Translating Difference and the Common

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This essay explores how racialized and gendered subjectivities might produce a common space of social cooperation that can break down the capitalist hierarchization of society. It analyzes both the capitalistic valorization of difference and the production of resistant and militant subjectivities that exceed and overturn capitalistic segmentation and dispossession. Within this framework I consider the production of the common through praxis and mode of organization, bringing to light the necessity for heterolingual translation of difference in order to interrupt the homogeneity of the capitalist language of value. The aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand, there is the need to better understand the present time and its violent contradictions. On the other, there is the necessity to bring to the fore race and gender differences in order to neutralize the social valence of in-difference and to challenge and transform the current social order.

Key Words: Common, Class, Race, Gender, Subjectivity, Translation, Communism

There’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout.

—Toni Morrison, Beloved

Difference and the Common

What happens when race and gender become sites of contestation in a political battlefield? When racialized and gendered subjectivities call for a new and different organization of social relations? The current times present several trajectories for pursuing this line of inquiry. The migrant workers’ uprising in spring 2006 in the United States, and the distinct kinds of support drawn by the candidacies of Barack Obama and Sarah Palin in 2008, show how claims around race and gender issues may or may not interrupt the functioning of capitalistic exploitation and the hierarchical stratification of difference. These examples help us to explore the production of the common through the possible or impossible composition of subjectivities and (race and gender) difference.

When I refer to the common, I have in mind not only nature (such as air, forests, and the sun), nor just an artificial common (such as knowledge or language), but also the common as an autonomous—however partial—social cooperation that involves the
conflictual process of the breaking down of hierarchies and exploitation (Hardt and Negri 2009). This is an open and never ending process, always susceptible to being reversed, which therefore always has to be produced anew.

In the current time, we face not only powerful and dangerous racist and sexist trends, but also a no less dangerous ideology of the neutrality of difference—that is, in-difference over race and gender. On the one hand, the ideology of color and gender blindness is the explicit neoliberal strategy to efface race and gender issues. On the other hand, there is a broad process of racialization and gendering of the global labor force, a worldwide strategy of the nation-state aimed at controlling labor mobility and regulating the new figures of labor. This involves the marginalization and illegalization (De Genova 2005) of women and migrant workers through race and gender blackmail and exploitation.

The deportations of migrant workers from the United States and political asylum seekers from Italy, and the exploitation of workers through the body shopping system in Asia, South Asia, and Australia attest to this trend, as do attacks on the right to abortion in the so-called North and on birth control in the so-called South, the rape and killing of women during Tata Group’s land dispossessions in India, domestic violence, and the trafficking of women all over the world.

As the long history of women’s struggles and feminist thought has made clear, no social change is possible without a change in gender relations. Similarly, as critical race theory has illustrated, race works as the ‘miner’s canary’ in that the marginalization and suffering around race are the precursors of a danger that threatens society as a whole (Torres and Guinier 2002). Unemployment and foreclosures brought on by the recent economic crisis have surgically followed color and gender lines, denying large numbers of women and minorities employment, social security, and basic rights.

In what follows, my aim is twofold: to better understand the present time and its contradictions, as well as to bring to the fore race and gender differences to diminish in-difference and to challenge and transform the current social order. To the latter end, I would like to explore how race and gender difference might produce a common space of social cooperation and break down capitalist segmentation and hierarchization of society.

First I dwell on interactions between class, race, and gender, followed by a discussion of race and gender difference within capitalism and an exploration of the production of subjectivity—taken as both subjection as well as a subjectivity that exceeds the capitalist mode of production. Then I consider the production of the common with a focus on its potential to interrupt capitalist valorization as well as on its praxis and mode of organization. I conclude with a discussion of the antagonistic relationship between “the one” and “the multiple”—that is, the tension between “unity” and “multiplicity” in the production of the common.

Class, Race, and Gender

Before delving into a discussion of class, race, and gender, let me explain what I mean by difference. Race and gender shape the whole of subjective experience and are part and parcel of the subject’s life. While other kinds of difference, such as
culture, religion, and nationality, are also constitutive of the capitalistic organization of society and also contribute to processes of racialization and gendering (for example, Islamophobia), they fall outside the scope of this paper.

My deployment of race and gender does not refer to the idea of natural or biological difference. Race and gender are sociocultural constructions, and I propose to focus the discussion on how difference operates within relations of production—this is to say, how difference operates within the antagonistic tension that shapes the functioning of the labor market, and how it figures in the production of both the common and hatred toward others in the form of sexism and racism.

