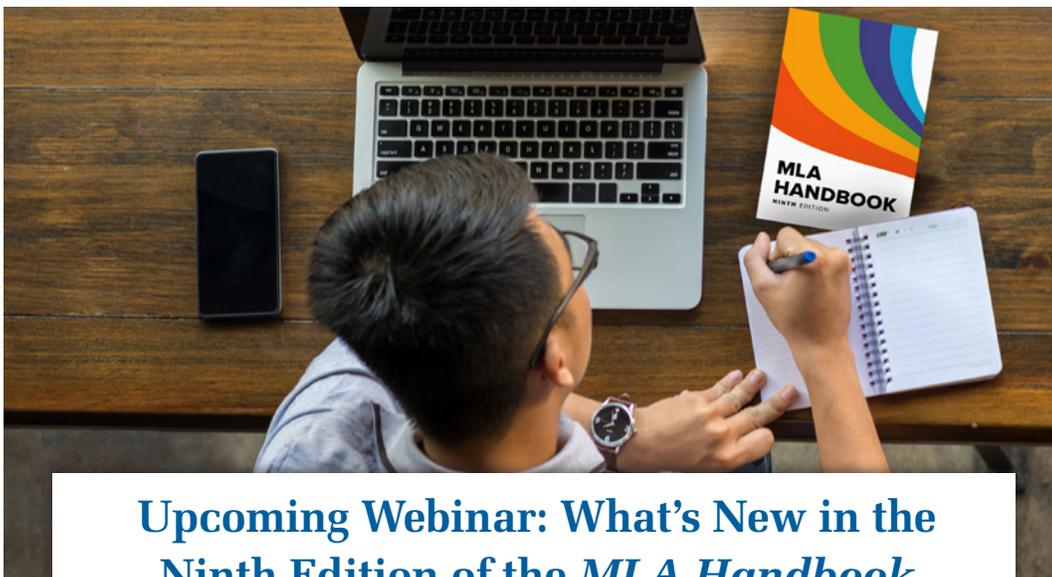


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# MLA Newsletter



## Upcoming Webinar: What's New in the Ninth Edition of the *MLA Handbook*

Learn about new content, how the style has changed, and more!  
24 March 2021 (2:00 p.m. EST) [webinars.mla.org](https://webinars.mla.org)

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## Collaboration, Companionship, and Consolation: An Interview with Susan Gubar

*The MLA Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement has been awarded to Susan Gubar, distinguished emerita professor of English at Indiana University, Bloomington. She accepted the award online during the MLA Awards Ceremony on 9 January 2021.*

Your early works, written and edited with Sandra M. Gilbert, including *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, changed how we read literature by women and expanded the number and range of women writers on college syllabi. What or who inspired you to pursue this direction in your scholarship?

**Susan Gubar:** Sandra and I met in 1973, during the surging second wave of the women's movement. The questions it was raising reminded us that we had always loved literature by women (*Jane Eyre*, *Little Women*, Emily Dickinson's poems), but we had never studied it in undergraduate or graduate school. Nor had we ever had a female professor. A course we team-taught at IU led to *The Madwoman*. Then the richness of women's contributions to literary history led us to ask, Why not celebrate them with the Norton stamp of approval?

Those are only two of the many books you've published with Gilbert. Why do you enjoy collaborative writing?

**SG:** At the start, the questions we were asking—about patriarchal aesthetic assumptions and women's exclusion from the canon—seemed so audacious to each of us that both of us needed a



Photo credit: Eli Setiya

partner in crime. I certainly would not have been able to go it alone! But also, both books were wide-ranging, so it was a comfort to be able to divide up the various tasks, even when we always revised each other's work. But I suspect the real reason I enjoy collaborating with Sandra is that she is a poet whose visionary gleams always inspire me. Collaboration is a lot of fun.

When you learned you were receiving this award, you emphasized that the feminist scholarship that you'd done was part of a larger movement that involved many other scholars, and you

asked that some of them share the virtual stage when you receive the award. Can you tell us more about that group and how it shaped your work?

**SG:** At academic conferences during the seventies and eighties, Sandra and I met many feminist colleagues embarked on projects similar or related to ours. They were dealing with different genres or different chronological periods or different geographies, but feminist critics in this generation were excited to be discovering and supporting each other. I remember the palpable excitement I experienced when Elaine Showalter or Barbara Christian gave a lecture or published an essay. Especially in the

headnotes for the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, Sandra and I could highlight the contributions of our peers, who excavated such out-of-print women writers as Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Zora Neale Hurston.

