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Economies of Writing, Without the Economics: Some Implications of Composition's Economic Discourse as Represented in JAC 32.3–4

Composition studies has recently increasingly engaged with economic concerns, as evidenced by the 2012 Watson Conference on “Economies of Writing” and a corresponding special issue of JAC. However, that increased engagement has not reflected an increased engagement with economic scholarship, resulting in a rhetoric that represents economy as either beyond intervention or a metaphor for non-economic phenomenon. Attention to economic scholarship can provide composition studies with a rhetoric that opens possibilities for economic agency.

Rhetoric's engagement with economics can be traced historically to Adam Smith and Richard Whately.¹ Arthur Coon's 1947 article “An Economic X Marks the Spot” invokes the scarce labor time associated with assessing student compositions as an economic phenomenon, and scholars such as Ira Shor and Henry Giroux have addressed the ways economic inequality has affected composition theory and pedagogy. However, aside from those encounters and brief invocations of the economic exigency for composition, the field has only recently begun to significantly engage economic concerns. This article examines the conditions of that recent engagement.

One site of that engagement is the 2012 Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition and its accompanying 2012 special issue (32.3–4) of *JAC*, both with the theme “Economies of Writing.” Min-Zhan Lu, the 2012 Watson Conference Director, describes in a 2004 article the ways she sees market-based economic activity driving other concerns and notes “fast capitalism's interest in prioritizing areas of our life” (41). Bruce Horner, editor of the

2012 *JAC* special issue, critiques in his introduction the “dominant ideologies” associated with economics that cede composition’s discursive territory to seemingly irresistible market forces (459). Horner’s project and concern are laudable: Much of composition’s economic rhetoric points toward an economic quietism that problematically disables economic agency. This article examines the *JAC* special issue in order to remedy that economic quietism. I begin with a brief rehearsal of economic rhetorics in composition studies to suggest that the *JAC* special issue is representative of composition’s broader economic discourse and then move to identify specific rhetorical moves in composition associated with economic concerns. I then work through the *JAC* special issue and point out economic metaphors and patterns of citation. I use a brief overview of relevant scholarly literature in economics to argue for deeper engagement with that literature and suggest possible moves toward a productive rhetoric of economic agency for composition.

Economic Rhetorics in Composition Studies

A first step in building a rhetoric of economic agency is to establish an understanding of the economic activities and roles of participants in the composition classroom. I value Horner’s work elsewhere and the work of scholars like John Trimbur and James Porter in their rare representation of students in the classroom as agents involved in economic activity. Porter examines “how rhetorical contexts themselves rely on an economic system of exchange” (175). Trimbur raises the question of the value of student work and how it circulates in relation to Marx’s dialectical revision of the economic model of “production, distribution, exchange, and consumption” (193, 194, 196). In *Terms of Work for Composition*, Horner uses a Marxist framework to examine the nature of writing as valuable work performed within the economic space of the composition classroom. Such perspectives open rather than foreclose the possibility of understanding the composition classroom itself as a site of economic agency: Seeing students as economic beings offers ways to theorize economic change as possible within the context of students’ work in the composition classroom rather than as something deferred beyond the college career.

This is not to say that rhetoric and composition studies is unaware of economic concerns; Arthur Coon’s 1947 *College English* article, for example, investigates the question of how much time it should take to “mark a theme” for a teacher of first-year composition and concludes that “freshman English is a very expensive course to teach,” but offers no clear course of action (27, 29). Later, with the Wyoming Resolution, the discipline sought to ameliorate economically unequal working conditions, but WPAs and institutional administrators are

still confronted with the overproduction of graduate students in English studies who are an exploitable source of cheap labor. The discipline's responses to the Wyoming Resolution often seem to characterize any solution to the problem as local and institutionally bound rather than alterable by broader economic change. The problem persists more broadly today, as documented in a report from John W. Curtis and Saranna Thornton that despite a sputtering economic recovery following the recent recession, "important long-term [economic] trends are still heading in the wrong direction for higher education" in government funding for higher education, faculty pay, and contingent labor, trends that reflect the well-documented increasing corporatization of higher education (4–5).

