



Cultivating commoners: Infrastructures and subjectivities for a postcapitalist counter-city

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate how infrastructure and care shape commoner subjectivities. In our research into an urban youth farm in Aotearoa New Zealand, we heard and observed profound tales of growth and transformation among youth participants. Not only were our interviewees narrating stories of individual transformation (of themselves and others), but they also spoke of transformations in the way they engaged with the world around them, including the land and garden and its many species and ecological systems, the food system more generally, the wider community and their co-workers. Such transformations were both individual and collective, having more in common with the collective caring subject *homines curans* than the autonomous, rational work-ready subject of *homo economicus*. Using postcapitalist theory on commons, commoning and subjectivity, we argue that these socio-affective encounters with more-than-human commons enabled collective, caring commoner subjectivities to emerge and to be cultivated through collective care in place. We suggest that the commons can be thought of as an infrastructure of care for the counter-city, providing the conditions for the emergence and cultivation of collective caring urban subjects.

1. Introduction

“What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where everything means the same thing?”

Sedgwick (1993, p. 6)

“The rupture of the earthquakes was seen to create both material and imagined spaces in which the rethinking of the city could occur. The gathering of people in short-term vacant sites enabled those who otherwise felt excluded from the rebuild process to join in with informal and often unstructured practices and performances that counterposed the blueprint being imposed by central powers. In these activity spaces, there was an unambiguous permission to experiment, to take ownership (however small) of an emerging art of the possible, and of the acting out of potential...”

Cloke et al. (2023, p. 139)

What does the idea of the counter-city offer us in thinking about the proliferation of temporary and longer-term commoning activities that

emerged in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in Ōtautahi Christchurch? While it is true that many of the processes of the rebuild of the city reinforced hierarchies and neoliberal ideologies of management, spatial planning and economic growth (Amore et al., 2017), it is also true that the city reinvented itself from the bottom up in a variety of ways: through the arts (Cloke et al., 2023), through new forms of planning partnership with Indigenous authorities (Thompson-Fawcett, 2022) and communities (Cretney, 2019), and through extensive community-led place-making and temporary commoning (Dombroski et al., 2022; Dombroski, Diprose, & Boles, 2019). The concept of the counter-city allows us to pull together the transformative and radical elements of the city of Ōtautahi Christchurch, and to hone in on those “richest junctures” (Sedgwick, 1993) where postcapitalist possibilities might be already emerging (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016).

Such a counter-city is not a fully formed alternative and does not exclude understanding the city as deeply affected by neoliberal strategies. Instead it is an eclectic collection of prefigurative interventions that invite us as residents and researchers to imagine and enact a different

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kind of city. In this sense, a counter-city is postcapitalist, in that it shifts our imaginaries away from capitalocentric notions of the city as always and necessarily capitalist (Anderson, 2020), enabling new visions beyond capitalism to infuse our analysis and sense of the city.¹ In Christchurch, prefigurative interventions were part of a “post-earthquake vibe”, imbued with “the potential to counterpose, if not counterveil, the neoliberal affects of the city” (Cloke & Conradson, 2018, p. 369). Many of the kinds of prefigurative interventions we have researched were temporary (Dombroski, Diprose, & Boles, 2019), and are sometimes understood only as a transitional blip that would eventually be unnecessary once civic infrastructures had been restored (Cloke & Conradson, 2018). But our work with community and transitional organisations over the last decade shows that this has not been the case. From quirky pop-up gardens to shared roadside libraries, from social art interventions to festivals in transitional architecture, from dance spaces to pop-up collective soup and pizza nights, from bike repair workshops to urban farms, an eclectic array of interventions were not only ‘gap-filling’ but also reorienting the city and its residents towards more-than-just-capitalist ways of being together in the city (For more examples, images and case studies, see Dombroski et al., 2023; Dombroski et al., 2022).

We thus understand the post-earthquake interventions of hundreds of community groups as something of a counter-city of postcapitalist possibility, where “previously hidden but now emergent subjectivities” have enacted a “different way of doing things” (Cloke & Conradson, 2018, p. 363). This counter-city of possibility includes postcapitalist *infrastructures* (the different collective supports for the city) and postcapitalist *subjectivities* (emergent subjectivities doing or experiencing things differently). To be clear, the term ‘postcapitalist’ does not refer to a coherent system of economy and governance that comes after capitalism is finished. We use postcapitalist in the sense that JK Gibson-Graham have developed it: as a lens through which to analyse places as already always more-than-just-capitalist (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). Gibson-Graham understand capitalist class processes as being just one class process present in place, with other class processes being present simultaneously – some of which are emancipatory, and some of which are differently exploitative or oppressive (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Gibson-Graham et al., 2000). In this sense, while capitalist practices are also present in the city, the idea is to attend to the generative diversity of other economic practices (particularly the non-exploitative ones) rather than seeing them as always “at the interstices, in experimental enclaves, or scattered and fragmented in the landscape” (Gibson-Graham, 2000, p. 102). The concept of a postcapitalist counter-city is useful as a way of gathering and naming the otherwise scattered fragments of the non-exploitative, prefigurative practices and interventions into something more visible, coherent and reproducible. The postcapitalist counter-city is one that is already here, simultaneously hidden and emergent.

