

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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Mine, Yours or Ours?

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ABSTRACT | This piece draws upon experiences from our private and professional lives to identify nascent models of the commons in Aotearoa. Through examining practices of shared motherhood and the sharing of cultural knowledge within the university sphere, we reveal the unequal divisions of labour that often occur in practices that seek to contribute to a social good and a common goal. As academia has increasingly embraced the idea of the commons, we propose a more critical engagement with some of the assumptions that affect how commoning projects are currently enacted, including the hidden inequities they contain and the mutual benefits possible. We also examine the tensions between benefiting from and contributing to sharing arrangements, considering the complexities of situations when less sharing is desired or when more sharing is required.

Keywords: the commons; sharing; university workspaces; politics of motherhood; Māori academics



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Introduction

The commons represents a hope-filled, restorative ideal, one that sits in contrast to the limits of private property and the harms of social exclusion. The project of commoning knowledge, spaces, and relations within academia can be found in shifts towards open access publishing and an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary collaborations, and emancipatory pedagogies. It is visible within our growing focus on ‘engagement’ and ‘impact’, or the ways in which we might make our knowledge more accessible to wide audiences, including sharing our knowledge with the communities who might most benefit. More broadly, the commons stand in contrast to capitalist enclosure, colonial dispossession, and the privatization of natural resources, and in contrast to exclusive intellectual property regimes, anti-democratic politics, and the theft of indigenous knowledge (Berlant 2016, Casarino and Negri 2008, Linebaugh 2009, Reid and Taylor 2010, Žižek 2009).

The commons pushes back against our seemingly reduced capacity to both imagine and enact novel forms of collective life and new solidarities. In light of the optimistic and utopian embrace of commoning ideals, it becomes increasingly important to consider what the ideologies and practices of commoning enable and foreclose, what they open for us and demand of us, what they reveal and what they hide from view. In this article we interrogate experiences of sharing, an ideal often seen to rest at the heart of commoning projects. We do so in order to critically explore the limits and potentialities of sharing as the basis for new common projects and spaces.

This piece draws upon experiences from our private and professional lives to identify nascent models of the commons, which in turn reveal the knotty tensions of owning and sharing. Our tone and focus here purposefully seek to contrast with those of conventional scholarly writing, where personal experiences in the academic workplace and private family sphere are so often under-acknowledged in the public work of generating intellectual ideas. We thus contribute to a wider intellectual call to unsettle what counts as the boundaries of legitimate data, labour, field, and method. This, we argue, involves acknowledging that the modes of sharing and care work that occur within the family and workspace often underpin – but are concealed within – the rewards and recognitions that individuals garner in academia. Commoning praxis does not necessarily mean inventing things anew, but recognizing, as Gibson-Graham argue, ‘the ways that we are all already in a space of commonality’ (2006: 160). At the same time as we seek to expose these too-often hidden realities and relations, we have been careful in deciding what to share. There are private and professional worlds and relationships that we touch upon here which we seek to respect and protect. Our lack of specificity in places thus reflects what Audra Simpson has termed *ethnographic refusal*, or the balance between ‘what you need to know’ and what we selectively choose to write about (2007: 72). The style with which we have written this piece thus enacts our central argument that commoning relationships often involve navigating the risks of sharing either too much or too little.

Our case studies reflect upon experiences of inhabiting roles in which one is expected, often altruistically and selflessly, to contribute to a wider social

goal, and in which one must negotiate complex questions of ownership, obligation, and recognition. Catherine's case study examines caring relationships that emerge at the intersections of family and the state, revealing how, in a situation of multiple motherhood, kinship combines both possessive and open ties simultaneously. Karena's case study explores experiences and expectations of sharing cultural knowledge within the university. Here she reveals how careful attention to the hidden complexities of sharing helps us to identify and rectify the inequalities and tensions that occur in these exchanges.

