AZIMUTH

*Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age*

**XII (2024), nr. 24**

# Critical Care

edited by • a cura di

Jocelyn Olcott – Tania Rispoli

InSCHIBBOLETH

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# COMMUNITIES OF CARE
# IN THE NITTY-GRITTY OF COMMONS-WORK

*Abstract*: What does it mean to create a community of care? Care scholars have identified the importance of thinking about care not only as individualised labour but as the basis for reciprocal and interdependent communities of care. The 'nitty-gritty' of care is rarely idyllic, and involves difficult collaborations and relationships with others. Indeed, it is in the nitty-gritty negotiation of the details of care that a community of care is constituted. In this paper, I argue that it is in the shared work of caring for commons, or 'commoning' that a community is constituted, although there are tensions in working out how to do this practically. This paper explores two core tensions: the tension between the openness and boundedness of communities of care, and the tension between the affective dimensions of care and the labour dimensions of care. The argument of the paper will be grounded in key examples from empirical research with two commoning communities in Aotearoa New Zealand: a community economies action group in low-income Porirua, and a trust and associated artist partners that organise temporary use of urban Christchurch sites for community wellbeing projects.

*Keywords*: care, commoning, affect, labour, community, New Zealand.

* * *

## 1. *Introduction*

When it comes down to it, the 'nitty-gritty' of care is rarely idyllic, and involves difficult collaborations and relationships with others. Whether it is washing a child, developing a constitution for a community group, or restoring a wetland, the practical details of caring are never completely straightforward. Yet it is exactly this nitty-gritty negotiation of the details of caring for shared resources, spaces or matters of concern that holds communities together, rather than boundaries or shared identity. This paper contributes theoretically to the question of what constitutes a community of care, if not boundaries or shared identity? While others have answered this using commons thinking, arguing a community is formed through caring for commons, I go deeper into the tensions inherent in care as a *practice.* The practice of care – for each other and for a commons – is what constitutes community, emerging and becoming and maintaining itself around a commons, negotiating the tensions that emerge in the practice of caring together. I argue that the nitty-gritty details of caring for a shared resource or commons develop *through* the tensions that arise when communities form around shared care work in place. I will develop this understanding of nitty-gritty negotiations in practices of caring together through a line of theoretical argument informed by two different commoning communities caring for two different commons.

The term 'nitty-gritty' refers to «the realities or practical details of a matter»[1], and in this paper, I am using it to draw attention to the awkward and detailed process of working out how to do something with others. JK Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink have used the term to describe the details of shifting to alternative forms of economy[2]. It is these nitty-gritty specifics and practicalities of 'doing' community that binds communities together more than idealistic statements of shared values, in many cases, more so than shared identities[3]. In this line of thinking, it is the 'doing' of commoning that constitutes the *being* of community[4]. The 'doing' of commoning refers to the shared work of care and responsibility for shared resources, spaces and matters of concern[5]. For Neera Singh, it is the repeated doing of care in groups that creates both the commons and the community of care[6]. Doing care in groups, and the communities that emerge, includes balancing tension between the openness and boundedness of communities of care and commoning, and the tension between the affective and the labour dimensions of care and commoning.

The argument of the paper will be grounded in key examples from empirical research with two commoning communities in Aotearoa New Zealand:

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[1] *Nitty-gritty*, in *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary*, ed. by T. Deverson – G. Kennedy, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, online version.

[2] J.K. Gibson-Graham – G. Roelvink, *The Nitty Gritty of Creating Alternative Economies*, «Social Alternatives», XXX (2011) 1, pp. 29-33.

[3] J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

[4] P. Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All,* Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 2008.

[5] J.K. Gibson-Graham *et al.*, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities,* Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

[6] N. Singh, *Becoming a Commoner: The Commons as Sites for Affective Socio-nature Encounters and Co-becomings*, «ephemera: theory & politics in organization», XVII (2017) 4, pp. 751-76.

