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Teaching Information Literacy through Dante

Made possible by a generous grant from EBSCO, this year's second MLA-EBSCO Collaboration for Information Literacy Prize was awarded to Jennifer Newman, assistant professor in the libraries, and Julie Van Peteghem, associate professor of Italian, at Hunter College, City University of New York. The award recognizes coursework developed in collaboration between department faculty members and academic librarians in literature, language, or related disciplines. We spoke with them about their winning project.



JVP: I agree, we can really complement each other. I think my experience as an instructor is quite common: I had a general sense about what “information literacy” was, but I hadn’t heard about the ACRL *Framework* until Jennifer introduced it to me. Once I understood that information literacy skills are essentially critical thinking skills, I felt it was important to integrate them into my courses more purposefully. Jennifer and I were immediately on the same page about making this

Tell us about the course you teach together and what kind of projects the students undertake.

Jennifer Newman and Julie Van Peteghem: We collaborated to integrate three concepts from the ACRL [American College and Research Libraries] *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* into a course on Dante’s *Inferno*: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, and Scholarship as Conversation. We wanted students to focus on elements of knowledge production in Dante’s time and our own. We visited the library twice and asked students to examine analog and digital information sources for evidence of who was involved in their creation. In the first session students worked with medieval and early modern manuscript leaves and considered the manual and intellectual labor involved in their production. In the second session they looked at modern books, journals, and encyclopedias,

reflecting on how they came to exist. Several further in-class and homework assignments reinforced key concepts from these sessions.

Why is it important for academic librarians and instructors to work together on teaching information literacy?

JN: I think that collaboration is important for two reasons. First, because information literacy comprises a wide range of skills, it can be taught most effectively when librarians and instructors work to tailor information literacy instruction to course content and learning outcomes. You have to make it relevant! Second, course instructors and librarians offer different perspectives based on the way they work with students. Instructors offer deep knowledge of their own students’ work, while librarians bring insight from interacting with the student body and studying information-seeking behavior. Working together helps us target instruction to student needs.

instruction as interactive and experiential as possible. We found that the ACRL frames are best introduced and explored through specific course content, so we thought about the kind of activities that would work best with my classes and at our library. We each brought our own expertise and together created various assignments that built on one another, scheduled at strategic points throughout the semester.

What are some takeaways you would share from your collaborative experience?

JVP: This experience taught me that sometimes it’s more important to focus on skills than to cover more content. I admit, I was hesitant at first to “give up” much class time for library lessons, but now I can’t imagine teaching a literature course without a librarian collaborator.

(continued on p. 3)



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Talking Race

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

AS WE GRAPPLE WITH A SEEMINGLY endless list of forms of violence (sexual and reproductive violence, violence against Indigenous people, transphobia, systemic racism, ongoing gun violence, anti-Asian violence, and the ever-present, daily violence against Black people) in this country, it is crucial once again to consider how the issue of race is at the root of each of these ills.

Faced with the current wave of political interventions against teaching about race, I want to reflect on Nikole Hannah-Jones's *The 1619 Project*, which contributed to a foundational disruption of the myth of American exceptionalism by exposing the myth of racial progressivism, and look back at another, much earlier, conversation about race. In her

contribution lays bare contemporary iterations of how popular narratives about the nation's origin and moral character reproduced beliefs in racial progress. And this despite trends in peer-reviewed sociological, historical, political, and economic research that show racial violence and inequality increasing.

A Rap on Race (1971) is a seven-and-a-half-hour conversation between Margaret Mead and James Baldwin. The lengthy, poignant exchange between Mead, "a persona of the white liberal (but dominant) sector," and Baldwin, "a persona of the black liberal (but subdominant) sector," is an attempt to understand how the tangled forces of whiteness and blackness have shaped American society. These well-known fig-

Baldwin places extreme importance on the Black community as a living and breathing entity. His conversations with Mead suggest that he understood the lack of knowledge about Black people of most people outside the Black community—including in Mead. In their conversation Mead highlights "growing up afraid of the dark." She says, "bad things happen in the dark, you can get hurt in the dark," microscopically focusing on white fear instead of the problem of racism.

Baldwin argues that rationalizing fear is crucial for the true development of a society. He notes the fundamental nature of accepting your "ancestors" and having a "brother in common," and he emphasizes how "the tragedy is that most white people deny their brother." This denial is a direct connection to the element of fear, the understanding that an entire people can actively and consciously abandon their "brother in common" to severe mistreatment and general discrimination.

