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MLA Newsletter



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You Had to Be There

You have a lot of calls on your time and on your travel funding (if, indeed, you have any travel funding).

That's why we're packing the MLA Annual Convention with things you can't get anywhere else—to make it worth your while to come, learn, and connect. We're providing more professional development opportunities for people at every stage of their careers, and we're encouraging connections between fields that might never connect in other venues.

Here's a quick sketch of three sessions I attended this year, sessions that couldn't have happened anywhere else.

First, I moderated a session that was open to the public and focused on fan culture and reader communities. It brought together a venerable scholar in the field who shared her work on '90s girls' zines, a mid-career scholar who works on the Harlem Renaissance, and an early-career scholar whose work on podcasts is pushing the field to reexamine peer-review practices. Chatter afterward was all about the rich overlaps among the three presentations, even though none of the presenters had previously met.

Next, I went to the Humanities in Five sessions. Anne Ruggles Gere, the 2018 president of the MLA, encouraged us as humanists to make clear the substance and value of our work to folks outside higher education. She put together two sessions that asked scholars to present their research to a public audience in a strictly timed, five-minute format. One session even had judges, from the Chicago media scene. The press was excited about the presentations, and so was the audience—excited about taking our work outside our own walls to show why the humanities matter.



Edward Savaria, Jr.

The final session I attended was in my field. The session featured lightning talks on the state of Victorian studies in relation to critical race theory. Not all the presenters were purely Victorianists, so they might not have attended a Victorian studies conference; the MLA was an opportunity to bring them together. The panelists gave original yet overlapping presentations that pumped up the audience and each other. I left the room thrilled about the future of Victorian studies.

Another significant thing that happened at the convention: the Delegate Assembly, the roughly three-hundred-person body that represents you in the governance structure of the association, tackled the issue of graduate student advising and mentoring. It reached out to members before the convention to collect lists of concerns and presented those at the assembly. Then the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee broke the huge assembly into small groups (small groups!) and had them

tackle a list of questions designed to lead to recommendations for action by the association to improve the conditions of graduate study in our disciplines.

And it worked. Delegates shared good stories and bad and made recommendations for policy and guidelines. People left the Delegate Assembly having had discussions and made connections they'd never had or made before at the convention. As a result, the association is creating new guidelines for graduate advising.

The MLA Annual Convention brings together researchers and teachers in your field with those from all other fields in languages and literature, writing studies, and cultural studies. Its attendees help determine the direction of the entire profession. Come to Seattle next year. And to as many MLA conventions as you can. We promise to make it worthwhile for you.

Paula M. Krebs



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

The Right to the Humanities

Comment on this column at president.mla.hcommons.org.

IT SEEMS THAT EVERY NEW president of the Modern Language Association comes to office in the midst of bad news—bad weather, government shutdowns, debates about immigration, and, of course, the crisis facing our profession. January, not April, would appear to be the cruelest month. Even when the weather is good, as it was in Chicago during the 2019 annual convention, one cannot escape the pall cast over our profession by a dismal job market and the continuing threat to the humanities. In a

of a partisan nature, yet many of the issues that dominate political discourse—and their political consequences—are of utmost concern to MLA members. The funding or defunding of organizations such as the NEH, NEA, and PBS, which are crucial to the well-being of the humanities, concerns our members; the closing down of humanities departments and the constant questioning of the role of a humanistic education are of concern to our members; debates and disputes about DACA or walls across borders

had turned education “almost by stealth” into “one of the most vital American exports” (18). And Larmer had the figures to prove the point: nearly 1.1 million international students attended American universities in 2017 and generated \$42.4 billion in “export revenue” (18). Recent restrictions on international student visas had, in contrast, led to a precipitous decline in international student arrivals (an 8.8% drop in graduate students from India was notable), and this had, in turn, compromised the revenues of major research universities.

“There is, however, another kind of innovation and growth that is not always visible in American higher education—namely, the role of migrants as innovators and agents of transformation in the arts and humanities.”

As a former international student, my initial reaction to this article was one of extreme fearfulness, if not horror. Surely it was wrong, if not unethical, to speak about international students in the same vein as soy beans and cars, textiles and pork, I thought. My initial horror was soon mitigated, though, as Larmer pointed to the ways that international students spurred innovation and growth, in business as well as in science and technology.

column published in a January issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jonathan Kramnick provided us with frightening figures on the bad state of the job market, which, he argued, may not have hit bottom yet (B4). In many departments of English, comparative literature, and modern languages, job seekers and placement officers are coming out of the hiring season with grim faces.

have a direct impact on some of the most vulnerable of our students, those from migrant communities.