So what might the infrastructures of a postcapitalist counter-city encompass? We follow Emma Power and Kathleen Mee to conceptualise infrastructure “not as pre-figured objects or necessarily public, capital goods, but as dynamic patterns that are the foundation of social

organization” (Power & Mee, 2020, p. 485). In post-earthquake Christchurch, many such patterns of organisation were disrupted and reconfigured, both materially and socially (Cloke et al., 2023; Cretney, 2019). In the gaps left, however, some interesting counter-city infrastructures emerged in the form of temporary commons and commoning practices providing services and reconfiguring spaces from private to shared, or from open access to cared for. For the most part, this work was not undertaken or organised by formal governance structures but was community led. That is, groups of people drew on values and ethics of care and collectivity to provide labour and spaces for the benefit of the wider community. This is where we see the emergence of previously somewhat obscured subjectivities of the postcapitalist counter-city.

What do we mean by a postcapitalist subjectivity? We use an expansive, decentred and embodied notion of subjectivity (Healy et al., 2020), where subjectivity refers to “one’s sense of what it means and feels like to exist within a specific place, time, or set of relationships” (Morales & Harris, 2014, p. 706). This sense of self can shift and change over time. A postcapitalist subjectivity is one that shifts away from *homo economicus*, the ‘rational economic man’ and towards *homines curans*, the ‘collective caring subject’ (Tronto, 2017, p. 27). It is a sense of self that encompasses more than just self-interested economic rationality. Indeed, for postcapitalist researchers, *homo economicus* rarely exists ‘in the wild’ but is carefully nurtured into being by neoliberal processes of schooling, consumption and the extension of self-interested ‘logics of choice’ into all kinds of spaces such as healthcare (Mol, 2008). Different communities draw on different origin stories to orient our subjectivities. For Māori, we/they are born into an extensive genealogy of human and more-than-human ancestors and relations in which collective care is part of what it means to be *tangata whenua*, people of the land (Yates, 2021). For others, the origins of each of us as helpless babies implies the potential for *homines curans* subjectivities, since “we take our first breath already implicated within the relationships of care that being-in-community entails” (McKinnon et al., 2021, p. 31). In the context of the postcapitalist counter-city we are interested in the subjectivity of the “commoner” – a person who is actively part of a commoning community caring for a shared space, knowledge or resource. As such, the commons infrastructure of the counter-city is not just the *result* of postcapitalist subjects acting in common-interest, but also helps to *reproduce* and *nurture* such commoner subjectivities. Neera Singh asks us to consider this reproduction seriously:

What are the conditions that foster affective relations between commons and commoners? How do people become commoners and imbibe norms that foster other-regarding behaviour and support collective action to govern the commons?

Singh (2017, p. 754)

In what follows, we thus consider the question with regards to the production and reproduction of postcapitalist counter-city infrastructures and subjectivities, focusing on a study of the urban farm *Cultivate* in central Ōtautahi Christchurch. We continue with the idea of commons as “infrastructures for troubled times” (Berlant, 2016, p. 393) while also being sites where “alternate subjectivities for alternate worlds” might be present and cultivated (Singh, 2017, p. 762). We flesh out the specificities of a commons-infrastructure and a commoner-subjectivity, paying attention to how both are produced and reproduced through relationships forming community in and with a specific place. We show how the commons-infrastructure of *Cultivate* provides an example in which farmers, social workers and young people, formed a sense of ‘we’, emerging as *homines curans* through care given and care received.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we introduce the case study *Cultivate*, then in the following section, we examine the features of this urban farm that make it a commons with a more-than-human community (Miller, 2020). We then use ethnographic and interview data to show how the commons of *Cultivate* creates the aforementioned “conditions that foster affective relations between

¹ Admittedly, the history of the term counter-city is not necessarily used quite in this way: it was used by Michel Foucault (1995) to describe the temporary plague city and the measures of social control thus implemented, by Derek Gregory (2008) to describe the suspended city-life in Baghdad under American occupation, and by Chris Ealham (2014) to describe the anarchist counter-infrastructure set up by the “Spanish-anarcho syndicalists”, initially in urban Spain and then later in exile in France. The infrastructures set up by the anarchists described by Ealham had their own municipal decision-making structures, their own libraries and schools, their own media and more, all collectively run and separate from the Spanish (and later, French) state. The examples we use in Christchurch are quite different. But we think the term counter-city has use here in thinking through together community-led responses to breakdown of business-as-usual.

commons and commoners” (Singh, 2017, p. 754) and transforms young people's subjectivities with reference to this more-than-human commons. In the last section we discuss the implications of commons-infrastructure and commoner-subjectivity for a postcapitalist counter-city and future urban transformations.