Baldwin says that lack of trust within the two communities is a direct result of white fear, and the notion that Black individuals are responsible for providing healing and mending for this fear is irrational, as Blacks have been and still remain the targets of this irrational fear. Baldwin stresses the importance of high levels of caution in Black communities, as the historical evidence and representation make it clear that white fear of Black people is a foundational aspect of the distrustful reaction of Black communities, as whites are historically known for abusing their "brother in common"

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book adaptation of the *New York Times Magazine* series, Hannah-Jones decenters 1776 and uses the project to counter-narrate nationhood from the perspective of Black communities and their histories. Each essay, photograph, and literary

ures concern themselves with America as a plural social text made up of a dominant white majority and a subdominant non-white (whatever that might have meant at any given point in American history) "minority."

and using him for personal gain. White fear graduated into exploitation and abuse, and the fear was unequivocally rationalized to maintain the abuse, discrimination, and mistreatment. Baldwin notes that Black people attempting to integrate found themselves “in serious psychological trouble, because they weren’t, no matter how well the uniform fitted, really what they were taken to be or were hoping or pretending to be.” For Baldwin, the integration of white people and Black people, given the climate, involved conformity in the name of acceptance. As the distrust of whites remains an issue, the psychological damage to and discrimination against Black people continues.

The questions that Baldwin and Mead addressed more than fifty years ago are still pressing today. Given the social climate in which racial tensions are more than ever shaping everyday American society, the temporary coalition that Mead and Baldwin formed still provides us with concrete examples to juxtapose with cases like Amadou Diallo; Ousmane Zongo; Kimani Gray; Kendrec McDade; Timothy Russell; Malissa Williams; Ervin

Jefferson; Patrick Dorismond; Timothy Stansbury, Jr.; Sean Bell; Orlando Barlow; Aaron Campbell; Victor Steen; Steven Eugene Washington; Alonzo Ashley; Wendell Allen; Ronald Madison; James Brissette; Travares McGill; Ramarley Graham; Dante Parker; Oscar Grant; Trayvon Martin; John Crawford III; Michael Brown; Ezell Ford; Eric Garner; Tamir Rice; George Floyd; Breonna Taylor; and Tyre Nichols, among many others. In closing, I encourage us all to read or reread Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* and appreciate how he articulates these matters accurately.¹ And I urge us to continue our conversations.

Frieda Ekotto

NOTE

1. Readers of French might enjoy Magali Berger’s translation of Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street*, *Chassés de la lumière* (Ypsilon, 2015), which includes two important afterwords.

WORK CITED

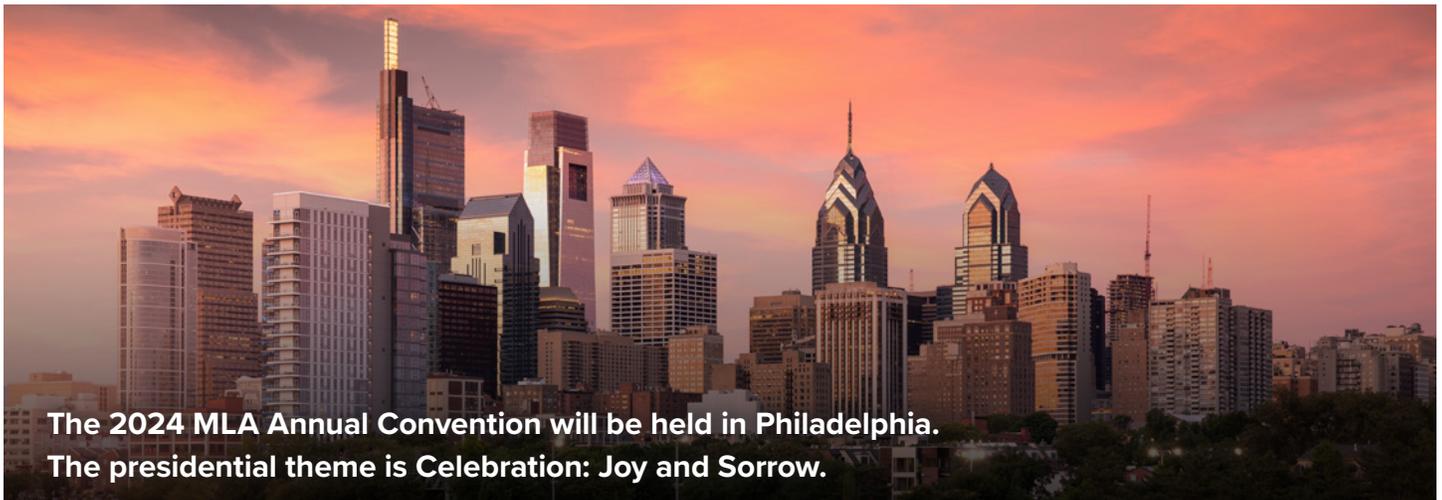
Baldwin, James, and Margaret Mead. *A Rap on Race*. Lippincott, 1971.

