

## Improving Graduate Education

### POWER DIFFERENTIALS IN GRADUATE

education are inevitable—graduate faculty members are in more powerful positions than the students they supervise. These differences should not, however, produce exploitative practices. The MLA's Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) took up these issues in the fall of 2018 and has since been leading the association's efforts to recognize the problems and to intervene to make change.

To get a sense of the issues of most concern to MLA members about graduate education, the DAOC developed a questionnaire it distributed to the members of the Delegate Assembly (DA) before the annual convention in Chicago in 2019. The DAOC then used the results of the survey to move the conversation forward in a completely new way, structuring a discussion of the topic at the convention without the usual constraints of parliamentary procedure. The committee ran small group discussions for the almost three hundred delegates, producing real conversation about graduate education. The discussions surfaced personal stories and produced reflection as well as recommendations that the DAOC then passed on to the Executive Council.

The Executive Council read and discussed the DAOC's notes from the convention and immediately appointed a task force (this may sound bureaucratic, but it's how things actually do get done). The task force, composed of graduate students as well as faculty members at graduate institutions and community colleges, worked quickly (for a committee!) and produced a report, including a set of recommendations, that served as fodder for more small group discussions at this year's DA meeting in Seattle.



Photo credit: Nat Seymour / Be Good Event Photography

The DAOC's report to the Executive Council on those discussions will help the council with the next step—a proposed set of guidelines for graduate programs that makes clear the expectations of the profession for equitable treatment of graduate students and the kinds of conditions that allow graduate students to do their best work and lead balanced lives.

Meanwhile, we have organized dozens of convention sessions and events aimed especially at graduate students, including the 22–24 October 2020 Summit on the Future of Graduate Education. The summit will bring together institutional teams of graduate students, graduate faculty members, and other interested staff members such as career services officers. The teams will work closely with experts from around the country to develop a plan of action

to improve doctoral education at their institutions. If your department would like to send a team, write to Brian DeGrazia ([bdegrazia@mla.org](mailto:bdegrazia@mla.org)) or visit [mla.org/Future/](https://mla.org/Future/). We will be able to keep the costs of attendance low thanks to the generous support of the Teagle Foundation, Yale University, and Columbia University.

These and other initiatives at the MLA have put graduate education at the top of the agenda and will continue to do so, focusing on better advising practices, expanded career preparation, and new curricular structures. If you'd like to get involved, contact Brian or me ([pkrebs@mla.org](mailto:pkrebs@mla.org)), sign up for the summit, or look out for the many professional development offerings at the Toronto convention.

Paula M. Krebs



## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# The Tasks Moving Forward

Comment on this column at [president.mla.hcommons.org](https://president.mla.hcommons.org).

### THE CRISIS OF THE HUMANITIES IS

all around us, proclaimed by the popular press and suffered perhaps most acutely by our graduate students in their bones. On the one hand, we are tempted to emphasize just how bad it all is in order to wake up those colleagues and administrators who are going about their daily business without addressing the defunding and downsizing of the humanities, the rise in contingent labor, and the dim prospects of employment in humanities fields for our graduate students. On the other hand, we are now tasked with thinking about both our own teaching and research and our obligations to graduate students in new ways, developing an ethics of mentorship responsive to precarious times. Graduate programs now have to reckon with their obligations to students during a very bad job market, and it is all the more important that graduate students be mentored not only on how best to do research and write but also on how to think about and plot their futures. During a time of intense anxiety about the market for graduate students, it is all the more important to develop and abide by an ethical code of conduct that prohibits exploitation, including harassment. Such a code would also emphasize the support we owe graduate students, the attention we must give to their work, and the practical mentoring we should offer that is focused on how to find employment when the degree is finished.

One obligation of faculty members in these times is to attend to the various institutional and public conditions that make work possible not just for tenured faculty members but also for graduate

students and contingent faculty members who seek the stable employment and living wage they surely deserve. This means ensuring a livable wage for graduate students and fighting for more secure, full-time positions. We all have now to take on a new commitment: fighting for the humanities, for the teaching of languages and literatures across the globe, and making clear in public terms why what we do is indispensable to culture, society, and even the public good and why tenured positions are crucial to keeping the humanities alive.

the case again for reading, writing, critical and creative work that empowers students to renew their consideration of how the world is structured and how it means. A third strategy, equally important, is to develop collaboratively a wide range of pathways to employment for graduate students. The humanities can and should be valued for its economic contributions, but market values will never capture the value of the humanities. Further, while we make the public case for the humanities, we must not lose the grain and texture of

