INTRODUCTION
Bioethical Regimes and Commoning Practices

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Abstract: This introduction outlines an approach to commons that captures and responds to intersecting social, environmental, and political complications. The extractive power of states and corporations has long threatened the lives and livelihoods of the poor. However, contemporary local struggles are not adequately understood by frameworks that rest exclusively on social and political power. Climate change and the lingering effects of colonial and industrial extraction multiply the threats to the wider ecologies on which human lives depend. Debates on the commons have addressed such struggles, but without sufficient attention to the diverse bioethical regimes that underpin conventional commons. We propose that such attention can inform analyses by moving beyond the narrow singularities of modern categories. Our introduction lays the groundwork for an approach to the commons that pays attention to multiple and intersecting modes of dispossession, while also looking at convening or 'commoning' practices that are oriented toward building alternative relational worlds.

Keywords: Anthropocene, bioethical regimes, commoning, commons, compound dispossession, environmental justice

On 15 March 2023, in a provisional courtroom in Deatnu-Tana, North Norway, the Finnmark Commission is gathered for a two-day hearing of local rights claims concerning the landscape and seascape. Wivian, a woman in her sixties who identifies as coastal Sámi, is asked to take a seat at the table facing the members of the commission. Like many other villagers giving testimonies during the hearing, she makes detailed references to long-established practices. She talks about berry-picking, fetching sea trout from the fjord and Arctic charr from the river, collecting grass and branches to feed sheep, hunting, cutting seaweed, picking seagull eggs, and gathering turf for burning. After a while, a member of the commission asks: "Has your family ever asked for permission to do this?"

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Wivian responds that except for when cutting firewood, they have never asked for permission. Then she adds: "Regarding asking for permission, nature is not there just for our use. We always ask for permission. And we never take more than we need." The commission member looks puzzled for the moment and then asks about her neighbors, whereupon Wivian responds: "They also ask for permission. And like us, they do not take more than they need."

The commission member's question suggests that the resources that Wivian uses are not self-evidently hers to take; her sense of entitlement does not preclude competing property claims. Wivian's response indicates that she concurs with this position, but it is also clear that her understanding of the source of the necessary permission does not coincide with that of the commission member. While the commission member's question suggests the possible existence of conflicting property claims, and an institutional authority with the power to settle these, Wivian's response challenges this assumption, invoking a notion of permission that includes the rights and needs of other-than-human beings and other-than-human forces. To take no more than one needs is to show restraint and to preserve life-giving resources for future use by oneself and others. Her position recognizes a multi-dimensional relationality as opposed to individual rights established by a singular authoritative law.

The Finnmark Commission, which was set up to investigate rights of use and ownership in the region at a time of political and environmental transition, was the outcome of a political process to mitigate a series of dispossessions suffered by the Sámi indigenous minority. In 2005, the Finnmark Act transferred the legal responsibility for the management of 95 percent of the land and natural resources of Finnmark county from the Norwegian state to a newly established regional body, the Finnmark Estate, managed by a board with equal representation from the Sami Parliament of Norway and the Finnmark County Council (Ween and Lien 2012). This legal arrangement required the ongoing negotiation of diverse local interests and concerns. Wivian had come to the Commission to uphold her local user rights in response to the planned expansion of a quartz mine. The mining company, Elkem, is seen by some as contributing to the viability of the local village, but others worry that the planned expansion will result in irreversible enclosures and threaten subsistence practices in the local estuary and hillsides (Ween 2020). The expansion will also complicate the livelihoods of reindeer herders who have never owned pasture as private property, but instead rely on access to extensive pastures along seasonal migration routes (Lien, this issue). For Wivian, as for the reindeer owners, such rights exceed the legal terminology of the state and evoke ethics and sociality beyond the human domain.

We open our discussion of future commons with this example because it allows us to acknowledge the ongoing importance of what might be referred to as 'traditional commons', while also drawing attention to the many complications

and provocations that take us beyond the story of a local community struggling against the extractive interests of a mining company. There are real challenges posed by the question of how to balance ownership rights against access rights, and between institutional permissions enshrined in legal frameworks against other-than-human permissions that rest on alternative notions of authority, as Wivian's case indicates. The Finnmark Commission has been asked to investigate the existence of user rights and property rights in a place that is marked by the reverberations of assimilation and colonial practices, where the formalization of rights is uneven, and where there is no singular vision of a common viable future.

