

International Journal of the Commons

Vol. 13, no 1 2019, pp. 16–35

Publisher: Uopen Journals

URL: <http://www.thecommonsjournal.org>

DOI: 10.18352/ijc.927

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ISSN: 1875-0281

Commoning for inclusion? Political communities, commons, exclusion, property and socio-natural becomings

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Abstract: As a response to the march of privatization and neoliberal individualism, the commons have recently re-emerged as an attractive alternative. In this article, I bring a feminist political ecology critique to the burgeoning literature on commoning to develop a conceptualisation of how political communities of commoning emerge through socionatural subjectification and affective relations. All commoning efforts involve a renegotiation of the (contested) political relationships through which everyday community affairs, production and exchange are organised and governed. Drawing on critical property studies, diverse economies, feminist theory and commoning literatures, this analysis critically explores the relationship between property and commoning to reveal how the commons emerge from the exercise of power. Central to my conceptualisation is that commoning is a set of *practices* and *performances* that foster new relations and subjectivities, but these relations are always contingent, ambivalent outcomes of the exercise of power. As such, commoning creates socionatural inclusions *and* exclusions, and any moment of coming together can be succeeded by new challenges and relations that un-common. I argue for the need to focus on *doing* commoning, *becoming* in common, rather than seeking to cement property rights, relations of sharing and collective practices as the backbone of durable commoning efforts. Becoming in common then, is a partial, transitory becoming, one which needs to be (re)performed to remain stable over time and space.

Keywords: Common property, environmental subjectivities, exclusion, feminist political ecology, inclusion, Nepal, political communities

Acknowledgement: The writing of this paper benefitted from conversations with Muriel Côte, Stephanie Johanna Leder, Noémi Gonda and Wendy Harcourt. A special thanks to Jyoti Hamal. All errors that remain are my own. The writing was in part supported by supported by a Swedish Research Council Development Grant (2015-03323), “Conflict, Violence and Environmental Change: Investigating resource governance and legitimacy in transitional societies” (2017), and by a Riksbankens Jubileumsfond sabbatical grant SAB17-0727 (2018). The field research was supported by a Carnegie Small Research Grant (2007), US National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant No. 9900788, and a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Award (1999).

I. Introduction

Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact.

(Butler 1990, 20)

Growing frustrations with the capitalist, technocentric economy have led to a proliferation of academic and activist attempts to imagine other forms of exchange, production and living well. The commons have re-emerged within these attempts as a viable alternative to the march of privatization and neoliberal individualism, as this special issue expounds. Examples from around the world show a range of commoning efforts: collectivization of governance and use of forests, water, and other livelihood resources, urban gardens and vacant lot reclamation, open source and internet-based production efforts and alternative currencies, among many others (Bollier and Helfrich 2015). These efforts help us to imagine “the particular combinations of work, exchange, production, distribution, investment and ownership that help our communities to survive *well* (rather than just survive)” (Dombroski et al. 2019, 4 emphasis in original).

In this article, my intention is to bring a feminist political ecology critique to the burgeoning literature on commoning to develop a conceptualisation of how political communities of commoning emerge through socionatural subjectification and affective relations. All commoning efforts involve a renegotiation of the (contested) political relationships through which everyday community affairs are organised and governed. But communities are by no means self-evident (Young 1990). Signalling the commons as ‘political communities’, highlights the continual renegotiations of who and what belong to ‘the community’ that are necessary to hold commons together. Socionatural is a term used in critical social science to think about the more-than-human, or in other words socio-ecological systems in a non-binary, non-anthropocentric manner (Braun and Castree 1998; Haraway 2016). It is distinct from ‘socio-ecological systems’ because in the latter, societies and ecologies are usually kept ontologically separate, and the focus is on understanding relations that link and iteratively effect societies and ecologies.

Socionatures, in contrast, do not presume *a priori* more-than-human objects and relations that can neatly be classified as purely ‘social’ or ‘natural’ (Callon 1986). Rather, ‘socionatures’ signal the complex entanglements of processes that make life possible, but have been compartmentalised as ‘social’ or ‘environmental’ within our epistemologies (how we make knowledge about the world) (TallBear 2011; Sundberg 2014). As I elaborate throughout this article, commoning relations are already socionatural. In order to reorganise production, exchange and community, relations between humans and non-humans need to be renegotiated and reconfigured (Nightingale 2018). Thus, as political communities commons is not a resource 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 with the world.

