What’s New about the 2015 MLA Convention

1. Vancouver. While the MLA has held meetings in Canada before, they’ve always been held in Toronto (where we’ve gone in 1928, 1993, and 1997). For the first time, we’re on the beautiful west coast of Canada. Apart from the scenery, the area is rich in museums, culture, and sports; see “Things to Do in Vancouver” on page 6 and visit www.tourismvancouver.com/mla2015 for details on restaurants, museums, and cultural events.

2. Meeting Rooms. For the first time in recent years, all convention sessions will be in one venue, the Vancouver Convention Centre. No need to go outside if you’re rushing from one session to another, and just one layout to familiarize yourself with.

3. Welcome Center and MLA PubCentral. We’ve combined the membership and registration area and the MLA publications area in a central location in the Vancouver Convention Centre, steps away from the exhibit hall, meeting rooms, and cafés. Stop by the welcome center for the latest issue of the Convention Daily or to update your MLA membership account, and visit MLA PubCentral to see a video of the MLA prize winners, to learn more about the Commons and the MLA Bibliography, or to purchase a book.

The convention will feature almost eight hundred sessions, many of them focusing on the presidential theme, Negotiating Sites of Memory (see Margaret Ferguson’s column on page 2). Other sessions range from a panel on Canadian presses to Creative Conversations with Thomas King and Smaro Kamboureli, JonArno Lawson, and Sara Paretsky to a screening of The Penelope Project and a performance of Kurt Schwitters’s Ursonate.

The Program for the 2005 MLA Annual Convention, held in Washington, DC, listed 176 session participants from outside the United States and Canada and 91 Canadian participants; the Program for the 2015 convention lists 248 participants from outside the United States and Canada and 293 from Canada.
Negotiating Sites of Memory in Vancouver

In January 2015, the MLA will meet for the first time in Vancouver, named in 1886 after a British naval captain, George Vancouver, who explored the area in June 1792. Names are important in the city’s complex history as a colonized territory—and in its other, intertwined though much longer history as a place inhabited by many indigenous peoples. George Vancouver, who named over four hundred places on the Northwest Coast, was adroit at using English names to stake symbolic claims on waters and lands important to Britain’s mercantile interests. But he didn’t understand and perceived no need to learn the language of the native inhabitants of the place he would name Burrard Inlet, after an English friend. When these inhabitants, who called themselves Tsleil-Waututh, or “People of the Inlet,” canoed down the waterway to meet his boat, they brought several cooked fish, and Vancouver gave them some pieces of iron in return. But, as revealed in his journal entry, he misinterpreted their two collective speech acts in a way that did not bode well for subsequent efforts at communication. Both times that they paddled forward to talk, Vancouver thought they were engaging in “consultations” among themselves on matters that remained a “profound secret to us.” He found “[t]his sort of conduct” suspicious and advised that it should “ever be regarded with a watchful eye” (3: 190). He did not imagine that the natives were making ceremonial speeches of welcome to a group of strangers—as they had done for millennia according to customs that are still remembered today.

Traveling between established seasonal encampments in a rich ecological system that was a crossroads for trade, the native peoples of the Vancouver area communicated in many languages and across many borders. Were some of those languages, now classified as dialects, mutually intelligible in the precontact past? It would be tempting but reductive to explain the difficulty of answering such a question in terms of the distinction that the historian Pierre Nora draws between cultures with customary memories, which he associates with orality and embodied habits, and cultures with history, which he associates with critical reason, the capacity for nostalgia, and, above all, historiography in its root sense: the writing of history. His distinction between memory and history is challenged by the past and present language situation of Vancouver, as are two other distinctions important both to the city’s history and to my presidential theme, Negotiating Sites of Memory: the distinctions between ancient and modern and between colonial and postcolonial. There are obviously contexts in which it’s meaningful to oppose these terms as names for earlier and later periods, but the notion of a linear succession of periods in a Newtonian uniform flow of time becomes an obstacle to thought about sites with histories that have been, and continue to be, sites of contested memory and interpretation.

