

# A YEAR IN REFLECTION



Photo courtesy of Purdue University .

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# NOTE FROM THE SLC HEAD



It is a delight to see Lingua Franca back in production after a hiatus during the pandemic, first with the special edition of Winter 2023 and now with this full-sized edition! The SLC Graduate Student Committee (GSC) has a long-standing tradition of producing high-quality newsletters that highlight diversity, professional issues, concerns, and challenges, as well as the fun and enriching aspects of graduate study in literature, language, and culture.

In the Winter special edition, we learned about the many intriguing professional and personal interests and activities of several graduate students. What I especially loved about that feature was that the selection of people included not only students from SLC's MA and PhD programs in literature and culture, but also some from SIS Comparative Literature and SIS Linguistics who teach for us in SLC and who contribute significantly to our programs and our community.

Some readers may have already heard the exciting news that, starting in the 2023-24 year, the Comparative Literature undergraduate and graduate programs will be housed in SLC. We are thrilled to welcome Comp Lit, directed by SLC Professor Beate Allert, into our School, and we envision many productive collaborations across the graduate programs in SLC moving forward.

This year, the SLC Executive Committee and the faculty as a whole have been taking some vital steps to improve graduate student mentoring in our School. We invite your feedback on this topic at any time, as we seek to better prepare students for their professional lives after graduate school and to enhance their experiences while they are here studying and working with us.

In other news, the future will bring some notable changes in our space in Stanley Coulter Hall. Our building's ground floor will eventually feature updated graduate student space that includes a lounge area with a kitchenette, reservable focus rooms for 1:1 meetings, in addition to multiple graduate student hubs with workstation spaces. Change can be hard, but we aim to make this transition to shared workspaces as smooth as possible for you. As soon as we have information regarding the timeline of the renovations, we will be sure to share it with you.

On behalf of the School of Languages and Cultures, I heartily thank Lingua Franca newsletter co-chairs Joel Meredith and Gwénaél Jouin, and everyone else from the SLC GSC, for all their hard work and dedication to this endeavor!

Wishing everyone a restorative rest of the summer and a successful Fall semester ahead,

Jen William  
SLC Head

# FROM THE EDITORS

## IN REVIEW: THE 2022-23 SCHOOL YEAR

It has been a great honor for Gwénaél Jouin and I to serve as co-editors of Lingua Franca. After a six-year hiatus, we are especially proud to reintroduce the newsletter to our community and look forward to future contributions from incoming editor Hitomi Kurita.

Over the 2022-23 school year, Lorena Piña Palacio has shown exceptional leadership as president of the SLC grad student committee. It has been a pleasure to serve with Lorena and our colleagues and friends: Ayaka Matsuo (treasurer), Dafne Zanelli (symposium chair), Edier Gomez Alzate (workshop chair), Santiago Parra (PGSC senator), and Anderson Carmona (webmaster/social chair). On behalf of the entire committee, our warm congratulations to the incoming GSC members. We look forward to your leadership in the 2023-24 school year.

Reflecting on the past year, we have seen the tremendous good that comes when the world unites around a common goal—in this instance, fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, we've seen a vicious return of America's divisive culture wars with drag queens, books, and the transgender community on the front lines. Wanda Sykes put it best when she said, "Until a drag queen walks into a school and beats eight kids to death with a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I think you're focusing on the wrong shit."

The stubborn and needless persistence of such battles is dispiriting. Yet, I take solace in the long view and the lives and leadership of those gone before. People like Helen Bass Williams, the first African American faculty member hired at Purdue in 1968. I think of the racism, misogyny, violence, and—frankly—white supremacist terrorism she faced. Nonetheless, Williams remained resolute in her quest to help African Americans access education and job opportunities.

As language instructors, we are uniquely positioned to carry on Williams' legacy in some small way. While our work is gauged by linguistic competencies, we also have the power to help students think of themselves as global citizens—to approach the task of learning about other cultures, languages, and ways of being with a sense of humility. To be open to new perspectives and experiences. To valorize the humanity of people we may never meet in places where we may never set foot.

