

ALA Presidential Address, April 9, 2016
UNLOCKING OUR SILENCES: THE ALA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Distinguished guests, members and friends of the ALA, good evening. What a splendid four days we've had in Atlanta! All the credit goes to our conveners for securing this prestigious location for our conference. One can only imagine what efforts and negotiations went into securing this space! As one of the conveners rightly put it in an e-mail, "we wanted to have a first class event for a first class organization in a first class venue! After all the ALA deserves nothing but the best and we pledged to do this as a service to the ALA." Let me therefore begin by thanking our hosts in Atlanta, Professors Nurudeen Akinyemi, Oumar Chérif Diop, Simona Muratore, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, Ana Teixeira, Lucie Viakinnou-Brinson and Subha Xavier. I would be remiss not to mention Sandra Rogers, Amandine Ballart, Stephanie Iasiello, Marion Tricoire and Patrick Harbin for their tireless contributions to the success of this conference. The African Literature Association extends its gratitude to Kennesaw State University and Emory University, along with their institutional partners and other sponsors. We appreciate your exceptional hospitality and the wonderful experience you've made possible for us here in Atlanta. Please rise and give a round of applause to our conveners.

To our outgoing president, Moradewun Adejunmobi, and outgoing EC members, our sincere thanks for your incredible contributions to the smooth running of the ALA. Moradewun, it was a personal joy to work closely with you. To our newly elected Vice-President, Adélékè Adéèko, and new EC members: Grace Musila, Joya Uraizee, Joyce Ashuntantang and Ketu H. Katrak; congratulations. I would like to recognize in particular James McCorkle, the Headquarters Director, Dot Vogt at the Headquarters, Mohamed Kamara, our treasurer, Anne Carlson, our secretary, and our new webmaster, Matthew Brown. Last but not least, specific thanks go to Abioseh Porter, the out-going editor of *JALA*, Tejumola Olaniyan, the incoming editor of *JALA* and Moradewun Adejunmobi for initiating and shepherding to a positive conclusion the new partnership the ALA now has with Routledge. Thank you all.

The topic of my address is "Unlocking Our Silences: The ALA Oral History Project."

Two Vignettes:

July 2015, Durban, South Africa: I was on a Carnegie Fellowship at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and one day, after I returned from campus, I took some dry cleaning to a laundromat in Davenport Square. I was served by an older black woman. After exchanging pleasantries, she asked me my name but when I offered to write it on her receipt pad, she said no, and asked me to spell it. "It is always nice to learn to spell the name," she said sweetly. I concurred. She handed me my receipt and told me to come for my clothes at 4pm. "Bring this receipt that has your name and shows that you have paid," she said. What time do you close? 5pm, she said. I left and took a cab. On the drive back to Bali Ridge, we stopped at a red light and when the lights turned green,

a white driver turned sharply left and cut off my cab driver who had the right of way. “Nothing has changed,” he said. “These white people still behave as if they own everything. That white man just disrespected me. He did that to disrespect me,” he repeated, shaking his head. Indeed, we had the right of way; straight ahead. The driver in the other car should’ve waited their turn! That white driver could simply have been a jerk but the raw anger in my cab driver’s few words said a lot; a lot in what was left unsaid.

June 2013, Raleigh, North Carolina: I went to a Food Lion “to Western Union money,” as we immigrants say, to Cameroon. When I came out of Food Lion and was walking to my car, a black man walked alongside me and when I looked up he said, You’re cute! You’re cute, too I replied; and kept walking. He drew level with me, stretched out his hand and when I took his firm grip, he looked me straight in the eye and said, “I am forty-one years-old and I have never been to jail.” My face did not betray any emotion but his statement hit me like a bolt! “Yes. I’m forty-one years-old, and I’ve never been to jail and I want black women to know that from the get go.” Books have been written about what this black man, in America, left unsaid that afternoon.

I joined the ALA in 1991, the same year I attended my first ALA conference. I was then a graduate student at McGill University. At the conference in New Orleans, I remember asking many participants (then and since), the following question: Who were/are the founding members of the ALA? The answer to this innocent question varied (and still varies) depending on whom you ask: a few names might be mentioned; that’s a good question, some would say; but quite often, people simply shrug shoulders or say they don’t know. I’ve been obsessed with this question and things came to a head for me this past year when our outgoing President tasked the Constitution and Policy Committee with comprehensively reviewing the *ALA Handbook and Calendar of Events*. Her charge to our committee was: To bring names of conference sites and Presidents up to date; correct spelling mistakes throughout; update references to technology; instead of specifying particular months during which tasks have to be carried out, use the annual conference and the fall retreat as the significant time markers designating events as happening several weeks before or after either the annual conference or fall retreat of the EC; review term limits for treasurer and secretary; review participation requirements for EC members following repeated absence; update tasks for the Headquarters Director; request information on standing committees in bylaws where such standing committees are mentioned but the charge is not spelled out; request and add caucus constitutions for all caucuses to the bylaws.

