

## Intergenerational Exchange as a Practice of Negotiation

*Juli Parrish and Wendy Chen*

Juli Parrish: As a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh in the late 1990s, I learned to write—and to assign—the difficulty paper. Mariolina Salavatori asked me and my peers to do the same work that we graduate students asked of our own students: to articulate our efforts to understand texts in writing, leaning in to moments of confusion or frustration and describing our processes, coming to “act[s] of interpretation and understanding” (85). Throughout my own graduate education, I was engaged in one long difficulty paper. Whether I was learning about rhetoric or literacy or pedagogy, I was writing myself through difficulty. That is a practice that I have worked to sustain throughout my career so far: to give voice to my own difficulty as a way of beginning to move through it. If the field of composition studies has a canon passed from one generation to the next, I want to say it is a canon of practices more than of texts: a canon of the ways we and the students we teach negotiate meaning, ask questions, unpack and figure out texts, speculate, theorize, and analyze; the ways we reflect on our own literacies; the ways we come through difficulty to understanding.

Wendy Chen: Currently, I am a first year PhD candidate in English at the University of Denver. Before that, I was a master’s student. Before that, I was a college student. For most of my life, I’ve largely been in the position of a student in intergenerational exchanges with faculty within academia. The power dynamics and structures that shape exchanges with those with greater authority are always present and pressing upon me. Moreover, I am always aware of my position as a woman of color within academic institutions that were designed to exclude people like me. It is alienating. The relationship a student of color has to the concept of difficulty within academia may be just as alienating. We seem to take for granted the idea that the more one is challenged by a class, extracurricular, or experience, the more one can learn and grow. But when and where does difficulty and challenge become less an opportunity for personal growth and learning and more a barrier toward those that society and academia view as “unworthy”? Indeed, is difficulty something that should be prized within academia at all?

Juli: I’ve been interested in seeing how others have written about the difficulty paper. Meghan A. Sweeney and Maureen McBride, for instance,

found that teaching the difficulty paper can make visible “cultural disconnects” (609) that some students encounter in their reading of some texts; Jonathan Cisco has explored the value of the “difficulty paper as a formative assessment for disciplinary literacy instruction” (83). I also consider the ways I have centered difficulty in WAC workshops, especially with graduate students, as a way to help them to articulate and share their knowledge about writing in their fields.

As a white, cis-gendered teaching professor, writing center director, and journal editor, I continue to value grappling with difficulty as a useful and even potentially transformative practice, but I also increasingly see that I embrace difficulty from a position of privilege. Barriers to access, exclusion from knowledge-making, and demands to white-wash experience are real and concrete difficulties faced by many of my own students, the consultants in my writing center, the students and faculty with whom we work, and the scholars who submit work to the journal I co-edit, *Literacy in Composition Studies*. My relationship to difficulty is not the same as theirs, and perhaps I should not ask them to make their difficulty visible to me, to voice all of their silences.

Wendy: What does silence mean within the classroom? How does a white professor interpret a silent student? How does a professor of color interpret a silent student? Is a silent student of color judged differently than a silent white student? How is difficulty interpreted and valued differently by a white professor vs. a professor of color, or by a white student vs. a student of color? As dialogues inside and outside of academia begin to grapple, more and more, with questions of marginalization and inclusion, concepts like silence and difficulty are being reexamined, redefined, and reclaimed by scholars across fields. In my current work on the role of silence within the writing center, I have been informed by Kendra L. Mitchell’s recontextualization of rhetorical choices and responses—including silence—culturally; by Suzan E. Aiken’s assertions of silence as a strategic, intentional, and rhetorical choice; and by Martina Ferrari’s recent explorations of the “coloniality of silence” (Ferrari, qtd. in Ferrari 326), to name a few.

Juli: I mentioned the canon of practices that I see as a link among generations of scholars and teachers and writers in our field(s). I want—and we need—to do more to recognize that this is a canon full of difficulties and silences that our students sometimes see and understand more clearly than we do. Jamila Kareem, in a recent issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies*, reminds us that our pedagogies and our histories often enact “yet another erasure of lived experiences.” That is, the prac-

tices we rely on, as much as the texts we celebrate and use to establish new paradigms, may silence some of my students and prevent me from hearing, in that silence, their contributions. I ask myself a version of the question that writing center consultant and doctoral student Lucien Darjeun Meadows asks: how can I “co-create” with students, writers, and the generations that come after me a “liminal zone” for “issues of power and privilege, voice and silence, enactment and negotiation?”

Wendy: The ways in which silence, difficulty, and other concepts are interpreted and negotiated within the classroom will inevitably echo the greater social tensions outside of academia. Take silence, for example. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, George Yancy observes that “[w]hen Blacks speak or do not speak, such behavior is codified in the white imaginary. To be silent ‘confirms’ passivity and docility” (69). Thus, to a white gaze, the silence of people of color can be passive, empty, or even threatening. Moreover, people of color cannot take silence for granted. Rather, they are often asked to identify or explain themselves and pressured to comply out of fear for their own safety. For people of color, silence, therefore, is a fraught privilege, rather than a right. Silence can often be a matter of life and death.

As Dalia Rodriguez explains, how a student of color uses silence—or has silence used against them—within academia can be an incredibly different experience from that of a white student. A student of color might be judged more harshly for their silence, which may signify to the white gaze blankness, unproductivity, or uncooperativeness. Kazim Ali’s chapter in *Resident Alien: On Border-crossing and the Undocumented Divine* argues that “[w]ithin the silent spaces is an immensity of energetic activity of various emotional tonalities. . . . The body that knows its sounds and silences increases its power and ability to speak in the face of the growing injustice and technology that works to supplant the functions of the body” (185).

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Juli: When I think about intergenerational exchange, I think first of the individuals with varying degrees of agency who set the terms for not just what is exchanged but how: the professors and administrators and journal editors who make specific decisions about whom to allow a voice and whom to silence, about whose difficulty to seize on as evidence of learning and whose difficulty to dismiss as irrelevant or disqualifying.

I want less to pass on the more static roles of teacher/student and editor/writer, and more to understand and think hopefully about the process of exchange itself: in which assumptions are surfaced about histories and legacies and canons and their relationship to our current practice, about the pathways that are available and how we make them visible to one another. In processes of exchange that invite all parties to collaborate, we have the chance to negotiate and navigate silence and difficulty differently.

Wendy: The question of how intergenerational exchanges should themselves be navigated today is fraught with questions of power and oppression. What does intergenerational exchange look like in American academia where students, more and more, do not have the same racial identities, gender expressions, and so on as their teachers? Do intergenerational exchanges that aim to provide answers or guidance based on past experiences only end up passing down and further entrenching the power dynamics of the past?

Wendy and Juli: We hope, in offering one intergenerational exchange, that negotiating questions and acknowledging difficulty and silences can stand in as one generative way to continue the work of interrogating or dismantling power structures that so many others before us—and the field more broadly in our current moment—have done and are doing.

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