Aarti Patel
Aarti Patel is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in religion at Syracuse University in New York. Aarti has served for two years as the co-President of the Religion Graduate Organization (RGO) at Syracuse University, and is currently serving in her second year as AAR Student Director of the Eastern Regional Organization.

Aarti's dissertation focuses on modes of domestic ritual and worship practices surrounding home shrines of members of the Hindu diaspora in the United States. Aarti's research engages with both ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis. She employs both traditional and spatial theories to explore the ways house shrines and the physical thresholds of homes are spaces, both imagined and lived, where immigrants and their families negotiate multiple identities. Aarti teaches courses at the instructor level, while also serving as a teaching assistant in the department.

Aarti Patel - Statement

Graduate students in the academy today face both enduring and new concerns that affect scholarship and individual well-being. These concerns often include financial concerns, harassment and assault, mental health, family concerns, microaggressions, representation and diversity, racism, sexism, and the prospects of a dismal job market, among other issues. One student put it aptly, "It would be a luxury to just have to worry about coursework, exams, or writing the dissertation." The reality of being a graduate student today is that, while working to complete the rigorous requirements for a degree, many students face a number of additional challenges that gravely feed into a vicious cycle. These problems are exacerbated by a lack of advocacy on behalf of graduate students. The future of the academy needs a voice.

This need for advocacy has driven my dedication to serving the academy. When I began my term as Student Director of the EIR, mental health was a major topic in discussions regarding the state of the academy and in the broader public discourse. This heralded a shift in focus on discussions regarding the state of the academy, both within the academic job market and in the broader public discourse. Through this, the voice of graduate students has been raised.

As AAR National Student Director, I would continue to foster dialogue and support relations between graduate students and the GSC. Recent programming in the different regions has included strong initiatives focused on professional development and fostering healthy mentor-mentee relationships. I would like to further develop programming for graduate students at all levels that provides tips on graduate studies and how to prepare for the academic and non-academic job markets. Such programming would not only continue to be held at the national meetings (e.g., through roundtable discussions and special topics forums), but also would be available in other forms throughout the year (including at regional events and through free webinars). The increased accessibility would contribute to increased awareness in the academy of the challenges graduate students face, and would provide greater opportunities for students to engage with and support each other on issues of concern.

Tekoa Robinson

Tekoa Robinson – Bio

Tekoa Robinson understands the difficult challenges of balancing one's vocational passions with being present in one's personal life. Sometimes the road to the terminal degree has meant that she has traveled a less than traditional path, has faced heart-breaking choices, and has learned what it means to trust in a vision beyond what seems to be the face of the normative structures of both the academy and family life.

Living in the Baltimore area, Tekoa recently completed her M.Div. at Lancaster Theological Seminary and is in the process of applying to doctoral programs in theology. She studies the work of Søren Kierkegaard and writes about Kierkegaard's authorship as Eucharistic liturgy. Her first article on this topic was published in the 2019 Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook. She has also presented papers at the Mid-Atlantic Regional AAR conference on the intersections of Kierkegaard and the Eucharist and was invited to preside over a session of the Kierkegaard, Religion, and Culture unit at the 2017 national AAR conference. She currently serves as the AAR Student Director for the Mid-Atlantic Region.

Tekoa Robinson - Statement

Four years ago I returned to my journey as a graduate student after putting my academic path on hold. I was excited, anxious, and a little intimidated as I registered for my first AAR meeting, that is, until I received my first issue of Speaking of Students. In this publication I read about the experiences of fellow students, tips and resources for first time AAR attendees, and the wide range of graduate student-centered programming. It seems like a small thing, but that simple newsletter helped me to feel a little less alone, a little less nervous, and a little more like I belonged at the AAR. By the following year I was serving on the Graduate Student Committee as Student Director for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the AAR, working to welcome others and planning meaningful programming alongside those members of the GSC who had made me feel so welcomed. Passing along this sense of belonging and working to create a strong community of support among graduate students has been and continues to be among my primary concerns.

My commitment to inclusivity, hospitality, and support has been birthed through my own experiences and through hearing the cries of graduate students from across the nation, both of which have enabled me to recognize that not only are students faced with re-envisioning the shape and contour of their professional trajectories as the "traditional" tenure-track position becomes ever more elusive, but many are having to do so while simultaneously experiencing the dehumanizing relational structures that persist in many sectors of the academy. The process of obtaining a Ph.D. should not include the mechanization of one's spirit and the death of one's passion, for without spirit and passion our scholarship easily turns into an expression of desperation and despair. Why should the public listen to what we discover and articulate as scholars of religion if we are simply mirroring the same harmful relational structures within our own institutions and educational processes?

As AAR Student Director, I would encourage programming that seeks to widen the vocational vision of what it means to be a scholar of religion by inviting those who serve in positions outside of the academy in such areas as public policy formation and debate, corporate ethics, ecumenical and interfaith relations, and other such paths, to participate in Special Topics Forums as well as to lead Student Lounge Roundtable Sessions. I would also urge the AAR Board of Directors to consider listing non-academic job postings on the AAR/SBL joint website. Additionally, I would work with the GSC to create programming that promotes intergenerational dialogue among scholars concerning how the relational structures within their educational formation have impacted their view of themselves, their scholarship, and the teacher/student relationship. This would help begin an intentional process of clarifying how we might better foster inclusive, hospitable, and supportive educational environments that resist the mechanization of spirit and the death of passion.