

The Intergenerational Blunder of Elitism as Fun(k)tional, aka An Open Letter on Choices When “Keepin’ It Rea1 Goes Wrong ...”

Todd Craig

Hey CompRhet World,

When asked about my perspective on intergenerationality in the field, I immediately think of J. Cole’s “Middle Child.” In 2019, Cole defined his “Middle Child” positioning, spitting “I’m dead in the middle of two generations, I’m little bro and big bro all at once,” as he leaves a studio session with rapper 21 Savage for a lunch meeting with billionaire Jay-Z. In this song, Cole depicts the tightrope walk required by being in the middle: too young for inclusion with peers who’ve come prior, yet too old to run with those who’ve come after. However, Cole sees this moment as a bridge and uses this positionality as beneficial to his maneuverings.

I, too, have seen these moments. There were times I was shunned by both the older guard and my peers, considered too “non-conformist” for the respectability politics needed to blend into the traditionalist sentiments of the field. My jeans sagged a little too low, my sneakers weren’t “shoes” enough, and my Queens-based slang just way too much. Sheesh, I was almost penalized in a teaching observation for using the word “y’all” too frequently (the observer had the count around seventeen). Throughout this #PumpkinSpiceLatte brand of academic hazing, with theft starring as “love” and the ecstasy of influence, I slowly realized it was *never* about the work; it was *always* about the choices I made, the scholar I decided to be. I realize now, on the other side of tenure, they were probably envious they didn’t choose to walk in their true selves.

Who we are within intergenerational contexts can be complex; it’s an action-packed question given our geopolitical location within the “twin pandemics” of racial injustice and COVID-19. And I put one before the other because one’s been bubbling waaaaaaay longer. Funny how things work around race, huh?

Does the new climate of higher education post-pandemic ever allow us back to the “normal” that once was? In the past year (which will probably total out to two years), colleges have closed. Public institutions and universities alike have consolidated, taking Ginsu knives to prior budgets, slicing and dicing “fiscal fat;” so if you thought there weren’t enough jobs *before*, what’chu think’s about to go down *now*, my G? A quick look at RhetMap.org’s market comparison visuals tells you all you need to know. I assert we return to a place where a younger generation of scholar/researcher/educators *must* take heed,

as there will be a premium placed on teaching like never before. The plush R1 gigs with that 1-1 or 2-1 teaching load – even more slim (and it was already crackhead skinny to begin with, but alas, I digress...). Thus, this new iteration of academia will require people who can teach *well*, in public *and* diverse settings, and in locations where your whole classroom might NOT look like you at all.

This hasn't been an issue for me; I've cut my teeth teaching and conferencing, researching and publishing in CUNY – one of the biggest and possibly most underfunded public universities nationally. We've been teaching under that "austerity funding" umbrella for at least two decades. My CUNY school is particularly known for its perpetual debt, so I've *always* taught under the hip-hop mantra of "making something outta nufin." But many schools don't see that value; in fact, one R1 institution "recruiting" me presented a salary cut so severe that it's overt racism was simply white and blinding. Sure, they're thinking "we're *saving* you from malnourished conditions." However, I teach more than anyone on their faculty. The 2-1 load capped at 20 yields 60 students a year, *if* those classes are full... My 3-2 load, with skyball caps of 42 in Fall 2020 (a different story for my next selection, "The Miseducation OF and BY..."), yielded about 90 ZoomRoom students. So I saw roughly 1.5 years' worth of your teaching load in one semester. The irony is said R1 doesn't even recognize none of their faculty can train graduate students (especially BIPOC students) to navigate *that* work. Did I mention I traditionally do this level of teaching while doing three conferences, one to two keynotes, and publishing one to two articles and/or book chapters a year?

The upcoming generation of CompRhet scholars must understand how to navigate *and* thrive in such overload scenarios.