The Sámi example may superficially appear to juxtapose commons to property, but Wivian's intervention is also a reminder of the stubborn existence of commoning practices, in spite of historical and contemporary dispossession. The Sámi, like most others, are not in agreement with each other about optimal solutions. Some see mining operations as the most viable option for continuity. Yet Sámi voices also extend understandings of what it takes to protect and sustain the fundamental conditions of existence in the face of climate change, environmental degradation, and widespread species extinction. They insist on drawing attention to alternatives (Joks et al. 2020). They also demonstrate the need to fight for a common ground, and to draw attention to the intrinsic multiplicity of ecological futures, even in the face of imminent loss.

The 'commons' has always been conceptually oriented to analyze the politics of differential access to life. Today, when climate change and environmental degradation dramatically alter the distribution of basic resources (including air, food, and water), there is an urgent need to reconsider how the commons, as an analytical tool, can generate new insights into the complexities that such changes bring about. We thus propose to extend the concept of the commons beyond issues of access to land and/or collective ownership to include an ethnographic focus on (1) compound, multi-layered forms of dispossession; (2) the historically specific bioethical regimes that shape diverse, often conflicting understandings of environmental justice; (3) the ways in which contemporary theorization of the commons addresses the ongoing transformation of bioethical regimes; and (4) the 'commoning' or 'convening' practices, that are locally deployed to build a more expansive understanding and enactment of commons in response to contemporary modes of dispossession.

Compound Dispossessions

Access to common foundations for livable lives is curtailed not only by classic forms of enclosure, but also by various modes of degradation, contamination, and unseasonal instability that intensify processes of exclusion and erasure.

The articles collected here document how the entangled configurations of air, water, and soil come to comprise the fragile conditions of existence across extensive and intersecting ecosystems. They attend not only to uneven relationships of access, but also to the lingering effects of colonial occupation, the ambiguities of multi-scalar dispossessions and environmental threat, and the difficulties of holding specific agencies to account in a world of distributed and multi-layered responsibilities. They show how some forms of dispossession emerge directly from social structures that enable the imposition of limits through property regimes and the enactment of legislation and/or of regulatory systems. Other forms of dispossession are not easily traced to specific sources, making it difficult to identify lines of responsibility through which to respond. The ethnographic accounts presented in this special issue explore such complications as they track experiences and understandings of contemporary dispossession and the possibilities of collective responses.

All the case studies in this special issue are attentive to what we call 'compound dispossessions' and how they affect the foundations for existence. They show how enclosures selectively restrict access to key resources through exclusionary property claims, while transforming the possibilities for life within those same environments. Some of the dispossessions have, over time, brutally destroyed local ecologies. David Bond, for example, describes the dispossessions that emerged following the installation of a major oil refinery on the island of St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. Here people were forced to cede their land and hence their possibilities of subsistence farming. Those who had work were employed by the oil refinery. The island residents were further dispossessed by the lingering and ongoing contamination of water, soil, and air quality that compromised life expectancy and left people with deep anxieties about how to survive the eventual closing of the facility.

Camelia Dewan's account of life among fishermen living near the shipbreaking industry in coastal Bangladesh describes irreversible ecological destruction of the fragile wetlands. The case highlights how the enclosure of commons goes beyond access rights. Dewan coins the phrase 'enclosure by contamination' to refer to the ways in which access to healthy food, air, and water is curtailed not by fences but by seeping toxicity. As with Bond's example of oil contamination in the Caribbean, local Bangladeshi people lose their autonomy from an industry that offers work but destroys the quality of life and thereby also creates new dependencies. What is ultimately at stake are ways in which such enclosures harm both human and more-than-human health and thereby the possibilities to sustain coastal livelihoods. In both these cases, the multiple enclosures that protect the interests of those who profit from the industry contribute to social and environmental injustice, as they allow the industry to ignore the contamination that destroys the lives and livelihoods of those who live and work near these toxic enclosures.

Penny Harvey's discussion of nuclear wastes addresses the destructive force of extremely hazardous and highly mobile radionuclides, which have a half-life that extends well beyond that of existing planetary life forms. Here again the dispossessions enacted are multiple and intersecting. In the case of nuclear wastes, the source of the contamination is perceived to come from another time, when nuclear wastes were discarded with no concern for environmental futures. The uncontrolled dispersal of nuclear materials certainly had detrimental consequences for both human and other-than-human lives, but contemporary containment projects are also transformative of life forms and of livelihoods. Harvey considers the enclosures enacted by the technologies of 'protective' containment and by the exclusionary worlds of technical expertise and political decision making that so often foreclose the emergence of alternatives.