*Te Hiko Centre for Community Innovations* – a community economies action group in low-income Porirua; and *Life in Vacant Spaces* – a trust that organises temporary use of urban Christchurch sites for community wellbeing projects. In each section, I will pose a question and some tensions that emerge from the literature, and then answer the question with reference to what emerges in the communities themselves. The communities of care that formed in each of these projects were quite different from each other, but also involved diversity 'within' the community of care as they negotiated the tensions outlined above. The 'ins' and 'outs' of community are explored in the first section, using literature on commons and commoning communities, and the example of *Te Hiko Centre for Community Innovation*. The second section develops thinking around care as both affect and labour, and the tensions that brings, with the example of *Life in Vacant Spaces* contributions to art in the post-earthquake devastation in the city of Ōtautahi Christchurch. As I work through the examples of each community of care, I demonstrate how we could understand the communities themselves as being constituted through the nitty-gritty practicalities of care work and the ethical negotiations of commoning that arise within and between these tensions. Finally, in the concluding section, I present some thoughts on what this might all mean for theories of care and communities – and why we should care about it.

## 2. *Tension 1: The 'Ins' and 'Outs' of Community*

In 2014, at the age of 82, Maria Mies published a direct and pithy challenge in response to renewed interest in the idea of commons. Her piece, titled "No commons without community" takes aim at the idea that the Internet is a 'new commons', and even, that it has created new communities. From Mies' standpoint,

> (…) no commons can exist without a community. The old commons were maintained by a clearly defined community where people had to do communal work in order to sustain themselves. This work was neither forced upon people nor was it a nice pastime or a luxury. It was necessary for people's survival or subsistence. Everyone was responsible to maintain the commons as a commons. This responsibility had not to be formally enforced by laws. It was necessary to maintain the life of all[7].

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[7] M. Mies, *No Commons without a Community*, «Community Development Journal», XLIX (2014) 1, pp. 106-107.

What she was particularly incensed about, it seems, is the way in which tech entrepreneurs were adopting the terminology of the commons to refer to their own work ‘enclosing’ knowledge and indeed, the materialities of the computer technologies required to access the internet, which have been the drivers of huge global enclosures at the heart of extractivist rare mineral economies. For Mies, reclaiming the commons in contemporary times can indeed involve widening the commoner community to something more than proximate peasant commons – *but a commons still requires some kind of community*. This understanding of the interdependence of commons and community is at the heart of my thinking around the work of *Te Hiko Centre for Community Innovation*, which is understood by its members and community as being a fluid and inclusive space of caring for wellbeing in the city of Porirua. While the organisation is multicultural with people of Pacific, Māori, Pākehā (NZ European) and other heritages, it is a community not from shared cultural heritage but from shared responsibility in caring for the wellbeing of people and environment in Porirua.

For Mies, the relationship between commons and commoners is one of ‘shared responsibility’. When it comes to analysing new forms of commons and commoning then, what is important is the presence or absence of a *responsible community who cares for it*. Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy have systemised some of the research into commons and communities in developing their ‘Commons Identi-Kit’[8]. Like Mies, Gibson-Graham *et al.* understand the commons as something that is cared for by a community, where:

- Access is shared and wide
- Use is negotiated by a community
- Benefit is widely distributed to community members (and beyond)
- Care is performed by community members
- Responsibility is assumed by community members[9].

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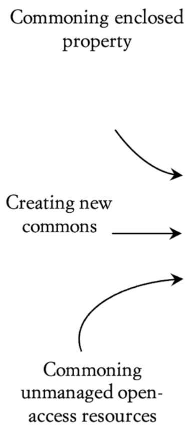
[8] Gibson-Graham *et al.*, *Take Back the Economy*.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 135.

Figure 1: Commons Identi-kit, Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013.


Commoning enclosed property
Creating new commons
Commoning unmanaged open-access resources

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

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, Cameron & Healy (2013) under creative commons licence.

Notably, and in line with wider research on commons, this does not necessarily include formal shared ownership of the resource in question – but the presence of a caring, responsible community. In this way, commons thinking can align with Indigenous understandings of land as a relationship of care and kinship[10], while acknowledging that returning lands to Indigenous ownership and management is also important. Even with this definition, we can see some tensions between the 'ins' and the 'outs' of a community. For Gibson-Graham *et al.*, community is defined in an inessential manner, that is, Gibson-Graham use the term 'community' as an empty signifier, one that can be filled with any manner of collective, as more of an expression of desire to overcome individuality and difference, to *produce* mutual identification[11]. So if it is not an essential sameness that produces community, what is it then? Where does this 'being in common' come from? For Gibson-Graham *et al.* it is in the «process of recognizing and negotiating [that] we become a community»[12] and indeed, in their project of thinking what community economies might look like, they propose that it is labour that constitutes the inessential commonality of a community, for «whether we acknowledge it or not, our own existence at every level can be seen as the effect of the labor of others»[13]. Being-in-common in many ways becomes if not 'doing'-in-common then at least 'becoming' in common.

