Singing. Powerful, heartfelt singing, somehow more resonant given its context: a rather stuffy classroom where we gather for a first-year Honors Program seminar, "Reading Culture/Reading Disney." Let me explain. This semester I'm co-teaching this Disney class with my colleague, Sue Doe, and the course objectives are what we've come to expect from an interdisciplinary, cultural studies course: we want to enhance students' media literacy, to help students develop critical lenses that enable them to understand the production, circulation, and reception of cultural artifacts. We want to introduce students to a variety of interpretive strategies that help them see the processes through which Disney, the quintessential media conglomerate, participates in global cultural imperialism, employs hegemonic strategies to win our consent, and reproduces raced, gendered, and classed values. We want students to leave our class not as cartoonish versions of anti-Disney clones, but as people who negotiate and, when appropriate, oppose Disney's practices and values. Disney, of course, is a particularly generative site for such discussion. ¹ Disney's "magic" inspires a kind of loyalty beyond rationality, and it often brings to the fore, particularly for our students whose childhoods have been saturated with all things Disney, tender and tenacious affective identifications. These emotional connections are at the core of any developed understanding of Disney's cultural power. That's where the singing comes in.
In an effort to understand what Henry Giroux calls "new racism" in Disney, Sue and I assigned several readings about the 1995 animated feature, *Pocahontas*. We asked students, for example, to read a plethora of Native American responses to the film and Gary Edgerton's essay, "Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the 'White Indian,' and the Marketing of Dreams." We assigned these readings after mid-semester, after much discussion about hegemony, Disney's aesthetic and ideological practices, and so on. The readings focused on Disney's practice of hiring several Native American consultants for the film, only to disregard their input; the fact that Pocahontas' character, based on model Christy Turlington, little resembled the original Pocahontas; Disney's penchant for "sanitizing" history; and the polysemic responses to the film. We selected brief clips from *Pocahontas*: the moment when Pocahontas falls in love with the first white man she sees, and the scene, a typically Disnified version of history, in which John Smith, rather than Pocahontas, is abducted. Our final clip selection featured Pocahontas teaching John Smith a particularly watered-down version of Native American spirituality through the song, "All the Colors of the Wind," made popular by Vanessa Williams.

When we screened that final clip, the students' singing began with a low murmur from several self-proclaimed "Disney Die-Hards" in our class. But soon, the voices swelled, and only two or three of our twenty-two students weren't singing about "what they never knew they never knew." From low hum to fairly operatic resonance, they sang with abandon, and they knew every lyric, our eighteen year old chorus. I was touched—their voices really were quite lovely, and some students sang with fierce concentration, eyes shut tight. This was no giggle-marred, defiant chorus. These student-singers were passionately absorbed in the music and lyrics. And of course their absorption, to which I was a committed outsider, left me feeling rather unnerved. After this intense display of emotion, after this obviously joyous and communal experience, how could we possibly leap to a staunch critique of the film's racism? The sincerity of their singing and the complicated emo-
tional ties it represented threw me off; I found myself without the
heart or the energy to push that communal resonance aside, to
demand a change in the class affect and turn to critical issues of
new racism and Disneyfied history, topics which, by the way, in past
class sessions had engaged the students in pretty much the same
kind of almost-unanimous alliance. Sue and I silently agreed to let
the film run for the last ten minutes of class, and we concluded by
reminding students that we’d come back to Pocahontas and our
readings the following period.