Composition's accounts of economic agency often relegate it to spaces before or after students' work in the classroom or figure economic inequality as class difference and subsequently propose dealing with that difference in cultural rather than economic terms. Such proposals presume that interactions among teachers and students are not economic but cultural and so define the writing classroom as non-economic. In *Dangerous Writing* Tony Scott focuses on student's commodified labor beyond the classroom and the question of how "[w]riting education in postsecondary institutions [is] posited in relation to [their] working lives" (153). Scott's work is admirable in its rigor but continues a habit from the "social turn" in composition of positing an economic problem and then turning away from economics to suggest a social solution. Donna Strickland insightfully points out the ways that such habits lead scholars to relegate economics to Marxist base beyond the imagined superstructure of the composition classroom and so to "focus primarily on the ways in which the teaching of English is *determined* by capitalist interests" (21). As in much of composition's discourse, the position of the writing classroom beyond the economic sphere becomes a cultural site from which to critique capitalism's imagined power and thereby rhetorically reinscribe that power.

Evan Watkins, in a prescient 2006 article, observes students making a similar move in assuming that the capitalist economy is beyond intervention and relegating any productive human agency to the cultural sphere (598). Watkins proposes most students likely see instances of nonmarket activities "as *cultural* representations rather than as relevant to the way the 'real' economy actually works today" (590). Financial derivatives and their deregulation, one of the defining foci of his article, were largely responsible for the economic crash of 2008, an after-the-fact confirmation that "dominant literacy works to extend and reinforce the idea that the economy works best when it works independently" (590). Watkins critiques the neoclassical economic literacies promoted as part of mainstream economics and recommends educating students about the wider web of economic practices that constitute classroom activity.

Such education seems crucial in a time when increasing demands for economic efficiencies drive significant changes in higher education. Like Watkins I believe the composition classroom must be understood as a site of actually existing economic activity:

Against the insistence that the economy runs effectively over there, while over here each of us individually learns to make good choices in accordance with its laws, we do what we can to teach a counter literacy where students understand and act on the awareness that economic relations are already right here. (591)

However, much of the discourse in composition, even when it ostensibly focuses on economic concerns (as in the *JAC* 2012 special issue), equates economic activity to market-based capitalist activity and thereby seeks to exclude it from the composition classroom. Doing so reflects what Watkins characterizes as the dominant economic literacy promoted by the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE), which offers “content standards for basic economic literacy . . . all drawn straight out of familiar neoclassical principles . . . [that] enforce perhaps the most significant lesson of all as the groundwork for NCEE literacy: there’s really nothing you can, or should, do about the economy” (589). Watkins traces a rhetorical shift by which the market-based capitalist economy relies on an ideology of individual choice while at the same refusing the possibility of human intervention, possessing a sort of irresistible agentless agency.

Some Common Economic Tropes

Such representations of the capitalist economy’s agentless agency are as common in composition studies as in the broader culture that the NCEE seeks to influence. Ira Shor asserts in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* that the American community college system was created not by human actors but by capitalist forces: “Virtually overnight, a headlong rushing economy created and peopled an educational frontier” (4). This economy drives all else before it; in Shor’s words, “a wildly growing and uncontrollable machine-economy rushed across the land transforming everything it touched” (2). In an interview with Leo Parascandola, Shor worries that “market logic will more aggressively configure all corners of life” and argues that “college teachers and students as well as curricula and campuses are inside the market system, not outside it” (Section 26). Note the use of the word *inside*: While the economy is assumed to be outside the classroom, it also surrounds the classroom. The market system is all-encompassing,

and the only economic transactions imaginable are the market transactions of an all-encompassing economy.

Henry Giroux similarly contends that “[m]arket forces have altered radically the language we use in both representing and evaluating human behavior and action” (1.1). Giroux portrays such market forces as irresistible and agentless. In accepting and condemning such circumstances, Giroux makes a move J.K. Gibson-Graham characterizes as common to contemporary mainstream economic discourses that construct the economy as beyond human intervention (“Economy” 96).

