The Point Is There Is No Point: Miasmic Cynicism and Cultural Studies Composition

Lisa Langstraat

If it is possible to identify the dominant structure of feeling of an era, our postmodern period might be classified as the Age of Miasmic Cynicism. This is certainly an arguable classification among cultural theorists who might instead name melancholia, fear, rage, or even boredom as primary affective modalities of our time. However, though miasmic cynicism may not be the umbrella affect under which all other emotional identifications form, its allusion to a lethargic, potentially lethal haze of skeptical distrust and anxious pessimism certainly seems apropos for this cultural moment—a moment when Gloria Steinem, that maven of 1970s feminist anti-advertising, stares vacuously from a Coach purse ad that describes her simply as a “writer”; a moment when a president and his cigar enjoy a brief but memorable extramarital romp with an intern who in turn enjoys a brief but memorable stint as a Jenny Craig Weight Loss Center spokeswoman; a moment when Jerry Springer’s sincere insincerity wins higher Nielsen ratings than Oprah’s insincere sincerity.

Given the bizarre, crazy-making proliferation of such cultural events, it seems quite reasonable that the ambient blur of cynicism would prevail in contemporary U.S. emotion culture.

Miasmic cynicism permeates our classrooms, our institutional and personal relationships, our field. Perhaps nowhere is it more prevalent in composition studies than in recent critiques of cultural studies approaches to composition. It’s hard not to feel cynical about the dizzying proliferation of cultural studies work, a proliferation that certainly reflects “a postmodern sensibility that delights in ephemerality and the commodification of culture” (Faigley 16). The profit-driven textbook industry markets dozens of cultural studies readers featuring snazzy
visuals hitherto unseen in our unabashedly print-oriented field. Mingled with an attention to inherently transitory popular culture texts and movements, such events have led critics to argue that cultural studies composition is just another academic “fashion” that, like power ties and philology, will quickly go out of style (see Spellmeyer, “Out”). Cultural studies seems just another brand of theory that academics have bought into, and brand loyalty alone can’t guarantee the social change to which cultural studies has, at least ostensibly, been dedicated. Indeed, it would seem that miasmic cynicism threatens to undermine the cultural studies composition project of helping writing and written agents articulate—and feel the power to negotiate—the production, circulation, and reception of cultural texts. The ambient pessimism, loss of affective agency, and misanthropy that accompany postmodern cynicism are anathema to cultural studies composition’s aims and desires.

How do we respond to the cynical assessments of cultural studies composition? Surely not by responding in kind—by cynically agreeing (with a wide grin) that it’s all a farcical business, nor by cynically cajoling (with an even wider grin) the critics who don’t “get” cultural studies and never will. Similarly, it makes little sense to lament the loss of cultural studies’ (perhaps mythical) radical status in the American academy in general or in composition studies in particular. Instead, I want to explore the affective climate that accompanies the sense that a now-institutionalized cultural studies has spiraled into a business-as-usual approach, and I want to explore the shifting political momentum that always accompanies such a structure of feeling. Several integral, if provisional, questions guide this exploration: What historical and material conditions have led to an environment in which cynicism so readily flourishes? Given its powerful place in contemporary emotion culture—and, by extension, its indisputable presence in our and our students’ lives—how does cynicism function in the cultural logics of domination and transformation that so influence our sense of selves as writing and written agents? How does the prevalence of cynicism influence cultural studies compositionists’ attempts to teach critical literacy practices? Addressing these questions requires exploring cynicism as a culturally constructed and rhetorically situated affect that, like any emotional constitution, is a site of both social control and transformation.

Given these considerations, I begin my exploration of cynicism and its institutional and pedagogical impact on cultural studies composition by discussing how cynicism in contemporary emotion culture can be understood as an effect of the shifting emotional identifications in
postmodernism, particularly in light of mass-mediated consciousness. After examining several theories of postmodern structures of feeling, I turn to a memorable pedagogical exchange in an attempt to distinguish between those moments when cynicism undermines action, and those moments when cynicism is an appropriate affective strategy for vexing the dominant and dominating processes of emotional hegemony. Finally, I argue that it is through cultural studies' methods of historicizing, intervening in, and maintaining a utopic vision about the possibility of revising cultural forms that we can most effectively address cynicism in our classrooms, professions, and daily experiences.

Cynicism and Authenticity in Postmodern Times

When everything feels like a movie,
You bleed just to know you're alive.
—Goo Goo Dolls

These lyrics from the Goo Goo Dolls' Top Forty love song, "Iris," succinctly illustrate the claims of many theorists who speculate about postmodern structures of feeling. When everything feels like a movie, an overdetermined narrative written and acted by someone else, corporeal reality and the experience of genuine emotion seem reduced to mere simulacra. Nothing is authentic. To bleed, to be reminded of physical human existence in the most primal sense, is to combat the anesthetized feeling of living someone else's life; it is a source of agency, a reaction against the predetermined emotion scripts whose images bombard us with disorienting alacrity.

Lest we take this doleful interpretation too seriously, however, "Iris" has a built-in trigger for postmodern cynicism. It is the theme song for the Meg Ryan/Nicholas Cage movie, City of Angels (itself a rather unremarkable remake/simulacra of the German film, Wings of Desire). As such, clips from the film dominate the Goo Goo Dolls' music video, demanding that we read the lyrics through the film's narrative, so that everything does indeed feel like a movie. If anyone is bleeding here, the camera is not going to record real blood. The wry referentiality of the line I've quoted thus pierces the potentially sentimental lyrics, reminding listeners (and MTV or VHI viewers) that the song is, after all, just Hollywood, the stuff of which suspect sincerity is made.

The affective textures of postmodern life are by no means monolithic, and certainly different audiences in different contexts may form different
affective interpretations of a song like “Iris.” This example nonetheless accentuates how our emotional lives, rather than transhistorical and exclusively biologically hard-wired, are very much produced by the cultural moment in which we live: postmodern culture engenders a distinctive emotion culture. It is an emotion culture in which cynicism—a response to the loss of the stable subject positions and grand narratives promised by Enlightenment discourse—thrives. Driven by a desire for the real, the authentic, in a culture where everything does too often feel like a movie, cynicism is a rhetorically situated, affective strategy for managing the contradictions and seemingly senseless experiences of contemporary life. What follows is a brief overview of several theories of postmodern cynicism, an overview designed to clarify the possibilities for interpreting the pedagogical moments of cynicism that so often vex those of us who call ourselves cultural studies compositionists.

As Lawrence Grossberg contends, “Much of what is talked about as ‘the postmodern’ is predicated on the perception that something ‘feels’ different, not only about particular aesthetic practices, but about a wide variety of life-experiences and historical events” (“Postmodernity” 271). Consider, for example, Fredric Jameson’s notorious claim that our era is marked by a “waning of affect,” a “depthlessness” of emotive experience precipitated by the subject positions humans assume in this late-capitalist culture of the simulacra (58). As all cultural elements “from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself” are incorporated into capitalist relations, every feature of postmodern life is colonized as an extension of commodity fetishism (87). A radically decentered subject, Jameson contends, is left only with a fragmented, schizophrenic structure of response. David Harvey similarly insists that the subjective stances we are forced to take in a mass-mediated, commodified culture that values instantaneity and disposability above all else create an emotional ground tone of “time-space compression.” The “condition of postmodernity,” time-space compression results in disorientation, alienation from possible feelings of community, and a lack of awareness of the concrete historical conditions that shape our daily experiences. For Harvey, the overwhelming saturation of images and the “collapsing time horizons” of our culture result in a particular range of psychological responses: “the blocking out of sensory stimuli, denial, and cultivation of the blase attitude, myopic specialization, reversion to images of a lost past . . . and excessive simplification (either in the presentation of self or in the interpretation of events)” (291, 286). Harvey makes clear that these responses overlap in significant ways:
nostalgia feeds the “blasé attitude,” and “excessive simplification” folds into cynicism.

Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* solidifies these assertions in a controversial and compelling work. Sloterdijk insists that our era is defined by “enlightened false consciousness,”

that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered. (5)

Because the promises of the Enlightenment have failed to materialize, Sloterdijk reasons, we are thrust into an alienating position of contradictions: on the one hand, we have been formed by the discourses of the Enlightenment, with their guarantees that rationalism can solve the problems of humanity; on the other hand, we know, rationally, that those guarantees have not been made real, and we feel abandoned by the very discourses through which our agency has been made possible. Enlightened false consciousness, then, serves as a kind of psychic “reflexive buffer” against the existential destruction engendered by our necessarily contradictory positions; this would seem to make political change impossible, since we seemingly have neither a lexicon nor models for such change outside of Enlightenment discourse. Slavoj Žižek echoes Sloterdijk’s claims, arguing in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that traditional Marxist notions of “false consciousness” have been replaced by cynicism, such that the ruling ideology is not even meant to be taken seriously.

Given the cultural dynamic of postmodernity, in which distinctions between reality and image, between the authentic and the fake, not only blur but often seem pointless, cynicism reigns. As Timothy Bewes contends in *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, “The cynic is the typical ‘postmodern’ character, a figure alienated both from society and from his or her own subjectivity” (2). Bewes identifies a postmodern strategic cynicism, an “elastic” psychic stance that allows us to function, even as we doubt the efficacy or authenticity of our actions (28). Indeed, a drive for authenticity supports postmodern cynicism, and that drive is evident in public and personal domains. For example, a recent issue of *UTNE Reader* features a “real” woman emerging from a Barbie-like husk, accompanied by the words, “Reclaiming REAL LIFE: Fed up with a faux
world? Here’s how to get real again (really).” The issue includes a variety of articles discussing everything from the virtue of a scrubbed pine table as the ultimate reality symbol (contra Martha Stewart) to recommendations for becoming attuned to the “bodymind” in an effort to resist that ubiquitous western mind-body split. Marketing, entertainment and publishing executives have, of course, picked up on American’s desire for “getting really real” and have appropriated authenticity-as-image. McDonald’s has scrapped its trademark, “Have a nice day!” farewell and instead trains employees to be more spontaneous—that is, “real” and authentic—in customer relations. Meanwhile, Wal-Mart instructs its cashiers to “personalize” the check-out experience by reading (often with mangled results) the ambushed consumer’s name from his or her check or credit card; again, the point is to make customers feel that they are individualized and sincerely cared for within the huge, alienating matrix of Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. The popularity of television series such as The Real World and Survivor reflects a similar fascination with the authentic-in-action, while Antiques Road Show is a stunning example of the value (monetary and emotional) that we place on the unique and authentic. Even the pseudo-intellectual cable station, The Learning Channel, has an authenticity-related slogan: “Life Unscripted.” Across generations, genders, and social classes there is what Bewes calls a “collective social anxiety around authenticity,” evidence of a “disavowal of the contingencies of representation, the pragmatics of political reality and the split, or disunified subject” of postmodernity (50–51).

The relationship between the drive for authenticity and the affective strategy of cynicism is complex; and cynicism, like any other affective stance, is experienced both individually and culturally. As Grossberg explains, “authentic inauthenticity” provides not an identity from which people can judge themselves and the world, but an affective position that allows for agency and meaning or “mattering maps”:

Authentic inauthenticity starts by assuming a distance from the other which allows it to refuse any claim or demand which might be made on it. This “hip” attitude is an ironic nihilism in which distance is offered as the only reasonable relation to a reality which is no longer reasonable. . . . This estrangement from the familiar and familiarization of the estranged means that the lines separating the comic and the terrifying, the mundane and the exotic, the boring and the exciting, the ordinary and the extraordinary disappear. If reality is already clichéd, the clichés can be taken as reality. If people are totally alienated, then alienation is the taken-for-granted ground upon which they build their lives. (We 225)
Of course, few of us are "totally alienated"—precisely because of the affective strategies we use to make sense of our lives. The distance between self and other that Grossberg identifies as inherent to authentic inauthenticity, however, is crucial for understanding both the causes and effects of postmodern cynicism. Indeed, what makes postmodern cynicism *postmodern* is precisely this distancing. As Bewes notes, "Cynicism denotes a refusal to engage with the world as much as a disposition of antagonism towards it, a flight into solitude and interiority and an abnegation of politics on the basis of its inauthenticity" (1). Communication scholars Ronald Arnett and Pat Arneson echo this perspective: "Cynicism as a communication technique is the invitation to destroy human connection—we cease to trust what has been said without evaluating or testing the statement for its public truth value" (17). In part, this distancing from the other is a traditional trait of cynicism: the person who feels she has been betrayed, deceived, or used by others becomes disillusioned, a cynic who distrusts others—and won’t let others “in”—as a means of protecting herself. Add to this mix the shifting relations of authority and the drive for authenticity in a time when metanarratives are ritually dismantled as part of postmodern life, however, and cynicism becomes not just an individual psychic wound, but a significant feature of contemporary emotion culture.

Cynicism may, of course, be an appropriate, even necessary, affective posture for knowledge-making and action. It can be a rhetorical tactic for addressing intentional deceit or regulating unjustified optimism, and “healthy skepticism” is an integral element in democratic and intellectual exchange. Moreover, the bleak affective stances evident in many cultural theorists’ discussions of cynicism may say as much about the authors themselves as the “others” about whom they write. Feminist critics such as Angela McRobbie and Elizabeth Wilson have long held that many of the theories of affect forwarded by Jameson and other white male critics may say more about a contemporary crisis of masculinity than any larger cultural structure of feeling. Similarly, Terry Eagleton offers a class-based critique. He argues, for example, that Sloterdijk’s enlightened false-consciousness is a luxury afforded the bourgeois class: “Some yuppie stockbrokers may be cynically aware that there is no real defence for their way of life, but it is doubtful that Ulster Unionists spend much of their time being playfully ironic about their commitment to keeping Ulster British” (39–40). And maybe a cynical world-view is endemic to academe, to intellectuals and especially to English-professor-types who entered the academy because they really wanted to share their love of
literature, or really wanted to participate in their students’ intellectual growth or some other noble cause, only to find that very often their altruistic goals are scorned or undermined by those whom (even after tenure) they feel powerless to fight against.

Nevertheless, I do believe that what Arnett and Arneson call “routine cynicism”—similar to what I have termed “miasmic cynicism”—is culturally pronounced and does have enormous consequences. Routine cynicism, a banal, unreflective, and “unceasing attitude of negativity,” is characterized by rejecting (or an incapacity for recognizing) distinctions between what is important and what is trivial (13). Rather than a situationally appropriate response, routine cynicism, Arnett and Arneson explain, disregards the context of communication such that “a hermeneutic of suspicion becomes normative” (280). Though cynicism might be an appropriate affective strategy for responding to specific cultural events and human interactions in postmodernity, routine or miasmic cynicism lived through an unwavering stance of authentic inauthenticity inevitably fortifies oppressive social structures and institutions.

