

the mind or in a computer—to “present and to preserve the data hidden in the faraway forests of the past” (175). Ironically, if not expectedly, Banta’s essay itself illustrates the tendency to forget or misremember that characterizes even our best efforts to record or recover the past. In reporting her visit to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she discovered that its vast genealogical records had “‘misremembered’ the middle names of [her] father and [her] maternal grandfather,” Banta misnames the library’s sponsoring organization. Referring to this organization as the “Church of Latter-Day Saints,” as Banta does (178), is not unlike calling the MLA the “Modern Association.” Since the LDS or Mormon church was founded in 1830, its proper name has remained the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Banta’s is a minor and altogether pardonable error. But one clause in her erring sentence isn’t. Banta writes, “The [church]’s genealogical data bank [is] ready to supply information even for ‘Gentiles.’” Banta’s observation that this church’s resources are available “even for ‘Gentiles’” strikes a disturbingly exclusionary tone. In the turn of a phrase, she aligns herself with a nameless, but clearly hegemonic, majority that she invites to find humor in the idea of being called gentile. Most alarming, this reference to the Mormon-Gentile dichotomy in the “institutionally sanctioned space” of *PMLA*, in an essay devoted to reconstructing history, directs a mocking glance at an unfortunate moment in the American past (178).

To be sure, Banta is not the only visitor to Salt Lake City—home to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and many of its ten million members—to find humor in the Mormon usage of a term more often associated with Judaism. Nineteenth-century Mormons in the American West applied *gentile*, as an adjective as much as a slur, to nearly everyone and everything that did not adhere to their faith or desert kingdom. Their xenophobia stood to reason: they were victims of religious discrimination, from ridicule in the press to acts of mob violence. They had been driven from a half dozen eastern states and were denied asylum in all others. *Gentile* thus served as a call to circle the wagons socially and politically around the fold—a means of naming the other.

Mormons have, however, outgrown the term and largely forgotten the nineteenth-century persecution, remembering instead the determination of pioneer ancestors who fled across the continent and settled in the forbidding Great Basin. It would serve the interests of the MLA, and reassure the organization’s members with ties to Mormons and to other “people shunted to the margins of memory” (181), if this publication’s editor did the same.

JOHN L. NEEDHAM
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The Salaries of Composition Specialists

To the Editor:

Cary Nelson, in his reply on salary issues (Forum, 114 [1999]: 392–93), is wrong to claim that composition specialists are paid a premium for their services. In fact, compositionists receive an average of \$10,000 less than English literature professors. According to the latest figures from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, specialists in English composition average \$41,164 at public institutions and \$38,157 at private ones, while English literature professors earn an average of \$50,269 and \$49,478, respectively (“Average Faculty Salaries in Selected Fields at Four-Year Institutions, 1998–99,” 28 May 1999: A14, 28 July 1999 <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v45/i38/4538cupa_salaries.htm>). These low salaries reflect the dismissive attitude toward writing studies that still prevails in our profession. Nelson maintains in a personal communication to me that he meant to single out only the composition superstars as overpaid, recognizing as we all must that composition instruction falls heavily on poorly paid graduate students, as well as on temporary and part-time faculty members. But though I have only my own department to go by, it is my impression that Nelson is wrong about the high end as well as the average: the salaries of the best-paid composition specialists nationally do not approach the level of the salaries of the best-paid literature professors.

Even some left-wing theorists disparage composition. Nelson himself has publicly criticized the hiring of writing teachers at Illinois: “The word in the department is, if they can walk a straight line at 10 o’clock in the morning, they’re hired” (Robin Wilson, “Universities Scramble to Find Teachers of Freshman Composition,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 30 Oct. 1998: A12, 10 June 1999 <<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v45/i10/10a01201.htm>>). Though Nelson later insisted that his remarks were taken out of context and that he has always criticized those who regard writing teachers as “Comp Droids,” a term that I believe he coined (Cary Nelson, “What Hath English Wrought? The Corporate University’s Fast Food Discipline,” *Against the Current* 74 [May–June 1998] 10), the damage had already been done. The writing specialists attending the MLA Conference on Doctoral Education in Madison last April were shocked to hear John Guillory assert that writing instruction has its roots in remediation. Perhaps Guillory too would back away from his reductive claim, which can be true only if we acknowledge that all education is a form of remediation. But then again, if Guillory meant his remarks to be supportive of writing instruction, perhaps we don’t need enemies. Looking at the *MLA Job Information List*, I have no doubt that composition specialists are in demand. But the low salaries they continue

to command confirms that writing studies specialists have little cultural capital when it comes to negotiating salary.