Consider Giroux’s use of passive or agentless constructions in describing the changes he sees imposed upon society by irresistible economic forces:

democratic values *give way* to commercial values, intellectual ambitions *are often reduced* to an instrument of the entrepreneurial self, and social visions *are dismissed* as hopelessly out of date. Public space *is portrayed* exclusively as an investment opportunity, and the public good increasingly *becomes* a metaphor for public disorder. (1.1, emphasis added)

Furthermore, according to Giroux, “public spheres *are replaced* by commercial spheres as the substance of critical democracy *is emptied out and replaced* by a democracy of goods, consumer life styles, shopping malls, and the increasing expansion of the cultural and political power of corporations” (1.2, emphasis added). Giroux almost always uses such passive constructions in describing the effects of economic forces on contemporary society, arguing that “as the power of the state and civil society *are reduced* in their ability to impose or make corporate power accountable, politics as an expression of democratic struggle *is deflated*” (1.4, emphasis added), and pointing out that “students *are now referred to* as ‘customers’ and ‘consumers,’ while faculty *are now defined* less through their scholarship than through their ability to secure funds and grants” (1.6, emphasis added). According to Giroux, “faculty *are now urged* to focus in on corporate largesse,” and they “*are now valued* as multinational operatives and increasingly *reduced* to contract employees” (1.6, emphasis added). Giroux marshals this impressive body of passive-voice evidence to support his concern “that corporations *have been given* too much power in this society” (5.1, emphasis added). Giroux’s passive constructions summon the ultimate extension of Adam Smith’s metaphor of the invisible hand and ascribe to the economy’s juggernaut an oddly agentless agency beyond human intervention.

Part of the reason that such scholars see the economic sphere as beyond individual human intervention may be that they perceive no alternatives: If all

economic activity is capitalist activity, there can be no space beyond capitalism in which humans might enact individual economic agency. Such seems to be the case in William Rodney Herring and Mark Garrett Longaker's *Rhetoric Review* article, where they append an appositive explanation in their phrase "the economic importance, the capitalist function" to equate economic activity to market activity (237). Their essay takes a further common step in its metaphorical identification of "rhetoric as economics," following the lead of Joyce Locke Carter, whose argument in the extended introduction to the collection *Market Matters* suggests that because markets are ultimately rhetorical, we also ought to understand that rhetorical exchanges are market exchanges (237). However, while Carter applauds such engagement with market-based capitalist activity, Herring and Longaker express concern about the ways in which contemporary "capitalist citizens are asked to trust the scientific discourse of economic specialists" (250). They do so, though, without clarifying why or how those citizens are capitalist or identifying which discourses citizens should guard against. As the work of these scholars demonstrates, composition studies carries anxiety about economic concerns.

That anxiety displays itself in the 2012 *JAC* special issue, although Bruce Horner's introduction makes clear that he wishes to not perform the representationally totalizing moves I detail above. Horner opens that introduction with "a rejection of any monolithic (dominant) conception of the economic in favor of a conception of the economic as plural" (453), and his expressed intent that the *JAC* special issue operates "from the standpoint not of a conventionally economic but a political economic model that refuses to cede to the sphere of conventional economics the terms for the production and valuation of writing and rhetorics" (454) is a valuable goal. At the same time, while I agree with the necessity of a language of economic diversity, I also suggest there are types of topics that we are *not* focusing on when we focus our scholarly attention on economies of writing. We are not focusing our attention, for example, on genres of writing or methodologies of writing or ideologies of writing—certainly not conventions of writing or essentials of writing; and not even cultures of writing or technologies of writing or politics of writing. Talking about economies of writing means that we are engaging concerns of evidence (to include sources cited) and language (to include both vocabulary and metaphor).

Economic Metaphors and Patterns of Citation

Terms examined in considerable depth in the *JAC* special issue include "consumers," "commodification," "production," "value," "circulation," "markets," and "labor," all of them connected to composition's concern with writing instruction. Scholars and practitioners in composition studies discuss these concerns in