In the commoning, feminist commons and diverse economies literatures, the commons is most often defined as collective ways of relating, and are a counter move to various forms of capitalist relations (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010; Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Singh 2017). In my analysis here I draw on some of these antecedents, critically exploring the relationship between property and commoning to reveal how the commons emerge from the exercise of power. I argue that commons are contingent achievements, never free from the ambivalence and contradictions of power. The ‘ambivalence of power’ refers to the multi-directional nature of power and its contradictory effects (Butler 1997). Power can be a productive force that produces the power to act or to relate, and in the same interactions, can have dominating, power over effects (Nightingale 2011b; Dean 2013; Allen 2016; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018). These contradictions and ambivalences of power are the points where inclusions and exclusions are struggled over. Thus, a focus on the complex dynamics of power helps to push forward our understanding of how political communities of commoning arise.

As a feminist political ecologist, I understand commoning relationships as *intersectional*, meaning that social relations of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity, caste, age, disability among others entwine together to shape how individuals experience power. Questions remain about how to ‘stay with the trouble’ of intersectional, ambivalences of power (Haraway 2016), to recognise and foster the performances and practices that allow collective subjectivities and affective relations to emerge and remain relatively stable over time (Butler 1990, 1997; Nightingale 2013; González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2019). Staying conscious and working with the ambivalences of power will help commoning efforts to avoid inadvertent exclusions and harm to both human and non-human others, exclusions which can undermine long term commoning goals.

In what follows, I first set up some important antecedents from the literature on commons, diverse economies, property and feminist political ecology. I then develop my feminist political ecology conceptualisation of commons as socio-natural becomings by linking critical property studies on power and authority to feminist work on power and subjection. To animate these more philosophical

arguments, I round out my analysis by telling a short story from my extensive empirical research in Nepal on community forestry that illustrates how commoning efforts produce ‘being in common’ (Singh 2017) *and* exclusions and enclosures of political communities and sociocultures.

2. Property and the commons

In the late 20th century, Nobel Prize laureate, Elinor Ostrom, sought to counteract the popularised idea that the collective use of natural resources necessarily led to their over exploitation (Ostrom 1990; Ostrom et al. 1999). Using a definition of property that rested upon institutions and rights, her research team sought to uncover the institutional arrangements that were required for common property to be viable over time (Ostrom 1992; Fennell 2011). They distinguished ‘common pool resources’, subtractable resources not easily fenced or bound, from ‘common property’, the rights and institutional regimes that address problems of excludability and sharing of common pool resources. A set of ‘design principles’ for successful collective management was inductively derived from case studies of functioning commons around the world (Ostrom 1990); these continue to be a cornerstone of much commons thinking. Examples from water irrigation schemes in the Global South and traditional fisheries were especially important in showing how defined collectives could set appropriator and collective bargaining rights that avoided problems of free riding and over exploitation (Berkes and Folke 1998). Their work has been crucial in defining the commons as *regulated* resource use, in contrast to open access which has no property arrangements.

The Diverse Economies and Commoning scholarship has drawn from some of Ostrom’s insights about property rights but largely rejects the emphasis on rational choice theory (Gibson-Graham 2011; Bollier and Helfrich 2015).¹ Commoning theorists have shown how individual and collective actions are not always conscious, but rather are relational outcomes of subjectification, individual agency, emotion, and embeddedness within wider political economies (Arora-Jonsson 2009; Nightingale 2011a, 2013; Singh 2013, 2017; Velicu and García-López 2018). Subjectification is a concept that comes from Foucauldian inspired feminist theory and refers to the processes whereby subjectivities come into being. Rather than something that is only imposed from the outside, subjectification occurs as power is internalised and re-expressed (Butler 1997). The resulting subjectivities emerge from this internalisation and refusal. As such, it is a dynamic process that can change over time and space (Nightingale 2011b). Below, I further elaborate theoretical nuances of subjectification, but here my concern is with how the performance of subjection is linked to agency.

¹ Some of Ostrom’s work tried to take account of a limited range of emotions and relationships to temper some of the blind spots in rational choice theory, but in a much more limited way than the other work cited here.

While certainly oppressive in some contexts, subjectification can also be liberating, particularly if the subjectivities that emerge facilitate collective action for living well. Commoning places emphasis on the social relations required to transform socionatural relations and thus while not often discussed in these terms, is intimately bound up in the performance of subjectivities (Nightingale 2011a; Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Singh 2017). “From this perspective, sustaining the earth’s commons is not a mere technical management of resources (in space) but a struggle to perform common liveable relations (in time)” (Velicu and García-López 2018, 3).