Prompted by the unveiling of her portrait in Stanley Coulter back in February of this year, I have spent so much of this year wrestling with HBW's legacy as I've researched and written a small piece for this newsletter. Be sure to take a moment to stop by her portrait, which now hangs in the main hallway of Stanley Coulter.

On behalf of Gwénaél, myself, and the entire 2022-23 GSC, we wish each of you a restful last few weeks of summer and an excellent year ahead!

If you want to explore past issues of Lingua Franca, you can [access them here](#).

# THE POST-GRADUATE GRIND

## 2020 GRAD RICARDO QUINTANA VALLEJO TALKS WITH GWÉNAËL JOUIN ABOUT LIFE AFTER PURDUE

### AFTER YOU OBTAINED YOUR PHD IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FROM PURDUE UNIVERSITY, WHAT TYPE OF POSITIONS WERE YOU LOOKING FOR?

First, I want to underline that, right after obtaining my PhD, I had a post-doc for two years in Mexico, where I am from. At the end of my post-doc contract, I divided my applications for jobs into several categories: tenure track positions, visiting positions, adjunct professor positions, other post-docs, and administrative jobs. I was on the job market for a year. After eight months, during which I received only negative answers from universities, I started looking for administrative jobs.

### WERE THERE A LOT OF JOBS IN YOUR FIELD?

There were only six or seven positions open in comparative literature after I graduated. However, comparative literature enables you to present yourself flexibly.

For jobs in Spanish literature, I presented myself as a scholar of Latin American literature. I argued that many works of Spanish literature are translated into English. Consequently, I underlined that—even if I did not primarily analyze works of Spanish literature—studying comparative literature made sense, especially because the discipline highly relies on translation and community-building. As for English departments, some of them offered programs in social studies related to diasporas and migrations, two phenomena that I explored in my dissertation.

### DO YOU LIKE YOUR NEW POSITION AS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AT RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE? IS IT WHAT YOU EXPECTED?

Yes, I like it very much. Rhode Island College is a small state school and, as such, the research requirement for a position as an assistant professor is not as heavy as in bigger institutions and for tenure track positions. As an assistant professor, I must teach 2-3 classes per semester, whereas a tenure track professor is required to cover 4-5. I also really like that the faculty at Rhode Island College is unionized, which is important for me.

### HOW MANY APPLICATIONS DID YOU SEND? HOW MANY RESPONSES DID YOU RECEIVE? WERE THEY POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

I applied for positions in the United States only, for personal reasons. My case does not necessarily represent what other comparative literature students may do. Other students holding a PhD in comparative literature can also look for jobs in other countries, of course. I sent 120 applications. I got six interviews: four in English literature, one in Spanish literature, and one in comparative literature. I finally received three offers.



### Ricardo Quintana Vallejo shares how his journey after graduation led to Rhode Island College.

This spring, Lingua Franca co-editor Gwénaël Jouin spoke with Ricardo Quintana Vallejo about his experience since graduating from Purdue in 2020. Today, Vallejo is an assistant professor of English at Rhode Island College.

**THREE OFFERS FOR 120 APPLICATIONS SEEMS LIKE A GAP FOR ME. MY FIRST QUESTION IS, HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO SEND 120 APPLICATIONS? MY SECOND QUESTION IS, DO YOU KNOW WHAT DID NOT WORK IN YOUR APPLICATIONS?**

I will first explain how I managed to send 120 applications. I wrote three different types of cover letters. One focused on teaching and another that was research heavy, one for positions offered by English departments and another for positions offered by Spanish departments, and one for positions in women and gender studies. For each application, I modified the first and the last paragraph to highlight how I could fit into the program I was targeting. I also used a system called Interfolio, through which I could send all the material requested by universities, such as a teaching statement, a demonstration of teaching excellence, course evaluations, a research statement, and a demonstration of research excellence. Each application took me around 20 to 30 minutes.

As for the second question, I would say that my first applications tended to focus on what I wanted to do instead of what the schools were looking for. I only received positive answers once I started to tailor my applications to job descriptions and what the universities needed.

**CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE APPLICATION PROCESS?**

First, I used the MLA job list. On the MLA website, you can also use filters to narrow your research down. I also let everybody know that I was on the job market. It may sound surprising, but sometimes people obtain a position thanks to their network rather than their qualifications.

