

**The MLA Stylebook**  
**Highlights of the Modern Language**  
**Association's 2005 convention**  
By Malcolm A. Kline and Julia A. Seymour

Published by Accuracy in Academia\*  
February 2006

Dear Mal...

Your pieces on the MLA have all been truly brilliant. Bravo. Would that there were a hundred voices such as yours.

Best regards,  
Alan

Alan Charles Kors  
Professor of History  
George H. Walker Endowed Term Chair  
University of Pennsylvania

\*From posted articles on [www.campusreportonline.net](http://www.campusreportonline.net)

## MLA Elements of Style

by: Malcolm A. Kline

Millions of college students consult the MLA Stylebook when writing term papers, but the group that publishes it, the Modern Language Association, devotes precious little time to elements of style at its annual meeting.

"Despite our name, there are very few panels on language at the MLA [convention]," Professor Anne L. Curzan said at the association's yearly meeting in Washington, D. C. Dr. Curzan is an associate professor in the English Department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

The panel on which Dr. Curzan spoke was itself markedly dismissive of the concerns of critics who fear a deterioration of literacy and grammar. Rather, panelists and the faculty members in the audience who crowded the suite and the Marriott here where the panel convened expressed frustration at being unable to counter the influence of language critics in the popular press.

**Unlike the commercial about Las Vegas, what happens at the MLA conventions does not stay at the MLA conventions. The MLA is the nerve center for just about every English Department at every college and university in the country.**

Most of those institutions of higher learning are represented at the MLA's annual gatherings, either in the affiliations of the speakers on the dais or on the name tags of the professors and Ph.D. candidates in attendance. They openly discuss strategies for achieving their personal and collective goals at these summits.

Michael P. Adams, a visiting English professor at North Carolina State University delivered a well-received attack on Barbara Wallraff's "Word Court" column in *The Atlantic Monthly*. For her part, Dr. Curzan dissected *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynn Truss.

"Punctuation itself is not an ascertainable fact, like mountains," Dr. Curzan insists. "Creating this kind of insecurity in people is not helpful."

"There are still victims of these attacks."

Dr. Curzan is the author, or co-author, of *First Day to Final Grade: A Graduate Student's Guide to Teaching and Gender Shifts in the History of English* as well as co-editor of *Studies of the English Language II: Unfolding Conversations*. **"Language is made by people," Dr. Curzan says. "People create language."**

**"Language in the form of our everyday conversation has no punctuation." She did not explain how court stenographers and transcription services function in this punctuation-free world.**

Academics have to contend with criticism from forces outside of academia, Dr. Adams lamented, "as a result of our capitalist system."

"At *The Atlantic Monthly*, Barbara Wallraff's rise coincided with the publication of articles such as Christina Hoff Sommers' 'Girls Rule,'" Dr. Adams noted. "Forget what you heard," the professor said dismissively. "It's really boys who are the victims."

"Never mind what you heard about women." In the course of this riff, Dr. Adams did not offer one piece of evidence to counter the reams of data Sommers offers in her speeches, articles and books.

When a member of the audience asked why the professoriat "can't get into *The Atlantic Monthly*," Dr. Curzan answered, "We don't have a voice with the public."

"How do we get a public voice?," Dr. Curzan asked rhetorically. "We're seen as liberal relativists."

A few minutes later, Dr. Curzan outlined her own pedagogic approach. "I tell my students what is expected of them but I don't make it a question of right or wrong," Dr. Curzan explained. "I don't say, 'Three errors per page and your grade goes down.'"

"I will just circle something that is not in standard written English but I won't take points off for it," Dr. Curzan said. "I won't get judgmental about it." Dr. Curzan's address to the MLA was entitled, "Selling Grammar to the Public." She may want to pitch it to her students first.

## MLA Apologetics

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

When English professors first banded together more than a century ago to form the Modern Language Association, they did so for the express purpose of preserving and protecting the English language. Now the MLA makes excuses for the corruption of verbal standards.

"The Modern Language Association convention, first held in 1883, is an annual gathering of teachers and scholars in the field of language and literature study," according to the MLA's 2005 program. "The convention enables members of the profession to share their ideas and research with colleagues from other universities and colleges."

"The many sessions present a range of approaches and examine a variety of languages and literary and critical traditions." So how does this varied approach play out?

**"The study of semantics usually reveals the student's lack of grammar," Professor Mary Blockley said, before urging the audience of teachers not to do anything about it. Dr. Blockley, who teaches at the University of Texas at Austin, spoke on the MLA's panel on The Sociolinguistics of Contemporary English.**

**"Don't use syntax to beat up on people," she urged the audience at the MLA's Washington, D. C. convention. "A sentence fragment can mean one thing in writing and another in speaking."**

**"Grammar is like our shibboleth that we can't be literate without it."**

"The audience is important," she told her own listeners at the Marriott. Another speaker on that same panel, Dr. Janina Brutt-Griffler, may have inadvertently given Dr. Blockley a preview of coming attractions, showing, in her presentation, what happens when a country's language is in freefall.

As associate professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Dr. Brutt-Griffler examined the confusion in war-torn Harare, the capital of the African nation of Zimbabwe. Until Zimbabwe's military enforced its own brand of martial law, the country welcomed refugees from neighboring countries wracked by civil war.

The resulting population mix now finds communication difficult not only in English but in native dialects as well. What Dr. Brutt-Griffler does not mention is that in all of these nations, education has deteriorated to such an extent that those seeking training and instruction usually leave not only their country of origin but also the continent that it is in.

I know. I am related to many of these denizens.

The other irony is that Dr. Brutt-Griffler entitled her presentation that focused on Zimbabwe, "The Postimperial politics of English." "Don't overstate the impact of English," she warns.

It is a point well-taken. The last British "colonial" overlord of Zimbabwe, Ian Smith, stayed in power for 15 years, when the country was known as Rhodesia. Since Smith stepped down, African-born Robert Mugabe has ruled independent Zimbabwe for a quarter of a century, with nary a recorded thought of stepping down.

## Decomposition

*by: Malcolm A. Kline*

The failure of schools from kindergarten through college to impart basic literacy skills is becoming so obvious that even academics are starting to acknowledge it.

**"A big complaint from composition teachers is that other professors complain that their students can't write," Dr. Thomas Lawrence Long said at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. Dr. Long teaches composition at Thomas Nelson Community College in Hampton, VA.**

A survey of 133 faculty members at TNCC revealed that 70 percent of those professors surveyed assigned writing assignments of at least five to ten pages. One-third of these professors assigned essays.

"Those professors who complain about their students' writing will not put in extra time teaching writing," Dr. Long notes. "At Chico State [in California] the professors refused to do so based on their union contract," according to Dr. Mary Boland of Cal State-San Bernardino.

"A course labeled writing-intensive is a snare and a trap because it makes writing someone else's problem," Dr. Deborah Holdstein concludes. Dr. Holdstein teaches at Northern Illinois University.

The MLA, which the professors addressed, is the largest conclave of English professors in the United States. Long known for its left-of-center orientation, the annual confab is a central hiring zone for struggling Ph.D.'s seeking university berths as well as an out-of-town tryout venue for professors seeking to introduce new "progressive" courses.

Indeed, judging from the comments of this MLA panel on composition, the "relevance" content of college composition courses is not likely to give way to fundamentals of writing and communications anytime soon.

"The matter with composition is that we have a mission but not matter," Dr. Long said. "The mission is to improve critical reading and writing skills."

