The Production of Subjectivity: Conversations with Michael Hardt

Michael Hardt with Leonard Schwartz
Transcribed by Holly Melgard
The Production of Subjectivity: Conversations with Michael Hardt

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The Conversant
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Leonard Schwartz’s Cross Cultural Poetics radio program provides a forum for wide-ranging discussions concerning contemporary poetic, translation, critical, curatorial, publishing and performance projects. Schwartz’s most recent books of poetry are At Element (2011) and IF, both from Talisman House.

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Image courtesy of Simon Carr. “Correspondences.”
The conversations between Michael Hardt and Leonard Schwartz published in this chapbook were previously published online in The Conversant’s October and November 2012 and January 2013 issues. The interviews were recorded for Leonard Schwartz’s Cross Cultural Poetics radio program at Pennsound (http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/XCP.php).

The first interview in the series, “Empire,” (CCP Episode #112) was originally published in Rain Taxi Review of Books’ Summer 2007 issue, while the second interview, “Love as Such,” (CCP Episode # 134) was originally published in Interval(le)s’ Fall 2008/Winter 2009 issue (II.2-III.1).
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The following three interviews with Michael Hardt originally aired on the radio show Cross Cultural Poetics (KAOS: Olympia, WA), conducted and hosted by Leonard Schwartz. Compiled over a period of six years, topics of conversation range from the collaborative writing process (2006) to love as a political concept (2007) to, by the conclusion of these discussions, the Occupy movement and current possibilities for action (2012). The transcription here has been edited so it appears transparent alongside the rhythmic stride of an exchange between a poet and a philosopher who, despite never having met face-to-face, have accumulated a repertoire of recurring themes, a prism of conceptual possibilities and a dynamic shorthand in the process. With these talks now collected and republished, in an historical moment of political activity, and in lieu of intensifying demands to “move from declaration to constitution,”1 readers seeking definitive information in the sentiments of either writer need not be deprived. But concerning the concreteness of the information to be found herein, with regard to both Schwartz’s and Hardt’s respective practices as translators, surely an explication of the constitutive labor framing this communicative language becomes a most critical if not political matter in the business of sense-making.

Of course a formal introduction from the maker of such conventionally formatted transcripts is rather uncommon, especially when both interviewer and interviewee are still living and both speak the same language. However, since grammatical correctness in oral speech is atypical, in the re-contextualization from mouth to page, information inevitably gets lost. In fact, throughout these interviews, the conversation returns again and again to the consequential displacement of matter made “redundant” by way of translation.
Part of parlance in every way, each interview was first transcribed and edited by myself, then edited by Schwartz, then Hardt and subsequent publication editors. The syntax was standardized; the use of terminology was regularized; the contemplative pauses were abbreviated and the jovial transitions (the sarcasm, puns, and wisecracks) were largely omitted. And because this makes the authority of the published page a no less plural speaking subject than the conversation itself, readers seeking definitive information in the interviews are encouraged to listen to the recordings in addition to reading the text at hand. As the pacing and time that elapses in the fleshing out of thought is primary information in any text, musical difference alone—diction, tone, duration—makes these two formats logically distinct. The manicured punctuation that repositions liminal statements as though definitively concrete becomes suspect in this way.

The live dialogue format of Cross Cultural Poetics (where “poets and translators from around the world talk about their art and their language”) documents occasions of improvisational exchange and speculation. Enacted over the phone, as is the case with most CCP episodes, the show consistently gets recorded in a single session without the use of pre-recorded/scripted questions or answers and little to no post-production editing. In addition, the show’s organizational framework reflects Schwartz’s poetic and scholarly preoccupations with translation as a political act. A scene in his recent poem “The Sudden” where “a mouth giving birth to thought // The framing of words / to fit each instant’s loss” foregrounds the “Grip of propositional statement” among the “Guards guarding the nameless machine.” Schwartz’s show similarly documents these scenes of words in the mouth, “gripped” by audio-recording. This present transcribed text, however, was neither recorded “live” nor “in person.” The transcript’s
transparency is an editorial fabrication. The recording’s “grip” on ephemeral speech here has been translated for the seemingly neutral documentation of an archival page.

In these recordings, for instance, Hardt speaks with a percussive rhythm and fluctuating pitch, I presume because he is actively approximating a common body of knowledge over the telephone. In sound, this differentiates his cited/improvised/meta commentary about shared terms whose definitions vary across discourses. This musicality translates less transparently on the page though it remains a significant contributor to the business of sense-making. Such differences make the final product that is the present text indicative of essential decisions made in the collaborative writing process. Part of Hardt’s opening statement in the first interview reads:

I’ve often thought that when people write together, in any collaboration like this, one almost ventriloquizes in the voice of the other—i sort of write in Toni’s voice, and Toni tries to write in my voice—and we end up writing in this third voice, which is neither his nor mine. And that’s one of the things that is freeing about it, this third voice that neither belongs to one nor the other person.

Here is what that same sentence looked like in my first draft, in which I initially transcribed the punctuation for pitch:

One of the things I’ve been thinking about (and this is the kind of thing that I would love to hear what you have to say about it [is that I’ve often thought that]) when one writes together (in any sort of collaboration like this), that one almost ventriloquizes in the voice of the other (like, I sort of write what I think is [/in] Tony’s voice and Tony
sort of tries to write in my voice [and we end up writing in this third voice which is neither his nor mine {and that’s what is one of the things that is sort of freeing about it (is this third voice that neither belongs to one nor the other person)}].

Now, I’ve yet to encounter an instance that did not require “minor” adjustments to the idiosyncratic grain of any speaker or conversation, and I can’t say that the text at hand is an exceptional case for the genre nor extraordinary in my own transcription experience. Prior to this project, I used parenthesis in first-draft transcriptions to notate a speaker’s inflected use of qualifying clauses. By the end of the third complete sentence in the first Hardt interview, however, bracketing this kind of information parenthetically (wherein the speaker drops his/her voice to interrupt his/her story with a qualifying clause [acknowledging the contingent applicability of further detail {and signaling the possibility of redundancy (depending on the reader)}]) would be unsustainable.

Besides this being a tedious way to parse whole sentences, it made the prose look pathological, whereas in the recording, both Hardt and Schwartz simply sounded conversational: inviting, thoughtful, and conscientious of the given differences of exposure to a body of mutual terms. Listening through the full recordings again, I found that the frequency of this particular phenomenon—especially Hardt’s densely nested definitions—was not constant by any means but was not infrequent. So as to adjust my tuning fork for the occasion, I went back through the books Hardt co-authored with Antonio Negri, for an alternative punctuation or a general rule of thumb that would suffice, only to find there would be no easy substitute. Scanning *The Labor of Dionysus, Empire and Multitude*, all of which complicate the basis for a common ground
in one sense or another, I found Hardt and Negri’s parenthetical use was minimal and generally reserved for temporally ephemeral, geographic and historical details. Throughout their books, many of the sentences navigated definitions that were densely populated by complex networks of discourse. Yet these formulations were difficult to track because their identifying marks were indistinguishable from the rest. Usually these qualifying clauses were simply separated by commas, if at all, with an occasional hyphen here and there to emphasize insistence—marking an arrival at more approximate meaning. In the end, my punctuation method simply tried to imitate this style in the books, which didn’t seem to have an exact logic for disguising these labyrinths so to resemble linear thought: just vary the sentences enough not to disrupt or slow down a musical fluidity that would lend to a fluent reading pace. Ultimately moving forward from this impasse meant adjusting my habitual method for transcribing what I had assumed were fluctuations between common, specialist and speculative bodies of knowledge—as if this range ever had an exact scale that could be bracketed.

Of course there were plenty more comparable adventures that are too numerous to list and no less minute. I should say that the punctuation used to demarcate the proprietary status of intellectual terms (quotation marks, italics, etc.) here has been minimized wherever possible, because in this context, any alternative precision would present a lie. Statements regarding love as a political concept recur in the second and third interviews, wherein the philosopher and poet flag usages of the term in discourse, which results in a comparable transcription fiasco. To differentiate love in discourse, love in general, “love” as such, love as it is being redefined, ad infinitum—in one paragraph alone, the formatting options to distinguish its many proprietary valences quickly run out. Based on these descriptions, it’s entirely
possible a close reader of Hardt’s passage may hear echoes from
texts by Hardt and by others. Non-disclosure of these sorts of
transcriptional undertakings recalls the category of alienated
expenditure that Hardt calls “Affective Labor”—the self-masking
labor force dedicated to the production and fabrication of coherent
speaking-subjects in communication systems such as text. And
the transparent expenditure in this transcription thus recalls what
Schwartz describes as, “[t]he ubiquity of these stimuli delirium /
both waste product and life invention [. . .] form as invention not
formula.”

I cannot say with any certainty that Hardt’s oral syntax in these
specific instances reflects his philosophical ideology as a whole.
I don’t presume to have located the exact coordinates of a poetic
praxis that systematically de-pathologizes subjective bodies of
information, de-privatizes specialist knowledge, or declassifies the
pluralism of speaking-subjects at the level of sentence punctuation.
To make such an argument, one also would have to account for
the exact contributions of the many editorial hands involved, not
to mention Schwartz’s influence as an interviewer and all kinds of
technical/existential contingencies, such as telephone interference,
weather, caffeine intake, current stage of completing the book
under discussion, etc. I have little interest in the minutiae of blood
or urine analysis to arrive at definitive formulas to explain the
poetics of Hardt’s or Schwartz’s respective mouths.

But what I can say is that the unquantifiable possibilities
dislodged by the act of masking the transcription for a seemingly
fluent reading experience has resulted in a most generous and
generative creative excess. Speaking as a graduate student,
accumulating debt during almost the entirety of this project,
what should I think when these interviews’ interlocutors state
that creative excess in translation lends to the production of
anti-capital? The interviewer asks, “Does the ‘we’ refer to a larger
collective you might see yourself as not speaking for but speaking with?” To which the interviewee replies, “The common is a terrain on which we have to struggle...struggle for certain forms of the common and against others. And I think your focusing on ‘language’ is one arena in which we can see that particularly clearly.” In the interest of “the notion of ‘power’—the way we or I or as individuals give power away,” which in writing is “particularly problematic,” the reader seeking concretion is invited to entertain the complications of the speaking “we” in this book.

Holly Melgard
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Endnotes


iii) Ibid, 62.


v) Schwartz, Ibid. 61.
The Production of Subjectivity: Conversations with Michael Hardt
PART I  Empire
Leonard Schwartz: Your books *Empire* and *Multitude* have provided a rich humus for all kinds of other projects that have been created in their wake. Can you say a bit about the nature of your collaboration with the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri? The whole notion of a theoretical work of philosophy that is written by two people is intriguing.

