Towards a Poetics of Un/Commoning: Individual Properties and Common Proprieties in Poetry and Popular Song

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Abstract: This article demonstrates how literary and cultural studies, through their emphasis on the linguistic and aesthetic dimensions of human life and productivity, can contribute to the discussion about the commons. On the basis of a purposefully diverse set of examples – ranging from Shakespearean sonnets to German-Turkish music of the 1970s and recent US-American pop – lyric poetry and popular song are examined as laboratories of techniques and as training sites for dispositions that enable collective resource use and governance. The analysis specifically emphasises the problem of the 'un/common', that is the conundrum of negotiating individual properties and collective proprieties. While a new formalism proposes literary forms as blueprints for socioeconomic forms, the article tests an approach that plays a visualist aesthetics of the commons (as forms) off against a sonically informed poetics of un/commoning (as *trans*formative practice).

Keywords: Commons, uncommons, popular music, poetry, aesthetics, poetics, form, performance, infrastructure, sound

INTRODUCTION – THE AESTHETICS AND THE POETICS OF COMMONING

In spite of its breadth, current scholarship on the commons does not easily admit the perspectives of cultural and literary studies. The *Cambridge Handbook of Commons Research Innovations* (2021) describes the field as follows:

> [T]he concept of the 'commons' has dramatically expanded to include many kinds of shared resources, both physical and virtual, in addition to a variety of other topics, including the global atmosphere, cities and urban infrastructure, neighborhoods and community gardens, technology and software, knowledge sharing and data networks, civil society organizations and humanitarian aid, among others.[1]

1. Sheila R. Foster and Chrystie F. Swiney, 'Introduction: Commons Research in the Twenty-First Century and Beyond', in Foster and Swiney (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Commons Research Innovations*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp1-13, p1.

The research summarised here is driven by the pragmatic need to speak to administrative institutions and policy makers. At the same time, the urge to produce palpable impacts may hamper the development of a methodology that grasps the full complexity of human world-making. As major thinkers

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from Marx via Cassirer and Dewey to Goodman and Latour have insisted, such worldmaking is based in the interplay of reproductive *and* creative, material *and* intellectual, economic *and* social, pragmatic *and* affective practices.[2] Within the discourse exemplified by my quotation, however, practices can only be addressed in relation to the paradigm of 'resources'; and intangible (non-'physical') resources – such as knowledge/s or socioculturally rooted organisational routines and affective responses – can only be addressed in terms of the paradigm of the 'virtual' (a term that puts their real-ness into question). In consequence, there is a long list of what the *Handbook of Commons Research Innovations* tellingly labels 'other topics'. While including fundamental domains of communal life such as 'cities and urban infrastructure' or 'civil society organizations', these topics cannot easily be mapped onto a positivist grid of inquiry. And the wide field of culture in the sense of the arts and entertainment, of imaginaries and aesthetics – which is so obviously important for producing a lived sense of human relationality and for generating ideas of what is common, of what might or should be commoned, by whom, and how – almost seems excluded from consideration.

2. See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (three volumes), Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1923-29; John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Minton, Balch and Company, 1934; Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett, 1978; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

However, as Massimo De Angelis – notably a political economist – reminds us, '[c]ommons are not simply resources we share':

> [C]onceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time. First, all commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people's needs. Second, the commons are necessarily created and sustained by *communities* … Communities are sets of commoners who share these resources and who define for themselves the rules according to which they are accessed and used … [T]he third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb 'to common' – the social process that creates and reproduces the commons.[3]

3. Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, 'On the Commons: A Public Interview', *e-flux Journal*, 17, 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/17/67351/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/. (Hereafter *On the Commons*.)

The emphasis on 'common' as a verb indicates that commoning research cannot stop short at defining properties that make certain entities into commons. Rather, we need to understand the processes and practices by which such entities are created, used and maintained. However, these practices depend not only on concrete processual rules but also on less definite sociocultural routines and on still more elusive – affectively, ethically and aesthetically grounded – dispositions that make people willing, as well as able, to engage in commoning. Accordingly, commoning research must study the cultural environment that sustains practices of commoning. It must investigate the cultural techniques and technologies, the traditions, concepts, knowledges and modes of perception (all of them 'virtual' commons in their own right) through which it becomes possible 'to common'.

My article follows these trajectories on a particular – and particularly important – cultural terrain: poetry and popular song. But let me begin by

sketching the general directions of enquiry that present themselves if we want to bring literary and cultural studies to bear on commoning research:

1. One direction of enquiry is to build on the concept of the *cultural commons*.[4] What happens if specific cultural domains are viewed as commons? How, for example, do literature and popular music function in the sense of collectively maintained pools of resources (as archives of works; ensembles of shared forms; inventories of knowledge; profiled networks of writers, performers and audiences)? And how do they function in the sense of sets of collectively oriented practices that take place around these resources (such as writing or recording; running publishing houses, music labels, libraries or websites; reading or listening, and discussing what has been read or listened to)?[5] An expansive approach to these questions is to view literature and music as social systems that are based in and cultivate key resources – thus producing, maintaining and transforming shared knowledges and dispositions essential to human sociality and world-making.[6]

2. Closer to the approach of 'traditional' literary and cultural studies, attention to commoning triggers questions of *representation*. How are various kinds of commons and diverse practices of commoning represented in literature or song? How do such representations create or transform what John R. Wagner calls 'social imaginaries'[7], and how do they conjure up what Lauren Berlant referred to as 'an imaginary for managing the meanwhile' (that is, the transition from late capitalism towards an uncharted beyond)?[8]

3. Thinking in terms of representation, and specifically thinking in terms of imaginaries, already takes us towards the field of *aesthetics*.[9] Following an old tendency that is returning to dominance in contemporary criticism, we are led to ask whether or how forms honed in the domain of art can be transferred to other domains of re/production.[10] Does it, for example, make sense to claim that poetic forms do not only 'inform' social imaginaries but can also – and more directly – serve as matrices for socioeconomic techniques of commoning?

4. A related, yet differently oriented, approach moves from form to *performance*.[11] What happens if we disentangle the commons from the desire for formal concreteness and if we replace our fixation on the static weight of materiality by an awareness of the volatility inherent in the cultural articulation of material entities?[12] More concretely, what is gained (and what is lost) if we stop grounding our idea of the commons in the basic model of a plot of land and conceptualise them as media of transformative worldmaking? These questions – which point to what Stephen Greenblatt calls the 'improvisatory intelligence' of artworks[13] – take us to the sphere of *poetics* (understanding poetics as enquiry into practices of artistic or quasi-artistic creation, and not as a set of rules delimiting such creation).

4. See Enrico Eraldo Bertacchini et al. (eds), *Cultural Commons: A New Perspective on the Production and Evolution of Cultures*, Elgar, 2012.