Miasmic cynicism engenders a distance between self and other that makes it difficult to sustain empathy and commitment. It depletes our affective energies and leads to the inaction and misanthropy that are anathema to social change. Indeed, miasmic cynicism, with its entangled desire for and suspicion of authenticity, helps to create and sustain many of the new conservative groups and radically oppressive movements that daily affect our lives as teachers, scholars, folks; when cynicism can no longer emotionally sustain us, turning to organizations that seem to offer authentic authority and renewed hope in metanarratives seems perfectly reasonable. Miasmic cynicism thus plays an integral role in what Alison Jaggar calls “emotional hegemony”: the processes through which dominant groups struggle to regulate the epistemic potential of emotions, thereby determining which emotional states are valued and which are mistrusted in specific contexts (130). Emotional hegemony is effective only insofar as it wins our consent by naturalizing that which is saturated with power relations. And routine cynicism certainly ranks among the most naturalized affects in contemporary emotion culture. That is why it is so important to explore how cynicism functions in the composition classroom, particularly the cultural studies composition classroom, where cynicism would seem to undermine, if not make irrelevant, the goals of critical literacy and action.
The T-Shirt Incident: Miasmic Cynicism and Pedagogical Poses
I suspect that we can all remember moments when miasmic cynicism permeated our interactions with colleagues or students. Frustrating and perplexing, such moments demand exploration as pedagogical opportunities. Here I want to recount an exchange saturated with postmodern cynicism. It was disconcerting at the time, and it remains one of my most memorable pedagogic failures. I describe this situation, which occurred several years ago when I was teaching at a mid-sized western university, in order to explore further how postmodern cynicism makes its way into our classrooms and how we might forge productive pedagogical responses to it.

One day, on my way to campus, I stopped at a local supermarket to pick up doughnuts for a morning meeting. At the bakery department, a man wearing a heavy overcoat on a warm September day grabbed a basket of cookie samples from the counter, ate some, and then crammed the rest into a worn backpack. Outside the supermarket several other men, similarly dressed, squatted by traffic intersections. Their signs read “HOMELESS. PLEASE HELP” or “LOST MY JOB. WILL WORK FOR FOOD.” A few drivers, delayed at a red light, rolled down windows and extended change or bills. I didn’t. Many transients traveled through town; it is located on a busy railroad route, and the hills surrounding town provide good campsites before the weather turns cold. Over the past few months, I’d seen transient and homeless men, sometimes the same men, every morning as I drove to the university. That morning was no different, and waylaid at the light, I remember thinking idly that the men accompanied by scruffy dogs with bandannas tied around their necks seemed to get the most response from the morning commuters.

I arrived on campus, endured the meeting, and finished last-minute preparation for my Composition 101 class. The man in the bakery department and the men with their signs were far from my mind. Upon entering class, however, I was faced with a peculiarly disconcerting reminder. Jeb, a delightfully clever student who always sat in the front row, wore a navy blue T-shirt with a yellow yield sign icon containing the silhouette of a grocery cart centered above the word “HOMELESS.” Knowing that Jeb was active in his church, I first assumed that the T-shirt represented some kind of community action group with which he was involved. But I was quickly disabused of that assumption when, as the students shifted their desks for groupwork, I noticed that the back of Jeb’s shirt read, in the same bright yellow graphics, “DOGPILE.”
My students had just finished drafts of their first assignment, an “autobiography of style” essay in which they were to analyze how their favorite styles of music, clothing, and so on might reflect cultural trends and values. A characteristic assignment for a cultural studies-oriented first-year writing course, the autobiography of style asks students to “balance the semiosis of contemporary life against the lived and living experience of individuals and groups” (Trimbur, “Composition” 127). After several weeks of discussing essays about our experiences with the issue, most of us were comfortable talking about each other’s “style” choices, so when the conversation in Jeb’s group dwindled, I took the opportunity to ask him about his shirt. He explained that it didn’t really mean anything, that he’d seen it at a local department store, had liked it, and had bought it. Within the context of the assignment they were revising, I asked other students (with Jeb’s permission) how they would interpret the shirt. What did the word dogpile have to do with the grocery cart and the word homeless? I was hoping someone would have information on the production and circulation of the shirt—what the logo DOGPILE might represent (no one associated it with the Web search-engine or any other product), whether anyone had seen such shirts in other stores or on other people. I suppose I was also hoping that someone would be as appalled and disconcerted by the shirt as I was; I asked if any of them had driven past the homeless men and their dogs that morning. But the students responded with shoulder shrugging, bemused smiles, and requisite eye rolling. Finally, one woman ventured that it might be offensive to some homeless people. At this, Jeb quickly explained that when he had gone to New York that summer, he hadn’t worn the shirt because of that very concern. The comment was met with silence, a few nods. I waited out the quiet. Finally, a member of Jeb’s writing group summed up the class’ responses when he said, “The point is there is no point. You’re not supposed to make sense of the shirt. You’re just supposed to notice it.” At this, I asked the class if anyone had encountered a similar rationale in their own autobiographies of style. But the conversation lead to a dead end; the students were more interested in the next set of due dates, and class was almost over anyway.

While not terribly dramatic, this scene, pregnant with so many ephemeral and powerful pedagogical realities, replays often in my mind. It reminds me of the influence that teachers’ emotions have on our expectations and class dynamics; I did, after all, feel an undirected, frustrating guilt about my ambivalent reactions to the homeless men that morning, and I’m sure those feelings informed my response to the T-shirt
and our class conversation. Similarly, the scene suggests the dangers of shame as a dominant pedagogical emotion; had I forced the conversation toward an indictment of the shirt as brutally insensitive, if not outright immoral, Jeb, a sensitive and caring young man, would surely have been the target of shame. And I firmly believe, contra Marx's claim, that shame is not the only revolutionary emotion; an understanding of the history of shame-as-pedagogy in U.S. education practices would surely lead most teachers to the same conclusion.6

The scene also, of course, embodies the pedagogical challenge of miasmic cynicism. While I searched for authenticity (surely the shirt must have represented something: were the cart and letters an icon for a homeless advocate group? Did they symbolize a political proposition? A band? A nonprofit merchandiser? A for-profit merchandiser?), Jeb and his comrades seemed to delight in the shirt's message of authentic inauthenticity: the point is there is no point. The political and lived realities of homelessness in our town meant nothing more than a flash of irony designed to bring attention to the shirt and its wearer. Image and reality don't simply blur; their distinction is inconsequential in this cynical framework. And I, a cultural worker dedicated to critical literacy, to teaching the power of sign systems to affect every aspect of our experience, didn't know how to respond to the pedagogical moment, to effectively address the cynicism, to articulate an action, to engage the ethical demands of the moment.

Many cultural studies composition teachers feel at a loss in the face of such miasmic cynicism. The scene I've described, for example, reminds me of Victor Vitanza's account of James Berlin's account of a student who, while fully aware of the manipulation and objectification of the media, continued purchasing the very goods that maintained his status as manipulated object. At a meeting of the Marxist Literary Group, Berlin used this example to ask the question, "[H]ow might we take this and other similar students to the other side of what we might deem social liberation?" Vitanza, in response, posed the "counter-question" of "whether cultural-studies theorists and pedagogues are socially liberating students or producing but cynics or, worse, producing liberated students who are but incipient cynics" (701). Vitanza laments that both he and Berlin were met with silence when they posed these questions to their audience—and for good reason. While, as I've discussed above, many cultural studies theorists discuss the general ambience of cynicism in contemporary culture, there remains a befuddling paucity of pedagogical attention to affect—including cynicism—in the composition classroom.7 In general,
compositionists lack a vocabulary to address affect in the classroom, and the problem is exacerbated for cultural studies approaches.

