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Nobel laureate
Gao Xingjian speaks
at the session
"Gao Xingjian
on Literature and
Theater."

MLA Commons Launches in Boston

Among the festivities at the 2013 convention in Boston was the launch of *MLA Commons*, a new online platform supporting a wide range of member-to-member communications. Combining a large-scale blogging platform and a rich social network, the *Commons* gives members an opportunity to connect with one another, to seek feedback on their work, to form groups for discussing ideas and issues, to collaborate on new projects, and much more.

MLA Commons allows for informal communication through blogs and discussion groups, but it also provides a means for creating more formal publications. As part of the launch of the *Commons*, the MLA released its first all-digital anthology, *Literary Studies in the Digital Age*. This collection, coedited by Ken Price and Ray Siemens, brings together ten articles on the use of computing tools for literary studies in an open format that allows users to comment. The *Literary Studies in the Digital Age* editors intend for the collection to grow and have created a means for authors to submit new articles for inclusion.

By the conclusion of the Boston convention, more than five hundred members had activated their accounts on *MLA Commons* and were beginning to create groups, to start discussions, to publish blogs, and to think about how the new platform might further their goals as scholars and teachers. Individual members and divisions and discussion groups planning sessions for the 2014 convention in Chicago will be able to use blog pages to publicize their calls for papers and may collaborate on session proposals in private forums.

To activate your account, visit commons.mla.org and click on the Log In button. Use the same user name and password that you use to log in at www.mla.org. Follow the instructions for confirming your permanent user name, and you'll be in! You'll then have an opportunity to fill out your profile information and to participate in the forums for the divisions, discussion groups, and committees of which you are already a member. (You'll see these in the groups section of your profile as soon as you log in.)

While the *Commons* is fully open to all MLA members, it is still in a beta state right now. It will continue developing—adding new features, working out bugs—in the weeks and months ahead. You can make suggestions by using the Feedback tab at the right edge of most pages, and we hope you'll join our member-to-member Help group to ask questions about the *Commons*. We look forward to hearing your ideas about how this new platform might develop and to seeing what you create on the site.

DAVID FOX, PHOTOGRAPHER





Foucault's Laughter

In the preface to *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), Michel Foucault tells us that “this book arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered . . . all the familiar landmarks of my thought.” The passage from Borges’s essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” “quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies” (Foucault xv). Foucault continues to laugh, uneas-

ily, at the incongruous worlds that collide here, threatening to “dessicate speech” and to “dissolve our myths” (xviii). Significantly, he wonders about the implications of locating such otherness in China. And yet the oddities of this list enable us to free ourselves, however briefly, from categories we take for granted, glimpsing their provisionality. Perhaps every time we rethink our own order of things, we should begin with a list such as Borges’s. Laughing with Foucault, we might ask, “what is it impossible to think” within the categories we have constructed for ourselves (xv)?

The lists of our MLA divisions (www.mla.org/divisions) and discussion groups (www.mla.org/discussion_groups) don’t make me laugh, but they do make me uneasy. They were last examined and revised in 1974. Despite a number of significant additions, the lists and the map of the profession they communicate have largely remained stable through four decades of enormous and exciting change in the field. Do they still serve us as an association?

This seems to me a propitious moment for a probing and capacious look at the structures of knowledge that shape our association, at how they reflect present interests and values, how they enable or limit evolution and innovation, and how they affect the work of our members. With the January launch of the association’s new Web platform *MLA Commons*, we find ourselves at a turning point in scholarly communication. We have, at this moment, an unprecedented opportunity to imagine fresh forms and new directions for collaboration, online and off-line. Having revised the structure of the convention to excellent effect, moreover, we can now undertake a second phase of renewal. But any reconsideration must assume that the task is not to invent a perfect “order of things” designed to remain in place for the next forty years. Instead, we need a process by which the MLA’s structures can change along with our approaches to our work, creating space for new

and emergent fields at the convention, as well as in our departments and job openings. It’s not just a question of taxonomy or terminology but of how a scholarly association as large and complex as the MLA can institutionalize the contradictory pulls of tradition and innovation.

