

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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Towards an Ethnography Commons

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ABSTRACT | How might the notion of an ethnography commons transform ethnographic research practice and pedagogy? In this paper, I consider how the concept of the commons, in all of its messiness, might provide a way of not only addressing questions surrounding the boundaries of ethnographic research and knowledge that have been fundamental to anthropology since *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), but also for crafting more transformative research and social interventions into the world itself. I do so first by considering how contemporary structures of capitalism are shaping the university, our research, and our relationships with our students. Then, I trace the ways in which the debates about the boundaries of ethnography have transformed research and pedagogy over the last 20 years. Finally, I conclude by suggesting a number of potential trajectories for acting on the promise of the commons through ethnographic teaching and research.

Keywords: commons; late-capitalism; property; pedagogy; ethnographic methods; neoliberal university



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Introduction

For many of us, these feel like scary times. We live in a moment between frameworks, an interregnum, in Gramscian terms—the old has not yet died and the new has not yet been born (Gramsci 1972: 276). Our physical, political, environmental, and epistemic infrastructures are under stress. Theorizations of everything from late capitalism (Jameson 1991) to late liberalism (Povanelli 2016) to late industrialism (Fortun 2012) to post-democracy (Crouch 2004) locate us temporally on, or even beyond, the precipice. The corporate university and its constant demands to innovate and disrupt amidst a larger prime directive to measure and audit does little to inspire hope that the institutions of intellectual life might contribute a meaningful platform from which to build future-oriented alternative ways of living. And yet, much contemporary anthropology is rooted in ‘a method of hope’ (Miyazaki 2004). It is insistent that the world is unfinished, that avenues for transformation always exist. This scholarly impulse demands that we see possibilities for remaking our situation and ourselves as beyond foreclosure. If this is the case, why does contemporary intellectual life often feel so hopeless? How might we create new scholarly practices for attending to this moment, for intervening in it more forcefully, and for making good on the ethnographic impulse to keep things open? Can ethnography—both as a mode of study and as a site of pedagogy—play a role in this project? Perhaps. But first we must attend to the question of property.

Tania Li’s recent ethnography, *Land’s End* (2014), describes the fallout of capitalist transition among subsistence highland agriculturalists on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. Instead of focusing on monumental dispossession via infrastructure projects or corporate land grabs, Li’s study describes in close detail the ways the end of the commons – taking place through a shift from dispersed forms of subsistence farming to cacao mono-cropping and ultimately private property – led to a slow and steady erosion of preexisting forms of reciprocal sociality. In their place is a new system of what she calls ‘capitalist relations,’ which is rooted in both the rearrangement of space around notions of private property and work around waged labour. The results of this shift are profound, fragmenting social relations, increasing competition producing new forms of poverty, expanding debt obligations, and widening inequality. Through ethnographic description, Li’s book shows us how capitalist relations produce individualized trajectories of wealth and impoverishment that not only transform intimate social relations but also neutralize possibilities for collective politics. Although the study is very much concerned with the shifting terms of life on Sulawesi, the book is particularly powerful for the way it unpacks the micro-transformations in sociality that occur alongside the expansion of capitalist norms. This makes the book both a tremendous study of the destructive effects of capitalism and an exemplary piece of anthropology as it presses its reader to reconsider how capitalist relations shape the conditions of their own life. This is precisely why Li’s ethnography is instructive to think with: we too find ourselves within these structural conditions, making lives and scholarship amidst the expansion of capitalist relations (albeit from a different vantage point).

The unfolding devastation experienced by the highlanders in *Land’s End* is not the same as that experienced by educated scholars situated in the center of the global academy. Yet, the divergent trajectories of the world’s permanent academic faculty and the precarious, contingent, underclass of academic labour

bear a structural (if not material) resemblance to the situation on Sulawesi. The political economy of higher education – marked by constrictions in hiring, increasing adjunctification of academic staff, emerging emphasis on individualized performance metrics, expanding programmes of professionalization, and the threat and closure of academic programmes of study – structures our relationship with our writing, our relationships in the field, our relationships with our students, and our relations with each other. It shapes the way we write and where we publish. It also narrows our will to struggle collectively for a different structural situation altogether.