CompRhet's GenNext scholars must also tackle the remaining twin of the pandemics once the health crisis eases its way on down the road. For decades, academia has not dealt with diversity and racial complexities in ways that honor our elders and forefolk' freedom struggles of the 1950s and 60s. Instead, the current field at large has duplicated older racialized attacks in less futuristic – and actually more elementary – ways. You think the field would get more savvy with racism ... but why? Why get savvy when you can continue to slap people in the face with ignorance, offering Flint water to BIPOC and marginalized CompRhet scholars while swearing it's spring water straight from some Icelandic glacier?

Again, I think back to that R1 institution's "courting"; in that salary cut, said administrator stated I'd be paid "as much as the white guy...and I think that's just fine." When I explained it was clear there was a powder-keg-problem on campus called racism, the response was "well, you'll be tenured. So you can choose when you decide to engage or not engage in the racism here." This false equivalent is yet another episode of "When Keepin' It Real Goes Wrong": in

this moment, said administrator “kept it real” – quadrupling down on the campus’ nationally-televised racist climate by comparing the worth of my Black body/teaching/mentorship/research to said white male colleague. But also, this administrator needed to be told “I’m a Black man in America – I can’t step out of my skin and not address racism!”

So with the upcoming intergenerational struggle, I see the need to push towards what I’m calling “Comp3.0.” I’m coining this phrase now, but be clear, you’ll see this laid out thoroughly in *K for the Way* (spoiler alert – new CompRhet book on hip-hop and DJ rhetoric coming) ...

Comp3.0 requires we meet this overt racism, discrimination, and respectability politics head on, pushing innovative research and scholarship that simply doesn’t ask the field for permission. For generations, we’ve witnessed many of our elders navigate this field. Sometimes successfully, and oftentimes not. We’ve seen colleagues denied tenure, denied promotion, rejected for awards, and gatekept in peer review processes at journals and academic presses. We’ve watched quietly as some scholars usurp creative consciousness from younger folx, snatch up research, go on Award Tours, and dishonestly claim the work as their own (oh yeah, we *see* y’all ... see *Get Rich* track 18). We’ve even seen budding scholar/researcher/educators of color excluded from the patchwork fabric we call doctoral programs. I contend Comp3.0 should rail against this cycle, pushing back in a way that *requires* the field to change.

I’m super lucky to sit with J. Cole-like positionality. I’m cool with many respectable CompRhet OGs: elders and forefolx in the field who have come before me. So like Cole, I want to shout out those OGs, elders, and forefolx who excavated the foundation for part of this field, blazing some fierce scholarly trails for me and others to run. I’m also cool with some younger folx on the come-up, those CompRhet GenNext scholars, cutting they teeth, getting bumps and bruises along the way. Fortunately, I can get slightly brolic with knowledge, and share a lil game based on my own travels, bumps, and bruises. Shouts to April and AD, Aja and Regina, Laquana and Shereen, Khirsten and Lou, Victor and Sherita, Sara and Vani, Yanira and Bene. I see y’all moving out here – salute! Continue to push the field forward by droppin’ that CompRhet crack! And keep supporting each other, while making your way through this treachery called “the field.”

I remember watching my mentor levitating through hallways of academe – strong, fearless and vocal, calling folx out for their Tom Foolery immediately! But *how*, Sway?

Simply by outpacing *ery’body!* While in my doctoral program, she had more publications and conference presentations than the other three racist directors combined. Yes ... *combined!* And tenure wasn’t easier for her ... nah, they were clear about making it hard, evidenced when her materials came up “lost” for

one full year (ironically, this happened to me, too – my chair at the time told me the following: “suck it up, get over it and reproduce your documents”).

My most valuable mentor-lesson defines my intergenerational message: know it’s all about your choices. The choices you make dictate your path; so no matter what, make sure those choices are ethical, equitable, and just. They will be the litmus test for how you are judged. And know the more ethical, equitable, and just your choices are, the more the field’s treachery will come for you! I’ve been in spaces where the prior generation hated me simply because I set my own pace and did the work. And sometimes, the generation after me was like, “Bruh ... can you slow down, please?” You must understand the impact of your choices.

