

June 27, 2017 BLACK HISTORY SPOTLIGHT: BARBARA T. CHRISTIAN

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Feb. 15, 2004 – A trail-blazing professor of African-American studies and a pioneer of contemporary American literary feminism, Barbara T. Christian was born on St. Thomas on Dec. 12, 1943, to Judge Alphonso and Ruth Christian. She died on June 25, 2000, at the age of 56, of lung cancer.

The author and editor of several books and nearly a hundred published articles and reviews, Christian was best known for her landmark study "Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1872-1976," published in 1980, which helped rediscover the work of important writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen.

"Christian was a path-breaking scholar," Percy Hintzen, chair of the African American Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, was quoted as saying in her obituary which appears in the online Berkeley News. "Nobody did more to bring black women writers into academic and popular recognition."

Christian became known for her critical presence in the growing debates over the inter-relationships of race, class and gender. Her widely cited article "The Race for Theory" challenged the increasing domination of African American literary study by theorists at the expense of other black writers.

She received her bachelor's degree from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis., in 1963 and her master's and Ph.D. from Columbia University in New York in 1964 and 1970, respectively. From 1965 to 1970, she taught at City College of New York.

In 1971, she became an assistant professor at UC-Berkeley, where she soon came to play a central role in establishing its African American Studies program. Devoted to the field and to her students, she chaired the department from 1978 until 1983 and went on to chair the new Ethnic Studies doctoral program from 1986 to 1989.

Christian became the first black woman to be granted tenure at Berkeley (1978), to receive the Berkeley Distinguished Teaching Award (1991), and to be promoted to full professor in the statewide UC system (1986). She subsequently was awarded the university's highest honor, the Berkeley Citation.

In her writings, Christian recalled her early years at Berkeley: "Not only was I a woman and black, but I was also pregnant when I first arrived. When I asked the chair for the spring

quarter off to have my baby, he said 'No,' so I brought the baby to class with me."

In 1972, a group of students asked Christian to put together a course on black women writers. She realized she knew very little about the subject, and that no such course had previously been taught. A curriculum she later developed on the subject matter served as a catalyst for her academic career.

Noted for her insight into literature by and about African-American women, Christian was the author of numerous essays on African-American and women's studies. Among her best-known books is "Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers," published in 1985 and reprinted in 1997. In the work, a collection of 17 essays, she first explains why she and other black women write, and then demonstrates the writing process itself.

In the book "Feminist Writers," Nancy Raye Tarcher talks about the effect of "Black Feminist Criticism":

"Within these essays Christian examines, from a black feminist perspective, such issues as the importance of motherhood and the mother-child relationship within the works of both African-American and Native African writers; 19th-century black women novelists' efforts to transcend the prevailing racial and sexual stereotypes of their age; and the attempts by such writers as Paule Marshall to destroy the image of the domineering black matriarch — the 'superwoman' — in modern African-American literature."

Among Christian's other significant contributions as a writer are these:

- As a contributor to "Black Expression," Addison Gayle, editor (1969).
- As author of "From the Inside Out: Afro-American Women's Literary Tradition and the State (1987).
- As editor and author of the introduction to "Everyday Use," by Alice Walker (1994).
- As co-editor with Elizabeth Abel and Helene Moglen of "Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism" (1997).

Christian clearly loved being an educator. In her acceptance letter for the 1991 Distinguished Teaching Award at Berkeley, she wrote: "I love the subject I study, that I have been teaching for some 20 years at this campus. I find African-American literature to be especially intellectually productive: African-Americans have created a literature that challenges the exclusivity of Western aesthetic norms even as they have developed an aesthetic of their own.

I find African-American literature to be beautiful, vital, because of the originality of the many forms grounded in that aesthetic, a blending of apparently disparate elements from Africa, the West, and the 'New World.'"

She went on to say that "African-American creative writers craft their personal expression, critiquing and celebrating their collective developing culture within the context of American racism by engaging readers in their own thinking and feeling process."

As for herself, "What I write and how I write is done in order to save my life, and I mean that literally," Christian once said. "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."

The many recognitions she received in her lifetime include the Afro-American Society Hall of Fame Award in 1980; the American Women's Educators Association Award in 1982; the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1983 (for "Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition"); a UC-Berkeley Feminist Institute grant in 1987; the Louise Patterson African-American Studies Award in 1992 and again in 1995; the City of Berkeley Icon award for community service in 1994; the Modern Language Association MELUS Award for contribution to ethnic studies and African-American scholarship in 1994; and the Gwendolyn Brooks Center Award in 1995.

Christian believed in preparing her students for the future. "For me, the classroom is not the only site of teaching and learning," she said. "I try to share with students what I do outside the classroom: the joys and difficulties of doing research, the papers I write, the institution-building necessary to the preservation and development of this field. Much of African-Americans' literary practice occurs outside of the academy."

She added: "Students who want to be involved in African-American literature need to learn not only about critical texts in the academy but also about that other geography. My hope is that in relating that world to the academy, students come to see that the academy, like literary practice, is both in the world and of it and that their study of African-American writings matters, whatever occupation in life they decide to pursue."

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