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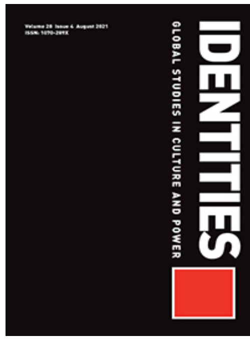

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ARTICLE

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Exploring 'festive commoning' in radical gatherings in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on immersive ethnographic fieldwork at three events in Scotland, all grounded in ecological sensibilities and focusing respectively on alternative medicine, music and reviving seasonal celebrations, this article illuminates aspects of what we call 'festive commoning'. We ask: how, and to what extent, were commons 'against and beyond' capital produced in these gatherings? We re-read a history of resistance to festive autonomy in this light, as a continuing struggle against capitalist enclosures of time, space, knowledge, history and being in the world. We argue that alternative grassroots gatherings can produce a 'festive commons' that resists such enclosures, including breaking down divisions between self and other, human and non-human beings. Such processes generate collective joy, and enliven the radical imagination. Experiencing festive commons is not only an aspect of the pleasure valued in some radical traditions, but also makes another world possible, even if only a temporary one.

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KEYWORDS Festive commons; commoning; radical imagination; collective joy; social reproduction

'This is NOT a festival, it is a gathering', a woman told me as we sat side by side around a fire. She was emphatic, and made the point several times. I[1] asked her what she meant by 'festival', but the conversation had already moved on, she didn't seem to feel she needed to explain. But I understood that, for her, the term 'festival' no longer means an autonomous, popular celebration, but is something commercial, organised for the purposes of making money, enclosed, with an infrastructure and a pre-established programme.

In this reading, in contrast to the mainstream of 'festival' commodified life, a gathering is a different form. At the one where I met this woman, people cooperatively create the environment for a solstice celebration that all comers can potentially join: no tickets, no entry barriers, no security, nothing

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for sale (except maybe some intoxicants, which are also liberally shared). It is not that there is no structure: the time in the calendar is obviously critical; the landscape in and around a 4,000 year old stone circle provides a focal point; and the movement of the sun (and its emergence from the clouds) shapes the rhythm of the celebrations and provides occasions for participatory music and dancing. A ramshackle 'bender' put up by whoever is there (although there are some who have expertise) with pieces of timber, rope and two large ripped pieces of canvas gives shelter from the wind and rain, and creates a space for music, conversation and relaxation during the short solstice night.

This and the other gatherings described in this article represented moments of breaking free from the constraints of 'normal life' in capitalist society that we call 'festive commoning'. We draw on definitions of commons as 'social systems' that combine 'the material and immaterial elements that constitute commons-wealth' and the 'social relations' built on agreed norms, which form the basis for 'doing in common' (De Angelis 2019, 212–13). This kind of doing actually *produces* commons, forms of life that are opposed to the logics of capital (Caffentzis and Federici 2014). As such, commoning generates the capacity for people to exist outside wage labour relations and capitalist consumption. The concept of the commons does not assume shared identity or culture, but is related to a collective aim of 'defending or producing a set of common resources' (Gilbert 2013, 165). Intrinsically evoking self-organisation, 'social experimentation' and 'conviviality and sharing', as a form of life, a form of study and a political project, the commons is crucial to addressing both democratic deficits and the ecological crisis (Brancaccio and Vercellone 2019, 10; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016).

Festive commoning, we argue, is part of a worldwide but heterogeneous tradition of festive forms that enabled escape from and resistance to capitalist enclosure of space and time, as well as breaching the division between human and non-human nature/beings and between self and other on which capitalism depends. In the present day, such practices of commoning subvert the norms of the individualised discipline of the current neoliberal capitalist order (Gilbert 2013). This radical history is one of struggles against enclosure and regulation of festive autonomy (Ehrenreich 2008; McKay 1996). Like other types of commoning, the festive form is under constant risk of being subsumed into capitalist logics, aided by the state, that seek to repurpose the festive in order to extract profit. In practice, then, whether commons can actually be produced is always contingent and uncertain. So the central question this article addresses is: how, and to what extent were commons 'against and beyond' capital produced in these gatherings? Through this exploration, we seek to contribute a new perspective to the growing literature on commoning.

Here we use ethnographic fieldwork in three alternative festive gatherings in Scotland to think through the concept of 'festive commons' and articulate aspects of this practice of commoning. By definition, this is an account that is not neutral, or disengaged, but immersed in the festive commons and part of the social relations it involves. Crucially, those social relations are entwined with the material conditions of their enactment: the gatherings we joined are consciously situated and related to local landscapes, histories and knowledges. They were also 'away from home', so not aspects of the potential for routine urban encounters that some recent studies have framed as 'commons' (notably, Amin 2012). How the tradition of 'festive commoning' plays out is always rooted in local, event-related and cultural idiosyncrasies – it entwines 'autonomy, community, life flow, and ecology' (De Angelis 2010, 956).

