

Chapter One

MATERIALIST FEMINISM AND
COMPOSITION STUDIES

The Practice of Critique and Activism
in an Age of Globalization

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As a doctoral student in rhetoric and composition in the early nineties, my interest in Marxism and materialist feminism was peaked in a course on critical theory. As I read the assigned critical theory texts, I was most intrigued by the theories that attempted to connect the intellectual work of theory to the struggle for material resources. Throughout the course, I attempted to understand what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have deemed the shift from Marxism to post-Marxism, which they characterize as a gradual flow in other directions, “in the way that river waters, having originated at a common source, spread in various directions and mingle with currents flowing from other sources” (5). A year later, as the fall merged into winter, I proposed an independent study on the discourses of radical feminists, Marxist feminists, and socialist feminists that emerged out of the New Left: Shulamith Firestone, Michele Barrett, Christine Delphy, Zillah Eisenstein, and others. The year before my doctoral exams, over winter break, huddled in front of the heat vent in my family’s farmhouse in eastern Washington, I struggled through Robert Tucker’s *Marx-Engels Reader* and later through volume 1 of *Capital*.

As I began a feminist dissertation on gender, writing instruction, and contingent labor in English departments, I read the work of Stanley Aronowitz, Erik Olin Wright, Nicos Poulantzas, and others who had debated theories of class relations and labor. I realized later that my foray into Marxist theory and materialist feminism was an attempt to connect my class background and upbringing with the discourses on class and labor in the American academy. While other graduate students appeared more than happy to declare the fall of Marxist thought under late capitalism, I was busy trying to obtain an education in Marxist thought.

Being out of step with the heady postmodern and poststructuralist times of the late 1980s and early 1990s seemed second nature to me. Unlike many of my graduate school colleagues who grew up in urban or suburban areas where their parents worked as white-collar professionals, I grew up on an apple and pear orchard in rural eastern Washington State. Growing up as I did on a small farm, I often felt more ties to Marx's descriptions of nineteenth-century modes of production than to the rhythms of the suburb, the commuter schedule, and the urban business day of 9 to 5 P.M. The farm, the seat of production, was also the site of our home, and the migrant workers, those who worked the farm with my family, lived next door in the labor camp, a series of cabins clustered around a washroom. Until the mideighties, the migrant farmworkers my family employed were white, working-class men and occasionally women who followed the crops across the United States: Washington cherries, pears, and apples in the summer and fall, Florida oranges in the winter, and California fruits and vegetables in the spring. In the late seventies and early eighties, the complexion and nationality of the orchard crew shifted. The generation of white, working-class men and women who made their living in farm work retired and/or passed away, replaced by Mexican immigrants drawn to farm labor out of economic necessity and due to the increasing use of global immigrant labor.

On the farm, issues of class, gender, race, and the struggle for material resources were always visible. In the "back room," my mother paid the two dozen workers who helped us grow and harvest our yearly crops; she negotiated bail or work release for workers in trouble with the law, and she, along with my father, supervised the labor camp. I worked with some of the migrant farmworkers in the summers, our work in the orchards often becoming an opportunity to interact across the evident divide of class, race, language, and gender. Ultimately, though, at night I went home to the white farmhouse, and the workers went to the labor camp. Although separated by only a few yards, our worlds were distinct and separate. In the fall, I returned to college and to the possibility of upward class mobility through education; they boarded trains, buses, and cars and made their way to the next harvest.