This transformation becomes legible in our work as we are pushed in divergent and opposing ways. On the one hand, we find ourselves driven to make singular scholarly contributions that demonstrate a unique and surpassing brilliance, that disrupt common-sense understandings, and that remake fields of knowledge. On the other, many of us worry about how ramped up demands for publication encourage a kind of mono-cropped scholarship that is vast, but not particularly deep or attuned to the worlds from which it emerges, if it is even available to wider readerships at all. I say these things not as condemnations of the work of others, but as reflections on the dual pressures I myself feel as a young scholar trying to craft my own research agenda and forge an academic career. The pursuit of metrics, of course, exacerbates this problem. Most high prestige publications are enclaved within privatized landscapes of fortified paywalls. Twenty-four hours of access to the most radical, transformative thoughts will cost you 42 USD. No Trespassing.

Beyond the Lab, Beyond the Studio

Perhaps starting with ethnography – research, writing, pedagogy, and praxis – could lead us in another direction. Although a good deal of the history of the debates around *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) focused on the question of representation (see Starn 2012), it seems to me (albeit in a sort of revisionist way) that we might also read that book, and the history of methodological questioning and experimentation that followed, as, at their heart, about the discovery of the epistemological boundaries that composed the discipline of anthropology altogether.¹ Although the question of writing was central to these discussions (perhaps to a fault), the deeper and perhaps more lasting challenge the volume launched was for ethnographers from within and beyond anthropology to rethink or at least to become deeply aware of the epistemological and socio-political boundaries that constitute ethnographic writing and research. Indeed, much critical writing and research that followed *Writing Culture* attempted in various way to deconstruct those boundaries by rethinking the roles of researcher, deconstructing bounded topographies of ‘the field,’ expanding scenes of collaboration, and opening up space for direct activist politics. In the post-*Writing Culture* moment, whole new trajectories of thinking and practice emerged in the name of these multi-sited (Marcus 1995), collaborative (Lassiter 2005, Rappaport 2008, Sangtin Writers Collective and Nagar 2006), activist (Hale 2006), and experimental open systems approaches (Fortun 2009, Fortun et al. 2014) to ethnographic research. The current turn towards experimental methods pedagogy in the form of collective projects (Rabinow et al. 2008) – studios and collaboratories – built on these approaches, offering new directions that are not aimed to rethink ethnography for the twenty-

first century, but also the university more generally.² Here, I suggest that the figure of the commons might move beyond these collective projects to set our work on a different path altogether.

Ethnographic laboratories and studios offer a kind of imperfect template for how we might think our way forwards. For Rabinow et al. (2008), the language of the studio and co-laboratory (respectively) gets us closer to the experimental, emergent qualities of ethnographic research. Unpredictable to the core, the ethnographic practice eludes the ‘techniques and tips’ model of pedagogy. Consequently, most ethnographers actually have surprisingly little formal methodological training. What is appealing about these collective pedagogical projects is that they offer grounds to continue developing a critical language around our methods, a necessary political maneuver (i.e. Fortun 2012), and a means to break down the barriers that compose individual scholarly practice by offering a new collective space to attempt to rethink our work by reimagining our approach to the field and the boundaries that compose it.³

Co-laboratory and studio approaches to ethnography not only seek to create new approaches to ethnographic knowledge, but also to redraw the boundaries that compose ethnographic projects by actively encouraging research collaborators to enter into the scene of theorization. Given the brief political economy I sketched out above, it is worth noting that both the studio and the laboratory find their grounding in spaces that are central to contemporary modes of economic production – studios and labs are paradigmatic spaces in the new economy with links to techno-design utopias and cutting-edge science capitalism respectively. Moreover, both studios and labs are structured by intensely hierarchical relations reflected in their daily practices, the ways in which they resolve questions of intellectual ownership of ideas, distribute the fruits of their earnings, and in their work with clients. Nevertheless, both lab and studio offer one key concession that marks them as very much unlike the classroom: Labs and studios are premised on collective collaboration, thus they are spaces in which learning and research take place by being together. This ‘being together’ reflects the most compelling part of ‘the commons’ and, indeed, ethnographic praxis itself.