Our exploration of the gatherings identifies several interconnected features of festive commoning: first, it involves struggles against the enclosure and discipline of markets and wage labour, as it resists the occupation of time and space by capital, and produces relations to resources, knowledge, energies and beings that are grounded in values of commons. Second, these practices, including the cultural and social forms they involve and the knowledges shared, connect such moments to a radical history of commoning. Third, these different relations are based on nurturance, sociability and sharing, which imply openness to other beings, human and non-human, including the natural environment. Such practices assemble and form collectives that produce a commons of solidarity, collective joy and love. Music, dancing, conviviality and sharing of alternative knowledge all contribute to producing a sense of being in common that breaks down the boundaries and divisions pervading everyday life under capitalism.

For these reasons, festive commoning is critical to creating and sustaining radical community. The 'collective joy' (Ehrenreich 2008) it generates enlivens the 'radical imagination': a sense of possibility that fundamentally different ways of being and doing can exist in the world. It is a form of social reproduction based on love and reciprocity rather than forms of capitalist exchange (Ferguson 2014; Federici 2019), a 'world-making' that enacts and prefigures a different world. Gilbert argues that any possibility for radical politics depends on generating 'affective' collectives (Gilbert 2013), while Graeber asserts that radical imagination is critical to the formation of 'counterpower' in a context where alternatives to the hegemonic order often appear virtually absent (Graeber 2004, 36).

In what follows, we first present details of our fieldwork and how it was conducted. We then proceed to discuss two interconnected aspects of the festive commons drawing on our ethnography and the work of other authors to situate these in historical context. The first is the practice of festive commoning as a struggle against the enclosure of time and space by the

state and capital, which also speaks to the resources of commons produced by these practices. Secondly, we consider the forms of social relations produced through this commoning, which enact norms of sociability, nurturance and collective life that break down the divisions on which capitalism depends. Finally, we identify connections between the festive commons and radical politics, in the contexts we researched and beyond, and point out the value of considering festive commoning as a particular form of the commons.

Researching gatherings

A festive occasion is bewildering to research. Not only does it present an overwhelming dazzle of actual and potential experience (Frost 2016), but also in adopting the position of an observer, one is always already outside the collective character of that experience, looking in from the outside, a vantage point that may yield only banal impressions of something that can really only be understood from within. Both of us were outsiders to the gatherings we studied, in that we had not been to them before, although we each knew some people who went. By contrast, an 'insider' perspective may be primarily affective, and can only be expressed through often inadequate metaphors. Commoning, as a form of doing, implies that it is experienced through engagement in that process. Even in smaller gatherings, there is only a limited amount one person can be involved in, so you are always having to decide what to go to, and what to leave out. How many conversations can you take part in? And when people know you are a researcher, conversations (and connections) can dry up and disappear around you, an experience we both had during our fieldwork. At times, exhaustion or illness can make it impossible to continue, and dramatically change how you experience things – intense immersion takes stamina. The hybrid of researcher/participant also means attempting to interrogate and reflect on one's own role and experience. As there are two of us, this interrogative and reflective process was not exclusively internal but also involved a vivid and mutually enriching dialogue. Inevitably, then, this account is a bricolage, a holding together of contingent experience in relation to empirical and theoretical work by others. In this it takes inspiration from the 'DiY culture' that has emerged in various countercultural movements since the 1960s (McKay 1998).

We conducted participant ethnography at three gatherings in Scotland, each lasting a few days, focusing respectively on alternative medicine, music and marking seasonal turning points. We conducted our research through immersion in the setting, following our different inclinations and chance encounters, which evidently only represent a partial and limited view of each occasion, varying depending on the size and scale of each. We did not conduct any formal interviews, but engaged in many informal conversations,

and each wrote fieldnotes that included descriptions, impressions, snippets of conversations and feelings. All fieldnotes used below are from fieldwork in the spring and early summer of 2018, and are not specifically dated to avoid identifying the research locations. Our respective experiences generated two 'versions' of these gatherings, but we also talked about these and shared fieldnotes, ideas and analysis. We consciously chose not to identify which fieldnotes were written by which of us, as this was very much a joint project.