I *chose* to work in CUNY at a PBI knowing full-well the institution’s reputation wasn’t the greatest, according to “the university” or the “negative press.” I could’ve made other choices then, and would love to make even more choices in the future, as I grow and expand as a scholar/educator/researcher. But in April 2014, I made a calculated choice to hopefully serve as a beacon amongst a younger generation of Black and Brown scholars. Kermit the Frog once said “it ain’t easy being green.” So you already *know* what my Black ass is going through ...

Finally, when you make those choices, stand by them. Be humble enough to move off a square if you realize you’re standing in the wrong spot. But to be very clear – and I mean Crystal like Billy – stand firm when you know you’re standing on a square that’s just.

And keep pushin’ – cuz ain’t nobody gon’ make it easy for you.

So who I am, you ask? I’m that MiddleChildDude, sitting between two generations, hoping with all I have that I’m making the right difference for my forefolx’ legacies, building upon the legacy of my mentor and making it easier for those on the come-up. As long as I’m hitting those marks, I’m Gucci, and that’s word to Big Bird.

I hope this letter hits different for you each time you read it as you move through this field.

And with that, I ain’t even tryna hold you ...

Peace and Love,
T O Double D

Works Cited

- 50 Cent. “U Not Like Me.” *Git Rich or Die Tryin’*. Shady/Aftermath/Interscope Records, 2003.
- A Tribe Called Quest. “Award Tour.” *Midnight Marauders*. Jive Records, 1993.
- Alvarez, Sara P., and Amy J. Wan. “Global Citizenship as Literacy: A Critical Reflection for Teaching Multilingual Writers.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2019, pp. 213-216.

- Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2020.
- Carson, A. D. *I Used to Love to Dream*. University of Michigan Press, 2020.
- Cole, J. "Middle Child." *Revenge of the Dreamers III*. Dreamville/Interscope Records, 2019.
- Cooke, Laquana, et al. "Culturally Responsive Computing: Supporting Diverse Justice Projects In/As Computer Science Education." *2019 Research on Equity and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT)*. IEEE, 2019.
- Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. "Ease on Down the Road." *The Wiz: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*. MCA Records, 1978.
- Duthely, Regina. "Black Feminist Hip-Hop Rhetorics and the Digital Public Sphere." *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2017, pp. 202-212.
- Echols, Khirsten. "Composing with Black Noise." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2017.
- Hierro, Victor Del. "DJs, Playlists, and Community: Imagining Communication Design Through Hip Hop." *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 28-39.
- Inayatulla, Shereen and Michael T. MacDonald. "Sans Papiers: Humanizing Documentation." *Literacy and Pedagogy in an Age of Misinformation and Disinformation*, edited by Tara Lockhart et al., Parlor Press, 2021, pp. 225-241.
- Kannan, Vani. "Taking a Lead from Student Movements in a 'Political Turn.'" *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era*, edited by Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, Stephen Parks, and Jessica Pauszek, Routledge, 2019, pp. 130-137.
- Kermit the Frog. "It's Not Easy Bein' Green." Written by Joe Raposo. 1970.
- Maraj, Louis M. *Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics*. University Press of Colorado, 2020.
- Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2020.
- Nas. "Ether." *Stillmatic*. Ill Will/Columbia Records, 2001.
- Ridolfo, Jim. "Rhet Map Market Comparison." *Rhet Map: Mapping Rhetoric and Composition*, 2021, www.rhetmap.org/market-comparison/.
- Roundtree, Sherita V. and Michael Shirzadian. "Third Space: A Keyword Essay." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020, pp. 173-184.
- Slick Rick. "Hey Young World." *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*. Def Jam/Columbia Records, 1988.
- Simmons, Benesemon, Vani Kannan, Sherita Roundtree, B. López and Yanira Rodríguez. "We Read Your Letter." *Writers: Craft and Context* vol 1, no. 1, 2020, pp. 6-14.
- Sway's Universe. "Kanye West and Sway Talk Without Boundaries: Raw and Real on Sway in the Morning." *YouTube*, uploaded by Sway's Universe, 26 November 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S78tT_YxF_c