5. Fan studies have had a pioneering role in studying popular music and literature as cultural commons, but usually without directly using the term. For a recent example of this trend and general review of the discourse, see Şelale Hannah Erduran and Elena Möhler, 'Beyond the Music: Fan Communities, Transformative Labour and the Global Ascendancy of K-Pop', in Maria Denzlein and Sophie Schönfeld (eds), *Listening in: Perspectives on Sound, Voice and (Popular) Music Studies*, Würzburg University Press, 2025, pp141-60.

6. On literature and art as a social system, see especially Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, Eva M. Knodt (trans.), Stanford University Press, 2000; and Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Ann Shukman (trans.), Tauris, 1990. Bringing in the concept of commoning entails reframing such approaches from a perspective that is interested in embedded social practices.

7. John R. Wagner, 'Water and the Commons Imaginary', *Current Anthropology*, 53:5,

The following readings of poems and songs touch on all four directions of enquiry. The emphasis, however, is on the last two: aesthetics and poetics. I follow a threefold agenda: Firstly, I explore the *aesthetics* of the common/s and of commoning. Specifically, I wish to show that practices of commoning depend on aesthetic presuppositions, on an aesthetic infrastructure. At the same time, I bring in the concept of *poetics* to read my samples as applying or working out aesthetically grounded techniques of commoning – techniques such as *formal simulation* (using literary or musical forms to stage a social space and configuration), *sonic performance* (using sound and voice to test the potentials inherent in social situations and subjective positionalities), and *transformative articulation* (using formal simulation and sonic performance to sever and forge sociocultural and socioeconomic linkages). However, and this is my third programmatic paradigm, in asking about *aesthetic strategies* of defining a common/s and about *poetic tactics* of performing commoning,[14] I will make a particular effort to consider the negation foregrounded in the title of this issue of the journal: the problem of the *un*/common.

UN/COMMONING – (RE-)ARTICULATING INDIVIDUAL PROPERTIES AND COLLECTIVE PROPRIETIES

I base my crucial last paradigm in Mario Blaser's and Marisol de la Cadena's proposition that there is a fundamental relationship between the common and the 'uncommon', the commons and 'the uncommons', commoning and 'uncommoning'.[15] As Blaser and de la Cadena suggest, thinking of 'uncommons as constitutive of the commons' and entertaining the notion that 'uncommoning might be crucial for giving shape to solid commons' (*The Uncommons*, p185, see also p187 and throughout) not only helps scholars to fathom the contradictions inherent in processes of commoning but may allow actual commoners to productively negotiate and even dialectically use these contradictions.

The concept of the 'uncommons' foregrounds the problem that processes of commoning entail enclosure and exclusion: 'Even though "enclosures" and "the commons" have been written into political economy analysis as opposite to each other … both concepts, articulated through a series of cascading binaries (such as individual and collective, private and public, basic subsistence and profit), end up converging' (*The Uncommons*, pp185-86). Although Blaser and de la Cadena fail to mention this, their approach presupposes C. B. Macpherson's theory of 'possessive individualism', which critically reconstructs the foundations of 'modern liberal-democratic theory' in a 'conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities'.[16] Building on this inference, I understand the problem of the un/common as the problem of how individual *properties* are related to and translated into collective *proprieties*.

This conceptualisation plays on the complex significations of the two

2012, pp617-41, p617 and passim; Wagner's conceptualisation of 'social imaginaries' draws on Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai and Charles Taylor.

8. Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34:3, 2016, pp393-419, p394. (Hereafter *The Commons*.)

9. See especially Cornelia Sollfrank, Felix Stalder and Shusha Niederberger (eds), *Aesthetics of The Commons*, Diaphanes, 2021, online open access, https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/aesthetics-of-the-commons-6419.

10. See especially Caroline Levine, 'Literary Studies and Collective Life', *New Literary History*, 53:4 and 54:1, 2022/2023, pp693-720. (Hereafter *Literary Studies and Collective Life*.) See also Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

11. See especially Kai van Eikels, *Die Kunst des Kollektiven: Performance zwischen Theater, Politik und Sozio-Ökonomie* [The Art of Collectivity: Performance between Theatre, Politics and Social Economy], Fink, 2013.

12. On materiality and articulation, see Stuart Hall, 'On Postmodernism and Articulation', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10:2,

words and on the historically and situationally shifting relation between them. The meanings listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for 'property' spell out the various implications of the idea of attribution or owning, referring both to a characteristic *quality* (of a thing or person) and to a *possession*.[17] A bridge between these root meanings consists in the historically contingent idea that it is the holding of specific possessions (such as, an estate) which constitutes the character and standing of a person as socially acknowledgeable and politically capable: according to a certain concept of propriety, it is property that makes a person 'proper' in the sense of 'respectable' or 'worthy of consideration'.[18] Indeed, 'propriety' could once be used synonymously with 'property' – as for example in the following sample quotation the *OED* extracts from a seventeenth-century moral tract: 'It is the Hedge … which hinders us from breaking into other mens propriety'.[19] And a quotation which Macpherson cites from a 1648 Leveller manifesto demonstrates that the two drifts of meaning inherent in 'propriety' do in fact oscillate: '[Parliament should bind itself so as not to] levell mens Estates, destroy Propriety, or make all things common' (quoted in *Possessive Individualism*, pp138; see also pp137-142). Making all things common, this implies, would be an attack on a given system of propriety. It would manifest a new propriety – not only in the sense of a new system of economic and social organisation, but also in the sense of a new idea of personhood and of a new aesthetics of world-relation.

The following readings will foreground this linguistic coding and submerging of a key problem in the organisation of human re/production. My pairing of the term 'property' (which I use in the twin sense of 'character' and 'possession') and the term 'propriety' (which I primarily take to mean 'the details or rules of conventionally correct or proper conduct'[20]) implements the double challenge faced by commoning projects: On the one hand, the constitution and management of a commons depends on organising different individuals into a functioning collective. As Blaser and de la Cadena suggest, this entails acknowledging the diverse characteristics, needs and dispositions (the individual properties) of the group's members as an 'uncommons' (as an aggregate of respected differences). Terming such an aggregate an 'uncommons' implies that differences are neither denied nor translated into a system of private possessions but rather come to be articulated – paradoxically or dialectically – as a kind of shared resource. On the other hand, commoning projects need to break through a deeply inculcated logic that bases such acknowledgement of individual characteristics (that is, of individual properties) in the right and power of individuals to own natural, social and cultural resources as private property. The successful re-negotiation of this logic – a re-negotiation (or sublation) which is at the heart of all ideas and hopes of commoning – depends on establishing a new sense of propriety: a new sense of what is proper or right.

De Angelis describes this as the 'key problem' of 'how individual interests can be articulated in such a way as to constitute common interests' (*On the*

1986, pp45-60. In particular: '[T] here was, and still is, a sense in which orthodox marxists think that something is ultimately only real when you can put your hands on it in Nature. We can't be materialists in that way any longer … Material conditions are the necessary but not sufficient condition of all historical practice' (p57).

13. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Culture', in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, second edition, University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp225-232, p229.

