MLA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession

2014–15 Annual Committee Report

Submitted by Shaden M. Tageldin (cochair, 2014–15)

Evie Shockley and Janice A. Radway (cochairs, 2015–16)

Committee membership, 2014–15
Angelika Bammer (Emory Univ.)
Barbara Chen (Liaison, MLA)
Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow (Duke Univ.)
Kate Flint (Univ. of Southern California)
Angela Gibson (Liaison, MLA)
Janice A. Radway (Northwestern Univ.), cochair
Evie Shockley (Rutgers Univ., New Brunswick)
Liana M. Silva (Houston, TX)
Shaden M. Tageldin (Univ. of Minnesota, Twin Cities), cochair

Charge
The Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) strives to act as an advocate for women’s interests and as a catalyst for promoting the status of women in the profession. The committee will

- gather and review information and sponsor publications about the status of women in the profession, giving special attention to conditions of employment and to issues such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, and disability
- review the professional status of women scholars throughout the academic labor system with regard especially to part-time employment, differential salary levels, and patterns of professional advancement
- propose strategies and policies to encourage the participation and advancement of women at all levels in the fields of languages and literatures
- build coalitions with MLA committees and allied organizations that share the CSWP’s interests
- make available to the profession the results of the CSWP’s studies
- organize programs for the MLA Annual Convention

[revised October 2004]

In 2014–15, the CSWP undertook a suite of interrelated efforts. The committee closely reexamined its charge and reinterpreted it for action in the present; keyed our convention sessions on women’s public intellectualism and public engagement to long-term projects to change the
discourse of the MLA and the academy, including a survey and two publications in progress; hosted three sessions (a pre-convention workshop, a paper-reading session, and a roundtable) at the 2015 MLA convention in Vancouver; and organized two roundtables for the 2016 MLA convention in Austin.

**Fall 2014 Meeting**

At the fall meeting, held on 9–10 October 2014 at MLA headquarters in New York, we welcomed new members Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow and Evie Shockley and opened the meeting by sharing news and perspectives from our respective institutions. Our ensuing discussions focused on several issues. First, we took up the two major axes on which we had decided, as a committee, to work this year: (1) women, teaching, and public intellectualism; and (2) sexual violence and the university. Before the meeting, the committee had reviewed three readings centered on these questions: selections from Ruth Nicole Brown’s *Black Girlhood Celebration*; Henry A. Giroux’s “The War against Teachers as Public Intellectuals” (*Philosophers for Change*); and Monica Vendituoli’s “A Scripted Response to Sexual Assault” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*). Reflecting on these readings and on the public implications of our own roles as intellectuals and as women, committee members agreed that, as scholars in the humanities, we might be best positioned to intervene in various publics not as developers of scientific surveys and analysts of statistics but as analysts of discourse and teachers of texts, verbal, visual, and sonic. Given our 2016 convention focus on the interconnection of two publics—that of the classroom and that of the communities beyond the university—what ensued was a lively discussion that connected the question of public intellectualism to the question of sexual violence and the university. What is *not* being taught in the language, literature, and culture classroom today? Might the decision by more women in the academy to teach texts that explore the complex and difficult terrain between the *language of sexual violence* and the
The rhetoric of consent address in more nuanced and trenchant ways the question of sexual violence looming ever larger in the contemporary United States university? That question, we noted, was surfacing on college and university campuses in many forms: from renewed attention to campus sexual assault to a drive to standardize the meaning of consent to a rising demand for trigger warnings in the classroom by survivors of sexual violence and other traumatic experiences—a phenomenon one committee member described as the “text as assault.” We also noted the race and class biases implicit in a tendency to privilege campuses as sites of sexual violence. Can women in the academy transform their classrooms and campuses into spaces of public intellectualism and engagement that confront the problem of sexual violence in its full complexity by marshaling the ability to dissect rhetoric and the larger social and political force fields in which rhetoric operates—one of our primary skills as scholars of language, literature, and culture; film and visual media; race, gender, and sexuality? We decided to organize a session on this issue, involving speakers from the academy and outside it, to address the chiasmus rhetoric/language and consent/violence. Our discussion then shifted to other ways we might entertain the question of women and public intellectualism and engagement. Committee members decided that the time was ripe for a fresh exploration, beyond the first-wave-feminist formulation of écriture féminine, of the connection, if any, between gender and writing; for an examination of the conditions of writing in the academy today—whether scholarship still must hew to certain forms, even in an age in which new modes, models, and platforms for academic writing are proliferating; and for a consideration of the extent to which these conditions disable or enable new possibilities for women as solo and as collaborative writers, from redefining “intellectualism” to redefining their “publics.” We decided to organize a session featuring speakers who had experimented with various ways of writing, both in their pedagogy and in their scholarship, and who would not only discuss but also embody creative, collaborative, or nonconventional practices as they reexamined the nexus of gender and writing. To that end, the
committee embarked on plans for two roundtable sessions at the 2016 MLA convention in Austin. The proposed roundtable sessions were as follows: The Language of Sexual Violence and the Rhetoric of Consent, organized by Jan Radway and Evie Shockley, and Writing Otherwise: Gender and the Future of Scholarship, organized by Angelika Bammer and Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow. We fleshed out these sessions and identified possible speakers. Committee members then turned to the bigger picture. Convention sessions, we realized, are ephemeral. Noting the importance of translating such sessions into longer-term CSWP interventions in academic and public discourse, we decided to tie each of our roundtable sessions at the 2016 MLA convention to specific projects.

