“The mixed potential of salvage commoning: Crisis and commoning practices in Washington D.C. and New York City”

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Abstract

This paper considers how and to what ends commoning practices can take shape in direct response to the specters and/or realities of eroding resources (we focus especially on public resources) within iterations of what we term “salvage commoning”. We show how, in such contexts, commoning practices may potentially alleviate but also potentially (re)produce inequities, exclusions, and resource retractions. To illustrate, we draw upon two examples: parent-teacher organizations in Washington, DC, and block associations in New York City. In both instances, people have cooperatively built new relations, coordinated voluntary labor, and stewarded resources in connection with specific commons (public schools and urban spaces) threatened by disinvestment and crisis. We show how troubling alignments and exclusions can emerge under these conditions, suggesting critical questions about the starkly mixed potential of salvage commoning—especially in the face of ongoing and emerging crises in which such orientations are likely to become increasingly prevalent.

Keywords: block associations, commons, commoning practices, crisis, parent teacher organizations, salvage, social reproduction

This paper explicates the contours of what we term "salvage commoning," or, commoning undertaken in response to threats or erosions to existing resources. While the focus here is on commoning practices which emerge to confront urban public disinvestments in particular, our arguments also resonate with other commons contexts. Echoing recent critical arguments (e.g. Berlant 2016, Enright and Rossi 2018), we call attention to commoning practices which might function to confront or overcome the specific crisis conditions which may have necessitated them, but might also—and even at the same time—exacerbate such conditions across broader geographies and temporalities. Resolution one way or another, we argue, hinges less on universal qualities or ideals ascribable to commoning in itself than on conditions and contexts negotiated in commoning practice.

We unpack these arguments in conversation with two examples: parent teacher organizations (PTOs) in Washington, D.C., and block associations (BAs) in New York City.[1] Both examples reveal different aspects of what is at stake in our conceptualization of "salvage commoning," especially the degree to which commoning practices can (re)produce some forms of exclusion and inequality even while ostensibly seeking to redress others—a danger that has been suggested in some commons theorizing while sitting uneasily alongside the emancipatory aspirations hailed within other variants of that theorizing. The best of the commons concept holds out the prospect that people may be able to realize liberatory relations and reshape material and social (re)production by deliberatively stewarding, creating, and distributing collective resources together even and perhaps especially under conditions of crisis. Whether explicitly named as commons (as is the case in many social movements, an ever growing critical scholarly literature, and even within entrepreneurial, civic, and educational initiatives) or whether in popular imagination by some other name (in often competing imaginations of collective resources to be taken back, reclaimed, differently distributed, or repaired) notions of the common or commons connote what are often conceived of as noble and righteous pursuits—collectively and democratically achieved and therefore, it is often tacitly presumed, benevolent and just ways of confronting problems and meeting needs. Nevertheless, we argue, it cannot be assumed that actually-existing commoning practices will generate equity and mutual thriving rather than exclusion and further inequity in the face of duress. Ongoing and emerging eco-social and political-economic crises will only heighten the need to seriously grapple with these mixed potentials.

Situating a commoning-structural nexus

In line with recent contributions to the literature on commons and commoning (e.g., Dardot and Laval 2019, De Angelis 2017) we understand commons to entail the collective activity of people working together to maintain or channel particular resources by instituting shared practices and protocols—activity Linebaugh (2008) calls "commoning"—just as much as actual resources themselves. While understood as mutually constitutive, the distinction here is between, on the one hand, forms of commonwealth or consolidated resources held in common, and, on the other hand, commoning practices or ways of cooperating and acting together. Without disregarding commons as resources, this paper is especially attuned to commoning practices. These could include, for instance, practices of cultivation, creation, stewardship, care, circulation, mimesis, and reproduction in relation to all manner of common resources including those natural and material, cultural or abstract, technological and accrued in technique, and more. In this paper we are particularly interested in urban fiscal, spatial,

public, and place-based commons and commoning and the ways in which commoning practices consolidated under duress in these contexts can link up to broader formations of urban political economy, social (re)production, and (in)equity.

Understood in the two-fold terms outlined above, what we are calling salvage commoning occurs in situations where access to or assets held within commons as resources are seemingly under threat to a degree that different, new, and/or improvised forms of commons practice and labor emerge in attempts to salvage—recover, repair, make up for, and/or perhaps improve—something of what is perceived as under threat or being lost. Our uptake of 'salvage' here echoes Berlant (2016) and Tsing (2015), who differently argue that such undertakings are often improvised, patchy, and conditional—cobbled together out of relations and resources at hand in ways that are incomplete and heterogeneous, generating practices and ways of cooperating that could overcome some of the failures that necessitated them and engender new relations, but that can also entrench old forms and fallbacks. At this moment of writing, real and perceived threats, looming losses, and ongoing crises saturate lived experience in countless contemporary milieux. This lived saturation can compel people to take action where they are at, within their own spheres of influence.[2] And when these actions include reactive commoning, we think it crucial to carefully question how such crisis contexts may inflect upon both the outcomes of and the intellectual and ethical-political assumptions frequently associated with commons and commoning.

Framed as such, salvage commoning is (at least!) doubly fraught—in contexts of being responses to crisis in the first place, and in the sense that there are deep uncertainties about the relations and institutional or structural forms which such reactive commoning practices might subsequently engender. These aspects can, of course, intersect and play out differently in different situations, such that analyzing, comparing, and contrasting different more or less similar instances of salvage commoning might generate insights not only about particular formations of commons and commoning in themselves, but also about broader conjunctural forces, crises, institutional and socio-cultural relations, and other structural contingencies at play in particular situations as encountered and negotiated within salvage commoning practice. Below, we outline some of the key questions and debates which intersect this framing.

