

Affect of the Commons

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“The commons” is currently a prestige concept for redescribing and rebooting democracy. In political theory after Kant it points to an unbounded, universally sensed space for the political. There’s a romantic story about the commons too, a pastoral story of nature and human creativity. Both of these are unconflicted spaces. At the same time, the concept points to an anti-pastoral process, involving rage at exploitation, theft, loss, mourning, the prospects of resistance to the state and capital, and the need to protect people from each other’s possessiveness. This register constructs the encounter with the commons as an ambivalent one, in which relations of property and intimacy encounter each other frictionally. This segment of a longer work focuses on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Juliana Spahr, and Liza Johnson, and engages the propertied and affective resonances of the commons concept. But rather than cast it as an aspirational achievement, it values the commons specifically for its negative pedagogy, its pedagogy of unlearning normative infrastructures as such.