(Meta)Physical Graffiti: "Getting Up" as Affective Writing Model

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> It is the kind of thing you see everyday. In the elaborate poetics of graffiti: the signatures left so artfully, the politics of slashing through them, crossing them out, erasing them, replicating them all over town. . . . Something in its roughened surface points to a residue in things, a something that refuses to disappear, . . . gathering a counter-force to a point of intensity that both slashes at itself and spits at the world.
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> —Kathleen Stewart

Almost one week after the September 11th attacks, I found myself making a coffee run to the campus student union, trying to return to the habitual routine I enjoyed before the world fell apart. Earlier in the week, huge panels of wood and buckets of paint had disrupted this path from my office to the union. A sign posted to one of the panels read: "Venting Wall. Write your feelings about the attacks and the coming war." People surrounded the wooden panels every day—some painting words, others reading them. A student group had erected this wall in the hopes that people on campus would freely express their anger, sadness, and fears about the terrorist attacks and imminent war. As a potential site of campus dialogue, the venting wall seemed to serve as a model of public rhetoric. For nearly three days, students and faculty painted statements like "Stop inhaling CNN!" and "Give peace a chance" and "Racism is un-American" and "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." Early on this morning, however, I walked by the board to see two gigantic words painted across the whole length of the wall. I stopped in my tracks and did a double take. Huge strokes of yellow paint read: "ZEPPELIN ROCKS!!!" My initial reaction was laughter. I cracked up, but then immediately tried to pull myself together when I noticed other students and faculty staring

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sadly at the words. A woman turned to me with an angry look. "This makes me so mad I could spit," she said. The wall was taken down that very same day, almost two full days ahead of the time it was supposed to be dismantled.

As I thought more about this scene, I began to hear echoes of my own relentless pedagogical question to students: *What is this writing doing?* I felt myself punctuated by those giant letters and excessive (punctuation) marks. It really got under my skin. In one sense, ZEPPELIN ROCKS!!! is not unlike any other rhetorical scene. In his textbook *The Call to Write*, John Trimbur even provides us with a model for reading graffiti as a serious mode of public writing.[1] Whereas composition texts usually reprint picture-perfect models of student essays and professional texts, here we find a sidelong shot of bright spray paint reading "COOL 'DISCO' DAN" in the midst of a chapter on public writing. Anyone familiar with graffiti culture might immediately recognize Disco Dan's tag as one that tends to *get up* a lot around the streets of Washington DC. That is, the tag saturates walls, sidewalks, buildings, windows, and anything else that can be painted.

According to Trimbur, this kind of rogue scrawl hits close to our rhetorical homes. He writes, "Spray-painted on walls and subway cars, graffiti can perform a number of functions: marking a gang's turf, putting forth political messages, expressing the individual writer's identity, expressing grief for someone killed or anger at an enemy" (18). Trimbur contextualizes street writing (like Disco Dan's tag) within the larger scene of public writing. While we may not often consider spray-painted words and pictures as "writing," Trimbur frames the graffiti on city streets as a rhetorical scene. That is, this kind of writing occurs within a given context. Even the most wayward street writers must "figure out what relationship to establish with readers, how to establish this relationship, what voice to use, and what genre" (20). Trimbur thus "rereads" the streets as sites of writing.

By rereading graffiti in these terms, Trimbur casts the strangeness of street writing into a rather ordinary rhetorical model of composition. He then asks students to think about their own experience with public writing: "Explain what set of circumstances called on you to write and what you were trying to accomplish by writing. How did you know what to do in the writing—what genre to use and what tone of voice?" (22). These questions recall some familiar rhetorical categories of composition, including writing as context, writing as style, writing as signification. Consequently, Trimbur's pedagogy re/familiarizes graffiti as a

mode of rhetorical writing; it is another instance of writing as meaning-full act, which reconfirms the very models of composition we have known for some time. In this pedagogy of paint, therefore, graffiti is rendered as (just) another form of composition. COOL "DISCO" DAN becomes (yet) another rhetorician. We can use Trimbur's model to generate one possible response to the question that bubbles up from the rogue ZEPPELIN composition: Q: What does graffiti—as a mode of public writing—do? A: *It means.*

Yet, what Trimbur's model does not explicitly address, and what the ZEPPELIN example makes painfully clear, is that writing scenes are overwhelmingly populated by bodies: shocked, angry, delighted, and feeling-full bodies. Although many models of composition focus upon the signifying dimensions of writing, they often fail to account for writing's experiential aspects. They fail to account for what Lawrence Grossberg calls affect, which "operates across all of our senses and experiences, across all of the domains of effects which construct daily life. Affect is what gives 'color,' 'tone,' or 'texture' to the lived" (80–81).[2] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick likewise emphasizes the affective dimension in her pedagogy that seeks to uncover "the aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do" (6). Working from both Grossberg and Sedgwick, we come to see writing scenes (whether it's the ZEPPELIN composition or an essay for a first-year writing course) as more than signifying scenes. They are also scenes that involve sensations and experience of liveness.

In fact, a range of theorists, from Henri Bergson to Mark Hansen, have tacitly suggested that the writing scene can never be reduced to mere signification insofar as the body is the very apparatus that creates meaning. In his work on new media, Hansen argues for the centrality of affective bodily processes in the generation of signification. Affect, writes Hansen, is "the capacity of the body to . . . deploy its sensori-motor power to create the unpredictable, the experimental, the new . . . [A]ffectivity comprises a power of the body that cannot be assimilated to the habit-driven, associational logic governing perception" (7–8). Because the body-of-sensation is always stubbornly present in scenes of writing, there can be no affectless compositions. In order to more fully answer the question of *what writing does*, therefore, we need a model that takes affect's operations into account.