DENNIS BARON
University of Illinois, Urbana

Reply:

I am delighted to have provided Dennis Baron with the opportunity to masquerade—however briefly—as the white knight of composition studies. The sentence in my Forum reply that has occasioned his performance was indeed ambiguous, and I apologize. Yet in *Academic Keywords*, several other books, and a score of recent essays, I report on dozens of interviews with abysmally paid part-timers, graduate student employees, and young faculty members—most of them teachers of composition—and decry their salaries, benefits, and working conditions. As a group, composition teachers are often so badly compensated that it is misleading to refer to their wages as a salary, since many cannot live on what they earn. I am glad that Baron put these facts before *PMLA*'s readers in detail, though he could well have done so in solidarity with those of us trying to reform higher education.

These are conditions I am working hard to change, not only as an individual scholar but as a member of the MLA Executive Council and AAUP National Council and as a long-time ally of the Graduate Student Caucus and several graduate employee and part-timer unionization drives. Given this history, the logic justifying Baron's exercise in interpretive high dudgeon might go something like this: in a fugue state, Nelson slipped into an alternative universe in which he believes all composition teachers are supremely well compensated.

For the record, neither in print nor in conversation did I refer to any group of humanities faculty members as overpaid. That statement in Baron's letter is false. I have been trying to get the arts and humanities professoriat to focus on the disciplines that *are* overpaid, including commerce. As for the "walking a straight line" remark in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I am sorry to have to tell Baron that I borrowed the phrase from one of his full-time composition faculty members; it was a colleague distressed at the necessity of doing last-minute hiring.

Actually, my Forum reply was about race, not rhetoric. My point was that it is most often those few minority scholars who are paid a modest premium for their services, not any other category of faculty member, who become a focus for resentment. I referred for comparison to the occasional rhetoric or business and technical writing specialist who is relatively well compensated. I did not mean to imply that they all are, any more than that all minority scholars are well paid. And I explicitly

stated that no humanities faculty members are anywhere near the top of the salary heap, an assertion backed up with data in *Academic Keywords*. Baron claims to have read that book, but it is difficult to tell from his letter. As for "Comp Droids," it was an allusion to some of James Sledd's witty rhetoric, so I am afraid I cannot take the full credit Baron wishes to assign me.

Finally, to ensure that this is the last letter of this series, let me apologize in advance to any science fiction buffs booting up their computers to protest the casual use of *droid*.

CARY NELSON
University of Illinois, Urbana

An Appeal for Mindfulness

To the Editor:

I attended the 1998 MLA conference in San Francisco, and it took me nearly two days of wandering the local parks to cope with the effects. What happened?

Allow me to explain: I am a recent reentry into literature, who had sought refuge in the more peaceful teaching of language twenty years ago because of the tide of negativity and politicization that had started to undermine all the scholarly values I had been trained in. I had entered the field frankly for a kind of spiritual fulfillment—by which I mean not at all something narrowly religious or Christian but rather a sense of our holistic being in this universe—which was wonderfully accessible through philological clarity. Was that so strange?

Now I have also started to attend the MLA convention. But where was the spiritual in most of the nearly nine hundred sessions of the 1998 convention? What is inspiring about the endless obsession with the marginal and decentered, the negative and the paranoid? What is the attraction of the erotic when it turns neurotic? And *pace* Foucault, what true work of art has ever been motivated by the desire for power and hegemony, so dreary to the meditative mind? In short, the spiritual emptiness of these discussions was overpowering. Were these the "dried voices" of millennium's end? Whispering echoes from the "twilight kingdom" of negativity?

Can we do without spirituality in the twenty-first century? As work for all of us becomes ever more purely mental, the need for a more dependable, holistic ethical system grows. An irresponsible computer sector, for example, has the power to wreak more havoc faster than do more traditional professions. The much-touted Y2K problem, if indeed it is as serious as described, at the least exemplifies this potential for harm. To put it bluntly: can our