Such foreclosures are characteristic of colonial, state, and corporate control. Knut Nustad describes how relations between people and fish are key to understanding processes of dispossession and enclosure in contemporary South Africa, where British settlers used trout to legitimize the appropriation of key resources. The introduction of trout to KwaZulu-Natal transformed riparian landscapes while imposing restrictions on the use of waters that were designated trout waters, affecting primarily Black communities who were further deposed from their land. Today, the labeling of trout as 'alien species' has become a tool for the African National Congress (ANC) to impose a new bioethical regime by taking control over natural resources. Highlighting the active world-making abilities of trout themselves, Nustad argues that it is their *ability* to thrive in the cold water that enabled British appropriation in the first place, while their *inability* to reproduce in still waters makes them part of ongoing debates about state control over natural resources on private property.

Ben Campbell traces the effects of state policy on the livelihoods of poor farmers and of the landless in his case study of energy commons in Nepal. The article draws attention to the social relations required to support technical innovation, as well as the political will required to promote and sustain energy justice. The widespread adoption of biogas systems, which were introduced to reduce dependence on wood fuel and to increase the protection of environmental resources, was short-lived. Neither state nor technical agencies appreciated the ways in which the energy commons are constituted in complex sociotechnical relational fields. When wealthier citizens decided that it would make more economic sense to prioritize tourism income over the collective rights to pasture, on which the biogas systems relied, the poor could no longer feed the biogas digesters and therefore stopped using them.

Marianne Elisabeth Lien also draws attention to local effects of the search for sustainable energy sources. For years, Sámi reindeer owners in North Norway have fought against the interests of mining, energy infrastructures such as wind power, roads, and recreational tourism in order to sustain the viability of reindeer

pastures. Recently, more frequent episodes of freeze-thaw cycles have temporarily blocked reindeers' access to the lichen in winter pastures. Herders have responded by establishing supplementary feeding regimes, but these threaten to fundamentally change the nature of Sámi reindeer herding practices. Lien shows how Sámi herders must negotiate not only the uncertainty of climate change, but also the political pressure to adjust to infrastructural expansion associated with the 'green transition'. This ultimately limits herders' flexibility and thus their capacity to respond to the effects of Arctic warming.

People's response to situations created by the compounding of climate change and historical enclosure is also a key theme in Jon Nyquist's article, which takes us to the fire prone landscapes of Western Australia. The forests of this region have become increasingly dangerous and hard to manage, and fire managers experience troubling changes in how fire behaves and interacts with the forest. The capacity of fire managers to maintain the region as a safe place to live with fire may be lost when anchored features of the landscape are complicated by unanticipated consequences of practices from beyond established horizons of expectation. Laura Ogden's article documents the complications inherent in an attempt to stem the tide of species extinction by creating new possibilities for future species survival. The species in question is the once nearly extinct Californian condor. The uncertainties surrounding the reintroduction of the condor are of a quite different nature than those faced by the forest fire managers. However, the specter of extinction produces an informative parallel. The condor can survive only if land is set aside, if the well-being of these birds is privileged over competing interests, and if scientific veterinary expertise is deployed to ensure that these carrion feeders are not contaminated by what they eat. The ethos of a moral commitment to counteract biodiversity loss involves managed surveillance of both birds and potential human intruders. The ambiguity here lies in the politics and ethics of containment, and in the limitations of new or alternative possibilities.