In the following article, I want to make a case for why we should talk about affect when we talk about writing, reading, and literacy. I also want

to offer one model of *how* to talk about affect in relation to the rhetorical scene of writing, a model that exposes rhetoric's dual dimensions of meaning and affect. Rather than reading COOL "DISCO" DAN or ZEPPELIN ROCKS!!! (or any other graffiti) as versions of familiar models, therefore, we might use their strangeness to expand our descriptions of what writing does. Using graffiti as an unruly exemplar, I read three familiar topoi—context, style, and signification—across scenes of graffiti in order to explore writing's affective dimensions that are often neglected in composition. By framing these topoi as useful but sometimes limited modes of "reading" writing, I attempt to expose the affective elements that shadow these rhetorical dimensions. More specifically, I argue that rhetoricity itself operates through an active mutuality between signification and affect. Our common vocabularies for talking about *what writing does* implicitly involve the affective dimensions that Grossberg and Sedgwick identify. The challenge is how to allow for these implicit dimensions to become a more active part of our writing models. Consequently, my hope is not to familiarize graffiti as another rhetorical text, but to (affectively) augment models of rhetoric and composition through the strange example of street writing.

Finally, I want to confess one additional hope that I have for this article. The subject of affect is beginning to receive a great amount of attention in rhetoric and composition studies. While I wish to add my voice to the growing scholarship on rhetoric and composition's affective dimensions, theorists like Lynn Worsham, T.R. Johnson, Marshall Alcorn, and Kristie Fleckenstein (among others) have already been posing a number of complex questions about the relations among body, sensation, meaning, and writing. One recent collection, *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, explicitly tackles these issues in one of the first serious studies of composition's affective dimensions. As editors Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche explain in their introduction, the collection attempts to "re-vision the ways in which emotion intersects with disciplinary practices and theories by highlighting the relationship between affect and rhetoric" (3). Similarly, Worsham—whose work Jacobs and Micciche cite as one of the first sustained explorations of affect in composition studies—argues that composition's new interest in affect should become "a category of critical *thought*... [that] move[s] us into a new orbit of social and political possibility" ("Moving" 163). The recent exchange in ***JAC*** between Daniel Smith and Christa Albrecht-Crane answers Worsham's call by bringing the question of affect into other conversations within the field. The articles and responses between

Smith and Albrecht-Crane address matters of agency, subjectivity, and civic consciousness.[3]

Although these works mark important theoretical contributions to composition studies, they are somewhat undermined by a persistent misunderstanding among certain rhetoric and composition scholars. This misunderstanding creates a false binary between signification and affect, wrongly claiming that these theories advocate affect "over" discourse and meaning. Consider one recent conversation on WPA-L, a listserv for writing program administrators, where a conversation about composition and affect turned into a critique of what was seen as impractical theory-talk. In response to a question about how to assess writing's affective dimensions, Fred Kemp argued that theories of affect have a limited application in the real work of classrooms:

> We have tended in our field to conceptually hone in here and there with ever more theoretical sophistication. Meanwhile, the mechanism for delivery of these sophisticated pedagogies to places where teachers actually encounter students seldom goes anywhere.... [O]ur ideas are like elephants trying to squeeze into dog houses. As we've gotten academically cuter with our pedagogical ideas, we've shunted ourselves further from both the writing program administrators who can understand and appreciate them, and even further from the possibility of their finding their way into the actual lesson plans in the tens of thousands of classrooms that teach writing in America. My feeling is that we need to think much more seriously about the huge management problems of getting something realistic (if theoretically flawed) to work across America, rather than the typically literaturists' job of one-ups-manshipping the best current ideas of the guy next to you.

Comments like Kemp's wedge an imaginary binary into the field's conversations, wrongly pitting "practical" teaching concerns against "theoretically extravagant" discussion of affect. Even certain listserv members who found the discussions of affect important still professed a frustration at the lack of classroom, or practice-based, focus. In the words of one list member: "I followed the recent discussion of affect closely, but I'd hoped for more information about practice. . . . I have plenty of theoretical underpinning at this point, but have found little that addresses actual practice" (Sailor). While discussing affect—via sensations, movement, body, and nonverbal aspects of experience—may indeed seem to fall outside the practical work of teaching writing, I argue that these comments reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the affective di-

mension. When we ask what writing does, we are not forced into a choice between either sensation *or* meaningful practice. Indeed, writing 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. What follows is one attempt to trace this proximity by using the strange instance of graffiti as an exemplary guide.

Context and the Cull of Writing

> [T]he [paint]brush does not function as a tool of conscious expression but as a kind of seismograph, feeling the oscillation and vibrations of the world and of the heart, and signing these on paper, silk, bamboo splints, etc.
>
> —Thomas Lamarre

Trimbur begins his model of public writing, including the graffiti scrawls that cover his textbook's pages, with questions about public writing's context: *What circumstances called this writing into being? What is it trying to accomplish?* In this way, writing is framed as a response to rhetorical exigencies; this model resonates with a version of social-epistemic composition pedagogy that Joseph Petraglia calls *the conversation.* Petraglia refers to this model as one of rhetoric and composition's (arguably dominate) paradigms of knowledge and meaning. He explains, "a social constructionist argues that knowledge is created, maintained, and altered through an individual's interaction with and within his or her 'discourse community'" (314). According to Petraglia, composition's social constructionist adheres to a "theory of knowledge [that] heralds an overdue acknowledgment of a rheto-centric universe" (316). For the social constructionist, in other words, reality is rhetorical. The world is a text within which we are always acting, and writing occurs inside this ongoing public conversation.[4] Patricia Bizzell (among others) has long argued that composition must come to understand writers as operating within one or more discursive communities. She explains that writers do not write apart from the culture, expectations, prohibitions, history, and narratives of a specific community, but rather "[w]riting is always already writing for some purpose that can only be understood in its community context" (89). In short, we always act within an ongoing conversation.

Figure 1: Graffiti

What is it that writing does, then? According to some of our most familiar composition models, writing *reacts* to a call; it is an act of participation within a discourse community. We can certainly read the scene of graffiti through this rhetorical lens. Known commonly as *writing*, graffiti tagging exists within a particular cultural-historical scene. As graffiti researcher Jeff Ferrell explains, "When graffiti writers write a tag, they write a practiced, stylized version of their subcultural nickname. . . .Tagging alone or with others, taggers thus participate in social, subcultural activity, both in what they write and how they write it" (70). The tag itself can serve as a topos for cultural, personal, and social threads. It marks out a story. These tags begin to carve out a different life for the writers, who may otherwise be dismissed as "troubled" youth. Tagging historian Craig Castleman writes, "A young person who seems unexceptional in most contexts may be a highly regarded 'king' or 'master outlaw' in the writing world. To such writers their names take on special importance, . . . and it is in the writing of these names that they hope to achieve

success" (76). Writing is thus a situated rhetorical event taking place in the streets.

