

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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Editorial

Nayantara Sheoran Appleton

Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington

Lorena Gibson

Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington

Introduction

Like a second album, the second volume of a new journal can be a tough proposition. Our first volume set the tone for this project, introducing the idea of the commons and asking how the practice of commoning might generate new conversations about ethnography. When the journal launched last year, it was not a culmination, but rather a start: of generative conversations, of relationships with a readership interested in the intrinsic political potential of commoning with/in ethnography. In this volume, we tune in to and amplify questions about ethnographic practice as a form of knowledge production. In particular, we engage with the question put forward in the first volume: “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?” (Elinoff and Trundle 2018: 1). Building on that, here we ask: what if ethnography is a source of commoning differently?



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This question of commoning differently, also taken up by the articles in this volume, encourages us to engage with emerging scholarship and a politics of uncommoning. Drawing again on a musical metaphor, we see uncommoning as a *counterpoint* to commoning. Musicians will tell you that a good counterpoint requires two qualities: (1) a meaningful or harmonious relationship between the lines (a ‘vertical’ consideration – i.e., dealing with harmony); and (2) some degree of independence or individuality within the lines themselves (a ‘horizontal’ consideration, dealing with melody). Uncommoning, as a political framework for shaping ethnographic commoning, is indeed such a counterpoint. We are inspired by the essay ‘Uncommoning Nature’ by Marisol de la Cadena (2016) where she draws on the Indigenous struggles with development projects for ‘the common good.’ In pushing back, in *counterpointing* the narrative on commoning, she allows us to see the complex entanglements between different human and non-human worlds with shared interests as well as uncommonalities. It is in this uncommoning that she locates ways to work beyond difference and the human/nature divide.

Uncommoning, as a framework to understand and reclaim the commons as a progressive political space, is further highlighted by de la Cadena and Mario Blaser in a special issue of *Anthropologica* in 2017. In their issue introduction they unpack community and commons, writing that the:

[...] idea of community denotes a shared domain, which, in light of our perception of uncommonalities, begs questions of scale, scope and relations: How far does the shared domain that constitutes a community extend? What kinds of things does it include, and what kinds of responsibilities do these things demand? What are the possible relations between the commons and the uncommons? In short, the idea of the commons and of commoning call forth an exploration of what making “things” (objects, identities, concepts, ideas and so on) common implies, especially where things might (also) be uncommon (Blaser and Cadena 2017: 186).

This emergent conversation on uncommoning helps us see that to common is not about flattening or settling, but rather about continually making space for dissonance and unsettling.

The contributions to this second volume of *Commoning Ethnography (CE)* collectively push for a commons that does not rest on a singular narrative of what commoning ought to look like. In different ways, these submissions uncommon the commoning project, creating progressive spaces for an ethnographic commons. (Re)claiming the commons to recognise and make space for difference, and to *differently* engage with the conversation on commoning, is a politically vital project for our time. The articles in this second volume of *CE*, then, offer us, in a very nuanced tenor, the differences we need to make space for in the commons or in commoning projects.

For example, Katharine McKinnon and Kelly Dombroski see the human body as a tool or instrument needed for truly engaged ethnography. In placing

their bodies within the space of ethnographic practice and also the neoliberal university, they foreground the academic body as a political refusal of the erasure asked of women within the neoliberal university. The ‘common good’ of a non-bodied imagined equality in the university is upended here, to instead ask for recognition of different bodies – including women and mothers. In highlighting their bodily differences, they ask the university (and academia) to uncommon its practices in order to work towards a embodied commons. Eve Vincent, in the second article, similarly pushes academic and research narratives to make space for ‘pain narratives’ and ‘critical storytelling.’ She highlights her own positionality as a settler anthropologist working in Aboriginal communities, to not erase difference or arrive at idealized narratives of ethnographic productions, but rather to magnify and demystify the different relations that shape the research process. This writing, evocative and honest, opens up space for commoning the ethnographic process *differently* in relationality with our interlocutors.

