recommends that aspiring contributors Google the Editorial Board members and study recent issues to "see what their interests are" and to "find out what they might want" (618). With this suggestion, McDiarmid makes clear what we all know: that publishing in *PMLA* is not some clean and tidy process of selecting the best of the best by the smartest people (even if such a thing as the best of the best really existed and could be clearly defined, as it is not in this roundtable.)

Wai Chee Dimock comes closest to addressing the realities and limitations of what the Editorial Board wants when she calls our attention to Jane Tompkins's "Sentimental Power." This essay, for Dimock, is "the single most consequential essay on American literature," but she suggests that "Sentimental Power" may not have been able to "get through the review process" at *PMLA* because "articles that are radical in their mode of thinking [or] too controversial [or] give too much offense . . . might not appear often in *PMLA*." Brilliance, again, is not the key ingredient for success and may in fact preclude it at *PMLA*.

María Herrera-Sobek suggests a similar problem: "In Chicano and Chicana studies and other ethnic studies and women's studies also, the difficulty of getting published in *PMLA* and other prestigious mainstream journals led to the emergence of new journals" (620). It is "difficult," Herrera-Sobek writes, "to navigate a fine line between being overly descriptive and providing the reader with too little information to understand your analysis" (624). She articulates the challenge faced not just by scholars focused on minority literatures but by scholars focused on any material outside the traditional canon. It could be that these articles on lesser-known material could not get published because they were not the "best of the best," but surely Dimock's reference to "Sentimental Power" is meant to remind all of us, even if Dimock doesn't do so explicitly, of the underlying politics behind such formulations and of the history of aesthetic judgments and exclusions based on "the best."

Because getting published in *PMLA* is, however, the "gold standard in our profession," as Herrera-Sobek notes, and an accomplishment that can "help you get a job" (620), it's incredibly important that our discussions of what a *PMLA* article represents move beyond the slippery standards of smart readers, the nebulous and/or unarticulated interests of an Editorial Board, and the taste of mothers. It may be that, as Richard Terdiman says, "it's much easier to say what a journal article is *not* than what it *is*" (619). Still, we need to do better to define our values in language that is specific, lucid, and helpful, especially for the neophyte members of our profession for whom an article in *PMLA* can make such a difference.

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Reply:

As the organizer of the 2005 MLA Convention roundtable "What Can a Journal Essay Do?" I am grateful for Audrey Fisch's careful reading. *PMLA* decided to print the roundtable precisely to address the questions Fisch raises about what a *PMLA* article represents. The roundtable format, with its informality, unpredictability, and multiple voices, virtually ensures that no singular blueprint will emerge. That was indeed our intention: to bring together colleagues with a great deal of experience with the journal and to invite them to share and debate their impressions as well as their misgivings. Of course, the many hours each of us has spent on the journal, and our commitment to it, might have resulted in some amount of self-congratulation on behalf of *PMLA* and its practices. Nevertheless, a generous reader can certainly take away useful advice: Have your essay read by a number of colleagues before submitting it. Make sure it is broadly readable and free of jargon. There is no absolute standard of what constitutes "the best of its kind," and thus decisions are inflected by the tastes and values of board members, though the double anonymity and multistage selection process guard against bias. Board members and the editor worry about the multiplicity of reviews and try to make sure that controversial essays receive a fair reading and a chance to be published in *PMLA*. If you are working in emerging fields, you face the challenge of balancing description of little-known works with analysis

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and theoretical reflection. *PMLA*'s standard is to publish "the best of its kind"—in my experience the stress is not solely on the slippery "best," as Fisch charges, but equally on "kind." The phrase is descriptive and to my mind useful, but it cannot offer more than a suggestive standard in a long, time-consuming, and sometimes disputed process of evaluation.

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