Echoing language familiar to compositionists, graffiti researcher Joe Austin likewise describes writing as a dialogic practice that draws on cultural specifics. In his meticulous study of early New York City train graffiti, for example, Austin points out:

> The work of . . . writers did not speak out from some isolated or some specifically confined elite space. . . . [W]riters invited the urban community at large into a public conversation about their work, and as such, the practice of writing took on important social meanings that extended well beyond those intended . . . by the writers themselves. (4)

As Austin's history suggests, tag writing is socially co-constructed in particular contexts. A tag enters ongoing conversations among other writers on the street. In fact, Austin argues that writing is more than a mark of self-expression; it is also a joint venture among writers. When the first graffiti writers wrote on subway trains, "writers created a new mass media, and in that media they 'wrote back' to the city" (4). Graffiti talks in the street-level media of sidewalk, paint, and the tag-sign. In Austin's analysis, the early subway graffiti was a response to many different "calls" encountered by New York youth. "[T]he new writing was created during the late 1960s and 1970s, a period of intense social upheaval, economic transformations, and cultural change. . . . This particular juncture of trends, events, and public representations shaped . . . the ways that writing evolved as a cultural practice . . ." (37). Poverty, poor schools, and negative images of blacks and latinos left early writers with few opportunities for positive recognition. Writing and tagging became a radically visible means of gaining respect and attention. Using Trimbur's model, we might say that tagging (at least this early subway writing) responded to the frustrating limits of inner-city life.

Because graffiti can be read in this way, as a (re)action within particular discourse communities, some scholars describe tagging as a form of literacy. In "The Writing on the Wall," Susan Weinstein writes, "[T]aggers carry on complex conversations, negotiate and challenge shared discursive norms, and develop identities that are intimately connected to a specific communicative world" (24). According to Weinstein's analysis, tagging is a meaningful act of literacy. It is a way of meaning-making for the youths who participate: there are codes to negotiate, a community with which to respond and communicate, and

identities to be both enacted and revised. In short, Weinstein implies that tagging is not an activity too far removed from what occurs in the writing classroom. For a tagger, she writes, "tagging is, if not *the*, at least *a* dominant discourse in his world, and he is invested in studying it, participating in it, and refining the skills he needs to be successful in it. . . . [T]aggers are doing much of what English teachers try to get them to do, but within an alternative discourse . . ." (32). This is street writing as composition's unacknowledged cousin. As one of Weinstein's subheadings reads, we can understand *tagging as discourse*. Graffiti's rhetoricity thus becomes saturated in/as discursive practices that respond to a particular context.

However, we should pause here to consider the *experience* of rhetorical context. Though Weinstein and Austin's socio-rhetorical readings provide one important means of understanding how writing works, we should consider what affective elements are contained in these contexts. Consider, as Grossberg puts it, what gives these contexts their color, tone, or texture. In short, we should consider the sensational experience of the body-in-context. Even before we have the opportunity to generate a discursive response to a situation, the body-in-context is first viscerally involved. That is, before tagging becomes a discursive or mediated code for meaning-making, it hits the body. This massive dent of the body may seem like a strange way to talk about writing unless we keep in mind the inseparability of discourse, literacy, meaning, and feeling. In his discussion of what we might dub "visual-digital literacies," Mark Hansen claims that "without the activity of the body within the space of the image, there would simply be no perception at all" (54). Hansen maintains that a body's sensation is not an effect of meaning; it is the very condition for meaning-making: "[T]he body is the site where all sensory information is processed and where information from distinct senses can be exchanged. . . . The body is the precondition not just for vision, but for sensation as such. It is why there *is* sensation at all" (27). 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.

To underscore this rhetorical primacy of sensation's cull, let's take another street scene as illustration. In her reading of the plastic bag pseudo-documentary in the film *American Beauty*, Gay Hawkins describes her reaction to the short scene as one of intense involvement. It wasn't a matter of liking the scene, she explains. It's not quite like that. The scene bowled her over, leaving her breathless. She says, "I was

participating in that scene before I knew it, it triggered a different rhythm or process in my watching, one in which I lost my self in a new relation." That is, before she could even identify or register some kind of index—admiration, disgust, semantic meaning, and so on—Hawkins says that she was *struck*. In her attempt to make sense of this rather unusual visceral reaction, Hawkins turns to the notion of the affective body as relationality. "[I]n other words," she writes, "affect *is* a relation, it's not having feelings, it's a distinctive being in and of the world." While we may be tempted to re-index, to reclassify, such an encounter, Hawkins argues that "we are in affect, *participating*, before this happens, affect precedes these kind of classificatory and cognitive activities" ("Documentary"). Before any qualification of the event, therefore, the affective body registers intensity and breaks expectation.

As Hawkins suggests in her trashy mediation, even before you can reach for the narrative to make sense of a textual street scene—before you can respond to it—you sense it. Before you can possibly *get* writing enough to respond, *it gets you*. You walk down the street and the tag hits before you have had the opportunity to index the meaning. Before you have had the chance to narrativize it, you have been viscerally struck. This experience recalls Steven Shaviro's description of the image's cinematic event. "I have already been touched and altered by these sensations [of the cinema]," he writes, "even before I have had the chance to become conscious of them. The world I see through the movie camera is one that violently impinges upon me, one that I can no longer regard, unaffected, from a safe distance" (46). Graffiti can similarly take hold of you in a space that you (probably) least expect it: the sidewalk, the mailbox, the shop window. You walk down the street and COOL "DISCO" DAN hits you all at once. It takes its hold on you. You do not *view* a tag but, to borrow from Shaviro, you *suffer* it.

