

Decolonizing the University: The 2016 Presidential Address

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If you think the question *what does one say in the Presidential Address for the nation's oldest and largest organization for faculty of color who teach languages and literatures?* is a daunting one, imagine how much more daunting it is when it is the second and final address of one's term. This is all the more true when that term comes after a year of hard fought victories that just barely (if at all) offset a continued assault on black life; when higher education (which is always, already in a state of flux) is changing in ways contrary to our interest and in ways we know will ultimately compromise the teaching and learning experience; and when critical thinking and intellectual and scholarly engagement must contend with the realities of a celebrity culture that privileges fame over substance, with an increasingly absurd political season that has been dominated by the cult of personality, and with the realities of an attention span so limited that I'd be foolish not to end this sentence soon.

Closet historian that I am, I did a quick review of previous addresses and found that those for the first year of the term trended toward issuing a charge, while addresses for the second year were more inclined toward reflection. I dare to do both here.

Since we last met, we have achieved much. Nine issues of *CLAJ* have been published, including a special issue on Maya Angelou and the double special issue "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" A special issue on Digital Humanities and African American literature has been proposed and submitted and is now under review with the editorial board. Thanks to an award from the National Endowment of the Humanities and in collaboration with the Project on the History of Black Writing and the Department of English at Howard, the first 50 years of *CLAJ* will be digitized (and encoded to offer rich metadata) and made available to the membership at no cost. Last summer, a small but incredible team of CLA faithfuls went through more than 300 boxes of *CLAJ* materials, which had been moved from Morehouse to a storage unit and then to Spelman, to determine what needed to be sent to Howard, what needed to be sent to our archives at Atlanta University Center, and what needed to be discarded. There are no words to describe the selflessness Geneva Baxter, Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, Elizabeth West, Mario Chandler, Yakini Kemp, Warren Carson, and Carol Marsh Lockett displayed as we worked for two days to complete a task that would have taken a less fierce crew at least a week!

In January, we contracted a web designer to give the website a full overhaul—from its look to its functionality. The Executive Committee saw the test site in our pre-conference meeting yesterday, and we can anticipate the complete transport of the new site to the clascholars.org URL in early summer. And planning is already underway for CLA 2017, which will be held in Columbia, MO, and hosted by the University of Missouri, April 5-7. In sum, we've had another banner year. It has been rewarding indeed to reap the benefits of work put in motion by recent past presidents Antonio Tillis, Warren Carson, and Mario Chandler and their executive committees.

But, lest you think that impressive summary of our successes was my feeble attempt at reflection, let me hasten to a sort of review (with color commentary, of course) of key moments in higher education and the American reality, particularly as these relate to our especial interests as people of color who work not only in the academy but who do the business of languages. That review, I hope, will lead logically to a charge-as-challenge I am fully confident this organization is uniquely poised to fulfill.

Perhaps it is fortuitous that the University of Missouri is hosting the 77th annual conference, since it was at Mizzou that the racially-informed campus activism that has long occurred on lower frequencies finally captured the national spotlight last year. From Mizzou to Claremont McKenna to Yale and Princeton or, more recently, Ohio State and Stanford to the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement our sisters and brothers in South Africa have so beautifully orchestrated to assert their outright rejection of the vestiges of empire and colonialism, what has become increasingly apparent to all is that the university stands in need of decolonizing, now more than ever. Demands for more diversity in faculty, student population, and curriculum and for the removal of overtly offensive or inherently racist symbols have been made, ignored, compromised, and, in the best cases, met. And this is meaningful progress. But as Jacob H. Carruthers notes in *Intellectual Warfare*, echoing Anderson Thompson, “we are battling for the African mind,” and this is the signal “struggle of the twenty-first century” (xiv). Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, harkening back to the fundamental argument he articulates in *Decolonising the Mind*, suggests in *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* that we must reimagine the center to radically reorient knowledge production and thereby human understanding. Acquiring more black faculty, and I’m intentional in my language here, is indeed useful. But doing the hard work of knowledge production that is funded by a decolonizing impulse is a whole other thing all together.

