

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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## A Sweaty Praxis

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**ABSTRACT** | This is a manifesto.<sup>1</sup> Considering the contemporary geopolitical sphere, it offers a provocation based on the concept of commoning ethnography, asking that we, as anthropologists, get sweaty (thank you Sara Ahmed (2014) for this push) – that we let go of our hold on ethnography – the concept and the practice - and by doing so open new imaginations and machinations of praxis and practice. Some of the statements are deliberately provocative. They aim for debate, perhaps dismissal; potentially debacle. It is a start of other thinking, but more importantly, doing. What I aim for is a push for the commons that puts anthropologists, as people whose lives and works are enmeshed in others, in the centre of the uncomfortable world, sweating with the permeability of an ethnography that changes shape in ways yet unknown.

**Keywords:** ethnography; commons; sweat; action; anthropology



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In 1947, the American Anthropological Association was asked to comment on a newly proposed universal declaration of human rights; a declaration that aimed to try and figure out a world where people were safe no matter their colour or creed. They refused to endorse it (AAA 1947). They distrusted a statement that was written by the West and enacted on the East; they distrusted a statement that, in pushing for acceptance, did not try to understand the differences and conflicts that existed. They distrusted a statement that white-washed the past and ignored the present.

The concerns were valid and important, and many still stand. But they marginalised anthropology (Goodale 2006). Those writing the declaration did not sit back and reconsider their position based on those concerns. They went ahead and wrote it anyway, and it became the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the most influential documents of the twentieth century. By not endorsing the declaration, anthropology was left out of the conversation, which was taken over by law and politics and international relations (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> It was a further 52 years before the AAA made a public, official statement on human rights (AAA 1999): a statement that allowed for some universal applications.

Anthropology is a discipline of people. But while we<sup>3</sup> research deep in the worlds of our communities, many of us sit outside them to think and write and speak and teach. Sometimes as we do this, we step away from the urgency of the world around us: caught up in the minutiae of academic life, our working of theory, our teaching of concept, we, ourselves, may become abstract.

In Sara Ahmed's (2014) work *Willful Subjects*, she asks us to climb into the bodies and the worlds of each other; to embrace the discomfort of lived experience and show the toil of the ideas and the stories we are living; to acknowledge the hegemony that creates a concept, and our role in that reality (2014: 18-19). As Arendt (1970:73) points out, it is the intellectual elite who are often removed from the realities of life: 'they cling with greater tenacity to categories of the past that prevent them understanding the present and their role in it.' We can move away from this, by breaking our bounds. Let's step back inside that world and sweat with the people around us. And let us do this through the commons.

A commons is a shared endeavour, a resource open for all, created of a desire to work outside private regimes. Commoning asks questions of who owns what, or who exercises rights in relation to what? Ethnography is about sharing lives and space and knowledge. A common ethnography is not about widening communication. It is giving up our conceit of a discipline bounded to an academic space. The move to dismantle the boundaries between our participants and ourselves is, of course, not new, and many anthropologists work hard to destabilise their own authority as well as that of others. What I am thinking about here is the opening of territory – a reframing of ethnography that takes us beyond our discipline and into a new space – one as yet undetermined, but communal and intimate. For a long time now we have been dismantling the boundaries of knowledge, paying attention to the permeability of personhood (Gupta 2002), the intersubjective nature of knowledge (Jackson 1998), experimenting with collaboration, participation, feedback, and more.<sup>4</sup> But while questioning these margins, and experimenting with form, while debating the limits and potentials that new and old techniques engender, it sometimes feels like anthropology still

clings to its ownership of ethnography as a disciplinary practice – that we fetishise ourselves as well as our exercise.

The bodies creating politics right now are pained, fighting, resistant, and wilful. Many political movements are a terrifying marker of potential futures: Brexit; Trump; Duterte; Erdogan. There is growing unrest in Latin America, humanitarian catastrophes in the Middle East, deepening authoritarianism in Southeast Asia, rising fundamentalism in South Asia, and persistent low-level warfare around the globe. Geopolitics at this moment is deeply contested.

In this context, ethnography is critical – it has the potential to join movements and open new spaces. We can study the movements and talk amongst ourselves. We can watch how things pan out, deconstruct the discourse, and reconstruct our stories. We can imagine shared communities and futures within them. Some of us can (and do) work with them, and fight with them, and cry with those whose lives become broken. Or we can reframe our position to do this and more: to shift the bounds of ethnography from us to them, to you, to we.

If we common ethnography, we destabilise our authority. But to challenge the authority of others, we must do it to ourselves first. This call to a commons is not to undermine (or refuse to acknowledge) the hard, intense, and brilliant work by scholars around the world who already work in deeply uncomfortable moments and intimately tie themselves to their participants, their communities – their worlds. It is about losing control over the practice itself. The idea is sweaty because it is deeply uncomfortable. It gives space to dissident voices, dislocates authorial authority, opens spaces for new knowledge to travel out of our control and into the world at large. If, in ethnographic practice, we create the worlds we communicate within (Maynard & Cahnmann-Taylor 2010: 3), then to address the precarity of contemporary time, it is time to get sweaty. As we share bodies and experiences with each other, we can create a commons – one born out of shared ambitions, but not homogenous desires, or disciplines, or knowledge. It will probably be conflicted; it will certainly be uncomfortable. The toil of the endeavour will make us sweat, because in keeping with Ahmed, the conflicts will require us to confront our own discourse, and fight with it, and for it, and against it and ourselves.

