When we first proposed this essay, a thirty-minute video promoting US military intervention against a Ugandan warlord dominated newsfeeds and headlines. In less than a week, some 100 million viewers had accessed *Kony 2012*, making it, in the estimation of the global video advocacy organization Witness, “the most rapidly disseminated human rights video ever” (Gregory). The video, by US-based charity Invisible Children, argues for the US military to assist the Ugandan army in capturing Joseph Kony. Although Kony is now a peripheral figure in northern Ugandan politics, *Kony 2012* spotlights his atrocities in Uganda’s civil war a decade earlier, and argues for his arrest lest he resurrect himself. Bookending this

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argument is the further claim that thanks to social media, ordinary people—young people in particular—now wield policy-influencing power: the power to make Kony “famous, a household name” (Invisible Children) and prod US lawmakers into action.

In March 2012, Facebook shares and Twitter feeds did indeed make Kony “famous.” As dozens of A-list celebrities tweeted their support for the Stop Kony campaign and students urged their teachers to incorporate the video into their lesson plans, New York Times pundit Nicholas Kristof praised the filmmakers for “galvanizing young Americans to look up from their iPhones and seek to make a difference for villagers in central Africa.” Such reception appeared testament to Kony 2012’s claim that “Nothing is more powerful than an idea [. . .] whose time has come [. . .] whose time is now” (Invisible Children). The video also drew blame as scholars took issue with its “white man’s burden” tropes and policy advocates pointed out its gross factual distortions. Prominent among critics were a Nova Scotian college student and a Ugandan-born teen whose Tumblr and YouTube rejoinders garnered their own audience of millions (Oyston; Canadian Press; Kony 2012 Video Is Misleading). Yet such criticism seemed to reinforce Kony 2012’s secondary claim: a networked world, where “the world can see each other,” fosters transparency and participation. A “global networked public that can now talk back,” proclaimed new media scholar Zeynep Tufekci, had turned Kony’s “simplistic call” into a “multilayered discussion” (“Value”; see also Tufekci, “#Kony 2012”).

With its emphasis on social media users who require no official sponsors to “[g]o out and rock it” (Invisible Children), Kony 2012 does indeed appear to illustrate Kathleen Blake Yancey’s claim of a digital writing public that produces “in an economy driven by use value” and has “learned [. . .] to think together, to organize, and to act [. . .] largely without our instruction” (301; original emphasis). When Yancey delivered this 2004 CCCC chair’s address, college writing instruction appeared in danger of becoming as anachronistic as the study of penmanship. Fast-forward a decade and (a quick Google search of “Kony” and “rhetoric” shows) we find students blogging about the video through Aristotle’s appeals, Lloyd Bitzer’s rhetorical situation, and Michael McGee’s ideographs—the relevance of rhetorical education reclaimed through public-writing pedagogy.

But as Kenneth Koch counsels in his classic poem “One Train May Hide Another,” “When you come to something, stop to let it pass / So you can see what else is there” (lines 53–54). In this essay we start with the Kony phenomenon not for its affirmation of composition’s digital and civic-engagement pedagogies, but to consider, on a parallel and hidden track, its potential challenges, including these:
Although *Kony* was celebrated as an example of democracy in action, skeptics pointed out the campaign’s *anti*-democratic aims—including propping up Uganda’s repressive government—and obscured *private* interests—including not only such dubious funders as the religious-right Discover Institute but also the escalating US corporate grab for central Africa’s resource wealth (Curtis and McCarthy; Dixon; Keating; Rollins).

Counter to the video’s depiction of central Africa as suffering from international neglect, news outlets increasingly report the dramatic widening of the US military footprint in Africa since 2008 (Ryan; Whitlock). Although terrorism and peacekeeping provide the warrants for this buildup, policy analysts point to rivalry between China and the United States over the region’s resources, including oil and (essential for cell phone and other batteries) coltan (Schomerus, Allen, and Vlassenroot, “Obama”).

Even as Invisible Children presents itself as steered by masses of young people moved by a powerful social justice idea, the charity operates in an economy of exchange values, from the well-heeled salaries and travel budgets of its principals to the commodification of activism through sales of Stop Kony action kits (Dixon; Keating).

Through such an inventory, we move from celebrating *Kony 2012*’s apparently sui generis virality to understanding it as part of a historical process among contending powers. To support such understanding, the African Studies Association speedily assembled a comprehensive guide to African perspectives on Uganda’s civil war (Brown, Metzler, Root, and Vinck). New media scholars and activists likewise expressed hope that the video could spark more substantive engagement. The campaign, Tufekci observed, could prove a “gateway moment” for young activists who “will keep looking, listening, and learning” (“#Kony2012”). Despite the video’s oversimplifications, argued Sam Gregory of Witness, at least “it’s enabling us now to have a conversation on some of the bigger questions.”