In 2012, the MLA Working Group on the Revision of Division and Discussion Groups sponsored, at the Delegate Assembly meeting and at the ADE-ADFL Summer Seminar in Nashville, open discussions about the structure and its present-day efficacy. It also conducted a written survey of the current division and discussion group executive committees. Our colleagues responded to a series of specific and pointed questions: Does the name of your division / discussion group accurately reflect the ways in which the field has evolved? Can you imagine combining your division / discussion group with another, and, if yes, which one? What would be the optimal way of (re)configuring your field? What directions in the profession are not reflected in the present structure, and what changes would enable us to look to the future and foster new knowledge? Although responses varied widely, a surprising set of shared assumptions emerged. Many members seem to agree that some changes are in order: “I’m not sure there’s a field here,” a colleague wrote about one division. “This century-based periodization is outdated and confining,” wrote another. Change, they agree further, might involve renaming some divisions and discussion groups, streamlining and reorganizing others, and adding new fields. And they agree that each unit should both assess itself and be reviewed on a regular (five- to seven-year) basis. Ideally, respondents emphasized, change would be initiated by the division and discussion group executive committees after consultation with their membership. Respondents also stressed the importance of protecting the commitment to a deep study of language and the past, as well as to smaller subfields and to newly won divisions representing emergent fields. At the same time, they stressed the urgency of making space for broad areas that are not currently represented or that are underrepresented in the structure.

This inquiry continued at the January convention in Boston with the forum “The Twenty-First-Century MLA: Reimagining the Order of Things” and its affiliated sessions “The Future of Writing Studies in the MLA” and “The Future of Chinese in the MLA” and with roundtables sponsored by ADE (“The Categories We Live By: Departments, Job Seekers, and the Organization of Knowledge”) and ADFL (“The

On the MLA Web Site

News from the MLA

Upcoming MLA Deadlines

2013 ADE Summer Seminars

2013 ADFL Summer Seminars



Management of Knowledge in Departments of Foreign Languages”). These open-ended sessions scrutinized the broad scholarly categories that organize the field (language/nation, regions, genre, period, comparison, and interdisciplinarity) and explored how division and discussion group structures shape and are shaped by departmental, job, and graduate student fields. We also looked more closely at two fields that face particular frustration within the association. The working group has yet to reflect on the lively and passionate conversations and debates that took place in Boston, to report back to the Executive Council, and to outline the next steps. The council’s task will be to conceive a gradual, reasoned, and collaborative process of renewal that can respond to multiple and at times contradictory demands. I will write more about this in future columns. Although

none of this is easy, I have found it energizing to take the long view from which our divisions, like Borges’s animals, “look like flies.” I would like to invite you to join our discussions on [MLA Commons](#) or by e-mailing me directly (mhirsch@mla.org). We need your participation as we review our structures of knowledge and ask what these structures might or might not allow us to study and to think. I hope that along the way we might also share some laughs.

Marianne Hirsch

Work Cited

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random, 1970. Print.

Members are invited to comment on the president’s column at www.mla.org/fromthepres.

Calls for Papers for the 2014 Convention

The 2014 MLA Annual Convention will be held in Chicago from 9 to 12 January. Information regarding calls for papers for both session organizers and session participants can be found on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/conv_papers). Calls for papers may be submitted until 21 February 2013 at www.mla.org/cfp_main; calls will not be edited before they appear on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/callsforpapers). Program copy forms will be available online by early March and must be submitted by 1 April 2013.

Members should familiarize themselves with the guidelines for the MLA convention, which appear on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/conv_procedures), before writing to the organizers listed in the calls for papers. If not provided, organizers’ addresses are available in the members’ directory on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/member_search). All participants in convention sessions must be MLA members by 7 April 2013. A member may participate as speaker, presider, or respondent only twice (e.g., by or-

ganizing and chairing a meeting, reading a paper, or serving as a speaker, presider, or respondent) at a convention.