14. On strategies and tactics, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Stephen Rendall (trans.), University of California Press, 1984 [1974], in particular pp34-39. (Hereafter *The Practice of Everyday Life*.) Certeau's dichotomy applies and tweaks the conventional distinction between form (as a 'prefabricated space', 'system', 'established language' and 'prescribed syntax') and practice (as producing 'indeterminate trajectories' or 'traverses' and as 'sketch[ing] out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires' (p34).

15. Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, 'The Uncommons: An Introduction', *Anthropologica*, 59, 2017, pp185-193. (Hereafter

Commons, no page number). Now, such an articulation is always more than a local achievement. It depends on a cultural infrastructure: an aesthetic sandbox in which individual properties can be stated (which is one meaning of articulation) and a poetic switchyard on which new collective proprieties can be forged and assembled (which is another, simultaneous and inseparable, meaning of articulation).[21]

In their combined roles as cultural domains, sites of social practices, and repertoires of aesthetic forms, poetry and song are particularly productive as such a sandbox and switchyard. Poetry and song are situated 'at the uncertain boundary between the public and the private'.[22] Although poems and songs are bound to foreground individual propria (perhaps it might be claimed that every poem or song stakes out an enclosure), they do so according to a logic of collectively oriented expression and communal acknowledgement – a logic which even the most private act of speaking or writing affirms and which is systematically foregrounded in the domain of poetry and song. Indeed, the special design of these arts is in simultaneously staging and contradicting – and thus in working through – possessive individualism.

Poetry and song thus provide apposite material for examining the proposition that the 'uncommons' may be 'constitutive of the commons'. Indeed, I propose that the notion of 'uncommoning' (or un/commoning) allows us to understand poetry and song as laboratories of techniques and as training sites for dispositions that enable collective resource use and governance. Accordingly, the following readings will examine the process of how poets and singers have been working (more or less credibly and successfully) towards a poetics of un/commoning, meaning a poetics of commoning that not only accommodates but *bases itself in* the uncommon. I will pay particular attention to the role of sound and voice within such a poetics, testing an approach that plays a visually grounded aesthetics of the common/s (as form) off against a sonically grounded poetics of un/commoning (as transformative practice). I will begin with a poem that prepares the field for a poetics of commoning by using the commons of the sonnet form to display and ironise received notions of commoning.

CRITIQUING RECEIVED NOTIONS OF COMMONING – AESTHETIC SIMULATION IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 8

The collection published at the beginning of the transitional seventeenth century[23] as *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609) offers a striking example of the potentialities of poetry and song as laboratories of commoning. Constantly foregrounding the 'uncertain boundary between the public and the private', Shakespeare's poems simultaneously prompt and frustrate persisting attempts to read them as manifestations of private affairs – as a 'key' that might 'unlock' Shakespeare's 'heart' or as a riddle that can only be solved by reference to the poet's biography.[24] As exercises in articulation,[25] Shakespeare's provocative

The Uncommons.) Blaser and de la Cadena use all three instantiations of the term: 'uncommon', 'uncommons', and 'uncommoning'.

16. C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Clarendon, 1962, p3. (Hereafter *Possessive Individualism*.)

17. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 'property' could historically mean both 'a distinctive, essential, or special quality', either 'of a thing' or 'of a person', and 'a (usually material) thing belonging to a person, group of persons, … a possession', specifically 'a piece of land under one ownership'.

18. See *OED* meanings of 'proper': I.2.a: 'Conforming to recognized social standards or etiquette'; and III.7.a: 'Such as a person or thing of the kind specified should be'.

19. The sample comes from the revised edition of Owen Feltham's *Resolves, Divine, Moral, and Political* (1661). See 'propriety', *OED*, meaning 3.

20. See 'propriety', *OED*, meaning 7.b.

21. For a comprehensive exploration of the concept of articulation, see Petra Sabisch, 'Articulation', *Choreographing*

lyrics insistently confront the problem of how individual properties can be articulated with or disarticulated from received proprieties. The poems simultaneously draw on and strain against the proprieties instantiated through the rigorous conventionality of the sonnet form (fourteen lines in iambic pentameter obeying an inflexible rhyme scheme)[26] and of the sonnet tradition (especially the Petrarchan tradition with its attendant routines of courtly love, including the blazonic celebration of the female love object).[27]

Generally trumped as love poetry, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* actually start out from the conspicuously pragmatic topic of biological and social reproduction. The first seventeen poems (usually termed 'procreation sonnets') imply an overarching communicative purpose: the speaker mobilises all means of invention to convince the addressee to marry and beget children. Sonnet 1 places these concerns in a remarkably wide framework of conceptualisation:

> From fairest creatures we desire increase,
> That thereby beauty's rose might never die[.] (Sonnet 1.1-2)[28]

Introducing the word 'creatures' – and reinforcing this choice of diction through the related word 'increase' – the opening lines of the collection establish worldmaking as the fundamental topic. Although the word 'creatures' triggers religious connotations and although other forms of creativity (especially writing poetry) will soon push to the foreground, at this point the poems focus on biological and social reproduction as the prime means of worldmaking. Speaking from the position of a collective ('we'), the speaker voices the 'desire' to ensure the proper production of offspring. The personal properties of the addressee (their exceptional 'beauty') are taken to imply a special obligation to obey the directive to reproduce the valuable resource of beauty. However, as the speaker's accusations (which can be read as accusations of onanism as well as narcissism) indicate, the addressee is unwilling to comply with propriety:

> But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
> Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
> Making a famine where abundance lies[.] (Sonnet 1.5-7)

Startlingly, the procreation sonnets speak the language of resource management. Treating the addressee's uncommon beauty as a resource, they adduce the demand of managing that resource in the common interest – which is taken to coincide with the addressee's own best interest (see Sonnet 4.9-10). Of course, the sonnets constantly provoke us to question the discourses they accentuate. The point of the procreation sonnets is not in urging anyone to have children. Rather, it is in examining the import, limits and potentials of established ways of speaking – especially of established discourses of commoning. Boasting the addressee's beauty as an important

Relations: Practical Philosophy and Contemporary Choreography, epodium, 2011, pp95-143.

22. Scott Brewster, *Lyric*, Routledge, 2009, p3.

23. See Trevor Aston (ed.), *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; and Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603-1714*, Nelson, 1961.

24. William Wordsworth, 'Scorn not the Sonnet' (1827), l.2-3, in *The Sonnets of William Wordsworth*, Edward Moxon, 1838, p54: 'with this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart'. For the ongoing drift towards biographical readings, see for example Elaine Scarry, *Naming Thy Name: Cross Talk in Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

25. On Shakespeare's Sonnets as exercises in articulation, see Zeno Ackermann and David Schalkwyk, 'The Articulation of Feeling in Shakespeare's Sonnets', *The Review of English Studies*, 74, 2023, pp470-484 (Hereafter *The Articulation of Feeling*.)