Globalectics grew out of an initiative Ngũgĩ and his colleagues give language to in a document they labeled “On the Abolition of the English Department.” At

the heart of their pursuit was an understanding that the “study of four and a half centuries of English literature, from Beowulf to Virginia Wolfe” (10) utterly failed to speak to the colonial situation or, more contemporarily, to the change a global world was making possible and ushering in. If “the unequal relationship of power underlying the totality of economics, politics, ethics, and aesthetics” (7) are to be resolved (and this is more complex than mere power redistribution), then we must understand that “there is no neutrality in anything, even in the organization of any space, especially that of knowledge” (8). “A reorganization of a space, the same space,” Ngũgĩ argues, “can, at the minimum, bring about different results and different perspectives” (8). We know how and why Ngũgĩ and his colleagues’ imperative was important then. But why and how are the different perspectives and results they call for so necessary now and for us? At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I would argue that they are necessary because the fragility of the American dream has finally reached its breaking point for the rest of the world in ways with which black people have been all too familiar. If you don’t believe me, consider these things, at the very least, as evidence—one, I mentioned earlier, the rise of student activism on college campuses all over the world; two, something we talked about last year but find ourselves still facing, the phenomena of domestic terror; and, three, the paradoxically logical success of a Donald Trump. It doesn’t take much effort to locate the seam that holds these not so disparate things together. The failure of the American myth and the corresponding crisis of American identity make each of these inevitable.

To be clear, the crisis of national identity is not new; nor is the need for and failure of a national myth exclusive to America. Every nation has its myth of power and greatness. And, as Toni Morrison reminds us in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, it is literature that does the work of myth making to establish and fortify national identities, all the more aggressively in times of crisis. As our national myth making body, American literature, is not different, she argues. With few exceptions, it “end[s] up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind. [But] For the most part, the literature of the U.S. has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*” (14-15).

Even as a coherent national identity is always in flux, 9/11, I would argue, initiates the demand for a new scaffolding of this architecture. The contemporary iteration of a narrow American national myth falters under the weight of an inability to stave off an outrageous act of terror. The election of a black president complicates the crisis beyond measure. And the myth finally crumbles when hit with the 1-2 punch of demographic and economic realities that make clear that a white majority and consolidation of white economic power are both things of the past. In sum, what we are seeing now from Dylan Roof in South Carolina to

Trump supporters nationwide is far more than an unreasonable anxiety about the demise of whiteness as we know it. There is real evidence that can no longer be ignored—the American dream has failed them. So its myth can no longer sustain their economic, ideological, or political imaginary.

Often, the first response to the low-level trauma of a broken (if not decimated) imagination is to rally unreasonably around symbols and figures that allow you one final attempt to believe in and to project images of your own strength—delusional though all of this may be. The corresponding response of those attempting to retain or to seize power is to repackage the rhetoric of power, strength, hope, and greatness—“Make America great again.” That is the moment in which we find ourselves—one where long-standing coalitions are frayed beyond repair and where chickens come home to roost in ways perfectly predictable but no less astonishing.

Black people have, of course, long grappled with the fallout of a dream deferred. But we seldom responded with violence. And we’ve never been fear mongers in the name of our own nationalistic interests. Instead, our visions of a liberated future turn on the notion of freedom for all. So what is the role of the teacher and scholar of languages and literatures, of people who work in the world of ideas and the humanities in such a time as this? And how does our reality as a 79-year-old institution founded on principles of equality make us especially poised to offer a unique response? It is our collective vocation to ensure that a populace drunk on the meaninglessness of words is better equipped to understand the power of rhetoric—its power to build or to destroy through persuasion—and to endow that populace with an ethical impulse to use words to enact and encourage others to live out the fullness of their humanity. If black lives matter, black words matter more. Are we not heirs of tradition of writers and thinkers who have made new myths when old ones failed and weaved tapestries of liberation when in literal or metaphorical bondage? As custodians of that literary tradition and as language, and by extension, cultural workers, are we not fully equipped to craft a message that actualizes the hopes of freedom?