The committee that nominated you for this award wrote that your work "transmits" your "enduring belief in the explanatory and healing power of literature as a life companion." Do you agree? How do you see this understanding of literature shaping your work?

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(continued on p. 4)



## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# The Future of the Humanities Can Be Found in Its Public Forms

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

### WE ARE, OF COURSE, ALL WORRIED

about the future of language and literature departments, the humanities in general, and the arts, as fiscal crises lead administrators to decide among programs and departments to fund. In my last column, I suggested that as much as we need to show how the humanities serve the social sciences, the sciences, public policy, law, and the study of the environment, we also need to show how all of those disciplines require the humanities. If we try, for instance, only to show how we might be useful to the STEM fields and other lucrative disciplines, we pursue a strategy that accepts the hierarchy of values that casts the humanities as secondary and derivative. No public defense of the humanities can proceed on the basis of the assumption that the humanities only gain their value by serving more highly funded disciplines and fields. Yes, we are all worried about where humanities PhDs will find work and we are eager to showcase the many talents of our graduates, but if the rationale we use for that purpose admits that the humanities have no value in themselves, we are contributing to the demise of the humanities, making our situation even more dire than it already is.

A recent survey conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences with Mellon funding found that 84% of Americans (it is not clear how that category is defined) have a positive view of literature, and yet many reported that the teaching of literature at the college or university level is a “waste of time” or “cost[s] too much.” The immediate question, then, is why

so many people value literature and yet also voice skepticism of or disdain for the teaching of literature in higher education. Why can't we make good on the high value placed on literature? The answer may have less to do with literary critical schools than with higher education as a whole—specifically, with the difficulty of making higher education affordable. Would literature be considered a waste of time if time were measured less by productivity and

ten working without a livable wage and health insurance. The limiting of imagination and the acceptance of wretched work conditions go hand in hand, following from a realism mandated by market rationality.

How do we make the case for what we do that appeals to those who already value literature and the imagination and want to see their connection to their public worlds? Surveys are a strange form of knowledge gathering,

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profit? Do art and scholarship become regarded as wasteful or even self-indulgent when the gifts they offer fail to be measured by the available metrics? Certainly, it would be unwise to ignore such market values as we argue for our place within higher education. But if we accepted those values as the defining ones for what we do, we would be shutting down that horizon of alternative values that gives a sense of life outside the market and opposes the dominance of markets. Market values narrow our ideas of knowledge and depend on the precarious labor of adjuncts who are of-

and I have my questions about some of the categories and methods deployed in the AAAS-Mellon report. And yet the report offers some insights that illuminate a path forward. So-called political liberals generally have a favorable impression of the term *foreign languages*, while far fewer conservatives perceive that term favorably. Question: What's nationalism got to do with it? Interestingly, it appears that Black, Latinx, and Asian Americans “are substantially more likely than White Americans to believe it important that young people learn languages other than English,”

and those who are less affluent are more in favor of learning foreign languages than those who are affluent. Question: What does learning across national and linguistic boundaries offer underrepresented communities? Con-

African American and African diasporic studies are rife with memoir, history, poetry, and experimental writing, including Afro- and critical fabulations, crossing performance, history, and narration. Indigenous peoples across the

their histories and creative works monumentalized in older versions of the literary canon. The literatures and art forms included in ethnic studies teaching, for example, are generally related both to a history of exclusion, effacement, extractivism, and empire and to a way of imagining a better world. Palestinian poetry cannot be fully understood apart from the way that it enters and registers the rhythms of ordinary life, the effort to preserve a people's memory against its erasure by official history, a memory linked through recitation to the task of persisting under protracted conditions of occupation and dispossession. These are among the many sites in the university where the connection to public worlds is already being made; these sites should be supported as the portals to a broader world, the link between the university and those who require the humanities to live a more illuminated life. The future of the humanities may well depend on realizing that the best case for art, poetry, literature, and performance is already being made by our most publicly engaged fields.

Judith Butler

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“The future of the humanities may well depend on realizing that the best case for art, poetry, literature, and performance is already being made by our most publicly engaged fields.”

