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ECOLOGIES OF THE COMMON:
FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF NATURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation proposes a theory of the common beyond the modern figure of Man as primary agent of historical transformation. Through close reading of Medieval debates on poverty and common use, contemporary political theory and political speeches, legal documents, and protests in public spaces, it complicates current debates on the common in three ways. First, this work contends that the enclosures of pre-modern landholdings, a process the unfolded in connected and yet distinct ways in Europe and the colonies, was entangled with the affirmation of the European white man as proper figure of the human entitled to appropriate the labor of women and slaves, and the material world as resources. Second, it engages contemporary theorists of the common such as Paolo Virno, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Although these authors depart from the prevalent assumptions of modern liberalism (in that they do not take the individual right to appropriate nature as the foundation of political community), their formulation of common is still grounded in Marx's view of labor as the primary force making the world. As a counterpoint to this position, this dissertation draws on feminist and science studies to bring into relief the entanglements of human and other-than-human entities (including water, soil, and technological infrastructures) that constitute the common. Finally, it examines connections and divergences between Western notions of the common-as-resources and contemporary

indigenous communal politics in Latin America that unsettle the divide between nature and politics. *Ecologies of the Common* mobilizes the pre-modern past and indigenous forms of life obliterated by Western narratives of development as living forces that might generate the future of the common as mode of living together in the ruins of capitalism.

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Introduction: The Cosmopolitical Common

Drowned Worlds

For a while the existence of the lake was a secret whispered in the ears of activists and residents of the Prenestino neighborhood, a densely populated labyrinth of cars, cement and steel in Rome, Italy. During moonlit nights, the urban lake could be reached through a narrow, slightly impervious path from the Ex-SNIA Viscosa, a former textile factory that activists had turned into a self-managed social center. At the end of the path, half-hidden by brambles, there was a drowned world: a skeleton of cement submerged by glimmering water, taken over by vegetation, birds and insects¹. The spill erupted from underground in the early 1990s when builders working at the construction site of a shopping center struck a source of Rome's famous *acqua bullicante*, mineral water that flows through a geological layer storing the ruins of the Roman Empire now mixed with plastic debris, the marker of terminal industrialism. The water submerged the construction site and formed a large basin of sixth metres in depth. The urban lake slowed down capitalist urban development and quietly began to exert its force of attraction on those who learned to care for its existence.

In 2014, an alliance of activists from the Ex-SNIA Viscosa and local residents, including do-it-yourself cyclists, rebel engineers, and hip-hop artists, organized a protest to block the development plan. They referred to the "lake that resists" as a common. In that messy field of political struggle the unexpected happened: the city's administration

¹ Seen at night the urban lake evokes the apocalyptic landscape described by science-fiction writer James Ballard in *The drowned world*, published in 1962. The novel depicts a European city in the aftermath of solar storms that have turned it into a tropical lagoon inhospitable to human life.

expropriated part of the land and pledged to work with the activists to keep the area accessible to all. What I find compelling about this story is not just that the recalcitrant lake became a common but how it functioned as catalyzer for a project of commoning. I argue that commoning here begins with an attachment that brings together the water, insects and plants, the concrete relic, and the activists. An attachment, as Isabelle Stengers puts it, is what “has the power to make practitioners think, feel, and hesitate” (2010: 15). Attachments generate problems, pose questions, propel collective becomings that could not be enacted by humans alone. The lake is not an object around which bounded human subjects coalesce. Rather, it is part of a political collective as the existent capable of enabling political thought and action.

This dissertation foregrounds the common as mode of living together that arises in the cracks of capitalism and requires the interplay of many kinds of beings, many of which are other-than-human. The common has roots in Medieval theological and legal debates concerning property ownership. The term traditionally referred to natural and social resources such as forests, rivers, and pastures. More recently, it has also come to encompass images and information that are neither public nor private, but collectively managed. In contemporary political theory, scholars such as Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1990) identify the common as one of the options within a polycentric system of governance, which includes market and state-based solutions. Marxist theorists, instead, propose the common as *alternative* to public and private regimes of governance (Hardt and Negri 2009, Dardot and Laval 2015). These works, and the ways in which they have been taken up and elaborated by social movements, have been vital for reintroducing the common in the contemporary political vocabulary. Yet, I worry that such images of the common tend to incorporate the

modernist distinction between self-organizing human collectives and a malleable earth. As a result, they tend to ignore the *socio-natural* assemblages that constitute the common.

My work departs from prevalent orientations toward the common in that it argues for a rethinking of the earth no longer as the feminized and racialized backdrop for Man's endeavors but as unstable ensemble of powers that enables the production of the new out of the exhaustion of the possibilities of the present. *Ecologies of the Common* explores the imbrication of human and nonhuman entities (including water, land and technological infrastructures) that sustain struggles for what, inspired by philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2010), I call the "cosmopolitical common." This project asks: What makes the common? How do particular beings come to matter in the making of the common while others are relegated in the background? What different modalities of the common come to light if we call into question the figure of Man-the-producer as the subject of history and the master of nature?

The urban lake is hardly an example of pristine wilderness. On the contrary, it is an ensemble of nature and technics that signals the advent of what some call the Anthropocene, the new geological epoch defined by human impact on earth processes. Introduced by biologist Eugene Stoermer and widely popularized by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen (2002), the Anthropocene has become a buzzword among scholars across disciplines, the media, and policymakers. For Crutzen and his collaborators (Steffen *et al* 2011) the epoch of human influence on the planet began with the industrial revolution in the eighteenth-century. But, they contend, it is only after World War II, with the Great Acceleration due to the intensive extraction of fossil fuels that *homo sapiens* has become a geophysical force capable of altering the remarkable stability of the Holocene through massive deforestation, climate change, and rising ocean levels.

There is considerable debate among scientists about the causes of this shift, its periodization, and the empirical evidence justifying the adoption of the proposed term. The International Commission on Stratigraphy, the scientific body that oversees the divisions recognized in the International Geologic Time Scale, is expected to take a decision by the end of 2016. Regardless, there is little doubt that the Anthropocene “has the capacity to become the most politicized unit, by far, of the Geological Time Scale” (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010: 2231).

Politics in the Anthropocene, and the politics of the concept itself, remain contentious. Some argue that the human species, now the dominant geological force on the planet, must enter an era of global governance and planetary stewardship to avert impending catastrophe (Steffen et al 2011, Chakrabarty 2009). Others object that the framing of the Anthropocene as a species-problem contributes to a post-political condition that replaces conflicts around socio-economic configurations with managerial planning and technological fixes. From this standpoint, the current planetary predicament is a result of capitalist socio-ecological relations that can only be addressed through the cultivation of agonistic disagreement over the trajectory of environmental dynamics (Swyngedouw 2011).

Despite their divergences, both positions share the investment in the human as the primary agent of world-making and politics as its proper sphere of action. As Anna Tsing points out, however, “making worlds is not limited to humans” (2015: 22). World-making is a matter of overlapping activities many of which exist irrespective of human life, control and even knowledge. Moreover, the Anthropocene concept tends to focus on the human as undifferentiated species. Thus, it belies the false universality of Man, the historical formation that feminism and anti-racism have struggled to dislodge from his commanding position.

What kind of politics, then, might reorient attention from the *anthropos* to the many earthly forces that partake in world-making?

Building on feminist and decolonial scholarship of socio-natural entanglements, this dissertation directs attention to more-than-human collectives that struggle to persist and transform in the midst of precarity, a condition of heightened, albeit uneven, indeterminacy about the future that is at once ecological, psychic, and social. In Europe, for example, precarity manifests itself in the form of austerity measures, flexible labour and killing regimes of illegality. In Latin America it emanates from the intertwining of colonial history and renewed waves of deforestation, mining and drilling that go under the name of “new extractivism.” Debates on precarity in feminist scholarship and allied fields tend to focus on the differential allocation of vulnerability across lines of gender, race, and geography under global capitalism (Butler 2004a, Berlant 2011, Puar 2012). The ecological dimension of precarity, however, has received less sustained attention². But insofar as precarity invests what Felix Guattari (2000) called the “three ecologies,” that is, the immanent domains of the earth, the social and the body as thinking multiplicity, it demands transversal ethico-political interventions. My reworking of the common moves in this direction, by exploring the common across the three immanent domains that Western modernity presents as separated.

The episode of the rebel lake is seemingly insignificant when placed next to big-pictures stories of antagonism, of riots and uprisings that characterize the uneven geographies of precarity. But I argue that it constitutes a cosmopolitical event. Isabelle (2005a) offers the concepts of *cosmopolitics* as a way to complicate the Western understanding of politics as gathering of sovereign individuals capable of making judgements in the interest

² Anna Tsing takes up the question of intespecies precarity in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015).

of the community. The prefix “cosmos” is meant to make explicit the presence of disparate entities and beings that do not have a political voice or do not even want to have one, and yet come to matter politically. If the story of the Anthropocene tells of the unintended consequences of that particular entanglement of humans and earthly forces that goes under the name of fossil-fuel capitalism, the episode of the recalcitrant lake begins to illuminate the potential of a cosmopolitical common.

The stakes of rethinking the common are real and urgent. Doomed to oblivion by Garrett Hardin’s influential pastoral parable (1968), in recent years the common has been taken up by political movements as a project capable of creating alternatives to the suffocating neoliberal climate. It figures prominently in the struggles of Indian and Argentinean peasants contesting the commodification of biodiversity (Goldman 1998, Bollier 2015), campaigns opposing the privatization of water in Bolivia and Italy (Mattei 2011), students’ contestations of the neoliberal restructuring of the university and free software programmers laying claims to “living knowledge” (Roggero 2011), protest encampments of Occupy Wall Street and Gezi Park. In the intensive present of struggle the common cuts across issues of economy and ecology, it evokes resistance to regimes of governance by debt (Joseph 2014, Lazzarato 2015), processes of financialization that subsume socio-natural life (Cooper 2010), and extractive economies that intensify the wresting of raw materials from the earth on an untenable pace and scale. The turn to the common in contemporary radical movements in Europe and elsewhere provided the initial impetus for this project.

In what follows I consider three diverging narratives of the common in order to situate my project within larger debates on this topic. Then, I turn to feminist engagement with matter, nature, and the earth to flesh out their centrality for reworking the common

beyond the binary of society and nature. Finally, I discuss the dissertation's methods and outline the chapters.

Three Narratives of the Common

Garrett Hardin's notorious *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) is a wildly popular text among neo-Malthusian environmentalists and conservative policy makers. If Hardin's parable turns the common into a relic of an ahistorical past, Elinor Ostrom's work (1990) reveals its relevance in present forms of governance of resources. More radically, Marxist political theorists shift focus to the *common* or *commoning* as social activity productive of institutions that prefigure and prepare the exodus from capitalist relations of production (Hardt and Negri 2009, Virno 2010, Federici 2012, Dardot and Laval 2015). This dissertation engages the latter line of inquiry, its political possibilities and limits in forging futurity in our volatile epoch.

In the concise essay *Tragedy of the Commons*, published in the journal *Science* in 1968, biologist Garrett Hardin envisions the image of herders accessing open pastures. Stripped of cultural histories, geographical locations, and social ties, Hardin's herder is a pastoral version of the *homo oeconomicus* of classic political economy, a man propelled by self-interest in a world of scarcity. Each individual strives to maximize his personal gain by overloading the land with livestock with no regard for the collective good. The pasture is gradually depleted and the users eventually impoverished. Hardin's writes (1968: 1244): "Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limits—in a world that is limited." The conclusion is lapidary: "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons."

Hardin used the inescapable deterioration of the grazing commons as a metaphor to illustrate his fundamental concern with the increase of population in an already crowded planet. Rejecting the notion that the sum of individual reproductive decisions will provide the best fix for the problem, he offered a draconian solution: authoritarian population control. As postcolonial scholar Rob Nixon (2012) aptly notes, Hardin was writing at a time when decolonization was spreading internationally. This was also the time when women's movements were claiming autonomy from patriarchy. The ghosts populating Hardin's tragic commons are the breeding poor and selfish women who keep having children. Biology makes women, particularly the poor and uneducated, ultimately responsible for overpopulation. A coercive force is needed to discipline the unruly reproductive body of the wretched of the earth.

The uncompromising title of Hardin's essay has been evoked countless times by advocates of centralized state control of natural resources as well as advocates of privatization (which is quite paradoxical given the author's defense of extreme state intervention). Much has been done to unearth the presumptions and methodological flaws of Hardin's bleak assessment of the common. To begin with, his ahistorical notion of the common conflated the Roman law categories of *res nullius* (vacant resources that can be appropriated), and *res communis* (that which does not belong to anyone and is unavailable to appropriation). Hardin imagines the herders as selfish subjects guided the maximization of utility but excludes the possibility of cooperation to prevent overloading and depletion.

The work of political scientist Elinor Ostrom (1990), recipient of the Nobel prize for economics in 2009, provides a powerful rebuttal of Hardin's argument. Drawing on game theory and the systematization of extensive empirical research, Ostrom's early work demonstrates the viability of the management of *common-pool resources* (CPRs), that is, non-

exclusive *natural* goods exposed to the risk of depletion. She investigates long-enduring and self-organized CPRs ranging from mountain grazing in Switzerland, to forests in Japan, to irrigation systems in the Philippines. Whereas the access to resources open to all is unregulated, the successful management of CPRs entails a complex set of culturally specific arrangements that users establish and modify collectively. The flourishing of the common depends on the crafting of *institutions*, that is, practical rules of collective action capable of incentivize cooperation and solve internal conflicts. Ostrom challenges policy models that present centralized state control and market deregulation as dichotomous options. The governance of the commons, she argues, depends on context-specific negotiations among individuals.

Ostrom's analysis is invaluable for posing questions of durability in the making of the commons but remains problematic in a number of ways. She frames the common as one of the options within a multi-level system of governance that comprises public and private solutions to the economic management of resources. While the crafting of enduring CPRs works in particular situations, market and State-based solutions may be more rational or efficient in other cases. This approach is not concerned with the historical erasure of the common. Nor it is interested in the conflicts that arise in the interactions among the state, the market and the common. As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval observe (2015), Ostrom's work oscillates between the emphasis on the collective management of the common and the economist belief on intrinsic characteristics of goods that determine the form of their governance. Ostrom provides a crucial corrective to Hardin's crude application of the model of the *homo oeconomicus* but she still operates within the liberal paradigm that assumes the capacity of rational individuals to devise advantageous contractual forms for managing resources in ways that increase benefits and reduce costs.

The third narrative of the common that I want to consider was inaugurated by Marx in *Capital, Volume 1* (1976: 874-940). Here, Marx famously argues that the enclosure of common land in sixteenth-century England was a key moment in the process of the “primitive accumulation” that prepared the ground for the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The historical process that forced peasants out of communal landholdings and into dependency on wage labor was a violent one, written in “letters of blood and fire” (875). In Europe this process included the expropriation of land and expulsion of peasants, the conversion of various kinds of property arrangements into exclusive private property rights and the commodification of labor power (Harvey 2003). In the colonies it comprised the seizure of land, the extraction of raw materials and the enslavement of indigenous populations. For Marx, primitive accumulation was the brutal, though necessary, precondition to capitalist development. It established the primacy of private property but also created the working class which he saw as the historical agent of transition to socialism.

A range of contemporary Marxist thinkers, have engaged and transformed Marx’s narrative of the common. A particular concern has emerged for the ways in which new waves of enclosures, dispossession of resources and welfare provisions take place continuously and on a global scale under current neoliberal regimes thereby reconfiguring non-capitalist aspects of society into capitalist form (Mies 1989, Midnight Notes Collective 1990, Harvey, 2003). Central for my project is the work of autonomist Marxists who focus on the shifting power relations between the common, states, and markets, and propose modes of living-in-common as alternative to the converging processes of capitalism and Western modernity. Rather than a coherent narrative, this is an archipelago comprising a range of different positions and points of engagement with the common.

Autonomist Marxism, and the tradition of *operaismo* (workerism) that preceded it, is a peculiar form of theorizing *within social movements*³ that emerged in Italy during a long season of struggle that began in the 1960s. This was an ebullient time marked by the tumultuous and uneven industrialization of Italy, profound transformations in the organization of labor, and widespread social conflict. Starting in the 1950s, former peasants from Southern Italy migrated to the North to be employed in the Taylorist factories thus changing the composition of the working class. There was a widening rift between the new wave of young, unqualified workers who refused the dominant work ethic and the Italian Communist Party's attempt to control revolutionary forces through a strategy that included the use of trade-union CGIL as "transmission belt" of the party in the factories. Intellectuals at the left of the Communist Party, increasingly critical of the Soviet Union and orthodox Marxism-Leninism, coalesced around militant journals to investigate the shifting composition of the working class and its potential for anti-capitalist struggles. Among them there were Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, and Romano Alquati. In the early 1970s, the multiplication of political antagonism and irruption of new political subjectivities—including proletarian youth, feminists, and a myriad of counter cultural groups—compelled many early workerists to join *autonomia*, a mobile archipelago of organizations and movements⁴. Some, like Tronti, rejoined the ranks of the Communist Party.

³ Here I am referencing Michael Hardt's discussion of Italian autonomist movements in the introduction of *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (1996). Hardt mentions Fredric Jameson's reflection on "the condition of theorizing without social movements" (5).

⁴ For an introduction to Italian autonomist movements in English see Lotringer and Marazzi (1980), Hardt and Virno (1996), Wright (2002). In Italy, DeriveApprodi has published several important histories and edited collections on workerism and autonomist Marxism. See the trilogy *Gli autonomi* edited by Lanfranco Caminiti and Sergio Bianchi (2007, 2008), and *Il ghiaccio era sottile* by Marcello Tarì (2012).

At the end of the decade, a sweeping campaign of state repression resulted in the imprisonment and exile of hundred of militants. In spite of it, autonomist thought has moved across borders and transformed through intellectual contamination, activist exchanges and encounters with other political and philosophical lines of inquiry⁵. Scholars-activists working within this heterodox Marxist tradition take the point of view of labor, and its antagonistic relation to capital, as central for grasping the metamorphosis of the common throughout history and its political potential for the present moment. Here, I succinctly consider three distinguishing features of Autonomist approaches to the common: the

⁵ In a text launching the conference Commonalities at Cornell University in 2010, Timothy Campbell suggested that “the decisive weight afforded to the notion of the common” (Campbell 2010) is the feature linking a number of influent contemporary Italian thinkers. He mentioned Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito’s elaboration on Bataille’s theme of the community of those who have no community; Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri’s autonomist analysis of the common in post-Fordist productive processes; Rosi Braidotti’s displacement of communal bonds in favour of Deleuzian nomadology and even Adriana Cavarero’s feminist reflection on embodied uniqueness and vulnerability. In spite of its attractiveness and effectiveness for the purpose of organizing a highly successful conference, I find the grouping of these thinkers under the banner of the common too encompassing and at the same time somehow “provincial” in its focus on *Italian* theory. After all, Agamben and Esposito’s work on the community would be best understood in the context of a conversation that began in France with the publication of Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community* (1998) and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* (1991). The evolution of Antonio Negri’s philosophy would be hard to grasp without considering the vicissitudes of the Italian revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the trajectory of political exile in France through which he encountered collaborators and interlocutors including Felix Guattari, Judith Revel and Michael Hardt. Perhaps most strikingly, the divergent philosophies of embodiment of feminist thinkers such as Adriana Cavarero and Rosi Bradotti can be more usefully employed to problematize current conceptualization of the common rather than as examples of it. Indeed, this is one lines of research that I pursue in this dissertation. But there is more. An analysis that focuses on the centrality of the common within Italian theory and the originality of Italian political thought with respect to the European philosophical tradition, runs the risk of obfuscating the ways in which non-European life-worlds productively displace the universality of Western modes of knowledge and conceptual apparatuses. Thus, instead of positioning my investigation within “Italian theory,” I focus on the role of autonomist Marxism’s in a heterogeneous landscape of theories of the common. On *Italian theory* see Chiesa and Toscano (2009), Esposito (2012), Gentili (2012), and Gentili and Stimilli (2015).

insistence on the creative force of “living labor,” the refusal of work and the constitution of forms of life autonomous from capitalist command.

While *Capital* was and remains the foundational text of classical Marxism, autonomist Marxism, focused on the *Grundrisse* (1973) and the relationship between *dead labor* – i.e. labor objectified in machinery and technology – and *living labor*, creative human activity that Marx identified with the collective potential of workers’ bodies (1973: 361). Marx describes living labor as the “subjective existence of labor” (295) and the “living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time” (361). If in the early 1960s, Italian Marxists had given a “francofortienne” reading of the *Grundrisse* – that is, fixed capital and machinery were seen as a vehicle of oppression against living labor – by the end of the decade Tronti, Negri and other *workerist* thinkers suggested an almost opposite interpretation whereby the development of collective living labor anticipated and prefigured that of fixed capital.

It is not that labor reacts to capitalist discipline but capital has to continuously respond to the self-organizing powers of workers and the shifting composition of the working class. Thus, autonomist thinkers reversed the classical relation between capitalist development and workers’ struggle by bringing to the fore the autopoietic capacities of living labor and identifying it as the driving force in the transformation of the productive process. The project of autonomy consists simultaneously in the refusal of the capitalist organization of work and a positive affirmation of alternative modes of living. From this perspective, autonomy is not a horizon, something always in sight but beyond reach. Rather, it is an ongoing process of invention not subordinated to the guarantees of an a priori truth.

The autonomist hypothesis on the primacy of living labor underpins much of current autonomist articulations of the common in relation to the transformation of capitalism

under contemporary conditions of globalization. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the common is the *productive* linguistic and affective cooperation of a multitude of working subjectivities that is put to work through current processes of capitalist extraction of value. Simultaneously, the common is a project of self-governance autonomous from the market and the state (Hardt and Negri 2009). In Negri's words (2013: 50) the common is "both the milieu in which occurs the rupture that we are constructing against the power that dominates us, and the result of this rupture." Paolo Virno anchors the common in the linguistic-cognitive faculties of *homo sapiens* which, he maintains, constitute the raw material of late capitalism but also the reservoir of potential for the active withdrawal from capitalism (Virno 2010).

Although autonomist scholars and activists often use *commons* and *common* interchangeably, they privilege the latter term to indicate the collective productive activity — living labor— underling instances of the commons that are specific in time, space and modes of organization (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). One of the advantages of choosing this alternative is that it brings into relief the common as ongoing production rather than focusing on the defense of that which capitalism incessantly encloses and destroys. *Commoning*, a term coined by historian Peter Linebaugh and widely adopted, goes in the same direction in that it shifts attention from things to activity, from the management of economic asserts to practices and social relations. My work builds on autonomist definitions of the *common* and *commoning* as collective *activity* that is put to work in the circuits of capitalist accumulation and simultaneously exceeds them. Departing from autonomist theorists, however, I shift attention from human living labor to the socio-natural assemblages that compose the common.

Aporias of the Common

Autonomist Marxism is compelling to me in that it troubles many of the assumption underlying the political ontology of Western modernity, that is, the hegemonic ordering of the world that began to emerge in the sixteenth century with the colonial conquest of the Americas and consolidated in the eighteenth century through the development of industrial capitalism, processes of secularization, the rise of science and connected configurations of personhood organized through demarcations of race and sex. The term political ontology has a variety of contested meanings. Here I am concerned with the kind of existents that make up a political collective and the power relations that transform it (Blaser 2009). The basic unity of modern political ontology has been the individuated masculine subject acting on the world to transform and appropriate it. With deep roots in the Greek and Roman conceptions of the citizen and the *pater familias*, the acquiring, self-owning subject of liberal politics occupies the center stage in the line of modern thought that runs from Hobbes and Locke to Kant and Hegel.

The historical emergence of the European Man as the agent of progress and civilization goes hand in hand with the rendering of nature as the normative outside of politics, the given that serves as the ground of history but is in itself out of history. For Hobbes the “state of nature” is the domain of competition, self-interest and enmity that precedes the formation of civil society (Hobbes 1968). Locke’s version of the state of nature describes the fall of man from plenitude to degeneracy that can only be remediated through the imposition of labor and enclosures (Locke 1988). For modern liberal thinkers, politics entails the overcoming of nature through the establishment of governments that represent and protect individual rights and property.

The political ontology of Western modernity requires an ontological distinction between a social order made up of autonomous individuals that speak through politics and a natural order made up of passive objects that speaks through science (Latour 2004). Building on Latour, anthropologist of indigeneity Marisol de la Cadena argues (2010, 2015) that modern politics is premised upon the “partition of the sensible” (Rancière 1999) into humanity and nature. This means that those who approximate the proper image of the *hu/man*, the European masculine subject, count in the sphere of politics. Conversely, those considered closer to nature —women, natives, people of color, and the nonhuman beings that make up non-modern worlds— are left uncouncted unless they disrupt the current partition of the sensible (de la Cadena 2010, 2015a).

Autonomist theories of the common offer a powerful counterpoint to the hegemonic assumptions of European modernity, particularly the idea that the individual right to property is the foundation of political community. Even the humanist Marxist evocation of an authentic *individual* nature alienated by wage labor that the socialist reorganization of labor would restore finds little echo in autonomist political theories. In place of sovereign individuals subsumable within a universal totalizing community (Rousseau’s general will, Hegel’s sovereign state), autonomist Marxists’ texts present us with the dazzling figures of insurgent subjectivities, metamorphic collectives, and revolutionary assemblages.

The *multitude*, theorized by Spinoza in the seventeenth-century and eclipsed from the horizon of modernity by the affirmation of the People, is the key figure of collective subjectivity emerging out of recent Autonomist debates (Hardt and Negri 2004, Virno 2004, 2008). The multitude is described as shifting ensembles of workers engaged in social relations that have the potential to escape the grasp of capitalism. The multitude is the form

of the collective in which many persevere as many without being reduced to one. What draws me to autonomist Marxism is precisely this rich and expansive elaboration of the collective and the role that difference, thought as positive alterity rather than pejorative lack, plays in it.

Yet, the autonomist project (but it would be more accurate to speak of autonomist projects) presents some aporias. It forcefully affirms the refusal of work while at the same time investing in living labor as the primary force making the world. Kathi Weeks, one of the few feminist theorists consistently engaging autonomist Marxism, convincingly argues that the trouble with this category is “that it is haunted by the very same essentialized conception of work and inflated notion of its meaning that should be called into question” (Weeks 2011: 15). Adding to Weeks’ point, I contend that by foregrounding living labor as that which incessantly recreates the world, autonomist theorists endorse the narrative of the human as self-inventive being. Man is the producer, the earth is the theatre of production. Autonomist Marxism inherits one most distinctive modern aspect of Marx: the narrative of the self-reflexive Man capable of activating the latent potentials of nature for his own transformation.

In *The Order of Things* (1970) Michel Foucault maintains that modern Man emerged in the nineteenth century through the convergence of three interdependent discursive domains—biology, political economy and linguistics. David Ricardo established the epistemological space of political economy by identifying labor as the source of all value, and linking political economy to the properties of the human species⁶. According to Foucault,

⁶ I expand on this point in chapter 2 when I engage the limits of Marx’s species-being in relation to Virno’s work.

Marx's work challenged bourgeois political economic from within its epistemological boundaries. It "introduced no real discontinuity" (1970: 261-262) in the humanist discourse.

This point resonates with Maurizio Lazzarato's assessment of the role of labor in Marxism. A somewhat dissonant voice within autonomist circles, Lazzarato registers "a strange convergence between capitalism and Marxism on the concept of labor." They share an "ontology of subject/object" for which "the constitution of the world is thought in terms of production, as a doing, as exteriorization of the subject into the object, as transformation and domination of nature and the other through the objectivation of subjective relations" (2004: 8). To readers familiar with the rebellious monsters and insurgent cyborgs that peek out from the pages of autonomist texts (Negri 2008, Chignola 2015) this assertions may appear incongruous. But, as I will show, what animates autonomist hybrids is ultimately labor power.

My project draws on feminist theory, science studies, and decolonial thought, as well on discordant positions within autonomist Marxism, to show how influential autonomist orientations often incorporate the modern "partition of the sensible" that distinguishes between human agents and a malleable nature. I argue that the intertwining categories of life, labor and language still underwrite radical articulations of the common and explore how they could be thought otherwise. Questioning Marx's treatment of "the economic as an ontological category of the human" (Osborne 2005: 37-38), however, does not imply the dismissal of Marx. Nor it implies the dismissal of labor as key category for the analysis of current power formations. However, labor needs radical rethinking to account for the world-making activity of other forces and beings. As a growing body of exciting scholarship shows, the reconsideration of living labor is important to account to the myriad ways in which capitalism extracts value from assemblages of nature and technics, including biotechnologies,

use of microorganism in the mining industry, and ecosystem services (Sunder Rajan 2006, Cooper 2008, Labban 2014, Nelson 2014, Goldstein and Johnson 2015). Thus, one of my guiding questions here is: How to inherit from Marx's and autonomist Marxist's vital critique of capitalism without embracing the humanist teleology of labor as transformative, and ultimately progressive force?

In order to complicate the idea of the common anchored on human labor and social interactions, this project examines the tension between the common and European modernity. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri present the common as a force of alter-modernity, capable of moving beyond the dialectic opposition to modernity in the effort to invent the new (Hardt and Negri 2009). As a way to engage this formulation, I employ both historical and theoretical lenses to explore the vicissitudes of the common from pre-modern times to our volatile epoch.

The excavation of the history of the common in medieval Europe points toward pre-modern practices of land-use that, I suggest, are inseparable from what Timothy Reiss calls *passibility*, that is, a sense of the self as “being *embedded in* and acted on” material, social, and divine qualities and events (2003: 2). The pre-modern common evokes peasant economies destroyed by capitalist primitive accumulation but also animated matter, heresies, marvels and monsters that populated the Medieval world. The Medieval common, I suggest, was more than a way to organize shared access to the land. It comprised modes of living involving a range of powers and beings that were erased by the intertwined rise of European modernity, capitalist economies, and the affirmation of a conception of personhood based on “determining thresholds, and shifting functions, between not only different species of living beings but also within the human race itself” (Esposito 2012: 276).

In this sense, I argue that common is the internal other of European modernity, that which modernity attempted to destroy in the violent effort to affirm itself. Contemporary articulations of the common, however, invest in the modern dichotomy between human subjects that re/produce the common and collections of objects that are communally managed. Thus, they project modern categories onto the pre-modern past. It is as if the common has traversed European modernity to emerge transformed by the racialized and gendered logic that govern the forming of the hu/man as laboring species.

My intention is not to invoke a return to pre-modern forms of being-in-common. Rather, as I further explain in the section on methods, I employ a genealogical method in order to illuminate the contingency of the current idea of the common as the product of human endeavors. Following Michel Foucault, I suggest that the excavation of pre-modern archives of the common contributes to constituting “a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (2003: 8). I pursue a similar de-universalizing strategy by exploring what happens when the Western notion of the common encounters Latin American indigenous movements whose political ontologies comprise nonhuman entities such as mountains and rivers. Whereas indigenous movements destabilize the separation between nature and politics, Western articulations of the common often rely on this very distinction, casting land and water as *resources* to be defended against new waves of enclosures and extractivism. The de-provincialization of prevalent interpretations of the common suggests the possibility of alliance between political ontologies that are perhaps incommensurable but become “partially connected” in the intensive present of struggle.

The Common as Improper Object of Feminist Theory

This dissertation tracks how intertwined notions of humanness and political subjectivity implicitly figure within and orient constructions of the common in contemporary political theory. Moreover, it calls attention to the more-than-human entanglements that enable the making of the common. Feminist theory is particularly well suited to these tasks because of its deep commitment to critically address how the mutually dependent categories of man, human, and political action presuppose in Western thought the appropriation, and simultaneously, the disavowal of nature.

Apart from some important interventions (Gibson-Graham 2006, Dominijanni 2009, Federici 2012), feminist engagements with the politics of the common have been, until very recently, sporadic and incidental. There may be good reasons for this. For some, the common may evoke forms of belonging that in spite of claims to difference end up privileging sameness. The common might appear as a reassertion of that universalism that feminists have been fiercely and joyfully struggling to dismantle. Is the common just the newest version of the “general interest”? Does it reintroduce the familiar notion that the struggle against capitalism takes priority over feminist and anti-racist struggles, positioned once again as “derivative and secondary” (Butler 1997) and therefore to be taken care of once the communism of the common will be achieved?

The concern with the reactivation of universalism in political theories of the common should be taken seriously. Indeed, one of my goals here is to trouble the common, introduce divergence within conceptions of man, labor, and language that, I argue, run the risk of slipping back into universalism because they rely on the Western partition between nature and politics. But I am also deeply attracted by the affirmative potential of the common, its force as technology of the otherwise, that is, a form of life that is at odds with dominant modes of being (Povinelli 2011). Thus I ask: what happens when feminism and

the politics of the common are exposed to each other?⁷ More specifically, what happens when the common becomes the object of feminist perspectives that unsettle the ontological divide between subjects and objects?

The devaluation of material existence, its identification with a force of necessity which stands in the way of political action, and the persistent association between nature and sexualized and racialized bodies rendered as less-than-human through relations of subjugation, have taken many forms in the history of Western thought. The Greek *polis*, the realm of male citizens who pursue a *good life* free from the constraints of the bodily reproduction of life, has been the originating paradigm for the conception of politics enclosed from natural life. For Aristotle as well as for Hannah Arendt, the contemporary thinker who most clearly draws on the Greek ideal to articulate politics as a uniquely human activity, the Greek *polis* depends on and yet must be separated from the *oikos*, the household inhabited by women and slaves.

The *oikos* is the lowly space of bodily activities that shelters life in its biological dimension, as birthing, feeding, and dying. Those inhabiting it are beings, which, according to Aristotle, are “naturally” suited to be ruled over: the barbarians but also women and children, animals and things (Chanter 2011). Although the *oikos* is politically organized through practices of subordination of women and slaves, in the line of thought that goes from Aristotle to Arendt, it is classified as pre-political, excluded from the proper realm of politics (Brown 1988)⁷. According to Giorgio Agamben, the abandonment and containment of bare life (*zoe*) in the *oikos*, outside the qualified human sphere of *bios*, is the constitutive act of Western politics (Agamben 1998). The relation of dependency and disavowal between

⁷ While Brown offers a scathing critique of Arendt’s distinction between *polis* and *oikos*, Adriana Cavarero focuses on the concept of natality to propose a positive feminist reading of the human in Arendt. See Cavarero 2009.

the *polis* and the *oikos* constitutes a powerful instance of the process through which Western thought construes nature and biology as the feminized, sexualized and racialized counterpart to the masculine order of politics. In the idealized account of the Athenian *polis*, the activity accessible to free adult men becomes the properly human sphere of politics. Men engage in politics, politics is what makes them fully human.

