

Caring in the Commons:
Exploring the Promise and Peril of Building a Community-Based Political Economy

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Cameron Norbu Attwood Conner has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
1. An Introduction to the Commons, Community, and Care	7
1.1 <i>The Foundations of Commons Theory</i>	7
1.2 <i>Community in the Commons</i>	12
1.3 <i>Care and the Commons</i>	14
2. Identifying the Origins of Exclusion in the Commons	18
2.1 <i>“Community is not a magic unicorn”</i>	18
2.2 <i>The Commons as Community</i>	22
2.3 <i>The Capacity for Exclusion</i>	24
3. The Cooptation of Exclusion for Purposes of Oppression.....	28
3.1 <i>How the Commons Aggravate the Capacity for Oppression</i>	32
4. Unbounding the Commons	35
Conclusion	38
Bibliography	41

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost that a paper on the commons written in the United States must recognize the debt we owe to the first commoners on this land. In this case, I give thanks to the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla peoples. These First Nations offer us an example of how a commons can take shape in order to hold land, water, and other forms of collective wealth in common for many lifetimes. Such practices of gentle reciprocity embody a “concept of people’s relation to property and the land” that are at the heart of what it means to be a commoner. It is with respect to these traditions that this paper is written.

It is also written for those generations of students who will come after me. I hope that it will someday prove useful as another young and inquisitive mind seeks out guidance in pursuing their own driving questions. I have written this as not only a theoretical exploration of how and where communities can be built, but also a call to action in the midst of a global crisis. It is a snapshot of one particular point in time that may prove valuable in the years to come as the world undergoes a radical transformation. A revolution is occurring under our very noses. We each have the responsibility to watch and be wary as those with power do not use this distraction to further their own ends, and maybe—just maybe—we can push in the other direction. May my ideas offer some potential paths on which to do so. Thanks to those who have helped make my vision for this document a reality, and thanks to those who will take it even further. Best of luck with these magical years and always feel free to reach out and ask for a hand.

Introduction

This thesis is dedicated to overcoming a pandemic of fear with a surge of hope. As we—students, faculty, staff, roommates, families, and friends alike—are scattered across the world or isolated at home during the seemingly unstoppable spread of COVID-19, the significance of community is becoming ever more apparent. In such a time of fear and tragedy, when our need *for* care and *to* care is more pressing than ever, we need to redefine what it means to truly “be there” for each other, what it means to support one another and, ultimately, what it means to come together as a community at all. For many, these challenges have shattered the myth that we can ever be entirely autonomous or independent beings. We have been collectively thrown into a state of precarity and vulnerability. Like a bucket of ice-water, the exigency of this situation may wake us to the fact that we are always-already dependent on one another to survive, and that now is the time to strengthen these bonds in new and ingenious ways. Now more than ever, it is apparent that we will never be able to return to the world that was, but only move incessantly into the world as it will be. As we take the first steps into this unknown, we must dream in and create living systems through which people will be able to address shared concerns or aspirations in self-organized and equitable ways. This thesis is intended to better illuminate one particular path we might take in doing so. And of all trailheads at which to begin, I suggest starting with a branch of theory referred to as “the Commons.”

For centuries, the commons has stood as the archetype for many collaborative communities. It refers to both a specific mechanism of collective self-governance on the local scale and a broader system of political economy in which “commons” can be

considered akin to terms like “market” or “state”. A commons can be characterized in the most general terms as a community which governs a shared resource and its usage. As popularly theorized, commons are a combination of “*resources*” (be they natural, social, or cultural), the larger *community* within which these resources reside, and the set of *social protocols* which govern interactions between the first two.¹ In this space, “Users negotiate their own rules, assign responsibilities and entitlements, and set up monitoring systems to identify and penalize free riders.”² To quote two of the leading theorists in the field, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich: “Commons are living social systems through which people address their shared problems in self organized ways.”³ From natural resources (forests, aquifers, pasture lands, etc.) that are cultivated through communal stewardship, to opensource and internet-based production efforts, cooperatives, alternative currencies, social centers, and vacant lot reclamations, there are many different kinds of commons. In so far as we are dependent on those around us, commons can even be seen as existing in latent forms throughout all of society. We are generally born into commons and, since they are responsible for channeling much of the “support and resources through which we reproduce our daily lives and knowledge,” we all rely on them to varying extents until we die.⁴ At its heart, any theory of the commons is simply based on a belief that individuals can come together to cultivate the elements most necessary for their collective wellbeing.

¹ David Bollier, *Think like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014). 15.

² David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (New Society Publishers, 2019). 16.

³ Bollier and Helfrich. 17

⁴ M. Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, In *Common* (Zed Books) (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2017). 12.

The value of the commons lies not only in these aspirational ideals, however, but also in its ability to combat the systemic dispossession occurring under capitalism and “temper the market’s mindless profit-maximizing that distorts so much around us.”⁵ By invigorating the commons, theorists and activists alike claim that we can better address “lacks and needs or aspirations for accessing healthy food, housing, water, social care and education.”⁶ As the perils of unmitigated capitalism (and now neoliberalism) become more apparent on both an individual and planetary level, the commons have recently reemerged as an attractive alternative to these political economies. Now, they likewise offer a point of hope during the precarity of our current pandemic. Across time and space, commons have already proven their worth and efficacy, binding together many of the class, gender, decolonial, and race-based struggles of history where such were the result of capitalist exploitation.⁷ Now they have the potential to help all of us survive an entirely new struggle taking place on a global scale by overcoming and reimagining dominant hegemonic norms that are quickly eroding in these times of uncertainty.

Yet, we should not follow this path blindly. If the commons is to serve as an aspirational model for political economy or even local initiatives, its very real externalities must be reckoned with. The act of commoning is based on the inherently political act of coming together in community. Community creation requires an up-front negotiation of political identities and frequently takes the path of least resistance, bringing together individuals who hold a previously shared memory, tradition, etc. in

⁵ Jonathan Rowe and Peter Barnes, *Our Common Wealth: The Hidden Economy That Makes Everything Else Work*, 1 edition (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013). 12.

⁶ De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*. 13.

⁷ Silvia Federici and Peter Linebaugh, "Women's Struggles for Land in Africa and the Reconstruction of the Commons", *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2018). 116-117.

common. As Anna Tsing writes: “Every instance of collaboration makes room for some and leaves out others.”⁸ In practice, this often leads to a systemic naming and exclusion of the “Other.” While the practice of commoning legitimately holds enormous hope in these difficult days, my concern is that, as communities form and intentionally cultivate the intimate relationships necessary for a commons to arise, they will develop those relationships with others who share their immediate identities according to root systems of oppression. Commons theorists often critique capitalism and other forms of political economy for perpetually dispossessing vulnerable communities in order to consolidate wealth in isolated pockets at the top. But unless this tendency towards exclusion is addressed, there is little to prove that the commons won’t do the exact same thing. Commons, just like capitalism, can serve to concentrate wealth as communities come together in order to enact self-governance and sustainability. If this new political economy is to be sought after and emulated, therefore, this capacity for exclusion cannot be ignored. The stakes of this conflict are significant: either commons theorists learn to account for the creation of equitable communities, or the commons loses its status as an aspirational post-capitalist political economy.