The complications of these compound, multi-layered forms of dispossession, which have emerged in times of radical environmental change, push us to go beyond the classic literatures on the commons. Following political scientist and Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1990), these foundational literatures attended to the mechanisms underpinning the maintenance of commons by specifying the importance of systemic components such as 'common pool resources' and 'common property regimes'. Such common resources typically included land, fisheries, forests, wildlife, and irrigation systems, while common property regimes denoted the systems through which rights of use were exercised. More recently, Lauren Berlant (2016) has proposed that the commons can usefully be reconfigured as a conceptual infrastructure for times of transition. Berlant's approach resonates with many of our examples, where the controversy not only involves a local community posed against the extractive interests of

corporate or state entities, but also reveals local communities in tension with themselves in the face of emergent vulnerabilities and divergent views of their common future. In our opening example the protocols that guide resource use and access are not tied to questions of legal rights in any straightforward way. The Sámi insistence on never taking more than you need suggests a way of being in the world that precedes the emergence of state regulation and property relations and opens us to what Berlant calls "nonsovereign relationality as the foundational quality of being in common" (ibid.: 394). In this collection, we build on this insight and show that such non-sovereign relationality often entails forms of more-than-human sociality (Tsing 2014) that transcend the modern distinction between nature and society, while incorporating the uncertainty that climate change necessarily entails.

Commons Revisited

On the one hand, 'commons' is the concept used to refer to the possibility of carving out and stabilizing a sense of shared belonging and semi-ownership; it has been applied to public spaces in densely populated cities, open-access Internet software, genetic codes, and heritage sites. Commons thus becomes an attribute that justifies resistance against private property encroachment and/or shifts the responsibility for maintenance to a broader collective, such as the municipality or the state (e.g., Ostrom 1990).[1] At the other end of the spectrum, there is the assumption that commons are bound to fail, due to human greed and over-exploitation. Despite several decades of scholarly critique, Garett Hardin's (1968: 1244) claim that "freedom in commons brings ruin to all" has been surprisingly robust (but see Mildenberger 2019). His reference to the alleged 'tragedy of the commons' continues to circulate, and to justify the rejection of collective rights. Presented as an inevitable 'law of nature', Hardin's theory fails to recognize the social complexity of the traditional English commons.

A particularly insightful critique comes from medieval historian Susan Buck Cox (1985), who shows that Hardin's account of the tragedy that befell the common lands of villages in medieval and post-medieval England was historically false. She details how the legal rights of common in sixteenth-century England were not granted by a landlord, but "were the residue of rights that were much more extensive" and probably older than the modern conception of private property itself (ibid.: 53). These rights were vested in those employed in cultivation and were a necessary part of the agricultural system. Furthermore, they were "painstakingly regulated," and "those instances in which the common deteriorated were most often due to lawbreaking and to oppression of the poorer tenant rather than to egoistic abuse of a common resource" (ibid.: 56). The contextual backdrop for illegality, then, was the long-standing dispossession of the

tenant due to the impacts of the Industrial Revolution, agrarian reform, and transfigured farming practices. As a result, the common system "was falling into disuse [while] a new system was taking its place, and with the change the actual use made of the common or common rights declined" (ibid.: 50). Cox thus established that what led to the decline of the commons in medieval England was not unlimited access, but the processes of enclosure driven by people in power wanting to take advantage of the possibilities that came with developments in agriculture. These developments were resonant with a new way of looking at 'nature' and a wider shift in what Van Rensselaer Potter had referred to as the bioethical relations that underpin human flourishing.[2] The transition that interested Cox (1985: 59) was from a system of collective rules and stewardship practices among neighbors who agreed and exerted a moral pressure on each other to a very different system based on private ownership, market production, and economic growth. In other words, the 'failure' of the commons was not the greed of 'commoners' or a lack of effective regulation but emerged in the course of a transition to a new bioethical regime.

Such bioethical transitions were not unique to medieval England. Cox drew on the work of Potter, who had introduced the concept of the bioethical to his analysis of the sub-Saharan region of the Sahel, where overgrazing was traditionally avoided and water access ensured by arrangements among tribal chiefs. Traditionally, peoples of the Sahel were semi-nomadic, combining farming and transhumant herding. Since the 700s AD, this flat, open region sustained powerful kingdoms and trading relations, reliant on the mobility and connectivity of camels and horses. It became an area of extreme colonial extraction through the integration of the region into the global slave trade and later through colonial occupation. By the time of independence in the late 1950s, political and environmental destabilization already ran deep. Drought and famine were common, and while explanations were often couched in terms of over-farming, overgrazing, and over-populating of marginal lands, the deliberate destabilizations of the colonial past were of fundamental importance. Soil erosion, desertification, extreme food shortages, and the violent conflict between herders and farmers were directly produced in the long colonial histories that marked this region. Potter (1974) detailed this period of transition as follows (cited in Cox 1985: 60; emphasis added):

> … before the colonial era 'over-pasturage was avoided' by rules worked out by tribal chiefs. When deep wells were drilled to obtain water, the boreholes threw into chaos the traditional system of pasture use based on agreements among tribal chieftains … we see the tragedy of the commons not as a defect in the concept of a 'commons' but as a result of the disastrous *transition period between the loss of an effective bioethic and its replacement by new bioethics* that could once again bring biological realities and human values into a viable balance.

