women and white women's participation in it. I can choose to use my own experiences of what it is like to be in the position of Other—even if only temporarily—as motivation to develop empathy for the status and conditions of those different from me. This empathy can, in turn, render me uncomfortable with my privilege, my WEM-CHMAI, potentially leading me to critique and challenge it. Our affinities, then, become a reason to engage with the status and conditions of our differences. We can also turn the focus away from subordination: it seems possible that Hum might have experiences of power and privilege in her life that might speak to my own experiences with power and privilege in complex and divergent ways, and such a discussion would lead to a more sophisticated understanding of entitlement.

This approach to positionality takes us out of the polarization that so often characterizes attempts to deal with diversity. Hum warns us of the danger of such an approach, however, when she writes, "Let us not collapse the layers of differences, erasing their complexities." There are no guarantees that seeking possible points of juncture will in turn lead to an examination and critique of differences; it is easier and less threatening for those with status to believe they reside in a world cleansed of hierarchy and entitlement. But cloaking difference is usually a means of preserving privilege. We WEM-CHMAs have to consciously and purposefully use points of juncture with the Other as a means of leading to a critique of our entitlement. Even though Sue Hum and I have never met, our shared commitment to social justice offers us a reason to attempt dialogue and provides us with the strength to begin confronting our differences.

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The Struggle over Composition and the Question of Might: A Response to Gary Olson

Tim Mayers

What are the most effective (and least effective) ways of critiquing scholars in composition studies? When we summarize, characterize, and make generalizations about the work of others—as we must—what
obligations do we have toward those whose scholarship we write about, whether in the spirit of praise or blame? As I read the various remembrances of James Kinneavy published in JAC, I was struck by the profound influence Kinneavy exercised as a scholar, a teacher, and a person. However, one comment among the remembrances raises serious questions for me about how we in composition studies comport ourselves as scholars. In his observations on the role Kinneavy played in the decades-long scholarly "struggle over composition," Gary Olson asserts that composition is witnessing "a revitalized backlash against theoretical scholarship. . . . For example, one might read the recent special issue of College Composition and Communication on 'teaching writing creatively' as an opening salvo in [an] . . . attempt to drag composition back to its expressivist roots" (538). Olson goes on to argue that the field of composition needs people such as Kinneavy who will resist this backward movement into what he calls "unthinking expressivism."

As a contributor to the special issue of College Composition and Communication in question—my essay is part of the Interchanges section also featuring Mary Ann Cain, George Kalamatias, and Ted Lardner—I initially bristled at this sweeping, vague, and (to my mind) grossly inaccurate characterization of our work. My intent here, however, is not to defend my work against Olson’s charge. (Indeed, I simply refer interested readers to the special issue of the journal; I’m confident most readers will determine that my essay, and the others in the Interchanges section, do not represent a backlash against theoretical scholarship and that they are not examples of "unthinking expressivism.") Instead, I would like to explore some of the functions that Olson’s characterization might serve. Two things seem immediately noteworthy. First, Olson makes a sweeping generalization; he suggests that an entire issue of a scholarly journal may serve as an example of a trend in the scholarship of an entire academic discipline. Second, the characterization is conditional; Olson writes that the special issue in question “might” be read a particular way, not that it should or must be read a particular way. Both of these factors might offer readers a wide degree of latitude in interpreting Olson’s statements. I would like to unpack these possibilities briefly here.

A Question of Might
What does it mean to read an entire issue of a journal symptomatically—that is, as an example of a trend in a scholarly field? In scholarly writing, the practice of exemplification always involves difficult and ethically-charged choices, as the recent exchange in JAC between Lynn Worsham
and T.R. Johnson so clearly illustrates. In the context of Olson's comment, a reader may legitimately ask what purpose is served by lumping together everything appearing in a given special issue of a journal—articles and essays that are thematically unified in some loose sense perhaps but that are also quite diverse—as evidence of a scholarly trend, particularly when that trend is characterized negatively? What responsibilities do writers have toward those whose work they characterize in such ways? I pose these questions not to rebuke Olson, but rather to highlight the kinds of decisions we all must face when we want to participate in scholarly discourse. As I have already pointed out, Olson—who perhaps recognizes the difficulties that he faces—tempers his characterization by using the conditional term might.

