The Condition of the Writing Class: Capital, Composition, Writing, and the Proletariat

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The time has passed when one could rely on support from a composition theory, or a theory of the production of cultural forms, when talk of language as productive force turns to the manner in which people use language to produce and reproduce the conditions of everyday life. In the not-so-distant past, one could rest assured in the practice of studying, critiquing, supporting, or rejecting the formal uses to which people put language—or the productive force implicated in all sociolinguistic production—precisely because no economic agent had ever succeeded in owning language, or the means of sociolinguistic production. Anyone's composition theory might allow for the fact that economic practices delimited by a dominant mode of production could exert a pronounced influence on an individual's capacity to use language in the production of cultural forms, in the production of socially negotiated compositions. But no one could ever claim that language exists as a function or product of a socially delimited set of economic practices. No one could claim that any person's positive or negative capacity to use either spoken words or an alphabet in the production of embodied or technologically mediated compositions depends on that person's class position as defined by the dominant mode of production. And, so, no one taking up the problem of language as a productive force could be expected or even encouraged to develop a theory of sociolinguistic production that was not also in some way a general composition theory, that was not also in some way a theory that stands upon the presupposition that all human beings who are not physiologically predisposed against language acquisition share in the collective ownership of language and, thus, an unevenly developed but common potential to participate in and struggle over the sociolinguistic production of cultural forms.
Accordingly, one would have good reason to expect that anyone interested in taking up the problem of language as productive force would eventually focus on the ways in which people shape language and use cultural forms in the production and reproduction of the conditions of everyday life. Because language, to date, has always existed as a "form of development of the productive forces" that has not come in conflict with "the relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto" (Marx, *Contribution* preface-abs.htm), one might be justified in expecting all talk of sociolinguistic production to articulate with composition theory, or a theory that speaks to the highly variegated ways in which socially articulated language users work on the semiotic materials that the world of language users produce and share in common.

But times have changed, and no one can rely on the support of composition theory when talk of language as a productive force turns to the manner in which the inclusive set of language users develop and deploy cultural forms in the production and reproduction of the conditions of everyday life. Today, talk of composition mistakes the central problem of sociolinguistic production when that talk fails to realize that language—a social, as opposed to a cultural, form that has always promoted the unfettered "development of the productive forces"—has, indeed, come in conflict with "the relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto." Adapting to our present circumstances the language that Marx used in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, we can say that the social relations that time immemorial have lead to the production and common ownership of language have today changed from being social relations leading to development of the productive forces to being productive relations that are not only defined by economic practices as delimited by a dominant mode of production but, also, constitute a fetter upon the development of the productive forces. Today, at the transnationally internetworked core (read: the Internet) of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system, social relations that result in the production of language are also relations that, on the one hand, bind language users to economic agents who own the means of sociolinguistic production and, on the other, exclude nearly all of the world's language users both from a share in the ownership of the economically delimited means of sociolinguistic production and from any and all guarantees of participating in the
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transnationally internetworked sociolinguistic production of cultural forms.

A matter of history: between 1991 and 1998, capital took directive control of the internetworked social, the globally internetworked realm of computer networked solutions, the internetworked system of fully automated writing machines, the Internet. In the short span of eight years, capital took possession of the field of internetworked writing that nations had develop through state-funded projects like ARPAnet (Advanced Research Projects Administration network) and NSFnet (National Science Foundation network). Prior to 1991, capital had been excluded by the National Science Foundation from NSFnet, the pre-commercial Internet backbone (read: the main network connections that internetwork the computer networks that comprise the global Internet). In those days, the state-supported system of internetworked writing machines catered to the needs of researchers and educators. But in 1991, capital received permission from NSF to access and use the Internet for commercial purposes. By 1993, capital had started to build and internetwork its own computer networks, responding as it did to increased distribution of personal computers, the composition of the world wide web, and the growing popularity of the Internet. In the same year, capital's expansion into internetworked computing prompted NSF to propose a transfer of control of the Internet to capital. It took only two years for the commercially owned and operated Internet to receive its launch. In 1995, capital took control of the Internet, and NSF decommissioned NSFnet. Capital received help from NSF for three years, making the transition from state to private control easier. But in 1998, a landmark year, NSF withdrew from its position of authority over the Internet, and the Internet completed its transition from being a state-financed operation to being a commercial venture (see “Brief,” “Computers”).

In less than a decade, capital had superseded the state as the provider of revenues used in the construction of the environs, or the conditions, that organize the networked processes of social production. In the short course of seven years, capital had taken over production of the automated system of internetworked writing machines that machinofactures the field of writing, or sociolinguistic possibility, that capital now produces, distributes, and exchanges for money. Capital, in other words, had managed to stake a state-supported, juridically protected claim to a machine-generated, transnationally internetworked space of sociolinguistic possibility and, in so doing, convert internetworked
writing into both a force of capitalist production and an alienable use value (read: salable commodity).

Between 1995 and 1998, writing became, as it were, the proper expression of capital at every point in the circuit of capital, from points of production to distribution to exchange to consumption. And writing, now the privately owned means of sociolinguistic production, suddenly became an expropriated prerequisite for anyone wanting or needing to write within the field of writing, or sociolinguistic production, that productive capital had come to own, produce, distribute, and sell. Before anyone could participate in and struggle over the sociolinguistic production of cultural forms, before anyone could begin to work on the semiotic materials that the world of language users no longer produced and shared in common, most everyone in the inclusive set of language users had to agree that they had no collective share in the transnationally networked means of sociolinguistic production, had no seeming alternative but to bind themselves to capital if they were to compose cultural forms within the transnationally networked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system, had no seeming alternative but to sanction capital’s right to take possession of the field of sociolinguistic production, had no seeming alternative but to contract with capital for the right to access and, thereafter, participate in the networked field of privately owned sociolinguistic opportunity.