specific ways that reflect an expert perspective on matters of writing instruction. Consider one example of how compositionists invoke concerns about citation and its relation to disciplinary expertise: On September 22, 2012, Mark Crane posted a message to the Writing Program Administrators' listserv calling attention to the first article in a four-week series on writing instruction on the website for *The Atlantic*. Crane's post received twenty-eight replies, with listserv respondents noting the way the series seemed to belittle the disciplinary expertise associated with writing instruction through its apparent inattention to composition scholarship. Well-regarded scholars criticized the way the "poorly informed" series "trivialized" composition's disciplinary perspectives in a manner similar to Jean Gunner's indictment of the "blithe pronouncements by the likes of Stanley Fish uninformed by composition theory and research" in the *JAC* special issue (Horner 457). While I agree with Gunner's contention that "resisting the hegemonic impulse to definitional containment," is important, I also suggest that a scholarly conversation about economic concerns implies a need for some level of familiarity with the literature of economics, in the same way one might expect those who make claims about writing instruction to have some level of familiarity with the literature of composition (616).

Victor Villanueva observes that in composition "we think of 'economics' as a numbers game. And we humanities types tend to fear numbers," even if many now take for granted the Jamesonian observation that culture and economy increasingly overlap (58). Those with graduate credentials in rhetoric and composition studies consider ourselves experts in work with producing and analyzing texts, trained more in humanistic endeavor than in the social sciences, but I believe responsible care in discipline-specific language use requires engagement with a discipline's terminology, concepts, and scholarship.

Scholars who use terms like *rhetoric*, *culture*, or *society* in academic contexts are typically being quite literal inasmuch as they refer in some way to the objects of study of disciplines like rhetoric studies, cultural studies, or sociology. While Horner's and Gunner's advocacy for a more capacious sense of the meaning of 'economy' or 'economics' is well taken, I argue that a more substantial grounding in economic scholarship would help to open a sense of economic possibility for composition studies. Horner "refuses to cede to the sphere of conventional economics the terms for the production and valuation of writing and rhetorics" (454), but cites Frédéric Lebaron's reference to Pierre Bourdieu's "double move" of the "formal economicization of his analysis of the symbolic order and the symbolic explanation of the foundation of economic reality" (Lebaron 563) in support of his refusal. Lebaron's argument acknowledges that the powerful application of economic concepts to sociological analysis in Bourdieu's work came in part from Bourdieu's work with economists, even as Bourdieu rejected the decontextualized

economic mathematicization that became increasingly popular with the rise of neoclassical economic ideas: In other words, the highly specific economic literacy Bourdieu developed early in his career was part of what lent power to his method. While the contributors to the *JAC* special issue sometimes demonstrate such economic literacy, they more often avoid economic ideas even as they seek to engage them.

The articles in the special issue perform two fundamental rhetorical moves. The first and more common is the one detailed above: to explicitly represent the economy as abstracted forces existing beyond the possibility of individual human intervention. The second rhetorical move, in which scholars figuratively represent economic activity as metaphor for some other non-economic system of exchange (for example the trope of characterizing spaces of academic argument as “market-places of ideas” while understanding that those ideas are not literally bought and sold), often results from assuming the first. There is a causal relationship between those moves, which deny composition studies the possibility of actually existing economic agency, and the patterns of citation in the *JAC* special issue.

In the *JAC* special issue, there are ten articles plus Horner’s introduction and Deborah Brandt’s afterword, totaling 271 pages of scholarship, with a total of 419 citations. Not counting Horner and Brandt, that makes 261 pages, and a total of four hundred citations, or a rough average of forty sources and twenty-six pages per article. In what follows I briefly assess each article’s approach to economic scholarship, noting how many of the sources they cite are either authored by scholars in economics or show up in *EconLit*, the database of economic publications (including scholarly books as well as the contents of 1,640 academic journals in economics) indexed by the American Economic Association.

My use of such counts is a crude heuristic and is meant in no way as a standalone critique of the articles in the special issue. While those counts may offer some idea of the depth of one discipline’s engagement with the other, which would seem important given the apparent insistence of the authors cited above and the *JAC* special issue itself on the relevance of economic concerns and concepts to composition studies, my primary intent is to use them as evidence supporting my claim about the unusual ways that economic discourses function in the discipline. I review each article’s approach to the economic vocabulary of composition, noting that these approaches are both representative and ubiquitous: Almost every composition scholar talks about economics either as abstracted forces beyond human intervention or as metaphor for non-economic phenomena.

