

UN/COMMON – FORMS OF THE COMMONS IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Cord-Christian Casper

In John Clare's 'The Lament of Swordy Well', a strip of common land speaks.¹ It protests its present condition of enclosure, setting its intense cultivation against the former state of common use:

Im swordy well a piece of land
Thats fell upon the town
Who worked me till I couldnt stand
And crush me now Im down

Swordy Well can name its status as a commons only in the poem's present, from which that status has already vanished. Its reverie issues from inside the enclosure that has undone it, and the unalienated life it mourns becomes sayable at the moment of loss, as it is forced into language by the very process that destroys it. The poem, composed in the 1830s, insists on Swordy Well's particularity: its former life, when it was 'as proud as they' and 'kept my horses cows and sheep / And built the town below' (l.68), was finite and specific, holding certain characteristics for a certain time. The commons emerges here as a concrete material and 'socionatural'² setting, with its particular uses and users, lasting only so long as a set of practices persists.

What the Clare poem shows in miniature, the essays gathered in this issue investigate across a range of cultural forms: how those forms register the commons as finite and as already passing, at the edge of disappearance or in retrospect from an already enclosed vantage point. The slash in this issue's title – 'Un/Common' – marks the entanglement of the commons with the enclosures and dispossessions against which it takes shape. Engaging with different commons and the forms of their representation, the contributors ask how a given arrangement of resources and participants becomes legible against the dispossession that closes it off. They also investigate the conditions that allow it to function as a commons in the first place, including the boundaries and procedures of inclusion and exclusion that hold it together – or at least make it reproducible for a certain time. Instead of seeking a definition of the immutable characteristics of commons, each contribution determines some of the relational strategies by means of which commons set themselves apart from their uncommon counterparts.

Cultural and political theorists have lately reevaluated the commons, long disparaged as inefficient arrangements doomed to tragic depletion³ and now reconsidered as 'assemblages and ensembles that human beings hold in

1. John Clare, *Major Works*, Eric Robinson (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2004, p164.

2. Andrea J. Nightingale, 'Commoning for Inclusion? Commons, Exclusion, Property and Socio-Natural Becomings', *International Journal of the Commons*, 13:1, 2019, p16. (Hereafter *Commoning for Inclusion*.)

3. Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 162:3859, 1968, pp1243-48. (Hereafter *Tragedy of the Commons*.)

4. Donald M. Nonini, 'Introduction: The Global Idea of "the Commons"', *Social Analysis*, 50:3, 2006, pp164-77, p164. (Hereafter *The Global Idea*.)

5. Robert Stam, *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media: Towards a Transartistic Commons*, Routledge, 2019, p13.

6. John McCormick, *Reclaiming Paradise: The Global Environmental Movement*, Indiana University Press, 1991, p73.

7. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. (Hereafter *Forms*.)

8. George Caffentzis,

common or in trust to use on behalf of themselves, other living human beings, and past and future generations of human beings'.⁴ This emphasis on the collective holding of material and immaterial resources answers to present environmental and economic crises. However, an approach that theorises the commons as 'a broad social concept' forming part of the genealogy of most human societies and 'potentially (albeit unevenly) theoretically available to all' of them⁵ also requires an analysis of the specific antagonisms from which commons emerge and the historical differences among actually-existing commons. The essays gathered here take a relational and formal view, shifting attention from the commons as a general human capacity to the specific antagonisms and forms through which particular commons emerge.

FORM

Explorations of the commons in literature and culture gravitate towards what John McCormick has called a 'commons theme'⁶, reading texts and films for their representation of shared resources or pre-capitalist arrangements. The essays collected here work along a different axis, examining the forms by which the commons are evoked and performed. The contributors deal with the formal repertoires of popular culture, literature, contemporary political practice, cultural theory and law. Across these materials, cultural forms share a claim 'to a limited range of potentialities and constraints' which function as 'abstract and portable organizing principles' inflected by the 'specificity of particular historical situations'.⁷ On this account, the composition and extension imputed to a commons depend on the genre that frames it and the narrative through which it unfolds, as well as on the images that accompany a given community of interest. From this angle, whether the commons are approached from a 'capitalist perspective' or involve the 'sharing and co-management of social wealth by citizens'⁸ is itself shaped by the cultural forms in which the commons imaginary is articulated.

