


Lisa Langstraat is right: there is "a befuddling paucity of pedagogical attention to affect—including cynicism—in the composition studies classroom" (303). We are experiencing the consequences of a traditional theory of affect that treats pathos, in Doug Brent’s words, as a “technical means of persuasion” (61). In "The Point Is There Is No Point: Miasmic Cynicism and Cultural Studies Composition," Langstraat contributes to a new theory of affect taking shape at the intersection of feminist rhetoric, feminist philosophy, and cultural studies. This theory of affect treats emotions as more than something to which rhetors appeal. It treats emotions as more, even, than “evidence for knowing” (Brent 61). In essence, this emerging theory of affect treats emotion not as epistemological action but as ontological action. Our emotions are performances. With these performances, we compose affective stances for ourselves. Our affective stances provide a vantage point from which to make meaning of the world around us. Our affective stances, then, give us agency.
Langstraat is concerned that cultural studies composition pedagogies treat texts as ideological artifacts, thus reproducing "the worst of late-capitalist values," yet leaving students "without a sense of agency—other than the power to be active consumers" (311). She echoes Julie Drew's claim that "much recent pedagogical practice . . . focuses student effort on old-style, close readings of newer (read: popular culture) texts, and on transforming one's self into a savvy reader/consumer—all under the auspices of cultural studies" (411). Drew calls for us to practice a cultural studies composition pedagogy that focuses instead on "who writes particular texts, and what conditions (economic, geographic, linguistic, political, technological, social, and so on) are in play to construct those individuals as authors, and those texts as more or less significant" (413). Langstraat adds affective conditions to Drew's list so that teachers can help "writing and written agents articulate—and feel the power to negotiate—the production, circulation, and reception of cultural texts" (294). Langstraat persuasively argues that when we dismiss affect as a category of analysis we abandon perhaps our best tool for helping students see themselves as agents. With her article, then, Langstraat positions herself to give compositionists the "vocabulary" they lack to "address affect in the classroom" (304).

I agree that compositionists need to create a vocabulary to address affect in the classroom. Langstraat does this creative work in her article, adding concepts such as miasmic cynicism, kynicism, reactive sentimentality, and resistance sentimentality to our vocabulary. She demonstrates that Fredric Jameson, Lawrence Grossberg, Peter Sloterdijk, and Timothy Bewes have a tremendous amount to offer those engaged in the project of rehabilitating cultural studies composition. She acknowledges that the predominantly white, male, continental theorists she draws on to define miasmic cynicism as the dominant structure of feeling "may say more about a contemporary crisis of masculinity than any larger cultural structure of feeling" (299). The theorists she draws on may also say more about a contemporary crisis of whiteness than any larger cultural structure of feeling. Langstraat implies as much when she cites JoAnn Pavletich, who argues that the dominant American standard of emotional detachment "particularly influence[d] white, middle-class male subjectivity" (307).

I read several moments in Langstraat's article as encouragement to seek out affective vocabularies that consider histories of race. Citing Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's contention that we treat affect as "a unitary category, with a unitary history and politics," Langstraat asks us to learn
to differentiate between "diverse affective positions" (304). Miasmic
cynicism, she acknowledges, "may not be the umbrella affect under
which all other emotional identifications form" (293). I want to take this
opportunity to extend Langstraat’s conversation by discussing the theo-
ries of affect that two contemporary African-American theorists can offer
to cultural studies compositionists.

I believe that bell hooks’ discussion of postmodern blackness and
Cornel West’s discussion of how nihilism functions as an affective stance
for some African Americans illustrates what we gain from differentiating
between diverse affective positions—specifically, what we gain from
exploring how histories and politics of race influence emotional identi-
fications and shape affective stances. I offer hooks’ and West’s work here
as brief examples of how we can do the work of mapping emotional
landscapes and recomposing our affective strategies with a diverse range
of students.

Langstraat argues that miasmic cynicism is shaped by the loss of
affective agency that we feel in a postmodern age that has discredited
Enlightenment discourses of identity (297). Hooks argues that
postmodernism thus positions “many other groups [so that they] now
share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty,
loss of a sense of grounding.” But hooks qualifies this statement by adding
that this emotional landscape is “not informed by shared circumstance”
(“Postmodern” 27). While hooks would agree that black people and white
people inhabit similar emotional landscapes in our postmodern age, she
suggests that we did not travel the same paths to get there.

Set alongside Langstraat’s discussion of miasmic cynicism, West’s
discussion of nihilism serves to differentiate the similar affective land-
scape that black people and white people now inhabit and to identify what
those different paths into that shared landscape might be. Langstraat
describes miasmic cynicism as “a rhetorically situated, affective strategy
for managing the contradictions and seemingly senseless experiences of
contemporary life” (296). Similarly, West describes nihilism as a coping
strategy among African Americans that is borne out of a particular
emotional context—namely, the “lived experience of coping with a life
of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) love-
lessness” (22–23). West argues that nihilism is an affective stance
performed in response to a collective black hunger for “identity, meaning,
and self-worth” (20).

Nihilism and miasmic cynicism share some of the same causes and
are both affective strategies that help people cope with or manage their
postmodern existence, but the hunger that West names is a hunger that is informed by the specific racialized histories embedded in the concepts "identity," "meaning," and "self-worth." While hooks argues that "the critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity," she also sympathizes with those who are skeptical of "postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time" ("Postmodern" 28). While all groups struggle to make meaningful lives—this is what culture is—African Americans have engaged in this struggle for meaning in the particularly dramatic context of capture and enslavement, an experience West calls "an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd" (23). And while we all want to feel self-worth, West reminds us that this desire is acutely felt among African Americans because of "the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture" (27).

