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CONFERENCE REPORT

# 'The Fruits of the Earth Belong to us all, and the Earth Itself to Nobody': 'Poetics in Commons', Centre for Poetry and Poetics and Creative Writing, University of Sheffield 22–23 May 2019

Helen Angell
Independent Scholar
helen.angell73@btinternet.com

'Poetics in Commons' was a two-day symposium with performances, boldly curated by Daniel Eltringham and Sarah Bernstein. Taking the word 'poetics' in its broadest sense, the intention was to explore 'the potential of literature and art to create and reinvent shared spaces, ways of being, and social and ecological cooperation'. In doing so, the symposium ventured beyond the written and spoken text into visual and performance art, even exploring the spaces in which the symposium was held.

The panel *Salvage* set the tone for the symposium. The first paper, 'Common Response', was jointly presented by Helen Charman (Cambridge) and Grace Linden (York). They introduced their pamphlet project which they had edited and produced in which the texts 'respond to other texts but holding "in commons"'. During the presentation poets in the audience read their poems from the pamphlet, creating a hall of mirrors in which poems were responses to responses to responses. Whilst some existed in a common, or at least shared, sense of time and space, as in Maria Howard's response to Lisa Robertson's 'Time is Luck' or Katy Lewis Hood's 'snail mail', a response to Dom Hale's 'The Noughties', some considered broader aspects of time, for instance Vicky Sparrow's 'Sonnet for Commoners' in response to *Perle*, an anonymous medieval text. Those texts closest in time and space provided an intimate and understandable exchange. For others, the intention was to build on each other through communion rather than one text being subordinate to another. Responses given by poets from other cultures and languages was also the focus of international

poet tag-team Ágnes Lehóczky (Sheffield) and J.T. Welsch (York) in their paper, 'The Book of Anonymous Authors'. Editors of *Wretched Strangers*, an expansive anthology of work from writers across the globe, they discussed how the author is neither inside nor outside, that the sense of self is only an identification of the fantastical imposed by language. They argued that 'everything wants to live' but physicality is in conflict with the fluidity of the poet. The collective exists in the anthology and also in the poet's collection as a place where we gather, a comfortable physicality in the lands created by the poems.

Running concurrently was *Collectives*. Andy Key (Berkeley) presented 'Style in Common', exploring how group style, or style-in-common, can help conceptualise the work of aesthetic collaboration and commoning in a way that neither valorises nor rejects out of hand the experience of individual bodies. Key identified this as a useful analytical concept for the interpretation of writerly coteries and movements, and for understanding how styles can be used to undermine and interrogate ideas of the self-contained and productive individual. 'Style in Common', Key argued, provides a conceptual space for the performance of a collective activity which still allows room for moments of personal individuation. Sam Moore (Kings College London) spoke on 'Locating the Commons in Small Press Publishing'. His paper illustrated the emancipatory potential of commoning for small press publishing through the power of DIY. Drawing on analysis of the Radical Open Access Collective, a global network of small, not-for-profit publishers of academic and creative works, Moore discussed the necessity of resilience and collaboration.

Post-lunch panels included So Mayer (Independent), Nell Osbourne (Manchester) and Hilary White (Manchester), speaking on *Tenderness*. Mayer's provocative 'Fuck the Commons; or What Can A Body Do In Public?' addressed the issue of how far sex acts/languages/communities/imaginaries are public and therefore enact commoning. Mayer referenced non-cisheteronormative sex in texts such as Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*, in which she formulates a lesbian anti-nuclear poetics. Whilst Mayer did not quite repeat John Lennon urging us to 'do it in the road', she wasn't far off!

Osbourne and White's 'Not Mattering in Common' brought the subject of commoning much closer to home. Referring to recent policies in Manchester to deal with homelessness, they explored how we interpret occupation of space as 'obstruction' or otherwise, often in connection with social status. At once passive and active, 'lying down' becomes as politically charged as a 'sit-in'. Lying down on the floor of LT5 seemed a suitable starting point. Whilst the audience was duly invited to do so, not everyone did. The request inadvertently made us think about how we choose to occupy our own space and even the inclusivity of the invitation.

In contrast, on *Utopias*, Iben Engelhardt Anderson (Copenhagen)'s 'Utopian Kinship: Literary Ritual-making and Communal Feeling' and Raphael Kabo (Birkbeck), 'Never a Common Common Enough: Ongoing Futures in the Poetry of Juliana Spahr', steered the theme back to the literary. Both dealt with utopian visions and their place in the interstices of the present. Considerations of post-capitalist and ecological communities through their representations in poetry allowed both to discuss the diversity of communal human relationships in our fast-changing landscape.