The clearest and simplest way of making this point is to advance the following unspectacular observations. After absorbing the substantial costs associated with the purchase of a Pentium class computer, some of us pay ATT $11.95 a month for a 56 kbps dial-up connection to the privately owned, transnationally internetworked processes of computer-mediated social production—otherwise known as the privatized Internet. Others pay Verizon $34.95 a month for a 100 mbps DSL connection. Still others pay Cox Communications $49.95 a month for a 300 mbps cable connection. A growing handful pay $9.95 a day to connect at Wireless Hotspots around the country at speeds up to 50 times faster than Internet dial-up. The less fortunate go to public libraries, sit down at tax-supported computer terminals, and make tax-supported connections to the privatized Internet through various state-sponsored, tax-supported leasing arrangements with various privately owned Internet Service Providers. But however we manage to forge our connections, typical users of the digitized everyday have one thing in common: they connect to the networked social—to the interindividual, computer-mediated site of language production—and encounter a wide range of networked writing
practices that exist for us only under the ritualistic sign of exchange. More specifically, typical users of the digitized everyday connect to an ideological communications apparatus and encounter a productive apparatus that generates a sociolinguistic formation that not only reproduces social relations through ideology but, more importantly, produces the necessary conditions for the state-sanctioned, juridically protected production and reproduction of social relations through private industry.

To acknowledge that productive control over the automated field of internetworked writing has been ceded to capital is, perhaps, to understand why I doubt the explanatory and directive power of contemporary composition theory to deal with the role of language as productive force in what can only be described as the fettered production and reproduction of everyday life. Because language users at the internetworked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system no longer share in the ownership of the means of sociolinguistic production, composition theorists—even Marxist composition theorists, with their focused attention on the production of cultural forms—must soon discover that they are overmatched in their encounters with the privatized system of machinofactured sociolinguistic production. The established range of composition theories must fail to galvanize compositionists in their encounters with the privately owned, fully automated system of internetworked writing machines that, for its part, establishes conditions under which the networked production of cultural forms becomes fundamentally inaccessible to expropriated language users unless they agree to bind themselves to the economic agents who, for their part, are the real owners and operators of the means of sociolinguistic production.

Composition Theory
Based on the preliminary conclusion that capital has subjugated sociolinguistic production to the service of wealth, one might deduce, I believe correctly, that Marxists will produce the answer best suited to capital’s penetration into and appropriation of the field of sociolinguistic possibility. Writing shortly after the fall of Soviet state capitalism to U.S. private capitalism, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff advanced a position that seems to support this conjecture. They argued that the specter of communism still haunts the capitalist world economic system because, plain and simple, capitalism generates Marxism, or the instrument for “class analysis that renders” communism “visible as the powerful ‘other’ of a now global capitalist system” (119). Marxism, explained Resnick and Wolff, is “sustained by its dialectical opposite, its capitalist
other, whose contradictions and crises have always both threatened and
invigorated Marxist theory and Marxist organization" (123). In their
estimation, the collapse of Soviet state capitalism did nothing to change
the fact that “the current spurt of capitalist development will, like all
previous spurts, sooner or later entail the parallel revival of its other—
Marxism” (119). To be sure, capitalism and Marxism will both “have the
new forms appropriate to the new conditions” (119). But, just as surely,
capitalism will produce alienation. And Marxism, itself one of the
inescapable contradictions produced by capitalism, will respond by
voicing that “attendant Utopian longing for an end to exploitation, for that
fullness of life that requires, among other things, that no separation exist
between the collective of producers and the collective of appropriators of
surplus value” (123).

At the same time, Marxist compositionists—those who have the
inside track on capital’s penetration into and appropriation of the field of
sociolinguistic possibility—will likely falter when tracking capital’s
subjugation of writing for the first time. They promise to mistep when
first striving to meet privatized internetworked writing with a Marxist
sociolinguistic theory that renders communism visible as the powerful
“other” of the transnationally internetworked capitalist world system. Marxists should notice that their
composition theories up so long as they stand on their own longstanding
assumptions about the social property status of language, the status of
social language as an unfettered form of the development of the
productive forces, and that related assumption that the inclusive set of
vested and unfettered producers of the social property “social lan-
guage” share in an unevenly developed but common potential to
participate in and struggle over the sociolinguistic production of
cultural forms.

One might say that the problem for Marxist compositionists in their
encounters with privatized, globally internetworked writing issues from
the fact that until recently Guy Debord, Frederic Jameson, Stuart Hall,
James Berlin, Michel de Certeau, and Valentin Vološinov made fairly
equal contributions to the discourse about the production of cultural
forms at the core and on the peripheries of the most technology advanced
sectors of the world community. To grasp my meaning, remember that we
were confronted not so long ago by Debord’s charge that we live in The
Society of the Spectacle—a media-driven culture marked by capital’s
industrial control over the technologically-mediated production of cul-
tural fantasies that capital composes and projects over and across the
unevenly developed capitalist world economic system. Capital, Debord argued correctly, has accumulated to the point of becoming Image (16). Shortly thereafter, we were challenged by Frederic Jameson’s remark that ours is an era marked by “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and yet untheorized sense” (48). Charged and challenged, we responded to capital’s spectacular, cultural penetrations into the social by claiming a special exemption from capital’s influence for the domain of everyday life, practical consciousness, language games, rhetoric, composition. Many claimed or stood on the assumption that capital could not launch a prodigious expansion of the social throughout the social, that capital which had accumulated to the point of becoming the perceived, spectacular Image could not accumulate to the point of becoming the expressed, embodied Word. Hall, for example, claimed that media never manufactures consent among the governed but, instead, participates in the “production of consent” (87). Berlin, following suit, argued that educators can help students, who have been bombarded by the “image and spectacle,” to become “active and critical agents in shaping the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions of their historical moment” (223). And, speaking on behalf of those who feel overpowered by the culture industry, De Certeau insisted that even the weak may resist capital’s penetrations into the social, provided, for example, that they deploy language in the form of memory at the “right point in time’ (kairos)” and, in so doing, produce a “founding rupture or break” that “modifies the local order” for having taken it “by surprise” (85). Each understood with Volosinov that language—being “the specific material reality of ideological creativity” and an element of the “immediate superstructure over the economic basis”—is intertwined with but is finally and assuredly distinct from the capitalist mode of production (xiv, 13). And each demonstrated why compositionists—imbued with an equal appreciation for the power of capital and the power of language users to set limits on the reach of capital—may be predisposed to stand upon old, time-tested principles about language when confronted with a social order that transforms all manner of internetworked language, including the internetworked forms of ideological critique (Berlin) and memory (de Certeau), into the language commodity: the processes of sociolinguistic production that issue from capital’s subsumption of internetworked writing; the monetized products of internetworked sociolinguistic pro-
duction that circulate as the social, the everyday, practical consciousness, composition, rhetoric, and language.

