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HERITAGE AND HOMAGE: NAVIGATING OUR CULTURAL LEGACY

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HERITAGE AND HOMAGE: NAVIGATING OUR  
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BY DELLITA MARTIN-OGUNSOLA

President's Address Delivered at Plenary Session I of the Sixty-Second Annual Convention and Sixty-Fifth Anniversary of the College Language Association at Lemoyne-Owen College, Memphis, Tennessee  
Thursday, April 25, 2002, 3:00 p.m.

To President Johnson and Dean Frankel, other distinguished platform guests, members of the local host committee, the College Language Association Executive Committee, and the body at large, I bring you enthusiastic greetings. It is wonderful to be assembled here on this beautiful April afternoon in the bend of the "Mighty Mississippi" to pay homage to our heritage of sixty-five years—a legacy that was born in the heat of the Great Depression, but one that has been navigated by our eminent past presidents through the currents of World War II, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, Reagonomics, Generation X, Clintonmania, and now Global Terrorism. In the wake of so much war and so little peace, one cannot help but return

to rivers—those vital sources of energy, but also potent forces of destruction, those waters of cleansing and healing, but also quagmires of turbulence, whose awesome beauty poet Langston Hughes, like so many bards before and after him, have captured in literature for posterity.

Yes, “we’ve known rivers,” and it is fitting that we come back to the Mississippi to celebrate our heritage. All of us exercise our ability to make choices in life, some major, others minor, to paraphrase Paul Lawrence Dunbar. However, destiny, or providential intervention, seems to operate in ways we still cannot explain. Almost two years ago it was decided that the CLA convention would be held here in Memphis, and that LeMoyne-Owen College would be our host. During October 2000, the Executive Committee was having its fall planning meeting in New Orleans, and we were happy to have Dr. Hugh and Mrs. Yvonne Gloster with us. Moreover, the three-year convention plan that had been projected since we met in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1999, included the following: 2000 in Baltimore, 2001 in New Orleans, and 2002 in Birmingham. By December 1999, the CLA immediate past president, Emma Dawson, had already gotten a letter of invitation from President Ann Reynolds from my own institution, the University of Alabama in Birmingham, so I was excited about trying to set things into motion. As we sat around the conference table, Dr. Gloster seemed to be nodding, but he was definitely aware of the thrust of our discussion. During a lull, he turned to me and gently asked: “Madam President, may I have a word?” “Of course,” I replied, “please do.” Dr. Gloster continued: “If you don’t mind, I would like to see the CLA go back to LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee, where it all started.” I paused to finesse an appropriate response. You know how that little demon of immaturity crops up in all of us at times? “Well,” I thought to myself, “there go my plans,” but I turned to him and replied, “Dr. Gloster, we were really hoping to bring the convention to

Birmingham, because that has never been done before. It would be so historic." Of course, that was not the right thing to say at that moment, and I am so glad that the reasoning, diplomacy, and persuasion of my colleagues, these members of the Executive Board you see here, prevailed. Like the Mississippi River, we changed course that day and made the decision to come to Memphis out of love and respect for our Founding President, *who wanted and needed to "home come" again!* I understood that on an abstract level, but I must admit that the urgency and passion of his request did not fully register on me at the time. Somehow I thought Dr. Gloster was ageless and that he would be here a while longer, for he had such a dynamic personality. Thus, the late-night call I got from Dolan Hubbard on Sunday, February 17, informing me of Dr. Gloster's death the morning before, hit me like a boomerang. It really did. You see, in his request Dr. Gloster had sensed that he might not make it back to Le-Moyne-Owen in this life, for he was at a point where he could see death approaching slowly but surely, and maybe even welcomed it, like the persona in Hughes's poem who sees "night coming gently, black like me." Too often, those of us who are younger (not necessarily young), those of us who are still in the midst of our pre-occupation with persons, places, things and events, are blinded by those very entities, and we fail to perceive impending change. Nevertheless, I am so glad I learned a lesson in humility from Dr. Gloster and from my CLA colleagues on that October day in New Orleans. Furthermore, I have learned during my two years as CLA president that humility is an essential element of leadership. In addition to humility, I have gained a greater appreciation for two other qualities that I wish to share with you today—the art of patience and the meaning of courage.