Scant evidence exists, however, that inquiry into the “bigger questions” ever took place. Instead, in public dissemination of the campaign, priority was given to the new technological *form* of the video’s launch, the *speed* and *mass reach* of its reception, and the *idea* that the metaphor of global discussion was being made real. When an African policy analyst on *PBS NewsHour* raised the issue of the disastrous 2008 US military operation in Uganda that resulted in the deaths of 1,000 civilians, the reporter turned to the segment’s second guest, a public relations digital strategist, for a comment. “I think what’s interesting,” she responded, “is that we’re seeing that this criticism is leading to more interest in the video and in the organization” (“Kony 2012”). With this response, the strategist shifted attention from substance to style. Similarly, Gregory’s blog entry for “Witness: Video for Change” blog entry made only oblique reference to criticisms of Invisible Children’s “advocacy choices,” and instead celebrated its successful “big-picture storytelling” and “audience-driven approach” (*Kony 2012*). In these and other instances, the *idea* of public conversation becomes the conversation. Rather than inquire into the video’s claims, most journalists, scholars, and policy advocates marveled over how the video went viral. Rather than
debate the consequences of military escalation in central Africa, they wrestled over the efficacy of “clicktivism.” The Kony phenomenon thus offers a textbook example not only of how technological innovation “introduces into human affairs” a McLuhan-esque enthrallment with the “change of scale or pace or pattern” (McLuhan 8), but also of how that enthrallment effectively discourages critical engagement with human affairs.

Of course, in the case of Kony 2012, the derailment of critical engagement might seem of little consequence. After all, if the video’s purpose was to mobilize many thousands of young people to set out on a designated date and “cover the night” with Stop Kony stickers, this experiment in converting digital engagement to embodied action flopped, easily dismissed as “a brief diversion, just a bit of internet chatter” (Schomerus, Allen, and Vlssenroot, “KONY 2012”). Yet if one considers the larger aim of creating a media event to convince Congress to step up US military aid to the Ugandan army, this campaign was no bust. Scores of US senators responded to the Kony clamor with their own YouTube video pledging an increase in US military efforts to bring the warlord to justice and “promote American values” in the region (Coons). Senators John Kerry and Patrick Leahy, chairs of the foreign relations and judiciary committees, both put US efforts to capture Kony at the center of spring 2012 campus speeches (Kerry; Lindholm). Consider further that Congress had already answered the video’s ostensible call to action—with President George Bush’s 2007 creation of the new US military command AFRICOM and with President Obama’s 2011 deployment of additional Green Berets to Uganda, bringing total forces on the continent, not including private military contractors, to 3,000 at the time of the video’s release (Escobar; Gettleman). Just this partial inventory counters the film’s claim that the region is not on American policymakers’ “radar screen” (Invisible Children). It also brings into view a new understanding of Kony 2012’s rhetorical mission: to secure audience allegiance for policy already being pursued. Viewed from this wider angle, Kony 2012 did not fail to foster in-the-streets activism because, all along, more passive acceptance is what it sought.

For such a mass rhetorical phenomenon, we think an alternative metaphor to “global conversation” is required: One train can hide another. This is the warning that appears at railroad crossings throughout France; it is the warning Kenneth Koch observed at a Kenyan railway crossing, prompting the meditations of his celebrated poem. Just as one train can hide another, a text such as Kony 2012 obscures the social relations advanced by its program. Just as one train can hide another, early conclusions that this video failed to galvanize a public into action mask its contribution to a larger project of marshaling public acceptance of a military campaign already underway. Just as one train can hide another, when our conceptions of public rhetorical practice prioritize discursive features and digitized form over—and to the exclusion of—historical context and human consequences, we miss how texts may mobilize meaning not to upend but to reinforce relations of power.
Our concern in writing this essay is that no matter the field’s recent emphases in composition and new media scholarship on embodied, affective, and unbounded composing practices within diverse rhetorical ecologies, our pedagogies remain textually fixated and thus may miss both the extratextual interests that deploy a text such as *Kony 2012* and the bodily impacts felt well beyond. Needed is the orientation of historical or critical materialist communications which, Lee Artz explains, aims to concretize practices and relations. Critical materialism allows one to acknowledge that yes, “[c]lass power is diffuse” (the forces that shape and benefit from the Invisible Children campaign are not immediately visible) without losing sight of the fact that the wielders of class power do have “names and addresses” (Artz 37). Of such a text as *Kony*, this orientation would urge readers to look into those names and addresses—to ask, “What is the relationship between this communication or cultural practice and the rest of the social order?” and to consider that although this viral video “has no fixed meaning,” it does have “actual material consequence” (Artz 37).