The problem for the immediate future of Marxist composition theory stems from its deeply rooted connection to the following Marxist tenets: (1) all people own language; (2) all language users may own, operate, and contribute to the development of many—not all—of the core technologies that language producers use to produce written compositions; (3) technologically mediated language users may be denied access to particular language-producing technologies, but this failure of access is not so great as to make a private property of language and, in so doing, to shift the central problem for writers from negotiated interpretation and rearticulation of cultural compositions that are themselves essential for the reproduction of everyday life to baseline struggle for the means of semiotic production that is itself prerequisite to the production of everyday life; (4) operating writers need not therefore struggle so much for the sign as in the sign.

The immediate problem for Marxist compositionists in their inevitable encounter with capital’s penetration into and appropriation of the field of sociolinguistic possibility stems from the fact that Marxist and non-Marxist theorists from Debord to Berlin share in a fairly stable set of assumptions that reach back to the general theory of historical formations that Marx and Engels first developed in *The German Ideology*. Marxist theories and non-Marxist theories of sociolinguistic production recall with Marx and Engels that one may abstract from the material activity of everyday life a total of five constants that go into the production of every realized historical relationship. These constant conditions result, time and again, in the human production of different socioeconomic formations that always include language and practical consciousness but never seem to include anything more radical than longstanding opportunities for language producers to print and publish sequences of words, not whole living languages, and, more rarely, to convert published words into copyright protected commodities. The first three fundamental conditions in the material production of history by material individuals include (1) the “production of material life itself,” or the ability of each human animal to satisfy physical needs like eating and sleeping and, so, to be in a “position to live in order to be able to ‘make history’”; (2) the production and satisfaction of “new needs,” or the ongoing production of material life itself; and (3) the reproduction of social life, or the natural/social “double relationship” that manifests itself in the sexual propagation of the species and the development of variegated social relations, including the
production of gendered and raced social categories (German, ch01a.htm). Having theorized what feminist scholar Monique Wittig has correctly charged as being a naturalized, invidious, and unacceptable distinction between the natural and social, between the natural essence of Man and Woman and the social reproduction of men and women, Marx and Engels regroup the social and theoretically sound aspect of the third constant—the reproduction of social life—with their fourth and fifth historical constants. The production of social relations is now understood to include (4) "a certain mode of production, or industrial stage" that "is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or social stage" (ch01a.htm). The combination and interplay between the production of social relations and the development of dominant mode of production results in what Marxists call the socioeconomic formation. And it is the existence of the socioeconomic formation, with its relatively autonomous social and economic modalities, that produces the conditions under which (5) human beings-in-collective produce consciousness, or language, which is "practical consciousness that exists also for other men." In short, the sociolinguistic substance of the social formation, which includes the practical consciousness as its first component, emerges through collective negotiations over and across the null, or unwritten, space between human bodies that intersects with both the production of social relations and the social relations of production but may never be reduced to an exclusive property of either the social or productive relations.

The transhistorical implications that follow from Marx and Engels' fundamental albeit imperfect theory of the material production of historical relationships are clear. Capital may never finally succeed in converting the social property language into language capital—a private, or exclusive, property that production capital machinofactures and circulates for the purpose of converting the production of social relations into an alienable (read: salable) product of the social relations of production. Any socially or productively oriented group of people may, of course, pressure other groups not to use language, but no group may stop another from using social signs—even if a group called The Sovereign Lords of Language were to stake out an area and mandate that no group passing through their well-patrolled sociolinguistic domain may use social signs without express written permission. Capital may, in other words, accumulate to the point of becoming the engine that produces The Society of the Spectacle, but capital may not accumulate to the point of becoming the engine that produces the The Society of the Society. These, at least, are
the implications that follow from Marx and Engels’ general theory of the material production of historical relationships.

From the perspective of one interested in producing a Marxist writing and composition theory fit to meet the challenges that issue from capital’s recent subsumption of writing, the significance of Marx and Engels’ remarks must be tied to Vološinov’s philosophy of language—or, more precisely, to the manner in which Vološinov converted the Marxist general theory of historical formations into a Marxist frame for discussing the property status of language, both written and spoken. When brought within Vološinov’s Marxist frame of reference, language emerges as the quintessential social property. Toward this end, Vološinov points out that although sign use, or language, is a function of individual human consciousness, “individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact,” not a transhistorical, non-material, non-semiotic function of the isolated human mind (12). The only definition of consciousness available to us, he continues, is a “sociological one” because individual consciousness, which requires the existence of some kind of semiotic material for its existence, only appears when members of a socially organized group have social intercourse. Human understanding appears only after the mind has been filled with signs, or “ideological content” (13). But, Vološinov explains, this filling necessarily occurs through the external “process of social interaction” (11). The individual human understanding, he continues, emerges where socially organized (as opposed to randomly grouped) human beings stretch ideological chains across “interindividual territory,” make meaningful connections between themselves, and, in so doing, establish the conditions under which individual consciousness appears (11, 12). According to Vološinov, individual human understanding appears only when individuals-in-collective grasp social signs with already known, socially negotiated signs—that is, when social beings bear socially-generated signs upon socially-generated signs, which, for their part, bear upon a physical reality that collective sign use converts into ideological material. This socially-contingent, uninterrupted linking of signs constitutes for Vološinov the “chain of ideological creativity” that, on the one hand, gives rise to all individual consciousness and, on the other, never breaks and plunges into that which doesn’t exist, a transhistorical human psychology that arises from a non-material, non-semiotic inner nature (11). At the same time, the manner in which individuals-in-collective produce individual consciousness demonstrates that sign production is not the property of any one group or individual but of all language using human beings, each of whom use semiotic materials
to negotiate the interindividual null, or unwritten, space that exists between and unites human populations, both large and small.

