The Trouble With Affect

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What does writing do? Jennifer Edbauer circles around this question throughout her essay on affect and writing. Her answer, and the case she builds in service of it, is that writing signifies and embodies affect. The connective tissue of the “and” functions as the problem she addresses: that is, compositionists tend to overinvest in signifying practices while largely neglecting the affective dimensions of writing. Whereas she acknowledges the promising work being done on emotion and affect in composition studies, she finds that it is undermined by scholars who create a “false binary between signification and affect” and who gauge the value of research in this area solely by its classroom applicability (135). For example, she cites a conversation on WPA-L in which Fred Kemp aligns studies of affect with the “literaturists’ job of one-ups-manshiping the best current ideas of the guy next to you,” when
“we” compositionists should instead be concerned with ideas more pertinent to “the actual lesson plans in the tens of thousands of classrooms that teach writing in America” (135). Edbauer contends that this kind of response reveals the extent to which compositionists misunderstand affect: “[W]riting is nothing but the proximate operation of affect and signification. In talking about the pedagogical practice of writing, therefore, we are already addressing affect’s operation” (136). Her point is that, whether we recognize it or not, affect is always part of the conversations we have about how to teach writing.

Like Edbauer, I worry that, as a field, we’re sometimes reluctant to consider innovative ideas—like those emerging from emotion and affect studies—as occasions for thinking about the conditions that inform how we teach, perform, assess, and talk about writing. In other words, positioning “use” as the primary means by which we assess the value of scholarship seems a tired form of self-sabotage, one that prevents “use” from gesturing toward efforts to take-in and “get up” with ideas, to use Edbauer’s construction. Yet, there is something unsatisfying about the move toward emphatic abstraction, conveyed at the end of Edbauer’s essay: “The ‘practical’ aspect of writing and rhetoric (for better or worse) is therefore nothing other than affect at work” (155). The force of this statement—accomplished by the “nothing other than”—is evocative, but I question it as a rhetorical strategy for making affect visible as an always already present, what Edbauer frequently refers to as a “shadow” component of writing and rhetoric. Below, I return to this question, attempting to think through the phrasing “affect at work” by exploring how a number of established writers depict the entanglement of affect and writing.

For now, though, I want to be clear about this: Edbauer does more than say affect is everywhere already. By focusing on graffiti as an “exemplary guide” to writing and affect in operation, she argues for a model of writing in which “rhetoricity itself operates through an active mutuality between signification and affect” (136, 134). Affect, for her, represents visceral, pre-verbal sensations that “strike us” when we encounter writing; it is a bodily experienced
response that leads into and makes possible discursive efforts to make sense. In a particularly representative excerpt, she writes: “Before you are 'called' to write as a reaction or act of participation, you are 'culled' by writing into the (bodily) sensation of involvement. You are first involved in the writing, which allows for the 'call' to get heard in the first place” (139). One of the ways in which she grounds this idea is through her discussion of style, a rhetorical flourish that gives writing “a hook, a feel, a space to invest certain kinds of interest” (146). So, style is one place to look in describing what writing does—it’s a site where, according to Edbauer, we can see affect working on the creation of feeling or sense.

The correspondence between affect and style calls to mind classical views of style as the artful crafting of ideas for the production of elegance, sensation, and feeling. Modern style texts, too, coach writers on how to inject eloquence, rhythm, feeling, and urgency into writing through the use of rhetorical techniques. Rather than point to specific techniques that demonstrate the alliance between affect and style, however, Edbauer borrows from Lawrence Grossberg to note that mystery is part of what “gives style its punch” (146). It is this elusive aspect of style that Edbauer says can complement more familiar notions of style’s “qualitative and contextual production” (147). She’s interested in style’s ability “to generate degrees of investment and aggregate sensations” (147). This seems a productive and highly suggestive way of addressing the relation between affect and style; it seems, too, one that might confirm suspicions about affect as that which deals in the ephemeral, the elusive, and ultimately the unnamable—in other words, the impractical aspects of discourse. Edbauer herself acknowledges that affect is “rather difficult to conceptualize and understand” because it refers to “that intensity that slips out of the semantic, semiotic, narrativized loop of meaning” (155). It’s this elusive, abstract quality of affect that calls to mind the frustrations expressed by WPA-L participants regarding the trouble they have connecting research on affect to writing instruction.