This provocative situation reflects why scholarship on cyni-
cism, such as Matthew Levy’s “Cynicism, Social Epistemic, and the
Institutional Context of College Composition,” is so vital in our
current cultural climate. The “singing day,” as we’ve come to refer
to it, is a quintessential example of what Peter Sloterdijk calls
“enlightened false consciousness”: the students were, after all,
quite aware of the ways in which this scene in Pocahontas, and the
song in particular, typifies Disney’s disparaging revision of history,
its bastardization of Native American spirituality, its racism—all for
the sake of a familiar romantic plot and the sanitized comfort of its
paying audiences. They, in other words, had the critical tools to
understand that the scene functioned hegemonically to cull from
them the very response that they exhibited: nostalgia, loyalty to the
song, at the seeming expense of critical awareness. As they sang,
these issues weren’t their primary concern. Indeed, when we met
again after the “singing day,” I asked them why, given what they
now knew about Pocahontas and Disney’s hegemonic strategies,
their primary response to the clip was to sing along with seeming
abandon. A few were surprised when I pointed out, as gently as
possible, that their singing could be interpreted as a means by
which Disney had won their ideological consent. But most were
quite comfortable with the contradiction between their critical
awareness and their actions. They offered some insightful analy-
ses, based primarily on their ability to sever their needs at the
moment—to feel a connection with the other humans in the class,
to hold on to a feeling of innocence that the film evoked, to
transgress expected classroom behavior by the aesthetic expres-
sion of song—from their critical acumen about hegemony, which for most of our honors students is a great source of pride. Enlightened false consciousness, indeed. Moreover (perhaps sans the singing and the Disney clips), such cynicism is prevalent in our classes, in our media, in our daily lives.

Of course, the burning issue is how to respond to this cynicism, how teacher/scholars can create from it teaching/learning opportunities that connect theory and practice, hegemonic power relations and human agency, reason and emotion. Levy’s article is, in so many ways, an excellent resource for these efforts. His summary of Sloterdijk’s “eight stages of enlightenment” from *Critique of Cynical Reason* and his definition of cynicism as a “learned psychology of survival,” a psychology in which “understanding is disconnected from behavior,” are compelling (349, 350). And Levy’s position on the challenges of enlightened false consciousness is lucid. He explains,

> The main problem is not ignorance so much as that, given the very real possibility of being “fooled again” (as The Who puts it), people would rather defend their provincial ways of life than consider evidence that might suggest they should change their behavior. This cynicism from below, the resistance to changes that could potentially lead to happier lives in a more enlightened social, political and economic reality, is not so much intellectual as habitual. Ideology critique has thus hit a wall of subjectivity, because its intellectual means gains no tractions on the surfaces of emotion and desire that masquerade as private reason. (352)

These tensions between ideology critique and subjectivity, between rationality and desire, have, of course, long vexed cultural studies scholars and proponents of social epistemic rhetoric, and they certainly feature in writings by James Berlin and Catherine Chaput, whom Levy critiques. I want to contribute to Levy’s analysis several observations about this issue. I share Levy’s concern with employing pedagogies that ultimately increase students’ cynicism. And I’d extend that concern into our profession, our scholarship and writing about cynicism; it is too easy for our
research to reproduce and strengthen a kind of zero-sum academic cynicism.

Like many scholars of contemporary emotion culture, I see the kind of cynicism that Levy engages as a particularly postmodern affect. Indeed, emotion scholars from diverse disciplines have attempted to make sense of the complex dynamics of contemporary U.S. emotion culture. Philosopher Kathleen Woodward observes:

[W]e are living in a cultural moment in which a new economy of the emotions is emerging. Once relatively stable, discourses of the emotions are now circulating at a rapid rate. Even as the possibilities of an individual's emotional repertoire are expanding, our postmodern culture is increasingly characterized by what Fredric Jameson has called the waning of affect. . . . In a culture dominated by the media, much of our emotional experience, once understood in terms of a psychology of depth and interiority, has been reduced to intensities of sensations. (60–61)