As I was painstakingly doing the revisions I got to page 62 and it read:

“APPENDIX J: SOME ALA HISTORY

1973 ASA, Syracuse, New York. Richard Priebe and Thomas Hale propose the organization of a scholarly association devoted to African Literature, separate from the African Studies Association.

1974 ASA, Chicago. Dennis Brutus presides over an organizational meeting for establishing the ALA and for working out details for an inaugural Conference.

1975 University of Texas, Austin. Inaugural ALA Conference. Dennis Brutus elected the first President of the ALA.”

That was it. First, I have to confess that page 62 felt like a letdown. Second, it reminded me of the June 3rd Opening Ceremony of the Bayreuth conference in Germany. When Ama Ata Aidoo made her remarks, she thanked Wole Soyinka, sitting to her right, and all the men who have made this association great but she also made a point of stating that there were women at the founding of the ALA; that she was there; that she was one of the women who founded the ALA. I had no prior knowledge of such women founders. Ama Ata’s statement and the Constitution and Policy Committee’s work revising the *Handbook* led me to address some of the silences that hold our ALA History hostage. I had been working on a different topic for this evening but page 62 of the *Handbook* changed my mind and the topic of my presentation.

Of the genesis of the ALA, Thomas A. Hale writes the following:¹

“At the sixteen annual meeting of the African Studies Association, held in Syracuse, New York, Oct. 31-Nov. 3, 1973, Richard Priebe, English Dept., Virginia Commonwealth University, polled African literature specialists on the need for an African literature association. The strong interest in such an association evidenced in the questionnaire responses prompted Priebe, with the help of Thomas A. Hale, French Dept. and Comparative Literature Program, Pennsylvania State University, to hold an organizational meeting for the proposed African Literature Association (ALA) at the seventeenth annual meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA) in Chicago, Oct. 30, 1974.

First plenary Session, Oct. 30, 1974, Palmer House: Priebe opened the meeting by stressing the need for an African literature association which could (a) provide better communication among scholars, teachers, and students at all levels of education, (b) coordinate research on African literature, (c) hold an annual meeting which could deal with specific issues and problems relating to scholarship and teaching, and (d) publish a newsletter which could keep the membership informed of conferences, availability of African writers visiting the United States, grants, fellowships, etc. . . .

After a near-unanimous vote in favor of the establishment of an African literature association (35 for, 4 against), those present agreed to elect a Steering Committee which would report back to a second plenary session on Nov. 1 with specific recommendations. The following were elected to the Steering Committee: Bernth Lindfors, Daniel P. Kunene, Richard Priebe, Ernest Emenyonou, Dapo Adelugba, Dennis Brutus, Agaja Olu Enahoro, Thomas A. Hale, Donald Herdeck, Fredric Michelman, and Eileen Over.”

The first Steering Committee Meeting took place on October 30, 1974; the second on October 31, and at the Second Plenary Session that took place on November 1, 1974, the participants “voted unanimously to maintain the existing Steering Committee,” adopted a Constitution, and agreed to hold the inaugural annual meeting in Austin, Texas (18 voted in favor of Austin, while 7 voted in favor of Wisconsin). As Bernth Lindfors writes in his introduction to *The Dennis Brutus tapes: essays at autobiography*:²

“The University of Texas could not provide funds to support a meeting of a professional association, so we asked the Dean of Liberal Arts and the Dean of General and Comparative Studies to underwrite the expenses of a separate Symposium which could draw colleagues from around the country and abroad who could participate in a business meeting afterwards and go through the formalities necessary to establish a new international scholarly body devoted to the study and teaching of African literatures. The Symposium would focus on contemporary black South African literature, and our plan was to invite South African writers to give keynote addresses and then have writers from other parts of Africa respond to issues raised. We did not have sufficient funds to fly anyone all the way from Africa, so we had to rely on bringing to Austin only those writers who were then somewhere in the United States.

Fortunately, there was an abundance of talent available. The keynote speakers were Esk'ia Mphahlele, Mongane Wally Serote, Oswald Mtshali, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Cosmo Pieterse, Mazisi Kunene, Dan Kunene, and of course Dennis Brutus; included among the respondents were Chinua Achebe, Kofi Awoonor, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ali Mazrui, Peter Nazareth, Pol Ndu, Emmanuel Obiechina, Romanus Egudu, and Biodun Jeyifo. Never before had such a constellation of African literary stars assembled in one place in the United States. The Symposium events drew large audiences, and when the ALA was formally inaugurated, more than four hundred writers, scholars, students, and townspeople signed on as members.