Dr. Boland derides criticism of composition courses that is based on whether rules of grammar are adhered to in those classes. **"We've got to reject the commonplace but bankrupt idea about literacy and composition," Dr. Boland told an appreciative crowd of 50 at one of the MLA panels on composition. "Academic freedom is at stake."**

Dr. Boland views as "superfluous" and "harmful" the insistence of English language traditionalists that college composition courses focus on such concepts as "How to write footnotes and works cited, triteness, topic sentences and parallelism" as well as "cogency and audience."

She claims "conservative elements" that voice such concerns shut down writing centers at the University of Rochester, the University of Minnesota and the University of Texas at Austin. Not only does she admit that the "conservative elements" she warns of on campuses are far from numerous, but the examples she gives of their efforts are a decade old.

As to what should be done to upgrade composition courses on campus, none of the panelists disagreed with Dr. Holdstein. "We need a well-funded university-wide effort," Dr. Holdstein concluded. "Marx was right. He has the same birthday I do so I'm prejudiced."

Oliver Stone has the same birthday I do but I have never regarded him as an oracle. By the way, none of the panelists noted that 30 years ago, composition was a high-school subject, not a college class.

## **MLAnimal House**

*by: Malcolm A. Kline*

Faced with declining literacy skills among college graduates, English professors at the Modern Language Association's annual conference came up with the same solution to the problem that frat boys in the classic film Animal House arrived at when faced with expulsion: Road Trip.

The MLA convention itself was a road trip for those outside of Washington, D. C.—the site of last year's meeting. One of the MLA members who made the journey, Annette Korvitz of Tulane, noted that "College literacy studies show that college graduates are less able to read complex texts."

But rather than look inward at their curricula for a cause and potential remedy, professors at the MLA looked across the sea for a solution and outside the Ivory Tower for a cause. "Professors should have one semester's experience out of country before hiring," according to Kathleen Woodward of the University of Washington at Seattle.

Students would benefit for being more peripatetic as well, the professors agreed. "We should be investing in study abroad scholarships," Tey Diana Rebolledo of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque advised. She did not name a source for the funding "we" would provide.

Ironically, Dr. Rebolledo revealed, "It is harder for students to take courses in Spanish because most students do not have a base or a background in a foreign language." That linguistic handicap might make international travel problematic, at least in Spanish-speaking countries.

**Gustavus Adolphus College is ahead of the curve on junkets. "We have funded 'Teaching for Social Justice' trips to Tanzania, Cuba and Ireland," Professor Eric Eliason, who teaches at GAC, reported. Dr Eliason did not share the Civil Liberties primers that Fidel Castro provided.**

When looking for villains, MLA members usually prefer right-wing bad guys, whether they are guilty or not. Thus, Professor Dennis Looney ticked off what he saw as the factors leading to a crisis in higher education and gave one of his least favorite presidents' top billing:

- "In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan and his entourage began to exploit the anti-intellectual impulse in the United States," Dr. Looney said at the MLA's panel on the crisis in the Humanities. Dr. Looney is a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. (As our friends in the media like to say, "Don't blame the messenger." What President Reagan's Department of Education did was document test scores that had been declining for a decade before his first inaugural.)
- "The economic boom in Asia leaves that region rich in math and science majors," Dr. Looney said at the MLA conference at the Marriott. "There has been a shift in the center of power." (This is like blaming rain on wet sidewalks. Both the U. S. Department of Education and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have documented the rigor of quantitative studies abroad, and the laxity of such course offerings at home.)
- "The graying of America is leading to a shift in funding from education to baby boomer's social security and Medicare," Dr. Looney says. (As a member of that generation, I feel compelled to offer up a bit of amateur math. The oldest baby boomers turn 60 this year. By law, they cannot collect social security or use Medicare for another two years.)

"University departments succeed when they meet the needs of the external community," Dr. Looney said. Dr. Woodward agreed, saying, "There is a lack of connection of the academic community to surrounding areas."

She and her compatriots propose methods of bridging this credibility gap. **"In the new economy, our role is not to preserve the old culture but to form a new culture," Dr. Eliason concludes.** Perhaps as a means of doing so, on the professor's campus, a retired classicist shares floor space in the English department with the women's studies program.

## MLA Abu Ghraib Fantasy

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

If you have not connected the national media's stories about the Abu Ghraib detention facilities run by U. S. troops in Iraq with the romance novels that you see in Wal-Mart, you are probably not a tenured college professor.

**"The pleasure of romance novels sets us up to accept the violence and carnage of Abu Ghraib," Professor Teresa L. Ebert told an audience at the Modern Language Association's annual conference. Dr. Ebert is a professor of English and Women's Studies at the State University of New York at Albany. At the MLA's Washington, D. C. conference, she spoke on a panel entitled "Marxism Now: Beyond Cultural Politics and Back to Class."**

Thousands of English professors from colleges and universities throughout the United States meet annually at the MLA conferences to try out research papers and even courses of study. "The women's romance novels that feature textuality, love and intimacy also, as part of the same structure, feature the aggression and violence we see at Abu Ghraib," Dr. Ebert told the morning seminar at the Washington Hilton.

For her research, Dr. Ebert, who has worked at SUNY-Albany since Desert Storm, read a lot of romance novels. Sporting her trademark black beret, Dr. Ebert took the audience of 22 on a virtual tour of paperback fiction:

- "In *Dancing in the Wind*, a 1994 novel, the hero promises to find the heroine's sister, 'whatever it takes.'
- "In the novel *Flashpoint*, the hero says, 'It still feels like slaughter.'
- "In *All the Queen's Men*, the hero says, 'I'll do whatever is necessary.'"

A self-proclaimed Marxist, Dr. Ebert has written studies with titles such as *Ludic Feminism and After: Post-Modernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism*. " **'Whatever it takes' is the backbone of capitalism and also the backbone of romance novels,**" Dr. Ebert told the audience at the Hilton. To illustrate her point, she brought in examples from newspaper headlines.

"A 2002 Alberto Gonzalez [White House Counsel's] memo treats the Geneva Convention as obsolete and quaint," Dr. Ebert said. "The chairman of Delta Airlines said he will do 'whatever it takes' to cut costs."

"It is not likely to mean cutting million dollar salaries," Dr. Ebert predicted. "It will probably mean downsizing."

Actually, Delta announced that the airline would cut executive salaries and downsize. But if Dr. Ebert gets half the story right on Delta, she is way off on Abu Ghraib.

"The torture of Abu Ghraib is typical, not exceptional, of capitalism," Dr. Ebert avers. From across the country, Hoover Institution senior fellow Victor Davis Hanson has a different take on the controversy.

"European and American journalists agonized over a purportedly mistreated Koran in Guantanamo Bay, yet remain silent about the police state right outside of Gitmo's walls [in Fidel Castro's communist Cuba]," Hanson writes. "Sexual stupidity at Abu Ghraib gets far more weight than the thousands murdered in the same building by the dictatorship that America ended."

An independent panel investigated the allegations of abuses at Defense Department detention centers shortly after the Abu Ghraib stories broke in the U. S. media. Chaired by Secretaries of Defense from Republican and Democratic presidential administrations, the panel's findings indicate that the media coverage that Abu Ghraib received was overblown.

"Since the beginning of hostilities in Afghanistan and Iraq, U. S. military and security operations have apprehended about 50,000 individuals," the independent panel reported. "From this number, about 300 allegations of abuse in Afghanistan, Iraq or Guantanamo have arisen."

