



Christensen, K. (1999). An uneasy infiltration: My first year on the MLA's executive council. *Workplace* 3, 77-82.

An Uneasy Infiltration: My First Year on the MLA's Executive Council Kirsten Christensen

I have a history of landing accidentally, or at least prematurely, in the middle of causes I choose. I have, more than once, been sucked into the vortex of some socially salvific moment, when all I really wanted to do was lie low and watch for a while. The disadvantage of such a fate is that I've had to be an expert, a seasoned activist, a steely advocate while still in the infancy of my conviction. But moving with abandon, right to the fray of my causes has saved time in the long run, I'd like to think, since making a difference often takes a very long time. I've probably made very little difference in my still-brief tenure on the Executive Council of the MLA, but at least I'm where I can stir things up. I'm still getting used to it.

Not surprisingly, I suppose, it was a couple of earlier baptisms-by-fire that ultimately led me to the Executive Council ballot. The first started blandly enough while I was serving as a departmental graduate student representative in the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of Texas at Austin. (The actual moniker for our group, I love to recall, was-still is-GAGLS, the Graduate Association of Germanic Language Students.) A student in the department came to me and asked if I knew if graduate students were allowed to belong to the Texas State Employees' Union (TSEU). I had some vague recollection from a previous year's discussion that we could not join the union, but I decided to check my facts before reporting.

So I called the TSEU office and asked if someone could come speak to our group about the union. Could they ever. Along came Ray Watkins from UT's English department and some young, fervent organizer, who together explained, in terms so cogent and appealing I wondered why we'd never heard their message before, that while Texas state employees, as residents of a right-to-work state, did not have the right to collective bargaining, we nevertheless still had a very active union, whose growing membership acted as a sort of de facto right to bargain. In fact, they enthused, the Instructional Workers' Branch of the union was currently involved in a struggle to gain a tuition waiver for graduate student instructors and researchers. That meant us. I thought I should join in.

It wasn't long before I was passing out membership forms around the department and at rallies, responding to Ray's requests to participate in planning meetings, speak to the leaders of UT's enormous graduate student association and at a law school conference, pester administrators, and, most satisfying of all, to lobby legislators directly, traipsing from office to office in the hallowed halls of the Texas capitol building, sometimes welcomed, sometimes ignored, and finally serenading mostly ourselves, at the end of one long day, by picketing and chanting on the red granite grounds.

At the end of my first year as a union activist, our struggles had borne uneven fruit, but fruit nonetheless: the German department was now swarming with dues-paying union members and our ranks had swelled in other departments across campus, as well. Most importantly, although our tuition waiver bill had been defeated in the legislature, despite our careful crafting and monitoring from subcommittee to floor, the

UT-Austin administration had nonetheless agreed to a \$125-per-semester tuition remission. It was an aggravatingly small, but still real victory.

So I thought it might be an apt celebration to talk about our little triumph to an audience that gave a damn. This only occurred to me, though, when I saw Marc Bousquet's call for papers in the spring 1997 MLA Newsletter for the GSC-sponsored session entitled "Organizing Locally, Acting (Inter)Nationally." Ray also thought such a paper would be a good idea, so I sent off a CV and an abstract for a paper we would present together and soon heard from Marc that the paper was accepted. I expected that I would not have any subsequent contact with Marc, as session organizer, until I saw him in Toronto. But Marc had other plans. His plans included baptism.

Soon enough I and all the other innocent session participants received an e-mail post from Marc announcing to us, in a tone both gentle and enthusiastic, that we had all been added to a newly-created listserve for the Steering Committee of the Graduate Student Caucus. He told us we should contact him if we were not in agreement, but in the same breath testified to our collective importance to the list, since we represented the front lines of a struggle the GSC cared deeply about. Being as chaotically busy as anyone else in graduate school, I was initially annoyed by this e-mail intrusion, but decided to inspect incoming traffic for a while before deciding whether or not I wanted to be removed from the list. I remember being curious enough about most of the list discussion on topics of organizing, unionizing, and, especially, trying to rouse the great beast MLA to care about the job crisis that I stayed on the list. I definitely felt more like a spectator than a participant, however, since I knew none of the people on the list (many of whom knew each other), knew nothing of GSC history and was only learning of the GSC future in fits and starts, as various threads wove their way through the list. I do remember, in particular, feeling nearly insulted when occasional posts hit the list declaring the inappropriateness of lurking on this GSC-SC list and asking all list members to please become more active participants in the on-going discussions. I was not lurking. Thieves, strangers and lizards lurk. I was none of these. I was simply a busy student, reading and learning from the rousing posts others wrote about the risks they were taking in their attempts to make a difference in the profession. Once in a great while-only when I felt articulate or relevant-I lunged into the discussion.

