

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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Introducing Volume 4

The Commoning Ethnography Editorial Collective
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Welcome to Volume 4 of *Commoning Ethnography*.

When we began formulating the foundation for this project back in 2017 our idea was to develop a journal that would bring together questions related to the production of ethnographic knowledge. We knew this was a very open remit for a journal, so we pushed ourselves to define our focus more clearly by asking our contributors to explore issues related to ethnographic method, praxis, pedagogy, and form.

By foregrounding ‘commoning’ among these questions we were particularly interested in emphasising ‘boundaries’ in our thinking. Here again we left what we meant by boundaries open for our contributors to define themselves. In some cases, boundaries referred to the extent or limits of ethnography. That is, we were curious about testing what counts as ethnography and ethnographic research, stretching the limits of both form and praxis. In other cases, our interest in boundedness opened up questions about who is included and who is excluded from ethnographic research, and, more pointedly, how different groups are included differently. Further, we are deeply interested in how forms of exclusion shape the kinds of knowledge produced by ethnographers. Another mode of thinking about boundaries and commoning has been to consider what of the ethnographic endeavour is shared, by who, and in what ways that sharing is limited, uneven, unequal, or impossible. In this we were curious about what is available to commoning and what is withheld, hoarded, or even refused.

For a new journal, this intellectual terrain seemed both wide open and not particularly well mapped. Nevertheless, we felt these questions were core to our own work as researchers, essential to the history of ethnography as a method, central to doing and teaching ethnography in a settler society like Aotearoa New Zealand, and still at the cutting-edge of debates within the range of social sciences that employ ethnography as a method (chiefly, but not only, Anthropology). This openness was scary. It has felt risky and not always clear to us what we are doing.

Yet, as an editorial collective, we have learned that our job is to ask some provocative questions and to hope to stir some interesting thinking. This has been the case tenfold. Over the past four years we have been so excited to see the ways this conversation has autogenerated itself as scholars have contacted us with various pitches, submissions, and collections. Somewhat surprisingly, our little journal has, year-on-year, attracted sharp, provocative, and edgy contributions. It is through these contributions that our initial open questions have found further definition and that our project has begun to take shape.

Working on a yearly basis has allowed us to keep up with the demands of publishing with limited resources. It has also had the benefit of enabling the journal to sort its own identity slowly through the work of our collaborators, reviewers, authors, and supporters. Our slow pace of publishing has been a blessing over the last two years of pandemic life, keeping this project going even while things around us change in unforeseen ways. It has allowed us to adapt to our contributors' changing circumstances and to continue to work together even as things have gotten stranger and more uncertain. It has also meant that we can think slowly about this project alongside our own work, taking the steady stream of submissions we receive from all over the world as grist to return to our original thinking.

In this context, Volume 4 feels remarkable. Whereas previous issues were anchored by special sections that brought a group of authors together around a specific topic (collaboration, risk, commoning), this issue is composed of distinct and sometimes divergent contributions. Of course, this can be said of most issues of a journal, but for us this feels like an achievement as these pieces nicely reflect the everyday work that a journal like *Commoning Ethnography* can do. The issue gives space to scholars exploring the edges of ethnography, pushing debates in their own direction through new methods, using ethnography as a mode of acting in the world, and lingering over their own relations with their craft.

The journal begins with a piece by the Ethnography and Knowledge Collective examining the relationship between reflexivity and positionality from within the context of the tumult, violence, and uncertainty of Beirut of the last two years. Within that context, the Collective takes up positionality and reflexivity – central discussions across the social sciences in the last several years – arguing that while reflexivity and positionality are now normal parts of ethnographic thinking and writing, they have also become hollowed out. Rather than see this as an inherent problem, they argue that our understanding of reflexivity and positionality needs to be relationally composed through our collaborations in the field.

The next piece by Dada Docot explores the ways solidarity and commoning, in the form of sharing and mutual aid through food pantries, became politicised and scandalised under the repressive Duterte government in the Philippines. Through a detailed description of a food pantry project and the

backlash it received on social media, Docot's piece describes how carceral and colonial memory pathologized these responses to the suffering produced by COVID-19. Docot's method and analysis offers insights into the relationship between social movements and ethnography. They also show us why commoning continues to matter and the kinds of deep historical and contemporary political structures that shape attitudes towards sharing and limit its potentials.