We each brought very different life experience to our research. Andreas grew up with traditional festivals in rural Bavaria which always felt like nurturing communities for him. He brought an enthusiasm, astonishment and curiosity for the multiple social facets of these events, for music, for learning, for the participants, for the organisational side, for what is happening and unfolding there in terms of content on the programme but also the interactions between people. Sophia has not been a regular festival goer, and had not been at such an immersive gathering for many years, so encountered the experiences initially from an 'outsider' perspective. An attractive feature for her was learning around plants, gardening and more sustaining and sustainable ways of living.

We set out to research festive gatherings that explicitly framed themselves as 'alternative' – connecting to or promoting non-mainstream ways of thinking and living, as well as alternative histories and knowledges. They were events of varying sizes, thematic focuses and organising principles. The first brought together for a weekend people interested in alternative 'people's medicine', both experienced practitioners and those relatively new to the subject. Participants came from parts of Scotland and from northern England, and included people of various ages, as well as some children. This was the second time such a gathering had been held, and putting it together had required significant organisational work by a dedicated group over many months. Based on a working farm that is seeking to be a hub for alternative ways of living on the land and includes a space that can be booked for events, it comprised two days of workshops and activities, some explicitly political in character, some more practical and others more experiential. It also involved sharing food – a wonderful team of cooks made vegan food for everyone – and evening music and dancing, as well as a bonfire. Most participants camped in a field on the farm, while a few stayed in B&Bs nearby. While many already knew each other, or were connected through existing online networks, a few had found the event by chance.

The second was a more conventional music festival that explicitly positions itself as creating connections to the land, traditions and music, both local and global. This four-day festival, which has been held in the same location since the 1990s, is also located on a privately-owned farm in a beautiful remote valley and is run as a community interest company, so does not seek to make a profit. But it does require tickets and there was a significant presence of

police (mainly focusing on drug interdiction) and some private security hired by the organisers. There is a bus service that picks up festival goers from major cities. The organisers' website and programme notes have an explicitly political framing connecting the event to the histories of resistance and the ecology of the region where it is held. Music is not only on stages or put on by DJs; other spaces encourage jamming and participatory music. There are workshops and activities on traditional crafts and lifeways, such as stone and wood carving and permaculture, and children's activities. Large numbers of volunteers get free tickets and food in return for running site services. Festival goers camp onsite in a motley collection of tents, RVs, caravans and campervans, although a few stayed in more luxurious accommodation: a well-heeled couple were overheard talking about the 'fancy hotel' they were staying in nearby. Many, if not most, of the people we encountered had been coming for years, and were not attracted by the line-up of performers, but by the overall ethos of the event, the place where it is held and the friends they encounter there. While there were many families, including children, and some older people at this event, the majority of the participants were young people.

The third – the gathering that was not a festival – was organised entirely cooperatively, without any particular prearrangements, apart from the experience of previous years. This was a solstice celebration at an impressive Neolithic site in a remote part of Scotland, and did not have a specific start or end time, although people typically stayed for two to four days. Most participants had been coming to the celebration for years, some from other parts of Scotland, some from nearby, and camped near the site in tents and campervans. Predominantly adults, there was a range of ages and a few children, and both tourists and travellers joined in at various points. While key parts of the celebrations were on the public land around the Neolithic site, a nearby piece of private land also formed part of the festive space. There was music and dancing, but the music was improvised and participatory with no amplification, and anyone was invited to pick up a variety of instruments that people had brought, mostly percussion, but also including a horn and guitars. A few players generated a central core to the music, particularly the pulsing bass of an inspired and indefatigable digeridoo player.

While this brief account of the three sites we studied has highlighted differences between them, in the next section we consider some commonalities as well by examining how struggles against enclosure of the festive commons manifested in each. We situate this in the context of historical struggles for festive autonomy.

Against enclosure of time and place

In an obvious sense, the gatherings we studied enabled breaking free from the times and spaces of capital in that all involved complete removal of people from their everyday routines and living for a few days out in the open air. For many participants we encountered, such events were moments in a customary festive calendar of 'life on the road' at which they gather with distant friends they may meet only at such gatherings. Indeed, we encountered some of the same people at more than one of these occasions, highlighting this aspect. One woman talked about wanting to contact a friend during the year in between, and realising that she did not have his phone number. He said, 'We know we'll meet at [the music festival]'. For such regulars, gatherings are key nodes in an annual cycle of alternative lives and livelihoods that provide opportunities for creating and cementing networks and sharing knowledge, generating and supporting alternative economies, and for an informal politics of deliberation around the norms, values and activities of these alternative communities.