The aboriginal peoples of Canada, Peter Kulchyski argues in Like the Sound of a Drum, had ancient modes of writing on the land and on the body as well as modes of communicating aurally across space by drum. These semiotic systems are, however, not only ancient but also modern; Kulchyski shows how they are being “reconfigured and redeployed” in ongoing negotiations among parties with competing understandings of modernity and private property (17). The parties don’t come to the table with the rough parity usually required for successful negotiations. One sign of the asymmetry is the endangered status of all of the more than thirty indigenous languages of British Columbia (“First Nations Languages Program”). The people who welcomed Vancouver to their inlet spoke a language now identified as Háaiq’mi’íxw, one of three closely related tongues grouped under the English term Halkomelem and also categorized, more generally, as a version of Central Coast Salish. Today, there are few speakers who describe themselves as fluent in Háaiq’mi’íxw, and there are none at all in the Tsleil-Waututh community (“Hul’qumi’num’”). Yet the number of indigenous language learners in Vancouver is growing, with support from the University of British Columbia’s First Nations Languages Program and community Web sites, such as Wiqwew.com, which highlights the Hbi’a’àq’mi’íxw word wiqwew, “to make a speech.”

Making speeches, listening to them, and sometimes interrupting, translating, interpreting, and debating them are activities that MLA members regularly practice as well as reflect on. These are also the activities that I hoped my colleagues would analyze and illuminate under the rubric Negotiating Sites of Memory. As I have thought more deeply about this theme during a summer filled with relentlessly terrible news about failed negotiations and proliferating acts of violence in many parts of the world, I have had moments of despair about the theme’s conceptual and ethical complexities. As a valuable alternative to war, negotiation may in some circumstances work as “a discussion or process of treaty with another (or others) aimed at reaching an agreement about a particular issue [or] problem” (def. 2), but negotiation can in other circumstances signify “manipulation” designed to get around an obstacle (def. 4). Negotiators may be at odds among themselves, and the fruit of a long negotiation may at times involve no more than an innovative phrase acknowledging that a problem exists in the eyes of both parties. A striking example of such a modest but still significant result of a negotiation over a site of memory occurred in June when the Vancouver City Council voted unanimously to acknowledge that the modern city occupies the “unceded traditional territory” of three indigenous peoples who have small land “reserves” within the city’s borders: the Musqueam, the Squamish, and the Tsleil-Waututh (Austin). “Unceded territory”: it’s a thought-provoking phrase both for citizens of Vancouver and for those who visit from other countries that have appropriated the lands of indigenous peoples and see
those appropriations as events belonging to the past. “Unceded territories” puts indigenous people’s claims to their lands squarely in the present while also implying that negotiations should continue in the future.

Among the more than two hundred sessions that MLA members have organized in connection with the presidential theme, many address bracing questions about the concept of negotiation and about the modern academic field of memory studies. The roundtable “Transnational Memories: Sites, Knots, and Methods,” for example, questions “sites of memory” as an “assumed framework” for a field that has been “linked from the outset to national memory cultures, institutions, and sites.” Other MLA sessions, however, dissociate sites of memory from physical monuments, museums, and forms of commemoration approved (and often funded) by modern nation-states. There will be sessions on the print form of the edition, silent films, sixteenth-century composting practices, French Renaissance menus, troubadour poems, medieval Iberia, the early modern erotic body, the human brain, and queer archives—all considered sites of memory from various theoretical perspectives. There will be discussions of geographic sites of contested memory and analyses of texts that reconstruct the memories of slaves, prisoners, and poets. Many of the sessions conceived under the rubric of the presidential theme engage with what Michael Rothberg has analyzed as “multidirectional memory” that is “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (3). Memory is also subject, of course, to forgetting. The ancient Greeks figured forgetfulness, Lemosyne, as the twin sister of memory, Mnemosyne, and both goddesses will be invoked at the upcoming convention. I hope you will be able to attend it. If you do and are not a Canadian citizen, please don’t forget your passport. Borders between sovereign states, even ones that have friendly relations, are serious social constructions.

Margaret W. Ferguson

Note
1. Written names for indigenous groups and languages have varied over time and are not standardized now; the First Peoples’ Cultural Council provides a useful guide to orthographic issues at www.fpcc.ca/language/toolkit/Orthographies.aspx.

Works Cited


Members are invited to comment on the president’s column at president.commons.mla.org.

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Proposed Amendments to the MLA Constitution

This year, the Committee on Amendments to the Constitution received three proposals for constitutional amendments. These proposals called for amendments to allow the implementation of the new convention forum structure, to eliminate references to printed matter, and to eliminate an instance of gendered language. As required by the MLA constitution (art. 13.B), the texts of the amendments have been published at the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/proposed_amendment). Brief explanations of the amendments are also provided.

The committee will present the amendments to the Delegate Assembly at the assembly’s meeting on 10 January 2015 in Vancouver. If approved by the assembly, the amendments will be submitted to the members of the association in 2015 for ratification.