My thesis is an attempt to illuminate the inner dynamics of this conflict by analyzing how the process of community building influences the commons’ capacity for exclusion. This analysis is premised on two questions: a) how did this exclusion in the commons arise to begin with? And b) is this tendency inherent to the commons? My aim in asking these questions is to better illuminate how the dynamics of power at work within communities undermine prevailing aspirations for the commons as a post-

⁸ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Reprint edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). 255.

capitalist political economy and, ultimately, to determine whether any room is left for redemption.

I seek to drive home two critical points in this paper. The first is that no matter the circumstances, commons are inherently and unavoidably exclusionary. I use exclusion to denote the means by which a community *ignores the contributions* that a specific subset makes—not the physical ejection from a certain zone of belonging—and I hold that this exclusion arises because of an innate reliance on the *undeniably political* act of community building. Community is political in the sense that it is perpetually contested and subject to competing dynamics of power. As such, the process of community building, while not an isolated and “self-determining” act, does center some and send others to the margins. As the virtues of the commons stem from the same central elements which lead to this exclusion, they have what I term an innate “capacity for exclusion.” Second, though these tendencies towards exclusion create an internal tension within the commons, exclusion on its own does not damn the project of commoning altogether. As I see it, this exclusion only turns harmful when these dynamics are exploited by capitalist, racial, and patriarchal norms that dominate contemporary society.⁹ When left unchecked, these three “root systems” coopt the commons by employing its capacity for exclusion as a tool with which to institutionalize the oppression of those already *margin-alized*. To illustrate this fact, I draw on narratives of care and carework¹⁰ so as to demonstrate just how pervasive and fundamentally corrosive such patterns of

⁹ Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory Third Edition*, 3rd edition (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

¹⁰ I use carework throughout my thesis to reference the unpaid reproductive labor of caring for others that sustains all social life and enables any social system to function. This includes care for infants, children, the elderly, and those with disabilities, as well as all those other daily acts that all humans depend on to recharge their bodies and minds (i.e. feeding, cleaning, sheltering, etc.).

exclusion can be. Given all these factors, I end with the conclusion that it is not enough to simply acknowledge our dependence on one another, as many commons theorists posit, we must also move to make sure that *all of those on whom we depend are duly recognized for their labor and cared for in turn.*

To support this argument, my paper is divided into four main sections following the introduction. The first grounds this work in the theoretical foundations that proceed it and introduces the terms that will be drawn on to support further analysis. It clarifies the concept of the commons and its theoretical genealogy, as well as what is conveyed by term “community” in this context, and how care work intersects with and serves to illustrate these key concepts. Section two then examines how these actors come together in order to demonstrate and analyze the commons inherent capacity for exclusion. By examining how exclusion has historically manifested in some of the most accessibility-committed commoning communities, I show that a) the commons are built on community, and b) community is impossible without exclusion. Section three then argues that this exclusion manifests in harm when coopted by elements of white supremacy, capitalism, or patriarchy, and that key qualities of the commons exacerbate this danger further. Finally, section four suggests one possible way out of this predicament, arguing that commons theorists must expand their concept of what it means to be a community by reckoning with their own capacity for exclusion and reciprocating the contributions of those that have been pushed to the margins.

1. An Introduction to the Commons, Community, and Care

1.1 *The Foundations of Commons Theory*

Commons are not a new phenomenon. The origin of the term itself is often attributed to the system of agrarian land governance widely used throughout medieval England during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries in which—prior to the enclosure movement of the late 1700s¹¹—significant tracts of English countryside were collectively owned by those who worked them. Although this land was most frequently part of an estate held by the lord of the manor under permission of the Crown, those who worked the land managed its use. Under this system, these “commoners” dictated the number of grazing animals allowed to pasture, and/or the number of trees that could be cut for wood. Even the lord himself was bound to obey these rules. First practiced in the early 1500s, it was expected that the lord “leave pasture enough to satisfy the commoner’s rights whether such rights are to be exercised or not.”¹² In this way, resources were managed *in common* rather than privately. Author, activist, and scholar Sylvia Federici describes this system in her book *Caliban and the Witch* as a series of “vast communalistic social movements” that, prior to implementation of feudalism, “offered the promise of a new egalitarian society built on social equality and cooperation.”¹³

¹¹The term “enclosure” refers to the process by which collective or commonly held land is divided into individual parcels and privatized. The enclosure movement mentioned here primarily occurred between 1760 and 1820 throughout England. During this time, land use became restricted to those who claimed official ownership so that in village after village common rights were lost. For more information, see E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*.

¹² *The Laws of England: Being a Complete Statement of the Whole Law of England* (Butterworth, 1908). 508.

¹³ Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2004). 61.

Systems of “commoning”—the verb form of “commons”—have thus existed successfully around the world and belie the assumption that any resource accessible to a community at large will inevitably be exploited to the point of non-existence.¹⁴

These practices extend much further back than Medieval England, however. For millennia, communities have come together to hold in common the elements necessary for their survival. As such, acts of commoning have been practiced and written about for far longer, and on a much larger scale, than is often acknowledged. When we speak of commons, therefore:

[We] do not only speak of one particular reality or a set of small-scale experiments, like rural communes of the 1960s in Northern California... We speak of the large-scale social formations that at times were continent-wide, like the networks of commons that in precolonial America stretched from present-day Chile to Nicaragua and Texas, connected by a vast array of exchanges.¹⁵

This history rebuts those who would delegitimize the commons by portraying it as nothing more than a township level concept or a utopic fantasy. Much to the contrary, it establishes the commons as a system that has stood as the foundation for entire societies and spanned centuries.

While historical practices of commoning have varied a great deal in this time span, patterns do exist that help explain modern-day interpretations of “the commons.” Legal scholar Rebecca Tsosie notes that indigenous commons collectively reflect “a perception of the earth as an animate being; a belief that humans are in kinship systems with other living things; a perception of the land as essential to the identity of the people; and a concept of reciprocity and balance that extends to relationships among humans,

¹⁴ An argument first put forward by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 as a critique of the commons. Since the publication of Hardin’s article, this critique has come to popularly be known as the “tragedy of the commons”.

¹⁵ George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, “Commons against and beyond Capitalism,” *Community Development Journal* 49, no. suppl_1 (January 1, 2014) 93.

including future generations, and between humans and the natural world.”¹⁶ Indigenous societies—while diverse, complex, and problematic in their own right—thus show us that the ideals written about today have manifested in patterns across time. Given this history, it is not surprising that the commons has come to be seen as a viable form of political economy.