Catherine: The art of knowing when (not) to share

The anthropological scholarship on motherhood and kinship has often sought to unsettle the seeming naturalness of the nuclear family. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that, across cultures, there are multiple ways in which the identity of motherhood and the labour of mothering can be shared – by wider family members, through informal fostering arrangements, by queer parents or for surrogate children with multiple mothers, and through communal systems of living (e.g. Benkov 1994, Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne 2013, Ragoné 1994, Segalen 2001, Terrell and Modell 1994). Such examples are often used heuristically to offer a refreshing challenge to the western cult of motherhood that requires a deeply attached, possessive, and labour intensive mothering role, one that has become increasingly difficult to enact alongside the contemporary demands of work and other care commitments. What if we could re-envision motherhood, we rhetorically ask, to common it and share the load through new arrangements, incorporating more deeply fathers, partners, extended families, and whole communities into care networks? Perhaps then we might find a way out of the current inequities of our childcare arrangements.

Ideas of commoning often assume the inherent value of sharing. But sometimes sharing is not easy, is riven with conflict, and depletes people's energy rather than distributes the load. Studies of family dynamics in the wake of divorce and remarriage, for example, show how the new family dynamics that develop can cut two ways (e.g. Simpson 1994). They can increase the forms of support available to family members, and multiply the number of family ties. But they can also create competition over resources (whose room is this, whose mum is this, whose money is this), a sense of being a central or peripheral member of particular family groups, and conflicts over parental authority. Such dynamics are of course not exclusive to reconstituted families, but can apply to all family forms, including the nuclear family or extended families.

My own experiences of parenting a child who came to us out of the New Zealand foster system showed me that enacting shared motherhood within New Zealand society is a complex endeavor. Adoption is rare in New Zealand, and almost non-existent in relation to the forced removal of children from their biological parents by the state. Adoption is more closely tied to an ownership model, for it cuts the legal links between a child and their birth parents and asserts them in clear, almost unbreakable terms with the adoptive parents. By contrast, fostering maintains a legal recognition of biological family, but utilizes the logic of care to determine the custodianship of the child by others (foster families, the state).

In New Zealand, when the state decides a child can never safely return to the care of their biological parents, or when biological parents willingly give

up their rights and responsibilities to provide ongoing parental care for their child, foster parents may apply for the permanent ‘guardianship’ of a child in their care. This means that, while the child stays in the custody of a foster family until adulthood, both biological parents and foster parents are legally recognized guardians, and thus must often make joint decisions about a child’s life (such as health, education, travel, place of residence, and religion). Biological parents also sometimes pick their birth children’s foster family from a selection of profiles, and usually have court-ordered rights to visit their children.

This has been my experience with our son, who, having been voluntarily placed up for permanent fostering by his birth-mother, came to live with us when he was one day old. In the abstract, I had imagined a shared motherhood model between myself and his birth-mother, in which my son would be blessed by having two mothers who cared for him in different ways. But in reality the differences in how each of us assumed our roles and came to be recognized as mothers within a particular social and legal context meant I came to embody a motherhood role more closely aligned to the singular, primary mother figure of the nuclear family.

For the three years before the guardianship and permanency was awarded – a timeframe which is common – I was legally recognized as a ‘non kin carer’. This meant I had few legal rights and little say when engaging with the state in determining the nature of our son’s ongoing care arrangements, what I saw as best for him, or the intensive time I gave to facilitate biweekly visits with his birth-mother that the social worker had determined was necessary. A lack of legal recognition of me as a mother contrasted with the day-to-day work of mothering a baby, adjusting to life in which another’s needs became my primary focus, forming a strong attachment with my infant son, and thinking of him as ‘my responsibility’. Recognizing the validity of my mother-through-care role was crucial in giving me the confidence to stand up to unrealistic demands from the state, in allowing me to advocate for my son’s needs as the key spokesperson for those needs, and in continuing to have the courage and belief that we could make it through when the labyrinthine state processes wore us down.

Sharing guardianship is premised upon the idea that both parents can collaborate harmoniously in the care of the child, with a shared vision of the care needs of that child. Yet, the specific reasons that lead the state to permanently remove children from their biological parents in New Zealand usually need to be considered severe and concrete (rather than precautionary), and the Family Court is generally wary of permanency, requiring high thresholds of proof regarding the ongoing threat to the safety of the child. These realities, accusations, and concerns often make it difficult for such sharing relations to be harmonious. Biological parents can feel deeply angry and resentful about having their children removed, and thus can work against foster families who they see as threatening their ties to their children. Even if a birth-parent gives up their child voluntarily into the permanent foster system, conflicts can arise. Foster parents can perceive birth-parents’ behaviors as potentially damaging and dangerous for their foster children due to the difficult situations that birth-parents face (such as addiction, experiences of abuse, or mental health issues). This often makes foster parents intensely protective, and can make maintaining healthy boundaries and intimacies with biological parents hard to sustain. The sense of pressure around these issues is particularly acute in countries like New Zealand, where foster families are often small, nuclear units that receive limited amounts of care support from others or

the state. The intensive parenting required to sustain a foster family, and the desire to protect the nuclear family ideal, often make parents in these households unreceptive to relations that threaten to deplete their already stretched resources of time, energy, and emotional labour.