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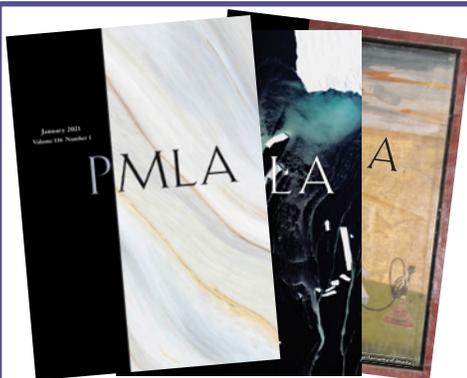
sider another finding: Latinx and Black Americans are “nearly three times as likely to have frequently attended poetry/literature readings and other literary events as White Americans, and the youngest adults (ages 18 to 29) are more than twice as likely as those 45 and older.” If the task ahead is to translate the general appreciation for literature and the arts into an appreciation for what colleges and universities have to offer, we should perhaps take as our point of departure those public poetry and literature readings that compel people, especially young people from communities of color, to show up or tune in with the hope of making sense of their world, reckoning with their histories and their desires. The fields of

Americas rely on poetry and ritual art to preserve their traditions, tell their stories, and negotiate the relations to time and space against a history of genocide and its denial. Throughout Latinx literatures, as diverse as they are, a poetics is operative not only as the study of the technique of poems but also as the technique of persisting while burdened and scarred by a history of colonial expansion and effacement. Feminist, queer, and trans writing has always been linked with fundamental questions of how to survive, live, flourish, fight, and pursue the promise of radical transformation.

Public events that include performance art, poetry, and literature draw from publics who do not regularly see

#### WORK CITED

“The Humanities in American Life: A Survey of the Public's Attitudes and Engagement.” *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 2020, [www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/humanities-american-life-survey-publics-attitudes-and-engagement](http://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/humanities-american-life-survey-publics-attitudes-and-engagement).



## PMLA Online

MLA members now have individual electronic access to current issues of *PMLA* and to the full archive of the journal through a partnership with Cambridge University Press.

To access *PMLA*, visit [mla.org/PMLA-Access](http://mla.org/PMLA-Access) and log in with your member

credentials. You can also follow the links in the e-mail notification you receive when a new issue is published.

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# Brent Hayes Edwards Named *PMLA* Editor

At its October meeting, the MLA Executive Council appointed Brent Hayes Edwards, Peng Family Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, to serve as the next editor of *PMLA*. His term begins in July 2021 and runs for three years. Edwards's research and teaching focus on topics including African American literature, francophone literature, theories of the African diaspora, translation studies, archive theory, black radical historiography, cultural politics in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, surrealism, experimental poetics, and jazz. He is the author of the award-winning books *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (2017) and *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003) and has published scholarly editions of Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and



(in collaboration with Jean-Christophe Cloutier) Claude McKay's *Amiable with Big Teeth*. Edwards has translated work by writers including Edouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Sony Labou Tansi, Monchoachi, and Michel Leiris. He served as co-editor of the journal *Social Text* from 2001 to 2011, and in 2012 he was named the

Harlem Renaissance period editor for *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.

MLA Executive Director Paula M. Krebs remarks that Edwards brings to the position “a wide range of scholarly interests, from literature and theory to popular culture and diaspora studies. His journal editing experience and history of collaborative work make him the ideal editor for *PMLA* at this important time in the journal's history.” Says Edwards, “I am honored and excited to serve as editor of *PMLA*, given its long-standing centrality to the field and its crucial role as an incubator for new scholarship. I look forward to working with the extraordinary staff and with colleagues on the Editorial Board to shape this new chapter in the history of the journal.”

Edwards will be the ninth editor of *PMLA*, succeeding Wai Chee Dimock, who has been editor since July 2016.

(continued from p. 1)

**SG:** I see this emerging in my work as I went on to write about pain in racial and ethnic contexts. After my cancer diagnosis in 2008, I sought out literature that could help me and other patients come to terms with traumatic injuries. Then I learned about the medical humanities, a field whose many scholars tap the healing power of literature for people in need of companionship, consolation, and some clarity about perplexing, life-threatening, or disabling conditions.

**In recent years you've written a column for *The New York Times* about the experience of fighting and living with cancer. What roles have reading and writing played in your healing?**

**SG:** Often in the column, “Living with Cancer,” a poem or story, a movie or novel furnishes me some insight into the experiences of cancer patients. I wrote

recently, for example, about a short story by George Saunders, titled “Tenth of December,” in which a main character with terminal disease comes to terms with his anxiety about physical degeneration. But the writing process also feels therapeutic, especially when I am composing an essay about my own treatment issues, because it gives me some distance from them and provides a means for me to better understand their nature and potential consequences.