The immersive abandon of festive gatherings operated in an alternative temporality, with 'no deadlines, no schedules, no requirements, spontaneous encounters, relaxing and yet rich in impressions' where 'the linearity of the time almost disappears', as we recorded in our fieldnotes. There is time to explore: a frequently heard invitation was 'Let's go for a wander'. The 'wander' could be movement and change, both spatially and experientially. It precipitates talk and reflection, times of motion and stillness, and the possibility of meeting other wanderers, or encountering something unexpected (fieldnotes, music festival). Even in the more structured setting of the alternative medicine event, conviviality was seen as essential, 'where minds and bodies can connect and be close in a very undemanding way' (fieldnote, alternative medicine gathering). Organisers felt that music, dancing, good nutritious food, laughter and celebration contributed to creating a space where people could let go of tensions and worries from their daily life, as well as difficult feelings that some of the workshops might have generated, such as complex experiences of class and gender.

The recapturing of time and space in these gatherings connects to a history of struggles to preserve autonomous festive commons in the face of efforts of state, religious and capitalist authorities to eliminate, co-opt or control them. In 15th century Europe – now seen as a 'sort of Golden Age of the commons' as a form (Brancaccio and Vercellone 2019, 701) – around three months-worth of any year was feast days, times when people were free of requirements for their labour. During that period, celebrations also often liberated people from the duty of deference to their superiors, and involved ridiculing authority, of the church and of kings, lords and grandees, as well as mocking and inverting social conventions (Bakhtin 1984).

During the rise of capitalism, the regulatory powers of the state and the church were systematically deployed to constrain and even eliminate the popular festive commons, involving restrictions on the spaces, times and manner of festive life (Ehrenreich 2008; Thompson 2010). In terms of time, efforts went into disciplining and increasing labour time, with holidays and festivals seen as wasteful and unproductive. Enclosure of common lands and exclusion of festivities from crown and church properties decreased the space available for autonomous festivities, and went along with prohibition of specific activities seen as dangerous. In settler colonial orders, ruling powers made great efforts to eliminate festive practices to 'civilise' and control indigenous peoples (see for example, Federici 2004; Ehrenreich 2008; Estes 2019).

Historically, the festive commons could be a potent mix of radical rejection of hierarchy, political resistance and unrestrained dance and music (Bakhtin 1984; Ehrenreich 2008; Thompson 2010). The combination of celebration, inversion, intoxication and occupation of physical space did, at times, provide grounds for actual insurrection; carnival has been a ground for organising uprisings, including revolution and slave revolts. In Scotland, acts of resistance to enclosures was sometimes planned at local fairs (Devine 2018). Festivities among indigenous peoples could be as much political as celebratory; for example, as well as feasting, music and gift giving, the 'potlatch' of the peoples of the northwest Pacific coast of the Americas involved consensus building and collective deliberation (McDonald 1995), while the rapid spread of the Lakota Ghost Dance in the 1880s represented 'a new political movement … promising Indigenous rebirth' (Estes 2019, 122).

More recently, similar dynamics can be seen in the history of 'countercultural' struggles that variously connect to political projects (McKay 1996; Gilbert 2013). Actions to enclose and constrain autonomous festivities have continued into the present, as a combination of efforts to protect private property and prevent use of public space for such purposes, along with attacks on manifestations of alternative ways of life, such as squatting and travelling. In the UK, George McKay has documented the intertwining of celebration and protest in waves of counter-cultural activities from the 1970s until the 1990s, with bans on free festivals in specific locations, such as Stonehenge; limits on parking for convoys of travellers, whether traditional or 'new age'; and the prohibition on 'repetitive beats' of sound systems at raves, as well as other elements of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 (McKay 1996). These regulatory efforts went along with extensive deployment of police and violence to enforce them.

This trend has continued in recent decades with the commodification and privatisation of festivals, which are now seen as a source of revenue for cities and regions in the UK and beyond, spawning a whole academic field of festival management studies (see for example Carlsen, Getz, and Andersson

2010). In the UK, cities strapped for cash after years of austerity profit from the temporary privatisation of urban public spaces, whether through outright enclosure in the form of paid for festivals in public parks in London (Hancox 2019) or ceding regulatory control of public thoroughfares to private companies, as is done in parts of Edinburgh during the Fringe. Intersecting logics of urban control and commodification are not only a feature of the UK (Bird 2016). Creating barriers and tickets for what were formerly free events may also be justified in terms of 'health and safety', as has been the case with the 'reinvented tradition' of equinox fire festivals in Edinburgh from 2018 (Tinsley 2017). What some scholars have termed a 'festivalisation' of culture (Taylor and Bennett 2014) has not meant increased autonomy within such events, or accessibility of all to them.

