

# INTRICATE INSCRIPTIONS: NEGOTIATING CONFLICT BETWEEN COLLABORATIVE WRITERS

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*Hell is – other people!*  
– Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

In “Collaboration, Critical Pedagogy, and Struggles Over Difference,” Amy Goodburn and Beth Ina discuss the dynamics that can inform collaborative relationships. Admitting that collaborators’ relational needs may exceed their interest in task performance, they suggest that “for some students, the value of collaboration is viewed primarily in terms of social interaction and not in the production of text” (146). In explaining these relational needs, they add that, “When evaluating students’ collaborative texts, teachers are often not aware of the many negotiations and interactions that may have contributed to the text’s formation but are not necessarily inscribed in it” (146).

Goodman’s and Ina’s analysis helps me understand a conflict that I tried to help two of my students resolve. Although the following narrative does not record success, it illustrates how social interaction can animate and undermine collaboration. More importantly, this story shows how a pedagogy based on a naive vision of care – on the wish to have collaborators treat one another with reciprocal integrity and compassion – can go awry. After sharing this story, I will offer three precautions that teachers can take in order to enact a more responsible pedagogy of collaboration – one that better

responds to the relational needs of students who are made vulnerable when they are compelled to work together.

## **Intimate Incriptions: Mae and Lam**

Collaboration took place in an upper-division composition class of twenty-two students. In class, I asked each student to work with a peer to compose a three-page proposal and give a ten-minute class presentation on an improvement they wanted our campus to make (e.g., build more parking structures). The eleven “teams” of two students each were prepared for collaboration by watching a video about effective and ineffective group work and by sharing positive and negative stories about their histories as collaborative writers. In peer review and class performance, ten teams voiced little anxiety about collaboration. One team, however, was riddled with conflict.

This team consisted of Mae and Lam, two traditional-age college seniors. Both students were Korean-American for whom English was their first language. In this collaborative process, Lam’s actions presented a problem. Accused of being a “screw-up” by Mae, Lam was often late to class, missed meetings, and was derelict in his duties. When students wrote reviews of their peers and assigned them a letter grade, Lam rated Mae’s contributions poorly, assigning her a “C minus.” Mae gave Lam an “F” that she typed in boldface and underlined twice. Mae even spoke to me after class, insisting that I take Lam to task.

I invited Lam to a conference where he told me his troubles. Sitting in my unairconditioned office in 107 degree heat, wearing a black leather jacket and fidgeting with a cigarette which university policy forbade him to smoke, Lam fingered his “moussed” hair and narrated his troubles with parents, girlfriends, and school. Confessing that he was late to meetings because his therapy sessions ran overtime, Lam also said that Mae had been unfair to him—giving him “weird looks” and “the silent treatment” whenever he arrived late. When I suggested to Lam that he talk to Mae about their conflict, he said that he did not want to explain himself to her—that it would seem like “begging for help.” He said that Mae should be able to see by looking at him that he was “in a bad

place." He argued that while he might appear to be "casualing out" (our campus dialect for taking one's duties casually), he was doing the best he could under these difficult, but undisclosed, circumstances. Lam then swore me to secrecy about his troubles—asking if we could keep them "between us guys."

Given Lam's behavior, it is tempting to treat him as an isolated player. Indeed, Lam did act like a solitary hero who commands attention by virtue of his difference and alienation. In this sense, Lam's separatism and rhetoric illustrate the idea that in groups "women are typically assigned the attention-giving roles and the men the attention-getting ones" (Kenton 149). In collaborative work, Lam exacerbated this gender-related inequity by assigning himself the attention-getting role. He further secured his hierarchical position by narrating his problems only to me (his formal evaluator) and then swearing me to secrecy, in effect giving me a knowledge I could use only to excuse his actions. With this tactic, Lam was exploiting the ethos of "emphatic individuation" (Gilligan, *Different Voice* 39) that characterizes and privileges male behavior.

