

In Common



Introduction

Gabi Lardies & Cait Johnson

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Cait Johnson & Gabi Lardies

Introduction

In attempting to pin down the meaning of the commons, we often found ourselves repeating “shared land and resources” as a shorthand definition. Although it slips easily into a sentence, this summary risks flattening out the real substance of the term, or detaching it from what is immaterial and not so easily measured. The words land and resources, which through the logic of capitalism we might understand as property or commodities, feel bound up with notions of containment, measurement and ownership that seem in opposition to what it means to be held in common. As Toyah Webb writes:

the land is taken and divided into neat parcels. this way it can be measured. what cannot be measured cannot be given value. anything that exists outside this limit is nothing (excess, useless). the only useful things are what can be named and nominated

Perhaps what defines the commons is what lies beyond this limit: an entanglement of living systems, human and nonhuman, where honouring interconnection prevails over principles of ownership, exchange and profit.

Whereas land might make us think of property, whenua denotes a different kind of relationship to the earth: one rooted in whakapapa and whanaungatanga. Papatūānuku, Ranginui and their offspring brought the natural world—nonhuman and human life—into being. Tangata whenua are connected through whakapapa to these atua and therefore to the environment and each other. Whenua, like all aspects of the natural world, is not a resource but an ancestor, necessitating a nurturing interdependence rather than an imperative to extract. At Ihumātao in mid-2019, while corporate interests backed by the state attempt to expropriate Māori land in service of profit, the call “ko au te whenua, ko te whenua ko au” speaks instead to the reciprocal relationships of care foundational to Te Ao Māori.

In his call to honour mātauranga Māori and consider our colonial past when moving towards a communal future, Ben Rosamond notes: “The privileging of nature as a sacred ancestor challenges the prevailing systems of Western political and economic theory, which are premised on the continued ability of humankind to exploit land and natural resources and hold them as property, rather than as kin.” Rosamond suggests carrying principles of Māori political and economic thought alongside conceptions of the commons from the Western tradition, pressing for a redistribution of political power: “As we re-common our resources, we need to decolonise our politics.”

Contributors to *In Common* foreground the life force or mauri of the commons. As Dan Kelly writes in his counter-critique of Garrett Hardin’s *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), “commons are not truly seen as property, an object for the owner to use and abuse as if it had no agency or life force,

but instead treated as alive, a non-human community to which we connect, where to 'manage' is really to care". Kelly argues against the individualism assumed to be innately human by Hardin and other critics of communal ways of being. He centres an understanding of freedom as self-determination and accountability to those with whom we share common spaces, noting that such individualist positioning erases those who have lived according to collective values for centuries.

In privileging the interrelationships embedded in the commons, we must not lose sight of the economic importance of these spaces and how the expropriation of communal land created the necessary conditions for capitalism to be imposed (a process that Karl Marx called primitive accumulation and one that we can consider to be ongoing). Quite simply, having access to land allows people to take care of their basic need for food and shelter. When this land is held and worked in common, our need for social support is also provided for, with mutual care yielding more abundant resources for all. Without access to land, people are impelled to participate in capitalism and work for wages to survive. Processes of land dispossession, such as the ongoing colonisation of Aotearoa and the enclosure of communal land in feudal Europe, concentrate resources into the hands of a few, and establish classes of people dependent on employment, rather than having free access to the means of survival.

Today, the management of natural resources in Aotearoa and around the world is largely in the hands of colonial states and capital, driven by economic values over principles of care. As a conservation worker, Eleanor Cooper writes in the space between two landscapes. Digging into the history of our colonial conservation estate, she unearths a dissonance with

Māori practices of kaitiakitanga. Colonial, protectionist ideas of conservation keep our richest ecological environments inaccessible, in order to preserve the picturesque. This is antithetical to Māori understandings of whenua as “the interconnected ecology to which people belong, rather than it belonging to them”. The indigenous model is one of sustainability, not preservation, of being part of the ecology and acknowledging that it is part of you. The legacy of state conservation has separated Māori from their whenua, restricting their ability to act as kaitiaki.

Nate Rew clearly asserts the dysfunctions of allowing capital to manage water sources, as it is “incapable of putting the value of water before profit”. While multiple instances of corporate water (mis)management have led to contamination and depletion, states continue to allow companies to extract water, treating it as a commodity to be sold. Like Cooper, Rew cites successful resistance by Indigenous peoples as providing a way forward by reconceptualising “an entirely different way of relating to the resources we rely on: a relationship of guardianship, of kinship with them—rather than exploitation”. For Rew, these struggles rekindle “not only relationships to the earth, but also to other first nation peoples”. These connections to each other “can begin the process of decolonising”.