As recent studies drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois have emphasized, racism works as a sort of internal, supplementary force in the determination of the labor market (Roediger 1991), and sexism (that is, the undervaluing of the female) has historically shaped the sexual division of labor within the workplace, the family, and the rest of society. Therefore, my emphasis on race and gender is informed by class difference, which I see to be the crux of the matter of sexual and racial discrimination. In other words, race and gender act as the tools by which capital organizes the labor market and social relations, and, therefore, they cannot be understood as separate from class difference.

In this vein, David Roediger has productively introduced the idea of “racial management” to explain How Race Survived U.S. History (2008). This entails the deployment of race to segment labor power and to produce labor subordination and hierarchies along the “color line.” Similarly, throughout the history of capitalism, a sort of gender management has been at work leading to female subordination. Karl Marx, in his study of Victorian anthropology—published as part of Ethnological Notebooks (1972)—explains the subordination of women as historically determined by the introduction of property, which fundamentally reshaped the female/male relationship. The blood relations founded on women’s reproductive faculty were remodeled by property, undermining the power women used to have owing to their control over reproduction. In this way, new forms of women’s subordination were introduced. Although Marxian thought has come under legitimate criticism from feminist quarters, I think late Marx provides a useful framework for understanding

1. In Black Reconstruction in America, Du Bois wrote important pages on the division between white and black workers. He noted that “[the white workers,] while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white” (1998, 700).
2. I am here mainly referring to Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” (1975), which argues that the functioning of the capitalist mode of production is not enough to understand the oppression of women and that greater attention is needed to ideology and culture. Nevertheless, this contribution risks removing the productive dimension from the understanding of women’s oppression. Therefore, I consider another argument within feminist critiques of Marx, which refers the theme of production/reproduction as pointed out by the 1970s international campaign “Wages for Housework” (an argument mainly taking root in the works of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James [1972] and later developed by Alisa del Re [1979]). This critique brought to light the cost and the productive dimensions of reproductive labor, the neglect of which (also by Marx) has largely supported and boosted the undervaluing of women’s labor and justified their exploitation.
the dynamics behind oppression and subordination on the basis of race and gender difference.

Alongside the introduction of property, modern philosophy, which largely aided the rise of capitalism, produced a split among human beings, distinguishing, as John Locke clearly pointed out in the *Second Treatise on Government* (1980), who owns and who is “the object” of ownership—that is, the proprietor and the property. On the one hand, there is the juridical subject of the white wealthy man and, on the other, all the women, the poor, and the nonwhite workers. Among these, slaves in the plantation system and women in domestic and reproductive labor were subjected—although by different forms of submission—to unpaid labor, the former as the property of the settler and the latter as the property of the patriarch.

Thus, for centuries property has worked to manage the inclusion/exclusion of race and gender difference within the sphere of rights. Nowadays, after powerful twentieth-century feminist struggles and anticolonial movements, and following the increase in labor mobility in the globalized world, the organization of the labor market and social relationships has changed. Processes of segmentation based on race and gender difference are by no means absent from “postcolonial capitalism” (Mellino 2009). However, these mechanisms, rather than socially excluding subjectivities on the basis of race and gender, are now organizing and including such subjectivities hierarchically within the labor market and the space of citizenship, a process that some scholars refer to as “differential inclusion” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 196; Mezzadra 2008).

As this discussion goes to show, race and gender differences should not be handled in isolation from class difference; rather, they should be thought as part of class segmentation, as tools of capitalist hierarchization of social relationships. We should also note that treatments of race and gender without class risk falling into biologicism or an abstract multiculturalism oblivious to the role race and gender play within people’s everyday experience.

However, talking about class requires more specification. I refer to class as a political concept, as the political composition of subjectivity: a concept that always exceeds “the prison of economy” (Tronti 2008, 69). This concept refers to the production of subjectivity as both subjected to, and resisting from within, the relations of production. Neither a strictly economic explanation nor a sociological description, class is rather the subjective experience and the socioeconomic condition entangled with race and gender difference that hold the potential to contribute to the production of the common. This is not an identity that implies homogeneity, but rather one that deals with the multiple differences that shape people’s lives. Therefore, the concept of class I have in mind is the combined functioning of class, race, and gender difference.