Following Docot's analysis, we are very pleased to continue to the journal's tradition of presenting graphic forms of ethnography through an excerpt from Lochlann Jain's recent book *Things That Art* (Jain 2019). Jain's collection of pieces provokes us to think differently about connections between things and language. It forces us to probe our own preconceived notions. It asks us to think differently about the world. Although at first glance the collection does not seem to be ethnography (in the narrowest, most restrictive sense of that word), upon close inspection the drawings are thoroughly ethnographic in that they recompose our commonsense before our eyes. As Jain puts it, *Things That Art* aims to 'rethink and refigure the epistemological mechanisms of sorting and meaning making – not by writing a political or theoretical treatise and explaining how it all worked, but through play' (this volume). Like all play, this work is deceptive: it is simultaneously fun and profound. We are pleased to republish it here alongside a new introduction by Jain. We hope that it inspires you to seek out the entire book.

Next, Susan Wardell takes us on a personal reflection through a different sort of graphic ethnography, reflecting on a stained-glass window she created based on an image she took during a trip to South Sudan. The piece traces in an intimate way not only Wardell's reflections on that trip, but also the assumptions that animated the photo and then the stained-glass. This multiple, recursive narration of the same image replicates something of Wardell's own process of reflecting on the inescapable privileges and inequalities that shape her experience as a scholar and person. The article returns us to the questions about positionality raised in the opening piece of the journal, suggesting how even the briefest relationships can generate a lifetime of reflexive thought. If positionality asks us to consider who we are, Wardell's piece shows that answering such a question also requires considering who one is becoming. Her piece demonstrates that the answers to these questions are never individual and are never quite settled.

Sarah Turner and Sarah Delisle's article "'My Grandmother Never Told Me That Before!'" Collaborative oral histories with ethnic minority youth and elders in northern Vietnam' describes their collaborative oral history project with Hmong youth in Sapa, Vietnam. The piece offers a careful description and analysis of the practices and possibilities afforded by collaborative oral history. They show how their collective project generated new relationships within their research team while also transforming relationships on the ground between the young people that participated in the project and their own communities. Here, Turner and Delisle demonstrate how collaborative research can generate modes of social transformation at the same time.

The last article is a piece of ethnofiction by Fiona Murphy. As Murphy describes in her introduction, fiction offers her a different mode of reflecting and thinking that exceeds standard forms of scholarly production. Ethnofiction sits at the edges of what counts ethnographic research, anthropological theory, and fiction. Drawing inspiration from people like Jean Rouch, Murphy notes that edges and boundaries are productive: 'In this in-betweenness, there is a freedom,

a different kind of ethical imagination, and a new analytic – a confluence that ultimately contributes, I personally believe, to better anthropological thinking’ (this volume).

We conclude the journal with our first book review. Lorena Gibson reviews *Hope and Insufficiency: Capacity Building in Ethnographic Comparison* (2021), edited by Rachel Douglas-Jones and Justin Shaffner. The volume offers a ranging exploration of global scenes of capacity building, critically unpacking what capacities are being created and what kinds of ‘lacks’ these trainings engage with. As Gibson’s review notes, the volume’s use of ethnographic comparison and critical attention to scenes of intentional social transformation might serve as a nice resource for readers interested in development practices and the forms of power that coalesce around them.

It is in the spirit of in-betweenness invoked by Murphy that we launch Volume 4 of *Commoning Ethnography*. This in-betweenness not only speaks to the feelings of liminality that have marked much of 2021, but also reflects our own sense that the most powerful work this journal is beginning to do emerges as we probe the edges and in-betweens of our established research practices. Across the diversity of contributions in this issue, we see *Commoning Ethnography*, and these articles, as pushing the boundaries of our thought in different, new directions. In between each contribution – both those in this and previous volumes – the journal is beginning to take shape.

As editors we like to imagine we have the final say over the journal’s vision and impact. The truth is that we have a hand in this, but the larger work in what *Commoning Ethnography* is and will be, is being done by the scholars that contribute to the conversation that we’ve staged here. We are very pleased with the exciting scholarship contained in Volume 4 and are looking forward to seeing how others pick it up to extend these conversations. We hope that it inspires you to think your worlds anew and, perhaps, to continue the conversation through your own submission to Volume 5.

Acknowledgements

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