2. Cultivate Christchurch

Our research began through a chance visit to Cultivate by Gradon and Kelly, on a drizzling, grey day in 2016. We were walking around Christchurch, visiting sites that had been activated as urban commons for another project (Dombroski, Diprose, & Boles, 2019). We walked past what looked like a community garden on the corner of Peterborough and Manchester Streets. It featured repurposed bathtubs, pallets, a kitchen sink and open rows of vegetables, as well as plantings under cloche tunnels. As we peered through the fence, two men dressed in gardening gear emerged from behind a row of shrubs. We got talking and found out that one was a social worker and the other a permaculture farmer. The men described how the garden worked: collecting food scraps from local restaurants, processing them on the Peterborough site using worm farms, composting (by mixing with waste woodchips dropped off by arborists), and promoting direct decomposition so as to build up the soil on what was previously a gravel demolition site. Lifting the covers on the three large bathtubs, the staff member revealed a mass of worms, processing food scraps to vermicast and vermijuce, the latter collected via the plughole of the bath into a bucket positioned underneath. There were rows of green leafy vegetables growing in the soil that had been made from waste, fertilised by vermijuce, and which were now ready to be harvested, washed and delivered by e-bike to cafes and restaurants in the city.

By processing waste into vegetables and soil, the farm was part of a counter-city food supply infrastructure. The farm also aimed to expand mental health care provision for youth. As the social worker explained, mental health services following the Christchurch earthquakes were under significant pressure. Some teens were waiting eight weeks for urgent appointments. Even when appointments were available, the environment of a counselling room and face to face talk therapy was not always conducive to positive outcomes. In contrast, on the farm young people worked alongside the staff, allowing for more spontaneous conversations that touched on mental health in less direct ways. Young people were able to care for soil and plants on site, as well as their fellow workers and volunteers, in a low-pressure work environment that was beneficial to their wellbeing.

Over the following year, we assembled a research team and discussed a possible collaboration with Cultivate staff. The resulting project had two stages. In the first, we used ethnographic and interview methods to explore the organisation, its people and sites, and spent time listening to youth and staff. In the second stage we presented our findings back to Cultivate, and worked with its staff and youth interns to develop an assessment tool based on their values and goals (see Dombroski, Diprose, Conradson, et al., 2019; Dombroski, Diprose, et al., 2018; Healy et al., 2019).²

At the time of the research, Cultivate operated two urban farms in Christchurch (with a city centre location in Peterborough Street and a suburban location in Halswell Road) and employed several administrative, farm and social work staff. The city centre farm was situated on privately-owned earthquake-cleared land which was leased on a 30-day

rolling term. Cultivate interns collected food waste in Christchurch's inner-city, using an electric bicycle and trailer to pick up bins in a part of the city where the council organic waste collection was not available (see Fig. 1). Interns contributed to the composting and worm farming, as well as vegetable growing, harvesting and delivery. The interns came from a variety of backgrounds and participated for different reasons. Some had connections to social welfare and the justice system, while others were looking for a supportive environment to prepare themselves for life beyond school. Volunteers from the wider Christchurch community and beyond also regularly worked on the farms.

In our ethnographic work, we observed the interactions between youth and staff, and between human ‘cultivators’ and their environment (including the nonhuman species on site, the food they were growing, washing, eating, delivering and composting, and the community of volunteers supporting the enterprise). Kelly worked alongside the community volunteers and youth for a half day per week during 2017, and paid particular attention to the embodied and place-based aspects of the work. This included using a composting toilet made of recycled materials; the sunburn and sweat associated with working outdoors; the feeling of power and strength in work boots with shovel in hand; the delicate focus of work involving transplanting baby plants; the fascination and disgust associated with the writhing mass of worms in tubs; the rich aroma of composting waste; the sounds of birds, cars, sirens and bees; youth “shit-talking” each other; and washing dishes outdoors after a meal. In talking to staff, some described how much youth enjoyed the physicality and relatively immediate results of their work. They could look back on the day and see what they had done: the pile of woodchips spread onto a series of pathways, compost layered up, a row of empty bins washed and ready to return, a row of plants transplanted, a pile of greens washed and packaged for sale. Paying attention – as a researcher and a worker – to the satisfaction derived from work *completed* was an unusual feeling for Kelly, then mainly working as an academic and a mother of young children. The affective and embodied nature of this farm labour was part of the healing and learning Cultivate intended for interns and volunteers. Such wellbeing work was about noticing one's body and feelings, and it encouraged the development of attachments and relationships to places of care and security. Because of this, we



Fig. 1. Cultivate infographic depicting its relationship with inner-city restaurants.

Source: Courtesy of Cultivate Christchurch and Bailey Peryman.

² Ethnography was conducted over one year by Kelly Dombroski. Interviews were carried out by David Conradson, Gradon Diprose and Kelly Dombroski. David conducted interviews with youth, with support from Kelly. Gradon conducted interviews with staff, with support from Kelly. Workshops and tool development involved Stephen Healy, Kelly Dombroski, Gradon Diprose and David Conradson. The project was approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (ref. 2017/143).

wondered about Neera Singh's question again. Could places like Cultivate provide “the conditions that foster affective relations between commons and commoners” (2017, p. 754)?

3. Cultivate as commons

The term “commons” refers to land, resources or spaces (including cultural resources) collectively managed by a group instead of individuals or the state (Waliuzzaman & Alam, 2022). The way in which commons are understood has changed over time. For example, Ostrom (1990) emphasised the rationality of commons: she found successful commons have clear rules and institutions created and enforced by the community, with high participation and cooperation. Other approaches frame commons as potentially revolutionary in an economic and public space sense, but also focus mainly on human actors (Harvey, 2015; Huron, 2018). Commons are thus often understood as something humans manage and as a form of property relations. These depictions of commons have been critiqued, however, with scholars such as Altmann (2020, p. 88) arguing that “common goods go beyond the idea of property and the implied opposition of public and private” and that the social function of resources is as significant as their ownership and use (see also Bollier & Helfrich, 2014). Indigenous scholars similarly note that the shared use of resources is about more than ownership; it can be part of kinship relationships with land, Country, whenua and all the beings that inhabit it (Yates, 2021). It is these more grounded understandings of commons – as a set of sharing relationships with both humans and nonhumans – that we explore here through Cultivate.

