

Expanding Narratives: A Presidential Address *Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper*

Our 2019 theme for the CLA convention, “expanding narratives,” was launched to acknowledge the 400-year anniversary of that Dutch ship which landed in Jamestown, Virginia, in late August of 1619, bringing to the colony of Virginia twenty African people who were brought there to perform labor. Slavery, as we know it today, did not yet exist in Virginia in 1619. A few of those African people (according to various legal documents) retained their status of being indentured servants and eventually gained their freedom. However, by 1640, a runaway indentured servant was enslaved for the rest of his life, and by 1662, slavery was legally binding in Virginia, with children to have the same status as their mothers. Virginia’s current Governor, Ralph Northam, who has many battles to fight, received criticism for speaking of “indentured servants” who arrived in Jamestown from Africa in 1619, but he wasn’t completely wrong about how they may have been viewed when they arrived. Whether we call them enslaved people or indentured servants, those African people who arrived in the colony of Virginia in 1619 launched the period of involuntary labor—the enslavement of African people and those found to have “one drop” of African blood—in what became the United States of America. Just as Spike Lee acknowledged that 400-year marker when he received his very first Oscar earlier this year, the College Language Association wanted to go on record noting this anniversary.

However, when we chose the theme, we also chose the “greater than” and “less than” mathematical symbols to acknowledge that 1619 did not tell the whole story. The colony of Virginia is not the same as the entire domain of the Americas, despite the way many people use “America” as a synonym for the United States of America. Amiri Baraka—then known as Leroi Jones—learned that lesson of nomenclature when he traveled to Cuba in 1960, and as he shared in a well-known essay, “Cuba Libre.” Thus, it is crucial to expand our narratives about the presence of African people in the Americas. This lecture is not intended to recount the historical lessons of the history of African presence in the Americas prior to 1619, but my intention is to acknowledge the insufficiency of relying only on 1619 as a point of departure.

Every story has an author, whether it’s a history with a scholarly historian or a completely invented fiction with a creative novelist. Most of us recall a relative who told us stories—whether completely honest or embellished—when we were younger. During the last three years, we have keenly recognized that the source of a story matters. Sources we once thought we could trust have proven to be unreliable. Fact-checking has become an overwhelming challenge in an era dominated by “alternative facts.” Police who should be defending us are sometimes found to have created false stories that provide justification for their own use of deadly force. Historical documents reveal previously hidden information about people and events we thought we knew. Every story has an author, and we know how important those authors can be.

When we teach composition classes, most of us emphasize the significance of subject, audience, and purpose. Expanding narratives includes moving beyond the original audience and purpose of documents once presented to us. Indeed, the presence of people who see the world differently automatically changes the audience for almost any story, film, artwork, display, or document. In a recent session of the Southeastern American Studies Association, historian Calinda Lee shared her experience as Vice President of Historical Interpretation for the Atlanta History Center. Until I heard her speak, I never thought about the possible hazards of having the

newly restored Cyclorama open to people who might glorify the confederacy while other viewers are descendants of enslaved African people and Union soldiers. From the 2017 events in Charlottesville, Virginia, we know that some people in the U.S.A. are passionate about defending the confederacy and all that the old South stood for. What many of us never thought about was that the illustrations in the Cyclorama were viewed as representing a *Union* victory by its creators, but then the work was dubbed a representation of a Confederate victory—to appeal to people in the South. Calinda Lee, who began her college journey at Spelman, is often the only woman and the only person of color in a room full of people discussing what to display and how to display it. Expanding our narratives will rely upon individuals who are unafraid to speak up—even when their opinion may diverge from the dominant narrative in the room. These solo voices—perhaps OUR voices—must help others to take into consideration an audience they never could have envisioned before.

Every story has an author, and every author who seeks an audience beyond the author's own self has a purpose. We as members of the audience—whether the intended audience or the unexpected audience—must recognize the designated *purpose* of a narrative. For example, when a television broadcast on UFOs investigated the ancient arrival of extraterrestrial beings, the broadcast showed statues and carvings from the ancient Olmec civilization in Mexico. How curious that the narrators did not mention anything about the completely AFRICAN faces on the statue attributed to those ancient Olmec people. How curious that the scientists observed that some of the Olmec artwork or historical carvings resembled space ships and showed people carrying bags to help with a new atmosphere, but no one who spoke during that program mentioned that the faces in their sculptures displayed the nose and the lips we all see in the faces of African people today and in statues historically and culturally attributed to the Cameroon and to Ghana and to Nigeria and other African nations. The *purpose* of that story was to discuss the antiquity of visitors from other planets. The antiquity of the African presence in the Americas was not on the agenda.