European modernity inherits and radicalizes the relationship between the *polis* and the *oikos*. Through the consolidation of liberal economies and modes of government in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the European bourgeois man emerges as the civilizing subject of history that turns the material world and its people into territory of conquest. The liberty of the modern man entails a double, interconnected movement: the overcoming of nature, now understood as external realm of constraints and resources, and the subjugation of variously dispossessed people in Europe and the colonies. Modern technologies of rule target simultaneously “waste” land and “idle” inhabitants in the name of improvement, while a complex of legal, medical, and administrative technologies normatively distinguish between fully human and less-than-human, normal and pathological, productive and unproductive, civilized and uncivilized. In the words of Lisa Lowe (2015: 3), “the human is ‘freed’ by liberal forms, while other subjects, practices, and geographies are placed at a distance from ‘the human’.”

The mobilization of technologies of race, gender and sexuality was key for shaping the category of humanity in exclusionary ways (Schiebinger 1993, McClintock 1995, Stoler 1995). Expanding on Foucault's idea of sexuality as the point of convergence between the discipline of individuals and the biopolitics of populations, Ann Laura Stoler examines the imperial management of the sexual practices of both colonizers and colonized and their pivotal role in the production of human and less-than-human subjects. She argues that the

European bourgeois self of the nineteenth century has to be understood in relation to the racialized landscape of Empire and its increasing hybrid population.

This dissertation contends that the enclosure of the common in Europe, a process connected and yet distinct from the seizure of land from native people in the colonies, played an important role in the rise of the modern Man as the proper figure of the human disarticulated from nature. My work also moves towards a reconfiguration of the common that disrupts what Donna Haraway calls the “productionist logic” wherein “nature is only the raw material appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism” (1989: 13).

Much feminist energy has been directed toward dislodging the conflation between the particularity of European man with the generality of the human, and the notion of objective nature. In feminist theory the *oikos* itself has become a place of refusal and subversion. Adriana Cavarero’s rewriting (1995) of the myth of Penelope, the industrious and faithful wife of the wandering hero, is exemplary in this sense. Penelope no longer waits for the return of Odysseus from the realm of death that he has chosen as his measure. Nor she surrenders to her suitors. Confined in the *oikos*, she becomes the wife of no one and a trickster. Through her weaving and unweaving she disrupts the time and place to which she has been assigned.

Penelope’s is a figure of operosity without ends, of subversive operosity as it were, in that her doing and undoing deactivates the workings of power. The *oikos*, once a mere site of containment, is thus turned into a space of autonomy from the patriarchal order of the *polis* and, perhaps, a place for cultivating an alternative politics of the living. The politics of the common that I am interested in arises precisely from this space of refusal of what constitutes the *good life* in the tradition of Western political thought. Cavarero’s “conceptual

pickpocketing” of Greek myth is part of a rich feminist genealogy that dares to think together mind and bodies, concepts and matter, nature and politics. This is less an act of reparation—feminists pictured as the better half of men stitching back together that which has been separated—than it is an act of affirmation pointing toward modes of living otherwise.

Such feminist genealogy, at least the version of it that I draw upon in my rethinking of the common, cuts across Marxist ecofeminism, feminist science studies, and decolonial feminism. Marxist feminist perspectives, in dialogue with ecofeminism, highlight the linkages between the exploitation of gendered and racialized labor and the enclosure of the earth. The work of Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa is key in this respect. Their investigation of the capitalist appropriation of so-called externalities to the market has extended from women’s domestic labor (Dalla Costa and James 1972) to broader questions of eco-social reproduction (Federici 2012, Dalla Costa 2014). These thinkers operate *within and against* the tradition of autonomist Marxism, adopting many of its conceptual tenets and yet putting pressure on prevalent conceptions of labor, including the misplaced investment in the category of “cognitive” or “immaterial” labor. I suggest that their work reconfigures the *oikos* in two senses. First, it renders it as in the quite literal sense of household, as space for the analysis and refusal of reproductive labor. Second, in a conceptual and political movement that leads from the kitchen to the earth (Dalla Costa 2007), the *oikos* becomes the larger eco-social milieu that makes life possible in the damaged landscapes of the capitalist Anthropocene.

This body of work has been rarely brought into conversation with feminist theorists who variously reframe nature as matrix of difference capable of enabling cultural expression and political action, while also approaching it as unstable site of sexualization, racialization

and biopolitical management of populations. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, draws on Luce Irigaray to use sexual difference as a vector pointing toward the reframing of biology and nature as capable of generating endless variation (Grosz 2011). Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing unsettle human fantasies of autonomy by illuminating world-making as a multispecies activity implicated in the circuits of techno-capitalism (Haraway 2007, Tsing 2015). Isabelle Stengers, a philosopher whose work has been rarely marked as feminist, reworks Gaia, the living planet, as assemblage of forces indifferent to human projects that poses the political problem of how to live otherwise (Stengers 2015).

Taken together, these feminist thinkers underscore the adventurous, risky aspect of politics without teleology. What they offer is by no means a flat ontology, one in which objects withdraw, power relations disappear, and a contemplative realism is asserted in place of a critical one. Rather, they offer an ontology of creation that makes possible the reformulation of the *oikos* from site of biopolitical containment to space of dwelling that is irreducible to the measure of modern Man.

Decolonial theory and indigenous studies interrogate the effects of colonial history in creating demarcations of race and sex within the human species, and between *homo sapiens* and its “environment,” while at the same time foregrounding the dynamic persistence of indigenous ways of thinking and living otherwise (Marcos 2006). Maria Lugones shows that one of the strategies employed by colonial power to subdue colonial populations was the introduction of a binary gender system that “created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers” (Lugones 2007: 186). Marisol de la Cadena ethnographic investigation of Andean indigenous movements elaborates on Stengers’ cosmopolitics to offer crucial insights on political ontologies that

exceed the distinction between political subjects and natural objects that characterizes Western modernity.

My intention is not to propose an easy alignment between these disparate thinkers. But by bringing them into conversation, I am interested in troubling the linearity of the prevalent Western feminist storytelling that reenacts interlocking narratives of progress, loss and return (Hemmings 2011). These narratives split the recent past into decades, each associated with specific theorists and lines of thought. In this prevalent political grammar, the past decade appears as the time of (re)turn to that which has been neglected by the de-realizing excesses of the linguistic turn —matter, bodies and sex. But as Claire Hemmings points out, the linear temporality that underwrites much of feminist storytelling tends to flatten out multiple and conflicting movements within feminist theory, obfuscate conceptual debts, and complex genealogies in favor of accounts of rupture and innovation. For example, Marxist feminism and ecofeminism, or any combinations of the two, are often positioned as belonging to a history that has been superseded by more sophisticated feminist tendencies. Yet, the remaking⁸ of Marxist ecofeminist perspectives provides important insights for articulating a politics of the common that addresses what it means to live together in multiple and divergent more-than-human words.

The feminist orientations discussed above inform my project in three crucial ways. First, the cosmopolitical common is inspired by feminist reframing of nature as a power of mutation rather than material substratum transformed by human intervention. Second, it is indebted to Marxist ecofeminism in that it cultivates a genealogical awareness of the entanglement between processes of feminization, racialization and the ongoing

⁸ Inspired by Kathi Weeks (2011) reworking of Marxist feminism for articulating a project of refusal of work, this dissertation engages ecological strands within Marxist feminism to articulate a more-than-human common.

commodification of nature. Third, it envisions activist arrangements that disrupt the modern Western distinction between human actors and a manipulable natural world deprived of political relevance.

But what is the political value of focusing on the cosmopolitical common when capitalist exploitation intersects normative forces of sexualization and racialization to continue to produce particular categories of bodies as less-than-human and therefore disposable? The mass incarceration of black people in the United States, the regimes of illegality that have turned the Mediterranean into a cemetery for migrants, the biopolitics of improvement that damages indigenous landscapes in North and Latin America, are manifestations of such logic of disposability. Pointing to the limits of the various turns to the post-human and inhuman, Sara Ahmed proposes a “willful humanism” to suggest that “we are not in the horizon of a post if some are still struggling to be human. A post might be postable from the vantage point of *having been* human” (2014: 255). But speaking, as I do, of a cosmopolitical common does not imply that the normative forces that create sexualized and racialized bodies as less-than-human have finally receded so that we can finally turn attention to what comes *after* the human. On the contrary, one of the key political stakes of thinking a cosmopolitical common lies in examining humanism as part and parcel of the capitalist colonial systems that created women, savages, animals and things as resources to be appropriated by the civilized white man in his quest for progress.

It is no coincidence that when the common surfaces in recent feminist scholarship of socio-natural assemblages, it is accompanied by a robust critical engagement with the exclusionary human exceptionalism that emerged out of Western modernity. Anna Tsing, a practitioner of the art of noticing, briefly touches on the “latent commons” (Tsing 2015: 255) as collaborative more-than-human entanglements that flourish in the ruins of

modernity. Marisol de la Cadena, the theorist of indigenous cosmopolitics, hints at “commons across worlds,” (2015b) that value divergences among partially connected political ontologies some of which do not take human subjects as their center.

I join the effort of these scholars to rethink the common as space of asymmetry and divergence rather than redemption from capitalist corruption. I do so by tracking the common *across* highly contested pre-modern and alter-modern formations. I trace the metamorphosis of the common across time and space and attend to the intersecting hierarchies of race, sex, and species that unwittingly slip into current articulations of the common in political theory. Finally, I highlight practices of commoning that reorient attention from Man, or the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene, to the many earthly forces that partake in world-making.

Unruly Methods

This study considers the temporality of the common as multidirectional and simultaneous. It points toward the past of pre-modern ontologies that European modernity had to struggle against in order to affirm itself. It unfolds in the intensive present of struggles that in Europe as well as in the Americas and elsewhere evoke the common as mode of living otherwise. As subterranean movement within modernity, the common approximates, without never coinciding with, indigenous communal forms of world-making that have been dispossessed by genocidal colonization and yet persist in the effort of inventing futurity. Exploring the political time of the common as nonlinear opens up “the possibility of thinking about the historical as distinct from and other to the present *and* as a present living force” (Wiegman 2000: 824). Instead of accepting the common as a stable category, my work examines what nuances of the concept that were once relevant are now ignored and with what effects. It

draws attention to under-analyzed aspects of the history of the common that may enliven present struggles and the uncertain futurity they may produce.

As I have already mentioned and will further illustrate in chapter 1, Michel Foucault's genealogical approach is a crucial influence in this study of the common. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault addressed the relationship between what he called "subjugated knowledges" and scholarly work. On a first level, he talks about "subjugated knowledges" as "blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked" (2003: 7). Foucault is referring here to a series of historical studies on disciplinary institutions such as the asylum, the clinic, and the prison that were produced in the 1960s and 1970s. These "local critiques" made possible to decentralize and ground the critique of disciplinary power into specific case studies, thus eschewing the generalizations proper to grand theories such as Marxism and psychoanalysis. Foucault is well aware that these grand theories provide precious analytic tools, but only as long as "the theoretical unity of their discourse is, so to speak, suspended, or at least cut up, ripped up, torn to shreds, turned inside out, displaced, caricatured, dramatized, theatricalized, and so on" (6).

On a second level, Foucault makes clear that these local critiques were made possible not only by scholarly work but were rooted in "knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges." It is the resurfacing of these "knowledges from below," writes Foucault, "the knowledge of the psychiatrized, the patient, the nurse, the doctor, that is parallel to, marginal to, medical knowledge, the knowledge of the delinquent, what I would call, if you like, what people know... that made the critique possible" (7). The genealogical method—as a method oriented at dethroning the

primacy of a transcendental subject of knowledge—emerges thus at the intersection between local critique and “a meticulous rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights” (8).

This dissertation connects political philosophy and scholarly work that heavily relies on local knowledges. It does so in two ways. First, it connects Medieval archives that have rarely been studied together, that is, theological debates about poverty and property with accounts of peasant life in common land, and material practices engaging objects as living things. Second, it juxtaposes current theories of the common with accounts of the insurrectional knowledges and practices of activist movements in Latin America and elsewhere that trouble Western modern ways of thinking politics. These movements reveal the contingency and partiality of a thought of the common that distinguishes between subjects and resources.

In the process, *Ecologies of the Common*, focuses on a variety of texts ranging from medieval treatises, to contemporary political theory, ecological manifestoes, political *communiqués*, protests in public spaces and legal documents. I approach the common through what Lisa Lowe calls a “past conditional temporality” (2015: 175) that suggests the existence of alternative conditions of possibility for the common that were largely undone by European modernity. Additionally, I am interested in the ways in which those conditions of possibility might be reactivated in the present in order to create the future of the common.

What is the relationship between such approach and the temporality of the so-called Anthropocene? Prevalent narratives of the Anthropocene complicate the forward-looking time of modernity in that they shift attention to the vastness of geological time (Chakrabarty 2009). But the Anthropocene discourse also employs the rhetoric of emergency to aggressively promote techno-managerial approaches to fix a planet gone out of balance. The dictum “There is no alternative,” unabashedly deployed by European technocrats pushing

through austerity measures and free-markets enthusiasts worldwide, is becoming part of the discourse of geoengineering that advocates drastic technological measures to cool the planet (Hamilton 2013). There are many ways to resist the emphasis on human agency that underpins such rhetoric of emergency. Here, I offer the cosmopolitical common as a way to slow down reasoning (Stengers 2005a) around the Anthropocene narrative of Man as primary agent of earth's becoming. Slowness, or a change of pace, might open up ways to appreciate new dimensions of living together.

Ecologies of the Common comes out of a training in feminist theories and methods that encourages the transgression of disciplinary enclosures and cultivates a sensibility for tracking the metamorphosis of concepts across time and space. Simultaneously, it ventures out of the “field-imaginary of identity knowledges” (Wiegman 2012), an imaginary that cultivates capacious understandings of subjects and agency, and is deeply invested in intersectionality as analytics capable of exposing and redressing multiple forms of marginalization. In taking up the common as object of analysis and foregrounding its cosmopolitical dimension, I am less concerned with subjects and agency than with more-than-human entanglements that enable collectives to think and invent. In this sense, the common constitutes an unusual object for feminist theory. Of course, as the previous section demonstrates, this is not uncharted territory, but one that still presents risks in dealing with an object that is somehow improper.

The Flow of the Chapters

The dissertation is organized in three parts, each addressing a particular aspect of the tensions between the common and European modernity. Chapter 1, titled “Genealogies of the Common” revisits the pre-modern uses of the common and the changes brought about

by the dispossession of land in Europe and the colonies. Historical studies of the common tend to focus on the significance of Medieval theological debates on “common use,” agrarian customs, and the role of the enclosures in the rise of capitalism. This chapter supplements this literature by reflecting on Medieval “animated materiality” (Bynum 2011). In order to complicate the modern idea of the common as resources manipulated by active human subjects, it shows how Medieval engagements with the common, and connected theological debates on “common use,” were permeated by dynamic conceptions of nature and matter that did not entail a divide between subjects and objects. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of John Locke’s labor theory of appropriation. It shows how Locke provided the theoretical justification for the enclosures in Europe and the dispossession of indigenous land in the colonies.

The second part of the dissertation, including chapter 2 and 3, draws on feminist theory and science studies to identify concepts of humanness, labor and nature that underwrite the autonomist Marxist articulation of the common. This part also considers the existence of more-than-human collectives engaged in the making of the common in the uneven climates of the so-called Anthropocene. Chapter 2 engages the centrality of the *anthropos* in the work Paolo Virno. The key thinker of the “naturalist” tendency within autonomist Marxism, Virno anchors the common in the generic human bio-linguistic potentials that set *homo sapiens* apart from the rest of the living.

The chapter supplements Virno’s work in two ways. First, it draws attention to some problematic implications of the species discourse that emerged out of the nineteenth-century’s exchange of ideas between biology and political economy. It shows how Virno inherits Marx’s modernist rendering of Man as species-being capable of transforming nature through labor. It suggests that Virno’s identification of the common with properly human

faculties obfuscates the effects of racialization and feminization that species discourse has entailed historically. Second, in order to complicate Virno's anchoring of the common in properly human capacities, the chapter discusses his use of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation and provides an alternative reading of Simondon's concept of preindividual nature. Building on Simondon, it proposes the common as a form of collective individuation that never loses sight of the pre-vital and living elements that constitute its milieu. At stake is not just the introduction of difference within human nature but a reflection on the possibilities of a more-than-human political practice in the Anthropocene. Chapter 3 places Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's formulation of an "ecology of the common" in the context of ongoing feminist debates on nature, matter and the forces of the earth. Through a close reading of the *Empire* trilogy, but also on Negri's earlier writings and Hardt's solo work, it considers the concepts of biopolitics and living labor, and explore their relation to an 'ecology of the common.' Hardt and Negri attempt to blur the boundary between limited natural commons (the earth and its ecosystems) and proliferating social commons (the products of social cooperation) but, ultimately, they dissolve nature into biopolitical activity. As a counterpoint to this position, this chapter expands the analysis of the urban lake which opens this introduction and explores the ecology of the common as a matter of composition involving disparate existents.

The third part of the dissertation, comprising chapter 4 and a brief coda, considers the encounter between Western notions of the commons and Latin American indigenous movements whose politics unsettle the modern divide between nature and politics. Drawing on Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser's ontologically-inflected ethnographies of indigenous politics, the chapter looks at Chiapas, Mexico, and Bolivia as sites of "partial connections" (Strathern 2004) between the common and the communal, that is, a form of

pre-colonial socionatural organization that has been reconfigured by contemporary indigenous movements.

It argues that both the common and the communal diverge from Western political ontology. But while the distinction between subjects and objects that undergirds Western politics is explicitly challenged in current indigenous reconfigurations of the communal, contemporary articulations of the common often rely on it and cast “earth beings” as resources that have to be defended against neoliberal privatization. The chapter also addresses a striking element emerged out of the Latin American political landscape: the inscription of nature/Pachamama into law as a right-bearing entity. It demonstrates that the articulation of the rights of nature is paradoxical in that it promises to extend legal rights to other-than-human beings, but it also extends a liberal tradition that is premised upon individual self-sufficiency and the appropriation of nature. Finally, the coda returns on the limits and possibilities of the politics of the common in the Anthropocene.

By infusing the common with feminist and decolonial insights about how to dismantle the hierarchies of gender and race embedded within the category of “the human,” as well as between humans and other beings, this work hopes to contribute to a collective formation that pursues the subtraction from capitalist arrangements of socio-natural relations.

Chapter One: Genealogies of the Common

The Memory of Combats

These pages are peopled by heretics, witches, spirits and a variety of beings that European modernity has relegated to the realms of folklore and religion. Their presence in a dissertation addressing the permutations of the common—a political project whose goal is to evade the constraints of public and private property—might strike some readers as odd. My wager, however, is that paying attention to beings that defy the modern division of nature and society (Latour 2004) might bring into relief qualities of the medieval common that have largely been eclipsed by prevalent conceptions of commoning as human activity (Ostrom 1999, Hardt and Negri 2009, Dardot and Laval 2015). I argue that the appreciation of the multiplicity of beings composing the pre-modern common is a resource for experimenting with the making of the common in the present climate of unevenly distributed precarity. It is my contention that the acquaintance with medieval modes of inhabiting the material world might unsettle current theorizing about commoning that takes as self-evident the distinction between natural and social, human and nonhuman.

I am inspired by Michel Foucault's genealogical approach to map out how the concept of the common came into being and how it could be thought otherwise. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault describes genealogy as an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault 2003: 7). A style of inquiry inherited from Nietzsche, genealogical investigations cast doubt on concepts and claims that appear natural or necessary. Against the power effects of systematic discourses, genealogy mobilizes blocks of historical contents that have been buried, ignored and disqualified. Foucault distinguishes two categories of

subjugated knowledge that, grouped together, form the basis of a genealogical inquiry. The first is erudite expertise, scholarly and specialized knowledge that has been confined to the margins. The second is popular, local knowledge produced by those who have been deemed incapable of adequate conceptualization, including heretics, witches, delinquents and the insane. Taken together, these perspectives constitute a “memory of combats”; they “allow us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (Foucault 2003: 8).

The legal, theological, and political conflicts around property ownership and common land-use in Medieval and early modern Europe have been the subject of much debate among contemporary critical scholars of the common. Building on robust historical accounts on Medieval popular practices of land-use (Thirsk 1964, Thompson 1992, Neeson 1996,) some Marxist thinkers focus on the common as economic-political arrangement that *worked* before capitalism and whose destruction played a crucial role in the rise of capitalist relations of production (Federici 2004, De Angelis 2007, Linebaugh, 2008). Departing from Marx’s linear account of primitive accumulation⁹, these thinkers describe the tension between the common and enclosures as ongoing and continuous in our contemporary moment (Midnight Notes Collective 1990, Harvey 2003).

Others have investigated the medieval tradition to reflect on the significance for the present time of dissident forms-of-life based on common use. Giorgio Agamben’s study on Franciscan poverty (2013) is exemplary in this regard as well as, to a lesser extent, Michael

⁹ Marx (1976) describes the sixteenth century enclosure of the English commons as an integral part of the process of dispossession that separated peasant communities from the land and created, an army of “free” workers with no choice but to sell their labor power to those in control of the means of production.

Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009) references to Franciscanism¹⁰. Little attention, however, has been paid to the “collective of beings” (Descola 2013: xx), human and other-than-human, that participated in the fabric of pre-modern commons. This chapter moves in that direction.

My goal here is to parse the archives of the political common whose history is as long as it is rich in conflict. I am interested in how the erudite categories of “common use” and poverty elaborated by the Franciscans in the thirteen-century intersected popular practices and knowledges of medieval commoners. Even more, I want to ask how these archives would be enriched, and complicated, by connecting them to medieval attitudes toward animated matter (Bynum 2011), popular practices of magic (Kieckhefer 2000, Jolly 2002, Ginzburg 2004), the natural and the supernatural (Bartlett 2008).

The work of Marxist feminist Silvia Federici provides a starting point to bridge these often-separated lines of inquiry: studies of the common and histories of medieval conceptions of nature and matter. In *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), she considers the intersection between life in the pre-capitalist commons, women’s social power, and a conception of the world that did not entail any separation between matter and spirit. While her main goal is to shed light on the appropriation of women’s work throughout the process of capitalist primitive accumulation, she also draws attention to practices involving a variety of nonhuman existents. Building on her work, I explore how the pre-modern commons came into being through the deeds of peasants, heretics, and witches but also of trees, animals, minerals and spirits.

¹⁰ This chapter engages Agamben’s work. Hardt and Negri’s influential elaboration of the common is discussed in Chapter 3. What might be worth noting here is that, in spite of significant divergences, these authors’ theories overlap in their reference to dissident Christianity.

To be clear, my goal here is not to celebrate the pre-capitalist common as holistic mode of life that might be revived in the present time through a project of reenchantment. My orientation is genealogical. Instead of assuming the making of the common as an inherently human affair, I suggest that we slow down and interrogate how we have come to regard it in such a way. Further, I am interested in considering how the “memory of combats” that arises from the medieval archives could be used to enhance current struggles for the common in the ruined landscapes of advanced capitalism.

In this endeavor, I draw on Jane Bennett’s exhortation “to re-describe human experience so as to uncover more of the activity and power of a variety of nonhuman players amidst and within us” (Bennett 2013: 109). Providing an important contribution to the project of rematerializing political theory (Braun and Whatmore 2011), Bennett argues for “the capacity of things —edibles, commodities, storms, metals not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010: viii). This perspective is valuable in that it reorients the attention away from individual agents to the agency of heterogeneous publics. But I remain unconvinced about the effectiveness of Bennett’s “re-descriptive” approach to make sense of how particular arrangements of existence come undone under the pressure of normative forces. In this study, I look at the pre-modern common as an arrangement of existence localized in space and time and involving disparate entities with uneven powers whose undoing was brought about by the rise of European modernity.

This chapter consists of three parts. The first part explores the deep-rooted connections between the common and the Christian tradition. It considers how the Franciscan theory and practice of poverty and *common use* were countered by the Church’s glorification of man’s natural right to appropriate the physical world (Tuck 1979). It argues

that in order to reconstruct the import of the range of forces opposing the primacy of private property in Medieval and early modern Europe, it is important to consider how the Franciscan erudite elaboration of life in common intersected popular practices of land-use. Thus, the second part of the chapter shifts attention from theological debates to the organization of the agrarian common and its erasure in the context of primitive accumulation. The third part of the chapter places the common in relation to medieval and early modern concerns with materiality. I suggest that medieval practices of *common use* ought to be understood in light of ontologies of nature and matter that were quite different from modernist ontologies. The making of the medieval commons was the result of entanglements involving humans and other-than-human entities that have been purified¹¹ by capitalist modernity. Paying attention to such entanglements might stimulate instances of alter-modern commoning, that is, modes of existence capable of creating alternatives to the legacy of capitalist modernity.

Omnia sunt communia. Community and Property in Early Christian Thought

From Greece to Spain to Italy, France and the UK, the Latin slogan “Omnia Sunt Communia” has resonated widely in protests opposing austerity measures imposed throughout Europe in the wake of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. In 2013 it appeared on the walls of Paris and Rome and in banners carried by protesters opposing the outsourcing of campus jobs at Sussex University, in the UK. In 2015 two leftist council members of the newly elected Madrid’s municipal assembly adopted it while being sworn

¹¹ In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that modernity’s Great Divide between nature and society (connected to the distinction between Europeans and non-Europeans) is produced by two sets of practices. Mediations that create mixtures and hybrids, and purifications that create distinctions between humans and nonhumans. See Latour 1993.

into office. How did the slogan “omnia sunt communia” come about and why it has become so popular among anti-austerity activists? One answer to these questions can be found in *Q*, the best-selling novel authored by the Italian writers’ collective Wu Ming under the multiple name Luther Blissett¹². The novel associates the slogan to German radical Reformer Thomas Müntzer. This is how it describes Müntzer’s execution in 1525:

It is said that during his last hours the preacher, although under torture, remained silent, without a word of complaint as he waited for the executioner, and that only once, in the last moment of his life, did he raise the voice for which he made himself so famous among the mob: ‘*Omnia sunt communia*.’ They say that was his final cry, the same motto that has animated the popular fury of recent months (Blisset 2003: 92).

Thomas Müntzer rejected the authority of the Roman Church and challenged Luther’s “moderate” Reformation with unprecedented force. An uncompromisingly radical thinker of apocalypse and revolution, convinced that the renewal of Christendom required the complete overturn of the spiritual and social order, Müntzer joined the Peasant Revolt in 1524-25 and became one of its most emblematic figures. The mass uprising, which involved hundreds of thousands of peasants, miners, artisans, intellectuals and Reformers across the Holy Roman Empire, gained traction through the explosive combination of anti-clerical movements that followed the Reformation and the popular rebellion against the feudal ruling class. At the battle of Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525, the army of the German princes crushed the insurgent forces. A few days later Müntzer was captured, tortured and hanged.

Drawing on a rich tradition of Marxist scholarship that regards Müntzer as a precursor of a classless society, the authors of *Q* depict him as the “master of the peasants,”

¹² Fabrizio De Donno elaborates on the resurrection of the myth of Thomas Müntzer in *Q*. See De Donno (2013). In *Improper Names*, Marco Deseriis provides a detailed account of the development of the Luther Blissett Project (see Deseriis 2015).

the minister whose sermons were like sparks that burst into revolutionary flames¹³. While Friedrich Engels' account of the Peasant War interpreted Müntzer essentially as a political leader who made a tactical use of religious language, *Q* takes a cue from the work of Kark Kautsky and Ernst Bloch to flesh out the linkages between theology and politics that characterized Müntzer's epoch (De Donno 2013).

The novel, notwithstanding its tendency to celebrate militant masculinity, offers a formidable fresco of the tumultuous European landscape of the sixteenth century. Two aspects of it are relevant here. First, *Q* reminds us that Müntzer's assertion that "everything is in common" has deep roots in the history of Christianity. The slogan must be situated in the tradition of the early Christian community of goods which, throughout the Middle Ages, provided inspiration to heretic groups opposing the power of the Church. Second, moving between the slaughter of rebels in Frankenhausen, to Anabaptist experiments in communal living to the trading cities of Venice and Antwerp, *Q* recounts how Europe was shaken by violent struggles against feudal power and forces pushing toward the development of capitalism. This was the moment when a long season of Medieval social upheavals culminating in the Peasant's War was violently suppressed, thus making space for what Marx described as the primitive accumulation of capitalism (Marx 1976).

In this section, I explore questions of community and property in Christian doctrine. I paint in broad strokes the development of a double identity within the Church, one concerned with government, the other with the mystical unity of a community of believers living a common life (Wolin 2004). I begin with a brief mention of some Roman law

¹³ Wu Ming is aware that the authenticity of Müntzer final statement "omnia sunt communia" has been disputed by a number of historians. This is how the writers' collective explains its approach to history: "We make use of historians' work, their research and their interpretations, but then we go on beyond the point at which they're constrained to stop" (Baird 2006: 255).

concepts and early Christian ideas of community of goods that influenced Medieval theological debates about property and poverty. Roman Law distinguished between things subject to divine right (*res divini juris*), including spaces of worship and the gates of the city, and things subject to human right (*res humani juris*). Further, *res humani juris* were divided between *res publicae* pertaining to municipalities and the collectivity of citizens, and *res privatae*, owned by individuals¹⁴. All divine things were unavailable for individual appropriation. In this sense, their status overlapped with that of public things. French legal historian Yan Thomas defines them as *inappropriable*, that is, excluded from commerce and exchange (Thomas 2002)¹⁵.

The separation between public and private sphere was connected to different forms of power, *imperium* and *dominium*. The public law concept of *imperium* indicated jurisdiction and power to govern. *Dominium*, instead, designated the exclusive individual ownership enjoyed by Roman citizens. The two concepts reflected the coexistence between a central state and the rule of private property that characterized the Roman republic and later the Empire. With the expansion of Roman imperial power, when citizens increasingly became subject to state authority rather than participants to the life of the community, the relation between *imperium* and *dominium* became more problematic (Meiksins Wood 2011). For example, Cicero's argued that legal measures were necessary for protecting individual

¹⁴ According to Roman law, only adult male citizens were part of both the public and private spheres as free persons responsible for their actions and as owners of property. Minors, women and slaves were, in different manners and degrees, dependent on men, not-fully-persons and therefore deprived of the right to property. Yan Thomas writes: "Under Roman law women did not form a distinct juridical species. The law...never proposed the slightest definition of woman as such, even though for many jurists the common belief in women's weakness of mind (*imbecillitas mentis*), flightiness, and general infirmity (*infirmetas sexus*) serves as a handy explanation for her statutory incapacities" (Thomas 1992: 83).

¹⁵ For an account of the juridical proximity of divine things and public things in Roman law see Yan Thomas (2002). See also Roberto Esposito discussion of the overlap between divine and public things in *Persons and Things. From the Body's Point of View* (2015).

property against the power of the community. Such position was symptomatic of the tension between the two terms, it expressed the concern about the imperial infringement of *dominium* (Wolin 2004). When the Roman Empire was replaced by the feudal patchwork of jurisdictions, such tension increased exponentially. In the feudal state issues of government and property became objects of contention among a range of powers that included lords, kings, and ecclesial authorities (Meiksins Wood 2011). As we shall see, the idea of *dominium* emerged as particularly significant in thirteenth century theological disputes on poverty and use.

Christian concerns with common property can be traced back to scriptural texts describing the life of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. The apostolic Acts 2:43-5 and 4:32-5:5 read, “And all who believed were together and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and one soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” This passage expresses two notions about community and property that became central in Christian thought: first, the unity of the Christian community; second, poverty and sharing as a way of life.

Let us see how these themes were articulated within Christian doctrine. The reference to “those who believed were of one heart and one soul” signals the emergence of what Sheldon Wolin has called a new notion of community, one “pitched to a transcendent key” (Wolin 2004: 92) that diverged sharply from the Greek *polis* and entertained a complex relation to the secular political order. On the one hand, Christians belonged to a community with transcendental qualities, superior to earthly societies. On the other hand, they relied on a political order that guaranteed peace at a time when the threatening forces of paganism

were pushing from the outside of what was left of the Roman Empire. In Hannah Arendt's words, "After the downfall of the Roman Empire it was the Catholic Church that offered men a substitute for the citizenship which had formerly been the prerogative of municipal government...It was an essentially otherworldly concern which kept the community of believers together" (Arendt 2013: 34).

In the Middle Ages, a time shaped by the legacy of the Roman Empire and the influence of Christianity, discussions about community and politics took place within a theological framework. The Gospel of St Matthew (22:15-22) and St. Paul's Letter to the Romans articulated Christians' double allegiance to divine powers and human institutions. St. Paul famously wrote, "the powers that be are ordained of God. Whoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Rom. 13:1-2). Augustine, who wrote the *City of God* in the aftermath of the sack of Rome in 410, further elaborated on the theme of obedience to authority. In the midst of the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of schismatic forces within the Church, he set out to demonstrate the supreme value of order through the conception of the two cities.

The earthly city of sinners and the heavenly city of God were distinct but intertwined, one plagued by conflict and the proliferation of private interests, the other expressing the common good. The preservation of authority and discipline in the earthly city was instrumental for creating the conditions for peace and unity of belief that made Christian life possible. The purpose of fear, allied to the doctrine of salvation, was to break the custom of evil and advance the spreading of Christian truth (Augustine 1998, Wolin 2004).

The second key theme introduced in the *Acts* —the community of goods among Christians— figured prominently in Augustine's vivid rendering of the two cities. Only men

who aspired to perfection, he suggested, had to renounce property. Others could retain earthly goods as “managers.” Proper *dominium*, however, was a divine prerogative. Augustine cited Acts 4 as a model for his monastic rule that instructs the monks to distribute goods to each according to his needs. Wealth was not an end in itself but a means to be used with justice. To be sure, Augustine was not concerned with the question of how private property was established in the first place. As Peter Garnsey observes: “Augustine and his colleagues were not in the business of questioning anyone’s title to land – unless, that is, they were heretics” (Garnsey 2007: 94).

With the rapid development of the early Church, and its transformation from a persecuted sect to imperial religion, ecclesiastic authorities became responsible for the government of Christ’s kingdom, and the management of an expanding structure of endowment and taxation that guaranteed the consolidation of the Church’s power. The apostolic ideal of communal life in poverty became associated with monastic coenobitism that operated in the shadow of the institutional Church. Monastic rules appeared in the 4th and 5th centuries. They ranged from the short collection of precepts of the Egyptian Pachomius (420s) to the detailed *Rule of the Master* that circulated at the beginning of the sixth century. Although some early examples of monasticism were connected to physical withdrawal and the solitary flight from the world, monastic rules aspired to the realization of a “total communitarian life” (Agamben 2013: 9) that reflected the apostolic paradigm. Life in the cenoby (from the Greek *koinos bios*, the common life) followed the example of the Acts of the Apostles in which “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32).