**2015 MLA Convention, Vancouver**

All three CSWP sessions at the 2015 MLA convention were successful. Our preconvention workshop, Talking with Our Publics: Engagement and Accountability (Angelika Bammer presiding), was reasonably well attended although less so than anticipated, given the fact that preregistration had closed almost as soon as the workshop was advertised. Organizers Angelika Bammer and Liana M. Silva reported 19 official registrants, not all of whom attended; in all, we counted 15 actual participants, including two CSWP members. Our speakers and facilitators were Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the MLA, and Liana M. Silva, an independent scholar, editor of the online newsletter *Women in Higher Education*, blogger, and writing consultant in addition to being a CSWP member. The workshop focused on practical strategies academics can use to convey their scholarship to two publics: the media and nonspecialist audiences. Feal addressed the first, Silva the second. Participants responded particularly well to the section on media (which included valuable contributions from Scott Jaschik of *Inside Higher Ed*) and found the hands-on exercises both useful and engaging. That said, perhaps because the session title did not advertise a focus on women, gender-specific dimensions of public engagement were muted.
Our paper-reading session, Community, Nation-State, World: Women and Biopolitics in the Twenty-First Century (Janice A. Radway presiding), was included in the 2015 MLA Presidential Theme, “Negotiating Sites of Memory,” and enjoyed a sizeable and engaged audience despite its lunchtime scheduling. We counted approximately 34 attendees, including Shaden M. Tageldin (organizer of the session) and two other CSWP members. Our speakers were Dina Al-Kassim (Univ. of British Columbia, Vancouver) and Erica R. Edwards (Univ. of California, Riverside); unfortunately, our third speaker, Mimi Thi Nguyen (Univ. of Illinois, Urbana) cancelled her participation. The papers by Edwards and Al-Kassim were excellent. Edwards offered a riveting analysis of representations of Black womanhood in the service of the militarized/police state, from Condoleezza Rice’s memoirs to Shondra Rimes’s Scandal, and argued the importance of thinking about Black texts that don’t fulfill our desires. Al-Kassim presented a rich reading—via K. Sello Duiker’s novel 13 Cents—of police demolition of the homes of Black women in apartheid-era South Africa and the following protests, in which those women stripped naked to lay bare relations of forced eviction, apartheid, gender, and race. A lively Q&A followed.