Rather than give way to the concessions of these times for further technique-based instruction premised on a smaller rendering of employability, I see a future of ethnography as directed towards the creation of new commons – spaces of gathering, sharing, exchange, and collaboration – spaces for learning to make a better, different ethnography together. The commons approach offers potential for doing better scholarship by troubling the primary boundary between field and home, breaking down barriers that cloister our research, and opening up our own strange processes of knowledge production to better incorporate the people at the heart of our research, while training our students to do the same. This space might enable us to think beyond anthropology and ethnography altogether, turning towards the much bigger question of learning how to-be-in-common.

For the Commons

At its most utopic, this is what I envision for the ethnography commons: a space of collective learning that gives fuller support to the project of reconfiguring the world by transforming our writing, re-crafting relationships within the communities of praxis that shape our research, and, ultimately, challenging the university itself.

This commoning might take place along three lines:

1. *Enhancing and building upon the forms of commoning we already practice.*

As J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) argue, in order to rethink capitalism it is necessary to shift our understandings towards the multiple forms of monetary and non-monetary exchange that already compose the economy. To do so, it is necessary to be attentive to the sorts of relations and practices of exchange that we already engage in, valorizing work that goes unnoticed and under-valued within the broader capitalist economy and using this as the foundation of a new ordering of economic relations. In the case of an ethnography commons, this means acknowledging the value of the seemingly mundane things we already do together as a matter of course – methodological discussions with students, collective writing workshops, group research critiques, and in-project trouble shooting. As ethnography is hardly a stable method, this sort of context-rich, deeply engaged pedagogy is already fundamental to most actually-existing methods training. Yet, these practices are often subterranean, existing in an invisible space of interpersonal labour that is unevenly distributed across the academy and is, yet, fundamental to driving our scholarship forward. Indeed, if we are to reframe our work around a commons, then labour and its distribution must always be central. Attentive reading, supportive encouragement, real-time problem-solving, and collective thinking are precisely the sorts of practices that are necessary to the production of knowledge, but obscured by single-authored by-lines and publication lists on CVs.

Of course, there are scholarly benefits to building a shared pedagogical approach to methods. The rigors of ethnography are in its unpredictability, which calls on scholars to respond to the unexpected contingencies that emerge from the dynamism of the field. Indeed, often, the first thing that gets destabilized in the field is one's neatly crafted research design. I would hazard to guess that the thing that allows most scholars to continue after their project appears to fall apart is not guts or intellectual will of the individual fieldworker, but is, instead, long and anguished conversations with close friends, intellectual companions, and advisors. By highlighting and supporting collective pedagogy as fundamental to ethnography, the commons emphasizes the importance of these existing pedagogical practices and offers a ground to embark on bolder experiments in collaborative research and being.

2. *The figure of the commons encourages us to rethink who is included in our research and how.* Collaborative ethnographies have pushed the limits for how ethnographies might be composed. One recent example is the Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar's book *Playing with Fire* (2006), which documents the struggles of a collective of women who, through their ethnographic work, deconstruct the intersecting struggles that shape their lives as activists from various class, caste, and religious backgrounds working together on projects of

‘women’s empowerment’ in India. As the ethnography shows, this process enabled them to not only discover the differences that have shaped their life trajectories, but also the silent power structures that shape their activism itself. The ethnography is both a remarkable artifact of a collective process and a powerful account of what it is to work within the power structures of development. By commoning the ethnographic form, the text exposes the uneven terms upon which both development and ethnographic knowledge are produced. The book (like many of the authors in this collection) testifies to the power and the limits, the variegation and the unevenness inherent in the commons concept itself. Here, working in common helps us to understand what is at stake in complex engagements with others. It also shows the powerful potential outcomes of such a risky, insistently collective approach to scholarship. While *Writing Culture* identified the artificial wall between observer and observed, its more powerful legacy (the one that nearly destroyed the field) was the way that discussion ultimately inspired greater challenges to the boundaries around the ownership of ethnographic knowledge more generally. The commons offers a site in which to imagine ethnographic praxis anew, taking up the challenges of decolonization more fully. Here, the figure of the commons feels at its most urgent, necessary, and also most risky. Taking on the political challenges laid down by feminist, indigenous, queer, post-colonial, and anti-colonial challenges to the ethnographic requires a new intellectual infrastructure capable of not only incorporating new voices, but radically altering the boundaries, spaces, and practices of knowledge production itself.