In this telling, language, or practical consciousness, is necessarily involved in productive relations from which might issue the right of private property over specific texts. At the same time, the vast, socially negotiated field of sociolinguistic production and ideological creativity never becomes an exclusive property of, for example, production capital (read: the body of capitalists who specialize not in finance but in the direct production process). In this telling, the relations of production rise from within the ongoing production of social relations from which issues an omnipresent opportunity for individuals-in-collective to stretch ideological chains across interindividual territory, to make meaningful connections between themselves, and, in so doing, to establish the conditions under which individual consciousness appears. Given this telling, it would be hard for anyone to imagine, let alone realize, a mode of production that so penetrates the production of social relations that the socioeconomic formation gets converted into an econosocial formation, or the product of a mode of production that specializes in the direct production of the interindividual grounds that human beings must access if they are to generate language, if they are to participate in the production of social relations, if they are to take up position within a determinate social formation that rises from within a determinate mode of privately owned and operated sociolinguistic production.

The power of Volosinov's germinal remarks on Marxism and the philosophy of language is such that one can understand why I might regard the Marxist general theory of historical formations as a problem waiting to happen for the Marxist compositionists who want, on the one hand, to theorize and provide a counterstatement to capital's recent advance upon and subsumption of sociolinguistic production, and who, on the other, must presuppose that an economic modality may not subsume its social formation, may not subsume the interindividual processes of agonistic yet unfettered language production. Because Marxists regard language as a social property, and because this social property rises out of a socioeconomic formation that cannot on the face of things be subsumed by its own economic modality, Marxists perforce conclude that the many faces of sociolinguistic production—call them speech, writing, rhetoric, composition, practical consciousness, the practice of everyday life, the quotidian, and individual subjectivity—must be overdetermined in substance but never necessarily a force of capitalist production (read: factory technology) or an alienable use value (read:
commodity). Because capital in theory cannot produce an economic modality capable of subsuming at the level of sociolinguistic production even a circumscribed portion of the entire socioeconomic formation, Marxist theories that bring the means of sociolinguistic production within their purview must take the next logical now untenable step: they must advance uncritically upon the production and reception of cultural forms. They have no choice but to produce a composition theory steeped in once-valid conceptions about the status of language as a social property and a form of the development of the productive forces.

There are, of course, numerous examples that could substantiate my observations about the longstanding, no longer appropriate tendency of Marxist composition theory to stand on a now compromised belief in the status of language as unfettered social property and form of the development of the productive forces. Of the two that I will offer, Raymond Williams’ work in *Marxism and Literature* is interesting because it continues to operate for contemporary compositionists as another touchstone in the long path from Marx to Vološinov to contemporary Marxist composition theory. Williams was quite candid about the fact that he grounded his Marxist literary theory, “cultural materialism,” in the foundation established by Vološinov—itself an echo, elaboration, and rearticulation of the general theory of the production of historical formations in *The German Ideology*. For Williams, interindividual sociolinguistic activity is implicated in the entire range of productive activities—industrial, political, legal, and cultural—and so may not be reduced to the condition of being an instrument for reflecting or refracting economic activities that are supposed to be the “real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” (Marx, *Contribution* preface-abs.htm). Where Marxists at work in the earlier, orthodox tradition tended to reduce the production of cultural forms to an activity that referred back to the economic basis, with its consistent, very general set of properties, Williams posited that cultural production is something more than an activity that rises from and refers back to the economic. Cultural production, he argued, is a material activity that is constitutive, not reflective, of the socioeconomic formation. Marxists, therefore, who work within the more orthodox traditions are not, from Williams’ perspective, being materialist enough when they critique and protest against a way of life that tends to reduce everything to economic activity and, at the same time, reinforces the idea that capital constituted a self-sustaining mode of production. For Williams, the problem of sociolinguistic production is as
definite as it is challenging. He concludes that all productive activity, including economic activity, stems from social processes that feature sociolinguistic conflict. And sociolinguistic conflict, even when it goes on within both the politico-legal and ideological superstructures, gives rise to the production of cultural forms that are themselves constitutive of the social order, that are important in creating and sustaining the impression that capitalist economic activity is a self-sustaining activity, and that cannot, therefore, be construed as being products of a reflective, "superstructural" process at all. Having rejected the idea that sociolinguistic activity can be reduced to a reflection of economic activity, and having argued that sociolinguistic activity is constitutive of the conditions that secure the future for capitalist economic activity, Williams moved, as I have argued, that sociolinguistic theory must translate itself into a Marxist theory of literary production, or a composition theory that stands, as I have argued, upon language as a social property and written language as a form of the development of the productive forces. He became the champion for Marxist compositionists who want to adhere to a "theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism" (5, 90–94).