"As of mid-August 2004, 155 investigations into the allegations have been completed, resulting in 66 substantiated cases. Approximately one-third of these cases occurred at the point of capture or tactical collection point, frequently under uncertain, dangerous or violent circumstances."

Harold Brown, who served as Secretary of Defense for President Jimmy Carter, co-chaired the panel with James Schlesinger, President Gerald Ford's Defense Secretary. Their report stands as about the latest official record on Abu Ghraib abuses, although numerous current and former public officials have made pronouncements on the controversy.

But the lady in the black beret remains undaunted. "According to the International Red Cross, 70 to 90 percent of the people arrested in Iraq were arrested by mistake," Dr. Ebert told the Hilton audience. As it happens, the Brown-Schlesinger panel tackled this assertion too.

"If we were to follow the ICRC's interpretations, interrogation operations would not be allowed," the panel concluded. "This would deprive the U. S. of an indispensable source of intelligence in the war on terrorism."

Dr. Ebert's panel was moderated by Barbara Foley of Rutgers, who introduced herself as the head of the MLA's Red Caucus. Presumably, the Red Caucus of the MLA is for those association members who find the main organization too right-wing.

## Stalinism at the MLA

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

Attending the Modern Language Association's annual convention gives the uninitiated a chance to see how professors can pass off theories to their students that do not hold up to independent inquiry. For example, **Grover C. Furr of Montclair State University in New Jersey is making a cause of proving the innocence of Joseph Stalin, who presided over three decades of genocide in the former Soviet Union.**

"I worked with Russian scholars in the Comintern," Dr. Furr told the audience at the MLA's Washington, D. C. conference. "I call current anti-communist scholarship 'lying, pseudo scholarship'." For one thing, he claims that Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech about Stalin's crimes was itself deceptive. "There was a secret speech behind the secret speech," Dr. Furr said at the MLA conference at the Washington Hilton.

He suggests that Khrushchev may have had more to hide about his own guilt than he did to reveal about Stalin's complicity in mass executions. To a point, Dr. Furr may be onto something: Khrushchev was Stalin's lieutenant on the scene during the forced famine in the Ukraine that starved millions of farmers to death for their refusal to give up their farms.

The English professor also insists that Leon Trotsky, assassinated by Stalin's agents, was guilty of treason during the Second World War. "All of the evidence supports the charge of Trotsky's collaboration with the Germans and Japanese," Dr. Furr says. "Trotsky was in touch with the Germans and Japanese." But so was Stalin. In fact, he signed a non-aggression pact with Adolph Hitler in 1939.

Dr. Furr says that researchers who source the Comintern files as proof of Stalin's reign of terror are wrong. But those writers actually give direct quotes from the files. Dr. Furr offers none.

By the way, at the time that Trotsky was assassinated, he was scheduled to testify before the U. S. House of Representatives Committee on UnAmerican Activities. In those days, HUAC focused nearly exclusively on efforts by the Axis powers—primarily Nazi Germany—to subvert American institutions and engage in espionage in the United States.

Former HUAC staffer Herb Romerstein shared the news of Trotsky's planned testimony at one of Accuracy in Academia's conferences. In a special report for Accuracy in Media, AIA's parent group, Romerstein reported that the Soviets also lied about casualties in the Spanish Civil War. The "war heroes" that Soviet apologists celebrated for decades were actually deserters shot by their own comrades. This vignette did not make it into Dr. Furr's talk either.

For their part, Dr. Furr's colleagues on the MLA's panel on "(Un)Critical Reading" want to restrict the flow of information in ways that would have made Stalin envious. It bears repetition that, in their courses, these professors can put their plans in action. "Reading is, and I exaggerate only a little, the other name of class," says Kimberly DeFazio of the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Dr. DeFazio offered up a "Labor Theory of Reading." "Does one sell one's labor to survive or does one purchase the labor of others?," Dr. DeFazio says.

"We need a theory of class analysis for critical reading," says Dr. DeFazio. "Spontaneous reading fosters unequal social relationships."

She took a sideswipe at "imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq." She also said that "The religious experience in America is funded by corporate donations."

"Should critical reading focus on the class struggle?," Vincent Barry Leitch of the University of Oklahoma asked rhetorically. "Yes," he answered himself.

"Intellectuals are affected negatively by the capitalist inclination towards innovation." But don't real intellectuals like innovation? It depends on how you define intellectual.

"For some three decades or more, we have seen an antipathy towards Marxism," Dr. Furr laments. Imagine.

## The Marxist Language Association

by: Malcolm A. Kline

Current college classrooms resemble old-fashioned communist party cell meetings for a very good reason: They are run by the same type of people, no matter how cutting edge their output looks.

**"Even if the subject is within the historical system, it can still influence it if it knows its limits," Professor Philip Goldstein told an audience of 25 at the Modern Language Association's annual conference. "Equally diverse black, ethnic and post-colonial studies are manifestations of Marxism."**

**Dr. Goldstein is an English professor at the University of Delaware at Wilmington, where he also moonlights as president of the faculty senate. He presided over one of several panel discussions of Marxism showcased by the MLA at its Washington, D. C. conference.**

"In the early 21st Century, black, cultural, women's studies and studies of post-colonial programs and movements have supplanted literary studies," Dr. Goldstein noted of modern-day college curricula offerings. It is a shift in which the MLA has played a major role.

Its annual convention draws thousands of English professors and teachers from across the United States. This year's annual meeting took place in two hotels in our nation's capital.

The MLA is mostly known for its language and writing *Stylebook*. The topics discussed at the group's annual gathering bear a remarkable resemblance to catalogue course entries at most colleges and universities.

Take the case of Kevin Floyd, an English professor at Kent State. "He specializes in Twentieth-Century U. S. Literature and Culture, Marxism, Gender Studies, and Queer Studies," his faculty web page reads. "He typically teaches courses in literary criticism and contemporary U. S. literature."

"He is the author of *Reifying Desire: Capitalism, Male Sexuality, and Modern U. S. Culture* (Minnesota, forthcoming), and of articles in *Cultural Critique*, *Science and Society*, and *Social*

*Text.* Dr. Floyd did not reveal whether he has viewed the film *Brokeback Mountain* at least once.

He spoke at the MLA conference on "Simultaneously Marxian and Queer Comments on Jameson, Allegory and Method." **Dr. Floyd's big complaint is that gay rights groups are spending too much time on ballot marriage initiatives and not near enough effort on trying to overturn "neoliberal" municipal ordinances such as the one passed by former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani ten years ago.**

**That regulation forbids businesses that cater to the gay community from operating within 500 feet of a school. Dr. Floyd views the 1995 rule as a "gross human rights violation." "Alternative sexual communities are formed by commercial public outlets," he said.**

Dr. Floyd rejects what he calls "the privatization of social feelings." "Gay promiscuity is irreducibly political and social," he explained.

At these MLA sessions, as at most academic conferences, the presenters present papers previously written. The young lady chosen at the last minute as a respondent to the two panelists on this panel would have provided necessary comic relief had the audience been of a more whimsical cast.

"What I got out of your paper was that if we take the private public we can mobilize for change," she said to Dr. Floyd. He and the audience nodded vigorously.

"What I got out of your paper is that if we know our limits we can achieve significant change," she said to Dr. Goldstein. Then Dr. Goldstein and the attendees bobbed their heads up and down enthusiastically.

Then the perky Ph. D. candidate exclaimed, "I really wish I had had the chance to read your papers." At this point, the crowd at the lecture looked like the answer to the rhetorical query posed by stand-up comics of yesteryear: "Are you an audience or an oil painting?"