Near this essay’s end, we will follow the lead of communications scholars such as Lee Artz and Dana Cloud, as well as political economist David McNally, and turn toward a critical materialist orientation that stays mindful of how one train hides another. A critical materialist pedagogy is one that, operating on the tracks of both formal and sociohistorical analysis, aims to reconnect discursive and digitized arguments to the extradiscursive interests they serve. More, by urging students and teachers of public rhetoric to “think about language *through the body*” (McNally 10; original emphasis), such a pedagogy can also make manifest the creative activity—the bodies of genuine from-below resistance and liberatory struggle—that texts in service to ruling interests would also hide from view. But before we can consider what thinking about language through the body could mean for the public work of composition, we need to take up a prior question: How in composition studies did the body get left behind?

**Banishing the Body**

Our view that composition’s socially networked, publicly engaged pedagogies are poised to become less, not more, attentive to human histories, relations, and experience may seem surprising given how much attention compositionists have recently paid to the materiality of digital production and circulation. Welcome trends include the embrace of the writer as designer or producer, an important correction of both the process era’s conception of the autonomous writer and the postprocess correction that veered toward jettisoning attention to writing students and classrooms altogether. But although restored attention to composing would seem likely to be accompanied by restored attention to composing contexts and conditions, the tendency has been in the opposite direction.
In fact, through its own version of “NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN AN IDEA,” composition’s historic tendency has long been toward the dematerializing belief that knowledge, power, and agency are matters of discourse. From Quintilian’s “good man speaking well” to Jacques Lacan’s world of things composed by a world of words, composition’s theoretical traditions favor the world as one’s discourses would have it over investigation into the world, including into extradiscursive realities, as it is. Take civic rhetoric pedagogies that marry Aristotelian precepts to the public sphere ideals of Jürgen Habermas. The Habermasian public sphere, even as it suggests eventful engagement with a peopled world, turns away from an existing society of unequal relations, hidden interests, and, at times, open class struggle. Rather than inventory existing relations, observes McNally, Habermas “invest[s] emancipatory possibilities in [communication’s] formal properties” in a “noncoercive public sphere where the best argument can prevail” (109; see also Lecercle 45–46). It is in this open and democratic public sphere that Tufekci imagines teenaged social media users clicking among contending positions on Ugandan problems and solutions. Presupposing a transparent and noncoercive rhetorical situation, composition students likewise assess the audience appeal and argumentative effectiveness of Kony 2012 as if no contextual investigation is needed. In these classrooms, new critical just-the-text close readings are making a comeback, repackaged as civic engagement.

The speaking subjects of postmodern theories are likewise idealized agents—a re-presentation, argues McNally, of the familiar bourgeois construction of the “sanitized, heroic male body” (5)—who have escaped the unwieldy, biologically and historically marked body. Even as postmodernism abounds with desiring, performing, policed, or technologized bodies, its “new idealism” represses regard for the physical body that labors within the global economy: the body that “strains with the sweat of coffee-picking,” “turns stiff from the routines of the assembly line,” “grows chaffed and swollen with the labor of scrubbing and cleaning,” and “breaks down from repetitive motion at the keyboard” (McNally 2). Favored instead is the “body as text [ . . . ] free to invent itself” as a “plaything of the imagination” (McNally 2; emphasis added). The body is rendered nonhistorical, noncorporeal, independent of economic structures that fatigue, stoop, scar, and kill. Being is presented as discursive—and if Being is discursive, so too is agency, the act of discursive will.

Given composition’s empirical traditions and pragmatic focus on individual writers, Rául Sánchez observes, this postmodern conception of authors as dematerialized discursive subjects has actually remained elusive. Coming to the rescue, however, enabling composition to more fully join literary and cultural studies in banishing the body, are global networked communication technologies, which Sánchez credits for creating a new “writing-subject.” In a kind of digital transubstantiation in which the body is made text by new information technologies, Sánchez locates the writing subject of contemporary composition “squarely within, rather than essentially apart
from, textuality,” its rhetorical agency characterized by a “thoroughgoing textual-
ity.” What makes this networked identity “material,” then, available with something
“approaching transparency” (235) for empirical study, is its movement and mutation
through the technologies of digital textual production and the circuits of distribution
comprising the global information economy. Giving guidance for this hypertextual
empiricism is Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT). Although ANT promises
to reintroduce a complex materiality to composing, it does so by further isolating the
discursive field from extradiscursive social relations. In place of attention to social
relations, object-oriented rhetorics such as ANT instead invest the material of digital