If Lam saw himself as persecuted and in need of care, it is also true that he wanted to stand out in class. The ethos of individual achievement permeated his actions, particularly when he asked me at least once a week if he would get an A in the class, and if I would write him a letter of recommendation since I knew him "so well." Thus, what distinguished Lam from his peers was not his intellectual performance but his stance of alienation and suffering. By assigning himself the role of the misunderstood male, Lam sought exemption by representing himself as a needy and tortured brooder whose difference connoted one-of-a-kind talent and depth.

Mae, however, would not let Lam assume that stance. Consistent with Chodorow's argument that men and women have "different relational needs and fears" (170), Mae complained loudly to me about Lam's behavior—calling him a "jerk-off" and claiming that he used his "mental illness trump card" to get his way. Far from craving a connection with Lam or wanting to understand him, she told me that she resented group work and saw it as a "burdensome, meaningless, and externally-imposed" obstacle to her education. All of this

tension exploded five days before their final project, an oral presentation in which Mae and Lam would have to team up and speak to the class.

In class, I had invited students to call me at home until 10:00 P.M. with questions or problems. One Sunday, at 11:57 P.M. (I have a digital clock), I had a call from Mae. As I picked up the phone, she screamed, "I'm sorry but Lam missed another meeting without an excuse . . . I'm sick of this goddamn shit." I confess that when I asked Mae what she thought we should do, I half expected her to respond as a moral agent— "the weaver" (Gilligan, *Different Voice* 17) of social networks and human relationships. It didn't happen. Instead, Mae said she wanted Lam thrown out of the class. When I explained that Lam had done his individual assignments (which had earned him a B minus), Mae reconsidered. She said she "could accept" Lam being banned from the presentation and having his course grade lowered to a D. More than that, she also wanted to subject him to public humiliation—to have him attend class on their presentation day and then tell him, in front of their peers, "not to bother speaking because you haven't contributed anything and aren't worthy of the name 'human being.'"

Mae's reaction might have signaled an individual oblivious to the suffering of others. One could ask what happened to the gender-related moral voices that Gilligan documents—the ones in which men speak of "equality, reciprocity, justice, and rights" and women speak of "connection, not hurting, care, and response" (*Moral Domain* 8). A more complicated understanding of Mae's anger, however, is necessary. Using Mary Belenky's insight that "powerless people do the kinds of things that women tend to do" (Ashton-Jones and Thomas 282) one can read Mae's resentments "for depth" — the way that Lam wanted his actions interpreted.

When I asked Mae why she was so upset, she spoke with clarity, saying, "What really bothers me is the fact that he'll have the same degree that I have, and then when we compete for the same job he might get it over me." Mae's statement indicates that she is not just the voice of capitalist competition, but a perceptive critic of male privilege. Mae resented the care being given to Lam partially because she realized that he was

exploiting our culture's glorification of "alienated" young men in order to evade responsibility. Yet, while I concurred with Mae's reasoning, the vision of justice she wanted (Lam's public humiliation) seemed too epic in scope. Since Mae and Lam were not speaking, and I had orchestrated their situation, I could not refuse Mae's request to intervene. And with Lam remaining noncommunicative and Mae becoming aggressive, even admitting to calling him several times a week between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M. to "subtly remind him" of his obligations, our collaborative process had become unproductive.

At this point I hoped we could stimulate communication around the ethic of care as a facet of collaboration—something that "involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's" (Noddings 24). I thought that if we could envision collaboration in a more holistic way, we could see that caring is always conflicted, especially when people disappoint one another and when "cared-for's demand incompatible decisions from us" (Noddings 18). Hoping to create a solution that would address human weakness and move students toward a working truce enabling them to coexist long and peacefully enough to do the work—I wanted to persuade Lam that he had a moral obligation to act responsibly toward Mae and to persuade Mae that injustice could be met with compassion. To that end, I requested a meeting with both parties.