Organizers are responsible for acknowledging all submissions and responding to all inquiries.

All requests for audiovisual equipment must be made on the appropriate program copy forms and must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. EDT on 1 April 2013. Because the need for audiovisual equipment is a major factor in the scheduling of meetings (and because the movement of equipment is both costly and hazardous), the deadline is firm. Participants must indicate their audiovisual needs when they respond to a call for papers and should check with the chair of the session or with the MLA convention office to be sure that the necessary equipment has been ordered by 1 April 2013.

Members without Internet access who need a printout of the calls for papers should write or call the MLA office to have a copy mailed to them (membership@mla.org; 646 576-5151).

Chairs’ Hotel Reservations

In August 2013 the MLA convention office will e-mail chairs of departments that are paid members of ADE or ADFL by 1 June 2013 early information about making hotel room reservations for the MLA convention. These chairs will also be able to make hotel reservations online through the ADE or ADFL Web site. ADE and ADFL chairs of departments that are participating in the e-mail discussion lists will be notified. This early notification does not guarantee that department chairs will be able to reserve a suite for interviewing job candidates at the convention, but it does give them the best opportunity to do so. Please note that suites may not be reserved through the MLA Web site. Chairs who would like membership forms or information about their departments’ 2012–13 membership status should contact Roy Chustek at the MLA office (646 576-5133; rchustek@mla.org).

Call for Contributions to Options for Teaching Series

The volume *Teaching Translation*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, is now in development in the MLA’s Options for Teaching series. For information on how to propose an essay for this collection, please visit www.mla.org/options.

The *MLA Newsletter* (ISSN 0160-5720) is published four times a year (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter) by the Modern Language Association of America, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789. The *MLA Newsletter* is edited by the executive director of the association, Rosemary G. Feal. The managing editor is Judy Goulding. The cost of an annual subscription is \$8. The subscription price is included in the dues of all members of the association. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. All news items and letters should be sent to the *MLA Newsletter* at the above address.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *MLA Newsletter*, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

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2012 Election Results

In the elections conducted last fall, Roland Greene (comparative lit., Stanford Univ.) was elected second vice president of the association. Greene will serve in that office from 7 January 2013 through the close of the January 2014 convention and will automatically become first vice president in 2014, serving in that office through the close of the January 2015 convention. His term as president will begin after the close of the January 2015 convention and will continue through the close of the January 2016 convention.

Alicia M. de la Torre Falzon (Northern Virginia Community Coll.), Donald E. Hall (Lehigh Univ.), and Paula M. Krebs (Bridgewater State Univ.) were elected to at-large seats on the Executive Council for four-year terms (7 Jan. 2013 through the close of the Jan. 2017 convention). De la Torre Falzon represents the field of Spanish, and Hall and Krebs represent the field of English, including American. In terms of membership categories, all are regular members of the association.

Fifty-one new representatives were elected to the Delegate Assembly. Seventeen delegates were elected to represent special-interest categories in the assembly, and thirty-four delegates were elected to represent seven geographical regions in the United States and Canada. A listing of all members of the Delegate Assembly can be found at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/del_assembly_members).

In addition, new members were elected to the division and discussion group executive committees. The listings of executive committee members at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/danddg for the divisions and www.mla.org/dgroupexcomm for the discussion groups) have been updated to include new committee members' names.

Delegate Assembly News

At its meeting on 5 January 2013 in Boston the Delegate Assembly took the following actions.

The assembly conducted elections for the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC), the Nominating Committee, and the Elections Committee. The names of those elected can be found in the relevant committee listing at www.mla.org/governance/committees/comm_gov.

In addition to annual reports from the association's standing committees, the assembly received three reports that did not require action: the report of the DAOC, the executive director's report, and the Finance Committee's report. Delegates had the opportunity to comment on or ask questions about these reports. The assembly also received a report from the Committee on Amendments to the Constitution that presented a constitutional amendment for the assembly's approval. The assembly approved the amendment, the purpose of which is to allow the Delegate Assembly and the Executive Council to use the same process for revising the dues structure of all membership categories. Following the provisions of article 13.D of the MLA constitution, the Executive Council, in February, will conduct a review of the fiduciary issues posed by the amendment. If the amendment does not pose any fiduciary problems, the council will forward the amendment to the membership for a ratification vote that will be conducted later this year.