The life of the migrant workers who came year after year to our farm and neighboring ones was unmistakably harsh and unjust: inadequate or nonex-

istent health care, low wages, scant or substandard housing. Although it was not evident to me in graduate school or in my first years as an assistant professor, my scholarship on labor issues in writing instruction was directly influenced by my upbringing on the farm, creating in me an abiding interest in work as a site of human struggle and class conflict. As an adjunct and a graduate student, I had ample opportunity to observe how graduate students' and adjuncts' teaching and interactions with students and their personal lives were affected by low pay, short-term contracts, inadequate office space, and lack of insurance. As I sought to make connections between my interest in class, gender, and labor in rhetoric and composition, I turned to the Marxist-inflected work of scholars theorizing the connections among literacy, class, culture, and labor such as James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, Richard Ohmann, John Trimbur, and Ira Shor. However, as I read the work of cultural critics and critical pedagogues in composition studies, I wondered why there were no feminist compositionists who engaged Marxist-feminist, materialist feminist, and socialist feminist ideas in their scholarship and pedagogy. I found traces of Marxist traditions in the work of fellow feminists, but few or none who directly identified with Marxist, socialist, or materialist feminisms. In her review of theories that have influenced feminism and composition studies, Elizabeth Flynn references liberal, radical, cultural, and postmodern feminisms, but she does not mention Marxist, materialist, or socialist feminisms (202). Moreover, in Susan Jarratt and Lynn Worsham's edited volume *Feminism and Composition: In Other Words*, a number of the essays draw on Marxist traditions, but the majority do not identify Marxist, materialist, or socialist feminist theories as significant traditions from which to theorize or practice feminism. In her response essay to this volume, Deb Kelsh critiques feminists in composition studies for failing to adequately engage materialist feminist thought, arguing that feminists in composition studies should work to develop a red feminism, which draws on "classical marxism," a feminism that attempts to "free all objects of patriarchy from exploitation" (107). In what is to follow, I engage with Kelsh's argument that materialist feminisms need to become a more prominent feminist stance in rhetoric and composition studies. I begin by addressing Kelsh's claim that materialist feminism has been suppressed in feminist composition studies. Although I believe Kelsh makes an important point about the problematic stance of feminist composition studies toward Marxist thought, her critique does not address why rhetoric and composition teachers and theorists do not engage these ideas in the ways she suggests we should. I argue that a compelling critique of the absence of historical materialism in composition is one that acknowledges the class contradictory position of the field and the ways in which Marxist discourses are present in limited but nevertheless suppressed ways. Finally, I sketch potential areas of inquiry that feminist scholars in our field can engage in materialist critiques and practices.

CRITIQUING THE ABSENCE OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM:
COMPOSITION AND MATERIALIST FEMINISMS

I analyze Kelsh's critique in some detail since it is the first feminist essay in our field to discuss how feminist compositionists should take up materialist feminist thought. First, though, a brief word on the historical evolution of materialist feminist thought seems necessary for those unfamiliar with it. Connections between Marxism and feminism were first made by nineteenth-century socialists inspired by Marx and Engels such as Clara Zetkin, Isaac Bebel, and Alexandra Kollontai and also labor organizers such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mother Jones, and Rose Pastor Stokes (Hennessey and Ingraham 3). This first surge of activity was punctuated later by a second surge in the 1970s in which a critical dialogue between Marxism and feminism took place among the emerging discourses of the New Left. Many radical and socialist feminists reworked significant categories in Marxist thought to account for gender in their analyses of "production, reproduction, class, consciousness, and labor" (Hennessey and Ingraham 6; see also Hartmann). The term *materialist feminism*, contends Hennessey and Ingraham, came from "the shift to cultural politics in western marxism post-1968" with a "growing attention to ideology" (7). British feminists Annette Kuhn, Anne Marie Wolpe, Michele Barrett, Mary MacIntosh and French theorist Christine Delphy used the term *materialist feminism* to reshape marxism to "account for the sexual division of labor and the gendered formation of subjectivities" (7). Hennessey and Ingraham further explain that these theorists preferred materialist feminism over Marxist feminism because they felt that "marxism cannot adequately address women's exploitation and oppression unless the Marxist problematic itself is transformed so as to be able to account for the sexual division of labor" (xii). Thus, the different labels—*Marxist feminism*, *socialist feminism*, and *materialist feminism*—provide different "signatures" that privilege "historical materialism," which Hennessey and Ingraham refer to as "emancipatory critical knowledge" (4). One of the goals of materialist feminism is to work toward the elimination of capitalism and to alleviate women's oppression under capitalism. While socialist and materialist feminists have often supported reforms for women within capitalistic structures, the overall goal is transformation.

