* as another medium of *scholarly expression*, because many of our members, in the past, have contributed articles to the nationally known journals of other organizations, and we desire, by no means, to discourage this practice in the future. We also state emphatically that the pages of our *Journal* are open to other persons with similar scholarly interests, because, in a free society, we definitely have no desire to establish a publication with narrow, non-liberal restraints; and, because we wish to stress the fact that mere membership in the Association is not a criterion which the Editorial Board will honor in its acceptance of material.

In several respects—size, circulation, and the number of annual issues, especially—the *CLA Journal* is, and is likely to remain, a modest publication, but, in some other regards, it has the most ambitious plans imaginable. It has no intention of placing any restrictions on the type of scholarly material, pertaining to languages and literature, that it will accept. Articles on most of the languages, including Greek and Latin, Old and Middle English, Modern English, and the Modern Foreign Languages, and articles treating the literature of all nations, as well as, studies in the Humanities, will be deemed worthy of careful consideration for publication. The *Journal* will gladly receive studies treating the art or science of the teaching of languages and literature; and a certain number of articles written in languages other than English, will be welcomed. Brief articles and articles of some length will be accepted, but excessively long articles may have to be rejected because of lack of space, unless they are exceptionally meritorious and timely, and then, it may sometimes be necessary to publish them, by parts, in different issues of the *Journal*.

A few book reviews of moderate length, and the *CLA News*, containing notes of interest on members and their departmental activities, will be regular features of the *CLA Journal*. Also, as the official publication of the College Language Association, it will print, occasionally, such announcements, committee reports, and transactions of the Association, that will need to be officially recorded and disseminated among the entire membership. Finally, though primarily interested