In this regard, at least three different approaches have been formulated. Since the 1980s, an extensive debate has discussed *intersectionality*, highlighting how race, gender, and class are interlocking categories of experience, affecting all aspects of human life. That is to say, differences intersect all determining hierarchies and subordinations as well as producing emancipation and conflicts. This account developed mainly from African American feminist critique (see Anderson and Collins 1992), although other scholars have approached the same topic in useful ways.
Some decades earlier, Louis Althusser (1965) suggested we go beyond the Marxist idea of the duality of “base” and “superstructure,” and introduced to that end the concept of “overdetermination.” This concept designates the correspondence as well as the contradictory nature of the whole set of practices constituting the social formation. This is the reflection on the multiple, often opposed, forces active in social relations and of their conditions of existence within the complex whole. As a consequence of the multiple forces that act upon subjective experience, class, race, and gender differences should not be thought as simply “contradictory” or acting separately. Rather, they must be understood as both complementary and contradictory, as part of an overdetermined process that comprises both supporting and opposing forces and that defines the whole of subjective experience.

Finally, Stuart Hall proposed to discuss the combination of differences as a question of “articulation” in light of the Marxian problematic of the “complex determination of the structure.” “What is ‘determined,’” Hall argues, “is not the inner form and appearance of each level, but the mode of combination and the placing of each instance in an articulated relation to the other elements” (1980, 326). Capital, as he points out, “reproduces the class, including its internal contradictions, as a whole—structured by race” (341). Expanding on Hall’s analysis on race, I would like to argue that difference is today lived as an experience that is articulated with the processes within the labor market and capitalist production.

There is a common thread running through these different approaches: intersectionality, overdetermination, and articulation are ultimately different names for the close interaction, or combination, among class, race, and gender within the concrete experiences of people’s lives. It is not my aim here to go into these different approaches, but I do want to emphasize the impossibility of understanding the production of subjectivity without taking into account the role of class in race and gender difference. In this regard, Chandra Mohanty unequivocally affirms that “[a]t this particular stage of global capitalism, the particularities of its operations (unprecedented deterritorialization, abstraction and concentration of capital, transnationalization of production and mobility through technology, consolidation of supranational corporations that link capital flows globally, etc.) necessitate naming capitalist hegemony and culture as a foundational principle of social life. To do otherwise is to obfuscate the way power and hegemony function in the world” (2004, 182–3).

However, the capitalist mode of production is not a level playing field. Rather, it is the space of the antagonistic tension between labor and capital, between labor management by capital and social cooperation exceeding capital. Therefore, class, race, and gender differences affect the production of subjectivity in terms of both exploitation and the composition of practices of resistance. They establish subjective positions within class relationships, working as tools for social hierarchies, on the one hand, and challenging capitalist social relations, on the other.

3. I discussed this topic in Curcio (2008).
Difference and Dispossession

To gain insights into the capitalist valorization of difference, it might be helpful to go over some studies on the capitalist articulation of difference in the context of primitive accumulation. Silvia Federici (2004) illustrates how the war against women waged in the form of witch hunts during the Middle Ages inaugurated a new sexual pact. The persecution and disciplining of the female body foreshadowed the sexual division of labor and the capitalistic rationalization of social reproduction. In this way, sex and gender differences were put to work to manage the socioeconomic and political shape of the development of capitalism.

This is similar to how race difference operated in the American colonies of the seventeenth century. In The Invention of the White Race (1997), Theodore Allen points to the violent process of social engineering that conferred privileges on white workers and justified labor exploitation and enslavement on the grounds of race. In this way, the racial division of labor laid the ground for capitalist accumulation. Black workers’ enslavement, together with the brutal dispossession of Native Americans, ushered in the capitalist era in America.

By “primitive accumulation,” however, I mean not only the violent expropriation of land, disciplining of bodies, and denial of freedom in a precapitalist era, but also the equally violent daily encounter between labor and capital on the wage-labor market. In this regard, I take the insights of different fields of study (e.g., French and Italian critical Marxism as well as postcolonial and feminist criticism) which read history with respect to its disconnections rather than its continuities, and refer to primitive accumulation not as the starting point in a linear process—progressing from a primitive to a more evolved process of accumulation—but as the condition of possibility for the production of the (‘original’) material condition of the exploitation of labor on a daily basis. This is the “actuality of the origin,” as Étienne Balibar pointed out in his contribution to Reading Capital (Althusser and Balibar 1970).