Yet these examples also highlight a more complicated, less utopic side of this history, and if the commons is to be considered a credible political economic alternative to neoliberalism, it must be evaluated accordingly. Though commons aim to cultivate collective wellbeing by bringing individuals together in order to recognize their commonality and interdependence, past commons have not always been prime examples of egalitarian relations. On the contrary, as Federici notes, “they have often been organized in a patriarchal way that has made women suspicious of communalism. Today as well, many existing commons discriminate, mostly on the basis of gender.”¹⁷ While it is thus clear that communities acting in concert hold great social potential, communities are also messy, divisive and capable of imploding.

Contemporary study of the commons first attracted widespread attention with Elinor Ostrom’s pioneering work in the late 1980s that proposed commons as an alternative to market and state centered systems of political economy. Since then, commons theory has gained increasing momentum, taking on many diverse forms. Each in unique ways has come to play a prominent role for academics and activists alike who seek to destabilize existing structures of neoliberal dispossession and exploitation.

¹⁶ Rebecca Tsosie, David Bollier, *Think like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014).

¹⁷ Caffentzis and Federici, “Commons against and beyond Capitalism.” i102.

Use of commons as a popular theoretical framework began with concerns over natural resources and collective action. Out of a belief that “neither the state nor the market is uniformly successful in enabling individuals to sustain long-term, productive use of natural resource systems” Elinor Ostrom undertook a study of what alternatives might exist.¹⁸ Her project aimed to understand how and why some communities self-regulate their use of a collective resource successfully while others deplete it to extinction.¹⁹ Her book *Governing the Commons* (1990) was a groundbreaking study of such communities worldwide that identified eight “design principles” which could be used to characterize a successful and sustainable commons. The recurring challenge facing such groups, she wrote, was figuring out “how to organize and govern themselves to obtain continuing joint benefit when all face temptations to free-ride, shirk, or otherwise act opportunistically.”²⁰ With this research, Ostrom gave birth to the field now known as commons theory and helped normalized a vocabulary of collective self-governance, reciprocal social systems, and interdependence.

Yet while historically important, Ostrom’s conceptualization of the commons is a far cry from the term as I use it here.²¹ Despite focusing on social elements of interdependence, she fundamentally framed these conversations through a rhetoric of resource management. This portrayed the commons as a series of variables to be calculated within what is ultimately a zero-sum game for survival. Taken up and

¹⁸ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, 1st edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). 1.

¹⁹ Ostrom. 30.

²⁰ Ostrom. 27.

²¹ Ostrom. 1, 25.

stretched in different directions by Marxist-feminists,²² ontologists,²³ capitalists,²⁴ post-capitalists,²⁵ and environmental novelists²⁶ to name but a few, the commons as a concept has been radically expanded since then. While all of these branches focus on and attribute different significance to the relationships present *within* a commons, little attention is given to interactions *between* different commons. Less still is paid to those boundaries that exist between commons and non-commoning communities—which is where I choose to focus my attention.

When I refer to the commons, therefore, I am hoping to draw most directly on feminist scholarship that shows us how, within “successful” commons, patterns of discrimination, hierarchy, and oppression can still exist. This tradition recognizes commons not as a “resources” or place, but rather “a set of more-than-human, contingent relations-in-the making that result in collective practices of production, exchange and living in the world.”²⁷ This lens prioritizes the role that emotional/affective relations—rather than the material or ontological—play in producing commons subjects. It is an attempt to train the spotlight on exercises of power that shape how, when, and where commons come into being. As feminist political ecologist Andrea J. Nightingale writes in her article “Commoning for Inclusion?” relationships of commoning are dependent on the intersections of one’s identities, “meaning that social relations of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity, caste, age, disability, among others entwine together to shape how

²² Caffentzis and Federici, “Commons against and beyond Capitalism.” Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*.

²³ Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive*.

²⁴ Rowe and Barnes, *Our Common Wealth*.

²⁵ De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*.

²⁶ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba, 1 edition (Washington, D.C: Counterpoint, 2003). Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002).

²⁷ Andrea Nightingale, “Commoning for Inclusion? Commons, Exclusion, Property and Socio-Natural Becomings,” *International Journal of the Commons* 13, no. 1 (May 6, 2019): 18.

individuals experience power.”²⁸ This quality makes commons extremely vulnerable to both outside manipulation and internal discrimination; as George Caffentzis and Federici warn, commons’ reliance on relationships mean that they are easily “co-opted” by the state or “gated” by private groups.²⁹ Going forward, we must understand that while the commons has immense potential to bring individuals together in support of collective social, economic, and ecological well being, it has also proven capable of causing immense harm. The question of where this harm comes from and how it can be mitigated are the motivating question of this thesis.

1.2 Community in the Commons

I argue that this harm is at least partially the result of the commons’ reliance on community. In order to explore the relationship between these two concepts, however, we must also develop a suitable definition for this term as well. Yet, this is no easy task; for all its popular usage, community is a slippery concept. Clearly, as Adrian Little writes in *The Politics of Community*, “it refers to some kind of association, membership of which is thought to be desirable for one reason or other” —but it is easy to see by looking at the world around us that associations can take a number of different forms.³⁰ Typical models of community that are frequently referenced in commons theory include models of locality, family, and/or polity as community. Each brings unique dynamics of power into the fold and can manifest the seemingly simple idea of community in drastically different

²⁸ Nightingale. 18; Similarly, in his preface to *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Marxist historian Peter Linebaugh acknowledges that commons can easily “unite in ways that protect privilege and are exclusionary on the basis of ethnicity, class, religious identities, or income levels” (7).

²⁹ Caffentzis and Federici, “Commons against and beyond Capitalism.” 100.

³⁰ Adrian Little, *The Politics of Community: Theory and Practice*, 1 edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002). 3.

ways. Beyond these models, “community” as a vague and elusive ideal has also been offered by politicians and philosophers as a tool for critiquing late twentieth-century concepts of ‘liberal individualism.’³¹ As prominent political theorist Michael Walzer puts it, “Men and women come together because they literally cannot live apart. Their survival and then their wellbeing require a common effort.”³² Any attempt to relegate humanity to the single dimension of Milton Friedman’s *homo economicus*, he argues, will necessarily ignore this fact. In short, the concept of community has been put to many diverse uses, all of which bring slightly different connotations to the table.

Building off of Little’s premise, I broadly use community to denote groups of individuals who hold in common some combination of *virtues* and *principles*. According to this definition, “community exists where virtues such as friendship, voluntarism and care are exhibited.”³³ These communities are able to exist because of the cohesive force that such shared virtues and principles provide, a force that I refer to as “commonality.” This commonality enables multiple individuals to identify with a shared goal or purpose and overcome the disagreements that will inevitably arise in any association. This force of commonality also distinguishes a community (multiple individuals united by interpersonal relationships) from a group (comprising a random selection of individuals without any broader shared identity).

As manifested in the commons, this commonality often includes factors of *proximity, shared governance, and/or common historical memory*.³⁴ One can imagine

³¹ Elizabeth Frazer, *The Problems of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 6-8.

³² Michael Walzer, *Spheres Of Justice: A Defense Of Pluralism And Equality* (Basic Books, 2008). 65.

³³ Little, *The Politics of Community*. 3.