Second, I read job descriptions carefully. They all ask for a cover letter, a CV, three letters of recommendation, a teaching statement, a teaching philosophy, and a portfolio containing evidence of teaching excellence (course evaluations, student comments) and of innovative pedagogy. The letters of recommendation include one from your advisor, one from another member of your dissertation committee, one from a person in your committee or not—preferably someone who is well known and who can explain how you match what the university is looking for.

**ARE SOME STRATEGIES YOU THOUGHT WERE EFFECTIVE WHEN APPLYING FOR A JOB?**

Research the schools and focus on what they need. Try to propose solutions to the problems they encounter.

**ARE SOME STRATEGIES YOU THOUGHT WERE NOT EFFECTIVE?**

Focusing too heavily on what you want rather than what the employer seeks.

**DO YOU HAVE ADDITIONAL COMMENTS TO MAKE OR ADVICE TO GIVE?**

Do not take anything personally. Rejection is normal and part of the research process. I have been rejected so often and impolitely, something future applicants will probably also experience. However, your value as a researcher is independent of what these responses say. It also does not depend on you getting a job one, two, or three years after you graduated.

I would recommend that students have several people read their application material (advisors, peers, students). Be open to feedback.

If you make it to interviews and job talks, have as many people as you can watch you do mock interviews, talks, etc.

In brief, have as much feedback as you can and be open to modifying your applications.



***Ricardo Quintana Vallejo would be happy to talk with any students looking for more information on how to look for a job after graduation. He offers to sit in mock interviews and job talks and is willing to review application materials.***

***You can contact Ricardo at [rquintanavallejo@ric.edu](mailto:rquintanavallejo@ric.edu), or through Instagram ([ric\\_in\\_rhody](#)), LinkedIn, and Facebook.***

# HELEN BASS WILLIAMS: PURDUE'S ONE-WOMAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

**REFLECTING ON A LIFETIME OF SERVICE.** by Joel Meredith

I want to express my gratitude to the staff of the [Purdue University Archives and Special Collections](#) for their generosity in helping me navigate their resources. I am also deeply appreciative of Dr. Mary O'Hara, whose dissertation on the life and work of Williams (*Let it Fly: The Legacy of Helen Bass Williams*) richly contributed to the materials on file in Purdue's library.

I would also like to thank the Helen Bass Williams Academic Success Center for their helpful [timeline on Williams' life](#) that distills many key milestones in her work and activism.

## GROWING UP

When we enter into conversation about someone like Helen Bass Williams, it's easy to walk out the highlights reel. The awards won, the distinctions—the legacy. The danger is in missing the finer details; the humanity exuded through formative moments.

The [Mary O'Hara Archives](#) captures such a moment in Williams' childhood, growing up in an apostolic church—something she enjoyed. That is, until all the children in the church were invited to the prayer bench one day to receive the Holy Spirit. Williams describes how everyone else had gone up except for her.

"I was the only sore thumb," she says. "All the kids were gettin' mad with me."

Despite the appeals ("C'mon, Helen!"), she refused to budge. This went on for days. By the fifth night, her mom was furious.

"You think you're too good?" she asked. But for her daughter, it was a matter of principle. She was supposed to feel the Holy Ghost—and she couldn't.

"I thought making them go up on the [prayer] bench and prayin' over 'em and shoutin' over 'em was a lot of bullshit."

And that's when it happened. She felt the Holy Ghost. She describes it as a "calm sweetness" that swept over her.

"I will always believe it was the Holy Ghost," Williams says. Still, she refused to go up to the prayer bench.

"I was too mean to let my mother know I had felt it and never went up."

In the years to come, Williams would need that meanness and stubbornness.

## BEFORE PURDUE

Williams spent the 1950s and 60s involved with the civil rights movement in the southern United States.

For Williams, activism was a way of life motivated by love of community. A 1986 article describes how Williams eschewed more visible roles within the movement for the “outback of the Mississippi delta,” where she “registered blacks to vote and sat in local post offices to help them fill out social security forms or read the fine print.”