The “actuality of the origin” is the persistent dispossession and ongoing exploitation that recent studies have identified within the globalization processes: from expropriation and resistance processes in the Indonesian pluvial forests (Tsing 2005) to the constitution of a national labor market through processes of hierarchization and exploitation of migrant workers, which takes place today on a global scale (Mezzadra 2008). Another good case in point consists of the women who were charged with witchcraft and killed in contemporary rural India because they happened to be landowners during the large land disposessions in the country (Ravi 2009). Thus, the actuality of the origin concerns the conditions of possibility that, on a daily basis and a global scale, reproduce the exploitation of labor that characterized the early history of capitalism. This is a daily, violent process that, while separating labor power from the means of production, reveals the constant need to reproduce the conditions that make the encounter between labor and capital possible (that is, the production of labor power itself).

4. Certainly, this example also reveals the long history of colonialism, exploitation, and disruption that has characterized the history of India.
In the past as much as today, this encounter requires, as discussed above, processes of segmentation and hierarchization of labor power through race and gender differences as one of its conditions of existence. Thus, racialization and gendering have long since worked as instruments of worker exploitation and capitalist accumulation. They have established the forms and conditions of the relations among subjectivities and differences and paved the way to the reduction of living labor to abstract labor. However, racialization and gendering are never fixed processes; rather, they comprise a set of relations always present in different forms or degrees and always open to reversion.

In the nineteenth century United States, after the Civil War, as African Americans began to enter the labor market in large numbers, the social discrimination exercised against Irish migrant workers was displaced onto them (Ignatiev 1995). Similarly, in the early twentieth century, widespread racism against Italians gave way to discrimination against Latino workers in tandem with the subduing of labor militancy among Italian American workers and the decrease in the number of Italian migrants in contrast with the surge in Latino population (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003). Today, Vietnamese are perceived as “whiter” than Cambodians by virtue of their entrepreneurial prowess, and the Chinese minority of the Hmong, no longer “gooks,” are accepted even by veterans of the Korean War such as the character played by Clint Eastwood in the recent film Gran Torino, who continues to hold in contempt all other racialized minorities.

In a similar way, while the feminist struggles of the late twentieth century brought women out of the household, new forms of exploitation of women have taken shape: the rise of double exploitation at home and at work; the racialization of domestic and affective labor, largely outsourced but still carried out by women; the emergence of the so-called feminization of labor—that is, capitalist valorization of human aptitudes historically associated with the feminine, such as language, affectivity, and abilities in interpersonal relations, as well as the casual and flexible condition of women’s labor and so on.5

These examples describe how primitive accumulation functions in concrete, historical contexts. The historical shift from one racialized and gendered capitalist regime of difference to a new one comes as a result of social struggles; however, these examples also describe how the challenges to capitalist accumulation arise from within it. More important, despite its violent force, primitive accumulation is always prone to being undone. It is the condition of possibility for both capitalist valorization and its disruption.

As Marx avers in the Grundrisse, “the production of capitalist and wage laborers is thus a chief product of capital’s realization process” (1976a, 512; emphasis in the original). If we combine our discussion on primitive accumulation with Marx’s insight, we can say that the production of capitalist and wage laborers is both a condition of existence for and a result of capital. To put it in a slightly different language, the production of capitalism comes before capital itself. Therefore, the condition of

5. On the feminization of labor, I am mainly referring to the work of Christian Marazzi (2006) and Cristina Morini (2007).
possibility for the reproduction of capital does not exclude a priori the nonreproduction of that possibility itself. Or, to put it differently, the breaking up of capitalist relations is always a possibility, just as much as their perpetuation and hegemony. Thus, primitive accumulation, while generating dispossession, also gives rise to the production of the common as the place from which to forge (new) assemblages of desire, experiences of resistance and struggles, and sets of singularities beyond the capitalistic hierarchization of difference.

The Production of Subjectivity: Within and Against the Mode of Production

The analysis of primitive accumulation developed so far implies that the common cannot be taken for granted but must be constantly produced within the antagonistic tension animating the relations of production. The common takes form through the action of a powerful and militant subjectivity constituted precisely by the desire to overturn capitalist dispossession and to interrupt the capitalist valorization of difference: that is, to block the conversion of difference into the capitalist language of value.