³⁴ See: Raghuram Rajan, *The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019); Bollier, *Think like a Commoner*; Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive*;

such a community to manifest within a neighborhood, a school, or an isolated pocket of activists—think Occupy or ACT UP! These stand in contrast to kinship communities, caste-based communities, and national/international communities. I have chosen to focus on the former because they are more readily considered “opt-in” communities, where a group of otherwise separate individuals are assumed to have some degree of agency in choosing who they associate with and so can be said to come together via the process of recognizing commonalities. By highlighting this process of developing commonality with the Other, I aim to show that it frequently occurs along lines beholden to capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. More specifically still, however, I have chosen to focus on commoning communities that not only embody these qualities but are also centered around the provision/acceptance of *care*. As will be discussed below, care and care work is essential to the survival of any community, let alone individual, and by identifying how and where those who provide care are systemically excluded from the commons, we can pinpoint deep-set faults within the broader system of political economy as a whole.

1.3 Care and the Commons

In order to define the concept of “care” and understand its important role within the commons, we must begin by identifying its place within society more broadly. To this end, Joan Tronto writes: “Caring seems to involve taking the concerns and needs of others as the basis of action.”³⁵ In practice, the *labor* of caring—or what I refer to as

Gar Alperovitz, *Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth* (Washington D.C.: The Democracy Collaborative, 2017).

³⁵ Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Psychology Press, 1993). 105.

“carework”³⁶—can encompass a wide array of activities, ranging from specific labor on behalf of infants, the sick, the elderly, or those with disabilities, to the daily acts all humans depend on to recharge their bodies and minds (i.e. feeding, cleaning, sheltering, etc.). In this latter sense, care can be understood to comprise a form of “reproductive labor” as articulated by Nancy Fraser, in so far as it constitutes a “key social capacity” that enables “birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally.”³⁷ Due to the multiplicity of needs we have as human beings, our dependency on the care of others is, to quote Eva Feder Kittay: “an unassailable [fact] about the human existence.”³⁸ Our need for care is thus inescapable; we are all always and already dependent on the care of others to survive. Any human society (regardless of its driving political economy) will collapse if it lacks—or neglects—those who undertake the labor of carework.

Because of a shared reliance on the concept of dependency, carework is already intimately associated with many branches of commons theory. In large part, this is because it is often used as a primary justification for why commons are necessary in the first place. Contrary to liberal economics’ emphasis on individualization, autonomy, and personal responsibility, the commons is celebrated as a form of political economy that recognizes the inevitable dependence of human beings on those around them. Bollier and Helfrich synthesize this sentiment in *Free, Fair, and Alive* by defining care as an

³⁶ While a significant debate rages over the difference between care, care work, and the latter’s potential to commodify the former, I use the two as relatively interchangeable so as to demonstrate 1) that caring involves labor and 2) how that labor can, in turn, be unfairly exploited.

³⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 100 (2016): 99; Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory,” 2008, 293–314.

³⁸ Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (Routledge, 2019). 29.

assortment of “elemental human activities that signify an awareness of interdependency, neediness, and relatedness as basic human conditions.”³⁹ To the extent that the commons can be considered a system “through which people address their shared problems in self-organized ways,” and care refers to “taking the concerns and needs of others as the basis of action,” one could consider the commons (in theory) to be the closest thing we have to a care-based political economy.⁴⁰ I thus employ care as a window into the topics of commons and community because it epitomizes the kind of world commons theorists are trying to create: one in which people come together and take a collective responsibility for themselves and others, engaging in reciprocal relationships of self-governance aimed at cultivating shared wellbeing.

As has already been noted, however, commons don’t always live up to this promise. Even though a community may come together to foster collective wellbeing, it does not mean that community will be equitable. *Carework is a critical example. Despite being unable to survive without it, communities have often turned care work into one of the most historically exploitative, flexible and invisible forms of labor performed by women.*⁴¹ Because care is both so central to a healthy commons, yet also easily exploitable, it serves as a perfect vehicle through which to analyze how systems of harmful exclusion arise and develop. Furthermore, since reciprocal networks of care/carework are always at the foundation of the commons, I consider it to be a sort of “indicator variable” by which to evaluate whether other forms of exclusion—and thus exploitation—are likely to arise as a result of commoning. In other words, if a

³⁹ Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive*. 73.

⁴⁰ Bollier and Helfrich. 17.

⁴¹ “Carework as Commons: Towards a Feminist Degrowth Agenda | Degrowth.Info,” accessed March 17, 2020, <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2017/02/carework-as-commons-towards-a-feminist-degrowth-agenda/>.

commoning community exploits those who perform carework by excluding them from the commons while still utilizing their labor, it is likely that other forms of exclusion and exploitation are present as well. Given this relationship, I very intentionally use narratives that center care to highlight the commons' capacity for exclusion because they demonstrate that, if a capacity for exclusion is possible where care is concerned, then it is possible anywhere in the commons.

Two key takeaways stem from this interdependence of commons, community, and care work. First of all, care occurs based on communal webs of relationships and actively cultivates them. By viewing this process through a feminist commons theory lens, the acts of giving and receiving care become an *embodiment* of the affective/emotional relationships that commons are built upon. Second, if the equitable provision and acceptance of care is inextricable from the success of a commons, but commons in the past have regularly undermined this foundation via exclusion, we must analyze where this tendency came from and if it is inherent to the commons. Together, the elements of commons, community, and care establish at least a cursory historical and theoretical foundation with which to begin an investigation of these questions. The next section explores the remarkable strength and resiliency of care-based commons in particular, and seeks to determine why, even here, exclusion persists. I will build off of this analysis in Section IV to understand how this exclusion can manifest as oppression and what the implications of this process are for commons theory more broadly.

2. Identifying the Origins of Exclusion in the Commons

There are many examples of care-based commons. Often, these communities are formed by those who fall through the cracks or are blatantly rejected by broader social welfare systems. Where state and market are unable to provide the basic tools for survival, people come together to address these issues collectively through commoning. This section unpacks how one woman created a system to sustain and spread incredibly intimate networks of care for those, including herself, who would have been unable to survive without them. Viewed as a manifestation of the commons, this story and others like it clearly demonstrate the incredible power of the commons, but they also reveal its inherent flaws and capacity to harm. By narrating that capacity here, following sections will be able to illuminate why exactly exclusion is so persistent in the commons and what variables must be present for harm to result.