This new economy of feelings, with its distinctive models of subjectivity and agency, rigorously battles traditional reason/emotion distinctions. Indeed, the model of what Catherine Lutz calls "dumb emotions"—the concept that emotions are severed from rational thought, and vice-versa—has been thoroughly challenged in recent emotion scholarship. Emotion and reason, rather than understood as hierarchical and distinct forms of thinking-action, are now posited—by scholars from psychology, history, legal discourse, cultural criticism, and rhetorical studies (to name a few)—as interrelated, deeply embedded in all practice. Yet, as Sara Ahmed points out, the traditional thought/emotion binary has been displaced into a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are "elevated" as culturally useful and appropriate, while others are denigrated as signs of weakness, as prohibiting growth and positive individual and social change (3). Levy does posit cynicism as a "dumb" emotion; he compares it to watching television, describing cynicism as "a passive activity, a clinging to identifica-
tions and attachments that promise protection against or at least diversion from an objective world that simultaneously represents itself as an absurdity and a necessity" (349). But I think it's helpful to challenge this conception of emotion as inherently passive and dumb. As literary scholar Sianne Ngai notes,

"[T]he nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings—ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient, Bartlebyan, but still diagnostic nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth. (5)"

Cynicism is often, as was the case for many of my students when explaining the “singing day,” a conscious choice, a rational-emotional response to a complicated rhetorical occasion. Levy explains that social epistemic approaches to rhetoric increase students' cynicism because they tend to “instill a sense of horror and feelings of outrage” as their primary affective outcomes. Through what he calls a “pragmatic approach,” he recommends revamping our pedagogical aims: rather than engaging those negative emotions, or encouraging different emotional identifications, he forwards teaching students practices, habits of mind, that “develop their capacity for action and reflection” (356). Drawing on Bill Readings’ analysis in *The University in Ruins*, Levy argues that first-year composition is in an always already compromised position of corporatized exploitation, a position that encourages cynicism on the part of its participants—teachers, students, administrators, and the rest. Since students already come to us with a particularly American form of cynicism, to promote “coerced identification or engagement” would only increase that cynicism; instead, we should “instill the rhetorical habit of analyzing constraints and practices in order to grasp possibilities” (366). Following Sloterdijk, Levy explains that if people believe their actions are wrong, but, within enlightened false consciousness, refuse to alter those actions, “it makes no sense to focus pedagogical efforts on
having students believe something in particular. The goal of an embodied enlightenment points us in another direction, toward a focus upon practices as opposed to beliefs" (366). Thus, Levy suggests, our goal should be not to lead students to believe something particular (which both Chaput and Berlin, as neomarxist, activist educators, do), but to practices of—well something, something not attached to particular beliefs.

And here's the bind. Levy suggests that particular beliefs, forwarded in particular social contexts, will necessarily result in particular emotional orientations. The social epistemic teacher who believes that most features of late capitalism are oppressive because, as a system, capitalism produces conditions wherein sweatshop workers live in inhumane conditions (as in Chaput's argument), or because it naturalizes, through labyrinthine hegemonic machinations, inhumane social relations (as in Berlin's claims or my premises for the Disney class)—these teachers necessarily produce primary affective states of horror and outrage in Levy's interpretation. Yet, this chain reaction (from belief to pedagogical activity to affective response) is never neat and direct. It's not empirically ensured. Only if we accept Enlightenment notions of unified, coherent belief systems and their mechanized, predetermined emotional correlatives can such chains of events be, well, overdetermined. Emotions, as belief-actions, are much more slippery than that.