In the early ninth century the abbot Benedict of Aniane (ca. 750-821), in alliance with the Carolingian court, succeeded in imposing the *Rule of Benedict*, written by his patron

Benedict of Nursia, as the standard for monastic life. Through this reform, the Roman Church and the Emperor were able to extend their control over a variety of monastic practices and communities in the Holy Roman Empire. The *Rule of Benedict* placed emphasis on the spiritual paternity of the abbot and the three virtues of the monk: obedience, silence and humility. Yet, precisely at the moment when the Church seemed to have gained control over the coenobitic life with the imposition of the Carolingian reform, the tension between ecclesiastic authorities and the community of believers reached a critical point.

In the eleventh century, Catholic clerics began to accuse of heresy the dissident groups that challenged the authority of the Roman curia to establish the parameters of Christian conduct. The Cathars and Waldensians, movements that flourished and reached wide following in the south of France and northern Italy, embraced apostolic life against the corruption of Catholic clerics. The Beguines, communities of women living a life of charity and mysticism, challenged the patriarchal structure of the Church by eschewing the discipline of a regular order (Cohn 1970). These movements rejected or reworked the Church's precepts regarding property, sexuality and the achievement of spiritual life. They expressed a range of "counter-conducts" that resisted the amalgam of pastoral power and civil government that characterized the Roman Church (Foucault 2007). The papacy attempted to channel dissent through the institutionalization of Franciscanism. In doing so, however, it found itself facing the threat of "highest poverty," a mode of living based on an unprecedented conception of use detached from property and rights.

Franciscan Poverty: Use Without Rights

This section focuses on the theological dispute on the role of poverty and property ownership in apostolic life that opposed the Franciscans to the Dominicans. It recounts how

the Franciscans friars, particularly the group known as the Spirituals, conceptualized a radical notion of common use, one extraneous to right. In the fourteenth century the Roman Church dismissed the Franciscan position with the striking affirmation that the relationship between humans and the earth was one of rightful appropriation. Political theorist Richard Tuck observes that, by doing so, the Church established *dominium* as natural thus laying the ground for the rise of the modern, subjective natural rights fully elaborated by John Locke (Tuck 1979). Connecting the theological conflict on property ownership to a broader social dynamic, I explore how its outcome contributed to creating propitious conditions for the demise of practices of common use that, I suggest, exceeded monastic communities. Throughout Europe, the two centuries that followed the defeat of Franciscan poverty saw the intensification of peasant struggles against the expropriation of modes of life in common.

The official recognition of the mendicant orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the thirteenth century was part of the Church's strategy to suppress the heretic revolts of conducts. Yet, divergent views and practices of poverty between the two orders sparked a conflict within the Church. For the Dominicans, poverty was related to a disposition of the soul more than the renunciation of material things. It was secondary to the higher end of charity. Members of the Dominican order were not allowed to own anything in private but they practiced common property. In contrast, the Franciscan Rule of 1223 stated: "Let the Friars appropriate nothing for themselves, not a house, nor a place, nor anything else" (Francis of Assisi, *Regula Bullata*, c.6). The Franciscan life was modeled on that of Christ and the apostles who owned nothing either individually or as an order.

Despite this doctrinal divergence, from the fourteenth century on the Franciscans joined the Dominicans as inquisition officers in Europe and the colonies. However, while the role of defenders of orthodoxy was central in the making of Dominican identity, the

Franciscan case was much more complex. The history of the order was characterized by idiosyncrasies and oscillations between the commitment to the form of life epitomized by Francis and the practicalities of a growing organization exercising important functions within the Church and secular society. The uncompromising position on poverty led many Spiritual Franciscans, the minoritarian group within the order, to be condemned as heretics and insane.

Thomas Aquinas' perspective on natural law and property was a major influence on the Dominican order. Aquinas argued that human conduct has to be modeled on principles derived from the natural laws laid down by God. While these immutable principles follow directly from divine command, there exist a range of secondary precepts based on human agreement whose modification may be useful for social life (Coleman 2013). Property ownership fell in this category of secondary arrangements. According to Aquinas there are two ways of considering a material object: "One is with regard to its nature, and that does not lie within human power, but only the divine power, to which all things are obedient. The other is with regard to its use. And here man does have natural *dominium* over material things, for through his reason and will he can use material objects for his own benefit." (Aquinas, quoted in Tuck 1979: 19). For Aquinas there is no distinction between the use and ownership of things. They exist in a relationship of continuity.

The philosopher-theologian Duns Scotus provided the Franciscan rejoinder against Aquinas, one that defined use and *dominium* as utterly discontinuous. He writes,

By the law of nature of God, there are no distinct *dominia* over things in a state of innocence, indeed everything is in common...One reason for this is that, since the use of things following right reason is allowed to men in so far as it conduces to harmony, peaceful intercourse and necessary sustenance, in the state of innocence common use without distinct *dominium* is more valuable for everyone than distinct *dominium*, as no one will then take over what is necessary for another, nor will they have to defend it by violence, but he who first found it necessary to occupy it, will use it as far as he needs. (Duns Scotus, quoted in Tuck 1979: 21).

Against Aquinas, Duns Scotus contended that in the natural state of humanity each one was able to use what needed without exercising *dominium* over it, that is, without excluding others from using the same thing. Common use was distinct from and even incompatible with property, including common property. Unlike common use that derived from natural law, the institution of individual or common property, although created in order to protect the civil order, had no natural ground. The practice of poverty, therefore, would entail a return to the state of innocence preceding the Fall in which things are used in common.

The controversy deepened already existing divisions between the majority of Franciscans inclined to temper the radical vision of Francis, and those who insisted on the observance of the rule. *Apologia Pauperum* (1269), a text by Bonaventura, who guided the Order as minister-general between 1257 to 1279 and was close to the moderate group of the Conventuals, attempted to reconcile the Franciscan abdication of property rights with the growing prosperity of the Order and the Church. The document sought to define the Franciscan obligation to poverty with great precision. It distinguished four categories of relation to material things: ownership (*proprietas*), possession, usufruct and simple use (*simplex usus*) (Makinen 2001). Bonaventura claimed that Franciscans friars committed to absolute poverty practice the simple use that follows from the abdication of rights. After separating use from the right to appropriate, however, he also maintained that the Church was the owner of everything that was used by the friars.

In contrast, Peter Olivi, a former student of Bonaventura, reinforced the ideal of poverty by arguing that the Franciscan vow involved not only the renunciation of ownership but also the commitment to *usus pauper*, that is, practical poverty and the penury of things in the everyday life. Olivi's work encountered the favor of Spiritual Franciscans concerned

about the increasing worldly involvement of the order¹⁶. But it also attracted the criticism of powerful Conventuals that supported the relaxation of the rule.

For a while the order enjoyed the favor of the papacy in the dispute with the Dominicans. In the bull *Exiit Qui Seminavit* of 1279, pope Nicholas III offered a detailed commentary of the Rule of Francis and concluded that Franciscan renunciation of property was “meritorious and holy” (Makinen 2001: 101). But when John XXII was elected pope in 1316 the equilibrium of power shifted toward the Dominicans. The new pope swiftly proceeded to move against the Spirituals whose commitment to *usus pauper* was seen as dangerous for the stability of the order and the curia (Burr 2001). A papal commission examined Peter Olivi’s writings after his death. The Spirituals who refused to submit to ecclesial authority were excommunicated or condemned as heretical. Many were imprisoned and burned at the stake.

The papal bull *Quia vir reprobus* (1329) marked a turning point in the controversy. It affirmed the principle of natural property by claiming that human *dominium* over earthly possessions was analogous to divine *dominium* over creation. As historian Gordon Leff notes, the document glorified property by claiming that “from the beginning of time, before the creation of Eve or the laws of the kings, property had existed as a divine dispensation” (Leff 1967: 247). The implications of this position are striking: property is natural to man even before the foundation of society. It does not follow from the necessity of exchanging things but is a basic fact of human life. Against the Franciscan theory of use detached from property, the papacy contended that “all relationship between men and their material world

¹⁶ In *Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis*, historian David Burr provides a detailed account of Peter Olivi’s work and his debt to Joachim of Fiore, a key figure in the apocalyptic tradition concerned with the end of the world. Burr also chronicles the Church campaign against the Spirituals and their influence on heretic movements. See Burr (2001).

were examples of *dominium*. For some lonely individual to consume the products of his countryside was for him to exercise property rights in them. Property had begun an expansion towards all the corners of man's moral world" (Tuck 1979: 22).

The papal assertion of men as natural proprietors laid the ground for the defense of individual property, competition and colonial expansion fully articulated in the seventeenth century by the thinkers of natural rights theory. Among them were Hugo Grotius, the theorist of occupation as primary means for establishing property, and John Locke, whose theory of property is based on the enclosure of land through individual labor. In the context of European modernity, the natural right to property became the encompassing framework for making sense of the relationship between the human and the material world, the individual self and the body (Cohen 2009).

In *The Highest Poverty*, Giorgio Agamben offers a suggestive reading of the theological dispute on property. The novelty of Franciscanism, he argues, is that when the friars rejected the conflation of use and property, they were effectively invoking the principle of *abdication iuris*, that is, the abdication of the right to ownership (Agamben 2013)¹⁷. In proposing to dissociate use from property rights, the Franciscans came close to enacting a community of life that exists outside of the grasp of the law. In this sense, Franciscanism constituted the culmination of a particular aspect of monastic life, that is, the notion of a form-of-life that through the complete identification with the rule, is able to abolish the rule itself. Monks and friars did not observe religious precepts as a set of legal obligations. Rather, their uninterrupted collective practice created the conditions for the constant re/generation of the

¹⁷ There has been extensive debate, within political theory and legal scholarship, about the role of Franciscan thinkers in the introduction of individual rights. Influential studies by Paolo Grossi (1972) and Michel Villey (1988) have traced the origins of subjective rights to Franciscan texts. The work of Richard Tuck (1979) and Giorgio Agamben's more recent interventions (see Agamben 2013), however, point to a different direction.

rule (Agamben 2013). Ultimately, however, the Franciscan order remained caught in a doctrinal debate so that its disruptive claims were neutralized by the curia. Quite paradoxically, the friars gestured toward a form of life released from the grip of law while at the same time struggling for establishing the lawfulness of renouncing the right to property.

For Agamben the point of studying the dispute on poverty is not to encourage an indeterminate wait for a new Franciscanism capable of ushering in a redemptive time in the history of humanity. Rather, the goal is to bring to the fore the actuality of Franciscanism, the subversive potential of claiming use as detached from *dominium* in a present dominated by the Western ontology of appropriation and operativity. The problem raised by Franciscanism is “How to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation. That is to say again: to think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use” (Agamben 2013: xiii). The legacy of radical Franciscanism, then, is a notion of use that not only rejects juridical ownership but also the ontological separation between the user and that which is used¹⁸.

Agamben notes that in gesturing toward a form-of-life untouched by the law, the Franciscans assimilated their life to that of nonhuman animals. In the words of Bonagratia of Bergam: “as the horse has de facto use but not property rights over the oats that it eats, so the religious who has abdicated all property has the simple de facto use [*usum simplicem facti*] of bread, wine, and clothes” (quoted in Agamben 2013: 110). This idea reflects the anomalous status of animals in Franciscanism. On the one hand, animals were “humanized” by Francis who called them “brothers.” On the other hand, with respect to their relationship

¹⁸ Agamben elaborates on the theme of use in *The Use of Bodies* (2015), the book that brings to an end the *Homo Sacer* series.

with the law, the friars were animalized. Expanding on this, I am interested in exploring the connection between the Franciscan understanding of use detached from right and a conception of creation¹⁹ that diverged with that embraced by the Church.

For Francis all of creation -- the worms, the birds and the stars -- expressed the power of the divine. Medieval narratives of the life of the saint portray “what appears at times to be a rather radically animistic view of the physical world, he also is said to have treated water, rocks, and fire as having sensate being” (Kiser 2003: 231)²⁰. Those who conducted a life of common use, then, renounced the right to appropriate because they perceived themselves as creatures of God living among other creatures of God. Further, and this is an important point for the purposes of this dissertation, the Franciscan distinction between use and appropriation can be connected to medieval practices of commoning.

Lisa Kiser’s interpretation of the garden of Francis described in *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano (1247), written twenty years after the death of the saint, draws an important link between Franciscanism and the resistance to the enclosure of land. Whereas other accounts and biographies placed emphasis on Francis’ itinerant life, *The Remembrance* provides him with a garden, a familiar feature in the life of saints and monastic orders. The Franciscan garden, however, was unique. Typically, European monastic gardens were heavily marked out from their surroundings by walls or ditches or other kinds of enclosures that signaled the separation between sacred and profane spaces. Conversely, in

¹⁹ It is worthwhile noting that Francis did not spoke of nature but of creation. In the next section I will elaborate on the problematic character of nature in the Middle Ages.

²⁰ In a much discussed (and criticized) article Lynn White Jr. famously described Francis as a precursor of ecological thought whose view of the world diverged from the orthodox Christian dogma of man’s rightful mastery of nature. Using a distinctively political language to describe the Franciscan approach, White writes: “Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (White 1967: 1206).

Thomas' account, Francis' garden was unditched so that no boundary existed between weeds and useful herbs, wilderness and cultivated land, owners and trespassers.

The openness of the Franciscan garden suggested two things. First, it referred to the Franciscan ideal that all beings, animal, vegetable, or mineral, have a place in the world irrespective of their value for the human. Second, it suggested the uneasiness with enclosures and the utilitarian understanding of land. In Kiser's words, "Thomas is taking a visible stand against the increasingly widespread practice, especially in the Italy of his own time, of privatizing land that once before had been open to common rights of use" (2003: 237). The Franciscan garden described in *The Remembrance* countered the "gardenization" of the European landscape, that is, the fragmentation and enclosure resulting from the rise of the precapitalist market economy. In Thomas' writings the appropriation of the land and the increase of soil productivity "represented a force that Franciscanism needed to oppose" (239). The description of Francis' garden suggests a different way of inhabiting the world, one not defined by property boundaries.

Agamben's study of the Franciscans seems to attribute a paradigmatic character to the notion of use developed by the friars. I would argue that use without appropriation is, in many respects, what characterized the medieval shared access to land, woods and water. As shown by *The Remembrance*, the concept of use theorized by the Franciscans was linked to medieval practices of commoning that asserted the validity of local customs against the impingement of legal codes. In the writings of Thomas of Celano the erudite Franciscan perspective on common use intersects localized popular practices of commoning.

In the course of the controversy with the Franciscans, the Church put forth a formidable defense of property. Pope John XXII effectively stated that, as the creature chosen by God, man had the natural right to possess the physical world. Such affirmation of

human mastery over the world prepared the way to the legitimization of the enclosures. The defeat and persecution for heresy of the Franciscan groups that refused to submit to the papacy, took place at the beginning of a long process in European history that culminated with the dissolution of the feudal order, the rise of merchant capitalism and the colonial adventure based on mercantilism. Throughout the centuries, the matrix of *dominium* morphed and extended its boundaries from matters of Church doctrine to Western conceptions of subjectivity as self-ownership, from the appropriation of the “vacant” territories of the New World to the enclosures of common land in Europe. These changes, however, were met by blockages and resistance. In the next section I turn to popular practices of commoning and peasant revolts.

Peasant Commoning

Historians of medieval peasantry have provided vivid accounts of everyday life in the commons, analyses of subsistence economy, property arrangements, customary usages and struggles against the enclosures (Thirsk 1964, Birrell 1987, Thompson 1993, Neeson 1996). This section reviews their work before considering the socio-natural (and supernatural) forces that were woven into the fabric of medieval commons.

One of the defining features of Medieval Europe was the distinction between the aristocracy and the commoners, largely rural peasantry living under the manorial system. The rural commoners were either free peasants who had to turn to the lords for protection, or serfs, subject to the law of the lord and obliged to work for them. Behind these broad categories of freedom and unfreedom, however, there were various local traditions and degrees of servitude and freedom regulated by custom. Both serfs and free agricultural workers living in the manor, the administrative unit of land controlled by the lord, had

access to open fields, wastes and fisheries that provided means of subsistence. Communal access to land took various forms in the plains of Western Europe including France and Italy, the southern German lands, the midland regions of England and large parts of Scandinavia.

According to historian Joan Thirsk (1964), the English commons comprised four elements that not always exist together. First, the open fields, that is, strips of arable land and meadow accessible by peasants. Second, the same strips of land that were converted in common pastures after harvest and in fallow seasons. Third, the “commons and wastes,” less fertile land including marshes, moorland, and forests that were used to graze stock and gather timber, stone, coal and a variety of food sources. Fourth, there was an assembly of peasants, a village meeting or other decision-making body that regulated the access to the commons and related controversies.

The wastes, sources of a great range of materials, were of crucial importance to Medieval economy of subsistence. They provided wood and timber for building, fencing, and the fabrication of equipment and utensils. At a time when the use of coal was very limited, wood was the main source of fuel for heating, cooking, and working in craftsmen’s workshops. Often the terrain of women and children, the wastes provided food and herbs for cooking and healing. These included berries, apples, mushrooms, nuts, greens and a variety of medical flowers and herbs. Birds, rabbits, and other small game could be hunted and snared. They were also used as gifts and means of connection and obligation with other commoners (Neeson 1993). Yet, in clerical writings, wastes and wetlands were often portrayed as perilous spaces inhabited by monsters, demons and outlaws. They constituted the porous boundaries between the orders of the natural and the supernatural (Di Palma 2014).

In spite of Garrett Hardin's notorious depiction of the commons as free-for-all and unchecked (1968), the use of the land was regulated by customary restrictions and negotiations. The limits in the usages of the commons were meant to guarantee the renovation of the land and the regeneration of trees. In his pathbreaking work on commons and customs in English history, E.P. Thompson elucidates,

“Agrarian custom was never fact. It was ambience. It might be best understood with the aid of Bordieu's concept of ‘habitus’ — a lived environment comprised of practices, inherited expectations, rules which both determined limits to usages and disclosed possibilities, norms and sanctions both of law and neighborhood pressures” (1993: 102).

Reciprocal obligation rather than property was the central concept of feudal custom²¹. These social arrangements, however, were not the expression of a radical egalitarianism but of a *subsistence ethic* that provided a minimal insurance of stability (Scott 1977). The communal economy was, to put it in E.P. Thompson's words, “parochial and exclusive,” delimited by the boundaries of villages and parishes.

As James Scott points out (2013: 51), the common existed in tense and ambivalent relation with the law: “the theme of common property is indissolubly linked in the little tradition to the question of local custom versus law.” Medieval jurisprudence acknowledged the existence of the commons since the promulgation of the Magna Carta in 1215. Among the charters forced on King John at Runnymede by the army of the barons protesting the rise of taxes, the Charter of the Forest reflected a material culture based on the use of commons and wastes. While the Magna Carta came to be perceived as a cornerstone for the

²¹ On this point Thompson's historical analysis intersects Roberto Esposito's philosophy of being-in-common as, at the same time, a gift and a debt toward the other. The terms common and community, as Esposito reminds us, come from the Latin *cum* and *munus*. *Cum* means “with” and *munus* indicates a gift and an obligation. Rather than a possession it implies a transfer. In this sense, the community and the common are not defined by identity, as much of Western modern political theory would have, but by the process of realizing shared obligations (Esposito 2010).

establishment of individual juridical and political rights against the excesses of sovereign power, the Charter of the Forest dealt with use, access to woods and various means of subsistence. In Peter Linebaugh's words (2008: 8) "in the two Charters political rights in restricting autocratic behavior paralleled common rights in restoring subsistence usufructs (goods or usages required for well-being)." Taken together, the charters protected the interests of the landowners and the church, acknowledged the rising role of the urban bourgeois, established freedom of travel for merchants, *and* recognized the existence of commoning among peasants. In the sixteenth century, however, the two charters were split: while the Magna Carta would evolve, the Charter of the Forest was left to collect dust.

Over the centuries since the promulgation of the Magna Charta, the access and usages of common land were sources of constant conflicts between peasants and lords. Together with the serfs' frequent rebellion against labor and military service, and the regime of taxation imposed by the lords, peasant's struggles for the common were an integral part of the widespread resistance against feudal powers. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, a time marked by the increase of population, the development of urban centers, the expansion of market exchanges and the trading system, the "rights" that the peasants had acquired or preserved came under increasing pressure.

The rise of the monetary economy provided incentive for the manorial lords to maximize their income through the sale of timber and wood. The demand of arable land was also on the rise and caused the widespread clearing of woods. Because of these transformations, the internal stratification among the commoners became more pronounced. While some possessed land and could employ workers, many joined an itinerant laboring class. In these circumstances, there was a multiplication of conflicts over the access to the commons. Disputes were frequent and sometimes violent.

Jean Birrell (1987) documents the nature and frequency of the struggles for the commons in the English county of Staffordshire. Manorial court records provide ample evidence of commoners' recourse to the law to protect the access to pastures and woodlands. Such option, however, was available only to free men and the better-off. Commoners more often were brought to court by the lords with the accusation of fence-breaking, raids and felling of trees. Cases of groups of men accused of illegally cutting down timber and wood were frequent in the early fourteenth century. Sometimes the men showed up in court and claimed that they had broken down the fences and cut the trees to gain access to the commons. It is likely that while many of these disputes reached the court, a much larger number did not. Moreover, the documents surviving in the archives suggest that fence breaking, raids on woods and other form of protest were widespread in many other counties.

The conflicts intensified in the following centuries. The effort of European monarchies to establish a uniform administration and to create a homogeneous system of land ownership and registration, was countered by peasant uprisings promoting highly localized social arrangements in which formal law tended to disappear. In the sixteenth century the continuous pushbacks against common land-use turned into a fully-fledged project of dispossession that created the conditions for the emergence of capitalist relations of production.

In some of the most vivid pages of *Capital*, Marx describes the process of so-called primitive accumulation. In contrast to classical political economy's narrative of individual industry as the basis of capitalism, Marx (1976: 669) remarks that primitive accumulation was "written in letters of blood and fire in the annals of mankind." Against Adam Smith's disembodied fantasy of the invisible hand, he describes the sheer violence that marked the

birth of capitalism. Robbery, conquest and murder resulted in the divorcing of producers (the peasants) from their means of production (the soil) and their transformation into “free” sellers of labor power. In Marx’s words (1976: 895):

The spoliation of the Church’s property, the fraudulent alienation of state domains, the theft of the commons lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital, and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians.

Here Marx describes the concurrent forces that in sixteenth century England triggered the transformation of peasants into proletarians. At first feudal lords began to drive the peasantry from arable land to turn it into pastures. While initially the English state resisted the demise of the peasant common, the Tudor state undertook a massive redistribution of land. After the break with the Roman Church, in 1536 Henry VIII ordered the dissolution of monasteries and the attendant commons. Church property was seized, given away or sold thereby driving away a great number of tenants. This paved the way for the rise of a new landed oligarchy, the gentry, that forged alliances with merchants and finance capitalists. Protests and rebellions ensued from the enclosures of common land. Peter Linebaugh (2008: 54) describes a wave of protest encampments organized in 1549 in lowland England. In East Anglia the protesters drafted and prayed a list of twenty-nine articles. They prayed that “...from henceforth no man shall enclose any more.”

Two decades earlier in Germany, the Peasant War demanded the restoration of customary forest rights. As I recalled at the beginning of this chapter through the evocation of the figure of Thomas Müntzer, in the German lands instances of radical religious reformation merged with the struggles of rural and urban commoners facing a profound shift in modes of government and property arrangements. Peter Blicke (1992) has proposed

the concept of “communal Reformation” to define the claims of movements and groups that predated, participated in or stemmed from the Peasant War. The access to common land and the identification of the *commune* as form of organization intersected in the insurrectional program of such groups.

The defeat of the German peasants did not put an end to the struggles for the commons. On the contrary, between the sixteenth and the nineteenth-century Europe was, albeit unevenly, swept by waves of enclosures that were met by forms of resistance that included riots, petitions and all manners of mischief and obstructions to disrupt and delay the process of privatization of land. The obstinate persistence of commoning forcefully expressed a refusal of waged labor that would become almost unthinkable in a fully developed capitalist economy. I argue that, taken together, the Franciscan formulation of use detached from the right to appropriate, and the struggles for common land-use that shook Europe throughout the Middle Ages and until the eighteenth century illuminate the memory of struggles, the stubborn persistence of practices that resisted the primacy of *dominium*.

Historical studies about medieval customs, agrarian practices, and the social meanings of common use shed light on many significant layers of a particular arrangement of existence destroyed by primitive accumulation. While this body of literature often employs the language of resources to define the commons, at times it also points toward something else. For example, when Joan Thirsk (1964) writes about the four elements making up the common-field system in England -- arable land, pastures, wastes and the assembly -- she hints toward a complex of socio-natural components of the common. Peter Linebaugh explicitly proposes to shift focus from an understanding of the commons as resources to *commoning* as a practice. He writes (2008: 279):

To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst —the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses

relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive.

This is an important point because it highlights the risks of reification of the common and reframes it as ongoing process. Ultimately, however, for Linebaugh “commoning is a labor process” (45). It is a praxis with “manifold particularities” (19) and intimately related to local ecologies but still a human praxis. While I find useful the reframing of the commons as activity, I worry that the focus on human praxis leaves out of the pictures a multiplicity of beings whose powers are involved in commoning.

The study of the medieval commons is particularly fruitful in this sense because everyday medieval life was peopled by a variety of beings that would be categorized under the modern rubric of cultural or religious “belief” or in the more negative terms of “superstition.” In order to add another layer to the memory of combats that might be used in the making of the alter-modern common, I now turn to this under-explored dimension of the pre-modern life.

Women, Magic and the Materiality of the Commons

In the Middle Ages the boundaries between people and things, natural and supernatural, living and non-living were much more fluid than they have been during European modernity. Medieval commoners inhabited a world densely populated by spirits that intervened in human affairs, and non-human entities including stones, herbs and holy relics that conveyed specific powers. How did these entities mattered in the making of the medieval commons? In order to complicate the modern idea of the commons-as-resources manipulated by human subjects, this section connects medieval “animated materiality” (Bynum 2011) and common-land uses. It demonstrates that pre-modern European commoning was permeated by conceptions of nature and matter that did not entail rigid boundaries between subjects

and objects.

What from the modern perspective appears as “nature,” was a highly unstable concept in the medieval world. As environmental historian Richard notes “the European Middle Ages lacked self-conscious or even coherent tacit discourse on relations of humans to nature or on nature as an entity, to say nothing of such concepts as environment and ecology, both of which are modern, not medieval, ideas” (Hoffman 2014: 86). Until the seventeenth century, when nature became the primary subject of scientific writing, there was no such thing as external and universal nature. Medieval nature “was neither unexceptionably uniform nor homogeneous over space and time. (...) In contrast, nature in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was conceived as regulated by uniform, inviolable laws” (Daston and Park 2001: 14). In the visual and written records of the medieval and early modern periods, “nature appeared to be both everywhere and nowhere” (Hanawalt and Kiser 2008: 1). This means that while occurrences and activities related to the material world, including agriculture, animal husbandry, medicine and divination, were ubiquitous during the these periods, discussions about nature itself were infrequent. In other words, nature was not conceived as an autonomous ontological domain with discrete boundaries.

Historian Sara Ritchey avers that medieval Christians were not concerned with the power of nature as a single harmonious whole. Rather, they expressed concern for how particular aspects of the material world expressed God’s incarnation in matter. She writes, “in the High and later Middle Ages, *natura* most often referred to an immaterial process or being, the very act of becoming and the actor, or the goddess who directed the generation of earthly material” (Ritchey 2014: 9). According to Robert Bartlett medieval discussions on nature and its opposites hardly produced stable concepts. The boundaries of nature were

porous, often defined through the opposition to the supernatural or construed through the exceptions of the magic, the marvel and the monstrous (Bartlett 2008).

In spite of the Church's efforts to purge pagan ways of inhabiting the world and affirm a cosmic hierarchy in which access to the divine was vertically mediated by ecclesiastic powers, theories and practices that complicated the Christian paradigm of creation persisted throughout the centuries. In *The Cheese and the Worms*, a study of the Inquisition trials of a sixteenth century miller from Frioul, in Northern Italy, Carlo Ginzburg brings to the fore fragments of medieval peasant culture characterized by an "elemental materialism" (1980: 61). In 1583 and then again in 1598, the turbulent time of the Reformation and the Church's persecution of heresy, a miller known as Menocchio was identified as heretic and brought to trial by the Inquisition.

During the interrogations the miller asserted a striking views of creation: "I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed—just as cheese is made out of milk and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels" (6). Menocchio could not conceive that anything could originate without matter, the cheese, a corporeal entity out of which spiritual creatures would emerged. Ginzburg contends that this was not simply the view of a man who had chewed upon a few books whose words and meanings had fermented in his memory. Rather, Menocchio's confessions expressed the tenacious persistence in the sixteenth-century European countryside of a pre-Christian elemental approach to creation and the material world that was closer to Ovid than Genesis.

In her recent work, Caroline Bynum (2011) details the intense medieval concern and ambivalence for what she calls "holy matter," that is matter as a site of transformation,

generation and corruption manifesting the power of the divine²². While there was no one understanding of matter, every medieval social group, those who doubted and those who believed, assumed a dynamic matter, “and matter included the human body as well as the animal body, the body of the stars, or the body of wood, ash, and bone” (283). If since the early Middle Ages a wide range of material things including herbs, bread, stones and cloth were understood as having healing, protective and other powers, in the late Middle Ages new kinds of “animated materiality” appeared. These included bleeding relics, animated images, paintings, and sacramentals used in ritual blessings. The key problem in the Middle Ages “was change –not the line between person and thing, or the line between life and death” (284) but the contradiction between volatile matter and the changelessness of the creator.

I am interested in thinking through the implications of medieval matter for the understandings of the commons. Here, I briefly consider two examples. First, the role of the ritual of perambulation in the making and remaking of the commons. Second, the figure of the witch and its entanglement with a material world endowed with powers.

E.P. Thompson and Peter Linebaugh draw a connection between the struggles in the medieval commons and the customary rituals of perambulation. These were processions of villagers usually performed during “rogation days,” three weeks before the feast of Corpus Christi. The ritual, also known as the “beating of the bounds,” and accompanied by games, pageants and plays, served multiple purposes. First, it mapped the village territory by inscribing the knowledge of the landscape in the physical memory of the participants. For E.P. Thompson, this form of mapping through collective walking engendered a continuous

²² Commenting on Bynum’s formulation of “holy matter,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out that “In the Middle Ages materiality exists to reveal something about God, certainly, but it also reveals something about itself, something that cannot be wholly subsumed into allegory” (Cohen 2015: 13).

renewal of customary land-usages. As geographer Kenneth Olwig elucidates, perambulations were part of a mode of dwelling through which a lived landscape was shaped and simultaneously shaped the body politic by producing a sense of belonging to a community (Olwig 2008). Traces of the landscape were embodied through a series of bodily practices, some of which involved pain. Childrens' heads were knocked on boundary markers such a ditch or a wall so that they could experience intense physical contact with important places and remember them in case of disputes over the right to walk upon and access common land.

Second, after the enclosures perambulations became opportunities for "possessioning," that is, for reestablishing the commons. Thompson writes: "in a parish perambulation, some labourers might carry 'an axe, a mattock, and an iron crow...for the purpose of demolishing any building or fence which had been raised without permission' on the commons or waste" (Thompson 1993: 119). Similarly, Linebaugh recalls how, as late as 1830, the commoners of Otmoor, in Oxfordshire, revitalized the old practice of perambulation in their protest against enclosures. A thousand women, men and children perambulated the seven-miles long boundary of Otmoor in open daylight to pull down the fences obstructing their way (Linebaugh 2010).

These scholars of the commons, however, do not pay much attention to how perambulation reflected an "understanding of a natural world pervaded by spirit and negotiated by magic" (Hoffman 2014: 92). This ritual also involved blessing for the crops, the belief in spirits threatening to spoil the harvest, the presence of relics and even holy trees. Perambulation was the climax of the Rogation festival introduced by Bishop Mamertus of Vienne to replace a pagan festivity. The procession paraded relics and banners painted

with images of saints through the fields to drive away wicked spirits from the air, and sprinkle the earth with holy water to protect it from drought (Borlik 2011).

According to Lewis Dayton Burdick, author of the early twentieth century study *Magic and Husbandry* (1905), in the ceremony of perambulation performed before the English Reformation “the people accompanied the bishop or some of the clergy into the fields, where they repeated litanies and implored God to avert from them plague and pestilence, and to give them seasonable weather and the fruits of the earth in their season. (...) certain trees along the boundary lines were known as gospel trees or holy trees because of the reading of the gospel under them” (192).

To the eyes of sixteenth century English Protestant reformers, however, fertility blessings and the parading of holy objects smacked of magic and superstition. Mocking the ceremony as pagan relic, Elizabethan reformer Henry Barlow defined it as “charming the fields” (Thomas 2003). Under Queen Elizabeth, the processions of Rogation days were prohibited or the use of Catholic paraphernalia was greatly reduced but not completely abandoned. As protestant minister Richard Baxter complained in 1650,

“profane, ungodly, presumptuous multitude are as zealous for crosses and surplices, processions and perambulations, reading of a Gospel at a cross way, the observation of holidays and fasting days, the repeating of the Litany or the life forms in the Common Prayer, the bowing at the name of world Jesus...with a multitude of things which are only the traditions of their fathers” (Duffy 2005: 578).

It seems to me that in order to make sense of the role of perambulations in the making of the common, customary practices ought to be considered together with their religious and magical components. The efficacy of the ritual of perambulation in re-establishing the boundaries of the commons and foster the fertility of the fields depended as much on the collective action of villagers as the multitude of things that they carried with them.

Among contemporary theorists of the common, Silvia Federici stands out as the one who has drawn explicit links between the process of enclosures, the colonization of the New World, and shifting conceptions of the body and the material world. Federici's analysis is firmly rooted into Marxist feminism. Her primary interest is to foreground the role, often neglected among Marxists, played by the disciplining of women's body and work in ongoing processes of primitive accumulation. In *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), she examines women's contribution to medieval subsistence economy and their role in the struggles against feudal power and the enclosures. This work shows the existence of a world of female subjects — healers, midwives, witches and heretics— whose knowledges and skills were disqualified by the capitalist sexual division of labor.

Although Federici acknowledges that the medieval village should not be idealized as an exemplary community of equals, she maintains that women enjoyed more social power in the medieval economy of subsistence than the capitalist money-economy. In the feudal village, she writes, “no social separation existed between the production of goods and the reproduction of the work-force” (25). This was a context marked by the prominence of collective relations over familiar ones, and in which women's activities were more a site of cooperation and sociality than the expression of the individual capacity to work. The demise of the subsistence economy and the rise of capitalism brought about profound transformations in women's life. In many parts of Europe women were expelled from the crafts and, gradually, the distinction between productive and unproductive labor was established. For liberal economists (but also for Marx) only productive labor, extracted from individual bodies and capable of producing marketable commodities, was generative of value and therefore compensated through the wage system. In contrast, the reproductive work performed by women, was devalued as fundamentally unproductive and freely appropriated.