What does this mean for who is included in a community? Is this an ableist or productivist understanding of what makes someone worth something in community? And what does this mean when some people contribute far more labour, which is perhaps appropriated by others in the community? For Gibson-Graham, these are not questions to be resolved in advance of an actual community. Their statement on labour is immediately followed by a set of ethical coordinates that are to be negotiated in «an ethical praxis of being-in-common». These coordinates invite us to consider labour as more-than-individualist. Gibson-Graham invite commoning communities to cultivate an awareness of:

- What is necessary to personal and social survival
- How social surplus is appropriated and distributed

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[10] M. Bargh – E. Tapsell, *For a Tika Transition: Strengthen Rangatiratanga*, «Policy Quarterly», XVII (2021) 3.

[11] Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

[12] Gibson-Graham, *et al.*, *Take Back the Economy*, p. xix.

[13] Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, p. 86.

- Whether and how social surplus is to be produced and consumed; and
- How a commons is produced and sustained[14].

Te Arawa scholar Maria Bargh has engaged with Gibson-Graham's thinking to suggest a set of coordinates for Māori economies, where questions of labour are also not resolved in advance but negotiated in particular places and communities. These coordinates include:

- What actions will increase mana or standing for humans and nonhumans?
- What actions will bring utu or balance between human and nonhuman groupings?
- What actions will show kaitiakitanga or care for humans and nonhumans?
- What actions will foster whakapapa or connections between humans, and with nonhumans?[15]

What I would add is that in these two examples, the labour that brings together a community is not individualised labour, but a collective understanding of labour that includes the interdependent and necessary interdependencies of 'care'. Communities are thus caring for others and being cared for while caring for a commons. This caring for commons involves complex ethical negotiations with others around sets of culturally situated ethical coordinates. A major focus of such ethical decision-making centres around what to do with commons – deplete, maintain or grow them. Importantly, such negotiations create and reproduce

> the 'common substance' of the community while at the same time making a space for raising and answering the perennial question of who belongs and is therefore entitled to the rights of decision[16].

The question of who belongs to a community is perennial, and thus blanket calls for public commons are not appropriate particularly in settler colonial contexts[17]. In many places, including Aotearoa New Zealand, what is appropriate includes opening and reopening questions of colonisation, decolonisation, land back and compensation[18]. This is certainly the case for Te Hiko Centre for Community Innovation, as an organisation situated on the traditional lands of Ngāti Toa Rangatira, and whose staff and wider community include Māori, Pacific peoples, and marginalised immigrants from this lower-income region near the capital city of Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington[19]. In Te Hiko's work, colonisation and the associated degradation of shared commons-based livelihoods (both in Aotearoa and abroad) are explicitly recognised as some of the many traumas that Porirua people are already responding to in a variety of ways.

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[14] *Ibidem*, p. 88.

[15] M. Bargh, *Rethinking and Re-shaping Indigenous Economies: Māori Geothermal Energy Enterprises,* «Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy», VI (2012) 3, pp. 271-283.

[16] Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, p. 97.

[17] G.S. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Te Hiko is a community-led organisation that emerged in the region after a sharp uptick in the number of people using a Wesley Community Action (WCA) foodbank in 2007, when 200 to 300 were coming in weekly. According to manager Makerita Makepelu, the centre's beginnings were with two questions to foodbank users: "What has brought you to our door? And would you like to come in and talk about it?" Those that returned to meet together began a journey of analysing their own economic situation and acting to improve it with the resources the shared collective had access to. These initial conversations revealed that household debt was a major reason for needing food bank support. Initially, a small group began to meet to discuss and theorise their situation – what were the structures that pushed ordinary Porirua families of mainly Pacific and Māori heritage into debt? Their small group inquiry led to a larger one day wānanga[20] with a range of affected people including third-tier lenders, ministers in the various churches, people using the food bank, upper-tier lenders and more. The wānanga included discussions around the question «how are we going to put them [all the affected people] together for our community to find ways to save?» because «What they were finding was that it was really difficult for people to save and all the wealth was being sucked out»[21].