First, I have learned the art of patience, not to just possess it but how to exercise it in a way that brings the greatest benefits for the maximum number of people.

Anyone who has either raised children or taught them in schools knows what it is to have patience. However, when one is dealing with adults, patience must assume a different form. With children, patience sometimes involves a certain amount of tolerance or deference to their age, size, and lack of knowledge. However, with adults, one cannot be so presumptuous. Instead, one must listen and really hear the other party—heart-to-heart and mind-to-mind—and come up with creative solutions that respect that person’s integrity, in spite of the criticism, complaints, and lack of appreciation this sometimes brings about. You are familiar with some of the irate telephone calls, plaintive e-mails, and face-to-face encounters that threaten to unravel you at times. Everyone wants his leader to “pull rabbits out of a hat.” However, although we know magic is not likely to happen, that leader must find ways to assure the members of the group that *together* she and they can find creative alternatives. Furthermore, that leader must bring about harmony and peace in a manner that makes the critics wonder why they even brought up the subject. In other words, I have come to realize that a conscientious leader has to “out-job” JOB!

Second, I have come to fully comprehend the need for courage. Those of you who know me understand that I am not by nature an outgoing person. In fact, throughout high school I was a wallflower, and during my undergraduate and graduate years of study, I was an introvert. So I have often asked myself the question: “How does a person like that end up as president of such an important organization?” Please believe me when I tell you that I never imagined in my wildest dreams the day would come when I would address a distinguished audience like this. What I am trying to say is that I feel more comfortable thinking and writing in a library carrel than publicly grappling with issues such as one encounters when she becomes head of CLA. Thus, it has taken a lot

of guts for me to stand before you and discuss my deepest longings for this organization. At last year's convention in New Orleans I articulated those dreams as four goals: (1) to eliminate the reference to ourselves as a "minority" and all that word implies; (2) to eradicate "Diaspora illiteracy," a phrase coined by Vèvè Clark in her introduction to *Ancestral House* (1995); (3) to continue to encourage excellence in teaching as we rethink traditional approaches and test new methodologies; and (4) to nurture our connections to essential communities—families, churches, public schools, libraries, and other cultural institutions. These goals are not ideas for which I claim credit, for I stand on the shoulders of other presidents, officers, and members of CLA. However, they needed to be restated as we entered the twenty-first century.

In reporting to you the state of CLA, it pleases me to assure you that we are on our way to achieving the above objectives, perhaps closer to realizing some than others, but nevertheless on our way. When one examines the panels, sessions, and forums arranged by the CLA program committee—headed by Vice President Yakini Kemp, who was assisted by English Representative Janice Liddell and Foreign Language Representative Regine Lator-tue—one definitely sees progress. For example, with respect to goal one—eliminating the use of the term "minority"—you will hardly find a reference to such. Instead there are panels like "Intertextual and Intercultural Convergences in Africana Literature," "Renegotiating Our Pasts: Women's Voices in New World Literature," and "Navigating Movement: Migration as Theme in Diasporic Drama." Concerning goal two—the eradication of "Diaspora illiteracy"—you will discover various cross-disciplinary panels like "Navigating the Quest for Self and Identity," where scholars of French, English, and German interact; and "Literature, Orature and Popular Culture," where scholars of Spanish, French, and Portuguese collaborate. In addition, CLA lauds the success of

its Study-Abroad Scholarship contest, which will enable our young people from any major or discipline at CLA institutions to venture beyond the walls of their scholastic home to broaden and deepen their education. Throughout his lifetime Dr. Gloster traveled abroad extensively, studying, teaching, and administering various programs so that he and the institutions he represented might be enriched by the priceless gifts gained from those experiences and so that our universities in this country could respond in kind. You will be very pleased to learn that the winners of this year's study-abroad awards are continuing to navigate Dr. Gloster's legacy of outreach to countries and cultures beyond the shores of the United States, even though they must now wade through the troubled waters of global terrorism and anti-Americanism. In short, it has taken real courage to promote this particular goal while at the same time being careful not to create dissension or upset the balance of professional interests in CLA, for the development of effective travel-abroad options has been quite a challenge until very recent times.