Potter had coined the term 'bioethics' to encourage reflection on more generalized ecological concepts and values. Over a decade later, in her book *The Global Commons* (1998), Susan Buck (who had previously published as Susan Buck Cox) wrote in more general terms about the complex historical layering of what became known as 'global commons'. Her work, which scales up Ostrom's approach, stresses the importance of international arrangements that foster enforceable commitments for the long-term protection of specific commons that are not regulated by existing nation-states.[3] These include the resources of Antarctica, the high seas, the deep seabed, the atmosphere, and outer space. It is Cox's interest in bioethical transitions that we build on here, pointing out shifting orientations toward fragile commoning practices, as well as how such practical arrangements and complications have consequences for livability. This approach is particularly useful when the commons are not necessarily either visible or available, or when conflicting bioethical regimes challenge the possibility for any mutual accommodation.

Environmental Justice in Times of Transition: Bioethical Regimes for Future Commons

The concept of bioethics is widely associated with the field of medicine and life sciences, and in relation to new parameters of life and death, such as new reproductive technologies, cross-species organ transplants, and genetic research (Brodwin 2000; Edwards and Salazar 2009; Franklin 2013; Strathern 1992). However, from its early beginnings, the concept was also intended to refer to planetary life in a broader sense, as evidenced in Potter's (1988) idea of 'global bioethics'. Recently, some have been calling for a return to Potter's more encompassing notion of the term to reconnect human health with the ecosphere and the global planetary changes of the Anthropocene (Churchill and Schenck 2021; Ehrlich 2009; Lee 2017). Taken in this sense, bioethics encompasses threats to biodiversity and ecosystems and questions about sustainability and environmental justice, while also highlighting how such threats are deeply connected to discussions about equitable access to life for human beings. A focus on the ethical thus introduces discussions of fairness, equity, and responsibility, as well as preoccupations with the boundaries of human intervention and the rights of the non-human.

We suggest that the concept of 'bioethical regimes' offers a useful analytic with which to approach the situations in which commons and access to livable worlds are at stake today. Bioethical regimes connect Cox's important critique of Hardin with the contemporary anthropology of environmental change, which has sought to uncover the logics, ideologies, and practices driving environmental degradation, destruction, and injustice (Harvey et al. 2019; Hetherington

2020; Moore 2016). Much of this literature also exhibits a strong emphasis on the non-innocent effects that historically anchored assumptions, ideas, and practices have for human and non-human life. The notion of bioethical regimes draws attention to the foundations or infrastructures that maintain access to life. In using bioethics in this way, we intend 'bio' to refer to life (not just organisms) without drawing a sharp line between biological life and other non-living dynamics and elements on which life depends. As such, bioethical regimes also encompass the interplay between living things and landforms, wind, fire, chemical elements, and so on, as they together form foundations for life. All the articles in this issue concern cases where what is at stake are precisely the possibilities for life, be it through livelihoods, access to safe water and food, or conditions for safe living now or in the future.

A focus on bioethical regimes allows us to amplify several ways in which a focus on commons can contribute to contemporary anthropological debate. First, bioethical regimes bring together perceptions, ideas, regulations, patterns of practice, and modes of being that have consequences for the possibility of life. In this way, bioethics points to what enables or constrains access to life in specific times and places. Second, a focus on bioethical relations implies an orientation to life beyond the here and now. An example is 'shadow ecologies' (Dauvergne 1997; Swanson 2015), which point to how a landscape intervention in one place may place an ecological burden on landscapes elsewhere. Similar long-distance bioethical implications are evident in writings on toxicity and exposure, where we see how toxins accrete in soils, waters, and bodies as lingering effects of colonial inequality and industrial production (Agard-Jones 2013).[4] Bioethical regimes are present in the very large and the very small, from the atmospheric to the microbial; their effects and traces circulate in both jet streams and blood streams.