My second example comes from the institutionally delimited field of scholarship in rhetoric and composition. Having grounded his work in Williams’ Marxist literary theory, with its roots in Vološinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language and Marx and Engels’ The German Ideology, Bruce Horner translates Williams’ revaluation of material cultural and literary production into a reason for compositionists to work purposefully within the Marxist tradition of historical materialism. Committed to advancing Williams’ theory from an attempt to “reestablish the material groundings of what cultural practices might be about” (Harvey 354) to being a bona fide theory of cultural production, or composition theory, Horner establishes a benchmark for theorists who want to bring historical materialism to bear on writing, rhetoric, and composition. He insists that rhetoricians who concentrate on the technologically mediated production of sociolinguistic forms (that is, written compositions) must cleave to the "Marxist tradition of historical materialism [first developed by Marx and Engels in The German Ideology], in which the mode of production is understood to include social relations as a significant ‘productive force’" (xvii). Significantly, Horner warns compositionists who want to become cultural materialists to steer clear of anything that smacks of Marxist base-superstructure analysis. In his estimate, compositionists will avoid those inescapable problems that
plague materialists who pursue some form of cultural reflection theory if they draw on *The German Ideology*, in other words, a text from Marx and Engels' early career that attends to the unfettered, socially delimited work of language workers rather than the problem of political economy. In so doing, Horner secures for both himself and contemporary Marxist compositionists a place within the longstanding Marxist tradition that concentrates on the production of cultural forms because language itself necessarily exceeds the subsumptive reach of capital. Horner argues that compositionists must characterize composition as real work and that this work, which leads to the production of social forms, includes "actual work on material," involves a "material social process," and, therefore, may not be "separated from the material social conditions of its production" (xvii). Only then, when compositionists have characterized composition as work, can composition theorists be assured of accentuating "the materiality and historicity of our work, and so enable us better to understand the specific and changing delimitations governing it and its real potentialities" (xvii).

Yet, the true disposition of language and composition is no longer with Horner, Williams, de Certeau, Berlin, Hall, Jameson, Debord, Vološinov, the early Engels, or the early Marx. Theories of the production of cultural forms that stand upon assumptions about the status of language as a social property no longer advance from a position that addresses the material conditions of sociolinguistic production, where that production takes place at the transnationally internetworked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system. For well over a century, Marxist composition theory has maintained that economic activity cannot become an inescapable determinate in the life of any writer, cannot always interpose itself between a would-be writer and the act of writing, cannot necessarily come between a would-be writer and the writer's real potential to work upon semiotic materials in the production of cultural forms. Today, relations of capitalist production have advanced so far that capital can and does come between the world of writers and both the internetworked social formation—constituted entirely of expropriated writing—and the cultural forms that writers may not produce except under the ritualistic sign of exchange. And so, today, relations of capitalist production have disqualified composition theories based upon the idea of language as social property, based as they are upon the assumption of assured access to unfettered language, from speaking to the core problem of sociolinguistic production at the transnationally networked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic sys-
tem. Suddenly, contemporary (Marxist) composition theory, no matter how materialist, fails the test of being “materialist enough.”

Bourgeois revisionist, liberal reformist Charles Moran attempts to get at this point in “Access: The ‘A’ Word in Technology Studies.” Moran emphasizes that grim economic realities underpin the work of literacy workers who specialize in computers-and-writing. Hard at work in a field where writers have little choice but to buy a new writing machine (read: computer) every four years, and where a fraction of the world’s population can afford to connect to the internetworked econosocial formation, Moran brings into sharp relief the withering economic disparities that influence whether persons will gain or be denied access to the transnationally internetworked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system. Moran notes that between 1979–1989, the poorest 20% of American families experienced a 9% drop in income, and families making less than $10,000 increased from 8.3% to 9.6%. At the same time, the richest 2% to 4% of U.S. Americans increased their wealth by 29% and managed to concentrate 40% of the nation’s wealth in the hands of 1% of the population (216). Confronted as Moran was by economic disparities that must have an impact, positive or negative, on each U.S. citizen’s right of passage to the econosocial formation, to the expropriated databases of semiotic materials, and to the fettered production of cultural forms, Moran asks—quite understandably—that we forestall talk of composition and launch what can only be described as a narrowly economistic, vulgar materialist writing program that succumbs to what John Trimbur refers to as theoretical “presentism,” or the leftist, postmodernist inclination to “mistake conjunctural effects for the organic trends in capital’s persistent if uneven development on a global scale” (197). Moran asks teachers and researchers in the computers-and-writing community “to do something other than what we do now” (215). He suggests that literacy workers in computers-and-writing work to ameliorate conjunctural effects produced by organic trends in capital’s persistent if uneven development on a global scale by (1) learning about, using, and advocating “less-expensive equipment”; (2) bolstering the case for cheaper access by studying the impact of studying in “technologically-impo...
inequalities of access to technology”; and (6) uncovering what students have done to gain “the access that they need” but cannot afford (218–19).

The clarity of Moran’s statistically driven perceptions aside, nothing Moran suggests will dissolve the fetter on writing and the production of cultural forms that afflicts members of the world community, over fifty percent of whom have never made a phone call (Rifkin 13; Hayles 20), nearly all of whom own no share of the means of internetworked sociolinguistic production. Nothing Moran suggests will assure increased access to the internetworked econosocial formation for the sociolinguistically challenged members of the world community because decreased access to goods and services in capitalist formations are not brought about by “crises of scarcity, like all precapitalist crises” but, instead, by “crises of overproduction” (Mandel 52). When, for example, business persons produce goods that through overproduction return neither surplus value nor the capitalist’s initial investment, capital will suspend operations, lay-off workers, ruin lives, and send capitalists into crisis in the midst of abundance. When faced with an econosocial formation that contains areas of interest that have reached the point of market saturation, capital will, of course, curtail production of and close access to formerly profitable, now exhausted areas of the internetworked econosocial formation. Capital will contract portions of the writing market as it did during the .com market corrections. Bearing this in mind, nothing Moran suggests will resolve the problem of privatized internetworked writing—except perhaps to underscore the failure of cultural materialist composition theory, with its assumptions about the dual status of language as social property and unfettered productive force, to deal with the problem of sociolinguistic expropriation. Nothing will change because Moran—like the compositionists he corrects—stops short of confronting those economic agents who control the relations of production that have already advanced upon the production of social relations and subsumed the processes of sociolinguistic formation, ideological creativity, and cultural production that proceed within the internetworked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system.