There is a way of understanding cynicism, and working against its most onerous effects, that requires neither the disavowal nor masking of beliefs in place of (seemingly free-floating) practice. If the social epistemic, Berlinesque belief in the "Good" is, as Levy insists, informed by an ill-fated Enlightenment premise that can ultimately be supported only by the force of a grade, then certainly this amorphous belief in the "Good" will disappoint and may reify enlightened false consciousness (357). If, however, "Good" is a response to a concrete rhetorical, material situation, the belief in good can still inform the practice and the affective affiliations associated with the good. And, yes, there may be times when hostility and horror are vital, life-affirming affects—such as when
my students viewed, for the first time, pictures of the working conditions in Disney's Taiwanese sweatshops, where fluffy stuffed animals are produced for sale at Epcot Center. Now, if hostility and horror were the final emotional goal of my course, if they were the only affective identifications that I made available to my students (as if that were even a possibility), then the ethical shortcomings of my social epistemic approach to teaching would certainly lead to a ho-hum failure of sophomoric dimensions. But what happens when, say, compassion is also a desired affective goal? That is, one of the reasons I include a unit on new racism in the Disney class is because I believe racism is wrong. I think every one of my students would agree with me on that—at least, that is the public opinion all would undoubtedly voice. But there’s more at stake than simply believing that racism is wrong. I also believe that we need to understand how Disney institutes new racism under the guise of happy multiculturalism, how that guise is primarily profit-driven, and how that guise affects viewers/consumers’ sense of culture and self. In the end, one of my goals is to enhance students' compassion for not only Native Americans who have voiced offense at Disney’s appropriation of Pocahontas (or Arabs and Arab Americans who are outraged by Aladdin, and so on), but also to develop compassion and greater understanding for those who represent, to them, difference (and ours is a pretty homogeneous group of white, middle-class students, who have two white, middle-class professors). I'd like to create the learning conditions that foster not just hostility and outrage, but cynicism (in Diogenes’ sense) about Disney and compassionate understanding about how the Disneyfication of history and humanity is an oppressive source of suffering.

Compassion is often cast as the opposite of postmodern cynicism on the emotional spectrum. For example, Martha Nussbaum’s Upheavals of Thought follows Aristotle in identifying compassion as perhaps the central political emotion. Because compassion builds solidarity and recognition between otherwise isolated human beings, it entails a sociocognitive process and a series of practices that engage ethical beliefs. Compassion re-
quires an act of imagination. It demands our capacity to see the suffering person or a person who is different from us as an entity not unlike us, an entity capable of experiencing the same emotions, the same pain. Thus, Nussbaum articulates compassion as not only an emotion, an active feeling (a practice), but also a necessary state for belief in the right and good, for it bridges difference, time, and space. Yet we know, also, that while compassion may be a precondition for powerful social change and justice, it has the potential for great harm. As Elizabeth Spelman, in *Fruits of Sorrow*, explains:

> Sometimes the use of other people’s experience of suffering to make sense of our own turns out to be a way to exploit their labor; I acknowledge your suffering only to the extent to which it promises to bring attention to my own. You sow the seeds, I pluck the fruits of sorrow. (172)

In other words, compassion—like cynicism, like hope, like any emotion or affective belief/practice—can be quite dangerous, counterproductive, and appropriated for oppressive means. (Consider the Bush administration’s policies of “compassionate conservatism.”)² And, of course, compassion must be understood in light of postmodern affect, what Susan Moeller calls “compassion fatigue.” Inuring us to misery and suffering through a constant, increasingly dramatic barrage of media spectacles that are ultimately driven by the bottom line, compassion fatigue leaves audiences exhausted and fatalistic about atrocities. Hence, compassion fatigue might be understood as a kind of extension or parallel to the cynicism of enlightened false consciousness. Yet, productive forms compassion can be taught through habits of mind and practices that, rather than severed from beliefs, as Levy suggests, are thoroughly saturated with beliefs. Let’s face it: a precondition for any social epistemic approach to pedagogy is a concomitant belief in ethical “good/s.” The point is that those beliefs in the “good” may be highly contextual, provisional. But such beliefs simply don’t adhere to the hard-line Enlightenment-inspired characterization that Levy, like many critics of social epistemic rhetorics, poses.
I find it hard to believe that my approach to Disney, or the social epistemic rhetorics articulated by Chaput or Berlin, would increase students' cynicism any more than the approach Levy suggests. A pedagogy that attempts to sever beliefs from practice is antithetical to our understanding of the deeply entwined relationships among emotion/action/rationality/beliefs. Levy's approach might, indeed, encourage hopelessness and cynicism more than any overtly political stance on beliefs in the classroom. In essence, Levy echoes Sloterdijk's concerns about our "critical addiction to making things better," as if that "addiction" demands that we participate in Enlightenment-inspired acts ruled by calcified beliefs. But, as Timothy Bewes charges, Sloterdijk's position is representative of "a perspective of defeatism imported into modernity by a wave of metaphysical uncertainty labeled 'postmodernist;'" for Bewes, and for social epistemic rhetoricians, political action driven by ethics—and by beliefs—is indispensable for social change (5).³ The "wall of subjectivity," which, as Levy notes, "slams" against ideology critique, is constructed and deconstructed in any teaching endeavor.