The latest iterations of such efforts of state and capital to limit the space and time of festive commons were one of the themes of explicit political discussion at these gatherings. Solstice celebrants were vehemently opposed to possible plans for the Neolithic site where they gathered to be enclosed as a tickets-only heritage venue, which could result in ending free access to a place they viewed as a commons, a struggle reminiscent of the banning of free festivals as Stonehenge in the 1980s (McKay 1996).

Long-time regulars at the music festival complained about how the skyrocketing costs of 'health and safety' meant increasing burdens on organisers (challenging the affordability and thus openness of the event). As well as costs of policing and ambulance services, licencing requirements for festival organisers can require the engagement of specialised lawyers. The sense that health and safety regimes were both disproportionate and missed the point was widely shared, as the following fieldnote sketches out:

> Actual harms/risks visible at [the first aid tent at the music festival]: sunstroke, cuts, lots of ankle sprains/injuries (one broken ankle is an ambulance case), anxiety, insect bites, a small child with fever, headaches. Some become 'regulars'—occasionally annoyingly so. At [the 'welfare' tent for people whose level of intoxication becomes problematic], the passed out drunks and people on bad trips flop onto inflatable mattresses, but no one is fighting (except in words).' (fieldnote, music festival)

At the music festival, some asserted the significant increase in policing in recent years had made the environment less safe, whether for those imbibing intoxicants or in provoking aggression in contexts which would previously have been dealt with by participants themselves. For example, participants told of a police officer aggressively trying to take a small child away from an inebriated man. They felt the child was not at risk; the man was peaceable and had not made any trouble. In their assessment, the potential for violence was created by the policeman's over-reaction. Distrust of police on such occasions is historical: there is a documented history of excessive police

violence against peaceful festive commoners, protesters and travellers (see for McKay 1996, 1998). At the solstice gathering, one older participant recalled being attacked by police at free festivals in the 1970s, and having all his belongings destroyed when he was evicted from a woodland where he was living in a home-made tipi.

This man's story not only passed on knowledge of radical history, but also evokes the 'DiY culture' of earlier forms of festive commoning. A label adopted by counter-cultural movements in the 1990s, 'DiY' denotes an ethos of 'doing something' rather than just complaining or protesting, and a focus on fashioning the self, manifested in both individual self-care and collective self-organisation (McKay 1998). We suggest that DiY is evocative of commoning, in that it implies *making* different worlds; developing and sharing the knowledge to do so; and learning such skills in the process. This was visible in the structures and decorations at gatherings, the vehicles and tents erected, forms of knowledge and craft being shared, as well as participants' costuming.

Workshops and activities around the 'people's medicine' as an alternative to the health status quo at the alternative medicine gathering also brought together history and the knowledge commons, through the practice of working with plant-based medicine. Cuts to tertiary education programmes mean that few degree courses in alternative medicine still exist in the UK, so opportunities to share and recuperate knowledges 'from below' were a critical element of the commoning at this gathering. Resisting the privatisation and enclosure of grassroots knowledge and resources (Federici 2019) was both a theme of conversation and an aim of the event. Specific concerns were raised about how restrictive official regulation of alternative remedies and big pharma's takeover of sales of herbal remedies recognised in biomedicine, such as cannabinol, were affecting the practice of alternative medicine.

Explicit resistance to threats of enclosure is complicated by the fact that in two of our three fieldsites, festive gatherings were possible due to their presence on privately owned farms, forms of life that are always already part of property-related restrictions on the commons. In a real sense, entry to these sites was contingent on and limited by their designation as private property. Earlier counter-cultural celebrations documented by McKay also reveal such tensions over the possibility of festive commons on lands designated as public vs. those that are privately owned (McKay 1996). However, some have argued that such legal categories inherent to capitalism may be less relevant than considering whether and in what ways commons is produced in commoning processes (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). In the next section, we explore this question of the openness of festive commons through an examination of the forms of social relations involved.

Practices of care-full commoning

One of the notable features of the gatherings we studied was an ecological sensibility based on connection to the earth, of being together on 'our spaceship', as one participant put it. This included enjoyment and appreciation of the natural environments of each location – which in themselves were a draw for participants – as well as attention to living lightly by minimising the leaving of waste around the sites. This ethos evokes several ways these events produced commons: openness to the other, both human and non-human beings and nature; practices of care and nurturance; and the formation of collectives that through these orientations produce solidarity and collective joy.

All the gatherings we studied aspired, in some sense, to be open to all; in the case of the two gatherings that required tickets, organisers had a sliding scale that allowed the unwaged to pay less, or in the case of the alternative medicine event, nothing at all. Many volunteers at the music festival work and get free food at the music festival in return for a far from onerous job (except when it pours with rain . . . and this is expected in Scotland) that allows them to attend the event.