Mass rhetorical phenomena such as Kony 2012 certainly do appear to exercise an
agency of their own; they fuel a technological fetishism wherein the means and memes
of digital communication are endowed with a “phantom objectivity” (Marx 128) and
an “autonomy” that seems “rational and all-embracing” (Lukács 83). But although
the Marxist understanding of the fetish serves as reminder to always look for what
else is there—for extradiscursive effects such as more military boots on the ground
in central Africa—the task of the Latourian critic is not to reattach the powers and
value of a smartphone or laptop to the human labor expended in its making, nor to
look into an ostensibly grassroots movement’s shadowy funders. Instead, ANT further
abstracts this stuff of global communication from global social relations. Investing the
products, means, and circulatory routes of digital production with a fully fetishized autonomy, ANT goes beyond endowing objects with a phantom objectivity to as-
signing them an independent subjectivity. Nonhuman and object-oriented rhetorics
such as ANT go well beyond Lev Vygotsky’s historical materialist view of humanity
as symbolic tool-making beings whose consciousness is also changed by the use of
these tools. Such contemporary rhetorics sever the tools from human agents and
turn them into commodity and technological fetishes.

Nonetheless, these rhetorics have commonsense appeal in the twenty-first-
century political economy. Just as Kony 2012 asserts its own narrative truth, seemingly
independent of the historic Joseph Kony and US designs, so too does New York
City’s complex power grid appear to turn on the lights all of its own accord while
just-in-time formulas move goods from warehouses to the shelves of Walmart. At
moments of disruption, one realizes the fiction at play: when Hurricane Sandy takes
out the lights of Manhattan, it is a human body that must slide into a manhole in
search of the saltwater-corroded circuit breaker; when thirty-six warehouse work-
ers in a tiny Illinois town refuse to load trucks bound for Walmart, they bring into
view the necessity of human bodies for the production and movement of goods and
services. Global capitalism depends on the story that human bodies are ancillary to
and disposable within a system that can largely function without them. As a theory
of neoliberal political economy, Latour’s ANT arises from and helps sustain such a
story, promoting the same enthrallment with technological means, processes, and styles that abstracted *Kony 2012* from its contentious context and emptied it of human content.

**A Land without a People**

The disappearing of human agents accompanying the neoliberal global economic order has not been carried out via a compelling fiction alone. Rather, the powerful fictions of self-propelling capital flows and border-crossing knowledge workers belong to wider efforts to reorganize economic relations, manage laboring bodies, and control political unrest. Such efforts are extradiscursive as well as discursive, heavily involved in the remaking of physical as well as virtual space in what social geographer David Harvey terms the “geographically articulated patterning of global capitalist activities and relations” (*Rebel Cities* 101). Especially given global capitalism’s vast disparities in wealth distribution not only between center and periphery countries but within countries as well, urban engineering works to ensure that cosmopolitan elites live carefully cordoned off from a city’s poor; in cities like Mumbai, Cairo, Jakarta, and Sao Paolo, high-tech international businesses thrive in close proximity to some of the world’s largest slums (see Davis 95–120).

In studying the contemporary geography of Managua, Dennis Rogers borrows Anthony Giddens’s term *disembeddedness* to describe how urban infrastructure shields elites from restive populations. Under the banner of progress and modernization, Managua is rapidly reconstructing its infrastructure to include, for instance, roundabouts that are hostile to walking and enable vehicles to pass through intersections without stopping, whisking them along in “well-maintained, well-lit, and fast moving roads” from one “safe” area to another (120). Rogers describes how these fortified networks help to establish separate Managuas that are adjacent but not interconnected, and this separation has profound consequences on the politics and social fabric of the city. The new reconfigurations “erode notions of ‘public space.’ Those on the ‘inside’ feel little responsibility towards those on the ‘outside,’ and no longer relate to notions of cohabitation and interaction but, rather, to an ideal of separateness from those perceived as different” (114). Similarly, in a study of economic segregation through gated communities in Cape Town, Charlotte Lemanski argues that such communities “replace spatial apartheid with social apartheid as different groups may live in spatial proximity but continue to operate in separate social and functional spheres” (416).