And it's also possible that I'm gravely misreading Levy's proposed pragmatic pedagogy. After all, while Levy wages considerable critique of others' pedagogical wranglings, there are few particulars about his own pedagogy. Indeed, there's an irony here that, in fact, threatens to increase my cynicism (and I suspect others') about scholarship on cynicism and the theory/pedagogy split that is embodied in Levy's article. Levy explains that he chooses to critique Berlin's work "because of the clarity with which he articulates the motives of the social epistemic" and because Berlin discusses honestly the "unintended consequences of his approach"; apparently, he's selected Chaput's article, "Identity, Postmodernity, and an Ethics of Activism," for the same reason: Chaput puts herself and her pedagogy on the line, lucidly explaining the theory/pedagogy connections she engages in her writing courses (362). But from Levy we get little insight into his actual practice of teaching, what this emphasis on practice over beliefs would look like in a real classroom. After all, if we take kynicism to
its (dare I say) logical conclusion, what's left is exactly what Levy promotes—a strategic refusal to articulate beliefs insofar as they can provide an explanation, a rationale for choices about practice. So, those teacher/scholars who dare to actually articulate their classroom practice and beliefs are put in an absurd position of transgression: Insofar as Berlin and Chaput are specific about their practices/beliefs—including their pedagogical successes and failures, their conflicted and contextual choices—they're more vulnerable to criticism by those who, out of theoretical cynicism, actually refuse to clearly explain their own practices, habits of mind and, yes, beliefs. When as scholar/teachers our research critiques others for what we ourselves fail to do—explain our practice/beliefs—there's a kind of Disneyfied dynamic at play, an ethics that invites surface engagement/description, that revels in a pre-prepared subjectivity for teachers and students, one that would avoid, at all costs, "ideology and subjectivity slamming into one another." And, of course, it's that moment of contact—that crashing together of ideology, beliefs, actions, emotions—that provides opportunities for recognition, misrecognition, meaning making.

So, our students sang a Disney tune in class, and that offered us an opportunity to discuss how hegemony works, why they exercised their agency through song, how beliefs/emotions/actions/rationality are entwined. It offered an opportunity for us to see enlightened false consciousness in its full glory. But it also revealed the other, competing, emotion-actions at play—the desire for community, for example. That these issues were open for discussion, analysis, further feeling-thought, seems a viable outcome for a social epistemic pedagogy that, rather than attempting to force a belief, rather than holding to some cartoonish Enlightenment version of unified, coherent ideology, is open to multiple, provisional beliefs, emotions, practices.  

*Colorado State University*  
*Fort Collins, Colorado*
Notes

1. There is, of course, an abundance of Disney-related scholarship. See, in particular, Giroux; Hass, Bell, and Sells; Wasko.
2. See Woodward for an overview of “compassionate conservatism.” Woodward examines the ways in which the Bush administration has appropriated the discourse of compassion not to address unjust power relations or social suffering, but to support economic agendas.
3. See my discussion of Bewes’ critique of Sloderjik.
4. Gratitude to my colleague and co-teacher, Sue Doe, whose insights, collaboration, and synergetic spirit have inspired and heartened me.

Works Cited


Giroux, Henry A. The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence. New York: Rowman, 1999


Energies and Outbursts: A Response to Laura Micciche

Jenny Edbauer

Ever since Lake Pontchartrain's levies broke down in the Big Easy, connections among emotion, ethical action, and rhetorical judgment have been weighing heavy in our vernacular discourses.