The commons erupts at moments of crisis, or of struggling bodies (de Angelis 2007). This is why it is apt at this moment. It is subversive, often incoherent, but also active and aspirational. It aims to change, by breaking down the boundaries that seem so concrete; it is social and shared, depending on trust and support. The rupturing of boundaries is done with the aim of production (Negri, in Curcio and Özseltürk 2010): production of values, a people, and a paradigm. A paradigm that shifts our normative practice, and by doing so brings into focus ‘what’s broken in sociality’ (Berlant 2016: 395).

The commons has always been rangy. It is ragged, and messy; no fences mark its bounds; it does not distinguish between human and non; it refuses to be determined by a hegemonic order. Its ideology is about sharing, and access, and compromise. Its boundaries are permeable, and moveable, and negotiable. It is not a landscaped garden, or a farmed piece of land. And what a relief. Because in amongst the weeds, the bushes, and the divots, are beetles, and hedgehogs, and badgers, and butterflies. When we enclosed the land and privatised the world, we bounded variety, and life, and wild creativity. Bounding knowledge and practice has the potential to do the same. Restricting our discipline confines what we can

know, what we can say, who can speak, and, more importantly I think, it restricts who can hear us.

Commoning can be a means to build new infrastructures of knowledge creation and distribution – by doing so it can give us routes to explore things we never expected. We can live in the bodies of many, many people. Its messy fluidity is its very strength. By opening walls, and becoming more organic, we allow others to enter the frame. We enable conversation, a commoning practice, because as Casarino (2008: 1) comments, ‘the common abhors monologues.’ And if we embrace the multi-sited nature of contemporary ethnography (Marcus 2002), where ethnography is created by many and varied disciplines, with many and varied aims and ideals, we can work in a world where we do not hold on, but by letting go, free ourselves to trying to figure out how to live in this unstable and chaotic world, along with others<sup>5</sup>: ‘the messed up yet shared infrastructures of experience’ as Lauren Berlant (2016: 395) so eloquently puts it.

In the last 50 years there have been many urgent moments of history, and anthropology’s tradition has been to step back and consider them and contextualise them and theorise them. But ‘the beginning of history must be lived’ (de Angelis 2007: 240), ‘because only living subjects can participate in the constitution of the mode of their interrelation.’ We refused in the 1940s to comment on human rights because we were afraid of losing our stance and supporting regimes that in promising freedom, created barriers, and essentialised discourse. They were valid concerns. But it left us out of the conversation, and our research – our much-needed research – did not help to figure out how to live in a world after conflict and holocaust and starvation and suffering, or to show the realities of the utopian ideal that human rights encompasses. A sweaty commons does not necessarily mean we need to act in haste or concede to the pressure of a world that demands more and more and more. Slow scholarship or distance can exist while we sweat. Think a marathon or an epic, not a sprint or a Vine. But our practices must be urgent and tense and present. We must claw in the mud, and smash it as we go.

Ethnography right now has the potential to do something important for the world. Many are already trying. Commoning ethnography makes a community of producers. We already are, so let’s permeate the borders and let others in. It took us 50 years as a community to make a statement on human rights that said ‘yes, we all have some.’ We should stand outside and sweat or shiver or cry or laugh with the world, and force ourselves outside the comforts of our bounds. We might get it wrong, we could get it right; I imagine it will be something in-between. It will not be perfect, but it will be something. Let’s step into the world and make ourselves, the people around us, our very discipline, sweat.

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## Notes

1. This paper was first delivered as part of the Commoning Ethnography panel at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Cultural Anthropology at Victoria University of Wellington in May 2017. It was made as a provocation, designed to elicit further conversation about the place of ethnography, and our position as anthropologists and ethnographers.
2. Although Messer (1993: 222) contends that despite this, anthropologists have been central to broadening the discourse on human rights, whilst the human rights perspective has broadened the ways anthropologists understand social justice and development.
3. I use we to denote the wider academy we belong to, which although composed of individuals, who are many and disparate, are also a community, and therefore a messy whole.
4. There are many anthropologists who for many years have been grappling with these issues; working hard to break the bounds; dismantling the hegemony. I do not mean to ignore their important work and its effects. This piece, however, is a provocation, and thus determines to ask if this is enough?
5. This is not a call for anarchy. When Elinor Ostrom argued against the commons' tragedy (Hardin 1968) and for its success, she concluded that commons 'need care and communing to work' (Wall 2017: 34). Sustainable commons have boundaries: they were used communally, but not free for all. Those using it were active in the making of its rules. They modified its norms to consider the wider system (Wall 2017: 28-29). In doing so they created an alternative norm, one that allowed for difference and change and community.

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