The question of might—that is, of exactly how this conditional term is intended to operate in Olson's argument—is an interesting one. An obvious aspect of the question is this: what is Olson referring to and why does he think his characterization is accurate? Yet, the question of might has another sense, too: the sense in which might implies force or power. In that sense, at least for some JAC readers, it does not matter what part of the special issue Olson has in mind. He offers a sweeping characterization of the special issue of College Composition and Communication; as an established scholar in composition studies, Olson has the might (the force, the power) to influence the thinking of many people in the profession. For some in the profession who have not read the issue in question, his comments might serve as the characterization for everything contained therein. As a contributor to the issue, this possibility is what most troubles me, especially insofar as I believe that Olson and I may actually agree on many substantive issues regarding the state of scholarship, and the future of scholarship, in composition studies. Olson inadvertently may have made enemies of those who should be friends. Given the many detractors composition studies already has, both outside and within the academy, this is a disturbing possibility indeed.

What's in a Name Anyway?
What I have come to realize—far more clearly than I did when I wrote my essay for the special issue of College Composition and Communication—is that in attempting to draw connections (and highlight divergences) between composition and creative writing in a professional forum for compositionists, I was entering one of the fiercest debates in the field. That debate, of course, is between the so-called "expressivists" and their opponents, who are known by several names, such as "social construc-
tionists,” “rhetoricians,” and “theorists.” Readers of JAC are no doubt quite familiar with this debate, so I need not summarize it here. I should point out, however, that I (like the majority of regular readers of JAC) would not consider myself a member of the expressivist camp. Perhaps one of the most interesting facets of this debate is that it seems characterized by frequent claims of misrepresentation. Combatants on both sides of the debate claim to have been misquoted, mis-characterized, and misrepresented by those on the other side. While this debate is largely about pedagogy and ideology, it is also about definitions and labels—and about who has the power (the might) and the authorization to attach labels and definitions to their own practices and ideologies as well as to those of others. What, for instance, would authorize me to claim that I am or am not an expressivist, a social-epistemic rhetorician, a Marxist, and so forth? What would authorize someone else to respond by claiming, “Oh no, you’re not” or “Ah yes, you are”? There are, of course, possible answers to these questions. What is most interesting to me is that such answers are rarely sought in the actual rough-and-tumble practice of scholarly debate. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to claim that an interrogation of the politics of naming, labeling, and defining is not often made an explicit part of the practice of naming, labeling, and defining.

I raise these issues because I suspect that another key labeling word—creative—might lie at the center of the cluster of issues I am trying to explore here. As an adjective modifying the noun writing, creative is a term that names a particular sort of practice as well as a disciplinary subdivision of English studies. Often, though, the term creative writing connotes more than the mere practice of writing in genres called poetry and fiction or the professional identity of people who teach such things in college and university English departments. It extends also to the epistemology and ideology most commonly associated with such writing and its teaching. In my essay, I describe, characterize, and critique the conventional wisdom of creative writing. This conventional wisdom does indeed look very much like expressivism as it is most often described (usually by its critics but sometimes by its advocates) in composition studies. Thus, when Olson writes that “theoretical” work in composition studies is “that which attempts to lead the field away from a debilitating preoccupation with individual psychology, ‘genius,’ ‘talent,’ and ‘creativity,’” I suspect he is engaged in a sort of guilt-by-association strategy in which creative writing is made synonymous with expressivism, and perhaps even with expressivism of the “unthinking” variety (538). Yet, earlier in the same piece, Olson writes that composition studies, because
of the kind of theoretical scholarship he advocates, "is perfectly situated to become a significant force in the development of original, creative, and perhaps even revolutionary understandings of how discourse works" (536). What, I wonder, can creative possibly mean here? Certainly, it does not mean what it means in that other sentence.