While the sites upon which Cultivate operated were privately owned, they had been brought into a commons-type relationship of shared use and benefit. Legally, the signing of the vacant land into a 30-day rolling lease enabled this. But it is more than a legal arrangement. The Cultivate founders noted that the legal owner of at least one of the sites was interested in supporting their work through making the land available for their use after an old house on the property was destroyed after the earthquakes. In environmental terms, Cultivate entered into a regenerative relationship with the land, creating tonnes of soil and other life over their time there, through hours of care and maintenance. While food grown on the site was sold, this was a relationship based on circular regeneration rather than extractive and linear production. Organic waste from restaurants in the city and tree mulch from trees around the city were returned to compost to make new soil, rather than landfilled in anaerobic purgatory.

Our understanding of the shift from private land to commons at Cultivate draws on Gibson-Graham et al.'s (2013) commons identikit framework. This describes commons as a set of sharing relationships, focusing on *processes* of commoning rather than seeking to define whether something is ‘truly’ a commons or not (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). The process of commoning involves bringing something that has either had private use and benefit rights, or open access with free-for-all rights, into a different kind of relationship where access is shared and wide, use is negotiated by a community, and care and responsibility are performed by community members (see Fig. 2: The commons identikit). As such the kind of ownership is not the primary indicator of whether something is commoned – property is ‘unbundled’ (Morrow & Martin, 2019), although commonly owned land such as Indigenous lands are much more likely to be (or have been) operating as commons. Other ‘commons’ are impossible to own. For example, Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) provide examples of commoning the air: beginning with the coal town of Newcastle, Australia, then describing the global agreements surrounding protection of the ozone layer as commoning, and then imagining a future where we might common the atmosphere to combat climate change (see also Dombroski, Healy, & McKinnon, 2018). In each instance, they seek to identify who has access, use, benefits, care, responsibility and ownership of the thing being commoned.

This framework enables us to think carefully about the commoning work that Cultivate is doing, since it is performed on ostensibly private

land (see Table 1). The community enterprise is legally a charitable trust with a board, and **access** to the community enterprise's farms was shared and wide (including community volunteers), but with some structure to ensure the safety of young people. Importantly, the community is a more-than-human community and included the plants, birds, insects, microbes and more that **used** the commoned space in both sites. The **benefits** accrued to all these, including youth wellbeing but also staff livelihoods, worms and birds and microbes habitats and plant lives. **Care** was performed by this more-than-human community, regenerating what was previously gravel into soil and reinvigorating teens experiencing difficulties. **Responsibility** was taken up by the board and community, with increasing levels of responsibility as the staff and interns became more integrated into the commoning community (Table 1). Cultivate's work with youth and permaculture farming could not be achieved without collective responsibility for the enterprise as a commons.

It is not only the land that has been commoned. There has also been a shift from a culture of individualised blame for mental health or employment failings to one of collective care. In Cultivate's framing, youth mental health, unemployment and insecurity are not seen as an individual failing of young people and their families. Cultivate takes **responsibility** for youth mental health and their wellbeing more generally, while inviting youth to be part of the collective of care – not just for themselves, although self-care is important – but for each other too. As such, a second commons is also observable: one where **access** to a mental health and wellbeing ‘service’ is shared and wide, where ‘services’ are **used** by those who become part of the organisation as interns, volunteers and staff. Here, **benefits** accrue to the youth themselves, staff, and the wider community and families. **Care** is collectivised and performed by a more-than-human community of staff, teens, volunteers, microbes, sunshine, hormones, practices, relations with Earth others, environments and more. And here, mental health is not owned or provided by any single individual, but collectivised as a reciprocal more-than-human relation of care.

Our work with Cultivate has given us insights into how urban shifts occur, particularly those aimed at prefiguring postcapitalist city futures. The two shifts discussed already are *from private land to commons* and *from individualised blame to collective care*. These shifts are about commoning land and space and collective responsibility for youth mental health. The final two shifts, which are about the changes in subjectivity necessary to become commoners in urban places, were *from individuals to commoners* and *from human to more-than-human communities*.

In the next section we explore the latter two shifts, describing a theory of change for postcapitalist counter-city research and action. Demonstrating shifts in subjectivity is not easy: some researchers identify moments of “swerve” where new subjectivities emerge unexpectedly or briefly (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Others identify practices that embed and nurture subjectivity in ways counter to the forces of neo-liberalisation (Singh, 2017). In the case of the commoners emerging in the community of Cultivate, we do not claim to have observed a fully formed counter-city subjectivity, but rather one that is “experimental, piecemeal and provisional” (Healy, 2022, p. 4).

