Differencing Negotiation

To inhabit the multiplicity of cultural borders, historical temporalities, and hybrid identities calls for a state of knowledge, an ethics of the intellect, an aperture in politics, able to acknowledge more than itself; a state of knowledge that is prepared to suffer modification and interrogation by what it neither possesses nor can claim as its own. —Iain Chambers

Recently, scholars in composition have been using the term negotiation in critical discussions of teaching writing to talk about how students might have a hand in shaping the world of difference of which they are a part. For example, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg write in the preface of their textbook, Negotiating Difference, that negotiation is not only a strategy whereby contending groups socially and politically interact but one that is constitutive as well—that is, “contending groups must negotiate not only their political and social differences but also the very concepts of difference and otherness that each applies to the other” (v). For Joseph Harris, negotiation describes a pedagogical process in which a composition instructor can keep students in productive dialogue with one another by conceiving of the classroom as a “local and shifting series of interactions among perspectives and individuals” (Subject 122). While Bizzell, Herzberg, and Harris have theorized negotiation in these senses from Mary Louise Pratt’s idea of contact zones, there are nonetheless important differences between them on this issue. For this reason it is necessary that I first give a brief summary of Bizzell.

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and Herzberg’s idea of negotiation as well as Harris’. I will then examine negotiation not only as describing a positive, if complicated, strategy of communication and interaction but also as a historically significant one that has often been advocated by culturally dominant groups in order to manage difference. I then propose attending more closely to what Peter Lyman describes as “the paralanguages of emotion” and, specifically, “the politics of anger” when theorizing negotiation and interaction. Finally, I suggest rethinking negotiation in terms of what cultural critic Iain Chambers calls “mutual interrogation,” an understanding of interaction that recognizes the need for strong mutual critique. Ultimately, I would like to see more polyphonic and contestatory discussions of negotiation, to pause before advancing the use of such a rhetorical strategy as a pedagogical practice to work through and write difference.

Negotiating Difference(s)

Bizzell and Herzberg’s idea of negotiation is closely aligned with the pedagogical practices that Pratt refers to as “arts of the contact zone.” For Bizzell and Herzberg, a pedagogy of the contact zone, one centered on negotiating difference, involves largely rhetorical analyses of the intertextual relation among historical texts—and what political and social consequences these texts had for those whom they represented. Negotiating Difference is designed around six case studies that highlight moments in the history of North America and the United States when groups of unequal power have struggled to validate and represent themselves politically, socially, and economically. The objective in having students read and analyze historical texts is ultimately to encourage students to become critical citizens. Bizzell and Herzberg believe that it is imperative for students to be aware of the historical antecedents of present social conditions so they might then be better able not only to communicate and live in but to help create a “multicultural democracy”:

People from virtually every nation in the world have worked and struggled here [in North America and
the United States]. Part of their struggle has been to communicate across cultural boundaries, and not only to communicate but to argue for rights, to capture cultural territory, to change the way America was imagined so that it would include those who were newer or less powerful or spoken about but not listened to—in short, to negotiate the differences of culture, race, gender, class, and ideology. Multiculturalism and its difficulties are not phenomena only of our own day: They are embedded deeply in our nation’s history. (v; emphasis added)

I agree with Bizzell and Herzberg that interaction between and among ethnic groups has always been constitutive; the degree to which the position of one group wins out over other positions has always been based on the ability to produce the other, to produce representations of the other that serve particular agendas. This is important to remember in both critical discussions and pedagogical practices. Critical analysis of historical texts helps students not only understand how historical antecedents situate them in present social relations, it also highlights the dialogic relation between various texts, positions, and authors.

