

## Unsettled Debts: 1968 and the Problem of Historical Memory

### *Introduction*

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How might scholars of communication revisit the “spirit of ‘68” without succumbing to distorted forms of memory such as nostalgia and myth? This brief essay introduces the contents of “Unsettled Debts: 1968 and the Problem of Historical Memory,” a Special Section that addresses the problem of historical memory *as such* by analyzing media objects and moments from 1968 that have been activated in the service of contemporary social movements, obscured through superficial citation, or omitted from the dominant record altogether. With recommendations for orienting to the past in the interest of decisive action in the present, this section will be of value to scholars of archival method, media activism, social movements, antiracism, feminism, internationalism, and critical theory.

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Back in 2018, the 50th anniversary of 1968 gave rise to a small industry devoted to commemoration and reflection. Scholars and journalists revisited that year’s insurgencies in dozens of essays and books, activists paid tribute to its emancipatory legacy in the streets, and companies exploited it on our screens. In one egregious display, Dodge Ram used an audio excerpt from a 1968 speech by Martin Luther King Jr. to narrate a Super Bowl truck commercial. Within hours, a hijacked version of the ad began circulating online featuring the same speech but using an alternate excerpt in which King denounced consumer society. In opposition to what Charisse Burden-Stelly (2018) has described as “the distortion of King’s lofty dream into a commodifiable fantasy,” many people have fought to preserve the memory of King’s radicalism and to defend the legacy of an era that feels at once distant and relevant (para. 2).

With each corrective, however, we are reminded that history is more than a record for us to set straight. It is a process of production in which we participate, where even our principled longings in the present can become obstacles to confronting our co-implication with the past. “I’m already suffering with MLK50 fatigue,” wrote Memphis Pastor Noel Hutchinson as thousands gathered in his city to honor Dr. King in 2018 (as cited in Cheers, 2018, para. 9). That week, a North Memphis store clerk shot and killed a young Black man named Dorian Harris. “While many of us are getting ready to brag to our friends, ‘We were there,’” Hutchinson lamented, “2018 in many ways here in Memphis still has the look of 1968” (as cited in

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Cheers, 2018, para. 9). Sometimes it seems as though the past is alluring precisely because of the commercialized distortions it accommodates—and that the distortions are what people desire. Indeed, as Robin D. G. Kelley (2022) reminds us in the Foreword to this Special Section, the “carefully curated narrative” that dominates public engagement with the 1960s is a menacing expression of triumphant neoliberalism.

How, then, might we revisit the “spirit of ‘68” without succumbing to distorted forms of memory such as nostalgia and myth? How should scholars orient to the contested past in order to foster decisive action in the present?

These questions have implications that exceed the particular legacy of 1968. One need only recall, for instance, how the mobs on January 6, 2021, carried signs reading “This is our 1776,” a citation that Donald Trump himself had invoked with his widely condemned 1776 Commission and Report (Corbould & McDonnell, 2021, para. 26). Indeed, as A. K. Thompson (2020) observes, Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan found broad traction because, in refusing to specify its referent, it could represent “visions of America’s past greatness bundle[d] together [with] the suburbanization, segregation, and White working-class advancement narratives of the post-war period . . . woven into a fabric cross-stitched with tales of antebellum gallantry and patched with tattered Confederate flags” (p. 538). In some cases, it could even be animated by “unapologetic recollections of colonial conquest, genocidal displacement, and overt racial mastery” (Thompson, 2020, p. 538). As these reactionary tapestries morph (inspiring everything from book bans to coup attempts), people of conscience will be compelled to chase and challenge the distortions. Equally important, however, is discerning how the problem of historical memory *as such* similarly influences leftist analysis and strategy.

Global 1968 looms large in the romantic imaginary of the political left—so much so that, as financial collapse forced a new generation into action in 2008, the slogan “Fuck May ‘68, Fight Now” began appearing in the streets of Europe. But while “fight now” is always a wise injunction, disavowing nostalgia does little to help us make sense of its traction or implications. Conversely, while 1960s mythology might fuel unwarranted optimism following a grim half century of capitalist entrenchment and Western imperialism, the legacy of ‘68 can also prompt strategic reckoning. If, as some argue, nostalgia for 1968 derives from a romance of “the event,” one need only recall that Malcolm X dubbed the 1963 March on Washington “the Farce on Washington” to discern that neither this romance nor its critique is new.