January can also be a cruel month for a new president of the MLA, for it is in this month when one comes face to face with the paradoxical role of a nonprofit organization in a public sphere dominated by partisan politics. As a nonprofit organization, the MLA cannot engage in politics

Let me shift from the idles of January to one public issue that has a direct impact on our work and calls for our urgent attention—the continuing decline in the number of international students coming to the United States. On 6 January 2019, *The New York Times Magazine* carried a story in its “On Money” section on the threat of visa restriction and anti-immigrant sentiments on education. A key argument in the article, written by Brook Larmer, was that the big increase in the number of students who had come to the United States in the past decade

There is, however, another kind of innovation and growth that is not always visible in American higher education—namely, the role of migrants as innovators and agents of transformation in the arts and humanities. We know, of course, about the great figures in American music and the arts born elsewhere. What would American symphony orchestras look like without their legendary foreign-born conductors such as Sir George Solti in Chicago, Zubin Mehta in New York, and Seiji Ozawa in Boston? Julie Mehretu, born in Addis Ababa, has been a major figure in the transformation of American abstract art. From Al-

exander Hamilton to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the list of American writers born elsewhere is too long to recite here.

Though not always visible, migrants have played a crucial role in research and teaching in different areas of language and literature. Comparative literature took root in the United States through the work of exiled European philologists. Indeed, I'm not sure the field could have acquired its identity as an American brand, or its institutional legitimacy in the post-World War II world, without the presence of scholars such as Leo Spitzer, Eric Auerbach, and René Wellek. Their postcolonial successors (Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ray Chow, for example) have been central in expanding the nature of literary studies in the United States. For over a century now, the teaching of foreign language departments in our universities has been anchored by native speakers from elsewhere. It is ironic that the teaching of foreign languages

is declining at precisely the moment in time when the country has been home to speakers of almost every language in the world, including the remnants of dying languages.

Underneath these debates about international visas is the larger question of access. As our executive director, Paula Krebs, noted in a letter to *The New York Times*, there seems to be an assumption, one that we must strenuously resist, that students from rural and lower-income backgrounds are not entitled to the humanities. And yet, in many institutions, including my own, students from those backgrounds continue to come to English and other humanities departments oblivious to the horror stories about the job market. Even when they are pushed into the lucrative STEM disciplines, these students somehow find their way into our classrooms. In community colleges, first-generation and migrant students meet each other in literary texts—writing and reading literature off the institutional

radars that tend to focus on the powerful and privileged. The MLA and its allied organizations must continue to play a major role in making the humanities a right for all. Although the association may not be able to campaign for specific candidates, we can and must speak out to bring the issues we care about to light, and we urge you to do the same: contact your representatives, write an op-ed or letter to the editor, create a blog or podcast—make your voice heard.

Simon E. Gikandi

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The “Next Big Thing” Ten Years Later: Digital Humanities at MLA 2019

Almost a decade has passed since, during the 2009 MLA convention, William Pannapacker [wrote](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that “the digital humanities seem like the first ‘next big thing’ in a long time” (“MLA”). He later [wrote](#) that he regretted that claim because it had become “a basis for a rhetoric that presents [digital humanities] as some passing fad” (“Pannapacker”). If the 2019 convention is any indication, it should be clear that digital humanities is neither a fad nor passing. Over the course of this year’s convention, I attended a wide range of sessions—many of them standing room only—that focused on the digital either as methodology or as object of inquiry, and I missed as many again since I could not be in two places at once.

Perhaps the most exciting session that I attended featured a roundtable of

early-career scholars focused on “[critical computation](#)”: the use of quantitative methods to address issues of race, gender, or other aspects of social difference (MLA session 417). The lightning-talk format of this session meant that each panelist spoke for only five minutes, giving me just enough of a sense of their project to have several questions for each of them. Individual presenters discussed, among other topics, the use of sentiment analysis to analyze

feeling in poetry from the Black Arts Movement (Ethan Reed); the declining percentage of women authors over the last 150 years, as represented in 104,000

volumes of the HathiTrust collection (Sabrina Lee); cataloging references to the female body through pronouns in early modern poetry (Whitney Sperrazza); and an examination of how women authors are represented in anthologies of literary journalism (Jonathan Fitzgerald).

“If the 2019 convention is any indication, it should be clear that digital humanities is neither a fad nor passing.”

The final speaker, Kenton Rambsy, reported on his work on a data set of 101 anthologies that contain short fiction by black writers. His [paper](#), which, like many

from the session, has been deposited in *CORE*, demonstrates that “anthology editors shaped the landscape of African American literature by repeatedly publishing approximately 30 stories by a core group of [seven] writers.” Seeing the effect of digital humanities training on the research of young scholars was almost as inspiring as the questions of diversity to which they are turning their attention.