Michael Hardt: I love the collaborative process. It is really quite liberating and obviously productive too. I’ve often thought that when people write together, in any collaboration like this, one almost ventriloquises in the voice of the other—I sort of write in Toni’s voice, and Toni tries to write in my voice—and we end up writing in this third voice, which is neither his nor mine. And that’s one of the things that is freeing about it, this third voice that neither belongs to one nor the other person.

LS: Tell us more about Antonio Negri—obviously you have collaborated with him on these two books, but you began actually as his translator. Is that accurate?

MH: Well, I suppose so. I translated one of his books in order to meet him. He’s someone with the kind of life story that ought to be a Hollywood script: he was a professor of political science in Italy in the ’60s and ’70s, but was also involved with workers and student movements, and was arrested and imprisoned for his political activity in the late ’70s. He left prison in the mid ’80s and then spent fourteen years in Paris. It was during that period that I went to Paris to meet him. And I thought I really couldn’t just present myself as some, you know, graduate student from Seattle [laughs], and so presented myself as a translator. We got along quite well and so I moved to Paris. Eventually one thing led to another, and we started writing together.
LS: What a great story. What’s the title of that book?

MH: That was his book on Spinoza called *The Savage Anomaly*. It was published in the U.S. by University of Minnesota Press.

LS: Let’s talk about your book *Empire*. Many readers leap directly to the propositional nature of the statements in the book, but I wonder if, for you, is the compositional process as important as what actually gets said?

MH: I suppose so. The experience of writing these books has been one of confronting a new global situation that we don’t really understand, and the writing process is really one of trying to grasp the situation. It’s not like we start a book and we really know what we’re after; we get it in the process of writing.

LS: Speak in order to discover what to say, and write in order to figure it out.

MH: Exactly! And that’s one of the reasons why *Empire* is so difficult. I think we’ve made a big effort with *Multitude* to write in a way that a non-academic audience could appreciate. But one of the things I discovered in trying to write for a more general audience is that certain difficulties of these kinds of projects are just inherent in them. And it goes something like this: if we were just writing something we already knew, then we could write it in the most straightforward way. But if the writing process itself is part of the discovery, and we’re trying to gesture towards and find figurations for something that we don’t yet understand, then of course it’s going to be difficult—partly because the reader is involved in the same process of trying to grasp something that hasn’t yet been fully digested. I don’t know exactly how to say it.

LS: I know what you mean. . .if it were easy to say, it wouldn’t be
especially worth saying. In *Empire*, you do talk about the difference between “empire” and “imperialism,” and you talk about the three modalities of control that empire exerts, one of them being language. So, in a sense, that problem is posed when you speak about the compositional strategy. How do you reach or write for many people without it becoming immediately commodifiable?

**MH:** I realize that I was probably wrong when I said before that what we’re writing is something that we don’t understand. I think it’s really that sometimes recognizing different or more precise terminology, or trying to invent different languages, allows us to see more clearly, gives us a different perspective or a different vision on things. I wouldn’t exactly put it that language has become commodified, at least in the old sense. There’s a long modernist tradition of talking about the commodification of language, that advertisers ruin things and we need to break through that with a kind of modernist difficulty. I’m thinking of high-modernism, of the great novelists and poets—it’s not quite the same as that, it seems to me. It is grasping the new, but it’s trying to find a way of expressing or having us see, newly, the changes that have taken place in the world. In my experience, I have to break through with a different language. And that allows us to see things differently.

**LS:** In a way what you say also mirrors your stance toward empire in the book. You don’t moralize against empire or globalism per se; rather, you seem to see a certain aspect of it which is inevitable and necessary, and potentially even revolutionary. Could you say a little bit, especially for readers who haven’t yet read *Empire*, about the general theoretical stance you take concerning the differences between imperialism and empire?

**MH:** It’s partly again to try to see power structures newly; the point of departure for the book is that imperialism, as we knew it, is no
longer the ruling form of power. Now of course, after September 11th, 2001 and especially after 2003, many people would say, “No, what’s going on is exactly U.S. imperialism.” The U.S. has taken up the mantle of the old British empire and they are attempting to control foreign territory and potentially the whole globe. That’s the way I would define imperialism: the power of a nation state to impose its sovereignty over foreign territory (as the British did, as the French did, as other imperialist powers did). And so, in some ways, we would see it through the same lens, but I think that’s a misrecognition of how power functions today. In fact, I would even argue that Bush and his cronies were also mistaken. They really thought that the U.S. could be an imperialist power; they really thought that unilaterally the U.S. could dictate, remake the Middle East, rule over the world, etc. And they were wrong, they were completely wrong...and now we see the disaster from it. We see the failure from it. In any case, we don’t need to be taken in by the same mistakes. The only way that global power can function today, the only way that the rich can stay rich and keep the poor poor, is by constructing a much more networked form of power, a network of control...a network that of course includes the United States, but also includes the other dominant nation states, the capitalist corporations, various multinational institutions, plus a variety of non-governmental organizations. It’s this that we’re trying to call empire; it’s a new logic of global control or domination. You might say this: in a way we’re trying to guard against fighting against old enemies and trying to recognize the new enemy.

**LS:** Along those lines, you reject the term “military industrial complex” as a piece of language that has outlived its utility, or is not descriptive of the enemy. Can you say what, in the description of empire you just offered, differs from the older notion of a “military industrial complex”? 

MH: It used to be much easier to recognize a single locus of power. If there was a Winter Palace that we could invade, if it was really all coming out of the White House—if we could locate power in that way, it would make political practice, at least at a conceptual level, very easy. You know who the enemy is. You know where it is. On the other hand, if in fact power, global power, is tending towards this kind of network that we’re describing, it makes it much less clear where to attack or where to stand. It really poses a new challenge for politics. Philosophers like Toni and I, and of course larger social movements and political movements, have been trying for the last ten years to grasp this new de-centered power structure and find ways to challenge it.

LS: In Empire you suggest “Imperial control operates through three global and absolute means: the bomb, money, and ether.” Now we know what the bomb is, and we know what money is, but it’s your third term “ether” that it seems to me is the most important, at least from the point of view of a poetics. You say about this third term:

“Ether” is the third and final fundamental medium of imperial control. The management of communication, the structuring of the educational system, and the regulation of culture appear today more than ever as sovereign prerogatives. All of this however, dissolves in the ether. The contemporary systems of communication are not subordinated to sovereignty; on the contrary, sovereignty seems to be subordinated to communication—or actually, sovereignty is articulated through communication systems. In the field of communication, the paradoxes that bring about the disillusion of territorial and/or national sovereignty are more clear than ever.
Can you talk about the way in which you chose to foreground communication as the battleground?

**MH:** One thing we’re trying to do is argue beyond a notion that all the means of communication are manipulated in some instrumental way by some sovereign or localizable power that stands behind them. In other words: it’s not just that the media, or other forms of communication, are instrumentally used to dupe people, or to maintain profits of corporations, or to make the population passive. I think that those are sometimes good approximations; I remember a wonderful science fiction movie from the ’80s in which the characters would put on a certain kind of glasses, and when they’d look at the newspaper, instead of the regular headline, it would say things like “Obey Authority”—that’s what the real message was! Those kinds of conspiracy notions about the media have a certain utility, but I think it’s more difficult than that. There isn’t a censor that tells the newspapers exactly what to think, and there isn’t even, usually, the head of a corporation who calls up a newspaper and who tells them what to print and what not to print. It’s a much more amorphous aspect. It’s de-centered and has a network form. That’s the kind of thing we’re trying to grasp.

**LS:** I’m thinking about your strategies as a writer—your command of a certain kind of theoretical language, but also the way in which you draw on a literary background: in *Empire* there are passages from Melville that come in, for example, but also a series, interestingly, of Christian rhetorical figures. What do you see as the writing strategies at this moment that best intervene in a communication system that is loaded in the direction of empire, but not inevitably destined to express the interests of power as opposed to the subversion of that power? Is it, for you, theoretical language that remains the best bet? Or is it the mixing and the cutting back and forth between direct speech, theoretical language, and a kind of
literary parlance?

**MH:** I think it is that mixture that seems most effective, but I was thinking as you were speaking about the political power of language itself and how much weight one can put on that. I’m against the notion that philosophers and writers can write a certain way and that’s going to tell people what to do—I’m definitely against that, but I sort of react too hard in that direction, and therefore discount the power of language and think the real power is in practice, is in the movements...but then I think that’s not really right either. I think there is, and there is necessarily, a properly political power in the invention of language. But that doesn’t reside necessarily in the authors; we just grasp, sometimes, this linguistic convention that can have political effects.

What it reminds me of is this passage from Spinoza’s book called *The Theological Political Treatise*, a book that got him in a whole lot of trouble. The whole book takes on religion, bringing it down to materiality; Spinoza says that prophets are just people with great imaginations, that sort of thing. But he also says that what a prophet does is call a people into being—and that seems to me like an amazing expression of the properly political power of language. When you say that a manifesto, or a prophet, can call a people into being, what it means is that it can organize the passions—you know, the striving for liberty, the organizing for democracy, etc.—and construct out of them a political reality.

**LS:** An extraordinary way of putting it. And I think that is the project of your book *Multitude* too—to replace terms like “masses” with the possibility of some other form of collectivity that you call “multitude” and are attempting to talk into being. To go back toward the philosophical structure of your thinking, can I mention a philosopher or two and ask you about their influence on your work?
MH: Sure.

LS: How about Giorgio Agamben, the great Italian philosopher whose work is cited and referenced throughout your book?

MH: He’s definitely a very close fellow traveler. He’s a personal friend of me and Toni, and he’s also thinking through many of the same problems. But then we come to great differences. The shorthand way of saying it (for people imbued with the history of philosophy) is that Agamben comes out of thinking through Heidegger and Hegel, and Toni and I come out of thinking through Spinoza and Marx. But I think the difference really has to do with the fact that in Agamben’s work there’s never a pointing towards the subjectivities that can create the new; he’s much more focused on recognizing the forms of power that determine and limit us, and less focused on the ways within contemporary reality that something else emerges.

LS: Gilles Deleuze?

MH: He’s definitely the writer that I came to philosophy through; I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation about his work, and so on. Toni’s relationship to Deleuze is quite different, because Toni comes through a heretical sort of Marxism of the ’60s, and only comes to Deleuze’s work, say, in the early 1980s. That relationship between Marxism and this newer French thought—call it post-structuralism—was a kind of shift for Toni, whereas for me it was my first... my baptism.

LS: As you’re talking about your books, it’s wonderful to hear the way you always think about what Negri would say as well. It reminds me of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom language is a form of responsibility. But there’s another passage in Empire I was hoping I
could get your response to; it’s in your chapter on “Virtualities.” You write:

Through circulation the common human species is composed, a multicolored Orpheus of infinite power; through circulation the human community is calculated. Outside every Enlightenment cloud or Kantian reverie, the desire of the multitude is not a cosmopolitical state but a common species. As in a secular Pentecost, the bodies are mixed and the nomads speak a common tongue.