When both students refused to talk, I intruded and began the meeting by summarizing Mae's call and asking Lam to respond. At this, Lam literally jumped up, kicked our table and said, "Look, I know I messed up, and you both hate me anyway . . . so what can I say?" Mae tisked. I then told Lam that his dramatic rhetorical move was familiar and unimpressive, and documented the major ways that he had let Mae down. I let him know that, in order to receive a passing grade on this assignment, he would have to do most of the work and turn in all documentation on time, to both of us. At this point, Mae laughed and said, "Go, Dr. J!"

When I then asked if Mae wanted justice for Lam, she said, "Yes! Absolutely!" Using Gilligan's argument, I explained how justice and care voices needed to coexist in both collaborators. Avowing that she was "unimpressed by Gilligan" and that

“justice is blind” Mae smiled and called Lam “clearly wrong and not worthy.” These last words “not worthy” were particularly interesting because, while Mae was saying this about Lam, the 1991 film *Wayne’s World* with its credo “We’re not worthy” was winning new fans in a campus retrospective. Mae’s allusion, though made in anger, suggested that things could improve.

Responding to her allusion, I ungallantly reminded Mae of the times she had been technically “wrong and not worthy,” yet counted on my caring. I spoke of the time she had asked for full credit for a paper turned in late, asked to resubmit an essay with many typos for a new grade, and missed a conference without calling. In asking both parties to think about how a justice-oriented teacher would react to their transgressions, I reminded them that, instead of justice, they had requested and received compassion. Once again, my involvement signified intrusion. I had transformed “care” into an act of shaming and an indirect threat of pulverizing justice. Luckily, the threat proved ineffective. Mae said that she was still unimpressed. She said that the extremity and frequency of Lam’s transgressions merited no mercy since “justice takes no prisoners.”

To bring my point home, I shared an excerpt from educator Nel Noddings’ book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* which I naively hoped would inspire ideological change. The passage, “Rules and Conflicts,” is drawn from the chapter “The One-Caring” in which, Noddings argues that caring is not a commodity to be earned, withheld, or lavished on a deserving few, but a “genuine response to the perceived needs of the others” (53). Noddings defines caring as a reciprocal activity. In other words, Lam, the would-be cared-for, had an ethical, as well as contractual, obligation to treat Mae fairly.

I also mentioned my own conflicts—that I felt obliged to be nonselective in my caring for both of them, but did not want to see my caring exploited by Lam and begrudged by Mae. Finally, I asked both parties that if the next time they judged one another, they would ask themselves why, in looking at another’s transgressions, they saw deliberate ill-will, yet in reviewing their own errors, they saw good intentions and emotional complexity. At this, Mae and Lam said they never

thought of it that way and agreed to drop their mutual “tudes” (our school’s dialect for “attitudes”) and give their presentation.

Using Noddings’s text appeared initially to have been a smart move. From then on, Lam did his work on time, and Mae stopped phoning him. More than that, both students seemed to learn that, given the complex interactions between self-image, intentions, and deeds, no one is immune to another’s problems or absolutely free to judge that person. But my pedagogical “success” was as premature as it was pretentious, because we still weren’t finished.

Eight weeks into the next term, Mae came to me with two grade inquiries. She wanted to know what grade Lam had received, and asked why she had received an A in the course. I told her that grades were confidential, and asked if she was disappointed in hers. On the contrary, Mae replied that since she had computed her grades to “a high A minus,” she wondered why the A appeared on her transcript. When I told her that I had used discretionary power (she had a 3.88) to assign her a grade that would more accurately reflect the overall quality of her work, Mae said she didn’t understand and wanted to know if Lam had received a lower grade. She even suggested that she knew someone who could find out his overall grade point average by doing a computer tap.

