

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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## Welcome to Commoning Ethnography

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The two words, commoning and ethnography, are funny words. Neither is particularly straightforward on its own, in combination they must seem maddeningly obtuse. This is ironic given that when combined they aspire, or at least, raise the question of what it means to be included in ethnographic research, writing, teaching, and thinking.

What does it mean to suggest that ethnography might be a site, source, or scene of commoning? What does combining the idea of commoning with the practice of ethnography allow us to think about or to do that we might not otherwise? Why create a journal dedicated to such an obviously paradoxical thought experiment?

These open questions are at the heart of this project. To be completely transparent: We do not yet know what it means to place the figure of the commons



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at the heart of ethnographic practice. We are not yet sure of how thinking the commons alongside our ethnographic work will transform the kinds of questions we ask, research we undertake, teaching we devise, or writing we produce. We are unsure of the boundaries or parameters of this project of commoning. We do not yet know what kinds of inclusions or exclusions we will create in the process of thinking the commons and ethnography together. We do not yet have a theory of commoning ethnography. Perhaps this is the point.

Despite this uncertainty now seems precisely the right time to try to experiment with new forms of knowledge production and to devise new infrastructures to think through those forms of praxis (e.g. Fortun and Fortun 2015). Here, we find the figure of the commons to be provocative even if it is unsettling. Rather than understanding the commons as a finished or known project, we undertake this effort to begin from a new premise altogether.

Starting with the idea of the commons has pushed us to ask hard questions about the sorts of knowledge we make, the kinds of poetics we prefer, the sorts of publics we generate (and alienate), and about our roles, rights, and capacities with respect to the forms of labour and property emerging from existing scholarly infrastructures. Thinking ethnography through the commons has pushed us to consider the sorts of boundaries, inclusions and exclusions, that structure our research. We have considered how notions of property, possessive individualism, and ownership shape the kinds of communities we enrol in our work and how we ask them to be enrolled. It has prompted us to reflect upon our own practices to consider where we have gotten such tasks right and where we might have missed the mark.

Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where this project is currently based, the idea of the commons has prompted us to examine how ongoing practices of settler colonialism shape not only our understandings of property and its discontents, but also the limitations of the notion of the commons itself. It has prompted long, often intense conversations about the relationship between Te Ao Māori, and ethnographic praxis and the production of anthropological knowledge. These conversations are still very much in motion.

By raising the idea of the commons and the practice of commoning, we have not endeavoured to provide either a revolutionary new theory for anthropological or ethnographic research, but rather to suggest a different set of premises from which to begin asking questions. Along the way, we have not positioned ourselves as knowers or owners of this knowledge, but rather as actors trying hard to think about the boundaries, practices, and forms of knowledge production as we make them. This first issue of *Commoning Ethnography* is a first, tentative step on this path. We are not seeking to mark out our own scholarly territory or hail a bold new intellectual turn, and instead offer this journal as an invitation to think together. We are a collective of ethnographers working towards something emergent, creating a hand-made space ripe for co-production and continued re-interpretation by and with a wide variety of collaborators.

In the process of making this issue, we have enrolled friends, colleagues, and associates, mainly because these are the people we've been in conversation with over the last two years. At the same time, we've been pushed, trying to find

space in our own professional and personal lives to make sense of the possibilities of new scholarly infrastructures, which make it easier to produce a journal than ever before, but also reconfigure the infrastructural labour pushing more work downwards into our already busy lives. Concretely this has meant trying to work out how we build a set of practices that can deal with the complexities of life, such as providing care for parents and partners, having babies, and caring for children with special needs. Rather than backgrounding these realities as external ‘pressures’, we seek to build and maintain a journal that accounts for and even renders visible the non-academic labours essential to our wider relational lives. In other words, how might we create open access infrastructures in ways that are liveable for our bodies, our families, and our lifeworlds?