Again, if you could take us through a few of the figures, images and concepts there... it is a rich and startling passage.

MH: I think we did a certain number of these things subconsciously, like this relationship between the theological and the political. Someone once said, “Why do you have to use religious imagery, when you’re not talking about something religious in that sense?” I think that often, theological language allows us to grasp that creativity that we have to recognize—the actual construction of the new. It’s one way of approach that helps us get out of our daily understandings that don’t seem to be able to grasp that possibility of creating a future; so, the mixing of that theological imagery with this worldly political project is a way of trying to grasp what you might call the divine, or the divinity of the creative instance: that’s a long-standing trope in poetic language, but here we’re trying to recognize it in the creativity of the political process.

The notion of mixture and flows is clear throughout our books. We’re trying to talk about subjectivities that are not really identities, that are not essences, but are based on a primacy of mixture, a primacy of miscegenation, a crossing of these boundaries that ought to be a way of addressing and undermining racial hierarchies, gender hierarchies, other hierarchies based on identities. In any case, the
method, in a way, of “mixture” and “movement” is already implicit there in what you’re pointing towards.

**LS:** Could you say a little bit about your emphasis on the term “immanence” in your writing?

**MH:** Well, the simplest level (which always appeals to me) is immanence as the insistence on horizontal political structures and horizontal social organization—“horizontal” meaning on the same level as each other, as opposed to a transcendent instant that stands above us. I’m describing things that are supposed to be commonplace among social movements and political organizations today, the organization of anti-war or anti-capitalist protest movements—it’s always done in that form. Or at least that’s the ideal, the spirit in which things are attempted. The more difficult problem is when we try to understand the forms of power that we need to oppose today as also residing on the plane of immanence. If we were to think of power as simply transcendent, that would be like having a man behind the curtain. You know, something like in *The Wizard of Oz*, where you have this guy behind the whole thing. Then power is transcendent and we can recognize where it is and we can attack it, blah, blah, blah...but if power really functions immanently, if it’s really spread out and not centered in any one place, it becomes much more difficult to identify and analyze and attack.

Let me just give you a little example of that which I think all of the anti-globalization movements were struggling with, before our new age of war and terror. What these movements were trying to do was to think about how to recognize the new forms of power, how to recognize that they were multiple. In other words: if you think back to the late ’90s and early 2000s, the various different globalization protest movements weren’t just against the White House. They didn’t analyze it as though global power were all just
dictated by the U.S. Government. Otherwise, they should have just been at the White House every weekend. But rather, they were experimenting with new enemies; they were trying to recognize how the WTO is actually a kind of power, how the IMF and the World Bank are sites of power, how NAFTA is a locus of power, and how they were all constructing this kind of network of powers that function together. And so they were trying to analyze what is the power that controls the world today, that dictates globalization, and also how to attack it. I wouldn’t call all of this a success—it’s not a finished process—but I will say that it was and has been an open experiment to try to recognize these things. How to recognize a form of power that functions immanently, and then how to address it, attack it, challenge it, overthrow it—these are the kinds of questions that we’re trying to confront, and that a large group of other people are trying to confront too.

LS: I appreciate what you said earlier: you’re not interested in your books offering dictates or precepts or taking any kind of moral high ground—this is because of the nature of immanent power, right? What is a solution in one situation isn’t going to work in another. It’s not relativism per se; it’s just a recognition of the fluidity of the object of critique.

MH: Right and its plurality.

LS: Michael, it’s a little bit off subject but I think it maybe brings us back to language and communication—I’m just wondering what poets you might be interested in? Do you read or find the work of those kinds of language workers useful for your own?

MH: In school, high modernism was the angle of American poetry I really worked in, and in recent years, it was Pier Paolo Pasolini—he’s well known for his films and somewhat for his novels, but it’s really
the poetry that interested me most. It’s one of those things, I have to say, that I’ve set aside because of other things seeming more pressing or urgent. But I think contemporary poets have addressed these same problems and are in a way part of, let’s say, the experimentation to create sorts of new responses. I’m convinced that that’s true and I think that I’m not up to the level of being able to recognize it.

**LS:** There are parallel kinds of concerns and investigations going on within a certain kind of poetic discourse—one of the reasons *Empire* and *Multitude* seem to constitute a really important horizon for so many poets. But let’s go back to the nature of your collaborative writing process with Antonio Negri, who as you said earlier was in prison for an extended period of time on charges pertaining to his political activism. Could you say just a little bit about that legal entanglement?

**MH:** It is complicated. The short version of it is that he was very involved with the non-terrorist stream of Italian worker and student movements of the ’70s, and so, when he was arrested in ’79, he was at first accused of all sorts of things: being the mastermind of all terrorism in Europe. But what he was actually then charged with and convicted of was that his writings made him essentially a leader of these non-terrorist but radical left movements. The law in Italy was that he could be held responsible as leader for any act committed by members of the group, so he was convicted on those sorts of things—things that happened at demonstrations, mostly. He spent four and a half years in prison, then managed, through a very peculiar Italian phenomenon, to leave the country and spend fourteen years in exile in Paris, and then came back and did four more years in prison plus two house arrests, and that completed the sentence.

**LS:** That is extraordinary. And when you first began writing with
him, he was at what stage of that odyssey?

MH: He was in Paris; that was in the mid-'80s, and so he had been a few years in exile.

LS: Then part of the writing process must have taken place during his second period of incarceration.

MH: A little bit, yeah. It wasn’t very productive, I have to admit. I think that often when someone’s in prison, they have a lot of other things on their mind.

LS: Well, there’s Antonio Gramsci, and a whole tradition of prison writing. . .but not in this case, it seems. I want to read you one last passage from Multitude:

How can we discover and direct the performative lines of linguistic sets and communicative networks that create the fabric of life and production? Knowledge has to become a linguistic action, and philosophy has to become a real reappropriation of knowledge. In other words, knowledge and communication have to constitute life through struggle.

Can you comment on that passage and what’s behind it?

MH: It’s interesting hearing you read these passages; I haven’t read them in awhile.

LS: I think it helps to hear one’s writing in someone else’s voice sometimes.

MH: You’re right—in someone else’s voice, and then after a certain amount of time too. The basic sense behind this, of course, is that we have to organize politically, and that has to become central to
productive life. When we’re talking about knowledge, language, communication—these have to become central to economic production. In a previous era, the industrial production of material goods (automobiles, refrigerators, etc.) organized all the rest of production in the world under their image: agriculture, service work, etc. were organized under that pinnacle of the factory. Our argument today is that the pinnacle of production that organizes the rest of the economy under its image is in fact what we call immaterial forms of production: the production of knowledge, the production of ideas, the production of effects. These are now economic activities, production values that are transforming all the others. So when, in this passage, we’re talking about knowledge and the organization of philosophical thought as a political need, it’s partly with that in mind—that these are now sites of extraordinary power.

LS: It puts extraordinary responsibility on the cultural worker. What are you working on, post-Multitude?

MH: Toni and I are of course writing, and we do think of it as a third in this series with Empire and Multitude...what it will actually turn out to be is very hard to say yet. Have you ever felt that when you ask a writer what she or he is working on, often the response sounds secretive? But I think in fact you can’t really tell until it’s done, so it seems false to try to dream up something, say it’s about X or Y.

LS: It also could hex the whole book too if you start to tell—while you’re talking about it you might kill it. I respect that demurral. Are you in the middle of it?

MH: Yeah, we’re in the writing of it, which feels like the middle because the whole first half is thinking and talking.
PART II  Love as Such
Leonard Schwartz: You’ve said that you’re interested currently in love as a political concept. I wondered if you could say a little bit about that, especially since in Multitude (your last book), it does come up. I was speaking with the political theorist Steve Niva who pointed out that it is very clearly there in your piece—in the beginning of the book about the golem. And then, toward the end of Multitude, a passage which reads as follows:

People today seem unable to understand love as a political concept, but a concept of love is just what we need to grasp the constituent power of the multitude. The modern concept of love is almost exclusively limited to the bourgeois couple and the claustrophobic confines of the nuclear family. Love has become a strictly private affair. We need a more generous and more unrestrained conception of love.

Could you comment on that passage and on the direction your thinking has gone since then?

Michael Hardt: In part it starts with a recognition that in certain political actions, in certain political demonstrations—the really good ones—you do have a feeling of something really like love. And so, it’s partly a way of trying to theorize that recognition of this feeling of...let’s call it a “collective transformation” that one experiences in certain kinds of political action. And therefore, a way to think about love, love which I do understand to be precisely a transformative power, something in which we come out different. And to try to think of it as a political concept. There are ways in which love has functioned as a political concept, more than it does today. In fact, when one starts talking about love as a political
concept, it’s hard to avoid religious traditions. Certainly in Judaic and Christian traditions, love has often been deployed as a political concept, as the construction of the community, precisely. And that seems to be the case today, as in the passage you read, that partly through the “segregation” or “confinement” of love into love of the same, love within the family, or even extending further, love of the race. Love of the neighbor was thought of as a restrictive category, let’s say. Love of those like yourself has destroyed the possibility of love as a more generous and positive political concept. That’s one way thing that has happened. It’s the political possibility of love that has been destroyed.

LS: You do bring up the question of the relationship between the form of love that you’re theorizing and attempting to describe, and love defined in a religious context. You speak in Multitude of a concept of the new martyrdom (which would be love), but I don’t think that is the same as love as a form of sacrifice or the way in which love is worked into a martyrology and sacrificial vocabulary and thought process in religion. I guess I’m asking if you could say a little bit more about how you differentiate between that which you are in the process of articulating, and the religious concept of love we have in the West.

MH: I think that once one starts thinking about love as a political concept it is a dangerous terrain. It is a terrain on which there are many horrible consequences. And I guess I would say that there are many different ways love functions as a political concept, and that some of them can lead to quite horrible ends... as I think you’re suggesting with the question. I think we have to differentiate between, in one sense “love of the same,” “love of the race,” let’s say “love of the neighbor”—which can be thought of as the same, which can function in a certain kind of nationalism, in certain kinds
of religious fundamentalism, and which also involve exclusion of others—and a different notion of love, which is the kind of political concept which seems to me we need to create, which is not a “love of the same” but in fact a “love of the different,” a “love of the stranger.” It’s hard for me not to repeat certain biblical contexts on this, because I think that within the Judaic and Christian traditions there are a lot of alternatives.

L.S: Sure.