Despite the problems that Marxist compositionists, philosophers of language, and unclassified historical materialists might have when developing the new Marxist forms necessary to meet and contradict the new sociolinguistic forms that capital has developed since the fall of Soviet state capitalism, I continue to believe with Resnick and Wolff that, for example, the latent potential for a Marxist reply resides in the ongoing
capitalist conversion of processes of simple or non-capitalist sociolinguistic production into processes of "normal," industrial, large-scale commodity production. One cannot be certain that a Marxist theory of writing will take root in the contradictory substance of capitalized writing, but no one should blanch at the thought that capitalized writing should give rise to a Marxist theory of writing and—perhaps, in due time—a fully elaborated Marxist theory of composition rearticulated to work within the new conditions of sociolinguistic production. And no one should be particularly surprised that the path to a Marxist theory of writing will take us into direct contact with the tightly wound contradictions that permeate every byte of capitalized, alienable, alienated writing and take us, more importantly, into direct conflict with the capitalist class that has converted the ongoing non-capitalist production of the social property writing into a private property that capital produces, distributes, and exchanges for money.

Subjugated Writing
The time has come for a Marxist theory of writing. The time has come for Marxists to step beyond the once unshakable, now crumbled positions on cultural production as material work, positions that stand and now fall on an unfailing, once justified belief in the dual status of language as social property and unfettered productive force. Having become a state-sanctioned, juridically protected property of capital, internetworked language must be characterized as a form of the development of the productive forces that has come in conflict with the property relations within which it has operated hitherto. Because the internetworked form of language itself has become a private property, Marxists must now undertake an activity that Marxist cultural materialists and compositionists like Williams and Horner have long considered a failing in the historical materialist sociolinguistic methodology. Marxists must now trace internetworked, technologically mediated language back to capital. They must understand what it means for writing to become a component and by-product of the capitalist relations of production, its production delimited by laws of the motion of capital, as delimited by the dominant mode of production.

We have no choice. There are no alternatives.

And so we begin with a decision to let go of the exceptional status of language and the sociolinguistic formation. And we turn to Notebook VI of the Grundrisse, wherein Marx details capital's method for translating ownership over the means of production into a mechanism for subjugating "historical progress to the service of wealth" (ch11.htm).
Marx wants us to know that capital’s rise to power follows a path to dominance that departs from those paths followed by “all earlier forms of property.” Rather than increasing its fortunes through development of protocols that “condemn the greater part of humanity, the slaves, to be pure instruments of labor,” capital seeks from its workers compliance without threat of compulsion. As we know, capital thrives where it converts a large portion of the world’s work force into a body of free workers who, being free, are fully at liberty to sell or abstain from selling their labor-power for wages, or, in our case, are free to participate in or turn their backs on the internetworked realm of sociolinguistic production. At the same time, capital thrives where it develops juridically sanctioned property relations that support capital in converting the relatively independent body of laborers into a fragmented body of the proletariat—”free workers” who have lost their rights of possession over the means of production and so have little choice but to exercise their free right to depend for their existence on capital and, in so doing, to sanction capital’s right to possess and distribute the means of production (ch11.htm).

Within the narrow confines of industrial production, capital gains control over the proletariat (1) by concentrating wealth into its own singular hand, (2) by concentrating bodies of relatively independent workers together in one location through the offer of wages, (3) by alienating workers from the social processes of work through the introduction of the capitalist division of labor, and (4) by alienating skilled workers from even the muscular aspects of work through capital’s use of science to shift the power of labor from human hands to privately owned and operated machine systems. When capital brings workers together in one place and sets them to work before privately owned machine systems, capital produces an objective relationship between workers, the activity of work, and the workers’ tools and, in so doing, alienates workers from both the work process and the product of their labor. Capital’s talent for organizing and presenting the conditions of work to the proletariat is what allows capital to transform labor-power into an objective property that capital may purchase, and eventually sell, and always manipulate, for the purpose of increasing the rate of commodity production and the rate of surplus profit (Marx, Grundrisse ch11.htm).

Wherever capital extends its organizational techniques beyond traditionally recognized areas of industrial production, capital succeeds in penetrating into undespoiled areas of the social formation, in subsuming heretofore relatively autonomous spheres of productive, unfettered activity. All capital needs do to subsume another area of the social formation
is to establish a property-based, alienated, objective association between human beings and all processes of some heretofore unfettered form of the productive forces—to take possession of the site of work, the instruments of labor, and the workers who conspire with, even as they struggle against, capital in its quest to realize surplus profits. That is capital's formula for subsuming areas of the social formation—a formula, I might add, that has sustained capital through its latest successful venture into the area of sociolinguistic production (ch11.htm).

For those wanting to work within the core or even on the semi-peripheries of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system, they must learn how to use the transnationally internetworked site of sociolinguistic production. Capital has produced a consumer good that, in Marxist terms, functions as a wage good, or a commodity that a would-be worker must purchase and consume if that worker hopes to gain some specific type of future employment. Capital, in the case of internetworked writing, has translated its state-sanctioned, juridically protected control of the language commodity into the ongoing production of a wage good that language users must purchase if they hope to work and produce anywhere near the core of capitalist world system. In this way, capital produces its trademark property-based, alienated, objective association between members of the proletariat and, in this case, the sociolinguistic component of an econosocial formation that circulates at the core of the larger, unevenly developed socioeconomic formation. Capital, in other words, subjugates sociolinguistic production to the service of wealth by subjugating elite literacy workers at the core and on the semi-peripheries of the capitalist world system to capital, owner and operator of the language commodity as wage good.