Mae also said, “Listen, I know these Korean guys. They’re always pulling this shit on women.” When I asked her what she meant, she said, “My sister’s husband is Korean, and he’s the laziest asshole I know, plus he walks like a fag.” Here the “issues” become conflated. Lam’s self-absorption and derelict behavior made him an undesirable collaborator. Yet, he became even more objectionable in Mae’s eyes because of her racism, her homophobia, and her constructed resemblance of him to her brother-in-law. Here, the intermingling of Mae’s multiple resentments underscores Ede’s and Lunsford’s question, “How do issues of gender, race, and class impinge on collaboration?” (125). Once racial and sexual biases are imposed on a demonized other, and the other enacts that demonization by behaving poorly, it becomes difficult to disentangle or defuse the inscribed sources of conflict.

During the few times I ran into Mae, I wondered why she had focused on justice to the point of her own practical

detriment. Later, a text provided a partial answer. Mae had given me a proposal in which she argued that the Philosophy Department should offer a course on the work of Ayn Rand, an advocate of Objectivist moral theory. Rand's theories provide a critical lens for reconsidering Mae's behavior and my methods of conflict resolution.

In defining Objectivism, Rand urges us to embrace a "rational selfishness" (*xi*) in which "concern with one's own interests" (*vii*) is primary. Rand argues that selfishness encourages collaboration since, "Men can derive enormous benefits from dealing with one another . . . but only on certain conditions" (125). The first condition of collaboration is that individuals exhibit industry and integrity. "It is in this sense that a rational man . . . never seeks or desires the unearned" (60). Lam failed on that count. The second condition is that a rational man does not shirk "the responsibility of judging the social world" (61).

I can see that my sympathetic pedagogy may have undermined Mae's possible attempt to enact rational selfishness. Built into Rand's principle is the belief that the person who receives care must deserve it: "If one's friend is in trouble, one should act to help him by whatever nonsacrificial means are appropriate . . . . But this [help] is a reward which men have to earn by means of their virtues and which one cannot grant to mere acquaintances or strangers" (53). My pedagogy failed to address this representation of morality.

My teaching also violated the central rule of profitable collaboration. Rand argues that rational actions are taken with a knowledge of "context" (59). She argues that, "just as a rational man does not hold any conviction . . . or pursue any desire out of context . . . he does not regard any moment as cut off from the context of the rest of his life, and [thus] . . . allows no conflicts or contradictions between his short-range and long-range interests" (59). If we pursue this idea, we can appreciate the logic of Mae's statement "What really bothers me is that he'll have the same degree I'll have, and then when we compete for the same job he might get it over me." From a contextual perspective, Mae may have seen collaboration as a double burden. In class, she was forced to let Lam exploit her. Beyond class, she was destined to see her peer benefit from his



unearned credentials. Aware of our culture's sexist practices, she had every right to solicit help against the parasitic and prospering Lam. In this light, her complaint represented a rational appeal to an authority figure who should have acted more responsibly.

Looking back, I can see how Lam fulfilled his role as the parasite and how Mae could have expected me to provide redress. By Objectivist measures, I was a derelict instructor who protected the Unworthy and ignored the Just. In this sense, my "compassion" may have stuck Mae as an affectation—a romantic gesture dispensed by an irresponsible teacher who wanted to appear benevolent. Furthermore, my grade elevation may have appeared as "the unearned" (Rand 60) and unrequested consolation prize given to her in lieu of justice.

## Reconsiderations

Despite this complex and unsatisfying situation, I have had many good experiences in orchestrating collaborative learning groups. Those group members became tightly connected individuals whose shared experience and knowledge bases enriched our classroom community and their formal projects. Yet those successes have not given me insights into how to transform ineffective collaborative relationships into nonexploitive sites of intellectual inquiry. However, I do have three suggestions that may help us refine aspects of care in order to create a more responsible and inclusive pedagogy of conflict negotiation.