## Disabled by Definition

*by: Malcolm A. Kline*

Despite its name, the Modern Language Association devotes more time to matters outside the realm of literature than it does to literary affairs at its annual conference. Thus its members, thousands of English professors from about as many schools, are more likely to come to the MLA's annual convention and argue against globalization than they are to discuss Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Add to that dynamic, to take a favorite phrase used at the conference, the use of the MLA convention by English Department chairs as a clearinghouse for new hires. There were about a half dozen job-training workshops on the first night of the conference alone and every time I went out to have a smoke I was continually running into conference attendees "stressed out" about all the job interviews they had been through.

The newly-minted Ph.D.s quickly discover that the way to gain that faculty chair is not through a mastery of the masters but by the invention of a new field of study, one for which there is usually little demand outside of the Ivory Tower. But if you stir the interest of the Search Committees, a professor's office could be yours.

Hence, we get the spectacle of graduate assistants strutting their stuff, peddling their hypotheses. To showcase some of this nouveau theoretical work, the MLA presented a panel

arranged by its Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession. Twenty-three people attended the MLA's panel on Black Disability Issues, half a dozen of whom were black and three of whom were visibly handicapped.

Of the three panelists, only one was black. The two who were not both agreed that "we need to find an intersection of queer studies, disability studies, gender studies and black studies."

(And they accuse conservatives of stereotyping and labeling! At least the so-called intolerant right-wingers usually understand that not all blacks are queer, disabled or even female.)

**"Critical race studies," Anna Mollow, one of the Caucasian panelists, suggested, "can be vitalized by queer studies." Ms. Mollow is a Ph. D. candidate from Berkeley.** She compiled, with Roger McRuer of George Washington University, the forthcoming anthology, *Sex and Disability*.

"Professor McRuer's research centers on queer studies, disability studies, and the intersections of the two," according to GWU's web site. "His current book project, *DeComposing Bodies: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, examines both the cultural construction of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness and the cultures of resistance shaped by queer and disabled writers and activists." Dr. McRuer presided over the MLA panel on black disability issues.

"Disability is best understood as a social phenomenon, not a biological given," Eden Koren Osucha, the other occidental panelist, offered at the MLA panel. Ms. Osucha, a doctoral candidate from Duke, warns against "the false separating of race and disability."

Mollow makes the point that marginalized people feel disabled, adding, "Who can be more marginalized than people attending the MLA?" Let's hope that every English professor in the country does not apply for benefits under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

## King Kong Deconstructed

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

Leave it to a pedigreed Ivy League liberal to construct an analogy so racist that even segregationists in the 1960s would have considered it uncouth.

**"There is an interracial relationship between King Kong and Fay Wray," Dr. T Mera Moore Lafferty said at the Modern Language Association's annual convention late last year. "It is allegorical of the black migration north and miscegenation."**

"King Kong and other films are just ordinary things that people go to see to eat popcorn but they are infused with racism."

Dr. Lafferty, currently with the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania, previously taught at Temple. The object of Kong's affection had a different take on their relationship.

"'You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood.' These were the first words I heard about King Kong," Fay Wray remembered. "Although I knew the producer, Merian C. Cooper, was something of a practical joker, my thoughts rushed hopefully to Clark Gable."

"Some of the inevitable critical commentary dissected Kong like a laboratory frog, and Cooper personally bristled at any intellectualizing over purported hidden messages and meanings," the producer's biographer wrote. "In a 1966 letter he wrote to an admirer, he took particular

issue with the licentious characterization given the scene of Kong plucking off Ann Darrow's clothes." [Darrow was the character played by Fay Wray.]

"I played this scene as a great gorilla playing as with a toy—and played it for comedy—and so the 1933 audiences took it,' Cooper wrote. 'It had **no** decadent 'rape' concept or execution!!!"

Cooper's colleagues had similar memories. "We focus our lenses, not on silly close-ups of love-sick females, but on elemental clashes between nations and their fundamental problems, between man and nature," Cooper's co-director, Ernest Shoedsack said. Cooper had shared directing chores on Kong with his long-time friend and partner Shoedsack in addition to his production responsibilities.

"This revulsion at the thought of cinematic celebrations of romance would become one of many in-jokes layered into King Kong, the epic fantasy in their near future," Cooper's biographer, Mark Cotta Vaz, wrote. It is a joke that Dr. Lafferty apparently did not get.

Vaz had access to Cooper's personal papers and interviewed many of his associates, including Miss Wray herself. Dr. Lafferty never once alluded to a primary source in her presentation at the MLA panel on "Post Modernity, Post Coloniality and Cross-Culturalism of East, West and Africa."

So where did she get the brainwave that she shared at the MLA's Washington, D. C. conference? "At Penn, she teaches courses in Critical Writing focused on theatre, television and film, as well as humanities seminars including Literature of Muslim America, East Meets West on Stage and Screen, and King Kong: Monsters and Their Brides," according to her current employer's web site. "In spring 2006, she will direct at Penn a multimedia production of Chinese-American Ping Chong's play *Kind Ness* in conjunction with screenings of Indonesian-American Fatimah Tobing Rony's short film *On Cannibalism*."

*On Cannibalism* appears to have been the inspiration for Dr. Lafferty's talk at the MLA gathering at the Marriott. "King Kong meets the family photograph in this provocative experimental video exploring the West's insatiable appetite for native bodies in museums, world's fairs, and early cinema," according to the Women Make Movies website. "Intertwining personal narrative about race and identity in the U. S. with layered footage, artifacts and video effects, *On Cannibalism* looks back at anthropological truisms with outrage and irony."

The side-by-side comparison of Dr. Lafferty's academic musings with Vaz's *Living Dangerously: The Adventures of Merian C. Cooper, Creator of King Kong*, raises some interesting questions. Unlike Dr. Lafferty in her talk, Vaz documents himself thoroughly in his book.

Also, where Dr. Lafferty hypothesizes, Vaz keeps speculation to a minimum. Indeed, while Dr. Lafferty's factual data base consisted entirely of the Xeroxed movie stills that she handed out before her lecture, Vaz gives the reader fully-footnoted information in every sentence.

As noted before, while Vaz quotes from Cooper's correspondence and personal files, Dr. Lafferty offers no sources whatsoever. Her approach is all too typical of the run of academic writing nowadays.

All of which begs the question, **why can't academics go to primary sources in their research? With their seven-hour weeks and rarely-denied sabbaticals, they have all the time in the world to find them, particularly since most of the papers of public officials are bequeathed to colleges and universities.** For example, Vaz found the Cooper papers at BYU.

Such an in-depth approach to research might lead to greater accuracy in academia, no matter how seemingly trivial the subject matter of the class may appear to be. For instance, if Dr. Lafferty is going to give lectures on classic films, she should at least know how they were made.

Author and activist David Horowitz has taken a lot of heat for asserting that professors should confine their classroom commentary to the subject taught. As the case of Dr. Lafferty shows, pedagogues have a hard enough time not going astray even within their alleged areas of expertise.





Dr. Lafferty's exhibits A, B, and C, presented to accompany her talk in which she posited that King Kong (1933) was an interracial love story.

## Feminism for Men?

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

Although men are increasingly outnumbered on college campuses, they may actually like the content of some women's studies courses, although perhaps not in a manner that the designers of those courses ever intended.

"With my students, I ask how they came up with their self-images," Emma Ruth Garcia explains. "I show movies in class."

"I show them **Real Women Have Curves** and **Maria Full of Grace**." Garcia, a teaching intern at Colby College in Maine, spoke at the Modern Language Association's annual convention last year.