The focus on property within commoning debates is uneven. Conceptually, commoning is not necessarily tied to property, but rather to collective action to foster both new means of production, exchange and use of resources (Gibson-Graham 2011; Dombroski et al. 2019), and new subjectivities and ways of being in common (Singh 2017). Many commoning efforts have as a reference point ‘resources’ such as new software, or forests, land and water, while others have looked at collective action efforts that are centred on a common goal such as Transition Towns (Bollier and Helfrich 2015). Nevertheless, assumptions about property underpin commoning efforts. The book, *Patterns of Commoning* (Bollier and Helfrich 2015), opens by invoking centuries old collective irrigation systems in the Alps and goes on to argue that commoning is about, “...joint action, of creating things together, of cooperating to meet shared goals...” (1). Indeed, many commoning efforts are precisely about trying to assert collective property rights over resources or processes (like software development) in the face of legal and economic regimes that want to privatise those rights.

Parallel to these debates, critical property studies have expanded the definition of property from a focus on institutions and rights, to conceptualise property as a relation that links social actors with objects of value (von Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006; Sikor 2008). Empirical studies show that property rights are meaningless if they cannot be exercised, and many contexts have overlapping and competing relations that govern resources (Peluso 1996; Lund 2008; Sikor and Lund 2009; Côte and Korf 2018). These findings catalysed theoretical work into the two-way relationship between exercising property rights and recognition of them. Property in this debate is conceptualised as power-laden social relations that emerge around land or resources, rather than an object or right (von Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006; Sikor and Lund 2009). Attention is placed on the kinds of property claims made, who grants these rights and who recognises them, and what struggles over authority and belonging emerge around them (Lund 2006, 2016). Relations within a wide range of contested and legally plural contexts have shown that overlapping property regimes often exist within the same geographical space and in relation to the same resources (Nuijten and Lorenzo 2009; Peluso 2009, 2011; Ribot 2009; Roth 2009). This latter insight helps to unpack how commoning efforts can overlay other forms of property or collective action, and cautions that such efforts will never be free from various struggles over power and authority.

3. Performing commoning: socionatures and affect

My understanding of the commons and their potential for fostering new socionatural relations of production and exchange rests on these precedents. Property—and by extension commoning—is a relation that is underpinned by conflict, authority, recognition, as well as collaboration, cooperation and consensus. Central to my conceptualisation is that commoning is a set of practices and performances that foster new relations and subjectivities, but these relations are always contingent, ambivalent outcomes of the exercise of power. For example, defining new rights and rules to turn vacant lots into urban gardens has rarely been achieved without significant struggle. These struggles occur between city managers, users of such lots (often homeless people), overlapping claims to ownership, as well as in the practices necessary to replace weeds with desired garden plants. These struggles are important for creating new political communities (González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2019), connected through gardening, but they can also disrupt other kinds of political communities, such as homeless people or gangs that used the vacant lots (Kurtz 2001). While we might make normative judgements about which one is better, power is exercised in multiple directions and among all actors in order to renegotiate and transform vacant lots, and, as I elaborate throughout this article, results in new forms of subjectification. The commons therefore emerge from the exercise of power and are simultaneously: i) relations of property-authority and sets of rights and rules that purport to regulate those relations, and ii) socionatural relations that extend subjectivities into more-than-human collectives.

Within the commons, power is not a negative force. As Foucault and Butler have emphasised, power is not simply power over or coercive power, rather, power also provides the ability to act and to affect (Foucault 1995; Butler 1997; Allen 2016; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018). To return to the concept of subjectivities, it offers insight into the operation of power as subjects are ‘the effect of power in recoil’ (Butler 1997, p. 6). Making a distinction between the subject and the psyche, Butler (1997), conceptualises subjectivities in a performative, relational manner. The exercise of power always has ambivalent outcomes (Butler 1997, 6). The potential for transformation is found in the ‘recoil’ as subjectivities emerging from dominating power can be potent sources for action by oppressed groups, but not in a straightforward manner. Empowerment, for example, implies a lack of power to begin with which ironically serves to reinforce the notion that the collective in question lacks power (Butler 1997; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018). This ambivalence means that subjects are not always consistent—‘subject positions’ are an artificial cementing of relational practices—and individuals can inhabit contradictory subjectivities at the same time (Nightingale 2011a,b). Here, the feminist political ecology concept of intersectionality helps to hold in view the way that individuals and groups perform multiple subjectivities (Sundberg 2004; Harris 2008; Arora-Jonsson 2009; Valdivia 2009; Elmhirst 2011; Nelson 2013; González-Hidalgo 2017). To understand commons-in-the-making, keeping an analytical focus on the performance of intersectional subjects helps reveal where power operates.