Keith Gilyard’s powerful article on Kamau Marcharia, known at the time of his unjust imprisonment as Robert Lewis, sets out to examine what the intersection “of the circulation of ideas relative to goods and services” with “fiscal operations” means for “race, class, and literacy’s relation to the prison-industrial

complex” (461). He cites thirty-nine sources, none of them by economists or appearing in *EconLit*. Scholars in radical political economy have demonstrated the undeniable economic link between capitalism and the prison-industrial complex, but Gilyard uses economy to refer to the circulation of written language and how, in work with written language, “pricing and bargaining transpired relative to who became enabled and disabled, validated or invalidated, through the written word” (471). In such a way, Gilyard represents economy as metaphor.

Ralph Cintrón, in a complex and wide-ranging ethnographic examination of Puerto Rican communities in Chicago, posits activist groups’ work toward social justice as a site of modernity in order to make a theoretical argument about equality. His argument is the most economically well informed in the special issue: In his twenty-six citations, he includes Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*, Hayek’s *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Fumagalli and Mezzadra’s edited collection *Crisis in the Global Economy*, Galbraith’s *The Predator State*, Marazzi’s *Capital and Language*, Marx’s *The German Ideology*, and Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Of those books, two (Friedman and Smith) are indexed in *EconLit*². However, much of his citational work is dedicated to an ontological rather than economic argument: The economy itself is figured as beyond intervention, and change must take place elsewhere, in some place beyond the economic sphere. Cintrón does careful and insightful work critiquing this perspective, but almost all of that work is relegated to footnotes 9 through 12. These footnotes make reference to the seven economic texts above in order to identify economic perspectives, but act in service of a social and ontological critique: Cintrón’s rhetorical purposes require him to identify the economy itself as constituted by abstracted forces beyond human intervention.

LuMing Mao’s essay offers compelling examples of China’s state-enforced language use in order to examine capitalist globalization as an economic phenomenon that brings about effects in the rise of rhetorics of cultural nationalism. Mao cites thirty-three sources and is the only author in the volume to cite Bourdieu’s 1977 *Social Science Information* article “The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges.” Despite its title, the article is not indexed by *EconLit*, and distances itself from Bourdieu’s early-career engagement with economic methods in order to posit linguistic exchange as a metaphor for economic exchange. Mao uses Bourdieu’s work to conceptualize the economy as unalterable base driving change in the cultural superstructure. In so doing, Mao represents economy as abstracted forces beyond human intervention.

Ellen Cushman offers a sophisticated deployment of the Cherokee syllabary in service of an argument for a rhetorical approach to media and a rejection of alphabetic bias. She cites fifty-eight sources, none of which are in the *EconLit* database or authored by scholars recognized as economists. Her primary reference

to economic concerns involves a caution against taking English for granted as “the social and economic water every fish swims in,” and in so doing poses the economy as abstracted forces beyond human intervention (558).

Vivette Milson-Whyte’s study of literacy practices and self-representation among Jamaican students addresses the material conditions (including financial constraint) affecting students’ identities and their perceptions of writing. She cites forty-three sources, including Bourdieu’s *Language and Symbolic Power* (also cited by Horner; Kapp; Lillis; and Brandt), although as a text sociological rather than economic in emphasis, it is not indexed in the *EconLit* database. Nor are the other sources she cites, and she cites no authors recognized as economists. The way she addresses those material conditions and financial constraint, in fact, takes those conditions as existing prior to and outside the educational environment and so demonstrates an understanding of the economy as abstracted forces beyond human intervention.

Rochelle Kapp’s contribution to the volume makes use of “three qualitative studies in order to analyze constructions of English, writing, and identity as “black” students move from working-class and rural school and neighborhood contexts where English is an additional language into a relatively elite, ‘white’ and tertiary environment,” and cites forty-six sources, none of which are authored by economists or indexed in *EconLit* (591). Her article represents the economy as the driver of educational change and discusses the ways that English proficiency can serve economic advancement, but it also follows Bourdieu’s lead in considering language use as a commodity and so understands the economy both as abstracted forces beyond human intervention and as metaphor.

