Lynn Worsham and Gary Olson’s interview with Ernesto Laclau makes explicit for rhetoric and composition the various(ly) connected interests of rhetorical, political, and social theorists. Laclau is concerned with, among other things, the ways in which discursive formations of political interests may serve, on the one hand, to advance radical democratic agendas and, on the other, to isolate individuals and groups from participating effectively in hegemonic struggle. He believes that understanding what he calls “the logic of hegemony” is a necessary precondition to developing strategies that, he argues, must rely on expanded notions of rhetoric and rhetorical argumentation.

Laclau understands hegemony to be the product of ongoing struggle among groups as they interact; this interaction, necessarily political, constitutes “the social.” Hegemonic struggle is not merely domination by more powerful groups but is, rather, a never-ending process in which identity and power are always at stake. Importantly for rhetoric and composition, hegemony is locatable at the symbolic, or discursive level, where identities—and thus differences—are constructed, dislocated, contested. Language, Laclau notes, “is by definition a system of difference,” and it is within language that the relational nature of identities may be found: “When one is thinking about black identities or white identities, one is not thinking two separate things; one is thinking in discourses which constitute whiteness through the exclusion of blackness. . . . [which functions] in your discourse as the Other.” The material objective of a radical democratic project must, according to Laclau, be accompanied by “destabilizing the category of whiteness. . . . It is not simply a matter of extending to other groups something which belongs to the dominant group; it’s that the process of this extension destabilizes the very categories of the dominant groups as such.”

Laclau’s use of “extension” here works in multiple ways. He refers quite clearly to the extension to Others of those rights and privileges enjoyed by dominant groups, but he also refers to the extension of the logic of equality itself. The logic of equality extends beyond the particularities of U.S. civil rights and women’s movements, for example, to tap into universal notions of equality that can, in specific historical moments, transcend the borders of individual group identity. Any individual group fighting for its particular interests must, in order to effect a hegemonic strategy, link its struggle with the struggles of others in the
name of more universal values. A hegemonic strategy, according to Laclau, "is one which tries to present particular interests as necessary to carry out a wider social aim. . . . If the rights of man and citizens are not extended to women, there is an internal limitation which prevents the extension of the democratic revolution in a variety of dimensions."

Laclau carefully qualifies his notion of the universal, however. In attempting to "rescue a notion of universality," he does not refer to a privileged universalism that transcends all particularism and thus achieves consensus. Rather, he attempts to articulate what he calls a "weakened" universalization of values, one that has been weakened, in the sense of a grand narrative, because of its interdependency on context. Laclau argues that "pure particularism is impossible because each pure particularity has to define itself by its differences with other particularities, and the system of these particularities necessarily reconstructs a certain universality." Thus, despite the contemporary political/rhetorical move toward particularity, or context, in social struggle, an element of the universal is always at work within the hegemonic. This is what intellectuals must understand, according to Laclau, in order to develop hegemonic strategies of their own. The danger, he warns, in recognizing only the particular within hegemonic struggle is that individual groups, while asserting their identities and their claims, will avoid "entering into relations of solidarity with other groups." Individual groups must make affiliations with others, based on "wider struggles at the level of society," in order for their efforts to result in "hegemonic consequences at the wider level." Laclau reminds us that

Marxism . . . tended to move toward a discourse of universality that was incompatible with difference, which in fact eliminated differences. Today, the problem of democracy is the opposite. Once you have a society in which you have a multiplicity of cultures, demands, interests, and so on, how do you combine them in a way that is compatible with the defense of their particularity?

Laclau is looking, then, for a discourse of universality that is compatible with difference. He argues that hegemonic strategies that incorporate a universality that is "necessary but does not have a content of its own," a universality that is "only given in a transient way by the particular social force," make "hegemonic rearticulations" possible. Laclau's introduction of articulation here is useful both for understanding and for strategizing: "we cannot conceive of articulation as the linkage of similar and fully constituted elements," he contends, "precisely because if the elements were fully constituted, the articulation would not play any kind of a grounding role." By putting seemingly dissimilar and incompatible things together, such as particularity and universality, "the nature of these . . . things is in some way modified." The resulting hybridization is the site from which new political identities may emerge and within which hegemonic struggle takes place. Laclau argues that "if language is by definition a system of difference and by extension any signifying structure is like that, then the incorporation of new elements has to modify all the elements of the whole."
Hegemonic struggle is marked, for Laclau, by what he calls “radical undecidability” accompanied by “the need for a decision.” The decision, he argues, “is going to produce some kind of articulation between two elements which is not required at the level of the structure.” The absence of this undecidability, of social struggle, of the need to make a decision, indicates in Laclau’s view, that the matter is a structural rather than hegemonic one. A “decision,” then, made at the structural level is one in which there is no choice, thus indicating a lack of freedom; that is, where there is no undecidability (read: no hegemonic struggle), there is no dialogic element, no persuasion, no freedom. Thus, “the possibility of a free society depends on the existence of relations of power.”