My surprise was thus rather profound when Marc contacted me off-list in the fall and asked if I might be willing to be the GSC's petition nominee for the ballot in the MLA's 1997 Executive Council election. Didn't he know he was asking a lurker? He claimed that my CV showed sufficient scholarly background to be taken seriously by those for whom activism was not impressive, and, most importantly, that my union organizing experience in Texas meant I had the sensitivity to the needs of graduate students-as-workers that the GSC wanted at Astor Place. I was intrigued and flattered, but quite certain I was not the woman for the job. Instead of saying no, though, I just asked for more information, especially about the time commitment. Marc assured me that my three meetings a year in New York would constitute the total requirement. There would be no duties in between meetings. He also confided that, while it was the sincere hope of the GSC that the candidacy they sponsored would be successful, he nonetheless considered success fairly unlikely that year and thus saw the presence on the ballot of a GSC nominee as a victory in itself. I decided that I could be a statement on a ballot without much difficulty. So I agreed. And so did Vicky Smallman. Her presence on the slate with me was tremendously reassuring.

The GSC then proceeded to gather the signatures necessary to advance our names to the ballot, and I wondered, off and on, if I had made a mistake, especially when the MLA office sent me the forms on which I had to list all my scholarly achievements and make my candidacy statement. I was appalled to see that, since conference presentations were not included on the form, and since my first article was still under consideration, I had to leave that part blank, thus making me look like an utter non-scholar, wildly different from the other candidates, all senior scholars. Ironically, it was this very difference, I'm quite sure, that contributed to the election's success, since voters had no list of publications to wade through when they considered us. Vicky and I wrote nearly identical, succinct statements, declaring that, as

graduate students, our representativeness of nearly one-third of the MLA's membership was our most important qualification. Those who voted apparently agreed.

Phyllis Franklin, Executive Director of the MLA, called in the late afternoon of December 10, 1999 I was in the middle of a sixteenth-century text when the phone rang, so I felt a sudden snap to the present when she cheerily congratulated me on my election to the Executive Council and said she looked forward to meeting me in Toronto. Herbert Lindenberger, outgoing MLA president, e-mailed me a short time later with his own effervescent good wishes, thrilled, he wrote, to be seeing this historic move of a graduate student onto the MLA's highest body. When I told my husband, I remember feeling distinctly like I was passing on bad news. I was not jubilant. I was scared. I told him that I was sure the GSC expected of me a more radical, even more confrontational stance than I knew I would be able to assume. I don't like conflict, I whined. I felt very irritable.

I did not whine, of course, when I wrote to the GSC steering committee list to pass on the news. I smiled my best cyber smile and tried to gush confidence over the internet. I wouldn't have had to fake it so much, though, had Vicky Smallman also been elected. I had hoped that any success would be in tandem with her, since I guessed that her impressive experience on MLA committees and on the Delegate Assembly would provide a bit of a competent camouflage for me while I figured things out. Instead I sought Vicky out at the convention in Toronto and accepted her gracious offer to ease me into my new role a bit by introducing me around at the first night of the President's nightcaps. And I thought that perhaps I should present a new policy at my first meeting—that all executive council members should be allowed to bring a counselor to all meetings. Vicky would be mine. All the way to 200

Vicky's assistance was not the only buoying aspect about the Toronto convention. It gave me enormous confidence to meet all the folks I knew from the e-mail list, to join in their conversations. And the welcome session was a remarkable experience. In an enormous room filled with 200 or so MLA members, mostly graduate students, the GSCers stood in a huge and happy huddle, rising en masse during Marc Bousquet's impassioned speech that decried the CPE report's look toward alternative careers as even a partial solution to the absurd tragedy of the job market. The contrast between the GSC-dominated portions of the meeting and the often boring and even condescending contributions by various MLA leaders was profound. The rest of the convention seemed, for the GSC, to ride the wave that began in that welcome session, with a cash bar that swarmed with interested new graduate students and finally with the GSC-sponsored session, scheduled at the end of the last day, crowning it all with a final burst of energy and vision.