By late afternoon the true nature and tone of the symposium revealed itself in three interactive performances. 'Ooze Disco' by Nia Davies (Salford) and Amy McCauley (Independent) was a shared performance exploring presence and absence as well as identity and control. Following remote instructions from McCauley, Davies answered questions such as 'Was the spoon made in Sheffield?' – a question we all ask ourselves about cutlery in these parts! Wound in a web and invited to sample Henderson's Relish, the audience experimented with the trust between our bodies, the hard and soft borders. mmmmm collective also incorporated spoons into their piece. Adrian Fisher and Luna Montenegro used recordings, pen and paper and poetry to respond to environments in their psycho-geo-socio-anthro-cabaret 'Defining the Borders II'. Meanwhile, Erin Liu (Independent) and Edmund Hardy (Independent)'s 'Film, Archive, Collaborative Communities' was a moving segment, especially the communication between Liu and her mother. The superb footage of Liu's grandmother provided plenty of opportunity to reflect on generational as well as political and cultural borders.

Opening the first evening's performances, Emma Bolland, in the absence of Helen Clarke, (Sheffield Hallam) performed her 'Sh! ffLight! (a score)' with Hestia Peppe (Sheffield Hallam). In response to the Tate Modern survey exhibition 'Shape Of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art' (2018), the piece combines strategies of art writing and *zaum* poetics. The score for two voices condenses individual negotiation of a quasi-public space, questioning curations that direct or impose a status quo of cultural histories. It offers a way of speaking that posits knowledge (in this instance about the validity of an imposed idea of culture) in an embodied activist language of utterance and sound. Always entertaining and thought-provoking, Bolland wielded her anti-establishment stance powerfully and intelligently. Indeed, her prefatory reading from the Hilary White and Nell Osbourne's zine *Academics Against Networking* served as a stirring defence of those rendered invisible, or semi-visible, by the classist and ageist assumptions of academic social life.

The second day of the symposium began with Anne Boyer (Kansas City)'s keynote, 'A prayer, nocturne & exhortation', a staggering paper in four parts: Air, Sleep, Time, and Exhortation. Boyer talked of the beautiful uncertainties and magic of life, things that should not and cannot be controlled. Through this celebration of angels, dreams and butterflies, Boyer's anti-capitalist paean called for 'reverence, not just for each other, but for all that exists, in which each thing or being as itself and in relation to all else is revered in its own state'. A life-affirming call to arms that affected each and every one of us not only for the rest of the day but in time to follow. In sleep we find power, 'we know the possibility of what does not yet exist through the appearance of our dreams without authors… so it is that the hours must become the grounds for all we want and need'. Boyer exhorted us to take back our time, to remember we are the authors of our own lives, the creators of the future.

Following the keynote was the panel *Poetics*. Lily Dessau (Geneva)'s paper, 'The Noisy Work of Clare's Commons', found us in more familiar territory, with room to explore the poetry of the commons and commoners. Seeking to reconstitute the vanishing commons through the juncture, or rupture, between sound and sense that takes place at the end of the poetic line, Dessau focused primarily on John Clare's

use of couplets in his sonnets. Dessau argued that 'it is through the active encounter with a boundary, or limit, that the poetic work of '"commoning" takes place'; the rhymes tether words together. Here the couplet becomes a site of resistance, the rhyme reflecting the flattened topography.

In the same session, Dan Eltringham (Sheffield) delivered 'Ecopoetics of Commoning and Enclosure', taking us back to the demarcation between commons and enclosure. Viewing the commons initially from a peasant perspective, Eltringham explored texts such as Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World; On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Tsing's work and that of Anne-Lise François update perspectives on 'the peasant woodland', reframing it as a contemporary space of precarious labour tied into global commodity chains, yet still offering a rhythm of resistance to capitalist extraction.

Rounding off this panel, Joey Frances (Salford) gave a paper entitled 'Un/common understanding in Sean Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament*'. Frances argued that Bonney's poetry is 'shot through with the voices of collective struggle for a greater stake in what ought to be held in common'. By this point, the tension between the 'commons' and the academic framework of the symposium was becoming increasingly obvious, reflecting Bonney's own stance that common understanding is anti-bourgeois.