2.1 “*Community is not a magic unicorn*”

Dr. Loree Erickson was one of the first to pioneer a system called “care collectives.” As an activist, she has spent years helping others navigate and establish their own systems of “mutual aid” that rely upon communal networks of care to ensure that individuals with temporary or permanent disabilities can receive the support they need. More broadly, her focus is on “the intersections of radical queer, disability and sex/uality, bringing together personal experience, creativity, and theory to explore issues of explicit sexual representation, embodiment, and desirability.”⁴² From a young age, Dr. Erickson

⁴² Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 41.

used a wheelchair to aid with mobility and required help with her personal care needs— “fancy words for getting into/out of bed and going to use the bathroom” as she puts it.⁴³ While living in Virginia as an artist/activist in her mid-twenties, Erickson received money from the state to support her and help pay for care needs. The amount of money, however, was so little that she was unable to pay caregivers even minimum wage. When she could afford support, attendants were often ill trained and actively homophobic. Refusing to accept this inadequate assistance of the state, and unable to procure better through the market, Dr. Erickson set about pioneering an alternative survival strategy.⁴⁴

Calling together her community, she decided to experiment with creating a new collective, friend-made care system. Consisting of disabled and non-disabled friends as well as other community members, this “care collective” resulted in a vibrant and reciprocal system of shifts and schedules that helped with dressing, bathing, and transferring.⁴⁵ Though she is no longer a resident of Virginia, Dr. Erickson continues to rely on the collective model in Toronto because she isn’t a Canadian permanent resident and so cannot access state resources. Buoyed by her system of mutual aid, Dr. Erickson has continued her activism while pursuing a PhD in Environmental Studies. But Loree’s care collective is not just a personal survival strategy. While she receives care, Dr. Erickson also helps coordinate the care of others in return. Since moving to Toronto, she helped initiate numerous other care collectives, organizing communities throughout both the United States and Canada to share and reciprocate care as needed. In addition, while

⁴³ Piepzna-Samarasinha. 41.

⁴⁴ Loree Erickson, Young, hot, queer & crip, interview by Elizabeth Sweeney, September 9, 2009, <https://www.dailyxtra.com/young-hot-queer-crip-12141>.

⁴⁵ *Loree’s Care Collective*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3rX8MAHULk>.; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*. 44.

Loree's need for access care is posited as a necessity, it is also "the chance to build community, hang out with Loree, and have fun."⁴⁶ In this sense, Dr. Erickson plays the role of "emotional caregiver" for those who spend time with her, blurring the distinction between care provision and care acceptance by engaging in relations of mutual-dependence.

This network of support allows Dr. Erickson to act as a community organizer for a wide array of issues while also cultivating sights of political action and traveling to lectures and conferences around the country as a leading scholar. When traveling, she reaches out for support in advance, broadening her web of relationships as needed along the way. As part of one such trip, Dr. Erickson wrote the following:

Hello lovely people...

I arrive in DC Friday, around 1ish and am around until Monday morning. Then I am heading to Richmond until Wednesday eve. I am traveling with a friend who can help out with some of my care, but I am in need of friendly recruits as well. Plus, it's an awesome opportunity to meet fabulous and friendly people/see friends I [haven't] seen in too long!⁴⁷

In the relationships it has allowed her to build, the webs of community that have been created, and the lives that have been changed, it is clear Dr. Erickson's care collective is not only a pragmatic survival strategy. In full, it is a radical revisioning of how care can be provided and accepted, founded in the power of community and mutual obligation.

For many in Toronto and beyond, Dr. Erickson's method of collaborative care has been both "a groundbreaking model for alternative dreams of care making and a place to be brought into disability activism and culture."⁴⁸ As it has spread, the concept has

⁴⁶ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*. 45.

⁴⁷ Piepzna-Samarasinha. 42-43.

⁴⁸ Piepzna-Samarasinha. 44.

transformed according to the specific needs of those individuals that utilize it, but its central principles of reciprocity, collective ownership, and relationship-based organizing have remained. This practice has saved lives while transforming what it means to care and be cared for. Rather than a chore, care (given and received) is posited as something people both need and deserve—while also being an opportunity to have fun and build community. It is needed in the sense that no individual can survive without it, and deserved because no one should be deprived of it, just as no one should be deprived of any other life-giving substance. The care collective forces one to physically confront these facts. As activist/writer Jennie Duguay engaged with her own care collective, she noticed that “Previously abstract concepts like “mutuality” and “interdependence” develop embodied meaning with people as they learn, in a sense, to “see through” the myth of independence, the value system assigned to certain labors over others, the ways ableism defines what is “able”/“normal” and what isn’t—all while chopping veggies or cleaning.”⁴⁹ Life sustaining relationships of care clearly illuminate the interdependence of individuals within a community.

Viewed as a manifestation of the commons, Dr. Erickson’s story and her model of the care collective simultaneously embody all that is revolutionary about the concept as well as its largest flaws. While Loree has managed to create transformative communities that rely on the power of collective action and reciprocal caring, her method also demonstrates the undeniable role exclusion plays in cultivating such community. More specifically, her narrative illuminates two premises of exclusion in the commons that are

⁴⁹ “Repeat After Me: Care Collectives and the Practice of Community Based Care,” *The Peak Magazine* (blog), May 21, 2017, <http://peakmag.net/disability-justice/repeat-after-me/>.

central to my argument: that commons are based on community and that in creating this community there lies the capacity for exclusion. Let us unpack these one at a time.

2.2 The Commons as Community

My argument in the following two pages is simple: the commons' history of exclusion stems from its inherent reliance on community. From the original CPR style commons that Ostrom first studied to today's proliferating digital commons and Dr. Loree Erickson's care collectives, a foundation of community provides the trust needed for sustainable practices of collective self-governance to emerge. As with almost any commons, Dr. Erickson's collaborative web of care was successful in part because of an emphasis on *decentralized governance* and *collective accountability*—factors that are contingent on a healthy community dynamic. Erickson was able to further her own wellbeing by relying on those who knew her best and accepted her sexuality rather than resorting to the inadequate or simply nonexistent assistance provided by the state. In this sense, commons operate according to the principle of subsidiarity, the idea “that decentralized, small-scale solutions, should as far as possible be a default option.”⁵⁰ Simultaneously, collective accountability ensured that she had security in this care because it was not offered as charity, but instead as one transaction within a system of collective reciprocity.

As these two elements suggest, the appeal of the commons lies in its ability to address complex issues, aspirations, or conflicts with local, intimate, and experienced knowledge. This approach is particularly appealing when placed in contrast to

⁵⁰ Alperovitz. 83.

presumptive and top-down state policies or profit maximizing market solutions. Rather, as Andrea Nightingale notes “Commoning emerges from, and creates, *emotional ties* to place, community, resources/non-humans” which strengthens loyalty and interdependency (emphasis added).⁵¹ This is why commons are naturally pluralistic and diverse, for these ties will vary according to local context, patterns, and relationships. To use a simple natural resource analogy provided by David Bollier: the commons works “because people come to know and experience the management of a resource in its unique aspects. They come to depend on each other and love *this* forest or *that* lake or *that* patch of farmland.”⁵² As a result of this interdependence, individuals hold one another accountable for the stewardship of these resources. The same goes for care collectives. The best care is provided not by attendants hired via the market or assigned by the state, but by those who know the care recipient intimately and can address them and their needs with responsibility and respect.

The underlying principle in this practice is that relationships are indispensable, and these relationships are only possible *within a strong community*.⁵³ Federici puts this bluntly: “Commons require a community, the principle being ‘No community, no commons.’”⁵⁴ In short, all that makes the commons an effective means of combatting the overreach of market and state flow from this reliance on community; the commons is thus both dependent on and defined by the community that constitutes it. Yet, as I have noted above, the act of coming together in community is an inherently political one, where the

⁵¹ Nightingale, “Commoning for Inclusion?”

