

The Midwest Popular Culture Association: Some History and Memories

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The Midwest Popular Culture Association and Midwest American Culture Association (hereafter, MPCA or Midwest PCA or Midwest PCA/ACA) began in 1973 with a conference in Duluth, Minnesota. An annual conference followed every year through 1997, at which time the organization went on hiatus. In 1999 I was finishing my term as President of the national American Culture Association. I wanted to remain active and consulted with Ray Browne (Secretary-Treasurer of the national PCA/ACA) about what I might do that would be most useful. My own idea was that I might try to do some fundraising, targeting media and entertainment companies as potential donors. Ray asked me instead to try to revive the Midwest PCA/ACA, and I agreed.

That turned out to be quite exciting and rewarding, although I must confess that I had very little firsthand knowledge about the culture or structure of the organization prior to 1997. I had only attended one MPCA conference – the 1987 conference in Kirkwood, Missouri. Ray Browne wrote a brief history of the MPCA for his 1988 book *Against Academia* ("Midwest Popular Culture Association," in *Against Academia*). That account reproduces a two-page, first-person reminiscence by Fred E.H. Schroeder, founder of the MPCA. Ray's 2002 book *Mission Underway*, a revised edition of *Against Academia*, includes Ray's historical account (reprinted from *Against Academia* and including Fred's reminiscence), plus a one-page update ("Midwest Popular Culture Association," in *Mission Underway*). The present essay is concerned primarily with the "relaunch" of MPCA in 2002, which I initiated, and with the aftermath of that resurrection. I will include some (incomplete) information about the earlier history of MPCA, which I have been investigating retrospectively. I hope eventually to be able to provide a fuller account of the early history.

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I do not know exactly why the organization became dormant in 1998. Ray told me (and also reported in *Mission Underway*, page 104) that Garyn Roberts had ended up spending some of his own money to keep the organization going. The first sign of trouble, to my knowledge, was the cancellation of a planned MPCA conference in Crystal Lake, Illinois, in 1998. I think Garyn had scheduled the conference in Crystal Lake to establish a tie-in with Chester Gould's widow, who lived in the vicinity. Gould was the creator of the *Dick Tracy* comic strip, one of Garyn's research interests. The conference was canceled because not enough people registered. (I did ask Garyn to let me know whether MPCA owed him any money, but he did not respond.) The new version of MPCA that eventually emerged built upon the efforts of past leaders of the organization including Ray Browne, Pat Browne, Fred E.H. Schroeder, J. Fred MacDonald, Maureen Honey, Lew Carlson, Larry Landrum, Jane Bakerman, Christopher Geist, Timothy Scheurer, William Schurk, Ruth Meserve, Sammy Danna, Christina Ferreira, James Ferreira, Susan Koppelman, Carol Miller, Katherine Pavlik, Garyn Roberts, Carl Holmberg, Mary Jean DeMarr, and Gary Hoppenstand.

My first attempt to revive the MPCA involved hooking up with the Great Plains PCA/ACA, which was planning a conference in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, in about 1999. The Great Plains group agreed to advertise that conference as a joint meeting of the Great Plains and Midwest organizations. Again, the conference was canceled because not enough people registered. (The Great Plains organization has been dormant ever since but was very helpful to the eventual relaunch of the MPCA by providing financial assistance and a mailing list.)

I next tried, in about 2000, to attach the MPCA conference to the Midwestern Conference on Literature, Language and Media (MCLLM), an annual event at Northern Illinois University (NIU – my home institution) put on by NIU English Department graduate students. Discussions about combining the events proved fruitless.

I had a sabbatical leave for the 2001-02 school year and decided to make a concerted effort to revive the MPCA as an independent entity, without connecting it with any other extant enterprise. In trying to affiliate with the Great Plains PCA/ACA and the MCLLM, I had hoped to achieve synergy, save myself some work, and avoid the scary prospect of starting from scratch. When it became clear that the only way to restart the MPCA was to create something completely new, I consulted with Pat Browne, longtime Program Coordinator for the national PCA/ACA. She gave me some very good advice, which was to schedule the

conference only in big cities, which are attractive tourist destinations, which have numerous colleges and universities to provide attendees, and which have major airports that make it easy for people from distant locales to attend.