Evidently such an aspiration to openness may conceal invisible barriers for some, as pre-existing forms of social relations re-inscribe hierarchies and exclusions. This was a concern for the organisers of the alternative medicine event. In their welcome for the weekend gathering, they articulated explicit parameters for creating an inclusive, welcoming and safe space for everyone. The gathering included workshops on patriarchy, social class and the 'hostile environment' for immigrants and refugees. These workshops were run by people who engage with such concerns in how they practice alternative medicine. They also explained how they envisaged the gathering as 'radical': first, in the sense of grounding, as literal roots that connect to the earth; and second, in that they sought to get to the root causes of problems in society in order to deal with social injustice. Other workshops aimed to enable connections between the human and the plant world, to see plants as friends and to change our relationship with nature. For example, one workshop leader told participants that while we are taught to see species like fungi as inherently risky and dangerous, learning about their properties enables new relations of respect, and provides access to sources of health and well-being. A fieldnote reflects on these sensibilities:

> The spreading tree remembers more gatherings than we can recall, more primrose springs, which hold the key to summer nights. The tree is a sanctuary, living with mosses, lichens, shading ferns at its roots, communicating with the passing river, the surrounding plants, its branches shelter nests, its bark is home to fungi and insects. Could we humans learn again to listen and hear the sighs, chatter and laughter across species boundaries? To take only what we need,

> and not want any more, as full as the tree with the collective joys and sorrows of being together, now, before, and tomorrow? (fieldnote, alternative medicine gathering)

Forms of human coexistence could also be observed at all the gatherings. McKay's account of late twentieth century celebrations describes how the mingling of counter-cultural 'tribes' – notably punks and hippies in the 1970s and 1980s – could be a source of conflict, but also politically productive in bringing together musics and movements of different generations and orientations (McKay 1996). In the Scottish gatherings, rather than outright tensions, odd juxtapositions emerged. By the bonfire at the alternative medicine gathering, while chatting to an older man with long grey hair and beard, a woman with pink hair and multiple piercings complained about 'bloody hippies', but the man did not appear to feel this epithet was directed at him. Gender ambiguity and fluidity (in dress and as a politics) was counterposed to wild-man masculinity (an example being the bagpiper described below, who wore only a kilt and an unbuttoned waistcoast, despite the cold wind), the latter not an articulated position but a performance. At the solstice encampment, teenagers were the only ones listening to music on digital devices, but they also joined in with the very low-tech participatory music. Based on conversations we had, regulars of the music festival seemed to have a different experience than young partygoers who just came for the weekend, and the various music venues there generated a huge variety of sounds, from all acoustic trad to techno. Yet divisions were not fixed. The combination of music, place/landscape and people who took on roles as orchestrators could dissolve divisions among people. A circle dance is an example:

> Some take the initiative to go to the stones, and musicians begin to play. A digeridoo, drums, bodhrans provide a rhythmic beat, other instruments punctuate, a single horn, a bell bowl. A wild-man bagpiper joins. As the pulse of the music intensifies, a woman in bright colours with flowers in her blonde & pink hair works to join us into a circle on the uneven ground ... Children, adults, dogs, old, young, all kinds: hippies, tourists, an Asian woman with two children. We circle, and the musicians circle the music, the bagpiper sometimes inside, sometimes outside the circle. Sometimes the circle of dancers breaks, but it is quickly reconnected. Circling around, arms stretched to encompass the space, a sense of being exactly there, in the moment, without thought, only the rhythm in the body, running along the connected circle, around the stones ... (fieldnote, solstice celebration)

Here, dance and music as forms of social relations produce commons. This circle dance connects a heterogeneous group of people to the motions of the earth, the seasons, the landscape and to similar gatherings over thousands of years. But dancing also establishes and nurtures ties between the people and welcomes them into the group.

Forms of order amid apparent chaos and heterogeneity emerged in unstructured engagements with music and dancing too. Late one night at the music festival a band played in a tent with a bar. The place was packed, everyone dancing exuberantly, with abandon, while at the same time, others consumed drinks, and moved from one spot to another, including a couple of dogs. But no aggravation, no irritation was apparent. Somehow the motley crew could synchronise their movements sufficiently to make space for everyone – which felt something like being part of a shoal of fish. 'Drifting in a sea whereby currents are formed by music and lights, the fantastic environment and the people. Floating in this sea does not mean to be alone – quite the contrary – it is a connectedness and immersion with the space/environment and it is easier to bump into one another, talk, hug etc'. (fieldnote, music festival)

