

# Tinfish Editor's Blog

Thoughts on book publishing, editing, contemporary poetry, dementia, administrative memos, and teaching by the editor of Tinfish Press.

Monday, June 15, 2009

## "Intercontinental and damn proud of it": Gaye Chan, Nandita Sharma, Stephen Collis and Otherly Ones



*There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like. Being immersed in the details of rock and field and slope--letting them come to you for once, and then meeting them halfway would be so much easier--if they took an ingenuous pride in being in one's blood.*

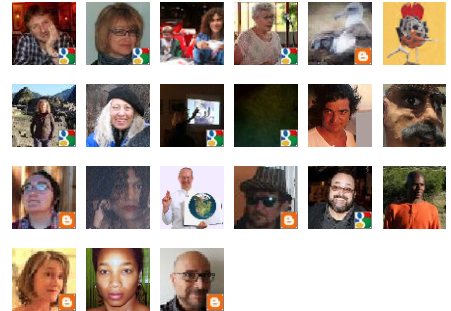
John Ashbery, "For John Clare," *The Double Dream of Spring*

I live in a condominium community; outside my back windows is a large common area, green, carefully mowed, populated mainly by egrets and the occasional solitary golf cart, which the property manager drives to his office in a shed at the edge of the field. Beyond the shed there is preservation land, a narrow undeveloped strip (that seems bigger than it is) covered by trees. My husband points out that this land includes a deep gulch and a swamp, not good for development in any case. When we moved in eight years ago, people ran their dogs in the common area during the late afternoon; on any given day, you could join them and talk about their dogs, since that was their only subject of conversation. A few years ago, we noticed that the dogs no longer congregated outside and were told by a dog owner that they had been disallowed. And for a while there was a group of roosters and hens that wandered the green space, beautiful ones. Their raucous cries at all hours got them banned, too, as they were carted off one day to who knows where. Since then, my kids and I have played catch out back and there is the occasional soccer-playing dog, some children. But mostly the land lies green and still, something to be seen but not a stage for sound, except for what mowers and weed whackers exhale, like asthmatics with microphones.

So the condominium community is the simulacrum of a commons, or the land not privately owned but shared in the years before the Enclosure Movement in 18th century England. When I looked up

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"enclosure" on-line, I found a link to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I opened it and got the beginning of [an article](#): "the division or consolidation of communal fields, meadows, pastures, and other arable lands in western Europe into the carefully delineated and individually owned and managed farm plot of modern times." A couple of lines later I read this: "To enclose land was to put a hedge or fence around a portion of this open land and thus prevent the exercise of common grazing and other rights over it." Directly underneath these words in a bright orange box was an alert to me, the reader: "MEMBERS GET MORE: Activate your Free Trial today!" A few more knowledge teasers followed, and then a promise of "premium content." Not that I begrudge the Encyclopedia their subscribers, but surely this is another example of enclosure, the fencing off of knowledge. Hence the allure of Wikipedia's seeming openness, to builders and receivers. If you read only this entry of my blog, you will be reading an "enclosed" version of my work, only a small slice of what I mean to say--a more fluid substance than the single link can offer. The internet's wild openness covers over the largest agglomeration of small farms ever devised. And that reminds me, I will soon need to build some fences against my children's curiosities.

Of course land use offers us a mirror on ourselves (and that's a western metaphor, no doubt about it); hence the Romantics' love for unenclosed nature in the face of industrial-era divisions. Another analogy occurs closer to home. The U.S. Post Office says I live in Kane`ohe, Hawai`i, but you could say that I live in Ahuimanu in the [ahupua`a](#) of Kahalu`u. Hawaiians organized the land in bands that went from mountains to the sea; they did not possess what westerners consider "private property," though the [Great Mahele](#) of the early 19th century changed that, under western influence. The land was tilled by commoners who did not own it but stayed, generation after generation. The land I live on is organized less according principle of the ahupua`a than that of the belt, or the road that goes around most of the island. I live mauka of Kahekili Highway (a bypass of Kamehameha Highway); the makai side features a strip mall and McDonald's. Near me, the land's tillage is done more frequently by road crews than by farmers.

Enter unlikely allies, if only geographically so, namely [Gaye Chan](#) & [Nandita Sharma](#) of Kane`ohe and Stephen Collis of Delta, BC, near Vancouver. Chan & Sharma have made a practice over the past few years of challenging notions of "public" space, unveiling it as a fiction operated in the interest of nations, not their citizens. They consider themselves modern day [Diggers](#). What is termed "public" land, they argue, is really that of governmentally held land. "Public" does not equal "commonly held." (The military opens [Bellows Beach](#) to civilians only on weekends.) They work with plants and with the internet. Their project, [Eating in Public](#), is easily accessible on-line. In it, they tell the story (with illustrations) of their use of "public" land (state and Bishop Estate-controlled) to grow papayas. This is their attempt to enact a "commons." Another version of their story can be found in Jules Boykoff's and Kaia Sand's [book on guerrilla poetries](#). It also brings together the notion of a material commons (where food is grown for the public) and a decolonized mental space. The results are moving, surprising, and sometimes sadly funny, as when they show us the gently regretful notes from the person instructed to remove their plants.