Further, while in the Middle Ages women exercised control over childbirth, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century new state policies introduced throughout Europe criminalized abortion, contraception, and adultery. To put it Foucauldian terms (1978), these measures were part of the biopolitical effort²³ to maximize the growth of populations and turn it into a calculable and predictable aggregate of individual workers. Drawing on Foucault, Federici focuses on processes of bodily discipline. Yet, unlike Foucault, she claims that the differential disciplinary investment in female bodies was functional to the capitalist reproduction of labor-power.

Federici identifies the witch-hunt, an event consigned to oblivion by Marxist historians, as a key strategy for the taming of potentially rebel female bodies in the context of primitive accumulation. The accounts concerning the size of the witch-hunt differ widely. According to Brian Levack (2013) at least 100,000 individuals in Europe and colonial America were prosecuted for witchcraft between 1400 and 1775. Others were accused, arrested and interrogated but never brought to trial or, if they were, no records are available. About 50,000 people were executed, and thousands more were tortured and banished. Anne Barstow (1994) argues that about 200,000 women were accused of witchcraft between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries.

Evidence of magical practice in medieval Europe is found in a variety of medieval texts: medical handbooks, monastic and liturgic texts, law codes, penitentials, sermons and other religious literature. The Graeco-Roman tradition as well as the Celtic, Germanic and Slavic cultures, influenced medieval engagements with the material world. Herbs, stones, animals were used in healing and protective practices and empowered through rituals and

²³ Foucault (1978) proposes the term *biopower* to define the nineteenth century shift from a form of power based on the sovereign's right to kill to a regulatory control tending toward the optimization of the life-forces of populations belonging to the territory of nation states.

oral formulas. Necromancy conjured up spirits, angels and demons, and divination “provided means for reading signs as meaningful in the natural world, whether lunar cycles, the cry of birds, or the entrails of an animal.” (Jolly 2002: 30). While the vernacular language lacked a single word to indicate magic, the Church labeled as *superstitio* the complex of false and illegitimate practices and beliefs of heretics, witches and sorcerers.

The association between women and witchcraft had deep roots in European culture.

The canon *Episcopi* (c.906) refers to

Certain wicked women ... who believe that at night, in the company of Diana, goddess of the pagans and an innumerable multitude of women, they ride on certain beasts, and pass over great distances of the earth in the depth of the night, and obey her commands as their mistress and are summoned to her service on particular nights.

Six hundred years later the infamous *Malleum maleficarum* (1486) portrayed the witch as a sexually rapacious, poor woman, often old and uneducated. By the late fifteenth century most demonologists agreed that witchcraft was a female crime. In 1580, the French theorist of mercantilism, absolute state sovereignty, and demonology Jean Bodin stated that women were fifty times more likely than men to succumb to diabolic temptations. A proponent of the notion that a large population is the wealth of the nation, Bodin advocated severe measures against witches and midwives whose activities interfered with population growth through birth-control and abortion.

The peak of the persecution of witches was reached between the mid-sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, when Europe was shook by intense social crisis, famine, urban uprisings, rural revolts against the enclosures and the wave of pauperization stemming from it. This period was marked by a new political attention toward the size and reproduction of the population, the connected rise of statistical studies and demography that would later develop into “an art of government” that had the management of the population as its

ultimate end (Foucault 2009). Considering the gender and social condition of the victims of the witch-hunt, Federici (2004: 170) notes that “witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women’s resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal.”

The witch-hunt was a key event in a broader process leading to the formation of capitalist bio-power: it disqualified and destroyed “a universe of practices, beliefs and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline” (165). What was disqualified and destroyed was, according to Federici, a magical conception of the world, the land and the body that had characterized communal living in pre-modern Europe. She writes: “at the basis of magic was an animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit, and thus imagined the cosmos as a *living organism*, populated by occult forces where every element was in ‘sympathetic’ relation with the rest” (142).

The activities of wise women, healers and midwives persecuted as witches in the context of eradication of peasant communal economies, were entangled with a material world that they drew on in order to bring forth transformation. Healers and witches engaged with a range of entities (amulets, herbs, animals but also incorporeal spirits) through which they performed healing and magic. Their use of things maximized the efficacy of things themselves.

The examples elaborated in this section are helpful to reframe medieval commoning as an activity enmeshed in the powers of an unstable nature. They might be thought of as an invitation to consider the pre-modern commons in more capacious terms, as a provisional arrangement of existence weaving together agrarian customs, modes of land-use, relations of gender and sexuality, and practical ways to approach a material world endowed with hidden

virtues. Considering medieval praxis as characterized by the engagement with a dynamic matter might stimulate us to think more deeply about the distinction between subjects and objects that seems so central in current approaches to the common.

Transatlantic Improvement

In seventeenth-century England “improvement of the wastes and forests became the slogan of the age” (Thirsk 1984: 205). The analysis of memoranda, pamphlets, parliamentary notes and other documents concerned with agricultural policy reveals that “improvement” was a recurrent theme, one closely connected to both the enclosures of the common and the dispossession of indigenous land in the English colonies. The writings of agrarian reformers extolled industry, thrift and productivity while condemning the idleness, waste and slothfulness associated with European commoners and indigenous populations in the New World.

The improvement of wastes and “empty lands” through labor and enclosures was perhaps best encapsulated in the work of John Locke. His theory of property was informed by processes connecting the two sides of the Atlantic: the development of domestic agrarian capitalism *and* colonial settlement in the Americas to which he contributed as a member of the English company that settled the Carolina colony (Arneil 1986). Echoing the papal assertion discussed earlier in this chapter that Man, as the chosen creature of God, has the right to exercise full *dominium* over the earth, Locke maintained that God had given the bounty of nature in common to humanity: “God gave the World to Men in Common...for their benefit, and the greatest Conveniencies of Life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated” (1988: 291).

The state of nature resembled the English wastes inhabited by the idle commoners and the wilderness of the America populated by indigenous people. In Locke's eyes, these uncultivated lands shared a marginal, uncivilized quality. They were lands left to nature whose potential productivity needed human labor in order to be unlocked. Specifically, by labor he meant English commercial agriculture as opposed to indigenous hunting-gathering practices: "As much Land as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, Cultivates, and can use the Product of, so much is his Property. He by his Labour does, as it were, inclose it from the Common." (290-291).

For Locke only "industrious and rational" individuals, owners of a body capable of labor are able to cultivate and improve "wastelands" and are therefore entitled to appropriate them. Because man has property in his own body and personhood, and since labor is an expression of embodied personhood, anything that is transformed by labor becomes personal property by natural right. Thus, individuals acquire the natural right to enclose common land when they mix their labor with nature. These qualities of self-possession, industriousness and rationality are associated with the Christian men distinguished from the Amerindians who lacked the intellectual means and skills to improve the land through proper cultivation. Even more specifically, they described the Englishmen who pursued a "peaceful" colonization by means of labor in contrast to the violence of the Spanish conquest (Arneil 1986).

From the Lockean perspective, the common good was best served through the proper cultivation of land, one capable of creating not just use value but exchange value (Meiksins Wood 2002). The enclosures of the common and the appropriation of indigenous land were key steps in the civilizing mission undertaken by the Englishmen both in the

national territories and in the colonies.²⁴ The transformation of nature into productive land and its incorporation in the monetary economy constituted the foundation of the civil society, a properly human community constituted by free and private persons. What Locke fully develops at the junction of the enclosures of the common and the colonial enterprise, is a model of Man capable of appropriating the world through his bodily activity and turn the mixing of labor and nature into a source of value.

The connection between the extinction of the European commons and the project of colonization in the context of primitive accumulation is a persistent one. Traces of it are found in the eighteenth-century English debate on the enclosures. John Sinclair, the President of the Board of Agriculture, wrote in 1803: “Why should we not attempt a campaign also against our great domestic foe, I mean the hitherto unconquered sterility of so large a proportion of the surface of the kingdom? ... let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt, or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common” (Neeson 1996: 31). Subsistence economy in the commons was perceived as primitive, akin to the savage world of the “poor native *Indians*” in America. The commoners were described as a “sordid race,” lazy and dangerous. They were wild and unproductive as the land that they lived on. Their existence stood in the way of national interest, economic growth and modernization. In the writings of eighteenth-century English critics of the commons, the enclosures were presented as solution to both economic and moral concerns. The establishment of property rights addressed questions of labor supply and productivity but

²⁴ While the narrative of improvement was concerned with dismantling both the European common and indigenous forms of land-tenure, it is important to point out that, improvement occurred in markedly different forms in the colonies. Alan Greer’s study shows that European settler colonialism also employed common property as a tool for seizing indigenous land. Thus, he complicates romanticized ideas of the common as spaces of freedom. See Greer 2012.

also of poverty and criminality. Starting in the middle of the eighteenth century, Acts of Parliament sanctioned the enclosures. Despite the stubborn non-compliance of the commoners, the civilizing politics of improvement prevailed as one of the driving forces of European modernity.

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been to trace the vicissitudes of the common in the passage between the Middle Ages to modernity. In order to begin to unsettle accounts of the common as primarily the product of human activity, I have drawn attention to medieval engagements with a material world percolating with powers. Medieval matter, as Caroline Walker Bynum observes (2011: 283), was “labile, changeable, and capable to act.” This metamorphic matter was the very stuff of the common, something that commoners were trying to unleash, control and negotiate with. In this sense, the chapter adds to the body of literature that describes the disqualification of the common in the context of colonial-capitalist development in which women, colonial subjects, animals and land were turned into resources to be appropriated by the civilized white Man.

The chapter insists on the importance of re-activating the memory of disqualified modes of dwelling in the current epoch that some call the Anthropocene to index a slice of geological time made distinct by the impact of the human on the earth. The excavation of the archives of the common and the enclosure suggests that a very specific figure of the human has had a central role in ushering in the Anthropocene, one endowed with the natural right of appropriation. This is not to suggest that pre-modern modes of dwelling on earth should be adopted. That would be impossible. But memories of combats are important because they can be used for challenging the regimes of truth of the present, particularly the

imperative that there is no alternative to capitalist development. In chapter 4 I will come back to the question of the tense relationship between commoning and modernity by considering the encounter between the common and indigenous communal practices in contemporary Latin America. But first I turn to current elaborations of the common to show how they both challenge and reinforce the hegemonic model of the human emerged out of European modernity. This is an abrupt jump in time but it serves the purpose of constructing the temporality of the commons as multidirectional, capable perhaps to straddle the distinction between the archaic and the contemporary.

Chapter Two: Life, Labor, and Language. Reading Virno and Simondon

Post-Fordist Anthropogenesis

Two stratigraphers writing in the magazine of the Geological Society of America recently asked, “Is the Anthropocene an issue of stratigraphy or pop culture?” Puzzled by the popularity of the Anthropocene, the proposed name for a new geological epoch shaped by human action, they argued that, in the current circumstances, the Anthropocene allows conceptual mapping rather than conceptualization based on empirical evidence (Autin and Hoolbrook 2012). To be sure, the Anthropocene has become a matter that exceeds the geoscience community. It is an issue of stratigraphy as much as of popular culture and, crucially, politics.

Within feminist studies and allied fields, a central question is that the generic anthropos of the Anthropocene closely resembles the hegemonic model of the human, the white man of European modernity entitled to appropriate a feminized and racialized material world in his quest for progress. But insofar as the term poses inescapable problems that beg interdisciplinary cross-pollination, it should not be dismissed as a fashionable concept (Moore 2015). Rather the problem becomes: What politics might be pursued within and against prevalent narratives of the Anthropocene that foreground an undifferentiated human as species capable of simultaneously causing and remediating the ecological crisis?

It is with these concerns in mind that I turn to the work of Paolo Virno, a radical political thinker who stands out for his persistent investment in human nature—a notion somehow out of sync with feminist and postcolonial contestations of who and what counts as human. Although Virno has not directly engaged the Anthropocene, the anthropos is at the core of his analysis of post-Fordism, a flexible form of accumulation that connects

disparate modes and places of production. The current economic regime, he argues, mobilizes the bio-linguistic faculties that set *homo sapiens* apart from the rest of the living. These faculties, understood as inexhaustible potentiality rather than as timeless given, constitute the common of humanity, that which might be actualized in the form of “engaged withdrawal” from capitalism and the state (Virno 1996).

In works such as *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004), *When the Word Becomes Flesh* (2015), and the more recent *E così via all'infinito* (2010)²⁵, Virno attempts to reconnect the history of labor with natural history, the transformation of social relations with the powers of the human as natural being. It is at the intersection between the human form of life and the post-Fordist transformation, he contends, that new modes of being together may emerge. As the key thinker of the “naturalist” tendency within Italian Autonomism, Virno offers a compelling point of entry for exploring limits and possibilities of Autonomist Marxism for thinking politics in the Anthropocene.

The first part of this chapter charts Virno’s investment in “human nature.” What is the anthropos for Virno? How does it support or unsettle the prevalent narrative of the Anthropocene that identifies the generic human as the primary cause of an epochal mutation? These questions are a useful point of departure to address Virno’s work. More broadly, they provide a starting point for engaging the tendency within Autonomist Marxist to privilege man-the-producer as the primary agent transforming himself and the world.

It is certainly puzzling that Virno participates in the species discourse without sufficiently addressing how it emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries within global circuits of exploitation that shaped the categories of human and nonhuman in

²⁵ *A Grammar of the Multitude* and *When the Word Becomes Flesh* were published in Italian in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Portions of *Così via all'infinito*, published in Italy 2010, have appeared in the journal *Parrhesia*. See Virno 2004, 2015, 2009.

exclusionary ways. In what follows I explore some of the implications of this elision at a time when much of the Anthropocene discourse describes the human species as the geomorphic force behind the Sixth Extinction (Kolbert 2015) while also placing confidence in managerial planning and technological fixes (Hamilton 2013).

The second part of the chapter tackles the centrality of the anthropos in Virno's work from a different angle. In order to complicate Virno's anchoring of the common in properly human capacities, I discuss his use of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation. While I follow the political reading of Simondon proposed by Virno, I suggest that Simondon has much to contribute to the reframing of the common as socio-natural formation, one irreducible to human capacities.

Life, Labor, and Language

Paolo Virno was a member of the Workerist group Potere Operaio until 1973, when the organization dissolved into the broader movement of Autonomia. He was active in the cycle of struggles that began in 1967 and culminated in 1977 with the irruption of new subjectivities in the Italian political scene. Young people rebelled against the discipline of the Fordist factory, feminists turned reproductive labor into a site of refusal, thousands of activists claimed mass illegality and violence as means of political action. Such intensification of political antagonism expressed simultaneously the refusal of work and the positive invention of new modes of living. As one of the defendants in the April 7th Trial, Virno spent three years in prison before finally being acquitted of charges of subversive association and armed insurrection. Throughout the 1980s and until the present, through books and contributions in militant journals such as *Luogo Comune*, *DeriveApprodi* and *Forme di Vita*, Virno has been a crucial voice in establishing Autonomist debates on the shifting nature of

labor and political organization in the age of post-Fordism²⁶.

While trajectories of exile and activist exchanges lead Autonomist thinkers such as Negri and Berardi to encounter the French philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Baudrillard, Virno has taken a different path, one defined by the interest in philosophy of language and the German philosophical anthropology of the early twentieth century. Combining Marx's concepts of "general intellect" and "species-being" with philosophical anthropology's reflection on human nature, and Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, Virno has developed a distinctive account of how the species-specific potentialities of *homo sapiens* have become the "raw material" of post-Fordist production.

In the "Ten Thesis" that conclude *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Virno (2004: 106) observes that "in Post-Fordism, the *general intellect* does not coincide with fixed capital, but manifests itself principally as a linguistic reiteration of living labor." This statement encapsulates a central motif of the Autonomist interpretation of Marx's "The Fragment on Machines." Part of the *Grundrisse*, "The Fragment" is the key text Autonomist Marxists draw on to make sense of the shifting relationship between labour and capitalism. Here Marx reflects on the relationship between *dead labor* – i.e. labor objectified in machinery and technology – and *living labor*, creative human activity identified with the collective potentiality of working bodies. Marx suggests that modern capitalism increasingly depends on the *general intellect*, that is, the centrality of the "general social knowledge" to the development of the productive forces. He writes (1973: 706), "The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree,

²⁶ Virno offers rich accounts of his political and intellectual trajectory in an interview with Branden W. Joseph (see Joseph 2005), and in *Gli operaiisti*, a book collecting biographical statements and interviews with many Workerist thinkers. See Pozzi, Ruggero and Borio 2005.

hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it.” In other words, *living labor*, described as the “subjective existence of labor” (295), has been objectified by capital in the form of machinery.

Autonomist Marxists propose an alternative reading of the general intellect, one that privileges living labor as that which is only ever partially captured by capitalism. This analysis is largely rooted in the post-1977 Italian landscape of repressed insurrection and capitalist restructuring. In Virno’s words (2004: 99) “the masterpiece of Italian capitalism consists of having transformed into a productive resource precisely those modes of behavior which, at first, made their appearance under the semblance of radical conflict.” This means that the refusal of factory discipline expressed by new antagonistic subjects has been converted into productive activities that blur the boundaries between labor and life. Post-Fordist workers are no longer required to perform repetitive tasks. What is now put to work is the capacity of acting in concert. Thus, if Marx identifies the general intellect with the abstract knowledge subsumed by the system of machines, Autonomist Marxists argue that the “general social knowledge” cannot ever be fully integrated within fixed capital because it is “actually inseparable from the interaction of a plurality of living subjects” (Virno 1996: 194). It is living labor that is called into play in a productive regime where value is attached to ideas, images, codes, and performances rather than objects. Technological automation notwithstanding, the key force of the productive process is the potential reservoir of collective human intelligence that, although incorporated into the machinery, is continuously mobilized and renewed through the interactions of a multitude of men and women. This new *mass intellectuality* drives the development of post-Fordist capitalism.

This is precisely where the nature of the *anthropos* comes into play. Virno’s wager is

that contemporary capitalism produces value by harnessing the “biological invariant” common to human individuals: the potentiality of speech and relationality. While other animals dwell in a fixed environment that triggers specialized behaviours, the species *homo sapiens* is characterized by innate disorientation (*disambientamento*). The lack of specialization, “the habit of not having solid habits” (Joseph 2005: 29), translates into a fundamental oscillation between blockage and innovation, negation and affirmation.

Here Virno draws on philosophical anthropology’s attempt to compare man and animal as a way to grasp the distinctive traits of man. Influential in Germany between the 1920s and 1950s, the philosophical anthropology of Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen was indebted to Jacob Von Uexküll’s ethological study of the relations between organisms and their *Umwelten*, lifeworlds defined by correspondences between sensory capacities and environmental forces (Von Uexküll 2010). Von Uexküll, however, seemed inclined to think that humans too act within a particular milieu, one more complex than that of many other living beings and yet functioning on the basis of the same operating principles²⁷. In contrast, philosophical anthropologists argued that the human species is fundamentally deprived of *Umwelt* and therefore compensates this deficiency through the creation of cultural environments and the capacity for self-reflexivity.

Virno and philosophical anthropologists agree that all organisms are enmeshed in lifeworlds. But humans, they contend, are eccentric beings, deprived of a milieu and therefore at a distance from themselves. This “openness to the world” sets *Homo sapiens* apart from other organisms. As beings that do not fully coincide with their milieu, humans have the capacity to transform their form of life. Insofar as post-Fordism relies on human

²⁷ Of course, the problem with Von Uexküll is the tendency to think in terms of enclosed sensory bubbles, vital spaces at times conflated with the nation state. Roberto Esposito has drawn attention to this aspect of Von Uexküll’s ethology. See Esposito 2008: 17-19.

non-specialization, it engenders, according to Virno, a historical and social repetition of anthropogenesis (2009). In other words, the post-Fordist organization of labor corresponds to an ontological condition that oscillates between repetition and the capacity to invent the new.

It is important to note that when Virno draws attention to the “since always” of human nature he is not evoking a transhistorical essence but a potentiality that is immanent in human beings. He is interested in how the “right now” of post-Fordism, with its insistence on flexibility and precarity, forces a reconsideration of the human as species. In this respect, his intervention partially overlaps with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s point that the Anthropocene “requires us to put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history of humans” (2009: 212). For both thinkers, it is not that the human has a species destiny to fulfil but the current global situation imposes a return to species thinking. What is perplexing, however, is the conflation between human generality and global dynamics. Chakrabarty links the global fact of anthropogenic climate change to the return to the generality of the species. In Virno’s analysis of the transformation of global capitalism, natural history is conflated with the history of *homo sapiens*. In both cases what remains unexplored are the other-than-human forces that enable, and disable, human existence and that capitalism variously enrolls in productive processes.

The Political Economy of Species, Race and Sex

According to Virno, in the context of post-Fordist transformations, Marx’s category of “species-being,” the generic existence of humanity, acquires new relevance. He writes (2008, 78), “Roles and tasks, in the post-Ford era, correspond by and large to the *Gattungswesen* or ‘generic existence,’ which Marx discussed in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*.”

We have come full circle: human nature is the point of integration between historical materialism, the critical trajectory that began with Marx and connects productive forces and social relations, and “naturalistic materialism”, by which Virno means the investigation of the distinctive capacities of the human species. A closer look to Marx’s species-being, however, reveals an ambiguous relationship between humans and their lifeworlds, one that somehow intersect philosophical anthropology.

In a famous passage the young Marx defines man as a natural, conscious living being who manifests a peculiar mode of existence through sensuous activity: “the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, is contained in the character of its life activity, and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character” (Marx 1988: 76). Species-being returns in *Capital, Volume 1* where Marx offers a famous definition of labor as the process by which man “regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (1976: 283). He goes on to say that through this relation man “develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power.” Clearly Marx was inspired by scientific ideas of life as constant transformation of matter. Metabolism, a concept that he borrowed from agricultural chemistry, refers to the material exchanges activated by labour for the production and reproduction of human life.

Now, it seems to me that the formulation of species-being reflects a process in which human beings act upon lifeworlds rather than in conjunction with them. Through labor, a form of energy capable of adding energy, men activate potentialities that would have otherwise remained latent. While nature participates in the metabolic process, it does so in a way that is ultimately subordinated to labor. Human relation to nature, therefore, can hardly be explained in terms of coevolution, as some theorists of metabolism suggest (Foster

2000)²⁸. Rather, it describes the emergence of the human out of nature, as living being capable of tirelessly mobilizing natural forces, animate and inanimate, for its own transformation. Ultimately, what underpins species-being is the narrative of the self-reflexive *anthropos* capable of transforming himself and the world. As Donna Haraway (2008: 47) puts it: “Of all philosophers, Marx understood relational sensuousness, and he thought deeply about the metabolism between human beings and the rest of the world enacted in living labor. As I read him, however, he was finally unable to escape from the humanist teleology of labor—the making of man himself.” For Marx, as for Virno’s philosophical anthropology, the human species has a relation to nature by virtue of its detachment from it.

Jason Read, an acute reader of Marx and Autonomist Marxism, suggests that the English translation of the German term *Gattungswesen* as “species-being” might be misleading in that it underscores biological meanings. While Read recognizes that species-being entails a biological reference, he argues that the French translation of *Gattungswesen* as *la vie générique* (generic life), might more accurately convey Marx’s use of the term (2003: 180). This attempt to detach species-being from biology, however, overlooks how in Marx “generic life” indexes man’s universality as *opposed* to animal particularity. Marx contrasts human species-being to the “species-life” of animals. Animal activity is identical to itself, it is purely instinctual and subordinated to physical needs. Humans, on the other hand, can act and, simultaneously, confront the objects that they have created. Labour, or *praxis*, is the primary way through which human beings collectively transform nature, and by doing so, transform themselves. In the attempt to define what is proper to man as laboring living being, Marx’s species-being creates a separation between the human and the nonhuman by which only the

²⁸ In *Molecular Red*, McKenzie Wark draws on Donna Haraway to elaborate a “low theory” of the metabolic rift in relation to the Anthropocene. See Wark 2015.

former acts upon the world, while the latter just exists.

Still more, in this concept we find echoes of eighteenth and nineteenth century's species discourse, one not only bound up with racialized and sexualized formations, but also paradoxically connected to classic political economy's effort to naturalize capitalist relations of production. The idea of the human as species emerged in eighteenth century Europe where it was often conflated with race, and used to naturalize the hierarchical ordering of biological differences. The development of species taxonomies was steeped in the colonial obsession for classification, connected to racial subjectification and infused with sexual difference. Linnaeus' taxonomy is paradigmatic in this sense. The Swedish naturalist introduced the term *Mammalia* in the mid-eighteenth century to indicate the class of animals, including humans, characterized by the presence of mammary glands. Then, he used the term *homo sapiens* to distinguish between humans and other primates and defined four racialized subspecies ranging from the white, blond, and inventive *Homo sapiens europaeus* to the *homo sapiens afer*, described as black, lazy and ruled by caprice. As feminist historian Londa Schiebinger (1993: 53-55) has shown, the genesis of *homo sapiens* was not only highly racialized but also profoundly gendered. While Linnaeus used a female characteristic (the lactating breast), to emphasize the ties between humans and animals, he employed a traditionally male feature (reason) to indicate human uniqueness, or, more precisely, the uniqueness of the European white man.

Marx was not immune from the racialized legacy of species thinking. In the *Grundrisse* he uses the distinction between species-life and species-being to contrast the Asiatic Mode of Production to the Germanic mode of production. Gayatri Spivak avers that Marx conflates the Asian individual with species-life, natural life without human specificity. It is only with European feudalism and the movement toward urbanization in the Germanic

mode of production that the self-reflexive relationship with nature typical of species-being emerges. Spivak points out that in Marx's description of the Asiatic individual "It is almost as if Species-Life has not yet differentiated itself into Species-Being" (1999: 80) The species distinction is now re-cast in historical as well as geographical terms. As Nicole Shukin (2009: 251) notes, species being is problematic in that it operates by producing hierarchical difference within the human, as well as between the human and other animals.

In *The Order of Things* (1970), Michel Foucault argues that modern Man emerged at the intersection of three discursive domains —life, labor, and language— articulated by biology, political economy, and linguistics, respectively. These are interdependent domains, characterized by an intense flow of ideas. Political economy, for example, borrowed heavily from the species taxonomy developed by natural history. Adam Smith, who was familiar with the work of Linnaeus, proposed the market as a natural, self-regulating force independent from individual agency and able to guarantee the perpetuation of the species against extinction (Schabas 2003, Cohen 2013). Political economy had an anthropological foundation insofar as it constitutes itself in relation to "the biological properties of the human species" (Foucault 1970: 257). Marx's project countered classic political economy attempt to naturalize an economic order grounded on private property and the slavery of wage labor. Yet, by thinking labor as species capacity, he imported from classic political economy the idea that labor is what makes us human.

I argue that Virno, with his insistence on the coincidence between human language and labor, runs into a similar problem. Moreover, his account of post-Fordism as historical reiteration of anthropogenesis runs the risk of producing an insidious foreclosure: it elides the effects of racialization and feminization that the species discourse has historically both enabled and entailed. The foregrounding of labor as potentiality immanent in the whole of

humanity obliterates the potentialities of the ecological and geological milieu that provides the conditions for what “we” have come to understand as human. Because he operates within a framework that conceives the constitution of the world in terms of production, Virno falls short of providing a counterpoint to the narratives of the Anthropocene that posits “generic” man as primary locus of geopolitical agency. However, in Virno’s work we find an expansive, and nuanced, notion of the collective that displaces the political ontology of modernity, particularly the idea that the political community is made up of individuals who have left behind the state of nature. His work invites the question of how to inherit from Autonomist Marxist rich account of the collective without embracing the human as central agent of world-making.

States of Nature

Virno’s account of the political valence of human nature in the context of contemporary processes of capitalist accumulation poses an important challenge to Western modern political thought. The liberal tradition envisions isolated individuals lacking communal relation. Each individual owns something but shares nothing with others except a set of recurring elements. For example, in Hobbes, one of Virno’s favourite targets, the relationship between the many and the sovereign is unidirectional. It begins with a multitude of hostile individuals scattered in the state of nature, and culminates with their submission to the law in exchange of protection from violence and death. Through the transition from the state of nature to the properly political civil state, the multitude abandons chaos and becomes the people. Hobbes’s bleak assessment of human nature serves as the bedrock for a theory of sovereignty in which individuals interact on the basis of interests mediated by the universal figure of the state.

To the Universal of modern thought Virno opposes the Common (2010: 204-207). While the former results from the abstraction of recurrent elements that return in a number of already individuated entities, the latter provides the conditions for the emergence of singularities. The common, the shared linguistic faculty of the human species, expresses a multitude of singularities that persist as such. There is no dividing line between the common and the multitude, only trajectories of dislocation. In other words, there is no overcoming of the state of nature, only countless realizations of its potentiality.

Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation is key in Virno's articulation of the common as shared bio-linguistic faculties that are performed differently by a multitude of singularities. Virno's interest in the process of individuation dates back to the 1980s. Already in *Convenzione e materialismo*, a book first published in 1986, he draws a connection between Marx's notion of general intellect and the philosophical concept of "principium individuationis" which he traces back to medieval philosopher Duns Scotus. Instead of taking the individual as the given unity from which everything else can be derived, Virno speaks of individuation as a process "whose rhythm is neither in tune with the cogito nor with consciousness (not even class consciousness) but unfolds through exterior intersections and dislocations of productive forces" (2011: 56, my translation) In other words, individuals are modulations of the "collective intelligence" of living labor. The reflection on the expansive dislocation of the general intellect remains a fundamental theme in Virno's thought. The encounter with Simondon has allowed him to fully explore this intuition and formulate the notion of the common as *preindividual reality*.

A rare case of thinker working at the intersection of physics, biology and philosophy, Gilbert Simondon has been largely interpreted as a philosopher of technics and

technogenesis (MacKenzie 2002, Stiegler, 1998). Explicit references to politics in his work²⁹ are sparse to say the least. Yet, the relevance of the model of ontogenesis for elaborating alternatives to the modern fixation with individuals as the basic unity of social and political life has become the subject of an increasingly lively debate. Etienne Balibar (1997) sees a convergence between Spinoza and Simondon as political thinkers. Muriel Combes (2013) argues that Simondon breaks away from the division between nature and politics that has been crucial in the juridical tradition of the social contract. Virno, who has translated Simondon in Italian and introduced his writings to Autonomist circles, employs Simondon to advance a politics of collective subtraction from capitalism. More recently, feminist theorists such as Hasana Sharp (2011) and Elizabeth Grosz (2012) have turned to Simondon in the effort to elaborate a feminist politics that moves beyond the image of the human as the sovereign subject of history.

Instead of focusing on elementary units or essences, Simondon shifts attention on *ontogenesis*, that is, the process through which specific forms of life come into being and change over time. Ontogenesis originates in a metastable “preindividual reality,” which Simondon, inspired by Presocratic philosophers, also calls *nature*. In physics and chemistry metastability indicates a system in a state of tension that even the smallest disturbance can alter. The preindividual is characterized by a level of potential energy, internal incompatibilities, different orders of magnitude and “disparations” that trigger a change in the system leading to the emergence of more or less completed individuals. Simondon writes (2009: 5), “In order to think individuation, being must be considered neither as a substance,

²⁹ Simondon's first publication, *Du Mode d'existence des objets techniques* appeared in France in 1958. It is only in 1989, with the posthumous release of *L'individuation psychique and collective*, that his work began to be widely read. His writings on individuation have been published as a whole in *L'individuation a la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (Simondon 2005).

nor matter, nor form, but as a system that is charged and supersaturated, above the level of unity, not consisting only of itself.” Individuation takes place when a communication is established between different orders of magnitude that coexist within the metastable system. This produces a new phase of being, a medium order that provisionally resolves an internal problematic. The growth of a plant is an example of ontogenesis: “a vegetable institutes a mediation between a cosmic order and an infra-molecular order, sorting and distributing the chemical species contained in the ground and in the atmosphere by means of the luminous energy received from the photosynthesis” (16).

Simondon describes the dynamic of differentiation within the preindividual as transduction, an operation —physical, biological, mental or social—through which an activity propagates and structures heterogeneous domains that remain in relation (Simondon 2009). Transduction designates the modulation of a field, its coagulation into specific points that, in turn, trigger new rounds of structuring activity. Importantly, by describing transduction as an operation that cuts across the physical, the social and the technological, Simondon shifts emphasis from the distinctions between these realms to the non-linear movements and thresholds that link them together. The same operation of transduction produces living and non-living individuals thus destabilizing the hierarchy between organic and inorganic.

Simondon distinguishes between “physical individuation” that produces inanimate individuals and “vital individuation” that produces living beings. There exists a difference of complexity and degree of metastability between the two. The emergence of physical individuals occurs in a definitive manner, is marked by a stabilization of energy that indicates a completed individuation. In contrast, living individuals always carry within themselves a dimension of preindividual potentiality that makes further individuation possible. They

function as systems of individuation amplifying the process of becoming by creating new structures in relation to the milieu³⁰. The preindividual is never left behind, it is not the past, but the present and the future of individuation. This argument carries an important corollary, “there is no real division between the physical and the vital, as if they were separated by an equally real boundary; the physical and the vital are distinguished by functions and structure, not on the basis of their substantial reality” (Simondon 2005: 323, translation is mine).

How does Simondon develop such position? While he draws on various philosophical and scientific sources, he explicitly refers to the Pre-Socratic concept of *physis* as major source of inspiration. He writes (2005: 196, translation is mine),

We could call *nature* this preindividual reality which the individual carries with it, while seeking to rediscover in the word 'nature' the meaning that the Pre-Socratic philosophers attributed to it. Ionic Physiologists found in it the origin of all species of being, an origin anterior to individuation. Nature is the *reality of the possible*, in the form of that apeiron from which Anaximander had every individuated form to arise.

Interestingly, the Pre-Socratics, a “minor” current of thought, overshadowed by the master tradition of Platonism, were primarily interested in cosmology, the study of the physical universe, rather than in human existence, a problematic largely introduced by Socrates. Simondon's concept of the preindividual revitalizes the problematic of *physis*, of the operations that engenders the cosmos rather than “man”. There has been a great deal of controversy on Pre-Socratic theories of nature among specialists of ancient philosophy. For the purposes of this project, it suffices to say that for the Pre-Socratics nature signified

30 This is the also the difference between living beings and technical objects. Technical objects participate in the process of individuation. However, while living beings, plants and animals, are fully individuated, technical objects remain at a level of abstraction. They constitute what Bernard Stiegler calls “organized inorganic matter”, distinct from “inert matter” and “living matter”. Importantly, for Stiegler “*it is organized inorganic matter that transforms itself in time as living matter transforms itself in its interaction with the milieu*.” In addition, it becomes the interface through which the human *qua* living matter enters into relation with the milieu.” (Stiegler 1998: 49)

simultaneously primordial matter and growth, origin and process. Anaximander, for example, used the term *apeiron* to indicate both a spatially and qualitatively indeterminate mass, and a primordial productive force³¹.

