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# Forum

*PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.*

## Cultural Holism

To the Editor:

I am not sure whether the Salman Rushdie affair and its implications for free speech need special airing in the pages of *PMLA*. As it happens, Betty Jean Craige (Guest Column, "Literature in a Global Society," 106 [1991]: 395–401) merely demonstrates that Rushdie's wisdom and insight do not appear to extend beyond his statement quoted by her that the attack on his book and on him is the result of a struggle between the forces ("apostles") of purity and of mongrelization (396). She then extends this point to make a case against intolerance generally and the way literature ("texts") is taught in particular. Surely, the constituency of the MLA does not need to be told about the dangers of the "uncritical teaching of any text" (399).

Unfortunately, the cultural holism advocated by Craige is precisely the kind of ideology that Rushdie (according to Craige) warns us about, namely, one of purism. Their disclaimers notwithstanding (396 ff.), the holists' implicit use of the vocabulary of transcendence identifies their doctrine as itself a set of beliefs held to be absolute or, in Craige's own words, as a "political agenda" (399). Like anyone with a political agenda, the holists want to replace their opponents' blueprint with their own. If the holists were in power instead of the "purists," to what lengths would they be prepared to go in order to deal with any opposition or dissent? After all, their motives are professedly pure, that is, free from selfishness. Would they become thought controllers (in the name of a higher good, of course)?

A final, parenthetical note: Craige seems to have forgotten that tolerance as well as international cooperation (in the form of the United Nations, for example) are Western concepts indebted to eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. How does cultural holism relate to this historical datum? Her piece is silent on this and other matters relevant to her theme.

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**Reply:**

I appreciate Arthur Tilo Alt's taking the time to express his fear that I am advocating a new "purism." I wish to reassure him that I am not. Nor am I