Laclau believes that violence is a necessary and not necessarily undesirable function of freedom within the social. “People will have things imposed on them that they do not want,” he argues. “In this sense, making decisions and establishing relations of power necessarily go together. I would argue that this is not bad. This is violence, power, but it’s not bad.” Eliminating all antagonism and power relations from society would be the end of freedom. When pressed by Worsham and Olson to place some limitation on the acceptable use of violence, Laclau hedges, saying only that “the problem of the limitation of violence cannot be solved on the basis of a blueprint determining in a rationalistic way what kind of violence is good and what is bad. That depends.”

While willing to accept that the social is constituted by power relations, I am nonetheless troubled by Laclau’s easy acceptance of rhetorical violence in social struggles. I am particularly uncomfortable with that easy acceptance in the light of the important point he makes in his discussion of representation: that it is at the discursive level that political identities are formed and from which material consequences arise. Discursive force, it would seem, is no small thing. Interestingly, Laclau himself provides two very clear means by which we can question his contention that violence is unavoidable, that force is a necessary and thus valuable component of discursive hegemonic struggle.

First, in his discussion of the universal and the particular, Laclau demonstrates that theories of articulation allow us simultaneously to hold multiple and seemingly contradictory notions—notions that are neither similar nor fully constituted—thereby constructing new ground from which to form affiliations for hegemonic struggle. This means individual groups, struggling in various and particular ways within the social, may affiliate themselves with other groups, engaged in different struggles, based on a weakened, or partially contextualized, universal value in order to continue their struggle more effectively. Extending Laclau’s argument here, and the logic of hegemony, allows us to suggest that the radical democratic project of human rights may be served by an accompanying destabilization of the category of violence and thus the destabilization of the dominance of the category itself. If violence, or force, like whiteness, is discursively constructed in relation to its necessary Other, we see that nonviolence is a necessary component of violence since their very existence is predicated
on their difference. Thus, Laclau's notion that persuasion carries within it an element of violence is modified significantly in that persuasion also necessarily carries within it an element of nonviolence.

The privileging of violence over nonviolence is a hegemonic decision. I read Laclau's claim—that violence is a necessary component of all social relations and that, within the discursive, force is necessary and valuable for persuasion—as a perception that this is a structural issue, not a hegemonic one. Destabilizing the category of violence, however, takes it out of the structural realm and places it firmly within the hegemonic wherein, according to Laclau, unlimited questions might be asked and the discursive field itself might be reorganized.

Instead of locating the question of discursive violence at the structural level where it is always already a fait accompli as far as social relations are concerned, I want to suggest rethinking the matter from within a framework that grants that in discursive struggle there exists the possibility for nonviolence. Further, if by articulating a universal value of human rights with a destabilized category violence we can locate that articulation at the hegemonic level rather than at the structural level, we are not left with, as Laclau would have it, only the option of making a decision. We might, as he argues elsewhere, continue to question and thus to defer the moment of decision. A decision is not required in order for struggle to occur, only for struggle to resolve. Articulating the notion of discursive force as inevitable is modified by its juxtaposition with the universality of human rights, as all elements within the process of articulation must be modified in the moment of inscription. The unavoidability of violence in all hegemonic struggle is thus called into question, creating space for other possibilities.