Consequently, models of context and response cannot help but be implicated in affectivity. Take a distinctly rhetorical scene of political effectiveness, like Anna Gibbs' analysis of the Australian ultra-rightist politician Pauline Hanson (a political equivalent of Reagan and Thatcher). Gibbs turns to the notion of affect for an explanation of Hanson's popularity, arguing that it was not only the significance of Hanson's rhetoric that persuaded voters to support her rightist policies. A thorough political analysis must also account for the *intensities* people experienced when they encountered Hanson's performance. Gibbs explains, "Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another." With this in mind, Gibbs is especially interested in Hanson's

face and voice (as they are caught on screen) to find what she calls "the affective resonance" of visceral response between bodies. With her pale skin, green eyes, and red hair, Hanson herself presented a disruption from the ordinary drabness of political faces. She was *striking*. Likewise, her voice was affectively contagious. Wobbly and full of emotional texture, Hanson's voice had the ability to affect hearers in powerful ways. In Gibbs' astute reading,

> Hanson's voice in the broadcast coverage of the last federal election often conveyed acute distress, as if she was about to burst into tears, and the communicability of this affect in turn set in motion a number of affective sequences in those who listened to it. The distress of the other, if distress itself particularly distresses the observer, often produces an impulse to put an immediate stop to it, as when a baby cries. . . .

Trembling and emotional, Hanson herself appeared less than articulate or self-assured. This performance was not at all harmful to her broad conservative and moderate support, Gibbs points out. For her inarticulacy "not only communicated the immediate affect of distress, but formed part of a more general attitude . . . of someone who has 'had enough', and this attitude, if not the detail of all of her actual ideas, evoked a ready sympathy in many people." In other words, it was not political, ideological content that *necessarily* won support for Hanson. It was not so much what she said, but the sensation of intensification she was able to cultivate in some members of her audience. In addition to these indexical lines, there was a certain kind of visceral feedback being fed by an interloop of bodies. There was a mutuality between Hanson and the bodies of her supporters.

At this point, we might now return to Trimbur's question—*What called this writing into being?*—with an eye toward the affective, experiential primacy of a body-in-context. Without discounting Trimbur in any sense, we might simply augment his model via the body's primacy. Although public writing does indeed operate through call and response, there is an operation of affective involvement that comes prior to response. This primacy of affective involvement has perhaps been most thoroughly explained in the philosophy of Spinoza and his interest in the *sensing body*. Spinoza explicates something he calls the affections of the body, where "the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked . . ." (104). For Spinoza, a body is never *a/lone(ly) body*, for one body is always in relation to another. "The human body can

be affected in many ways by which its power of activity is increased or diminished," writes Spinoza (104). The relation of affect is not a one-way proposition. A body is *affected by* another body as much as it *affects* another body. His sensing body is a body-in-relation. As Spinoza explains, "the human body is composed of very many individual bodies of different nature, and so it can be affected by one and the same body in many different ways" (115). Even the body that I substantively identify as *my body* is a matter of sociality and involvement in affect: I slip on my headphones to listen to music that makes me feel more energetic, more awake. The body of the songs enters relation with my body in such a way that increases certain intensities. You *get down* and immediately "lose yourself" in the music. Clichéd as it may be, this phrase bears out a kind of truth, for we do indeed lose our selves as delimited spaces. We lose our selves as an enclosed-bordered subject. The music moves you, in spite of your wishes or desires. Your body reveals its own capacities for being affected by sonic bodies. Various intensities mark the lived duration between two states experienced by one body that is affected by another body. The *sensation* of such a relation, moreover, is what we might call the encounter of affect. It is the experience generated by relations—by your body-in-relation. We find that the rhetorical context that "calls" writing into being is always first a scene of affect's experience. This is the primary *cull to writing*, which marks a relay between rhetorical context and the affective body.

Style in the Aggregate

> I'm absorbing and devouring language in its coexisting state and creating something else with it. . . . The English language isn't much, especially in its current state.
>
> —Phase 2

Another way that we commonly answer the question of *what writing does* is through an analysis of style, genre, voice, and presentation. In this mode, style is often rendered as a chosen rhetorical posture. When Trimbur asks students about their own instances of public composition, he is questioning their stylistic choices: "How did you know what to do in the writing—what genre to use and what tone of voice?" (22). For Trimbur, the style of public writing becomes a strategic part of the rhetor's in/action. Style does not merely adorn, but it is a *techne* for production. "Writers need to imagine [the] audience in their minds in

order to figure out what relationship to establish with readers," Trimbur explains, "how to establish this relationship, what voice to use, and what genre" (19–20). Style accomplishes certain rhetorical goals by answering the call to write. The genre of graffiti writing and tagging, for example, does the work of literally "marking" streets as the domain of certain individuals or groups. It is a singular mark of ownership that could not be accomplished in any other genre or style. Style, as Trimbur suggests to students, performs a rhetorical function.

We can also read style as a product of meaning-full construction. It is constructed through rhetoric just as much as it functions as a device of rhetoric. As Ferrell explains about graffiti styles, "The public visibility of tags as physical residues derives from the subcultural significance of tags as stylized markers, as components of writers' social interactions and identities" (58). The New York tagging scene of the 1970s and 1980s cultivated the practice of forming names from the writer's characteristics and, quite frequently, neighborhood location: Tabu, Sweet Duke, Barbara 62, Hulk 62, Cat 2-223, Phase 2, Mono, Sane (Castleman 73–75). Far from a *personal expression* of the writer's "individuality," the highly stylized tag name is a performance of a *rhetorical self.* Austin points out that certain early tag styles copped from TV and movies, such as the early tag "Bolita as Johnny Cool." Austin writes, "[T]he [NAME] AS [OTHER NAME] form used by neighborhood graffitists mimics the televised introduction of a character in popular programs. These television conventions can be used to create a spectacular and glamorized version of everyday social life . . ." (45). This early "Hollywood" style responds to a particular "call" from the writer's own situatedness. Austin continues, "This [style] gives some freedom to a necessity: in the urban landscape, several different identities must operate simultaneously every day" (45). Style is not only created by the rhetorical contexts of writers' lives, but it also functions rhetorically as a strategic response to those contexts.

