CONVIVIAL MOMENTS. REFLECTIONS ON PARTICIPATION IN *UNDISCIPLINED ENVIROMENTS*

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I found myself picking up my notebook and a pencil to draft my reflections of my experience at *Undisciplined Environments* (UE)*:* they felt the more appropriate tools. I don't mean to romanticise my approach to the intellectual life. I couldn't do my job without my laptop and all the complexity-survival apps that extend between it, my brain, and my mobile phone. However, with a pencil in hand I can write with just one window in view, and through it the lake Petén Itzá glimmers back at me when I look up in a moment of distraction. This reminds me of certain qualities of my experience at the *Undisciplined Environments* Conference, an event that took place in March 2016, against another watery backdrop. The Swedish capital Stockholm is made up of fourteen islands and more than 50 bridges that span an extensive Baltic Sea archipelago, which, in late Spring, are still run about by freezing winds, even if the tulips and blossom are out. In that far colder, far more urban context, around 400 scholars, activists and artists had gathered to discuss the possibilities for pushing political ecology further beyond disciplinary boundaries, as part of broader efforts to mobilise post-colonial environmental justice perspectives. To remember this event, I'm writing from the island-peninsular of Flores in Guatemala, the gateway into the forest communities of the Maya Forest I collaborate with as part of my fieldwork here. As I sit to write my memories of another participatory moment I begin with my pencil in hand and the first thing I remember is a meal.

The dinner in question was an opportunity for participants to get to know each other before presenting together at UE conference the following day, and had gathered ten mostly unknown faces together around a table laden with shared plates, in a cosy Greek-Cypriot place nearby the conference venue. The papers we would share were part of a two-part session I'd co-organised for the conference called "The More-Than-Human Commons and the Politics of Knowledge," along with Patrick Breshihan, based at Trinity College, Dublin. Based on several years of conversations around the topic and a letter-based exchange exploring some new readings we had put together a call for papers, and were excited to receive an overwhelming number of proposals. For me the enthusiastic response reflected a growing interest in "commons" as one of several key concepts through which to think environmental and social relations beyond private property relations. Following Elinor Ostrom's landmark scholarship, which rejects notions that common ownership of land (or seas, or other "resources") will inevitably lead to their decline, commons scholarship has largely focused on what kinds of "rules" enable effective governance of the commons.[1] Patrick and I had also engaged with commons theme at the 2014 Degrowth Conference in Leipzig[2] as part of a group assembly process, where commons was regarded as a key concept for the reimagining of economies and social relations from the premise of care, solidarity and cooperation, rather than perpetual competitive growth. However, while there had been much agreement on the significance of the concept – which connects histories of resistance to enclosure in various forms with post-colonial geographies in the present – we'd found much ambiguity around its use. In particular there was a tendency to slip into discourses of resource use and valuation that mirrored, rather than offering transformative possibilities to, dominant capital-based framings. Drawing on emerging debates in post-colonial anthropology and cultural geography, we therefore proposed the "more-than-human commons" as a means to articulate relationships that move further beyond humanist, or dualist, ways of thinking and doing politics. We had taken as our starting point a post-colonial politics of knowledge: an assumption that colonial power relations still structure the way we know the world, but might also be reconstructed otherwise. Additionally we emphasised embracing material and nonhuman forces as critical allies in the struggle to determine more expansive ways of organizing in common, alongside recent

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1. See for example E. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990; E. Ostrom, J. Walker, R. Gardner, *Rules, games, and common-pool resources*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994.
2. *The Fourth International Degrowth Conference for Sustainability and Social Equity,* Leipzig, 2-4 September 2014.

work in "more-than-human geography".[3] This, we hoped, would provide a counter-point not only to what anthropologist Arturo Escobar calls the "analytic of finitude," a "cultural order in which we are forever condemned to labour under the iron law of scarcity," but also to techno-utopian fantasies of infinite growth that tend to ignore material questions of reproduction[4]. Disrupting the binaries of social and natural, human and non-human, that undergird the history of capitalist enclosure and biopolitical control, the more-than-human commons aims to foreground conflicts over what ecologies are visible and how they count within new regulatory and economic regimes.[5]

We were delighted to discover – from both the proposed abstracts for the session and the papers in performance – that our panellists had engaged with this notion in depth and with ingenuity, developing their own creative routes through their empirical and disciplinary contexts. Our two sessions included explorations of the temporality of the commons beyond "clock-time" (Michelle Bastian); Cleo Woelfle-Erskine's engaging exploration of collaborative science in "salmon-beaver-human worlds" as well as Oscar-Felipe Reyna-Jimenez's thoughtful excavation of commoning in the Wirikuta Sacred Natural Site through attention to the way that gold, silver and peyote are enrolled into assemblages there. Among theoretical contributions, Maan Barua also gave a stimulating coherent account of an emergent commons premised in a "politics of inhabitation", drawing on a sensitive attention to the diverse ways (and speeds) that non-human animals inhabit dynamic environments, and a "politics of negotiation", where animals' intent and knowledges are made to matter. Besides these rich ideas, I found a quick spirit of conviviality among my fellow-contributors. From the moment we sat together around the dinner-table to find common ground I was caught up in a web of enthusiasm and interest that carried me along, quite oblivious to the passing of time. While it is always possible to encounter with excitement those who share your interest at a conference event, the quality of my experience felt different – above all because of the intention to listen to one another that we shared, and the consequent sense of presence that filled our table, creating what felt like a short release from the competitive pressures of the workplace. Our conversations threaded easily between the theoretical content of