26. On the rigidity of the sonnet form, see Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p76. Drawing on Helen Vendler, Schoenfeldt emphasises the 'deliberately taut and

resource, the poetry interrogates conventional proprieties concerning the sharing of properties.

As Blaser and de la Cadena argue, 'the idea of the commons and of commoning call forth an exploration of what making "things" (objects, identities, concepts, ideas and so on) *common* implies, especially where things might (also) be uncommon' (*The Uncommons*, p186; emphasis added). Shakespeare's Sonnets do exactly that: they ask what it implies to make things common, and they ask whether there are alternative ways of commoning. In particular, the poems are interested in techniques of negotiating the uncommon and the common. What the Sonnets call 'love' is suggested (and interrogated) not only as a way of making things common but also as an instance of the uncommon and as a technique of negotiating the uncommon and the common: 'For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings' (Sonnet 29.13-14).

Sonnet 8, which the 1609 Quarto situates in the middle of the procreation sequence, explores the problem of the uncommon in terms of sound and music. Indeed, the poem deals with what Benedict Anderson terms 'unisonality', that is 'the echoed physical realization of the imagined community'[29]:

> Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
> Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy;
> Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,
> Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?
>
> If the true concord of well-tuned sounds
> By unions married do offend thine ear,
> They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
> In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.
>
> Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
> Strikes each in each by mutual ordering,
> Resembling sire and child and happy mother,
> Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing:
>
> Whose speechless song, being many, seeming one,
> Sings this to thee: 'Thou single wilt prove none.'

Against the background of the dominant visuality of the 'procreation sonnets', Sonnet 8 switches gears and imagines the addressee's excellence in terms of sound. But while they themselves are '[mu]sic to hear', the addressee fails to tune in with the commonly preferred way of hearing music: rather than complying with the protocol of 'joy delight[ing] in joy' (8.2), they show a problematic affective response by 'hear[ing] music sadly' (8.1). This problem of mood connects the addressee of Sonnet 8 to the Jessica of *The Merchant*

rigid structure' of the form and argues that *Shakespeare's Sonnets* explore the 'tension between feeling and form'.

27. For a dialectical gauging of how the sonnet tradition both constrained and enabled expression, see Heather Dubrow, *Echoes Of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses*, Cornell University Press, 1995.

28. Here and in the following, Shakespeare's poems are quoted from Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, (revised edition), Arden/Methuen Drama, 2010.

29. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, Verso, 2006, p145.

of Venice. Having only recently converted from Judaism to Christianity and from the confines of the Venetian ghetto to the splendours of Belmont, Jessica confesses: 'I am never merry when I hear sweet music' (5.1.68).[30] Sonnet 8 implies a similar remark by the addressee as motivation of the rejoinder spelt out in the poem. Their 'hear[ing] music sadly' suggests that the addressee fails to accord with a deep-rooted discourse of world-making: the ancient discourse of 'world harmony' which Leo Spitzer found encapsulated in the German word 'Stimmung' ('mood', 'tuning', 'attunement') and which, Spitzer argued, already showed fissures in Shakespeare's time.[31] Being out of tune with the world around them and the traditions handed down to them, the addressee refuses to put their personal properties (their beauty) at the service of propriety (the continuance of their family).

The sestet of the sonnet (lines 9-14) plays on the phenomenon of sympathetic vibration: if one string of a lute is plucked, the other strings pick up the resonance. The conceit urges a specific notion of propriety: a proscriptive model of the individual's articulation with a harmonically ordered structure. The poem identifies this structure as the (socially elevated) family, which is presented as a naturally given organic configuration, but also as an enclosed commons. Simultaneously, this harmonically ordered structure is enacted through the sonnet form. Indeed, Sonnet 8 manifests an aesthetic strategy that combines formal simulation and sonic performance: in so far as the speaker adduces the sonnet form as a codified space of sociality, the acoustic articulations triggered and framed by the form demonstrate the correct social articulation of the individual.[32] Thus, the fact that 'one string' (in the middle of line 9) rhymes with 'mutual ordering' (at the end of line 10) audibly suggests the need for the individual to enter into a social network.

The logic of acoustically founded social harmony comes with a flipside. This is the mechanism of exclusion the poem executes through the sonic relationship between the repeated determiner 'one' (occurring four times in the poem and entering into a striking figure of repetition in line 12) and the concluding pronoun 'none'. The conclusion of the sonnet – 'thou single wilt prove none' (line 14) – drives home the message that 'one' can subsist only in regulated articulation with other subjectivities and that such articulation depends on renouncing personal idiosyncrasies. Sonnet 8 thus exemplifies and examines a discourse according to which a radically 'uncommon' personhood, a singular 'one', is not an option. In this discourse, and in the sociocultural system it sustains, common proprieties beat individual properties.

But the poem also brings out the harsh rigidity of that discourse. Indeed, the insistence of the speaker, the ingenuity of the conceit and the sound effects that substantiate it manifest an excess of formal control. The palpable rhetorical pressure and the overly careful design of the poem give away the design of its ideology, so that its quasi-humanist celebration of organic relationships becomes recognisable as a neo-feudal mechanics of hierarchical integration. It is unlikely that the speech act dramatised in the poem – a

30. The play is quoted from Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, Norton, 1997.

31. See Leo Spitzer, 'Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung" – Part 1 and Part 2', *Traditio*, 2, 1944, pp409-64; *Traditio*, 3, 1945, pp307-64.

32. See Christopher Warley on the complex functions of the sonnet form to work out 'an idealized social order that, in turn, articulates the social position of the speaker', *Sonnet Sequences and Social Distinction in Renaissance England*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p6.

speech act that conspicuously overrides and suppresses the addressee's voice – will reach its professed goal to convince the addressee to beget a child. Rather, the poem constructs *and* deconstructs a set of notions that connect the uncommon excellence of the social elite to a specific kind of enclosed commons: the 'house' (see Sonnet 13.9), meaning both the socially elevated family and their hierarchically structured *oikos*. I thus read Sonnet 8 as an ironical plea for a different programmatic of commoning: one that would match what I have introduced, in dialogue with Blaser and de la Cadena, as un/commoning. Indeed, such un/commoning is what the body of Shakespeare's Sonnets seems to be concerned with. Let me illustrate this by considering a second poem from the collection.

TOWARDS A POETICS OF UN/COMMONING – ACOUSTICS AND VISUALITY IN SONNET 43

As Peter Hyland indicates, the Sonnets play with a bold 'myth of social restructuring' according to which a 'speaker-poet' attempts to use the affordances of poetry so as to 'assert control' over a 'powerful and attractive youth'.[33] One way of reading Shakespeare's Sonnets is as a concerted effort by the speaker – a speaker who is repeatedly boasting the masks of tutor, poet or actor – to get access to the complex of resources impersonated by the addressee, to break into (or perhaps to break) the ideological system articulated under the trope of fairness. My second example from the collection, Sonnet 43, is one of the poems in which this effort – and its precariousness – come out with startling emphasis. Like Sonnet 8, this poem also deals with social relations. But while the earlier sonnet surveys such relations from a distance (there is not a single first-person pronoun), the speaker of Sonnet 43 has entered the space of the social by articulating a vehement attraction to the addressee. Indeed, at this point in Shakespeare's collection the discourse of biological, social and ideological reproduction has long since been overwhelmed by the idea of 'love' as a productive and transformative force (see the above quotation from Sonnet 29). Here is the full text of Sonnet 43:

33. Peter Hyland, *An Introduction to Shakespeare's Poems*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p147.

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see;
For all the day they view things unrespected,
But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.

Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright,
How would thy shadow's form form happy show
To the clear day with thy much clearer light,
When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so?

How would (I say) mine eyes be blessed made

By looking on thee in the living day,
When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade
Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay?

All days are nights to see till I see thee,
And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.

In contrast to my previous example, this poem is based on visual rather than sonic analogies. Its topic is not resonance but respect (see the last word in line 2). If Sonnet 8 is based in a musically grounded framework of social stability, Sonnet 43 projects a *vision* of social transformation. Indeed, the speaker proclaims a phantasmagoria: they are best able to see the addressee with closed eyes and in absolute darkness. The reason is not only in the speaker's uncommon power of vision but also in the uncommon person of the addressee. That person, it is claimed, owns such remarkable presence that even their mere shadow can cause other shadows to shine brightly (line 5). By such wilfully paradoxical means, the speaker bridges all contradictions so as to rise from dejection to ecstasy. Simultaneously, the sonnet intervenes in an established 'distribution of the sensible'.[34] The movement is towards an all-encompassing connectivity. The speaker's supernatural power of sight connects them not only to the addressee but to the entire world: while during the day, things fail to return the speaker's gaze, now – in the night of transvaluation – everything and everybody seem united in a perfectly reciprocal relation.

34. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill (trans.), Continuum, 2004. (Hereafter *The Politics of Aesthetics*.)

Of course, the speaker indulges in a 'dream' (line 14). At the same time, Sonnet 43 resembles Sonnet 8 in demonstrating the argument also in terms of sound. And while the boldness of the poem's visual conceits underlines the impropriety of its mood, its sonic relationships performatively corroborate the postulate of universal connectivity: 'see' (in line 1) rhymes with 'thee' (in line 3), thus ratifying the speaker's desire; the chiasmus in line 4 – 'darkly bright … bright in dark' – is an event of queer acoustic pleasure just as much as it is a transformative paradox; the strongly exposed figures of repetition – especially the polyptoton in line 5 ('whose shadow shadows does make bright') and the figura etymologica in line 6 ('How would thy shadow's form form happy show') – postulate the power of sonic infrastructures to *make sense* and override the given social and symbolic order. The poem's function as an articulatory echo chamber comes out most strikingly in its acoustic manifestation of the speaking 'I' as both subject *and* organ of seeing**:** 'I [eye] wink' (line 1); 'mine [m-eye/I-n] eyes' (line 1); 'unseeing eyes [I's]' (line 8); 'thy [th-eye/I] shade shines [sh-eye/I-ns]' (line 8); 'sightless [s-eye/I-tlesse] eyes' (line 12); and so on. At the same time, 'night' [n-eye/I-t] (lines 13 and 14) is sonically revealed as the domain of the 'I' and of its/his/her/their uncommon exercise of commoning.

In its techniques of poetic commoning, then, Sonnet 43 resembles Sonnet 8. Again, the poem works in terms of formal simulation and acoustic testing. However, if my first example overaccentuates and thus

interrogates dominant prescriptions of unisonality, the second poem uses sound to subliminally ratify the ways in which its argument exceeds the proprieties instantiated by the sonnet form. The result is a powerful – if highly precarious – instantiation of radical un/commoning, a quasi-utopian prompting of new proprieties that offer to accommodate the properties of both speaker and addressee, commoning them in terms of a new logic of universal respect.

COMMONING THE UNCOMMON – ALIENATION AS AN AFFECTIVE COMMONS IN POP MUSIC

We will now turn from early to late modernity and from Shakespeare's poetry towards a cultural form that is usually kept in a separate compartment of reception and evaluation: contemporary popular song.[35] In fact, I have long been drawn to the notion that the strangeness of Shakespearean sonneteering – especially its disorienting combination of historical situatedness and transformative force – can be made accessible by foregrounding the similarities of its performative techniques with rock and pop music. As I have argued elsewhere,[36] the specificity of such music lies in its concept of articulation: in the importance attributed to the human voice, in the ostentatious neglect of regulating this voice, and in the focus on the ways in which the unregulated voice struggles with a system of speech and an often relentlessly patterned musical idiom. Strikingly similar criteria of specificity apply for *Shakespeare's Sonnets* – a cycle of poems that is also obsessed with the performance of individual identities through utterance and with the expression of unregulated subjective dispositions within a highly regulated social context and through a strongly patterned poetic form.[37] Against this background, I find it urgently productive to ask how early modern lyric poetry relates to contemporary song lyrics.

This proposition seems particularly attractive in relation to our topic of commoning. Since culture is a system of collective worldmaking, commoning can be understood – at the most general level – as the originary work of culture. This is what Raymond Williams means when he insists that 'culture is ordinary'.[38] In spite of their tendency towards conceited sophistication, Shakespeare's Sonnets also tap into this dimension of culture. Indeed, the poems repeatedly stress the protean ordinariness of cultural practices: 'My mistress when she walks treads on the ground' (130.12). Today, it is in the domain we designate 'popular culture', and especially in so-called popular music, that the ordinary and the originary functions of culture are clung to, translated or re-enacted with particular emphasis. Combining the articulatory power of performed poetry and the affective power of music, popular song can be seen – and is heard by its audience – to engage (more or less ostentatiously and more or less productively) in the processes that Williams describes as 'the finding of common meanings and directions' (*Culture Is Ordinary*, p11). The function of such music is not to simply affirm the collective and the

35. On the problematic of separating 'popular culture' from other domains or levels of culture, see especially John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 1994, tenth edition, Routledge, 2024; and *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

36. Zeno Ackermann, 'Sounding the Sonnets in Popular Music', in Manfred Pfister and Jürgen Gutsch (eds), *William Shakespeare's Sonnets: For the First Time Globally Reprinted: A Quatercentenary Anthology*, Volume 2, Edition SIGNAThUR, 2014, pp97-118, see especially pp97-98.

37. Adam Bradley offers a different rationale for reading contemporary popular song and early modern poetry in conjunction: 'Transplant an ancient Greek and an Elizabethan to the present day and place before them John Ashbery's "… by an Earthquake" and a transcription of Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" and they'll more readily recognize Swift's lyrics as the poem', *The Poetry of Pop*, Yale University Press, 2017, p20. (Hereafter *The Poetry of Pop*.)

38. Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary' (1958), in John Higgins (ed.), *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Blackwell, 2001, pp10-24. (Hereafter *Culture is Ordinary*.)

communal. Rather, it consists in simultaneously staging and negotiating – and thus in articulating – the tension between individual properties and collective proprieties.[39]

My first musical specimen, the 2013 break-up ballad 'Say Something', may be considered a textbook example of this function – or of how this function is affirmed, adopted and also displaced at the very heart of the contemporary culture industry. Especially the award-winning second version of the song, which A Great Big World (Ian Axel and Chad King) recorded with additional vocals by Christina Aguilera,[40] instantiates the urge to find 'common meanings and directions' by translating individual positionalities, experiences and affective responses into shared affective dispositions. Since the music video produced for this version of the song does a remarkable job of visualising its cultural work,[41] I will make it the jumping board for my discussion. The ploy of the video is in foregrounding the theatricality of the song through a decidedly theatrical mise-en-scène: while there are cuts, the various dramatic transactions shown in the video all seem to take place within the same set – a set that resembles a theatrical stage space. This space represents a commons of sorts: it serves as a visual analogy to the common cultural ground which the song evokes and on which it performs its articulations.

Panning up from the floor of the stage, the camera initially gets hold of Ian Axel, hunched over a grand piano while playing the song's opening chords. Even before the first words of the lyrics are heard, the video cuts to an overhead shot of a couple lying on a mattress that is also situated in the common stage space. The position and gestures of the two young people act out the theme of the song: the ending of a relationship, when still lingering affective bonds can no longer be translated into successful transactions of intimacy. While the woman tries to make contact with the man, he is unable to respond to her advances. At this point, Axel sings the first lines of the lyrics – whose metre matches the slow balladic waltz of the music: 'Say something, I'm giving up on you / I'll be the one, if you want me to' (–uu –uu –uu / –uu –uu –uu) (See *The Poetry of Pop*, pp14-15). In themselves, the words are not clearly authorised or contextualised. Suggesting that Axel sings the thoughts of the woman on the mattress, the video offers a concretion of the communicative situation. But by simultaneously staging a gap between the (actual) voice and the (putative) subject of the enunciation, the video also underscores the openness and multi-directionality of the lyrics. Virtually everybody may push their subjectivity into the gap and identify with the affect expressed by lyrics, voice and music.

There is a strong sense, then, that the song's rationale lies in making individual experiences and emotions accessible as a commons. Indeed, the video goes on to systematically demonstrate that the lyrics may be applied to various configurations and scenarios of estrangement. While Axel is singing the second line, King – the other half of A Great Big World – steps up to the piano. Placing his hands on the side of the instrument opposite the keyboard

39. See Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music*, Routledge, 2006. Middleton's investigation of popular song as a site for staging 'the voice of the people' centres on the concept of articulation, including the articulation of properties and proprieties. See, for example, p253, n53, on the 'post-Gramscian development of articulation theory': '[O]ne might say that the desirable trajectory is from a relation of property … to one of wonder in the connectivity of difference'.

40. A Great Big World with Christina Aguilera, 'Say Something', single record, Epic (USA), 2013. This version appeared in the same year as the original song and won the Grammy for 'Best Pop Duo/ Group Performance'.

41. 'Say Something', Christopher Sims (dir.), 2013, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2U0Ivkn2Ds.

and sadly gazing at his musical partner, King establishes a configuration that mirrors that of the young people on the mattress. The video repeats this ploy several times by arranging different pairs of characters in or around different kinds of beds, introducing not only an old man who is harrowed by his spouse's withdrawal into death but also – strangely, yet to some effect – a mournfully looking girl who reaches out for an also mournfully looking dog crouching under her bed. In the process, the stage space of the video emerges more and more clearly as a trope: initially signifying the virtual space created by the song's lyrics, it morphs not only into the broader cultural space on which popular music enacts its theatre of subjectivity but also into the space of the communal as such. By these means, the video proposes an ambitious programmatic for the song: it is to serve not only as a cultural commons in its own right but also as a training site for various practices of commoning.

This performance of a commons and of commoning is not only textual (the lyrics) and visual (the video) but also musical and vocal. Already with the beginning of the lyrics' third line, the video cuts to the wings of the stage space, where Aguilera emerges from the dark. Having found her position on the set – a position close to the piano but also strangely separate from the other two musicians – she begins delivering a backing to Axel's vocals. That the famous singer stays in the role of trailing behind and curling around a voice less powerful than her own, might be interpreted as an instance of musical commoning. Indeed, the song enacts vocally what the video suggests visually: if the video disperses the significance of the lyrics by applying them to different characters and situations, the presence of Aguilera's voice similarly doubles and splits vocal authority (partly, but not exclusively, along the axis of gender). Between each other, the lyrics, their dual vocal performance and their filmic visualisation construct an open – a polyvocal and multidirectional[42] – communicative situation: while articulating powerful individual feelings, the song is also offered as a versatile template for feeling together. Carefully lifting and salvaging strong emotions from the ruins of terminated relationships, it transforms shared experiences of alienation into an affective commons.

I introduced 'Say Something' as a textbook example of commoning, specifically of commoning the uncommon. In spite of the dazzling productivity of song and video, however, one might well feel that there is something missing from – and that there is something wrong with – the performance. Indeed, 'Say Something' not only testifies to a universal urge of commoning but also manifests an attempt of mining and displacing that urge. This is a widespread procedure from which, say, Shakespeare's Sonnets cannot be exempted. But it comes out with a special force and traction in mass-mediated and profit-oriented forms of cultural production – in what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry.[43] Indeed, 'Say Something' reduces both the problem of alienation and the process of commoning to a purely affective significance. The socioeconomic reasons of alienation and the socioeconomic dimension of commoning are ignored and suppressed.

42. The two concepts go together: sonic polyvocality induces communicative and semantic multidirectionality. On polyvocality, see Stephen M. Buhler, 'Musical Shakespeares: Attending to Ophelia, Juliet, and Desdemona', in Robert Shaughnessy (ed.), *Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp150-74, p160.

43. For a brief recapitulation of the argument, see Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', Anson G. Rabinach (trans.), *New German Critique*, 6, 1975, pp12-19.

QUERYING FORMALISM – INFRASTRUCTURAL AESTHETICS AND 'STRUCTURES OF FEELING'

In her seminal essay 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', Lauren Berlant argued that the transition from the collapsing structures of late capitalism towards a new fashioning of economic and social life depends on an intermediary structure or infrastructure that would facilitate the transition without reproducing what is to be left behind. If 'Say Something' has a political point (and I suppose it does), it is in conjuring up a version of such an infrastructure. Berlant does not suggest that aesthetics 'is' the infrastructure of commoning. But her inquiring into 'the esthetic induction of the invented structure that will govern the transformation' (*The Commons*, p413) clearly points to aesthetics as a key component of that infrastructure.[44] So how can we understand the 'esthetic induction' of commoning?