"I watch a lot of TV and read the papers," Garcia modestly said of her work. "I work with them [the students] to break down images and stereotypes."

"In **Real Women Have Curves**, the heroine defies her parents by not being a virgin before marriage and not taking a boyfriend into one's home to avoid a disgrace," Juanita Isabel Heredia said. Dr. Heredia serves on the Ethnic Studies department steering committee at Northern Arizona University.

Interestingly, the Internet Movie Database description of **Real Women** does not even mention the heroine's sexual coming of age. "Freshly graduated from high school, Ana receives a full scholarship to Columbia University," the IMDB relates. "Her very traditional, old-world parents feel that now is the time for Ana to help provide for the family, not the time for college."

"Torn between her mainstream ambitions and her cultural heritage she agrees to work with her mother at her sister's downtown LA sewing factory. Over the summer, she learns to admire the hardworking team of women who teach her solidarity and teamwork."

"Still at odds with what her mother expects of her, Ana realizes that leaving home to continue her education is essential to finding her place proudly in the world as an American and Chicana." Dr. Heredia, who spoke on the same panel with Garcia, addressed the topic "Latinas, Sex and the City."

During her talk at the MLA's Washington, D. C. convention, she showed a scene from **Real Women**. The scene shows the immediate prelude to and aftermath of Ana's first one-night stand. In the latter scene, the boyfriend promises to call and Ana tells him not to bother.

Dr. Heredia also showed a scene from **Maria Full of Grace**, the tale of a pregnant Columbian girl who works as a "mule" for a drug trafficker. She swallows narcotics in order to transport them into the United States.

"Both characters learn to control their own bodies through their sexual experiences," Dr. Heredia said at the MLA meeting at the Washington Hilton. Why does this feminist take sound like it was dreamed up by guys on the make?

*Malcolm A. Kline is the executive director of Accuracy in Academia.*

## Post Politically Correct Studies

by: Malcolm A. Kline

**When academics can unearth politically incorrect themes in otherwise PC literature, these esoteric offerings might soon become extinct.**

"Critics had trouble with the religious messages in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," Professor Jacqueline M. Fulmer said last year at the Modern Language Association's annual convention. "She [Morrison] has said it is the only overtly religious novel she has ever written."

Dr. Fulmer teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. She spoke at the MLA Washington, D. C. convention's panel on "Literary Theory and Folklore Theory."

"In her novels, she focuses on the experience of black Americans, particularly emphasizing black women's experience in an unjust society and the search for cultural identity," the women's history web site tells us about Miss Morrison. "She uses fantasy and mythic elements along with realistic depictions of racial, gender and class conflict."

In like fashion, few African studies courses will acknowledge the repression of native regimes on the continent that has occurred since all of Africa's 54 nations achieved independence from European colonial rule. African folk tales, on the other hand, provide telling insights into the human rights breakdown that has claimed much of the continent.

"In one African tale, the tortoise embodies British colonial rule when he eats all the birds' food," Professor Thomas Jay Lynn said at the MLA conference at the Washington Hilton. "Other tales show allegorical representatives of the post-colonial era military dictators as villainous animals."

Most of these stories are about as politically correct as you would expect them to be. In one such fable, "Raven steals water from petrol for a thirsty world," Dr. Lynn recounts.

Dr. Lynn specializes in African folklore. He teaches at the Pennsylvania State University-Berks County campus. "African folk tales were adapted to African-American folk tales such as *Song of the South* and *Uncle Remus*," Dr. Lynn said. "Brer Rabbit voiced the strategy frequently employed in African folk tales of convincing your assailant to do something by insisting that you do not want him to."

"Please don't throw me in that Briar Patch," Brer Rabbit pleads with his antagonist, Brer Fox. Of course, Brer Fox falls for the ruse and Brer Rabbit escapes his clutches while cavorting in said destination and tauntingly saying, "I was born and raised in a briar patch."

"Alice Walker uses this strategy in *The Color Purple* when Squeak convinces the warden that he should release Sophia by telling him that the worst thing he could do to her is make her a white person's maid," Dr. Lynn said.

## MLA Lexicon

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

**In at least one aspect, the Modern Language Association is true to its name: When I went to the annual MLA convention late last year, I heard words being invented right on the spot.**

One of these inventions was the word "textuality." Teresa Ebert, one of the thousands of English professors in attendance, used this one. Her talk centered around her professor's explanation of how women's romance novels led to "the violence and carnage of Abu Ghraib." (As you can see from our previous dispatches, Dr. Ebert's topic was fairly typical of MLA themes as well.)

Imagine my surprise when I looked up the word in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary and found no matches. "The word you've entered isn't in the dictionary," Merriam-Webster's helpfully informed me. "Click on a spelling suggestion below or try using the box to the right." No luck there, either.

Most of the words and phrases employed at the MLA's annual meeting are real, no matter how awkward the context in which they are used.. What follows are favorite terms of MLA speakers and members as heard at the group's 2005 conference:

- Hegemonic (This is an MLA standby in all its forms and tenses, particularly when paired with a favorite MLA modifier, e.g., "patriarchal hegemony.")
- Shibboleth
- Intersection
- Interstice
- Rubric
- Xenophobia
- Descriptive, not
- Normative
- Binary (As we use this term in our everyday conversations, i. e., "dismantling binaries," and "academic vernacular binaries)
- Discursive
- Social constructivism
- Stand point theory

Apparently, if you can use all of these phrases in one sentence, you automatically qualify for the MLA Gold Circle. Many of the speakers at the convention did actually try to do just that, after introducing the thought with the phrase, "What needs to be fully articulated is that..." My

nominees would be Kimberly DeFazio of the State University of New York at Stony Brook and Anne Mollow of the University of California at Berkeley. Both did work many of the aforementioned verbs and nouns into their respective presentations.

It would be irresponsible of us to suggest going to a faculty party and building a drinking game around the repetition of these phrases by college professors. Had we adopted such an approach at the MLA convention, we would have been hammered before the first lecture ended.

*Malcolm A. Kline is the executive director of Accuracy in Academia.*

---

## Dead Whites Make Comeback

by: *Malcolm A. Kline*

When you find that rarity in academia today—a genuine scholar who knows his subject—you pay attention because you want to, not just because you have to, particularly when the professor is resurrecting a man of letters who has been purged from most thoroughly modern college classrooms. You also get a pretty good idea of why the politically correct gatekeepers of the Ivory Tower have banished such sages from campus lecture halls in the first place.

**“You have the three founders of standard English,” Professor Dennis Taylor pointed out at the Modern Language Association’s annual conference late last year. “[John] Dryden was a Catholic convert, [Alexander] Pope was a lifelong Catholic and [Jonathan] Swift was a Tory sympathetic to Catholicism.”**

**Dr. Taylor teaches at Boston College. Of the trio he enumerated, Pope is the most troubling for secular scholars who hold most of the tenured positions in academia today. “Pope’s Catholicism influenced his work,” Dr. Taylor said at the MLA’s Washington, D. C. conference, and “Mainstream literary tradition does not know what to do with it.”**

“Pope, a founder of standard English, was a papist.” For most professors, this influence makes Pope’s work incomprehensible. Dr. Taylor views their discomfort with wry detachment.

“This sets up a paradox in Pope of his Catholicism compared to his education and role in crafting standard English,” Dr. Taylor told the audience at the Marriott, “at least, an apparent contradiction.”