However, my criticism of Bizzell and Herzberg in this matter echoes Harris’ criticism of Pratt’s “arts of the contact zone.” He writes, “what Pratt seems to end up doing is, in effect, importing difference into her classroom through assigning a number of readings from diverse cultures. At no point does she speak of how she tries to get students to articulate or negotiate the differences among themselves” (Subject 118). A similar critique can be leveled at the stance of Negotiating Difference: that there is little talk about using the differences to be found in students’ experiences, differences students bring with them to the composition classroom. Certainly, one problem is that the book is firmly rooted in the tradition of the rhetoric-reader. Students are asked to closely read a collection of historical documents and evocative essays, but the text asks that they pay little attention to why and how they might want to go about voicing positions in actual classroom settings.
The lack of attention to pedagogical practices means that students see and examine how others have negotiated differences as well as the consequences this has had for those others. The textbook does not ask students to negotiate difference themselves or put their own positions into dialogue with one another but to negotiate only the text, to put their positions into dialogue with the instructor through papers prompted by the apparatus related to each specific case study.

Also, in their claims for negotiation, Bizzell and Herzberg largely ignore negotiation as a strategy to get things done that those in power often favor. After all, the languages and protocols of negotiation are often the languages and protocols of dominant groups, of those who have the power to institute and legitimize their own ways with language. Further, if we apply in this case Bizzell and Herzberg’s imperative to be aware of how historical antecedents inform present social relations, then negotiation should come under intense scrutiny. The United States government’s relation with Native Americans, for example, has been characterized historically by broken promises and treaties, deceitful negotiations, and general bad faith. Although Bizzell and Herzberg include a case study of the first contacts between Puritans and Native Americans, there is no case study, and only a brief mention, of the United States government’s subsequent relation to Native Americans, no examination of how the ideology of Manifest Destiny, for example, allowed Europeans to believe that they could use any means necessary, including negotiating in bad faith, to displace Native Americans. In short, Bizzell and Herzberg fail to examine the negative historical antecedents of the very strategy they are advocating.

On the other hand, Harris raises important issues of voice, representation, and agency for students in actual classroom settings, not just for those whom students read about in historic contexts; he is critical of text-based historical analysis if it does not connect to students’ lives and experiences. He is worth quoting here at length:

How, for instance, do white students speak with their black classmates about a text written by an
African author? What forms of evasion, politeness, resistance, hostility, boredom, or incomprehension interfere with their talk? And how might these be lessened or at least acknowledged so that something more like conversation and less like a simple trading of positions can take place? Or what happens when a student finds that—due to the accidents of race or class or gender—he or she has somehow become the "representative" of a text (and by implication, culture) that the class is reading? In what ways is such a student free to criticize or resist as well as to celebrate or identify with the claims that text may be making? Or, conversely, how do students who are not members of the same culture as the author of the text gain the authority to speak critically about it? (Subject 118-19)

Harris is asking us to think of issues of cultural difference in terms of teaching, not just in terms of textual analysis. Harris emphasizes actual classroom exchanges and calls for a "negotiation of the contact zone." Ultimately, he would like to see the contact zone refigured from a notion of "physical space," where readings from diverse positions are brought into contact with one another, into "something more like a process or an event" in which students actively put into dialogue their differences (Subject 122). Harris believes that we have asked students to spend enough time expressing differences, and it is now time that we ask them to attempt to bring these differences into meaningful dialogue with one another (West 8). Although I agree with Harris on this point, still I fear that negotiation as it is being discussed in relation to the study of writing may be going the route that community did some years ago. That is, negotiation is not being talked about as having negative associations, only positive ones.  

Rethinking Negotiation as Mutual Critique

The questions Harris poses above are a good start toward thinking about the political and rhetorical dimensions of negotia-
tion in the classroom. But if we are to insist on using negotiation as a strategy to work with and through difference, we need to realize that the objective of negotiation is often to diffuse subversive action. Negotiation seeks to turn action toward language in order to then wrangle transformative, disruptive, “slippery” ideas back into the status quo, into something workable, knowable. Often this is done through the rhetorical conventions of dominant groups. In this sense, we might think of negotiation as what philosopher and political theorist Mark Kingwell calls “civil dialogue.” He writes, “Civil dialogue comes into play only when real power relations are no longer up for grabs—that is, when social roles are already highly defined and immune from routine questions about their legitimacy” (236). As a kind of civil dialogue, negotiation is characterized by a willingness to compromise; and because this willingness to compromise is based on moral acceptability and technical usefulness it is presumed to be shared by all groups. At this point I not only want to pose problems with Harris’ idea of negotiation but also to elaborate on it and propose different ways we might think about negotiation—or, in a simple conceptual switch, difference negotiation—as it relates to the study of writing.