Despite an interest in materialist ideas in activist communities and among leftist academics, there has been a systematic retreat from class analysis and Marxist ideas in the American academy. The turn away from historical materialism has been well documented in a number of collections and single-authored books by Marxists and materialist feminists who work in English studies, sociology, political science, and philosophy. More recently, in rhetoric and composition, a series of JAC interviews with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe attempt to take stock of the directions for Marxist and post-Marxist thought (see Worsham and Olson). While Marxist theory has been

part of the work of cultural critics in composition who borrow from the Birmingham School, and Marxist theories have been present in work on language theory, ethnographic writing pedagogy, and critical pedagogy, the tendency has been to “tame” or “domesticate” the emancipatory project in those discourses. As Patricia Bizzell argues in “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies,” although we “draw on European and third World Marxist theories of literature, literacy, and education, citing Mikhail Bakhtin, Paulo Freire, and Lev Vygotsky,” we have tended to “denature the Marxism of theorists whose work we use frequently, to assimilate the Marxist thinker into a more apolitical discourse that covers the same ground” (53).

Bizzell’s critique is one that Kelsh might find compelling as she argues that the omission of historical materialism in rhetoric and composition seems curious since feminist compositionists “always implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—interrogate the division of labor whereby people are constructed to undertake the subsistence care of humanity” (100). Given this acknowledgement, she argues that it seems odd, that “largely absent from the essays I am responding to (essays by Laura Brady, Shirley Wilson Logan, Nedra Reynolds, and Eileen Schell) is an explicit critique of the late-capitalist division of labor that conditions knowledge production” (100). Citing Marx’s “Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy,” she argues that the omission of historical materialism in feminist composition studies is both contradictory and dangerous and must be critiqued (101).

Hypothesizing the reasons for the omission of historical materialism in composition studies, Kelsh finds several culprits. First, she argues that composition studies and feminists in composition studies have tended to embrace postmodern and poststructural theories that reject historical materialism. Like feminists in literary studies, feminists in composition tend to cite and rely on a tradition of cultural materialism, not historical materialism (101). In the essays she responds to in the volume authored by Laura Brady, Shirley Wilson Logan, and myself, she finds a concern with language issues, with “resignification” and “representation” and not a critique of capitalism. She contends that “[c]ultural materialist paradigms produce models for people for freedom for some people only. Feminisms that advocate local resistance dependent on the materialism of language are unable to provide an effective way to free ‘women all over the globe’ from exploitation” (105). In other words, “capitalism must be confronted as a ruthless system, not as a system that simply needs to be more open” (105). Kelsh cites statistics on women and poverty across the globe, asking: “How will the many women on the planet whose daily focus is on staving off hunger, on gaining access to food, be helped by feminisms that argue for liberation in language rather than for liberation from exploitative labor arrangements?” (105).

It is interesting that Kelsh points out that cultural materialist theories come from the academic class (literary and cultural theorists) who stands to

gain the most from the exploitation of composition faculty (103). These traditions, argues Kelsh, lead feminists in composition to take on compromise positions. Since cultural materialism is rewarded in the academy, feminists in composition and in other fields recognize that to place emphasis on Marxist ideas is to risk “public demonization” for relying on ideas that many consider “dated,” “crude,” or politically and theoretically ineffectual (103). Feminists avoid historical materialism and Marxist paradigms, Kelsh claims, because they “do not want to lose their jobs, opportunities for promotion, or a chance for inclusion in projects” (103; for a counterperspective on this see Trimbur).

