



The Commons: A Gathering: Thursday 31 March 2022, at The MERL, Reading. UK.

List of Contributors:

Carmen Wong:



Carmen Wong/oho_co is an artist-researcher, recovering academic with student debt, and curiously hungry migrant. Their practice often experiments with deep listening, somatic practice, and food for convivial collectivism. They are currently a tentative resident in SW UK where they co-animate JarSquad, a creative social enterprise growing a solidarity economy in the communal making of jam and preserved foods which cannot be transacted with money. They also train in nonviolent communication, and grounds-keep Care-as-Commons, a reading/doing group where artists, researchers, and carers explore care as commoning practice to build solidarities in art, food, economy and our environment. @oho_co @wearejarsquad @carecommons

Digestif: Experiments in Mutual Sounding

Informed by a triage of Miki Kashtan's descriptions of flow and deaccumulation in the gift economy, Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*, and Silvia Federici's *Reenchanting the World*, Carmen will propose a vocalization experiment to feel out how we story what we value/extract, what our ideas and languaging around giving and receiving sound like for each of us, and how to move into sounding our needs out loud.

JC Niala:



Image credit: ©Fig

JC Niala is a writer, WW1 historian and doctoral researcher at St. Catherine's College, University of Oxford. Her research focuses on urban gardening and explores the ways in which our imaginations of nature affect how we treat it. JC has performed her poetry in various settings including allotments in London as part of a Poetry School/ London Parks & Gardens Trust Residency. Her artist's journal of poetry *Portal* was published by Fig in March 2022. Her non-fiction book *A Loveliness of Ladybirds* explores colonial history, urban allotments and natural history all through her own life in Kenya and the UK. Shortlisted for Canongate's Nan Shepherd Prize in 2019, the book will be published by Little Toller in November 2022. Her project Plant an Orchestra sources and aims to plant & tend 700 Mpingo (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*) trees that are used to make clarinets.

Common resources, plural practices:

JC will share some of her work before inviting you through a series of prompts to think and write about 'common participation'. Worldwide environmental challenges continue to demonstrate that the idea of independence is impossible. At the same time, ancient wisdoms are being revived. One such understanding is the importance of plurality. Even though co-operation is critical – different ways of being are just as necessary. JC will use the model of an allotment site as a jumping off point. Allotment sites are spaces in which the common resource of land is worked in a myriad different way to create a loose and powerfully connected community. It is a system which has counteracted the vicissitudes of life by becoming more effective during times of crisis. It is a practice which simultaneously integrates newcomers and sustains families through generations. It is at once old and new. Allotment sites are also one of the results of the enclosure of the commons. Please bring along something to write on and with and a willingness to share your unique contribution to the common imagination.

Annabel Edwards & Leah Gordon



Writer and researcher, Annabel Edwards (born Cheshire), has worked in publishing, journalism, and on various art projects. She and Leah previously worked together, documenting the free festival scene in the 1990s, when Annabel was commissioned to write a book about New Age Travellers.

Leah Gordon (born Ellesmere Port, UK) is an artist, curator, and writer. Her work explores the intertwined and intersectional histories of the Caribbean plantation system, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Enclosure Acts and the creation of the British working-class. In the 1980's she wrote lyrics, sang, and played for a feminist folk punk band. Gordon's film and photographic work has been exhibited internationally.

Monument to the Vanquished (after Albrecht Dürer)

Leah Gordon & Annabel Edwards will discuss their multi-faceted exploration of the, oft overlooked, but epoch-changing 'Enclosure Acts'. The enclosure acts describe the legal process through which common rights over land were terminated and the common land converted to the exclusive property and use of a landowner. This project starts from a belief that a deeper understanding of the enclosure acts, along with the industrial revolution and the American and Caribbean plantation system, is vital to having a critical understanding of the systems and politics that will inhabit now.

They will discuss PART I | THE COMMONERS, how they made contact with people that still had common rights over land, discovered how they exercise these rights, photographed commoners in the common lands and interviewed them to hear more about their personal stories and commoners' status. These stories behind the remaining commons and commoners that held the varied rights presented as an excellent mechanism for understanding the historic legacy of the Enclosure Acts.

Leah will discuss the use of aesthetics of the images which were taken on an analogue medium format camera with b+w film and subsequently hand-tinted using traditional photographic dyes and how she used this process to enliven the landscapes, through colour, with a form of magical realism to the uncanny nature of the land. This served to highlight a lost more spiritual and mystical, often matriarchal and less mercantile, connection to the land. It is the breaking of this relationship which Italian feminist historian, Silvia Federici, argues was central to the capitalist expansion of which the Enclosure Act was a dominant apparatus.

They will also introduce their plans for PART II | URBAN VAGABONDS, PART III | RURAL REBELS & PART IV | MONUMENT TO THE VANQUISHED.