Jeanne Gunner’s examination of what her article’s subtitle calls “The Writing Program as Institutional Brand” initially seems to counter such views of economy as metaphor and economy as abstracted forces beyond intervention and does careful work identifying multiple intersecting economic imperatives. She cites forty-four sources, among them a study reprinted from *Social Text* of what Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter have referred to as “academic capitalism.” However, Rhoades and Slaughter are professors of education, not economics, and their study examines how conditions in the university are driven by broader patterns of economic activity. Like Gunner’s other sources, their work is not indexed in *EconLit*. While Gunner responsibly understands economic activity as overdetermined, she at the same time asserts that abstracted “market forces demand and reward . . . the commodification of learning” and so represents the economy as abstracted forces beyond human intervention (618).

Julie Lindquist’s analysis of “the academic marketplace” and discussion of how academia’s “marketplace functions as a system of value” examines “disciplinary knowledge production” that might be characterized as “emergent or

slow-growing” (646, 645). She cites eighteen sources, none by economists or indexed in *EconLit*. While her article is valuable in posing “the question of how to sponsor difficult-to-sponsor research,” one might also take from it—as with Gilyard, Kapp, Harris, and Lillis—the caution that the existence of exchange or reward does not literalize the metaphorical translation of such systems into actual markets: In other words, one might question the uses of representing economy as metaphor (664).

Joseph Harris performs a rich and compelling analysis of the ways scholars in composition studies deploy student writing in the pages of *CCC*, and I take methodological inspiration (I believe there is some value in counting things³) from Harris’s use of quantification: In its approach his article is perhaps the most deeply economic of the entire volume. In arguing for a problem-posing approach to the use of student writing in composition, Harris uses the work of Marguerite Helmers to approach the conclusion that assuming beforehand that we know our students leads us to also assume beforehand that we know the value of their writing—and investigating the value of writing is a pursuit highly economic in nature. Harris cites sixty sources, mostly from *CCC*, none of them by economists or indexed in *EconLit*, and notes that “student texts are a form of currency in the knowledge economy of composition,” indicating that by currency, he means a generalizably acceptable way of doing things, and so ultimately treats economy as metaphor (667).

So, too, does Theresa Lillis characterize scholarship as exchange in her use of the metaphor of “the academic economy” (696). Like Horner, Lillis cites Frédéric Lebaron’s *Theory and Society* article, “Pierre Bourdieu: Economic Models Against Economism, Theory and Society,” but consigns it to a footnote and does not pursue beyond passing mention its insights about the origins of Bourdieu’s methods. In addition to Lebaron she cites thirty-two other sources, none of them by economists or indexed in *EconLit*. While her investigation of the geopolitics of academic publication on a global scale invokes questions of academic labor, value, scholarly production, and the circulation of scholarly texts as metaphorical commodities, she does so in the context of what she calls an “economy of signs” and thereby treats economy as metaphor (704).

Finally, Deborah Brandt’s afterword on “The Real and Fake Economies of Writing” performs a welcome indictment of the practice of “[f]orcing language into fake conditions of scarcity [that] helps ruling groups maintain their economic and political advantages” (769). Given its function as an afterword, it would be unfair to expect its seventeen citations to engage with economic scholarship. At the same time, though, Brandt’s insights cross over into the economic domain when she uses the observation that texts are “manufactured, owned, bought and sold as commodities, increasingly so as they are the medium of exchange for most

of the information service economy” in support of her argument that “language is not just symbolic” (771). The “not just” in Brandt’s formulation can support Horner’s “conception of the economic as plural” as counter to either understanding the economy as a monolithic set of abstracted capitalist forces beyond human intervention or as a metaphor for something other than itself (453).

Doing so, however, requires a more thorough engagement with the heterogeneous economic landscape and therefore a more careful attention to economic scholarship. Out of the four hundred citations in the special issue’s ten articles and 259 pages plus Horner’s introduction and Brandt’s afterword, there are two publications indexed in *EconLit* and seven publications by authors in the field of economics. Contrast this to the 1,640 economic journals indexed in the *EconLit* database, or even the forty-one most highly cited economic journals in Laband and Piette’s 1994 *Journal of Economic Literature* study. These journals represent a broad spectrum of economic perspectives: not just right-wing economists like Hayek and Friedman but left-wing economists like Stiglitz and Sen, and not just neoclassical perspectives but perspectives from feminist economics, Marxian⁴ economics, radical political economy, and other forms of economic heterodoxy. A lack of familiarity with such perspectives and scholarly expertise leads composition studies away from rhetorics of economic possibility: Following the lead of Villanueva and well-regarded economist and rhetorician Deirdre (Donald) McCloskey, I would argue for an increased awareness of the connections between scholarship in rhetoric and economics, given that to do otherwise—by representing economy as inalterable or metaphor—removes a sense of how the particulars of economic intervention might operate.

