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CCCC March 9–12 2022

Linguistic and Communicative Justice

Racial Capitalism and the Labor Theory of Value in Composition Pedagogy

presentation transcript

1. Value

In 2016, artist Mimi Onuoha produced "The Library of Missing Datasets," a mixed-media installation consisting of "a steel filing cabinet containing a changing arrangement of folders, each of which is labeled with the name of a current missing dataset," including such folders as "English language rules internalized by native speakers" or "police violence against Native Americans." According to Onuoha, "The point of data collection is a unique site for unpacking change, abuse, unfairness, bias, and potential. We can't talk about responsible data without talking about the moment when data becomes data." I've been asking FYC students to engage with questions of data, value, and appropriation in the work of writing. Each assignment—a digital literacy narrative, a rhetorical ethnography, a documented inquiry, and a multimodal argument—incorporates a requirement to present and comment on data. With the digital literacy narrative, students incorporate the Dear Data postcards practice developed by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec (<http://www.dear-data.com/theproject>) and adapted for composition by Madeleine Sorapure and Austin Fauni (<https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/25.1/praxis/sorapure-fauni/>). With the rhetorical ethnography, students use the suite of digital text analysis applications offered at Voyant Tools (<https://voyant-tools.org>) to investigate empirical qualities of texts, including readability statistics and topic modeling. With the documented inquiry, students investigate the Google NGram viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>) and publicly available government and NGO statistics. And with the multimodal argument, students combine and apply these increasingly complex skills using Tableau's data visualization capabilities. In addition to these assignments, as well as readings about the uses and misuses of data, and instruction in how to download their own data profiles from social media sites, students also receive their own engagement and time-on-task data—or contextualized paradata—from applications like Eli Review and Canvas, and I encourage them to incorporate this data into their metacognitive reflections in the model proposed by Kathleen Blake Yancey, wherein students assess different possible valuations of their work. My implicit arguments in doing so are that (1) quantitative approaches to assessment can be rhetorically appropriate in context, and that (2) students have a right not only to their own language but also to their own data.

2. Ownership

My argument that students should own their data emerges from the insights offered by digital security and surveillance scholar Bruce Schneier and built upon by race, gender, and technology scholar Safiya Umojiya Noble that "in the US today personal information about you is not your property; it's owned by the collector" (Schneier 195). In rhetoric and composition, Jessica Reyman (2013) has noted that "when users access, read, network, post, or compose within many online spaces, they are simultaneously giving up information about a wide range of their online and offline activities and, ultimately, giving up control and ownership of their contributions" (514), prompting us to return to the question Doug Hesse posed in his 2005 Chair's address: "Who owns writing?"

As examples of such expropriation, composition scholars like Reyman and others have shown how corporate interests lay claim to data about students' digital activities and market that data, and that student-produced digital texts are themselves becoming more modular, deliverable, and recombineable (Ridolfo and Devoss 2009, Dush 2015). This phenomenon is an instance of what economists working from various perspectives (Sraffa 1960, Samuelson 1966, Foley 2000, Kliman 2007, Shaikh 2016) have characterized as the transformation problem, where there is a mismatch between profit as surplus value and the labor input: in many commodities, the proportion of labor to capital varies, leading economists to ask, how is labor transformed into capital? That question is increasingly relevant in environments associated with students' economically valuable intellectual labor and the commodified capital emerging as the product or by-product of their labor, and even more relevant when considered in conjunction with Asao Inoue's work on labor contracts and grading (2015, 2019).

3. Commodification

In making his argument for labor-based grading contracts, Inoue notably does not engage Bruce Horner's *Terms of Work for Composition* or *Rewriting Composition*, both of which examine the commodification of writing tasks, writing pedagogy, and writing skills. More recent scholarship in computers and composition has attended to how writing in digital contexts produces, among other outputs, Horner's exchangeable and commodified skills as well as commodified paradata in the form of granular data about student interactions with digital systems that are resold by Canvas, Blackboard, Turnitin, and other corporations as learning analytics. As John Cheney-Lippold puts it, such data-driven commodification gives us digital shadows that he characterizes as statistical "measurable types," arguing that "[w]e are. . . made of data that is interpreted, conferred truth, and disseminated. . . The resulting classifications become the discursive terrain from which we, and others, compose our digital selves. . . Measurable types. . . are actionable analytical constructs of classificatory meaning." These statistical "measurable types" operate as the

commodification of experience for extractive purposes when the extractor of value is not the producer of value.

In *The World Computer: Derivative Conditions of Racial Capitalism*, attention economy scholar Jonathan Beller posits "the history of the commodification of life as a process of encrypting the world's myriad qualities as quantities. . . By means of the coercive colonization of almost all social spaces, categories, and representations—where today language, image, music, and communication all depend on a computational substrate that is an outgrowth of fixed capital—all, or nearly all, expressivity has been captured in the dialectic of massive capital accumulation on one side and radical dispossession on the other" (6). Beller's critique has considerable merit in the way it draws careful analogies between the calculations of digital difference and the material practices of contemporary racism, but like Inoue's critique, Beller dehistoricizes the connections between capitalism and its history of racist expropriation.