To start, we are interested in questioning the relationship between commoning and broader, more widely recognized economic practices and political-economic formations. Many scholars (e.g., Bollier and Helfrich 2012, Dellenbaugh et al. 2015, Ostrom 2012) see commoning as offering a "third way" of organizing economic life beyond states and markets. Other scholars have challenged this positioning, arguing, rather, that commoning exists in relation with other diverse economic forms (Gibson-Graham 2006), that commoning can in fact be supported by the state (Huron 2018), that it can be embedded within market activities (Cameron 2015), and even that—as commons expand and contract in relation to fluctuating enrollments of labor into different value regimes—commoning labor can variously and sometimes simultaneously be enclosed by and serve as a resource for livelihood within expansions and contractions of economies and wage relations (Gidwani 2013). Our argument jumps off from these latter positions, working to explicate overlaps between place-based commoning practices, the state, markets, and fluctuating enrollments of labor and value in particular urban contexts.

A closely related second question concerns the extent to which commoning practices can potentially, even if unintentionally, undermine collective care for and provision of common resources. As Caffentzis (2010) warns, commoning can come to serve as "neoliberalism's Plan B." In crucial ways, commoning practices themselves can become a kind of subsidy to what has been described as the "shadow state" (Wolch 1990, Gilmore 2007)—an array of non-profit and 'voluntary' organizations that provide forms of social welfare and service which might otherwise be provided by the state. Perhaps especially in global north urban contexts, scholars (Foster 2001, Kodras 1997) have noted that a reliance on commons and commoning has been central to the entrenchment of shadow state as—closely linked with the shrinking and retraction of welfare states; often accompanied by discourses touting the importance of devolution and local control—particular commoning practices have emerged to fill localized needs and service gaps and subsequently become semi-formalized and enrolled as vehicles for the administration and provision of state and civic services "scaled down" to the local level. Withdrawal of state support can force people and communities to come together in attempts to cooperatively meet needs. As Gilmore (2007, 44) notes, when both the state and the market fail to provide for people, "the voluntary, non-profit sector can pick up any stray pieces because the extent to which extra economic values (such as kindness or generosity or decency) come into play is the extent to which abandonment produces its own socially strengthening rewards." We are alert to the dangers of romanticizing this. The commoning practices embodied in the examples we unpack below have arisen in contexts of fiscal crisis and austerity where precisely such coming together became necessary and took the form of commoning to buttress respective commons-as-resources at moments where those commons were perceived as being under threat, but where such practices have since come to abet inequitable and restricted stewardship of, access to, and benefit from those commons in the present. Tensions between local control and broader geographies of stewardship and resource provision (Foster 2001) are also palpable in these contexts.

A third issue, again closely related to those above, concerns processes of expansion and inclusion versus exclusion and restriction stemming from the protocols and boundaries upheld by commoning communities themselves. To some degree, this is a question of the gaps between commoning as an ideal versus an imperfect and constrained practice. It is also a question of whether commons should be conceptualized and enacted as open to all or as open only to those who help care for the resources and/or who explicitly commit to specific ethics or ideals. In one foundational work, Ostrom (1990) asserts that boundedness is essential to successful commons, allowing commoners to know each other and, thus, better work together to collectively govern resources. Dardot and Laval (2019) take Ostrom's ideas even further by proposing that "instituent praxis"—an ethic of constant cooperative negotiation over access to and protocols for all manner of commoning and commons usage—should be foundational to transformative politics. Others, (e.g., Stavrides 2016) reject notions of bounding the commons, arguing instead that a true commons must not exclude any people, and must be open to all. Still others (e.g., Gibson-Graham 2006, Gibson-Graham et al. 2016) seem to suggest that an always expansive and flexible ethos should animate commoning practices. In practice, of course, commoning efforts often face severe constraints and limitations and can—as is central to our concerns—find their genesis and animating ethos in (re)action against current conditions rather than toward transformative ideals.

Finally, crystalizing out from everything just outlined, it is starkly clear that deep contingencies condition the shape of commons and commoning practices, and that these can differ and shift profoundly across space and time. In global north urban and other contexts, arguments about the commons have often featured theoretical and political sensibilities focused on the preservation, subsistence, resilience, and/or radical or liberatory potentials in the common(s) concept (e.g., Chatterton 2010; Dardot and Laval 2019; De Angelis 2017; Hardt and Negri 2009), even when folded into broader critiques. But this emphasis on the radical or liberatory does not easily align with research and theorization from global south, Black radical, and other locations (e.g., Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Gidwani 2013; Gilmore 2017; Simone 2004, 2014). In those contexts, communities and groups have often been forced to respond to threats, erosions, and profound disruptions to resource access and social reproduction by protecting and stewarding commons in provisional and improvised ways and as matters of necessity and survival. Research from these locations and contexts aligns with our own concern over the potential for enrollment, capture, or enclosure of commons and commoning practices by state-capital regimes and other structures in dominance, here understood not only in terms of the potential enclosure of commons as wealth and resources (as is often implicit in accounts of "primitive accumulation"), but also the enrollment of commons practices within structures of dominance that may abet the enclosure of commons as resources. These concerns are tightly interconnected with questions about how commons and commoning intersect market, state, and potentially regressive or inequitable structural-conjunctural formations, as well as questions of exclusion, constraint, and (en)closure versus inclusion and expansion in commons practices, as explored in the examples presented below.