For my purposes here, I want to probe how power operates within the commons to create inclusions and exclusions. Being a commoner is not a state of being, but rather a performative set of relations wherein the exercise of power brings people and non-humans into life giving relations² (García López et al. 2017; Singh 2017, 2018; Velicu and García-López 2018). The presence of strong communitarian relations does not necessarily lead to commoning for all, nor does it necessarily foster nurturing relations with non-humans. It can as easily lead to distrust and attempts to exclude members who are seen as ‘others’ or with less social power (Arora-Jonsson 2009; Nightingale 2013; Velicu and García-López 2018), or the prioritisation of some non-humans over others. The vacant lot as urban gardens again comes to mind. As Kurtz (2001) shows, exclusions are inherent to processes of producing functioning urban gardening groups, but how these play out are quite variable over time and space. Given political commitments to fostering better ways of living in the world, it is important to ensure that attempts at commoning do not simply produce better access and sharing of resources among a group of elites, or produce new forms of marginalised others.

In order to understand the exercise of power within the commons, I emphasise two aspects of subjectification. First, that commoning relations are not only social-political relations, they are socionatural relations. Here, I want to go beyond the current emphasis on how connections with the non-human are vital to the commons (Nightingale 2011a; Singh 2017), and focus more on how commoning brings non-humans into *new* kinds of relations as well as *new* relations between people. In an urban garden, to thrive, new relations between plants, insect and other species need to be reconfigured along with bringing people and plants into new relations and of course, people with each other (White 2011). While the importance of specific socionatural properties was recognised by Ostrom in their formulation of common pool resources (i.e. ‘resources not easily fenced or bound’) (Ostrom et al. 1999), my conceptualisation probes the relational emergence of subjects and qualities of both humans and non-humans. By extending the conceptualisation of subjectivities into socionatural relations, power is understood as decentred from humans; subjects are formed by dynamic, everyday relations that both extend and limit human actions as they are performed and understood in relation to non-humans (Nightingale 2011a; Schnabel et al. 2016; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018). This means that relations with non-humans are crucial to commoning subjects. Subjects are not only constituted through human interactions, but are also products of people’s relations with plants, animals, infrastructures and other aspects of the non-human. This insight means that commons, as relational practices, are not new ways of interacting in the world, but new ways of being in the world (Singh 2013, 2017; Velicu and García-López 2018). I extend these analyses to argue for the need to look for the ambivalent and contradictory effects of power in both human and more-than-human relations.

² By ‘life giving’ I mean relations that support vibrant life, or a sense of aliveness and connection across all aspects of life (Bennett 2010).

This formulation of socionatural commons begins from earlier ecofeminist and feminist critiques of science that refuse the dichotomy of nature and society. A central tenant of ecofeminism is how understandings of the world (ontologies) that hold society as somehow distinct from nature are complicit in the oppression of marginalised human others and over exploitation of non-humans (Harding 1986; Diamond and Orenstein 1990; Haraway 1991; Plumwood 1991; Warren and Cheney 1991; TallBear 2015). The same binary ways of thinking fuel hierarchies between humans and between humans and the world around us. Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2010) recognised the significance of non-humans in commoning and diverse economies early on, driven by recent fears over the Anthropocene and what that implies about human impacts on the world. To be sustainable in the long term, diverse economy activists need to embrace an ontologically embedded understanding of socionatures that holds social and natural relations together in promoting new relations of production and exchange (Gibson-Graham 2011; Singh 2017, 2018).

In my rendering of a feminist political ecology of the commons, socionatural commoning subjects are not unique to the Anthropocene, however. The world has always been constituted through socionatural becomings, the difference lies in the analytical tools and conceptual constructs we use to understand those becomings (TallBear 2011; Haraway 2016), rather than socionatural relations first becoming relevant in the Anthropocene. In other words, it is not concerns over the Anthropocene that drive my interest in socionatural commoning relations. I argue that to recognise how commoning practices can support better ways of living well, the ontological inseparability of societies and ‘everything else’ has to sit at the centre of our conceptual thinking, regardless of how the Anthropocene unfolds.³

This also means that non-human relations are not confined to those ordinarily considered ‘nature’ only (Sundberg 2014). Rather, all commons arrangements imply the need to reconfigure human and more than human relations including technology and infrastructure such that new practices of sharing, appreciating and exchanging are possible. Digital commons is a good example (Bollier and Helfrich 2015). The electronic and decentralised qualities of the Internet and remote server platforms are important for how users of the digital commons are able to create commoning relations for alternative markets, open source software development, etc.—and the new kinds of struggles over access to and control over novel socionatural assemblages they produce.

