

Dear CLA Members,

Despite the delays caused by COVID-19 and the unique challenges that have emerged throughout 2020, the University of Memphis remains humbled and thrilled to host the historic virtual convention of the College Language Association (CLA) April 7-10, 2021. Begun as West Tennessee State Normal School and most recently remembered as Memphis State University through the 1990s, the university has consistently expanded its commitment to the population of the mid-South, whether providing role models as teachers and staff in Shelby County Schools, collaborating with FedEx and International Paper, or enlivening the already vibrant cultural and intellectual life of the “Home of the Blues.” As the school begins to garner national attention in athletics and academics, we welcome the opportunity to help shape the conversations initiated by an internationally known organization committed to language, pedagogy, and literary study.

As the city where CLA started we are thoroughly pleased to be hosting its 80<sup>th</sup> convention and debuting a radically different experience for participants. Thankfully, we have been sitting at the intersection of historical celebrations that also serve as a launching pad for shifting towards the future of literature, language, and culture. By the time the convention arrives in 2021 the city will have celebrated its bicentennial and the university will have commemorated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Memphis State Eight, the first African Americans admitted to the school. The theme of the convention, Afrofuturism: Diasporic Notions, comes at an ideal time for Memphis as we connect the crucial black cultural traditions and experiences with the possibility of the future being imagined through the realms of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction.

Memphis boasts a very diverse student body and has included diversity as one of the core values in its construction of a 21<sup>st</sup> century urban university. With a substantial first-generation population, Memphis faculty emphasize a true balance between teaching and research. As a university in the middle of the Southern Delta many Memphis students are committed to remaining in the region post-graduation to serve underrepresented communities that have been traditionally misrepresented and marginalized. Other students take the values they learned from the award winning, deeply beloved faculty outside the region to affect state, regional, national, and global change.

Our keynote speaker is Ytasha Womack who has already been a screenwriter, actress, producer, and director in her young career. We are thrilled she remained committed to speaking at the convention remotely after we were forced to postpone. Her most recent work has put her at the forefront of the Black Speculative Arts Movement. In particular, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013) situates her in the middle of the critical discourse surrounding speculative fiction while works like her Rayla Universe series and her forthcoming novella *A Spaceship in Bronzeville* add to the increasing body of work in what that has become an emergent field in contemporary African American literature.

While we will not see you in Memphis we hope that we will be able to provide you with a taste of the city with a number of virtual tours and experiences that evoke the unique racial and cultural history of Memphis. We promise an exploration of important landmarks and sites will augment an intellectually stimulating and culturally exciting time.



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Sincerely,

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