

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko ngā wā kāinga hei
whakamāhorahora

Cultivating Commoners

Dr Kelly Dombroski, University of Canterbury

Kelly.dombroski@canterbury.ac.nz

Dr Gradon Diprose, Massey University

Dr Stephen Healy, Western Sydney University

Assoc. Prof. David Conradson, University of Canterbury

Commons and Commoners



CULTIVATE
URBAN FARMS



Project: Delivering Urban Wellbeing through Transformative Community Enterprise

National
SCIENCE
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko Ngā wā Kaitiaki hei
whakamāhoriora

MBIE project by BBHTC, emphasises the role of the built environment in shaping wellbeing. As soon as I saw the call for proposals, I thought of the reading I had been doing with Stephen around the ways in which the commons as a shared space, shapes community - -and indeed, shapes the human commoners who make up the part of that community,

So in the end, we aren't really looking at a built environment, but the way in which a particular ecological, eco-social and material environment enables and indeed shapes a certain kind of community, and indeed, a commoner subjectivity.

The environment we are studying in this instance is the ecological, eco-social, and material commons of the urban farms of Cultivate, an organisation in Christchurch that aims to inspire young people to live lives they value in an urban farm setting. Their urban farms are situated on privately owned but vacant land where landowners have given Cultivate permission to use. Staffed by ecologists, farm managers, youth and social workers, and take up youth not currently in employment or training and work alongside them to collect green waste, make compost, grow food and supply restaurants in the Christchurch area.

But for now, it is worth pointing out that we are not only interested in the development of a commoner subjectivity merely for the reason that we are interested in a politics of the commons as a kind of resistance to the enclosures that capitalism and colonialism has wrought, but we are interested in the development of a particular commoner subjectivity that might emerge out of a community intervention and community

enterprise that involves humans, more-than-human and associated relationalities and exchanges in a therapeutic outdoor space. This is a kind of commoner subjectivity whereby the commoner becomes, ironically, more aware of themselves as an individual of worth and value through relationship with community, whereby the community is both human and more-than-human in constitution.

Iris Marion Young suggests that the term 'community' is less a real thing than an expression of a desire to overcome individualism and difference, and to produce social wholeness and mutual identification. And we could easily say that this community is more than human, whereby living things in acting out of their desire to become fully mature and grow in whatever context they be – microbes in the compost heap, pumpkin plants on the compost heap, trees dropping leaves and eventually returning to the soil – all these living things contribute to a more than human community that shares not a common being, but a being in common as Jean Luc Nancy would put it. In some ways then, community relies on each member to become – to become more fully themselves in some ways. Hence in a really odd way, as Stephen Gudeman claims there is no commons without community and no community without commons, we could also say both community and commons are a space where each being involved is supported to become fully themselves, or even individuated. And here we can refer back to Stephen's paper yesterday where he referred to Neera Singh and Jason Read and the concept of being transindividuated ...

Jean-Luc Nancy takes this idea much further – he is tries to avoid simplistic notions of community by proposing that there is no common substance or common identity.

For me, this line of thought is important for answering a number of questions I have been pondering, and I hope my colleagues and coauthors will join me in exploring as we continue this work.

Common(er) Questions



- Can a temporary commons and transitional community shape us into long-term commoners?
- What role do our attachments to (and relationships with) a common place play in enabling commoner subjectivities?
- What is the role of the more-than-human in caring for and enabling commoner subjectivities

National
SCIENCE
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko Ngā wā Kainga hei
whakamāhoriora

Firstly, because there is an implicitly temporary nature of the commons being created or cultivated by Cultivate: the urban farms are on temporary free leases on land left vacant by earthquake demolition or on other land that is being unused by its owners, and the young people who spend time there are generally on internships or community service for periods of 3 to 6 months. Gradon and I have written about temporary commoning elsewhere, and indeed presented at the 2016 IAG on this. Becoming a commoner through becoming affected by the commons in cultivation is important for ongoing commoning processes in the city and elsewhere, as an antidote to isolating processes of enclosure and neoliberal subjectivities as cultivated by many hierarchical processes of schooling and work elsewhere. As Velicu and Garcia Lopez argue, we must move away from the Ostrom-style view of the commons as a site where access to common pool resources are negotiated in place, to an understanding of the commons as a struggle to perform common livable relations in time. It is this temporal shift that is important in a place where transitional spaces are the norm – rather than the question being how to sustain commons necessarily, the question for me is how do we, together, reform ourselves as subjects, to move from homo economicus to what Tronto calls *Homines Curans*, the collective caring subject. While she is not referring specifically to commoners, it is no great leap to understand a commoner subjectivity as something closer to what Tronto is calling us to pay attention to.

