Typically, the discussion of multiculturalism in composition and rhetoric has focused on the classroom and students. Thus, one of the aspects I admire about Sue Hum’s work is her insistence that we enlarge the scope of what we mean by diversity by looking at ourselves as a discipline and as an institution. How do we—as a field, as university faculty, and as administrators—exclude and include? How do we divide and marginalize? How do we represent difference to ourselves and others? And, even more importantly, how do we begin to talk about the politics of difference without glossing over the issue of privilege?

I admire Hum’s insistence on this topic because it holds us accountable to the entire university in multiple and myriad ways—as individuals interacting in our everyday lives, and as collective, institutionalized groups structured by hierarchies that value, reward, and normalize some more than others. Hum pushes us to examine the numerous and often conflicted ways in which we are positioned and position ourselves. She suggests that in “All Us People” (*JAC* 20.1) I assume the “appropriate position” when responding to her “Yes, We Eat Dog Back Home” (*JAC* 19.4) by examining my complicity with the privilege attached to the white, Eurocentric, middle-class, heterosexual, male academic (WEMCHMA). She focuses on our differences, pointing out that unlike her I can choose to embrace or reject the position of Other for myself.

Certainly, I agree that when it comes to race and gender, I can choose to position myself in ways unavailable to Hum. I want to risk, though, turning away from the different positions we occupy to consider the value of the flip side—if not our similarities, then at least possible points of juncture. I realize that I am walking a dangerous line here, that the white liberal position is to gloss over differences and celebrate our similarities: at our core, the assumption goes, we are all alike and conflicts begin when people become so caught up in their dissimilarities that they lose sight of their shared humanity. This is not a stance I endorse. I do believe, however, that it is important and beneficial for people occupying different positions to allow for the possibility that they also may occupy positions that are not mirror images but that correspond in some sense. Feminists
such as Minnie Bruce Pratt, Sandra Harding, and bell hooks have been urging us to see such correspondences for some time; in their view, a woman can be both privileged and oppressed. White women are in a position of entitlement in relation to African American women; white women are in a position of oppression in relation to white males. (This is further complicated by class, and various other social and cultural factors.) Men's studies scholars, such as Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, have applied this feminist perspective to the lives of men through the study of how men are institutionally privileged by their gender and how men are privileged differently. Such scholarship analyzes race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as they are present in masculinities—hegemonic and subordinate forms of manhood that are historically and culturally varied. In other words, male privilege is a complicated phenomenon; black men may be more privileged than black women but less privileged than white men, and so on.

The notion that any one individual can occupy plural and conflicting positions renders my own positioning more fluid and flexible. When I wrote my initial response to Hum's "Yes, We Eat Dog Back Home," I situated myself within male privilege, which is only one of many positions I assume or have assumed. Consider, for instance, my status in the department where I presently teach writing. At George Washington University, the English department's ethos is defined by literary studies; those of us in the writing program are clearly second-class citizens, as evidenced by the kind of appointments faculty hold. While there are over thirty tenured or tenure-track faculty members in the literature program, there is only one tenured faculty member fully devoted to the writing program: the director. Some of the literature faculty occasionally choose to cross over to teach composition; the overwhelming majority do not. Writing faculty are part-time, with only a few faculty in full-time, non-tenure track, non-renewable positions. (I've held various kinds of appointments in the program, but never a tenure-track position.) Last year, writing faculty considered their working conditions dire enough to merit the initiation of a campus-wide attempt to unionize all part-time faculty.

While my experience in GWU's writing program is by no means a mirror image of Sue Hum's experience in academia, it does place both of us in subordinate positions in the academy—even if those positions are also different. Recognition of such a connection can play a part in a critique of privilege. For instance, white women, if they choose, might use their experiences of oppression by white men as an entry point for developing an understanding of the oppression of African American
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.

George Washington University
Washington, D.C.

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