But perhaps we should slow down to consider tagging's elements of style a bit more closely. In spite of the descriptive power of the above models, graffiti is not fully explainable as a trangressive (per)version of Official Writing. In his classic study of subway graffiti, for example, Craig Castleman points out that it is the sheer excesses of tagging that make a writer successful: "Style, form, and methodology, major concerns of most writers, are secondary in significance to the prime directive in graffiti: 'getting up.'" Castleman explains, "[T]aggers . . . have to write their names at least a thousand times before they can expect to get noticed by other writers" (21). In other words, excess wins the day. Tagging is a

thoroughly intensity-based writing, and writers are consumed by the challenge of getting (their names) up as many places and as often as possible. The director of the United Graffiti Artists puts it like this: "'[T]he significant feature of the new graffiti is its sense of purpose, the particular emphasis it places on "getting around." Only a youth with a sense of vocation can put in the necessary amount of work'" (qtd. in Castleman, 19). One stylish piece simply will not earn you respect as a tag writer. *You gotta get up to get down.*

Tagging styles thus seem to be *sick* enough to be a Strunk and White anti-model. But even Strunk and White, for all their prescriptions and maybe in spite of themselves, readily admit that style is a process of *getting up*. They write that style "is the sense of what is distinguished and what is distinguishing. *Here we leave solid ground.* Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind? . . . These are high mysteries . . ." (66; emphasis added). Consternated and a bit frustrated, Strunk and White imagine style as floating, exploding, and eluding their best efforts to mark its essential elements. The fact that style is experiential seems to leave Strunk and White feeling rather ambivalent. Its floating mystery keeps style from being a fully "usable" mode of rhetorical effectiveness in writing. On the flip side, graffiti writers revel in the experiential aspect of style. "The public performance that gains recognition for the writer is the performance of the signature," writes Austin, "created as a lettered art work to be evaluated, learned from, and, hopefully, admired" (48). To Austin's list we might add one more aspect of style's signature performance: the letters themselves—written in wildstyle, bubbles, bombs, pieces—create an experience of sensation. Phase 2, one of New York's earliest writers, calls writing a matter of impact: "'This is "impact expressionism," so having impact is a duty'" (quoted in Austin 45). More than achieving a rhetorical goal by mastering style's mystery, tagging style seeks to keep its strange combustion alive through impact.

To create a strong ethos, therefore, the writer counts on an aggregate of sensation. The writer's ability to create "impact" depends upon the feeling of *too much* or *more than normal*, or an experience of something *got around*. In other words, the writer depends on something else existing in proximity to signification and discursivity. Being spotted—getting up in as many different places as possible—is the only way to build ethos as a writer. Moreover, the range of a tag's movement can also become an index of a writer's position within a loose community. Getting up is not merely quantity of tags, but also the farness and nearness of a tag's travels.

Artist/graffitist Margaret Kilgallen talks about tagging on trains as the creation of a network and a circulation of experience:

> Writing on trains, or train marking, is like networking. . . . Because if somebody's living in Maine, it's pretty amazing that it arrives in San Francisco intact and I can read it. . . . When I see things I recognize, I don't know anything about the person; I just know what they write, and it's kind of like meeting an old friend. There is not specific communication that goes on between people, but you have a sense of anybody who's spending so much time writing on trains, because, if I'm to walk into a yard and see something in California, that person most likely has written on hundreds of trains.

Kilgallen offers one of the most vivid examples of the circulation of graffiti writing. The train puts the tag itself into circulations that might not otherwise be possible, moving a single piece of graffiti across the country. Early reports of subway train tagging have much the same effect for material circulation. The train becomes a route for marks to travel between places, entering publics that might not otherwise have encountered the tag. Interestingly, what circulates in these instances is not just the name. Rather, the intensity itself is circulating, rendering the degree and range of circulation as part of the style. Kilgallen explains that she is not merely impressed by how far this single tag has circulated, for example, but the fact that its wide circulation suggests an attending intensity of "hundreds of [other] trains." Unlike a "traditional" artist, the tag writer cannot point to a particular *piece* in order to build a strong ethos; the writer must instead attempt to generate the experience of affective intensities surrounding his or her name.

Consider the tag "Half Dead," which I originally found on the streets of Austin in the summer of 2002 (Figure 2). This tag reappeared on San Francisco streets during the fall of 2003 (Figure 3). This tagger's range not only shows how much he or she can get seen, but it also reflects an ability to generate an experience of impact. While the tagger(s) generated a particular style of writing (all capitals written in a single run-on word), he or she also generated a writing style that included these *sensations* of range. Writing styles like Half Dead's exposes an affective strain to its rhetorical function. Style is experiential. It "works" in its aggregate of sensations. This is not to say (contra Trimbur) that style does not "fit" the context as a response.

Nevertheless, style also creates certain degrees of investment sites for audience affect, or what Grossberg defines as "the strength of the

Figure 2: Austin Tag

investment which anchors people in particular experiences" (82). This description gives style a qualitative measure, as well as a strangely quasi-quantitative dimension. Style is that which opens sites for making something *matter* to people—giving it a hook, a feel, a space to invest certain kinds of interest. Whereas Strunk and White profess relative ignorance about what makes one style explode and another flop, Grossberg suggests that it is precisely the "mystery" that gives style its punch. "Because something matters," he writes, "it must have an excess which explains the investment in it, an excess which ex post facto not only legitimates but demands the investment. The site of investment is constructed as an excess, distinguishing from other potential sites" (86). Grossberg gives the examples of a music fan who "'knows' there is something *more* in rock music which distinguishes it from other forms of music" (86).[6] Borrowing from Grossberg, we can argue that a "working" style is one that generates aggregate sensations of excess, all of which cull attention, interest, and affective investment. Therefore, an affective

description of style for composition might talk not only about style's qualitative and contextual production, but also its ability to generate degrees of investment and aggregate sensations. In asking *what writing does*, we can point to the intense experience of affect and style.

