

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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Introducing Issue Three

The Editorial Collective

Eli Elinoff, Lorena Gibson and Catherine Trundle

Victoria University of Wellington

The year 2020 has, to put it very mildly, been a wild one. It has been a year of disease, a year of fire, a year of violence and a year of profound disagreement. It has been a year that has, at times, crawled and, at other times, been a blur of manic change. It has been a year of frantic, urgent mobility followed by long periods of stasis. Some of this slowness and immobility has been welcome, casting a new light on previously harried lives; other times the year has felt unbearably uncertain and confining.

Like everything else, our academic lives have also transformed radically. Our daily work, our global collaborations, our international connections, and our relationships with students have been disrupted. Things we used to take for granted, like sitting in a room with students, friends and colleagues and thinking together, are no longer possible. We now attempt to build a common intellectual community over vast distances through technological mediation, encountering both the possibilities and limits of that way of living all at once: Nice to see you all! We can't hear you. You're still on mute.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the changes wrought by COVID have had their own character: we experienced a period of significant lockdown, but we have also enjoyed periods of freedom and movement. In some parts of the world this openness must seem like a dream. Indeed, the distance of these shaky islands from our academic comrades in other places, at times, feels profound. At the same time, our year has brought its own convulsions. Like other places we have moved from in-person teaching to online teaching and back again and back again. We have wrestled with the implications of these changes on our students and ourselves.

Without international students, the cracks in our universities' economic models have grown wider. Along with rest of the sector, Aotearoa New Zealand's universities also careen from managerial restructure to managerial restructure. We wrestle with what to do with ongoing research agendas and collaborations staged in other parts of the world now on pause.

This issue has taken shape within this context, providing a welcome space to continue our common intellectual work. Our authors hail from around the globe and have each experienced different aspects of this volatility in different ways at different times. Despite these challenges, their commitment to this project shines through in the deep and thought-provoking writing that composes this year's issue. Through it all, these authors kept up with editorial deadlines, engaged with their collaborators, and produced magnificent thinking for *Commoning Ethnography* Volume 3. The Editorial Collective is so grateful to them for this.

The issue features a special collection entitled *Trial by Fire*. In the introductory piece guest editors Rachel Douglas-Jones, Nayanika Mathur, Catherine Trundle, and Tarapuhi Vaeau probe the underlying heroic assumptions embedded within the initiatory rites of immersive fieldwork, and the personal consequences and costs that fieldworkers sometimes bear. In the subsequent essays, Vivian Choi, Mythri Jegathesan, Madeline Donald, Malini Sur and Malvika Sharma all share moments from their own field research and reflect upon its lasting impacts. In discussing the vulnerabilities and violence to which they were exposed, these scholars chart the ways in which the field is never neatly contained, how it exceeded the boundaries of time and space, how it haunted the writing process, and how it challenged any simple categories we might utilize to divide researcher from researched.

Essays in the collection explore what happens when the taken for granted power dynamics of ethnography are inverted and researchers are exposed to tremendous risk, psychological harm, and, sometimes, bodily injury. Yet the pieces also complicate any simple binary between vulnerability and privilege. As these pieces show, such experiences force us to rethink the kinds of tropes that shape debates about power and agency in ethnographic research. The first of these pieces, by Yasmeen Arif, also asks us to question the troubling heroic tropes of ethnography. These, she points out, are not available to all, and yet they drive venerated academic styles of narration, scholarly identities, our imaginings of ethnographic 'adventure' and 'impact', and our unspoken expectations regarding the rites of passage through which scholarly disciplines are entered and distinctions are earned.

Beyond the special section, two pieces, the first by Michael Cepek and the second by Amy Kennemore and Nancy Postero, return to our journal's ongoing engagement with questions of collaboration. Cepek's piece describes his profound commitment to activism and his wide-ranging collaborations with Cofán communities in their struggles with oil extraction in Amazonian Ecuador. Cepek raises the question of his own personal commitments to friends and interlocutors in the community by probing two critical questions: What counts as sustained, politically engaged collaboration in Anthropology and what happens when your collaborators' visions of politics transform from under your feet, diverging from your own? Rather than solving such questions, Cepek brings us through his own efforts to make sense of these questions and to transform himself alongside and with his collaborators.

Kennemore and Postero's piece tackles similar questions about the ethics and political possibilities of collaboration. They do so by examining their own projects while also leading us through a wide-ranging review of how these questions have been answered by Black and Indigenous scholars from around the world. By linking such critical theories of collaboration, with special attention to Latin America and Aotearoa, with their own experiences as White ethnographers working with Indigenous collaborators in Bolivia, they highlight some of the essential debates raised by collaborative methods and also highlight the limits and binds of this style of work. Their work, read alongside Cepek's, draws out how these questions have been wrestled with by Latin Americanists working in that region's diverse indigenous landscape and extends the journal's engagement in this long conversation in ethnographic research.

Finally, we are pleased to offer a debut slice of the English language version of Claudio Sopranzetti, Sara Fabbri, and Chiara Natalucci's graphic ethnography, *The King of Bangkok*. Originally published in Italian and then subsequently translated into Thai and now English (University of Toronto Press 2021), *The King of Bangkok* tells the life story of an urban migrant who travels to Bangkok from northeastern Thailand to make a living. Working in reverse, the narrative follows Nok, a blind lottery ticket salesman as he sells his last tickets in an effort to return home. In the process, the book brings readers through Thailand's radical political and economic transformation and Nok's political awakening in the process. The selection we present here offers a small portion of that story—Nok's journey to the resort island of Koh Pha-Ngan—alongside an interview with the authors detailing their working process and the relationship between this text and Sopranzetti's more conventional academic ethnographic work. We ask them about the potential of graphic ethnography to bring scholarly insights to wider audiences. They also consider the effects that this version of the story has had on the ground in Thailand.

Taken together, the contributions to this third issue of *Commoning Ethnography* speak to the journal's core provocations. They explore the way in which ethnography exceeds the boundaries of the Academy and connects scholarly knowledge to other intellectual and artistic modes of knowing and doing. And they probe the complex ethics and politics of ethnographic knowledge production in innovated ways.

Eli Elinoff, Lorena Gibson and Catherine Trundle

School of Social and Cultural Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
PO Box 600
Wellington
New Zealand

eli.elinoff@vuw.ac.nz

lorena.gibson@vuw.ac.nz

catherine.trundle@vuw.ac.nz