The result of that wānanga was the shared realisation that it was not just one person or institution's fault – the loan sharks were functioning in a racialised economic system where banks did not want to lend small amounts to poor people, for example. Many were poor because they had been disconnected from their land-based livelihoods in Aotearoa and the Pacific through colonisation. The group went on to develop a theory of change around imagery of ‘plugging the drain’, as Makerita puts it:

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[18] M. Scobie – A. Sturman, *The Economic Possibilities of Decolonisation,* Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 2024.

[19] In the 2018 census, Porirua East was 44.6% Pacific peoples, 31.1% Māori, 38.9% European peoples, 4.8% Asian peoples, and 5.3% other. Respondents can select more than one ethnicity. Porirua East had a 2018 population of 2,235 people with a median age of 29.5 years.

[20] Māori term for an in-depth immersive learning event.

[21] Ruth Nonu, Good Cents coordinator, May 10, 2023.

> ultimately what we want is abundance in our community. We want that [drain] plugged in there so that we can grow the wealth in our community. And wealth just isn’t money. It’s knowledge, it’s our people, hearing their voice. Yeah, that’s our Theory of Change. We find the disturbance, what’s sucking it out of our community, we get the people together to grow abundance and plug that hole[22].

Eventually, this theory of change, the experiments with small groups meeting to discuss, and the enthusiasm of local people for collectively acting in the area of debt and savings led to what is now known as ‘Good Cents’, an eight week ‘programme’ that takes the shape of a relatively fluid discussion and support group led by previous group participants. Eventually, Te Hiko was established as an arms-length organisation ‘umbrella-ed’ by WCA. This was an effort at disconnecting Te Hiko from the colonial histories and hierarchies of the Methodist church and creating something that was community-led and independent[23]. In an interview, Te Hiko staff and volunteers highlighted the tension of the openness and boundedness of the community of care. In a spirit of manaakitanga[24], the organisation maintains somewhat open and fluid boundaries with all of the work it is engaged in. For example:

> We talk a lot more about creating and holding space (…) like Good Cents. It’s just you create some space for eight people to come together and go on a bit of a journey and have a conversation. They cross[-pollinate], you know, a little bit of insight goes in and they learn from each other and now what is that? Is that a course? Is it a group? Is it an organisation? (…) Is it a programme? If we want to go for funding, oh, we’ll call it that, you know[25].

The fluidity is about shared and wide access, use and benefit – anyone can access the various ‘programmes’ that Te Hiko offers or supports. But for each specific programme such as Good Cents, there is some kind of group responsibility and care for the nitty-gritty details of how it works, alongside the other commons elements of access, use and benefit. For Good Cents, participants usually commit to eight weeks of discussion, so the commoning community here has a temporal dimension. Others, such as a regional fruit and vegetable cooperative, or a cross-organisational forest regeneration collective, have longer time frames with different but overlapping commoning communities enrolled. Depending on the 'thing' that is being commoned, the fluid boundaries of community shift and change – eight weeks speaking about debt with a group of people in similar situations might lead to a long term commitment as part of savings pool, or a second short term commitment to help facilitate another group to talk about debt, or volunteering in the fruit and vegetable cooperative to enable affordable nutritious food for more. So while the organisation is open and inclusive, it has multiple gatherings of smaller core communities of care.