This subjectivity is a completely materialistic one, entirely located within the antagonistic tension between labor and capital. In late capitalism, libidinal investments as well as the unconscious do not take place outside the mode of production (Jameson 1981). Rather, they are strongly linked to the historical constellation of the material conditions of labor and social relations. While enjoyment, pleasure, and desire, as well as dissatisfaction, fear, and similar affective concerns, inform the entire experience of the subject, their textures are defined and shaped along the lines of color and gender division within capitalism.

Take the xenophobia that is present in all modern societies. This concern about foreigners as an infection of the national social order has gone on throughout history, side by side with fears of other figures that ideologies of capitalism have designated as alien. Likewise xenophobia is reflected in the constant denial of the Other as a result of colonialism and orientalism. This is a process of detachment, discharge, segmentation, and hierarchization by which the Western subject has constituted its other and concomitantly itself (Said 1978).

At the beginning of capitalism, aliens were women—usually from the lower classes—accused of being witches, as mentioned above. They were persecuted because of the control they had over reproduction and because of the fear that the power they wielded could undermine the existing social order. Similarly, the exploitation of African slaves and the dispossession of Native Americans at the beginning of U.S. history were largely justified on the grounds of their classification as aliens for practicing a different form of social organization.

In the following centuries, the aliens were migrant workers, although this was not peculiar to America. The phobia of migrants, be they Irish or Italians, arose in America during the forging of a new low-cost labor force that drove the transition between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In the post–World War II period, the enemy became Latinos. These mainly illegal workers, reserved for “unskilled”
jobs, constituted the exploited and blackmailed labor force upon which the U.S. economy continues to be based. In the aftermath of 9/11, the people of Middle Eastern descent and all the nonwhite foreign workers in the country have become the new national enemy as possible or potential terrorists, and the “war on terror” at home and abroad supports new forms of labor exploitation.

Fears, as well as desires and aspirations, continue to reflect the apprehensions and beliefs of subjects that are always contingent upon their particular social and political conditions while simultaneously being accountable for them. For instance, the massive support given to Obama’s candidacy expresses a kind of “hope” that would be incomprehensible in a different period. Significant in this regard is the way “hope” stands for restoring the injured sense of identity and alleviating the long legacy of guilt (around being charged as racists) that American society has experienced, especially during the period of the Bush administration. Furthermore, “hope” assumed a range of different meanings. The expectation to restore the injured American identity was conjoined with African Americans’ hope of overturning entrenched discrimination as well as with migrant workers’ aspirations for better conditions of life. More than a summation of different kind of expectations, then, “hope” was a slogan, an empty signifier into which everybody could place his or her desires independent of whether those desires were part of the White House candidate’s political agenda.

Similarly, the contemporary mobility of labor is based on neither a pure economic need nor a romantic idea. Rather, labor mobility brings to light the reshaping of the international division of labor and enables us to make sense of the concrete materializations of globalization. Nevertheless, such mobility also strongly expresses the desires and aspirations of contemporary subjectivity to resist, travel, connect experiences, and discover new worlds and possible forms of life.

It is true that contemporary subjectivity is complex and multifaceted. She expresses positions and contradictions that must be recognized as constitutive of the production of the common (Revel 2004). While I affirm this complex subjectivity, however, I want to situate the production of subjects’ desires with respect to class struggle and antagonism within the mode of production. Dynamic rather than static, contemporary subjectivity traces the anthropological mutations of modernity which are always determined in class struggles and transformations of the mode of production. That is to say, she is inseparable from the labor/capital relations that make her possible, although she is much more than a mere effect of the relations of production.

The production of subjectivity, Jason Read (2003) points out, should be thought by the double meaning of its genitive as simultaneously involved “in” and constituted “by” the mode of production. This twin process describes both forms of subjection and irreducible subjectivities producing the common. On the one hand, there is the production of subjectivity by capital (that is, subjection and production of the dispositifs of power): capitalistic command over living labor and the capturing (by racialization and gendering as well as by disqualification and precarization) of social cooperation. On the other hand, there is the productive power of subjectivity (that is, subjectivation and production of the common) as an autonomous and resisting force that exceeds power relations and capitalist production.
Therefore, while capital translates difference into the language of value and uses race and gender as tools in the segmentation and hierarchization of labor power, a political subjectivity takes the form of flight from the dominant social order. Such subjectivity, irreducibly situated in the capitalist hierarchical organization of difference, is exactly positioned where she can break up the internal equilibrium of the functioning of capitalist social relations and practice a new political and subjective experience that can produce the common: a cooperative ground of practices, discourses, and imaginaries beyond the confines capital sets up along the lines of race and gender difference.