MH: But at least that seems to be one division that might be helpful here. On the one hand we have a political notion of love as “love of the same,” which functions as a kind of racism, a kind of nationalism, etc., and it does involve love it seems to me. It’s important to think of it that way. But, it’s horrible. It’s “love gone bad,” let’s say. Whereas, we can think of using that as a caution or a warning: a political notion of love that is not only open to difference—like not only a kind of tolerance, but a love that loves the stranger, a love that functions through the play of differences, rather than the insistence on the same. There’s a second criterion one might add to that. As you can tell… this is something I’m still in the process of figuring out, so one gets partial formulation of this. It seems to me there’s also a horrible form of “love gone bad,” in which love is thought of as a merging into one. We get this in Hollywood romances and in romantic poetry, which is when two become one in love. It seems to me to be a horrible idea—both at the level of personal relationships, but also politically. I think rather love has to be thought of as a proliferation of differences, not the destruction of differences. Not merging into unity, but a constructing of constellations among differences, among social differences. Like I was saying when we were talking about religious fundamentalism, we can see the need for thinking about racial
differences, the recognition of others, etc. That’s another way of distinguishing between love as a political concept that might function democratically, that might work toward a democratic politics, and other ways in which love functions as a political concept, that goes quite wrong. That is a way of thinking about certain kinds of fascism, racialist, nationalist, etc.

**LS:** I was thinking of Martin Buber who writes and speaks of the love of the stranger. Out of his concept of I/Thou, or from the basis of his concepts that the address between the I and You, springs his notion of a bi-national state that would be Israel and Palestine in one. That was always his argument, that it had to be a single state solution, that it had to be one state that would incorporate the stranger, be that stranger Jewish or Arab, into a single state. I wondered if Buber is an influence, or someone you’re reading. You know, *Multitude* does begin or nearly begin with that image of the golem, the golem is haunting us, drawing directly out of various currents in Jewish mysticism that are not identical to Buber, but certainly related. That section in your book ends with:

> Perhaps what monsters like the golem are trying to teach us, whispering to us secretly under the din of our global battlefield, is a lesson about the monstrosity of war and our possible redemption through love. (*Multitude*, 12)

Could you say a little bit about that story of the golem, and why you began your book with it?

**MH:** On a strictly anecdotal note: my co-author Toni Negri and I, in the kind of games that co-authors play with each other, we had felt frustrated in retrospect that in *Empire* (the previous book), we had used a whole series of Christian theological references. And so,
in writing *Multitude*, we thought, “Well ok, this time we should have all Jewish theological references.” And so we started it as a game that certain kinds of writers play, at least. I’m sure you feel this way. There are certain kinds of constraints that end up being very productive. That’s where we started, and so the idea would be then in another book, we would have to have all Islamic references, which is at the moment a little beyond my level of understanding. So we started that way, and it’s true that you were referring to Buber and there are a number of authors within the twentieth-century Jewish theological tradition who insist on alterity, who insist on that notion of difference as fundamental to any effaceable system. You described it really beautifully too. I think that is something I’m trying to think here. You know, in any number of discussions about difference in political terms, that seems to me to be a very important and operative framework. About the golem: the golem seemed to me a myth of love frustrated and love gone horribly wrong. It seemed to me a kind of cautionary tale like the kinds of things I was just recounting to you, which is that there are certain ways in which we should read these tremendously evil political developments: fascisms, nationalisms, racisms, certain sorts of political fundamentalisms—as forms of love. I mean, I think that they do involve a kind of love. Everyone always talks about them in terms of their hatred, which is of course true too, but I don’t think there’s really a contradiction between love and hate. What I think is really fundamental to them is there’s a kind of “love of the same,” “love of the race,” and that’s what leads so horribly wrong in them. I guess I’m trying to say that the golem was one way of trying to start thinking about this caution about the evils that can result from love gone bad. Therefore, the need to think of the kinds of distinctions, or say, criteria for what would constitute a positive, or productive, or really democratic form of love as politics. In a way, starting from there, starting from that caution that you read, it was almost a need
or mandate to think further about what would flesh out the notion of “love as politics”—in what way of distinguishing that from these quite horrible forms of love as politics.

**LS:** The golem is traditionally a man made of clay, brought to life by a ritual performed by a rabbi. Golem literally means “unformed or amorphous matter,” and its animation repeats, according to the ancient mystical tradition of the Kabala, the process of the God’s creation of the world recounted in Genesis. And of course, as you were saying, in most myths or legends of the golem, it goes terribly wrong and the creation turns against its creator, or the creation is misused by its creator, depending how we read it. When you chose to ground the book in passages from Jewish theology, you described that as part of a constraint based form of writing. What are the implications? In what ways do you think that shapes the book as the constraint usually does shape the direction that the thought moves?

**MH:** That was the idea. I think that we weren’t as successful as I would have hoped, in the sense of having that consistent reference pervade the thinking. But I think that this particular constraint is one (at least this is what I had in mind) about thinking alterity, about thinking of the notion of difference, or even just thinking the stranger, hospitality. These sorts of concepts seem to me essential to thinking of political movements and political philosophy today. In a way, it guards against thinking of politics as a kind of unification, as the construction of identity that excludes those that are different. There were those constraints or those reminders in thinking about the possibilities for politics and democracy in this age of globalization. That’s what I was hoping would be the effect of the constraint.

**LS:** If I could put another figure in front of you, I would say from
the twentieth century Jewish mystical tradition. . . it would be Freud. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in that famous passage, in which he describes the couple in love as the most subversive form of energy available, in that the couple in love need no other more sublimated union or form of identification: be it tribal, or ethnic, or nationalistic, or universalist. It’s the intensity of that intertwining—not necessarily union—but intertwining that marks that out as potentially destructive of the existing order to the extent that the two don’t need any third or fourth or fifth or multitude at that point. I wonder if you could say a little bit about your critique of that notion of Freud. Is that identical to the Hollywood union or the pop song union that of course we’re all encircled by? Or, is there something else going on, do you think, in that notion of the sublimated and the “unsublimated”?

**MH:** Right. No, that’s quite brilliant, and I’ve found—actually you’ve pinpointed this quite perfectly— in trying to think about this, in trying to think about love as a political concept, I find myself constantly having to struggle with religious theology on the one hand, and psychoanalysis on the other. They’re the two boundaries. And it seems ironical for me, because I neither believe in God or the unconscious. I’m not sure which one is a greater violation of some scriptures. In any case, you’re right. My first thing to say would be that I think that Freud is not able to think about love outside of the couple or outside of the family. It always comes back to the father, or it always comes back to some primal scene that involves Mommy, Daddy, and Me. That said though, it’s true (as you’re suggesting) that there is never anything simple in that relationship. There’s nothing identical in that relationship that Freud is talking about in love between the couple. There are always—and this is the helpful thing, at least from my way of thinking—an enormous number of other useful things in Freud’s thought and psychoanalysis in general,
but here in reminding us of the non-identical nature of the way in which there’s always multiple meanings in every drive, or desire, or relationship, so that one has to think then of the multiplicity in the relationship. There’s nothing purely identical in one’s feelings in love. What I would like though—this is the operation that I hope to do—with using the kinds of insights of Freud or psychoanalysis, is to try to expand them beyond the confines of the familial scene so that we can think further. It seems to me necessary, in order to think politically, to move beyond that. It seems to me that Freud always thinks that forms of love that are outside this libido must be sublimated or frustrated, that the following of the leader is essentially following the father, etc. And so, I think that we need to move outside of that, in order to think of love as a political concept.

LS: In Multitude you write:

> We need to recover today this material and political sense of love, a love as strong as death. This does not mean that you cannot love your spouse, your mother, and your child. It only means that your love does not end there, that love serves as the basis for our political projects in common and the construction of a new society. Without this love, we are nothing.

If we look at that passage: are you moving on now to a critique of it? When you say, “this does not mean you cannot love your spouse, your mother, and your child,” obviously we can imagine, or we know of positions from which you can’t. From a Leninist position that would look at marriage as turning the other into property, from a certain feminist perspective, we can analyze marriage that way as well. You say that, “this does not mean you cannot love your spouse, your mother, and your child.” So I’m just asking if you could go a little further into the way in which that is a box that you state in the
book, but also OK.

MH: That’s great. What I would say is: in a way, love has been destroyed as a political concept. This is a further one, other than what we were talking about before: the personal and political levels of it, or Eros and what’s often called Agape, are separated or segregated, so that the “love of the spouse,” the “love of the child” that functions on that level of Eros, is separated from the level of “love of the people,” which belongs, like you say, to a certain ascetic socialist and communist tradition that’s very priestly in that way: refusing the level of Eros and only insisting on this level of Agape, which translates in these political terms into a “love of the people.” It seems to me that in order to think of love as a political concept, we have to think it simultaneously as both, as a figure that recognizes the connection between and continuum between that level of the personal and the political. The terms don’t exactly work here, but at least that is the first way of thinking about it.

LS: Are deployments of the concept of Eros that emerged prior to Freud useful for you in terms of your account of or construction of the political idea of love?

MH: They are... It’s complicated... This is my own philosophical training that’s stopping me from speaking at the moment, because when one thinks “Eros,” first one thinks about Plato writing about love using the term “Eros,” and then about Freud, and they are of course not identical, those two. The way Eros has come to be used most commonly today is primarily in that intimate either familial scene or the scene of spousal coupling, which is segregated from the political. That is exactly what seems to me to be the problem. If Eros could be attached to what would need not deny those energies and let’s say, “We need to be revolutionaries in the way in which we
care about each other,” or something like that. You can imagine the absurd caricatures of that, which unfortunately in some ways, in certain times, have been somewhat true. So, it’s not to deny that level of the personal attachment of the love we have for each other, the love we have for those immediately around us, in order to love the people in some abstract sense. . .but neither to limit love to that scene of the personal, and in a way, discount it from politics by saying, “Oh well that’s just the personal.” It seems to me not an easy operation, but one that’s necessary in order to do this, is to think of the two together: the love of those around you and the love of the people. It’s both concrete, therefore, and abstract at the same time. I’m not sure if this is making much sense. I at least see it as the problem that one has to confront.

LS: In Multitude you do offer a number of examples. In this passage you write:

We need to invent new weapons for democracy today. There are indeed numerous creative attempts to find new weapons. Consider, for example, as an experiment with new weapons, the kiss-ins conducted by Queer Nation in which men would kiss men and women women in a public place to shock people who are homophobic, which was the case in the Queer Nation action held at a Mormon convention in Utah. The various forms of carnival and mimicry that are so common today at globalization protests might be considered another form of weaponry.

So, obviously the task of writing here to align love with weapons seems, on the one hand, a kind of shocking opposition—though, I guess, we do have Cupid with those arrows and so on, in the tradition. So, I shouldn’t be so shocked . . .
MH: [Laughs.]