The frequency with which the phrase “global information economy” appears in composition scholarship suggests how much the field understands itself to be bound up in global capitalism’s ideological promises, material patterns, and reconfigurations of public space: Like the SUVs Rogers observes racing through Managua, Sánchez’s
textualized “subjects” and “agents” of globalized networked technologies also “traverse large physical spaces in almost no time” (235). Awaiting acknowledgment, however, is another correspondence—that between the protected enclaves and vast inequalities this global economy has produced and the cordonned public imagination and professional apartheid of composition studies. Claims about multiliterate discursive power elide the precarious terms of employment awaiting most of our students, graduate and undergraduate alike. Depictions of a composition professional’s digital mobility studiously ignore—or suggest a cosmopolitan class disembedded from—the low-wage migrant labor through which undergraduate composition continues, ever more deeply, to be delivered. The double body-banishing whammy of linguistic idealism and technological fetishism further insulates writing research from contact with the potentially mercurial body, locating theory in the sanitized corporate. Even as public and digital rhetorical theories emphasize global connectivity and the creation of “convergence cultures” (see Jenkins) that purport to be progressive portals to the world, these theories take shape in corridors cleansed of globalization’s most troubling material effects and evidence of struggle by its discontents. The result is a pedagogy that “thingifies” (as Martin Luther King Jr. once put it) a peopled world and can wind up marshaling composition’s support for unjust social orders.

In “Composition 2.0,” for instance, Steven Fraiberg depicts urbane digital designers in a Tel Aviv that appears devoid of any struggle save that the “linguistic borders in Israeli society” are “being infiltrated by English” (108). The enigmatic graffitied message “know hope” (which Fraiberg observes in his opening account of commuting to the high-tech company “sponsoring” his ethnography) and an oblique mention of “the ambiguity and uncertainty of the political situation” (100) are the only other indicators of an extralinguistic question—whether this country will accommodate the region’s more than 5 million dispossessed and movement-restricted Palestinians—that is quickly abandoned. Fraiberg’s depopulating point-of-entry narrative clears the stage for celebrating linguistic multiplicity, multimodal creativity, and textual freedom of movement: the “transcultural” and “global flows” of discourse “crossing” geographic boundaries that he suggests have been made anachronistic and moot by twenty-first-century literacy practices (103–4). To be sure, “Composition 2.0” concludes with a compelling vision of a linguistically just world—wherein teachers embrace an expansive conception of composing and writers create convergence cultures, reworking global forces through local knowledge and needs (117–18). Yet this linguistically just world is a discursive world from which contending histories, claims, and an entire people have been rhetorically excised. The essay’s central question—how the field of composition can develop “a perspective capable of understanding the teaching of English writing within the context of other languages and globalization” (101)—never bumps up against the urgent, but unasked question of its setting: how the Israeli state as constituted can accommodate the Palestinian people.
The failure of these two questions to converge, Fraiberg suggests, is owed to Israel’s “tightly knit society that is based on close networks of people” (111). But also sheltering Tel Aviv is a complex infrastructure—including some 540 roadblocks and checkpoints (“West Bank Movement” 4)—keeping a restive population mostly out of sight. At one moment Fraiberg comes close to acknowledging this infrastructure: the name of the software security company Check Point, he notes, “indexes the checkpoints set up all along Israel’s borders” (108). With that acknowledgment comes the possibility of taking up the substantial, potentially instructive contradiction between the idea of transcultural flows on which this essay’s vision depends and the actuality of heavily fortified and policed national boundaries. There is the possibility of checking the claim of linguistically dexterous border crossers against the reality of Israel’s checkpoints. The possibility for connecting language and theory to actual bodies and lived practice, however, is not realized, as abstract idealism reasserts itself in the next sentence: “The linguistic borders in Israeli society are also being infiltrated by English” (108). Here, then, is an ecology of writing that reifies the narrowed world of network-facilitated relations and the information economy as the world itself.

Yet such discursively constructed realities also contain the irrepressible traces of bodies and relations that fetishizing discourses deny. They hold the hints of another train on a hidden track, the possibility that, as Koch writes, “Jerusalem may hide another Jerusalem” (line 52). For example, in addition to suggesting that checkpoints are more than a linguistic marker, Fraiberg also points out that the “technorati” of his study draw on the iconography of an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) commando unit to represent themselves as “high-tech warriors” on the global economy’s front lines. Although he claims that “the instruments of military power have been replaced with the pencil, megaphone, and wrench,” an illustration included from “Networld’s” website shows one tiny Lego-like soldier clutching a lethal-looking dagger between her or his teeth (108). It is a small but telling disturbance in what otherwise appears as a story of technological prowess replacing military might.