Some scholars argue that the preindividual modelled on the *apeiron* resembles a transcendent and eternal power, a substance from which individuation proceeds as a discrete sequence of steps, a discontinuous path, or series of switching from one state to another³². These interpretations, however insightful, read Simondon's idea of "dephasing" as progressive succession of states of being and not as continuous shifts in the configuration of a metastable system that modifies the system itself. Simondon (2005: 196, translation is mine) suggests that "In virtue of the *apeiron* that it carries within itself, being is not only individuated being; it is a couple formed by individuated being and nature; through this remainder of nature it communicates with the world and with other individuated beings." Transductive operations affect both individuals and milieus. The pre-individual milieu is never equal to itself, it is transformed by individuation in a way that does not impoverish its potential to engender endless variation. Form, matter, and energy coexist in it, neither one of them appears as external element that superimposes on the others from the outside.

Simondon elaborates on psychic and collective individuation as prolongation of vital individuation. Western thought has overwhelmingly conceptualized the psyche as individual

31 For an introduction to Pre-Socratic understanding of nature see Naddaf 2005.

32 This is the argument of Filippo Del Lucchese who claims that in Simondon "rather than becoming, beings 'switch from one state of being to another: individuation is either complete or is not (...) Between physical and psychic individuation, as between psychic and collective individuation, there is a discrete sequence of steps, one after the other, as if the biological being of the individual comes before its mental being. This is a dangerous path and not one that helps ground a new ontology of relation and 'becoming' rather than being." (Del Lucchese 2009: 182) Alberto Toscano makes a similar criticism when he detects in the work of Simondon a "cosmogonic narrative moving from the undifferentiated to the individual, a narrative that would be forced, once again, to adduce transcendent principles to explain the fact of productivity" (Toscano 2006: 156).

interiority, inaccessible from the outside. Conversely, collectives and groups are usually described as that which diminishes the distinctive character of each individual. From the perspective of ontogenesis, however, psychic individuation results from the resolution of an internal problematic that allows the individual to consider itself part of the world. Simondon calls “subject” the conjunction between individual and preindividual. The subject, what is conventionally called the “I”, exists only in relation to a preindividual reality, it is never enclosed but always more-than-itself.

Perhaps because of this movement of the many within the “I”, that Simondon sees psychic and collective individuation as inextricably connected. Insofar as it incorporates the perception of the individual as part of a milieu, psychic individuation opens onto collective individuation. This, however, is not an effect of an innate sociality of individuals, but of a transductive operation that puts into communication the charges of preindividual reality that are shared by individuals. In describing the intersection between the two dimensions Simondon introduces the transindividual. He writes (Simondon 2009: 8): “Both individuations, the psychic and the collective, are reciprocal to one another; they allow for the definition of a category of the transindividual, which can be used to explain the systematic unity of the interior (psychic) individuation and the exterior (collective) individuation.” The transindividual, in other words, is the surplus of potential that is actualized when a subject enters collective individuation, when a being is affectively connected to what in oneself is more than individual.

Virno glosses over Simondon’s insistence on the preindividual as pre-vital field of disparation that propels innumerable modes of becoming. Instead, he uses the preindividual to describe the common potentialities of the human that are put to work in the circuits of post-Fordist accumulation. From this perspective, the common refers simultaneously to the

linguistic capacities of the species-being and the “transindividual” public sphere that might be produced by the multitude. He offers three definitions of the preindividual common and all of them are species-specific. First, “the pre-individual is the biological basis of the species, that is, the sensory organs, motor skills apparatus, perception abilities” (2004: 76). Sensory perceptions constitute the generic capacity of the human rather than of any particular individual. For example, when I touch something, it is not just me who touches but the generic “one” of the species. Sensory perceptions exceed the sphere of the subjective to open up to the larger domain of the impersonal and the common. According to Virno this is also true of language. A historical-natural language is shared by the speakers of a certain community, it belongs to everybody and to nobody. Thus, the linguistic faculty encapsulates the second definition of the preindividual common. Finally, Virno argues that in the regime of advanced capitalism the realm of productive forces is preindividual because “the labor process mobilizes the most universal requisites of the species: perception, language memory and feelings” (77). How does Virno resolve the question of the relationship between the preindividual common and the realizations of its potential? Once again, he turns to Simondon and specifically to the notion of collective individuation which he sees as a prerogative of the human associated with political life.

In contrast to the conventional image of the collective as a sort of synthesizing machine that diminishes difference, Simondon claims that the collective furthers individuation. Virno remarks: “According to Simondon, within the collective we endeavor to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax. Only within the collective, certainly not within the isolated subject, can perception, language, and productive forces take on the shape of an individuated experience” (78-79). The multitude, an unstable network of cognitive workers, is a form of collective individuation in which the many persevere as many and always carry

within themselves shares of preindividuality. It is in the network of the multitude that the second face of the common may emerge: “besides being preindividual, it is *transindividual*; it is not only the undifferentiated backdrop, but also the public sphere of the multitude” (Virno 2009: 64).

Virno is careful to not characterize the multitude simply as network of rebellious singularities capable of creating alternative modes of living. It is a much more ambiguous formation, one that reflects the ambivalence of *homo sapiens*. Instead of indulging in hyperbolic narratives of capitalist domination and workers' insurrection, Virno's nuanced assessment of the multitude underscores the indeterminacy of any radical political project. But in his peculiar political reading of Simondon it is as if the process of individuation that might actualize the common would begin and end with the *anthropos*.

Other readings of the preindividual, however, radically dislocate the centrality of the human. Gilles Deleuze, for example, suggests that the ontology elaborated by Simondon is “one in which Being is never One” (2001: 49). Muriel Combes defines the preindividual as a “power of mutation,” always in excess over itself (2013: 3). Unlike much of modern Western thought that understands the social as processual and dynamic, capable of mobilizing a malleable nature, the ontogenetic approach frames preindividual nature as what creates the conditions for the production of variations that reverberate through the social. For Elizabeth Grosz, the pre-individual “is the real, the world, the universe in its unordered givenness. What is given are singularities, specificities, tendencies, forces but not yet modes of ordering and organizing them into systems, levels, dimensions, or orders. Chaos” (2012: 45).

In this vein, the ontology of disparation elaborated by Simondon does not accord particular privileges to any species of individuals, including humans. The preindividual, a field of pre-vital incompatibilities, provides the conditions for the emergence of living and

non-living beings. In other words, the chaos of disparation makes individuation possible but it is not reducible to any particular trajectory of becoming. As a thinker of milieus and shifting scales that go through processes of bifurcation, Simondon sidesteps the hierarchical ordering of beings. By foregrounding this aspect of the differential, chaotic nature of the preindividual, I want to complicate Virno's notion of the common as reservoir of human potentialities and public sphere of the multitude.

A profound skepticism, if not an outright rejection, of "anthropological" problems appears everywhere in Simondon's writings on individuation. "The notion of anthropology itself" he contends "implies the implicit affirmation of the specificity of Man, separated from the vital" (2005: 297, my translation). The reference to anthropology can be taken as a critical reference to the dominant humanist orientation of Western philosophy from which Simondon seeks a way out. In the French context of the 1950s, the tendency was to look at the human either through the Freudian lenses of the psychic or the Marxist lenses of social relations of production. The model of ontogenesis breaks with both traditions in that it places emphasis on what enables individuation, on transductive transformations across vital, psychic, social and technical domains. For Simondon, there is no human nature only thresholds and transitions that define the human as a particularly unstable field of individuation. But rather than explaining instability through the abstract model of the species he focuses on degrees of individuation³³. This is not to deny human singularity but to refuse

³³ Simondon's critique of species-thinking is also evident in *Two Lessons on Animal and Man* (2011), the text that served as introduction of the course of general psychology that he thought until 1967. The two lectures comprise a concise historical overview of philosophical theories of human and animal life from the ancient Greeks to the 17th century. Not surprisingly, Descartes is singled out as the most radical thinker of discontinuity between the domain of *res extensa* that pertains to the animal, beings completely devoid of intelligent apparentship and interiority, and the *res cogitans*, the human domain of the exercise of rationality. In this heterogenous philosophical landscape, a broad distinction emerges

bounded notions of the human as form of becoming autonomous from animal and mineral existence. Individuation is not human to begin with, it emerges out of a more-than-human milieu and unfolds in innumerable directions.

Virno does away with the notion of politics as overcoming of the state of nature deeply ingrained in the liberal tradition. In thinking the common, he connects natural potentialities with a politics that is also entangled with the development of the forces of production. This is a powerful move but one that presents the limit of analyzing the human species as rather undifferentiated aggregate of living beings and in utter isolation from ecological and geological formations³⁴.

Simondon, on his part, does not provide an analytics of power, an understanding of how particular individuations of pre-individual tensions come to acquire a consistency as abstract models with violent effects on the existence of bodies that are marked by them. For example, how did species, race and gender become hierarchical categories producing divisions within the human and between the human and its others? What his work offers, however, is the forsaking of anthropology as the ground of politics. This, I contend, does

between Greek thinkers and early modernity. If antiquity authorizes parallels and comparisons between animal and human reality in ways that generally do not translate into normative oppositions and differences in nature, Christianity and Cartesianism institute an ontological divide between animal and human nature. Looking at the 19th and 20th century, Simondon identifies a dialectical movement that goes from the Cartesian negation of the positions of Antiquity to a sort of synthesis operated by scientific theories. Science reverses the Cartesian affirmation of two distinct natures in that it produces a double generalization and universalization of the categories of animality and humanity. Simondon writes (Simondon 2011: 62): “contemporary thesis consist of saying: what we discovered at the level of instinctive life, maturation, behavioral development in animal reality, allows us also to think in terms of human reality.” In other words, the *modus operandi* that characterizes mature modernity focuses on the abstraction of the species at the expenses of the complexity of individuation.

³⁴ Virno’s position risks to lose sight of the myriad ways in which capitalism extracts value from the articulations of human and nonhuman energy (Cooper 2008, Johnson 2016). Moreover, it cannot account for how these articulations may translate into moments of refusal and invention.

not mean to do away with politics altogether. On the contrary, it poses the challenge of cultivating different forms of politics.

Making the Common in the Ruins of the Anthropocene

Scholars of Simondon, from Balibar to Virno, understand collective individuation and the transindividual as prerogatives of the human and associate them with political life. In highlighting, instead of glossing over Simondon's rejection of anthropology, I explore a different interpretation. As Andrea Bardin suggests (Bardin 2010: 102), transindividuality indexes a “modality of the political,” an open threshold between pre-vital and psychic-collective individuation.

This is the direction toward which Simondon points us with the striking assertion that the collective “exists *physikos* and not *logikos*” (2005: 314). Instead of thinking preindividual nature as the mute substratum that is left behind in the human process of collective becoming, Simondon calls attention to the indeterminacy of *physis* that makes politics possible. What is at stake here is the opening up of an approach to politics that does not lose sight of the pre-vital and living elements that are elaborated by psychic and collective individuation. Collective individuation is realized via transductive movements that actualize a more-than-human field of potentialities. As that which creates the conditions for trajectories of becoming, preindividual nature “renders social transformation thinkable.” (Combes 2013: 54).

The philosophy of ontogenesis challenges the division between nature and politics that has been so crucial in the juridical tradition of the social contract that culminates with Hobbes' theory of politics as sovereignty. Simondon's contribution to “a line of inquiry striving to think the political *outside* the horizon of the legitimization of sovereignty”

(Combes 2013: 48) lies in situating the constitution of the collective in the realm of natural processes, as elaboration of tensions that cannot be resolved at the level of pre-vital and vital individuation alone.

This approach offers a radical revaluation of nature, its capacities and powers, its relations to the social. It positions the human as part of nature, as a being not different in kind from other beings and “act[ing] by virtue of many diverse natural powers, human and nonhuman” (Sharp 2011: 111). Drawing a connection between Spinoza and Simondon, feminist philosopher Hasana Sharp adopts the notion of transindividuality to name “a collective agency, an always provisional and never isolable operation of action and differentiation” (38). She proposes that “We regard ourselves as transindividuals, beings who come to exist and act more determinately by virtue of the increasing concurrence of other beings. Precisely insofar as a being can affirm and coordinate a multiplicity of agencies it is individuated” (39). Clearly, this understanding of transindividuality undermines the identification between politics and the properly human capacity for thinking and acting in concert.

What are the implications of such shifts in considering the preindividual and the transindividual for the articulation of the common in the ruins of the Anthropocene, within and against the new geological epoch? To put it another way, what other modalities of the common come to light if we call into question man as primary agent of world-making while taking seriously the inescapable planetary problems posed by the Anthropocene concept?

According to Alberto Toscano, Virno’s identification of the common with human nature implies that collective life lies in a state of latency that could express itself in a given political occasion under the circumstances of contemporary capitalism. But, as Simondon indicates, politics begins “With the invention of a communication between initially

impossible series; as invention of a common that is not given in advance” (Toscano 2007: 3). Rather than existing as reservoir of human potentiality, the common could emerge from “the risk of invention confronted with the hazards of disparation (7).

Moving along this line, I consider Simondon’s argument that the emergence of the collective does not require distinctions in kind between human and nonhuman natures as an opportunity for reworking the common. A way to pursue this project would be to take more-than-human disparation as the ground for the difficult task of composing the common. I would thus propose the common as a form of collective individuation that arises from attachments with its ecological and geological milieus of possibility. Isabelle Stengers suggests that “attachments are what cause people (...) to feel and think, to be able or become able” (2005b: 191). Attachments generate problems, pose questions that may be resolved through new trajectories of collective form-taking.

A more-than-human common then might arise when “we,” that is, a collective that can only emerge out of situated struggles, begin to think and act not as a human ensemble but through attachment to others that are not necessarily human. At stake is the redefinition of political agency: the power to transform does not pertain to subjects who manipulate resources deprived of political relevance but to entanglements that enables collectives to persist and invent the new.

To conclude, this chapter complicates Paolo Virno’s identification of the preindividual common with human nature, the linguistic potential that has become immediately productive under the current regime of post-Fordist flexible accumulation. It makes two claims. First, it contends that Virno’s focus on the potential of *homo sapiens* elides the effects of racialization and feminization that the species-discourse has historically both enabled and entailed. Second, it foregrounds Simondon’s preindividual nature as domain of

indeterminacy that enables social transformation. Thus, it explores a notion of the common that does not rely on the distinction between generic “natural life” and the “qualified life” of the laboring human. The reframing of the common here introduced through the engagement with Virno’s naturalistic materialism begins to reorient attention from the *anthropos* to organizational forms that make present the other-than-human forces operating “within everything we think is ours, or our own doing” (Sharp 2011: 9). In the chapter that follows, I develop this point more in detail.

Chapter 3: Ecologies of the Common

“Most of those who have written about the affects, and men’s way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follows from the common laws of Nature, but of things which are outside Nature. Indeed they seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of Nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself.” —Spinoza, E III Pref.

The Art of Composition

This chapter opens and ends with composition. Deriving from the Latin *componere*, (from *cum* and *ponere*), composition refers to the activity of bringing together heterogeneous parts. It shares an etymological proximity with the common but it is also close to compost, the breaking down of earthly-smelling organic materials, mainly kitchen scraps, into fertile soil³⁵. The compost bin presents an uneasy togetherness of worms, guts, waste, eating and caring. It is characterized by responsiveness but also recalcitrance and unpredictability rather than reciprocity. Not unlike composting, the composition of the common I am interested in is a messy process requiring many kinds of beings.

What makes the common? This question arises again and again throughout this dissertation. It is largely prompted by a particular passage of *Commonwealth* (2009), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s final installment of the *Empire* trilogy. An “ecology of the common,” they write, would focus “on nature and society, on humans and the nonhuman world in a dynamic of interdependence, care and mutual transformation” (171). This proposition gave me pause when I first read it. It felt intriguing and yet out of place in a text that celebrates the potentiality of social cooperation but does not spend much time

³⁵ Bruno Latour hints at the shared etymology of composition and compost. By the end of this chapter, it should become clear how my thinking about the commons differs from Latour’s project of “building a common world” (Latour 2010: 474).

addressing ecological questions. In this chapter I draw on feminist theory and science studies to reflect on composition and the ecology of the common in ways that trouble the self-inventing human that underpins much Autonomist thought.

In what follows, I resist the assumption of much contemporary political theory, including that of Hardt and Negri, that the world in which we live and act politically is a human construction. This view is perhaps most clearly articulated by Hannah Arendt's distinction between the world and the earth. Arendt views the world as properly human artificial environment that brings together and simultaneously separates unique individuals, creating the conditions for political action (Arendt 2013). This man-made world also stands in-between human beings and the earth, the given space of biological life³⁶.

Departing from this position, this work contends that the emergence of the political common is enabled, rather than hindered, by a milieu of more-than-human forces. There are practical and theoretical reasons for such a project. The rapid patterns of adaptation of disaster capitalism to melting glaciers, advancing deserts, and disappearing coastlines require profound shifts from dominant modes of inhabiting the earth as theater of extraction. What might be needed to pursue such transformation is not so much a reinvigorated humanism, no matter how multiple and differentiated, but the crafting of altogether different ways of being in the world.

I proceed in three steps. First, I consider Hardt and Negri's concepts of biopolitics and living labor, and explore their relation to the ecology of the common. I draw primarily on the *Empire* trilogy, but also on Negri's earlier writings and Hardt's solo work. I show how Hardt and Negri's politics of the common and the multitude oscillates between Deleuze and

³⁶ For a powerful critique of Arendt's rendering of material existence as realm of necessity and politics as realm of freedom, see Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Thought* (1988).

Guattari's transversal conception of life and the Marxist allegiance to human self-making activity. I suggest that ultimately, their social ontology of living labor as the human capacity of transforming the world dissolves nature into the social.

Second, I examine divergent feminist attempts to challenge the Western divide between humans endowed with agency and malleable natural resources deprived of political relevance. I turn to Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa's Marxist ecofeminist analyses of the linkages between social reproduction and the commodification of nature. This approach exposes the limits of Hardt and Negri's argument that the intensification of the current mode of production will lead beyond capitalist domination. Then, I consider Deleuzian feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti who bring to the fore the earthly forces that enable and vastly exceed the scope of human existence. Specifically, I look at how they engage sexual difference and the body as thresholds for rethinking nature, life, and the powers of the earth. Taken together, these feminist thinkers open up the space for conceiving the common beyond anthropocentrism. Finally, following philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, I reframe the ecology of the common as a matter of composition involving disparate existents.

Biopolitical Production

Throughout the *Empire* trilogy, Hardt and Negri expand on Foucault's meditation on biopower and biopolitics³⁷ to analyze the qualitative transformation in the relationship

³⁷ Initially Foucault used the concepts of biopower and biopolitics to describe the ways in which political authorities invest in the bodily vitality of populations through a series of calculations, interventions and regulatory controls. In *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), however, he specifies that the biopolitical fostering of life was the crucial preoccupation of liberal governmentality, a form of power that emerged in Europe in the 18th century and which anticipated many features of contemporary governance.

between capitalism, labor, and the production of subjectivity. Drawing on Spinoza, Marx and Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri contend that biopolitics consists of the human creative capacity to resist capitalist biopower through the production of new subjectivities and forms of life. This emphasis on the power *of* life is connected to a set of other concepts that Antonio Negri has been consistently developing since the 1970s: living labor, *potentia*, constituent power, multitude. They are all ontological figures in a framework in which ontology is understood not as a myth of origin but as a process of metamorphosis and becoming of the social, as the human capacity of constituting and continually reinventing itself.

Already in *Insurgencies*, the book first published in 1992 that anticipates many themes of the *Empire* trilogy, Negri inscribes Foucault's biopolitics in this theoretical constellation, claiming that, "after demonstrating how power can subjugate humanity to the point of making it function as a cog of a totalitarian machine, (...) Foucault shows instead how the constitutive process running through life, biopolitics and biopower, has an absolute (and not totalitarian) movement. This movement is absolute because it is absolutely free from determinations not internal to the action of liberation, to the vital assemblage (*agencement*)" (27). This ontological notion, which commentators such as Alberto Toscano see as a departure from Foucault's anti-universalist biopolitics³⁸, is clearly influenced by Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault. Deleuze suggests that Foucault's thought culminated in a "certain vitalism" that understands life as the capacity for resisting force. He writes (1988: 92-93):

³⁸ Toscano notes that "biopolitics is configured by Foucault as "an 'anti-universal' concept." According to Toscano, Foucault's decision to speak of "governmental practices" is a way to put aside "universals" such as the State, society, and the sovereign. Rather than assuming the existence of such universals, Foucault's genealogical approach describes new governmental practices as a field shaped by heterogeneous forces and technologies. See Toscano 2007.

When power becomes bio-power, resistance becomes the power of life, a vital power that cannot be confined within species, environment or the paths of a particular diagram. (...) Spinoza said that there was no telling what the human body might achieve, once freed from human discipline. To which Foucault replies that there is no telling what man might achieve 'as a living being', as the set of forces that resist.

Deleuze's take on biopower develops against the backdrop of his concept of life as impersonal force that cuts across the boundaries of subjects, organisms, and species. For Deleuze and Guattari, life runs between the immanent fields of natural and the social to create provisional convergences, assemblages of heterogeneous elements that constitute processes of production. The breaking down of the barriers between nature, the social and the subjective is crucial in this framework. Nature is not the substratum of a human enterprise but a process of production in itself. It is not ontologically separated from the social, they are part of the same plane of immanence: "they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 5).

Instead of fully confronting Deleuze's challenge to think the natural and the social together, Negri turns to the workerist reversal of the relationship between capital and labor, and makes Marx's concept of living labor the central category for understanding the power of life. In contrast with the longstanding argument that capital is the driving force of the process of production, workerism³⁹ claims that living labor and workers' struggles compel capital to transform. In *Empire* (2000), Negri and his collaborator Michael Hardt develop the same argument when they contend that "the history of capitalist forms is always necessarily a reactive history. (...) the proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future" (268). In other words, this constitutive ontology

³⁹ *Operaismo* (workerism) was the "heretic wing" of Italian Marxism developed in close connection with workers' movements of the 1960s. Key figures of *operaismo* include Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati and Negri. For an account of the relationship between operaismo and Italian Autonomism see Steve Wright 2002.

foregrounds the leading role of the productive forces over the relations of production. Living labor is that which “constitutes the world, by creatively modeling, *ex novo*, the materials that it touches” (Negri 1992: 326). It is the pure expression of individual/collective subjectivities, the cooperative power that capitalism incessantly attempts to appropriate and turn into dead labor. In the *Empire* trilogy, biopolitics is made to coincide with the constituent *potentia* of living labor and distinguished from capitalist biopower. In this Marxian elaboration of Foucault’s biopolitics, the “politics of life” is described as unstable meshwork of cooperative encounters.

While industrial capitalism functioned through a complex disciplinary ordering of space and time that provided the basis for the organization of the *productive cooperation* of living labor, contemporary capitalism no longer organizes but rather expropriates increasingly autonomous productive processes through flexible and fluctuating networks of control. The paradox at the heart of global capitalism, then, is its dependence on a workforce that, although highly precarized and fragmented, is endowed with self-organizing capacities that threaten capitalist command from within. In a regime of increasingly immaterial production where the creation of value is attached to ideas, images, codes, sensations, and performances rather than objects, capitalism functions as an apparatus of capture that aims to appropriate and valorize the innovations resulting from the field of social cooperation. In other words, for Hardt and Negri exploitation operates through the *expropriation of the common*.

The central axis of Hardt and Negri’s most recent work, the common refers to many things at once. It comprises “both the product of labor and the means of future production. This common is not only the earth we share but also the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships, and so forth” (2009: 139). The common consists of the “natural common,” associated with that which is

given in nature and described in terms of scarcity and limits, and the “artificial common,” which includes affects, ideas, information, code and images produced by human labor and cooperation. Unlike the natural common, biopolitical common is described as limitless and reproducible, governed by a logic of abundance and proliferation (Hardt 2010).

The making of the common is the open process through which the multitude, variously described as the highly differentiated class of cognitive workers and shifting constellation of singularities, experiments with the management of the commonwealth beyond the constraints of public and private property. To be sure, such formulation is in striking contrast to the Lockean conception of the earthly common as an inexhaustible repository of resources to be transformed into value by human labor and enclosures. However, a closer look at Hardt and Negri’s common reveals that, despite the efforts to blur the boundaries between nature and culture, the former is still subordinated to the latter.

As I show in Chapter 2, Marxism has a rich history of engagement with the “natural” foundations of social development. “Metabolism” and “second nature” are central concepts in historical-materialist analysis of the entanglement between nature and society. Metabolism indicates the socio-ecological process through which labour mobilizes organic and non-organic actants in order to produce and reproduce human life (Smith 1984, Swyngedouw 2006). “Second nature” is nature that has been transformed by human activity. The concept was used by Hegel to distinguish between the material environment out of history (first nature), and the fully historical complex of human institutions that manifest free will.

Geographer Neil Smith contends that Marx’s work straddles the line between first and second nature by offering a glimpse of the “the production of nature” under capitalism. Although the refashioning of nature predates capitalism, it is only with the rise of accumulation for its own sake that nature is produced at a world scale thus achieving the

“unification of all nature in the production process” (Smith 1984: 72). This approach is insightful in that it defies the modern understanding of nature as external to society and links the transformation of nature to social relations of power. Yet, Noel Castree observes, it runs against the problem of grasping how “the materiality of nature” (1995: 20) enters the process of production.

It seems to me that Hardt and Negri’s conception of the biopolitical common shares a great deal with the production of nature paradigm. In a conversation with Cesare Casarino, Negri claims that “mine is a nature that had experienced a process of capitalist modernization from the fourteenth century onward. In any case, the point is that for me nature is always fully cultivated nature, in which the irrigation canal is just as sacred as the tomato or the peach” (Casarino and Negri 2008: 180). Against the worship of nature as an entity out of time, Negri rightly claims that nature is not fixed and immutable but in constant transformation. This metamorphosis, however, is the result of social and cultural interactions. In other words, nature is always already “second nature,” always already invested by the force of living labor.

What forcefully emerges in the *Empire* trilogy is the centrality of the productive dimensions of *bios* or living labor as “the form-giving fire” (Marx 1973: 361) of human creative capacities. At its core, Hardt and Negri’s concept of the politics of life is profoundly humanist, or to be more accurate, it reflects the attempt to produce a new humanism that, while hybrid and completely embedded in the second nature of artificiality, is still the principal force recreating the world. For Negri this is the humanism emerging in Foucault’s late work, a “humanism that comes after the end of any possible humanism of transcendence and that reaffirms human power as a power of the artificial, as the power to build artfully” (Casarino and Negri 1988: 146). The issue that Hardt and Negri’s project of

“humanism after the death of Man” has yet to address, however, is that of the place of a highly differentiated human in a wider field of forces that give rise to it.

Saying that “nature is just another word for the common” (Hardt and Negri 2009: 171) means that, because nature is constructed and transformed through living labor, the common is the product of social practice, i.e. a social construction. Now it becomes clearer how, for Hardt and Negri, the distinction between natural and biopolitical common breaks down: the biopolitical common encompasses the physical world and the socio-cultural practices which transform it. Still, what remains elusive is how the “mutual transformation” between human and nonhuman invoked in their ecology of the common takes place. Hardt and Negri are not alone among Autonomist Marxists to dissolve the natural into the social.

Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, for example, argue against the partition between natural and social commons. They explain (2013: 297):

Far from being reducible to the status of “objects,” which inheres in the legal concept of goods, the commons --even the most natural, as we saw with the example of water-- cannot exist independently of a complex web of human activity devoted to their production and reproduction. This means focusing on the moment of excess that characterizes the common with regard to the commons.

From this perspective, it does not make much sense to conceptualize water as “natural” common without taking into account the complex socio-material infrastructures that organize its distribution and usages. In large parts of the world, water, a key element in processes of industrialization and urbanization, has long been managed by large-scale state bureaucracies capable of mobilizing technical and financial resources. These hydraulic networks have been increasingly relying on private companies to maintain and extend water supplies (Bakker 2013). Framing water as fully integrated in the web of human activity, as Mezzadra and Neilson suggest, brings to the fore the creative capacities of labor, what Marx’s famously described as “life-engendering-life” (1988: 76).

In keeping with the example of water, however, it is worth recalling Bruce Braun's observation:

Water flows. It reacts with certain chemicals and dissolves others (...) It obstructs movement and enables movement. It serves as a pathway for viruses and bacteria. (...). Do these properties matter to the material form of the technological networks and bureaucracies that control its movement, or to the narratives, hopes and fears that circulated around it?" (Braun 2005: 645-646).

Water goes through phases of transformation irrespective of human intervention. Far from being a component of our environment, something with which human interact, water makes up of our bodies and those of countless other organisms. When affected by human activity, as in the case of underground water contaminated by chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing to access reserves of oil and natural gas buried thousand of feet below the ground, water produces effects that vastly exceed human capacity to know. Water undergoes transformations that, as many other earth processes, presents an eventfulness beyond the scope of human involvement (Hird 2010).

This suggests that the distinction between natural commons and social common breaks down not because material resources are always mobilized by labor but because what makes up the common are socio-natural dynamics in which other-than-human entities participates as forces of change. Paraphrasing Braun (2005: 646), then, I want to ask: must the real actors in the politics of the common be always already social?

In his reflection following the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009, where activists gathered to protest the failure of global governance in addressing the ecological crisis, Michael Hardt (2010) draws attention to the differences between environmental and anti-capitalist movements for the common. First, he notes, ecological activism focuses on questions of *limits*. Its political priorities are the preservation of the climate and the forms of life inhabiting the planet. In contrast, anticapitalist

movements focus on the human creative capacity to produce a *limitless* common, a common of ideas, affects and knowledge. Second, if environmentalists largely rely on scientific expertise for making their claims, the assumption among anti-capitalist activists is that everyone has access to the knowledge necessary for political action. Finally, there is the issue of temporality. Environmentalists envision “the end of the days” in terms of irreversible catastrophe. Anti-capitalists, instead, think of it as that which might usher in a more just world.

Hardt also suggests that, in spite of their differences, these movements converge in that both defy property relationship characteristic of capitalist accumulation. To “the traditional measures of economic value” they oppose “the value of life as the only valid scale of evaluation” (Hardt 2010: 266). Both are concerned with the production and reproduction of forms of life, but while advocates of the social common prioritize human interests and the overcoming of hierarchies within the human, ecological activists broaden the frame of reference to other-than-human beings.

Hardt neither explores the implication of this difference nor interrogates the distinction between natural and social common. But he hints at the fact that, in spite of the capitalist effort to constantly update quantitative metrics to capture them, forms of life remain immeasurable, capable of a surplus that is never fully reducible to value. What exactly is this surplus? Is it exclusively human? And if not, what are the implications for the politics of the common? These questions need to be addressed in order to avoid reductive dichotomies between nature and society in the politics of the common.

Whereas some proponents of the “production of nature” are careful in pointing out that the recognition of the indeterminacy of nature is a crucial component in the composition of socio-natural arrangements alternative to capitalism (Swyngedouw 2011), in

Commonwealth, Hardt and Negri turn to feminist theory to demonstrate that nature is a “subject of mutation,” constantly constructed and transformed. In a passage that discusses Judith Butler’s rejection of the binary of sex and gender they write: “she argues instead that, in addition to gender, sex too is socially constructed, that sex and sexual difference are, following Foucault, discursive formations” (170).

Clearly, this is an argument against the dichotomous thinking at the heart of modernity that distinguishes between fixed biological facts and the mobile constructions of culture. Yet, by aligning themselves with Butler’s insistence on the interpretative matrices that limit the affirmation of non-normatively gendered embodiments (Butler 1990, 2004b). Hardt and Negri end up privileging an understanding of the common as completely *denaturalized*. What gets lost in their formulation of an ecology of the common is the “mutual transformation,” the “becoming with” (Haraway 2008) of nature and the social.

In order to think the common otherwise I now turn to feminist approaches whose relation might need reconsideration. I begin with Marxist ecofeminist analyses of the linkages between the capitalist appropriation of gendered work and the appropriation of nature. Then, I turn to feminist philosophies that privilege inhuman forces over bounded human subjects. Each of these orientations has its own key figures and debates, and they are rarely brought into productive conversation. By intertwining them together I hope to trouble the linearity of Western feminist storytelling (Hemmings 2011) that positions ecofeminism and Marxist feminism as belonging to a past superseded by more sophisticated developments within feminist theory. It seems to me that both tendencies are relevant for articulating political projects for the present time. Specifically, they provide rich resources for elaborating an ecology of the commons that does not dissolve nature into the social.

Social Reproduction and the Care of the Earth

One of the most fruitful, and at times contested, points of engagement between the autonomist thought of Hardt and Negri and feminism has been the question of social reproduction. Since the 1970s, the important work of feminist thinkers such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Leopoldina Fortunati⁴⁰ has been questioning the orthodox Marxist assumption that the domestic sphere is essentially unproductive of surplus value and therefore marginal to the process of valorization.

Focusing on gendered and racialized patterns of exploitation, these scholar-activists maintain that the extraction of work from populations that appear to be outside the wage relations has been key in paving the way for and sustaining processes of capitalist accumulation. Thus, the gendered labor of care has been freely appropriated by capitalism that has relied on it for the reproduction of labor power. Such perspective has had the historical merit of unmasking the naturalization of unpaid labor organized along gendered and racial lines under industrial capitalism. Moreover, it provides valuable insights for examining how capitalist relations of production invest society as a whole in the regime of post-Fordist production.

As Hardt and Negri have at times acknowledged, the autonomist articulation of immaterial and affective labor owes a tremendous debt to Marxist-feminist critiques of the binary division between productive and unproductive labor. However, the authors of *Empire* have yet to engage with some of the most pressing questions posed by the evolving lines of inquiry stemming from debates on social reproduction. For example, in the work of Federici

⁴⁰ Key texts in this tradition include Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1972), Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (1975), and Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (1995).

and Dalla Costa the concern for the centrality of reproduction extends well beyond the analysis of domestic labor, to account for socio-ecological processes that make life possible. They have explicitly linked the struggles for the autonomous reproduction of everyday life — what Silvia Federici calls a “feminist politics of the commons” (2012) — to a politics of the earth. In the words of Mariarosa Dalla Costa, both women and the earth “have been considered zero-cost natural resources, and treated as machines for the production of labour and food as commodities” (2007: 108).

Through the alliance with ecofeminist perspectives⁴¹, Federici and Dalla Costa’s critiques of the capitalist appropriation of so-called externalities to the market connect the plundering of the earth and gendered forms of dispossession. As some scholars have noted, this approach has laid the ground for contemporary analysis of the ways in which biological and ecological processes have become enmeshed in the circuits of capitalist accumulation. In the same way that a range of (re)productive activities previously invisible have become commodities, with the unfolding of climate change the risks associated to environmental complexity have entered the sphere of economic calculus⁴². From disaster management to low-carbon markets to ecosystem services and the fast-growing business of weather derivatives the ecological crisis has become a money-spinner (Cooper 2010). So far,

⁴¹ The heterogeneous and contested perspectives developed by ecofeminists cannot be reduced to a monolithic paradigm that opposes the women’s nurturing qualities to a masculine technoscience. A key contribution is the call for a science capable of taking into account land-use practices and knowledges that are destroyed in the name of progress. In “Ecofeminism Revisited” (2011), Greta Gaard provides a stimulating account of the contributions of ecofeminism from the 1980s onward. Emphasizing the ecofeminist insights on the connections among racism, sexism and the appropriation of nature, she proposes to retrieve ecofeminism as foundational for much of current feminist scholarship of socio-natural entanglements.