4. Capitalism

However, Beller's project also offers philosophical overlap with that of Cameroonian political theorist and decolonial scholar Achille Mbembe, who points out that African slaves "were very much democracy's other, so the white racial unconscious vilifies them today. . . Afrofuturism rejects outright the humanist postulate, insofar as humanism can constitute itself only by relegating some other subject or entity (living or inert) to the mechanical status of an object or an accident. . . Western humanism. . . stands as a . . . vault haunted by the phantom of the one who had been forced to share the destiny of the object" (63). Digital difference, as Western culture's ongoing extension of the historical expropriation of racialized bodies, produces the monetary profits of contemporary capitalism.

Mbembe's 2019 monograph *Necropolitics* asserts that "racial capitalism. . . must be understood as an economic system. But it is also an apparatus of capture and a regime of signs, a . . . compulsion to put things in order as a precondition for extracting their inner value. . . Whenever an order is manufactured and value is extracted, that which is deemed valueless is made redundant. It is forced to lose its face and its name, that which gives substance to the signifier, and to wear a mask. This does not simply apply to objects. It applies to people as well" (158). Note here the two functions of the system Mbembe names as "necropolitics" or the power over life and death: capitalism as ordering function, and capitalism as human-constructed hierarchization of embodied labor. Technologies replace labor-intensive processes with capital-intensive processes, and race is a technology.

5. Economy

In this theoretical frame, Beller sees a need to "redesign of the protocols of . . . mediation and value

abstraction that currently make computation a continuation and extension of racial capitalism. . . This struggle must draw upon and be participant in the knowledge base accumulated through prior revolutionary and decolonial struggles” (253). As Chris Gallagher notes, “[r]ecent efforts such as the ‘WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Writing,’ the CWPA/NCTE/NWP ‘Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,’ the Visibility Project. . . and ‘threshold concepts’ . . . all attempt to stabilize and publicize the field’s theory and practice”—at exactly the time when unacknowledged capitalist and racist understandings of writing instruction are becoming increasingly destabilized.

In fact, in advocating for the anti-racist principles and anti-exclusive value of labor contracts in composition pedagogy, Inoue anticipates objections that “the capitalist language of contracts is far from liberatory, and accentuates particular relations of power, usually understood through one’s relation to labor and the means of production in capitalist economies.” However, Inoue cites Marx’s interpretation of the labor theory of value to compellingly argue that such contracts can indeed serve liberatory and anti-racist ends, extending the arguments that other scholars (e.g., Hart-Davidson 2015, Yancey 1998) have made about the usefulness of students reflecting on their own composing practices in aiding learning. Yet Inoue’s argument also constructs capitalism as monolithic in its profit-oriented appropriation of the value of labor. Some recent Marxian economic thought has contested the representation of a monolithic capitalism, pointing instead to the potential for other forms of appropriation, including self-appropriation.

6. Quantification

Our historical moment offers the possibility of promoting economic access and making visible racial inequalities. Inoue’s engagement with the labor theory of value offers evidence that quantitative approaches can be useful not only in our teaching but in administrative arguments over funding and money.

Money is a metaphor for value. Neoclassical and Keynesian economists largely understand that money is a metaphor for value at the technical level of micro- and macroeconomics, but in the mainstream and popular discourse of economics, the definitional gap between value and money is so narrow as to be nonexistent. However, in mainstream economics, value is a function of the equilibria between consumers’ needs and producers’ capacity. The quantitative algebra of the labor theory of value in Marxian economics makes necessary distinctions among commodities, capital, and labor. Labor, in Marxian economics, is the fundamental unit of value, and its metaphor is the hour. I propose here that, for academic purposes, measuring the value of what we and our students do in hours is better than measuring the value of an education through the neoclassical economic measure of dollars.

7. Humanity

Approaches that measure and quantify through hours draw our attention to the complex temporal materialities of human experience, in contrast to market-based capitalist monetary fungibility. In critiquing such fungibility, Africana scholar Jodi Melamed and her co-authors highlight the "importance of rationalities of abstraction and commensurability for capitalism, rationalities which "enact and disavow racial and colonial violence by constituting people, land, and the relations of social life as translatable into value form." Melamed and her co-authors further assert that economic capital "can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups," but I would suggest that such perspectives ignore the heterogeneous and overdetermined economic landscape posited by Wolff and Resnick (2016) and Gibson-Graham (2006) in recent Marxian economic scholarship. That scholarship focuses on the question of who appropriates the value of surplus labor at particular stages in the cycle of economic circulation.

8. Pedagogy

My own work redefines Marx's cycle of economic circulation in the context of digital composing as one of production, distribution, use, and re-production, and redefines Marx's classical inputs of land, labor, and capital into digital networks, intellectual and affective labor, and material-technological capital. Given such redefinitions, I can reframe Marx's question into the one posed by Resnick and Wolff: who appropriates the surplus value of intellectual and affective labor, and at which stages in writing's cycle of production, distribution, use, and re-production?

To do so, I've asked students to work with the contextualized paradata they themselves have generated with course management technologies, including their own work time, and to reflect on the material and embodied value of the hours of labor they've performed in digital contexts, in order to ask: who has appropriated the value of that labor, and why, and how? As Mimi Onuava puts it, "one answer to these missing datasets lies in those who have a stake in the data cooperating to disrupt the structures preventing access to it."

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