Producing the Common

The production of the common as a cooperative plane of language, practices, and imaginaries happens through the interruption of the relations of production with the refusal of racialized and gendered subjectivity to engage in capitalist valorization. The production of such an autonomous and resistant political subjectivity, who will be the agent of this interruption, is both the result and the condition of possibility of the production of the common. There is no class without class struggle, Mario Tronti explains in analyzing the labor/capital relationship in post–World War II Italy (1966, 228–34). “There are no class struggles without the production of the common” is how we might update his statements for a contemporary communist manifesto at the height of the capitalist mode of production and globalization processes.

Today, as in the late twentieth century, there is no political consciousness that is to be developed at an indefinite future, but rather there are subjectivities embodying difference that could hic et nunc organize the production of the common as a site of radical transformation and social change. Class as a political concept arises as the composition of subjectivity and difference in a common ground of imageries, language, and expectations.

Within such a production of the common, differences work as the thematic variation that at any time makes the interruption of capitalist valorization possible through the construction of affinities between and across differences and through the composition of multifarious desires, motivations, and beliefs together with their conditions, limitations, and effects. This process of flight from the capitalist valorization of difference is never completed, but is a ceaseless endeavor.

A political subjectivity, in that sense, constructs ties where capital produces separation, interruption, and fractures. She practices what Jacques Rancière (1999) has defined as “disidentification” from an imagined belonging—whether ethnic, sexual, religious, or territorial—that gives the subjectivity the chance to break from the politics of recognition that seeks to fix difference by means of reducing it to the capitalist language of value. However, the disidentification I have in mind is not évènementielle; it does not take the form of an event. Rather, it refers to a process of organization and production of the common through which this political

6. The idea of refusal I am using is Tronti’s: that is, refusal as the interruption of the relations of production (1966, 234–52).
subjectivity expresses her singularity beyond identity and belonging. Disidentification is a process through which subjectivity voices herself, not to express her undeniable difference, but rather to articulate a multiplicity of differences through the experiences in her life, as postcolonial critique has highlighted. Such a disidentified subject practices, in the service of the production of the common, “intervals of subjectification” (Rancière 1999, 137), the space in between identities, conditions, statuses, names, and belongings. This “interval” is the rupture or interruption of capitalist valorization, the space and the condition of the refusal that makes possible the transgression of borders standing between separate identities and places. This is “the construction of ties that bind the given to what is not given, the common to the private, what belongs to what does not belong” (138) and that subvert the capitalist organization of society and its hierarchies, reminding us that the common is a process of organization that always needs to be produced.

The transgression of subjectivity and the rupture of exploitation and hierarchies express the discontent and indignation felt toward the capitalist organization of social relations. This means to “go against”: to go against the “sameness” of the capitalist language of value by crossing the material and immaterial borders along race and gender lines that capital erects around us. This is the production of the common, a different form of common living that organizes the social relations “by all” and “for all” and flees from hierarchies and exploitation.

Translating Difference: The Praxis of the Common

The construction of “a different form of common living” has to be produced from within the antagonistic tension between labor and capital. Against the homogeneity of the capitalistic language of value that reduces subjectivity and “difference” into “sameness,” we need to push the language of living labor that speaks of the inexorable heterogeneity of social cooperation. To produce the common, this heterogeneity must be organized. The subjectivities that embody difference should gather together in a common substance. This is not a linear and smooth process. Rather, the relationship between the self as singularity (i.e., partiality of labor and subjectivity) and others as multiplicity stands in continuous tension with the homogenizing process of capitalist valorization and with the encroachments of the logic of sameness. Therefore, to produce the common, difference as partiality and the common (as the coming together of subjectivities and differences) have to engage with each other and invent various forms of articulation for the valorization of the other.

However, we need to keep in mind that the production of the common could operate in an ambivalent manner, both greeting and denying the other. If to greet refers to a genuine engagement with difference, to deny means closure in defense of difference as a supposed identity. On the one hand, there is the production of ties—as “being-between”—among subjectivities that embody difference, as we have

7. Here I have in mind the reflections on subjectivity by subaltern studies and, in particular, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work (2000) and the analysis of Chandra Mohanty (2004).
witnessed in the U.S. migrant workers’ marches in 2006 or in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. On the other hand, there is difference as an identity to defend, such as in the “Hockey Moms for Palin” initiative that supported the McCain-Palin ticket in the last U.S. presidential campaign or, a worse case, in nativists’ patrolling of the U.S.–Mexico border.