Similarly, an incongruous moment near the beginning of Kony 2012 disturbs its sanitized version of US military power. While introducing us to his young son, narrator Jason Russell tells us that “just like his dad,” Gavin enjoys everyday childhood activities. In one shot, we see Gavin jumping on a trampoline; in another, he makes snow angels. Then as Russell adds, “And just like his dad, he likes being in the movies,” young Gavin runs from a sturdy-looking outdoor playhouse that is twice his height. As Gavin shrieks, “Look out! Run! It’s a bomb!” the house, through his father’s movie-making magic, is reduced by an incoming missile to burning rubble. Next, in what appears to be a grocery store, we witness Gavin training his smartphone on the back of a woman and, with a “Daddy, watch this!” giggle, appearing to blow her up (Invisible Children). To appropriate a term from “Composition 2.0,” Gavin’s play “indexes” how Western civilians remotely experience the violence of war—telescoped through digital feeds from distant aerial perches: a laser finds the target, a
sudden flash, and the “bad guys” are eliminated, seemingly without carnage or loss of actual life. About these two brief moments—the disconcerting glimpse into the high-tech militarized imagination of the American child; the dramatization of war as gleefully destructive—Russell offers no explanation. Instead, with the transitional phrase, “But he was born into a pretty complicated world,” the video turns to the idea of suffering Ugandan children who, not withstanding the visual meaning of the previous two scenes, can be saved by a benevolent exercise of US force.

To Have Waited at Least a Moment to See What Was Already There

Gavin’s digitally assisted pyrotechnics and Fraiberg’s high-tech warriors are the traces of historical processes and social relations. As such, they mark starting points for undertaking a needed inventory that has rematerialization as its aim: the reattachment of discursive texts and digitized narratives to human agents, contexts, and consequences, testing fetishized appearances against lived realities. Testing fetishized appearances against lived realities was, of course, the project of Karl Marx, who begins Capital with the appearances that surround the commodity, whether “the table, the house, the piece of yarn, or any useful thing” (128). Through Capital’s first volume, Marx pursues a double strategy:

• He follows the commodity as, circulating in the marketplace, it acquires a “phantom-like objectivity.” Tracing how the commodity’s “sensuous characteristics are extinguished” as the useful thing becomes an exchange value, interchangeable with other values on the market, he elucidates capitalism’s transformation of specific human labor into general exchangeable quantities of value (128; see also McNally 52–53). As commodities are alienated from the labor that created them, the relations of production and cooperation, of appropriation and exploitation, vanish from view; so it happens that fetishized products, abstracted from the concrete conditions of their making and the specific terms of their use, circulate seemingly by their own accord.

• Not satisfied only with naming this world of appearances, Marx also pursues the de-fetishizing, rematerializing strategy of tracing the commodity back to production’s “hidden abode” (279). There, one can glimpse how capitalism is not a relation between things governed by unassailable laws but instead a relation between people, thus subject to social mediation and struggle.

Significantly—and contra the caricature in composition scholarship of the critical pedagogue who whisks away the veil of appearances for astounded and instantly enlightened students (for example, Lynch 459, 469)—Marx did not take commodity fetishism and, above all, the money fetish, as mere apparitions. “Fetishes,” McNally points out, “are real for Marx [. . .] because human agents really are dominated by the abstracted forms assumed by their social relations” (69). Instead, by toiling to connect the “spirits, specters, and fetishes” to “practices of living bodies,” Marx both
“dispels myths of self-birth”—a myth ANT reinforces by accepting the appearance of nonhuman agents—and attends to those living bodies laboring to change their societies (McNally 75).

A century and a half later, suggests McNally, Marx’s double or dialectical strategy is not less but more relevant. Critical materialism, McNally explains, enables an investigation into the appearance that “speculative capital buzzes around the globe [. . .] unhampered by the limits once set by nature, geography, transportation systems, or rebellious laborers” (46). Central to critical materialism is defetishization: “forcing the disembodied abstractions of idealism into contact with what has been marginalized, repressed, and debased” (10), one carried out especially by learning to “think about language through the body.” In a practical demonstration of how thinking through the body rematerializes networks of labor disappeared by global commodity flows, Harvey asks his introductory geography students to inventory the origins of the breakfasts they ate that morning. By attempting a full inventory of what was needed to create, transport, and prepare “[t]he bread, the sugar, the coffee, the milk; the cups, knives and forks, toasters and plastic plates—to say nothing of the machinery and equipment needed to produce all these things,” students start to glimpse all that “link[s] them to millions of people laboring away all around the world” (Companion 40; emphasis added). The lesson here isn’t about consumption. After all, a student concluding that she should somehow pursue a socially just breakfast cereal choice would still be bound up in the neoliberal ideology of power through individual consumer choice making; meanwhile all the human labor required to create, transport, and sell her new breakfast choice would slip back out of view. Instead, Harvey’s breakfast inventory promotes understanding of human geography and political economy along with mutual recognition among people otherwise unaware of their ties to one another—a starting point for further investigation.