Moreover, the parental roles are not evenly shared, which can cause jealousy and resentment. To begin with, the foster parents have few legal rights but huge responsibilities as they seek to build secure homes for new family members, while birth parents can make numerous demands on foster families through state-sponsored legal representation that classifies them as the legal 'parents'. But over time this dynamic can flip, with foster families gradually gaining legal recognition and protections, while birth families witness (and often grieve over) the strengthening bonds that their children develop within permanent foster homes as babies grow up and develop primary attachments to their new families.

Over time, becoming a permanent foster mother – or just 'mother', as I came to see myself and others came to see and call me – required me to care for my son by developing an, at times, possessive and fiercely protective primary mother role, which also empowered me to make decisions about our shared life and my own wellbeing. Asserting possession of our son in this way was thus also about asserting self-possession in the face of relations and legal arrangements that I felt were erasing me from view. Ownership here is not akin to the Lockean liberal and individualist idea of being able to do what one wishes to a thing with impunity. Rather, as Rosalind Petchesky (1995) argues, it involved one's right to 'keep others out' at a safe distance, and to stop others from depleting one's ability to care for and protect dependents and the self simultaneously.

Discussions with social workers and other foster parents revealed that, over time, these arrangements between foster parents and biological parents often end up not functioning because the ideological premise upon which the system is based – the active engagement of the birth-mother/parents, and the open, welcoming engagement of the foster parents – is undermined by the reality of how these relationships unfold. As a social worker said to me, 'Most of the time, the birth-parents fade out, they can't continue to keep that sort of relationship up'. Another social worker told me that, for birth-mothers, it can be deeply painful to stay in touch with a child who, willingly or unwillingly, they have had to give up. Contact with the child becomes a too-difficult reminder of loss or a sense of failure. Moreover, mainstream society offers few positive cultural scripts for how a mother who has birthed a child can form an ongoing relationship that is not intensive, dutiful and sacrificial, and which is not imbued with social shame and stigma for her non-primary role. In the end, the permanent fostering system functions by failing to function as it is ideologically designed to do, and by falling back into the nuclear family model in which foster parents come to closely resemble adoptive parents in everything but name. The model of shared motherhood tends to fail, as the different parties are set up in an adversarial, yet dependent, arrangement that requires them to draw up limits, assert some ties over others, and live with the consequences of how daily care and its absence build certain relationship and reduces others.

Yet this picture is not always simply one of boundary maintenance, but of care in multiple directions. Despite the challenges, I have sought to ensure the continuation of birth ties, and thus the long-term wellbeing of my son, in a culture

that perceives the substance of blood as a constitutive element of personhood, identity, and kinship. In recognizing this, I have had to take on primary responsibility for maintaining the relationship between my son and his birth-mother – organizing regular visits, encouraging them to speak on the phone, sharing photos, even supporting her with the emotional labour of birth-mothering by, for example, helping her to buy his birthday presents. A necessary enactment of both a sense of ownership and sharing can thus coexist in a complex tension, and lies at the heart of what Petchesky refers to as a ‘maternal, caretaking concept of ownership’ (1995: 397). This bears resemblance to Annette Weiner’s idea of inalienable possessions, in which birth and foster mothers must work out ways to collaboratively or adversarially ‘keep-while-giving’ (1992).

The lesson of my story is not that more radical and shared approaches to parenting and care are unimaginable or impossible in our society. It does however offer a warning about how much responsibility we can ask particular individuals to bear for commoning projects within a wider societal setting that remains structurally untransformed. In other words, unless we re-envisage how we practice kinship, family and personhood more broadly, we will only be able to offer limited social, material, legal or ideological support to those we ask to create families in novel ways. The parallels to academia are clear here. Unless we re-imagine the academy more broadly, from the bottom up and the top down, we risk asking people to enact new forms of sharing and commoning at a personal cost, in a space that is designed to channel and reward them otherwise, and which may not recognize their labour or contributions. Going against the grain can sometimes be heroic and transformative. But it can also feel exhausting and futile.