I was still buzzing from Toronto when I headed to my first council meeting in February. On the flight from Austin to New York, I tried to devour the voluminous pile of "annexes," or agenda items, I had received. It was a colossal list of 32 matters to be covered in two days, ranging from the benign (White House Millennium Program) to the loaded ("Committee on Professional Employment Follow-Up Activities"). I made notes on the annexes and tried to articulate opinions of things that I thought might matter to the GSC. As the first day's meetings began, I was delighted at the enthusiasm and collegiality with which I was received. I wondered if any of my fellow council members were as curious as I was about what it would be like to have (or in my case-be) a graduate student on the council.

I found out what it was like with a blow to the gut in the first hour of that first meeting. Before we had even come to the Annex #1, we convened in "executive session." Elaine Showalter pleasantly announced parts of her vision for the year, then moved almost seamlessly into an announcement that she, in consultation with Phyllis, had determined that she would cancel the Welcome Session, since, in its various permutations over its brief history, it had, she concluded, "served its purpose" and the new member breakfast would henceforth be enough of a welcome. I could not believe my ears. Both the lightheartedness with which she made the announcement and the lack of resistance to it stunned me. So this is how they quiet brilliant activism, I thought. They all know damn good and well that the vocal

graduate students were the most interesting part of the session, and the only ones who dared address the crisis in the profession. But the session was apparently just too messy for them. So they would cancel it. I felt nauseated because I knew the Toronto session was the catalyst for this move but they would not admit that, so I didn't know if I should. Then Elaine distributed, without commentary, a copy of a post incoming GSC president Laura Sullivan had written to e-grad, a public list on which, it was clear, someone at Astor Place had been lurking. Real lurking. Laura's post, written to summarize both the content and the spirit of the welcome session for those who had not been there, was direct and bold in its assessment of the chasm that separated the GSC presentations from the others. Laura's tone was triumphant, as it should have been after the vibrancy of the GSC presence there. But the circulation of her printed post in the council was a clear mockery. Apparently it was used as a justification to do away with the session since, as Laura's post made clear, the graduate students didn't appreciate MLA efforts on their behalf anyway.

I protested. My mind tried to stay ahead of my tongue so that I did not create enemies before I'd even had a chance to scope out allies. I argued that the Welcome Session could be re-worked, revised, improved, but that it should not be cancelled. It reached too many people. Let them eat breakfast, they countered. I tried to imagine anyone getting fiery and enthused about what the MLA could do for them over croissants at an 8 a.m. welcome meal. I protested again. I looked to the rest of the council. David Bartholomae questioned the move, wondering if it would eliminate an important venue for graduate student views. You're damn right, I thought. No, he was told, they have their own session. No one will miss this. They were wrong. But they won, since the issue was not up for vote and even if it had been, no one besides me felt any degree of indignance about it. This was only my first meeting. And I could not believe my utter impotence to halt such a callous trampling of my constituents.

At that meeting I felt the profound imbalance between the immediacy of my GSC mandate and the slow-moving beast of the MLA. And I wondered how I could ever do justice to the GSC if I remained alone on the council. Ironically, the solitude I felt as the lone GSC-er on the council had its counterpart within the GSC. Although my report to the GSC steering committee of that first meeting obviously stressed the welcome session debacle, I could not possibly have portrayed the enormous variety of issues that the council acted on at that meeting, most of which were of little or no significance to the GSC agenda. After that first council meeting, when GSCers on our e-mail list ranted about "the MLA" in general, or "the Executive Council" in particular, they were now talking about me. When they were frustrated with lack of action at Astor Place, they were hoping I could fix it. When they advocated some radical response, they were no doubt thinking of the strength of our group. So was I. But suddenly I also had to think of how everything we did might hamper my personal effectiveness on the council. I could not afford to alienate my colleagues there, nor did I want to. I wanted to build trust among this diverse group of academics with decades of scholarship and activism to their credit, all of whom had been extraordinarily gracious to me and many of whom had expressed great solidarity with the GSC cause.

The October 1998 meeting brought more opportunities to bring those causes into clearer focus. (I did not attend the May meeting because I was just days away from giving birth to my son.) In particular, the council's lengthy discussion of the upcoming Delegate Assembly motions and resolutions, especially the GSC-sponsored resolution for proportional representation on the executive council and other committees, led to a very intense discussion. Our motion, a member of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) declared, would require a constitutional amendment to pass, and would thus not reach the floor of the Delegate Assembly in 1999 I was perplexed and angry, since I knew that Mark Kelley and others had discussed the motion and its ramifications at length with Phyllis Franklin. It was excruciatingly awkward not to have been present at any of those meetings myself. That meant I could not reconstruct conversations nor speak from first-hand experience. But I knew that there had been serious miscommunication, even deliberate misrepresentation. The DAOC moved on with its agenda, but my mind was reeling.