This points to how ecstatic festivities can generate 'collective joy' through synchrony of bodies, beings and purposes, potentially forming a basis for solidarity and cooperation (Ehrenreich 2008). Weir's discussion of dancing as a practice of 'collective love as public freedom' is instructive (Weir 2017, 19). She describes how round dances initiated by indigenous activists as forms of protest in the 'Idle no More' movement in Canada, and also joined by non-indigenous supporters, were used in 'creating and sustaining solidarity to support resistance to colonization' (Weir 2017, 31). But the collective assembled in such rituals is not a given – this depends on the *orientation* of the dance. The circle dances used in these protests were traditionally for mourning rituals, connecting dancers with 'all their relations', dead and alive, human and non-human, and thus open to all kinds of others (Weir 2017, 31). Ferguson makes a similar distinction between practices of affective solidarity that promote 'power-over relations' and those that generate 'power-with relations', with the latter being part of 'a common project to "take back" or recreate "the commons"', (Ferguson 2014, 257).

One of the most distinctive aspects of all the gatherings we studied was how the usual barriers of (particularly urban) anonymous sociality were immediately lowered on the sites, and people found it easier to talk to those previously unknown. This shift to a different kind of sociability seemed to occur almost automatically, and without effort, highlighting the emergent character of social norms in festive commoning. '[T]he space was extremely friendly and conveyed a feeling of family, solidarity and inclusiveness' (fieldnote, alternative medicine gathering). There was definitely more eye contact, and a willingness to engage, to share (space, food, drinks etc.), and to care (for those suffering ill-effects of intoxicants, for example). Exceptions to this norm of sociability (behaviour that might seem unremarkable in other settings) seemed quite striking. One such incident is described below.

> Most people are very open to initiating conversations and there is an ethos of sharing space—e.g. in relative lack of litter (although it gets worse on the last day). The one exception I encounter: on the second evening, I go into the yurt where they have acoustic music. A board outside says it is somewhere to get warm—there is a stove—and I am cold. Two fiddlers, and two or more guitarists. There are people sitting around the sides on folding chairs and some on benches made of planks. Just inside the door there is an empty folding chair next to a couple both seated in similar chairs. I stand there, thinking about sitting down, and before I can do so, the man (who's nearest to me) folds up the chair and puts it in between the two of them to prevent me from sitting on it. Really! (fieldnote, music festival)

This incident, while minor, shows how for each person the specific concatenation of encounters at such a gathering is different, and the sense of being part of a collective is variable, contingent and uncertain. Pre-formed groups did establish their own particular spaces, including couples and families, particularly so in the music festival, where there were far more people than at the other two events. Barriers to festive commoning were as much affective as physical, however.

One might imagine that such an immersive experience of collective life could be disorienting and exhausting. But the intensity was actually profoundly sustaining and generative (see also the accounts in O'Grady 2017). In the review session at the end of the alternative medicine gathering, there were bright faces and an air of excitement about the new connections and possibilities encounters had opened up. While in every case, the end of a gathering means that the commons that has been produced actually disappears (as much of it is provisional and put together for the occasion), something ineffable has been created. 'On the way home, I feel a looseness and freedom in my body that I haven't felt for some time, as if accumulated knots dissipated somewhere. This even though I really haven't slept enough for days. The sun I've soaked in warms me and recalls the open spaces and the pleasures of the river. The feeling lasts for a while after I get back'. (fieldnote, music festival)

Return to 'normal' urban sociality provided a stark contrast to the commons of the music festival. The afternoon of the day I returned was drenched in sunshine, and a city park was full of groups of people enjoying the day, eating, playing with children and dogs. They all congregated in their little groups, with gaps between each, as if on separate spatial islands. As I walked by with my dog, no one looked at me, the absence of the openness of the festival seemed very striking. Having just experienced a very different environment, despite this noticing, I still found I easily slipped into the norm of urban anonymity, and felt no inclination to breach these rules.

The analysis above points to considering enclosure in a more affective, psychic sense. In the last century, a particular conception of the individual as bounded, autonomous and rational has become dominant in social science,

reflecting a similar trajectory to the enclosure of time and space discussed above. This bounding has been a project linked to the fear of the crowd, of the contagion of unrest and uncontrolled collective emotion, as a will to resist suggestibility was seen as an essential part of the training for civilised life (Blackman 2012; Gilbert 2013). This training was *intended* to prompt fear of attunement to others, human and non-human, that can emerge through a process of experiencing being 'one yet many' (Blackman 2012), of becoming a collective body. Thus the enclosure of the physical commons went along with the elimination of a sense of belonging to a collective, not just individual, mind and body. Medieval festivals, Bakhtin argues, incorporated a sense of a collective body, a body in the world, living, defaecating, feasting, copulating, dying (Bakhtin 1984).