I know that I have, at least in part, forgone the tradition of past presidents who have used a literary text to ground their remarks for this address. Indeed, I was deeply drawn to the two Morrison novels about American myth as flashpoints to frame the point I’m trying to make—*Paradise* makes clear better than any novel I’m aware of the limitations of crafting a communal identity myth of exceptionalism that cannot be sustained, while *A Mercy* calls us to question just what informs the American myth *before* and *as* it is being crafted. But not terribly unlike the years not so long ago when the race to space consumed the public and academic imaginary in ways that required CLA presidents to defend the sanctity of teaching languages

and literatures when science was king and thereby to expand their remarks beyond the traditional text, our current socio-political reality has beckoned me to attempt to read the world as text.

In that spirit, if we were playing the “if you could meet any CLA president who is an ancestor who would it be?” game (and who among us doesn’t play that game regularly?), at the top of my list would be Darwin Turner. In his 1964 address, he reminded the membership that “Humanists need not fear the charge that they are not training students to do anything. A student needs to learn not merely to do, but also to be. Only the humanistic studies can provide this knowledge” (13). He further retells that literature includes “the best that has been thought and written,” even as other “disciplines have invaded and ... annexed parts of the Province of what was literature” (13). Fearful that we might stray “too far from aesthetics” and “be accused of masquerading as a psychologist, an historian, a sociologist, or a philosopher,” “we teachers of literature,” Turner laments, “have failed to adjust to a changing audience.... We cannot continue to dwell in a cave, blind to the world behind us” (13). I have invoked Turner here, albeit circuitously, as an inroad to suggest that perhaps we continue still to dwell in the cave—but blind not so much to the world behind us but to the world ahead of us. A better world is possible if we but imagine it; creating a grand narrative to fortify it will surely follow.

If we can answer the question “how do fierce, revolutionary, moral people lose it and become destructive, static, preformed—exactly what they were running from” (Morrison, “Paradise Found” 78)—and this is the question Morrison tells A.J. Verdelle she seeks to answer in *Paradise*, then surely we can do the work Robin D. G. Kelley calls us to do in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. We must “tap the well of our own collective imagination...do what earlier generations have done: dream.... Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us” (xii). Our job, along with the writers we read and teach, is, as Toni Cade Bambara once put it, “to make revolution irresistible” (35).

I’m unabashed in my feeling that we must dream in black. And this organization has to dream in ways that sustain our people psychologically, emotionally, politically, culturally, and spiritually. Black words can fund the building blocks that give us the courage to establish and maintain excellence in this world, most especially in this moment as white supremacy shape shifts from overt to subtle, from racist to racism, from hatred to discrimination, from dog whistling to vitriol. Watershed moments, as hard as they may be to bear, can also be opportunities to reorient worldviews.

Jericho Brown's remarks earlier today at the Langston Hughes Society luncheon sent me back to my handwritten draft and then to my laptop to include comments I'd deleted because I thought they veered too far from the aesthetic of art and more toward the rhetoric of the political. But Jericho's thoughtful invocation of Hughes's life work and then Jericho's poetry reminded how the aesthetic and the political, language and literature have no separation in black life. I had thought to talk about how, in "The Obama Doctrine: How He's Shaped the World," Jeffrey Goldberg helps us to understand more clearly the nuances of and contradictions inherent to President Obama's approach to foreign policy, one that deviates substantially from the Washington playbook on how America deals with the world. The essential point that emerges from that article, at least in my estimation and most relevant to my musings here about the denouement of the American dream, is this—the idea of America as a superpower is no longer a myth worth perpetuating, and this from a sitting U.S. President. The stress of globalism and the collision of cultures, he argues, do not have to lead to push back from and strike out again those who are different. He literally says *you can replace stick-waving with diplomatic persuasion*. Then, you are free to redirect that hard power to soft power to solve real problems of the human condition.

This seems to be a good a time as any then to vision a response to that critical question W. E. B. DuBois's question posed at Johnson C. Smith and later published as "Whither Now and Why" where he asks what the aims and ideas of the Negro will be if he achieves equal American citizenship. "Are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we will have in this process no ideas of our own?" (193). We must, finally, establish without fear ideas and ideals of our own. And we must build the thing that will sustain us and enable us to thrive. *Why must we*, you ask—because we are the ones who can save us. To paraphrase the closing lines of one the best books of narrative prose I've read in the last 10 years¹ remixed with a little Sterling Brown—This is not the end. There will be another day. THIS is the coming. Strong men, Strong women, CLA, keep a'comin.'

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