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MLA Interviews from the Candidate's Point of View

Lee Skinner

IN FALL 1998 I was asked to participate in the ADFL mock interviews for job candidates at the MLA convention in San Francisco. At the same time, I continued to be involved in my own department in helping graduate students prepare for the job market, as I have been for the past several years. This combination of factors caused me to think about my own experiences at the convention—especially as I tried to prepare for the mock interviews and to cast my mind back to the answers I had given “for real.” Since my primary experience with job interviews has been as a candidate at the dissertation stage and since most of the candidates I have worked with at my institution are also at that stage, my take on the job search by necessity reflects that perspective. What follows is a summary of my experiences on the job market, at the mock interview, and with candidates at my institution, combined with advice and tips I hope may prove helpful to current candidates.

Before going to the MLA convention, I prepared for my interviews by readying myself to answer questions in two basic areas, research and teaching. I concocted a brief (three-to-five-minute) description of my dissertation in which I attempted to communicate succinctly not just the subject matter but also the central argument and theoretical ideas I was exploring. My goal was to convey to my interviewers a sense of why my research was timely and important as well as to describe the content of the dissertation. This turned out to be one of the most difficult steps in my preparation. While I was wholly familiar with my dissertation topic in all its permutations, it proved surprisingly tricky to articulate that knowledge in a way that concisely captured the essence of my arguments. Candidates should also think about the fact that their audience may or may not be specialists in the area under discussion; at some interviews, not all the interviewers will work in the target language. It is important to be capable of describing your research in terms that will not alienate or exclude nonspecialists at the same time that you make clear to them the importance of your topic and approach. You cannot assume that your interviewers will immediately grasp the gripping nature of your analysis of poetic rhythm in Mallarmé. On the

other hand, you do not want to give the impression that you are patronizing your interviewers. There is a way to feed them information without seeming to do so, and it can be as subtle as the phrasing you use. “I’m writing a comparative work on Juan Rulfo, who was a famous Mexican writer who didn’t publish very much, and on J. D. Salinger, a reclusive American novelist” is not as effective as “My thesis compares the contradictory relation between fame and reclusiveness in Mexican and United States literary cultures through a comparative analysis of Juan Rulfo and J. D. Salinger.” Both statements give listeners the information they need, but the second does so a bit more tactfully.

In some interviews my interviewers interjected comments or questions in the middle of my dissertation description, so I also recommend that candidates be comfortable stopping and starting their prepared descriptions. In other words, you should not have to start from the very beginning of the memorized description when interrupted. It was also helpful to me before the MLA convention to practice talking about my research in different ways and registers and to answer varied types of questions about my dissertation (my professors and friends were wonderfully patient and spent long hours helping me do this). My interviewers asked the following questions, among others: “How did you choose your dissertation topic?” “How much archival research have you done for this?” “What have you learned from the process of writing your dissertation—aside from the fact that you can do it?” “How much have you written, and when will you defend?” “How would you explain your dissertation to a group of undergraduates?” I was also asked to explain how my dissertation related to current criticism in my field, as

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well as to give my opinion of relevant criticism. At the mock interview I was asked, "Why is your dissertation important?" In the real-life interviews, this question was rarely asked so bluntly, but it was always implicitly present. Explaining the significance of your project should be the heart of your dissertation description.

Research institutions also asked me to describe the next project I planned to conduct. I tried to present a project that was different in focus from my dissertation but not so far removed from it that the intellectual connections would not be obvious. From my experience with the graduate students at my institution, I would say the main problem candidates have with the "next project" description is vagueness. Although interviewers do not expect the candidate to have developed this project in the same detail as the dissertation, I think they want something more than a declaration of interest in a period or author ("I'm interested in modernism" or "I'm interested in Chilean poets of the 1940s"). Try to think of a reason why you're interested in the topic, an idea that has the potential to be developed into a book ("I want to investigate the representation of monstrosity in modernist texts as an expression of gender anxiety connected to shifting societal roles for men and women"). Interviewers want to make sure that the candidate will continue conducting research after the dissertation and that he or she has begun to think about a long-term career and research plan.

For questions about teaching, I prepared ideas for and descriptions of the following types of courses: a graduate class in my field (but not on my dissertation), a seminar for advanced undergraduates, and an undergraduate survey in my field. I made up rough syllabi for my own use so that I would be able to refer to specific texts or authors I would want to include in the courses. There are differing opinions about whether or not you should distribute such syllabi to your interviewers. I did not, except when the institutions had specifically asked me to bring a course description or syllabus to the interview, but another school of thought holds that giving out syllabi helps the interviewers remember the candidate more clearly. It might work best to give out syllabi for classes that will be particularly your own, such as undergraduate or graduate courses in one of your specialty areas.