4. Cultivating commoners

In early 2018, we interviewed 14 staff and youth, including 6 interns and 8 staff (some contractors or part-time). At the time, this comprised everyone active on the urban farms except one person who declined. The interns, who were between 16 and 20 years old, included five men and one woman. We asked general questions about their work at Cultivate and the things that they had noticed about working there. When appropriate, we asked if they had noticed any changes in themselves during their time at Cultivate. The goal was to listen to what the interns and staff had to say about their own internal states as well as physical health, without pushing them into certain kinds of answers. We also asked questions that invited reflection on what they thought worked and

Access	Use	Benefit	Care	Responsibility	Ownership
Narrow	Restricted by owner	Private	Performed by owner or employee	Assumed by owner	Private individual Private collective State
Shared and wide	Negotiated by a community	Widely distributed to community and beyond	Performed by community members	Assumed by community	Private individual Private collective State Open access
Unrestricted	Open and unregulated	Finders keepers	None	None	Open access State

Fig. 2. The commons identikit.

Note: The shaded area indicates the criteria for identifying a common. ‘Commoning’ refers to the process of bringing either private or open-access property and resources into common access, use, benefit, care and responsibility.

Source: Adapted from Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) under creative commons licence.

Table 1

Commons identi-kit for Cultivate's community enterprise.

	Commons of Cultivate Community Enterprise					
	Access	Use	Benefit	Care	Responsibility	Land/property/legal relationships
Characteristics of a commons	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)
Cultivate Community Enterprise	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, others.	Privately owned, temporary access

Source: Authors (after Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).

didn't work in the organisation. For example, we asked “If there was anything you could change here, what would it be?” and “If you had a friend who asked you about doing an internship here, what would you say?”

In the interviews, the young people articulated deep care for the world they lived in, describing their transformative experiences in reflective ways. Riley,³ for example, spoke of a passion for a different kind of society in the face of planetary ecological issues:

Everyone says one person can't change the world. They're probably right. But one person can start a change. I wholeheartedly want to start that change. I think the way the world turns at the moment is a little bit messed up, and there's a lot of stuff in life that's unneeded and unnecessary.

He later added that:

We're going to have to really dig deep into ourselves to figure out what's right and what's actually going to help each other.

In contrast, Casey reflected on the more personal challenge of joining

the organisation as an intern after some bad experiences at home and school:

I've never had this before. Like, this is different, quite daunting and stuff ... But what I did here was try and turn up every day. Like just try and turn up every day, because I know what I have done. It's affected what I can do now or tomorrow or in a week's time.

Both personal and planetary wellbeing were interwoven throughout our conversations with the interns. We developed a summary of the young people's experiences (Dombroski, Diprose, Conradson, et al., 2019)⁴ which highlighted the challenges and changes they had faced, and how their sense of themselves and their relationships with others had developed through Cultivate. They described social changes, emotional changes, physical changes, and changes in knowledge and skills. These changes were part of their response to the environment of Cultivate, and also highlight the practices through which new subjectivities became possible.

³ We have used gender neutral names and pronouns to preserve participant anonymity.

⁴ We have since had the interviews transcribed, and Kelly analysed them according to these and newer themes using NVivo software.

4.1. Social changes

Hayden described a number of social activities that were meaningful to interns, including the weekly shared lunch cooked from vegetables they had grown and harvested. Others mentioned bonding through teamwork, and the interaction with community members who volunteered and lunched with them on Thursdays. As he recounted:

We'll be tired because we're working all day in the sun, but it's still all close and we just get on ... 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.

Hayden also recalled some social changes that had followed from observing one of the staff:

One of the previous boss people that we had, he used to ... 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.

4.2. Emotional changes

Others reflected on their emotional experiences, particularly around emotional self-regulation, talking things through with others, and healing from addictions. As one intern reflected with reference to another workmate:

We were both on a pretty difficult path when we both started here. It's helped us both. 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.

One of the staff was hired for their farming skills but attended some training on working with youth. They learned about the way that trauma affects people's ability to regulate their emotions when overwhelmed. They reflected:

What you're trying to do is talk to the emotional stuff and really acknowledge it and then trying to bring in and help with the connections between different situations, and trying to get them to then move from the emotional path they're in, and start using a little bit of logic. That [workshop] was epic, and that was half a day, and just all the stuff that I was like, "oh cool, okay, I can see a million places where this is a thing".

Several of the young people noted the benefits of focusing on specific tasks, such as completing a row of planting, or shovelling a pile of woodchips, or washing a set amount of bins. They reported the satisfaction of seeing completed work, and the confidence this instilled in them for facing future tasks. Others referred to the meditative state of flow or focus that a task could inspire. As Morgan described:

If I've had a lot going on, if I do that kind of job, it kind of gets me to focus on that more and just focusing on the little seedlings and putting them in. Yeah, just feeling the surroundings of it and, yeah.

4.3. Physical changes

For many, the changes they had experienced connected across their body and emotions. Current research shows that sunshine and vitamin D, getting one's 'hands in the soil' (and the associated contact with microbes), eating a diverse range of plants, social interaction and physical activity all have a positive impact on physical and mental health (Stuart-Smith, 2021). In this area, Riley reflected on their diet:

Before I came here I was really not into my veggies and fruits, but since I've actually been here I'm starting to eat quite a lot of veggies. It's quite surprised me ... I feel a lot better ... the mental health is just

... [I] feel better emotionally and just feel as if I've got more energy to do stuff.