Those who worry that digital humanities research ignores the material could have found much to consider in a session called “[Bookish Transactions: Publishing, Media, and Materialism](#),” which pointed to a particular concern with the codex (session 481). Opening the discussion, Lee Konstantinou observed that more attention has been paid to the effect MFA writing programs have had on literary production than on the consolidation of the publishing industry since the 1960s. Matthew Kirschenbaum suggested that we know more about how books were made in Gutenberg’s time than about how they are made today. He then discussed his visit to a production plant for a major commercial printer in Kendallville, Indiana, tracing the entry point of book manuscripts into the building through fiber-optic cables and their departure on pallets along the building’s rail spur. After N. Katherine Hayles spoke about the production of scholarly monographs, the remaining three panelists gave overviews of large-scale, computational work on the publishing industry. Laura McGrath focused on the role of literary agents, Richard Jean So on race and publishing, and Dan Sinykin on conglomeration and neoliberalism. The talks highlighted the shared history of digital humanities and book history scholars and suggested, as Kirschenbaum put it, that all scholars should consider the intersection of social justice and supply chain in the question “Who is making your book?”

Multiple panels at the convention focused on the subject of digital humanities pedagogy. [Two panels](#) that I organized with Diane Jakacki (sessions



Pedro Szekely, via Flickr

89 and 639) took as their starting point that one’s answer to the question “What is digital humanities?” is most clearly articulated in decisions in the classroom. Panelists pointed to the emphasis in digital humanities pedagogy on process and connected it to the writing classroom (Grant Glass), addressed the utility of digital humanities training at a regional polytechnic university (Mitchell Ogden), discussed the difficulty of digital humanities training within multilingual programs like East Asian studies (Molly Des Jardin), and considered the perils and imperatives of professionalizing graduate students in digital humanities seminars (Lindsay Thomas).

I attended other sessions that discussed everything from [digital scholarly editions](#) (session 245) to the [far-reaching impact](#) of NEH-sponsored summer seminars on literature and technology (session 350) and missed sessions that covered [critical approaches to augmented and virtual reality \(session 155\)](#), the [rights and responsibilities of collaboration \(session 487\)](#), and the [relation between design and fiction \(session 635\)](#). Such a wealth of offerings highlights that digital humanities is not, in fact, a fad. At the same time, however, the last ten years have made clear that not all humanities scholarship need

be digital. Digital humanities is just one method among many that we can use to understand the products and producers of modern languages. In the end, it’s the opportunity to attend—back-to-back—a session that close-reads Hemingway’s relation to his boyhood environs in Oak Park and another that distant-reads his entire corpus that brings me to the MLA convention every year.

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- Brian Croxall is assistant research professor in Brigham Young University’s office of digital humanities. With Diane Jakacki, he is editing the forthcoming Debates in Digital Humanities Pedagogy.*

Humanities in Five: A How-To Guide



Edward Savaria, Jr.

Today I'm going to answer the question that has surely been weighing on everyone's mind since the 2019 MLA convention: How do you take a 150-page manuscript and turn it into five minutes of entertaining content? That is precisely what I—alongside Manu Chander, Ryan Cordell, Liam Corley, Vanessa DiMaggio, Sean Gerrity, Renata Kobetts Miller, and Lauren Shohet—did for this year's inaugural Humanities in Five: A Contest.

Working on such a presentation can be a daunting task, especially for those of us who are used to the traditional MLA-style, twenty-minutes-per-speaker conference panels. Here I hope to guide you toward what worked (and what didn't!) as I prepared for my Humanities in Five debut.

WHAT WORKS

- Let go of the written word: I thought I could reduce the usual eight to ten pages for a twenty-minute presentation to a page or two for five minutes, but no.
- Connect your work to something relevant for the audience, an anecdote or idiomatic expression that most people would be familiar with but that you can

twist to get them to see it from a new perspective.

- Choose a few images (no more than four or five) to guide you. I started with eight and cut to three by the time we went onstage.
- Practice, practice, practice—and just when you think you've practiced enough, do it again. And while you're at it, time yourself. You will hear that ominous *Ding!* more than once, believe me.
- Meet with trusted mentors to practice and receive feedback: mine gave me an excellent closing line that I wouldn't have thought of otherwise.
- Be open to advice and the potential to radically change the way you see your work. This process opened my eyes to the necessity of considering a variety of audiences. If we want to see the humanities flourish and take on an important societal role, then we must include everyone.
- Have fun!

WHAT DOESN'T

- Holding on too tightly to previous experiences or work methods: everything—the audience, the setting, the format—is different, so don't expect to

be able to prepare the way you have for previous presentations.

- Expecting five minutes to be easier than twenty! (Hint: it's not!)

I would say my biggest takeaway from this whole experience is just letting go: of preconceived notions, of the words on a page, and of the nerves that come with standing on a stage in front of a lot more people than you see at the average conference panel (plus a camera!). The contest, as Anne Ruggles Gere, then president of the MLA, designed it, not only made me think about my own work from an entirely new perspective but also reminded me that, no matter what stage of our career we're in, taking a step back, bringing fresh eyes to our work, considering our audience, and accepting the mentorship of those around us are worthy endeavors that can make us better academics.

Erin Cowling is assistant professor of Spanish at MacEwan University. You can see her Humanities in Five: A Contest presentation, "From Cup to Commerce: How Chocolate Made the Transatlantic Journey into Spain's Literature," at www.mla.org/Humanities-in-Five-A-Contest.

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