Meaning and the (Anti-)Hermeneutic of Impact

> Even when I have language, however, my sensory experience still represents a kind of surplus over it.
>
> —Terry Eagleton

At this point, I would like to revisit our initial scene of writing—those giant yellow words reading ZEPPELIN ROCKS!!!—and the question it spawned. What is it that this piece of public writing does rhetorically? I initially posed an answer that might be the most obvious and the most

Figure 3: San Francisco Tag

natural response for rhetoricians and compositionists: *it means*. Perhaps this answer comes so easily to us because we have grown used to the idea that a writing scene's rhetoricity is grounded in the contingent and local context of significations, meanings, and interpretations. Indeed, many compositionists have come to believe that language is grounded in what Steven Mailloux calls a rhetorical hermeneutics. As Mailloux explains, "[There is] a practical inseparability of interpretation and language use . . ." (379). His assertion recalls composition's familiar model of social construction insofar as rhetorical action and participation rely upon an understanding of a given community's discursive norms. Rhetorical agency relies on the writer's ability to function within a specific context. Mailloux continues, "In some ways rhetoric and interpretation are practical forms of the same extended human activity: rhetoric is based on interpretation; interpretation is communicated through rhetoric" (379). Moreover, interpretation relies upon the participant's structures of understanding that occur prior to a given scene. We are already in a conversation's context, which in turn helps us to *see* the conversation in particular ways. "We are agents within and because of our enculturation," writes Mailloux (389). Any instance of language use is consequently an instance of interpretation and meaning. Language signifies within the enculturated grids we are always part of. To say that the ZEPPELIN composition *means* might seem to be the most general way of saying what this writing *does*.

Of course, it goes without saying that graffiti signifies in a variety of ways. We read the signs and tag marks through a particular lens of interpretation. Trimbur explains his textbook examples of graffiti as another instance of interpretation's multiple function. "Some see [graffiti] as simply a crime—an antisocial act of vandalism—while others believe graffiti is a form of artistic expression and political statement by disenfranchised inner-city youth" (18). In civic discourses, tagging is often read through the hermeneutic of crime, dangerous youth, and threat. According to Austin, "Before the names began to appear all over the walls of New York City in the late 1960s, there were already several frameworks in place within the commercial public sphere to 'make sense' of this new writing" (37). The new graffiti styles quickly translated into signifiers of a new crisis within the city limits. (You need only to keep your eye on the local news to see that this crisis-discourse continues to work as a hermeneutic for graffiti writing.) On the flipside, Trimbur further suggests, graffiti also becomes a signifier of resistance and struggle. As language, tag or graffiti writing

lends itself to the rhetorical hermeneutic of interpretation that Mailloux describes.

Q: What is it that this piece of writing does? A: *It means*. It is interpreted across enculturated structures of meaning. But, as we have seen above, the scene of writing also contains affective elements beyond its significations. A tag's "success" comes from the intensity leaking out from its figurative structure—it creates a *sense* beyond what it *signifies*. Roland Barthes exposes this intensity as a kind of experiential sensation that does not necessarily *mean* in the same ways that *meaningfulness means*. Here we should recall that Barthes points us toward three levels of meaning in a given image. The first two address the informational level (which is the level of semantic communication) and the symbolic level (which addresses signification). These two meaning-full levels form what Barthes calls a kind of "obvious meaning" to the scene itself. But, he continues, signifiers with their attendant significations are not all there is: "I am still held by the image. I read, I receive (and probably even first and foremost) a third meaning—evident, erratic, obstinate" ("Third" 318). This third meaning exceeds the existence of the scene itself in its informational and even symbolic dimensions. Whereas informational and symbolic levels of the image are remainderless—every gesture matches a corresponding meaning—the third meaning is the "one 'too many,' the supplement that my intellect cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive" (320). There is, in other words, an affective intensity to text and image that is not exhausted in signification.[7]

An obtuse shadow exists in proximity to the figure's signifying meaning. Furthermore, this obtuseness cracks up the story or indexation that allows us to make sense of such strange writing. As Barthes asks,

> Do [obtuse meanings] not give the obvious signified a kind of difficult prehensible roundness, cause my reading to slip? An obtuse angle is greater than a right angle: . . . the third meaning also seems perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely. . . . [T]he obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; . . . it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. (320)

As Barthes explains, the obtuse exists outside of critical metalanguage. It is "outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution. . . . [W]e can agree on it 'over the shoulder' or 'on the back' of

articulated language" (326). While a "semantologist would not agree to its objective existence," therefore, the obtuse takes on a life almost as a reverberation of meaning-full signification (326). The obtuse is not apart from meaning, but rather inheres in it as a constant dense reminder of the body. "[T]he obtuse meaning can be seen as an *accent*," Barthes writes, "the very form of an emergence, of a fold (a crease even) marking the heavy layer of informations and significations. . . . [It is] a sort of gash rased of meaning (of desire for meaning)" (327). Such third meanings or obtuse meaning are a kind of reverberation in the gestures of signification. As an accent (the peculiar accent of meaning and mediated discourse), affective intensity shadows, disrupts, and even helps to shape signification itself. We should therefore note, as Barthes points out, that such an accent "does not even indicate an *elsewhere* of meaning (another content, added to the obvious meaning); it outplays meaning—subverts not the content, but the whole practice of meaning" (328). This sense refuses to properly signify, and it cannot be pulled back into the realm of informational meaning and re/cognition. In short, intensities and sense exist in the folds of such communications. No matter how much a communication signifies, no matter how much it is re/cognized, there is always an excess of sense on the back of its meanings.[8]

Reading tag writing primarily in terms of discourse risks missing something that exists beside(s) its function as/in the symbolic. Tags themselves become a material force that encounters a whole array of other bodies and forces. It is not only a material effect of certain literate and discursive practices, but it also creates visceral effects. As Shaviro says of cinema, the material form of such writing/image is both "intense and impalpable" (26). Shaviro argues that such "cinematic" images initially confront the viewer without mediation, causing us to "respond viscerally to visual forms, before having the leisure to read or interpret them as symbols" (26). The image, in other words, is "on the order of a direct stimulation of the optic nerves, bypassing the cognitive and reflective faculties altogether" (33). Cinematic images produce a material shock to the body, which cannot be ignored when we discuss images and their signification. Shaviro continues, "The materiality of sensation remains irreducible to, and irrecuperable by, the ideality of signification" (33). Tags along a street have affective intensities swirling through and around them. They possess what cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls "lived impacts and rogue vitalities" (2). "[A]ffects . . . arise in the course of the perfectly ordinary life as the promise, or threat, that something is happening—something capable of impact," writes Stewart (3). These

live(d) impacts are a measure of the intensity that exists *in proximity* to their figuration as meaning.[9] Interpretation and the productions of meaning are never far from visceral, felt experience that doesn't always coincide with meaning. A writing's *impact* may not have the same effect as its *meaning effects*. The two exist in proximity to one another in the space of rhetoric. Very much like a pun, or even the buffoonery and useless expenditure of two giant yellow words reading ZEPPELIN ROCKS!!!, writing is comprised of impacts that are at once intense and im/palpable.