With the above in mind, what we ultimately offer in this paper is less a stable typologizing than a conceptual framework attuned to the contingent interrelations among commons, commoning practices, and related structural and situational dynamics—especially those just signaled—within conjunctural contexts marked by crisis. Focusing on two North American urban contexts in specific, we question how commoning practices which may emerge and serve some people well in the face of a particular crisis or threat to the common(s) in one location at one moment may contribute to doing harm in others. The implication here is that the forms of praxis which animate particular commons may require ongoing vigilance and critical renovation to be kept from turning exclusionary. The realities of salvage commoning force us to think commons and commoning not as panacea or airy hopes, but loci of negotiation and possibility, one way or another, which require constant deliberative effort lest they become elements of broader relations of dominance and inequity.

Explicating salvage commoning

In what follows, we explicate these contours and tensions in relation to two modest examples: parent teacher organizations (PTOs) in Washington, D.C., and block associations (BAs) in New York City.[3] As bodies, both PTOs and BAs draw upon cooperative association; collectively agreed upon and democratic procedural, fiscal, and governance structures; and voluntary labor in order to steward particular commons-as-collective resources for boundary-delimited communities of users in their urban civic contexts (respectively, marshalling funding and resources to supplement public education, and channeling voluntary labor towards the maintenance and improvement of urban space, with both public education and urban space understandable as different forms of commons). Crucially, in both instances

people have begun undertaking distinctive kinds of commoning work in response to situations wherein commons as resources have come under threat and/or been significantly diminished (in the face of cuts and chronic underfunding public education in one instance, and in the face of disinvestment in urban space and urban municipal and public services, in the other). Ultimately, both examples throw into relief potentials for commoning practices to become exclusionary and yoked to structures in dominance in ways that exacerbate inequity and injustice amid shifting conjunctural contexts. Both examples further reveal aspects of salvage commoning which may need to be actively challenged and dislodged if such negative outcomes are to be averted. Below we lay out these mixed potentials in several overlapping cuts.

In broader crisis contexts . . .

Among the many reasons people may begin to undertake commoning, one can be as a stopgap response to public and institutional shifts, often experienced as crises, in the places they live. These include responses to shifts experienced locally as disinvestments, erosions to resources, and closely connected crises of social reproduction.[4] Such contexts and responses are clear in the backstories of BAs in New York City and PTOs in Washington, D.C.

Ordinary New Yorkers have long experience with crises inscribed in and through the spaces of the city. The deep overlapping crises with which the city struggled from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s loom large in recent memory. Over those decades, neighborhoods across the city were hit first with the compounding effects of deindustrialization and suburban outmigration, followed by a fiscal crisis involving shrinking tax bases, municipal debt and insolvency, slashed budgets, and the retraction of public and municipal services (see Tabb 1982), all ultimately leading to widespread perception of the city as synonymous with dysfunction, disorder, and rampant crime. Not coincidentally, we think, this period also saw the proliferation of block associations and related hyper-local civic initiatives across the city. These contexts and confluences offer useful points of entry for thinking about how dynamics of salvage commoning in particular situations may articulate with shifting structural conditions and formations more broadly.

Along these lines, the history of an organization called the Citizens Committee for New York City (CCNYC) is instructive. The CCNY was founded in 1975—an especially low-point in the longer fiscal crisis. Explicitly reacting to that context, the CCNYC's initial aim was to work toward "filling in gaps in the city's bureaucracy with volunteers and working with existing community organizations to provide services lost in the budget cuts" (Ferretti, 1975). The CCNYC initially pursued this mission by focusing on resident-led civic efforts largely already taking shape at block and neighborhood levels across the city, wherein residents were experimenting with different ways of confronting the immediate effects of the crisis in the places they lived. The CCNY set out to inventory and amplify such efforts where already existing and to foster them where needed.

The diversity of the commoning practices ongoing in these neighborhood-level efforts was evident in a 144-page publication called the *New York Self-Help Handbook: A Step by Step Guide to Neighborhood Improvement Projects*, which the CCNY released in 1977 (Carlson, 1977). The handbook highlighted a huge variety of undertakings: volunteer-run crime prevention initiatives; sanitation and environment-

focused efforts; attempts to rethink and reorganize food production and distribution around neighborhood capacities and needs; all kinds of initiatives for children, youth, and families; resident-run cooperatives, credit unions, and health initiatives; and much more. The *Handbook* garnered national attention. A 1978 *Washington Post* article cited it in arguing that "[i]n a perverse but important way, New York City performed a service for the nation through its fiscal crisis" to the extent that it showed the power of citizen groups to fill municipal gaps and make sure their cities did not perish in a "trough of red ink," concluding that such initiatives—which, it noted, were largely anchored in what was estimated to be more than 10,000 organized BAs across the city—had emerged through crisis to challenge New York's previous political structure in and through "mini-governments at the grassroots level" (Pierce, 1978). Many contemporary block associations—including one examined in closer detail in the next section—trace their origins to this period of crisis in ways that continue to profoundly influence their organizing ethos and practices today.

The contexts surrounding public schools in Washington, D.C. over the last several decades are different, but no less crisis-ridden than those just described. In D.C., the flight of middle-class white residents to the suburbs during the 1950s and 60s lead to funding and qualified staff shortages for the public schools. By the late 1960s the school system was in crisis, but residents had little power to intervene (Levy, 2004). By the 1970s, middle-class Black residents were also leaving the city for the surrounding suburbs, exacerbating the crisis (Gale 1987). As part of the unique limited home-rule arrangement whereby D.C. functions as the seat of US federal government, residents of the city have historically not been afforded the right to elect their own local and national officials. The D.C. school board has never had the authority to raise funds through taxation, and for much of the city's history school board members were not elected but appointed by the federal judiciary. That changed in 1968, when a public outcry amid the deepening education crisis spurred congress to allow that the board be elected by local vote. Six years later, the city was further allowed to elect a mayor and a city council, but in the interim the institutional apparatus of public education and the school board became one of the few—and therefore highly contentious—arenas for city politics (Risen, 2008).