⁵² Bollier, *Think like a Commoner*. 12.

⁵³ Bollier. 12.

⁵⁴ Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*. 94.

definition of a group will always mean the identification of an outgroup. And, ironically, this factor is at the heart of both what has made the commons such a popular vision, and the deep-set flaw which could lead to its ruin.

2.3 The Capacity for Exclusion

The capacity for exclusion in the commons arises from a community's intrinsic drive for a common identity. Returning to our definition of community provided in Section II, we can ground this thesis in the belief that community stems from shared virtues and principles exhibited by relationships of "friendship, voluntarism and care."⁵⁵ In practice, these qualities serve as a form of commonality which those in the community can jointly hold. These very basic commonalities serve as the *beginning* of a conversation for otherwise different parties to come together around, engage in, and build a relationship upon. It is as these conversations evolve that the intimate knowledge so fundamental to commoning emerges, and a collective, particular, identity begins to grow. Exclusion thus results from a *perceived* dissonance between this identity and a subgroup's apparent deviation from it. Before I develop this logic and transfer its implications to the commons, however, let me first define the term "exclusion" in this context.

Notice, to begin, that the boundaries of community as I have depicted them are not impermeable. I do not separate groups in a Walzerian sense, with borders symbolizing a distinct binary between "member" and "foreigner". Rather, I draw on border scholars Nandita Sharma and Arash Abizadeh, along with care theorists like Eva

⁵⁵ Little, *The Politics of Community*. 3.

Feder Kittay to argue that communities—just like individuals—cannot be isolated or bounded entities since they are always-already dependent on others. This is impossible to deny for, as Kittay writes, though conditioned “in fundamentally significant ways by cultural considerations, dependency for humans is as unavoidable as birth and death are for all living organisms.”⁵⁶ Though I do believe that membranes distinguish communities, that common identity does exist, and that these divides have a tangible impact, I also presuppose that membranes and identities can overlap and transform, existing in a perpetual state of permeation with one another. As such, groups cannot truly engage in the process of self-determination because there is no “self” properly considered. If membership can be said to exist, it is only in a *liminal* sense. Simply put, the “Other” is an integral part of “our” world and culture.⁵⁷

Exclusion, therefore, means the willful or structural *ignoring* of contribution, not the lack of contribution or ejection from a certain zone of belonging. Again the archetypal example of care illustrates this dynamic. No commons is possible without an underlying foundation of care provision and acceptance; yet care—or more specifically, *carework*—has historically been one of the most exploitative, flexible and invisible forms of labor both in the commons as well as all other political economies. It cannot be said that the inequity and exploitation of these laborers has stemmed from or resulted in their *removal* from the commons—since care providers clearly play one of the most vital roles needed for its survival. Yet neither are they full and equal participants in the commons. They are thus in limbo, with a distinct claim to membership, but also “excluded” from the

⁵⁶ Kittay, *Love's Labor*. 29.

⁵⁷ Reece Jones, Nandita Sharma, "Dispossessing Citizenship" *Open Borders: In Defense of Free Movement* (University of Georgia Press, 2019).

practices of decentralized governance and collective accountability that are central to a functioning community. With this definition of exclusion in mind, let's take one more step and look at how communities develop in order to better grasp why exclusion arises as a natural externality of this process.

In order to create the bonds of community, a group must take action to identify and sustain the recognition of some shared identity or “commonality” as I term it. This can manifest through geographic proximity in neighborhood communities, through social beliefs in activism, through kinship in the family, or any number of other anchors. In recognizing this commonality, the group is engaging in the creation of a unique “character” with which to identify. American feminist author, activist, and organizer Charlotte Bunch supports this theory in her writings on diversity and coalitions, plainly stating that “if coalitions are to work, there must be a common cause.”⁵⁸ This collective goal must be powerful enough to overcome the internal disputes that inevitably arise in any group. I began this section with Dr. Loree Erickson because her story demonstrates that even in some of the most challenging situations, where people have come together to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds, there exists a basic level of common identification that enables and facilitates cooperation. In this case, the commonality is one of the most elementary that commons can be built on: *likeability*. Even without a shared history, kinship, tradition, or clearly articulated vision—elements that many commons theorists focus on as key catalyzers of community—the necessary bonds of commonality can be created through an affective commitment to the communal character of likeability and the *connection* it creates.

⁵⁸ Lisa Albrecht, Rose M. Brewer, et al. *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances*, "Making Common Cause: Diversity and Coalitions." (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Pub, 1990).

Inversely, therefore, Dr. Erickson's example also demonstrates how deep the potential for exclusion runs in the process of community building. Were someone in Loree's situation not to possess her charisma, they may not find the same systems of community support as readily available. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha states as much in her book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, recognizing that "[Loree's] collective working relies on her having access to a broad network of friends and acquaintances, a social and activist life where people know her and are interested in helping out, something many people, especially sick, disabled, and mad people, are too isolated to be able to access."⁵⁹ Put another way: "I don't ever want to depend on being liked or loved by the community for the right to shit in my toilet when I want to."⁶⁰ Even within the radical concept of care collectives, this demonstrates that there will be some who are *more likely* to be accepted and embraced because of certain personal qualities. This narrative of exclusion is an extreme example, but it is meant to be. Dr. Erickson's story demonstrates how exclusion is inherent to community building by showing that, even in the most adverse situations, where community is present, so too is a tie of commonality.

⁵⁹ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*. 46.

⁶⁰ Piepzna-Samarasinha. 47.

3. The Cooptation of Exclusion for Purposes of Oppression

Alone, the commons' capacity for exclusion is not inherently problematic. As communities change and their membranes expand, contract, and meld together, margins and thus marginalization will not be static. In an environment dominated by root systems of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, however, these dynamics of exclusion will be coopted and used to institutionalize the oppression and exploitation of non-dominant groups, further concentrating wealth (be it social, economic, material, etc.) among the already privileged. The likelihood is thus that, in such an environment, commons will begin excluding others on far more politically significant factors than "likability." That is to say, though we are all always-already bound in relationships with the rest of the world, factors like prejudice, privilege, and proximity will inevitably lead to certain relations of commonality being more frequently realized than others.

This claim is grounded in the assumption that structural oppression has its roots in the "words, stories and silence" that shape our social world, mold our prejudices, and in turn lead to discrimination.⁶¹ In this framework, prejudice is something all people come to adopt via socialization. It is the attitudes and feelings that influence a learned "prejudgment about another person based on the social group to which that person belongs."⁶² Discrimination is therefore the action that comes from prejudice: how people behave towards others based on predetermined stereotypes. All people have prejudice, and all communities discriminate. Not all, however, can enact "oppression." Oppression

⁶¹ Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic, eds. *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. Print. 3.