In addition to being a response to the loss of Enlightenment narratives, miasmic cynicism, according to Langstraat, also serves to manage the effects of late-capitalist commodification. Our postmodern lives, she argues, pace Jameson, are "colonized as an extension of commodity fetishism" (296). West similarly argues that corporate market institutions have "helped create a seductive way of life, a culture of consumption that capitalizes on every opportunity to make money" (25–26). West believes that this culture of consumption revolves around feeling pleasure, which "in the American way of life . . . involves comfort, convenience, and sexual stimulation. Pleasure, so defined, has little to do with the past and views the future as no more than a repetition of a hedonistically driven present" (26). West and hooks both emphasize the tendency of commodity fetishism to take sexualized forms. For hooks in particular, the pleasure we are encouraged to want often relies on the commodification and colonization of Otherness—a pleasure "so successful," hooks argues, "because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" ("Eating" 21). For hooks, race and ethnicity have become "commodified as resources for pleasure, [and] the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground" (23). While we are all living in a moment of intense commodity fetishism, then, we differ in how our bodies and cultures serve as resources for commodification. This is another way in which our paths to shared emotional landscapes might differ.
Differentiating miasmic cynicism and nihilism is an example of how we can continue to build vocabularies that address affect, vocabularies that can account for histories of race, class, and gender. We need to build complex vocabularies that can help us theorize possibilities for agency with all of our students. But we are still left with the question of how to compose alternative affective stances with students. Recognizing how dominant structures of feeling such as nihilism and miasmic cynicism function as "learned helplessness," it is important to offer students (and ourselves) models for doing this work (314). This is in concert with, but also in addition to, Langstraat’s call to help students practice cynicism and resistance sentimentality. I support her assertion that "pedagogies need to address hegemony as a process, rather than seek a single interventionist mode of action for every case and every location" (317).

It seems important, then, to expose students to a range of strategies that can serve as interventions and to a range of writers who are explicitly using writing to engage in hegemonic struggle.

Langstraat, hooks, and West share strong beliefs in the transformative power of love and empathy as interventionist strategies. West, for example, calls for a "direct attack" on black self-hatred in order to "tame it with love and care" (27, 29). This "love ethic," West argues, has "nothing to do with sentimental feelings"; it is a "last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people" (29). West is clear that he is not only talking about a sense of agency for African Americans as individuals, but also a communal sense of agency, one that recaptures the tradition of "black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support" (24). Love, as West describes it here, is an example of what Langstraat might call resistance sentimentalism, a performance that "evokes an affective climate that taps into the communal possibilities of emotional investment" (319).

In addition to discrete strategies that students and teachers can analyze and deploy, it will also be useful to use writers like hooks who have thoughtfully considered the forces (emotional, economic, geographic, linguistic, political, social, and so on) that continually construct her as an author. While hooks’ essays of cultural criticism are widely read in cultural studies composition classrooms, cultural studies compositionists might also use her autobiographical works (Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood and Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life) as models that show how writers use their affective stances to negotiate the production, circulation, and reception of their texts.
In the face of nihilistic despair, hooks fashioned the strategy of "talking back," which served to create for her an alternative affective stance, and thus a different kind of agency in the world. Hooks argues that rhetorical stances can be created from the emotional responses of oppressed people, as "even the most subjugated person has moments of rage and resentment so intense that they respond, they act against." These moments, hooks argues, prompt understanding of the ways that "structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, and one invents, new, alternative habits of being" ("Politics" 15). Talking back is a strategy that allows hooks to mediate the competing concerns that postmodern culture makes of black women rhetor-subjects. Her experience as a black woman struggling to deal with the emotional pain of a racist and sexist culture galvanizes her belief that she and other marginalized people need to come to voice so that they might construct themselves as subjects. She has come to voice by shifting how she uses emotion and language. Rather than using language to hold on to her emotional pain, she uses writing to create an alternative space from which to speak, one that uses her emotional pain as a prompt for talking back to and transforming the circumstances that create that pain.

Langstraat shows us that postmodern theory productively extends the new theory of affect taking shape at the intersection of feminist rhetoric, feminist philosophy, and cultural studies. Those of us committed to rehabilitating cultural studies composition pedagogy must follow her lead and extend this conversation further. We need to continue to look for writers who can broaden our understanding of how hegemonic struggle is powerfully engaged on an affective level. Emotions, as Langstraat argues, collectively position groups of people in the world. African-American writers such as West and hooks offer insight into how histories of race inform the affective stances they assume and the struggles for agency in which they engage. We need to show students the work of writers who use their affective stances to create agency. With our students, we need to collect a wide range of writers who explicitly discuss the production, circulation, and reception of their texts and the affective interventions their texts attempt to make. This will help us to help students locate their affective stances in intellectual and cultural traditions like and unlike their own.

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The Limits of Argument:
A Response to Sean Williams

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I have always been interested in the connection between writing and art. Both are systems of representation—attempts to express, inform, educate, question, persuade, and critique humanity. For the most part, art and writing have been separated by disciplinary distinctions, but the emergence of the Internet and new communication technologies has forged a