Third, a focus on bioethical regimes draws attention to vital relations along with the practical and conceptual infrastructures through which these relations are maintained. The importance of this interplay is particularly clear in relation to contemporary critiques of anthropocentric logics. For example, Davis and Todd (2017: 770) argue that at the heart of Anthropocene logics is a way of relating to the world built on "a severing of relations … between humans and the soil, between plants and animals, between minerals and our bones." Similarly, Puig de la Bellacasa (2015: 700) shows how "productionism," an ethos that, in the case of soil, is "aimed at increasing soil's efficiency … at the expense of all other relations," fails to recognize the vital role of microbial life for the fertility of soil (see also Lyons 2020).

Nowhere is this colonial and capital-driven logic of production, elimination, and disconnection more apparent than in the case of the plantation. The plantation is an assemblage comprising regulatory regimes and values, as well as patterns of practice involving simplification, improved varieties, upscaling, and

usually also foreign capital and exploited labor (see Perfecto et al. 2019). Such "shape-shifting forms of plantation colonialism" (Paredes et al. 2024: 2) can become concentrated in a specific landscape formation, changing it to adapt to its own needs, or it can travel and be replicated. Sometimes it is the plant itself—for instance, soy beans (Hetherington 2020) or palm oil (Chao 2022)—that is identified as demanding a regime with implications for other life forms. In this way, the landscape becomes a bioethical formation as it is shaped by the assumptions entailed in specific bioethical regimes, but also in the ways that it allows or constrains access to life for both humans and non-humans. For instance, a production forest makes life possible in a very different way than a *satoyama* forest (Tsing 2015), just as a tree or an animal can carry the possibility of life for another (Rose 2012).

The conceptual frameworks that underlie the plantation and other colonial and capital-driven projects carry deep-seated assumptions about *time* and *life*. Productionism is driven by a relentless and restless futurity, "marked by a linear imperative of progress" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015: 694). Progressive time, moreover, is also a severance, cutting off the future from the past (Dawdy 2010; Rose 2004). Settler thought, for example, requires the elimination of the native (Wolfe 1994), including native nature, as the disjunctive point beyond which the future unfolds. There is, in other words, "a link between time concepts and violence" (Rose 2004: 15) or a "doubling up of violence" that "not only kill[s] parts of a living system but actually disables or kills the capacity of a living system to repair itself" (ibid.: 7). This "indifference to or justification of the suffering of others" (ibid.) is linked to the ways in which progressive, forward-oriented notions of time encourage people to think of destructive events as merely 'disjunctive moments' after which they can move on to something new.

In many instances, the effects of decades of landscape interventions, driven by a modern logic of production, combine with climate change effects to cause disasters and destruction, such as when production forests burn in wildfires, when flooding is exacerbated by landscape alterations, or when pathogens are encouraged to spread by the homogenization of landscapes. Such interplays across scales are discussed in several of the articles in this issue. What concerns some reindeer herders in the Nordic Arctic, for example, is not only that episodes of freeze-thaw make pastures less accessible, exacerbating other pressures on the land, but that the effects of such adaptations are unknown and could compromise fundamental notions of what reindeer herding is about (Lien, this issue). What troubles fire managers in the Australian southwest are the ways that forests are made more dangerous and more difficult to manage by the ways in which extractive activities, invasive pathogens, and population growth fragment the landscape and change the structure and hydrology of forests (Nyquist, this issue). This combination of practical and conceptual

regimes and runaway Anthropocene effects is one of the patterns that characterize dispossession in today's world.

This leads to a fourth point that a bioethical lens supports, namely, that life is always relational and always *lived*. Progressive time supports a biopolitics that is "enamoured with the proliferation of new life" (Parreñas 2018: 188) and indifferent to living *well.* Writing about the processes that structure and surround the lives of orangutans that can no longer live in the wild, Parreñas shows how colonial occupation destroyed conditions of life for orangutans and then forced them to stay alive and reproduce for the sake of the survival of the species. This case resonates strongly with Ogden's (this issue) account of the condor recovery program, and can be described as "a particular modernist ideology that aesthetically values forests in the midst of their destruction, orangutans on the brink of their extinction, and the appearance of their freedom in the midst of their active enclosure" (Parreñas 2018: 141). A colonial biopolitics promotes the bare life of abstract individuals making up a population, who are valued for the mere fact of being alive, even while the possibility of living well is kept from them (see also Stevenson 2014).