What, then, are the commons? The answer depends both on the material forms in which they are arranged and the representational forms through which they are evoked. A commons can find expression as utopia or tragedy, as a system of management or a promise of 'dis-accumulation' (*The Future of the Commons*, p33), as a 'relational constitution of our collective selves'⁹ or a particular group's customary rights. Temporally, it can be formatted as a pre-capitalist relic (a 'first major emphasis in the study of Commons'¹⁰) or a post-capitalist future story.¹¹ It can hinge on a particular place and its role in the 'biological, cultural, and social reproduction' of a determinate group (*The Global Idea*, p164), or it can ally itself with an 'environmental protection agenda' that extends 'far beyond its attachment to a particular piece of land'.¹² Each version comes with its own form of representation, and each form selects its own spacial or temporal scale of common life. As Caroline Levine puts it, if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal

'The Future of "the Commons": Neoliberalism's "Plan B" or the Original Disaccumulation of Capital?', *New Formations*, 69, 2010, pp23-41, p24. (Hereafter *The Future of the Commons*.)

9. Irina Velicu and Gustavo García-López, 'Thinking the Commons Through Ostrom and Butler: Boundedness and Vulnerability', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 35:6, 2018, pp55-73, p61.

10. Pavlos-Marinos Delladetsimas, Ide Hiergens, Pieter van den Broeck and Frank Moulaert, 'From Marxism to Contemporary Institutionalisms in Landed Commons', in Frank Moulaert, Pieter van den Broeck, Pavlos-Marinos Delladetsimas and Liana Simmons (eds), *From Land Ownership to Landed Commons: Social Innovation in the Commoning of Scarce Land Resources*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024, pp48-84, p51.

11. Gregory Wilpert, *Developing Consciousness for the Post-Capitalist Commons*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2026.

12. Jane B. Holder and Tatiana Flessas, 'Emerging Commons', *Social and Legal Studies*, 17:3, 2008, pp299-310, p304.

patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form' (*Forms*, p3). The contributors to this issue ask whether commons forms perform this same boundary work, and how such forms are adopted and assessed across a range of literary and cultural practices.

Taking these forms seriously means attending to problems of scale. It makes a difference whether a commons is claimed in a parallel poetics accompanying an act of land reclamation, as in the case of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in the seventeenth century, or whether it amounts to a 'global, planetary action over shared ecological issues', as Anupama Mohan argues in this issue. Such scale shifts expand what counts as common resources, including 'many kinds of shared resources, both physical and virtual', from the global atmosphere to urban infrastructure to digital networks.¹³ After all, an expansion across spatial and temporal scales can also obscure antagonistic claims. What looked like one commons across history may just turn out to be composed of incompatible systems of allocation and competing rights. As David Harvey notes, when we 'jump scales', the 'whole nature of the common-property problem and the prospects of finding a solution change dramatically'.¹⁴ On the representational side, the same difficulty arises: a description of parochial conviviality, as in 'Swordy Well', may not afford a model for thinking about immaterial or planetary commons.

UNCOMMONING

Forms evoke their obverse: a boundary separates a commons from its environment. Derek Wall observes that the necessity for boundaries can be seen as a defining feature of the commons in Elinor Ostrom's sense: 'This meant that while they might be used communally there was not a free-for-all; commoners in a defined community had access but this was not open to all passers-by'.¹⁵ Any boundary setting apart a common ground also recurs within the commons itself. In Niklas Luhmann's systems-theoretical terms, a 'system of differentiation' involves the '*reduplication of the difference between system and environment within systems*'.¹⁶ By this logic, commoning defines shared resources differentially, through warding off what the commons paradigm treats as their obverse: enclosure and commodification. Proceeding from this process of differentiation, we can understand uncommoning in three ways. First, it names a process of change: because commoning must be constantly performed, the uncommons constantly proliferates, so that, as Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena put it, 'the uncommons is constitutive of the commons'.¹⁷ Second, and following from this, the uncommon is the constitutive outside against which an ensemble of shared resources defines itself, beyond its literal or conceptual boundaries. Third, uncommoning can stand as a synonym for enclosure itself, the processes by which common rights face extinction or restriction.

This last sense of uncommoning recurs throughout the cultural forms

13. Sheila R. Foster and Chrystie Flournoy Swiney, 'Introduction: Commons Research in the Twenty-First Century and Beyond', in Sheila R. Foster and Chrystie F. Swiney (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Commons Research Innovations*, Cambridge University Press, 2023, p1.

14. David Harvey, 'The Future of the Commons', *Radical History Review*, 109, 2011, pp101-7, p102. (Hereafter *The Future of the Commons*.)