As I wrote this piece, sharing care for a sick toddler with my husband, and juggling it with my commitments to writing, my son Christian has been playing two of his favorite games with me. He’s practicing his independence, like all New Zealand children must, and goes through phases of responding to my requests with a defiant smile, saying, ‘No, no, no, Christian says no way!’ Children teach you that maternal possessiveness and its authority regularly reaches its limits, as children in our society have multiple ways of charting their own path in contradistinction to the care and its obligations that they receive. This draws to mind Marilyn Strathern’s point regarding the links between ownership and possession, or how, ‘simply owning what you have does not preclude its alienability’ (1988: 162). Christian makes me reflect that all forms of ownership, be they formal or informal, conventional or experimental, have unintended ends, boundaries that are breached, and trajectories that we cannot completely control.

My son is also learning possessive pronouns, and possessiveness more generally. He’s taken to grabbing me round the neck and shouting, ‘You are MINE, Mummy is *just* mine.’ He reminds me how the relational dynamics of possession and ownership can cut both ways. Indeed, such an insight bears reflecting on within a scholarly domain, in thinking about how others come to feel that they have strong claims on us, our skills, time and knowledge, be they our students, interlocutors, collaborators, allies, a community, or our academic friends. And this too has its necessary limits. The demands and expectations others have on us to share our labour, knowledge and spaces is the thorny balance to which Karena now turns.

Karena: Experiences of sharing Māori knowledge in an academic environment.

The concept of sharing undoubtedly underpins an academic environment, and a number of key tensions arise in this complex arrangement of the commoning of both knowledge and space in a university community. One of the assets of a university is its significant platform to increase the visibility of diverse indigenous and minority perspectives which are under-represented in mainstream society. In Mason Durie's discussion of indigenous participation in tertiary education in New Zealand, he stated 'universities have the potential to demonstrate social cohesion, and also to prepare graduates for leadership roles in promoting a society that can model inclusiveness without demanding assimilation' (2009). However, reflecting on some Māori academic experiences of sharing in the university environment raises questions about some of the inequalities and invisibilities in these types of sharing arrangements.

One of the courses I teach at Victoria University of Wellington is centered thematically on the Māori language craft of *karanga* and *whaikōrero*, formal oratorical roles on the marae.¹ The lectures for this course are booked in the meeting house of the university marae, sensible both for the content and lecturer of the course; with the relationship between the marae and many Māori academics described by Addis et al. is 'akin to the chemistry laboratory for chemists, the gymnasium for physical educators, or the art studio for artists' (2011: 545). However, the marae is more than solely a laboratory or teaching, learning, and research space – the overlapping institutional and cultural demands of this inherently communal and multi-purpose space can bring about situations where determining how it may be fairly shared is not straightforward.

Consider, for example, a situation where another department might request the use of the marae's meeting house for a one-off visit for one of their courses during lecture times booked for this Māori oratory course. This situation may well be particular to the marae, as it is difficult to imagine another course coordinator being approached to move their lecture from its usual venue because another course would like to visit that lecture theatre during that same time-slot.

Now, in the interest of upholding the mana of the marae by being hospitable to guests, Māori etiquette may suggest it would be appropriate to find another venue for the Māori language lecture. Doing so could also, arguably, further a broader social aim of increasing visibility and understanding of Māori culture and community through enabling a cultural experience for those who may have had little exposure to things Māori in wider society. However, both of these potential benefits are predicated on a definite and immediate cost which, in this situation at least, would be borne solely by the Māori language students, who would be inconvenienced by being dislocated from their most obvious and pedagogically appropriate learning environment in order to free the space for others. Whether this also implies that the needs of these Māori language students are less important than those of others merits consideration. Temporary imbalances in the distribution of benefits within a sharing relationship are not uncommon, but in order for a sharing arrangement to be equitable, and not exploitative of one party, it needs a foundation of reciprocity, an expectation of eventual quid pro quo. How is this reconciled in sharing situations where the

benefits for one party are immediate and obvious, but the benefits for the other are less so?