In Jessop Building, the speakers focused on the commons as *Articulations*. 'Towards a "commonist" poetics', presented by Andrés Anwandter (Independent), explored how poetic practice implies and reinforces an understanding of language as a commons. Looking at trespassing on intellectual property, poetic collectives and enlarging and enriching the field of language through linguistic experimentation, the exposition was illustrated with performances of poetic excerpts from the British and Latin-American tradition.

'Phrase' by Beth Dynowski (Edinburgh College of Art) is a text, speech and sound work composed of a fragmentary monologue and sounds from the public domain shared online under the creative commons licence. It contains multiple pieces of text pieced together that span vast distances and times, ranging from sacred texts to pop music – from Sappho, the Bible, Etta James, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

to conversations in supermarkets, pubs and at home. The voices, texts and sounds form a chorus which tries to reconcile the split between public and private, self and collective, and to consider this as political, poetic and, possibly, a liturgical space. The third speaker on the panel, Emma Balkind (Edinburgh College of Art), drew on her research to discuss a variety of themes covered by projects on the commons in contemporary art from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In 'The art of conversation? Considering the commons and discursive practice', she related the concept to historical land law, feminist protest, open-source creative commons, the prevalence of commons discourses in anti-austerity positions and protest following the 2008 global financial crash.

Visual art was also a concern of both Katy Lewis Hood (Queen Mary) and Sharon Kivland (Sheffield Hallam). Echoing similar themes to those evident in Boyer's keynote, Lewis Hood's paper dealt with the impact of carbon production in the US. 'Salvage Poetics in the Toxicommons: Jennifer Scappettone's *The Republic of Exit 43*' explored matter and metaphor in the marvellously named Freshkills Landfill site in Staten Island through Scappettone's visual and verbal collages. Lewis Hood argued for 'salvage as a political and poetic activity of tracing, repurposing, and resonating with discarded materials to…as an immanent alternative tactic in the residues of late capitalism's ecologies'.

Sharon Kivland provided extra style, charisma and a distinctly Parisian flavour, delivering the paper 'Die Holzdiebe' on her exhibition of the same name. Based on a series of articles written by Marx for the *Rheinische Zeitung*, reporting on the proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, the exhibition illustrates 'Debates on the law of thefts of wood'. Ever engaging, Kivland explored the politics, theories and some of the practicalities behind this conceptualisation. At its heart was the distinction between scavenging and theft, how we determine what belongs and to whom and the fairness of this. That Kivland does this with such humour and intelligence whilst sticking a pin firmly into anything pretentious was nothing short of inspirational.

Meanwhile, on *Tidalectics*, Holly Antrim (Independent) and Rosie Roberts (Glasgow School of Art) moved the commons to the sea. Antrim's film, 'Common Ground', shot on the Moray Firth in 2016, circled the evolutionary narrative of a live expanded film work of the same title. The paper appraised the film's relation

to sound and image, act and material, archive and intimacy, layered between sub-
ject and audience, through common and remote territories. Echoing Boyer's earlier
comments about air and its natural resistance to being owned, Roberts postulated
the same for the sea. In 'Tidalectics' she discussed the North Atlantic sea as a com-
mons; a cultural and natural resource neither owned nor known completely by any
individual person. She also discussed the islands of the North Atlantic as both actual
and metaphoric sites.

Of especial relevance to an entire generation was Hestia Peppe's 'An Impossible
Commons of House Sharing', delivered on the *City* panel. Offering a personal perspec-
tive through her own experience of renting in London, Peppe expanded her talk to
include the influence not only of shared accommodation but key social events such as
the last years of the credit boom in the early 00s, the financial crash of 2008, Occupy,
the protests against tuition fees, the banning of squatting in the UK, the rise of Property
Guardianship, and the referendum to leave the EU in 2016. Further considerations of
the city were provided by Jacob Soule's 'From Rights to Encounters: The City Novel
Beyond the City'. Turning to the contemporary city novel as a site for the production
and articulation of new 'imagined communities', Soule performed a close reading of
passages from Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such A Full Sea* (2014), a novel which proposes a
future urban archipelago of walled cities within a post-national world order.