LS: You cite kiss-ins at demonstrations by Queer Nation.

MH: Right. In these kinds of political discussions, it’s always difficult giving examples (or not always), but often the examples seem to deflate the argument, if you know what I mean.

LS: Yes indeed! [Laughs.]

MH: It’s necessary, but then they seem to bring it down to something very specific that doesn’t apply to other things. Those do seem to me to be good examples of struggling against certain norms: of heteronormativity, of certain social structures that prevent love from functioning as a political concept. I think you’re right also to point out that once one thinks that love is a political concept, one cannot think of love as opposed to or outside of violence. I think that it necessarily involves a certain kind of violence, often a violence against what hinders its actions. It’s difficult to give a sufficiently general example of what that would mean: a kind of love that acts through violence. For those who do think in terms of religious scriptures, the Judaic and Christian traditions are full of that—are full of love that requires a violence in order to defend itself, in order to continue as action. I don’t mean by this at all that we should either repeat scriptural actions or that we should take the scriptures as models for living, but at least the reference to them sometimes helps because it can denaturalize the current assumptions. For instance, in this case, the assumption that love would never involve any sorts of violence.

LS: There are two things I want to say. One, maybe the most concrete thing we could say, or maybe the most concrete thing I could ask would be: what do you see as the primary barriers that
prevent us from actualizing this love?

MH: We’ve been talking about some that are very important and quotidian, you know, that have to do with everyday life. One attempts to talk about the kinds of practices that do struggle against love that expands beyond the family. This is the way I understand a lot of either what goes under the labels of queer theory or queer practice. Even certain practices of say, gay male cruising that was common in the 1980’s, or certain theorizations of that, which I think are trying to struggle against, break the limitations of a certain necessity for love to be confined within the couple. That seems to me to be extremely important on one level of thinking. On another much more important level of thinking, it would probably be better to return to the contexts that you posed earlier, with respect to the golem. One thing that prohibits us from loving the stranger—from enacting the kind of politics that is based on love in a much more general expansive way—is precisely the regimes of violence in the world and those proscriptions for division that prohibit us, that not only make it dangerous, but make it impossible for us to form a politics constructed through love in this way.

LS: The context or contact, I should say, between the concept of violence and the concept of love on the one hand, and opposition on the other is, I think, also there in Multitude when you write about two different forms of martyrdom:

The one form, which is exemplified by the suicide bomber, poses martyrdom as a response of destruction, including self-destruction, to an act of injustice. The other form of martyrdom, however, is completely different. In this form the martyr does not seek destruction but is rather struck down by the violence of the powerful. Martyrdom in this form is really a kind of testimony—testimony not so much
to the injustices of power but to the possibility of a new world, an alternative not only to that specific destructive power but to every such power. The entire republican tradition from the heroes of Plutarch to Martin Luther is based on this second form or martyrdom. This martyrdom is really an act of love; a constituent act aimed at the future against the sovereignty of the present.

I wonder if you could take us through that passage a little bit—in terms of the concept of martyrdom you’re describing.

**MH:** It’s nice the way you do these things, because sometimes when you repeat things to me, they sound a little bit more coherent than they did before I heard them.

**LS:** When I read passages from your book?

**MH:** Yeah, it’s nice.

**LS:** That’s great. I’m glad to be able to provide you that coherence! [Shared laughter.]

**MH:** I think you’re right, that what’s at stake in this...there are a couple different things that are at stake. The one is that there is one form of martyrdom, the former one, which is not aimed at constructing anything. It has a certain glorifying nobility in that willingness to die in order to document an injustice. I think from the perspective of the martyr, it functions that way. But the second kind of martyrdom is different in the sense that it’s striving to construct a different kind of world, and its martyrdom is not in any way intended. It is a consequence, it is a risk that is taken in trying to construct a different world. It is struck down precisely by the forces that don’t allow that change to take place. I remember Toni and I, when we were thinking about this, we were making lists for
ourselves of all the different historical figures that are considered martyrs, and putting them on one side or the other. In a sense, what we are also doing in a way is protesting against that former type of martyrdom. It seems too often now the martyr has only been relegated to that former figure. We’re forgetting there’s the sort of figures of martyrdom which were, in a way, bearing testimony, in a way, to a future world, because that’s what they were struggling for. They were only struck down in the process before that could be achieved. They’re both, I suppose, testimonies—but ones that are pointed in different directions.

**LS:** So that figure of the martyr is there. I don’t think you’ve set it up as the only possibility that the person who pursues or embodies the form of love you’re articulating necessarily ends up martyred—although it is future tense at the end of the book. You say, “This will be the real political act of love.” It is something that is, I wouldn’t say messianic—although you say there’s a Jewish theological kind of weave in the book—but it’s still something we’re anticipating. This will be the real political act of love. Yes?

**MH:** Yes. I mean it just seems useful to recognize that there are many instances of democracy in the world or attempts toward democracy in the world, but we’ve not yet achieved it. There’s a strong relationship between this act of love as politics, and the coming of democracy for the first time.

**LS:** I have long thought that the real problem with Christianity is that it hasn’t happened yet, and I wonder if that is also part of what’s being articulated in your book. But Michael, I want to ask you a question about composition and about the way you work as a writer. I know you’re in process on new work. Anything—without interfering with that process—you can tell us about what form your reflections and actions on love are going to take in the new book.
with Negri?

MH: I think that actually in the book he and I are writing together, love will probably again have a rather limited role. A number of things I have been writing about have been separate from the collaboration. . .

LS: I see.

MH: We go through different phases, as I think any writer does. A previous phase we felt was very important was to try to write in such a way as to engage a larger public and speak in a vocabulary and in a mode of discourse of writing that would be accessible to more people. At the moment, we’re in a different phase. We’re very much wanting to write for ourselves. Not that we want to be incomprehensible or something, but there are certain problems that we are anxious to work out, and the writing process is the means of doing that. We’re trying to give ourselves just the freedom to write just the way we speak to each other. . .if that makes sense.

LS: Absolutely. And love? Are those essays you’re working on, or talks?

MH: It’s taken mostly the form of the talks now, partly because it’s a topic that is not yet written because I’m not yet sure how to resolve it, in a way. It is an open question that I don’t feel yet ready for. On the other hand, it is a wonderful way to engage people—with love—because it is something that doesn’t require special knowledge—or in fact there are so many special knowledges that come to bear on it, that everyone has a way of entering into the question. So, I’ve found it a really wonderful way to open it as a discussion with different kinds of groups. As you can imagine, activists—especially a young generation of activists—I find very appealing, and I find it already
very natural in a way to talk about political organization and love. In fact, more so than I would with political activists of my own generation—those in their twenties rather than in their forties, let’s say. And on the other hand, academics who of course get a little bit squirmy when I start talking about love, because it feels sentimental, it’s not quite... it’s the thing that poets ought to talk about, and not political philosophers.

LS: Yeah, what are you trying to do, take it away from us?

MH: [Laughs.] But then, once one works through the ideas a little bit, it’s embedded in so many of the scholarly fields that people are working on today, that it becomes a very fruitful discussion—and fruitful for me in particular. I guess this is the selfish part of choosing a topic for lectures: it is something that gives me a lot...

LS: That’s the passion of it to pursue as a philosopher with a love of knowledge and so on. And of course one thinks of, you know, constructing the terms that then can be known in the world. So, when we kidded about stealing something from poetry, that makes some sense, right, to think of the act of creating the object that then can be understood or known. The philosophical or poetic functions form a couple in order to accomplish this kind of writing. Don’t you think?

MH: Absolutely. And I mean there are long poetic traditions of using the romantic couple as metaphor for the poetic process, and recognizing love as a way of thinking of the process of construction that poetry is. I was thinking of Dante and the Provençal traditions—thinking of romantic love as an analogy of the poetic process itself.

LS: That is a rich source to draw from. The poet Robin Blaser
certainly draws deeply from Dante in order to construct a notion of a possible public world, on the basis of a notion of love.

**MH:** You’re right that I should think more about contemporary poets in this regard, because I think that that would be very helpful.

**LS:** I think that you would find it in the work of Robin Blaser in particular. In his book The *Holy Forest*, his notion of the private as the privy, reduced to the privy, or we’re all in a certain kind of privy and the public world that is made accessible or possible through something that he is drawing out of Dante, I would say. So, I was just struck by that reference that you made. As far as a book from you on love goes, we’re going to have to anticipate it, is that right?

**MH:** I think so.

**LS:** Thank you so much Michael and let’s speak soon.

**MH:** Great.
PART III Commonwealth
Leonard Schwartz: Great to have you back on the program and to have your new book Commonwealth (published by Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) and your soon to be published new text with Antonio Negri entitled Declaration also in hand, about which I hope we can speak. As I mentioned, this is a kind of trilogy. Your first work was Empire, the second was Multitude and now the third is Commonwealth. I wondered if you could say a little bit about the underlying architectonic of the three and where Commonwealth fits in the structure as far as your thinking is concerned?

Michael Hardt: Well, you know in some ways, calling it a “trilogy” for ourselves was a way of stopping us from writing more books like this. So unless we start something like prequels—like Star Wars would do—at least we have an end to it. But once we started calling it a “trilogy,” like you say, we did sort of create in our minds an architecture of the whole. In some ways, we considered Empire, the first of the three, to be focused primarily on the characteristics of the new global power structure. Multitude in many ways was both inspired by the alter-globalization movements and following new possibilities in the era of globalization—new possibilities of democracy, of alternatives.

As a final piece, Commonwealth is trying to articulate the notion of the common as both a perspective and an alternative, really, to the current economic and social possibilities. In some ways, “common” can be understood here as being something outside of alternatives we are otherwise presented with, which are these alternatives between private property and public property. You might say Neoliberalism focused on the role of “private property,” and some sort of Keynesian and/or Socialist solution focused on “public property” (meaning, property controlled and regulated by the state).
We think of “the common” as something which is neither of those two, and which is, instead, characterized by open-access and self-management. So this might find a way outside of what seems to us to be a restrictive binary, which we’re often faced with (especially in these moments of economic crisis like we’ve had since 2008).

**LS:** You know, from the point of view of poetics, there is a passage in your preface that is particularly striking. You write:

> Language, for example, like affects and gestures, is for the most part common, and indeed if language were made either private or public—that is, if large portions of our words, phrases, or parts of speech were subject to private ownership or public authority—then language would lose its powers of expression, creativity, and communication. (*Commonwealth*, ix)

Could you comment on that aspect of it? I mean, large pieces of language are lost to private ownership or public authority—but I agree with you and your point stands: if there is any common really left, it might be in the arena of language. Could you comment on whether language resists its commodification, its privatization and the general deprivations visited upon it? (Because, obviously you’re writing a book that is calling for the increase of the common.)