These are the background conditions for struggles within the D.C. public education system that continue to this day. Over the course of localist power politics in the 1970s, budget cuts and fiscal austerity spanning the 1980s and well into the 2000s, and through a recent history in which local autonomy to choose the school board was pulled back and forth between residents and appointed control boards at different crisis inflection points (Levy, 2004; NRC, 2011), PTOs have emerged as perhaps the primary mechanism through which parents can work cooperatively to exercise their constrained power and work to salvage what they can from their local schools. And as is the case with BAs in New York City, to this day the legacies of having emerged through crisis deeply condition the ways in which such aspirations are put into practice.

. . . salvage commoning in practice

These linkages between crisis and practice become all the more clear when one looks at the sensibilities and activities within particular PTOs or BAs. Consider the Janney Elementary PTA, for example. Janney is a public school in the affluent Tenleytown neighborhood of northwest Washington, D.C. In the summer

of 2019, a parent at Janney reported receiving the following email from the school's Parent Teacher Association:

> "Hi friends! We have just 145 families who have not yet made a tax-deductible donation to Janney's Student Support Fund (yep — that's you guys!). Please know that we appreciate & recognize the many contributions you all make to our school on a daily basis, but please also know that our DCPS [D.C. Public Schools]-allocated budget is not enough to cover the basic needs of our school. Principal Lutz puts almost 98% of her DCPS budget towards teacher salaries. Everything else is funded by the PTA. Our collective dollars back-fill all the needs of the school."[5]

The message is clear: private parental support of this public school is necessary because the city does not adequately fund the school's needs. The PTA notes on its website that because Janney has a relatively high number of enrolled students, it receives less public money per student than most elementary schools in the city. By this argument the school's PTA, which operates the Student Support Fund, performs a necessary role in keeping the school functioning, let alone exceeding basic standards.

At Janney, as in other PTAs across the city, this kind of operating logic based in necessity dates back decades, traceable to the crisis contexts which the group was founded to confront. The Janney PTA was formally incorporated as a tax-exempt entity in 1990—a moment when D.C. was approaching a nadir of its own fiscal crisis wherein public services and, as already noted, public education were suffering from crippling disinvestment (Levy, 2004). And over ensuing decades featuring ongoing struggles over who was to control the D.C. public schools, through what mechanisms, members of the Janney PTA worked hard to defend public school funding as a resource. For instance, members were prominent in the public outcry and pushback against the Control Board that took over the school system and slashed budgets in the mid-1990s (Horwitz and Schneider, 1995), they have shown up at all manner of D.C. council and city planning meetings over decades to submit testimony for their budget priorities,[6] they have formed coalitions with PTAs from other neighborhoods fighting for similar priorities,[7] and have received both laudatory and critical attention for their success (Brown et al. 2017, Matos 2017).

While it bears repeating that the contexts surrounding BAs in New York City are different than those of PTOs in D.C., we see clear similarities in how having been forged amid crisis profoundly conditioned the operating ethos and forms of practice within the respective groups. Again, looking closely at a specific example is revealing here. Covering a catchment area of just a few blocks of one street in the Clinton/Hell's Kitchen neighborhood on the far West Side of Manhattan, the West 46th street BA emerged from the work of a group of civic activists who, during the 1970s and amid the broader urban crisis, participated in precisely the kinds of self-preservation through place-making celebrated and channeled by the CCNY as noted above. The official BA here was subsequently constituted in the early 1980s with the stated goal of continuing to monitor and improve municipal services and build community through the volunteer labor of its membership. And that they did. Over decades, the West 46th Street BA and its members kept in close contact with city and municipal agencies regarding the quality of public services and all manner of quality of life and public safety issues effecting the physical and affective environments of their street and neighborhood; spearheaded ambitious block

improvement and beautification projects; raised and re-distributed hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenues and in-kind exchanges supplementing local charities and social and public services; and held regular public events to gather people, raise awareness, and garner support for these and other pursuits (Author 1, 2020). Throughout, the specter of disorder and disrepair as experienced amid urban crises served as a powerful motivator—something to be vigilantly guarded against.

To connect these examples back to the notion of salvage commoning, we would underscore several characteristics that are shared across both the Janney and the West 46th Street examples. First and to re-iterate, we understand both as examples of commoning because both draw upon cooperative association, collectively agreed upon and democratic protocols, and labor in order to steward particular commons-as-resources (public schools and urban space) for boundary-delimited communities of users.[8] While there are certainly crucial overlaps which we explore in more detail below, we understand these examples first and foremost in terms of commons and commoning rather than other conceptual frames—communitarianism, for instance, or iterations of the "shadow state" described elsewhere—because, in both cases, these groups were and remain constituted primarily around particular stewardship practices in relation to their respective resources rather than ideological or state-institutional commitments or commitments to community for itself.