Against the backdrop of the institutional terrorism of the Jim Crow regime, Williams’ committed herself to building political power—but she was equally attentive to the daily aspects of people’s lives. A letter written by William P. Davies, president of the Mississippi Baptist Seminary, describes how she would pack up her car on Sundays and look for a church where she could “show them how to prepare commodity foods” and “talk with them about better ways of feeding their families.”

Davies details Williams’ generosity, which included providing a warm welcome to strangers needing a place to stay en route to other points. “She did not lock her door,” Davies writes, “and felt it was a deep privilege to have people feel that they could use her house.”

Reflecting on this period of her life, Williams wrote, “Life in Mississippi was a privilege within itself. To be alive and able to serve in any meaningful capacity was a special blessing” (emphasis Williams’).

During her time in Mississippi, she worked alongside Ed King, Amsey Moore, and famed movement leader Fannie Lou Hamer. She also crossed paths with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the march in Selma where her “spirited resourcefulness” came in handy. The July-August 1986 issue of the *Prairie Citizen* describes the encounter.

“As Helen and other black leaders knelt in a prayer circle, police dogs snapped and growled an inch behind their heads. ‘Martin (Dr. King) sweated and prayed and sweated—he was afraid of the dogs.’ But Helen had decided to win the dogs over, so she brought rancid hamburger to coat her fingers. The dogs stopped straining at their leashes to sniff, and to the annoyance of their handlers, to lick her fingers.”



## THE WORK CONTINUES AT PURDUE

According to the May-June 1975 issue of the *Perspective*, Williams “came to Purdue in part because she felt that her civil rights activities had so provoked the racists that her life might be in danger if she stayed in the South” (10). But her work couldn’t be stopped. As the first African American faculty member on Purdue’s campus, Williams had a critical role to play in West Lafayette.

In a letter to friends and supporters in Greater Lafayette, Williams details her work outside the classroom. The four-page letter opens by giving us a picture of this group of friends to whom Williams addresses the letter. “You are the only local committee of which I am aware that functions to assist in a Purdue University program and all of you should have awards,” Williams writes (emphasis Williams’). “In one way or another, things have been easier for blacks here because of you.”

The letter outlines the way that Williams and this committee helped to support students on Purdue’s campus. “What happened with your money?” Williams asks. “Well, teeth were fixed and one very pregnant young woman drove over to 57 South, wound up in Mississippi where she had her baby, drove back and all for less than \$300. She needed over \$800 here and her husband simply didn’t have it. SO, YOU BROUGHT LIFE.” (Emphasis Williams’.)

There was one bit of the letter that I had to reread, where Williams rather casually mentions an incident involving her dog. “Mama Dog (my 19 year old sooner) had a nervous break-down when one of the 13 students sleeping on my floor took off her tennis shoes.” (Emphasis my own.)

In the same letter, Williams acknowledges her own limitations as she aged. “Many [students’] parents living in Gary,” she writes of the African-American majority Chicago suburb, “have called me asking if they can come work for me and live with me until they find jobs!” Besides jobs being scarce in Lafayette, the moment had passed for Williams. “Relocation I did plenty of in Mississippi,” she writes. “It, like children, is for the young and at 60, I cannot begin it here.”

Already, she was dreaming of returning home to the “yellow clay country of Southern Illinois where all 250 of the inhabitants are living on Social Security and are over 60 or under 12.”

## IN REFLECTION

Reflecting on Williams' passing in 1991, *Journal & Courier* columnist and university historian John Norberg wrote, "There is no building at Purdue named for Helen Bass Williams. There's just a spirit—a spirit that needs to be carried on in her name."