We also hope to engage with debates about the political economy and ethics of publishing that have been growing in recent years. For example, in producing this first issue, and in line with recent critiques of the oft-invisible and precarious work practices that produce anthropology journals, we have avoided the use of unpaid graduate labour in the production process.<sup>1</sup> Beyond this, we are considering ways to engage with recent debates about the politics of citational practice, the inequities of peer review, and the geopolitics of who gets included in the networks of prestige that journals generate and reinforce (e.g. Bal 2018, Weiss 2018). In this vein, over the following year we aim to extend the editorial advisory board to include more scholars and practitioners located outside of Australasian and Euro-American academic institutions, and are reflecting on how to do this meaningfully, in ways that facilitate generative connections and exchanges across geographic borders.<sup>2</sup>

This journal is thus what we see as a modest step towards initiating a new conversation among ethnographers that might both interrogate the boundaries that form our work while also challenging us to draw and redraw them as we go. The pieces in this first issue reflect our early thinking along these lines. Our contributions by Fiona McCormack, Alex Golub, Nomi Stone, and Luca Sebastiani and Ariana Sánchez Cota reflect on ideas of commoning and the boundaries of ethnographic work in different ways, opening pathways and raising problems as they go. McCormack’s article considers how Aotearoa New Zealand’s fishing quotas reveal the complex anti-politics of commoning, in which notions of common pool resources are used to dispossess and restrict indigenous peoples’ access to the sea, deepening settler exclusions. Golub’s piece asks us to consider how the emergence of ‘professional anthropology’ in the inter-war period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a critical time of boundary drawing. In wresting control from a diverse array of thinkers, which he calls ‘amateurs’, whose alternative socio-political commitments inspired different forms of writing and thinking, the new professional anthropology opened possibilities for the legitimization of anthropological research in the academy but closed other possible futures and silenced many alternative voices in the process. Stone asks us to think about how the uses of poetry might transform both ethnography’s audiences and also the kinds of knowledge such research produces. Finally, Sebastiani and Cota reflect upon the way in which ethnographic praxis might enable or truncate activist solidarities within their work within the M15 movements in Spain

The issue also contains a special section, *Debating the Ethnography Commons in Aotearoa*, which contains a set of shorter provocations first delivered at Victoria University of Wellington in May of 2017 to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the anthropology programme. These pieces mark the tentative origins of this conversation and our efforts to rethink ethnography through the figure of the commons. Across the set of papers we not only ask what the ethnography commons is and what we might do with it, but also engage in a set of conversations around the value of property and its discontents, the role of capitalism in structuring scholarship, and the ways in which unsettled questions of sovereignty have underpinned the relationship between Māori and Anthropology. Situated as they may be within that specific conversation, these papers offer early reflections, answers, and punchy provocations for thinking the commons and ethnography together in the aim of producing new futures for both.

We hope this journal will become a space that challenges the boundaries of knowledge-making, and facilitates robust debate about the institutions and practices that guard those boundaries. We are particularly interested in critically considering the lines we draw between academic and non-academic spheres, between the subjects and objects of research, and the creative knowledge practices that flow across and between these boundaries. In our call for contributions on our website we provide guidelines for a variety of submission types, but we also welcome other, alternative forms of work that we have not considered or conceived of yet, which challenge us to reconsider *what* counts as knowledge and *who* gets to count in producing it.

We are inspired here by Lauren Berlant's sense of the commons as a kind of broken infrastructure that demands constant renewal through collective engagement (2016). In launching this journal, we aim to begin a conversation that includes diverse actors, allows for new forms of knowledge production, and helps us rethink how we might remake our scholarly infrastructure in more inclusive ways for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is an open-ended conversation that we will renew each year with a new issue. We are very pleased to invite you to participate in that conversation. Please see our open call for papers for further information on how to contribute to the next issue of *Commoning Ethnography* or our emerging blog hosted on the Victoria University Ethnography Commons Website – [www.ethnographycommons.org](http://www.ethnographycommons.org)

## Notes

1. In the production process of this issue, we have relied upon the labour of salaried academic, administrative and library staff, and graduate students who we have paid a living wage for the work they do for the journal. We are also considering ways to conduct peer review processes that avoid reliance on the unremunerated labour of precariously-positioned academics.
2. We are particularly interested in working against what Sara Ahmed describes as the largely symbolic 'non-performance' of diversity that is so common in academic institutions (2012).

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