My first suggestion is that preparing students to collaborate includes discussing that this activity makes all participants vulnerable and that ongoing conflict can become an integral feature of group work. Ervin and Fox suggest preparing students for "fair and honest collaborative relationships" by encouraging them "to negotiate their goals and discuss their roles and expectations for joint projects, perhaps in writing" (68). This strategy of direct articulation seems valuable. To it, I would add the concept of modeling. Ever since my experience with Mae and Lam, I have presented, with both students' permission, this story to subsequent students as a case study which they can examine and discuss

before they engage in their own projects. Because these students are not intimately invested in this conflict, they are able to interpret this story as an inverted exemplary narrative— as a dramatic example of what to avoid.

My second suggestion is not to assume that collaborators will naturally arrive at consensus or share common definitions of entitlement, responsibility, or reward. Entertaining this suggestion involves recognizing collaboration's subversive aspect (Schilb) and questioning its popular and "sentimentalized" representation as the uncomplicated enactment of a shared egalitarian project (Bleich 47). Greg Myers writes persuasively that conflict is endemic to collaboration and that when consensus is enforced, it "must mean that some interests have been suppressed or excluded" (156). John Trimbur complicates the notion of consensus when he transforms it from the kind of working truce that I decreed to "a critical instrument [that can be used] to open gaps in the conversation through which differences may emerge" (614). Avoiding my facile solutionism, Trimbur writes that "We need to see consensus . . . not as an agreement that reconciles differences through an ideal conversation but rather as the desire of humans to live and work together with differences" (615). In *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, Joseph Harris supports the idea of disagreement as an ethical and energizing catalyst for intellectual exchange. In discussing how teachers often move classroom conversations from "diversity to consensus, wrangle to dialogue," Harris argues for "the value of keeping things at the level of a wrangle, of setting up our classrooms so a variety of views are laid out and the arguments for them made, but then trying *not* to push for consensus, for an ultimate view that resolves or explains the various conflicts which can surface in such talk" (115).

Another powerful reconsideration of the value of consensus can be found in Kurt Spellmeyer's critique of Composition's general embrace of collaboration:

In the highly liberal form of conversation envisaged by most defenders of collaborative learning, the participants refine their interpretations of the world through an open exchange of ideas and the practice of mutual critique.

While no single participant can claim definitive knowledge at the outset, all the participants, in their search for consensus, may draw steadily closer to a shared perception, a collective truth. (80)

To this “utopian desire for an all-inclusive, unconstrained community,” Spellmeyer adds an important qualification: “I would like to point out that the model of conversation, generous as it seems, can scarcely do justice to the actual constraints on discourse in many classrooms, constraints of a uniquely institutional sort” (80).

When Spellmeyer mentions institutional constraints, he is not just describing the desire for self-advancement that often fuels “the educational encounter” (Bowles and Gintis 265). He is also aware of the elaborate network of creative, competitive, emotional, ethical, and relational needs that drives people to forge individual achievements within collective enterprises. In fact, he describes this drive as a natural catalyst and writes that “Societies change, and never stop changing, because no system can accommodate everybody’s situation equally and because a culture, as something shared by everyone, can continue only if its members remake society, over and over, for their own ends” (91). This image of a society made vulnerable to its participants’ ends (e.g. rational selfishness, male privilege) underscores the idea that the conflicts that occur during collaborative work can have long-standing origins (e.g. Mae arrived critical of Korean men and homophobic, while Lam was already male-privileged) and no ending except for the constructed one at the end of the term.

Mae’s articulation of injustice inspires my third suggestion: arbitrating disputes requires methods of conflict negotiation that diminish students’ vulnerability and dignify their need for recognition and protection. Arguing that “We must find ways to help students and faculty improve ineffective, unfair, or unrewarding collaborative relationships” (68), Ervin and Fox assert that “We must be more flexible with the contingencies of an effective collaborative relationship” (67). To this assertion, I would add the idea that flexibility, a term which suggests maturity and humanity, may have different consequences for students than for teachers.<sup>1</sup> If

students perceive themselves as trapped in unproductive relationships based on unequal power distributions, they may refuse a teacher's invitation to be flexible with individuals who are exploiting them. Feeling victimized by both teacher and peer, they can understandably react with disappointment, disengagement, recalcitrance, and withdrawal.