Fortunately, the issue of our representation motion came up again on the second day of the meetings. Linda Hutcheon (then second vice-president) proposed forming an ad hoc committee to deal with

constitutional amendments and their ramifications. This was a direct response to our rejected resolution, since the DAOC had said the changes we wanted would require an amendment. Although I have tremendous respect for Linda Hutcheon, I responded irritably to her suggestion, since I could see that our very fundamental issue of graduate student representation was in danger of getting lost in a bureaucratic nightmare. When I pled that this was all absurd and unnecessary, that we had been misinformed, that we did not want an amendment or an ad hoc committee, but merely a consistent voice in MLA governance, and that if the Nominating Committee could be counted to nominate graduate students on a regular basis for the ballot-for all positions-then we could care less about an amendment... Hutcheon immediately (and graciously and sincerely) withdrew her proposal for the committee and wanted to talk business, right then and there.

In the end, in conversations that extended beyond the official meetings, Hutcheon offered to attend the Nominating Committee meeting that took place in February 1999 to exercise her influence to get graduate student names, proposed by the GSC, onto the ballot. With the election of Michael Berubé, the GSC's candidate for the Nominating Committee, Hutcheon's attendance at their meeting no longer seemed necessary, although she continued to be willing to support us there, had we wanted her to. Hutcheon and Margaret Ferguson discussed with me the similarities they saw in our struggle to get graduate students in important positions within the MLA to the plight of women in the profession several decades ago. Once the Women's Caucus exercised enough uncomfortable pressure in the right places, women's names started appearing on the ballot, and soon enough it became precedent and habit. Hutcheon suggested that we might expect the same course for the GSC. I had hoped she was right. Unfortunately, however, at their recent meeting the Nominating Committee apparently chose to ignore Bérubé's suggestions, instead placing a graduate student on the ballot who is not a GSC member and is not in contact with the GSC at all. So the battle continues.

I am extremely grateful to Hutcheon for her sensitivity to the graveness of this issue for me and for the GSC and for her willingness to act on it. I considered her offer (not to mention Phyllis Franklin's eventual confession that yes, she did remember having discussed an amendment with Mark Kelley at one point) an important, if measured victory for the GSC. Still, that whole 'amendment' portion of that October meeting was absolutely unsettling for me. The air there was very tense and I know that my temper must have seemed very misplaced to some in the room. I wish I could say this did not bother me. It did. I am not a politician. Or, rather, now I am. I'm just not very thick-skinned yet. I hope that will change.

I leave today for the first meeting of my second year on the council. Cary Nelson will be there, too. I am certain that his presence will be a strengthening force. I look forward to a more successful, less frustrating year. Or perhaps I should just look forward to increased wisdom. I have learned that I cannot nor, for that matter, should try, in my interactions with the council, to represent the collective rage of every graduate student with grim job prospects, every part-timer, every adjunct. Instead, my job will continue to be a balancing act: lively, energetic response to issues of grand importance on the council's agenda, and equally lively, if less voluminous response to issues of smaller importance to GSC's goals of achieving greater graduate student representation on the policy-making bodies of the MLA and to addressing the severe injustices in the job market and in hiring trends in our profession. I look forward to sounding like a broken record during my tenure on the council. I also look forward to the support of the thoughtful and experienced colleagues who share the council seats with me. I do not expect overt resistance to any GSC issue from other council members, but varying levels of passion sometimes have the same effect.

I am grateful for the vision of the GSCers before me, who have understood the possibility and the absolute necessity, however overwhelming the logistics, of redirecting the gaze of the MLA to its most exploited members. Those who would argue that interest in employment issues is at odds with the MLA's traditional purposes would do well to read the second article of the constitution: "The object of the association shall be to promote study, criticism, and research in the ...modern languages and their literatures **and to further the common interests of teachers of those subjects.**" Surely the securing of ethical working conditions

and indeed, even the chance to be a teacher, is a fundamental interest of all members of this association. If not, it should be. I consider it a most important and humbling opportunity to continue to work toward this end.

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