**MH:** Yeah, that’s exactly right I think. I guess the important point about “language” for us here—or from my perspective—is that language is creative. What one loses when either commodifying language (making language into private property, and one could even think when one says “commodified language” of advertising language or of other ways that language becomes commodified), or when language is being regulated by some public authority (such as the state). . .what one loses is precisely its inventive capacities.
So that’s part of our argument for the “common” throughout this. I think “language” only poses one example, but as you say, this is maybe a paradigmatic one: what we lose when we lose the common or what we stand to gain when we make more of our lives open to this structure.

But you know, there’s another way in which language is an excellent example here, which we don’t articulate in that passage and perhaps we don’t articulate this enough in the book: once we at first celebrate the common in this way, I think it’s also good to recognize that the common is not always a beneficial and positive aspect of life. The common can also be quite negative and destructive. Language is also a realm that has, for quite a long period, carried all sorts of social hierarchies and enforced them. I mean through accents, diction, etc., language has carried with it all kinds of hierarchies that aren’t regulated either by private property or the state but rather created through different and even previous social forms of domination. I guess what I’m trying to get at here is that even while we are affirming the possibilities of “common” (upholding wealth in common for creating common structures), it’s not as if it’s as simple as, “Making things ‘common’ is the answer.” Rather, I would say that the common is a terrain on which we have to struggle, and that we have to struggle for certain forms of the common and against others. And I think your focusing on “language” is one arena in which we can see that particularly clearly.

**LS:** I really appreciate what you just said, Michael, because I think there has to also be a critique of the “common” just as there is a critique of populism, too. Not all forms of populism are desirable, and I’m not even talking about just “vulgarization” (which is connected to the notion of “the common,” or that part of its etymology of the word), but that aspect that you were talking about: if everything becomes common, there is a risk there as well. So I
appreciate the willingness to critique “common” as well as the call for the need to rethink it. You know, it seems to me philosophically the major figures in your and Antonio Negri’s book are Michel Foucault, Immanuel Kant and Spinoza. Could you say a little bit about Foucault and the notion of “power”—the way we or I or as individuals give power away as opposed to it being static/fixed in a particular place—and the connection between Foucault and the idea of what you call “biopower” in the book as a whole?

MH: One aspect of Foucault’s thinking central for us during our discussions while writing this book is expressed by a relatively simple statement he made late in his life: “Power can only be exerted over free subjects.” There are at least two things that we were reflecting on here. First, those subjected to power always have access to a margin of freedom. The exertion of power, in other words, is never complete. There is always a remainder to power. But a second element of this statement is perhaps more important and has more radical implications: the freedom of those subjects really comes first. Freedom is prior to power. The exertion of power, in other words, is always a reaction to and an attempt to contain or restrict that prior freedom of subjects. This priority of freedom to power is most evident in temporal terms (the freedom already existed) but I would say it also is an ontological claim. Free subjects are the source of creation and invention, whereas power can only react, recuperate and obstruct.

In some ways, at least in our thinking, all this is very close to central aspects of Machiavelli’s thought, namely his view that “Power is always a relationship. Power is not a thing.” And so, what that means is that those over whom power is “held” always have the ability to refuse and overthrow and undermine it. That’s what it means, in a way, to say, “Power is always a relationship, not a thing.” So Foucault helped us think through these questions about power.
We do say in the preface that we think of the book as working toward an ethics of freedom, trying to think about the possibilities of freedom in these relationships of power, a very Foucaultian project... That does sound very abstract, but—

LS: —Well, no, I think it’s intriguing to think about just the way you put it: “power” as a “relationship.” As well, you cite Machiavelli behind Foucault in terms of thinking of “power” as a “relation,” and I think there’s a clear relationship to Italian philosophy in general in the book. With your co-author Negri being an Italian philosopher, I guess the two points I wanted to make there are: (1) You go on in those early chapters also to make a technical point about Kant that sometimes is overlooked, distinguishing the “transcendent” (being a kind of power that is not a relationship but a thing) and the “transcendental” (the desirable aspect of Kant’s thinking, where we have the ability to detach from the immediate in order to produce a critique of the immediacy of things), and the ability to abstract from experience on some level. So the abstraction is crucial to the book and crucial to the task of thinking about power as opposed to being overpowered.

One question I have for you stylistically, and maybe it relates to the relationship to both Foucault and Kant, is the way you use the personal pronoun “we” in the book. Does “we” refer to you and Antonio? Does the “we” refer to a larger collective you might see yourself as not speaking for but speaking with (as the book is arguing against, as does Declaration, the idea of a kind of leadership figure)? The question of “we” in writing is always a kind of problematic, particularly if it is a relationship of power. I wondered if you could say a bit about your use of “we” in the book.

MH: It’s difficult. I think that in the most immediate, we are thinking “we” as the two of us, and I’m quite sure that with the writings in our book, it’s partly the nature of how collaborations are.
What happens in at least our collaboration, and maybe others too, is that a lot of the writing is really about the conversations between us. We’re not even thinking about some ideal or concrete readers—we’re really thinking about each other. I think that the “we” is often for us internal to that dialogue. In working through our differences, sometimes obviously we see things differently. In fact, I think more often than “we see things differently,” we sometimes don’t understand what the other person is trying to say. That happens not that infrequently you know, and I think we even have a sort of unspoken rule: you can ask three times, “What does that mean,” and on the third time, if you still don’t get it you just let it go. And then it’s like, “Ok, it stands. You know, I tried. We both tried.” And so I guess what I’m trying to say is that the “we” is the fruit of the negotiation, and that the writing process is a kind of incitement that we experience together. Sometimes with negotiations, and I really think this is true. . .very seldom do we find ourselves having different opinions, but often, if not frequently, we find ourselves not being able to understand each other. I mean, sometimes I find I can’t understand myself, so it’s not all that strange that part.

But I suppose there is another element to the “we,” which you were also suggesting, which I would like to think of as an invitation: I don’t think we’re the only ones that think this way, and you’re right, we’re very reluctant (but also careful not to pretend we’re) speaking for others, but there’s no need to fool ourselves in thinking we’re the only ones thinking this way. In fact, I would say a lot of what we learn is that the books are a fruit of not only conversations with each other but also learning from social movements that have been going on in the last ten years. In some ways, I think the “we” springs from that also. Maybe I’m now onto a third point—that “we” is partly that relationship with various groups of activists in different countries that we have relationships with and to whom we’re speaking. So, it’s not as simple as I first would have pictured it.
It became more complicated.

**LS:** Yeah, I think it is a fluid “we” reading the book—a “fluent we,” as opposed to a “fluid we” in that sense as well. It intrigued me to think through the compositional overflow and strategy vis-à-vis the pronoun we—and we’ve discussed this in the past—because of two points: (1) I think philosophizing as two is intriguing to think about. We think of the philosopher as a solitary mind or solitary thinker and here you and Negri are creating a work of political philosophy between the two of you as the fruit of a dialogue or a negotiation as you described it. But also: (2) We’ve discussed this in the past, that there’s a concept of love in this book; there is a desire to reclaim love as a political concept, a political or productive idea or expression throughout the book. You have a chapter entitled “De Singularite 1: Of Love Possessed,” where you write:

> Love is productive in a philosophical sense too—productive of being. When we engage in the production of subjectivity that is love, we are not merely creating new objects or even new subjects in the world. Instead we are producing a new world or new social life. (Commonwealth, 181)

Can you say a little bit about the political concept of “love” that you and Negri and your loving dialogues are constructing in this book? Any time you say “we,” you must love the others in that group too at some level.

**MH:** Right, I think so. Well first, a way that might make sense more immediately is how Spinoza defines “love.” He’s always very simple in all his definitions, but “love” is the recognition of the increase of my power with the recognition of an external cause. So I love that external cause, which makes me more powerful—both more powerful to act and to think. This might sound obscure when I say
it that way, but you know we often find that in the company of (and in conversations with) certain people, we are more intelligent. In being with them, my power to think actually rises. I think what you were saying about “dialogue” and the “fruit of the collaboration” is true—I think together with Toni, but also we know other people too. And I’m sure you have this experience too, that with certain people, part of what one can understand with “love” is that, with them, I have a greater power to think.

The power to act might also then give us an entry into thinking about politics. Love could be conceived in this way: the political concept of “love” (at least in the Spinozan approach to it) as a relationship is a way in which we have greater power to act politically. I mean, I’ve often felt—and I remember us talking about this before—that activists, especially a younger generation than me, feel quite comfortable with this kind of discussion and they identify with it. And I think that the lives of activists, in the actual and practical work that they do, is recognizing that a political love is characterized by this (increasing the power to act together with these others). I think that Spinoza would say that we together compose a new body in that internal relationship among us.

L.S.: Last time we spoke about the concept of love, and at that time, you spoke—or perhaps we spoke about “love” as “hemmed in.” On the one hand, the Freudian concept of “love” is the notion of “trapped in family” or “family romance.” On the other hand, the concept of “love” is “hemmed in” or “trapped by” Platonic notions of the idealized “object of love” the “otherworldliness” of “love.” So, it’s intriguing for me to read the new book and see that Spinoza, for you here, is the way out of that trap! Indeed:

For Spinoza, in other words, love is a production of the common that constantly aims upward, seeking to create
more with ever more power, up to the point of engaging in the love of God, that is, the love of nature as a whole, the common in its most expansive figure. Every act of love, one might say, is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture with existing being and creates new being, from poverty through love to being. Being, after all, is just another way of saying what is ineluctably common, what refuses to be privatized or enclosed and remains constantly open to all. (There is no such thing as a private ontology.) To say love is ontologically constitutive, then, simply means that it produces the common. (Commonwealth, 181)

So, the notion of “being” in a philosophical sense, it is argued, is equivalent to the idea of the “common,” to that which we have in common—that which is. Spinoza provides a way of thinking about love as a form of productive power. I want to ask you more about Spinoza as a philosophical source.

MH: Spinoza is a difficult one to use in a way, because you know it’s really not ascetic, though his work feels ascetic at first (he distills his definitions and formulations to a minimum—they seem austere). Because of that austerity and rigorous simplicity, it’s extremely difficult for people to enter into Spinozan thought. I mean, reading The Ethics is a project. It’s not like something you can just pick up. So then drawing on it, we have found that it can be difficult not to put off readers with the obscurity and austerity of it. And yet, once you enter into it, and the kind of thinking we were just trying to work through in the passage that you just read, it’s anything but austere. I find it is, in some ways, the most sensuous and passionate of philosophical paradigms. In fact, this is something I’m trying to work through right now: the contrast between a seeming austerity and a deep sensuousness or passion is a quality that’s perhaps
characteristic of Spinoza’s work. But all that takes a bit of excavation and working through that for non-specialist and/or people completely unfamiliar with his thought—as I think most of our readers are—is sometimes tricky.

