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Remarks for MLA Session 699, Candid Conversations: Mentorship in the Humanities

My remarks are organized into two parts — one that considers a collaborative model for faculty mentorship, and another that considers the formation of a new professional identity in humanistic careers. I believe mentorship that privileges faculty-graduate collaboration ultimately leads to a more individualized mentorship experience, and allows advisors to recognize the range of graduate student productivity as work.

- 1) Collaboration can take many forms, like co-teaching, co-authoring, and co-presenting. The most rewarding experiences I've had in graduate school have been collaborative, including co-teaching, delivering a collaborative conference presentation, and designing an independent study which required the approval of my professor — an act of both collaboration and self-directed study. While co-teaching, the professor I worked with encouraged me to include my own dissertation research as part of our class lectures. The shared pedagogical work of grading, creating paper prompts, and debriefing after precept sessions led to a mentorship relationship that felt more like an apprenticeship — I was learning on the job, under the direction of an expert. More recently, while I was soliciting scholars to interview for a BBC documentary, the same faculty mentor introduced me to scholars in his professional network who were experts on the film's topic. Through simple acts of collaboration, advocacy, and networking like this which emphasize a reciprocal professional relationship, a faculty mentor can be an advocate for student work both in the academy and in the humanities writ large.
- 2) In her candid conversations video response, Olivia Quintanilla emphasizes the importance of faculty advocating for their students. I want to make an adjacent claim that mentors must not only advocate for their students, but teach students how to advocate for

themselves. Mentors should show students how to navigate the university in new ways, and assist in the formation of a network that can exist across departments and into the administration, thus modeling the forms of institutional navigation and negotiation that are an important part of professional life in any career. Such advocacy is especially important for women, students of color, and students of other groups who are underrepresented in institutional leadership. Too many mentoring practices have a kind of “color-blindness” towards students’ economic status, race, gender, sexuality, and/or ability, and as such miss opportunities to practice mentorship as activism — for instance mentoring female students on how they might successfully negotiate their salaries across the wage gap, or joining student adjuncts in fighting for improved labor conditions. Mentors should help students access forms of support that are missing — like transitional support for students past-funding or maternity leave — and empower students to advocate for institutional change in practical ways, allowing them to become advocates not only for themselves, but for others.

While I agree with the video respondents that the responsibility to seek mentors outside the university falls mainly on graduate students — to refer to the candid conversations prompt— attached to this question is also the act of forging a new professional identity that exists reciprocally with one’s scholarly identity. Such an identity, which conjoins academic training and our broader humanistic engagement is akin to what Stacy Hartman calls “identities that travel” — the ability for humanists to reach broad audiences as writers and educators. I love this phrase because it underscores the translational and navigational aspects of professional identity formation.

- 1) To reference Olivia Quintanilla again: Olivia testifies to the importance of self-assessment for graduate students — and I take this to mean not only the “year in review” asked for by our departments, which tends to shape our accomplishments purely in academic terms such as publications and chapters submitted — but a self-assessment that allows us to articulate our skills and values wholis-

tically, and allows us to reflect on our evolving interests over the course of graduate study. Perhaps visiting the Morgan Museum's exhibit on William Blake's watercolors inspires an interest in museum careers, or your course on Shakespeare adaptations leads you towards a career in script doctoring, fixing and shaping the scripts that were once the site of your academic criticism. Sometimes academic areas of interest lead to "non-academic" thoroughfares. It's important that students and faculty realize that students are not abandoning their training or scholarly pursuits with an interest in careers outside the professoriate — but that there is an intellectual continuum between jobs outside of and inside the academy.

- 2) Key to constructing a new professional identity is the versatility of your research. During an informational interview I had with a director who has since become my external mentor, I asked how he had become so prolific — how had he taught at NYU, published books for presses like University of Illinois Press, Penguin Books, and Harper Collins, and directed tv and film for PBS, VH1, and Lifetime, of all places? He explained that he took the same material and re-shaped it for different publics — for him this looked like an oral history documentary, a mystery novel using elements of this documentary, and a screenplay for a television episode adapted from the mystery novel. Each piece of writing represented a continued elaboration of a central idea from his research, with the oral history forming the foundation of all works. I think this model can be adapted more generally for humanists. How can you adapt your research to speak to different publics? What new audience would you like to engage with? Could you consider adapting your research into an art exhibit, website, film or other alternative format? As Jose Gomez argues in his candid conversations video response, the expansion of our work into "networks outside of the academy ultimately broadens the demand for the humanities." Adapting your work for a new audience broadens your networks, in turn allowing for increased opportunities for humanistic visibility and mentorship.

3) While mentors can be found through professional associations, networking events, conventions and conferences, LinkedIn Groups, and mentoring websites, you can also embark on a more targeted approach to mentorship — one in which you identify and pursue a specific person as a mentor. Think of who you'd most like to work with and find a way to speak with them, either informally or through an informational interview, establish your shared professional interests, and make the case for the ways that you can contribute to their field.

The construction of a versatile professional identity ultimately creates new models for public humanism. While the formal theme for this convention has been “Boundary Conditions”, another theme — our role as humanists during the next 4 years — has emerged as one that has punctuated our panels and conversations. I think many of us are attracted to careers in the humanities because the values of intellectual rigor, diversity, and critical engagement, but now, more than ever, we need publicly engaged humanists out in the world — people who implicitly know the value of fact checking (whether it exists in an essay or the space of 168 characters), who value logical argumentation based on factual evidence over heresay, and who value critical insight and nuanced interpretation over propagandistic slogans. We need people who will fight for a world in which language does matter. Thank you.