For all users of the internetworked social, regardless of their employment aspirations, capital organizes sociolinguistic production into a property-based, alienated, objective association and so, again, subjugates sociolinguistic production to the service of wealth. Writers who use internetworked writing for whatever purpose may only produce internetworked communications if they direct writing into the field of sociolinguistic possibility that capital produces with and controls through its ownership of the automated system of internetworked writing machines (read: internetworked computers). What this means is that capital has machinofactured a “field-to-point” (read: internetworked) method of organizing technologically mediated communication. Capital has, in other words, machinofactured a field of sociolinguistic possibility to which writers must connect themselves one point at a time. In the past,
capital had attempted but failed to subjugate interindividual communications to the service of wealth through its organization of "point-to-point" (read: telephone and telegraph) or "point-to-field" (read: radio and television) communications models. Point-to-point communications, with its genuine capacity to organize and capitalize upon the interindividual site of sociolinguistic production, was and is too narrowly focused to subsume an entire social formation. (Telephone companies have long since converted interpersonal communications into capital but cannot, at the same time, convert the entire range of simultaneous telephonic communications into a net that brings the entire set of language users together in one place, before a privately owned machine system, under capital control.) Point-to-field, or the broadcast model that vaulted Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* into existence, had the power to penetrate the social formation but never, of course, to subsume it. (Television companies have long since converted public and private domains into a canvas upon which to project a vast array of capitalized messages and, in so doing, to convert culture into capital, but capital cannot use broadcasted cultural capital to subsume the set of relatively independent language users because language users heretofore have grounded their interpersonal communications upon a social substrate that may be capital, as in the case of telephonic communications, but is never necessarily capital.) Field-to-point, on the other hand, subsumes the entire set of fragmented language users who latch themselves onto the fully objectified econosocial formation because the internetworked system of writing machines is, if nothing else, a vast social formation that brings the production of social relations within an informational field that is itself coterminous with social relations of production, the mode of production, the economic. In this way, capital manages once again to subjugate to the service of wealth the sociolinguistic production of the variegated set of internetworked writers by producing its trademark property-based, alienated, objective association between writers and the sociolinguistic component of the econosocial formation.

Coming on the heels of capital's successful reorganization of the field of sociolinguistic possibility—its proven capacity to establish a property-based, alienated, objective association between each writer and the field of machinofactured writing—capital also manages to alienate the inclusive set of proletarianized field-to-point writers from their own writing. Writers who graft themselves onto the capitalized field of sociolinguistic possibility produce writing that now appears to them as both the product of the capitalist direct production process and an appropriated commod-
ity that carries an exchange value at every point on its path across the capitalized field of sociolinguistic possibility. Because the internetworked social formation is constituted entirely of capitalized writing, all writing that gets directed into the capitalized field of writing emanates from the field of capitalized writing as an object that only exists because it was produced by capital’s direct production process. If a language user directs any form of writing, any form of inscription, into and across the econosocial formation—no matter how complex the written message may seem and, in fact, be—that inscription is a product of a direct production process that the proletarianized language user helps to produce and reproduce but never owns. All writing that each field-to-point writer produces and passes through the econosocial formation emanates from the writer but only after the writer’s writing emanates from the capitalized field of sociolinguistic possibility. Every time someone passes a motion picture (cinematography), a photograph (photography), a map (cartography), a sound recording (phonography), a text (typography), a scanned document (facsimile, xerography), a handwritten note (chirography), point-to-point audio (telephony), point-to-field audio (radiotelegraphy), and point-to-field video (television) through capital’s field-to-point system of communication, that written communication circulates as the product of capitalist industry until such time as its sinks into nothingness.

If the internetworked writer’s own writing emanates from the internetworked field of writing as a product of capital’s direct production process, the internetworked writer’s own writing becomes converted into a commodity that capital appropriates and profits from as each byte of field-to-point writing traverses the subjugated field of internetworked writing. Today, the field of internetworked writing has been capitalized from its backbone to its peripheries. Those capitals responsible for owning and operating the Internet backbone are always shifting, but control is concentrated in a relatively few hands, with the major backbone providers being at one time “MCI, WorldCom, Sprint Corp. (FON), GTE, and PSINet Inc. (PSIX)” (“How”). These backbone providers traffic in and control the traffic of information that traverses the automated system of internetworked writing machines. Operating from a position of strength, backbone providers are well positioned to charge transfer fees to smaller capitals, or the thousands of Internet Service Providers (ISP) or Online Service Providers (OSP), like AOL, that typically own or rent and, of course, operate several points-of-presence, or access points to the rest of the commercially operated Internet. These smaller capitals, in turn, capitalize the points-of-presence that produce interface between personal
computers and the Internet backbone, which routes seventy-five percent of messages to their final destinations. ISPs and OSPs charge fees to businesses and individuals—the sometimes owners and operators of Local Area and Personal Area Networks—who must buy a quantifiable share of language commodity that they cannot otherwise access but must access if they are to write their way onto and within the transnationally internetworked field of automated writing. Although there are public peering points on the Internet, where carriers of similar size trade in kind and so pass data packets more cheaply to the Internet backbone, no one may communicate within and across the commercialized, privatized, internetworked social space without producing writing that is, on the one hand, the product of the capitalist direct production process and, on the other, a commodity that capital appropriates and profits from as capital creates, conducts, and exchanges the bytes of writing that internetworked writers produce but do not own as they travel between points on the internetworked field of sociolinguistic production.

If capital has reorganized sociolinguistic production so that internetworked writing exists as a wage good, as a field of writing that subsumes the social formation, as a product of each writer that circulates as a product of the capitalist direct production process, and as a commodity that internetworked writers produce and that capital profits from as it makes its way across the internetworked econosocial formation, capital has also reorganized sociolinguistic production so that the capitalized site of interindividual sociolinguistic production produces individuals who emanate from capital as capital. Capital has organized a social situation wherein language users come to bear a property-based, objective, alienated association with themselves as social beings. Because the social formation and the writer's writing emanates from capital as capital, one must conclude that writers themselves emanate from capital as capital. Capital, for having capitalized writing, has calibrated the automated system of internetworked writing machines to produce a social formation that produces capitalized writing subjects who emanate from capital as capital because they connect to the internetworked processes of interpersonal communication and, there, satisfy all but their strictly biological needs (breathing, sleeping, waking, eating, eliminating, copulating, reproducing) "through the exchange form" (Marx, *Grundrisse* ch10.htm). Capitalized writing subjects, as it were, pay for the right to write the social texts that enable them to feel as individuals-in-networked-collective who thrive at the transnationally internetworked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system. But capital's ownership of the
transnationally internetworked core of the capitalist world system converts the writerly self into a product of a direct production process because it presupposes that capital has converted both the interindividual semiotic, semantic terrain and internetworked social beings into alienable use-values, objects for sale commodities.