Laclau offers a second opportunity for questions as well. In arguing that "the distinction between identity and identification is central," Laclau notes that in order to have identity, there must be "acts of identification." Otherwise, he reasons, "one would be entirely at the symbolic level, in Lacanian terms, and the dimension of the real, which is absolutely central and which requires constant acts of re-identification, would not be possible." Surprisingly, Laclau fails to examine persuasion in the same way that he gives identification a thorough going over. The possibilities for effective hegemonic strategies that Laclau finds in the spaces between identity and identification may also be found in the spaces between persuasion and persuading. Such a distinction allows us to refuse the inevitability of the statement In persuasion there is violence, and to posit instead that In the act of persuading there is the potential for violence. This distinction, and the space it creates, provides multiple grammars of violence rather than just the one offered here by Laclau. Discursive temporal compressions, such as may be found in Laclau's use of persuasion, serve to erase the present tense, to erase, in fact, the very moment of undecidability in which Laclau desires to work and thus to erase the possibility of nonviolence contained within a notion of persuading.

Until and unless there is persuasion, violence is unrealized. Composition theorists and teachers know all too well that the space between an attempt to persuade and successful persuasion can be vast indeed. That space may be filled
with any number of revisions—revisions not only of rhetorical strategies but also revisions of one’s assertions. That space, in which the act of writing is taking place, is also the space in which the subject is always in the process of becoming through discursive production. I question Laclau’s position on force, then, not only because I believe that nonviolence as a universal value is worth the effort but because one’s assertions as well as one’s subjectivity are necessarily unstable during the act of persuading, and it is within such indeterminate moments that violence is postponed. The logic of hegemony itself suggests that the interaction of multiple and ongoing attempts within the social to persuade may continually defer the realization of violence. We might argue, then, that while discursive and other social struggle may indeed be violent, the articulation of nonviolence as a universal value and discursive force as a destabilized notion can modify the potential of rhetorical violence while continuing to construct, and reconstruct, political identities.

Laclau says, “decisions are things that have to be made too soon.” I’m taken with that phrase. I’ve been turning it over in my mind, playing with various ways it might mean. I’m struck by our long political and rhetorical tradition of privileging answer over question, conviction over uncertainty, outcome over potential. Laclau offers a vocabulary with which to rearticulate those relationships, however, when he suggests that it is the possibility of unlimited questions and of reconstituting the “system of questions that it seeks to answer” that makes democracy possible. He adds that questions operate by “narrowing the field of the answer. So the questioning is already the first step in the organization of a discursive field.” If we take Laclau to mean that ongoing questioning and responding, from multiple positions, may continually reorganize, rather than reduce, the discursive field of social struggle, then my questions are not so much a critique of his position as they are a continuation. His unfortunate use of the term narrowing in reference to the discursive field seems to suggest a two-dimensional shape that is systematically reduced by questioning, getting smaller and smaller until we are left, unavoidably, with an answer, and the realization of discursive (and other) force. The notion of organizing and reorganizing, however, allows for multiple configurations of temporal and spatial relationships, as well as the continual reconstitution of political identities operating within those matrixes.

Rearticulating social struggle as ongoing in the present tense, but deferrable in the absolute sense of resolution (the liberal dream of utopia which Laclau repudiates), allows us to rethink Laclau’s position on discursive force. The possibility that violence, like the poor, will always be with us is not erased; rather, we postpone that decision which would relegate the issue of violence to a structural level where questions are no longer posed, and we create space instead for alternatives to violence, discursive and otherwise.

Laclau speaks of the “vast resources of incoherence, contradiction, and outrage present in contemporary society.” Compositionists, charged as they are with the conservation of dominant discourses, do not traditionally see incoher-
ence as a resource, but it is perhaps in incoherence and contradiction, the articulation of the seemingly incompatible, that such alternatives may be found. Those who have consistently lost in discursive social struggle, lost in terms of asserting their needs and desires, representing and naming themselves, might balk at the notion that force is unavoidable. The fact that they've experienced violence isn't the same thing as saying that they must experience violence. Accepting Laclau's claim that all persuasion contains an element of force need not be accompanied by a commitment to wield discursive violence more effectively, particularly if we add that all persuasion contains an element of nonviolence. Many of those who work within and around theories and pedagogies of discourse will undoubtedly receive Laclau's claim with some discomfort. Compositionists, therefore, might juxtapose the notion of discursive violence with a commitment to nonviolence and see where that articulation could take us.

University of Akron
Akron, Ohio

Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 18 of JAC was awarded to Susan C. Jarratt for "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing"

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Professor Kinneavy at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Atlanta.