(continued from p. 1)

JN: It is amazing how generative the collaboration between librarians and course instructors can be. Julie and I started discussing library instruction several years ago, and the conversation continues! This dialogue has helped us both to keep improving our pedagogy. We’ve created an approach to teaching information literacy that can be adapted to other courses, and I can use our success in Julie’s course on Dante as a conversation starter with other faculty members.

JVP: Just like we scaffolded all student assignments, our own work started small, and we slowly built it up. I found a new way to structure my literature classes, and I keep learning from our collaboration. Fellow instructors, get to know your subject librarian if you don’t already!

View Newman and Van Peteghem’s project submission in *CORE* (<https://doi.org/10.17613/k51q-v939>), the open-access repository for the humanities, and visit www.mla.org/Info-Lit-Prize by 15 June to find out how to apply for the 2023 award.



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NHA Update: After Big Wins for the Humanities in FY23 What Comes Next?

As a member of the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), the MLA receives regular updates from the alliance. This guest column was written by Alexandra Klein, the NHA's communications and government relations manager.

In March, the National Humanities Alliance is hosting the 2023 NHA Annual Meeting and Humanities Advocacy Day—the first to be held in person since 2020. Looking back at the past year, we have much to celebrate, including the largest-ever yearly funding increase for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the humanities community's robust advocacy that made the increase possible. Yet we know that we'll confront a more challenging landscape this year, given the split Congress; therefore, rallying advocates from across the country and cultivating bipartisan support for federal funding for the humanities remains absolutely essential.

In addition to increasing the NEH budget to \$207 million for fiscal year 2023 (FY23), the final appropriations omnibus bill, passed in mid-December 2022, contained several other wins for our funding priorities:

- Title VI received \$75.4 million, an increase of \$3.5 million, and Fulbright-Hays received \$10.3 million, an increase of half a million dollars.
- The Institute of Museum and Library Services received \$294.8 million, an increase of \$26.8 million.
- The National Archives and Records Administration received \$427.52 million, a \$39.21 million increase; its grant-giving arm, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, received \$9.5 million, a \$2.5 million increase.

These wins were possible because of strong, year-round advocacy by the humanities community. And none of these successes would be possible without the support of scholarly societies such as the MLA. In mobilizing their members, scholarly societies enabled us to recruit advocates from all fifty states and Puerto Rico to participate in our 2022 Humanities Advocacy Day, which kicked off our advocacy for these FY23 wins.

As we turn our attention to FY24 appropriations, it is crucial that, given the realities of a split Congress, we focus on cultivating strong bipartisan support. While we are optimistic that we can build on our past success—even when the last administration sought to defund the NEH year after year, a Republican-controlled Congress passed increases for the NEH—cultivating this support will take continuous effort. Over the past year, we have been hard at work to ensure that bipartisan support remains robust.

In an effort to engage members of Congress beyond Humanities Advocacy Day, we held a virtual briefing in July 2022 to discuss the many ways the NEH supports Indigenous American languages, including the preservation of Native languages and lifeways through grants to study and document

endangered languages and make language resources accessible to tribal members. Staffers heard directly from three NEH grantees about the profound impact that NEH funding has had on their work in language preservation and revitalization.

We have also secured new, bipartisan leadership for the Congressional Humanities Caucus, bringing in representatives Dina Titus (D-NV-01) and Mike Carey (R-OH-15) as the new chairs. We are pleased to have bipartisan leadership. With members from both sides of the aisle leading the Congressional Humanities Caucus, we are able to show all members of Congress that federally funded humanities programs have bipartisan support.

These are all positive steps forward, but it remains crucial that we gather together once again on Humanities Advocacy Day to meet with members of Congress and their staffs and work to ensure bipartisan support for federally funded humanities programs. While many anticipate that increases in domestic spending will be hard to come by, we are confident that we can impress upon Congress the importance of the humanities and why it is critical to continue robustly funding these programs.