The next two articles, also in the spirit of commoning ethnographic knowledge production and ethnography, unsettle the ways in which medical anthropologists and ethnographers view and share their research results. In Pauline Herbst’s work, the graphic comic serves to make available an accessible narrative about a complex medical condition. This different way of sharing, this different ethnography, is an example of unsettling academic authority and of making space for difference in knowledge production. Similarly, Alexandra Widmer, in revisiting a colonial narrative of a medical encounter between colonial authority and local Pacific sorcerer resistance, provides us with different stories of the same encounter. One singular event is recast through different lenses. It is an act that creatively makes space for voices previously unheard. It *uncommons* the narrative by revisiting and unsettling the presumed settled.

Each of these articles, in their own divergent brilliance, have been fascinating for us to read and engage with. We also note another (minor) difference, or opportunity, to uncommon with the goal to common ethnographic practice. Each of the submissions in this second volume are from ethnographers, but not all are from anthropologists. Thus, as we continue to probe commoning and ethnography alongside each other, we also make space for the disciplinary uncommoning that enables an ethnographic commoning.

A few notes about our editorial decisions in this volume. The issue features articles and text with non-English language words. We have not used a ‘standard’ practice over the author’s decisions to italicise, or not italicise, those words. We have also been careful not to change author’s voices in these submissions, with the clear aim that each different contribution, much like each member of a band, comes together to make for a much richer textual (or musical) experience. It is our ardent hope that in each of these texts you can actually *hear* the authors as they engage with the idea of ethnographic practices and outputs. Finally, while the authors have all engaged with reviewer feedback during the peer-review process, we also listened when some of them were not willing to take on the changes requested for various reasons. For some, accepting all reviewer requests would soften the overall tensions they were trying to highlight – especially when engaging with the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research

practice. We have made these decisions deliberately and hope it appears in the spirit of commoning editorial authority.

Special Section: Labours of Collaboration

Our concern with minimalising editorial authority is reflected in the special section on the Labours of Collaboration. This section is comprised of four pieces: three articles and one performance video accompanied by a transcription. Each of these pieces in their own way shed light on the *very* different forms of collaborative labour as sites of commoning knowledge and ethnographic production. The section has an introduction which maps out the conversations on collaborations that have shaped our own collaborative labours, and also situates the four pieces within larger debates and stories about collaboration.

The four pieces come from a diverse range of academic spaces and encourage a truly multi-faceted engagement with the labours of collaboration. In the first article, ‘NGO-Research Collaborations and Conflicts’, legal anthropologist Amanda Reinke demonstrates the complexities and possibilities of doing collaborative work with/for non-governmental organisations. The second piece is a collective video performance (and transcript) by Beaudelaine Pierre, Naimah Petigny, and Richa Nagar, entitled ‘Performing Embodied Translations: Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being.’ Introduced by Sima Shakhsari, it is an innovative resistance to standardized academic expectations around gaining and presenting knowledge.

The third piece brings the conversation on collaboration in ethnographic research to our own local context in Aotearoa. Rachael Fabish, in ‘Pākehā working with Māori – Activists and Academics’, makes visible the discussions that can shape the way non-Indigenous researchers need to listen to and learn from Indigenous people in different spaces – i.e., spaces designed and maintained with Indigenous worldviews prioritised. In the final article in this section, ‘The Benefits, Challenges, and Disincentives of Interdisciplinary Collaboration’, authors Jennifer Lanterman and Sarah Blithe draw on their diverse academic backgrounds to highlight the how deeply entrenched academic systems do not always recognise or support interdisciplinary scholarship.

Collaborative work, as we outline in the section introduction, is not easy. It is a result of multiple entanglements and contestations, but one which is closer to the intellectual and emotional grounding of the commons. Collaborative labours dilute power and redistribute the agentive possibilities across human and non-human spaces. Collaborative labours lay bare the unease, tensions, and negotiations that lead to commoning projects, and they lead to spaces rife with potential to take us beyond the colonial and capitalist extractive private property model we are so deeply enmeshed in. Collaboration, like commoning, is a political project that ethnographers need to attend to if they hope participate in de-centered knowledge production.

This special section on collaboration is the start, rather than an end, of an important conversation on the relationship(s) between collaboration and commoning. As Silvia Federici repeatedly reminds us, there can be ‘no commons without community’ (Federici 2011a; 2011b; 2014). Thus, for us to collaborate is

not necessarily *to common*, but there can be no commoning without a commitment to different collaborative labours.

