

Barbara T. Christian; Professor Fostered Black Women Writers

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Barbara T. Christian, author and UC Berkeley professor of African American studies who examined and encouraged contemporary American feminist literature, has died at the age of 56.

Christian, who helped focus attention on such writers as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, died Sunday of cancer at her home in Berkeley, university officials announced.

Intrigued by literature since she discovered T.S. Eliot's poetry as a freshman at Marquette University, Christian began concentrating on black women writers as a graduate student at Columbia University in the 1960s. Born to activist parents in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, she chose Columbia specifically because of its proximity to Harlem.

There she became a part of the black intellectual elite frequenting both a bookstore run by the brother of black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux and the Harlem home of poet Langston Hughes. The poet's personal secretary introduced her to the long-forgotten novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God," written by Zora Neale Hurston in the 1930s.

"I sat there and read it in his [Hughes'] study, spellbound," Christian told the Chicago Tribune in 1996. "I knew it was the start of a lifelong project."

In 1980, Christian published her crowning achievement in that project, "Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1872-1976." In the first part of the book, she provided a historic assessment of the origins and development of stereotypical images of black women and how those stereotypes affected the work of African American women writers. The second part was an in-depth look

at the writing of three contemporary novelists--Morrison, Paule Marshall and Alice Walker.

Christian also was known for her 1985 book, "Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers," which contained her critical analysis of a series of essays.

Aside from her widely respected literary criticism and writing--more than 100 articles and reviews in addition to several books--Christian was a popular and successful teacher. A member of the UC Berkeley faculty since 1971, she chaired its African American studies department from 1978 to 1983 and its ethnic studies doctoral program from 1986 to 1989.

She became UC Berkeley's first African American woman to receive tenure in 1978, its first promoted to full professor in 1986, and five years later its first to receive the Distinguished Teaching Award. Earlier this year, Christian received the campus' highest honor, the Berkeley Citation.

Among her students, who represented all ethnic backgrounds, was Terry McMillan, author of the best-selling romance novel about black women, "Waiting to Exhale," which later became a motion picture.

Christian's teaching extended far beyond her classroom when she helped create the University Without Walls, a community alternative college for people of color.

She earned her bachelor's degree in English from Marquette University and master's and doctorate at Columbia. She taught at the College of the Virgin Islands, Hunter College and City College of the City University of New York before moving to Berkeley.

Survivors include her daughter, Najuma I. Henderson of Berkeley, her parents, Judge Alphonso and Ruth Christian of St. Thomas, V.I., and five brothers and sisters.

Memorial contributions can be sent to the Barbara T. Christian Scholarship Fund in care of Marvin White in the English department at Stanford University.