New Task Force Addresses AI

The MLA and CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication) have formed a joint task force on writing and AI, chaired by Holly Hassel (North Dakota State University) for CCCC and Elizabeth Mathews Losh (William and Mary) for the MLA. Members will seek community feedback to help with their assessment of core issues and how these issues are likely to affect teaching and research, host a website to share resources, and formulate recommendations on promising directions for AI in scholarship and teaching. The task force invites you to take a moment to visit its website on *Humanities Commons* (aiandwriting.hcommons.org/) and to take a brief survey (www.surveymonkey.com/r/AI-task-force-survey) to help inform its work.

Advocacy for All

The MLA serves members directly, of course. That's our main job. But it isn't our only job.

The MLA is a convener and a publisher. We organize the annual convention and many professional development events; we publish the *MLA International Bibliography*, the *MLA Handbook*, the online *MLA Handbook Plus*, and *PMLA*; and our many books and other publications show up in our members' lives regularly. The bibliography anchors your research, and, if you teach, you turn to many of our other publications for help.

While we serve our members directly in so many ways, we also do some work that can be seen as indirect service to members. That's the work that supports the humanities nationally—policy and advocacy work. The MLA is a member of the National Humanities Alliance (NHA; www.nhalliance.org), which plays a key part in our advocacy efforts for teaching and research in the humanities. The NHA advocates in Washington for federal support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Title VI and Fulbright-Hays funding for international education, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the Library of Congress.

As the current president of the NHA, I work with that organization's staff to help coordinate its annual meeting in Washington, which trains folks from all over the country in how to talk to congressional staffers and representatives to enlist their support for the humanities and culminates in Humanities Advocacy Day. The NHA talks with representatives and senators year-round, but Humanities Advocacy Day allows humanists from all over the country to talk—in person—to their elected officials about the importance of the humanities.

When I was a member of the board of the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, one of the state councils in the

Federation of State Humanities Councils, I saw firsthand the ways our congressional delegation supported the humanities. The representatives and senators frequently attended the grant-award ceremonies we ran, and they showed up for public events run by the folks who received our grants, from the Civil War historical reenactments of the Black soldiers of the 14th Heavy Artillery of Rhode Island to school civics programs and theater talkbacks. Humanities programs that reach out to the public are very popular with elected officials on both sides of the aisle.

Our advocacy work through the NHA is successful because state legislators understand the value of what state humanities councils do, and they know the NEH funds the councils. But championing the value of humanities research, as represented by NEH research grants to individuals, is a tougher sell. That's where it's important to have academics going to Capitol Hill, to talk to legislators about the value for the country of federal funding for humanities research.

That advocacy work doesn't just happen on Capitol Hill on Humanities Advocacy Day. Your universities advocate at the state and federal level all the time, and you can make a real difference in their messaging. Every year at the MLA Annual Convention, my office sponsors the session *Advocating for the Humanities* at the State House and on Capitol Hill, which brings together experienced advocates (lobbyists, if you will) to talk about how to work with your campus's government relations officers to get them to tell better, more persuasive stories about the humanities. I guarantee you that almost all the stories your legislators are hearing about your university are about STEM successes, with maybe some business incubation thrown in. But you can change that.

Working with your dean, your provost, and members of your government rela-

tions staff, you can start directing attention to the important humanities work on your campus. That includes faculty publications and prizes, and it includes public humanities work and community-engaged research and teaching. Good stories are what bring public attention to higher education, and we have excellent stories in language and literature—it's who we are.

The MLA tells the stories of our disciplines at the federal level, and we want to help tell the stories at the state and campus levels as well. Feel free to contact me if you want to learn more about the organization's advocacy work, and be sure to have your department join MLA Academic Program Services (MAPS; maps.mla.org) so that you can access the program-based advocacy resources of the Association of Departments of English and the Association of Language Departments. Use the resources of the National Humanities Alliance (www.nhalliance.org/pitching_the_humanities). Come to the advocacy sessions at the MLA convention in Philadelphia.

The more we talk publicly about the value of what we do in language and literature, the easier it will be to make the case for the retention and even expansion of our departments and programs at the campus level. We can all become advocates for the humanities.

Paula M. Krebs

View Paula's video about successful humanities programs and hear big news about our plans for sharing models that can help.