While these frustrations aren’t especially worrisome or surprising to me, the notion of trouble and affect deserves some attention.
The remainder of this response, then, focuses on the trouble with affect. This framing point allows me to draw out some implications of Edbauer’s study so as to get a grip on the durable, present, nameable quality of affect and to make a case for affect as trouble in the domain of writing instruction—good trouble, trouble that opens questions and moves theory and practice. More specifically, as I use it, trouble denotes three activities: to agitate and disturb; to interfere or interrupt; and to exert oneself or take pains toward achieving a goal. The rhetorical force of affect in our thinking, teaching, and writing has the potential to perform these actions, and to productive ends that widen the scope and consequences of our work. Like it or not, composition is not a self-contained field of study that deals only in student writing and writing pedagogy; it deals in the sprawling reach of meaning, feeling, telling, making, doing, and seeing. Thus, calls for focusing exclusively on what’s doable in classrooms across America will always be frustrated and impaired by the vastness of symbolic action and its complexity. Also, the multiple desires of compositionists to carve out new means and ways of depicting and contextualizing writing acts will continue to push against the borders of writing classrooms—that is, if we think of these classrooms as worlds separate and protected from the outside mess of how and why people do language.

Affect and writing intermingle. A recent site where we can see this claim in action is *Critical Intellectuals on Writing*, edited by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham. In this collection, the editors pull conversations about writing from *JAC* interviews with prominent critical writers. I use this space to amplify Edbauer’s description of writing as something we’re “culled” to do, reflecting on established writers’ discourse about the act of doing something with and through words. These dialogues about writing, rare in a culture that valorizes “creative” writing above all and recognizes and rewards a fairly limited notion of what counts as “creative,” can teach us something about affect and critical writing. They can also teach us how to teach our students a discourse about writing that accounts for the “mystery” presence of sensation and feeling in the rhetoric, practice, and nature of writing.
Agitation is insistent, hard to ignore, unsettling. It makes us lose focus and sometimes forget where we were. Chasing a fly around the room while trying to write gets us off-track, annoyed, leaving thoughts unfinished and incomplete. In another sense, agitation is a form of protest and radicalization; it calls attention to a problem and makes a stink about it. To agitate is to bother to care; to disturb is to insert a blip in an otherwise settled moment. These actions are, in effect, a form of trouble-making because they stand in unsatisfied relation to what is. In terms of writing and affect, agitation and disturbance often constitute the grounds for writing: the desire to upset accepted knowledge or perhaps to unravel the intricate assumptions and givens built into a particular claim. Likewise, writing itself can be an act of agitation for the writer, one that requires a breakdown of self before one is able to get words and be gotten by them.

Gloria Anzaldúa captures this experience when she describes her writing process as involving a kind of “dismembering of everything that I am feeling, taking it apart to examine it and then reconstituting it or recomposing it again but in a new way. So that means I really have to get into the feeling—the anger, the anguish, the sadness, the frustration. I have to get into a heightened state. . .” (20). Affect is not merely the experience around writing; it is part of the very condition that makes writing possible, that generates motive and purpose, terms that tend to represent logos-centered activities in composition textbooks. What’s agitated or disturbed in Anzaldúa’s description is the life of the writer or the coherence of the self. Getting access to language for her involves a shakedown of feeling, suggesting that here is the fertile basis for doing language and for accessing what’s at stake in writing.

This decomposition ushers in a “heightened state,” what I argue is also an agitated or disturbed state, not sustainable over time but generative for spurts of writing. Indeed, Anzaldúa has to “leave that sadness, leave that compassion, whatever it is that I am
feeling” (20). This transport through feeling is a necessary component of good writing, according to Anzaldúa, since “disembodied writing which has nothing to do with your feelings or with your self or with what you care about” is essentially mediocre writing (20). This focus on embodied writing is echoed by Michael Eric Dyson, who says that through church rhetoric he “got a sense of the rhythms, the passions, the almost physical texture of language; I felt the very visceral dimensions of verbal articulation” (73). In his understanding, language performs “a kind of oracular and wisdom-tradition intervention upon our lives” (73). As a performance and an intervention, language is indeed an agitator, rallying for change by impressing upon us the urgency of a situation. He describes language, particularly in minority communities, as an “index of one’s own attempt to create oneself against the world and to say to the world, ‘I do exist’” (75). For him, language is to be “launched” in the form of “linguistic and rhetorical resistance against political destruction, against moral misery, and against narrow conceptions of what language does and how it functions” (76).

Especially illuminating in Anzaldúa and Dyson’s accounts of writing is their resistance to conflating embodied, felt writing with “personal writing.” The charge of having something to say, and the desire to agitate against the usually or never said, is what matters here, rather than the injunction to speak in first-person, through narrative, about experience, and so forth. These moves, often identified as markers of affective writing, are beside the point, in my view, because they aren’t necessarily illustrative of the affective drive to speak. In part, I think this is an issue of reading and thinking differently about the function of affect. By this I mean that most of us have been trained to read feeling, affect, and/or emotion as present in writing when the above-mentioned rhetorical moves are part of the equation. However, the evolving understanding of affect in rhetorical theory should invite us to challenge the idea that disclosing, or getting personal, is what counts as affect in scholarly writing. Deserving of further thought in the field is how we recognize affect in the act of “reasoning” or in analytical, scholarly discourse. This is a crucial issue because learning to see how affect is
embedded in language, persuasion, and meaning amounts to unlearning damaging constructs of gendered identity that link feeling with femininity, a link that positions both as unreasonable and untrustworthy.