Having attended conferences of the Northeast, South, Midwest, and Far West PCA/ACA organizations, I understood that there are two basic models for academic conference planning. One model is to hold the conference at a university campus. This gives you free or low-cost meeting rooms and audio-visual facilities but may mean an undesirable location, inconvenient travel for some people, and limited options for lodging. The other model is to hold the conference at a hotel in a big city. This provides the advantages Pat Browne identified but is more expensive for both the organization and attendees. Having seen MPCA conferences fail to materialize in Crystal Lake and Cape Girardeau, I scheduled a "comeback" conference in Milwaukee in 2002. I am eternally grateful for Pat's advice and glad that I followed it. The Northeast organization had followed the college-campus model with great success, but I thought it made more sense to do that in a compact region (New England) than in the vast Midwest. As of 2002, the Far West chapter had for many years had an annual conference at a hotel in Las Vegas, but the conference was run by Felicia Campbell, a professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.¹ The annual Far West PCA meeting was therefore a hotel conference but closely connected with a college campus. Hotel guest room rates tend to be artificially low in Las Vegas as a loss leader for gambling tourism, so the Far West business model was actually a hybrid and probably not easily transposable to other regional PCA/ACA organizations.

Dealing with hotels turned out to be even more complicated and stressful than I had imagined, although it was a good learning experience. I was extremely fortunate in 2001-02 to have Lori Abels (now Lori Scharenbroich) as a graduate teaching assistant. Her official assignment at NIU was to assist me in editing the journal *Popular Music and Society*, but I "borrowed" some of her time to help me plan and administer the MPCA conference.² Lori's strengths and interests nicely

¹ Felicia continued this model until her death in 2020. Since then, because of the pandemic, the Far West PCA has had only virtual conferences.

² Support from Northern Illinois University has been vitally important in the development of MPCA over the last two decades. The NIU Communication Department substantially subsidized my efforts to reactivate MPCA. Many faculty members and students in the NIU Communication

complemented my own, and she therefore ended up doing most of the liaison work with our first two hotels, the Wyndham Milwaukee Center Hotel and the Marriott Minneapolis City Center. Especially after the MPCA's hiatus, but also simply as a matter of good business practice, I thought it was important to have a conference planned for 2003, not only 2002. I also considered it essential to be able to announce the dates and location of the 2003 conference at the 2002 conference. This would at least convey an impression that we knew what we were doing and that we had built a foundation that would last longer than one year. That impression would be helpful to get repeat presenters and for recruitment and retention of area chairs.

The 2002 conference went well, with 178 participants listed in the program book. To place the "new" MPCA in a proper context, I list below the dates and locations for all MPCA conferences:

- 1973: Duluth, Minnesota; University of Minnesota-Duluth, October 12-13
- 1974: Chicago, Illinois; Northeastern Illinois University, October 10-12
- 1975: Kalamazoo, Michigan; Western Michigan University, October 9-11
- 1976: Bowling Green, Ohio; Bowling Green State University, October 21-23
- 1977: Normal, Illinois; Illinois State University, October 6-8
- 1978: East Lansing, Michigan; Michigan State University, November 2-4
- 1979: Bowling Green, Ohio; Bowling Green State University, October 11-13
- 1980: Kalamazoo, Michigan; Western Michigan University, October 23-25
- 1981: Columbus, Ohio; Franklin University, October 22-24
- 1982: Terre Haute, Indiana; Indiana State University, October 27-30
- 1983: Bowling Green, Ohio; Bowling Green State University,

and English Departments have attended MPCA conferences, served in MPCA leadership positions, and brought their own colleagues and students into MPCA.