During the interviews I was asked about the courses for which I had prepared, but I was surprised by other kinds of questions. One institution asked me how I would teach a graduate survey at the master's level. Graduate surveys were not offered at the university where I did my PhD, nor was any distinction made between MA- and PhD-level classes, so this question required me to shift paradigms rather rapidly. I was also asked about an intermediate composition class in the target language, about an undergraduate introduction to literary analysis, and about courses in Latin American culture and film. Other teaching-related questions included: "Can you describe a typical day in your first-year language classroom?" "What

experience have you had with Spanish for the professions?" "Have you taught courses in Spanish for native speakers?" "What is your pedagogical philosophy?" At the mock interview I was asked about using technology in the classroom as well. As a candidate from a research institution that placed relatively little emphasis on pedagogical training, I frequently felt like an impostor answering some of these questions, especially the ones focusing on methodologies or teaching philosophy. I tried to emphasize my enthusiasm, flexibility, and enjoyment of teaching, but many questions required me to think on my feet—with mixed success, I'm afraid. A particularly painful moment occurred in one interview when I was asked what books I had used in first- and second-year language teaching and I could not remember the second-year text. That moment leads me to my next recommendation: review the textbooks you have used. I was also asked in a couple of interviews to summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the texts I had used. This question can be dangerous, especially if you do not know what textbooks are in place at the interviewer's institution. Candidates should speak in positive terms whenever possible and, if forced to point to a negative in a text, should keep their critique local and specific in lieu of making a general attack on the textbook and its author. Given the closeness of the academic world, it is always possible that your interviewer is the textbook author's best friend.

Hence, despite my attempts to prepare for every conceivable question, in almost every interview I was asked a question for which I had not—and could not have—prepared. At some point during my interviews I realized that I could indeed answer questions for which I did not have a response memorized. So for me one of the most important aspects of the interview process was becoming confident that I truly could answer any question. Of course, you cannot anticipate every possible question, and even if you could, you could never prepare an answer for every question in advance. What is important is knowing that you are capable in an interview situation, so that when you are asked a question you were not expecting, you do not freeze. You must believe that you have the necessary knowledge. When I think of questions for which I could not possibly have prepared, I remember certain incidents. For example, I had an article about the Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré on my c.v.; in one interview I was asked to explain why Ferré is seen as an important writer. Elsewhere I was asked if I could teach a course on phonetics or Spanish literature (well outside my field). I was informed that a particular department was especially strong in one area—not mine—and asked to explain how my work would complement that department's perceived mission. One institution informed me that it had an interdisciplinary program for freshmen and asked whether I would be interested in creating and teaching a course for that program. And I was asked whether I would be interested in setting up and running a language laboratory.

One tip that might cut down on surprises: anything on your curriculum vitae is fair game. Do not put anything on it that you do not want to be asked about, and reread articles and even conference papers if you do not remember them clearly. Trust me: if a paper appears on your résumé, someone, somewhere, will ask you about the paper, even if you gave it your first year in graduate school, on an author you have not thought about since then.

You will not have all these experiences within the same interview, but you will probably have some of them. The type of interview and the focus of the questions will vary greatly depending on the kind of institution at which you are interviewing. Research institutions will, understandably, focus their questions on your research; sometimes these interviews evolve into engaging conversations about your field and the way in which you position yourself as a critic within that field. You may be asked wide-ranging questions about the current state of criticism or pointed questions about a particular critic or work. I had a couple of these interviews in which questions about teaching simply never arose. Even if interviewers do not ask you specifically about teaching, however, they are assessing your general demeanor to imagine what your classroom performance would be like. Are you capable of capturing the attention and respect of a roomful of students? How do you respond when challenged? Do you think quickly on your feet, or would you be likely to resent deviations from the lesson plan? Liberal arts colleges and institutions more geared toward the teaching mission will usually ask briefly about your research, but most of the interview will revolve around teaching and how your teaching in particular will contribute. These institutions are the places that will expect you to be familiar with different pedagogical theories and teaching methodologies and to be able to connect those theories to your own teaching; they are seeking teachers who are analytic and thoughtful about their teaching at every level.

I found that the more I knew about the institutions where I had interviews, the better equipped I felt. I looked up the schools and departments on the World Wide Web to find information such as the number of undergraduate majors, the number of graduate students, and the number and types of classes taught. In a couple of cases having this information enabled me to avoid talking about my plan to offer a special-topic course that another professor was already teaching. Similarly, when the interviews were scheduled, I tried to find out who would be present and then looked them up in the *MLA Bibliography*. You can engage people more personally if you know their specialties and are able to weave in references or ask appropriate questions in the course of the interview.

The makeup of the interviewers will vary widely according to the type of institution. Large institutions with a department devoted to your language will send a team of interviewers from that department, and it is generally safe to assume that all the interviewers will have some fa-

miliarity with your field. Smaller institutions with a department that includes several languages will usually be represented by people from the department who are not all from the section that runs your language. Therefore some of them will know very little about your research area and may not speak the target language. Since a portion of the interview will be conducted in the target language, it is difficult to address the people evaluating your production of the language without excluding the other members of the committee. Frequent eye contact helps. It is a good idea to try to respond to all the interviewers, not merely the one who voiced the question. The same advice applies to those moments in which you are talking about your work on Dante or your course on Italian post-war neorealism to a group of faculty including French, German, and Russian specialists. This is another time when it becomes crucial to find some kind of equilibrium between speaking to people familiar with your field and those who are not. It can help to remember that all the people at the table will, if you are lucky, be your colleagues and that they are assessing you as a potential member of their department who will bring a necessary ingredient to their institution.