Interfering or Interrupting

Affect interferes and interrupts writing by reminding us of how a striving for seamlessness is a doomed enterprise. To interfere is to clash, to generate conflict, to collide and thereby impede effects, to meddle and so change the outcome of an intended action. It also implies an intersection of sorts, as contrasting forces meet and alter and/or nullify one another. And interruption signifies a break into a steady stream of something, a method of hindering movement or intention, at least temporarily. It creates discontinuity, breath, a hiccup in time that stretches a moment. Suspension is key to interruption, often leading to a rethinking or rearrangement of priorities and planned steps. Suspension and then change are nearly synonymous with the act of writing for Homi Bhabha. In describing the agency of writing, he says that writing "constitutes in a dialogic way new relationships between elements that may or may not be pregiven such that the pregivenness is questioned, the preconstitutedness is questioned. . . . [W]hat happens in and through the writing is the reconjugation of those given conditions, and that is what I believe to be the effectivity of writing as a kind of agency, as a performance, as a practice, and as a process that is too little understood" (39). Agency, performance, practice, process: descriptions of writing and acts associated with it that are useful not only in relation to published, widely-read critical writing, but also to the writing we ask our students to produce. If writing is an act of agency—staking a claim, enacting a feeling or sense, embracing confidence and worthiness through language—then students have much to gain from conversations about writing that emphasize what we're doing when we're taking apart and putting words together.
Writing conjugates, Bhabha tells us, interfering with existing formulations of an idea in order to perform new ones. I see this as an affective move because it necessarily entails sensations that "strike us," returning to Edbauer, in such a way that we feel compelled to work with words. What if we spoke with students about writing as a compulsion drenched in signification and affect? We’d of course have to address the abstract nature of this language, finding models and words for giving life to such ideas. And we’d likely have to lead discussion about texts differently, highlighting affect’s root presence, its role in the constitution of motive in writing and communication. This is not reader-response; it’s probably closer to a Burkean sense of rhetoric: symbolic, motivated, identificatory.

At this point, I’ll try to make more concrete this idea of affect as a root presence. Here, then, is a brief example of affect at work in communication by way of complicating that familiar rhetorical tool in first-year writing classrooms: the emotional appeal. Because I see this appeal as located within the visceral, embodied territory of affect, it offers a useful point of reference for my discussion. Let’s look at Colin Powell’s presentation to the United Nations in 2003, during which he used the tools of “rational” discourse, supplied by the Bush intelligence team, to make the case for going to war with Iraq. Powell’s position as a well-respected military leader lent authority to his strategic use of graphs, recordings of intercepted telephone conversations, the history of UN resolutions on the disarmament of Iraq, and empirical evidence in the form of data and incriminating photos. Obviously concerned about the perceived legitimacy of the evidence, Powell underscored its factual nature: “My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we’re giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence. I will cite some examples, and these are from human sources” (“Transcript”). Despite these assurances, his reasoned approach to making a logical case for war in Iraq, and to rallying leaders of other countries to join that fight, turned out to contain serious misrepresentations and inaccuracies. In a 60 Minutes interview,
former intelligence analyst Greg Thielmann described the fallaciously of the presentation in these terms: "The main problem was that the senior administration officials have what I call faith-based intelligence. They knew what they wanted the intelligence to show" ("Man"). The call to war was indeed an emotional appeal, one that relied on instilling fear, pride, hate, and shame (if the UN failed to act in the face of the "facts"). But this appeal is inseparable from rational efforts to make the case for war; in other words, the rational and emotional components, among others, are inseparable and are together fallacious.

In this scenario and others, we mystify the embeddedness of affect in acts of so-called rational presentation when we rely on false judgments about reason/logic/facts as credible and trustworthy, and emotion as suspect and unreliable. As Suzanne Clark puts it, the "pseudoopposition" between reason and emotion "covers up the vulnerabilities of reason" (97). In this way, emotion and the emotional appeal get equated with emoting, an expression of feeling that speaks from and about the self, and not emotion as always already present in meaning-making activities—not emotion as additive (which assumes that reason, logic, rationality are normative, staple ingredients) but emotion as integral to communication and persuasion because it's an inescapable part of being alive and moving through the world.