Toward a Literacy of Affect

> The logic of sense is necessarily determined to posit between sense and nonsense an original type of intrinsic relation, a mode of co-presence.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze

The concept of affect meets the street in a radical way for writing studies. Insofar as we are bodies always entering into compositions with other bodies, we do not only (de)construct writing but also experience its intensity. When we encounter writing, it not only signifies something *to* us, but it also combines *with* us in a degree of affectivity. Writing, in other words, involves a mutuality between sensual and signifying effects. The two dimensions exist in proximity to one another: meaning and feeling always shadow the other in rhetoric without reducing to the other. Our present exemplar of graffiti and street writing offers a brief exposure of this rhetorical doubleness. On one hand, street writing is rendered *readable* because of certain hermeneutical grids: historical, cultural, local. Yet, more than figuration, the street tag is also an experience of a strange figure. It strikes you in its obtuse contours that refuse to be/come part of the story. Accompanying the signification of a writer's name is the intensity generated at its meaningful borders.

Here we begin to see a tension at work between significations and the erratic, obstinate, live operations of affect. In his brief essay "Structures of Feeling," Raymond Williams suggests that we must hold this tension open, resisting the urge to subsume all of culture under the heading of signification. Since explicit social forms do not exhaust the range of culture, we cannot fully consume culture via representations. "[P]ractical consciousness is always more than a handling of fixed forms and units," writes Williams. "There is a frequent tension between the received

interpretations and practical experience. Where this tension can be made direct and explicit, or where some alternative interpretation is available, we are still within a dimension of relatively fixed forms" (130). As Barthes says, something takes place on the back of interpretation of cultural meanings. An accent remains in the folds of cultural meaning; an accent (like the Texas-Midwest accent that my own talk carries with it) cannot be reduced to the social contents that are explicable. Of course, comments like those from the WPA-L discussion reflect the discomfort that this irreducible mutuality presents. "[T]he tension is as often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming," explains Williams (130). But uncomfortable as this tension might be, discussing affect may indeed move us into new orbits of social and political possibilities, as Worsham suggests.

Moreover, this tension generates a number of implications for the work of composition and the concept of literacy. Attending to both orders opens up some very *practical* ways of talking about culture as lived event. It also opens up possibilities for attuning to culture and "reading" the world. This attunement offers up an/other kind of rhetorical literacy—an affective literacy—that is not grounded in only the explicit order of representation, signification, and epistemology. Instead, an affective literacy would be a strange literacy, one that tunes into the lived dimensions of culture that do not surface or emerge in full representation. Attuning to culture's affective field allows us to follow Worsham's call to "expand our notions of literacy to their widest possible circumference, to a point where literacy . . . involve[s] us, and our students, in more than an epistemic relation to the world and to the earth" ("Writing" 101). If the world does not only emerge in recognizable ways, but also operates through implicit structures of feeling, then our literacy methods cannot continue to fall back upon modes of reading that only traffic in explicit articulation. We need a literacy that acknowledges, along with Maurice Blanchot, that I am not the center of what I know (10). That is, my ability to articulate and explicate the world cannot ever possibly cover its full operation.

Consequently, an affective literacy reads not only for the contents of culture, but also for its modes of inaction. This literacy is one that recognizes what Grossberg argues: "The power of affect derives, not from its content, but from the fact that it is always the vector of people's investment in reality" (104–05). Affect is a kind of event that makes culture go live. As Worsham argues, even the work of ideology itself

operates through affective dimensions. In "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion," Worsham explores "the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic order takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings" (216). The realm of the social, with its various (ideological) formations and positions, is thus structured through this affective braid. Worsham argues that ideology's power is not primarily in terms of its contents, but in the operation of relation itself. "[T]he primary work of ideology is more fundamental than the imposition of a dominant framework of meanings. Its work is to organize an emotional world . . ." ("Coming" 106).[10] Signifying and ideological contents of culture are only one order; those meanings must be put into play, much like a song must be played in order to make the musical contents "live." The affective field of culture is important to read in its lived, practiced eventness—the ways in which culture is actively connected in experience.[11]

Without forgetting to read culture for its significations and meaningful contents (as if we *could* forget such a thing), our literacies can stretch further to the rhythm, texture, accent, and intensities that cause culture to go live. As a methodological augmentation, this affective literacy attunes to the multi-leveled event of culture: the qualified level of content as well as the affective intensities that "connect" the world in a thread of experience. In Worsham's words, such a literacy "would no longer function primarily as an agency in the articulation of knowledge . . . ; instead, it would become an indispensable agency for making the world strange and infinitely various" ("Writing" 102). It becomes a way of acknowledging that the world does not only function in explicit ways.

Getting back to this essay's opening scene, we might now revisit our question with a renewed understanding and vocabulary for description. What is this writing—and any other writing we encounter—doing? Or, to put another spin on it: Why should we talk about affect when we talk about writing and rhetoric? And how should we talk about it? Perhaps one of the most significant reasons for *why* we should talk about affect lies in the ways in which this model changes our views of pedagogy. In "An Affirmative Theory of Desire," Christa Albrecht-Crane argues that we must become more attuned to the affect and desires that infuse the classroom already. Our pedagogies must begin to explore those "other processes" that are present to the writing scene:

> [A]mong them [are] processes of affective production and creation. Such processes are driven by the desire to produce affective connections, resonances, and all sorts of affect-infused offshoots, movements, and relations. . . . [T]eachers and students desire affective engagements in innumerable, minute, diverse affective moves. Affect is ubiquitous, in the classroom as well. (24)