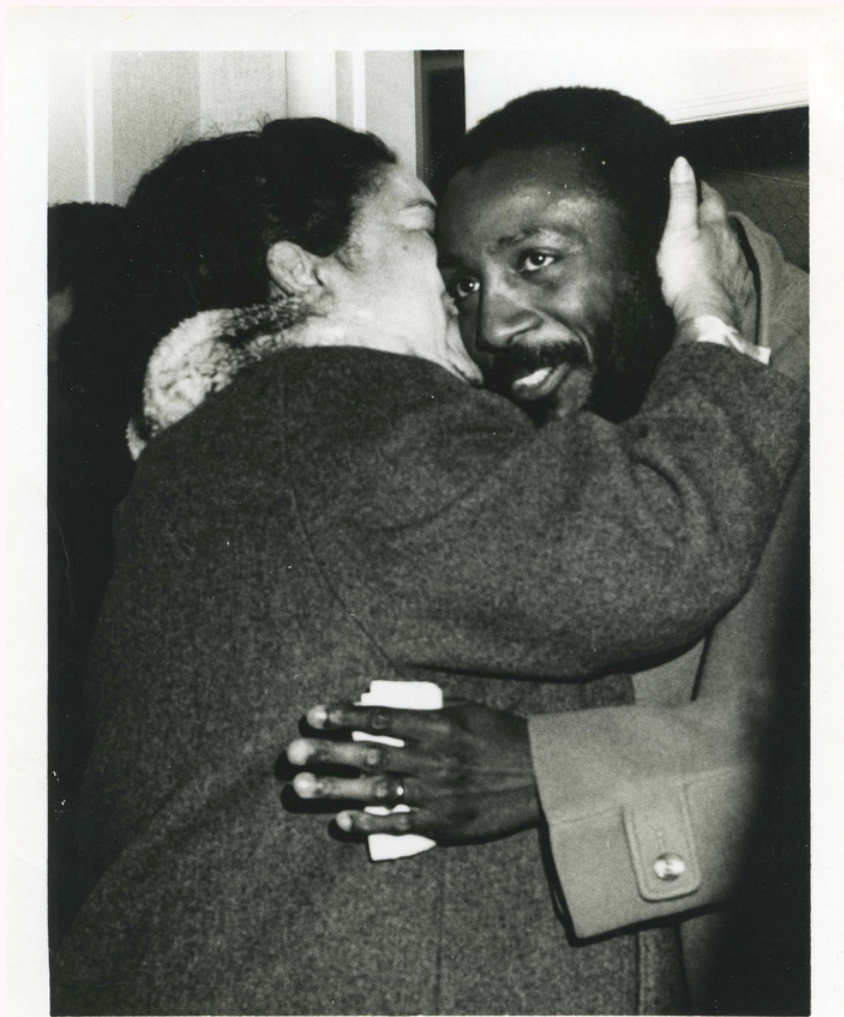
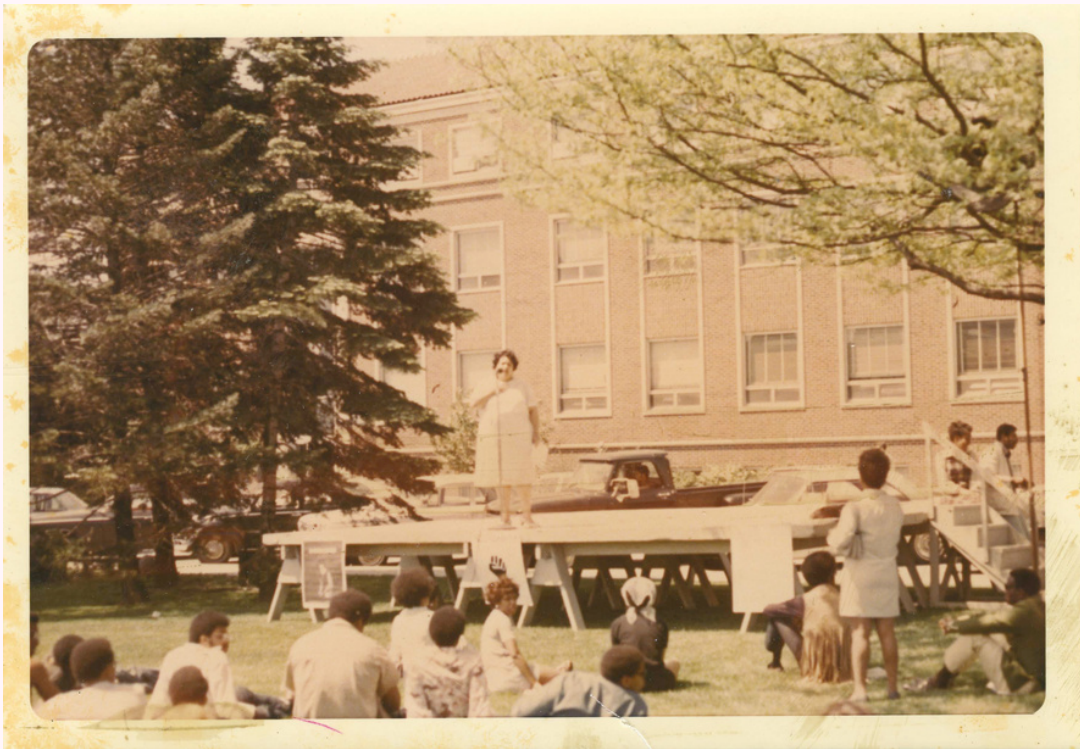
It would be easy to stop there. To close with Norberg's words and move on. But I can't do that.