15. Derek Wall, *Elinor Ostrom's Rules for Radicals: Cooperative Alternatives Beyond Markets and States*, Pluto Press, 2017, p28.

16. Niklas Luhmann, 'Differentiation of Society', *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 2:1, 1977, pp29-53, p53.

17. Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, 'The Uncommons: An Introduction', *Anthropologica*, 59:2, 2017, pp185-93, p187.

investigated by the articles in this issue. Conceived as primitive accumulation, uncommuning describes the specific antagonism by means of which existing common forms were eradicated. Marx describes the historical genesis of capital as ‘the expropriation of the immediate producers, i.e. the dissolution of private property based on the labour of its owner’¹⁸, and identifies ‘the theft of the common lands’ as one of its constitutive moments. The ‘usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism’, he writes, were ‘just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation’ (*Capital*, p895). This raises the question of whether this account is historical or whether it describes a process that remains operative beyond the destruction of the common-field system or the drainage of the fens. The Midnight Notes Collective casts its lot with the second view, treating primitive accumulation as ‘a regular return on the path of accumulation and a structural component of class struggle’.¹⁹ Harvey, dubbing primitive accumulation ‘accumulation by dispossession’ because, as he puts it, ‘it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process “primitive” or “original”’²⁰, also treats enclosure as a permanent and recurring feature of capitalism. If enclosure is continuous, the commons is never settled, emerging instead through ongoing formation and acts of distinction. It is, as Harvey writes, ‘continuously being produced’ and just as continuously appropriated (*The Future of the Commons*, p105), coming into view only against the uncommuning that marks its outside and curtails its reach.

If commons are constantly defined by the drawing and re-drawing of their boundaries, then, it is all the more important to trace the lines of inclusion and exclusion and the limits and procedures that decide who counts as a participant. The ‘critical enabling conditions for the commons’²¹ and their threat of enclosure are intertwined, so that the commons remain entangled with constitutive social antagonisms of race, class and gender, as well as with the conditions of capital accumulation. They also function processually, since any commons project ‘creates socionatural inclusions and exclusions, and any moment of coming together can be succeeded by new challenges and relations that un-common’ (*Commoning for Inclusion*, p30). The forms investigated in this issue reflect this dialectic in different ways: Julia Boll tracks the appropriation of ‘communitas’ by centre-right politics, Anupama Mohan traces the colonial inheritance in the law of the sea, and Mark Schmitt reads folk horror as the return of the rural commons in its uncanny and reactionary forms. Each shows how ‘forms constrain’ (*Forms*, p4) the kinds of common life they make available, and how those constraints are bound up with the social antagonisms the commons struggle to overcome.

The relational view rules out two ways of essentialising the commons: as a fixed golden age behind us, mourned in its absence, or as a fixed horizon ahead, awaited as a definitive future state. Raymond Williams describes the first version as the myth of the commons, ‘in which the transition from a rural

18. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy – Volume One*, Ben Fowkes (trans.), Penguin Classics, 1990 [1867], p927. (Hereafter *Capital*.)

19. Midnight Notes Collective, ‘The New Enclosures’, Reprinted from Midnight Notes, #10, 1990, *The Commoner*, 2, 2001, p1, <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/New-Enclosures-Midnight-Notes-Collective.pdf>.

20. David Harvey, ‘The “New” Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession’, in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds), *The New Imperial Challenge: Socialist Register 2004*, Merlin/Fernwood, 2008, pp63-87, p73.

21. Mark Moritz, Paul Scholte, Ian M. Hamilton and Saïdou Kari, ‘Open Access, Open Systems: Pastoral Management of Common-Pool Resources in the Chad Basin’, *Human Ecology*, 41:3, 2013, pp351-65.

22. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford University Press, 1975, p96.

23. Ernst Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics', *New German Critique*, 11, 1977, pp22-38, p38.

24. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p9.

