

Literature & Criticism

Lindsey Moser (LM) & Tay Jones (TJ):
What did you feel were some advantages and disadvantages of defending your dissertation online?

AG: I felt like the advantage was definitely in the nerves department! Defending my dissertation online allowed me to invite people who would not have otherwise been able to attend, for one, so it allowed me some extra moral support. I also appreciated both the flexibility and the financial advantages it afforded me. Because I live in Texas, I was going to have to take off from my own university teaching for a couple of days to fly up to IUP, and while I could do that, not having to do that allowed my teaching schedule to stay relatively intact. I think this was particularly helpful at this juncture in our culture because I was also having to transition my on-campus students into being distance education students. As a summers-only student, I appreciated the option to do this, since it was during the school year. At the same time, however, I

Defending Online

Lindsey Moser and Tay Jones sat down (virtually) with Rod Taylor (RT) and Amy George (AG) to discuss their experience completing one of the largest steps of their doctorate online: their dissertation defenses. With Twitter threads full of advice to graduate students whose research may have come to a complete stand-still because of COVID-19, Rod and Amy were still able to defend their dissertations on time. We wanted to know what that experience was like for them.

definitely missed getting to see my professors in person. As a summers-only student, I had come to really enjoy the moments shared in person with them. I definitely missed getting to hug Dr. Yang!

RT: Honestly, when you're in the room you have to read faces and you have to be able to read the room. And you have to exercise the best practices for public speaking, where you're always looking your audience in the



eyes and doing those sorts of good public speaking things. But with the [Zoom] defense, the anxiety associated with doing that sort of work, it was helpful for me just to be able to just, more or less, stare at a corner of my laptop screen and talk to it. I didn't have to check in and see everyone's level of engagement. Any other advantages. I was able to do it barefoot [laughs].

But disadvantages are, I think, in the same corollary as the advantages in that you're not in the room with people and it is stripped of that certain level of intimacy that I think you spend all of your graduate career cultivating.

LM & TJ: *What advice would you give to potential Zoom defenders?*



AG: Relax. Don't overthink it. I know that videoconferencing can feel weird, and at first, you might feel detached if you're not used to it, but it really is a great tool. Your committee is still your committee, and they are still rooting for you. It's a bit different, but it's no less effective.

RT: It doesn't matter if you do it face to face or virtually, either you're prepared or you're not. Either you know your work or you don't. You have to be able to defend

your ideas and back them up. You have to know your stuff because I don't think that there should be some sort of like, "Well, it's on Zoom. We can't be as rigorous." You still have to be ready.

Rod and Amy, thank you for taking the time to chat with us about your experiences, and congratulations from us and the entire Lit Crit community!

Into a New Space – Literature and Criticism Goes Online

Dan Helman

Our students are ones who pride themselves on becoming knowledgeable with the literature and bringing that energy into the classroom setting. Our professors guide us through our evolution from students to scholars and professionals. However, we've had to adjust to a new normal where this is all done digitally now. I spoke with Brandi Billotte (BB), a current PhD candidate in coursework, and Dr. Michael T. Williamson (MTW), a long-time faculty member, to hear their perspectives on our sudden shift online.

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What do you find most beneficial about having class in an online format?

BB: I live an hour and a half from campus, so I love not having to spend all of those hours driving back and forth. Also, I have found that I'm working a little harder to make sure that I'm really understanding and engaging with assignments (probably because I simply have more time on my hands). It's also been great to sit through class with a dog or two on my lap.

MW: I have been really delighted with the way most MA students in 676 Critical Approaches to Literature and Composition have addressed the question "What are the

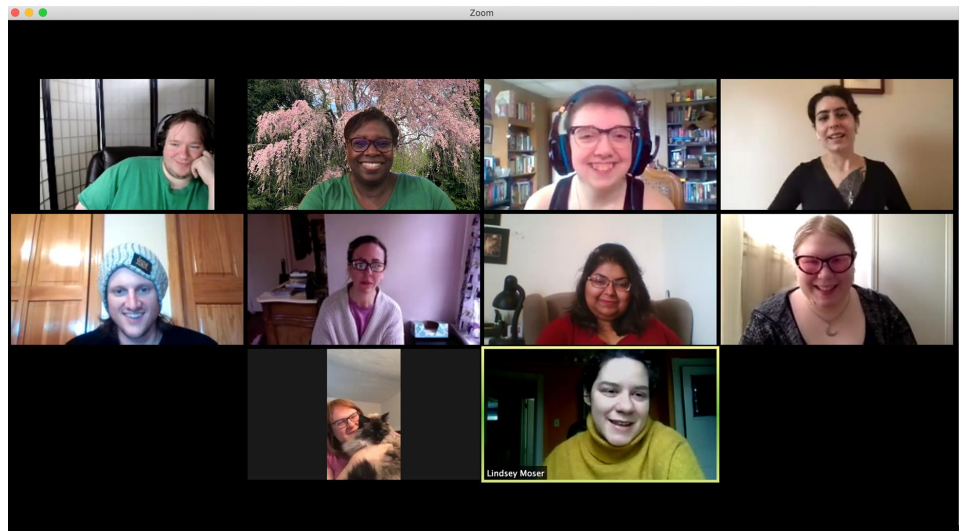
functions of literature and composition during and after times of crisis?” We have all enjoyed sharing writing and comments on each other’s writing have been superb. Linking the class to Dr. Sorrel’s 632 Composition Theory and Practice class has been great. He is a real asset to the MA Program because he brings extensive experience as Associate Director of the Rutgers University Writing Program into our MA Programs! I make adjustments related to social distancing pretty easily, so I don’t miss much more than the sense of trust that comes from being in the same physical place together. I actually prefer seeing you all with your pets and children and significant others on Zoom to being in HSS. Oddly enough, I think we are building a different kind of community, and I like it.