For a critical materialist method that enables defetishizing, rematerializing investigation—whether of one’s breakfast, a text such as Kony 2012, or a setting like “Composition 2.0”’s Tel Aviv start-up—we join Cloud in recommending mass media sociologist John Thompson’s depth hermeneutics. Thompson’s tripartite approach, developed from the work of Paul Ricoeur, does not deemphasize discursive power. Because symbolic forms are “something more” than “contextualized social phenomena,” Thompson observes, any analysis should attend to how structural features organize, express, and mobilize meaning (21, 284). For example, expressed and mobilized in Kony 2012 when young Gavin “blows up” a woman in the grocery checkout is a generalized contempt and disregard for bodies that are female, nonwhite, working class, aged (McNally 12). For the practitioner of depth hermeneutics, it provides a moment for examining the structures through which ruling ideas about disposable bodies are mundanely inculcated. Similarly, close reading of Kony 2012 could yield insights into what makes the idea of US military humanism so compelling or tease
out the video’s many contradictions—for instance, notwithstanding its do-it-yourself “go out and rock it” discourse, viewers are exhorted to purchase a prefab action kit.

At the same time, Thompson warns, formal analysis can fall prey to “internalism,” becoming an “abstract exercise [. . .] oblivious to what is being expressed by the symbolic forms whose structure it seeks to unveil” (22). Or, as Cloud explains, when formal analysis is separated from the historical and social contexts in which meanings matter, it can produce “neo-Aristotelian” and “text-centered readings” more concerned with a text’s “effectiveness in reaching its target audience” than with its veracity (“Materiality” 7). Hence, depth hermeneutics links formal analysis with far-reaching social and historical investigation to reconstruct the “particular circumstances” and the “relations of domination” in which a text is produced, deployed, or received (307). Assisting such an investigation into Kony 2012 could be the guide prepared by the African Studies Association. The work of inventorying can also travel beyond the region—finding, for instance, the unsettling echo of Gavin’s glee in simulating the killing of a stranger in a US Marine general who told a public audience, “It’s fun to shoot some people” (Hancock).

Finally, the method’s crucial third component, reinterpretation, works to counter both the inertia of simply accepting a text “pre-interpreted” and also the common fear that critical questioning of a public narrative or argument, especially one with professed altruistic intent, will result in disillusionment and distrust of any mass argument. As depth analysis opens up a social world’s doxa to “risky, conflict-laden [. . .] dispute,” Thompson maintains, the “divergence between lay interpretation and depth interpretation” creates a new “methodological space” and the possibility for the “creative construction of possible meaning” (290, 22). Such space is what could be created if, as an ethnographer, Fraiberg took the Israeli “emic perspective (how Israelis tell their own history)” and “traditional stories of Israeli history” (120, 108) as partial and as naturalizing what has been a much more multifaceted and contested (including by Israelis themselves) historical process. This is not to suggest that depth hermeneutics disdains everyday understandings and meanings such as those in which Fraiberg roots his study. On the contrary, Thompson writes, to stave off internalism and idealism, interpretation should start with everyday life, with “an elucidation of the ways in which symbolic forms are interpreted and understood by the individuals who produce and receive them”—the “ethnographic moment [. . .] an indispensable preliminary.” But to assess critically how a society’s story about itself has been composed, to glimpse competing and excluded narratives, one must “also break with interpretation of everyday life” (279).

Undeniably, more than a scholarly method is needed to disrupt imperial logic and end an occupation. But although classroom instruction alone will not end the new great games being played among rival powers around the globe, our pedagogies can cultivate habits of response to the powerful ideological texts and ready-made
campaigns that, from STAND to Stop Kony to J Street U, hail students on today’s college campuses. By learning to think about language through the body, composition’s public-writing classrooms can also learn to see and take inspiring lessons from campaigns that really are do-it-yourself and student-led—for instance, the movement of Quebec’s college and university students that throughout spring and summer 2012 joined social media networking to pots-and-pans-banging marches to stave off a tuition hike, throw off a repressive anti-protest law, and bring down the government that had pushed for both.

We need to end, however, with obstacles to enacting pedagogies that embrace such public rhetorical work in full, embodied form. For starters, finding time to open up that reinterpretive space is a materially challenging task given the urgency of social and environmental conditions plus the speed, volume, and insistence of new media texts vying for attention. A hyper-kairotic “Time is now” urgency is what the Kony 2012 filmmakers particularly exploited by declaring a fast-approaching “expiration date” for the video even though much of the footage was already almost a decade old. An urgent “We have a moment [. . .] This moment right now” insistence also repeats through Yancey’s call for composition to join the new writing publics (297). Her “We have a moment” refrain is a simultaneous call to action and warning that this call will soon expire. Yet the fault line she also pointed to in this 2004 address—globalization promising “(newfound) cooperation and communication among peoples” while producing “just-in-time jobs” and “just-in-time people” (301)—has only deepened.6 Consider further that even as we and our students appear to be awash in information and proliferating viewpoints, mass media consolidation has resulted in just a handful of conglomerates controlling most of the globe’s information outlets. Such media consolidation and information control work to swamp a public with urgent imperatives: to march into wars against phantom weapons of mass destruction, to cut Social Security and Medicare against the threat of a fiscal cliff, to “reform” public higher education as a means of remedying decades of widening economic inequality. In such circumstances, composition needs a public-writing pedagogy that can join “We have a moment” with “We need to take a moment.”