Toward a Rhetoric of Economic Possibility

I find no fault with any of the articles in the special issue except in their largely uniform avoidance of economic concerns in the name of engaging economic concerns. They are uniformly excellent, produced by admirable scholars. They also constitute a remarkably compelling instance of composition’s avoidance of economic discourse and in so doing reflect the naturalization of a complex set of social, political, and economic relations and interactions and the placement of that naturalized economy beyond human intervention. But “to the extent that the economy has been taken from us—represented as removed from the forces of social and discursive construction—it becomes important and urgent to take it back, not as a homogenous and unified level, sphere, or system, but as a discursive terrain” (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2). To do otherwise is to allow for the continued naturalization of economic inequality that the *JAC* authors seek to push against.

Political economist J.K. Gibson-Graham's locally focused work on community economies demonstrates the economy's heterogeneity, embracing a variety of types of transactions: It in fact does not consist solely of monetized, commodified market transactions. This stands against the mainstream view shared by free-market proponents and by old-left Marxist perspectives focusing on culture as superstructure resting upon and determined by a base of economic production, and pointed out by Gibson-Graham and the Marxian economists Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, who note that "the contemporary economic (and therefore also the social) field is represented as dominated by . . . capitalist exploitation" (13). Yet composition studies talks about "the economy" as comprising only capitalist transactions. Economic perspectives more fully grounded in the particulars of economic disciplinary expertise can sharpen composition's economic vocabulary and analyses and help to counter that "remov[al] from the forces of social and discursive construction," thereby situating economic activity qua economic in its material-historical richness beyond market-based activity as a site for possible intervention by scholars, pedagogues, and students in composition studies.

The essentializing move Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff describe occurs via

the operations of a discourse that places capitalism at the defining center of economic identity. All other forms of production are seen as opposite (and therefore deficient), complementary, the same as, or contained within capitalism; they are measured against a capitalist norm. Such "capitalonormativity" confines the proliferative potential of economic difference within a binary frame. (13)

Capitalism is the dominant term in relation to which all economic formations are understood, and yet it is understood that there is nothing exterior to the economy, which, like the weather, permeates all aspects of life. Scholars in composition studies tend to understand student work as commodified at multiple levels, including in its exchangeability for a grade and in the exchangeability of the skills and practices of literacy for a salaried job in the information economy and so understand such commodification as the essential constituent element of contemporary market capitalism.

The work of management economist Colin Williams confirms this tendency. Williams points out that "[t]he view that predominates is that the overwhelming trajectory of economic development is toward a commodified economy" (527). In a commodified economy, "goods are produced for exchange. . . . exchange is monetised and conducted under market conditions [and] the exchange of goods and services on a monetised basis is motivated by the pursuit of profit" (527).

This trajectory toward commodification aligns with the transcendent and agentless power Gibson-Graham suggests contemporary views ascribe to the economy. The turn from a Keynesian economic philosophy favoring strong and active roles for both government and the private sector in regulating broad macroeconomic trends toward a neoliberal economic philosophy favoring the unregulated efficiencies of free-market competition relies upon a rhetoric representing a sought goal—the absence of the possibility of human economic intervention—as economic reality. As the preceding section illustrates, such a rhetoric has found considerable purchase in the ways composition studies consistently turns away from perspectives in the rich tradition of economic scholarship that allow for the recognition of possibilities for complex economic agency.