Cultural studies has, at least implicitly, always been concerned with how human emotions are imbricated in power relations and with the "subjective side" of human experience. Simultaneously, however, affect and emotions have been, and frequently remain, a nuisance, a source of inconvenience that muddies otherwise clear theoretical waters. As Grossberg observes, affect has been a notoriously difficult topic for cultural critics who often try to explain it away as "merely the aura of ideological effects" (We 79). Yet, it is precisely the overreliance on ideological critique that today’s cultural studies theorists and educators work against, challenging claims that the culture industry enforces a mass emotional numbing that undermines social change. Rather than referring to the "absolute power of capitalism" to control individual consciousness through the "empty pleasure" of mass culture—and the appeal to pure reason as a cure for such emotional manipulation—contemporary cultural critics insist that consumers are not "cultural dupes," but are active, critical users of mass culture. This emphasis on human agency to make meanings (in excess of those intended by the producers of mass culture) can bring affective issues to the fore by challenging privatized or individualized conceptions of emotions. But too often the emotional realm lurks just beneath many discussions of hegemony or reception; it rarely surfaces. What Diana George and John Trimbur refer to as "a masculinist view of class culture as the privileged object of inquiry" in cultural studies composition (86) has undoubtedly attributed to this oversight; the tradition of binary thinking (rational-masculine/emotional-feminine) continues to plague much cultural studies work. On those rare occasions when affect is explicitly discussed in cultural studies pedagogies, it tends, as Lynn Worsham notes, to be lumped into generalized terms, such as "resistance" or "pleasure." Yet, the affective response of "resistance," for example, can be inspired by anger, delight, sorrow, exhilaration, cynicism, or a host of other, commingled emotions. As Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank charge, "Affect is treated as a unitary category, with a unitary history and unitary politics. There is no theoretical room for any difference between, say, being amused, being disgusted, being ashamed, and being enraged" (17). The failure to distinguish between such diverse affective positions has, I think, contributed to the many charges that cultural studies compositionists tend to dismiss students' feelings and values in the service of "imposing" a "leftist" viewpoint.
So what do we do? How do we address the affective dimensions of pedagogical scenes like the T-shirt incident? How do we respond to miasmic cynicism? While I've by no means perfected a strategy, I find it valuable to engage many of the heuristics that drew me to cultural studies in the first place: historicizing culture, including emotion culture, in order to reveal how emotional hegemony functions; critiquing cultural forms and their effects as well as reconstructing and/or intervening in the circulation of those forms, thereby recognizing our agency to understand and act upon our culture; and maintaining faith in a utopic vision that the world can be a better, more just, more humane place—that our teaching of rhetoric, our relationships with students, mean something more than college credit in an age of consumption and cynicism.

**Historicizing Cynicism**

In far too many discussions of composition theory and pedagogy, emotions, including cynicism, are naturalized, rendered unproblematic "just are's" that exist outside of political economies and historical influences. Spellmeyer, for example, claims that English studies teachers/scholars should become "ethnographers of experience . . . who find out how people actually feel" ("After" 911). With the exception of the term "actually," I couldn't agree more. But consider the conditions Spellmeyer forwards for such an endeavor: he claims that we must eschew alienating theories of experience and instead "renew emotional coherence" and "search for the basic grammars of emotional life" (910, 911). He doesn't address the ebonics-like quandary of whose "grammars" we should be searching out, nor does he confront the vexing issue of how and why certain emotions might be considered "basic" or fundamental while others are—what? Superfluous? Irrelevant and dispensable?

Rather than reverting to some notion of emotional "basics," we need an understanding of the ways emotions, like any aspect of enculturated subjectivity, are historically situated. Enter cultural studies' emphasis on those social concerns that, as Richard Johnson has explained, are "actively privatised, held at the level of the private. Here, so far as formal politics and state actions are concerned, they are invisible, without public remedy. This means not only that they have to be borne, but that a consciousness of them, as evils, is held at a level of implicit or communal meanings" (52). It might seem contradictory that in a culture where random channel surfing results in Springer-ish surplus emotional displays or where victim impact statements enormously influence jury decisions, we might understand emotions as "actively privatised." Here
it is important to distinguish between privatization and repression. The latter, as Foucauldian critique reminds us, would assume that "real" emotions are suppressed by the social, leading to claims that mass-mediated cultural forms create "synthetic feelings" (Glasser) or "counterfeit emotions" (Postman). In composition discourse, this translates into arguments that students' authentic emotions are sacrificed when the "social" is foregrounded in the writing classroom. To understand emotions as actively privatized, however, requires a different theoretical tact. It means demystifying conceptions of emotions as those hardwired features of life that are somehow beyond the social and analyzing the ways that affect is imbricated in power relations. It means asking who is allowed to feel, what emotional investments are acceptable in a given context, and how "appropriate" emotional expression reflects power relations in that context.

I think these have been particularly tough questions for cultural studies writing teachers because in the field of composition many discussions of feelings in writing instruction tend to be associated with full-frontal expressivism—some pedagogical approach in which students' (highly individualized, privately experienced, and rather self-indulgent) feelings are the fodder for every communicative act. Replacing assignments to "write about how you feel" with invitations to "write about the cultural influences that shape the way you feel and imagine different ways of feeling and acting" is no easy task. A cultural pedagogy of privatized affect makes the first kind of writing easier for students; they've had plenty of opportunities to internalize and naturalize models for such self-expression. And so have we. Since we lack a critical vocabulary for emotions, it is difficult to historicize the affective realm with our students. Moreover, given the ways that cynicism (perhaps more than skepticism) is valued as an appropriate academic stance, it is a particularly challenging affective position to unravel and historicize.

If I had the opportunity to go back, to use the T-shirt incident as a fruitful pedagogical moment, I'd explicitly address the students' affective responses and the prevailing stance of cynicism in that room. We'd discuss when and how pointlessness and cynicism are valuable or appropriate affective responses. I'd then ask students to read and discuss sections of Peter Stearns' *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*, which chronicles the shift from the Victorian celebration of intense emotion to a 1950s "cool" or constrained emotional style, a style very much still with us. According to Stearns, the "feeling rules"—the "recommended norms by which people are supposed to
shape their emotional expressions and react to the expressions of others"—of the late nineteenth century valued the possibility of experiencing life primarily through intense emotionality (2). A new mainstream emotion culture, however, emerged from the 1920s and was firmly in place by the 1950s. No longer were strong emotions the treasured source of civilization, now most advice literature, particularly as it related to workplace and school, counseled Americans to avoid situations that might provoke intense emotions or to conceal all evidence of heightened emotionality (138). As the culture grew suspicious of any intense emotional expression that threatened self control, "American cool," an affective stance of restraint and containment of emotional expressivity, was born.