The possibilities for an alternative bioethics also motivate recent anthropological literature on ecological futures. For Lyons (2020), the alternative to a monocrop agricultural regime is a life politics geared not toward production but toward creating the conditions for a viable future. For Parreñas (2018: 185), the alternative lies in "interconnected vulnerability" and an openness to being affected. Deborah Bird Rose (2012) simply calls for a cosmopolitics that begins with the realization that one's life is reliant on others. Several of the cases in this issue also occupy this uncertain edge, drawing attention to the complicated patterns through which life is both supported and undermined—torn between the hegemonic and the alternative—and the sense that both may, each in a different way, be impossible. It is in response to these kinds of tensions—where the current world seems impossible to live in, but another kind of world seems impossible to achieve—that Berlant (2016) reaches for the concept of the commons. But rather than seeing commons as a solution, a model, or a fully conceived alternative, Berlant refers to it as a 'pedagogy', a conceptual and practical infrastructure for the conception and creation of alternatives. For Berlant, commons is the infrastructure that enables us to nurture attachments that are "felt but yet unestablished" (ibid.: 399), not a vision of how life can be organized better, but a strategy for "living with the malfunctioning world" (ibid.: 396).

Commoning and Convening Practices in Times of Transition

Susan Buck Cox (1985) described the decline of the commons in medieval England as a historical moment of transition from one bioethical regime to another

not yet fully in place. The ethnographic cases gathered in this issue highlight similarly complex bioethical regimes at times of transition. Many transitions are marked by ecological crises, toxic enclosures, extinctions, or shifting weather patterns associated with climate change (cf. Bond, Dewan, Ogden, Lien, Nyquist, Harvey, this issue). Some involve the dismantling of established patterns of access and user rights through colonial, state, or other forms of dispossession (cf. Nustad, Campbell, this issue). All generate uncertainty, unpredictability, and uneven access to that which is needed to uphold precarious livelihoods. The challenge of how to carry on in these situations invites us to explore a more expansive understanding of the concept of commons.

In our opening vignette, Wivian's testimony to the Finnmark Commission shows an encounter between contrasting bioethical regimes—two different frameworks for understanding what 'permission' might entail. One approach to a case like this is to highlight indigenous knowledge and epistemic dispossession, or, as Verran (2023) suggests, to mobilize ethnographic disconcertment as an epistemic tool. Another is to trace out the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contestations that are revealed. Alongside these approaches, we would like to draw attention to the mundane work required to create some degree of common foundation from which to carry on together across differences (see also Verran 2023). Efforts may fail, mistranslations occur, and conflicts will surely endure. However, as all the case studies in this special issue reveal, people continue to secure a degree of common ground to carry on, seeking to carve out a livelihood in spite of the compound dispossessions in the ruins of environmental disaster, amid the brutal consequences of colonial occupation, or in the face of deep uncertainty about the future and the ecological changes that are increasingly felt.

We focus on 'commons' to capture mundane engagement with contemporary environmental, social, and political complications. We hold on to the term, not as a notion of shared interest or liberal democratic values, or as a way to specify a particular governance regime, but rather as a way of "learning to live with messed up yet shared and ongoing infrastructures of experience" (Berlant 2016: 395). Ethnographic work on commoning and convening practices can highlight those relational commitments that are ongoing even when governance fails, when shared livelihoods are radically threatened, and when what is provisionally shared requires continuous effort to be created or maintained. Burnett and Gordon (2021: 42) propose the commons "not as a promise for another world per se, but as an expression of the vital relations holding together the worlds we are already in." What is 'common' then, is not just shared vulnerability or shared interests, but rather "the unspectacular activity of existing in proximity and thereby creating social worlds" (ibid.: 43). This may include relational commitments beyond the human, as well as mutual self-restraint in worlds that cannot always be mapped in advance.

To insist upon attention to vital relations of co-existence in more-than-human worlds (Lyons 2020) is to call for an attention to practice, which is perhaps better described as 'commoning' rather than 'commons' (see also Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Linebaugh 2008). Commoning suggests a practice rather than a system and highlights the work that is needed to build and maintain something in common.[5] The term challenges the premise that things (resources, regimes, ways of thinking or of being) are held 'in common', an assumption that rests on "the foundational liberal myth of common interest on which democratic politics relies" (Burnett and Gordon 2021: 44). Instead, it emphasizes heterogeneity, fragility, and sometimes disconcertment (Verran 2023). Commoning can be the gathering of *altered* life (cf. Murphy 2017) into new foundations for *further* life. In this sense, it relates to the infrastructural work to which Berlant (2016) refers. It is the work being done in relational commitments that assemble and align beyond the human, underpinning survival and supporting life. It is an enrollment and a convening practice (Amin and Howell 2016) that draws people together without necessarily assuming singularities of purpose or shared predicaments.