25. Garrett Hardin, *Filters Against Folly: How to Survive Despite Economists, Ecologists, and the Merely Eloquent*, Penguin Books, 1987, p37.

to an industrial society is seen as a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder'.²² The fixed future horizon has a comparable effect in the other direction, treating the commons as a settled destination rather than as something articulated in the friction of specific antagonisms. In contrast to this mythical retrospect or normative futurity, we might do better to follow Ernst Bloch in situating the commons as an ambiguous utopian kernel, sifted from the ruins of history as part of 'the still subversive and utopian contents in the relations of people to people and nature, which are not past because they were never quite attained, and which can only be of use in this way'.²³ Like Bloch's utopian kernel, Giorgio Agamben's coming community sits at an odd angle to the certainty of a stable common ground, withdrawing into a potential maintained in its resistance to definitive realisation. From this admittedly gnomic and studiously impractical perspective, a given commons is less a model for resource allocation than an example: 'On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity'.²⁴ Following this thread of latent, potential, or prefigurative commons, the contributions gathered here track how a commons becomes thinkable through specific cultural forms. Williams' myth in particular recurs across the issue's archive in different guises: it shadows the pre-modern communities of folk horror (Schmitt) and the coronation liturgy (Boll), but is countered in volatile performances (Ackermann) and confronted with an alternative, 'conflict-ridden' aesthetic in nature writing (Smith). In Harald Pittel's account, Raymond Williams' commons thought becomes a resource only when read against any uncritical call for common life, recovering him as a thinker who insisted on historical specificity and treated common culture as a dialectical practice grappling with its own reach.

No story about the end of a commons has been more influential than Garrett Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons'. While Ostrom and others have refuted its empirical accuracy, its narrative template endures. 'Picture a pasture open to all', Hardin-as-narrator begins, whereupon, as 'it is to be expected', the imagined commoner does what the form requires: he takes the benefit of overgrazing while distributing the cost, 'locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited' (*Tragedy of the Commons*, p1244). The argumentative force of the tragedy lies in the commonsense appeal of its inevitability. To foreclose any commons hopes, Hardin inveighs against 'the poetic approach': 'Rhetoric like Muir's may give one a wonderful "oceanic feeling" (to use Freud's term), but this feeling is more likely to prevent than to facilitate advances in understanding. It is when ecological rhetoric is most beautiful that we must be most on our guard'.²⁵ The essays gathered here refuse that warning, taking their cues from poetry (Ackermann), nature writing (Smith), folk horror (Schmitt), and a wholesale recasting of the high and deep seas (Mohan). They examine cultural forms as the place where the commons becomes legible in ways that

interrupt the tragic inevitability of its ending, offering what Joseph Albernaz calls ‘incommensuration’, a ‘tendency to ruin the enclosures of language, to “repudiate measuring”’.²⁶ The contributors analyse specific cultural forms to track how a given commons becomes articulable yet incommensurable with a linear narrative of its undoing.

26. Joseph Albernaz, ‘The Commons: Ruin and Romance’, *Social Research*, 88:1, 2021, pp115-50, p125.

THE ARTICLES

Zeno Ackermann opens the issue with a methodological argument for bringing literary and cultural studies to bear on commons research. Working across a deliberately broad range of materials, from Shakespearean sonnets to German-Turkish music of the 1970s and recent US pop, Ackermann distinguishes between an aesthetics of the commons, which treats commons as forms, and a poetics of commoning, which treats commoning as transformative practice. The distinction lets him recover the cultural infrastructure that makes commoning possible, the techniques and dispositions that enable collective resource use and governance. Through C.B. Macpherson’s theory of possessive individualism, Ackermann locates the central problem of the un/common in the relation between individual properties and collective proprieties, and poetry and popular song appear in his account as laboratories of technique and as training sites for the dispositions any commoning project requires.

Harald Pittel pursues the question of common culture through Raymond Williams, whose distinctive account of how a culture becomes common has been largely absent from current commons discourse. Pittel traces a ‘common dialectic’ across Williams’ writing, the relation between ‘culture in common’, which extends a minority’s values across the social body, and ‘common culture’, which insists on participatory democratic meaning-making by all. Pittel argues that Williams enacted this dialectic performatively, as in the 1983 lecture at the Centerprise community project in Hackney. Common culture, on Pittel’s reading, announces itself as a practice articulated through its concrete instances and through the social occasions on which it is enacted.

Jos Smith examines contemporary British nature writing and the commons it represents, beginning from the observation that the literal commons in Britain today survive as a vestigial 4.5 per cent of land, much of it in remote Scotland and northern England. Smith reads two contemporary authors who engage these landscapes from different angles. Nick Hayes grapples with the loss of commons through a project of trespass on private land that was once common. Helen Baczkowska explores the surviving commons and the ecologies and livelihoods bound up with them, through a narrative structure of ‘islands of vibrant descriptive prose’ that mirrors the spatial isolation of contemporary commons. Smith argues that both writers exemplify a ‘double character’ by which nature writing extends off the page: Hayes into the mass

trespasses he co-organises with Right to Roam, Baczkowska into the ecological restoration and oral history that accompany her descriptive prose.