We argue that festive commoning can create an analogous openness to being part of a collective body. Accounts that concentrate on the collective in festive events – not reducible to individual identities, states and experiences – tend to focus on specific features that enable such an experience, for example music and listening (Duffy 2014) and dancing outdoors (O'Grady 2017). Our focus on the production of festive commons seeks a more holistic approach to the subject, but is thus inevitably impressionistic and contingent.

Conclusion

As a form of 'being-with', the kind of alternative festive grassroots gatherings described here can generate a sense of joy and 'collective love' that produces an open, solidary commons (Weir 2017, 22). As Weir puts it: '[T]he experience of freedom in the practice of *communitas*, or collective love … involves the overturning of hierarchies and the practice of equality among heterogeneous participants, inclusive of all in the solidarity of a "we" that supports the expression of individuality and diversity. It is an embodied freedom, a freedom of bodies and pleasures that resists the patriarchal social order. I would argue that it is this experience of freedom in love that underlies solidarity' (Weir 2017, 22). Produced through relations with others, human and non-human, the 'joyous affect' generated in such gatherings can actually 'increase the potential power of bodies' (Gilbert 2013, 147), meeting a felt need for relational and embodied experiences of being alive and the collective joy these can generate (Federici 2019). While the collectives formed may be contingent and ephemeral, they can contribute to the emergence of radical democratic practices as they draw on the 'creative potential inherent in social relations which … resist the neoliberal imposition of an individualising, commodifying "grid" upon those relations' (Gilbert 2013, 161) If we see capitalism as a 'social force and field of social relations', festive commoning

may be considered as a 'value struggle' that enables us to experience forms of social reproduction 'against and beyond' such capitalist relations (De Angelis 2010, 956, 968).

Evidently, it is not merely the fact of a festive gathering that generates a potential for radical democratic politics; a certain 'strategic orientation' matters greatly (Gilbert 2013, 191). The gatherings we studied were not part of any explicit political strategy, but they demonstrate a political orientation towards 'commoning' in several ways: their positioning in opposition to commodified 'festivals', connecting to a radical history of festive commons; their resistance to various forms of enclosure; the ways the practices involved revive and circulate knowledges from below; and their aspiration, however imperfect, to enact forms of equality and openness in relation to human and non-human others, which is particularly significant in a context of ecological emergency and rising xenophobia. As practices of commoning, gatherings can reconnect those who engage in them to a 'social flow of doing' that breaks away from the profound alienation capitalism produces (Holloway 2010, 38–39). Festive commons can thus be a fertile soil for radical politics, as they enable envisioning a different world, through engaging in alternative practices and cultivating knowledges from below. Certainly not everyone who participates experiences these events in this way, so this potential is always contingent and uncertain.

Such occasions can be considered as inheritors of the tradition of 'communal luxury' emerging from the 1871 Paris Commune. In its many, varied iterations, this tradition sees joy, pleasure and beauty that all can participate in enjoying and creating as central to the common life in a society that aspires to being radically egalitarian and democratic (Ross 2015). Communal luxury is not peripheral to the politics of the commons – the experience of collective love and joy may contribute to enabling the kinds of collectives that make radical political movements possible. Hennessy points out that 'critical consciousness is leavened with ineffable affective attachments and identifications ... [that can] motivate action' (Hennessy 2014, 274).

The generative power of the festive commons can appear even in conditions of repression and all-out war. Arundhati Roy describes how Naxalite guerrillas, pursued by the Indian army, stage a wild festive gathering lasting a whole day and night with their local supporters in the jungle, despite the risk of capture, and the torture and death that inevitably means for the fighters. She writes: 'Happiness is taken very seriously here, in the Dandakaranya forest. People will walk for miles, for days together to feast and sing, to put feathers in their turbans and flowers in their hair, to put their arms around each other and drink *mahua* and dance through the night. No one sings or dances alone. This, more than anything else, signals their defiance towards a civilization that seeks to annihilate them' (Roy 2012, 116–17).

While the gatherings we discuss here are not related to a life-and-death struggle, the desire they reflect for *communitas* is about much more than just 'leisure'. As aspects of broader movements to reclaim and protect the commons, they reveal the generative and sustaining potential of festive commoning as a practice that resists enclosure and may reach across divides, including between human and non-human beings and nature. Experiencing such a different world is not only an aspect of the pleasure and fun valued in some radical traditions (Graeber 2004), but also demonstrates that there *are* alternatives to the status quo.

Note

1. Where the first person is used in this article, this refers to the first author, Sophia Woodman.

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