Furthermore, the magnitude and character of the unwaged, ostensibly voluntary labor accruing in and through these relations are noteworthy. The IRS filings of the Janney PTA for 2017 report that the 11 parents on the PTA board collectively worked 59 hours per week on PTA matters over the 2016-17 school year. This labor was overwhelmingly female: 57 of those 59 weekly hours were worked by women. This account does not include the labor of the extended network of parents and volunteers, which may add substantially to those totals. The resources stewarded by PTOs here include not just dollars, but also in-kind donations of many types and, perhaps especially, the time and expertise of parent volunteers—not just PTA board members, but all who participate in fundraising and myriad other activities throughout the year. While they are not compensated for this work monetarily, parents often see this as a necessary investment. Meanwhile the magnitude of labor undertaken in and through the West 46th Street BA is harder to quantify, as activities like remaining vigilant, reporting to 311, and even interacting in friendly ways with strangers on the sidewalk might be considered part of the "work" in ways that make accounting fuzzy. But an average membership of several dozen has met regularly for meetings, events, and civic undertakings for decades. The impacts of their volunteer labor have literally been wrought in numerous permanent changes to the physical spaces of the street and the neighborhood (Author 1, 2020). Many of the immediate forms this volume of labor takes in both PTO and BA contexts are noted in the descriptions above. Below, however, we turn our attention to the broader formations which this volume of unwaged labor may help to engender. Here the mixed potentials of salvage commoning come into clear focus.

Mixed Potentials

In commons and social movement literatures, commons are often framed as potentially ameliorating a troubled historical inheritance. That is, commons can be posed as potentially redressing previous rounds of enclosure and loss. In the wake of a troubled past and given continued threats of crisis, people have

felt the need to somehow collectivize and mobilize cooperatively simply to and have some influence over commons-as-resources that they rely upon for their thriving and social reproduction. Such dynamics are at the heart of what we mean by salvage commoning. They are clearly at play in the PTO and BA examples we are highlighting, and by extension, we might imagine, other urban and place-based commoning efforts. At the same time, there can be important variations across different salvage commoning contexts, spaces, and times—particularities that are crucial to consider. People engage these dynamics with different understandings of the possible practices and commitments involved. As is true in our examples and as we discuss below, some may have access to additional resources which others do not. The structural conditions under which certain practices may once have made good sense can shift in ways that present new challenges and crises—in which previous commoning practices may even come play a part—in another moment. In these details, there are thorny issues for commons practitioners and researchers alike.

In her work on the shifting geographies of social reproduction in relation to development, Katz observes that "[c]apitalist production and its entailments have pushed people to the drastic limits of their own resilience" even while capitalist and other powerful interests find new ways to "draw on that resilience for their own ends" (2001, 718). Likewise, Caffentzis (2010) warns that something like salvage commoning can be relied upon by those in power, acting as a kind of backstop amid enclosure and exploitation. The dilemma is clear: where threats to resources and crises of social reproduction loom, people often turn to unwaged cooperative measures, not least forms of commoning. At the same time, state-capital and other structures in dominance have proved both willing and able not only to stoke crisis conditions, but to enroll such cooperative labor as a kind of subsidy in place of and contraposed with substantive investments in social reproduction and future welfare. Yet these relations of dominance and enrollment are highly uneven, such that salvage commoning might be understood to occur across a spectrum of contexts and practices that we want to closely consider.

On one end of the spectrum, there are locations and communities where the struggle for social reproduction is constant if not dire, and people's capacities are largely taken up by the intense demands of living under conditions of precarity and injustice including highly constrained access to resources. While such conditions are perhaps most frequently imagined in association with locations outside the global north, they clearly also persist, with difference, in places like Washington D.C. and New York City. Mullings (2003) states this plainly in a retrospective on the fate of community organizations in Harlem following the last decades of the 20th century: With the advance of globalized capitalism, the rise of neoliberalism, and the decline of the welfare state having given way to the explosion of the carceral state, countless (largely BIPOC, predominantly low-income) people, communities, and local organizations have been compelled to expend incalculable amount of energy and labor simply struggling against forms of organized abandonment, displacement, and structurally produced violence that are incompatible with their thriving.

But salvage commoning is also undertaken by those of relatively greater means, whose survival and social reproduction are under less dire threat, and who have more resources—not least, larger reservoirs of bandwidth, time, and voluntary labor—to direct toward their collective efforts. These commoners may share certain concerns and structures of feeling with people harder hit by the same

crises they view themselves as working to confront, but the material stakes and affective attachments are not the same. The Janney PTA and the West 46th Street BA fall on this relatively well-resourced end of the spectrum, though that is not necessarily the case in all PTOs and BAs.

Situated within the broader analytical framework animating the special section on "work outside the wage" to which this paper contributes, we take seriously the contention that forms of labor which occur in spaces not fully counted in official economic calculous not only articulate with but also aggregate toward durable institutional and structural forms and socio-spatial patterns. We therefore want to ask after the spectrum of salvage commoning practices just described: Into what durable forms might the labor being undertaken in these situations aggregate? What factors are at play in this labor being channeled in one direction or another? How might different conceptualizations of the attendant material stakes and attachments matter to those outcomes? And, vitally, where might possibilities to make new or different lines of connection, toward different outcomes, emerge in and through these undertakings?

On these questions, the fate of the civic upswell which took place amid the urban crises in New York might be read as a cautionary tale. At their outset, the efforts of the CCNYC and the "grassroots" civic apparatus of "mini-governments" that it championed were arguably part of a longer legacy connected to the War On Poverty and the federal Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Conservative observers had worried that the urban-focused elements of that legislation amounted to a federally instituted open-ended experiment in "community revolution"—one ostensibly meant to devolve governance and foster local self-determination and democratic participation, but in practice operating to empower radical urban minority fringe groups while fundamentally reshaping the patron-client relations between the state, communities, and local non-profit organizations formed to take advantage of new streams of federal resources.[9] To again echo Gillmore (2007), these conservative reactions seem to have been lamenting an early iteration of the "shadow state"—one intended to marshal and channel the collective capacities of ordinary urban residents and communities in politically significant ways. But in this case, such capacities were arguably not fully realized until the later 1970s, by which point they had been increasingly seized upon as offering solutions to eroded resources, mounting budget deficits, and disorder amid roiling crisis. In the period that followed, forms of commoning such as those undertaken within BAs increasingly became a dominant mode of civic praxis, but now toward highly restricted and even exclusionary ends. Here the experience of West 46th Street is again illuminating.

