



IN MEMORIAM

VèVè A. Clark
Associate Professor of African American Studies
UC Berkeley
1944 – 2007

VèVè Amasasa Clark, born December 14, 1944, joined the ancestors December 1, 2007. Raised in Queens, New York, Clark received her bachelor's and master's degrees from Queens College. She first came to the University of California, Berkeley, as a graduate student and completed her Ph.D. in French and ethnology in 1983. After earning tenure at Tufts University, Clark returned to UC Berkeley in 1991 as an associate professor in the Department of African American Studies (AAS).

Clark's scholarship, teaching, and service — indeed her entire intellectual acumen and arsenal — reflect her passionate commitment to the field of African American and African diaspora studies, a discipline that she in no uncertain terms both fashioned and elevated. Especially concerned with the interplay between vernacular and literary epistemologies, Clark's work consistently challenged binary paradigms for reading and understanding African diasporic responses to slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. Fluent in French, Spanish and Creole, conversant in Wolof, and with training in literary studies and anthropology, Clark embodied interdisciplinarity well in advance of its present popularity; her work was at the vanguard of our most consequential scholarly currents. While space precludes a complete listing of Clark's extensive areas of expertise, she was most passionate about African and Caribbean literatures, Afro- Caribbean folklore, African diasporic theater, African American dance history, and critical pedagogy. Clark often spoke of infrastructure as a means to dismantle institutional barriers and foster social justice through the academy. Effectively, she has left her telling signature on a variety of existing institutions at Berkeley and beyond, including the forging of the doctoral program in African American and African Diaspora Studies at UC Berkeley, one of few such programs in the nation. Moreover, she was instrumental in creating other significant organizations, including the Haitian Studies Association, for which she served as founding member of its board of directors. Her enthusiasm for her research subjects translated seamlessly into the classroom, where she taught some of the department's most popular courses, including *Marasa: Caribbean Literatures by Women*, *The Negritude Movement in French African/ Caribbean Literatures*, *African Women Writers*, and *Introduction to the University*.

The coeditor of several books, Clark also authored numerous essays on Haitian theater, African American dance and Caribbean literature. One of her best-known essays coined the term “diaspora literacy” and in so doing helped to define the rapidly expanding field of African diaspora studies. “Developing Diaspora Literacy: Allusion in Maryse Conde's *Hérémakhonon*,” first published in 1989 and later revised and republished as “Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness” in 1991, draws from Clark's fieldwork in Haiti and articulates and advances a methodological approach to African diasporic literatures from “an informed, indigenous perspective.” She challenged scholars in the field to examine black literary texts beyond the traditional oppositional categories of slaveholder/ enslaved, black/ white, and colonizer/ colonized. Profoundly engaged with the connections among historical narratives, cultural productions and

political possibilities for resistance and change, Clark argued that analyses absent “diaspora literacy” could not succeed in assessing either the symbolic or material significance of African diasporic cultural production. The term and its underlying theoretical and methodological tenets have been adopted by scholars in many fields.

A recipient of numerous awards, Clark won a Guggenheim Fellowship for her research on Katherine Dunham, the legendary African American dancer, anthropologist and social activist. Her essay “Performing the Memory of Difference,” published in 1994, examines the performance of historical memory and the subversive political agency in several of Dunham’s productions. As with her essay on diaspora literacy, Clark’s scholarship on Dunham paved new approaches to the artist’s work. In 1978, Clark, along with Berkeley colleague Margaret Wilkerson, coedited *Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: An Anthology of Writings*. The anthology, originally published in limited number by the Institute for Social Change at UC Berkeley, quickly became a sought- after resource on Miss Dunham. Committed to making the materials available to a wider audience, Clark and her former student, current University of California, San Diego, professor Sara Johnson, revised and expanded the anthology to include previously unpublished materials, including excerpts from Miss Dunham’s unpublished autobiography. *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* was published in 2006 by the University of Wisconsin Press and was named one of the top ten arts book of 2006 by the American Library Association. It is quickly becoming a staple in dance history, performance studies, and African American studies curricula in universities across the United States.

Clark’s commitment to articulating the relationship between vernacular culture and artistic productions carried over into her pedagogy. A teacher par excellence, Clark ensured that her students discovered, honored, and articulated their own voices in the classroom. Employing a variety of multimedia, Clark made “high” literary theory accessible and relevant to her students without reducing its complexity. She made herself available as well; both undergraduate and graduate students lined up outside her door and she regularly extended office hours in order to make time for each student. While her literature courses regularly drew high numbers from across disciplines, her development of AAS 39B: Introduction to the University perhaps best epitomized her commitment to combining her scholarship and teaching in service to the university. Concerned with the exceptionally high attrition rate amongst African American students, Clark developed the course to prepare students for both the academic and extracurricular rigors of student life at UC Berkeley. In this course, Clark taught incoming freshman how to read and write critically, use the library, navigate the financial aid system, access Berkeley’s tutorial resources, and maintain mental and physical health. The significance and success of Clark’s mission in 39B is perhaps best expressed by the number of African American M.D.’s, science Ph.D.’s and J.D.’s who credit Clark’s course with not only helping them succeed at Berkeley but also inspiring the pursuit of their advanced degrees. The University recognized Clark’s exemplary service by awarding her the first Social Sciences Distinguished Service Award in 1996.

Clark’s influence as a teacher and mentor extended beyond the undergraduate classroom and UC Berkeley’s walls. She served on numerous Ph.D. committees and M.A. exams for students from disciplines as diverse as comparative literature, English, sociology, education, anthropology and ethnic studies, as well as for students from other universities. Her commitment to graduate student academic and professional development motivated her initiation of the St. Clair Drake Cultural Studies Forum. With fellow Berkeley faculty Ula Taylor and Saidiya Hartman, Clark created the forum to provide graduate students opportunities to present and discuss their own projects and forge connections across various fields and disciplines. The St. Clair Drake Forum provided graduate students working on all aspects of the African diaspora an intellectual home before the African American studies department’s development of a Ph.D. program and continues to draw participation from across the university. Clark’s commitment to the Ph.D. program in African diaspora studies, inaugurated in 1997 and at the vanguard of an explosion of Ph.D. programs in elite universities across the U.S., was foundational. Her labor in developing the curriculum was tireless and she was a consistent advocate for both the program and its students.

VèVè Clark’s untimely death ironically underscores her profound and extraordinary influence. Her peers from across the country sent remembrances of their first encounters with her, the utter joy she brought to teaching, and the selflessness of her service. Department chairs, distinguished professors, and the first woman and African American dean of Harvard College all testified to her lasting influence on their thought, scholarly production and academic careers. Current colleagues remembered the force of her presence and the power of her honesty. Former students, now tenure- track faculty members, lawyers, doctors, published creative writers, filmmakers and social activists, described how she helped them succeed. Perhaps most telling, however, was the line of current students standing at her memorial, waiting patiently to thank her publicly for her incredible combination of exacting intellectual rigor and deep, compassionate love for her students. Clark,

in the tradition of Frantz Fanon, reminded all of us that the dehumanization of others is ultimately dehumanizing. In testimony after testimony, colleagues, friends and loved ones who gathered to mourn her passing and celebrate her life, marveled at the numerous ways that Clark consistently recognized and always insisted upon the humanity of all she touched with her extraordinary research, scholarship, teaching and service.

Ula Y. Taylor
Sara E. Johnson
Trica D. Keaton
Lisa Ze Winters