However, Gibson-Graham demonstrates that “what is usually regarded as ‘the economy’—wage labor, market exchange of commodities, and capitalist enterprise—comprises but a small subset of the activities by which we produce, exchange, and distribute values” (*Postcapitalist* 90). In addition to wage labor, market exchange, and capitalist enterprise, there exist alternative market transactions and nonmarket transactions, alternate modes of payment for labor and unpaid labor, and alternative forms of capitalist enterprise and forms of noncapitalist enterprise (71). This diversity of value exists in rhetoric and composition studies, as well, as Horner demonstrates in *Terms of Work for Composition*, and as we see in our valuation of student writing, in our engagement with intellectual property, in Donna Strickland’s investigation of composition’s *Managerial Unconscious*, and in other ways. So, too, does Collin Williams demonstrate that “there exist large alternative economic spaces of self-provisioning, non-monetised exchange and monetised exchange where the profit motive is absent” (526). While the work of composition studies can and does intersect with market-based economic spaces, it intersects in many ways with those alternative economic spaces as well.

Rhetorics that responsibly engage the ways that composition intersects with both market-based economic spaces and alternative economic spaces would help scholars productively respond to the “shift” Gibson-Graham has observed “from an understanding of the economy as something that can be transformed, or at least managed (by people, the state, the IMF), to something that governs society” (“Economy” 96). According to Gibson-Graham, this shift relies upon “a hegemonic move through which representations of economy have slipped from their locations in discourse and landed ‘on the ground,’ in the ‘real,’ not just separate from but outside of society” (*Postcapitalist* 53). Well might scholars in composition work against such domination, when the term *economy* now denotes “a force to be reckoned with outside of politics and society, located both above as a mystical abstraction, and below as the grounded bottom line” (“Economy” 94).

The language scholars use to assess and counter such a circumstance matters in material ways. Naming and identifying the complex web of economic activities associated with composition studies can help to transform the economic imaginary.

Using the work of James Porter, John Trimbur, and Bruce Horner, as well as the work of Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff, I offer a definition of economic activity as the appropriation of value at any stage in the overdetermined and dialectical economic cycle of production, distribution, use, and re-production. Classical economic perspectives identified land, labor, and capital as the three primary economic inputs to the production of value, and examined how those economic inputs could be combined and transformed into other economic outputs. Today, in the context of that economic cycle of immaterial production, distribution, use, and re-production associated with rhetoric and composition, we might see the new inputs as material-technological capital (mostly computers in their various forms, which have replaced land as the new scene of economic production), immaterial labor (defined in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's Marxian framework as "labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication," including "analytical and symbolic tasks" and the emotional work involved in "the production and manipulation of affect" [290, 293]), and immaterial capital (often understood as the intellectual property that immaterial labor produces and that gets aggregated itself and reproduced into new forms of immaterial capital or embedded in forms of material-technological capital), with the term *immaterial* reminding us how our social and informational and rhetorical lives are deeply linked to material economic practices, not just determined by them in the old-left Marxist sense. Such an understanding, however, requires a more fully developed economic perspective and a sense of the discursive richness of the field of economics.

A closer examination of the operation of that dialectical and overdetermined cycle of production, distribution, use, and re-production, grounded in the scholarship of economics, might help composition studies formulate rhetorics of actually existing economic agency. Doing so is necessary because of how the fields of economics and composition studies intersect: If composition scholars understand writing as a technology, and understand as well that technologies function to replace labor-intensive processes with capital-intensive processes and that such a transformation is by definition economic, then all of the field of composition must be taken as necessary site and subject of economic inquiry. Performing that inquiry would help to illuminate the host of heterogeneous economic activity that stands in contrast to the market-based transactions of a presumed monolithic and hegemonic global capitalism, well documented in the economic literature. Increased familiarity with such literature on the part of scholars in rhetoric and

composition can help to open up possibilities of theorizing and enacting genuine economic change.

Notes

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²Marazzi's book and Fumagalli and Mezzadra's collection may be too recent to appear.

³It is perhaps worth noting that some scholars in rhetoric and composition make use of citation counts and journal impact evaluations for the economic purposes of tenure and promotion.

⁴I follow conventional usage in distinguishing "Marxist" from "Marxian": "Marxist" describes the social and cultural movements with goals of advancing Marx's revolutionary ideals whereas "Marxian" describes the study and analytical application of Marx's economic principles.

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