Mark Schmitt turns to folk horror cinema as a cultural form through which contemporary Britain confronts the commons it has lost. He expands the genre category beyond strict 'horror' to take in a broader range of folk-oriented narratives that interrogate the commons and their undoing. Schmitt locates these films in a 'post-British' moment, in Michael Gardiner's term, a prolonged phase of devolution prefigured by a wide range of cultural forms. Drawing on Williams' keywords analysis of 'folk' and on Max Horkheimer's account of instrumental reason, Schmitt traces the ambivalent political potential of folk politics, since folk cultures represent pre-industrial resistance to instrumental reason and can also become tools of post-Enlightenment mass deception. Films from the 1970s revival and the 2010s neo-folk wave hold this dialectic in suspension, registering the desire for residual forms of community alongside the reactionary nostalgia that desire can produce.

Julia Boll reads the 2023 coronation of Charles III as a state-sponsored performance of the commons that exemplifies the appropriation of commoning aesthetics by neoliberal politics. The coronation's liturgical theme, 'Called to Serve', and the Big Lunch organised across Britain on the coronation weekend together mobilised a sentimentalised simulacrum of communal life. Boll traces the convergence of religious and political discourse with folkloric imagery through which a 'spirit of service' got naturalised as Britishness, and she shows how the performance reframes austerity as community spirit. Reading the commons through Victor Turner's notion of *communitas*, Boll argues that the affective belonging produced by performative commoning remains open to ideological capture, and the article addresses the analytical plasticity that lets the same vocabulary circulate across the political spectrum. Boll closes by asking whether forms of commoning still resist neoliberal enclosure under such conditions.

Anupama Mohan's contribution takes up the conceptual problems the issue has been working through and recasts them from a different starting point. Beginning from the observation that the commons is a terracentric and colonial concept, rooted in English legal traditions of common land and exported as the legal infrastructure of empire, Mohan reads the ocean as the limit case at which this inheritance becomes visible. Through readings of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) and the High Seas Treaty (2023), she shows how 'global commons' frameworks reproduce the inequalities and extractive logics they were meant to address, especially in their effects on communities in the Global South. Drawing on Enrique Dussel's reading of Marx, Mohan turns to usufruct, the right to use and enjoy resources without owning or diminishing them, as the basis for an oceanic

commons grounded in stewardship rather than possession. The shift from ownership to usufruct opens the possibility of a 'transmodern' thalassology, ecologically attuned and decolonially oriented, and it offers a vocabulary for thinking commons beyond the enclosure/possession logic that the rest of the issue has tracked from within.

Across these contributions, the question of the commons is also a question about commons thinking itself. Can the commons still be claimed, and on what terms? Several contributors approach this possibility cautiously, tracking how the language of community and shared service is enlisted for centre-right politics (Boll), how the claim to the commons oscillates between personal protest and a collective demand (Smith), and how Williams's common culture survives only when read against any uncritical call for common life (Pittel). Anupama Mohan's usufructuary turn, by contrast, points beyond these impasses. For all these differences, the concept of the Un/Common names a doubled stance. To work with the commons today is to refuse the common sense of Hardin's tragedy, a calcified golden age, and an all-too easily co-opted gesture towards mutual aid in equal measure. As Jason W. Moore argues, the appropriation of 'Cheap Nature' that has underwritten capital accumulation since the sixteenth century is exhausting itself, and what comes after will depend not only on redistribution but on 'our capacity to forge a different ontology of nature, humanity, and justice'.²⁷ The cultural forms examined in this issue are sites where that rethinking takes shape, reaching for a commons beyond the enclosures that are built into the concept itself.

27. Jason W. Moore, 'The Rise of Cheap Nature', in Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, PM Press, 2016, pp78-116, p114.

Cord-Christian Casper is a Research Associate in the English Department at LMU Munich, where he is completing a postdoctoral project on the commons in early modern nature writing. He earned his PhD from Kiel University and has previously worked at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen and at JLU Gießen. His research encompasses ecocriticism, commons theory, New Materialism, and visual culture. Recent publications include *Against Anarchy: Political Alterity in Early Modernism* (De Gruyter, 2020), a co-edited special issue of *SubStance* on 'Ecocriticism and Narrative Form' (2021), and 'How to Get Outside: Assemblages in Speculative Nature Writing', in Kai Merten and Kerstin Howaldt (eds), *New Materialist Literary Theory* (Lexington, 2024).