Second, I emphasise the role of affective and emotional relations in producing commons subjects. Commoning is not simply a rational, conscious act of getting involved in a collective practice. As has been recently developed by several scholars, commoning emerges from, and creates, emotional ties to place, community, resources/non-humans (Singh 2017, 2018) and it is through these subjections

³ The Anthropocene remains a contested concept within the geological sciences (Steffen et al. 2011).

that new political communities emerge (Nightingale 2011a, 2013; González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2017; Velicu and García-López 2018; González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2019). Affective subjectivities are relationally produced between people, non-humans and everyday practice, meaning that subjects are not (un) consciously rearticulated by individuals, but rather imply a sense of self that refuses the boundary between individuals and their socionatural environments (Davidson 2003; Nightingale 2013). Milton first argued along these lines using a conceptualization of identity to show the need for connection with nature in environmental activism. This limited her to theorizing how people need to see themselves as part of an environment, identify with it—love it—in order to become environmentalists (Milton 2002). Using ideas of subjectivity rather than identity allows for a more profound entanglement of the human and non-human.

My understanding of commons subjects thus builds from these insights and Singh's argument that commons are a site for coming together of the creative energies of humans and more-than-humans that foster affective socio-nature relations and subjectivities of 'being in common' with others (Singh 2017). It includes ontologies of the world that imagine socionatures to be constituted through the entanglements of material, spiritual and cognitive frictions (Mignolo 2009; De La Cadena 2010; TallBear 2015) like those that are articulated by the people in Nepal in the case study below. My conceptualization goes one step further, to focus on *doing*, such that *performing* commoning requires a transformation in subjectivities to encompass (new) collective relations, (new) relations with non-humans and (new) emotional socionatural commitments. This conceptual move embraces the kinds of ontological and affective transformations that occur as conceptions of property, community and commoner are politically enacted on the ground.

Feminist theory reminds us, however, that these processes of subjectification are not simply processes of embracing a common life world and collective practices that transform socionatural relations in positive ways. Subjects are ambivalent and unstable (Butler 1997, 2009; González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2017). Emerging from the exercise of power, there is always a partial acquiescence *and* refusal of subjection within the subject (Butler 1990, 1997). Commons subjects cannot be sustained by consciousness alone. They need to be performed in the everyday, practices that forge affective, embodied relations between people and non-humans, relations which will always contain some elements of ambivalence and contradiction and fundamentally emerge within the exercise of power (both power over and power to) (Nightingale 2013; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018).

To bring this line of argument back to my concern with property, commons and commoning are power(ful) performances that both deliberately and riotously reshape the relations that bring life (and property) into being. By riotously I invoke the vibrant (Bennett 2010) but also ambivalent and unintentional outcomes of the exercise of power. The commons are not controllable. Our most diligent efforts at creating new, common and ultimately emancipatory socionatural communities cannot escape the inadvertent production of others, differential exclusions, and unpredictable outcomes that characterize all relational becom-

ings (see also Mignolo 2009). Commoning to promote more sustainable food production, can undermine habitats for less valued non-humans, for example, excluding them from efforts at promoting life. Similarly, increased food security for some (low income communities in the Global North engaging in local food production), can undermine livelihood security for others (Global South farmers who rely on selling produce to markets in the Global North). While this latter example raises complex questions about global food commodity chains, the point here is that local commoning efforts by necessity create an 'outside'. And if our politics strive for inclusion and living well, we need to attend carefully to the consequences of those exclusions.

Further, commoning is always a contingent achievement and requires constant negotiation with other claims to shared resources and relations. A community garden and the more than human relations it embodies, for example, can be removed in a few short hours by a municipality with a tractor if rights to occupy that land are not recognized. In a counter move, collectives can redefine dimensions of private property rights by establishing gardens in vacant lots or harvest fruit from trees on private land that is not being utilized. While successful examples abound, commoning activists need to bear in mind that these achievements will always be subject to overlapping claims (Kurtz 2001), and that struggles over recognition of these claims and overlaps by those outside the collective is part of the commoning effort.

Therefore, the commons is not a site, a place, or even a community. Rather, my feminist political ecology account privileges the socionatural affective relations and the work that commons *do* (other than producing goods or resources). This focus on becoming commons, realigns our scholarship and activism to the ambivalent socionatural practices through which commoning is a partial achievement. It demands that we hold sight of the exclusions commoning creates and the ambivalences inherent in even the most well meaning attempts to transform subjectivities and relations.

4. Socionatural becomings in Nepal

I now turn to the messy everyday life of being in common in Nepal to further illustrate the ambivalent, contingent nature of commoning. The story brings into view overlapping property claims, struggles over the authority to assert rights to a shared forest, as well as different visions of securing long-term livelihoods. Through this example I want to celebrate the transformations evident *and* hold sight of the exclusions and enclosures that have resulted.