This range of negative reactions suggests how easily a pedagogy inspired by compassion can be interpreted as one driven by privilege and exploitation. Suggesting that a balance of justice and compassion is desirable, Carol Gilligan invites us to assume the perspective of Shakespeare's Portia—a character who “argues for that resolution in which no one is hurt” (105). Some composition scholars have been able to help students achieve this balance. For example, Qualley and Chiseri-Strater quote a student's comment that “‘Collaboration involves the loss of individualism, but it results in the gain of the individual’” (111). While I see this sense of gain as desirable and possible, collaboration can also become a site of loss and frustration.

Frustration occurs when I remember that “collaborative settings can reify traditional patterns of power and authority” (Ede and Lunsford 44). While arbitrating Lam's and Mae's disputes, I hoped to transcend those patterns by making Lam accountable to Mae, complicating Mae's justice orientation, and illustrating the interdependency of all participants. Yet, in some ways, I had actually reinforced gender stereotypes by applauding Lam for merely doing his work and by shaming Mae into accepting a caregiving role. From this perspective, and despite her A, Mae experienced more loss than gain.

These complicated interactions have led me to modify the ways that I orchestrate and support group work. First, I encourage the formation of groups of four or more students. Widening the focus (avoiding the polarized interactions of two participants or the tie-breaking role of the third) helps dissipate the intensity. Second, I keep the grade percentage low (never more than 25 percent) in order to afford individual learners relatively tolerable levels of autonomy. Third, I have greatly increased the time that I spend mentoring these groups, and have created a “late policy” that protects diligent students and prompts unprepared ones. For example, this semester's policy

reads: "Anyone who misses an outline or draft conference without a documented medical excuse, or does not have all of their work done on time, will have their paper grade lowered by one letter grade per class day that the work is late."

Of course, no safeguards or incentives can preclude acts of injustice or perceptions of inequity. Given students' individuated visions of responsibility and justice, it is difficult to imagine a method of conflict negotiation that would appear effective and fair to all participants. Spellmeyer highlights this difficulty, and relates it to the fact that society fuels the very "indeterminancy" it resists. He argues "that although culture (read here as "collaboration") is indeed a construct, there are no rules for constructing society itself because the act of construction (read here as "negotiation") always begins where it is needed, at the points of discontinuity, tension, exclusion, and rupture" (91).

Spellmeyer traces tension's origins back to the competing visions that are always inscribed in any collective enterprise. As he writes, "we might think of our disciplines (and I would add "our pedagogies") less as places defined by agreement and more as sites of problem posing and negotiation—places where the 'transformation and deformation' of codes can occur" (91). These words remind me of how thoroughly activities intended to be transformative can become deformed. Supporting, in every sense of the word, my students' conflicts has helped me see that, given the troubling "particularities of experience" (Ervin and Fox 65), we should work to dignify, intuit, and research students' inscribed relational positions in order to create a more complex portrait of collaboration. This portrait should not depict group work as a passionless activity that automatically leads to "better writing," communal agreement, or an unquestioned social good. Rather, it should represent the collaborative relationship as a problematic struggle of intricate negotiation and potentially intimate wounding—as an occasionally enervating interaction whose responsible direction requires an ethic of care, an awareness of danger, and a carefully nuanced pedagogical response.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Teachers, especially writing teachers who often hold non tenure-track jobs, are also made vulnerable if students' displeasure with collaborative learning is reflected in poor teaching evaluations. Since many composition teachers' achievements are "measured" by one criteria—students' written representations of what went on in the classroom—it may be in our practical interest to achieve and sustain a baseline of student happiness.

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