I'd share with students the central causes for this shift in "appropriate" emotional behavior: efforts to homogenize national culture, given the influx of immigrants; new goals for and attitudes toward childhood socialization; the standardization of American media; growing distinctions between urban and suburban communities; and shifts in American middle-class identity as divisions between the service-sector population and older entrepreneurial and professional groups became more pronounced (Steams 185–86). I'd also offer critical addendums to Steams' position, such as JoAnn Pavletich's argument that

The retreat to emotional inexpressivity on the part of the dominant class coincided with two important political movements: serious and potent attempts on the part of middle-class women, the working class, and people of color to change the face of U.S. power dynamics, and the equally serious and potent attempts by the dominant class to homogenize and incorporate U.S. culture. (57)

Pavletich contends that these social changes, firmly in place by the 1950s, particularly influence white, middle-class male subjectivity. As women and minorities vied for political and economic opportunities, and as corporate economy threatened the autonomy afforded to merchant and small-scale capitalism, "middle-class men moved toward an emotion culture that reflected their cultural position: cautious and restrained" (57). After we read about and collaboratively explored differing conceptions of emotion culture, I'd ask students to examine their responses to the T-shirt, as well as to other contemporary cultural texts and activities, from Sprite commercials to statistics on Americans' voting habits, in an effort to develop vocabularies for articulating contemporary affect. We'd work
toward theorizing the drive for authenticity, including the aforementioned inauthentic authenticity, and we'd try to locate those situations where cynicism seems an appropriate affective response—as well as those situations where cynicism has the potential to undermine engagement, action, and understanding.

This process of historicizing and articulating, integral to cultural studies methods, would help us avoid the confessional tone so often associated with overtly discussing emotions in the writing classroom. Instead, the goal would be to present emotions as rhetorical. And by rhetorical, I don't mean limited to the development of pathetic appeals. Instead, I mean recognizing that emotions act as technologies of persuasion very much shaped by historical and material conditions. Consider, for example Susan Wells' comment in "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" She writes,

"The cynicism that we encounter daily in our students and ourselves responds to a fragmented and contradictory public. . . . Cynicism, distrust of politics, even apathy, are neither moral failings nor signs of a romantic (or postmodern) political innocence; they are strategies for addressing a public that no longer supports the illusion of organic integrity. (333)

To understand cynicism (and, by extension, other affective identifications) as a strategy developed in relation to concrete social relations is to begin the process of demystifying the emotional hegemony that always shapes those social relations.

Accompanying an attention to the history of emotion cultures, then, should be a dialogue about how emotions can be a strategy within local (and national/global) political and personal activities. This means more than simply lamenting cynicism's stranglehold on youth, as has been the case in many academic and popular discussions of youth and cynicism. Consider Mark Edmundson’s recent Harper's piece, “On the Uses of a Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students.” In line with a number of other popular critiques of today's youth (Peter Sack's Generation X Goes to College or Katharine Washburn and John Thornton's collection, Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture come to mind), Edmundson argues that today’s college students suffer from “cool consumerism,” an affective stance of self-containment and blending-in that is a marketing bonanza for the “buy in order to be” thrust of current youth consumer culture. The consumerist commitment to a laid-back norm precludes passionate engagement: "Strong
emotional display is forbidden. When conflicts arise, it’s generally understood that one of the parties will say something sarcastically propitiating (‘whatever’ often does it) and slouch away” (41). This cool ethos of consumerism, Edmundson insists, shapes every aspect of university interaction: students are even lured to schools based on slick brochures guaranteeing “a cross between summer camp and lotusland” (46). Set up for entertainment rather than critical literacy and rigorous academic engagement, students reject any form of criticism, inspiring a classroom atmosphere of “urbane tolerance.” And when students observe the university’s star system in which some professors teach fewer classes under better conditions, they come to expect—and evaluate—performance over teaching. Edmundson explains: “But more and more, as my evaluations showed, I’ve been replacing enthusiasm and intellectual animation with stand-up routines, keeping it all at arm’s length, praising under the cover of irony” (48).

Edmundson’s perspectives ring true to me—to many of us, I suspect. An ethos of consumerism and its attendant cynicism do envelop many of our activities in the academy. But the problem with Edmundson’s analysis, like so many other “kids these days” critiques, is that he falls into the old cultural dupe trap: students, victims of consumerist culture, are duped into the affective orientation of cool consumerism. Such an analysis doesn’t take into consideration the ways in which cynicism or cool disaffection are, indeed, strategies for responding to the fragmented public that Wells articulates so well. Edmundson conveniently glosses over those situations where youth are enthusiastic, passionate, engaged. He homogenizes emotionality in ways that foreclose intervention and action. Indeed, the strategy he claims for rectifying cool consumerism’s impact on teaching, in ways similar to Spellmeyer’s argument, retreats into some enlightened praise of authentic genius:

I’m canning my low-key one-liners; when the kids’ TV-based tastes come to the fore, I’ll aim and shoot. And when it’s time to praise genius, I’ll try to do it in the right style, full-out, with faith that finer artistic spirits (maybe not Homer and Isaiah quite, but close, close), still alive somewhere in the ether, will help me out when my invention flags, the students doze, or the dean mutters into the phone. (49)

While such a change of consciousness and teaching style might make Edmundson feel the heroic sensibility that is, perhaps, necessary for staving off complete pedagogical burnout, it doesn’t really change things.
It doesn’t help students recognize the ways that emotional hegemony functions to win their consent. It doesn’t address the multitude of affective strategies that we all use to confront the frustration of consumerist, postmodern times. Put simply, it privatizes and individualizes affect, refusing to intervene rhetorically in cultural constructs of emotionality.

**Critique and Intervention**

Because cultural studies approaches to writing are so deeply ingrained in composition studies, it is sometimes difficult to remember that they are, in fact, relatively new. If we use the publication of Trimbur’s 1988 article, “Cultural Studies and Teaching Writing,” as a provisional starting point, we recognize that cultural studies approaches to composition have only been around for a little over a decade—a pretty short period in comparison to other pedagogical stances in composition. Like early cognitive approaches which tended to, say, classify developmental writers as cognitively immature or deficient but which now forward socio-cognitive theories vital for action-writing pedagogies, early cultural studies approaches had some significant problems. The greatest of these was its emphasis on structuralist forms of textual critique that eschewed not only an analysis of the cultural use of texts, but also underplayed the possibility of cultural intervention; these text-based approaches assumed that mere consciousness raising, albeit through heuristics for leftist interpretation, would lead students to critical awareness and action.

Consider Alan France’s *Composition as a Cultural Practice*, an important text to examine because it was one of the first book-length attempts to articulate a cultural studies pedagogy for composition, and because it offers not only theoretical “we shoulds” but laudable close descriptions of daily interactions in an introductory composition course. Influenced by Foucault’s concept of the “rhetoric of violence,” France planned a composition course around a central question: “How do the human sciences explain what causes people [in this case, mass and serial murderers] to perform ‘unspeakable’ acts of violence?” (119). Students read articles and wrote essays designed to help them recognize that expert writers’ cause-effect explanations of violence were based on cultural conventions (for example, the pathological mother). Now, one would assume that issues of violence in contemporary society would generate much affective response from students. Most students, particularly first-year students who are learning to negotiate a new campus environment, are quite aware of the potential violence on their campuses. Moreover, the
media's depiction of violence certainly has an enormous impact on the "mass youth culture" for which France's course was designed. However, students' affective response to the issues of violence get very little attention in France's descriptions of classroom interactions; while he laments their grisly relish in recounting the details of violent acts, there is very little attention to the ways in which their work on violence might connect to the material reality of their own lives. That connection would seem vital were the course to meet cultural studies' goal of developing rhetorical strategies to intervene in oppressive cultural practices. France's approach to textual analysis reflects a central problem in early (and some contemporary) cultural studies approaches to writing: texts are imbued with inherent ideological qualities, undermining the reader's active participation in constructing textual meaning. And, of course, that participation hinges on the readers' affective investments.