Harris would like to see the classroom mirror situations outside of it that make use of negotiation (town meetings, department meetings and the like), situations in which discussion and debate are expected to end ideally either in altered understanding or with actual changes in policy. In his book, A Teaching Subject, he describes a meeting of his English department at which nothing was accomplished—neither “refinement of ideas” nor “negotiation of perspectives.” Those on both sides of the issue concerning personnel and required course offerings ended up retreating back to the very positions from which they had entered the debate. He writes, “Such experiences have helped convince me that something is missing from a view of teaching which suggests we simply need to bring people out of their various ‘safe houses’ and into a ‘contact zone,’ and that is a sense of how to make such a meeting of differences less like a battle and more like a negotiation” (120). Although I admire Harris’ proactive stance here, I find his faith in and insistence on negotiation as a way to make “meetings of differ-
ences" less like battles somewhat troubling. And although I realize that he is talking about pedagogy, he nonetheless speaks as if battle has just one meaning, as if struggle isn't an effective way to alter social relations. Certainly, inroads made toward civil rights, for example, involved, and continue to involve, battle and struggle as well as negotiation. I am simply wary of slipping too easily into a view of struggle as negative and negotiation as positive because one implies violence and the other, ostensibly, does not.

For these reasons, I would like to see discussions that critique negotiation, so that if we are to use it—or better, some modified critical version of it—we can do so while keeping in mind that it often favors those in power. When theorizing negotiation, we might attend more closely to what Peter Lyman refers to as "the paralanguages of emotion" and, specifically, to "politics of anger." He writes,

The rules of politeness and rationality that govern social dialogues may make it impossible to say what needs to be said by making certain topics impolite, certain tones of voice or emotions irrational, or simply defining topics as psychological and not political. . . . A phenomenology of anger does not focus upon the means of expression of anger, but its meaning, the self-understanding and understanding of the world of the angry person. (59, 61)

When different groups meet and interact anger sometimes surfaces, and it seems that a primary reflex is to think of ways of diffusing that anger, of "negotiating" it. But such moves do not allow for us to learn how to hear what anger is being made to say, what anger is being asked to defend, how anger can act as a dialectic of self and world. We might think about how emotions such as anger influence the negotiation process, how negotiation is a process that seeks to diffuse anger in the first place. Direct, angry speech poses challenges, yes, but anger is not something that always needs to be immediately diffused. The challenge becomes how to listen critically, how to relate the political impulses of individual and collective anger to present and preceding social conditions.

Paying close mind to the politics of anger is all the more
important once we begin to understand the conservative potential of anger as well as its transgressive potential, how anger "offers emotional resources to defend social order far more potent than ideology or reason" (62). Lyman also examines anger as a moral response that acts as

the emotional foundation of civil order in its moral form, the capacity for moral outrage by which society defends its mores and sacred values. The moral response is trained, not learned; and it is intolerant, not flexible. It takes its power from the sense of personal violation that is aroused when one sees that which one cares for violated. The socialization of anger is an important part of the moral training of the good citizen. (62)

That is, the socialization of anger allows for the individual to serve authority and its interests uncritically, even perhaps to sacrifice one's own interests to that of authority (62). Viewing anger in this manner opens up critique of its role in social and political affiliations of all kinds, including those stemming from class, nationality, and gender.

Learning how to receive direct and critical speech, how not to take such criticism personally, to think it and not simply feel it is as important as learning how to craft critical arguments. We might think about how moral and political stances are articulated through anger and what implications these articulations have for pedagogical as well as social relations. In short, we might theorize the different ways that anger can act as an impetus for and as a hindrance to thoughtful social action. However, because negotiation is currently thought of as either "navigation" or compromise, because it lacks any real critical edge, it is an inadequate mechanism with which to understand and to critique the complicated rhetorical connections between the personal inflections and the political articulations of anger.