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One strategy is to convince deans and provosts that investing in the humanities is a key way for the university to survive, so we need to be prepared to show how important the humanities is for attracting students and preserving the public value of universities as sites for open critical inquiry unimpeded by external authorities. Another is to enter into public debate about the value of the humanities, especially the teaching of languages and literature, in order to show precisely how and why the world would be radically impoverished without humanities courses and fields of research. Against the current tide of anti-intellectualism, we have to make

the academic work we do. Making that public case, however, is indispensable, especially if it shows how the liberal arts, including language and literature programs, substantially contribute to the university and our ability to act as informed, critical, and thoughtful faculty members and to cultivate those capacities in our students.

The immediate task for mentors is to revise our practices in both an ethical and a practical direction. It is imperative to develop a new practice of mentorship for graduate students in the light of today's alarming economic horizon. It now becomes our responsibility as well to think knowledgeably and creatively

with our students about how they can find positions that pay a livable wage and offer opportunities for them to pursue their talents and to flourish. (You can read more about the MLA's efforts on these fronts in "Improving Graduate Education," on page 1 in this issue.) Otherwise, we train them in academic fields only to abandon them to a market for

which they are unprepared. That practice is intolerable. It is as important to support their efforts to secure a livable wage within graduate school as it is to help them find pathways to employment with a PhD in hand. To do that, we have to become smarter about the economic world, even if it means stretching beyond our own formation in the human-

ities and learning about the economic and financial conditions of universities. We must study the trends that affect employment possibilities in our fields, especially in the humanities, and engage the public debate on the enduring and urgent value of what we do.

Judith Butler

## Strategies for #Decolonizing at MLA 2020

*At the 2020 MLA convention in Seattle, attendees came together for Strategies for #Decolonizing, a session where members working on decolonizing efforts across different periods could collaborate and share ideas. We checked in with Patricia (Tricia) Matthew, the session organizer, and Atesede Makonnen, a graduate student attendee, to find out how it went.*

**People may still think of the typical MLA convention session as a series of individual presentations. What was the format of this discussion?**

**Patricia Matthew:** I wanted to have a very open session that wasn't just three or four people talking for most of the time with very little room for Q&A, so I worked with a group of BIPOC [black, indigenous, and people of color] scholars to come up with questions and then asked everyone in attendance to suggest more. They did, and I was especially glad when a few people pointed out that we needed a group to think of indigeneity in a global sense.

**Atesede Makonnen:** Tricia opened with brief remarks that provided a framework for the session and then had us divide ourselves into various groups thinking about a particular strategy or topic of decolonizing. Decolonization from a global perspective, pedagogy and the classroom, and material conditions were just a few of the topics—I was part of the citational practices group. There were no preassigned groups or requirements for the participants; some people chose to contribute, and others listened. The session format provided an agency

to participants that really allowed for some great discussion. Toward the end, groups chose a representative to sum up responses and suggestions, so that we had a sense of the broader conversation.

**PM:** I spent a lot of time thinking about setting a tone that would allow those whose lives (professional, activist, everyday) were bound up in the success of any decolonizing project to have as much space as possible to talk about their experiences and strategies. The collective I brainstormed with (Jonathan Hsy, Gena Zuroski, Deanna Korteksky, Nikki Hessell, and Manu Chander) was very worried that this would end up being a superficial session that was about and not for scholars doing this very hard work.

**What did "decolonizing" mean for the session participants? What role does social media play in these efforts?**

**AM:** Two threads stuck out to me from the discussion—the first is that decolonization recognizes and articulates patterns of oppression. The second thread that ran through many of the conversations saw decolonization as a project

deeply committed to finding practical strategies to deal with that oppression. One of the most instructive spaces for decolonization for me, and many others, has been *Twitter*, and the energy from the conversations and communities on academic *Twitter* was definitely present in the room. This session actually felt like the physical embodiment of the best parts of *Twitter*.

**A number of different period- or author-focused groups (e.g., #MedievalTwitter, #ShakeRace) have organized to work on decolonizing issues. What was the value of bringing them together at the MLA convention?**

**PM:** Before the conversation started, I asked everyone to look around the room to see how many people of color were present, and I reminded everyone that for many of those people of color gatherings like this were a rare opportunity for us to not be as isolated as we often are in our own departments. You might well be the only #ShakeRace scholar or the only #MedievalTwitter faculty member in your department . . . or the only #Bigger6 person. To be together and to make that work the main focus of the conversation with no obligations

to perform for an audience (by giving a paper, being on a roundtable, etc.) is so important right now when this work—especially the work of the #MedievalTwitter contributors—is under attack.