Almost automatically, the topic of aesthetics triggers a close attention to form. Indeed, we are currently seeing a new formalism that shows two related tendencies: Small-scale forms (such as, an urban gardening project) are understood as metonymies of large-scale forms (such as, a new organisation of socioeconomic life in general). Simultaneously, artistic forms (such as literary forms) are taken as metaphors, or even homologies, of socioeconomic forms. Arguing that textual or literary forms are 'workable blueprints for the future', Caroline Levine asks: 'What collectives is it possible to know or build with different forms?' (*Literary Studies and Collective Life*, p697). In a similar – although more open and productive – fashion, Christian Haines claims that '[t]he literary commons mobilizes aesthetic form as a milieu for developing social potentiality'.[45] Visually figuring the infrastructure of commoning as a universally shared stage space, the video for 'Say Something' also draws on and plays into a practice of understanding aesthetics as an arsenal of concrete forms.

This line of thinking promises ready-made recipes and portable solutions for commoning. But as my reading of 'Say Something' indicates it also drifts towards reductionism. In fact, the approach of the communalist formalists is newly rigorous rather than substantially new. It resembles not only Fredric Jameson's neo-Marxist genre theory but also Bertolt Brecht's and Walter Benjamin's striving for a transformative 'literarization' of social life ('Literarisierung aller Lebensverhältnisse').[46] Similar to Jameson, scholars such as Levine view literature as a 'socially symbolic act'.[47] But while Jameson is interested in how the unity of the text *conceals* the material contradictions articulated via form (and 'Say Something' may be an instance of this), the supposition of literary forms as 'workable blueprints for the future' treats form as an apposite means of mediation. Similarly, while Brecht and Benjamin put the emphasis on the *process* of production (seeing the transformation of the author's role in the context of a comprehensive reorganisation of the relations of production), the new formalists focus

44. Habermas' thesis that the establishment of the literary sphere preceded and facilitated that of the public sphere resembles this argument; see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, MIT Press, 1991 [1962].

45. Christian Haines, *A Desire Called America: Biopolitics, Utopia, and the Literary Commons*, Fordham University Press, 2019, p21.

46. Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, Anna Bostock (trans.), Verso, 1998, pp85-103, where the phrase is translated as 'literarization of living conditions' (p90).

47. Fredric Jameson, 'On Interpretation: Literature as Socially Symbolic Act', in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, 1981, pp17-102.

on how processes can be abstracted into transferable structures. Leaning towards a reification of form, this approach sacrifices indirection as a seminal technique of literary worldmaking. The mistake is in failing to recognise the figurative character inherent in all notions of 'form', especially in the assumption of 'social forms'.[48]

Instead of supposing that aesthetic forms can simply be translated into social or economic forms, we should understand worldmaking – and we should understand the specific form of worldmaking we refer to as commoning – as a series of articulatory processes, specifically as a constant co-ordination of material, semantic and affective forms, formations or performances. In this, we can build on Berlant's notion of infrastructures, which implicitly alerts us to the difference between concrete forms (such as the rather clearly defined conventions of the break-up ballad) and what Berlant calls 'placeholder forms' (form as the loosely defined ground of transformative practices, such as the stage space conjured up in the 'Say Something' video).[49] Arguably, the point of 'Say Something' (and of creative production generally) is not in inventing, transporting or imposing forms but in performatively *using* forms, it is not in defining new forms of feeling but in peeling feeling *from* the confines of formal convention. Dwelling on the double meaning of the prefix 'infra' (designating what is below the level of the manifestly structural, but also designating a structure that sustains other structures), we might finally arrive at – and return to – Williams' concept of 'structures of feeling'.[50] Characterised as 'social experiences *in solution*' which can still be understood as 'structured formation[s]' and which relate to 'emergent [social] formations' (*Marxism and Literature*, pp133-34), structures of feeling are *infra*structures: while they are structurally determined, they refuse to be structurally delimited. Rather, they hover – and this is my favourite phrase from Williams – 'at the very edge of semantic availability' (p134).

But how can 'the very edge of semantic availability' be approached? As my readings have demonstrated, one way is in attending not only to *phenomena* of form (such as literary or song forms) but also to *phonomena* of sound and voice. Combined investigation of these domains will attune us to the ways in which sound simultaneously articulates given forms and exceeds their regular shape. Thus, Shakespeare's Sonnet 43 uses the conventional stage of the sonnet form to grope beyond form: towards a new structure of feeling and a re-distribution of the sensible (see *The Articulation of Feeling*, especially pp483-84). Striving towards the edge of semantic availability, the speaker audibly performs a transvaluation of the social and ideological proprieties instantiated through the given form. Representing what de Certeau calls a 'superimposition' and a 'traverse' (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, p30, p34), this poetic *tactics* is very different from the aesthetic *strategy* recommended by Levine and finally held on to in 'Say Something': rather than using form as a static 'blueprint for the future', Shakespeare employs it as the stage for performatively unleashing an impossible transformativity.[51]

48. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1977. Both the purchase *and* the problematic of correlating social forms and literary forms are at the heart of Williams' treatise. (Hereafter *Marxism and Literature*.)

49. See Berlant: 'People are reclaiming bits of nature and of culture, and saying "this is going to be public space." Those public spaces are … placeholder forms for the commons to come' (*The Commons*, p408).

50. Berlant also briefly gestures towards Williams (*The Commons*, p397).

51. On the sonnet form as ground for experimental social articulation, see Linda Gregerson, 'Open Voicing: Wyatt and Shakespeare', in J.F.S. Post (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp151-167.

AN UNACCOMMODATING ARTICULACY – ATA CANANI'S TACTICS OF UN/COMMONING

As has been demonstrated, poetry and song persistently dwell on the tension between the common and the uncommon. At the same time, my examples – two Shakespearean sonnets and a recent hit – have also indicated the difficulty of negotiating individual properties and collective proprieties in credible visions and sustainable projects of commoning. While literally *displaying* various sophisticated tactics of commoning, 'Say Something' (as an amalgam of song and video) displaces the urge 'to common' onto a plane of pure affect. Uncommon experiences are ostensibly pooled as a collectively shareable resource. Paradoxically, however, these experiences are also forced into the shape of marketable goods adapted for individual consumption.[52] Shakespeare's Sonnets, on the other hand, strikingly expose facile ideologies of the common/s (an important work in which these poems excel), but they put the accent less on articulating individual properties and collective proprieties than on mining the dramatic potentials that spring from their collision.

I conclude by turning to an artistic performance that more completely realises the objectives and techniques distilled from my previous examples: Ata Canani's song 'Deutsche Freunde' ('German Friends'). Written in 1978 and performed on TV soon after,[53] the song represents an early example of the German-Turkish music emerging from post-Second World War immigration to the FRG. The song deals with the experiences of the so-called 'guest workers' ('Gastarbeiter'), people from Southern Europe and Turkey whose labour was needed by the West German economy but who – labelled 'guests' rather than 'immigrants' – were kept in a limbo between the status of migrant labourers and that of 'foreign fellow citizens' ('ausländische Mitbürger'). Operating from the perspective of a Turkish teenager who had unwillingly followed his father to Germany, Canani's song performance *sounds* (as in 'taking the depth of') the imaginary community of the nation. Its point is in breaking into the enclosure of nationality and in articulating nationhood as a commons (an act of re-definition, of pushing the boundaries, of shifting the fence around a resource).