- October 20-22
- 1984: Bloomington, Indiana; Indiana University Bloomington, October 4-6
- 1985: Chicago, Illinois; Loyola University, October 17-19
- 1986: Kalamazoo, Michigan; Western Michigan University, October 23-26
- 1987: Kirkwood, Missouri; St. Louis Community College-Meramec, October 16-18
- 1988: Bowling Green, Ohio; Bowling Green State University, November 3-5
- 1989: Lansing, Michigan; Sheraton of Lansing, October 26-29
- 1990: Toledo, Ohio; The Toledo Hilton and the Medical College of Ohio, October 4-7
- 1991: Cleveland, Ohio; Holiday Inn Lakeside, October 17-19
- 1992: Indianapolis, Indiana; Radisson Plaza Hotel Indianapolis, October 8-10
- 1993: East Lansing, Michigan; Michigan State University, October 1-2
- 1994: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Marriott Green Tree Inn, October 7-8 (joint meeting with the Lyrica Society)
- 1995: Indianapolis, Indiana; Ramada Plaza Hotel, November 3-4
- 1996: Bowling Green, Ohio; Bowling Green State University, November 15-16
- 1997: Traverse City, Michigan; Northwestern Michigan College, October 22-25
- 1998: No conference (a conference had been scheduled for October 15-17 at the Holiday Inn / Holidome in Crystal Lake, Illinois, but was canceled)
- 1999: No conference
- 2000: No conference
- 2001: No conference
- 2002: Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Wyndham Milwaukee Center Hotel, October 4-6
- 2003: Minneapolis, Minnesota; Marriott Minneapolis City Center, October 17-19
- 2004: Cleveland, Ohio; Radisson Hotel-Gateway, October 8-10

- 2005: St. Louis, Missouri; Westin St. Louis, October 14-16
- 2006: Indianapolis, Indiana; Sheraton Indianapolis Hotel & Suites, October 27-29
- 2007: Kansas City, Missouri; Crowne Plaza Kansas City Downtown, October 12-14
- 2008: Cincinnati, Ohio; Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza, October 3-5
- 2009: Detroit, Michigan; Westin Book Cadillac Detroit, October 30-November 1
- 2010: Bloomington, Minnesota; Sheraton Bloomington Hotel Minneapolis South, October 1-3
- 2011: Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Milwaukee Hilton City Center, October 14-16
- 2012: Columbus, Ohio; Renaissance Columbus Downtown Hotel, October 12-14
- 2013: St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis Union Station, a DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel, October 11-13
- 2014: Indianapolis, Indiana; JW Marriott Indianapolis, October 3-5
- 2015: Cincinnati, Ohio; Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza, October 1-4
- 2016: Rosemont, Illinois; Hilton Rosemont-Chicago O'Hare, October 6-9
- 2017: St. Louis, Missouri; Hyatt Regency St. Louis at The Arch, October 18-22
- 2018: Indianapolis, Indiana; Hyatt Regency, October 4-7
- 2019: Cincinnati, Ohio; Hyatt Regency Cincinnati, October 10-13
- 2020: Virtual conference, October 1-4 (the conference had been scheduled for the same dates at The Westin Minneapolis but was converted to a virtual conference because of the pandemic)
- 2021: Minneapolis, Minnesota; The Westin Minneapolis, October 7-10
- 2022: Chicago, Illinois; DePaul University, October 14-16

The 2002 relaunch was followed by a period of steady growth of the MPCA. For example, the 2016 conference program book listed 75 areas and 440 participants. It has been a pleasure to visit the great cities of the Midwest and to observe the

success of the hotel model recommended by Pat Browne. It is notable that in its earlier years MPCA used the college-campus model, also with success, through 1988 and in 1993, 1996, and 1997. Because of the pandemic and its disruption of the travel, hotel, and higher-education sectors, the 2022 MPCA conference will be held at DePaul University in Chicago. I think that is an excellent plan in that it will save money and avoid contractual entanglement with a hotel while still offering the advantages of big-city surroundings, and at a university that has become a major center of popular culture study.