“Actually, Alexander Pope’s Catholic father introduced him to the classics.” Pope’s Catholicism seeped into his work in ways large and small: In his *Essay on Man*, for example, he used “[rosary] beads and prayer books” as symbols of old age.

In stark contrast to Pope, Christopher Marlowe is regarded as a “pioneer atheist.” Yet the religion in the climactic scene of his most famous work, *Dr. Faustus*, is usually ignored by Marlowe buffs in institutions of higher learning, and has been for some time.

Dr. Dayton W. Haskin, also of BC, has made a life’s work of studying not only Marlowe but changes in the college canon over time. Of Marlowe’s classic work, Dr. Haskin says, “Dr. Faustus is sort of a 16th Century *The Graduate*: he is given every advantage but doesn’t know what to do with it.”

Of college course offerings, Dr. Haskin offers, "Religious writings of [John] Donne have rarely made it into English courses at Harvard." Ironically, "Harvard was founded by Puritans in the 17th Century."

At Harvard, over time, "Reducing the possibility of studying religion led to a secular canon." And, as Harvard went...

Although this is the type of panel that the 121-year-old MLA in days gone by would have assembled, that particular discussion was exceptional last year at the group's late December gathering. Of more than a dozen arguably representative seminars which I attended at the MLA's annual convention, it was the only one of its kind.

*Malcolm A. Kline is the executive director of Accuracy in Academia.*

### **MLA Least Wanted**

1. David Horowitz
2. Academic Bill of Rights
3. George W. Bush
4. The war in Iraq
5. Capitalism
6. Joe McCarthy
7. Economists
8. Business Professors
9. Accuracy in Academia
10. American Council of Trustees and Alumni

Honorable mentions: Such notorious right wingers as Christina Hoff Sommers, Daniel J. Flynn, and Hillary Clinton.

### **MLA Most Wanted**

1. Karl Marx
2. Big government
3. More Funding
4. Sami Al Aryan
5. Michael Hardt
6. Antonio Negri
7. Toni Morrison
8. Jacques Derrida
9. The American Association of University Professors
10. Tony Kushner

--compiled by Julia A. Seymour

## Public Enemy No. 1

by: *Julia A. Seymour*

A marked hostility, if not a hatred, for David Horowitz was an oft repeated theme during the 2005 Modern Language Association Convention held in Washington D.C., and the session, "Graduate Student Teaching and the Culture Wars" was no exception.

**Henry James Morello, a Penn State University lecturer, kicked off the session with a talk entitled "David Horowitz Owes Us an Apology."** "The Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR) is one man's attempt to manipulate the concept of academic freedom and force his personal agenda on others," Morello said.

"The Student Bill of Rights [ABOR and similar ones] has been used by extreme factions of the Republican party to attack liberalism in the academy," said Morello.

Morello believes that ABOR is dangerous and that Horowitz, its author, owes an apology to teachers, students, parents and businessmen for his incorrect assumptions and negative impact on education.

Horowitz's belief that college students across the country are being indoctrinated by liberal professors indicates that he "assumes students are empty-headed and gullible," said Morello, who countered by saying, "If the academy is left, why isn't the left dominating..." and asked why so many students leave college as conservatives.

Students are not blank slates, and many get their values from their parents, so Horowitz must have a problem with parents, said Morello. "We do our jobs as parents, and we don't need you, David Horowitz, telling us what to do," he said.

Morello also criticized what he sees as the negative impact on students by Horowitz. Horowitz causes students to have a lack of respect for their teachers by encouraging them to investigate their professors and help run a blacklist on [discoverthenetwork.com](http://discoverthenetwork.com), according to Morello. This lack of respect for students turns into a problem within the workforce after college too, Morello said. Morello also believes Horowitz is also helping fuel students' sense of entitlement

"David Horowitz owes us [students, teachers, parents and businessmen] an apology," Morello repeated. The conclusion he came to was that "David Horowitz is fighting a war against higher education...Trying to spread fear and mistrust like a virus and the best to inoculate is education." Students of all stripes should be challenged equally. All ideas should be vigorously challenged," Morello said.

After the "Horowitz is the greatest threat to modern education" speech by Morello, Nicole McFarlane of North Carolina A&T presented "Keeping the 'Historically Black' of Historically Black Colleges and Universities," in which she discussed much of the history of North Carolina A&T and the challenges it has faced, as well as the personal challenge it has provided her with.

The most remarkable lesson McFarlane says she learned was how not to take things personally and how cultural politics are socially constructed.

The third speech was by Frank Gaughan of Hofstra University and Peter Khost of SUNY-Stony Brook. It was entitled, "Reading, Writing and Representing: Understanding Long Divisions in Literature and Composition."

After Gaughan's initial explanation that the humanities are facing a relevancy crisis, Khost explained that such departments are publicly criticized with comments like "My kids aren't being taught to read and write because they're [professors] trying to turn them into Marxists, feminists, homosexuals or worse: graduate students." The public considers the work we do abstruse, cryptic and absurd continued Khost.

The pair went on to say that few professors explain things well, and fewer students are becoming English majors and the cycle of a bad reputation, influencing people not to major in the subject and a greater stratification of jobs will continue unless something is done.

Statistically, Khost said that from 1970-2001 the number of English majors dropped by one-third, but there are the same number of English professors and they have trouble finding work because there aren't enough students. "We need to make it more relevant" in order to attract students back to it, Khost said.

We need to go public, said Gaughan, meaning that since colleges are already public it only makes sense to open the lines of communication, practice our discourse theories with the public, and act out internally and externally. We should establish dialogue between all groups to supplant negative views of our work, said Gaughan.

"The better we're able to explain what we're doing, the better we can make a case for what is going on," Gaughan explained.

## McCarthy Madness

by: *Julia A. Seymour*

The current mantra of the left seems to be that they are under McCarthyist oppression at the hands of the right everywhere, but especially in American colleges and universities; and that was certainly the prevailing view of the "Academic Work and the New McCarthyism I" panel during the Modern Language Association 2005 conference held just before New Years.

**One of the speakers, Bill Mullen, spoke out against the action of Daniel J. Flynn and the "surveillance group" Accuracy in Academia [this made me laugh, then worry about the visibility of my name tag and my safety].** Mullen attacked Flynn's criticism of W. E. B. Dubois as anti-American in his book. "We need to look at Dubois as someone who promotes free speech and freedom rather than ceding him to the right," said Mullen, who teaches at the University of Texas, San Antonio.

The roundtable, presented by the Radical Caucus of the MLA, centered around discussions of anti-war English curricula, the "frightening" legislative influence of the Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR), criticisms of the Patriot Act, and how "politics of panic" and "hypernationalism" created attacks on professors since 9/11.

Jacqueline Brady of Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York told the group how she uses *1984* by George Orwell and draws comparisons to the empire of the Bush administration. She sees a similarity between the rhetoricians in the book and the "intentional manipulations of public discourse by Bush." In Brady's English 24 class (an interdisciplinary course) they also read Iraq war readers, material on the bombing of Japan, *The Insider* and *Democracy Now*.

The anti-war curriculum is used by Brady to teach her working-class students. Brady was pleased that "it may have prevented my students from joining the military."

Later during the question and answer session, someone "playing devil's advocate" asked if the panel members would object to someone choosing to create a pro-war curriculum or would they hire someone who wanted to do that.

"I would have a problem with hiring someone who wanted to teach a pro-war stance, but I'm not currently in a position to hire anyone," said Brady.