Secondly, as Judith Butler attests, we cannot remake and rework our subjectivities simply by desiring to do so. Most of us are so embedded and embodied and habituated into certain ways of being in the world, that we must pay attention to the conditions of possibility that allow commoning -- or collective, caring -- subjectivities to arise. Butler

refers specifically to childhood and our primary attachments – she implies to people, but I would like to emphasise our attachments to place – and the myriad human and more than human elements that assemble to make our places of attachment unique. This is interesting for Cultivate because you have groups of young people working who are not in employment or study, some of whom are going through the justice system, others who are on internships to increase their employability funded by WINZ, others struggling with mental health issues and needing a supportive first workplace. In some ways, as Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries notes, community enterprises of this nature can provide an opportunity for “the sustenance of that first attachment” which may have been damaged, forgotten, betrayed or just waylaid in the things life throws at us. While Father Boyle was speaking primarily of attachment to the parental figure and the rehabilitation of gang members through attachment to a stable community, we might extend the need for a primary attachment to community and place to all of us who have forgotten what it means to be part of a caring collective and the pleasures and pain of working together on a shared task. Indeed, Stephen Gudeman’s work on the commons suggests that just as there is no commons without a community to care for it, there is *also no community without a shared commons*. In many ways then, I’d like to explore how the commons of Cultivate acts as the both the sustenance of first attachment, providing the connecting point and shared relationship to a place that allows community to develop, and also the ways in which being part of a community caring for a commons might shape individual commoner subjectivities in ways that makes future commoning activity more likely, even as the group and places are somewhat temporary.

Thirdly, it is worth pointing out that for me these common liveable relations are not limited to the human alone. Like many scholars of this generation, I – we – have been interested in thinking about we get out of the rationalist, individualist, human centric view of the world that got us into some of the messes we find ourselves economically and environmentally.

More-than-human care?

CARE...a species activity that includes everything that we *do* to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. (Tronto 1993, 103, emphasis added)

Suppose, instead, we were to introduce a different route to greater collective political concerns, one that begins with acknowledging that humans are essentially, in the plural, *homines curans*, 'caring people'? (Tronto, 2017:28)

She goes on to define our 'world' as including bodies, selves, environment and all that interweaves in and between these...

Building on Tronto's understanding of care as all the activities we (as a species) do to care for and maintain our world, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa asks us to consider whether or not care might indeed be all the activities we *and* other species do to care for and maintain our world. The subject *homines curans*, then, is not only collective caring subject of humans, but potentially recognises the fact that we are not all human – even within ourselves in our own body, and potentially beyond too. In the case of the youth of Cultivate, I'm interested in entertaining the idea that the commons – here a collective or assemblage of both human and nonhuman, plants, microbes, insects and more – might indeed care for our youth, showing them a different way of understanding the world as interconnected and interdependent, and their own connection and possible action within this.

...

We need to disrupt the subjective-collective behind the “we”: care is everything that *is* done (rather than everything that “we” do) to maintain, continue, and repair “the world” so that *all* (rather than “we”) can live in it as well as possible.

That world includes . . . *all* that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (modified from Tronto 1993, 103). What the “all” includes in situation remains contingent to specific ecologies and human–nonhuman entanglements.

What counts is the “interweaving” of living things that holds together worlds as we know them, that allows their perpetuation and renewal—and even that which helps to their decay as we have seen with the example of worms’ labor of composting. (Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161)

Puig de la Bellacasa’s reworking of care...

Can the commons care?

- We often talk about caring for commons but in Cultivate we can see how the commons cares for youth.
- Commons as hybrid collective? Assemblage? “everything is connected” “Corpus Christi”



National
SCIENCE
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko Ngā wā Kainga heoi
whānau hōranga

As I said at the beginning, I am beginning to suspect that as we seek to bring into being Homines Curans or the collective caring subject, we might need to understand the ways in which we become individuated or transindividuated as part of a commoning community.