Having succeeded in tracing writing back to capital, we cannot but conclude that capital has, in fact, subjugated sociolinguistic production—once a form of the development of the productive forces—to the service of wealth. And, at the same time, we cannot help but feel that the time is ripe for a Marxist theory of subjugated writing, a theory that we now see must send its roots down into the sociolinguistic productive forces that, as I stated earlier, have come into conflict with the property relations within which that had been at work hitherto.

Proletarianized Writers
The moment will soon arrive when a Marxist will succeed in mounting a composition theory that thrives on the expropriated conditions of sociolinguistic production. For now, however, we need to take our first steps in the direction of this as yet unrealized composition theory. We need to provide ourselves with a reliable base upon which to develop that future composition theory, with its capacity to speak to the problem of the econosocial formation at the transnationally internetworked core of the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system, and to the problem of alienated, fettered, subjugated sociolinguistic production. That base, I argue, emanates, along with the body of capitalized writers, from today’s expropriated conditions of sociolinguistic production.

Because a vast body of writers now emanates from capital as capital, and that capitalized social body has lost its share in the collective ownership of language, we have no choice but to admit that internetworked writers who are not capitalists are themselves members of the proletariat. These productive writers, none of whom own the means of sociolinguistic production, are, in typical proletarian fashion, the producers of value but not the appropriators of surplus value. More importantly, these productive writers—all of whom work on, with, and through expropriated materials of sociolinguistic production—belong to a class of proletarianized writers that capital has, for its own reasons, called into existence. Simply put, the overwhelming majority of internetworked writers who are not capitalists are, instead, the proletariat. And, for having recognized this fact, we have also provided ourselves with the reliable basis upon
which to build a writing theory that, for its part, can develop into a composition theory that emanates from the proletariat as a theory for the advancement of class struggle.

At this juncture, no one may expect any mature form of class struggle to emerge from the writing proletariat. For now, we must be satisfied in knowing that internetworked writers constitute a class in the first of the two senses of the word that Marx forwarded in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Internetworked, proletarianized writers are a class that does not know it is a class and, therefore, does not operate as a class against capital. These writers constitute a class because they live under “conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter” (*Eighteenth ch07.htm*). Drawing on the work of Mario Tronti, we can say that while the class of proletarianized writers appears from the outset to be a “class against capital” and not a “class for itself,” the writing proletariat is, in fact, a class for itself and not a class against capital because the confrontation between capital and sociolinguistic producers transforms relatively independent language users into a uniform class of language workers who lack the necessary means to advance from being a “class for itself” to being a “class against capital.” Today, the writing proletariat operates as a class for itself and not a class against capital because its interests, forged one contractual point at a time, never, for example, take a party-based form of political action that seeks to end, not revise, a mode of production that produces a core of writers who work on expropriated sociolinguistic materials and a much larger body of sociolinguistic producers who have never made a phone call. No matter how heated the political content that flows from local points-of-presence onto the transnationally internetworked econosocial formation, the writing proletariat remains a class that is not a class because, as Marx pointed out, “the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them” (*ch07.htm*).

The writing theorist’s job, at this juncture, is to assist the writing proletariat to become a class in the second, positive sense that Marx forwarded in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. It is possible, after all, for the proletariat to become aware of its condition and to struggle for the purpose of “asserting their class interest in their own name,” indeed, for the purpose of presenting themselves to and against those who have appropriated the means and ends of productive activity for the purpose of taking control of the means of production (*ch07.htm*).
Tronti explains that the social processes that convert relatively independent laborers into "class for itself" do nothing to guarantee that the unified body of fragmented workers will become an active, subjectively focused "class against capital." This change, he argues, will occur only through a long and terrible process of history that includes a series of moments when workers will not risk becoming a "class against capital," a refusal based on their failure to produce an organization that can demand power. At the same time, this process of history may also include moments when workers will accept the risk of becoming a politically organized party that converts the proletariat into a "class against capital" that, for its part, may present capital with a simple, entirely justified demand for total power over production and an end to the structure in dominance that is the unevenly developed capitalist world economic system. It is, of course, the writing theorist's job to help the class of proletarianized writers to realize their very real potential to become a "class against capital."

Wedded as compositionists are to theories of cultural production steeped in once valid conceptions about the status of language as a social property and a form of the development of the productive forces, compositionists must surely struggle in their first attempts to forge a theory of sociolinguistic production that begins from the premise that internetworked writers have lost ownership and control of writing—all epiphenomenal appearances to the contrary. Compositionists, themselves members of the proletariat, must surely struggle when faced with the challenge of producing a writing theory that genuinely serves the interests of the proletariat—the only productive writers in town. But the time has passed when one could rely upon support from any of the existing composition theories, or theories of the production of cultural forms, when talk of language as a productive force turns to the manner in which people use language to produce and reproduce the conditions of everyday life.

The time has come for compositionists to become writing specialists well versed in the largely alien apparatus of Marxist analysis, critique, and counterstatement.

Such are the demands of our time.

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Notes

1. The state has continued in the business of constructing networked processes of social production but on a smaller scale. NSF, for example, still works to develop internetworking solutions for scientists and researchers. At present, NSF is involved in the construction of vBNS (very high-speed Broadband Network Service) and the Internet2 collaborative effort between NSF and 100+ U.S. universities to develop internetworking solutions and “advanced applications for learning and research” (“Internet2,” “VBNs”).

Works Cited