The area-chair model has long been a fixture of the national PCA/ACA and is also used by other regional PCA/ACA organizations. I think this system has been key to the success of PCA/ACA and MPCA, and certainly important to their growth. An area chair is a subject-matter expert assigned to recruit and vet participants and to group the participants into panels on a particular topic. Given the sprawling nature of popular culture and American culture as fields of study, some decentralization is necessary in the collective definition of the discipline and in the creation of conference programs. The area chairs for the 2002 MPCA conference were 22 people I knew or who were recommended by Ray or Pat Browne. The area chairs did fine work. Some of them remained in their positions for many years and thereby greatly contributed to the growth and vitality of MPCA. In later years we added many more area chairs. They included volunteers and people recommended by existing area chairs. After the first year we scheduled an annual area-chairs breakfast at the conference to thank people for serving, to provide a forum for exchange of ideas, and to develop some sense of the "best practices" being enacted by the area chairs. In 2006 two people who were not area chairs (Molly Moran and Pamela Wicks) mistakenly showed up at the area-chairs breakfast. Rather than asking them to leave, I "harvested" them as area chairs. That was one of my favorite moments. No such thing as a free breakfast.

I asked the original group of area chairs to commit for at least three years so that the organization would have some continuity and a foundation for growth. Turnover of area chairs has not been much of a problem, but the decentralized system inevitably creates tensions related to job performance and overall quality control. These are perennial issues in the national PCA/ACA, and the MPCA also encountered them fairly quickly after the relaunch. In an ideal world, all area chairs would do their jobs with great efficiency and transparency, all panels and papers would be excellent, every subcategory of popular culture and American

culture studies would be represented by one and only one area, and every area could be counted on to generate exactly the same number of panels every year (two is a good number). Deviations from the ideal sometimes necessitate an administrative response. Initially I took it upon myself to try to regulate the overall area-chair structure of the organization and to negotiate with individual area chairs about any issues arising. Eventually, oversight of area chairs became the responsibility of the MPCA Vice President. The existence of administrative offices developed concurrently with the evolution of the MPCA's area-chair system and is probably equally important.

At the 2002 conference we scheduled a business meeting to figure out what kind of organization we might want and who might be interested in building it. As expected, some of the area chairs were eager to create a new organization and to take leadership roles. Over the next few years we created bylaws (mostly borrowed from the PCA/ACA in the South), elected officers, and developed a system of committees and procedures to supplement the area-chair structure. The initial administrative structure for the relaunch consisted of myself as Executive Secretary and Lori Abels as Conference Coordinator. These offices remain in existence, but within a few years we added several more offices and grouped the officers into an Executive Council.

Other regional organizations have varying levels of bureaucracy. Generally, the alternative to bureaucracy is to have one person, or a small group of people, do all the work and make all the decisions. One of the problems with the latter model is that the organization can easily collapse if there are not enough people learning the ropes, making a personal investment in the organization, and developing relationships with each other. I have assumed (without much evidence) that a lack of organizational structure and identity may have contributed to the disappearance of the MPCA after 1997. For that reason and because of my own biases, I thought it was important to develop an organizational infrastructure for the revived MPCA.

That caused me a bit of a dilemma. I am simultaneously a control freak and a believer in democracy, teamwork, and process. At the beginning of the relaunch of MPCA, Lori and I necessarily did too much of the work ourselves. This was not sustainable, but I nonetheless enjoyed it and took great satisfaction from our successful conferences. It was extremely fortunate that Lori, despite finishing her M.A. at NIU and going on to have a life outside of academe, has been willing to continue as Conference Coordinator. She has done a splendid job dealing with

hotels and doing most of the on-site work connected with the conferences (among her many other contributions). She has done these things much better than I would have, and they are very important. It is because of Lori that we have had attractive guest room rates at our conference hotels, excellent food events, good audio-visual support for panelists who needed it, and a well-organized registration desk. Lori has also been central to the fiscal health of the organization by keeping hotel costs down while still creating the conditions necessary for conference attendees to have memorable positive experiences.