Just as that first attachment and connection to family is understood to bring into being a healthy path to a baby coming to realise both their connectedness and separateness from the other, so too does an attachment to a commons and its community – I think – help young people to realise both their connectedness and separateness from others. This was often expressed in terms of self-care by the youth we interviewed. And the founder Bailey has a wonderful way of describing the youth as coming with hoods up and hunched over phones then unfurling into the sunlight.

It is not just the staff and community enterprise that cares for the youth and enables this unfurling however, it is the commons itself. But here's where I get stuck because the commons in this case is somewhat temporary. The place of Peterborough st and the place of Halswell farm certainly speak to and care for the youth by providing food, greenery, something to care for and focus on, but these places are not permanent. So what then is the commons that is caring for youth?

Commons in Youth Wellbeing

- Social: shared lunch, bonding, teamwork, work skills, community interaction
- Emotional: self-regulation, talking things through, healing from addictions
- Physical: eating vegetables, fitness training, yoga, hard physical work, sunshine
- Knowledge: cultivation, growth and development of plants and people, soil



National
SCIENCE
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko Ngā wā Katanga hei
whakamāhoranga

As I read through the transcripts here are some of the things that stuck out to me, and I struggle to see which is commons and which is community and wonder if we really need to separate out these things. I'll work through these and you can give me some thoughts.

Social

“We'll be tired because we're working all day in the sun, but it's still all close and just get on and just - yeah. When it comes to Thursday with the shared lunch it's a good time to bond with everyone and just get to know them a bit more and find out new things.”

“One of the previous boss people that we had, he used toand he'd be always like - have real meaningful conversations, and it would just - you could pick up ideas on how to start conversations and stuff, because I was a pretty shy person as a kid and never really talked to people.”



Emotional

“We've stopped with the addictions and stuff that we had and focussing on more easier ways to go about it without having to put up with just stuff that isn't healthy.”

“Now that I've started working here my mind - I've focussed on things that really matter. It just distracts you from all of the bad stuff that you could be doing when you don't have anything to do you just get bored”



National
Science
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko Ngāi wā Kaitiaki hei
whakamāhoriora

Add thoughts on self awareness, breakfast etc

Physical

“We've had this little program thing, and there's this little fitness thing. We end up turning the work that we do here into fitness and how we work our bodies and work our muscles when we are doing certain stuff.”



National
SCIENCE
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Kō Ngā wā Kaitiaki hei
whakamāhoriora

Again breakfast

Knowledge

“We usually do a layer of shit and then food waste and then put more shit and just lay it - a lasagne basically. It's probably the funnest part about being here is just the compost. It's just - I don't know. It's pretty interesting when you start to learn about the new ways of decomposing waste instead of just chucking it in bins and just never knowing where it goes to.”



National
Science
Challenges

BUILDING BETTER
HOMES, TOWNS
AND CITIES

Ko Ngā wā Katanga hei
whakamāhoranga

Commons for Urban Wellbeing

COMMONS OF CULTIVATE including individuals, organisation and wider community					
ACCESS	USE	BENEFIT	CARE	RESPONSIBILITY	PROPERTY
Shared and wide	Negotiated by a community	Widely distributed to community members and beyond	Performed by community members	Assumed by community members	Any form of ownership (private, state, or open access)
Youth, staff, volunteer, public birds, insects, microbes, plants	Youth, staff, volunteers, birds, insects, microbes, plants	Youth, staff, volunteers, wider community, environment	Youth, staff, volunteers, environment, 'more-than-human'	Staff, board of trustees...?	Privately owned, temporary access

Source: Adapted from Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013

So here the struggle for me is thinking about the care column here, and how we understand who is caring and who is receiving care – and I think here what is useful is Joan Tronto’s concept of ‘caring with’.

I also imagine David will have some useful thoughts on attachment to place , therapeutic environments and the development of self awareness

Cultivating Commoners

- Even as their interaction with this particular commons is temporary – does it help cultivate a commoner subjectivity as the youth care for it?
- What might the implications of this be in becoming *homines curans* and the future of Christchurch and elsewhere?

Where to Next?

- Youth workshop
- Data analysis
- Video making
- CEROI tool development
- Report
- Articles!

Acknowledgements