⁴² Sara Nelson’s lucid analysis of the ecosystem service economy makes an explicit reference to Federici’s work. Nelson revises Autonomist Marxism to investigate how in ecosystem services the activities of both social and ecological reproduction become direct sources of value. See Nelson 2014.

however, Autonomist thinkers have largely ignored this particular dimension of post-Fordist economies.

Dalla Costa has eloquently described her journey from militancy with the Marxist group Potere Operaio and the Wages for Housework campaign to her more recent research on economies of subsistence and the environmentalism of the poor as a journey “from the kitchen to the garden and the land” (2005: 121). Such trajectory coincides with the broadening of the scope of the analysis of reproduction to include the consideration of the ecological exhaustion provoked by the expansive neoliberal enclosures of land and the seas. In *Our Mother Ocean* (2014), Dalla Costa documents the struggles of the World Fisher Movement from its inception in Southern India to the present. She defines the ocean as a common whose regenerative powers must be supported by the cooperation between humans and nature.

Dalla Costa’s position here is in line with Carolyn Merchant’s call for a “partnership ethics” (2013) grounded in relationality and reciprocity that understands humans and nonhuman nature as equal partners able to cooperate in the achievement of mutual survival. Similarly, in the book *Earth Democracy* (2006), Vandana Shiva celebrates the image of the “Earth family” by which she means the community of beings supported by Mother Earth. Her argument is that the care of the commons, the earth that we share with nonhuman living beings, would require attention and appreciation for the life-sustaining practices performed at the level of the local, particularly by women and indigenous groups in the Southern hemisphere. The making of the commons would proceed hand in hand with a re-enchantment of the world, a consideration of nature as harmonious whole, capable of regeneration and dynamic equilibrium.

Such formulation of the politics of the earth is not devoid of problems. The rendering of nature as a homeostatic system is difficult to sustain in light of the existence of positive feedback loops and irreversible “tipping points” that characterize complex systems⁴³. Further, the alignment between atmospheric and oceanic forces and the universalized figure of the nurturing and benign mother is problematic for many feminists. Although inclined to romanticize the possibility of partnership and harmonious relation between humans and the earth, this Marxist eco-feminist perspective is an important counterbalance in the context of a Marxist debate still attached to narratives of growth.

While I do not endorse the view of nature as a harmonious, maternal whole, I find Dalla Costa’s work useful to problematize Hardt and Negri’s work. In particular, it highlights the limits of the argument that the intensification of immaterial production, characterized by the capitalist dependence on the cooperative capacities of living labor, contains seeds of autonomy from capitalist command. Consider Negri’s recent intervention on the virtues of accelerationism⁴⁴:

⁴³ In *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (1984) Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers challenge the idea of nature as a homeostatic system through the analysis of phase changes at the molecular level of organization. They describe an active matter, characterized by the sudden and irreversible emergence of organized structures out of highly turbulent situations. What appears as pure chaos at the macroscopic level corresponds to processes of self-organization at the molecular level that might produce dissipative structures, new dynamic states of matter always embedded in unstable situations of non-equilibrium. Prigogine and Stengers claim that, through the rearticulation of time and nature, the view of molecular and cosmological processes that have enabled the emergence and variation of life forms on earth, has shifted “toward the multiple, the temporal, and the complex” (292).

⁴⁴ In “#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” (2013), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams propose accelerationism as a future-oriented left-politics, one “at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology”. They call for a “Promethean politics of maximal mastery over society and its environment.”

“The process of liberation can only happen by accelerating capitalist development, but—and this is important—without confusing *acceleration* with *speed*, because acceleration here has all the characteristics of an engine-apparatus, of an experimental process of discovery and creation within the space of possibilities determined by capitalism itself” (Negri 2014).

Negri does not elaborate much on the difference between acceleration and speed but, strikingly for his post-Hegelian brand of Marxism, it is still capitalist development, albeit driven by living labor, which provides the tools for liberation.

For the advocates of the biopolitical common the problem is not slowing down the development of productive forces but freeing them from the grip of capitalism. From this perspective, the absolute democracy of the common may arise from the full deployment of the tendencies driving the present mode of production. The question of the earth is set aside as a matter “completely subordinated to industrial policies, and approachable only on the basis of a criticism of those” (Negri 2014). In contrast, Marxist ecofeminists situate the reproduction of living labor within the milieu of earthly practices that sustains it. Further, they direct attention to the destruction of eco-social practices caused by capitalist acceleration and its differential impact across gradients of gender, race, and geography.

There is a final point that I want to address in Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s work. I suggest that she does more than theorize ecological limits. In her work we find hints toward an understanding of the earth as that which enhances human capacities for feeling, thinking, and acting differently. How else should one understand her claim that the earth “is not only a source of nourishment, but from the earth bodies gain spirit, sensations, and imagination” (2005)? Dalla Costa’s trajectory from the *oikos* to the ocean has important implications for the project of reworking the ecology of the common. It provides a critical angle for challenging the hierarchal oppositions between the earth and the world, *oikos* and *polis*, *zōé*

and *bios*, at the heart of Western conceptions of political freedom. It shows how the materiality of existence constitutes not a constraint that humans have to transcend in order to access the sphere of politics, but a site of emergence of politics. The problem then becomes how to develop ethical-political orientations in which nature is the enabling realm of potentiality rather than a realm of necessity that must be left behind. That is the challenge taken up by feminist thinkers Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz.

This Common Which Is Not One

The work of Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz overlaps interestingly with that of Hardt and Negri. All these theorists share a language of affect, power, and desire distinctly influenced by Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Their writings move away from the Hegelian philosophies of lack and negativity towards immanence, from the focus on sovereignty to the affirmative powers of life, from the politics of recognition to the politics of difference. In this section, I explore the sites of tension between the ontological projects articulated by Braidotti and Grosz and the revolutionary project envisioned by Hardt and Negri. I argue that Grosz and Braidotti's expansive conceptualization of life poses profound challenges to Hardt and Negri's celebration of human self-making activity. In turn, the Autonomist attention to the problem of organization remains relevant for charting a passage from an ontology of difference to the composition of the common. To begin unpacking this claim, I now turn to the work of Elizabeth Grosz.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the complex encounters between feminism and post-structuralism and the crucial influence of critical race theory and queer studies created the conditions for denaturalizing the categories of race, sex and gender. The focus on the role played by cultural practices and networks of power/knowledge in the formation of

gendered subjects gained considerable currency in feminist and queer circles in Europe and the United States. The turn to the entanglement of language and power, however, came at the expense of a complex understanding of biology and nature. Particularly in the Anglo-American context, the concept of sexual difference became synonymous with essentialism, that is, that which traces the boundaries of what the feminine is or should be.

In marked contrast with this interpretation, Elizabeth Grosz presents sexual difference as a field of multiple becoming that does not reflect the specular relationship between phallic sameness and subjugated otherness. Forging an uneasy alliance between Luce Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference and Deleuze's philosophy of life, Grosz describes sexual difference as "an open materiality, a set of (possibly infinite) tendencies and potentialities which may be developed, yet whose development will necessarily hinder or induce other developments and other trajectories" (1994: 191). Against the claim that sexual difference is a pure effect of representation, Grosz argues that bodily morphologies express tendencies and desires that push toward differentiation. Rather than being the raw material which drops out of relevance as it is transformed by cultural inscription, bodily materiality generates problems and events that culture has to address. Bodily tendencies are elaborated in particular cultural forms but biology in itself neither determines culture nor is determined by it. Rather, biology and culture fold into each other.

Grosz is well aware that feminism has had good reasons for detaching women from the understanding of biology as given and immutable. Biological essentialism and the sexual division of labor associated with it have been at the normative heart of patriarchal power. Her work, however, shows how the violent denial of the force of human and non-human matter in favor of a human masculine subject who masters the world is what has determined

the hierarchical positioning of humanity above nature and of white men above women, people of color, animals and machines.

It is significant that in the short essay *The Italian Difference* (2009), Negri refers to Mario Tronti's workerism and to feminist philosopher of sexual difference Luisa Muraro as the two exceptions in the Italian philosophical landscape of the second half of the twentieth-century. What sets these thinkers apart from the postmodern proclivities of Italian "weak thought"⁴⁵ is that they both develop non-dialectical philosophies radically embedded in struggles and engaged in the biopolitical production of new forms of life. However, as Negri suggests, it was the feminist difference that played a crucial role in the exploration of the biopolitical field. Those who are familiar with Luisa Muraro's work may have noticed that in this essay Negri defines her philosophy in terms of "feminine difference" rather than "sexual difference." This slippage reveals a great deal about Negri's difficulties in dealing with corporeal specificities and their role in the making of subjectivities. It signals a non-engagement with the relationship between the biological and the social.

In contrast, I want to echo Grosz's suggestion that sexual difference is the space of the encounter with the new, of unexpected collision between (at least) two embodied perspectives, (at least) two sexed bodies, each capable of producing practices of pleasure and modes of existence. As tendency towards bifurcation and openness, sexual difference could be understood as a mode of organization for producing a common in which any dream of unitary recomposition is constantly displaced. As Ida Dominjanni points out, the subject of the common "isn't only multitudinous and plural but *differential*, marked, that is, by a difference that doesn't recompose itself as an identity, that doesn't unravel into equality, and

⁴⁵Perhaps Negri's favorite polemical target, "weak thought" is the philosophical perspective developed in the early 1980s by Italian philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti.

that doesn't add up to a coalition, but rather acts as an alterity that is potentially always present and that cannot be reduced" (2009: 137).

This is a powerful insight, one that serves as a reminder of the contingent nature of the common. Sexual difference shatters any fantasy of recomposition into one, it makes space for a conception of the common in which the process of composition is ongoing and open-ended. Hardt and Negri's formulation of the multitude as assemblage of singularities that constantly remakes the common is headed in this direction, but its limitation consists in bypassing the embodied dimension of singularities. In spite of the references to the corporeal and affective dimensions of labor and hints at a new ontology of the human, Hardt and Negri end up gravitating away from materiality to focus on human relational and linguistic capacities that, once liberated from the grip of capitalism, would constitute the fabric of life in common.

But there is more. For Grosz sexual difference is the vector pointing toward a reframing of biology. In her work, the features traditionally used to characterize human beings, namely the capacity for transformation and invention, describe the *modus operandi* of nature and the earth, that which makes us become other than ourselves. To be more accurate, the capacity to create the new describes the ways in which living bodies attempt to draw strength from a field of forces that are largely indifferent to them. The forces of the earth, atmospheric forces, oceanic tides, gravity, temporality, "impinge on, transform, and become the objects for living beings" (Grosz 2008: 102). In turn, living beings harness and transform them to give rise to provisional zones of cohesion, conceptual formations, bodily habits and modes of being together. Foregrounding the indeterminacy of chaos, the real that exists beyond human control, Grosz offers a striking image of the earth. It is not a closed system tending toward equilibrium that has to be protected from the impact of the human.

Nor it is a benevolent, maternal organism. Rather, it is a field of forces that impinge on human thoughts, actions, and sensations.

For the Love of Zoé

In a recent essay, Rosi Braidotti includes a reference to Hardt and Negri as part of a community of Spinozist scholars working “on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force” (2010: 206). She adds that such engagement “requires an interrogation of the shifting interrelations between human and nonhuman forces”. Now, even a cursory glance at Braidotti’s and Hardt and Negri’s writings reveals that the concern for the nonhuman is of much more interest for Braidotti than for the authors of *Empire*. While Hardt and Negri focus on living labor and the productive dimension of *bios*, Braidotti’s ontology of embodied becoming brings into relief *zoé*, the generative vitality that runs between animals, plants, and minerals.

In Braidotti’s zigzagging route across the technological landscapes of neo-liberal capitalism, the notion of biopower emerges as the organizing principle for the proliferation of discourses and practices that focus on “life itself.” Biopower is a formation that incorporates and recombines technologies of sovereignty, discipline and control to regulate life across differential lines of geography, gender, race, class and species. From the multiple theaters of high-tech wars to the commercialization of biological materials, to market-based solutions to climate change, “life itself” has come to the fore as a fundamental resource for capitalist exploitation. According to Braidotti, however, the contemporary emphasis on “life itself” at a time of the convergence between technology, biology and economics has positive potentials because it complicates the modern divide between nature and culture. She contends that the ethical challenge of the present is to shift away from anthropocentrism,

towards a sustainable mode of relations between human and nonhuman forms of living. In this framework, biopolitics is transposed into an ethics of sustainability centered on technologically mediated living beings. Braidotti's wager is to rethink life without the human as leading agent and carrier of change. Once the possibility of life without the human at the center is confronted, what emerges is the productivity of the *zōē/bios* compound.

In opposition to the Heideggerian legacy of finitude expressed by Agamben's conceptualization of bare life⁴⁶, Braidotti lays out an affirmative biopolitics that places nature and culture on a continuum. Similar to the way Negri links Agamben's biopolitics to the annihilation of resistance (2007), Braidotti claims that by identifying *zōē* with death and the vulnerability of life, Agamben forecloses any possibility of transformation. She points out that, in the same way that sexual difference has been rendered in pejorative terms as the "other" of Man, *zōē* has been thought in opposition to *bios*, that is, the human sphere of ethics, politics and social life. As such, *zōē* has been historically feminized: "women were classified alongside natives, animals and others as referents of a generative force that was reduced to a mere biological function and deprived of political and ethical relevance" (Braidotti 2006: 170).

Braidotti's conjoined use of *zōē/bios* implies that, in order to dismantle the old habit of reducing *zōē* to disposable matter, they must be thought in relational combination, as a field of biosocial forces that affect and co-produce each other. For Braidotti, the commitment to the emergent properties of life implies a shift in the understanding of subjectivity. She writes: "We need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole" (2013: 82). In Braidotti's dethroning of the human as the sovereign subject of history, the

⁴⁶ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998).

celebration of the vitality of matter is linked to the theorization of a subject as assemblage emerging out of the nature-culture continuum, a subject composed by inhuman potentialities.

Braidotti and Grosz's frameworks mark a striking break with the view of the human as a "dominion within a dominion" that Spinoza called into question (1996). However, the question remains as to whether their rich conceptualization of nature, life, and the earth can contribute to forms of collective action. How to move from the mesmerizing effects of the chaotic unfolding of life to collective practices pursuing the subtraction from the capitalist arrangement of eco-social relations?

The Political Ecology of the Common

The concept of composition has a rich genealogy that spans Spinozism⁴⁷, Italian Autonomism, Deleuze and Guattari, and science studies. This section explores Autonomist composition and, drawing on science studies, reworks it to bring into relief the multiplicity

⁴⁷ In the *Ethics* (1996) Spinoza describes Nature as the ever-changing composition of all bodies, from the simplest to the most composite. Things and the bodies composing them, have conative tendencies, that is, a disposition to self-preservation that is enhanced or diminished through encounters with other things and bodies. The composition of bodies produce some kind of variations (*affectus*) that augment or decrease each body power to act. In Europe, Gilles Deleuze paved the way for a radical reading of Spinoza with the publication in 1969 of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Louis Althusser, on his part, wrote very little on the Dutch philosopher but famously argued that his seminar Reading Capital was more indebted to Spinoza than structuralism. Such influence is reflected in the work of Althusser's students Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, authors of influential books on Spinoza. Antonio Negri has written three books on Spinoza, including *The Savage Anomaly* (1991), which connects Spinoza's thought to the development of capitalism in the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century. Feminist scholars Genevieve Lloyd (1994) and Moira Gatens (2009) have explored the implications for feminism of Spinoza's parallelism between mind and body. Hasana Sharp (2011) focuses on Spinoza's break with human exceptionalism and reflects on its implication for a feminist politics of renaturalization. For a concise overview of Negri's work on Spinoza and his relationship with the feminist politics of renaturalization see Tola 2014.

of existents involved in the making of the common. The Autonomist notion of class-composition has roots in 1960s analysis of the Italian working-class dynamics. At the time, the main concern was identifying practices of insurgency and creating the conditions for linking them to one another. If in the 1960s class-composition focused on the autonomous tendencies of living labor within the factories, in the 1970s, insurgent subjectivities proliferated beyond the walls of the factory thus signaling that a new constellation of living labor had emerged. This required a qualitative mutation in compositional processes, one more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage than to Marxist-Leninist attempts to reach a synthesis out of multiplicities (Deseriis 2012). Thus, if in contemporary Autonomist parlance composition is still very much related to the process of organization, it designates the coming together of differences that are never reduced to one.

For Hardt and Negri composition indexes the conflicting and cooperative interplay of singularities in the common, and ultimately designates a process of organization of human living labor that exceeds representative democracy. They envision a wildly autopoietic multitude engaged in the re/production of nature but pay little attention to the earthly forces that give rise to it. In science studies, however, composition has become a tool for contesting the bifurcation between nature and politics.

In his meditation on composition, Bruno Latour argues that politics consists in reassembling that which Western modernity has divided, that is, a natural order made up of passive objects that speak through science, and a social order resulting from the interaction of autonomous individuals that speak through politics (Latour 2010). Building on Viveiros de Castro's critique of Western mononaturalism⁴⁸, Latour contends that there is not such a

⁴⁸ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro concept of *mononaturalism* refers to the hegemonic Western mindset that conceives nature as the universal ground of diversified human action. In this

thing as a given nature, a common world shared by humans, a world of facts to be reconciled with a world of values. Rather, a common world needs to be composed; it has to emerge out of a space of indistinction between subjects and objects.

Strikingly for a non-modern theorist, Latour's compositionism relies on the most distinctive political form of European modernity: representative democracy. From the metaphor of the "Parliament of Things" introduced in the early 1990s, to the bicameral model presented in *The Politics of Nature* (2004), Latour reimagines representative democracy as a "boundlessly pluralistic proceduralism" (Whiteside 2013: 202), a proliferation of assemblies, spokespersons, recognition of competencies and representational roles that enrolls hybrids into the body politics and grants the right to appeal to those who have been temporarily left out (Watson 2011).

Isabelle Stengers's approach to composition is decidedly less committed to representative politics as well as to the image of a common world. She is more attuned to non-representational activist practices that convey "the cosmopolitical stance that 'we are not alone in the world'" (2005b: 192). If Latour provocatively declares (1988: 173) "Like God, capitalism does not exist," Stengers talks about the need of an "ethology of capitalism" to learn about the subtle ways through which its operations of capture are conducted (2011). She invites a return to Marx's investigation of political economy while at the same time rejecting the Marxist fidelity to the narrative of progress (2011, 2015). Much more than Latour, Stengers is interested in making sense of how particular modes of existence come

framework a single, unified nature allows the emergence of multiple perspectives on political and cultural matters. However different, these multiple views share a common world, the external natural reality. In spite of its purported universalism, the provincial nature of Western mononaturalism emerges through the juxtaposition with the *multinaturalism* of Amerindian cosmologies in which humans and animals share subjectivity and agency but differ in their corporeal natures (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

undone under the pressure of normative forces or, in turn, express forms of resistance and becoming.

Both Latour and Stengers gesture towards the composition with Gaia, the figure of a turbulent earth that disrupts the fantasy of human exceptionalism. Latour, inspired by Stengers, claims that Gaia unsettles the image of earth as inanimate support of European modernity. Yet, he also argues that, in order to face the challenges posed by unruly earth, what is needed is the “search for a new Leviathan that would come to grasp with Gaia” (2013: 103-104). What Latour proposes is a new distribution of sovereignty, one that redesigns but ultimately reaffirms “the hegemony of a European State philosophy” (Luisetti 2016). Stengers (2015), in contrast, presents Gaia as an intruder, an assemblage of forces that exists irrespective of human reasons and projects. An implacable and impersonal force, Gaia does not demand anything but poses the political problem of how to live otherwise.

In gesturing toward the possibility of composing with Gaia, Stengers suggests that this is a matter of care for practitioners engaged in an experimental politics, one that is not guided by great narratives of universal emancipation but nevertheless resists capitalist eco-social relations. The question is not reconciling humans and the earth after centuries of capitalist exploitation. Nor does composition imply reciprocity and partnership with nonhuman companions. Rather, it is a highly situated process in which practitioners devise pragmatic operations that confer to Gaia the power to spark alternative modes of being together in the field of catastrophe. Learning to compose with Gaia is a “cosmopolitical” project in that it entails making present that which causes practitioners to think and act, instead of re-instantiating politics as an exclusively human art (Stengers 2005a, 2011, 2015).

Stengers often refers to Starhawk’s ecofeminist witchcraft as an example of cosmopolitical practice. Combining ecofeminism, radical environmentalism and social justice

activism, Starhawk and the witches of the Reclaiming tradition have been active participants of anti-nuclear blockades, direct action campaigns against the devastation of old-growth forests in Northern California, alter-globalization protests and, more recently, Occupy Wall Street. Through writings and a variety of rituals, including the spiral dance, the witches often invoke the Goddess, the name for a magic conception of matter and nature that was violently disqualified by the European witch-hunt of the sixteenth and seventeenth century and the rise of the Enlightenment ideals of human rationality⁴⁹.

It would be tempting to dismiss the rituals of neo-pagan witches as spirituality that smacks of essentialism, or nostalgic remembrances of a lost enchanted world. But Stengers reads them as ethico-aesthetic-political experiments that, by invoking the Goddess, make present among practitioners “a cause without a representative” (2005b: 195), without a spokesperson who speaks in its name. These techniques activate the power to think in a way “that it is no longer I, as a subject, as meant to belong to nobody but myself, who thinks and feels” (195).

Stengers’s evocations of feminist witchcraft make uncomfortable reading for many Western activists and political theorists trained within the secularist tradition, including feminists who grew up with the refrain the closes Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*: “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (1991: 181). Yet, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa is quick to point out, Haraway’s sentence is usually disconnected from the preceding words affirming that the cyborg and the goddess “are both bound in the spiral dance” (2012: 201). In spite of their

⁴⁹ In *Dreaming the Dark* (1982) Starhawk connects the European enclosures of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century to the witch-hunt that undermined women’s control over reproduction. As I show in chapter 1 Silvia Federici (2004) expands this argument to argue that capitalist primitive accumulation was sustained by the appropriation of land, the criminalization of witches and the disqualification of an animistic conception of the world, the land, and the body that characterized the economies of subsistence in pre-modern Europe.

seemingly oppositional valence, both figures attend to the more-than-human intricacies of world-making and thus contribute to the feminist project to dismantle the human fantasy of autonomy. What matters in Stengers's reference to neo-pagan witchcraft is not whether one believes in the goddess or not. Not everyone might feel compelled to join the spiral dance. But these activist techniques point toward a particular staging of the political scene, one that binds those involved in struggles together with existents that might be other-than-human.

Following Stengers, I propose to reframe the ecology of the common as a matter of composition that involves the interplay of disparate beings, not all of which are human. The making of the common is a highly specific task, it can only emerge out of situated struggles. Thus, as a way to clarify what I mean, I want to return to a particular instance of the common, the story of an urban lake in Rome, Italy, which opens this dissertation.

In the early 1990s, builders working at the foundations of a shopping centre in a densely populated area in Rome struck a source of underground water. After a few months, the construction site was under water. The newly formed basin bordered the Ex Snia, a former textile factory turned into a laboratory for local activists. Over the years, activist and neighbourhood residents learned to pay attention to the lake. Recently, they mobilized to stop new development plans, organized protests and parties, studied the geology of the area, tested the water for assessing toxicity levels, learned about the birds that have chosen the lake as their home, negotiated with the local administration. The lake became a common but one where is hard to tell where the natural ends and the social begins.

This is how the hip-hop song *The Lake That Struggles* (*Il lago che combatte*), composed as part of the mobilization, describes what happened: “the lake invaded the reinforced concrete and asked for help, we learned to imagine, love, and experience it” (“il lago ha invaso il

cemento armato e ci ha chiesto aiuto, noi l'abbiamo immaginato, amato, conosciuto")⁵⁰. The lyric speaks of a "nature that resists." For some this may conjure up the romantic image of an innocent nature that turns against plunderers and profiteers to form a common that a group of activists are called to defend. I do not wish to subscribe to this narrative of holistic nature. More than an example of pristine wilderness whose wholeness needs to be protected, the lake resembles what someone would define as "second nature" produced by human action. But this second nature does something, is capable of altering the beings that press upon it. *The Lake That Struggles* illuminates with dynamic, it makes present what forced activist thought and action.

To me the significance of the rebel lake is this: the watery formation slowed down urban development and forced political thought in those capable of sensing its power of attraction. The activist arrangement of which the lake is part disrupts the distinction between human actors and manipulable resources. I propose this as an instance of composition, a messy process involving asymmetric beings. What might be flourishing around the urban lake is an ecology of the common, a precarious formation perhaps but the fertile ground for further experimenting with alternative political textures.

⁵⁰ *The Lake That Struggles* is a song by Assalti Frontali and Il Muro del Canto. The video-clip, showing the rebel lake, is available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dcb_Thrq2P8.

Chapter Four: Political Ontologies

Frictions: The Common and Indigeneity

In 1552 the Valladolid controversy between theologians Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas staged competing visions about the colonial enslavement of Amerindians. For De Sepúlveda, a translator of Aristotle inspired by the Greek philosopher's theory of natural slavery, indigenous people were barbarians incapable of self-government who deserved coercive forms of conversion. In writings that inspired his remarks in Valladolid, he described Amerindians as inferior to the *conquistadores* as children are to adults, and women and monkeys are to men. In his rebuttal, the Dominican bishop de Las Casas argued that New World peoples were humans capable of conversion. In order to prove that they approximated European standards of civility, he provided a detailed description of indigenous customs and practices of governance. Although the panel of jurists and theologians called in Valladolid to adjudicate the dispute agreed with de Las Casas, its verdict was never made public. The Spanish imperial machine continued to feed on indigenous labor and land.

As María Eugenia Coterá and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo observe, the encounter with indigenous populations provoked much European speculations about who counts as human. Indigenous peoples “were central to the emergence of European humanism” (2015: 555). Although Sepúlveda and de Las Casas disagreed about the natives' degree of humanity, the Valladolid controversy is compelling also for what they had in common. The two opponents shared the idea of self-government as prerogative of fully human beings. It never occurred to them that practices of government could also encompass other-than-human entities. Yet, as recent work in archeological anthropology shows, in the pre-colonial Andes,

the Inca state comprised subjects that were both human and non-human⁵¹. Without a doubt, the Valladolid dispute was a significant moment in the imperial reworking and extension of the Western distinction between humans capable of making decisions about how to live together and other-than-human beings that belong to a state of nature out of history.

At the same time that de Sepúlveda and de Las Casas debated the humanness of Amerindians, Europe was traversed by conflicts over the common countering the extension of the matrix of ownership and dispossession that prepared the ground for the emergence of capitalism. Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, the enclosures separated European peasants from the land thus turning them into “free” wage laborers, individuals with nothing to sell but their labor power. In chapter 1 I argue that the distinction between bounded individuals and the natural world became central at the junction of the colonial dispossession of indigenous land and the enclosures of the European common. These distinct and yet interconnected processes converged in creating the conditions for the emergence of Man as proper figure of the human detached from the material world. In this chapter I deepen this argument by looking at the relation between the common and indigeneity.

In chapter 2 and 3, I examine how the common has acquired a central role in contemporary Western radical political imaginary. Recent political theory offers the common as a project capable of departing from the oppositional politics of Western modernity. From this perspective, the common is a form of *alter*-politics rather than *anti*-politics (Hage 2012). It creates alternatives to the dominant order of things, modes of living in which means and ends are intimately connected. Multiple instances of the common exist as spaces of alterity in

⁵¹ For this insight I am indebted to Darryl Wilkinson, whose book project focuses on how power worked in the Inca state. See Wilkinson 2013.

the rubbles of capitalist modernity. Yet, my work shows that some influential iterations of the common remain paradoxically committed to one of the key tenets of modernity: the distinction between humans as political agents and a natural world deprived of political relevance. In this sense the identification of the commons with altermodernity, its power to disrupt dominant modes of dwelling in the world, needs careful interrogation.

In order to further displace the modern proclivities of current thinking about the common, this chapter returns on the relationship between the common and indigenous struggles. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage notes the increased affinity between a radical imaginary invested in alter-politics and critical anthropological thought that aims at “taking us outside of ourselves precisely to continuously remind us of the actual possibilities of being other to ourselves” (2012: 292). Following this insight, this chapter draws on decolonial anthropological thought, and more generally on decolonial studies, to generate problems that are pertinent for enacting a radical politics of the common. Looking at indigenous movements in Latin America that bring mountains, rivers and the dead into the fold of politics, it shows that these movements introduce questions that are relevant for thinking the common otherwise.

My compass for investigating the asymmetrical relationship between the common and indigenous politics is Marisol de la Cadena’s work on the presence of “earth-beings” in the political arena (2010, 2015a). Earth-beings, a term that translates the Quechua word *tirakuna*, refers to other-than-human entities that, together with the Quechua people in the Andes (the *runakuna*), form political-geographical communities called the *ayllus*. The presence of earth-beings in Andean politics unsettles Western modern political ontology predicated upon the separation between society and nature.

At the most basic level political ontology describes what constitutes a political collective and the power relations that traverse it. It consists of “the power laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world” (Blaser 2009: 11). Ontologies precede mundane practices but are constantly reshaped by them. Medieval political ontology, for example, assumed that the king was the mediator between the will of God permeating the cosmos and the body politics of all those subordinated to sovereign will. With the affirmation of European modernity and the intertwined hegemony of capitalism and colonialism, Man emerged as the new organizing principle of political life (Foucault 1970, Douzinas 2000): a self-sufficient and self-possessing person separated from other living beings through the hierarchical ordering of sexual difference, race, and species (Cohen 2009, 2013). Modern political ontology is thus defined by the convergence of sovereign individuals in the social contract that provides a protective shield against the excesses of the state of nature. In this ontological framework, the social developed as the autonomous sphere of proper subjects that speak through politics and express multiple and competing perspectives on the world, while nature became the unitary realm of objects that speak through the mediation of science (Latour 2004).

When seen through modern lenses, the evocation of earth beings in Latin American public life appears as a matter of religious belief or folkloric revival. For indigenous activists, however, earth-beings are an integral part of political life. Humans are not alone in enacting worlds they but always find themselves grappling with the conditions of their own acting. As decolonial ethnographers of social movements have shown, the struggles of Latin American indigenous movements illuminate the existence of disparate ontologies and multiple worlds alternative to the Western single notion of reality (Blaser 2013). Insofar as worlds are not enclosed in themselves, political ontology is an approach that focuses on their uneven inter-

relations, productive displacements and misunderstandings. Its toolkit, largely developed within anthropology, include Anna Tsing's "friction" (2005), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's "equivocation" (2004) and Marilyn Strathern's "partial connection" (2004). These concepts illuminate the interplay of alterity and convergence, distinctiveness and concatenation.

Adopting the lenses of political ontological I want to ask: What kinds of entities are involved in the making of the common? How do some entities come to exist as active political agents while other are relegated into the background of politics? The notion of multiple political ontology theorized by decolonial anthropology allows me to further investigate how the boundaries of the common are done and undone. Through the reading of a variety of texts and events, including political speeches, protests in public spaces and legal texts, this chapter explores some encounters between the common and indigenous politics in contemporary Latin America.

The chapter begins with a reading of Zapatistas' political speeches and then turns to the political upheavals leading to the rewriting of the Bolivian constitution. My goal here is twofold: first, I want to "provincialize" the common and thus resist the tendency to find common everywhere. Second, I consider the friction between the common and the communal (Mignolo 2011), that is, a form of pre-colonial socionatural organization that has been reconfigured by contemporary indigenous movements. Frictions, in the words of Anna Tsing are "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (2005: 4). Building on this, I argue that both the common and the communal diverge from Western political ontology. But while the distinction between subjects and objects that undergirds Western politics is explicitly challenged in current indigenous reconfigurations of the communal, contemporary articulations of the common in political

theory often rely on it and cast “earth beings” as resources that have to be defended against neoliberal privatization.

The second part of the chapter takes a detour of sorts to interrogate the role of gender in political ontological conflicts. It looks at how nature/Pachamama has become a right-bearing entity in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian legal frameworks. I am interested in the ambiguities inherent in the encounters between indigenous cosmologies, state formation and transnational environmentalism. I show that through complex processes of translation involved in these encounters, the ambiguous figure of Pachamama becomes normatively gendered, strategically deployed in the pursuit of state consolidation and environmental campaigns that assume the earth as benevolent mother. I contend that earth rights are double-edged: they promise to open up the space of the political to other-than-human beings, but also risks to extend the modern liberal tradition that is premised upon the appropriation of nature. In the concluding section, I return on the possibilities opened up by the encounter between the commons and the communal in Latin-America.

The Land and the Dead in Zapatista Politics

The idea of the commons has circulated widely in reference to the Latin American uprisings of the last two decades. The ongoing project of autonomy from the state and the market set in motion in 1994 by the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, has been at times interpreted through the category of the common. The same key has been used to analyze the indigenous movements in Ecuador and Bolivia that in the early 2000s paved the way for the progressive governments of Rafael Correa and Evo Morales. More recently, the common has been evoked as alternative to the intensification of the neo-extractivist model pursued by governments across Latin America (Svampa 2015). Neo-extractivism refers to the export-

oriented, large-scale projects based on the development of mining and hydrocarbon industries. The progressive administrations of Ecuador and Bolivia turned to neo-extractivism as a source of revenues then used for the implementation of a variety of social services and anti-poverty measures.

In this section and the next I argue that ongoing political movements in Southern Mexico and Bolivia that have been interpreted as instances of commoning differ from Western understandings of the common as collective resources. My point is that these movements should be seen as expressing tendencies that are connected and yet autonomous with respect to the common. They are autonomous in that express, at least in part, a political ontology that, unlike the one born out of the Greek antiquity and developed throughout a long history of Western hegemony, stands largely outside the nature/society divide. Saying, as I do, that indigenous movements in Latin America express tendencies that are autonomous from the common does not preclude the possibility of alliance. On the contrary, I am interested in how indigenous politics put pressure on and stimulate the thought of the common.

The emergence out of the Lacandón jungle of the Zapatistas in 1994 played an important role for revitalizing the political imaginary of the common. Arising from the encounter between indigenous groups and a small group of mestizos Marxist revolutionaries (Khasnabish 2008), the insurgency began the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), went into effect. One of the pre-requisites of Mexico's participation to the liberalization of trade was the revision of Article 27 of the constitution that, as a result of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, allowed small farmers and indigenous communities to access the *ejidos*, communal land that comprised over 50 percent of Mexico's croplands and 80 percent of forest land.