What has been a drawback for you?

BB: The lack of access to the library is certainly a drawback during this time of final paper writing. Also, as someone with children, not having in-person classes is tricky; since everyone is essentially confined to the home 24/7, it can be tough to find a quiet time and space that is completely without distraction (for Zoom class meetings or for working in general).

MW: Preparing Zoom classes has been difficult. I’ve only felt comfortable over the last couple of weeks. It was jarring at first to see how much you all depended on the interpersonal interactions of the classroom. That was a drawback. Now that the literary texts are front and center and everyone has stepped up to become more responsible and

careful readers, things have improved tremendously. I have enjoyed linking classes together too, especially when considering links between 20th century novels in our [984] class and Dr. Holm’s 764/864 Gothic literature class! Strangely enough, I think we all got to know each other more closely and compassionately. The Zoom interactions took away our filters and added an intensity and honesty to our interactions. Our already strong sense of community was strengthened as a result.



Social Connection While Social Distancing

Dan Helman

Never did we expect that after Spring Break that we wouldn’t be coming back to campus to continue our education. Despite the sudden shift online, our faculty were able to transition us to using Zoom and other programs to aid in instructional delivery. However, this didn’t necessarily address the social gap. Luckily, Literature & Criticism Program Director, Dr. Veronica Watson, stepped in to meet that need, and the “LitCritic Corner” was born.

Held twice a week, LitCritter Corners provided us a space to discuss issues affecting us as students and scholars in a more laidback format that included alumni, current and prospective students. We discussed such topics as staying sane in social isolation and also nerded out by looking at CFPs we might submit to.

Watson says LitCritter Corner satisfied some of the things she loves most about being program director. “I was really missing hearing chatter about research and teaching in the hallways, having students poke their heads in my office to say hello, and the random conversations that happened when I ran into someone in the elevator or as I walked from the library,” she explains. She figured if she was missing those encounters, others might be feeling the same. She continues, “It was great connecting with current and incoming students as well as alumni in those community chats!”

The informal nature of these chats has allowed for more open and sometimes humorous discussions. It is beneficial to have those spaces, even though mediated by technology, so that we can show kindness and lift each other up.

Always a Lit Critter *Alumni Profile*

Dr. Ghada Al Abbadi
Earned Doctorate in 2012

Life Post-L&C: I teach World Literature, Gender Studies, Critical Thinking, and Arabic Literature in a Global Context at a college prep, independent school in Dayton, Ohio. In addition to teaching, advising



students, and serving on faculty committees, I try to find the time for presenting at conferences. In February, I presented a PechaKucha at the National Association of Independent Schools’ Annual Conference titled “Making Good Trouble: Teaching Subversive Arab Texts in a Western Context.” I am now looking for a new challenge--perhaps going back to graduate school for a master’s in educational leadership.

PhD, In the World: History and literature inform each other: that is one thing that continues to fascinate me. Whether I am teaching a young adult book like Ruta Sepetys’ *Between Shades of Gray* or a classic like *Othello*, my students and I strive to historicize. In addition, I am intentional about liberating my students from a binary mindset; it is another thing I learned during my time at IUP. This belief in the multiplicity of narratives and relativity of truths enables me, for example, in a unit on conquest and hegemony, to read *Things Fall Apart* as a response to *Heart of Darkness* and to weigh both texts against Achebe’s “An Image of Africa” and Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*.

Probably the best takeaway of all is gaining intellectual perseverance, humility, and resilience, without which it is impossible to have the readiness to grow as a scholar. These virtues are equally necessary for writing. I model them in the classroom, in part by writing beside my students, to drive home the message of the primacy of process.

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**CONGRATS TO ALL WHO HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DEFENDED THEIR  
DISSERTATIONS THIS ACADEMIC YEAR!!**

Asmaa Alshehri, *African American Women's Activism and Leadership: Life writing, Films, and Social Media from 1960 to Present*

Tariq Al-Soud, *A Comparative Study of Mobility in the British Victorian and Modern Arab Novels by Women: Jeopardizing Virtue and Honor*

Christopher Burlingame, *Taming the Terrible?: Transgressive Novels, Adaptation, and the Illusion of Legitimacy*

Peter Faziani, *The Intrusion of Trauma into the Daily Routine: The Consequences of the Interwar, The Cold War, The Salvadorian Civil War, and The Vietnam War in Literature*

Amy George, *Mosaic Reflections and Representations in Asian American and Arab American Poetry*

Kelly Hamren, *The Poetics of Metamorphosis in Russian Modernism*

Jemayne King, *The Soles of Black Folk: African American Sneaker Culture and Its Influence in Literature, Film, Television, Sports Studies, and Music*

Matthew Loudon, *We're One Weird Herd: Alternative, Queer Communities in Modern Animation*

Carl Sell, *Appropriating Medieval Literary Tradition: Tales of Arthurian Heroism from Historia Brittonum to Warhammer 40,000*

Andrew Smith, *What do Manga Depict?: Contemporary Japanese Comics and the Culture of Japan*

Rodney Taylor, *Writing Back: Anti-Plantation Literature in the Reconstruction South, 1865-1905*

Kristi Williams, *Feminine Arguments from the Grave*

**Everyone please stay  
healthy and be encouraged!  
WE are not alone.**