Ultimately, Kelsh argues that the study and practice of theories of classical Marxism should be a direction that feminists in composition studies should pursue in order to engage global feminisms. Although she is careful to acknowledge that the writers in this first section in *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words* make points that are “insightful, carefully thought through, and based on the most-up-to-date scholarship,” she ultimately argues that they are too caught up in the capitalism of the American academy, thus performing feminist work that is ultimately limited and local (104). While Kelsh offers a compelling analysis, she critiques the authors for work we did not set out to do, or for work we were asked to do in a volume whose purview was to address Anglo-American feminisms in relationship to the field of composition studies. Yet, at the same time, her point is well-taken: feminists in composition studies need to engage with global feminisms especially in light of the effects of globalization on the world’s populations.¹ Her critique, however, does not factor in the specific set of class relationships within rhetoric and composition that makes the embrace of Marxist and materialist feminist theory a troubled proposition.

COMPOSITION, CLASS CONTRADICTION, AND THE RELATIVE ABSENCE OF MATERIALIST FEMINISMS

It is the material base of composition that dictates, to a certain degree, the ways in which complex political discourses such as Marxism can be thought and practiced. As Bizzell argues, there is a tendency in composition theory and pedagogy to “denature” and assimilate Marxist theories into more “apolitical discourses” or to “read out” Marxist influences (52). In our field, the class contradictory position of the first-year composition course ensures that complex political theories such as Marxism or feminisms are assimilated into more manageable pedagogical discourses. As Lynn Worsham points out in her insightful essay “Writing against Writing: The Predicament of *Écriture Feminine* in Composition Studies,” theorists in composition studies have tended to take up radical theories of writing like *écriture féminine* “as a source for new textual and pedagogical models and strategies,” as applications, not as theories

that help us rethink the relations of the field (95). Making radical theory into classroom assignments domesticates and tames that theory, allowing our field's "will to pedagogy" to flourish unchallenged. The result, argues Worsham, is that "[c]omposition theorists will effectively manipulate *écriture féminine* to shore up the foundations of their field as a modernist discipline committed to the old dreams of the Enlightenment" (99). In lieu of this commodification, Worsham points to a different mode of engaging *écriture féminine* in our field, that of "unlearning," a process "of defamiliarization vis-à-vis unquestioned forms of knowledge" (102).

Like *écriture féminine*, Marxist critique has been "tamed" and domesticated (see Bizzell) by a set of labor dynamics that makes radical discourses into pedagogical stances. Since the working lives of most compositionists center around teaching first-year composition or administering the first-year composition program, the theoretical and practical focus of the field reflects those concerns. Only a few compositionists hold positions in which reduced teaching loads make theorizing, research, and doctoral education a prominent focus. Thus, our field's tendency toward domesticating radical thought is intimately tied to the type of labor we perform in the American academy. As many have pointed out, composition studies is built on the material base of undergraduate writing courses. The first-year writing course carries the institutionalized intent of producing students who can read, write, and process information in ways that allow them to join the professional managerial class or, at least, the middle class. As David Bartholomae writes in "Inventing the University," students must learn to write like us, sound like us (presumably white, middle-class academics and professionals) (135). However, as critical pedagogues and feminist compositionists argue, composition as a field offers potential opportunities for resistance and transformation of oppressive cultural, material, and linguistic structures, although there are conflicting perspectives about whether or not such transformation is possible. It is not my intention here to debate composition courses as conservative or liberatory enterprises; such binary views do not treat the "exercise" of composition instruction in all its complexity or historicity: my point is to indicate that our field is "class contradictory" as composition courses reproduce dominant literacies while also serving a critical site of intervention in those theories and practices of language and literacy. Some teachers and scholars in composition argue even further that the composition classroom is a site for promoting social transformation and social justice, where students can deploy their literacy work as a way of taking action on community-based and campus-based issues. Furthermore, for many students deemed "basic writers," the composition course is simultaneously a gate keeping them from the university or a "way in" to an educational system that would have kept them out in previous eras.

