

In January 2014, the MLA convention will take place in Chicago, and this year's presidential theme is Vulnerable Times. In recent years, the MLA president has had the privilege of choosing from his or her scholarly or professional engagements a theme for the convention's Presidential Forum. The theme is meant to introduce topics, concerns, provocations, and formats that will put divergent fields and historical periods in productive conversation, spawning a network of interconnected sessions during the convention and possibilities of continuing collaboration afterward.

Vulnerable Times addresses vulnerabilities of life, the planet, and our professional disciplines, in our own time and throughout history. Its aim is to illuminate acts of imagination and forms of solidarity and resistance that promote social change. The theme and my interest in vulnerability derive from my long-standing feminist work on lives that have been marginalized, forgotten, or omitted from dominant histories and narratives. They also emerge from a concern about the precarious place of education—particularly in languages, the humanities, and the arts—among the local and global priorities of the present moment. How do we mobilize the textual, historical, theoretical, and activist work we do as teachers and scholars of languages and literatures to shape conversations about broad social and political problems?

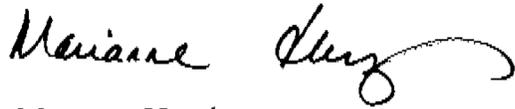
Vulnerability and its antithesis, resilience, appear in studies of the environment, social ecology, political economy, medicine, and developmental psychology as terms that help address the predisposition of people and systems to injury and understand their ability to recover from shock and catastrophe. While acknowledging the vulnerabilities stemming from our shared embodiment, feminist theorists have also underlined the unevenly imposed and socially manufactured vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups throughout history. They have seen vulnerability—both shared and differentially inflicted—not as weakness or victimhood but as a space for engagement and resistance emerging from a sense of fundamental openness, interdependence, and solidarity. Conscious of the critiques that follow from a claim to vulnerability as precarity, they have nevertheless used this claim to imagine and to demand social and political institutions and acts of repair that would strengthen the recognition of interdependence and reduce susceptibility to injury.

Vulnerable Times aims to contribute literary, humanistic, and historical perspectives to these interdisciplinary engagements. It looks to the temporalities that follow from an acknowledgment of vulnerability and asks how different historical moments and different cultural contexts have conceived of vulnerability and invulnerability, how they have attempted to avert catastrophe, envisioning alternative futures. Papers, panels, and roundtables might engage subjects such as social difference and disposable lives; trauma, memory, and testimony; war, genocide, and violence; the effects of conquest, empire, and globalization; exile and migration; species, climate, and

environment; intersubjectivity, intercorporeality, embodiment, and disability; affect and the senses; intimacy, collaboration, and solidarity; resistance and activism; justice, repair, and redress; public arts and humanities; and endangered languages.

I hope you will attend the 2014 convention in Chicago, and I look forward to exploring Vulnerable Times with you.

With warm wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marianne Hirsch". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

Marianne Hirsch  
2013–14 MLA President