In other business, the assembly approved one motion and two resolutions. The motion will be forwarded to the Executive Council in February, and the council will consider its implementation. The two resolutions will also be forwarded to the Executive Council in February. Following the provisions of article 7.B.3 of the MLA constitution, the council will conduct a review of the constitutional, legal, and fiduciary issues posed by the language of the resolutions. If the resolutions do not pose any constitutional, legal, or fiduciary problems, the council will forward them to the membership for ratification. The membership ratification vote will be conducted later this year.

A complete report of the Delegate Assembly meeting will appear in the May 2013 issue of *PMLA*.

Winners of MLA Prizes Announced

The winners of eight annual and seven biennial awards given by the MLA were recognized at the January 2013 MLA convention in Boston. Marianne Hirsch, then first vice president of the association, announced and presented the prizes at the MLA Awards Ceremony on 5 January. A complete list of this year's prizewinners appears on the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/awards_winners).

The MLA's prizes are awarded under the auspices of the Committee on Honors and Awards, which appoints the members of the selection committees and determines procedures, deadlines, and criteria for eligibility for all prizes. Deadlines for upcoming prizes are located at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/awards_competitions). To submit books or to obtain detailed information about any of the prizes, call or write the coordinator of book prizes at the MLA office (646 576-5141; awards@mla.org).



Larry F. Norman receives the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for French and Francophone Studies from Marianne Hirsch.



Tamales for Dollars: Survival Guatemalan

“Why did you stay away from Guatemala for forty years?” “Why did you decide to return now?” These are questions that friends, family members, and colleagues asked me in the weeks preceding my travel back to the country where I completed the final year of the *bachillerato*. In truth, I had always intended to revisit the people and places that meant so much to me when I was a teenager. But the seemingly endless military and paramilitary conflicts of the late seventies, eighties, and early nineties served as a major deterrent to returning. I studied and taught Guatemalan literature and culture, and I did not want to go while the political situation was atrocious. I had also shifted my linguistic alliances to the Spanish spoken in Spain as decades of family travel to Galicia kept me distant from *la tierra chapina* of my youth.

So why visit now, sixteen years after the historic peace accords? In a word: *Facebook*. My Guatemalan school has a page, where I found several of my good friends, which gave me a tangible reason to travel back. I planned most of the trip to take place away from the capital city, despite my having lived there for eleven of the twelve months I resided in Guatemala. I wanted to see the country as the tourist I know myself to be today. In Antigua, the colonial capital destroyed by earthquakes, I rediscovered what I had glimpsed on a day trip in 1972, but it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site transformed into a lively destination for language learners, community volunteers, and wealthy Guatemala City dwellers with second homes.

The spoken Spanish was more standard than I remembered, so I was grateful when familiar regionalisms cropped up. Some expressions I may never have known in the first place: when I was asked if I wanted to “cancelar” at the hotel, I reacted with surprise, since I was checking out (it means “to pay your bill”). I was touched to hear the age-old lines of the women inviting me to buy their wares: “No he vendido nada hoy.” “Aunque solo sea para el autobus” (“I’ve sold nothing today.” “Even if it’s just to cover my bus fare.”). Most of all, I felt the soul rattling of the familiar rendered foreign, of things remembered as if dissipated into the clouds shrouding the volcano Agua that towers over Antigua to the south. This was the country of my second birth, and it had been lost to me. On the ruins of Antigua I stand, with surprising calm and contentment, mentally putting together the pieces of my life.