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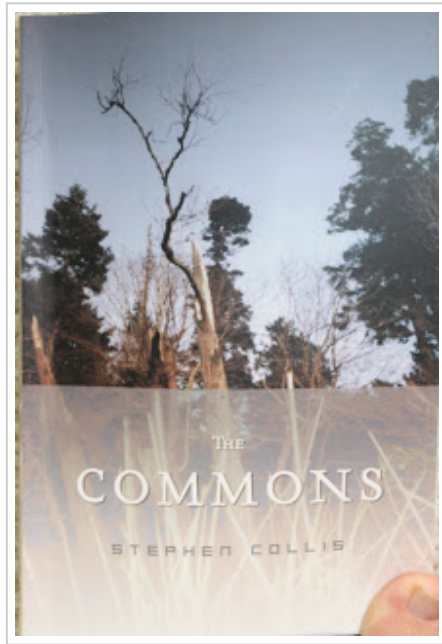
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[Stephen Collis](#) is in the process of writing a series of books advocating the commons, including the most recent, aptly titled *The Commons*, from Talonbooks in Vancouver. His interests range from the [anarcho-scholasticism of Susan Howe](#), in a wonderful teachable book of poetics, to anarchist Spain, the work of Phyllis Webb, archives, mines, and in this volume everyone poetical from Robert Frost to John Clare to William Wordsworth to Henry David Thoreau and finally to the poet himself and his collaborators "Alfred Noyes and Ramon Fernandez," who seem one with Collis, as well as his most formidable opponents (to quote that other Stephen, Colbert). "Noyes and Fernandez" write an introduction at the end of the book, in which they define the commons so: "Common lands are held in trust by everyone and governed only by local custom. They embody sustainability and the sharing--commoning--of the resources such sustainable communities depend upon" (139). He too joins the material with the imaginative, noting that enclosure "is happening now with water and air, with ideas and genetic coding and materials . . . In so far as a literature takes on a practice of quotation, collage, allusion and intertextuality it holds out a sort of commons--a page on which any may write with the common resources of the poetic past" (139).

To that we might add something called parodic collage; *The Commons* begins with "The Frostworks," a re-mix of "[Mending Wall](#)" by Robert Frost. Where Frost opens his unstraightforward poem, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," Collis responds:

Something there is  
that spills  
makes gaps  
the work of  
hunters at spring  
the wall  
between us  
is a collapse

and so on. Frost's grammatically perfect sentences give way to "gaps" of no commas or periods, simply a flow of words from Frost's poem in an order unimagined by the New Hampshire farmer poet.

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## TPM Talking Points Memo

In "Clear as Clare," Collis remixes John Clare, but not to the witty effect of his operation on Frost. Clare walks through England in a poem that owes much to Susan Howe's peregrinations through histories and texts. Most moving to this reader were the following lines:

a little patch of common  
buckled to my bread  
the woodpecker sweeing  
flags flaze and flitting

said arable  
said commons  
said cottage rushlight  
clouded dipples stirtling

dim to the seem

and beneath these lines a "note":

at night ... hounding home

This page combines the virtues of Clare's early close-watching of nature and close-listening to language with the sadness of his later poems of loss. I remember reading [John Burrell's book on Clare](#) in college (yours used for nearly \$700), a book that claims Clare's madness had much to do with the enclosure movement. While I'm now loath to go along with analogies between social conditions and mental ones, the book made a strong impression at the time.

Collis performs similar operations on Wordsworth and Thoreau, before turning to a meta-commentary on his work as a poet in the final section "from THE BARRICADES PROJECT" (119-134). Here the non-enclosure of vocabularies, including the use of computer jargon in "Dear Common: *!Ya Basta!*": "I'll download your rebellion / but my virus makes actions properties / buying up the domains of freedom / and surveiling the lines of defence" (128). I quote these lines as Twitter announces it will not shut down for maintenance an hour tonight in order to keep lines of communication open among Iranians protesting the likely fraudulent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Such odd marriages of capital and rebellion! Collis's conclusion is an overt getting-to-the-point:

Let us propose post-capitalism (131)

and an ending that seems to address Chan & Sharma:

we are hope's eternal website  
very otherly moving coasts  
intercontinental and damn proud of it  
very otherly at least and yes  
very otherly awaiting the dawn


In his afterward to the *Quixote Variations* by [Ramon Fernandez](#), translated by Alfred Noyes / Stephen Collis, Collis writes about poems that do not end, either because they have been reworked so often that "authenticity" is in question (Whitman, the unnamed Marianne Moore) or because they are not finished. "It is that 'area larger' that is the wonder in poetry--the suggestion, amidst poetry's inherent brevity, of a wider field of intellectual and emotional play the poem we read is a condensation of" (32-33). If the poem is inevitably enclosed, then, the poet's and reader's imaginations cannot be; the poem on

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the page has a fence around it. The poem in the mind is not a palm at the end of it, but part of the commons. This is not the Commons on which Emerson saw his eyeball, but a commons on which people like Chan, Sharma and Collis are planting vegetables and flowers and more poems. That other commons we call the commons.

For anyone interested in reading more on the Commons, Nandita Sharma recommends the following:

- 1) Neeson, J.M. *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820*, J. M. (1993), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- 2) Linebaugh, Peter, 2007 *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons For All*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 3) Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker, 2000. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston: Beacon Press.

More work by Stephen Collis in [Tinfish 18](#).



Posted by susan at [6:16 PM](#) 

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## 2 comments:

 [John](#) said...

lovely!

[June 16, 2009 at 9:41 AM](#)



[slarry](#) said...

Yes, lovely indeed.

[June 16, 2009 at 9:25 PM](#)

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