

In January 2013, the MLA convention will take place in Boston for the first time since 1952, and I would like to invite you to consider participating in the presidential theme, Avenues of Access.

Choosing the convention theme, a tradition established by Marjorie Perloff in 2006, is the privilege and the responsibility of the president. Themes now give each convention a specific character, an array of topics and concerns, encouraging focused concentration on matters of great importance to the profession. I hope that Avenues of Access will build on the accomplishments of recent conventions. Sidonie Smith's theme in 2011, *Narrating Lives*, built on her lifelong work in life writing—and allowed MLA members to record their own narratives for the MLA's *YouTube* channel. And earlier this year, Russell Berman's *Language, Literature, Learning* offered a constellation of initiatives that ranged from the acquisition of literacy to the desideratum of what Berman called "universal bilingualism."

I hope Avenues of Access will prove to be as capacious and rewarding as the themes of my predecessors. The four topics I have in mind are bound by the multivalence of the term *access*—that is to say, by the multiple desires and aspirations we attach to it.

Student access to higher education. More than half the high school graduates in the United States enroll in college, but only about half of those enrollees eventually graduate. The world's first experiment in mass higher education is not over, but, over the past forty years, college has been redefined as a private investment rather than a public good—and it is increasingly out of financial reach for too many of our students. Cutbacks in state support for public universities and in financial aid for students, combined with rising tuition, have created a monumental student debt crisis in the United States. What effect, if any, does debt have on our students' choices of majors and careers? What role, if any, should scholarly associations play in making higher education more accessible for students?

Tenure-track jobs for PhDs. We don't ordinarily speak of access to higher education in this respect, but we should: the academy has become far less accessible for aspiring college professors. In 1970, three-quarters of all the people teaching in American universities enjoyed the essential job protections of tenure, allowing them to pursue inquiry—in their research and in the classroom—wherever the pursuit of truth took them. Today, only one-quarter of college professors are tenured or on the tenure track, and the new faculty majority consists of adjunct, contingent labor. What can we do to begin to reverse this trend and make higher education more accessible for new PhDs? What can we do to advance the discussion of alternative career paths for PhDs and reach out as an association to the growing "alt-ac" constituency?

The implications of disability studies for the humanities. Since its creation of the Committee for Disability Issues in the Profession in the mid-1990s, the MLA has been at the forefront of disability studies in the humanities. What have the past fifteen years of disability studies done—or not done—to the practice and knowledge of the humanities? What do we now understand, and what questions do we need to ask, about the range of human embodiment and mindedness? Does disability change what we know about narrative, about textuality, about aesthetics? We might also think in terms of our students, some of whom may have mild to moderate intellectual disabilities ranging from dyslexia to autism. Congress's 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act makes federal funding available—for the first time in United States history—to qualified students with intellectual disabilities. How can, how *should*, our classroom practices accommodate such students?

Open access and the future of scholarly communication. Just as the MLA was the first major humanities organization to address the subject of disability, so too is it the first such association to reorganize itself to meet the challenges of the digital age. Similarly, the MLA is undertaking an innovative multiyear inquiry into the possibility of rethinking the dissertation, as part of its comprehensive task force on the future of graduate programs in the modern languages. The association thus seems well positioned to ask or encourage questions about the future of peer review, of monographs and print journals, of intellectual property and what Siva Vaidhyanathan calls “the Googlization of everything.” But how—and in what media—can we proceed from here?

I hope Avenues of Access will provoke a wide range of responses, elaborations, and exchanges. If you want to propose sessions for the convention, please use forms that will be available on the MLA Web site at www.mla.org/convention. On those forms, you can indicate whether you wish your session to be considered for inclusion on the brochure that will announce the Presidential Forum. Although space constraints will prevent me from accepting all proposals, I would be most grateful for your help in identifying potential contributions to Avenues of Access. I would also welcome proposals that include alternative session formats, including (but certainly not limited to) workshops, seminars, and electronic roundtables.

The 2013 convention will be exciting—and fascinating for all the right reasons. I hope that you will attend, and I look forward to meeting you in Boston.

Regards,



Michael Bérubé
2012–13 MLA President