The driver who took me from the airport to Antigua talked about a woman who sells the town’s best tamales on Saturday evening near the church of La Merced. The plaza by the church was filled with food stands of all kinds, but the *tamal* vendor was a few blocks away (everyone knew where when asked). The old indigenous woman had special holiday tamales that smelled amazing. The only problem was I didn’t yet have quetzales, the national currency. “Acepta dólares?” I asked. She didn’t answer right away: there was some consultation with the younger woman who was helping. I named my desired exchange rate, and the transaction began. A twenty dollar bill became 150 quetzales, and 30 quetzales bought the tamales to be enjoyed with a fresh-squeezed *limonada* (made of limes) back at the hotel. I tipped her. I later found out she had added a quetzal or two to the price of the tamales, a custom in the country whereby locals pay one price and tourists pay more (this happened on boat rides across Lake Atitlán). It’s how poor

Guatemalans survive in a brutal economic and social system. The entire exchange with the seller could not have happened if I didn’t know Guatemalan Spanish: the language, the customs, the food. But it also wouldn’t have transpired in the way it did had I not been a dollar-toting foreigner, aware of her place in a globalized Guatemala where indigenous women carry food in baskets on their heads while chatting on cell phones. Nothing *unheimlich* about it.

The sight I did find uncanny was the twelve pillars outside the Metropolitan Cathedral in Guatemala City. Inscribed on them are the names of those who were disappeared, tortured, massacred, and assassinated during the decades of what is often called a civil war (but more appropriately named, as it was in Argentina, a dirty war). According to Amnesty International, some 200,000 civilian lives were lost. Organized by departments (the geopolitical divisions of the country), the alphabetized lists read like a history of the Spanish viceroyalty: Castilian names, indigenous names, hybrid names like Canil Mendoza. From the highland department of Quiché come the Menchú family names. Towering above one pillar is the name of Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera, beaten to death two years after the peace accords were signed. (For more on the bishop’s murder, read Francisco Goldman’s *The Art of Political Murder* [New York: Grove, 2008]).

I used to come to this cathedral often, since it’s only two blocks from my former school. Standing near these engraved pillars, having just seen the sculpture commemorating the peace accords in the National Palace next door, I felt a sense of hope for Guatemala’s future. Then I remembered the name of the vast urban slum that dominates a central ravine in Guatemala City with its metal shacks and persistent, abysmal poverty and violence: La Limonada. “Is it still there?” I asked my driver on the way to the airport on the last day. “Yes,” he said, “bigger than ever.” And still somehow they survive, I think, as I prepare to become a returnee once again.

Rosemary G. Feal

Note

Read more about my trip to Guatemala and view photos on [MLA Commons](#).

Members are invited to comment on this column at www.mla.org/fromtheeditor, where they can also read earlier columns in Feal’s “survival” series: “Survival Spanish” (Summer 2007), “Tan cerca de Dios: Survival Poqomchi” (Spring 2008), and “Return of the Pensative Daughter: Survival English” (Spring 2011).

**26 Broadway, 3rd floor
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ISSN 0160-5720

**Dated Material
Please deliver by 1 March**

Making Nominations for the Phyllis Franklin Award for Public Advocacy of the Humanities

In recognition of her long and distinguished service to the humanities as executive director of the Modern Language Association, the association honored Phyllis Franklin with the establishment of the Phyllis Franklin Award for Public Advocacy of the Humanities. The award honors a person who has fostered public support for the humanities through speaking, writing, policy making, or other activities and is open to academics and to public figures outside the field and the academy, such as politicians, corporate leaders, foundation heads, journalists, educational administrators, and persons from the world of arts and entertainment. Previously the award has been presented to Edward M. Kennedy (2003), William G. Bowen (2005), Richard J. Franke (2007), and Terry Gross (2010).

The officers of the MLA will review nominees for the award and will recommend names for consideration by the Executive Council. All suggestions, endorsements, and solicitations of comments on persons proposed for the award will be strictly confidential; the award will be presented at the annual convention. Letters of nomination should be addressed to the president of the MLA and should include the name of the nominee and a statement commenting on the candidate's achievements. Letters must arrive at the headquarters office by 1 April 2013 and may be sent by mail or e-mail (execdirector@mla.org).



Millennium Park, Chicago