Vanessa Arapko foregrounds commons as social systems, which involve the sharing of resources but more fundamentally consist of social relations. She notes: “Where the telos of capitalism is the valorisation of value, money begetting more money, for the commons it is the reproduction of life,

of autonomy from and against capital.” Rather than prioritising the production and exchange of goods and the extraction of profit, the commons allow people to organise their lives around sustaining, nourishing and caring for each other. Arapko affirms that rather than being contained in a far-off and possibly unattainable future, the postcapitalist commons are already present in our care for and connection with one another.

essa may ranapiri speaks to Arapko’s assertion of “imminence” and “immanence”—the suggestion of an approaching reclamation of land sits alongside the sense that this land and the bodies that belong to it have never left each other. Bodies and their relation to space are at the centre of ranapiri’s poem, with colonial forces and oppressive constructions of gender sharply delimiting these relations.

what land is distant
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Oliver Cull similarly enquires into the ways in which the gendered regulation of space produces alienation. Cull draws links between the suburban, car-oriented layout of Tāmaki Makaurau and the ways in which patriarchy and capitalism work to inhibit the emotional and life-producing capacities of people socialised as men, often leading to an alienation from the self. He argues for a feminist politics that envisages an existence for those socialised as men “beyond the emptiness of simply being non-violent, non-dominating, and non-manipulative—inspiring and co-conspiring to plan new forms of engagement with the world that involve care, feeling and solidarity”.

The generosity of Jade Kake's willingness to sit with us and share knowledge is the sort of relationship her projects rebuilding papakāinga housing seek to provide structure for. Precolonial kāinga were unfortified villages made up of clusters of dwellings, in which people would live and work, located close to natural resources. In our interview, she delineates systemic barriers that have prevented, and continue to prevent, Māori from living in these traditional settlement patterns. Forced into European structures, the ability to live from the whenua and to support each other have been deliberately taken. Without discounting the reality of the housing market, her work reestablishes papakāinga as places in which Māori can rebuild "relationships with each other, ourselves, culture and whenua" in order to heal trauma and reclaim parity.

The capitalist housing market, and its privatisation and commodification of land and shelter, comes into play in Dieneke Jansen's photographs and films. Her lens bears witness to Tamaki Housing Group's struggle against state-led gentrification in Glen Innes. This struggle came to a head when Niki (Ioela Rauti) was given her third 90-day eviction notice from her home of 22 years, to make way for development by the Tāmaki Regeneration Company. Although loss is the structure underpinning these works, it is something else that jumps forward: the people standing alongside Niki, supporting the occupation, passing cups of hot soup, a cluster of sunlit faces marching, holding handmade banners and placards, wrapped in layers and resistance. It is the strength and love of community that is the heart of the images.

The state is again complicit in Amber French's poetry. Her experience of WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand) echoes the disempowerment and lack of care that Niki experienced, "just stuck waiting ... Please ...". The state is missing the ability to care, stripped away by the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s and '90s. This recent history moved New Zealand away from a welfare state into a place allowing markets to rule. The provision of housing, benefits, healthcare and education—once seen as rights for citizens—were positioned within market structures and subjected to financial logic. Many state assets were privatised and the remaining were restructured to mimic private distribution rather than common resources or services accessible for all. French succinctly summarises the capitalist values of the state when she says, "you're mean and probably don't love".

Freya Elmer sees libraries as standing in contrast to this pervasive neoliberal logic as they "create equal access to knowledge" and "prioritise community support". Mapping the fluidity of libraries as alternative subversive spaces, Elmer notes they are "fierce and radical" places "that advocate and protect". Katie Kerr maps the library as a visual poem in which structures, rhythms and relationships are explored. Kerr observes both the physical and social structures at play in the Auckland Central Library. In her reimagining of visual cues, we see established order disrupted by relationships; a once-rigid institution inhabited by society. The importance of libraries lies increasingly in the relationships they allow and the communities they nurture. With this in mind, Elmer asks: "Can the model of the library-commons be used to subvert our capitalist social structure?"

Just as a library acts as a commons, so too does a book. The word publish stems from the Anglo-Norman *puplier*, meaning to make public or known, announce or proclaim. We can trace this further back to the Latin *publicare*, meaning to make public property or place at the community's disposal.¹ By publishing, we gather knowledge to be held in many hands. Like other commons, publishing is not only about the resource; rather, it is the creation of interrelationships around it. Hands are linked by what they hold.

While it is easy to put our fingers on the resource we have made, defining relationships is slippery and hard to put a page-count on. Embedded in the principles of our manifesto is that we see publishing as a social medium. We see books as reaching out, “creating a network of knowledge and relationships, a ripple effect where connections and understandings radiate outwards”.² The book launch, which approaches as we write, will be a series of gatherings (hui, reading groups, discussions, workshops, poetry readings) enabling face-to-face connections. Participants, contributors and readers hold *In Common*, determining the next steps for this knowledge and community. Just as it belongs to us, so too do we belong to it.

¹ Michael Bhaskar, *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network* (London: Anthem Press, 2016), 16.

² “Our Values”, Pipi Press, 2019, <http://pipipress.co.nz/>.

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