⁶² Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Beacon Press, 2018).

means to “hold down” (literally “to press”) and thus can only be carried out by the dominant group since only they have the power to institutionalize their prejudices and patterns of discrimination.⁶³ The critical lens that connects prejudice, discrimination, and oppression provides us with an explanation of 1) why, as communities come together around a shared set of values or principles, they will have a tendency to develop those relationships based on commonalities of “least resistance” and, 2) how the exclusion of the “Other” that results can manifest in harmful systems of oppression.

Viewed through the lens, the inherently political nature of community building suggests that commons will have a propensity to arise along racial, class-based, and patriarchal lines because of predetermined and socialized prejudices. Habits of prejudice teach that the Other is something to be feared; it teaches that “‘they’ will hurt us either because they are more powerful or because they want our privileges.”⁶⁴ While this fear “takes multiple forms depending on where we fit in the various scales of domination, all of us are taught to distrust those who are different.”⁶⁵ If this claim holds true, and community members are accepted in line with standard dynamics of power, then community building holds a dangerous capacity to concentrate wealth (be it social, economic, etc.) as in-groups form along lines of power and privilege. Where individuals or groups are taught not to identify with one another across social barriers, systemic exclusion will be the result, harming all involved as it reinforces interconnected systems subjugation.

⁶³ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Crossing Press, 1983). 2.

⁶⁴ Albrecht and Brewer, *Bridges of Power*. 50

⁶⁵ Albrecht and Brewer. 50

Many examples exist of how exclusion in the commons can lead to oppression and harm when coopted. The historical undervaluation and exploitation of care work is a crucial illustration of this fact. Across the world and throughout history, care providers in the commons—often women—have been expected to provide for the needs of others in their community while receiving little reciprocation in return. Indigenous communities in Africa and South America, for example, have for centuries excluded women from the right to participate in assemblies where decisions are made, and women thus “risk seeing their children excluded from access to the land because membership in the commons is established through male lines.”⁶⁶ Today as well, many commons discriminate in order to concentrate power. Co-housing groups form in order to facilitate a commons like community of reciprocal care and labor but are predominantly created by upper middle class, highly educated, white, liberal, heteronormative families;⁶⁷ Black churches are often a refuge for people of color who have experienced a great deal of racism within society, but also historically have been spaces that are “homophobic and that uphold heteronormativity within black communities;”⁶⁸ and neighborhood engagement programs are aimed at coordinating collective action and community voice, yet often form solely around those that have the time, energy, and resources to engage. Where people are taught not to perceive their commonality with certain Others via the socialization of prejudice, commons may only serve to entrench inequalities as individuals gravitate towards those like themselves and form communities along existing lines of discrimination.

⁶⁶ Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*. 6.

⁶⁷ Amanda Abrams, “Cohousing’s Diversity Problem,” CityLab, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/08/cohousings-diversity-problem/536337/>.

⁶⁸ Angela Jones et al., *The Unfinished Queer Agenda After Marriage Equality* (Routledge, 2018), 122.

My argument so far has gone as follows: if commons proliferate according to current theory, they will be formed on the basis of *commonalities* due to the inherently political nature of community building; given the individual's vulnerability to socialization these commonalities are, in turn, likely to arise in accordance with dominant prejudices of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy; as commoning communities form, wealth will be shared as commons theory suggests; however, privileged communities will have considerably more wealth to share than others, and as they continue to coalesce, this wealth will be gradually be concentrated as it is 'reciprocally' shared only within these new and self-selecting communities. Of course, the inverse is also true: less privileged communities will likewise come together in solidarity and cooperation. This fact should not be overlooked, since communities/commons of care often prove the *most* vital for vulnerable groups. Where people lack the resources to accomplish or purchase care on their own, they often turn to those around them to provide a form of collective security. This should not change. Dr. Erickson's care collectives are a perfect example of this practice. To the extent that individuals have come together to create coalitions of common wealth, therefore, the proliferation of commons can be considered a positive process. But, in the end, whatever benefits result will be dwarfed by the cementation of structural inequalities and oppression they produce.

To the extent that such divisions form, they will mark the end of the commons. As Federici notes, these types of non-egalitarian relations are corrosive to the commons' founding principles and serve to "generate inequalities, jealousies, and

divisions, providing a temptation for some commoners to cooperate with enclosures.”⁶⁹

In Section V, I suggest the solution to this seemingly intractable crisis of the commons is based in an argument that the principles of commons theory in fact obligate commoners to expand their practice of reciprocity far beyond their immediate communities. Before attempting to salvage commons theory, however, there are two additional features of the commons that exacerbate these issues and which also deserve note.

3.1 How the Commons Aggravate the Capacity for Oppression

Those who advocate for the commons do so on the premise that, as a political economy, it is uniquely capable of recognizing our inherent and universal dependency on one another. This premise, however, is not enough. Left unchecked, the commons will intensify the harms already inherent to community building for two reasons. First of all, commons theory is premised on *intimacy* as a tool for self-governance, and second, it does not account for a mechanism of ensuring inclusion and equity across commons.

Elaborated upon, this first point simply posits that the very intimacy which allows strong webs of effective interdependence to develop in the commons is not scalable to larger situations. For Elinor Ostrom, the very first of her six design principles for a long enduring and successful commons was drawing “Clearly defined boundaries.”⁷⁰ Without defined boundaries that are closed to “outsiders,” Ostrom argued that “local [commoners] face the risk that any benefits they produce by their efforts will be reaped by others who have not contributed to those efforts.”⁷¹ Though dated, the implications of Ostrom’s

⁶⁹ Caffentzis and Federici, “Commons against and beyond Capitalism.” I103.

⁷⁰ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*. 90.

⁷¹ Ostrom. 91.

arguments are still reflected throughout commons theory. The simple assumption is that, without strong relationships of *trust*, individuals are unlikely to engage in collective action that may be pirated by one individual rather than contributing to the overall communal good. It is the element of trust that is lost when communities are scaled up, and it is the desire to maintain this trust that incentivizes exclusion. In other words, were Dr. Erickson's care collective to expand beyond her intimate friends and relatively limited travel acquaintances, those bonds of trust that encourage accountability and ownership would be unable to mature along with the physical practice of mutuality and interdependence.

Even though commons rarely exclude by physically expelling people, this principle suggests that commoners will increasingly exclude as communities grow in number by ignoring their contributions so as to maintain relations among the initial group that are as close as possible. If this exclusion occurs according to already entrenched systems of stratification and exploitation, it will exponentially increase the exploitation and oppression of those already discriminated against.

The second reason commons theory exacerbates the potential for harmful exclusion is because it has no external means for ensuring that such harmful exclusion does *not* take place. In the commons theorists largely agree that "there is governance... but no government."⁷² This in the sense that there is no large, remote third party, exercising "authority and control over people through laws passed by legislatures, rulings handed down by courts, and policies adopted by various officials and politicians."⁷³ Rather, governance in the commons means "Authority, power, and responsibility for

⁷² Bollier and Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive*. 120.