**Grover Furr of Montclair University was in the audience and said he hopes "we all" have a problem with someone wanting to teach a pro-war class. "All ideas are not equally valid. The pro-war arguments are in many cases, like in creationism and Intelligent Design, based on historical falsehood. So pro-war arguments are a disqualification for those who want to teach others," Furr explained.**

Michael Bennett, a professor at Long Island University, answered that most professors do not support the war because "we've been taught to think critically and we hear 'pre-emptive strikes' and think 'Blitzkrieg that's not a good idea'."

The only dissenting opinion came from panelist Julie Gerk Hernandez of the University of Cincinnati, who said as long as the curriculum allowed for dissenting viewpoints she would be okay with a professor teaching a pro-war curriculum.

Hernandez' earlier discussion was about ABOR. "The American Council of Trustees and Alumni and Students for Academic Freedom work in tandem to prevent anti-war teaching and intimidate professors who 'silence conservative students'," said Hernandez. This is a problem, because as professors it is our job to provide alternative information and encourage critical thought, she said.

Sophia A. McClennan of Penn State University followed Hernandez' talk with her concerns that the attacks on professors who take anti-war positions are fueled by the politics of panic and hypernationalism.

## The F Word

*by: Julia A. Seymour*

The redefinition of feminism and the many prefixes that get attached to it, upsets Kellie Bean, an associate professor of English at Marshall University. She is particularly offended by and worried about "girly feminism."

"Girlyies have run away from 60s radicalism by heading back to beauty," said Bean at the Modern Language Association's annual conference. Holding up the editor of *Lucky* magazine and her quote about finding the perfect kitten heels as her modern feminist activity and writer Christina Hoff Sommers as examples of girlyies who are hurting the feminist cause, Bean expressed disgust to the packed crowd.

While there may be something to Bean's point, that girlyies are not "real" feminists and have no business co-opting the term, she needs a little help with her facts. Bean brought up Sommers quote that gender feminism (presumably the only valid kind in Bean's mind) simply, "does not suit me" then proceeded to talk about Sommers as if she labels herself a girly feminist and spends all her free time at the mall. But the truth about Sommers and her feminist persuasion is very different from the portrait painted by Bean at the panel on "Humanities and the F Word: Women and the MLA."

"I consider myself a mainstream equity feminist. And I believe most American women subscribe philosophically to the classical, first-wave kind of feminism whose main goal is equity, especially in politics and education. A first-wave mainstream or equity feminist wants for women what she wants for everyone: fair treatment, no discrimination," wrote philosophy professor Christina Hoff Sommers in both her speech, "Who Stole Feminism?" and in her book of the same title. Sommers defines herself as such a feminist because she does not agree with women who view all of life as a constant sexual-political struggle through the lens of sex-gender feminism. For Bean to lump Sommers in with the girlies denigrates her serious work, which does not include chapters on makeup, high heels or how to entice men, and it hurts Bean's cause because it is inaccurate.

Bean did explain that she has a problem with all these new labels of second- and third-wave feminism, equity feminism, girly feminism and others saying, "My concern is not that all women be activists, but I wish those doing the opposite would stop calling themselves feminists."

At the MLA's annual convention in Washington, D.C., this panel discussed the problems of redefining feminism, feminist activism in the third world, the connections between feminist theory and community involvement, and overworked women in academia.

In contrast to Bean, Sharon P. Doetsch of UC Santa Barbara is not concerned with the words used to describe feminism. In "Feminisms Becoming: Connecting Visions, Struggles and Theories in Feminist Activism since 1990," Doetsch spoke of her observations concerning feminist activism in the social justice movement. She found that people working in issue-oriented groups did not use the language academic feminists use. "We need to be willing to let go of the language of feminism to cooperate with grassroots efforts," said Doetsch, adding that adaptation to the constituents' language will help foster the necessary dialogue for action.

**Nina Y. Morgan of Kennesaw State University gave a presentation on feminist activism in the third world. "Where have all the feminists gone?" asked Morgan as she began speaking, but she answered her own question as she spoke of third world feminism.** Because of the reality of feminist activism in the third world, "women are poised inside and along the edges of a new world order," said Morgan. During the question and answer period she condemned the trafficking of women for sex and menial labor as well as child pornography, two issues she feels feminist activists must try to end.

Carlow University's Katie J. Hogan talked about a different issue than the other panelists, presenting "Superserviceable Feminism." In it she talked about service work within academia and how women are doing more of the work for no benefits. All Americans are overworked because capitalism encourages harder and more work, creating more work hours for everyone, but within academia women are expected to do more of the service than men are, said Hogan. "There is a danger for these women in providing service because it has no exchange value [does not count toward promotion, tenure or pay]," she said. Then Hogan offered a solution to academia, "We need to change the way we conceive of service work and the way we reward it."

## **Antidote to Apathy**

*by: Julia A. Seymour*

How to engage students in political issues and civic involvement was the central question of the panel, English Studies and Political Literacy, held on the first evening of the Modern Language Association conference at the Marriot Wardman Park here in Washington, D.C.

"The only way for us to enhance political literacy is to look at students and the way it has always happened; through civic involvement and inspiring activity," concluded Adolph Reed,

Jr. from the University of Pennsylvania, but Reed took a less than rarefied view at the students themselves.

He said that “kids are sponges” and teachers are facing student conservatism en masse because “over the last 25 years we have been living through a conservative ideological campaign to steer [the nation] right.”

Reed has served on the academic freedom committee of the American Association of University Professors. As Reed sees it, higher education is currently under assault on five fronts.

- Author and activist David Horowitz is “using freedom as a plug to intimidate faculty”
- The marketization or privatization of the university structure is causing the rise of “the notion of students as paying customers”
- There is a growing number of highly paid administrators who are not educators
- Private universities are growing
- **A class struggle is going on because many faculty are part-time or adjunct. This was not the last time the class struggle would be invoked at the MLA conference.**

Emory University professor, Mark Bauerlein; presenting a stark contrast to Reed, suggested deviating from the standard criticism of humanities classes to provide students with a “critical love of country” explaining that “we need to provide students with a sense of citizenship that is positive [too].”

Bauerlein thinks that a base of factual political and historical information is necessary for these students to then build upon, but in most cases, he finds they lack the foundation. He also suggested that adding materials by Whittaker Chambers and libertarians might be useful as well (the listeners did not seem to accept or reject this idea).

The forum also featured journalism professor, David T. Z. Mindich, and English professors Patricia Roberts-Miller and Kenneth W. Warren as well as retired professor Donald P. Lazere, who presided over the session.

Mindich, who teaches at Saint Michael’s College, tackled the question from the perspective that young people are not consumers of news and that getting them to form habits of news consumption are essential in addition to a diligent press that provides information to the public.

“All power must be checked, and the ultimate check on power is an informed citizenry thanks to a free press,” said Mindich.

Young people are not less intelligent, or disinterested in politics, Mindich asserted. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart is tremendously popular among young people. It is an entirely political show that requires a certain amount of political knowledge, explained Mindich.

Teachers need to find a way to engage their students in a way that elevates them like The Daily Show does, not that condescends to them, Mindich said. “We need to change our expectations of the students and challenge them.”

After Mindich’s talk, Ken Warren presented a paper entitled, “Learning Political Literacy through Chicago’s Public Schools: What’s College Funding Got to Do with It?” Warren, who

teaches at the University of Chicago, sought an answer to missing political literacy by looking back to public education prior to college.

"Those who teach college are limited by what is taught in primary and secondary school – where there is less control and lower funds," said Warren. He urged involvement on that level, but cautioned would be reformers that it is a struggle and "it takes a lot to change the institution."