According to Dan Berger and Emily Hobson (2020), it is an error to assume that consequential political work only takes place during periods of explosive movement activity. This assumption, which is bound up with the legacy of the long sixties, should therefore not dissuade today’s organizers from orienting to the intervening decades (often understood as a period of leftist decline) and recognizing them as an equally “usable past” (Berger & Hobson, 2020). But even if we reject the first clause of Lenin’s famous dictum that “there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen,” the second is harder to dispute. The mass uprisings since 2008, both progressive (Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter) and reactionary (elections of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Charlottesville 2017, Washington D.C. 2021), remind us that the implications of escalated street confrontation demand constant strategic reflection. Little wonder, then, that our current chaotic conditions have prompted renewed popular

interest in the late 1960s and that era's revolutionary themes. Aaron Sorkin's (2020) *Trial of the Chicago 7*, Steve McQueen's (2020) series *Small Axe*, the FX miniseries *Mrs. America* (Boden, Fleck, Asante, de Clermont-Tonnerre, & Bravo, 2020), and Shaka King's (2021) *Judas and the Black Messiah* have revisited to great acclaim and thoughtful criticism the sense of revolutionary promise that characterized 1968 and, specifically, examined this promise through the conservative backlash of the 1970s. Identification with the victorious pulse of the 1960s, we find, can be a political liability but also a political opportunity.

This Special Section began as a graduate student conference dedicated to contending with the contested legacy of 1968 and, by extension, with the dilemma of historical memory. In this effort, compelled in part by the proto-fascism of the Trump era, several of the organizers gravitated toward Walter Benjamin's (1968) observation that "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (p. 255). Because this danger is always threatening to make the tradition of the oppressed "a tool of the ruling classes," Benjamin (1968) believed that the past needed to be approached instead in a way that might bring the present into a critical state. Finding ourselves at the Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, we organized our conference program around analysis of media objects and moments from 1968 that had been reactivated in the service of contemporary political movements, obscured through superficial citation, or omitted from the record altogether. The submissions that make up this Section are among those that rose forcefully to the occasion.

In "'Thái Bình means Peace': (Re)positioning South Vietnamese Exchange Students' Activism in the Asian American Movement," Ly Thúy Nguyễn analyzes the mythologized legacy of Vietnamese exchange student and antiwar activist Nguyễn Thái Bình, foregrounding the contradictory investigative reporting on his death. A student in the 1968 cohort of a U.S. Agency for International Development scholarship program, Bình was one of numerous influential Vietnamese antiwar activists who have been largely overlooked in movement histories. He was deported for his activism and killed after allegedly hijacking a flight to Saigon in 1972—an allegation many Asian American organizers and scholars reject, instead insisting that he was assassinated. Taking up Bình's story as a case study in the power of resonant myths within the Asian American Third World left, Nguyễn carefully analyzes the political force of historical ambiguity. In "Con Che? The Specter of Communism in the 1968 Chicano Blowouts," Magally Miranda and Efrén Michael Lopez similarly contend with the implications of ambiguity in the history of that pivotal wave of Los Angeles student protests. Through close readings of activist media, letters of complaint, newspaper coverage, and oral histories—much of this material found in the Los Angeles Unified School District archives—they piece together minutia to reveal the unnerving process by which communist participation in the protests has been obscured. To correct for how Cold War politics distorted the memory of the Blowouts, Miranda and Lopez extend feminist scholarship about interpreting the archive's silences and recommend centering the marginalized testimonies of women activists to uncover a more complete story.

Questions of gender and movement leadership also animate Clementine Bordeaux's reflections on the enduring influence of the American Indian Movement (founded in 1968) in "The American Indian Movement and the Politics of Nostalgia: Indigenous Representation from Wounded Knee to Standing Rock." Comparing AIM's famous early iconography to representations of the 2016 #NoDAPL mobilization, Bordeaux draws out the contrasting gender politics of these two periods of struggle. Young Indigenous activists today,