Hayden enjoyed the physicality of hard work on the farm, including digging compost and lifting heavy loads. Hayden explained that "we end up turning the work that we do here into [a] fitness [programme] and [discuss] how we work our bodies and our muscles when we do certain stuff."

4.4. Knowledge and skill changes

Finally, other youth interns reflected on the intellectual growth and the new skills they had learned, which had developed their confidence and ability. One intern described to us how to make a "shit lasagne" of compost to get the best result, saying "it's pretty interesting when you start to learn about the new ways of decomposing waste instead of just chucking it in the bins and just never knowing where it goes to". Some interns discussed the commercial and industrial food system, including the problems with "all the unneeded chemicals in the food", and others mentioned their desires for a world where "everyone is equal" with "not so much hierarchy".

The social, emotional, physical and knowledge changes in subjectivity were often linked. For example, many of the youth mentioned learning how to eat breakfast and bring their own lunch, as well as how to pay attention to how they felt both physically and emotionally during the day. Completing a full day's work was initially challenging for some interns, and some of the farm staff struggled to accept the reality of the teenagers who were new to working, particularly when produce orders for local cafes and restaurants had to be filled. In our interviews with staff, we noted the conscious efforts staff made to integrate learning and work experience with the youth, and their care to not expect too much, too soon. Staff also thought carefully about the negative structures and people which had shaped the young people's subjectivities prior to their arrival at Cultivate. They sought to make space and create norms that helped young people become more aware of themselves and others.

If these social, emotional, physical and knowledge changes form part of a new subjectivity, a new "we" where the individual and the collective "intra-act" (Barad, 2003), what is the 'infrastructure' that sustains and enables them? In this line of thinking, we could say Cultivate was building an "infrastructure of care" (Alam & Houston, 2020; Lopes et al., 2018) around the young people's time at the farm. This included some direct instruction, but also creating a space where self-learning could happen in and with place. Jordan, a part-time farm staff, described how when a young intern was not coping with work, they would leave them alone, while keeping the relationship open:

I can be like, cool man, I'm doing this, here's how I'm doing this, this is what we're trying to achieve overall, and it would be cool as if you want to help me do that. ... I'm going to keep doing this and you can go and have a moment over there, or do whatever you do.

Interns would then sometimes sit and cool off in the shade of a large tree, lie out in the grass and look at the sky, or even continue to have a bit of an outburst but with less intensity. This attentiveness to the needs of the interns for space and processing time was evident throughout the organisation, even when it presented challenges to meeting productivity related targets. Some of the youth commented on this during our unrecorded workshop discussions, noting that just as a plant requires care and good conditions (soil, water and warmth) to flourish, so too did they. And that it was not the plant's fault if it was struggling in a difficult environment or with difficult conditions, as it was doing its best to adapt. The affective intra-action with plants was one way that youth made sense of their variable achievements and challenges, mental health and growth.

In this way, Cultivate offered a form of collective non-stigmatising care, which was significant given the burgeoning demand for mental health services in Canterbury and elsewhere in New Zealand

(Canterbury District Health Board, 2018). The young people at Cultivate spoke of positive changes in their wellbeing and mental health, and of their own commitments to helping others. These developments were enabled through participation in a community of care, and involvement in a place that was attentive to their needs, but which also functioned as a working farm that had to keep running (no matter how they were feeling or acting on any particular day). By collectivising some of the care for the young people of Canterbury, Cultivate worked to expand and amplify the capacity of the somewhat stretched Christchurch community in the aftermath of the earthquakes. Cultivate also worked to prefigure a different kind of city and urban infrastructure where the wellbeing of young people and the land, rather than just productivity, was at the centre of investment and decision-making. In this way, Cultivate operated as a ‘commons’, a shared resource used to benefit a collective of people, with a governance structure and norms that ensured mutual benefits. As Berlant has suggested, the commons can be an infrastructure for troubling times (Berlant, 2016), that points to “the difficulty of convening a world conjointly” yet also offers us “incitements to imagining a livable provisional life” (Berlant, 2016, p. 295).

5. Urban shifts: from individuals to commoner communities, from human to more-than-human commons

The case of Cultivate can also inform understandings of how people become commoners. To address this, we firstly summarise our understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and social change. Like Singh (2017), we follow a poststructuralist understanding of subject formation, where subjectivities are part of intra-active and two-way relationships with the societal structures that shape them. While people are shaped by the institutional and infrastructural environments surrounding them, Butler (1990) argues we also have the ability to challenge and change these wider norms and expectations by performing our identities in new ways. This perspective recognises that individuals have the capacity for compassion and care towards others, and that these values can be incorporated into action. As Butler (1990) argues, however, we cannot remake and rework our subjectivities simply by desiring to do so. Most of us are so embedded, embodied and habituated into certain ways of being, that we must pay attention to the conditions of possibility that allow commoning - or collective, caring - subjectivities to arise (Healy et al., 2020).