**AM:** I've had the privilege of seeing how conversations about decolonization have played out in different groups at different conferences, from #Bigger6 at NASSR to #ShakeRace at RaceB4Race. Those groups and conversations have been incredible; what this MLA session provided was a wonderful (and urgently needed) crossroads and meeting place for scholars from different fields, positions, and levels of experience with the practice of decolonization. In my group alone, we had two Romanticists, an early modernist, a Victorianist, and a medievalist (as well as a mix of positions, from

graduate student to tenured professors). Each of us came to the circle with unique experiences, which led to some fantastic conversation as we learned from one another. Giving this kind of work a platform at the MLA convention allows a much broader picture of the challenges and successes of decolonizing academia.

**What next steps emerged from the session?**

**AM:** Besides a sense of support and solidarity, by the end of the session our groups articulated various strategies for advocating for the work of decolonization. For example, our group on citational practices proposed bias-recognition training for peer reviewers. One of the general takeaways was that

more spaces and opportunities for this conversation are necessary. I definitely want to say thank you to Tricia for organizing and leading such an energized and generative session—and to the MLA for providing a space and support for this often-difficult work.

**PM:** I'm waiting to see what's next. I know groups exchanged e-mail information with the hopes of future action, so we'll see. We came up with a handout for the session, and that's now posted in *CORE* for anyone who wants to learn more.

*Atesede Makonnen is a PhD candidate in English at Johns Hopkins University.*

*Patricia Matthew is associate professor of English at Montclair State University.*

## Thank you for attending MLA 2020 Seattle!



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# The Role of Land Acknowledgments

Many who attended the 2020 MLA convention in Seattle likely noticed land acknowledgments posted throughout the conference spaces reminding or maybe notifying us of our collective occupation of lands whose original and rightful stewards include the Duwamish, Tulalip, and Suquamish Tribes, as well as many other Coast Salish Nations. For members from Canada, New Zealand, and Australia these acknowledgments might not have seemed out of place, but other members may have been surprised to see them and unsure what they meant. As a practice, land acknowledgments are given at the start of gatherings that take place on stolen land—which in the Americas and the Pacific is every gathering.

These acknowledgments remind us of our ongoing responsibilities to the Indigenous peoples who have been murdered, violently relocated, and assimilated through education practices that sought to eradicate Indigenous languages and epistemologies so that we might gather on their lands. The practice has been rightly criticized for a variety of reasons, from promoting a rhetoric of land as private property, which does not fully articulate Indigenous relationships

to place, to presenting Indigenous peoples as part of the past rather than the present and future. At their worst, land acknowledgments are becoming performative, yet another means of virtue signaling by organizations and individuals whose engagement with Indigenous communities begins and ends with land acknowledgments.

At their best, however, land acknowledgments give us an opportunity to be unsettled and uncomfortable. Recognizing the nations that are kin to a place offers a point from which we might learn more about the stories of the land we occupy. Some of you might have done some research about the Duwamish peoples and discovered their ongoing struggles for federal recognition, inspiring you to find ways to use your academic and archival training to help the Duwamish in their efforts. Others might have adapted and presented a personalized version of the land acknowledgment posted throughout the space after reflecting on what it means to participate, individually and collectively, in the ongoing displacement and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples who are still here and actively fighting to restore our

relationships to lands we have been related to for tens of thousands of years.

These are brief examples of responses to land acknowledgments that honor the intention with which they are given. Indigenous peoples who put time and labor into crafting land acknowledgments do so to bring decolonization into the present by reminding us of ongoing colonial violence in Palestine, Wet'suwet'en, the Pacific, the Americas, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Organizations that offer land acknowledgments—and individuals who hear or see them—are responsible for going beyond virtue signaling and for finding meaningful ways to hold themselves accountable.

To learn more about land acknowledgments, please visit [nativegov.org/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/](https://nativegov.org/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/).

To see the original and rightful stewards of the land you occupy, please visit [native-land.ca/](https://native-land.ca/).

*Tarren Andrews is a documented, non-enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana, and a PhD candidate in English at the University of Colorado, Boulder.*

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**The MLA International Symposium is  
headed to Glasgow in June 2021!**

View the call at [symposium.mla.org](https://symposium.mla.org).

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