So much for the content of the interviews; what about form? That is, when you know what you are going to say, how do you present yourself in a way that enhances rather than detracts from what you're saying? What to wear seems to be one of the main concerns; it certainly was one of mine and has been paramount in the minds of other candidates with whom I have spoken. Indeed, I spent what seemed to be almost as much time worrying about what to wear as about what to say. My advice is to wear formal clothes in which you feel comfortable. A jacket and slacks or a skirt is an outfit that always works well; you probably do not need to wear a suit unless you normally do. Finally, comfortable shoes are crucial: the Job Center may not be in the foreign languages headquarters hotel and shuttles are often slow, so you will probably be walking back and forth.

Body language is also important. A friend of mine still talks (unfavorably) about the candidate she interviewed once who slumped in the chair throughout the entire interview and answered only in a monotone. Use your body to communicate your attentiveness and interest; make eye contact with all your interviewers and remember to smile when it feels appropriate. At the mock interview an audience member asked about the pros and cons of gesturing with one's hands to punctuate one's answers. I would advise candidates not to be fearful of using their hands if they are accustomed to doing so, but, as one of the ADFL representatives pointed out, it should not be allowed to become a mannerism that will distract the interviewers. Finally, try to schedule your interviews at times convenient for you, and do not put interviews back to back. Even if they are in the same hotel or at the Job Center, allow at least half an hour between them in case the first

one runs late (a fairly common occurrence) and so that you can have a moment to relax and look over your notes on the institution that will interview you next.

In rereading this essay, I find that it captures the content of the interviews but doesn't seem to communicate the stress, frenzy, and even humor of the experience. In the weeks before the MLA convention I frequently woke at night with my mind racing; I would instantly begin running through my answers in my head. I felt exhilarated during most of my interviews but completely spent during a few. While some interviews flew by, some (mercifully few) dragged slowly, even though I was answering and asking the same series of questions. I barely slept while I was in Chicago for my real interviews, but when I returned home, I promptly got sick and spent the next week lying in a stupor on my sofa. What I have learned to tell candidates from my institution is that this is a stressful time and that the stress should be acknowledged. I also tell them that they should do whatever it takes to get through this period. In other words, December is not an appropriate time to quit smoking. (I resorted to intense workouts as a way to purge my body of the stress.) One of my colleagues emphasizes the importance of continuing to work on your dissertation throughout the interview-preparation process, and I think that that is wonderful advice. But if it is not possible to maintain steady progress on your dissertation, you should not feel guilty. My dissertation suffered a ten-week hiatus when I was on the market. As one of my friends said one year in early December, "I need to hear that it's okay to focus on preparing for interviews instead of working on my dissertation." The interviewing process is difficult enough without the addition of guilt for unfinished research.

Speaking of stress and anxiety, it can be very difficult to come to terms with the realization that ultimately most of the job search is out of your control; I am not sure that I ever did manage this epiphany. On the one hand, I obsessively focused on every detail of my performance, from my shoes to my posture to my thesis-defense

date; on the other hand, I had to recognize that whether or not I got a job would depend on factors I could not influence. Job candidates are bombarded by advice whose underlying assumption is "Follow my instructions and you will be gainfully employed." But as we know all too painfully, the job market is such that eminently well-qualified, well-prepared candidates don't get jobs, and not because there is a better candidate but because there are scores of superb candidates. I had a couple of interviews during which I felt that the interviewers were not really interested in me; perhaps they had already identified their ideal candidate or changed their minds about the qualifications they were seeking—I can only speculate (fruitlessly, of course). I also had several interviews that seemed to go wonderfully well and that concluded with the interviewers' displaying intense enthusiasm about me, but the sequel was a rejection letter or merely silence. It is almost impossible not to wonder what you did wrong and to feel personally rejected; the interviews and their aftermath can be devastating. But such incidents are evidence of the essentially arbitrary nature of the job search, in which many factors truly are out of the candidate's control and of the depressed market in general, in which there are far more eminently qualified candidates than there are jobs.

With that in mind, I offer my concluding advice: control what you can and try not to worry about everything else. Most of all, try to relax and enjoy yourself. Think of the interviews as a way to meet people who are interested in your work. When I went to the MLA convention, I had been holed up in my house writing my dissertation for ten months; it was wonderful to have a series of challenging conversations with colleagues who asked insightful, fresh questions about my work. Much to my delight and surprise, I found that the convention could be a place for productive intellectual exchanges and stimulating discussions. I hope that you are able to keep that in mind as you go through the search process, and I wish you the best of luck.