These tensions extend beyond the sharing of a physical space and into sharing of knowledge and ideas. At Victoria University of Wellington, enriching course content through the inclusion of diverse perspectives is becoming standard practice across the institution, reflecting the university's aim to recognize the Treaty of Waitangi, cultivate social inclusion, and support cultural wellbeing (Victoria University of Wellington 2014). To achieve this, Māori academics throughout the university are regularly relied upon to provide a range of support outside of our own Schools – including giving guest lectures, devising course content, translating course titles and student submissions, and recommending teaching resources. Individually, these requests are small, and are often so regarded by both those asking and those giving. Cumulatively however, they can add significantly to overall workload, especially given that opportunities to reciprocate are rarely obvious.

Māori academics recognize this service as mutually beneficial to Māori and the wider university community, contributing an important, if not immediate, social good for the various communities we serve, both within and beyond the university (Kidman and Chu 2015). But while this is mutually beneficial, the workload is rarely mutually borne. In these settings, it appears that *the inviting* of Māori academics to do this work is considered an act of generosity, this invitation thus constituting one half of a reciprocal arrangement; the reciprocation of my labour as a Māori academic is being given the opportunity to provide it.

As noted above, a temporary imbalance of effort in a sharing arrangement is common, but when an imbalance in contributions becomes normalized and/or accepted, it renders the arrangement exploitative and, therefore, ultimately both unethical and unsustainable. Given that this academic input is critical in enriching the academic environment and ensuring the achievement of the shared aims of the wider university, the challenge is for the wider university community to devise creative solutions to address the imbalance in workload in this sharing arrangement.

A first challenging step is to identify opportunities for genuine reciprocity. This can be particularly challenging when, given that only one party has expertise in this area, the contributions can rarely be like for like. In order to address this labour imbalance, potential solutions could include compensation through resources to support regular teaching commitments and research opportunities. It may also involve weighting these contributions within an academic's workload model, and recognizing these contributions in any evaluations of performance. It might also include consideration of this unique service to the university shared by Māori faculty members when considering the staffing numbers of those academic cohorts relied upon to provide this service. Other assistance could be created through greater opportunities for non-Māori staff to actively engage in developing their own knowledge of diverse perspectives rather than assuming that Māori themes and content should exclusively be discussed by Māori academics.

An underlying principle of the concept of the commons is the notion of mutual benefit (Casarino and Negri 2008, Gibson-Graham 2006). The examples I have discussed show that the benefits of the commons can be recognized as genuinely mutual, but not equitably shared. This often results in uneven demands on contributors to the sharing arrangement and, consequently, imbalanced

contributions to advancing these shared societal aims (see also Berlant 2016). Sharing, at face value, can seem simple and self-evident. But efforts to build a genuinely co-constructed commons, and especially one intended to rectify social inequities and invisibilities, must first attend to some of the complexities hidden within the sharing arrangement.

Final thoughts

Our case studies show the often hidden and under-acknowledged costs of the labour of sharing that can undermine the autonomy, authority and agency of particular parties. Ownership and practices of sharing offer both challenges and opportunities for commoning relationships within academia. In bolstering or creating shared common spaces we need to be attentive to the ways in which care labour can inform ideas of ownership and how these might be entangled with notions of self-possession. Equally we should consider how sharing and commoning might, in an imbalanced labour arrangement, default to an exploitative relationship.

Our two case studies show the complexities of sharing, both when less sharing is desired and also when more is required. In some circumstances, we need to listen carefully when colleagues, collaborators and research partners assert a desire to own, control, represent and fight for their communities, spaces, and ideas, rather than simply seeing these as acts of exclusion when we are left out. In other circumstances, what is required is a deeper commitment to ensuring that sharing arrangements contain within them the right flows and forms of labour and reciprocity for each party involved. We need to remember that an invitation to share and be part of a conversation, no matter how important, is not the same as negotiating the daily work of sharing a task or project and being a true partner within collective spaces. We also must be mindful of what types of labour, sacrifice and care work are performed to build and maintain any collaborations and common spaces, by academics or by those with whom we work. What counts or does not count, is visible or invisible, in the care of any commons will determine who is excluded, who is included, who benefits, and who does not from these relationships.

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Notes

1. For further reading on this cultural space see Higgins and Moorfield (2004).

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