Part of what commoning draws together will always be an uncontrolled excess, what Blaser and de la Cadena (2017) refer to as 'the uncommons'. The idea of uncommons gestures toward an endlessly proliferating excess that arises through involvement in more-than-human relations, as well as, crucially, the excess that occurs despite, alongside, and below such efforts, such as the liveliness in ruins and rubble (Gordillo 2014; Ogden 2021) or the equivocations that mark all engagements across difference (Viveiros de Castro 2004). It includes the stuff created by the unpredictable and creative subversions of people in response to ordering projects (see Bond, Dewan, Campbell, this issue) and the hybridity that proliferates from efforts at purification (Latour 1991; see also Nustad, this issue). The ambiguous effects of the global planetary changes emerge in uneven and patchy ways (Tsing et al. 2020), like uncommons, as do radioactive wastes (Harvey, this issue). The value of the alternative is always partial and emergent, and the weaving together is never complete. Commoning is always an ongoing attainment in dialogue with inherited conditions, with life already altered (Murphy 2017).

We thus end our introduction with the observation that commoning amid the inherited, contemporary, and anticipated complications of the present is not automatically coherent or heroic. When a return to traditional commons is no longer an option, when people find themselves faced with irreversible changes and erasures (Bond, Dewan, Campbell), we nevertheless find subtle but crucial elements of commoning in how people respond to their situation through their relational worlds. Infrastructures for livable lives often start, simply, from a response. This can be an affective response, such as anger and desperation toward an oil refinery (Bond), or comments and stories that try

to make sense of changing fire patterns (Nyquist), or a practical solution to a loss of access to pasture (Lien), or even a sense of moral obligation toward a threatened species (Ogden), landscape (Nustad), or energy source (Campbell, Harvey). Such responses can make a difference. They may reveal to people some deep truths about their situation and reorient their ways of being in the world (Nyquist). Somewhat more tangibly, creating foundations for livable worlds can be a response in the form of using what one's situation offers (Dewan), and working creatively and ambivalently with the regulatory devices that also underpin dispossession (Lien, Nustad, Harvey). More concerted still, commoning can be an explicit attempt to create new connections between people, non-humans, things, and regulations. All of these efforts—from the unacknowledged responses to the conscious attempts to create new connections—are bioethical involvements ultimately geared toward creating, sustaining, or repairing the foundations that give access to life. But at the same time, they all have to confront unclear, tentative, and ambiguous paths, as well as shifting environmental affordances in worlds that are inherently unstable (Campbell, Harvey, Lien, Ogden). And even if there is a path, there may not be an endpoint, a stable regime of rights and obligations, as suggested by the conventional literature on the commons. Response, reorientation, improvisation, and ambivalence do not necessarily end with concerted effort but may continue in unpredictable ways. The compound nature of ongoing dispossession implies that even when a degree of 'livability' is reclaimed, there is no guarantee that the conditions allowing people to carry on will be long-lasting. Spatial and temporal reverberations of environmental destructions, as well as actions and liabilities that are hardly traceable, will continue to have an effect on people's lives. A focus on contemporary practices as a bioethical orientation offers a place from which to make space for alternatives.

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Notes

1. For a nuanced critique of 'equality without equivalence', see Walker (2020).
2. As discussed below, Cox was explicitly referencing the work of Potter (1970, 1988), who had coined the term 'bioethics' in the 1970s to address basic problems of human flourishing and environmental relations instead of the biomedical contexts to which it was later applied.
3. We acknowledge the insights of William Blomquist (2001) in his review of Buck (1998).
4. In this way, "industrially produced chemicals like PCBs have become a part of human living-being" (Murphy 2017: 495).
5. The move to commoning has happened not just in the anthropological literature on commons (see Kalb 2017) but also in adjacent fields and interdisciplinary

spaces (e.g., see Partelow and Manlosa 2023,) as well as among those who write about commons for a broader popular audience (Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Standing 2019).

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