The text-as-ideological-artifact approach substantiates Vitanza's claim that cultural studies writing teachers may actually engender cynicism by helping students understand how texts reproduce the worst of late-capitalist values, yet leaving those students without a sense of agency—other than the power to be active consumers, despite their knowledge of the sometimes nasty implications of that consumption. In the course I've recounted above, we might expect France's frustration with students' "stubborn refusal to generalize from individual instance and the Scottish commonsensical faith in the objectivity of language" (134). It's easy to imagine that students, while coming away from the course with good research and synthesis "skills," might nonetheless be cynical about their power to act upon these discourses of violence; they may be perversely fascinated with, say, the latest news report about the latest school shooting, but they may feel that there is nothing they can do about it, no way of intervening in such violence. And, as France's course description suggests, the difficulty many teachers devoted to social epistemic rhetoric have when it comes to addressing affect in the classroom leaves the problem of rhetorical intervention even more vexing. The feeling of agency necessary for intervention is complicated, too, by the drive for authenticity and the endorsement of authentic inauthenticity. As Lee Ann Carroll explains, when we and our students confront the postmodern reality that writing comes less "from the heart" than from "familiar cultural narratives," we can experience the "pomo blues," a sense of melancholia that, again, inhibits ethical action (922).

If combating miasmic cynicism entails combating the feeling that
change isn’t possible, perhaps our most powerful pedagogical strategy would begin with feelings. In addition to historicizing affect, showing students how naturalized emotional responses are in fact culturally engendered, we might cast emotions as not just responses, but as acts. That is, emotions are generally understood as primarily, if not exclusively, reactive, born of external events and stimuli. Certainly, we do emotionally react to our surroundings and happenings. Inauthentic authenticity is, I would argue, one reaction to consumer culture. Yet, affective identifications are also proactive. They are acts of resistance, acts of accommodation, acts of rhetoric. To understand them as such is vital in an effort to de-privatize affect (including cynicism) in order to open possibilities for intervention.

Sloterdijk provides one of the most provocative examples of promoting affective identifications as forms of intervention. For Sloterdijk, enlightened false consciousness engenders acute pessimism, such that happiness is simply a “beautiful alien. It cannot be anything more than a premonition that we approach with tears in our eyes without ever reaching it” (xxxv). Within this framework, what Sloterdijk calls “the critical addiction to making things better” should be abandoned; it is simply a leftover effect of Enlightenment rationalism and leads to inauthentic ways of acting and being that, in the end, simply reinforce enlightened false consciousness (xxxvii). Instead, he argues, we should revive kynicism, the satirical tradition of rhetorical critique that eschews theoretical abstractions for the “exuberant experience of a well-spent life”; this satirical affective stance allows us to “find ready answers rather than to brood over insoluble, deep questions,” thereby combating the paralyzing cynicism engendered by (the failures of) Enlightenment reason and dialectic (287). Kynicism thus provides a self-consciously constructed rhetorical affect. It is a stance, a way of being, that refuses the binary of reason and emotion, if only as a result of refusing to engage in that binary in lieu of an empathic communion with experience itself.

While I understand how kynicism might be a valuable rhetorical affect on an “individual” level, on the level of a kind of westernized Buddhist consciousness to which Sloterdijk alludes in Critique of Cynical Reason, kynicism as a form of collective cultural resistance or intervention is rankling. Consider, for example, Vitanza’s call for action regarding the importance of questioning the effectiveness of cultural studies, composition, and production. Referring to Sloterdijk’s concept of enlightened false consciousness, he explains,
We must be prepared to realize that the conditions of the Symbolic (the economy that determines all things written, thought, spoken, emoted, acted by way of the Negative) make all things by way of the impossible. The economy at work and play in the conditions for the possibilities of critique, therefore, is a restricted one (Bataille). It makes critique in a community possible by way of the impossible, by ways of exclusion. It is a critical expenditure with reserves, without any notion of exuberance. If we continue to accept this condition—in the name of discipline and punishment, in the name of recognition for others and ourselves in the name of propriety—what may remain to us and our students are ever-growing wastelands of cynicism. (702–03)

I assume that Vitanza’s mention of the possible “by way of the impossible” is a reference to Sloterdijk’s rejection of Enlightenment dialectic and reason, such integral features of our subjectivity. While acknowledging the complexity of creating “a Gestalt switch in someone’s disciplinary mind”—a basic condition for cynicism—Vitanza offers little in the way of concrete avenues for community action (701).

The “critical addiction to making things better,” which Sloterdijk so virulently rejects, is founded on the premise that “making things better” requires us to participate in Enlightenment-inspired acts ruled by always already damned rationality. Certainly, much has been said about the debate between those who celebrate the power of modernist discourses of rationality and those who would eschew such discourses for different affective strategies, such as excessive jouissance or cynicism. But the either/or stance (either Enlightenment rationality or postmodern post-rationality) so often reflected in those debates doesn’t necessarily take us very far when intervention is our goal. Bewes, for example, charges that Sloterdijk’s cynical celebration of experience—with its concomitant emphasis on sophistry, spontaneity, and natural chaos—is the work of a metaphysician “to whom the realities of politics are inauthentic and repugnant.” For Bewes, the “incredulity” of Sloterdijk’s position is representative of “a perspective of defeatism imported into modernity by a wave of metaphysical uncertainty labeled ‘postmodernist’” (5). Bewes insists that the modernist ideals of rational, collective political action, political action driven by a clear ideological purpose, are indispensable for social change.

This either/or framework, frequently couched in masculinist terms that reflect the worst of both modern and postmodern discourse, supports what Paul Rogat Loeb calls “learned helplessness.” In *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*, Loeb recounts psychologist
Martin Seligman’s research, which contends that severely depressed people share a common “explanatory style” of the stories they tell themselves about how the world works. Loeb explains that people suffering from learned helplessness “have become convinced that the causes of their difficulties are permanent and pervasive, inextricably linked to their personal failings. This master narrative of their lives excuses inaction; it provides a rationale for remaining helpless” (25). While Loeb presents a rather oversimplified version of Seligman’s concept of learned helplessness, he nonetheless provides a compelling account of the ways in which contemporary conceptions of activism and intervention reinforce an explanatory style of cynicism. The ideology of radical individualism, he claims, has enforced a notion that, to be an activist, one must be an exceptional individual. Loeb tells of a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day CNN special, for which Rosa Parks was interviewed. The commentator introduced Parks with the standard rendition of her refusal to give up her bus seat to a white person, an act that, the host explained, made Parks “the mother of the civil rights movement.” Missing from the introduction, Loeb explains, was any context for Parks’ activism: that she had spent twelve years working with the local NAACP and other activists in the Montgomery area, or that she had attended a ten-day training session at Tennessee’s labor and civil rights organizing school, the Highlander Center, a year before her courageous act on the bus. The heroic narrative that casts Parks as a lone actor, as the person who single-handedly gave birth to the civil rights movement, denies the communal, long-term efforts of Parks’ collaborators. And it mystifies activists as people “with more time, energy, courage, vision, or knowledge than a normal person could ever possess” (34). This exceptional-individual narrative, Loeb explains, works in concert with other narratives that reinforce learned helplessness: that activists always have a perfect plan for action at a perfect time, that they are saintly in their moral resolve and single-mindedness. By recounting the efforts of activists whose primary exceptional qualities are their abilities to accept ambiguity, to recognize the shifting strategies necessary for continued social change, and to act communally despite their own and others’ imperfections, Loeb demystifies activism. And, by extension, he reveals how learned helplessness leads to continued inaction.