I began doing research within a community forestry user group in Mugu District of northwestern Nepal in 1993 and returned at regular intervals until 2009. The story here is based on ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews done in 1999 (8 months) and 2007 (2 weeks). The time frame helps to show the contingent achievements of commoning as well as the affective relations that promote a common sensibility (see also García López et al. 2017).

Early one morning in 2007, a small group of Brahmin, Thakuri and Chhetri⁴ women stood in the grey chilly morning of Mugu District calling to their neighbours. When they saw me they smiled and said, “This is our *andolan* (revolution). We are saving the forest,” and shook their small red and white flag lightly. They were part of a group of women who had decided it was time to do something about what they believed was over exploitation of the community forest.⁵ Their response included halting all harvesting of raw logs from the forest for over a month and a campaign to raise money for a savings-credit group from all the people outside the user-group who either bought or illegally used forest products. They went daily to demand donations in the nearby bazaar town for over two weeks.

I had followed the Pipleli community forest user-group since 1993 and watched it cope with a number of threats in 1999. I left Mugu with evidence that seemed to show the user-group had succeeded in producing deeply emotional, affective relations between different caste groups and between individuals and the forest that promoted both growth of non-human species and supported the collective in times of internal and external crisis. Of course there were ambivalences and struggles over management priorities and authority to govern the group—most often manifest in hierarchies of intersectional gender-caste subjectivities—but nevertheless, it seemed to be a fairly successful example of commoning in relation to shared natural resources that produced new socionatural affects (Nightingale 2003, 2005).

In 2007, the forest was again under threat from in-migrants needing firewood for cooking and grazing land for their animals. The bazaar town had grown rapidly—due to the recently ended civil war (Hutt 2004) and new economic opportunities—and the bulk of the building materials came from the community forest. In-migrants did not share property rights to the forest commons, nor did they share the same historically embedded sense of being-in-common with the space of the forest. This lack of shared affective relations fractured the performances of commoning that had served to build the socionatural community forest throughout the 1990s. The women’s *andolan*—which excluded the Kami women in the group—suggested deep fractures not only between factions in the user-group, but also in people’s own sense of attachment to the forest and their responsibilities towards it, all of which was again reshaping intersectional community forestry subjectivities, gender and caste relations, and the non-human space of the forest.

⁴ Caste names confer relative status in a social hierarchy that has been imagined from the perspective of those at the top (Brahmins and Thakuris). I want to avoid reproducing those hierarchies by referring to ‘high’ and ‘low’ castes. For the castes within this particular user-group, Kamis are excluded from sharing food and entering the houses of Brahmin, Thakuri and Chhetri castes which serves to socially and politically marginalise them. (Cameron 2007; Nightingale 2011b).

⁵ Community forestry is a government supported program in Nepal that turns over legal management of forests to village user-groups. This particular user-group is composed of 3 spatially separated villages and is composed of 4 different caste groups.

But to understand these changes, it is necessary to first recount an incident from 1999. At that time, the Pipledi community forest (as both a management regime and as a place) was surveyed (mapped) by the army who wanted to use it for live ammunition training. Immediately afterwards, men from nearby villages challenged the property claims of the Pipledi user-group, stating that now it was a government forest since the army had surveyed it and therefore they had equal rights to resources within it. In response, the entire group rallied together. They instituted more patrolling in the forest to limit the sudden increase in poaching from nearby villages, they walked the boundaries of the forest with neighbouring user-groups to (re)agree on who had access to what places,⁶ and they sent a small delegation to Kathmandu to petition the Ministry of Forests to stop the army's training. During this time, men and women from all castes expressed to me their deep emotional connections to the forest. One Brahmin woman told me, "Pipledi is like our heart." (*Pipledi hamro mutu justa ho.*) (interview 2/99), a sentiment that was echoed by many others. A Kami man passionately replied to a question about the effectiveness of sending a delegation to Kathmandu, "...what else is there? Or else we can run away and be refugees and tell the army to stay here. We will not become refugees" (interview 7/99). Describing the forest as "our heart" or insisting they would not become "refugees" without access to the forest indicate subjectivities that emerge from their affective and embodied practices within community forestry. All my respondents expressed deep connections between their well-being and the forest as a more-than-human space; subjectivities that go beyond simple rational choice assumptions of benefits from the commons. In other words, not only are community forestry subjectivities formed out of intersectional differences shaped by gender, caste, ethnicity and age, they are also formed by experiences and affective relations with the forest itself.⁷

Yet by 2007, some rather potent conflicts were emerging that fractured the user-group along intermingled gender and caste differences. The management committee, dominated by relatively wealthy Brahmin, Thakuri and Chhetri men, were ostensibly using their authority and the group's property rights to take turns using money generated from selling timber permits for their own use. They were also accepting bribes from timber buyers for issuing permits that did not flow through the user-group's accounts, thereby hiding the scale of harvesting. The Kami men, while excluded from 'eating' money in this way, were taking bribes for cutting above the permit limits. They earned good piece rate wages doing the timber cutting so cutting more doubly benefitted them. The men from all these caste groups

⁶ Mainly men were involved in this walking of the boundaries, but some women were included and women were avid patrollers of the forest. When I arrived, they insisted that we all go together to walk the perimeter of the forest. By the end of the day, the group had significantly dwindled, but in the morning, one woman from every household in the two higher caste villages came along.