Patricia Roberts-Miller was the final panel speaker, and she discussed the need for fairmindedness. "Teachers commonly think that people will not act unless they have information," but, said Roberts-Miller, "while it is possible that people learn and remember because they are engaged with the information, the reverse is also possible: that people are engaged with the information and so they learn and remember it."

She said that there can be a problem with political Calvinism on both sides meaning that one's identity exists only within this political framework and the result is that one stops listening as soon as they know what the other person "is" (meaning how they would label the other person).

Roberts-Miller does not view this as a healthy way to treat political subjects, rather, she thinks there needs to be civil discourse and more than one viewpoint expressed.

## I Think the Press Hates Us

by: *Julia A. Seymour*

"From our standpoint, the press just don't get us and [from their viewpoint] academics are abstruse," said Carnegie Mellon professor Jeffrey J. Williams to open a panel called *Covering Academe*, that could have been alternately subtitled "Why does the press make fun of us?"

**The very first speaker, David R. Shumway, also of Carnegie Mellon, articulated the complaint of those who attend and present each year only to be mocked by the media. "Ridiculing the convention has become a holiday ritual for journalists. They note the wackier titles and mock us," Shumway said.**

Shumway limited his comments to the mainstream media and said he believes the reason journalists do not choose to cover, or do not provide good coverage to the humanities is because of an inherent difference between journalism and academia. "Journalists strive for objectivity and work in the ideology of fact," but academics work in theory and interpretation, he said. Shumway also suggested part of the disconnect may result from competition.

"This turf battle is not going to be easily resolved," but Shumway said the best solution is that "academics should try to explain better [what they do and why] and be involved."

Richard Byrne, a reporter from *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*, was supposed to present, but was unable to so prompting Jennifer Ruark of *The Chronicle of Higher Ed* to read his paper to the audience.

Byrne's position is that the humanities should be covered by the press when it meets the criteria of being newsworthy and serious. His speech also explained the need for standards within academia and that the press should devote space to issues of academic malfeasance and plagiarism. "Journalists need to dig deep" to find the real stories, wrote Byrne, but he cautioned that it is not the journalist's job to find an audience for the humanities when it doesn't exist. "But when it is news, I want to cover it."

Scott McLemee of *Inside Higher Ed* made a presentation called, "Outside Looking In," and asked a pointed question of the gathered academics: "Why are 22-year-olds socialized [within classes] to consider them [the press] **mere** journalists?" He went on to say that while journalists do sometimes get things wrong, there seems to be a distinctive viewpoint coming from the professoriate that journalists are inferior. McLemee also offered up a solution to this phenomenon and to the image problem of professors and academia in the press. "Get professors speaking honestly and intelligently to journalists," he said.

Williams, who had opened the panel, also presented "Naiveté," in which he agreed with the previously mentioned idea that the problematic relationship between academe and journalism stems from their common ancestry and is a sort of family rivalry. He stated that holding onto snobbery because journalism is driven by market forces is unfair. "Journalists are intellectuals too," said Williams "and they should be in the union of intellectuals [with us]." He also said he would like to see more reporting of cultural events, but that means academics need to talk about what they are doing; and that there needs to be better and more accessible writing by professors, but even more importantly there needs to be more and better editing.

Ruark also gave her own statement as a respondent to the panel, saying that she believes many journalists are "comfortable with professors as philosopher kings" because journalists work within an entirely different framework and for a different purpose. The lack of good press coverage of the humanities is "the case of literary scholars not making a strong case for their studies to the journalists. They need to explain better what they do, why they do it and what is different about it," said Ruark.

In the question and answer session one listener made the point that perhaps the panel should have included a journalist from a newspaper or other mainstream media, rather than three education publication reporters.

## Teaching and Reaching

by: Julia A. Seymour

"There is a lot of teaching that has for eons taken place outside of the classrooms. Recently more has occurred [in American schools]," said Douglas Dean Hesse of Illinois State University to open the panel, " Faculty Roles in Student Learning beyond the Classroom," at the Modern Language Association's annual convention.

For example, the University of Miami has several residence halls that have live-in faculty members who interact with students in residence life programs. Margaret J. Marshall, a professor there, spoke on the panel about her experiences in the program. Marshall and her husband live in a residence hall, eat with students, have regular planned activities with students on the hall including faculty/fellow dinners that are planned by faculty and Resident Assistants (RAs).

"Most of my responsibility is informal, like helping point students to resources, reviewing paperwork and some advising," said Marshall, adding that there are some formal responsibilities and many fun activities. One of the most important things faculty can learn from the experience is that "a huge part of college experience has nothing to do with the classroom—we don't always consider that," said Marshall.

Marshall thinks there are great benefits for the faculty and the students, although they can be hard to quantify. "I think first-generation college students benefit the most. I know much more about campus resources than I did before I moved in 2 years ago. We learn and live together," explained Marshall.

**Following her speech, Kelly Fisher Lowe of the University of Wyoming talked about the challenge of getting students to write.** "I do think there is a need for a student-

centered community—an intellectual community to show the students the importance of reading, writing and reasoning,” he said.

Lowe promoted the idea of writing across the curriculum (WAC) courses saying that students say they best learn to write when it is wrapped around other things. He suggested incorporating writing and library skills in freshman seminars dealing with adjustment and concurrently offering an academic seminar in which students can design their project. **We need to deliberately package thing together like writing, science and philosophy to engage the students**, said Lowe.

The third speaker was Katherine Durham Oldmixon who teaches at Huston-Tillotson College, the oldest historically black college in Texas. Oldmixon wears many hats at the school including working in the writing center, teaching British literature and world literature, and was asked by the school to create a writing program. She is also an artist, and when she came to Huston-Tillotson the arts had fallen away, with the exception of music.

A member of the community, Boyd Vance, who directed Pro-Arts Collective wanted to get involved at the college and Oldmixon sought his help in putting on a black adaptation of *The Tempest*. This spurred many more joint ventures which helped her students discover talents they didn't realize they had, connect with people from different backgrounds and help ease racial tensions in the neighborhood, according to Oldmixon.

---

*We attended the more “mainstream” panels at the MLA’s annual conference late last year. To give you an idea of how wacky “the wackier titles”, that one MLA speaker alluded to, can get, we attach an appendix on the following page showing you some of the meetings that we missed.—ed.*

### Other MLA Panels

- *Reading Race In Black and Yellow*
- *The AntiSocial Thesis in Queer Theory*
- *The New Black Aesthetic and the Cultural Mulatto*
- *What's the Matter With Whiteness: On seeing the interface*
- *Convergences and Divergences: Chicano and Fronteriza Literatures*
- *Gender in Arab Shakespeare Appropriations*
- *Marxism and Globalization*
- *Old English Poetry: Bodies Aesthetics and Sexual Difference*
- *From Bebop to Hip Hop: Breaking the Cultural Divide I*
- *"Adulterated" Children's Literature: Adult Uses and Misuses of Children's Texts*
- *Heterosexuality: Queer Perspectives on Visual Culture*
- *Queering Faulkner*
- *The Gender of War: Jelinek*
- *Redface, Blackface: Women and Race Performance*
- *Worldly Women: Imagining Cosmopolitan Feminisms*
- *Beyond Orientalism: The Foreign Spaces of Victorian Sexology*
- *Sex and Music*
- *Gender Negotiations and Asian American Literature*
- *Prison Shakespeare*
- *Dykes to Watch Out For*



*Malcolm A. Kline is the executive director of Accuracy in Academia.*

*Julia A. Seymour is a staff writer for Accuracy in Academia.*