3. *Imagining an ethnography commons as a space of collective encounter might help us to rethink social praxis altogether.* The commons is, of course, a place to learn the difficult practice of “commoning.” In a recent piece in *Society and Space*, the literary critic Lauren Berlant (2016) argues, rather soberly, that the adoption of the figure of the commons across the US and Europe obscures the knotty, irreducible, political nature of such a project. The blanket valorization of the concept not only elides the fact that no such ontology of commoning exists (yet), it also ignores the genuine complexities of working across difference, as though the mere idea of the commons would smooth out the variegation, diversity, and disagreement that inherent in being together. Nevertheless, she points, out that it is these thornier qualities that make the commons an essential project for these ‘troubled times’:

For the very scenes in which the concept attains power mark the desire for living with some loss of assurance as to one’s or one’s community’s place in the world, at least while better forms of life are invented and tried out. The better power of the commons is to point to a way to view what’s broken in sociality, the difficulty of convening a world conjointly, although it is inconvenient and hard, and to offer incitements to imagining a livable provisional life (Berlant 2016: 395).

I am moved by Berlant’s conception of the commons because it is a fraught one from its outset. In working together, in attempting to share, we understand and encounter the limitations of ourselves and each other. We learn about the way in which what we take to be commonly held is, in fact, rather uncommonly divided

(see also Kelly and Trundle, this collection). It echoes Jacques Rancière's foundational insight that, 'There is politics because the commons is divided' (2011: 1). In short, if we are to live in common, then we also must learn to engage with each other in the spirit of disagreement. Yet, it is these difficulties that reveal the most utopian dimension of the commoning project. Might ethnography offer an occasion to return to collective engagement by cultivating practices of being-in-common of this richly political sort? Might such a project begin the process of reconfiguring the university to support intellectual life beyond the easily monetizable forms of value central to contemporary academic life? Can the figure of the always-divided commons push us to sort through the brokenness of this moment and begin cultivating new practices, new affects, or new politics together? Might it transform the university from being a scholarly space directed by the entrepreneurial ethics of individual scholar-geniuses (who occasionally engage with their student-clients) into a space of collective praxis where scholarship becomes a means of creating works and lives together?

Rather than conceive of our ethnographic work as beginning and ending in the field, the commoning idea radically redraws the boundaries between those two spheres, seeking to produce a new sort of space within the university, against the university. In the immediate term, coming together around ethnography will no doubt lead to different sorts of intellectual interventions. Some of those might come in the form of more accessible ethnographic texts, others might not be written at all, but be music, art, or dance. In the longer term, the aim of an ethnography commons is to actually intervene at the level of sociality, producing new sites and ways of being-in-common. This is what we so desperately need right now, both in the academy and beyond, to shift away from the proprietary landscape that values idiosyncratic brilliance, mono-cropped scholarship, and individualized success, towards something richer, more complex, diverse, difficult, unknown, together.

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Notes

1. I'd also like to bracket the potent political critiques of *Writing Culture* (i.e. Scholte 1987, Polier and Roseberry 1989).
2. I was involved in the creation and founding of the Studio for Ethnographic Design (SED), a collaborative, interdisciplinary ethnographic collaboration at University of California, San Diego in 2013. We used the language of the studio

to speak directly to the design world. Along the way, SED and its many collaborators have debated the idea of the ‘studio’ and questioned design, raising many of these same points.

3. Kim Fortun has made this point to me in a number of conversations (see also 2009).

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