

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

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On Power and Obligation in Publishing

The Commoning Ethnography Editorial Collective
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Welcome to Volume 5 of *Commoning Ethnography*.

We'll start with the obvious: this issue was a challenge to produce. It arrives nearly three calendar years after our last issue. This was not our plan. There are myriad reasons for the issue's untimeliness. Chiefly, these have to do with a quite volatile period in the life of our institution in the long wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as it played out in its own untimely way in Aotearoa. They also have to do with changes in our personal circumstances and shifting personnel on the editorial collective.

Rather than unpack these circumstances, the experience of trying desperately to publish the journal while also keeping up with all the other things in life has raised a different set of questions: What is the nature of the relationship between author and editor? What kinds of obligations, responsibilities, and power relationships are enfolded into that relationship? What happens when those asymmetries shift around?

For the editorial collective, the last three years of slowly moving the publication forward has often felt like a failure to fulfil our obligations as editors.

We have rarely felt ourselves in the position of power usually associated with journal editorial teams. Instead, we have felt pangs of guilt for how long our contributors' work sat, enduring both long waits and spotty communication while we wrestled our work lives towards moving the issue forward.

This confessional tone might strike readers as unusual, especially readers who have themselves waited on tenterhooks as their work was assessed by editorial teams and external reviewers. For an expectant author, the submission experience doesn't necessarily feel animated by personal obligation but instead appears organised through hierarchies of power and knowledge mobilized in the practice of technical judgement. Perhaps under normal circumstances that is exactly how the process goes. But as our publication timeline stretched out and reorganised itself multiple times, we became aware of the multiple strains of personal responsibility coursing through our relationships with our authors.

It should be said that it makes no sense to deny that an editorial staff has power over authors. Of course we do. It is ultimately an editorial team's decision to publish a piece or not. However, under these extenuating circumstances a new question arose: What do journals owe to those who submit their work to us? What kind of relationship is the relationship between author and editor?

These feel to us like very *Commoning Ethnography* questions.

On the one hand, our experience in putting this long delayed issue together clarified the range of bureaucratic structures that typically regulate academic publishing relationships and the ethics that govern them. Everything from the structures of editorial boards down to the infrastructural systems that manage submissions, reviews, and revisions should smooth the process for authors and organise it for editors usually enabling a timely engagement for all sides. On the other hand, we recognise that these elements appear to depersonalise the ethical obligations that arise between editor and author and make a journal's decision to move ahead with a piece appear as a simple matter of technical evaluation. For more established journals, submission, review, and publication seems like the results of the implementation of depersonalised, neutral processes. With fewer bureaucratic and technical buffers between ourselves and our authors, our sense of personal obligation to our authors is perhaps more visible. It is also more vexed when we as editors do not live up to those obligations in a timely manner. These are the downsides of our more personal approach to publishing but they are also revealing.

As we have encountered these questions, we also have recognised our own effort (albeit incomplete) to develop an ethics of relationship building rather than enclosure maintenance in our own review process. Where the latter seeks to manage relations through apparently technical evaluation, the former leans into the review as a space of commoning, shared labour, and collaboration. Due to our limited capacity when we started this project we chose to eschew standard peer-review practices in favour of something we call peer-engaged reviewing. This approach emerged as both a reflection of our ethos and an accommodation to our small scale. It afforded us a chance to re-evaluate our engagements with authors' work not just as quality control but as a process of intellectual engagement and relationship building.

Our review process is as follows: First, we evaluate each submission as an editorial collective and then submit the article to one or two external reviewers. We ask our reviewers to evaluate the quality of the submission, but not only that. We are also interested in helping our authors find the best versions of their work for publication in *Commoning Ethnography*. We directly ask reviewers to engage texts with that in mind. We ask them to consider: is this article publishable? If not, what might it take to do that? How can your review help the author develop their thinking? When all of this works, the review is explicitly cast as a space for author and reviewer to think together, helping the author and the publication achieve their best form. Finally, we offer reviewers the option to reveal themselves to authors. This is a further effort to enlarge the kinds of ethical, intellectual engagements that build the journal. In asking these questions we seek to rethink practices and norms of peer-review by cultivating a review space that fosters ethical relations between author, reviewer, and editor. We still reject pieces and often require quite substantive revisions, but our rejections and our revisions come from a different place and uphold a different set of obligations.

These are our aspirations, anyway.

Articulating them here helps us make sense of the feelings of coming up short that have arisen while producing this issue of *Commoning Ethnography*. It also clarifies the way that the technical and infrastructural elements that seem to depersonalize and manage the publication process may also be sites of ethical work, sometimes (but not always) enabling responsiveness and clarity for authors and editors. It is nice to imagine that buried beneath the polite, formulaic automated responses from publications, there may be an ethic of responsibility at work. At the same time, our experience clarifies that the seemingly technical implementations of transparent ethics obscures the deeply human work of publishing. Technologies of transparency can mask as much as they reveal.