she observes, identify strongly with AIM and even share in elders' nostalgia for the organization's heyday but do not identify with its masculinism. Highlighting the instructive self-representational practices of emerging Indigenous artists and activists, Bordeaux recognizes nostalgia as an opportunity for intergenerational communication about colonial heteropatriarchal norms. Loubna Qutami similarly focuses on the political importance of self-representation in decolonial struggle in "Reborn as *Fida'i*: The Palestinian Revolution and the (Re)Making of an Icon." Revisiting the rise of the "new Palestinian" with the 1968 Battle of Karameh, Qutami traces the emergence and evolution of the *Fida'i* as an icon. Through analysis of a rich selection of photography, poster art, and political manifestos, she shows how organizational shifts in the Palestinian Resistance Movement have corresponded to transformations of this central revolutionary symbol. Its romantic allure has inspired superficial invocations and opportunistic appropriations; however, Qutami argues, rather than concede the *Fida'i* to these destructive tendencies, we should embrace its allure as a signal that an uncompromising decolonial politics remains an enduring possibility. Historical shifts in visual meaning also figure centrally in my own contribution, "Lost in Citation: Afterlives of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike," in which I analyze the 2018 commemorations of the strike through their citations of the historic "I AM A MAN" placard. Foregrounding how these citations modify the original, I argue that such modifications reveal transformations in the political field that constrain today's labor movement from living up to the legacy of this historic fight. Formal citations, I suggest, can be made to disclose the presuppositions that mark the context of their elaboration, and can therefore help us to grasp the insidiousness by which capitalism and the state recuperate legacies of struggle.

Courtney M. Cox takes up the recuperative "smoothing" of 1960's-era radicalism directly in her interview with historian Amira Rose Davis, "The Limits of Smooth Legacies: 1968, Feminist History, and the Tradition of Athlete Activism." Reflecting on contemporary mainstream celebrations of Tommie Smith and John Carlos's podium protest during the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Cox and Davis remind readers that this action was initially widely condemned. Both athletes were expelled from the Olympic village and ostracized until the 1980s, when they were recast as heroes. To explain this smoothing process, Davis argues, we must attend foremost to what, and who, gets buffed out. Taking up another formative moment associated with the '68 Olympics in "Afterlives of Tlatelolco: Memory, Contested Space, and Collective Imagination," Paulina Lanz revisits the Tlatelolco massacre, when the Mexican Army opened fire on a large student protest 10 days before the games began. Lanz explains that this tragedy figures prominently in Mexico's history of political repression but has in the intervening decades been retold through civic memorialization, much of which has unfolded ephemerally within the physical borders of Tlatelolco Square itself. The contestation of Tlatelolco makes it a site of reckoning and imagination, laying bare the battle between historical memory and historical amnesia.

Also engaging with the politics of ephemerality, Adrien Sebros' "Once Lost, Painfully Present: Maya Angelou's *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (1968)" calls our attention to the tapes of Maya Angelou's celebrated 1968 public affairs television program, which were lost for decades and then, by chance, unearthed in 2009. With its rediscovery and digitization, this program has introduced a new generation of viewers to Angelou's insights and strategic sensibility regarding Black unity, education, liberation, and culture. Extending media scholarship on archives and Black visibility, Sebros analyzes the program's content and public-access origins for painfully relevant lessons about how to combat the persistence of state violence against Black bodies. The issue closes with this focus on media technology, as Soledad Altrudi, Frances Corry, M. C. Forelle, and

Andrea Alarcon transport us back to "The Sociotechnical Imaginaries of 1968." Through four markedly distinct case studies—"Earthrise," the iconic full photograph of the Earth; the tech demo that predicted the personal computer; a policy debate over the balance of power in the air quality-control crisis; and the taken-for-granted emergency line, 9-1-1—they show how visions of technological advance often coincide with fantasies of a better world. Building on the theoretical concept of the "sociotechnical imaginary," however, they remind us that technological aspirations are ultimately inextricable from social relations of power and that this fact must always be brought to bear on analysis of our technological present.

This issue is marked by various omissions. No single volume can contend with the full legacy of 1968. Nonetheless, taken together, these essays affirm that habits of memory and citation are fundamental to how social movements and political thought develop. We summon the past and make history through collective processes that can be difficult to recognize, and that are often unconscious. Only through analysis can we confront patterns of mythic recollection and nostalgic longing. In so doing, however, we find that such habits disclose an affective identification with the promise of a different and better world. By making these desires apparent, we might help to realize them in the present. This is our debt to the past—and, as Benjamin (1968) reminds us, it "cannot be settled cheaply" (p. 254).

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