The Society for Critical Exchange
at Miami University

Stephen Nimis

When I first came to Miami University in 1981, fresh out of graduate school at the University of Minnesota, my adviser, Wlad Godzich, urged me to be sure to look up Jim Sosnoski and the Society for Critical Exchange. Then as now I was inclined to follow Wlad's advice, so within weeks of arriving I had lunch with Jim and Patti Harkin to talk about SCE, about which I knew nothing. Jim and Patti were very gracious and quite enthusiastic about involving me in some "project" or other. SCE focused on literary theory, and that had been a central preoccupation of the Comparative Literature Program at Minnesota. In this first meeting the three of us brainstormed wildly about many things and thus began a long, splendid relationship of collaboration and mutual support. At the time, I had no idea that this was unusual. I thought that my academic life would always be replete with associations and collaborations that would stretch me and take me to unknown places with unpredictable consequences. Alas, twenty-five-years later, as I write these words, my SCE days now seem like those halcyon days that are only fully appreciated in retrospect. I have collaborated and team-taught with scientists as well as colleagues from fine arts. I also have traveled to exotic places with students and professors from a whole variety of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. But the kind of intense and spirited exchange that characterized the various projects in which I participated with SCE have turned out to be elusive and difficult to find since then, and difficult to sustain. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to reflect on those projects and what they meant to me, as a modest homage to my friend Jim Sosnoski and as a protreptic to humanities scholars on the benefits of collaboration.

In time I came to realize that it was a favorite tactic of Jim's to introduce himself to new faculty and urge them to participate in some collaboration related to their own interests as a way of "stirring things up." I was interested in having a literary theory reading group, but Jim suggested a group for reading colleagues' work in progress. He gave me a list of the usual suspects in the French and English Departments and helped me set up a meeting to organize things. Although this monthly colloquium was not an official SCE project, it was a great way for me and others to meet people with similar

interests in other departments and formed the basis for the launching of many collaborations and friendships. New faculty would inevitably be recruited to contribute a paper, and for many temporary hires this might be their only opportunity to make some professional and intellectual connections with regular faculty. The only weakness of this format is that eventually regular attendees become associated with a particular question and the character of the discussion became somewhat routine. Nevertheless, the core members of this group continued over the years to draw on each others' energy and expertise to further a whole range of interdisciplinary undertakings that are, quite frankly, simply not part of Miami's present. Although inter-disciplinary work is touted consistently as a priority by every level of Miami's administration, collaborative research in the humanities has been an unfortunate and unintended victim of Miami's escalating demand for more scholarship in the most prestigious venues.

Over the years SCE sponsored a number of highly visible events that were turned into journal volumes of *Critical Exchange*, several of which I edited. Never one to micromanage, or to put himself in the center of things, Jim liked to farm out the work and the credit for these ventures to whoever was likely to benefit the most. Thus listed in my tenure dossier was not only a volume I edited and for which I wrote an introduction on the work of a well-known European classicist, Wolfgang Kullmann, whom we brought to campus, but also a volume on the work of Fredric Jameson, and a volume on our project for a dictionary of literary theory. Although these were limited circulation publications and often poorly produced, I am proud of these early efforts that put real intellectual engagement ahead of seeking the most prestigious venues for my individual work. In the end, these efforts made an important contribution to my tenure case, but more importantly the character of these early engagements outside of my own department and often outside of my intellectual comfort zone had a lasting positive effect on my development as a scholar and an educator.

Probably the most lasting legacy for me personally of any SCE project was the GRIP Project (Group for Research into the Institutionalization and Professionalization of Literary Studies), which Jim, David Shumway, James Fanto, and I launched in the context of the centennial of the MLA in 1983. Fanto was already working on this topic and provided the rest of us with readings from Foucault, Bourdieu and others, which we vigorously discussed and wrote about for several months. James Fanto only taught in the French Department at Miami for one year, but Jim's interest in his work lead to a multi-year project with numerous conferences and publications. Our project called attention to the often unspoken networks of power that reproduce certain structures of privilege in our profession, privileges which are in turn often misrecognized as rational distinctions. Although the project had several permutations, the high point for me was when Jonathon Culler took *The GRIP Report* to task in his plenary address at the Midwest Modern Language Association meeting in Minneapolis, for overlooking the way professional networks were enabling and not just constraining. When Culler critiqued me by name in my own home town to the delight and amazement of all my friends, I felt that

I had arrived. My contribution was a critque of the rhetoric of footnotes, an obsession in the field of Classics. I noted how references to Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, that archetype of German scholarship, became *de rigeur* long after his scholarly authoriy had declined just as a way of proving that you were the real deal. This was published in *Arethusa*, a journal in which I have continued to publish since that time, as "Fussnoten: Das Fundament der Wissenschaft." The article's publication provoked a minor sensation at the American Philological Association and to this day people still refer to me as "that footnote person." Many people have asked what provoked me to write such a scandalous paper; and the fact is that what provoked me more than anything was the opportunity and the context provided by the collaborative work of our group.

I should also mention the VOCAT Project (Vocabularies of Criticism and Theory), since it was our most spectacular failure. The idea was to create a database of material on literary theory that could be searched and cross-referenced, taking advantage of the technological revolutions emerging at the time. We received seed money from Miami and several other funding agents around the state, only to be then turned down by NEH. I mention this because the NEH reference work personnel were furious about the decision to squelch the project, a decision that came from high up in the administration of NEH, which at the time was headed by Lynne Cheney. Needless to say, being considered some kind of terrorist in the culture wars of the 80s by Lynne Cheney is a kind of badge of honor, but it also took the wind out of our sails, and this turned out to be the final chapter in my association with SCE. SCE's headquarters moved from Miami and Jim left shortly after that for the University of Chicago to work on the emerging field of implementing technology in education. Sadly, although I have lost touch with Jim over the years, I'm sure that somewhere he is diminishing himself in some way for the greater good of a junior colleague or on behalf of some bold initiative. There is a part of me that wouldn't mind stirring things up with Jim Sosnoski just one more time.

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