In one sense, I applaud Olson because he refuses merely to discard words, such as creative, because they may be hopelessly contaminated signifiers, and instead strives to redefine and reinvigorate them in the context of his argument. This effort is in fact what I attempt to do with the word craft, and my effort is similar in many ways to W. Ross Winterowd’s effort to rearticulate the idea of craft in The English Department. Yet, this delicate intellectual activity, I would argue, demands an extraordinarily high degree of care on the part of those who would engage in it. An understanding that our key terms are slippery and open to interpretation, and the attempt to use certain terms in ways that are not customary, both serve to intensify the scholarly demand that we define our terms. I am not certain that Olson fully meets this demand in his essay. And to be fair, perhaps few of us ever fulfill this imperative as fully as we should, yet that is no excuse for relying on easy and dismissive characterizations of those whose positions might interfere with our own. I agree with Olson that scholars in composition are uniquely poised to understand how discourse works. Perhaps we can also provide viable criticism of (and, more importantly, alternatives to) the coercive and corrosive tendencies present in so much of today’s public discourse—that is, if we are willing to follow our own lead and practice what we preach.

(Un)Mending Walls
Composition is, of course, a slippery term, a site of contention, a name that means different things to different people. In the words of Anne Ruggles Gere, composition might be thought of as a “field” in the sense of “a kind of charged space in which multiple ‘sites’ of interaction appear” (4). Thus, it is not at all surprising that a struggle for composition studies is underway, or that it has, in fact, been underway for some time. Important figures and important groups of people, as Olson observes, do have vested interests in defining composition studies in different (and often incompatible) ways. In pointing to this fact, I most emphatically do not want to advocate a benign, fuzzy pluralism; I am not longing for an academic world in which we can all just get along. Also, I imagine that almost all contributors to JAC would agree that the articulated and unarticulated ideologies authorizing our scholarly and
pedagogical practices have serious and far-reaching implications—for us, for our students, and for the worlds we inhabit. Undertaking a critique of theories and pedagogies that seem flawed or inadequate is both an obligation and a responsibility. Yet, in this kind of field, in this kind of charged space, I believe that we have an imperative to take care—more care than we might take in almost any other context—to choose our words carefully, for words are what we are all about. Those of us in composition study words and the ways in which they make (and unmake) worlds (Lunsford 12). Composition, though it is a discipline in several important senses of the term, is also both a trans- and an anti-discipline (and I say this even though I applaud the ongoing efforts to ensure that competent professionals in composition receive the same institutional and disciplinary rewards and recognitions that accrue to those in other, more respected disciplines). One of the key scholarly activities of defining composition studies, as Stephen North suggested over a decade ago, is “foraging,” or searching through other fields and disciplines for that which may be applicable to composition. Of course, no one has the time, energy, and knowledge to forage everywhere. Thus, successful foragers must be trusted to bring to the field that which they feel will be relevant or helpful, and to leave behind that which they feel will be unhelpful or counterproductive. Part of what I and my colleagues in the interchange in College Composition and Communication were trying to suggest is that some (certainly not all, certainly not even most) figures and theories from creative writing might prove interesting and useful to scholars and teachers in composition. Gary Olson’s characterization of that entire issue may leave the impression that we should be taken to task for where we looked in our effort to enrich composition studies, not for what we found. I hope that’s not the case.

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Works Cited


Struggling over Composition

Gary A. Olson

Tim Mayers is absolutely correct: he and I “actually agree on many substantive issues” regarding the state and future of composition scholarship. So it would indeed be unfortunate if I had inadvertently “made enemies of those who should be friends.”

He and I agree that “composition” is a slippery term, a “site of contention.” We both agree that scholars have an obligation to critique “theories and pedagogies that seem flawed or inadequate.” To do less would be to abdicate our responsibility to the discipline. What’s more, neither of us advocates “a benign, fuzzy pluralism”; to do so is to cease to struggle for the professional and intellectual values we most cherish, to abandon the struggle over how the discipline should be defined.

That is, Tim and I both understand that in every discipline there is hegemonic struggle over the identity of that discipline: one group of like-