

the question of whether the Modern Language Association should be officially represented by a man who has recurrently violated norms professed by the association itself. One way to avoid that question is to proclaim that people whom Said publicly assaults he is nonetheless willing to assist in other contexts. The first part of Daniel Boyarin's letter is a regrettable expression of that approach; the last part exhibits a repugnant attack of its own.

The issue I raised about the public conduct of Edward Said is not what Edward Said does or does not do on "other fronts." It is not dependent on whether those who reflect on the subject are "Zionist" in orientation or Israeli in affiliation. Nor does it entail, as Daniel Boyarin irresponsibly charges, some "attempted suppression of free discourse." The issue is whether Edward Said, who has repeatedly and publicly attempted to intimidate, discredit, or demean individuals whose views differ from his own, should be the officially authorized spokesman of the MLA. That issue extends far beyond a matter of individual conscience. It concerns the professional and ethical standards of the Modern Language Association itself.

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To the Editor:

Without entering into a lengthy theoretical debate concerning the knotty relation between politics and language, and forbearing as well to urge on all of us the benefits of self-scrutiny and restraint in our choice of words and modes of argumentation (especially concerning explosive and painful moral issues), I would like to say that the final, ad hominem sentence in Edward Said's response to Jon Whitman goes a long way in support of Whitman's argument concerning Said's unsuitability as president of the MLA. This sentence reads, "Whatever oedipal rebellion he [Whitman] may now be enacting can't change the past any more than Israel's intransigent bellicosity can change the fact of its fifty-year dispossession of the Palestinian people, the destruction of their society, and the illegal military occupation of their territories" (Forum, 114 [1999]: 107). Mounting the oedipal charge seems to me a morally questionable procedure. Far more serious, however, is the relation between language and truth or "fact" that Said's words exemplify. Presuming to understand and to be able to state in evidence the inner workings of Whitman's psyche, coupled with Said's assertion as fact what can only be a personal interpretation of the complex and multiply interpretable Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflicts, Said makes this reader question precisely what Whitman questioned: Said's relation to language and to the subjective realities that language describes and produces.

lation to language and to the subjective realities that language describes and produces.

Said suggests that the source of Whitman's animus is both psychological and political, resembling that of a "partisan, recently nationalized Israeli, once again fighting a Palestinian." Since none of us will ever know the "real sources" of either Whitman's animus or Said's, the question with which we must concern ourselves is more immediate and concrete. Is the source of Whitman's animus nowhere to be found in the documents Whitman cites? The facts in this controversy are at least as much the published words of Said and his opponents as any contextual political debate in which they participate. "[D]emocratic process" has elected Said president of the MLA. Democratic process, however, has also "appointed Whitman referee," for that process requires citizens to familiarize themselves, and refamiliarize themselves, with such facts as exist and carefully to interpret accordingly. It is on the basis of Said's published words—their form as much as their content—that the members of MLA can and must reach their own individual and collective judgments.

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To the Editor:

In his comments in *PMLA* Jon Whitman seriously questions Edward Said's fitness to serve as MLA president. I too wonder if anyone gave sufficient consideration to the fact that, through the years, this high official in the MLA governing body has condoned the terrorist acts against innocent Israelis. It is inexcusable that the man at the helm of an organization devoted to the study and promotion of humanistic values is someone who endorses violence and hatred among people. This is not politics or ideology. This is commonsense decency and morality. While I do not wish to resign my twenty-year membership in this organization, I urge everyone to protest this shameful state of affairs. The MLA leadership must rethink this.

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### **The Mormon-Gentile Dichotomy in *PMLA***

To the Editor:

In her column "If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem" (114 [1999]: 175–83), Martha Banta considers the work of memory, how it functions—whether in the "old meat" of

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.

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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](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