Albrecht-Crane sends out a call that is receiving more attention in composition studies: the call to theorize those resonances that have too long been our unacknowledged partners in the classroom. An increasing number of writing scholars have addressed the ubiquity of affect through various connections. For instance, Kristie Fleckenstein's *Embodied Literacies: Imageword and a Poetics of Teaching* tackles the dialectic of meaning-making. Her book promises to address "the doubling of embodiment as both incarnation and unification, the doubling of image and word, of writing-reading, and of a poetics of meaning and teaching" (4). She then traces the ways in which meaning-making draws upon embodied experiences and knowledges that do not necessarily emerge in discourse. Fleckenstein's interest in writing's embodiment also parallels Nedra Reynolds' recent work on spatialization and meaning. Reynolds' *Geographies of Writing* explores the relationship between place-based knowledges, feeling, and meaning. Whether the focus is on physical spaces or textual artifacts, Reynolds draws attention to the fact that these encounters (with place or texts) "are about *feeling*—structures of feeling or felt senses that are deeply emotional visceral, embodied" (164). Writing scholars like Fleckenstein and Reynolds thus tacitly suggest that when we talk about the context of writing, we are already talking about the sensation and primacy of affective involvement.

When asking students about "the call to write," our questions are therefore implicitly questioning their experience of this involvement. Likewise, when we teach or analyze the rhetorical function of style, we must remember that we are also addressing a kind of experience. Style is more than the genre, voice, and look of writing; it is also an aggregate of sensation. Style is an active and directive *pulling*—it draws various degrees of investment into particular sites. An affective writing model takes care to trace these sensual effects of writing, which exist beside(s) writing's signifying, meaningful effects. In short, an affective model keeps an eye toward writing's dual impact: the impact of meaning and the impact of sensation. These are rhetoric's domains of effects that construct the experience of daily life. The "practical" aspect of

writing and rhetoric (for better or worse) is therefore nothing other than affect at work.

So, what is it that a text like ZEPPELIN ROCKS!!! is doing? How does COOL "DISCO" DAN operate? One answer comes more readily from the street than from the textbook: this writing *gets up*. It exists in the strange doubleness of rhetoric—*between* and simultaneously *within* signification and affect. Disciplinary models that cast writing primarily in terms of articulatable meaning (even the meaningful acts of public rhetorics) risk overlooking the operation of affect in their own work, as well as their students' works. Fuller composition models might consider the prospect of turning to the street for examples of how to talk about writing's double function. Like graffiti, the sensations of writing are strange, elusive, and difficult to measure. Yet, as Stewart says in our opening epigraph, writing contains "something that refuses to disappear" into a mode of signification and meaning. Something else remains in that street writing scene, just as in every other scene of composition. Our challenge is to develop models that take this *something else* into account.[12]

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Notes

1. Thanks to Jeff Rice for pointing me to this section in *The Call to Write.*

2. Although we may be tempted to read Grossberg's analysis as an expression of *pathos*, we must carefully note the asignifying, nonnarrative, and sensual aspects of these affective investments. In "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi acknowledges the slipperiness of affect as a concept insofar as it is asignifying, sensual, noncognitive, and nonrepresentational. This makes affect rather difficult to conceptualize and understand. The most notable difference between affect and emotion (or a commonplace notion of pathos) lies in emotion's structure of signification. As Massumi notes: "Emotion is qualified intensity; the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized" (*Parables* 28). Affect, meanwhile, is that intensity that slips out of the semantic, semiotic, narrativized loop of meaning. It is a different kind of sensation.

3. See ***JAC*** issue 23.1 (2003), which includes Daniel Smith's "Ethics and 'Bad Writing': Dialectics, Reading, and Affective Pedagogy," and Christa Albrecht-Crane's "An Affirmative Theory of Desire." Both Smith and Albrecht-

Crane expand their arguments in responses found in *JAC* 23.4 (2003).

4. The predominance of this theory for composition studies is reflected in our most common (and most used) resource: the textbook. Consider even the very titles of such popular texts as *Everything's an Argument, Signs of Life,* and *The World is a Text.*

5. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out the obvious connections here between George W. Bush's bumbling-effectiveness and Hanson's own "powers of in/articulation." If Gibbs' reading is correct, this might help explain one reason why Bush retains such strongly persuasive powers in spite of his poor speaking skills.

6. Being a hip hop fan, I would like to stretch Grossberg's argument to its best possible conclusion by suggesting that there is "something *more*" in the thumping bass of hip hop sounds. But this is precisely his point. Regardless of what kind of fan you are, there is a degree of intensity that is invested in those musical styles you find most invigorating.

7. Barthes is talking about images specifically, but I suggest that we can "stretch" his concept into a wider sense of textuality's obtuseness.

8. Here we might also recall Richard Lanham's distinction in *The Electronic Word* between *looking at* and *looking through.* Street graffiti is not necessarily made to be looked "through" in order to see any underlying or transparent "meaning." In fact, tags themselves are often difficult to read because of their highly stylized lettering. Instead, these tags are made to be looked "at" in a surface way. Lanham's at/through distinction might also be redescribed in the terms I'm using here (drawing largely from Grossberg): degrees of affective investment. That is, the at/through difference is a difference in the kinds, degrees, and ranges of affective investment and interest. My thanks to Collin Brooke for pointing this out.

9. I want again to emphasize that I am not settling on the "side" of affect over signification. Neither am I (necessarily) laying out a causal relationship between the two. Rather, I am simply tracing these two dimensions in their proximity. We might recall Eagleton's observation in the epigraph of this section: "Even when I have language, however, my sensory experience still represents a kind of surplus over it."

10. Though Worsham uses "emotion" to describe this affective field, she is careful to explain that this is not the sense of emotion that is normally found on (the losing side of) the emotion/reason binary. Neither should we identify this sense with of emotion that is often yoked "to an expressivist theory of the subject and an unreconstructed notion of 'the personal'" ("Coming" 105). Rather, Worsham identifies subjectivity (and the personal) as a product that is mapped through affective processes ("Coming" 105).

11. Likewise, Brian Massumi argues that affect is "the connecting thread of experience. It is the invisible glue that holds the world together. In event" (217).

12. I would like to thank Diane Davis, T.R. Johnson, and Jeff Rice for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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