If Loeb’s approach to citizenship and action seems a bit naive or facile, I’d want to defend his position because of its inherent rhetoricity. It’s the stories we tell ourselves, the narratives we inherit, that lead to learned helplessness or to active citizenship. And enlightened false
consciousness, with its attendant cynical smirk, is one of those stories. It can easily drift into a kind of psychic determinism that results in either/or thinking: either we bag every aspect of Enlightenment reason and its counterpart, ideologically-driven political action, or we trash every cynical, sophistic strategy that would find resistance through irony and polemic. Since cynicism, however, is a product of mixed feelings—the desire for authenticity and the mistrust of it, the longing for Enlightenment rationality and the suspicion of it—it requires mixed action, a bevy of interventionist strategies that resist narratives of learned helplessness.

Enervated by my own frustrations and narratives about homelessness, my students' apparent apathy and obvious cynicism, and the power of interventionist pedagogy, I found myself unable to address the T-shirt incident. In retrospect, I know I was searching for a single, appropriate response, a single form of action. And I think that's endemic in much cultural studies theory and pedagogy, particularly approaches that stress textual analysis to the exclusion of other forms of intervention. I'm not suggesting that cultural studies teachers/scholars Oprah-ize ourselves and supportively embrace any level of intervention or action that makes us feel better; that would simply reproduce the classroom-as-safe-space, which is a rather toxic mirage in our culture of cynicism. Instead, as we historicize and denaturalize affective identifications, including cynicism, we also need to present emotions as actions. To theorize the difference between a cynical action, an empathic action, a fearful action, an angry action—or any combination of such emotional actions—is to theorize the ways in which our actions are not only tempered by affect, but are communally and rhetorically constructed through affect. Diana George provides an exceptional account of this process in "Changing the Face of Poverty: Nonprofits and the Problem of Representation." She explains that nonprofits face a contradictory challenge: on the one hand, to receive community support they must depict the poor and homeless as "deserving," thereby working against long-held convictions that poverty is equivalent to moral decay; on the other hand, representations of a "deserving" poor result in stereotypical images of "poverty as something that can be seen and easily recognized: fallen down shacks and trashed out public housing, broken windows, dilapidated porches, barefoot kids with stringy hair, emaciated old women and men staring out at the camera with empty eyes" (210). Some nonprofits even respond to the "emotional overload" created through these images of poverty by incorporating a cynical stance in their publicity. A 1998 Oxfam envelope reads: "En-
closed: No Address Labels to Use Up. No Calendars to Look At. No Petitions to Sign. And No Pictures of Starving Children” (209).

The common representations of poverty, George contends, result in “charity but not activism—not in real structural change or an understanding of the systems that remain in place to keep many in poverty even while the culture at large is a prosperous one” (210). At issue in these questions of representation, then, is affective response. Tempering the inclination for disgust or fear of homeless people, for example, requires that nonprofits engender in their contributors a charitable sympathy, yet that sympathy or pity simply reinscribes the ideology that equates poverty with worthlessness or helplessness. Pity creates a distance that allows us to construct homelessness as something experienced by people who are “out there,” who are not like us. (Such was the gist of Jeb’s reference to people who live in New York City, not in a relatively prosperous western community, his community.) If, however, nonprofits represent the needy realistically, as people who look like us, who are not helpless, who often won’t even call themselves poor, well, they risk a cynical response from would-be contributors. And that cynicism could easily result in a loss of financial support. The key for ongoing support of nonprofits, then, is constructing representations that engender affective action that falls between pity and cynicism. George cites several examples of nonprofit publicity that do just that: a Habitat for Humanity holiday thank-you card that features two photos of Habitat housing recipients—white families who smile from their porches and whose barbecue grills and lawn chairs in the background signify a middle-class way of life; and a successful rally by members of Casa Maria, Tuscon’s Catholic Worker House, who fought against threats to prevent homeless people from selling papers from the city medians (they called a gathering of “church people & uppity tramps” en masse at a City Council meeting, and that gathering created a visible front that could not be denied). These strategies, George contends, disrupt the representations of homelessness and poverty that pervade popular media, thereby providing pedagogical opportunities for the public to wrangle with the diverse causes and subjects of poverty.

While George’s discussion—quintessentially cultural studies in its emphasis on production, circulation, reception, and intervention—doesn’t focus on issue of affective action, it nonetheless provides a powerful model for pedagogical efforts to address cynicism. Successful strategies for re-presenting homelessness and poverty require more than a simple shift in pathetic appeals, though certainly pathetic strategies play a significant role. They also, however, require modeling hybrid forms of
affective action: the impossible becomes possible when Habitat for Humanity starts shifting its representations of the poor such that those representations inspire a new affective education, a new way of feeling about the working poor who have been failed by the American Dream. But these new representations do not represent some absolute rupture in common depictions of homelessness. The kynicism of “uppity tramps” and the rational, ideological strategy of depicting homelessness as neither moral failure nor as unlike-us minority, but as a structural effect of our economy—these strategies work both with and against the traditional depictions of poverty that inspire charitable pity. This is the way hegemony works, and our pedagogies need to address hegemony as a process, rather than to seek a single interventionist mode of action appropriate for every case and every location. We may long for such a single strategy for action, and we may desire the promise of an absolute outcome. That longing is certainly expressed in George’s and other cultural studies approaches. Yet, reproducing the either/or dynamic of intervention in our classrooms can simply reproduce cynicism and the feeling that nothing can be done. By presenting rhetorical heuristics that affectively address local politics and intervention, by teaching our students the power of multiple strategies that, as Loeb contends, better allow us to live with the ambiguities and imperfections inherent in any activist movement, we engage in an affective reeducation that is more likely to get things done.

The Utopic Impulse
When the desire for authentic feeling and action clashes with the sense that all is image and simulacra, when our belief that we can make things better is undermined by the crazy-making complexities of acting in postmodern economies and structures of feeling, the result is too often miasmic cynicism. And miasmic cynicism, in addition to collapsing our sense of history and making intervention into oppressive cultural practices seem futile if not absurd, sabotages the utopic impulse that makes the best cultural studies work so powerful and promising. It seems that voicing utopic desires in a culture of cynicism results in two charges: fatuous naiveté or sappy sentimentalism.

When Loeb asked students what words they associate with social activists, their responses were typical: fanatical, crazy, troublemakers, angry, extremists (35). Cultural images of people who believe in and fight for socio-political change are rather bizarre. I’m thinking of a recent ad campaign for eyeglasses. It features farsighted, middle-aged people who stage a demonstration (for some unclear purpose) at a bookstore. The
protesters (some of whom land in country-club-like jails) are deemed the Presbyopic Six, but their complaints prove unnecessary when a representative of the eyeglass company explains that a new lens can solve all of their vision problems. This campaign is an obvious example of postmodern consumerism as the answer to all social ills (remember when Mercedes-Benz appropriated Janis Joplin’s protest song, “Oh Lord, Won’t You Buy Me a Mercedes-Benz?” in their ads?). But it’s also a typical cultural image of the activist. The Presbyopic Six, an obvious reference to the Chicago Seven, are fumbling idiots who demand lactose-free cream for their decaf. They suffer from some kind of arrested development that presents the 1960s protests of this now “farsighted” generation as a source of embarrassment and chagrin. Nothing has changed since the Chicago Seven staged their civil protests, these ads imply, and social activists who actually believe they can change the world are naive, immature, ill-adjusted. As I write, hundreds of protesters at the Genoa convention have been incarcerated, beaten and sexually assaulted. That the eyeglass commercials continue to run during these horrifying events, that the advertisers depend on the public’s capacity to separate the depiction of activists in the ads from those in Genoa, is appalling. Yet, any outrage about these events gets swallowed up in our cynical, “just-kidding!” climate, which tells us that any real affective action is a naive waste of emotional energy.