**This award is for scholarly achievement, but some of us have had the pleasure of seeing you teach and know how you can hold an undergraduate lecture hall rapt. How has your teaching informed your scholarly writing?**

**SG:** I am happiest writing when it feels like teaching. In retirement, I have to admit that I don't miss attending departmental meetings or grading papers. But I very much miss being in the classroom, engaged with lots of students on

a complex textual or cultural problem. Sandra and I have been thinking of our next collaborative publication, *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1950–2020* (which will come out in August 2021), as an effort to teach the history we ourselves lived through. Of course, in the process of teaching it, we found that we relearned it in a new way. That is the bliss of teaching.

**Whose work do you enjoy now? What books—either scholarly works or literature—should we be reading?**

**SG:** During the pandemic lockdown, reading has been a refuge. In my feminist reading group, we have tackled loads of contemporary writers: Marilynne Robinson, Tayari Jones, Brit Bennett, Jesmyn Ward, Curtis Sittenfeld, Patricia Lockwood, Susan Choi, and Sally Rooney. I'm always on the lookout for a new publication by Zadie Smith, Rachel Cusk, N. K. Jemisin, or Ali Smith.

# MLA Hosts Summit for the Future of Doctoral Education

In November, the MLA hosted its inaugural Summit for the Future of Doctoral Education. The event brought together representatives from humanities doctoral programs for high-level discussions and hands-on workshops aimed at helping participants initiate and sustain meaningful change in their departments.

The idea for the summit arose from ongoing conversations among graduate

students, faculty members, and higher education professionals about how doctoral programs should adapt to the academic humanities' changing landscape. Decreased funding for the humanities and declining numbers of tenure-track positions, combined with increased interest in publicly engaged scholarship and humanities careers outside the academy, suggest that doctoral programs must change if they want to prepare a new generation of PhDs to succeed intellectually and professionally. With the support of Yale University, Columbia University, and the Teagle Foundation, the MLA convened a diverse array of voices to discuss how doctoral education can evolve to face new challenges and embrace new opportunities.

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“. . . doctoral programs must change if they want to prepare a new generation of PhDs to succeed intellectually and professionally.”

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Originally conceived as an in-person event, the summit took place on a virtual platform because of the COVID-19 pandemic; although the transition cre-

ated some hurdles, the online setting allowed for a broader range of participants. Departments from across the United States and Canada were able to participate, and in greater numbers than originally planned: while the initial plans for an in-person event imagined twenty to twenty-five teams representing different doctoral programs, the virtual gathering had thirty-three. And while we

originally anticipated having four or five experts in the field leading the gathering, twelve experts in faculty, staff, and administrator positions—at institutions from Washington State to Washington, DC, midtown Manhattan to southeastern Idaho—Zoomed in to share their knowledge and experience.

The summit is the latest initiative in the MLA's ongoing efforts to shape the field of doctoral education in response to doctoral students' changing needs. It builds on the work and successes of the Mellon-funded Connected Academics project ([connect.mla.hcommons.org](http://connect.mla.hcommons.org)), which sought to broaden career horizons for language and literature PhDs. One of the main lessons learned from that project was that alongside hands-on professional development, a real change in program culture was necessary to showcase the broad range of career outcomes for humanities PhDs and to prepare them for

roles in fields beyond higher education. Such a change would not be possible without departmental and institutional buy-in. To achieve this buy-in, attendees of the summit came as part of institutional or departmental teams, including at least one graduate student each, committed to making lasting change locally.

While many of the challenges to this work are structural and will take time to address, the summit also identified key actions that can be taken in the near term. Here are three:

1

Update your departmental website's alumni directory with career outcomes for all alumni, regardless of their career path and current role; communicate about and embrace all outcomes as equally successful.

2

Engage with alumni meaningfully and create opportunities for them to interact with current students.

3

Assess admissions practices and recruitment materials; determine whether these accurately reflect the goals of the program and the values of the department and institution; embrace more holistic admissions and advising practices.

We hope these actions will serve as a starting point for doctoral programs seeking to adapt to the changing career landscape for PhDs in the humanities, and we look forward to continuing to reflect on the many stimulating discussions that emerged from the summit.

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