3. See for example S. Whatmore, "Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world", in *Cultural Geographies*, 13, 4, 2006, pp. 600-609.
4. A. Escobar, "After nature: steps to an antiessentialist political ecology", in *Current Anthropology*, 40, 1, 1999, p. 6; see also M. Cooper, *Life as surplus: Biotechnology and capitalism in the neoliberal era*, University of Washington Press, Washington, 2008.
5. P. Bresnihan, M. Byrne, "Escape into the City: Everyday Practices of Commoning and the Production of Urban Space in Dublin", in *Antipode*, 47, 2015, pp. 36-54; M. De la Cadena, "Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond 'politics'". in *Cultural Anthropology*, 25, 2, 2010, pp. 334-370.

the panel and our experience of related events; but also into reflections on our own academic contexts and the new pressures and kinds of precarity we faced in our different situation. The sense of understanding of our mutual contexts that this created, before the day we presented together, created a sense of solidarity that, for me, then changed the way we performed our contributions. While inevitably we came at our topics from different perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, I found this appreciation of difference and commonality moved us beyond the frustrating staccato stutter that can sometimes characterise events where no one knows one other, and toward meaningful conversation, where the gaps in between us matter.

The homepage for UE conference[6] describes the intention to cultivate such interactions as the aim of allowing crossings between "isolated disciplinary silos". As we live in "undisciplined environments" the authors claim, "we need undisciplined thinking". Before the conference I had found the title rather difficult to get my head around, and I struggled with a number of questions (does disciplinary training help or hinder this exchange? Are environments really undisciplined?). However, time given to these questions combined with the spaces for exploring them within the conference left me feeling engaged and enthused. For me, this enthusiasm – a contagious affective connection, that traverses bodies and expands a sense of collective possibility – was familiar from the above-mentioned Degrowth conference, which, in 2014, had gathered around 2000 academics, activists and social thinkers. With an innovative format somewhere between a conference, a protest camp, and a festival – at times translated in situ into four different languages – I remember leaving that event feeling that, however grim the political situation might have felt, "this thing just might be possible." Enduring memories of taking part in a slow motion "flash mob" in a mall, releasing balloons among bemused shoppers while a larger demonstration took place outside; and of watching films about transformative action projected onto high-rise buildings at night, became catalysts on my return to Bristol for exploring with friends how we might support each other into imaginative acts of cultural resistance.

While taking on a more specifically academic remit, and therefore a more academic tenor and array of themes, the *Undisciplined Environments* conference drew together many of the same people and shared the ethos of engaged intersectional and interdisciplinary conversation grounded in principles of sharing and solidarity. For me, UE extended the common feeling I'd found at Degrowth, into a question that might be

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6. http://www.politicalecology.eu/news/item/entitleconference

phrased thus: "if this thing were possible, what kind of thing would it be?" The remit of the conference in this sense was to explore how the interdisciplinary field of Political Ecology, which has been developing since the 1970s with the particular influence of Marxist political economy, can interact with discussions arising in indigenous, decolonial, and gender studies, as well as in emancipatory political and social thought, in order to further contribute to the decolonization of social and environmental knowledge. These themes were richly explored in sessions and plenaries throughout the days, pushing at the limits of disciplinary conversations and often challenging what we count as relevant knowledge. At times this also led to the staging of challenges to academic form and format, as well as content, even though the conference was largely traditional in its overall structure. This was possible partly through the invitation for the submission of experimental sessions, including reading performances, arts practices and exhibitions, that were reflected in the programme alongside the usual paper contributions. It was also due to the questions being asked by participants, that pushed deeply into what I called above a "postcolonial politics of knowledge," as well as some of the courageous responses that were formulated to problems identified. Notable highlights included a panel involving Kim TallBear from the University of Alberta, and Ailton Krenak, Krenaki leader and Brazilian public intellectual, which conveyed the importance of moving beyond "armchair criticism" and toward uncomfortable, but enlivening, challenges emerging at the intersection between gender and sexuality studies, and networks of indigenous knowledge-producers and conservers. In like manner, the multiform interventions that made up the innovative sessions organised by Cleo Woelfle-Erskine and July Cole "Who will queer political ecology? or Cute goners, (in)human thinkers, and queer wastoids" went some way to connect issues of gender exclusion and species extinction. Many of the richest interventions at the conference allowed us to begin to imagine what a world might look like if its violently normative horizons were creatively reconfigured.

In relation to this point, what made my experience at UE distinctive from attending other events was the admission of failure that marked its foundation and structure. The premise for the conference was that power and conflict are at the core of socio-environmental change, but that *existing knowledge and higher education structures are ill-equipped to address them*. This admission implicates us all, calling for humble reevaluations of our working contexts; a brave reexamination of our collective (disciplinary) histories; and a willingness to cross borders as part of active processes of political listening, before making what we might call political speech. For me, this ethos, together with the experience we made of it as we met to co-create the event, breathes the possibility of

university-as-commons: a project of intellectual emancipation already in-the-making, even as the hegemonic atmosphere of "publish-or-perish", tied in turn to the processes of privatization and neoliberal restructuring that are reshaping university structures and commitments, remain a real influence on our everyday lives.

Why did a pencil feel like the right instrument with which to reflect on my experience? For me, decolonising the politics of knowledge that dominates the way the world makes itself known to us is as much about rediscovering joy in the process as it is about actively witnessing violence in ways that make us feel uncomfortable enough to move toward change. I still had to write up my piece on a laptop to translate it into a form that I can share, but the process was different and it enlivened my day. The university-as-commons is made in the mix; on the margins between worlds; in the process of experimentally seeking ways to thrive that push back against alienation in all its forms. I have found that clues for this project are often found in the tactics that deepen and widen the possibility for affects like joy, enthusiasm and solidarity to catch us up, and push us together beyond resignation to atomism.

.My thanks to the organisers of UE – may we continue to open up such moments of conviviality and to widen the sense of "us" that is included in this conversation.