The first of January 1994, the Zapatistas army (EZLN), mainly composed by poorly armed indigenous Maya wearing balaclavas, seized six towns in the Southern state of Chiapas, home to a large percentage of Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Tzotzil, and Chol populations. A young Tojolabal woman, whose nom de guerre was Major Ana Maria, led the takeover of the key city of San Cristobal de las Casas⁵². I will return to her in a moment. As the gun-shaped chunks of wood carried by the insurgents in the early days of the rebellion suggested, the Zapatistas have never been primarily a military force. Their goal has never been seizing state power in the manner of traditional Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries. Although the military structure of the EZLN is still in place, the movement has increasingly distanced itself from the vanguardist guerrilla model. Its central focus has been the creation and expansion of a network of autonomous municipalities (*caracoles*) outside the jurisdiction of the Mexican state. The caracoles constitute the building blocks of a form of autonomous governance that erodes state sovereignty (Reyes and Kaufman 2015). *Mandar obedeciendo* (leading by obeying), the succinct expression encapsulating Zapatista autonomous governance, means that those chosen to govern are governed by the community.

According to Gustavo Esteva, a Mexican activist-intellectual close to the Zapatistas, the insurgents sought to “reclaim their commons and to regenerate their own forms of governance and their own art of living and dying” (Esteva 2004: 10). Similarly, the Midnight Notes Collective identifies the Zapatista upheaval as a powerful alternative to neoliberal

⁵² The role of Major Ana Maria’s role was not exceptional in the EZLN. Women made up from 30 to 40 percent of the military ranks of the Zapatista army. In 1994 the movement made public the Women’s Revolutionary Law that countered masculine hegemonic practices within the postcolonial state by demanding women’s participation in the revolutionary struggle and in the governance of the community, control over reproduction and access to education and health. For an assessment of the Women’s Revolutionary Law twenty years later see Marcos 2014.

“new enclosures” (1990). Moving beyond Marx who described the English enclosures of the sixteenth-century as a phenomenon circumscribed in space and time that created the conditions for the rise of capitalism, *Midnight Notes* sees the enclosures as integral to capitalist accumulation, taking place continuously and on a global scale through dispossession of land, resources, and welfare provisions. From this perspective the ongoing Zapatista experiment in autonomous governance, distinct from the Mexican state and the market, is more than resistance. Rather, it makes visible a form of existence that Marxist orthodoxy relegated to the past. Still more, it shows how the common can function as a connector among struggles “a place where Marxism, ecology, indigenous, and antislavery struggles meet” (Caffentzis and Neill 2004).

Esteve’s point about the Zapatistas’ effort to engender forms of governance connected to a particular art of living and dying deserves further exploration. If, as Walter Mignolo contends, for the Zapatista revolution to succeed “the Marxist cosmology needed to be infected by Indigenous cosmology,” (Mignolo 2011: 219), what are the consequences of such contamination on the politics and the common? What happens to the common in the mountains of Southeastern Mexico where Marxist guerrillas encountered Mayan communities?

Mignolo warns against the universalizing deployments of the concept of the common in Latin America. He argues that the common, both in the imperial formulation of the British Commonwealth, and in the current leftist reworking of the term, emerged from the Euro-American epistemology and mode of existence. As such, it should be distinguished from the communal, a form of social organization that existed before the European colonization of the Americas and continues to exert its influence in contemporary indigenous society and politics. If the common is a Leftist revolutionary project, one with a

Marxist genealogy, the communal is a de-colonial project rooted in pre-colonial societies and in the indigenous experience of five hundred centuries of coloniality. For Mignolo, the Zapatista model of governance in the caracoles is a reconfiguration of the communal rather than the common. Confusing the communal with the common, or worst subsuming the former into the latter, would be an unmistakable gesture of colonial appropriation (Mignolo 2011).

Native studies scholar Jodi Byrd (2011) makes a similar point in response to Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright's proposal of instituting global commons as key strategy of decolonization (Sharma and Wright 2009). According to Byrd, the problem of reading colonialism as generalized theft of the common and the global commons as generalized redistributive strategy is that it construes the indigenous claims to land as regressive and exclusionary. These progressive projects render indigenous sovereignty as "an obstacle to the gaining of a commons as the means to the end of oppression within the land that once did, but not longer can or should, belong to indigenous peoples" (Byrd 2011: 204). Thinking about the common, then, requires attention to specific histories of dispossession to avoid replicating the logic of colonialism⁵³.

I agree with Mignolo and Byrd that the genealogy of the common, and current articulations of commoning, should not be conflated with indigenous modes of living and struggling. With Byrd, I am interested in complicating romanticized ideas of the commons as spaces of freedom. But I would also emphasize that the eradication of the common and the dispossession of indigenous land were intertwined in the affirmation of European modernity. As I show in chapter 1, seventeenth and eighteenth century European thinkers

⁵³ Dene political theorists Glen Coulthard makes a similar point in his book *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. See Coulthard 2014.

such as John Locke and the English improvers (and to a certain extent even Marx) construed the commons as a residue of the past, a pre-historical relic to be swept away by private property, the necessary precondition of economic growth.

For Locke, the commons was the blank slate upon which individuals could erect fences by improving idle land through labor. As Barbara Arneil (1996) shows, Locke's theory of property proposed America as the quintessential pre-political state of nature that preceded improvement. The social and political forms of organization that characterized pre-colonial Americas were conveniently ignored in order to convey the image of an empty land waiting for the European man for bringing civilization. Yet, Locke's move toward the enclosures as primary mode of improvement was simultaneously directed at European wastelands.

The eradication of the common in Europe went hand in hand with colonial expansion, the dispossession of native lands, the affirmation of the human as a masculine individual owner of his own body and capable of appropriating the world through labor, and the violent disqualification of racialized and sexualized beings understood as less-than-human. By this I do not mean to suggest that the annihilation of the common and the eradication of the communal were symmetric processes. Each of them has a specific genealogy. The commons was largely, (but not exclusively) born out of the onto-theological horizon of Christianity that, over five hundreds years ago, played a crucial role in the formulation of the colonial project. However, as I have shown in Chapter 1, it should not be overlooked that in Medieval Europe the rejection of property ownership in favor of a practice of life-in-common was persecuted as heresy by the Catholic Church. In a nutshell, my point is that the commons functioned as counterpoint to European modernity, the heresy within, rather than as hegemonic formation.

What I find problematic is that in revitalizing the common, large parts of the Anglo-European Left often tend to turn the concept into an encompassing category while at the same time purifying it of its non-modern elements that point toward an engagement with nature not based on the distinction between subjects and objects. In this chapter I suggest that exploring the tension between the common and the communal might be useful to reveal the problematic separation, achieved through what Bruno Latour calls the work of purification (Latour 2004), between humans as autonomous agents of commoning and other-than-humans that are relegated in the background as mere resources to be transformed by human activity.

In order to continue to excavate the complex relationship between the common and European modernity, this chapter turns to contemporary permutations of the communal that bring other-than-human beings into politics. Further, it highlights the common and the communal as modes of existence alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Even Mignolo concedes that the distinct trajectories of the common and the communal do not mutually exclude each other. I suggest that the Zapatista insurgency can be seen as frictional site of encounter between these divergent ways of living and struggling. I approach the question of how the communal infects the common in the mountains of Southeastern Mexico by analyzing the role of the land, the mountains and the dead in the articulation of Zapatista politics.

In their reading of Subcomandante Marcos' writings, decolonial political theorists Margaret Kohn and Kelly McBride argue that by insisting on land as the precondition for the survival and flourishing of indigenous identity, the Zapatistas brought together claims of identity recognition, economic redistribution and political self-determination that are usually distinct (2011: 112). While I follow Kohn and McBride's turn to the relevance of the land in

Zapatista politics, I explore a different dimension of the land, one grounded on Marisol de la Cadena's claim that current indigenous mobilizations in Latin America are challenging Western hegemonic conception of politics grounded on the ontological distinction between humans and nature.

Many commentators understand ongoing Latin American political movements as responses to neoliberal extraction of resources (and increasingly also as responses to the new extractivism enacted by local progressive governments, more on this later), or as environmental mobilizations protecting territories that are crucial for the subsistence of indigenous populations. Alternatively or in combination with such interpretations, these movements are seen as articulating ethnic claims connected to religious and cultural belief. According to de la Cadena something different is happening, something whose import cannot be grasped using the lenses of political economy and the analysis of cultural difference. Indigenous movements are summoning into the political field "sentient entities whose material existence—and the of the world to which they belong—is currently threatened by the neoliberal wedding of capital and the state" (de la Cadena 2010: 342). What is at stake is not simply the affirmation of indigenous "beliefs" but a disagreement between worlds regarding the ontological make up of politics, that is, who/what counts as a political actor or concern.

Building on this argument, I consider the land, the dead and the mountains as a vital part of the Zapatista insurrection and the experiment in autonomous governance that ensued from it. I examine two speeches delivered by two Zapatistas spokespersons. The first speech was given by the Subcomandante Marcos in the Zocalo, the heart of Mexico City, before 250.000 people, largely indigenous, gathered for a rally following the March for Indigenous Dignity in March 2001. This is an extraordinary political document, a powerful

text that weaves together modernity and its alternatives in a rich tapestry of images and concepts. It reclaims liberty, justice and rights for all, that which Western modernity has affirmed as universal but whose access has been restricted or denied to indigenous people. But it also exceeds the political vocabulary of modernity.

One of the central motifs of Marcos' speech is the mirror. Addressing the crowd gathered at the Zocalo with his back toward the presidential palace, Subcomandante Marcos (2002) claimed:

We are a mirror. We are here in order to see each other and to show each other, so may look upon us, so may look at yourself, so that the other looks in our looking. We are here and we are a mirror. Not reality but merely its reflection. Not light, but merely a glimmer. Not path, but merely a few steps. Not guide, but merely one of the many directions which lead to tomorrow⁵⁴.

Even though the claim of constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and culture is explicitly articulated in the speech, the Zapatistas are not just demanding that the Mexican authorities recognize them as counterpart. They are also disrupting the traditional relation of recognition by which, to put in Hegelian terms, the slave can only acquire subjectivity when is recognized by the master.

The mirror stands for the faceless Zapatistas, the insurgents who have turned the colonial deprivation of individuality into a weapon of collective transformation. The mirror faces indigenous people who can see a trace of themselves in it, a fragment of collective life autonomous from the postcolonial neoliberal state. Simultaneously, in a powerful dismissal of political vanguardism, the mirror also shows the Zapatistas as "reflected light," something whose power is amplified by a larger context of struggles: "Now there is no longer the 'you' and the 'we,' because now we are all the color of the earth." In shifting from recognition to

⁵⁴ Subcomandante Marcos's speech is available here <http://inthesetimes.com/issue/25/10/marcos2510.html>

autonomy from sovereignty (Reyes and Kaufman 2015) the Zapatistas create a political alternative to modernity. But there is more.

The speech at the Zocalo affirms that the land is involved in the insurgency in ways that would be unthinkable from the modern perspective. In Marcos' words, "We are rebels because the land rebels if someone is selling and buying it as if the land did not exist, as if the color of the earth did not exist." The Zapatista rebellion expresses more than a revolt for reclaiming land and identity dispossessed throughout the ongoing conquest of indigenous territory. It expresses the insurgence of communities for whom the land is not a resource at the disposal of its human inhabitants but a landscape peopled by entities with whom humans have to negotiate. When Marcos refers to the insurgency *of* the land, he is evoking a cosmology with profound implication on political life.

As Mihalís Mentinís (2006) elaborates, the struggle of the Zapatistas is dynamically informed by a cosmology in which being human means to depend on an animal co-essence (*nagual*) that defines one's power to act. For the insurgents "Mountains and forests are alive, they have their *ajaw* (Tzeltal for 'guardian of the mountain'), each of them having specific powers and their distinct character" (154). In order to further elaborate this point, I now turn to the speech delivered in August 1996 by the insurgent leader Major Ana María to welcome thousand of activists gathered in the Zapatista community of Oventic for the Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. Major Ana María (1996) spoke an "improper" Spanish, a language hybridized with elements of Tojolabal, her indigenous language:

For Power, that Power now clothing itself all across the world with the name of 'neoliberalism,' we did not count, we did not produce, we did not buy, we did not sell. We were a useless number in the accounts of big capital. Then we went to the mountains searching for the good and to see if we could find alleviation for our pain, of being forgotten stones and plants. Here, in the mountains of the Mexican southeast, our dead live. Our dead, who live in the mountains, know many things.

Their death spoke to us and we listened....Little boxes that speak told us another story that comes from yesterday and points towards tomorrow. The mountains spoke to us; the macchualtin, those who are ordinary and common people, and we the simple people. as we are called by the powerful...Behind our black face, behind our armed voice, behind our unspeakable name, behind the we that you see, behind us we are (at) you (*Detras de nosotros estamos ustedes*).

In an acute analysis of the concluding sentence of the speech (“*Detras de nosotros estamos ustedes*”) Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy (2002) explain that what is most striking in Major Ana Maria’s words is the displacement of the subject-object correlation, the I and the you, that characterizes the pronominal structure of European languages but not Amerindian languages. Descriptions of actions in Indo-European languages are based on the presence of an acting subject, a verb, and an inactive recipient of the action. This is what we find, for example, in the sentence “I told you,” where the “you” is presented as essentially passive with respect to the speaking subject. In contrast Tojolabal speakers say something like “I told, you heard,” to describing a bi-directional, inter-subjective process (Lenkersdorf 1996).

In the last sentence of the quote above, Major Ana Maria’s native language, Tojolabal, infiltrates Spanish in a peculiar way. Through the cleaver misuse of the word *estamos* rather than *somos*, she confounds the boundaries between the one who speaks, the indigenous woman acting as spokesperson of her political community, and those who are listening, largely non-indigenous activists. Such linguistic transgression offers a glimpse in a cosmology out of which the grammar emerges, one in which “persons, living systems, and nature are not objects but subjects” (Mignolo and Schiwy 2002: 8).

To expand on Mignolo and Schiwy analysis, I would add that in Major Ana Maria’s speech Mayan cosmology is present also at a more obvious level. She refers to a conception of time that moves in cycles rather than linearly (“another story that comes from yesterday and points towards tomorrow”). Insofar as the Zapatistas see the past from which the dead speak as future, they invest in the revolutionary possibility of a world turned upside down.

The indigenous *cosmovision* also emerges in the references to mountains inhabited by ancestors who speak and pose problems to which the insurgents have to respond. The neoliberal Mexican state relegated indigenous people to the status of “forgotten stones and plants,” that is, less-than-human beings assimilated to nature, and therefore destined to be ruled. Something quite different happens in the mountains of the Mexican southeast where mountains and the dead enter in the composition of a political community that is not only challenging the dehumanization of indigenous people but also the partition between the world of nature and that of politics. What has been flourishing in Chiapas, albeit intermittently and under precarious condition, is more than an insurgency against the new enclosures. It is simultaneously an insurgency of political ontology, the cultivation of a mode of living together that puts pressure on the assumptions about the inert earth that supports the architecture of Western politics.

Earth Beings in the Bolivian Water War

In the early 2000, massive uprisings against the privatization of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia, ushered in a profound political transformation of the Andean country. The water-war, followed by widespread roadblocks organized by indigenous peasants and coca-growers, is often described by academics and activists as struggle for the autonomous management of common resources. In *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that Bolivian social movements were based on the common in two intertwined senses: they claimed access to resources and organized themselves through pre-existing forms of indigenous communal self-government (2009: 107-112). Commenting on the innovative juridical framework introduced by the Bolivian constitution in 2009 largely as a result of social struggles, Italian legal scholar Ugo Mattei writes that the constitutional text is “the most advanced juridical

model elaborating the concept of common good available to humanity if only it would set aside Western arrogance and rethink its model of development” (Mattei 2011: 22, my translation). In what follows I bring to the fore aspects of these struggles that are often overlooked by theorists of the commons. In particular I pay attention to the role of other-than-human entities in the political collectives that played an important role in the formation of the Bolivian pluri-national state.

Bolivia, the Andean-Amazonian territory where 62 percent of the population self-identify as indigenous, mainly Aymara and Quechuas, has been a laboratory for neoliberal policies since the mid-1980s. In the late 1990s, the World Bank negotiated with the Bolivian government the privatization of the public water system in Cochabamba, the third largest city in Bolivia, in exchange for \$600 million in debt relief (Hindery 2013). After the public water system was sold to the consortium Aguas de Tunari, controlled by the multinational corporation Bechtel, water rates soared and local communities risked to loose access to sources of water that water committees had long managed without state concessions. The people in Cochabamba organized through the Coalition for the Defense of Water and Life (known as the Coordinadora) that included water committees, farmers, Quechua indigenous groups, factory workers and women’s organizations.

The committees, mainly established at the city’s edges, had devised a variety of ways to operate water supply systems including rainwater collection systems and the drilling of wells. They also decided the degree of connection to municipal water supply system. According Marcela Olivera, who during the water war was the international liaison for the Coordinadora, the water committees were (and still are) the expression of a process of autonomy “based on practices recognized neither by the state nor by the international community – and that need no recognition in order to exist” (2015: 88).

The water-war quickly spread to the western Andes of Bolivia. Aymara groups in Oruro and La Paz opposed a bill before Congress that would have privatized water in the region on the ground that it violated indigenous understandings of water (Webber 2011). A wave of strikes and road blockades shut down large areas of the country and ultimately forced Aguas de Tunari out of Cochabamba. The water-war was a catalyst for a period of prolonged political unrest. In 2003 protests against the privatization of natural gas raged in the indigenous city of El Alto, a satellite of the capital city of La Paz, and led to the resignation of Bolivia President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. Simultaneously, a movement of unionized coca growers contested the U.S.-led drug policies in the Andes and eventually catapulted Evo Morales into presidency. First elected in 2005, Morales is currently serving a third consecutive term until 2020.

Although the mobilizations in Bolivia involved a multitude of organizations, they were largely animated by indigenous groups and conveyed various elements of indigenous cosmovisions. The evocations of Pachamama and other figures of Andean cosmology during the protests are significant in this sense. In the Cochabamba water war, for example, campaign posters referred to the role of Andean deities' in the resistance to neoliberal privatization: "Pachamama, Wiracocha, and Tata Dios gave (water) for us to live, not to do business with" (Andolina, Laurie and Radcliffe 2009: 144). The works of Aymara scholar Pablo Mamani Ramirez helps us to clarify the meaning of this slogan. He writes that "in the logic of the *ayllus*, water cannot be bought or sold, or subjected to market logic because water is a vital part of life: it is the blood of the pachamama" (Mamani Ramirez 2004: 81). What does it mean that water is the blood of Pachamama and what is the logic of the *ayllu*?

In Andean cosmology, Pachamama is the matrix of life that includes the earth. Despite being disqualified by the scientific paradigm of colonial modernity, it remains a

central figure in indigenous cosmologies that still shape much Andean life. Ethnographers of the Andes describe Pachamama as the earth's generative powers (Silverblatt 1987), and as temporal and spatial entity that refers to the vitality that animates the earth at a particular moment in time (Allen 2002). Although it is usually translated as Earth-Mother or World-Mother, Pachamama was originally deprived of maternal qualities, at least of those associated with the chastity and benevolence of the Virgin Mary. After the European colonization, however, the Andean deity has been progressively assimilated to the Virgin and rendered as a nurturing mother (later in the chapter I will return on the gendered qualities of this earth-being and examine their controversial role in Bolivian politics). If Pachamama embodies the earth's generative vitality, water constitutes one of its multiple expressions, it is "the blood of Pachamama" that allows indigenous communities to flourish.

The debate on the *ayllu* among scholars of Andean indigeneity is extensive and largely exceeds the scope of my research. My focus here is how the *ayllu* approximates and yet troubles the commons. The work of Jeffrey Webber, author of important studies of Bolivian political movements, is an interesting point of departure for this discussion. Webber interprets the *ayllu* essentially through categories of socio-economic organization. He describes it as a widespread pre-colonial formation that still informs life in the Andes and refers to communal control over indigenous territory and land. This definition brings the *ayllu* in close proximity to the commons as both seem to designate the communal use of land and natural resources distinct from state and private property.

For Webber, the Bolivian revolts expressed "racialized peasant class-struggle" (2011: 172). They were born out of the explosive convergence between long-standing indigenous struggles against state-racism and the opposition to neoliberal policies threatening the communal management of water and land. This account connects the opposition to

neoliberal privatization to indigenous conceptions of “natural resources” but, concerned as it is with illustrating the development of “racialized peasant class-struggle,” it does not consider the extent to which these conceptions informed political movements.

The identification of the *ayllu* as socio-economical formation linked to kin-relation is important but in recent years, indigenous thinkers and allies have provided insights that illuminate the role of other-than-humans in it. Aymara scholar Marcelo Fernandez Osco contends that the *ayllu* “keeps order by maintaining an understanding of the sacred character of everything. This sacral sense charges the notion of life with resonances that expand beyond humans to include a multiplicity of life forms that are not considered in asymmetrical or objectivist terms” (Osco 2010: 30). In light of this redefinition, it is easier to grasp why, in the logic of the *ayllu*, the privatization of water is problematic. Water is not simply a resource but part of a collectivity whose persistence and possibility of flourishing is threatened by neoliberal development.

Marisol de la Cadena further clarifies the logic of the *ayllu* when she defines it as “the socio-natural collective of *tirakuna* (the sentient beings made of earth and water) as well as of humans, animals and plants, inherently connected to each other, so pervasively that nobody within it escapes such relations, for it is such relation, the *ayllu*, that makes the place and the persons who live in it” (de la Cadena 2013: 59). This means that the exchanges among earth-beings and various others actors, form the *ayllu*, a geographically localized collective that in many Andean contexts assumes insurgent valences when confronted with neoliberal privatization.

Framing the *ayllu* as socio-natural organization comprising other-than-human expressions of Pachamama, allows me to return to the common. Rather than emphasizing sameness, I want to foreground possibilities of alliance. Marcela Olivera notes that in

Cochabamba hundreds of water committees are currently adapting communal practices that can be traced back to pre-colonial times to contemporary urban struggles for autonomy. In Cochabamba, she writes, “water is considered a being that belongs to everyone and no one” (Olivera 2015: 87). Clearly, she is using the language of the common to describe the activity of the water committees. Yet, she is also careful in defining the specificity of water as a *being* that “expresses flexibility and adaptability, (...) and allows for social reproduction” (87).

Olivera, a participant in the water war and an architect of activist networks across the Northern and Southern hemispheres, is gesturing toward the productive friction between the communal and the commons. Frictions, as Anna Tsing explains, are capable of creating new cultural and political configurations, but they highlight difference rather than erasing it (Tsing 2005). When Olivera, argues that for the water committees in Cochabamba water is a being that belongs to everyone and no one, she is rubbing the communal and the common against each other so that they become inseparable and yet subtly distinct.

My point here is that indigenous groups within Bolivian movements are not just claiming common access to resources and organizing themselves through pre-existing forms of indigenous self-government. They are affirming that what Western political ontology presents as “natural resources,” are beings that participate in political action. In other words, these struggles suggest that there is no ontological distinction between political agents and things that have to be managed in the exercise of political power. Rather, the entities that exist within a political collective emerge out of a network of relations (Blaser 2013). Still, what does it mean for the politics of the common?

My intention here is not turn to indigenous political ontology as the redemptive source for the common. Donna Haraway warned long ago about the “cannibalistic western logic that readily constructs other cultural possibilities as resources for western needs and

actions” (Haraway 1989: 247). However, reading the common together with the communal might destabilize the historical privilege associated with political theories and practices that accord special status to the human and render nature as the backdrop of political life.

The Paradoxes of the Rights of Nature

In April 2010 thousands of indigenous activists and environmentalists, came together in the Andean city of Cochabamba for the World’s People Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Nature. In his impassioned inaugural speech Bolivian indigenous president Evo Morales recalled the fiasco of global governance in Copenhagen, where the year before the so-called developed countries had failed to reach a binding agreement for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. He invoked Pachamama, the indigenous name for the vitality that animates the earth: “We have two paths: Either Pachamama or death. Either capitalism lives or Mother Earth lives. Of course, brothers and sisters, we are here for life, for humanity, and for the rights of Mother Earth. Long live the rights of Mother Earth! Death to capitalism!” Morales’s cry, a variation of the slogan “Tierra or muerte!” used by Latin American revolutionary movements since Emiliano Zapata’s agrarian struggle in the Mexican Revolution, is a striking example of the mobilization of Pachamama in climate change politics. In Morales’s speech the rights of Pachamama/Mother Nature are presented as the alternative to the capitalist plunder of nature.

In the previous sections of this chapter I employed the lenses of political ontology to explore the partial connections between the commons and the communal. Here, I turn attention to one of the most puzzling issues arising from the summoning of “earth beings” in the Latin American political scene: the inscription of nature/Pachamama as subject of rights in the juridical frameworks of Ecuador and Bolivia. I explore what happens when

Pachamama becomes a subject of rights within a project of state building, even as such project presents itself as pluri-national and socially progressive. Some commentators suggest that the rights of nature trouble the idea of the common in that they posit nature as subject whose rights have priority over the right of human collective to access resources. The urbanist and artist Paulo Tavares (2010), for one, contends:

the political problem of the commons is not addressed by protecting and regulating collective or universal appropriation, but to the contrary, by questioning the very idea of appropriation that comes together with the concept of property, even if property becomes universal or common. Not only a legal frame drawn around an universal subject to define what a common should be, but a radical universalization of the idea of the subject established through the definition of human and non-human common rights.

Tavares is right in pointing out that the problem of appropriation would not be adequately addressed through the transfer from individual to common property (though this would be no small feat). I want to argue that the extension of rights to nature, and the “universalization of the idea of the subject” would not be a solution to this problem either. Leaving aside the common for a moment, my analysis of the conferral of rights to nature/Pachamama in Ecuador and Bolivia demonstrates that what is at play is the reinvestment in the political power in a particular kind of universal subject: the state that exercises sovereign power through law. When nature/Pachamama is inscribed in the juridical model of subjectivity it acquires rights but simultaneously becomes exposed to governmental strategies that ultimately increase its subordination to power. In what follows I unpack the paradoxes of the rights of nature.

The constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, issued respectively in 2008 and 2009 as a result of prolonged seasons of political unrest that paved the way for the election of progressive presidents Rafael Correa and Evo Morales, are the product of contradictory attempts at creating models of development alternative to hegemonic neoliberal formations.

These constitutional texts formalize into law, and incorporate into the state form, indigenous cosmovisions and political struggles. This has been a process involving a variety of political actors engaged in asymmetric power relations, including indigenous movements and earth beings, environmentalist NGOs with specific notions of nature and justice, and various institutional structures. Although, as I show here, the development of legal frameworks granting rights to nature/Pachamama seems to have the potential of making indigenous ontologies public and therefore to reconfigure the boundaries of the political community, it is becoming increasingly clear that the translation of indigenous cosmologies into the politics of rights produces rather paradoxical effects.

In recent years much decolonial enthusiasm has greeted the shift from human rights to the rights of nature. Catherine Walsh, for example, observes that the naming of nature as subject of rights in Ecuador's constitution "interrupts the human-defined subject of law and with it the Cartesian logic that separates humans and nature" (2015: 107). She goes on to say that constitutions are one thing and governments are another, thus making clear that the struggles that made possible the drafting of an innovative constitutional text did not fully translate into innovative policies. Indeed, in Ecuador ongoing protests around mining and oil extraction show a widening rift between the neo-extractivist agenda pursued by Correa's government and movements pushing against the plundering of resources. Other scholars are skeptical about the decolonial potential of assimilating indigenous cosmologies in the boundaries of state sovereignty through the articulation of nature as a subject of rights (Cuelenaere and Rabasa 2012, Bernal 2013).

In considering the ambiguities of the inscription of nature/Pachamama in the paradigm of rights, I make three claims. First, by looking at the development of the idea of the rights of nature in Western legal circles and scholarship, I suggest that within the

paradigm of rights the human subject remains firmly at the center as the figures from which rights extend to natural objects. Second, I examine the Ecuadorian constitution and contend that the turn to rights risks to increase, rather than reducing, the subjection of nature to the neo-extractivist state. Third, I show how in the case of Bolivia, nature/Pachamama had first to become a gendered subject in order to be recognized as subject of rights. The ambiguous figure of Pachamama has been turned into a benevolent mother whose re/productive powers—including the “gifts” of oil, gas, and minerals—are ultimately placed under the wing of the state. Such normative rendering of the Andean matrix of life is revealed by feminist responses to the role of Mother Earth in the Bolivian political scene.

A distinct feature in the constitutions of the pluri-national states of Ecuador and Bolivia is the incorporation of the indigenous concepts of *sumaq kawsay* (kichwa) and *suma qamaña* (aymara). Translated in Spanish as *buen vivir* and in English as living in plenitude, these terms describe alternatives to the Western paradigm of development offered by indigenous modes of living involving landscapes, animals, and humans (Acosta 2010, Gudynas 2011, Escobar 2012). There has been considerable debate on the genealogy of *buen vivir* and its ongoing incorporation in governmental discourse. Kichua poet and activist Ariruma Kowii conceives *sumak kawsay* as “an ancestral conception of life that has been maintained throughout many indigenous communities until the present” (Ariruma Kowii 2008). Ecuadorian indigenous activist Mónica Chuji contends that *sumak kawsay* conveys the idea that “nature should no longer be viewed as a factor of production or a productive force, but instead as an inherent part of the social being” (Chuji 2014).

For Eduardo Gudynas, a sociologist involved in the constitutional reform in Ecuador and now a critic of the Correa administration, *buen vivir* is “an umbrella term for a set of different positions” (Gudynas 2011: 444). The concept is rooted in indigenous

cosmologies but connected to a variety of critical perspectives on Western forms of development including feminism and environmentalism. Gudynas goes as far as suggesting that *buen vivir* and the connected notion of the rights of nature, express a new conception of political community, one that includes nonhumans as part of an extended polity (2011: 445). This is a compelling claim, one that deserves further examination. The reconfigured polity theorized by Gudynas is presented as a break with Western modern political ontologies centered on atomized human agents united in the sovereign nation-state through the social-contract.

To be sure, it would also constitute a reconfiguration of pre-modern Andean and Mesoamerica polities. As Darryl Wilkinson (2013) brilliant work demonstrates, the Inka empire comprised a range of political subjects such as mountains or lakes that, to our modern eyes, would look as nonhumans. The Inka rulers developed a complex set of material practices, including the construction of infrastructures, directed at bringing powerful earth beings under control. Notably, in the Inka empire political subjects were not defined through the paradigm of rights. What is remarkable about the Ecuadorian and, the Bolivian legal framing of *buen vivir* is precisely that the political participation of Pachamama and other earth beings is defined in the post-Enlightenment terms of rights. But how does the idea of the rights of nature came about? How did it make its way into legal debates in Ecuador and Bolivia? What are the consequences of the incorporation of Pachamama into the juridical model of subjectivity? Does it really disrupt or rather reinforce Western conceptions of political community?

Scholars working within feminist, queer, indigenous and critical legal studies have demonstrated that the politics of rights is laden with paradoxes, failed promises, and regulative effects (Scott 1996, Douzinas 2000, Brown 2002, Povinelli 2002, Byrd 2011).

Gayatri Spivak famously wrote that rights are that which “we cannot not want” (Spivak 1989). But rights do not come by themselves. They are fought for and conferred, usually by a state that recognizes right claims and governs through them. Given the current intensification of extractive economies and modes of commodification of nature that impinge on the earth’s ecologies, the rights of nature might be something we cannot not want but whose genealogy and effects need critical questioning.

In Western modernity, particularly in its Lockean articulation, rights confer to atomized individuals a degree of immunity from the arbitrary power of the state and the excesses of the community that threatened property. Pivotal in the making of the modern subject of right, were the Declaration of Independence of the United States (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) that proclaimed the rights of man as the foundation of the new nation-state. If for the Americans revolutionaries “All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator certain inalienable rights,” the French National Assembly claimed that “In respect of their rights men are born and remain free and equal.” The rights of man were born out of historically specific conditions. Yet, rights move in a transhistorical register grounded in the universal notion of a shared human nature that set apart human individuals from the rest of living and nonliving beings.

Hiding behind the abstract notion of the universal rights of man was the particularity of the white, property-owning, male European national citizen. Since its inception the discourse of rights concealed the exclusion of all those who were defined as non-proper men and less than human. Insofar as the poor, women, slaves, foreigners, and natives lacked the qualities that approximated the humanist ideal of the subject of right, particularly the capacity of channeling bodily forces toward the proper domain of productivity and reproduction, they were deemed closer to the order of nature than that of politics.

The stark divide between the universality of rights and their empirical application was soon revealed by a series of powerful contestations. French women's demanded to be included in the political community born out of the revolution but were rejected through a essentialist rendering of sexual difference according to which women's "natural" inclination toward dependency, unruly bodies and role as mothers made them "non-existent" citizens (Scott 1996). Women's supposed proximity to historically specific ideas of nature made them unfit for politics. In 1791 the irruption of the Haitian revolution shed light (even as it was silenced) on the radical contrast between the rights of the European Man, the owner of black slaves in the colonies whose property was declared natural and inalienable by the French declaration, and the rights of man claimed by the insurgent slaves (Trouillot 1995). As a slave revolt, the Haitian revolution revealed how the European conception of what counts as human was linked to a racialized system of property relations.

The claims of French women and Haitian slaves opened a tear in the fabric of the rights of man by illuminating the constitutive exclusions that accompanied their affirmation. Still more, they revealed that, to paraphrase Costas Douzinas, in the context of modern universalism it is not so much that humans have rights but that rights make humans in the image of white men (2000: 372). For the writers of the American and French Declarations, the association between (a certain prototype of) humanity and rights was a self-evident fact, one that did not need to be explained. Yet, specific ideas about what counts as fully human and its proprietary entitlement to the world of animals and things became entangled in the modern discourse of rights.

Contemporary ideas on nature as right bearing entity owe much to the liberal conceptions of rights articulated in the French and American constitutions. Two exemplary texts in this sense are Christopher Stone's essay *Should Trees Have Standing?*, first published in

1972, and Roderick Nash's *The Rights of Nature* (1989). Stone's seminal article provided intellectual foundations to the rights of nature. A law professor at the University of Southern California, Stone wrote the article in support of a suit filed by Sierra Club to prevent Walt Disney Enterprise from building a large ski resort in the Sierra Nevada. The case went all the way up to the Supreme Court that eventually ruled against Sierra Club. But in his dissenting opinion Court Justice Douglas embraced Stone's position.

This is how Stone's basic argument works: modern legal history presents us with a series rights extensions to entities previously thought of as less than persons. These include women, children, the insane, slaves, fetuses, and Indians. Why then, to not consider forests, oceans and rivers as right-holders in their own right? The fact that trees and streams do not speak for themselves does not mean that they should not be recognized worth and dignity independently of how they benefit human beings. As other entities that cannot speak—corporations, municipalities and infants—trees and forests should have guardians bringing cases for them.