**LS:** I can certainly say that opened up Spinoza for me. In a way I always found him sort of forbidding and austere. The great American poet Louis Zukofsky draws so deeply from Spinoza, and I never did really feel like I got it up until I started reading your book—which is not exclusively a commentary on Spinoza to be sure, but it did certainly open up some air and light for me, in terms of going back and trying to look through those texts.

Hey Michael, I have a completely different/related question, but it sounds different. Can you tell us a little bit about the difference between the bees and the wasps?

**MH:** Well I was intrigued by this passage that Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze were intrigued by too: they were intrigued by what Guattari read—that certain wasps pseudo-copulate with certain orchids so that the orchid takes the form and shape of the genitals of wasps, and the wasps think or act as if... I don’t know what they think. So, he was intrigued to think about “love” in this way and that’s what brought us to this passage. He was intrigued by it in a way that separated “love” from the kinds of strictures that you were mentioning a little earlier. It seemed to him like an image of cruising, kinds of non-reproductive sex acts, these sorts of things that he was partly titillated by. But it was a kind of non-productivity/non-re-productivity that I think fascinated Guattari, and then together with Deleuze, they were writing about it.

What Toni and I were trying to reflect on was the relationship between this and a number of bee narratives. Bees are really central and political in the history of European and political philosophy (from Adam Smith, who takes it from Bernard Mandeville, etc.).
Most of the European philosophers, especially of economic thought, have some relationship to bees—for the division of labor and their productive qualities. And in some ways, what we were working through was the contrast between the productivism and the unproductive character of bees. I wouldn’t call it “refusal of work”—this relationship between the wasp and the orchid. Eventually, we came to propose that maybe a wasp and an orchid’s relationship could be a model for thinking about love. It gets outside of some of the cloisters or blinders in which both productivity and certain love relationships are enclosed.

LS: Yeah, so bees only do it with bees, which is ever always “love of the same,” and wasps at least try to do it with orchids, and that’s “the love of the other” or the “love of the stranger,” right?

MH: Yeah! I think that’s also certainly what Guattari is trying to get at. Sometimes these examples . . . I mean I felt we—

LS: —Wasps take so much grief. You know, I think this is really great: WASPS (White Anglo Saxon Protestants) and insects—they take so much grief! This is really a redeeming moment for them by way of you and Guattari—so, wasp celebration! Celebrate the wasp!
LS: About the book, Fredrick Jameson has written:

*Commonwealth*, last and richest of the *Empire* trilogy, is a powerful and ambitious reappropriation of the whole tradition of political theory for the Left. Clarifying Foucault’s ambiguous notion of biopower, deepening the authors’ own proposal for the notion of multitude, it offers an exhilarating summa of the forms and possibilities of resistance today. It is a politically as well as an intellectually invigorating achievement.

Michael, we’re talking about Spinoza and bees and wasps. I also want to talk about some of the formulations toward the later half of the book that related to Antonio Gramsci. You talk about the difference between armed struggle and a war of positionality, which is what we do as cultural workers—produce images and works that try and reshape the discourse in such a way as to change the way in which power flows. Could you say a little bit about Gramsci and the way you play certain things out—certain proposals and certain suggestions in Gramsci—in terms of your thinking about a biopolitical diagram?

MH: Well, in Gramsci’s term, “war of position,” Gramsci is of course thinking about trench warfare during World War I. He’s distinguishing a war of maneuver, especially an attack (“frontal attack”) from a “war of position,” where the trenches might gain a better vantage or relationship to each other. But, as you say, the way Gramsci then thinks the “war of position” is one in where you don’t conduct a direct political action, but rather you change the playing field—you change the cultural environment. Sorry if that gets us to a different kind of metaphor, but I think an excellent contemporary
example of that is the way that Occupy Wall Street and other
Occupy discourses of the past year have very successfully changed a
public discussion about inequality. Many are often frustrated that
the Occupy movement doesn’t have many concrete successes, and
in fact it had very few demands that would actually lead to concrete
successes.

But, one way one could undoubtedly recognize the success of
it is the way discussions of economic and social inequality in the
U.S. were transformed quite radically by the movement. Across the
political spectrum, the discussion about wealth and equality (the
99%, etc.) has been radically transformed. So in a “war of position,”
that’s what happens—we move not by any sort of direct political
action but by recasting the field. You said “we as cultural workers”
are often engaged in that, and I think you’re absolutely right. That
is an important recognition: political achievements are often and
maybe even most importantly achieved by reframing the discussion
rather than by some more “direct” or “overt” achievement.

LS: Yeah, I think so. I think we kind of know as professors, and I
think journalists and people who work with language know this
too: whoever is asking the questions is shaping the possible answers
in the discussion. So to ask certain questions or to produce a book
that asks certain questions in a suggestive and powerful enough
way that people want to respond to those questions or, to provide, if
not answers, then at least responses to those questions, does begin
to reshape the field—not necessarily the “playing field” (although
it could be) but the “field,” as you put it. That does bring us right
into your and Negri’s new work that to is to be published very
shortly, Declaration. I do want to talk about your reflections and
comments on the Occupy movement, on the Arab Spring, on the
developments in the last year that you talk about in the book, but I
would be remiss if I didn’t again cite your last chapter, “Instituting
Happiness,” where you cite Spinoza:

We still don’t know, Spinoza says, what a body can do and a mind can think. And we will never know the limits of their powers. The path of joy is constantly to pen new possibilities, to expand our field of imagination, our abilities to feel and be affected, our capacities for action and passion. In Spinoza’s thought, in fact, there is a correspondence between our power to affect (our mind’s power to think and our body’s power to act) and our power to be affected. The greater our mind’s ability to think, the greater its capacity to be affected by the ideas of others; the greater our body’s ability to act, the greater its capacity to be affected by other bodies. And we have greater power to think and to act, Spinoza explains, the more we interact and create common relations with others. Joy, in other words, is really the result of joyful encounters with others, encounters that increase our powers and the institution of these encounters such that they last and repeat.

(Commonwealth, 379)

It’s a great passage, and it does I think really bring us to your new work Declaration in which you are writing in the first chapter at least about everything that stands in the way of everything described in that last passage. The way subjectivity is interrupted by new forms of subjectivity in these four figures: you call them the “indebted,” the “mediatized,” the “securitized,” and the “represented.” I wondered if you could talk about the first two of those figures, the “indebted” and the “mediatized,” and the clash between those stances—those statuses, and the concept of subjectivity in this passage.

MH: It seems here, what we’re trying to figure out are ways in the
current crisis (the current crisis is not just an economic but also a social one) that the “we” has become generalized (yes, and I’ll say this “we” is a much more general we, since you’ve made me more self-conscious of this). These forms of impoverished subjectivity or disempowered subjectivity are the figure of the “indebted” today. In the U.S. and elsewhere—in the sense that almost everyone has to become “indebted”—you have to become indebted to go to school, to get commodities, to get health care. Almost everything you do, you have to become “indebted.” It’s not just a periodic debt, like you go into debt and then you’re going to get out. Rather, it’s becoming a permanent condition—a condition of “indebtedness.”

What we were then trying to think through was, “What are the disabling aspects of that subjectivity of the ‘indebted.’” It had to do partly with the immediate hierarchies that are involved and the ways that societies get divided by creditors and debtors. I think that already, as I was saying a little earlier, that one of the great successes of the Occupy movement in the US is to make more socially visible the kinds of hierarchies of debt and social inequalities that are associated with debt. But debt also has many other, let’s say, “debilitating” functions. Nietzsche thinks of modern society as based fundamentally on debt—so it’s no coincidence that in German the word “debt” and the word “guilt” are one.

I would say that there is a moralism to debt also (but of course in English we don’t have the same word for it). I think that there is a moralism combined with a work ethic because when you’re indebted (like for education), you have to not only work, you have to take the first job possible. Like for instance, the students who go to law school who, of course with the enormous debts they incur when they go to school, can’t get out and do pro-bono work for poor people or some other kind of job. They have to take the kind of job that is going to pay back their debt. And even more generally, in some ways I’d say we’re shifting from a society of welfare to a society
of debtfare. The things that welfare had provided—housing, health, education—are now all provided individually through debt. And so the argument goes that this increasing prevalence of debt is a characteristic that disempowers us.

Similarly, there’s a certain lament about the “mediatized” that I think is partly true. I’m suspicious that there’s a certain lament about being “mediatized” that goes something like this: “We recognize that the more deeply media enters into our lives, the more shallow our experiences, so that the depth that had been the practice of writing a letter and mailing a letter and receiving a letter and reading it are all thinned by the rapidity and brevity of email.” Or that, “The practice of ‘friending’ has really thinned the previous experiences and complexities of friendship.” Or even that, “The narrating of one’s life that one does continually on Facebook thins the experience of previous experiences of narrating your life.” So I think that’s one way of being “mediatized”—but we’re more concerned actually with not only the fact of the media (because that’s what we wouldn’t want to refuse: the fact of our engagement with new forms of social media and others, and the internet more generally). Rather, we’re concerned with the qualities of communication that need to be discovered (and it seems in a way disempowering), so that there’s a different communication. In both cases, we find that there’s a different “indebtedness”: a kind of indebtedness to each other—even bonds with each other, rather than the kinds of financial bonds under which we suffer. And here’s a different kind of communication both using new technologies and not, which can be discovered. In some ways that the movements beginning in 2011 can open for us, in order to transform the disempowered forms of subjectivity under which so many of us now suffer, the practices of these social movements offer a means for inverting them—like I say, by creating their opposite. They are empowered figures.
LS: In *Commonwealth*, I was struck by your quote from Hölderlin’s poem “Patmos”: “Where there is danger / The rescue grows as well.” In that there is this notion that, built into those poisonous aspects of certain structures, there is a remedy for those poisons, but here specifically I’m thinking about the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (and so on). Over and against how *The New York Times* is always talking about how important Twitter and the Internet and Facebook were for the Arab Spring, the suggestion in your book is really about actual people and actual places encountering one another in the flesh and in person. That is a kind of triumph over the kind of alienating aspect of electronic media. Without being nostalgic in wanting to destroy the Internet, or thinking we can’t function without it, there is built into such movements the desire for personhood, the body and the flesh. I appreciated that in your analysis and discussion of the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring.