As Canani's website explains, his inspiration for the song came from a dictum by the Swiss writer Max Frisch: 'We called for labour power, and human beings came.'[54] The song picks this dictum up and articulates it with the perspective of the people referred to. The lyrics not only put Frisch's sentence into the passive voice (interestingly, an impersonal passive voice), but also emphasise the contrast between its two clauses. This is done by exchanging the cumulative with an adversative conjunction: 'Labour power had been called for … *yet* human beings came.' The most significant ploy of Canani's lyrics, however, is a counterintuitive intervention: the seemingly unmotivated phrase 'our German friends' is pushed between the two clauses.

52. This wide-spread phenomenon is at the centre of Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Duke University Press, 2008.

53. The song was recorded only much later, for the sampler *Songs of Gastarbeiter: Volume 1*, Trikont, 2013. I am basing my discussion on Canani's performance of the song in a TV magazine show in 1979; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2QITWrBkFE.

54. Max Frisch, 'Preface', in Alexander Seiler, *Siamo Italiani: Die Italiener*, EVZ, 1965 (my translation), http://ozanatacanani.de/.

Here is a transcript of the song's first lines – as sung, by a very young Canani, on German TV in 1979. I also supply my own translation into English:

Arbeitskräfte wurde(n) gerufen – unsere deutsche Freunde
Aber Menschen sind gekommen – unsere deutsche Freunde
Aber Menschen sind gekommen – unsere deutsche Freunde
Nicht Maschinen, sondern Menschen – aber Menschen sind gekommen
Unsere deutsche Freunde – Freunde, Freunde
Die haben am Leben Freude

Labour power had been called for – our German friends
Yet human beings came – our German friends
Yet human beings came – our German friends
Not machines but human beings – yet human beings came
Our German friends – friends, friends
These people take joy in life
[This is followed by an expressive instrumental interlude.]

The repeated insertion of the phrase 'our German friends' has a strange and haunting effect. Who are the 'German friends' so insistently invoked? What is their position in relation to the singer and within the syntax of his pronouncements? What is to be inferred from the fact that the singer's positionality as a non-native speaker of German is constantly foregrounded in the very act of invoking the 'German friends' – not only through his accent but also through a, perhaps wilful, violation of grammatical propriety (the phrase 'unsere deutsche Freunde' should read 'unsere deutsche**n** Freunde')? Who is supposed to be good in taking joy in life? (It may seem obvious that the remark refers to the German majority society rather than the people referred to as 'welders, unskilled workers, workers in muck and garbage' – but the song also admits a different understanding.) And finally: Is such taking joy in life a good or a bad thing?

There are no absolute answers to these questions. Indeed, the poetic tactic of Canani's speech acts is in disabling interpretive finality; it is in destabilising semantic certainties and unsettling fixed positionalities. This is comparable to the multidirectionality which I identified as the chief vehicle of affective commoning in 'Say Something' and which is also evident in the vision of total respect conjured up in Shakespeare's 'When most I wink'. I have argued that A Great Big World and Aguilera use multi-directionality to lift strong feelings from their private locations, pooling them as a resource to be commonly used and tended. Along similar lines, Canani's song performatively works towards lifting protocols of property and belonging from their ethnic localities. Provocatively foregrounding a transnationally inflected idea of friendship, it gestures towards new proprieties – proprieties that will allow for and depend on a commoning of nationhood as a shareable resource.

Canani's lyrics insistently press the issue of nationhood (a propriety) and its possible conflict with the protocols nationality (a property). They do so not only by an inflationary use of the adjective 'German' but also by carefully listing, later in the song, the immigrants' countries of origin (mentioning Turkey, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece and Yugoslavia). Moreover, the singer complains about his confused sense of belonging. As the lyrics explain to the German audience they apparently address, the singer has been exiled from the commons of Turkish nationhood:

> I am Ata and I am asking you where we are now supposed to belong
> Our German friends
> I am Ata and I am asking you where we are now supposed to belong
> Our German friends – friends, friends

This raises the problematic of 'third culture kids'. But again, the interpolation of the 'German friends' complicates the argument. If listeners allow themselves to float in the multidirectional logic of the song's lyrics, music and voice, the location of properties and proprieties becomes indeterminate. Who is the Other, the uncommon person: the singer himself, or the 'German friends' he invokes as an almost spectral presence? How do the properties of foreignness and uprootedness relate to the proprieties of friendship?

Canani's tactics of unsettling, confusing and interlacing the common and the uncommon do not solely depend on his lyrics. The performance works by means of combining textual and sonic dimensions of multidirectionality. Thus, Canani sets his German lyrics onto the aesthetic infrastructure of Turkish pop music – whose style yet again fuses global influences with distinctly local and traditional idioms. Moreover, he crosses the tone and logic of the German language not only with his Turkish accent but also with the diction of his instrument – an electrically amplified bağlama, which is given lots of room in the performance (especially in musically illustrating the way '[t]hese people take joy in life'). Appropriating words that Nick Coleman uses in relation to the young Mick Jagger, the voice Canani establishes between his singing and playing might be described as the 'vessel of an unaccommodating new articulacy' that accompanies 'a brand-new social mobility'.[55]

55. Nick Coleman, *Voices: How a Great Singer Can Change Your Life*, Jonathan Cape, 2017, pp9-10.

The concept of articulation is useful in translating the felt effect of Canani's performance into an explicit interpretation. Indeed, the tactic of the performance is to methodically span or confuse two senses of articulation: On the one hand, the song articulates (in the sense of *voicing*) uncommon properties and experiences – notably including the properties and experiences of the native population (their property of being German and their experience of taking joy in life) as well as those of the immigrants (their property of being nationals of diverse other countries; their experience of working in 'muck and garbage'). At the same time, the song articulates (in the sense of *coupling*) these different experiences with each other, not only placing them side by side

but also exchanging them for each other in the manner of a juggler playing the shell game. Joy in life, for example, is indicated as a common aspiration – and a good thing as long as everyone can aspire to it.

The song performance skilfully uses the cultural techniques explored in the course of this essay: *formal simulation* (using the song form to stage the scenario of German society), *sonic performance* (using linguistic and musical multiaccentuality to test the subjectivities involved and the potentials inherent in that social situation), and *transformative articulation* (using multidirectionality, heteroglossia and conceptual play to forge a new propriety of friendship and a new understanding of nationhood). It is the successful sublimation of possessive individualism that makes me suggest Canani's performance as a particularly impressive instance of the poetics of un/commoning. The feat could never be pulled off in prose, and it is difficult to fully conceptualise in the terms of academic discourse. It depends on the special potentialities, the uncommon redistributive power, of poetry and song.

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