Seen in this light, to be in common requires the building up of a bridge between singularity and multiplicity without disregard for difference. This is what some postcolonial scholars describe as a process of translation that maintains difference rather than repressing it in going beyond the capitalist language of value. According to Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon, while capital classifies and hierarchically organizes differences (in what they call the homolingual address of translation), being in common occurs each time anew in what they call the heterolingual address of translation. This is the mode in which “you are always confronted, so to speak, with foreigners in your enunciation” (2009, 137). Heterolingual translation might be the mode in which immanent subjectivity combines difference and valorizes the creative potential of the other. This is the production of the common by and through difference from a condition of incommensurability (i.e., heterolingual address of translation) as opposed to the production of equivalence (i.e., homolingual address of translation).

This way, difference as singularity, rather than as identity, could become the terrain—although tactical and situated—for the translation of languages, experiences, and imaginaries in the political composition and organization of the common. However, this is not a process immune to the encroachment of identity; rather, it is always threatened by the possibility of its reversal. It is at one and the same time joined with and different from the composition of homolingual translation, although continuously overlapping with it.

A linguistic example could be helpful to describe this complex process of heterolingual translation as translation of the common. The speech among Latino and Chinese workers in the United States is heterolingual because they speak a new configuration of languages that looks like English but is not English. Nor is it Chinese or Spanish or Span-English. It is a new language (uncodified and free from identity) in which the Latino and the Chinese worker act more as inventors than translators, composing (and producing) a new, heterogeneous means of communication that builds up ties among different languages, cultures, and experiences, although it continuously deals with the homogeneity of English.

In the production of the common, where heterolingual translation does happen, race, gender, and class affinities compose each other, disjoining former identities and constructing a new fabric of social identity. This was the case with the Justice for Janitors campaign in the Los Angeles business district. Started in the early 1990s by the coming together of a group of undocumented workers, mainly Latino women, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 399, this self-organized campaign produced a wide alliance in support of janitors’ struggles for better wages and working conditions. This citywide alliance, supported by the media and involving

8. I want to thank Alvaro Reyes for suggesting that I develop this point.
a broad range of activists and advocates, was able to mobilize black and Latina/o janitors (from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico) together with a large network of migrant workers (Trevizo and Montag 1990; Milkman 2006). Moving beyond insular identities and belongings, these workers shared knowledge, languages, and political expertise coming from different country-specific experiences and political traditions. The struggle produced a common ground of imaginaries, expectations, and political practices that exemplified how the composition of race, gender, and class difference could broadly work to produce the common.

It was a similar heterolingual production of the common that was at play in the composition of the migrant marches of 2006 in the United States, which translated the enormous differences among workers’ experiences and demands into the common slogan “¡Si, Se Puede!” The migrants acted precisely by interrupting the homogeneous language of capital. They invented and practiced forms of self-organization and autonomous cooperation that destabilized the traditional, homogenous form of representative democracy. They suspended capitalistic relations of production, playing with the heterogeneity of language, imageries, and political practices instead of going along with the empty and violent homogeneity of the political institutions of capital. Nevertheless, this powerful political experience was never completely devoid of the risk of being assimilated by homogenous and representative practices. The identity backlash was always a distinct possibility, reminding us that heterolingual translation is constantly at stake.

Therefore the translation, as well as the production, of the common is a battlefield, a plane of tension on which homogeneity and heterogeneity compete. The case of the coalition for Obama is exemplary: it was the outcome of a process of composition of differences and openness to new alliances around a common goal. It has also run the risk of redirecting difference into an “identity politics” or, worse, into the “neutrality of race” (Curcio, Hardt, and Wiegman 2008), that is the capitalistic valorization of difference. This is the capturing of the common into a form of system functioning and compatibility, not heterolingual translation. Rather, it speaks the language of multiracialism and multiculturalism, emptying difference of its political meaning while relativizing it.

As an ambivalent process, translation could embrace the partiality of singularity as an incommensurable difference or it could impose the homogeneity of identity, lapping into essentialism. Identity refers to a form of (dialectical) recognition of difference—based on the homogenization of the Other—that denies the disparity of translatability and untranslatability, and fails to recognize the hierarchical organization of social relations around difference. Identity is intimately connected with the empty idea of (universal) equivalence of difference that underpins the notion of the neutrality of race and gender. Singularity, on the other hand, is the (immanent) subjectivity producing the common as the possible form of communism in the twenty-first century.