In addition to considering affect as interfering with the emotion/reason script we've all internalized and used as a handy but faulty way of categorizing speech acts, there is a way in which the basic ingredients of writing—grammar and language—can themselves become sites where interruption, motivated by a desire for change, produces rupture and fresh thinking. For example, in describing the effect of continental philosophy on her thinking and writing, Judith Butler says that she found this tradition exhilarating because it challenged grammar and "ordinary language" (43). "There's something in the life of the sentence that's become new or odd or estranging in some fundamental way—and I went for that. I was very much seduced by what I think was a high modernist notion that some newness of the world was going to be opened up through
messing with grammar as it has been received" (44). She continues by commenting on her own writing as a medium for expressing the difficulty of thinking outside normative structures:

It's not that I'm in favor of difficulty for difficulty's sake; it's that I think there is a lot in ordinary language and in received grammar that constrains our thinking—indeed, about what a person is, what a subject is, what gender is, what sexuality is, what politics can be—and that I'm not sure we're going to be able to struggle effectively against those constraints or work within them in a productive way unless we see the ways in which grammar is both producing and constraining our sense of what the world is. (44)

This testament to interruption and interference as enabling forces in critical writing nicely captures Edbauer's idea that, before we are "called' to write," we are "culled' by writing into the (bodily sensation) of involvement" (139). When Butler speaks of "the life of the sentence," and grammar as "producing and constraining our sense of what the world is," I think she addresses embodied involvement in the act of writing: in other words, we use language not just to describe or reflect embodied realities; we also use it to work against constraints imposed upon our bodies. Language, in this sense, is a tool at our disposal by which we reconfigure body, self, gender, sexuality, race, and more.

Exerting Oneself

Commenting on Marx's project to "make the taken-for-granted world seem spectral, strange," Judith Butler describes the affect necessary to do critical work as follows: "It means undergoing something painful and difficult: an estrangement from what is most familiar" (46). Defamiliarizing the familiar is "a painful process, and not everybody wants to undergo it" (46). Olson and Worsham claim that this demanding aspect of intellectual work is also the reason why some "simply avoid it" (8). The "pain of intellectual work," as
they put it, is in fact "one cause of the current increase of anti-intellectualism in the academy" (8). This is certainly a trouble with critical writing: it asks a lot of us emotionally and intellectually. One has to go to a great deal of trouble in order to push against normative judgments and beliefs. Critical writing, in this view, involves a sacrifice exacted through the sheer effort required to exert energy and attention enough. This "pain" or trouble calls for sacrifice of sometimes what one holds dear (concepts of gender, selfhood, sameness, and so on) for the goal of scrutinizing what's embedded, and often what's violent or hurtful in these holdings.

Mary Belenky offers a different metaphor in her explanation of how affect and exertion lace the act of writing. Rather than depicting the writing process as involving pain that one undergoes for the sake of new knowledge, Belenky frames her comments through the context of love and intimacy. Discussing the process of writing *Women's Ways of Knowing* with her collaborators, she notes the sensuality of writing, especially during moments when she wrote into her own text "a beautiful perception from someone else's text" (34). This intimate sharing of words takes physical form: "It's so loving to have that mingling going on—knowing that these are stolen words in a way, words coaxed out of someone, but liking the closeness of having her words and my words all mingling right there" (34). This model of critical writing seems to entail openness and vulnerability, a willingness to merge self and other. And this endeavor certainly invites troubles, particularly because it has to do with conflict, negotiation, listening, insisting, and retracting—all of which depend on consistent and sometimes tough interaction. It's no small accomplishment to be able to articulate to others, let alone to oneself, where writing fails and misses, confuses and frustrates, goes astray and forgets focus.

Whether the exertion of critical writing is more adequately described as painful or loving, it's clear that these metaphors for the act are troubled because they incite emotional, intellectual and, I would argue, productive trouble that includes and surpasses getting words. As such, these experiences form part of an affective
continuum that accompanies critical writing, a continuum that I think we should make visible to students by exposing them to writing by writers about writing. More specifically, critical writers' discussions of writing seem to me important content for writing classrooms, where many of us are asking students to grapple with complex, sometimes controversial issues without an explicit framework for addressing the affective dimensions of doing so, the link between body, writing, and affect that Edbauer illuminates so persuasively, or the motives that drive persuasive, argumentative, and positional writing. Regarding this final point, I mean to suggest that deepening the context of first-year writing would have to include some attention to affect because doing so provides a framework for discussing how writing "strikes us" and frequently moves us to speak back. Edbauer's discussion of affect provides a refreshed vocabulary and context for talking with students about writing as a way of seeing, challenging, and constructing embodied realities as always tied up with the mess of "that intensity that slips out of the semantic, semiotic, narrativized loop of meaning."

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Works Cited


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. 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.