New Feature: Interview Transcripts

In the spirit of collaboration and creating space for different ways of engaging with knowledge, we have initiated a new feature in *CE*. This feature will include transcripts of interviews or podcasts that speak to the idea and practice of the commons. This is an opportunity to use the *CE* journal platform to amplify certain conversations that have already appeared in audio format elsewhere. It allows us to examine up close the nuances of commoning projects in different spaces – physical and intellectual.

In this second volume of *CE*, we include a transcript of an interview with the Karrabing Film Collective by David Boarder Giles and Melinda Hinkson, with Timothy Neale producing it for the *Conversations in Anthropology@Deakin* podcast. The Karrabing Film Collective comprises of Lorraine Lane, Cecilia Lewis, Elizabeth Povinelli, Linda Yarrowin, and Sandra Yarrowin. In the interview, they highlight how their Collective works to bring ways of life from their parents' and grandparents' times to bear on the contemporary, amongst other topics. They highlight the political potential rife in everyday collective practices. The Collective is a commoning project on Aboriginal lands, taking on the labour of commoning simultaneously in uncommon spaces like the academic, visual, and everyday.

We hope this new feature of *CE* allows us to make available and boost the signal of conversations around commoning, collectives, and collaborations that are happening in different (largely non-textual) formats.

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We also appreciate the support and camaraderie of our colleagues in the two spaces we occupy: Cultural Anthropology and the Centre for Science in Society at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington. Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, Jeff Sissons, Eli Elinoff, Catherine Trundle, Caroline Bennett, Grant Jun Otzuki, Tarapuhi Vaeau, Janepicha Cheva-Isarakul, Jennifer de Saxe, Rebecca Priestly, Rhian Salmon, Tim Corballis, James Beattie, Pauline Harris, Laura Kranz, Hazel Godfrey, Maria Risoli, and Courtney Addison – thank you for all you do for us every day. We would also like to acknowledge the additional support we have received from Eli, Courtney, and Michael for our editorials in this issue. Thank you both for reading this work and providing feedback on short notice.

The peer-engaged review process we employ is integral to *Commoning Ethnography*. For that, we thank our reviewers for their critical and generative engagement with the articles in this issue. This non-blinded review process has instilled a layer of rigorous engagement with the scholarship, thereby shaping the conversations on commoning here in these pages and beyond. Your contributions are immensely valuable and we thank you for your time and generosity.

Also, much appreciation for Lilian Klein at Milk and Honey who checked in on us as we wrote and ensured our tea kettles and coffee cups were always filled. This issues would have been impossible without the sustained care and caffeine provided in our little staff café.

Finally, we would like to thank Debbie Evans in the School of Social and Cultural Studies, and Stella Ivory, a recent graduate of the Cultural Anthropology programme. You are the best team of proof readers we could have hoped for. Thank you!!!

Concluding Thoughts

To some, this volume may appear as a musical duet between its two editors. However, for us, it is anything but. As should be clear by our acknowledgements, we have not done this work on our own. In many ways, working on the second volume of this journal is comparable to releasing an album, where musicians, instruments, recording equipment, sound engineers, producers, album cover designers, record pressers, and audience all contribute to the overall musical experience. For us, when talking about this issue, the musical tenor evoked is one of the *qawwali*, a *Mehfil-e-Sama*, where different voices, ideas, and texts come together in rhythmic and melodic way.

This is the second chapter, second album, second rendition of a discussion on commoning and ethnography that started in 2017. We look forward to continuing to engage with you, our readers, on these and other issues over the next few years with/in forthcoming issues. To that end, we invite you to contribute to this conversation via articles, poetry, fiction, photo-essays, videos, performances, graphics, and other innovative ways. Please see our open call for papers for information on how can contribute to the next issue of *Commoning Ethnography*.

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Nayantara Sheoran Appleton

Centre for Science in Society | Pūtaiao ki t e Pāpori
Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington
Aotearoa New Zealand
Nayantara.S.Appleton@vuw.ac.nz

Lorena Gibson

Cultural Anthropology Programme
Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington
Aotearoa New Zealand
Lorena.Gibson@vuw.ac.nz