In the foment of the late 1960s and early 1970s and in the face of threats of 'slum clearance', residents of West 46th Street, in cooperation with residents across the broader Clinton/Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, created solidarity networks, created numerous limited equity co-ops, and fought for and achieved significant local zoning and development restrictions including some of the strongest tenant protections in New York City. They seem to have shared the radical egalitarian spirit evident in many of the care-based activities described in the *New York Self-help Handbook* noted above. As the West 46th Street BA officially coalesced out of the late 70s, founding members counted these among their inspirations. As time passed and crises ground on, however, these energies and ideals began a slow creep toward a different orientation. Efforts to break the grip of organized crime, drugs, and prostitution in the neighborhood mutated into participation in often highly racialized forms of community policing in

the following decades. Earlier commitments to cultivate and steward resources cooperatively gradually morphed into notions that the best way to protect collective resources might be to push for their privatization. Ideals of radical community self-determination transformed into beliefs that hyper-local community control might best be achieved through staunch order-maintenance. All of these changes seem to have been underwritten less by state-institutional coercion than by residents increasing suspicions that 'quality of life' for some might have to come at the cost of exclusion and even repression of others—especially given the limitations of life under constant threat of crisis. In short, grassroots networks and aggregate voluntary labors that may once have been a fount of collective egalitarian support incrementally became a supportive apparatus for new experiments in urban austerity and policing and, by extension, modes of real-estate led development and displacement which dominate the neighborhood today.[10]

The aggregate legacy of the Janney PTA is no less fraught. Over the years, it has grown into a formidable fundraising machine. For the 2019-20 school year, the Janney PTA had a budget of $526,250, raised through individual parent donations and fundraising events. Most of this money went to pay salaries for ten additional teachers and support staff beyond those allocated by DCPS, but also for substitute teachers, facilities repairs, textbooks, class materials and school supplies, performing arts, International Night, fifth grade graduation, janitorial and nursing supplies, and teacher/staff wellness and appreciation, among other expenditures.[11] In short, the PTA funds a remarkable array of activities to benefit its students. In this, Janney reflects a larger trend. According to a 2014 Indiana University study, PTO revenues throughout the U.S. increased 527% between 1995 and 2010—mostly in response to perceived and actual cutbacks in public financing of public schools (Nelson and Glazley, 2014).

The students who attend Janney are largely white and relatively well-off. For the 2018-19 school year, the latest year for which statistics are available, the school was 72% white (in a public school system which was overall only 11% white).[12] Only 2% of Janney's student population was classified as "economically disadvantaged," whereas in the broader school system 47% of students are classified as "at-risk"—essentially a proxy for "economically disadvantaged". Moreover, 93% of Janney's students came from within the elementary school's attendance zone, which is situated within an area which has among the city's highest housing costs.[13] There are only two subsidized housing properties located within Janney's attendance zone: a large building for seniors and a 15-unit building for people with disabilities.[14] There is no subsidized housing specifically for families with children. The work of the PTA supports a public institution, to be sure. But only certain people can access this particular public institution: children whose families can afford to live within the school's attendance zone, along with a tiny percentage of students who are able to get into the school "out-of-boundary" through the school system's annual lottery.

In all of this, Janney just one example among many. Across the city, fundraising by PTOs varies wildly, depending on the wealth of the parent body of the school. All nine public elementary schools in Ward 3—long Washington D.C.'s wealthiest and whitest ward—have active PTO's that raise hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to support school activities, at an average of just over $300,000 per school. But there are 80 public elementary schools in the city, and 57 of them either do not have PTOs or do not raise enough funds to require formal IRS reporting. A spatial analysis of these 80 schools

reveals stark correlations with race, income, and property values: schools in the whitest, wealthiest, most expensive parts of the city, including Ward 3, Georgetown, and the Capitol Hill neighborhood, are all served by high-performing PTOs.[15] Schools in the lowest-income, least white, less expensive parts of the city either do not have PTOs or have PTOs that raise vastly less in funds. In addition, many of the highest-performing PTOs serve elementary schools with attendance zones that, like Janney's, contain zero or close to zero subsidized housing, making it that much more difficult for low-income students to access and benefit from those schools.[16] While the wealthy PTOs are raising money at a scale that allows them to fund salaries for additional teaching staff, less wealthy PTOs are limited to funding things like cheerleader uniforms, field trips, and tokens of teacher appreciation. The latter are important activities, but they are not likely to bolster student success to the same degree as additional teachers, staff, and extra-curricular programming.

We are not arguing here that people should not engage in the labor of commoning at their children's public schools or in their neighborhoods, in response to crisis or otherwise. Far from it: the mobilization of these forms of collective labor to collectively steward resources is in many ways admirable and often legitimately necessary. But it is important to recognize that—explicitly in the case of salvage commoning—the failure of broader institutions, commons, and structures to provide what people think they need is often a crucial part of the context. And depending on the always-shifting economic, social, geographical, and cultural positions of different commoners, ability to collectively steward, preserve, and perhaps generate resources may vary widely, potentially exacerbating already stark inequities. This is the quandary: under conditions of crisis, some may be better able to band together and undertake commoning efforts to prop up particular commons in particular places for particular users, while others may be less successful. The resulting differences can magnify and concentrate the effects of crisis elsewhere while creating new conditions of exclusion which prevent people who may need resources the most from being able to traverse the boundaries that determine access within the delimited community of users. The potential for widening inequities is glaring. In a very material sense, commoning practices which emerge from crisis in one (literal, temporal, or structural) location can in these ways end up hardening exclusions and abetting resource erosions for people in other locations. Further, such dynamics may allow the labor of commoning to be more readily captured by private interests, capitalist value-regimes, state-institutional, and other potentially unjust formations—in our cases, perhaps especially those associated with highly classed and racialized property, real estate, and policing regimes.

