

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

DENNIS BARON  
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### 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*.

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### 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