The success of this Symposium and the birth and baptism of the ALA owed a great deal to the organizational skills of Dennis Brutus. He was the one who formed an efficient Austin Working Committee to oversee local arrangements, he was the one who persuaded writers to come, he was the one who ran the business meeting at the end of it all that resulted in the creation of a viable and vigorous ALA. Appropriately enough, he was also the one elected by acclamation to serve as the ALA's first Chairperson.”

If you heard your name in the quotes I've just read from Thomas Hale and Bernth Lindfors, please stand up so we can recognize you. Thank you.

If I who have been a member of this Association for 25 years know so little about the founding of the ALA and the History of the ALA, I can assure you that many of the junior scholars don't know either. We celebrated 40 years of the ALA in Johannesburg at the University of Witwatersrand in 2014, and yet, the ALA has a chronic problem with preserving its institutional history. It is quite disheartening when one is looking for information about the ALA and has much difficulty finding it. It's even worse when one has to pursue man-know-man back channels to get what one needs, if one is lucky! It should not be so. That is why, tonight, in this presidential address, I am asking for your help; for your participation in launching and sustaining what I'm calling “The ALA Oral History Project”! Many people in this room have retired; many are slowly but surely looking forward to retirement and there are many junior scholars who are rejuvenating this organization, picking up the mantle, and are prepared to lead the next phase of the ALA in the 21st century. I am asking us, all of us, to tell our ALA story; to take responsibility for the history that is told about the ALA; the oral history that we will shape and leave behind for others 10, 20, 50 years from now. We, scholars of African literature, celebrate orality and the oral transmission of knowledge by our forebears. Thankfully, the best quality of orality is its

dynamic nature; for orality has embraced the digital age and now finds expression in many forms, and that's what we should do also. My plea to you is to submit your memories or stories about the ALA of years past and present to be archived as the ALA Oral History Project on our new and improved website where it will be readily available to all members. Please note that all data handled by the ALA website is now fully encrypted using the latest "cipher suite." I see this project as one of the archival venues for preserving our institutional memory. We now live in an ALA era where we've gone from giving 2 awards to 8; where digital communication has replaced stencils and floppy disks; where electronic voting and online membership renewal has replaced cumbersome snail mail, et cetera; saving us time, money, effort. But it also means there are people on the back end working to make our associational life easier. You will notice that our task is made easier by the incredible work and changes our webmaster has made for a more secure and user friendly ALA website, with more improvements to come. Whether old or young; whether senior or junior scholar; we have stories that can contribute to building the history of the ALA and we cannot build this history together if members do not participate. It is our shared responsibility to our institutional memory.

Furthermore, many of you work tirelessly behind the scenes to maintain the good health and stature of the ALA. Member cooperation would make things even better for the officers who deal with the day-to-day issues that make for a smooth running of our organization. You heard at the annual business meeting this afternoon how your officers have done a lot of work to clarify guidelines in the Handbook, to streamline processes, to clean up our books, to bring us into compliance with the IRS, to create a system for preserving our documents for future easy access. Thanks to these efforts, we are now an organization of over 570 members. What a record number! We aim to grow even more with the new structures firmly in place. This being an election year in America, here's one more encouraging sign: the breakdown of our most recent elections show that electronic votes were e-mailed to the then 478 registered members; 67% of the registered members (324) opened that e-mail; of the 67% that opened the email, 65% (211) started to vote; and of the 65% that started the vote, 80% (169) completed the elections ballot. This is an improvement given that the number of votes cast this year more than doubled last year's number. 478 ballots were sent out and 169 members actually completed the ballot! My hope is that we more than triple the number of votes cast next year.

I know we are better than this. I trust we will do better than this. Our membership numbers have never been this high. It is exciting to see that our membership might hit 600 this year! This speaks to the love for this organization and the energy that thrives within and for the ALA. In that light, permit me to modify the Martin Luther King quote used by the conveners on page three of the conference program and say, "ALA progress is neither automatic nor inevitable ... Every step toward the goal of our ALA Oral History Project requires the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."³ Who else are those individuals but you; us? My mother died in 1984 at the tender age of 46. In her short lifetime, she always told me to give people their accolades while they were still alive to acknowledge them. "Don't wait until I die," she'd say, "and then come to my grave and shed tears and say how great I am/was! I won't hear you. I'm dead." Yes, she was very blunt about it and rightly so! Following my mother, I'd ask,

who else are we, if not, the praise-singers of our ALA family? Let's sing about the ALA. Let's lift those cloaks of silence and fill in the gaps of our ALA history. Let's build this 21st century ALA Oral History Project. We await your submissions. Thank you all.

¹ "African Literature Association" in *Research in African Literatures* 6.1 (Spring 1975): 60-63.

² (London: James Currey, 2011): 1-11.

³ The actual quote reads, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable . . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."