If we are truly to learn from our differences, then we need attend more closely to politics of listening and to the paralanguages of emotion and not uncritically accept current multiculturalist discourse about negotiation merely because of the apparent moral acceptability and technical usefulness of a willingness to
compromise. We might also think about how we listen for and how we hear the silences as well as the utterances of others. For example, Trinh T. Minh-ha believes that “silence as a will not to say, or to unsay, and as a language of its own has barely been explored” (73). Lyman thinks that “silence may be as important a text of anger as is vehement speech” (63). Chambers refers to what King-Kok Cheung calls enabling silences, strategies that “permit others to be irreducible to a common syntax” (51). But anxious calls for negotiation do not allow for silence itself to be seen as a strategy of negotiation—a strategy that seeks to avoid dominant notions of negotiation as compromise. Frustrating, stalling, and hesitating may be, and have historically been used as, strategies by those who have little faith in or who are, for any number of reasons, suspicious of negotiating processes.

Negotiation reconceived as what Chambers calls “mutual interrogation,” what I prefer to call “mutual critique,” attends both to a politics of listening and to the influence of the paralanguages of emotion during social interaction. Further, mutual critique allows for the realization that not all parties might be interested in compromise in order to maintain the status quo, that others might be interested instead in disrupting and transforming the status quo. Chambers writes,

To hold on to the uncertainties of mutual interrogation is imperative. Otherwise my desire continues to reproduce the cycles of hegemony that subject the other to my categories, to my need for alterity. Then my recognition of difference merely becomes the prison for the object of my desire. Requested to carry the burden of “authenticity,” of “difference,” of “post-coloniality,” the other continues to be exploited, to be colonized, in another name. I am referring to what unfolds towards me and away from me, to what both envelops and exceeds me. (54)

What I like about Chambers’ stance is that it recognizes the transformative potential of the otherness of the other. That is, it recognizes the need, if we are to learn from and live with our differences, for dominant positions to be altered by the unknowable.
of other positions. Whereas traditional understandings of negotiation are characterized by a willingness to compromise, understandings of mutual critique are characterized by uncertainty and risk. And whereas negotiation is invested in maintaining the status quo, mutual critique realizes that strong critique may serve as an impetus to upset the status quo. Mutual critique involves an understanding of social relations as dependent on both the need to critique other positions as well as the need to listen critically to them.

Changing the Rules of Negotiation

For Bizzell, Herzberg, and Harris, theorizing negotiation as a pedagogical practice highlights the political dimensions of meetings between groups of people inside and outside the classroom, but the strategy itself—its history and the motivations of those who call for it—is not in turn politicized and interrogated. Certainly, negotiation is not without rules. But calls for negotiation which do not critically examine the historical and political dimensions of these rules leave me uneasy.

Still, Harris and Bizzell and Herzberg make compelling arguments for the negotiation of difference. And, in general, they bring refreshing insights to debates about contact zones. I agree that it is imperative when writing about difference that students become aware of historical antecedents of present social conditions. It is also important to realize that discussions about difference are themselves constitutive, that who we think we are results from rhetorical and political contestation. And Harris’ focus on actual classroom practices reminds us that teaching writing and learning about difference involve much more than textual analysis, that they also involve paying close mind to the micropolitics of interaction among students in the classroom. Yet, I stress that negotiation as it is being talked about in discussions of writing and difference needs to be complexified, differenced, and used with some caution. I think the last thing we as composition instructors who are dedicated to exploring theories of difference want to do is call for and enact forms of “colonization,” ones that seek to manage
difference by insisting that it “show its cards” at the negotiating table and unproblematically respect the rhetorical and communicative strategies of dominant groups.

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Notes

1 Pratt defines contact zones as “spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today” (34). “Arts of the contact zone,” then, describe pedagogical practices that analyze texts and cultural expressions which result from contact between groups of different cultures.

2 It is no small irony that it was Harris himself who critiqued the singularly positive connotations of community. (See “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing.”) Nevertheless, it is the spirit of such revisionary and problem-posing scholarship that has inspired much of my own work, including this essay.

Works Cited