Finally, our roundtable session, Gendering the Public Intellectual (Kate Flint presiding), attracted a spectacular turnout of approximately 150 participants, including several CSWP members. Speakers included Cathy N. Davidson (Graduate Center, City Univ. of New York), Lauren M. E. Goodlad (Univ. of Illinois, Urbana), Jack Halberstam (Univ. of Southern California), Marilee Lindemann (Univ. of Maryland, College Park), and Sharon Marcus (Columbia Univ.); Daphne Ann Brooks (Yale Univ.) had to cancel her participation for medical reasons. Approaching the gendering of discourse in the public sphere from different angles and in different styles—some more experience-based, some more theoretical—and in terms of overall representation and the assumptions and expectations inherent in its framing, our speakers addressed their interactions with different publics inside and outside institutions and their experiences with various media. In the
discussion that followed, there was a vigorous and interesting exchange of ideas. Many MLA attendees informed Kate Flint, the organizer, that this roundtable was one of the highlights—if not \textit{the} highlight—of their 2015 MLA.

\textbf{Spring 2015 Meeting}

We held our spring meeting via a two-hour conference call on 6 February 2015. Having received a report in advance on the outcome of our sessions at the 2015 MLA convention, the committee turned first to a discussion of the longer-term projects we would pursue based on these sessions. Given the resounding success of our roundtable and the fact that all of the papers presented therein were polished and provocative, the committee agreed to pursue publication of these papers in the MLA journal \textit{Profession}. To that end, Kate Flint agreed to invite our panelists to resubmit their papers by 31 May 2015, to write an introduction that engaged the larger stakes of this suite of essays, and to submit the whole to \textit{Profession} for peer review and possible publication. Flint has reported that Daphne Brooks, Cathy Davidson, and Sharon Marcus could not publish their work with us but that the other panelists were on board; she expected to be able to see this CSWP project to fruition. The committee moved quickly to finalizing the roundtable sessions planned for the 2016 MLA convention in Austin. The final shape of the roundtables is as follows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{The Language of Sexual Violence and the Rhetoric of Consent}

  \textit{Presiding}: Janice A. Radway, Northwestern Univ.

  \textit{Speakers}: Kate Nace Day, Suffolk Univ.; Anastasia Salter, Univ. of Central Florida; Aishah Shahidah Simmons, independent scholar; Ariana E. Vigil, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Rebecca A. Wanzo, Washington Univ. in St. Louis

  \item \textbf{Writing Otherwise: Gender and the Future of Scholarship}

\end{itemize}
Speakers: Jennifer Ahern-Dodson, Duke Univ.; Angelika Bammer, Emory Univ.; Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow, Duke Univ.; Dorothy Kim, Vassar College; Julie Rak, Univ. of Alberta; Lisa Ruddick, Univ. of Chicago

Finally, before and during our 6 February 2015 conference call, the CSWP agreed to pursue, in conjunction with the National Coalition against Censorship (NCAC) and the College Art Association (CAA), a second major long-term project, this time in anticipation of the 2016 MLA roundtable, “The Language of Sexual Violence and the Rhetoric of Consent.” CSWP cochair Shaden M. Tageldin worked with Joan Bertin, executive director of the NCAC; DeWitt Godfrey, president of the CAA; and (through MLA liaison Angela Gibson) MLA survey-design editors to design and administer an extensive joint survey by the CSWP and the CAA of the CAA and MLA memberships regarding the use of trigger warnings in the college and university classroom. The survey culminated in a report disseminated thus far only to the CSWP. Tageldin presented a paper on the CSWP’s findings on 12 June 2015, alongside Bertin and Godfrey, at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Annual Conference on the State of Higher Education in Washington, DC. Tageldin is in discussions with Bertin and Godfrey—as well as with ongoing CSWP cochair Jan Radway and new CSWP cochair Evie Shockley—regarding prospects for the publication of this CSWP paper, whether in Profession, in an AAUP forum, or both. The committee also may develop a best-practices document on trigger warnings.