⁷³ Bollier and Helfrich. 120.

implementation are diffused among identifiable people, each of whom has opportunities to deliberate and make decisions with others.”⁷⁴ Yet this model holds no space for an outside authority to ensure the communities created for collaboration are inclusive of diverse opinions and those portrayed as foreign “others.” Who in such a scenario is to stop individual commons from creating a community based on shared values of prejudice and practices of discrimination?

By clarifying the concept of exclusion, tracing the process of community building, and finally applying these lessons to commons theory, we have identified a central conflict in the commons that calls into question its ability to support and sustain human wellbeing. In both theory and practice, we have seen how commons often rely on and foster relationships that are far from the perfect egalitarianism that is often presented by commons theorists. As communities form and cultivate the intimate relationships necessary for a commons to arise, there is little to stop these communities from developing that commonality with others they feel most comfortable around, continually concentrating wealth as those already on the margins are excluded even further. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha rightly advises: “Community is not a magic unicorn.” Equitable, inclusive commons will not develop spontaneously as we heed our better angels and invite all to share in collective action. We need a way to ensure that the commons, in contrast to other methods of political economy, resists the tendency to dispossess and exploit those most vulnerable.

⁷⁴ Bollier and Helfrich. 120.

4. Unbounding the Commons

To overcome this obstacle, I suggest scholars move beyond the realization that “dependency is inescapable in the life history of each individual”—a premise which is already central to the commons—and broaden their understanding of just how many people commoners are dependent upon. Commons theorists often employ the term “community” in reference to a bounded, self-determining entity that is constituted by a distinct binary between members and foreigners.⁷⁵ This is in line with theories put forth by Michael Walzer and other political theorists which assert “*Admission and exclusion* are at the core of communal interdependence. They suggest the deepest meaning of *self-determination*” (emphasis added).⁷⁶ This is in part because scholarship on the commons is most often focused on relations *within* individual commons and so neglects relationships *between* them. Despite a rhetoric of interdependence, this literature thus gives the impression that commons exist largely separate from one another.

Based on the definition of community I offered in Section 2, however, we know this cannot be the case. It is impossible to precisely delineate between who is and who is not a “member” of a community, or where one community stops and another begins. The people perceived as “foreigners are, in fact, not so foreign” Nandita Sharma writes—they are an integral part of “our” world.⁷⁷ Any human’s reliance on others is not constrained to a neighborhood, a church, a school or even a city. Our dependency extends far beyond that to those who keep the power running, plant and pick the food we eat, protect our

⁷⁵ Walzer, *Spheres Of Justice*.

⁷⁶ Walzer. 62.

⁷⁷ Jones, *Open Borders*. 87.

oceans and aquifers, and pass down knowledge to the next generation. Better yet, our dependency extends to the food, oceans, and aquifers themselves. It is not enough to say that, as humans, we recognize the inevitability of dependence. We must also ensure that all things we depend on are duly recognized and compensated for their labor so that our shared inheritances can be sustained for many generations to come.

This dependency is defined by three key dimensions: spatial, temporal, and biomic. Our human dependency is *spatial* in the sense that we live in a world from which it is impossible to fully extricate ourselves. COVID-19 has demonstrated this fact, illuminating our reliance on the care and labor of those quite far away from us. It is *temporal* because our obligations extend both to those whose historical sacrifices and oppressions made us possible and those who will come after us. Finally, human dependency is *biomic* because neither commons nor community can ever be exclusively human enclaves. We are all part of a larger ecosystem and planetary biome, no single element of which can be understood or survive in isolation.⁷⁸ Commoners must consider each of these dimensions when determining the extent to which they are dependent on others.

I cannot say with full certainty what it would look like to recognize this extended dependency. On the one hand, it would seem to require that commoners deepen their *self-awareness* to acknowledge that the range of people on whom they depend spans far beyond the boundaries of their own community. Put another way, we must resolve to *listen*, and listen as if it is a political act. To listen politically, Anna Tsing says, “is to detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas.”⁷⁹ Many already do this in terms

⁷⁸ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. 235.

⁷⁹ Tsing. 254.

of the environment by caring for the natural world, just as it has nurtured them. On the other hand, when commoners locate the source of their life-giving support, they must acknowledge that care as they would in their immediate community and work to reciprocate it. Commoners, in short, should adhere to the principle that ‘an obligation is owed to all who have helped me live and live well.’ This means they must strive to make sure that *all of those on whom they depend are duly recognized for their labor and cared for in turn.*

Conclusion

Today, more than ever, we need to come together in community and attempt to provide for collective survival and wellbeing. Yet, as schools close and businesses shutter their windows in response to the spread of COVID-19, the strings that tie together our webs of community feel as if they are slowly being snipped one at a time. Retreating into our homes, it feels as though we are more alone than ever.

Yet while it is true that these circumstances challenge the conventional ideas of what a community can be, rarely, if ever have we also been more connected. Humankind faces a collective struggle unlike any other we have seen in modern history. We are more dependent on one another than we have ever been. While our roles differ within this pandemic and the greatest burden will undoubtedly fall upon those with fewer resources, this struggle is nonetheless a commonality that binds us together and out of which communities can form. We can build from this commonality to create a new paradigm as the world knits itself together again. Time will tell what will be left standing, but in this place of precarity we can choose to either cling onto the same rooted structures of power and privilege that have heightened this crisis, or we can contribute to their revolution.

The theory of the commons provides one promising path forward, but it too has its failings. In this thesis I have attempted to illuminate one pitfall I see as particularly hazardous and briefly suggest a way in which it might be overcome. Because of its reliance on community, the commons hold an inherent capacity for exclusion. This exclusion is defined not in terms of physical presence or even agency in a community, but recognition. Where individuals are “excluded” from a community, they still play a vital role in its subsistence but fail to be acknowledged for doing so. When coopted by

the forces that currently dominate society, this exclusion will serve to perpetuate class based, gendered, and racial exploitation. If commons theorists continue to say that community building and subsidiary collaboration is of the utmost importance, it will only exacerbate preexisting inequalities as those with wealth share it equitably among themselves or their own social spheres, neglecting to acknowledge the full scope of their dependency. If we are to address the structural inequalities that play out in the process of community building, we must move to make sure that all of those on whom we depend are duly recognized and valued for their labor. This requires broadening our dimensional understanding of dependency and institutionalizing the twin pillars of self-awareness and unbounded reciprocity in the commons. Only then can the commons live up to its potential as a post-capitalist political economy.

Just like individuals, communities cannot survive as bounded, sterile, and compartmentalized entities. “No commons is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them”, this is how we must understand the slogan ‘no commons without community.’⁸⁰ Community should not be intended as a gated reality, but rather as “a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.”⁸¹ Commons and commoners *must always* struggle to create mechanisms of sustainable “self”-governance while also calling into question who exactly that self is and recognize that the answer is ever changing and evolving. Only by recognizing the inevitable interconnectedness of these collectives and

⁸⁰ Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*. 110.

⁸¹ Federici. 110.

their ever-shifting osmotic nature can we hope to salvage the commons as an aspiration for the future.

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