Members who wish to comment on the proposed amendments may do so at either the open hearing of the Delegate Assembly (9 Jan., 10:15 a.m., Vancouver Convention Centre, 122, West Building) or the assembly meeting itself (10 Jan., 1:00 p.m., Vancouver Convention Centre, Ballroom AB, Convention level, East Building). Written comments are also welcome, but they must be received at the MLA office by 19 December so that the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee may review them before its meeting at the convention. Comments can be addressed to the coordinator of governance at the MLA office or sent by fax (646 576-5107) or e-mail (governance@mla.org).
Editor’s Column

Graduate Students and the MLA Convention

Most graduate students reading this column weren’t born when I attended my first MLA convention in the late ’70s. Short version: nervous, fascinated, out of place, thrilled, intimidated, enthralled. And New York City! Although the convention has changed a great deal in the ensuing decades, for most graduate students, one question still pops up consistently: What am I doing here?

This year the MLA convention is being held in Vancouver for the first time. The linguistically and culturally rich city promises to offer a particularly rewarding site for the convention, and I want to be sure all our members—including graduate students—are able to make the most of their time there. Having worked with the MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession (CSGSP), I’m familiar with some of the ways that graduate students experience the convention. To find out more, I got in touch with several MLA members who’ve recently attended as graduate students, and here’s what I learned.

The convention offers important opportunities for scholarly development. Members reported that at sessions and in informal conversation, scholars pose serious questions and give good advice. Those who gave papers appreciated the feedback from scholars from a wide range of fields and institutions. The convention allows graduate students to hear and evaluate new scholarly work in their fields before it is published. One graduate student told me that a highlight of the convention is meeting other graduate students and identifying common research and professional interests.

The comprehensive scope of the Program—which offers presentations in English and in languages other than English, on film, music, popular culture, the profession, comparative studies, and dozens more topics—means attendees can go beyond their usual range of expertise and learn what’s happening in other fields, something that smaller conferences don’t usually facilitate.

But cost is a hurdle. The number one challenge to attending the convention is cost. Travel and lodging expenses can add up to a hefty sum, and this year there may be fees associated with acquiring or renewing passports and visas for non-Canadian citizens traveling to Canada. Some departments fund graduate student travel, and the MLA offers travel grants to all eligible applicants. For the first time this year, the MLA offered a block of rooms at a discounted price. Also new for the 2015 convention: students seeking roommates can post on MLA Commons. One member suggested staying with friends (or friends of friends) in the area, and another proposed that members in Vancouver who have extra space offer it.

And attending the convention can feel overwhelming. Some graduate student members recall feeling isolated, lonely, lost, or overwhelmed at the convention. While these sensations tend to hit all first-time attendees, graduate students generally have a smaller on-site network than other attendees, and they may also be facing the intense stress of seeking a job.

To help graduate student attendees feel connected and make the convention a good experience, here’s a list of ten tips from seasoned attendees. If you have a tip to add, I encourage you to leave a comment on this column on MLA Commons.

1. Familiarize yourself with the way the convention works. The CSGSP assembled a useful guide that takes you step-by-step through deadlines, items to pack, and ways to save money. More resources and tips are available in the convention blog.

2. As soon as you’ve decided you will attend the convention, begin to network. How? Use MLA Commons to get connected. Join the 2015 MLA Convention group and participate in discussions in other groups as well. Make plans to go out for dinner with a group. Find a roommate.

3. Check the convention area of the MLA Web site. You’ll find announcements on excursions, cultural events, and other relevant convention information. The cities we visit provide a rich range of cultural resources that can help you recharge.

4. Once the Program comes out, plan, plan, plan. Mark all sessions you may wish to attend. The MLA offers a mobile version of the Program, and you can create a personalized schedule and share it with others. If someone is presenting on a topic close to your research interests, you might drop a line and say you’re looking forward to the session and to meeting him or her. Many session organizers use MLA Commons to discuss the material presented, make social arrangements, and so on.

5. Find at least one other person—another student, a faculty member from your current or past institution—who will commit to joining you at the Presidential Address or the Awards Ceremony and the receptions that follow them. You won’t feel alone, and you will also meet new people. Congratulate the president on her address. Converse with award winners about the topics of their books.

6. The CSGSP sponsors at least two sessions. Be sure to attend those sessions and talk to the participants. You might also want to connect with members of the CSGSP on MLA Commons before the convention. They enjoy hearing from graduate students, and they want to be part of your on-site network. Read the CSGSP blog for information and resources especially for graduate students. Also check out sessions on nonteaching careers, contingent labor issues, and graduate studies.

7. Before, during, and after the convention, Twitter offers a way to connect with other attendees (and other interested people). Many graduate students have created a virtual community through Twitter, one that yields interactions, connections, and maybe dinner. Or at least coffee.