Karl Fitzgerald



Karl Fitzgerald is an economist and works as the Director of Advocacy at Prosper Australia, an NGO celebrating their 130th year of operation. He is the author of many papers on a fairer way to share the global commons, including the Speculative Vacancies report into Melbourne's empty housing and the Total Resource Rents of Australia. He is an executive director for the Global Empty Homes Network, a global alliance of policy experts and campaigners concerned at the impact of commodification on our communities. He produced and co-directed the Real Estate 4 Ransom documentary.

Why is Location, Location Revered as a Real Estate Strategy but Ignored in Economics?

Karl will give an introductory speech on the importance of protecting our commons by economic means. The earth urgently needs a system to slow down the economic framework so that land, housing and natural monopolies rebalance back towards their earning potential, rather than the hyper-profiteering speculators have enjoyed in recent decades. A giant renewable resource which sits at the heart of society has been ignored, leading to great profit for some alongside a lifetime of precarity for others. Tiny rays of hope are appearing around the planet, with the UK leading on a number of fronts. He and his radical crosstitch partner, Rayna are working towards a permaculture inspired Community Land Trust at their 27 acre farm, Windfall Commons.

Michael Smythe:

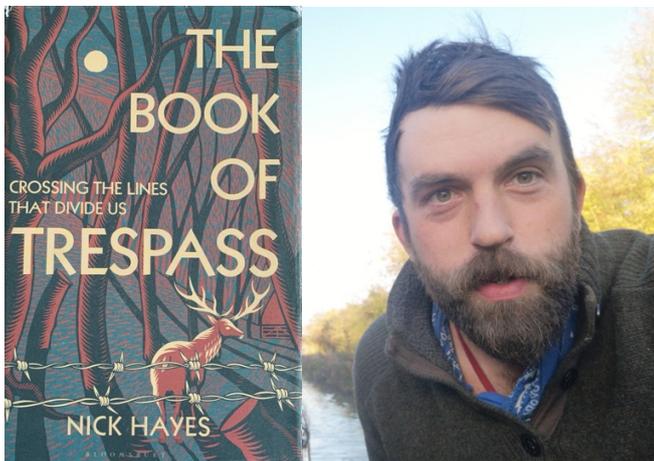


Michael Smythe is an artist, urban farmer and creative director of Nomad Projects, an independent arts foundation that develops experimental projects across digital and location-specific spaces. Nomad Projects critically engages with issues surrounding environmental and social equality within the urban landscape. Current projects includes Phytology, an urban physic garden and research institute in Bethnal Green (East London), Urban Mind a global research project investigating the relationship between the landscape and mental health and Mobile Apothecary, a herbal medicine dispensary providing free healthcare to individuals and communities with limited access to accommodation and quality health care.

Creative Ecologies & Tactical Resistance in the Anthropocene

How can we diversify creative practices in response to current ecological and social challenges? Creative Ecologies & Tactical Resistance in the Anthropocene will explore strategies for individuals and communities to reshape the urban environment to prioritise environmental and social justice. We will discuss interspecies collaboration, economics and community activism referencing recent projects such as Phytology, Urban Mind and the Mobile Apothecary.

Nick Hayes



Nick Hayes is an illustrator, print maker and author of *The Book of Trespass*, which tells the story of how the English were divorced from nature via the barbed wire of exclusive ownership. He is co-founder of the Right to Roam campaign, which seeks to redress this injustice, at least in part, by introducing rights of access that supersede the right of large estates to exclude to public from the nature they need so badly.

The Modern Commons

Nick will talk about the modern commons, and how indigenous societies can inform our new approach to communities interacting with nature.

Sheila Ghelani:



Image credit: John Hunter

Sheila Ghelani is an artist of Indian/English mixed heritage, whose solo and collaborative performances, social art works, installations, texts and videos seek to illuminate and make visible the connections between race, ecology, science, history and the present day. Since 1995 her attentive, detailed and care 'full' practice has been cross-pollinating ideas, materials, people and places in order to un-settle dominant narratives and make space for those that are (or that which is) in-between, on the edge, in the middle, at the border. Sheila is also part of Land Body Ecologies the fourth collaborative residency group in Wellcome Collection's Hub since 2014. www.sheilaghelani.co.uk @sheilaghelani

Rambles with Nature to Common Salt:

Sheila will talk about her *Rambles with Nature* series - a body of collaborative art-works begun in 2013 - and trace a line through to *Common Salt* her 'show and tell' performance made with fellow collaborator artist Sue Palmer. Made for small audiences gathered around a table, *Common Salt* was shown at The MERL in January 2019 as part of a tour to many other museums, libraries and arts venues including Museum of London Docklands, Wellcome Collection, bside festival, Somerset libraries, Manchester Library and Royal Museums Greenwich funded by Arts Council England. The performance explores the colonial, geographical and natural history of England and India, from the first Enclosure Act and the start of the East India Company in the 1600s, to 21st century narratives of trade, empire and memory. A book about the project was published in July 2021 in partnership with the Live Art Development Agency. It documents and explores *Common Salt*, placing the performance text, images and reflections from both artists alongside writings from invited guests including Deepa Bhashti, Jane Trowell, Alice Procter and Alan Read.

To book go to: <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/event/the-commons-a-gathering/>

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