Thus, to imagine and practice communism today requires, first of all, a shared responsibility for the other. It calls for the rejection of solitude and individualism, and the development of new forms of common coexistence in resistance and organization. This way, we may still put to work the idea of a “social surplus” from the Grundrisse as a fundamental part of communism, notwithstanding the limits of the
Marxist theorization of communism, especially in its concrete application in “real socialism.”

Organizing the Common

The production of the common as the rupture of a capitalist valorization of difference requires the invention of forms of political organization able to translate desires, needs, and forms of life into a common constituent dynamic. The common, as Hardt and Negri argue, “is an inexhaustible source of innovation and creativity” (2009, 111–2). It interrupts capitalist relations of production, inventing a process of organization of singularity in the common. Therefore, to produce the common means to create self-organization (that is, the autonomous organization of the self as singularity in a collective way), replacing delegation and participation within representative democracy as the leading forms of social and political organization. Within this framework, the production of the common aims to be an open process of politicization that challenges the traditional forms of politics, recognizes singularity and difference, and opens up a space for agency.

Valorizing singularity in self-organized practices goes beyond the process of dialectical recognition by an external and homogeneous identity (i.e., homolingual translation through a party or a union) that is characteristic of representative democracy. It sparks unconventional forms of politics and organizations. These practices act as the common constituent dynamic, meaning they are free from the institutional production of power.

Several examples of this unconventional form of political organization take form in recent history. These are, among other examples, the aforementioned social unionism experiences such as the Justice for Janitors campaign and the political practices expressed by the migrants’ uprising in spring 2006. Another such form is found in the Workers Centers: self-organized and independent (from unions and parties) political experiences founded on workers’ agency and taking voice. These centers combine “different types of organizations, from social service agencies, fraternal organizations, settlement houses, community organizing groups, and unions to social movement organizations . . . working at the intersection between race, gender and low-wage work” (Fine 2006, 12–3).

All these experiences involved the organization of the contemporary cheap (mostly displaced migrant) labor force by autonomous political practices with assistance from advocate groups, social movements, churches, neighborhood groups, associations, and so on. Nevertheless, to produce the common, these experiences have to allow room for a militant subjectivity to make her voice heard. They need a militant subjectivity that breaks with the political recognition required by representative democracy and valorizes differences, inventing new forms of politics. Working in this way, the production of the common emerges as heterolingual translation, bringing together and valorizing subjectivities and practices that have multiple historical and geographical origins. Also, the production of the common enables experimental practices within the unions, contributing to the renewal of the labor movement internally by challenging the traditional form of representative democracy.
The One and the Multiple

A crucial question that emerges in this discussion is the question of the relationship between “the one” and “the multiple”—in other words, the relationship between “unity” and “multiplicity,” between the holistic homogeneous subjects of the entire history of capitalism and the heterogeneous subjects in the production of the common. To put this in other words, this is the antagonistic tension between the homolingual translation of the capitalist language of value and the heterolingual translation as the production of the common.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, social and political struggles have shown the rise of a “new” subjectivity that is neither apolitical nor ineffective. Rather, it is a testament to the inability of the traditional labor movement, the homogeneous subject of social transformation, to follow desires, languages, and the forms of life of contemporary—heterogeneous—subjectivities. These struggles, wary of pessimism and political impasses, openly challenged the universal subject of political transformation some time before academia and postmodernism decreed the “death of the subject.”

The student struggles in 1968, the feminist protests during the 1970s, and the African American fight for civil rights, together with the more recent examples above, prove, among other things, the possibility of a nonhomogeneous composition of subjectivities within the common. These were none other than autonomous and self-organized practice and social cooperation in action. They describe the rise of a political subject that takes the partiality of difference as the central force in social transformation and confronts the holistic homogeneity of the traditional political subject: namely, the parties and unions.

Working on the potentiality of rupture expressed by difference, this political subject composes singularity on a common plane of action and challenges the capitalistic organization of social relations and the presumed universal homogeneity of the political subject. This is organization of the common by the partiality of difference. That is to say, the production of the common finds its potentia in the composition of the multiplicity of differences. However, the composition of the multiplicity of differences is not a smooth plane, but a constant struggle. It raises the question how singularities and differences could be both the bases for, and what are at stake in, the production of the common. This is the conundrum that a political praxis oriented toward communism has to resolve.

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