Gibson-Graham (2006, p. 16) suggest that it is sometimes at the level of the body where a momentary “swerve” towards something new comes out of an embodied experience that disrupts usual habits. In their work in ‘depressed’ regional economies in Australia and the US, they describe research moments where bodies swerved towards different ways of being. A man who understood himself as victim of retrenchment momentarily registered himself as a body capable of caring and giving in the local community (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 52). A group discussing the pain of retrenchment and the power of community in regional Massachusetts “appeared to momentarily relinquish hard-edged identities associated with predictable and entrenched political views and make overtures to each other in a mixture of relief, disbelief, and recognition” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 137). Such swerves are “momentary glimmers” (p. 16), and do not constitute new subjects forming. They are something like what Dikeç (2005, p. 173) describes as a “political moment”, involving an interruption or transgression – when individuals or a group challenge the nature of the relationship through which they are positioned, when those who are ‘unaccounted for’ speak.

Drawing on William Connolly, Francisco Varela and Buddhist philosophy, Gibson-Graham formulate a theory of subject formation and transformation beginning with the fact that we *already know how to care*, but arguing that this embodied know-how is often suppressed by the “street-fighter mentality of watchful self-interest” (Varela, 1999, p. 66). Thus, embodied practices of self-cultivation and environments that nurture such cultivation are important for transformations in subjectivity.

The narratives of change that emerged through our research reflect both these embodied practices of self-cultivation *and* the nurturing environment of the commons-infrastructure. For example, Morgan recognised which activities calmed and helped regulate their emotions, Casey did the hard work of ‘turning up’, and Cultivate staff recognised the need to step back. Each of these moments reflect embodied practices of self-cultivation. Here the nurturing environment includes the farm itself, the plants, insects and microbes, and the non-punitive work norms and shared lunch routines. What emerged through participants’ narratives was the importance of both the self-cultivation and the wider environment that supported these ‘swerves’ in self-cultivation. Unlike traditional talk-therapy, Cultivate provides a wider collective of care and therapeutic environment that shifts the focus away from individual self-cultivation, recognising the important role that place plays. Acknowledging the shift from individual to commoner that Cultivate helped foster is not to deny individuality, but rather to emphasise the significance of relations of care beyond the self. This was the opposite of *homo economicus*, stuck in his wilful march of ecological destruction and hypothetical ‘tragedy of the commons’. The stories from Cultivate suggest that subjects already desired something different, and that they just needed a supportive environment to ‘swerve’ towards it. To use Singh’s terms, commons and commoners are co-constituted through intersubjective communication and affective relations (Singh, 2017). In this way, Cultivate is part of a counter-city where people are already acting and emerging as care-full economic subjects, enabled by the supportive infrastructures around them.

The shift in subjectivity from a human-centred one to a more-than-human community is increasingly recognised as necessary in times of climate disruption as a fundamental platform for cultural change (Healy et al., 2020; Yates, 2021). In order to be a commoner in the 21st century, we must all be commoners with Earth others – the myriad of other beings and Earth processes which also enable us to live (Singh, 2017). Increasingly, Western science has begun a shift to recognise that even a human is not fully human but are themselves a hybrid more-than-community of many kinds of microbes that does not just “end at its skin” (Miller, 2020, p. 404). But this shift in thinking is unnecessary to the many groups of humans who have long understood that community is more-than-human, where indeed kinship with Earth others is genealogically documented. Indigenous Māori express familial relationships to land and more-than-human, with Ngāi Tahu researcher Christine Kenney (Kenney, 2019, p. 375) calling this “a socio-ecological genealogy” which “imposes relational obligation on Māori to enact guardianship roles and responsibilities to ensure the well-being of the inhabitants and the broader environment (lands, rivers and seas)” where “these obligations devolve to tribal communities with historical ties to regional lands”. Shifting from human to more-than-human subjectivities involves rejecting the separations of Cartesian dualisms in favour of an ontological model of human and non-human entities – fish, birds, trees, microbes, atmospheres, cryospheres, seas, landscapes – all existing in relation as kin (Yates, 2018). In Aotearoa New Zealand, more widespread appreciation of the relational concepts of whakapapa, mauri (life-field or life-force) and mauri ora (life-field vitality) can rupture unrealistic modernist ontological models and help catalyse systemic shifts in urban imaginaries and materialisations (Yates, 2010; Yates, 2022). This more-than-human and Indigenous counter-city is already present in Aotearoa urban areas, held together by ties of kinship and interdependence and by practices of care and connection (Thompson-Fawcett, 2022; Thompson-Fawcett et al., 2019).⁵ In this counter-city, it is again care, not competition, that *precedes* humans, operating an

⁵ In recent times, as concerns for cultural and social justice and ecological care have become more mainstream, this kind of relational thinking has become more widespread in Aotearoa, including among non-Māori. See the recent report *Me-Tū-a-Uru: For a flourishing and abundant environment* <https://www.metuauru.co.nz/>.

ethical and empathetic condition that supports living beings (see also Cushman, 2006; de Waal, 2008). Part of the shift from individual to commoner and from human to more-than-human is thus intentionally drawing on the narratives, knowledges and relationships already present, and furthering nurturing these through practices of commoning and collective care. As Singh (2017) puts it, to challenge “the conception of humans as *homo economicus*” we must recognise that “we are not only hardwired to maximise utility but are also driven by a desire to care, give, and be valued as givers” (p. 760).