8. You’ll find members of the CSGSP and fellow graduate students in the graduate student lounge in the Vancouver Convention Centre (201, level 2, West Building), a great place to hang out, network, debrief, and eat some (free) munchies. Be prepared to exchange contact information.
9. Spend time at the exhibit hall. Not only do you get to see what’s being published in fields of interest, you can also chat with acquisitions editors about your work. If you find yourself in the exhibit hall between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m., chances are you’ll come across a booth party. Indulge!

10. If you are on the job market, take advantage of the preconvention workshops for job seekers, the demonstration interviews, and job counseling with an experienced professor (sign up at the Job Information Center, in the Fairmont Waterfront).

I hope these suggestions communicate clearly that whatever you are doing at the convention, your participation has enormous potential and great value—for all attendees, and for you personally. As one MLA member said to me about attending the convention, “I have always looked at it as an investment in my future.” My colleagues on staff and I look forward to seeing many of you in Vancouver.

Rosemary G. Feal

Members are invited to comment on this column at execdirector.commons.mla.org.

About the Job Information Center

All candidates, departmental representatives, and interviewers who wish to use the facilities of the MLA Job Information Center must be registered for the convention. The center will be located in the Waterfront Ballroom, Lobby level, in the Fairmont Waterfront. The center will be open from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on 8 January, from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on 9 and 10 January, and from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon on 11 January. The center provides several services to candidates.

1. Information on Interview Locations. Job candidates can find the location of their interviews by visiting the center (the information is not available by telephone).

2. Sign-In Procedures for Departments. Departmental administrators or representatives who plan to hold job interviews during the convention, whether in their hotel suites or in the interview area of the Job Information Center, are encouraged to sign in at www.mla.org/jil_dept to ensure interviewees can find them. Alternatively, interviewers may come to the Job Information Center during the hours listed above to provide their interview locations.

3. Counseling Service. Experienced departmental administrators will be available to discuss individual employment problems from 10:15 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. on 10 and 11 January. Appointments can be arranged through the staff member on duty in the interview area. Each counselee should bring a cover letter and vita.

4. Interview Area. Tables in the interview area will be assigned to departmental representatives on a first-come, first-served basis. Staff members will be available in the area to assist interviewers and candidates.

5. Vacancy Notices. A list of openings will be posted on bulletin boards in the center. Departmental representatives should submit detailed descriptions of any last-minute vacancies to an MLA staff member in the center.

Sessions 2, 4, 5, 37, 72, 161, 341, 553, 601, and 723 may be of particular interest to job seekers and hiring committees.
Traveling to Vancouver

When planning your trip to Vancouver, you can go to the MLA Web site to find out about visiting Canada and about whether you need a visa to enter Canada for the 2015 convention. Students in the United States on F-1 visas can find out about requirements for reentry.

A couple of tips on travel to Canada:

• You will need a passport to enter the country. If necessary, update your passport and any travel visas well in advance of the convention dates. Routine renewal of a United States passport takes four to six weeks; expedited renewal takes three weeks.

• It is important to know where you’ll clear customs, particularly if you have a connecting flight, when you may go through customs in your stopover city rather than in your departure or arrival city. For example, some flights to Vancouver connect through Toronto and require you to clear customs in Toronto. Make sure you have enough time between flights to pick up your baggage, clear customs, and drop off your baggage for the final leg of your trip.

Things to Do in Vancouver

Want to explore Vancouver during the convention? Here are some outdoor alternatives to pursue on your own or with friends:

• Explore Granville Island, including the Public Market.

• Stroll through Stanley Park, the largest urban park in North America, with five miles of waterfront views.

• Hike the beautiful park trails in Lynn Canyon.

If you prefer to stay indoors, Vancouver features a variety of museums and galleries, including

• UBC Museum of Anthropology

• Vancouver Art Gallery

• Vancouver Maritime Museum

• Burnaby Village Museum

• Contemporary Art Gallery

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra will be performing on 8, 9, and 10 January. For those who like hockey, the Vancouver Canucks will play two games at Rogers Arena while the MLA is in town. For ticket information, visit http://canucks.nhl.com/.

Finally, you can join other attendees in a number of MLA-sponsored cultural excursions (for details, go to the MLA Web site):

• Granville Island Lunch and Tour with the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts

• Vancouver Art Gallery Private Tour

• UBC Museum of Anthropology Exhibit Preview and Tour

• Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art Special Talk and Tour

• Vancouver Public Library Architecture and Special Collections Tour

• Raincity Grill Locavore Food and Wine Pairing

For more ideas, visit www.tourismvancouver.com/.