Whether we are entering the discussion of historic representations or the discussion of current events, we are the voices that must keep our issues on the agenda. In “Peril,” the powerful foreword of *The Source of Self-Regard*, Toni Morrison's new collection of *Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, Morrison warns that “Authoritarian regimes, dictators, despots” are always careful to control the media—including all the writers: “journalists, essayists, bloggers, poets, playwrights,” because these writers, in Morrison's words, “can disturb the social oppression that functions like a coma on the population, a coma despots call peace” (vii). Our narratives—whether fiction or nonfiction, whether broadcast or shared online or taught—our narratives must keep expanding and must overwhelm efforts to silence us. There is power in writing and there is power in teaching those narratives.

Archival materials that become available will expand the ways we understand and contextualize our narratives. As we read and analyze previously undisclosed correspondence and drafts of manuscripts, we will understand and interpret works and authors differently. As we digitize that material, we insure that it will reach even more readers for even more interpretation.

Indeed, this expansion of our narratives relates to the methods by which our stories are shared with others. This digital age has firmly grasped the College Language Association and at least one of our allied organizations, the Langston Hughes Society. Both the *CLAJ* and the *Langston Hughes Review* are reaching audiences as electronic journals. Moreover, both of these journals are being indexed and digitized in databases that make them available globally to a degree never before possible. Perhaps you, too, have seen your students seeking, seeing, and

citing essays published in OUR journals. When our journals were only available in print form, students had to go to physical libraries to find the journals on shelves—if the library carried that desired volume and number. The current generation of students does not spend as much time in physical libraries as we elders did. With digital access, students can sit comfortably in their pajamas and read work by Blyden Jackson, Rita B. Dandridge, Richard Long, and Eugenia Collier—all published in the CLAJ. Scholars in remote universities can now access these prior volumes of CLAJ and all future volumes. We are expanding our narratives in many ways.

Ultimately, whether you are writing the narrative or teaching it, you are making a choice. When we surrender the power of constructing the narrative, we lose all control. The controversy over the selection of *Green Book* as best picture at the 2019 Academy Awards reminds us of the significance of telling our own stories. Yet, for decades, we have had to wrestle with *how* we tell our own stories. In 1941, Langston Hughes challenged writers to do more than present images of madness, murder, and defeat in our stories. He cited Richard Wright's *Native Son* and his own Broadway hit, "Mulatto," as examples of works that ended with a protagonist dead or doomed to die. Indeed, like Wright's Bigger Thomas—reinvented for the HBO version that aired April 6, 2019—just last Saturday—and like Hughes's Robert Lewis, we may face various kinds of oppression and challenge. Like Lorraine Hansberry's Beneatha Younger, we may have family members telling us what to believe and challenging our ambitions. Like Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha, we may have people who demean us because of the way we look—or even because we enjoy the life of the mind. As Alice Walker says in the introduction to her 2018 collection of poems, "No one escapes a time in life when the arrow of sorrow, of anger, of despair pierces the heart" (xv). The question becomes, what do we do once this arrow has pierced us? Should we merely scream at the archer? Or do we, as Walker's book title suggests, find a way of *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart*?

We must be like the speaker in Maya Angelou's famous poem, and we must rise.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

We have an obligation to face our challenges realistically, but we also have the obligation to use our talent and our calling to make the world a better place for ourselves, our students, and future generations. What story will *you* tell? Will you capture and repeat tales of difficulty and defeat? Will you repeat (and approve of having your students repeat) lies invented by oppressors to maintain illusions of superiority? Or will you reach, discover, and share narratives that uplift and inspire?

When she gave her Nobel Lecture after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison shared a folk tale that she claims is told in several cultures. The wise woman was blind, but she was challenged by some young people determined to reveal her as a fraud. Let me share it the way Toni Morrison told it.

Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead."

She does not answer, and the question is repeated. "Is the bird I am holding living or dead?"

Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender, or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally, she speaks, and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." (102-103)

The future of the narratives is in our hands. It is in our hands as writers, journalists, podcasters, and actors. It is in our hands as editors, publicists, and scholars. Certainly, it is in our hands as professors. We have before us the challenge of expanding our narratives—even in the face of dictators or despots who might wish to silence us. We have the challenge of insisting that our students read and engage with texts. We have the challenge of deciding who tells the stories that reach large audiences. I don't know the long term future of our narratives, but what I do know is that the future of our narratives is in our hands.

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