

their scholarship and teaching is to celebrate ‘hybridity, impurity, intermingling’ ” (397).

Terrific! But it sounds like plebeian politics to me, not radically different from the pronouncements of Phyllis Schlafly, George Bush, Louis Farrakhan, except for the subtler music to which the new words have been set. And it’s not *that* much subtler, if your Discman has a middling pair of wide-range earphones.

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To the Editor:

Although the overall implications of Betty Jean Craige’s article “Literature in a Global Society” are certainly admirable ones with which few readers of *PMLA* will disagree, the use of the word *holism* gives one some pause. As Craige mentions, *holism* was coined by Jan Smuts in 1926 (400). What Craige does not mention is that he was none other than Jan Christian Smuts, the longtime prime minister of South Africa. Although Smuts disagreed with the ideology of apartheid, which was manufactured by his political opponents, he was a fierce champion of racial segregation and a vehement opponent of any effort to empower the Indian and African populations of his country. Thus his philosophy of “holism” is hardly an appropriate point of orientation for Craige’s multicultural ideals. According to his most recent biographer, Kenneth Ingham, “Smuts’s dream of a Whole, his philosophy of Holism, was really only a philosophy of the part, the white part of society, and even then only that part which adhered to the traditional culture of Western Europe” (*Jan Christian Smuts: The Conscience of a South African*, London: Weidenfeld, 1986, 250).

This leads to the other, more conceptual problem with holism. Its stress on the whole inevitably exercises a discursive constraint on the partial constituents it seeks to include. In its organicist emphasis on coherence and totality, it is bound to hypostatize some particular version of experience even when it claims to be integrating its parts into an overarching whole. A less unifying, more heterodox term (or terms) might be more apt in epitomizing the largely laudable goals that Craige advocates.

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**Reply:**

I thank both Harold Fromm and Nicholas Birns for their thoughtful observations.

I am aware that Smuts was a segregationist. However, the widespread use of the word *holism* by thinkers who do not share Smuts’s political orientation—by many ecologists, for example—shows that the word was not contaminated by Smuts’s racism. In criticizing his “holism” for not being adequately holistic, we in the late twentieth century need not discard the language he used in his 1926 attempt to relate matter, life, and mind to one another.

Holism, as I say (396), can be considered a model of reality, a methodology, and an ideology. *Holistic* is an adjective we would apply to individuals and approaches rather than to phenomena themselves. Fromm is right that “wholes are not self-identifying phenomena”; to think that they are would, of course, be dualistic, not holistic. A holist recognizes that all systems are open: a saltwater marsh, which an ecologist (whom few would call a “self-appointed or socially sanctioned priest”) studies as an ecosystem, is not independent of the ocean or the adjacent landmass. Scholars of all kinds bracket areas for scrutiny, but holists distinguish themselves by attending primarily to the functioning of a system’s components *in relation* to one another. The holistic model is nonatomistic: in ecology holists study the flow of energy through systems; in the humanities holists study the flow of ideas through texts.

Human beings have always been identifying wholes. Aldo Leopold begins the famous essay to which Fromm refers, “The Land Ethic,” by pointing out that since the time of Odysseus, who hanged his slave girls for misbehaving during his absence, we have extended our ethics to encompass not only free men but, eventually, all persons. Leopold argues that we should further enlarge our moral community to include the “land,” which he defines as “a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals.” This is not the place to address Leopold’s environmental holism, so I shall confine my remarks to the notion of our expanded human community. The West, for at least a hundred years, has recognized human beings as members of a single species (a few pre-Darwinian ethnologists thought of the various races as distinct species); we now consider the human race a whole. With recent civil rights legislation, the United States has expanded the moral community of those originally covered by the nation’s declaration that “all men are created equal” to include individuals of both sexes and of all colors. Our current curriculum battles are awakening us to the revolutionary consequences, which we have only begun to experience, of regarding the global human community as a whole, a system.