Travel Assistance

The Executive Council has voted to allot funds to provide convention travel grants to graduate students, unemployed members, non-tenure-track faculty members, and members residing outside the United States and Canada. To learn more about these awards and application requirements, including the required statements, visit the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/grants).

Members may apply for assistance at the Web site or by mail. Applications must reach the MLA by 1 December 2014 and should be addressed to Travel Assistance Program, MLA, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789 (fax: 646 835-4067). Fax transmissions may be used to meet the deadline, but they must be followed by signed applications. Applications by e-mail will not be accepted. For additional information or details on how to apply, please contact Annie Reiser (646 576-5141; areiser@mla.org).
Membership Ratification Vote

The 2014 Delegate Assembly took several actions—the election of one honorary member and three honorary fellows and the adoption of a resolution—that were submitted to the membership for ratification votes this past spring. All 2014 members as of 16 April were eligible to vote. Of the 23,904 eligible voters, 2,718 (11.4%) returned ballots. Voting results are presented below.

Members ratified the election of Ottmar Ette to honorary membership in the association and the election of Maryse Condé, Amitav Ghosh, and Suzan-Lori Parks to honorary fellowship in the association. Each candidate received support from over 95% of the members who voted in that section of the ballot. All four candidates have been invited to accept the honor.

The resolution that the 2014 Delegate Assembly approved, which called on the MLA to ask the United States Department of State to “contest Israel’s denials of entry to the West Bank by United States academics,” was not ratified by the membership. Article 11.C.7 of the MLA constitution states that resolutions “must be ratified by a majority vote in which the number of those voting for ratification equals at least ten percent of the association’s membership.” Of the 23,904 eligible voters, only 1,560 (6.5%) voted yes on the resolution. The tally of no votes was 1,063.

Deadlines for 2016 Convention in Austin

Except where otherwise indicated, the deadline is the close of business on the date listed. For specific information, consult the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/conv_procedures). Please address all correspondence concerning division, discussion group, and committee sessions to Karin Bagnall (kbagnall@mla.org); special sessions to Stacey Courtney (scourtney@mla.org); and allied sessions to Deirdre Henry (dhenry@mla.org).

- 12 Jan. Session organizers may post calls for papers for Jan. 2016 convention. Any entity that submits more than one session must submit at least one call for papers.
- 1 Apr. Program copy deadline for all convention sessions, including special sessions for Jan. 2016 convention
- 1 Apr. Deadline for receipt of requests for waiver of membership requirements for participants in Jan. 2016 convention
- 1 Apr. Deadline for Web submission of requests for audiovisual equipment for Jan. 2016 convention
- 7 Apr. Deadline by which participants in Jan. 2016 convention must be listed on the MLA membership rolls
- 15 Apr. Deadline for receipt of requests for funds for eligible speakers at Jan. 2016 convention
- early June Notification of Program Committee’s decisions mailed to members who submitted proposals for special sessions and competitive sessions for Jan. 2016 convention
- mid June Notification of decisions on funding requests mailed to organizers who applied for funds for speakers
- mid July Proofs of program copy and information on date, time, and place of Jan. 2016 convention sessions sent to organizers
- late July Deadline for receipt of corrections to proofs of program copy for the Nov. 2015 (Program) issue of PMLA for Jan. 2016 convention
- late Aug. Information on date, time, and place of the Jan. 2016 convention sessions to be sent by organizers to panelists
- late Sept. Fall 2015 MLA Newsletter (Convention Issue) mailed to members and posted online
2014 MLA Elections

The 2014 MLA elections for second vice president, Executive Council, Delegate Assembly, and division and discussion group executive committees will be conducted both online and on paper. All 2014 MLA members who have provided an e-mail address will be notified by e-mail when balloting becomes available at the Web site in mid-October. All other 2014 members will receive a letter with instructions for obtaining a paper ballot.

Online ballots must be submitted before 12:00 midnight (EST) on 10 December; paper ballots must be received at the MLA office no later than 10 December to be counted. Members who vote online do not have to complete the ballot in one session but may exit the system and return as many times as necessary to finish voting.

Online voters have easy access to candidate information within the ballot system. Members who request a paper ballot will receive a printout of the candidate information along with the ballot.

Both ballots provide a means for members to suggest candidates for the 2015 executive committee elections.

If you are an eligible online voter and do not receive an e-mail notification by 24 October, please check your spam folder before contacting the coordinator of governance. Requests for paper ballots must reach the coordinator of governance (Carol Zuses, MLA, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789; telephone: 646 576-5103; fax: 646 576-5107; governance@mla.org) by 17 November.