We borrowed two ideas from other regional PCA/ACA groups – a Friday evening reception and a Saturday luncheon. Lori turned those into high points of the conference. I thought it was important to get them right, because they brought the entire group of people together. These are the kinds of events that make conference participants feel that they are all part of one thing. This is especially important because popular culture and American culture are such multifarious fields of study. With so many different areas of interest combined into one conference, social events help people to focus on what they have in common. An additional unifying influence, again borrowed from other regional organizations, was the inclusion of a featured speaker at the Saturday luncheon. Journalist-activist Salim Muwakkil kicked off this annual event in exemplary fashion at the 2002 Milwaukee conference by delivering a hard-hitting address on racism and the culture of incarceration in the United States. My preference for luncheon addresses was political speakers, partly because I believe the PCA/ACA and its affiliated organizations have sometimes neglected the political roots of popular culture studies. However, selection of speakers is always dependent on who is available and eventually became a matter for discussion by the entire Executive Council. There was not a clunker among our luncheon speakers. Introducing the speaker as people finished eating lunch provided the President with an opportunity to make some prefatory ceremonial remarks thanking various people for their good work, mourning the loss of people who had died during the preceding year, and so forth. I do not think the organization succeeds or fails by these small touches, but they do have an impact and contribute to an overall vibe. It is better to do them well than to do them poorly, and I would say MPCA has done them quite well. In recent years the organization has downsized the Saturday lunch event but has added Friday featured speakers (often academics from local universities) and a game night for group cohesion.

In 2008 I developed a serious health problem at exactly the same time that I

moved into a new, ridiculously demanding administrative job at NIU. I had already planned on stepping down as MPCA Executive Secretary within a few years, but instead I exited the position abruptly after the 2008 conference. Because of my control mania I had regrets about leaving the position at all, but I was especially sorry to dump it on my successors in such unceremonious fashion. Heather McIntosh and Brendan Riley shared the job of Executive Secretary briefly. Both had served admirably in positions on the MPCA Executive Council. Having them ready to step up was a blessing. Heather was going through her own tribulations at the time and did not remain long in the new position. Brendan did an outstanding job through 2012 and then left the MPCA job to become Executive Director of the national PCA/ACA. Kathleen Turner Ledgerwood succeeded Brendan as MPCA Executive Secretary. Malynnda Johnson succeeded Kathleen and is the current Executive Secretary. Heather, Brendan, Kathleen, and Malynnda have been excellent stewards of the organization. As of late 2022 I believe the MPCA is in fine health. The organization reached a milestone in 2013 with the launch of its own annual publication, the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, initially edited by Bob Batchelor. Norma Jones succeeded Bob. CarrieLynn Reinhard succeeded Norma and is the current Editor of the journal (mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal) .

A number of additional people deserve praise and thanks for their willingness to serve as officers and members of the Executive Council after the relaunch of the MPCA. These people include Timothy Scheurer, who became the first President of the new organization; my NIU colleague Gretchen Bisplinghoff, who became the first Vice President and later President; Angela Nelson, who succeeded Gretchen as Vice President and then President; Paul Booth, who succeeded Angela; Cortney Cronberg Barko, who succeeded Paul; and Katie Wilson, who succeeded Cortney (Cortney then succeeded Katie for another term as President). Anthony Adah, Ann Andalaro, Cory Barker, Anne Canavan, Darryl Kent Clark, Cynthia Cooper, John Dowell, Brian Ekdale, Jane Florine, Shanna Gilkeson, Gary Hoppenstand, MaryAnn Janosik, Matthew Kneller, Paul Kohl, Julia Largent Kuttler, Allison Levin, Sarah Petrovic, Delana Price, Hai Ren, Linda Robinson, Jesse Schlotterbeck, and Pamela Wicks have served quite ably and enthusiastically in various capacities on the Executive Council. Because there are dozens of people who have served as area chairs and on various committees, I will not list them all here, but these dedicated individuals have been crucial to the success of the reformed MPCA. My wife, Janet Novak, served as an area chair

after the relaunch, has served on several committees, and was an unsung contributor to my Executive Secretary duties through 2008.

It has been one of the great honors and pleasures of my life to work with such a fine group of people on such a worthwhile project. Looking ahead, I hope to remain involved with the MPCA for as long as I can, and it is my expectation that the organization will continue to prosper and improve thanks to the efforts of the many enlightened and energetic folks who have chosen to make MPCA a significant part of their professional lives.

Works Cited

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