Cultivate's sites and spaces do just this – forming part of an urban counter-infrastructure of care that nurtures different kinds of subjectivities, ones more attuned to their own mental health, the health and wellbeing of others, and the health and wellbeing of the soil, the food system, the planet and its ecosystems and species. Cultivate youth are part of a more-than-human community of multispecies and intra-human more-than-human communities, with compost and microbes. In later developments since our research Cultivate has pursued deeper connection to the values of *mana whenua* (the people of the land, in this case, Ngāi Tūāhuriri), including *whanaungatanga* (relationships and family), *manaakitanga* (hospitality and care), *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship), *mana rangatahi* (youth empowerment) (McKnight et al., 2021). These have emerged as the organisation has taken further steps as part of becoming an organisation embedded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), which promises Māori sovereignty and partnership in governance) and responsive to the cultural needs of Māori rangatahi (young people) with kinship ties to the land.⁶ We return to Singh's (2017) provocation: that caring for a specific place in community is part of “becoming a commoner” (p. 751). For the young people at Cultivate, it was their attachments to place – and the myriad human and more-than-human elements that assemble there – which helped foster more-than-human commoning (see also Alam & Houston, 2020).

This section has discussed the small, prefigurative urban shifts present in Cultivate's work from a theoretical perspective: the shift from private land to commons, from individualised blame to collective care, from individuals to commoners, and from human to more-than-human communities. The process of commoning is explained through the “commons identikit” framework, which involves shared access, negotiated use, and community care and responsibility. In traversing these topics, we have shown how clarifying the rules of use, access, benefit, care and responsibility—and figuring out how this commons-sociality can be sustained through time – is an infrastructural concern. What Cultivate as a commons infrastructure holds together is a space of collective subjectivation. Our account has illuminated the role of practices, place and non-human life in nurturing different subjectivities. It has also shown how caring for a specific place in community is an essential aspect of becoming a commoner. As Singh puts it in the context of her research work in the forest in India,

The self that emerges through these affective socio-natural interactions differs from the atomized individual subject of Western thought. This self includes a sensibility and concern for the wellbeing of others with whom it is relationally entangled.

Singh (2017, p. 760)

Similarly, in the context of Cultivate, we can see a vision of the self not as an autonomous subject acting on the world, but a relational emergence responding to the world, even in the context of a Westernised and colonised city. When the ‘world’ around this becoming-subject is a commons characterised by nurturance and care, then the subject becomes someone different. What remains for us as researchers, humans, and dwellers on this planet is to proliferate the kinds of affective encounters, communities and infrastructures of care that places such as Cultivate offer. One way to do this is to participate in them and to write

about them, as we have here.

6. Conclusion: dispersing seeds

Cultivate in many ways functioned as safe space for individuation, providing the conditions for people to becoming more fully themselves, as a subject who desires and is capable of connection with others. The relational emergence of the self, entangled with others and in commons of care, is conceptualisation of self that has potential for political thought and practice, and resonance with Indigenous approaches to self and subjectivity (Singh, 2017). In our research with Cultivate, this relational emergence was evident in the stories of transformation and growth that youth interns relayed to us through interviews and in casual conversations over the year of research. Cultivators narrated stories of individual transformation (themselves and others), as well as transformations in the way they engaged with the world around them, including; the land, garden and its many species and ecological systems, the wider food system, co-workers at Cultivate, and the wider community. Secondly, Cultivate provided a collective infrastructure of care that supported the wellbeing of human and more-than-human communities. It was striking how the farm transformed a rocky vacant space into a functioning community of microbes, insects, plants, humans and more. As such it nurtured a collective ‘we’, a more-than-human community better able to care for themselves and each other. The transformation of both individuals and the place suggests an interdependent collective change in affective relations between commons and commoners.

In 2020, Cultivate reported that 35 interns had come through their care since 2016, many of whom are likely now a little closer to a post-capitalist *homines curans* than the autonomous *homo economicus*. In 2021, the organisation underwent some big changes. A number of core members left, including key farming staff, to pursue other related projects in youth care, composting, urban farming and more. A governance board process was initiated that worked to change Cultivate's mode of operation. Now, the farm no longer exists as a separate entity on Peterborough Street, but the youth work in teams on other organic farms in the region, ostensibly with the same kind of human care and support that the cohort we studied experienced. We might read this as the end of the conditions that fostered affective relations with the commons. Or, we might read this as part of the cyclical process of the plant life: growth and proliferation leads to maturity which cycles back to transformation through decline and then regeneration through the spreading of seeds. While the farm we studied no longer exists, it may be that Cultivate adapted and continues to provide the conditions and space for fostering care for the more-than-human world.

What we have learned more generally is that the postcapitalist subject of the counter-city can be formed and nurtured through the infrastructures of care that urban commons such as Cultivate provide. Here we have sketched a postcapitalist counter-topography (Morrow & Dombroski, 2015) of the urban space of Ōtautahi Christchurch, with commons as one of the necessary “infrastructures for troubled times” (Berlant, 2016). These commons are able to produce the kinds of “affective encounters and a set of practices” that might nurture “other-than-capitalist subjectivities and postcapitalist futures” (Singh, 2017, p. 769).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kelly Dombroski: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **David Conradson:** Methodology, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Gradon Diprose:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Stephen Healy:** Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Amanda Yates:** Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

⁶ See also: <https://www.cultivate.org.nz/partner-with-us>.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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