In relation to goal three—the focus on excellence in teaching—CLA presidents and other leaders have always stressed the attainment of this objective. In fact, that is one of the primary reasons the organization was established in 1937. However, each generation has had to find the most appropriate ways of re-articulating and revitalizing the instructional process as we have moved through time. During our era the use of technology presents another challenge. Again, in the program are two special sessions on Friday that deal with excellence in teaching—"Survival Strategies for Navigating the Academic Terrain at Historically White Colleges and Universities," by the CLA Committee of that same name, and "Literature, Race, and Rights: Teaching and Learning in Collaborative Contexts," an NEH-sponsored seminar.

With respect to goal four—nurturing our connections to essential communities—CLA has discovered a diamond in poet Nikky Finney. As I read the Book Club KET interview of Bill Goodman with Finney, I was impressed by the timeliness of her remarks and was doubly glad that LeMoyné-Owen College had extended to her the invitation to speak at our banquet on Friday night. Please allow me the liberty of quoting a portion of that interview with some ellipses, because the copy available to me has not been properly edited. Nevertheless, it does allow us to understand the gist of Finney's poetics. In response to the interviewer's question, "Who are your heroes and heroines and mentors that you look to and who have guided you through your writing career to date?" Finney states the following in reference to her collection of poetry *Rice*:

"One of the inspirations for *Rice* is my grandmother [,] who did not go beyond the 8<sup>th</sup> grade [,] and yet could walk through a forest in South Carolina and name the plants and the trees that she saw there [,] she was also fiercely independent and a farming woman [,] who . . . needed very little from the outside world because she could either sew it or grow it or make it with her own hands. And I appreciate folk who are independent of needing so much from so many [,] . . . so many . . . people I think are invisible in the world today who are extraordinary in this way. And I look to them for inspiration because I think we as Americans and as human beings get more dependent on things, technology and things, to say we have to get up in the morning and can't get through our day without it [,] and I think those other folks depended on an *inner spirit* and an *inner drive* and *inner necessities* to make family and make community and help one another, and so I always find myself reaching back for those spirits and those individuals to guide me, make sure I am on the right path, make sure I'm writing about the right things." (May 2000 *Book Club Interview* Internet 2)

I cannot rephrase the above testimony more eloquently than Finney, but I would like to call your attention to the fact that the *inner spirit*, *inner drive*, and *inner necessities* to which she refers do not imply self-centeredness, self-indulgence, or self-destruction. Therefore, as people

who possess a wealth of drive, talent, education, time, and resources, we owe it to our families, communities, nation, and world to use that wealth optimally and maximally for the betterment of humankind. As the events of September 11, 2001, have painfully shown us, we can not afford the luxury of taking our heritage for granted or of setting little store by it, as Esau did for a mere “mess of pottage.” Dr. Gloster placed himself at the service of the human race, which we can gather from the title of his best-selling textbook, *My Life, My Country, My World: College Readings for Modern Living* (1952). Consequently, it is essential that we carry out these goals and forge new objectives as the need for such arises, for to those who have more, more is expected.

What has the CLA presidency taught me? Simply stated, the humility to admit when one is wrong, is off key, or misses the mark—as we all do at times; the patience to work lovingly with others, especially when frustrations and negative attitudes threaten to overwhelm you; and the courage to press for innovations that everyone agrees need to be made, but few are willing to tackle. Have we solved all the problems? Certainly not, for we are still grappling with two critical needs. Under this presidency, we began addressing the question of financial solvency and related issues of better accountability and management. Another crucial challenge involves the overhauling of the CLA committee structure. We cannot continue to use outmoded approaches to problem-solving in contexts where they no longer work or allow us to function optimally. CLA Family, although we treasure our rich, priceless legacy, we must navigate it with a renewed vigor and vision, for with the passing of so many of our older members, we leaders of this generation are now the elders. Therefore, we must guard against the decay or destruction of this “Ancestral House.”

Thank you so much for allowing me to serve you these last two years, but like Maya Angelou, I, too, will say:

**“What you lookin’ at me for, I didn’t come to stay.” May  
God bless you all.**

*University of Alabama at Birmingham  
Birmingham, Alabama*