That commoning can become part and parcel of new and/or ongoing inequities in such ways should be unsettling for commons research and theorizing. At the same time—again echoing Tsing (2015)—we must also emphasize how chaotic and haphazard this process may be. While dynamics of boundary making and exclusion around resources can be glossed as top-down phenomena, they can, as Osmon (2017) compellingly argues in his discussion of the privatization of parks in New York City, take place in ways that are in fact highly localized, unsystematic, and ideologically diverse. In Osmon's account, concerned citizens of many political stripes began experimenting with ways of advocating for parks and public space amid fiscal crisis and disinvestment. And many initially did so to the consternation of elites, private interests, and politicians who only slowly and haphazardly came to incorporate some of these

citizen-innovated tactics into cohesive policies and institutional forms we might now recognize as hallmarks of privatization. That took decades and was not a smooth top-down process. Likewise, people in the PTAs and BAs we examined do not, generally speaking, seem to have started undertaking the commoning activities they did with any pre-determined plan to enclose resources or abet exclusion and privatizing interests. Those effects seem to have emerged much more chaotically over time, suggesting no neatly orchestrated neoliberal plot—only messy subjectivities, practices, and contingent outcomes that might have been otherwise. And in that chaos and mess persist opportunities to ward off exclusion and (en)closure and instead pursue the best of the commons concept.

Commoning beyond boundaries

Here we might return to the question of whether and how particular commoning efforts could exceed specific geographic boundaries. Such questions have long tempered hopes that commoning could engender a more broadly and radically egalitarian future, often (e.g., Harvey 2011) framed as doubts that successful but relatively limited commons experiments could be "scaled-up" sufficiently to challenge capitalist dominance. But here again, if we understand commons not only in terms of resources and commonwealth but also in terms of generative and structurally consequential unwaged labor adjoined with particular conceptualizations enacted in practice, we might imagine that part of what gets created and potentially exported in and from different commons are certain modes of being and acting cooperatively—not only relations to material resources, but also traditions, forms of common sense and good sense, protocols and narrative frameworks (Author 1, 2020)—which condition the laboring practices involved.

In these terms, questions about commoning across boundaries might be framed differently. In the PTA and BA examples we have given, people banded together to undertake what they seem to have understood as righteous, even noble work—collectively salvaging, repairing, and supporting threatened resources, public institutions, spaces, and indeed ways of life and processes of (re)production. But it is precisely here that questions such as those posed by Berlant (2016) become especially salient: What, from a historical inheritance littered with deeply violent, inequitable, and catastrophically broken social and affective relations, is to be repaired in such instances? In the midst of troubled times and palpable failures to adequately support one another at any number of scales and by any number of measures, what, exactly, could justly be deemed salvageable and worth attaching to?

Such questions should make any would-be commoner pause and consider the inherited and perhaps unquestioned conceptual frameworks conjoined with impulses to action. How many commons in ordinary civic institutional and voluntary contexts such as those we have described above are predicated on common sense liberal notions of self-preservation, waste and risk-mitigation, and selective repair to some idealized status quo? Such notions blur too easily with racist, nationalist, xenophobic, and other exclusionary social currents prevalent in the current moment. In that direction loom the worst potentials of salvage commoning.

At the same time, critical questions about the potential mobilizations and pitfalls of salvage and repair could open out in radically different directions. In Snyder's (2014) study of the BAs of New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood, for instance, collectivities which had once been exclusionary,

functioning only in the narrow and highly localized self-interests of a few, became unsettled and more collectively powerful precisely by resisting their own bounds, striving to expand beyond themselves, and implementing open-ended democratic modes of deliberation, experimentation, and coalition-building across spatial, temporal, and social boundaries. At its best, perhaps salvage commoning would be animated by such forms of praxis, resembling what Gilmore (2017, 237) calls "infrastructures of feeling," or, forms of attentive action that are "constantly renewed and updated over time," "strong but not static," and based on "the radical process of finding—anywhere, if not everywhere—in political practice and analytical habit, lived expressions (including opacities) of unlimited participatory openness." Drawing on the Black Radical Tradition, Gilmore argues that such forms of attentive action are cultivated across space and time when people recognize the possibilities inherent within and selected from among lineages of critical thought and action emerging from struggles for liberation in the face of injustice, structural violence, and socially produced precarity and abandonment. In such mobilizations, Gilmore maintains, "[w]hat matters—what materializes—are live rearticulations and surprising combinations" emerging from "movement away from separation and exclusion; in fact, its opposite" (ibid.).

In a more explicitly commons context, Gilmore's formulation is clearly echoed in what Dardot and Laval term "institutent praxis," or, forms of thoughtful experimentation which conscientiously and deliberatively work to transform pre-existing structural conditions in and through the negotiation of commoning protocols and institutions in practice (Dardot and Laval, 2019). Such sensibilities-in-practice may emerge from banal commoning efforts just as much as epic struggles. But they are consequential not only in the structures they support, but in their capacity to aggregate, articulate, and ricochet, for better or worse, across different contexts.