Yet at the same time that many of us embrace emancipatory pedagogical discourses and acknowledge working-class origins, we work in departmental

systems and institutional structures in which literacy work is considered non-intellectual “remediation” and devalued socially, politically in higher education. As we know, the composition workforce is often made up of part-time and nontenure-track faculty, many of whom are women, and teaching assistants, both male and female, who are positioned in low-paying, low-ranking positions within the hierarchy of the increasingly corporatized American academy (see Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu). The instructional workforce at the top layers of the profession is also predominantly a white workforce. At the same time, “basic writing” courses are often disproportionately filled with students of color, international students who are nonnative speakers, and white, working-class students. In this gendered, classed, and raced structure, there is yet another overlay of classed relations: that between literature and composition faculty. The number of credit hours generated by first-year composition at large state universities makes it possible for English departments to fund specialized, low-enrollment courses and to maintain a faculty size that allows for specialized research and graduate education (see Crowley), even, ironically, that of tenured Marxist and materialist feminist intellectuals whose light teaching loads enable them to launch relentless critiques of capitalist class relations from privileged positions in the academy.

Our field’s focus on pedagogy and administrative logics is also mirrored in the preparation graduate students receive. Many graduate students and faculty in rhetoric and composition have not had much of an opportunity to study the history of Marxist ideas and may be unfamiliar with these traditions if their course work and preparation has taken place in traditional English departments. Systematic study of the history of Marxist thought is often undertaken by scholars in departments of sociology, philosophy, and political science, and less so in English departments. Moreover, in English departments, Marxist theory is often filtered through theories of literary interpretation, which places an emphasis on reading and analyzing literary texts, or through cultural studies with an emphasis on reading popular cultural texts. Rhetorical theories do not tend to emphasize Marxist categories or paradigms, or if they do, as in the case of Kenneth Burke, that affiliation is buried or mentioned only in passing. Moreover, introductory rhetoric and composition anthologies in master’s level and doctoral level rhetoric and composition courses do not, for the most part, include sections on Marxist analysis, although issues of class and critical pedagogy may be raised without much acknowledgement of the Marxist frameworks that drive such theories.

These different layers of material life in English departments coupled with the turn away from Marxist thought in general in the American academy accounts for, in part, our field’s partial and uneven engagement with Marxist ideas through critical pedagogy and cultural studies and our almost nonexistent engagement with materialist feminisms. As Kelsh points out, feminists in composition studies are missing a vital opportunity to link to global feminist

movements via materialist feminisms. How, then, given the class contradictory relations of composition should feminists in composition studies go about engaging more systematically with materialist feminist ideas? What are sites of intervention for feminist materialist scholars in composition and rhetorical studies? How should feminist composition scholars take up what Kelsh, Ebert, and Hennessey and Ingraham refer to as a “global feminism”?

MATERIALIST FEMINISM AND SITES OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL INTERVENTION

In *Ludic Feminism and After*, Theresa Ebert argues that feminist materialist critique “is one of the most effective means through which challenges to global capitalism can be carried out” (5). However, she argues that “critique in itself is not an end; it is simply a means for producing the historical knowledges of social totality that are necessary for any coherent praxis for a radical transformation of patriarchal capitalism” (5). While Ebert and Kelsh provide significant critiques of current feminist thinking, asserting materialist critique as a essential element in political struggles against capitalist exploitation, the question that haunts their analyses is the connection between their materialist analyses and the work of activists and activist scholars, both local and global, who work to effect the critical interventions hypothesized in their theories. I do not raise this point to imply a theory-practice split, suggesting that activists do the work and theorists merely hypothesize conceptual change, but to address the connections between a feminist materialist intellectual practice and a transformative feminist activist politics.

Materialist feminist ecological activist Gwyn Kirk provides us with a model of materialist feminist activist scholarship that documents how critical discourses work their way through social processes and networks of real people in complex rhetorical situations. Articulating an integrative materialist feminist approach to ecological issues that connects materialist critique and political activism, Kirk analyzes the intersections of critique and activism in the everyday lives of those organizing around ecological issues: environmental racism, deforestation and sustainable agriculture, militarization, reproductive rights, and labor exploitation. Kirk contends that “[i]f ecological feminism is to inform a vital ecological politics in the U.S., we need to emphasize the interconnections among oppressions, activists, and movements; to frame issues broadly to mobilize wide-ranging involvement and support, rather than emphasizing points of disagreement; and to show how the process of capital accumulation is reinforced by the ideological articulation of difference based on gender, ethnicity, and culture” (349). Kirk argues that materialist critique means “opening up a public debate that challenges and opposes the values and practices of this economic system—its hazardous production processes as well

as its consumerist ideology”—and promoting local economic projects, community-building, and education (361). In Kirk’s case, the critique is always tied to contextualized political work, and it is this connection between critique and activism that offers feminists in composition studies a model for future work, for activist scholarship.