⁷ This is difficult to articulate succinctly. By 'the forest itself' I mean the non-human animals and plants that people interact with in the forest. But conceptually, I understand 'the forest itself' as sociounatural, meaning that both human and non-human dimensions of the forest are co-emergent.

who in 1999 were deeply concerned about a 15-day training course disrupting their forest access—“if the army takes that land we could die [without getting sick first].” (interview with Thakuri man 2/99)—now saw the commons as a space of short-term gain. These relations to the forest were deeply emotional as well as economic. Kami men discussed with me in 2018 how they saw their chance to escape grinding poverty, even if they were concerned about the rapid deforestation. Meanwhile Brahmin, Thakuri and Chhetri men literally got into fist fights or arrived drunk at user-group meetings to passionately oppose the corruption amongst the leaders. The forest was clear-cut in many places and under-story species have been effected both by changes in light regimes and by disturbing the soil from dragging logs down the hill. Some of these under-story species have potential as high-value medicinal plants, most of which by 2018 had died. But opening up the canopy creates space for different kinds of plants and animals so the long-term effects on the forest are not evident yet. What is at stake here are particular changes in the socionatural forest—men extracting timber and revenue, new species composition within the forest—rather than a simple destroying of the forest.

The women in the *andolan* had different affective, economic and embodied relations with the forest. In contrast to the men who controlled the committee and rarely visited the forest to collect resources, like the Kami male timber cutters, the women were often in the forest daily collecting firewood, fodder, and grazing animals. They also insisted the forest, “is our heart” (Chhetri woman, 12/07), and that because “they have sons too...” (Thakuri woman 12/07) they would not allow the over exploitation of the forest continue. But to assume that their *andolan* was the performance of a simple conservation subjectivity (Agrawal 2005), or evidence of women’s closer relationship to nature (Shiva 1988; Diamond and Orenstein 1990), is to miss the complexity of affective, socionatural commoning subjectification. Several months earlier, the Chhetri, Brahmin and Thakuri women in the user-group had participated in a training on the cultivation of medicinal herbs hosted by the nearby National Park. They immediately grasped the potential for new socionatural relations that could help secure their long-term livelihoods and planted hundreds of seedlings in the forest. As one woman said, “If the goats and horses are not allowed in the forest then the herbs won’t be destroyed which will be beneficial for us.” (Thakuri woman 12/07). Their subjectivities as forest saviours were embedded in complex layers of everyday interactions with the more than human space of the forest, household relations that meant they simultaneously had primary responsibility for food production but little control over household cash resources, their relations with each other, and with the user-group as a whole. Struggles over belonging and the exercise of power through intersectional subjectivities were not absent either. Note that the Kami women in the user-group were not included in the medicinal herb training nor in the *andolan*, meaning that this was not a women’s initiative. Rather, it was a crucial performance of commoning, one that brought the more elite women from ‘higher’ caste households into new relations of production and exchange that had potential to significantly change their long-term livelihood security. For the Kami women, it was yet

another practice of exclusion, a further enclosure of certain resources in the forest that would serve to maintain their precarity, rather than reduce it.

Thus, these factions of the user-group imagine the forest as a commons in very different ways. The men on the committee see it as a relation of extraction, and they manipulate property and extractive rights to forge new socionatural relations within and outside the user-group that sell timber faster. Their subjectivities have been transformed, in part due to increased economic opportunities connected to the growth of the bazaar, in part due to changes in household labour allocation which meant many of them spent even less time in the forest, both of which bring them into different socionatural relations. The Kami timber cutters similarly view the forest commons as a set of relations that allow them profit. Despite being on the front line of watching the large timber trees dwindle from the forest, none of them were willing to be the first ones to put a stop to it. Perhaps because they knew their actions were ‘destroying the forest’, none of them were willing to talk with me about how they felt about it. I can only speculate that their subjectivities have also been transformed by changes in timber cutting technologies (new manual cross cut saws make the job more efficient), changes in economic opportunities and less dependence on agricultural production.