Adding a Latin-American perspective on *Nation*, Mau Baiocco (York)'s 'Collectives,
Exiles and Common Destinies: A Survey of Recent Venezuelan Poetry' discussed the
response of poets to an unstable political and geographical environment in which
'the cities they inhabit are 'in the meantime and just-in-case''. Particular attention
was given to collectives and the work of poets Katherine Castrillo, Carlos Colmenares
Gil and Jesús Montoya. Likewise, Karine Zbinden (Sheffield)'s 'Poetics and the Public
Square in Bakhtin' examined the role of Bakhtin's theories of novelistic discourse and
poetic language. Against the backdrop of the oppressive artistic and linguistic poli-
cies of the Soviet Union, Bakhtin expounded on the regenerative force of folk culture
as a major driver of cultural renewal.

The final academic panel in the HRI was *Takeaway.* In a link to both Sharon
Kivland and Dan Eltringham's papers, Natalie Joelle (Birkbeck)'s 'Gleaning in Lean

Culture' took the diverse use of Millet's 'The Gleaners' as a lens through which to trace the development of the term, employing images and references from modern art and advertising. From Ford's inspiration from the meat production industry to its current reference to 'slimming down' management strategies, Joelle explored the ethics of taking for free what is rightfully ours. This was a talk very much about scarcity rather than abundant thinking in which we were asked to consider the meaning of waste in its multiple senses.

Glasgow-based poet and performer Sean Wai Keung (Independent) addressed 'commoning' through poetry and food. Transforming our usual perceptions of takeaway food as unhealthy and its establishments as unsightly, Wai Keung explored how they not only provide experience of other cultures but important opportunities for immigrants. Stressing the enduring power of eating together as a way of forging social connection, 'Takeaway Poetry/Food Culture as Both Commoning and Widening Experience' could not have given a stronger endorsement for chicken tikka pizza! Rounding off this enjoyable panel, Nicky Melville (Glasgow)'s 'The Imperative Commands' combined visual imagery and poetry. A witty commentary on contemporary society, Melville's performance used found instructions collected over a year against a backdrop of collages. The reframing and restaging of everyday life, its objects and messages, largely through advertising and politics, provided a challenge to the power structuresthat are so often our current language of commons.

The final panel – titled simply *No* – featured Jess Cotton (UCL) and Ed Luker (Bishopsgate Institute) with James Goodwin (Birkbeck) sadly unable to present on 'Black Sociopoetic Death' due to last-minute illness. Cotton's 'Against Lyric Pedagogy' considered how poems are read and taught within an institutional setting as well as how far they can serve as acts of solidarity in the classroom and on the picket line. With reference to how the commons is presented in the work of Anne Boyer, Fred Moten and Juliana Spahr, Cotton explored the paradox of poetic refusal. Ed Luker focused on race and the language of the commons, in 'Common Language: Phonic Antagonism in Linton Kwesi Johnson and Abondance Matanda'. Arguing that in Matanda's poetry the antagonisms of race and class are explored phonically, Luker

sought to show how her work is in a historical dialectic with Johnson's, where it is forced to escape the competency of his work, through its vehement rejection of fixed and identifiable use of black patois or dialect.

The symposium was intense, eclectic and confirmed the intangibility of community; a fantastic success for Sarah Bernstein and Daniel Eltringham. By unspoken common consent, the first of the evening events – a lightning-speed delivery of Dominic Hale (Edinburgh)'s excoriating *Scammer*, took place on the roof garden. Holly Pester (Essex) and Alec Finlay (Independent) closed the symposium with extended readings on themes of extinction, latency, parleys and proxys; disabled access to mountains and a much-loved green bivvy bag.

'Poetics in Commons' questioned the supremacy of the individual and rejoiced in freeing ourselves from the boundaries of states and borders, even if only to gain access to the normally locked roof garden. But there remains the irony of exploring 'the commons' in academia itself. We have been a predominantly white, middle-class audience, even though the subject of the papers has been more diverse. It has thrown up questions about the comforts and discomforts of being an audience and how far we feel compelled or even excluded from participating in a constructed 'common' space, the commons dividing as well as uniting. And whilst, as Rousseau argued, words exist by common consent, it has shown how some things are not understood because they are deliberately not meant to be. These power struggles are as much about knowledge as they are about geography, about how we make our learning accessible to others or enclose it. Only in the act of sharing can we become one.

## Competing Interests

Helen Angell completed her MA in Creative Writing at University of Sheffield. She was supervised by Ágnes Lehóczky. In addition, she has acted as a Section Editor for *Route 57* under Dan Eltringham.