In any case, within the pages of this issue we have articles that have come to us across the last few years, submitted by a range of authors who have maintained their patience with us, enduring long waits and spotty communication. We are deeply grateful to them for sticking with us and not losing patience. To the authors who submitted to us but could not endure the terms of our uncertainty, we apologise.

In the coming year we anticipate initiating a range of rebuilding efforts including expanding our editorial collective, looking at our workflow, and re-engaging our editorial board. We hope that this return to our first principles – structural, infrastructural, and ethical (though we do not see these as distinct) – will help us deepen our goal of cultivating relations with authors through our review process while also allowing us to publish and communicate in ways that authors find more regular and reliable.

On to the wonderful articles that compose this issue: This issue extends our interests in collaboration, activism, ethnography during the pandemic, and the poetics of ethnography, both conceptual and graphic.

The article by Han Tao, Hailing Zhao, and Rachel Douglas-Jones examines the question of access in ethnographic research. Taking up this important, but underexamined conceptual space, the piece describes the barriers

and blockages Han and Hailing encountered in attempting to conduct their research during the China's pandemic lockdowns. Using multi-modal storytelling, the authors raise questions of access and inaccessibility considering what this means for ethnography more broadly. By employing a multimodal approach, the article deepens our attention to the ways that the pandemic exposed certain assumptions about what fieldwork is and transformed how we conduct it.

The second article by Amber Adams, Nichelle Barton, Hanna Hochstetler, Maresi Starzmann, Claudia Vallejo-Torres, and their community collaborators brings us into a space of Participatory Action Research, where practices of collaborative storytelling become methods of community engagement. This is an exciting contribution that locates both the potentials and limits of ethnography as a mode of community-based intervention into questions of the legacies of the criminal justice system in the Midwestern United States. Cleverly, the authors suggest that as participants engaged in storytelling practices, both its possibilities and its downsides emerged. Their reflexive analysis illustrates what ethnography can offer and where it redistributes ethical and political burdens in the process.

Veronica Miranda's article uses *testimonio* and auto-ethnography to explore the experience of postpartum mental health during the pandemic. Starting with the abrupt ending of a patient-therapist relationship in early 2020, the article shows how the pandemic brought the structural violence wrought by an uncaring mental healthcare system into sharp relief. It also shows how these methods might offer possibilities for us to understand such structural forces within the wider realm of their lived experience.

Knut Graw's engagement with the question of narrative voice and migration raises a classic set of questions surrounding representation, ethnographic mediation, and veracity in ethnography. The piece challenges readers to consider how various modes of anthropological analysis affect migrant narratives, suggesting that the presentation of raw transcripts is returns voice back to research participants. In suggesting this, Graw raises questions about the limits of our conceptual and theoretical interventions in sharing migrant experiences. By returning to the question of migrant voice, the article probes how we might come to terms with the experiences of migrants and how our understandings of those experiences silence or amplify the voices of individual migrants.

This year's second graphic ethnography selection comes from Letizia Bonanno, who, like Graw, engages with questions related to migrant experience, but unlike Graw uses graphic ethnography to draw out not a singular experience but multiple experiences across multiple temporalities. Rather than seeking fidelity to a single narrative, Bonanno's text and graphic illustration challenge that very idea. Although not in direct dialogue, the two pieces offer different approaches to the role of the ethnographer in documenting both migrant experiences and the forces structuring them. Read together, they help us consider the range of ways of addressing critical questions about what ethnography and migration might say to each other.

Finally, this issue includes Andreja Phillips's review of *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* (S. Chao, K. Bolander, and E. Kirksy, eds.). Book reviews are an exciting addition to our journal and we hope to publish more pieces like

this in the future. If you are keen to read and review a recent text that overlaps with themes that speak to the wider *Commoning Ethnography* project please email us at editorsce@vuw.ac.nz.

Before concluding, we would also like to offer a fond farewell to one of the founding members of our Editorial Collective, Catherine Trundle. Midway through 2022, Catherine de-camped from Wellington for a new position in the Department of Public Health at La Trobe University. Catherine is a force of nature. She crystallised our vision and extended our networks. She developed the look of the journal and helped contribute to its ethos. Her energy and enthusiasm for production helped move each article through stages of copyediting, layout, and proofing, pushing each issue out into the world. Her nuanced, critical thought - style and attention to ethnopoetics are deep in our DNA. We are grateful for that work and our collaboration together. We are proud to continue it in this issue.

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