When you talk about the “mediatized,” you also have a passage where you talk about the way in which: “Watching the evening news is enough to make you afraid to go outside: reports of children kidnapped from supermarket isles, terrorist bombing plots, psycho-killers in the neighborhood, and more” (*Declaration*). This made me think about the poet Kenny Goldsmith, who does a very interesting piece that’s kind of like Duchamp’s taking a toilet bowl and putting it into a museum, except he does it with language. For one piece, he took twenty-four hours worth of traffic reports from WINS radio in New York, and then just read that in a different context (at the Museum of Modern Art), wherein you hear that even the most quotidian of media language is filled with the language of fear: “It’s the usual Sunday evening massacre at the Cross Bronx Expressway, etc.” In this context, you don’t hear it as violent or as “fear of the other,” because it’s a traffic report. It’s just the noise in the background in the car—that is where you’re getting
your information. But when one hears it out of that context, one realizes, “Ah, everyone is in everyone else’s way as they commute home from work.” There’s the language of massacre embedded in the description of a traffic flow. So I’m wondering if you could say more about “mediatization,” because it does pertain directly to the question of “language” that we started off with.

MH: What you’re just referring to also refers to our being embedded in the security regime, and the way that the fear created by that positions us in a really false notion of security. That kind of fear is not only created by the media, because fear is at the root of accepting a security regime that functions to surveil us in all kinds of ways and also invokes us as its actors. And once one experiences the kind of fear you’re talking about, once one is not only willing to undergo all kinds of surveillance, but also to be the watch guard and look for suspicious activity of your seat-mate on the airplane and report the suspicious car in the neighborhood, etc... that entire cycle of pseudo-security that circulates through fear is another aspect (I would say) that characterizes our impoverishment and our lack of power. It would be another aspect of contemporary subjectivity that would have to be overturned, mainly by finding ways to overcome that fear, to discover a different form of security. Like the encampment in Tahrir Square that I probably don’t understand: if you remember, there was one very spectacular day during the eighteen days of the encampment of that square, when those in the square were beaten spectacularly by thugs in the regime who came spectacularly by horses and even on camel. And what was remarkable was that the next day, for those who were camped in Tahrir Square, their slogan for the day was, “We’re no longer afraid.” That to me seems to be a remarkable achievement. It’s not that kind of heroic, Che-Guevara, I-have-no-fear, faith-in-my-death-because-I-know-someone-will-rise-again. Rather, it’s that lack of fear that the
fact of not being afraid precisely comes from—that being together in the square is a product of the kind of communication and composition that is achieved in a kind of encampment. And that was repeated in Madrid later. In fact, those occupying the central squares in Spain starting on the 15th of May in 2011 were, in many ways, inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt. One of their mottos too was “We have no fear.” In fact, in Spain more than in the US. . .I would say this was ripe in many European countries. The social movement predecessors had often involved what I call “cliché violence” (you know, fighting with the cops, breaking Starbucks windows, that sort of thing) but there was none of that in the 15th of May encampments. To explain why there was no violence, they would say, “Well, we’re no longer afraid.”

So this is what I’m trying to work with: in some ways fear is the root of our acceptance of a security regime, and what the encampments seem to discover, perhaps more seriously, is a real security that involves banishment of fear—not in recklessness but in the kind of security found in being together. But, by proposing an agenda, how can we exit from fear and construct a real security—one which would be nothing like the security we’re constantly being fed and bombarded with?

LS: That’s very moving, Michael. I wonder if there’s any level at which you might also offer a critique of, say, Occupy Wall Street. I noticed you using the term “encampment” as opposed to the word “occupation,” and language is never innocent. I’ve thought several times that it’s a shame that the word is “occupation,” because you think of occupying the West Bank, you think of the U.S. occupation of Iraq—“occupation” is not a neutral term. There was the comedian the other day who was saying it’s a sign that Americans are really out of shape: “in the ‘60’s people used to march and today people occupy.” But beyond that, you did began by saying the common isn’t
always desirable, and I wondered if there was implicit in your choice of words—“encampment” over “occupation”—a critique of the way in which this has been “framed” (in Gramsci’s sense).

MH: The first thing that seems important to Toni and I is that one needs to recognize that it didn’t begin in September in Zuccotti Park. That it is a continuation of a cycle of events that started elsewhere. There are many different ways one can trace these things, but our perspective sees it as a cycle that begins in Tunisia and is translated across North Africa, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria in very different ways, but that it also makes the leap to Europe in the Spanish encampments in May seems central to us. Also, for similar encampments in the major square in Athens (Syntagma Square, which faces the Greek Parliament) or of course the tents in Tel Aviv in the summer (for which, if it was called an “occupation,” it wouldn’t have succeeded in existing), they were much more drawing on Tahrir at that point. In some ways, by the time Zuccotti Park was occupied, they had the whole year at their backs. I think that…but I don’t mean this in any way to deflate the accomplishments of Occupy Wall Street. Rather, this is to understand them in a context in which I think that many of the activists involved in the Wall Street “occupation” were explicitly thinking of. And thinking of the lessons and tactics and aspirations of the previous encampments of the year, of course their aspirations have to be translated into radically different contexts. The struggle against the tyrant in Egypt becomes the struggle against the tyranny of finance, which is a very different thing of course. And yet, the encampment, the general assembly, the organization of the square, the negotiation of differences, the horizontal modes of organization without centralized leadership and spokespersons—these are all very recognizable practices that are adapted and translated for each local situation.
So, in part, I think what you’re picking up is a wanting to expand the focus and not think of the Occupy movement as strictly a U.S. phenomenon. Often it even seems to be presented as something that was born in Wall Street and then went everywhere else. But to see it in a larger context puts one in dialogue with these other encampments of the year.

LS: Absolutely. Your book *Declaration* does that work of trying to look at the inner historical logic of events that, even without thinking it through, you can see have to be related at some level. Trying to think out how they are related and how the dissatisfactions, unrest and movements from Tunisia to Zuccotti Park are somehow related, it’s also clear in your book where your sympathies lie. You write that some of the more traditional political thinkers and organizers on the left are displeased or at least weary of the 2011 cycle of struggles. And you respond:

> We need to empty the churches of the Left even more, and bar their doors, and burn them down! These movements are powerful not despite their lack of leaders but because of it. They are organized horizontally as multitudes, and their insistence on democracy at all levels is more than a virtue but a key to their power. (*Declaration*, unpaginated)

So it’s clear that there’s an argument for, in Kantian terms, an almost transcendental (as opposed to transcendent) logic running through mass movements. “Mass” is not a term you use. You use the term “common”—but for the birth of the commoner and the common (that you see happening in 2011 specifically), where would that leave us? Where does that leave you and Antonio Negri in terms of your writing? What seems the next important thing to write?
MH: We’re certainly in a period where we are quite inspired by and learning a great deal from not only the practices of movement but also the kind of theorizing and concepts that are being produced in movements. One of the insistences of this pamphlet of Declaration is that the movements have to eventually progress towards the construction of lasting and durable alternatives. We pose this in terms of the language of constitution, even thinking analogically with the US, although being very different terms in some ways: moving from “declaration” to “constitution,” moving from what I think they’ve done so far—this is partly what we argue in this pamphlet. So far, they’ve been good at declaring new truths about the world but not yet at organizing these in a new social formation. I mean, encampments have been very good at organizing a square but not a society. That seems to us not in the mode of predicting but certainly in the mode of telling them what we think they should do. But the next logical step seems to be one of constitution and of discovering ways of expanding the forms of democracy practice in miniature—the kinds of relationships that people have discovered in encampments and generalizing the mechanisms for having them move outward to society as a whole.
If Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* remains a master text for our own mythmaking, as a section from the preceding conversations with philosopher Michael Hardt asserts, then it also follows that the relationship between speech and writing remains particularly fraught. Since speech as cure is the most basic assumption of Freudian psychoanalysis—and writing... well, writing is many things for Freud and for the rest of us but surely most of those things are troublesome, there is an implicit risk in making over speech as text. Writing is the sign of a problem with speech, a problem that speech could not solve for itself, be it a quandary of memory, of authority, of self-reflection or of an increasing complexity that frustrates speech, for which language as text becomes the objectification and sign. Socrates, the other end of the spectrum in our “Love as Such” discussion, concerning Eros, famously refused to write, seeing speech as the vehicle of truth and writing as its loss.

The psychic sublimations and repressions required in order to write need no review here, though the temptation to remind oneself that Moses wanted us to worship the Writing on the Tablets he had brought, and that Freud asks us repeatedly to reflect on Moses and that Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* dramatizes for us both the failures of speech (Moses’ speech impediment, Schoenberg’s idea of *Sprechgesang* in lieu of full throated song) and of Commandments to sway any crowd the way image, sound and light can sway us—that is a temptation that proves irresistible. Freud and Martin Buber, who also has appeared in these conversations, came from Vienna, one of the great café cultures of its time, in which, as in all great café cultures, speech is virtually deified. I want to say then that speech, conversation or dialogue
are where we need to turn our attention, since it is where our own
culture fails us: Starbucks is not the sign of a great café culture, to
say the least. The reigning models of conversation, from talk radio to
NPR, offer bombast and sterility as our major and minor modes of
address. When Holly Melgard and I transcribed the Hardt talks we
wanted to maintain the conversational moment but also clear away a
certain stumbling (on my part of course), so that the reader wouldn’t
have to stumble with me. Just as the reign of radio mandates the
clearing away of most fascicles, the reign of writing clears away one’s
own disarticulations. In speech, we must struggle through the valley
of the letter “u,” as in “um,” or “um” again or “uh,” and “uh” again,
starting from one high point (the impulse to speak), descending
down that slightly curved line into the gut, umbilicus or
underground universe at the bottom of “u,” then rising back up
again to the peak on the other side of the letter, in what we have
brightly said or written. “U” and “V” do that to you, “V” especially,
as the concept of love as a political concept discussed above demonstr-
strates.

Speech, more speech, speech offered to speech, with its stumbles
and bright spots is, I recognize, the raison d’être for Cross Cultural
Poetics, the radio program I’ve done for five years, interviewing vari-
ous poets, translators, editors, playwrights, musicians and philoso-
phers. Speaking of speech, I don’t think “Spoken Word,” with all
the contempt it heaps on writing, is the answer either, since Spoken
Word is never or rarely a spoken word at all but a highly elevated,
highly conventionalized form of address that seems little con-
nected to what one might actually say and mostly a monologue at
that. Writing seems closer to speech than does Spoken Word. From
whence the transcripts of the conversations with Michael Hardt,
conversations now untethered from whatever dramatic
circumstance might have originally tied them to speech. Is it a
radical political act to have a conversation, when the Internet
and other media dependent on writing or image or both, occupy so much of our time, along with commerce itself? A quote from Freud’s text:

The aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world dominion with it. And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species. And it is this battle of the giants that our nurse-maids try to appease with their lullaby about Heaven. (Civilization and its Discontents, 82)

If song qua lullaby is music cleansed of any encounter between two actual beings, infantilizing us, then conversation, still musical but also between beings both actual and imaginary, is the sign of Eros in its mildest sublimation, teetering on its potentially happy, potentially disastrous desublimation.