Such a pedagogy would need to navigate the tension between the synchronic and diachronic and, with it, the tension between the felt need to act immediately and the concurrent need to be as informed as possible. Most often these tensions are expressed as binaries: as, for instance, in a Los Angeles Times op-ed by a high school teacher who urged Kony 2012 “naysayers” not to “squelch young activists” like her students and sons (Strickler). In composition, Paul Lynch similarly subordinates critical pedagogy, which he understands as chiefly concerned with “undermin[ing] the realities around us,” to Latourian production (463): “A composition should no longer be judged by how incisively it debunks,” Lynch argues, “but instead by how expansively (and perhaps ‘sloppily’) it puts together” (470).
Remedy this fear of the critical as naysaying and debunking are the creative possibilities of what Thompson terms reinterpretation. That third component is essential to critical materialist method for thinking about language through bodies that are not only subjected to history but seeking to affect history’s course. With its valuing of reinterpretive creativity, critical materialism does not preclude inventive in-the-moment uptake, but fosters it—as when Palestinian activists appropriated the garb and blue paint of the film Avatar’s oppressed Na’vi to protest Israel’s separation wall (“Palestinians”). An excellent example of synchronic and diachronic analyses joined rather than opposed can also be found in sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne’s multimodal account of manifs casseroles (pot-banging popular protest). In that account Sterne investigates such protests historically while also drawing readers into the streets with him, his students, and his neighbors during the 2012 Quebec student uprising (Sterne; see also Sterne and Davis). Sustained inquiry into Kony 2012, too, brings us to the inspiring self-activity of Ugandans against their current US-backed regime, including the mass 2011 walk-to-work protests and the unprecedented 2012 LGBT Pride march. Such inquiry cultivates both critical space—powerful counters to the video’s white-man’s-burden representations—and creative space, one in which young activists might imagine a solidarity more powerful than ordering a $20 action kit.

Notes

1. For a roundup of initial news reports and mainstream media assessments of Kony 2012, see Goodman and Preston; Kristoff; Kron and Goodman; PBS NewsHour’s “‘Kony 2012.’”

2. See, for instance, Cole; Dixon; Izama.

3. Like the nineteenth-century liberal economists Marx depicts as enthralled by the circulation of commodities in the marketplace and utterly ignorant of the “hidden abode of production” (279), Latour imagines objects-as-agents with the extraordinary capacity to “make everything, including their own frames, their own theories, their own metaphysics [. . .] even their own ontologies” (147; also qtd. in Sánchez 239).

4. With the insertion of the word “also”—“The linguistic borders in Israeli society are also being infiltrated by English” (108; emphasis added)—Fraiberg suggests that a prior claim—“The physical borders of Israel are being infiltrated by the Palestinians”—does not need to be written and defended. The effect is to render uncontroversial, already resolved, the historically vexed question of whether the Palestinian people are trying to infiltrate Israel’s borders or exercise a right of return.

5. Our emphasis on Gramscian inventory taking is inspired by Edward Said’s classic “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” from which we took this essay’s epigraph.

6. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, we also think about the field’s response to digital communication and globalization through literary critic Walter Mignolo’s critique of the “hubris of point zero,” the self-assured and unilateral perspective of modernity that “constantly name[s] and celebrate[s] (progress, development, growth)” while also “silenc[ing] or nam[ing] as problems to be solved by the former (poverty, misery, inequities, injustices, corruption, commodification, and dispensability of human life)” (xviii). Here progress, development, and growth are rarely acknowledged as a cause of poverty, misery, and injustice, but are often offered as the solution. The linguistic idealism of composition is built on a similar unity and likewise carries its vexing contradictions, its erasures and silencing. As we pause in the moment that Yancey suggests we have, we might consider that although our digital pedagogies and
theories make some claims of novelty and a progressive politics, they may be following a conservative
narrative that still moves predictably downstream from modernity’s “point zero.” In this familiar nar-
rative, technology is joined with “free markets” and with one of a handful of Western European– and
US-sanctioned models of representative government in the spread of growth and progress.

7. As Cloud explains, “debunking” systems of inequality are a vital part of the “pre-conditions
for a vital public sphere” in which social and economic injustices “can be democratically debated,” and
in which “[o]rdinary people” can discover themselves as “not only the objects of history” but also “its
makers” (“Rhetoric” 348–54).

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