The women’s *andolan* group, who was more willing to talk with me about it, continued to understand themselves and their livelihoods as deeply connected to the long-term viability of canopy trees and to believe in the potential of collective mobilisation to stop the men’s over exploitation. They contested the authority of the committee by engaging in their very public *andolan*, and asserted earlier property arrangements that bound the forest and user-group to the three villages only and to the conservation of non-human forest species, especially the overstory trees. The Kami women were excluded from these relations and my fieldwork was not long enough to know if they pushed back. Previously, they had responded to community forestry enclosures that limited the days of leaf litter harvesting, by violating the rules (Nightingale 2006). They had not been part of the decision making and did not have the power to force the committee to open the forest for harvesting. The season was progressing so they exercised power in a different way by gathering the leaf litter they needed. My guess is that the Kami women are not content to simply let medicinal herbs grow and get the already better off women rich, but that story awaits the opportunity to visit Mugu again.

This example helps to show the ambivalent and contingent nature of commoning. Beyond the transformations in subjectivities and practices in relation to the forest as an extractive space, the women’s *andolan* throws a spot light on how commoning also involves exclusions and the reinvention or cementing of intersectional inequalities. The *andolan*, while impressive in bringing together a large group of women to motivate around a common cause—they planted seedlings, raised over NRS 20,000 (approximately US\$ 200) for their savings credit group to buy more seedlings and market their herbs, and blocked all harvesting from the forest for nearly a month—also created particular commoning subjectivities. For the women involved, it fostered being-in-common in relation to the forest and

their experiences of household and community oppressions. By working together, they reconfigured their socionatural personal, financial and harvesting relations in such a manner that they could engage with community forestry in a new way. However, the *andolan* also served to redefine who belonged to the commons and created a new level of exclusion for the Kami women of the user-group who were not included in the Park's training or the medicinal herb cultivation. The *andolan* was therefore a performance of both commoning inclusions *and* exclusions. The *andolan* was predicated upon the production of 'others'—both over exploiting men and the excluded women—as well as the increased solidarity and emancipation for the women involved.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have developed a feminist political ecology take of commoning that conceptualises it as power laden performances and practices that serve to (re)create socionatural subjectivities and affective relations. While some of these insights have been asserted by other commons theorists in different forms, (Singh 2013, 2017; Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Velicu and García-López 2018; Dombroski et al. 2019), here I have emphasised how these relations are never free from the ambivalence and contradictions of power. The exercise of power rarely has linear outcomes. Subjection is a moment of power over, power to, and power of (Allen 2016; Ahlborg 2017), and commoner subjectivities are similarly imbued with these ambivalences. As such, commoning creates socionatural inclusions *and* exclusions, and any moment of coming together can be succeeded by new challenges and relations that un-common.

Indeed, Ostrom's core insights remind us that the commons is predicated upon exclusions. Commoning theory has moved well beyond the fetters of new institutional economics and its commitment to rational, autonomous individuals governed by institutional rules and property rights. However, to understand what the commons *does*, the practices and performances of commoning need to be understood as power in action, the bringing into relation humans and non-humans, that will always entail some form of 'outside' or 'other'. Attention to struggles over rights, intersectional subjectification, the forms of authority that serve to support commoning efforts, and the overlapping claims that can result will help to recognise 'becoming in common' as well as what is being 'un-commoned'.⁸

Becoming in common then, is a partial, transitory becoming, one which needs to be (re)performed to remain stable over time and space. These relations are deeply affective. Subjectivities are formed within socionatural relations and everyday practices that create emotional attachments that can be transitory and do not necessarily lessen the precariousness of people's livelihoods (see also González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2017, 2019). A love of the forest can be only

⁸ I use 'un-commoned' to emphasise the action of taking the commons apart. For me, 'de-commoned' invokes the idea that they are no longer needed (like the parallel to decommissioning).

one kind of emotional attachment to that place, and cannot prevent contradictory practices (Nightingale 2013). Riotous socionatural communities therefore cannot overcome the ambivalences of power. Instead, a core part of the commoning project needs to be staying with the trouble, keeping in view the exclusions, others, and power over that commoning practices create. Without constant consciousness, these troubles can un-do commoning efforts and their achievements. Commoning ultimately requires normative choices about which humans, which non-humans and which socionatural relations to attend, although such attention will always be partial. It is not possible to control and direct all the outcomes of commoning. Many will be unexpected, footloose and surprising, some desirable, some less so. For this reason, my feminist political ecology critique of commoning pushes diverse economies scholars and activists to focus on *doing* commoning, *becoming* in common, rather than seeking to cement property rights, relations of sharing and collective practices as the backbone of durable commoning efforts.

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