For a natural object to be a holder of legal right, Stone maintains, three criteria should be satisfied: "first, that the thing can institute legal actions at its behest; second, that in determining the granting of legal relief, the court must take injury to it into account; and, third, that relief must run to the benefit of it" (1996: 8). Stone concedes that even though things can demand legal action, human mediators are needed to advance the legal process. At a pragmatic level, the attribution of legal standing to natural objects has to be anthropocentric in that it requires human mechanisms to establish and enforce rights. But this is hardly a procedural issue: the legal standing of trees depends on human action, trees have rights insofar as humans recognize them as right-holders and act of their behalf. Stone's assertion that "court must take injury into account" casts the law as protector and discounts

its power to injure, while casting natural objects as needing, even demanding, such protection (Brown 1995).

Stone's argument revolves around a progressive history of rights that goes hand in hand with what the philosopher Peter Singer describes as the expanding circle of moral concern (Singer 1981). The conferral of rights to forests and rivers, for Stone, is a testament to "the personal capacities within us to recognize more and more the ways in which nature — like the woman, the Black, the Indian, and the Alien— is like us" (Stone 1996: 40). This well-intentioned statement begs the question: who is the collective subject invoked here? The "us" whose personal capacities would allow the recognition that other subjects have equal moral worth? I would suggest that the white masculine subject still functions as the emanating center from which rights extend to other entities. Rights stretch from the center to the periphery, they create the promise of equality and personhood "which they never fulfill but to which their aspirants remain in thrall. (...) the 'magic' of rights may inhere to the fact that while they formally mark personhood, they cannot confer it; while they promise protection from humiliating exposure, they do not deliver it" (Brown 2002).

In *The Rights of Nature* (1989), Roderick Nash offers a US-centric intellectual history of environmental ethics that stretches from John Locke's elaboration of natural rights to the radical environmentalism of Earth First! In his strictly emancipatory narrative, rights extend slowly but inevitably to include women, slaves, animals and plants in the virtuous circle of right-holders. Since nature does not demand rights, human beings have the responsibility to articulate right claims on behalf of non-speaking animals and ecosystems. Thus the attribution of rights to nature is a matter of human self-restraint. Such linear trajectory of emancipation is presented as nothing less than the logical deployment of the full potential of American liberal values: "a logical extrapolation of powerful liberal traditions as old as the

republic” (Nash 1989: 200). Even the most radical expressions of environmental ethics are, in Nash’s words, “not so much a revolt against traditional American ideals as an extension and new application of them” (Nash 1989: 12).

Nash illustrates the movement toward the expansion of ethics through the drawing of a pyramid shown upside down, an admittedly oversimplified description of the widening process of ethical inclusion. At the base of the pyramid, representing the pre-ethical past, stands the isolated Self, an individual mired in self-interest. In the middle-level, representing the present, the attribution of ethical relevance reaches upward to the category of “race” up to “animals,” which stand in between the present and the promises of a future in which everything from rocks and the entire universe is conferred ethical relevance and therefore legal recognition. The Self at the basis of the pyramid unmistakably resembles the individual in the pre-political state of nature imagined by John Locke’s, whom Nash indicates as a key source for the American tradition of natural-rights.

What Nash does not address is that in the liberal tradition of Locke’s, nature was construed as endless supply of resources given to man to appropriate. The protection of natural property rights, established through the mixing of labor and land, was the primary motivation for the social contract. Grounding the rights of nature in Locke’s theory of natural rights obfuscates that the possessive objectification of nature, and of humans defined by their proximity with nature, was not just a contingency, but a crucial part of the history of American liberalism and its conception of rights. Stone and Nash promise the end of possessive humanism, but do not adequately reflect on how that would also require a radical revision of the basic tenets of liberalism.

In her now classic study on women’s rights, Wendy Brown claims that in liberal states that encode sexual difference as subordinated deviation from the masculine norm,

rights are paradoxical in a variety of ways. Access to abortion, litigations against sexual harassment, provisions that guarantee equal pay for women, are something we cannot do without even if they don't completely eliminate male privilege. Yet, rights also have a productive and regulatory function. Rights that are based on forms of suffering that characterize women's subordination, end up locking women into an identity defined by injury. Thus legal recognition becomes an instrument of regulation, a way of reproducing subordinated identities (Brown 1995, 2002).

Elaborating on the regulatory power of legal recognition, Elizabeth Povinelli has offered a trenchant critique of Australian multiculturalist legitimization of Aboriginal rights to culture and land. She contends that the enforcement of Aboriginal land claims in Australia is tied to the conformity to standards of authenticity that are adjudicated by the courts (Povinelli 2002). Thus, the multicultural state incites Aboriginal subjects to perform acceptable modes of cultural identity while forgoing others seen as repugnant or inappropriate. Looking at the process of inscription of nature/Pachamama in the constitution of Ecuador, I want to argue that the rights of nature are no substantial exception to the regulative function of rights. The legal provisions that render nature into a subject entitled to protection from injuries ultimately reproduce its subjection to state power. Let's see how.

The preamble of the Ecuadorian constitution declares that *sumak kamsay*, living in plenitude, is the organizing principle of the pluri-national state and links it to a distinctive conception of the Pachamama "of which we are all part and is vital to our existence." The constitutional preamble articulates the project of constructing a "new form of citizenship coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature." Central in the elaboration of this new

form of citizenship is the affirmation of Pachamama as a right-bearing entity. Article 72 reads:

Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life becomes real and reproduces itself, has the right to be integrally respected in its existence, and to the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structures, functions, and evolutionary processes. All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature. (...) The State shall give incentives to natural persons and legal entities and to communities to protect nature and to promote respect for all the elements comprising an ecosystem.

In Ecuador, the campaign for granting legal standing to Pachamama was conducted by various organizations including the indigenous groups Pachakutik and CONAIE and Accion Ecologica, an influential environmental organization resolutely opposed to the commodification of nature. The US-based Pachamama Alliance also played an important role in the process and invited the American Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) to assist in drafting rights of nature constitutional provisions (Fitz-Henry 2012). Created in 1995, CELDF has spearheaded the drafting of legal provisions recognizing the rights of nature in dozens municipal bodies in the United States, particularly in Pennsylvania and Maine. This is how Nina Pacari, an indigenous jurist and member of the Constitutional Assembly, recalls the encounter between environmental activists and indigenous organizations: “From a Western logic you can conceive of a natural contract. For the cosmovisión of the indigenous people, this isn’t necessary because in holistic thinking, by violating the individual rights of a person you violate the rights of nature. Oil exploitation is an example. But in the debates, the environmentalists said it was important that nature be defined as a subject with rights. So we said, let’s meet in the middle” (Pacari, in Tavares 2013).

Pacari's quote suggests that the framing of Pachamama as a subject of rights is the result of the negotiation between different modes of conceiving nature/Pachamama, two entities that overlap but are not the same thing. On the one hand, there is an indigenous *cosmovisión* for which subjects and objects do not stand in hierarchical opposition but are related as knots in a thread. On the other hand, environmental groups proposed to enroll nature into the realm of law as a way to widen the circle of juridical personhood. This divergence expresses not different views of a single world, that is, culturally specific understandings of a single reality, but, more radically, the existence of distinct ontologies. In order to meet in the middle indigenous groups had to adopt the language of rights while environmental groups had to acknowledge the existence of Pachamama, a concept that complicates Western notions of the environment.

To be sure, there is something remarkable about an event capable of generating the encounter between distinct political ontologies, distinct worlds between whom, in spite of constitutional compromises, a disagreement remains about the nature of reality and the reality of nature. Of course, these are worlds in ongoing transformation, shaped by the prolonged effects of colonial contact. The translation of indigenous cosmologies into the idiom of rights is part of a long history of survival. Marisol de la Cadena explains that in order to be recognized as legitimate adversaries within the political scene "indigenous leaders speak in modern terms, translating their practices into a politically acceptable speech" (2010: 349). These processes of translation, however, do not correspond to the erasure of elements that exceed modern political ontologies. In other words, demands for indigenous rights exists next to the affirmation of the political role of entities that do not make sense from the Western point of view. The adoption of the vocabulary of rights has been important for carving out a space for indigeneity in the post-colonial context. The outcomes of translation,

however, are rather ambiguous. Thus, in Ecuador the struggles leading up to the constitutional definition of nature as subject of rights have been bringing to the fore political actors (Pachamama and other earth beings) that slow down reasoning about what kind of existents engage in politics (de la Cadena 2010). Yet, it is important to complicate the hopeful claim that framing nature as a right-bearing entity opens up the space for a more-than-human polity (Gudynas 2011). A closer look at how the Ecuadorian constitution frames the relationship between Pachamama and other political subjects is revealing in this sense.

A series of articles in the constitution qualify nature/Pachamama as subject to human management within state sovereignty. For example, Article 74 states, “individuals, communities, people and nationalities have the right to benefit from the environment and natural riches that will enable *el buen vivir*.” It continues: “Environmental services will not be susceptible to appropriation” but “their production, use, and exploitation will be regulated by the State.” Elsewhere, the constitutional text states: “Non-renewable natural resources belong to the inalienable and imprescriptible patrimony of the State.” Article 400 declares that “the State shall exercise sovereignty over biodiversity.” Article 407 poses limits to extractivism in protected areas but establishes exceptions in case of national interest and by petition from the President.

By mobilizing Pachamama as an entity whose subjecthood depends on and is mediated by state sovereignty, the constitution creates the conditions for neo-extractivism. As political scientist Angelica Bernal points out “throughout the vast part of the Constitutional text, sovereignty is a more central principle, not *el buen vivir* as advocates have professed” (Bernal 2013). The problem with the rights of nature then is not only that, as I have shown, man remains the irradiating center, the fundamental element from which

rights are conferred, with dubious results, to various Others. Perhaps more important is that the framing of nature/Pachamama as a subject whose rights depend on state recognition might have the unintended consequence of producing new forms of subjection. In this respect, the conferral of rights of nature constitutes a minor rearrangement rather than a radical reconfiguration of the boundaries of Western modern political ontology.

To be sure, the entry of *sumak kawsay* and Pachamama in the Ecuadorian constitution has been a complicated process and the contours of the rights of nature are now sharply contested in the country. During the constitutional debate, Rafael Correa, the urban, catholic, non-indigenous president of Ecuador, nervously declared that the inclusion of Pachamama in the constitutional text was a concession to the “infantile” demands of indigenous groups and environmentalists. Over the years, his government has articulated a variety of responses to the rights of nature. In May 2011, for instance, the Ecuadorian army was sent in the jungle in the northwest provinces of Esmeralda to destroy the equipment of local illegal gold miners (Fitz-Henry 2012). The muscular military operation was justified, at least in part, on the ground that the pollution caused by illegal mining constitutes a violation of the rights of nature.

Correa repeatedly accused of “indigenous fundamentalism” and “infantilism” the groups opposing the aggressive neo-extractivist policies pursued by his government. Ecuador’s main goal, he repeated in a 2012 interview in *New Left Review*, is to lift people out of poverty. The extraction of natural resources is essential to this end. Invoking the socialist tradition of “Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh or Castro” who never “said no to mining or natural resources,” Correa dismissed calls to keep oil and gas in the ground as “an absurd novelty” (Correa 2012). Correa’s critics also worry about the country’s increasing dependence on Chinese capital. In 2008, the government made the bold decision to default

on \$3.9 billion of foreign debt it considered illegitimate. Since then China has become Ecuador's main lender. In exchange, Beijing has access to a stunning percentage of the country's oil production. Chinese companies have been investing heavily in projects ranging from the construction of a \$2.2 billion hydro-electric dam aiming at providing one third of Ecuador's electricity, to the \$12 billion Refinery of the Pacific, a petrochemical complex that will guarantee the smooth delivery of crude from Latin America to mainland China. According to Andrew Ross "China exercises a near monopoly on Ecuador's oil—up to 90 percent this year alone—and is fast becoming the dominant player in mining and mineral extraction" (Ross 2015). For Alberto Acosta "The problem is we are trying to replace American imperialism with Chinese imperialism. (...) The Chinese come with financing, technology and technicians, but also high interest rates" (Krauss and Bradsher 2015). Local NGOs, including Acción Ecológica, lament that the price paid for the partnership with China might be the erosion of Ecuador's sovereignty.

In August 2013, Correa scrapped the Yasuni-ITT initiative that aimed at keeping considerable reserves of oil in the ground of the Yasuni Park, one of the most biodiverse areas of Amazonian Ecuador. The proposal, heralded as an unprecedented attempt at tackling the causes of climate change, was that Ecuador would renounce extractive plans for the area and thus reduce carbon emissions in return for economic compensations from carbon-rich countries. However, since only a small fraction of the promised donations was given to Ecuador, the government lifted the ban on drilling and authorized Petroamazonas, the state oil company, to explore the area.

In the wave of protests that followed Correa's announcement, activists invoked the rights of Pachamama and cited the Ecuadorian government's decision as unconstitutional. These episodes confirm that, after much initial excitement and expectation among

indigenous organization, environmental groups, and decolonial intellectuals, a bifurcation is occurring between the incorporation of Pachamama into state structures and the ways in which this concept is articulated within indigenous movements.

Pachamama, Sovereignty, Gender

Similar questions arise with respect to Bolivia's articulation of the rights of Pachamama. Although the Bolivian constitution does not go as far as to establishing Pachamama as a subject of rights, *buen vivir* and the rights of nature have ranked high in the political agenda of Evo Morales's government. As I recalled in the opening of this chapter, the Morales administration took a leading role in the People's Word Conference on Climate Change and called on the General Assembly of the United Nations to adopt the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth drafted in Cochabamba. Internally, the Bolivian administration promoted the Framework Law of Mother Earth (in effect since October 2012) that explicitly connects the guiding principle of *vivir bien* to the rights of nature. What is interesting is that in Bolivia the mobilization of Pachamama in the project of state building has taken a controversial gendered dimension.

The strategic "Pachamamismo"⁵⁵ articulated by Morales's government privileges a motherly version of the ancient deity, a benevolent mother-goddess and a feminine figure in need of saving. Morales presents himself in the international scene as a staunch defender of Mother Nature, against the plundering of "savage capitalism." Simultaneously, the Bolivian government has been pursuing what Álvaro García Linera, a Marxist intellectual turned vice president, calls "Andean-Amazonian capitalism." This model, aimed at fully developing

⁵⁵ To my knowledge, the term Pachamamismo has been introduced by leftist intellectual Pablo Stefanoni to criticize Evo Morales's government. See Cuclenaere and Rabasa 2012.

Bolivia's productive forces, includes the implementation of state regulated extractive projects whose revenues are in part directed toward funding anti-poverty programs. The Cochabamba's cry "Pachamama or muerte!" assumes a rather controversial meaning when confronted with the stark reality of an economy that is increasingly dependent on the extraction and exportation of lithium, oil and natural gas and where dissent, often expressed by indigenous groups, has been met with the use of state force⁵⁶.

Of course, Morales and his supporters are not single-handedly responsible for the association between Pachamama and benevolent maternal wholeness. As I anticipated earlier in this chapter, it has roots in the colonial assimilation of the ancient Andean deity to the Virgin Mary and extensions in current transnational climate change activism⁵⁷. But the excavation of the pre-colonial archives reveals different, decidedly less reassuring, images of the earth.

In the book *A Culture of Stone* (2010), art historian Carolyn Dean notes that in the ancient Andean world the earth was feminine while discrete parts of it—individual stones and mountains known as *tirakuna*—were more often male. Pachamama was understood as generative being with whom the Inkas claimed to have a special relationship developed through agricultural and architectural techniques that integrated features of the landscape into the built environment. If properly cultivated, such relationship was one of "reciprocal giving and leading to marriage and procreation" (Dean 2010: 89). But the relationship with Pachamama, at times a capricious and unforgiving entity, could also be a complicated matter.

⁵⁶ The construction of a 182-mile highway cutting across a national park and indigenous territory known as TIPNIS, has been a political minefield for Morales. The plan, backed by Brazil, has been opposed by indigenous groups that in 2011 clashed with the police during a march to La Paz. The project, cancelled by the Bolivian government after the protests, is now back on the table.

⁵⁷ References to Mother Earth, often presented as an indigenous woman, were widespread at the People's Climate March in New York City in September 2014.

Archeological records and chronicles of the pre-Hispanic times refer to constant negotiations between people and unpredictable earthly powers. For example, the wilderness above and beyond human society was known as Mama Huaca, the embodiment of destructive natural forces, dangerous for human communities. The affirmation and preservation of Inka political power comprised the struggle for bringing undisciplined earth-beings under control through persuasion, cajoling or the use of force (Wilkinson 2013).

In reconstructing Inka relationships with the landscape, Dean distinguishes it from the Western dichotomy between a feminized nature and masculinized culture. Pachamama she argues, was part of an Andean cosmology organized around complementary pairs that differs significantly from the gender binary that has long dominated Western thought. In Andean cosmovision, complementarity involves pairs whose positionality shifts rather than being fixed and permanent. Further, the pairing of oppositional elements requires a third part, the space of coming together and conjoining. Dean writes: “the particular gendering of space, natural forms, and even people shifts depending on the relationship of the complements to one another in a particular instance” (96)⁵⁸.

Ethnographies of contemporary Aymara and Quechua communities demonstrate that complementarity, what Andean people call *chachawarmi*, is still relevant. In her study of Quechua communities near Cuzco, Peru, Catherine Allen maintains that Pachamama is the animated quality of the world and is addressed as female. The *tirakuna*, instead, are localized earth-beings with powerful personalities that assume a male aspect and tend to be hierarchically organized. Masculinity and femininity, however, do not stand in rigid

⁵⁸ On complementary and sexual fluidity in Mesoamerican cosmologies see Sylvia Marcos’ 2006. The title of her book (*Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions*) resonates with Luce Irigaray’s image of the two lips to index difference and togetherness. See Irigaray 1985.

opposition to each other. On the contrary, “a given entity may be considered male in some contexts and female in others, according to the qualities it manifests” (2002: 62).

Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones elucidates the radical ambiguity of *chachawarmi*, a term often translated as man/woman. She suggests that this concept simultaneously conveys and exceeds the fixed, hierarchical, heterosexual opposition between man/woman that has been imposed through the colonality of gender on “cosmologies incompatible with the modern logic of dichotomies” (Lugones 2010: 743). Drawing on the work of the Aymara linguist Filomena Miranda, Lugones contends that the complementarity expressed by *chachawarmi* needs to be thought in relation with *utjana*, the communal dwelling in the land. Taken together, these concepts situate practices of complementarity within communal living. In the context of the Aymara *ayllu*, *chachawarmi* refers to a fluid positionality, to what one does rather than to what one is. For example, when Miranda, a scholar who lives in the city of La Paz, is called to participate in the government of her *ayllu*, she does so with her sister thereby taking the place of father and mother. By doing that, she becomes *chachawarmi* without being man/woman.

As Lugones points out, however, *chachawarmi* has acquired a normative, hierarchical meaning in the everyday life of contemporary Bolivian communities. For Lugones the normative translation of *chachawarmi*, and the connected subordination of women, reveals how “the long process of subjectification of the colonized toward adoption/internalization of the men/women dichotomy as a normative construction of the social (...) was and is constantly renewed” (748). In other words, *chachawarmi* is simultaneously normatively translated but also practiced and lived in ways that differ from what Lugones calls the “colonial/modern gender system.”

Fernando Huanacuni Mamani, an Aymara lawyer close to the Morales's administration offers an example of normative translation of complementarity. He writes: "According to the original indigenous cosmovision, we are children of the Cosmos and Mother Earth; all that exists is generated by them. (...) Life emerges from this relation of complementary pairing...This implies going back to forming enduring relationships like our ancestors lived...It is necessary to re-establish the man-woman relationship but as an enduring relationship" (Huanacuni Mamani, in Cochrane 2014). According to the political theorist Regina Cochrane, this call to return to ancestral values is grounded on "rigid version of gender complementarity" (Cochrane 2014: 583), one that is explicitly heteronormative.

This position echoes that of the Bolivian feminist collective Mujeres Creando's (add a note). In a text collectively written during the process of the Bolivian constitutional revision, Mujeres Creando addresses the ways in which the concept of *chachawarmi* has been taken up by the Morales administration. The activists write: "the proclaimed *chachawarmi* establishes an obligatory hierarchical relationship between man and woman. We reject the concept of the *chachawarmi* as model of the relationship between man and woman, and we declare a right of cultural disobedience and desecration of traditional mandates for all indigenous women" (Maria Galindo/Mujeres Creando 2014).

Other feminist responses to Evo Morales's mobilization of Pachamama reveal the tension between a normative translation of *chachawarmi* and the articulation of different possibilities of thinking the earth. Complicating the rendering of Pachamama as subject of rights, the feminist collective Feminismo Comunitario contends that the image of the motherly Pachamama expresses the attempt to control women's reproductive powers. In statement issued by at the People's Word Conference on Climate Change, Feminismo Comunitario criticized the translation of Pachamama into Mother Nature. The statement

reads: “We understand Pachahama, a la Mapu, as a whole that goes beyond visible nature. We argue that the understanding of Pachamama as synonymous with the Mother Earth is reductionist and machista, in that it refers to reproductive capacities only to subject women and Pachamama to patriarchal power” (Feminismo Comunitario 2010, my translation). This position assumes particular relevance in a country where abortion remains illegal except for cases of incest or rape.

The contestation of Bolivian feminists exposes some controversial aspects of the entry of Pachamama in Latin-American politics. The Morales government renders the earth as a powerful figure endowed with political rights that are recognized by the state but one that, in the process, assumes normative gendered features and is subordinated to state sovereignty. On the one hand Pachamama is recognized as central for developing alternatives to the Western project of development. On the other hand, the Bolivian state is also engaging in colonial translation by asserting its role in the government of a feminized Pachamama and her mineral “gifts.” The conferral of rights to Pachamama depends on its inscription in a “colonial gender system” (Lugones 2010) that turns the vitality of the earth into a motherly figure. Turning Pachamama into a subject of rights, then, runs the danger of locking up this ‘earth being,’ and with it Bolivian women, into a subordinated identity (Brown 2002).

My reading of the encounter between the politics of rights and Latin-America earth-beings hopes to contribute to debates on political ontology by drawing attention to the role that gender and sexuality play in it. Political ontology, as Mario Blaser argues, is concerned with the enacting of reality. It is traversed by struggles that bring into being the entities that make up political collectives. The inscription of Pachamama in the legal frameworks of Ecuador and Bolivia is the product of the negotiation between indigenous modes of

existence and environmental law within projects of state building that remain deeply committed to extractivist development. As a condition of possibility for dwelling in the Andes, Pachamama displaces the centrality of the human in the process of world making. It signals the persistence of political collectives whose formation exceeds the modern distinction between humanity and nature. Nevertheless, its incorporation in the nation state has been largely dependent on gender normalization. Particularly in Bolivia, Pachamama has come to count as part of the pluri-national state as a gendered subject, one whose political valence is informed by the histories of patriarchy and colonialism. Insofar as gender and the politics of rights are employed for governing collectives of beings, the critical tools developed by feminist scholars and practitioners will remain relevant for addressing conflicts between, and within, ontologies.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have elaborated upon instances of friction between the commons and indigenous politics in Latin America. First, I considered the Zapatista movement that, in spite of the low intensity war waged by the Mexican authorities and paramilitary groups, strives to exist at the southern border of Mexico. Much has been written about the political impact of the Zapatista uprising across Latin America and beyond, its poetic language, the creative use of grassroots media, the pursuit of autonomy as alternative to the new enclosures. Just as relevant, and less often acknowledged, is the political ontology enacted in the autonomous territories, one defined by the presence of other-than-human beings whose significance surfaces in political communiqués and public speeches.

Second, I looked at Marcela Oliveiras's writings on the water committees in Bolivia and shown how they illuminate the proximity and divergence between the commons and the

communal. Third, I turned attention to the ambiguities of the rights of nature/Pachamama in Ecuador and Bolivia and used feminist critiques of rights for analyzing the role played by gender in the inscription of Pachamama in the pluri-national body politics. Before concluding this discussion, I want to draw attention to a vital thread that links the encounter between the commons and indigenous politics. In Latin America, these socio-natural formations have been enabling each other in tracing patterns of autonomy from neo-colonial power and capitalist exploitation. Taken together, they illuminate the limits of the politics of recognition by investing in the making of alternative worlds rather than just struggling against the dominant order of things. Yet, important divergences remain.

As I was finishing up the first draft of this chapter, I found out that Marisol de la Cadena, whose theoretically inflected ethnographic work prompted me to reflect on political ontology, was taking up the concept of the commons. It was not surprising, given how her work engages key assumptions of Western political theory. This confirmed Ghassan Hage's insight on the affinities between critical anthropology and radical political imaginary (Hage 2012). Once again, de la Cadena's intervention encouraged me to delve deeper into the question of alliance across irreducible differences. In an essay published online and titled "Uncommoning Nature" (2015b), de la Cadena writes about alliances that "may include the parties' constitutive divergence—even if this opens up discussion of the partition of the sensible and introduces the possibility of ontological disagreement into the alliance." This alliance across ontologies, she continues, houses hope for "a commons constantly emerging from the uncommons as grounds for political negotiation of what the interest in common—and thus the commons—would be"⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ The article, published online as part of Supercommunity, an editorial project by the e-flux journal, is available here: <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/uncommoning-nature/>.

De la Cadena seems to be using the common, but perhaps commoning would be more effective here, as that which allows the creation of provisional bridges between worlds, frictions that increase the power to act of each of them without erasing alterity. However, this reference to the common takes as point of departure the existence of equivocations, defined by Viveiros de Castro (2004: 9) as “a type of communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same things, and know this.” This (un)communicative process retains and works through, rather than attempting to resolve, a degree of incommensurability. What is the relationship between this particular use of the common and my initial claim about the importance of provincializing the common? Is de la Cadena making an argument for the common as practice of relation across ontologies? It seems to me that in taking up the commons, she is acknowledging it as a force of altermodernity while at the same time implicitly rejecting notions of the common built upon the primacy of the human as agent of world-making. Commoning might become a practice of relation across ontologies, but this would first require an encounter between uncommons. This means not just dealing with the existence of plural instances of commoning, local and diverse commons that would need to figure out how to articulate a larger political project. Rather, this means abandoning the investment in the “one-world world” (Law 2015), that is, the assumption that there is just one humankind and one nature. This chapter inhabits the space of ontological disagreement in between the common and indigenous communal practices. It is in this conjunctive disjunction, I suggest, that the common is exposed to the possibility of becoming other than what it is.

Coda

In a recent essay political theorist Jodi Dean (2016) writes, “Politics in the Anthropocene is a matter of perspective: we can’t look at climate change directly.” Dean advocates the adoption of an anamorphic approach to the Anthropocene. Anamorphic paintings include parts that appear distorted when looked at directly. They require the viewer to gaze at them from a specific position in order to fully reveal their content. Dean recalls that for Jacques Lacan anamorphosis indexes a hole in the image that can only be filled by the partial perspective of the gazing subject.

The adoption of a partial, partisan gaze, Dean argues, can be used as a tool against the “Left anthropogenic enjoyment,” that is, the tendency to linger on the planetary disaster produced by capitalist expenditure, accumulation, and waste. Left anthropogenic enjoyment thrives on circulates evocations of catastrophe and finds images of the end of the world more fulfilling than images of the end of capitalism⁶⁰. According to Dean, current conversations about the political potential of other-than-human beings are symptomatic of this tendency. Agency is dispersed among all sorts of things. It gets lost in the empty contemplation of extinction and deep time. Political action is displaced onto microbes while humans are confined to the role of powerless observers, victims, and survivors. Fascinated by images of interconnected planetary wholes, the Left is incapable of imagining human subjectivity and organizing political struggle.

The anamorphic gaze, argues Dean, is an antidote against Leftist anthropogenic enjoyment. It approaches problems from the side, cuts the fabric of connectedness, thrives

⁶⁰ Fredric Jameson elaborates on this point in *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005: 199).

on the creation of gaps, and turns such gaps into openings for collective action. Instead of addressing climate change as a whole, anamorphic activism focuses on specific processes that contribute to it, processes in which “the people,” the collective subject of political action, is already implicated.

Dean goes on to say that the recent campaign against the Keystone XL Pipeline, the oil infrastructure project that would have carried carbon-heavy petroleum from Canada’s tar sands to the Gulf Coast, provides an example of anamorphic politics. Instead of focusing on global warming as a whole, the campaign targeted the expansion of oil infrastructures that contribute to it. Along these lines, art and activist projects such as Liberate Tate and the Natural History Museum have been targeting cultural institutions to force them to cut ties to the fossil fuel industry (an example of this are oil tycoon David Koch’s generous donations to the Smithsonian and other major museums). Through protest performances and media interventions, these projects turn the supposedly neutral zone of the museum “into a base camp against the fossil fuel sector” (Dean 2016). Instead of abandoning institutions, these activist campaigns occupy and repurpose them as focal points of authority.

I am hugely sympathetic to Dean’s insistence on collective action as well as the activist projects she discusses. Moreover, I find Dean’s critique of the imaginary of interconnected wholes stimulating (more on this in a moment). But I remain unconvinced about the infernal alternatives underpinning this account of anamorphic politics. Either we invest in the imaginary continuum of nature and culture or in the power of the people to disrupt the operations of capital. Either we return to the proper domain of politics or stand paralyzed on the brink of disaster. Either we reinvigorate human agency or give up collective action altogether.

Consider how the controversy over the Keystone XL pipeline presents a challenge to the logic of the either/or. The contestation concerned the construction of new oil infrastructure, but also property rights, including those collectively claimed by indigenous people. Native American communities successfully resisted the pipeline on the ground that it posed a threat to indigenous relational understandings of land. As the work of indigenous studies scholars makes clear, the land, ancestors, and nonhuman others are central to indigenous praxis (Coulthard 2014, TallBear 2015). They inform indigenous politics. By recentralizing the image through a proper gaze, the anamorphic approach risks of losing sight of these important elements or dismiss them as “distorsions.”

Still, Dean has a point in her concern about the ambiguities in various turns toward objects and ontologies. The critique of “Left anthropogenic enjoyment” is a call to action against the depoliticizing effect of positions that accept capitalism as inescapable horizon. But I have my doubts that reestablishing the primacy of the properly political, an antagonistic politics that has the human collective subject firmly at its center, would be effective in creating alternatives to the capitalist Anthropocene. Rather than a Promethean politics, this dissertation argues that what might be needed is the reinvention of politics, one that makes present that which enables practitioners to intervene and object. This is what Isabelle Stengers suggests when she talks about designing “the political scene in a way that actively protects it from the fiction that ‘humans of good will decide in the name of the general interest’” (2005a: 1002).

Ecologies of the Common set out to put pressure on the categories of politics, the common, and the collective opening them toward feminist and decolonial perspectives that place emphasis on friction and divergence rather than holistic connectedness and imaginary wholes. I argue for a politics within and against the Anthropocene that, instead of treating

the earth as common to be managed by more just institutions, makes space to the composition of the common in situations differently stratified by capitalist, patriarchal and colonial relations.

Stephanie Clare (2013) demonstrates that the stratifications produced by forces of appropriation, racialization, and feminization intermingle with what she calls geopolitics. Building on and departing from Foucault's biopower as mode of governance that has the human as its target, geopolitics indexes "the force relations that transform the earth" (62). These involved techniques and knowledge apparatuses such as agriculture, urban planning and engineering that physically change the surface of the earth (but one could also think about how mining and fracking impact deep geological strata). Yet geopolitics also involves the forces of the earth itself that exceed human knowledge and control (Yusoff et al. 2012).

Engaging Frantz Fanon, Clare shows how he thought of decolonization as a process involving the transformation of the earth. The new human born out of anti-colonial struggles "emerges in his engagement with geopolitics, through partaking in struggles to give shape to the earth, struggles with humans, rocks, rivers, and plants" (73). Noting that Fanon's call for a new humanity still requires proprietorship, Clare wonders about modes of inhabiting the earth beyond property, even when collective. My work proposes the common as subterranean movement buried by Western modernity and re-emerging from its ruins to invent modes of composing with the earth that do not entail appropriation. Still, how does the making of the common discussed here differ from fantasies of holistic connectedness?

Dean approvingly cites philosopher Frédéric Neyrat's ecology of separation (Neyrat 2015) as counterpoint to the moralistic horizontalism of humans and nonhumans. Neyrat distinguishes between *separations*, which open up the space for relationality, and *splits*, which are "juxtapositions without relations" (2015a). He argues that the production of a "distance

within the interior of the socio-political situation,” would be the “condition of possibility of real creative response to economic or ecological crisis” (2015b: 659). Yet, Neyrat also deploys these concepts to show how human exceptionalism is based on a deep split for which the whole of being lies on the side of the human.

In making this point, he references Luce Irigaray’s attack to the universality of Man. Against the phallogentric economy of the same that constructs women as specular reflections of men, Irigaray (1993) affirms an ethics of sexual difference as the possibility of relation between (at least) two modes of existing, (at least) two sexed perspectives. What Neyrat emphasizes, is the potential of embracing separation (another word for irreducible difference) as condition of possibility for relations within and beyond the human. His ecology of separation is indebted to the feminist thought of difference.

Similarly, my account of the common is informed by feminist images of the earth that foreground asymmetry and the possibility of relation without reciprocity. Rather than invoking the earth as a whole, they emphasize the impossibility of making wholes. In her reworking of Gaia, the risky figure of the living planet depicted by some as the quintessential figure of organicism, Isabelle Stengers (2015) draws attention on the earth’s multiple regimes of existence that exist regardless of human life and yet provide the condition of possibility for countless forms of life. The intrusion of Gaia disrupts the idea of the human as self-inventive being that undergirds much of the Anthropocene discourse.

Stengers’s Gaia is close to Haraway’s recent proposal of using Chthulucene as the name for a “timespace” that troubles the universalist anthropos of the Anthropocene. Chthulucene is a feminist version of Cthulhu, the monster imagined by H.P. Lovecraft. It approximates the “earth-wide tentacular powers” (2015: 60) of non-modern figures such as the Inka Pachamama, the Navajo Spider Old-Woman. Both Gaia and Chthulucene are

concerned with world-making as activity that is not limited to the labouring human. Departing from the notion of a natural common that has to be managed and preserved by the cooperative activities performed within the biopolitical common, this dissertation brings attention to modes of commoning that, to use, Felix Guattari's words "dare to confront the vertiginous Cosmos so as to make it inhabitable" (2008: 44). It argues that composing ecologies of the common is a highly situated process—one faced with the enormous challenge of cultivating spaces of conviviality and endurance disentangled from capitalist capture. This is an ongoing creation that does not carry guarantees of redemption or the promise of reenchancement, but gestures towards the unknowns that collective action might be capable of ushering in.

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