There are many promising arenas for a materialist feminist-activist scholarship in our field, and one of the most promising is rhetorical analysis of how international feminist social change movements enact rhetorical action. For instance, many international and transnational feminists are currently engaged in aspects of the antiglobalization movement, working on issues as diverse as human rights, worker rights, environmentalism, antiracism, and feminism. Feminist rhetors can analyze how these communities of activists maintain coalitions and enact contextualized strategies and tactics for change. Moreover, this research can analyze critical rhetorical strategies in dynamic and highly changeable contexts, thus providing a space for critical reflection and assessment of our theories of rhetorical action, many of which are still rooted in the classical era, a time when women’s participation in the polis was slight or nonexistent.

As scholars and practitioners of rhetoric, feminism, and literacy, we can also broaden our focus from issues of English and writing in the American and North American context to address issues of global or “World” English (both written and spoken) and its material, economic, and raced, classed, and gendered dimensions. A rich scholarship on comparative and contrastive rhetorics and teaching English as a Second Language or Foreign Language (TESOL/TFL) exists, but this work usually is not cited or engaged by scholars in composition studies. Our work in composition and literacy studies has all too often been focused on language issues in the American or European contexts, and we have virtually ignored other sites in the world where written composition and spoken English are regularly taught and demanded as part of a state-sanctioned system of schooling, often tied to corporate interests. Moreover, indigenous language preservation and literacy as a tool of political struggle for people of color (Lyons, Powell) are important issues to explore as a counterpoint to the dominance of English as a “world language,” the language of business and capital.

In addition, we can address how current struggles against labor exploitation in the American academy relate to the struggles of workers in other sectors of the “global economy,” thus countering Hennessey and Ingraham’s charge that theory and practice have merely become a professionalized discourse instead of political praxis “aimed at redressing women’s oppression and exploitation worldwide” (2). In composition studies, we have often been interested in the discursive representations of work and gendered narratives of professionalization, as Kelsh notes, but less interested in the political processes by which literacy workers come to consciousness and begin to change their

working conditions by participating in distinct political movements that relate to workers engaged in labor struggles in other sectors of the economy. We need a labor scholarship in our field that addresses how literacy workers seek to change their working conditions, one that analyzes the political frameworks and theories labor activists draw upon to ground their campaigns for labor justice. Increasingly, my work has been focused on chronicling the emergence of a national and international movement of contingent faculty who are organizing via unions and professional associations (see Schell). The rhetorics and activist strategies they draw upon are closely allied with that of antiglobalization activists who are directly battling corporate labor practices in areas as diverse as manufacturing (antisweat shop labor), agriculture (through the sustainable agriculture movement), the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank. This list of potential arenas for study and action is by no means exhaustive. It is often said that we are living in an “information age,” but it is less often said that we are living in a time when the globalization of capital has brought widescale and often devastating changes to world economies, to labor situations, to the environment, and to peoples’ lives across the globe. Our feminist theories of language and literacy work must account for the social and economic effects of these systems on people’s lives and livelihoods and work to address and change them through pedagogical and rhetorical scholarship and activism. Clearly, there is much work to be done, and feminist materialist scholarship and pedagogy that is both activist *and* critical is a place to begin.

NOTE

1. I realize that globalization is an overused and hotly contested term; however, as Friedman argues in his popular book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, globalization “is the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before” (9). However, globalization is not inherently liberating or democratic. On the contrary, it may have a brutalizing and exploitive effect, especially on the world’s most vulnerable populations: women and children (see Mies, Sassen, Sandoval).

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