Conclusion: The Necessities and Contingencies of Commoning

In the midst of all manner of crises, already afoot and yet to come, dynamics of what we are calling salvage commoning figure to become increasingly prominent. Responses oriented toward delimited actors fending for themselves and those within their boundaries will likely fail to confront or transform the broader structural conditions which crises signal. In these contexts, it seems imperative to learn to common well, and perhaps differently.

If nothing else, we hope the concept of salvage commoning surfaces, problematizes, and therefore pushes people to critically question the short distance between commoning to confront crises and/or threats to resources, on the one hand, and commoning as abetting harmful formations structured in dominance, on the other. In the examples we have considered above, people often do not seem to be thinking of their activities in any of these terms, but simply in terms of the practical need to maintain the conditions for their living, thriving, and reproduction. As we have shown, if not done carefully that can (re)produce exclusions and bolster injustice and inequity—in relation to privatizing capitalism, certainly, but also racialized stratifications and segregations, communitarian exclusions, strains of populism, and other pernicious formations. To echo Chatterton and Pusey (2020), it is clear that "post-" commoning practices which follow crisis are not necessarily liberatory, and perhaps likely will not be unless people work critically, deliberately, and constantly to make them so. And that may be a matter of adopting and performing an unsettled and expansive approach to commoning—one always vigilant against potential culpability in exclusion, and perhaps emphasizing processes as much as outcomes—rather than a

reparative, hardening, and boundary-making one. That work may take place in local and institutional contexts that seem banal, but its effects can aggregate, generating modes of being and thinking in common, for better or worse.

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[1] Here we use PTOs as a generic term encompassing, predominantly, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) associated with particular schools, but also other often closely related public school support and policy activist coalitions.

2 Anderson (2020) terms this predicament "precarious hegemony"—a situation in which dominant socio-cultural and political-economic formations have produced tremendous, deeply inequitable precarity for many, even while those formations are themselves vulnerable and dependent upon forms of labor and practice which are never guaranteed. Here people's senses for and actions in response to experiences of precarity are contingent upon place-based conditions including structures of feeling which can channel cooperative energies in ways which aggregate towards the further consolidation of dominance, or not, depending.

[3] These examples are not exhaustive or definitive, but suggestive. Both derive from work undertaken separately by each co-author within longer-term research projects focused on intersections among urban space, civic action and spatial labor, and urban commons. Interest in PTOs emerged from [Author 2]'s scholar-activist commitments to neighborhood-level housing and equity organizing in Washington, D.C. (Author 2, 2018), and in the context of recent D.C. City Council hearings on proposals for PTO fund-sharing laws, for which GIS maps of PTA revenues created by [Author 2] were submitted in exhibit. Interest in BAs emerged from [Author 1]'s larger ethnographic project documenting how ordinary resident's everyday practices were connected to hyper-policing and political-economic value formation in a gentrifying neighborhood in Manhattan (Author 1, 2020). As part of the fieldwork for that project, [Author 1] attended monthly meetings, public events, and broader civic meetings pertaining to one particularly active block association over the course of three years. Our combined interest in what we now call salvage commoning stems from years of conversation and conferencing about overlapping findings emerging from these separate projects, wherein we shared critical questions about how and why commoning practices might serve to (re)produce structural inequities in contexts such as these.

4 Katz defines of social reproduction as the "daily and long-term reproduction of the means of production, the labour power to make them work and the social relations that hold them in place," including "the 'fleshy, messy' and diffuse stuff of everyday life, as well as a congeries of structured material social practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production" (2009, 696). While social reproduction is perhaps most often associated with child-rearing and education, by this definition it also includes a wider array of generative practices and forms of—often unwaged and under-recognized—labor within everyday life.

5 https://www.dcurbanmom.com/jforum/posts/list/90/825208.page

[6] https://ruth4schools.com/april-newsletter-dcps-budgets/janney-parents-on-the-budget-cuts/

[7] https://www.foresthillsconnection.com/news/parents-from-wards-2-3-and-4-join-call-to-restore-wilson-funding/

[8] In general, here we are following criteria laid out by the likes of Ostrom (1990) as well as Gibson-Graham and Healy in their "commons identi-kit" (2013, 130-37). It is worth noting, however, that in both the PTA and BA examples, the people undertaking this work would not necessarily self-identify as commoners. Perhaps not uncontroversially, we maintain that commoning can still be legible and subjected to critical scrutiny as commoning, even when the practitioners in question do not necessarily self-

identify with commons terminology and movements. Requiring that commoners understand themselves explicitly as such seems to us a—culturally, geographically, historically, linguistically—problematically restrictive criterion when exploring the kinds of questions we are trying to open up.

9 “The Community Revolution” was the title of Daniel Bell and Virginia Held’s contribution to a 1969 special issue of Public Interest focused especially on New York City politics. The issue also featured contributions from neo-conservative ‘godfather’ Irving Krystol as well as James Q. Wilson, who went on to co-create the infamous ‘broken windows’ theory of order-maintenance policing.

10 See [Author 1] (2020) for a detailed analysis of the relationships among everyday spatial praxis and gentrification in Clinton/Hell’s Kitchen, including a deep ethnographic account of the ways that these decades of urban transformation have been experienced and negotiated by residents in this space.

11 https://www.janneyschool.org/pta/pta-budget/; http://www.janneyschool.org/support-janney/student-support-fund-contribution/

12 https://osse.dc.gov/page/data-and-reports-0

13 http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/Janney+Elementary+School

14 A comprehensive list of D.C.’s subsidized housing can be found at housinginsights.org.

15 Source: IRS 990 filings, publicly available through Guidestar.org.

16 Again, see housinginsights.org.