I can't do that because, although there are parts of Williams' story that are utterly foreign to me (like the idea of students' parents calling and asking for a place to stay while they look for work), others feel all too familiar.

For example, take the trove of photographs depicting life in Mississippi in the 1960s. For me, the images of a mobile children's health clinic evoked more recent events in Flint, Michigan, in the wake of the water crisis that left thousands of disproportionately impoverished Black children facing the lifelong (and generational) effects of lead poisoning. Some of the images capture the carefree joy of the young; others are haunting, documenting the physical ailments of those same five- and six-year-olds.

The work to which Williams dedicated her life remains unfinished. It remains for each of us to examine what it is we can do to help further it.





*Comedian Dick Gregory performed at Purdue in 1982. After racist threats were made to the Chamber of Commerce, the person who was supposed to introduce Gregory pulled out of the event and Helen Bass Williams introduced him.*

# HELEN BASS WILLIAMS' WORK

## MISSISSIPPI ACTION FOR PROGRESS

24 counties

6,400 economically disadvantaged children served—and their families

## HELEN B. SCHLEMAN GOLD MEDALLION AWARD RECIPIENT

*"Based upon the recipient's contributions and concern for women students, her encouragement of women in academic and professional areas, and for her leadership and service outside the University community."*

## FIRST WOMEN TO WIN THE LEATHER MEDAL AWARD, CHOSEN BY SIGMA DELTA CHI.

*"Named for the award for 1971-72, as the individual 'who makes the greatest contribution to the welfare, success and reputation of Purdue University.' Mrs. Williams, widow of a physician, has no children of her own. But she is unofficial mom, dad, and advocate of many Purdue students."*

## \$95 M IN GRANTS

*"During the War on Poverty years, she wrote 95 million dollars in grants that 'mechanized blacks in the south and gave them wheels to ride into the 20th century.'"*

## 1986 SOUTHERN ILLINOIS WOMAN OF THE YEAR

# BRINGING A LIVING WAGE TO GRAD STUDENTS AT PURDUE

During the 2022-23 academic year, the Purdue-West Lafayette chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) committed to helping raise awareness about low graduate student pay. This is part of a larger community effort advocating for all Purdue employees to earn a living wage. Focusing on the graduate students, the AAUP launched a survey in seven departments during Spring 2023, asking graduate students about their monthly income and how well they can keep up with their expenses.

As we have begun analyzing the results, it has become clear that graduate students at Purdue do not earn a living wage. Many forgo seeking health care, and almost all struggle to pay their bills. International students, in addition, are burdened by high fees, and find themselves unable to see family at dire times like loved ones' funerals. We have begun disseminating the survey results to faculty in these seven departments (including SLC). Next year, we hope to extend the survey to the entire graduate school, so that faculty across campus can become more aware of the struggles of their students, and can begin to form alliances and solidarity with students as they demand to make a living wage.

Michael Johnston  
Associate Professor, English

Please feel free to contact Michael Johnston directly with any questions or if you would like to learn more about how to get involved with ongoing efforts: [mjohnst@purdue.edu](mailto:mjohnst@purdue.edu).