Instead of affectively investing in communal, social change, miasmic or routine cynicism encourages a privatized form of sentimentalism as an emotional outlet. I’m using the term “sentimentalism” advisedly, for sentimentalism is not necessarily anathema to social change. The sentimental—associated with the excessive, inappropriate emotionality of the unruly feminine—has long been a despised category of expression because there is a sense that sentimentalism exchanges action for feeling-for-feeling’s-sake. Critics such as Suzanne Clark and Robert Solomon challenge this action/feeling binary, insisting that sentimentalism, rather than the antithesis of ethical engagement, may be the precondition for it. Yet, there seems to me some truth in Oscar Wilde’s witticism that sentimentalism is “merely the bank holiday of cynicism” (qtd. in Solomon 225). Though it is beyond the purview of this essay to fully distinguish between the sentimentalism of Touched by an Angel and the sentimentalism of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, there is a difference. Perhaps we might understand the difference in light of “reactive sentimentalism” and “resistance sentimentalism.” Reactive sentimentalism is an emotional retreat from routine cynicism, a buffer against the feelings of helplessness
engendered when we wrangle with the difficulties of identifying and intervening in oppressive cultural formations. Reactive sentimentality privatizes and dehistoricizes affective action. Resistance sentimentalism, on the other hand, evokes an affective climate that taps into the communal possibilities of emotional investments. Rather than a retreat to privatized expression and interaction, it taps into the power of affective action to engage civic issues through community action. The difference between these forms of sentimentalism is the difference between charity, as a function of *noblesse oblige*, versus activism, as a function of the awareness of and desire to oppose structures of subjugation. Yet, miasmic cynicism makes it difficult to distinguish between these forms of sentimental action. I think of a recent conversation with a colleague, whom I was trying to convince to join me in efforts to establish service learning components in our advanced composition courses. “You composition people,” he quipped in a “just-kidding!” fashion, “suffer from some kind of guilt complex that makes you think you have to change the world.” Attempts to change the world—in this case, to invite students to reconceive of the relationship between rhetoric and civic action—are too often privatized as the emotional maladjustments of a few extreme, but well-meaning, sentimentalists.

In this emotion culture, where cynicism reigns and any utopic impulse seems damned to naivete or reactive sentimentalism, the engaged, critically informed hopefulness and optimism of resistance sentimentalism could be understood as “outlaw emotion.” As Jaggar explains, outlaw emotions, those emotions that are conventionally unacceptable given dominant perceptions and values, have powerful and often untapped epistemic potential (131). Outlaw emotions, often experienced by subordinate groups, reflect the ways in which any society’s exercise of emotional hegemony is never total or complete. For example, a woman may feel anger or discomfort, rather than gratification, when a male colleague compliments her appearance; a welfare recipient may feel resentment, rather than gratitude, when collecting food stamps (131). These outlaw emotions are often situated within the personal and are experienced as isolated, personal issues. But, as Jaggar argues, they provide glimpses into affective gaps that emotional hegemony would camouflage, and they are therefore powerful forces for epistemic and social change. As outlaw emotions, the hope and optimism of the utopic impulse underlying the best work in cultural studies would be a source of critique and intervention, rather than embarrassment. A utopic affective stance of resistance sentimentalism should be understood not as naive,
but as *kairotic*—an appropriate position for this moment of miasmic cynicism.

In “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt,” Homi Bhabha insists on the *activity* of the affective. “It is from the affective experience of social marginality,” he insists, “that we must conceive of a political strategy of empowerment and articulation . . .” (56). Yet, miasmic cynicism is so pervasive, so naturalized in our everyday interactions and discourses, that even recognizing it as a cause and effect of social marginality requires enormous emotional and pedagogical energy. Central to the ability to recognize, and to act on, cynicism and its effects is, of course, rhetoric. And the rhetorical methods of much cultural studies work—historicizing and thereby denaturalizing cultural formations, intervening in those formations through hybrid approaches to activism, and maintaining a belief in the possibilities of communal civic engagement—provide powerful strategies to those of us who wish our classrooms to be sites of real social engagement and change. My point is there is a point. And though that point may be dulled by miasmic cynicism and a distrust of authentically feeling and acting in this emotion culture, we can keep the point alive through committed teaching, theorizing, and rhetoric.8

*University of Southern Mississippi*
*Hattiesburg, Mississippi*

**Notes**

1. On melancholia, see Goleman (231–60); on fear, see Massumi; on rage, see Worsham; on boredom, see Spacks.

2. Sincere insincerity, according to Grossberg, is a primary stance of postmodern popular culture (*We* 80–84). Unlike insincere sincerity, which harkens to some authentic positionality, sincere insincerity supports an ironically distanced position that glories in its own artificiality.

3. In a recent *JAC* interview, Žižek reverses his earlier position on the space/place of postmodernity. He explains that postmodernism has become a “kind of myth that we invent in order to be able to sustain modernization,” whose last global, digital stage we are living now (Olson and Worsham 268). While Žižek insists in this interview that postmodernism is the “ideological self-perception of modernism” (269), the very features of late modernism that he identifies—especially those relating to the fast pace of change and techno-development—are those that Harvey and others define as postmodernist. While it is beyond the purview of this essay to tease out the implications of Žižek’s latest theoretical incarnation, suffice it to say that the ephemeral definition of postmodernism that
undergirds much theoretical discussion is, in fact, more generative than stilted. Few credible critics would argue that postmodernity occurs in a moment of rupture, and this is particularly true in light of emotion culture. Many of the affective features of modernism, particularly our lexicon for emotions, remain active and important, even as postmodern structures of feeling operate alongside them.

4. See the special issue of the *UTNE Reader*, especially articles by Lague and Spretnak.

5. Grossberg identifies four strategies of authentic inauthenticity: ironic inauthenticity, which celebrates the fragmented and the contradictory; sentimental inauthenticity, which favors excessive emotion as the source of social change; hyper-real inauthenticity, which privileges a bleak affect of grainy reality; and grotesque inauthenticity, which exalts the terrifying and abnormal (224–34). Each of these strategies entails a different relation to affect and each produces different ways of acting, but all presuppose a cynical position.

6. Boler offers a compelling history of the 1920s mental hygiene movement and its influence on educational policies that forward shame as a central pedagogical strategy. See also Bartky’s phenomenological account, which connects women’s corporeal experiences to educational experiences of shame.

7. Early work on affect in composition theory attempted to account for what Brand calls “hot cognition,” thereby correcting cognitive theories’ dismissal of emotions in problem solving writing theory. More recent work, such as McLeod’s *Notes on the Heart*, attempt to offer taxonomies of affect necessary for understanding the role of emotions during writing processes. However, with notable exceptions such as Worsham and Boler’s works, there remains little research on the socio-cultural construction of affect in composition theory and pedagogy.

8. I wish to thank my friends and colleagues Michelle Comstock, Julie Lindquist, and Genevieve West for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

**Works Cited**


---

**Reviews Reviewed**

Authors of books reviewed in the pages of *JAC* now have an opportunity to respond to their reviewers online. *Reviews Re-Viewed* is a new feature of *JAC Online* designed to make the humble art of book reviewing more dynamic and to encourage and support intellectual exchange between scholars. Visit *JAC Online* at [http://jac.gsu.edu](http://jac.gsu.edu) to read responses by Robert J. Connors, Sharon Crowley, Gesa Kirsch, Roxanne Mountford, Charles Paine, Joseph Petraglia, and James E. Seitz.