

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Introduction to MLA Panel: 2018 on 1968

by Paul Lauter



(LEFT) NO CHICAGO PROTEST PINS, CA. 1968. MLA ARCHIVES, NY.



(RIGHT) LOUIS KAMPF AT MLA ANNUAL CONVENTION, 1968. MLA ARCHIVES, NY.

Think back to what happened in 1968 outside the halls of academe and the corridors of the New York Hilton and old Americana hotels, where the MLA would convene in December: the Tet offensive carried out by Vietnamese forces; the massacres at My Lai and elsewhere carried out by American troops; Lyndon Johnson's abdication; Robert Kennedy's decision to run for president; Martin Luther King's murder and the subsequent rebellions across America; the violent suppression of protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Kennedy's murder. Nixon's election.

In the MLA meeting of 2018, held at the same hotels in New York, we tried to set MLA1968 in that turbulent time. Some will remember the 1968 convention as a disruption of professional norms, an intrusion of unprofessional politics. Those of us involved in the "disruption" still remember it as an effort to insert the stunning historical realities of that time into our work—for all of our colleagues and the world to see—at the annual convention.

Many threads of activism came together—or didn't. One was the "No Chicago" campaign, which successfully moved to keep the MLA from supporting the economy of Mayor Daley's city after its police riot. A small group of radical activists focused on stopping the war on Vietnam. To that end, we asked for (and were given) a large meeting room to present an anti-war talk by Noam Chomsky; we also collected signatures for the "Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority," which pledged signers to encourage and support draft resistance. We put posters up on the hotel walls: one said "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." Another pictured Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver saying, "I got my job through the MLA." We handed out "Mother Language Association" buttons and anti-war leaflets. And we founded what would soon become an affiliated organization within the MLA, the Radical Caucus.

Events at the meeting surprised us as much as MLA officials. We never expected to establish an organization. We never expected to run a candidate, Louis Kampf, for MLA second vice-president, much less—as some charged—"take over the MLA," though we did want to "shake things up."

We never expected to collect funds at a big MLA forum to bail out our comrades who had been arrested for defending the posters we'd put up. We never expected to introduce a motion to set up a Commission on the Status of Women. We never really expected to present a proposal to end MLA's participation in the Center for Editions of American Authors and, instead, to use such funds to publish the work of "lost" women authors and writers of color. Most of these goals emerged from passionate discussions at meetings of a "Tactics Committee" in Dick Ohmann's room in one of the convention overflow hotels.

In one sense, we utterly failed: somehow, our resolution against the war—though passed by large margins at the annual business meeting, and later affirmed by the whole membership of MLA—did not bring the war to a halt or even reduce American attacks. But history suggests that we succeeded beyond our wildest imaginings. We succeeded in illuminating radical change in what was not yet called the "literary canon." We succeeded in helping bring gender norms and hierarchies into question. We succeeded in supporting the national movement, then called "open admissions," to win greater access to higher education for many more minorities, women, and working class people. These efforts helped diversify the traditional white, male faculty, as well as the arts and sciences curriculum. And they led, in due course, to helping the MLA take a stance against the exploitation of adjuncts and the degradation of academic labor.

In 1968, many or most of today's MLA members were not yet born. But the events of that year in Vietnam, the United States, the streets of Paris, and at the MLA meetings produced changes that have affected all of our lives—personal, political, and professional. In the papers that followed this brief introduction, our speakers commented on changes that have, and have not, occurred as a result of events in 1968. Then we mobilized memory, and maybe hope, to debate what might or should happen next. That debate has continued in the many issues of *Radical Teacher* that have emerged since those remarkable days fifty years ago.



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