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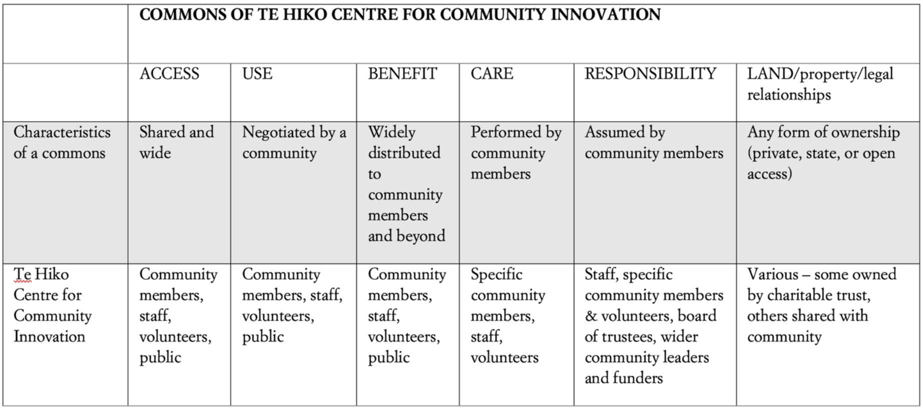
[22] Makerita Makepelu, Te Hiko manager, May 10, 2023.

[23] David Hanna, Director, Wesley Community Action, July 31, 2024.

[24] Manaakitanga is often translated hospitality, and carries a broad sense of care and responsibility.

[25] David Hanna, Director, Wesley Community Action, May 10, 2023.

Figure 2: Commons analysis of Te Hiko
(author's own, based on Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013).



| | **COMMONS OF TE HIKO CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 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) |
| Te Hiko Centre for Community Innovation | Community members, staff, volunteers, public | Community members, staff, volunteers, public | Community members, staff, volunteers, public | Specific community members, staff, volunteers | Staff, specific community members & volunteers, board of trustees, wider community leaders and funders | Various – some owned by charitable trust, others shared with community |

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

Thus the ‘plugging of the drain’ is about circulating common-goods from within the community rather than having an endless tap of outside funding to support – yet this outside funding is still accessed, requiring more formal organisational structures to hold such funds. Te Hiko staff spoke of WCA as being a ‘backbone’ or ‘spine’ that held together the legal structure for many other initiatives that were local, regional, and national. All such initiatives participated in learning circles where the various groups came together a few times a year to discuss their impact, learnings and make time for reflection. For Te Hiko, taking on the role of leading learning circles is part of disconnecting from colonising ways of understanding community development where outsiders hold the knowledge and funds and dispense it in ways to facilitate their own agendas. The learning circles refused any hierarchy of knowledge, with city council or ministry of social development attendees having the same place in the circle as community members from Porirua east. The guiding tikanga[26] of these meetings and the work in the region were those of Ngāti Toa Rangatira as mana whenua[27], including beginning and ending meetings with karakia (prayer, incantations), prioritising the building of relationships, acknowledging the different roles of hosts and guests, and providing food. The ‘perennial’ question of ‘who belongs’ is thus answered by the tikanga of Ngāti Toa, and the values of He Ara Weteriana (the Wesleyan Way) that preceded and envelop Te Hiko.

The outer boundaries of the community of care then, continued to change in response to community needs. The tension between who is ‘in’ the community and responsible for caring for the shared commons and who is ‘out’ of the community and not necessarily a recipient of the benefits of the shared commons is a productive tension. In the case of Te Hiko, it is has opened up new spaces of nitty-gritty negotiation with a widened community – a widened community of responsibility in the case of the wānanga and learning circles. It has also opened up new spaces of nitty-gritty negotiation for a smaller community of care, as in case of the smaller temporally bounded groups taking care of Good Cents iterations. The return to the commons here is not a blanket approach of Indigenous spaces being handed over to a mixed group of commoners, but a ‘braided’ approach[28] where Māori, Pacific, Wesleyan and

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[26] Tikanga is typically translated as ‘normative ethics’ but is also a stand in for Māori law. It is related to the word ‘tika’ meaning right, correct, just, lawful. Many thanks to Matt Scobie (Ngāi Tahu) for pointing this out. See also Bargh – Tapsell, *For a Tika Transition*.

[27] Mana whenua refers to the Indigenous kinship group who have authority in the land.

[28] M. Scobie *et al., Braiding Together Student and Supervisor Aspirations in a Struggle to Decolonize*, «Organization», XXVIII (2021) 5, pp. 857-75.

Western knowledges and protocols operate together to care, in acknowledgement of mana whenua leadership and trauma in the city of Porirua.

## 3. *Tension 2: Affect and Labour in a Commoning Community*

While for Mies, it seems that a commoning community is primarily a matter of shared responsibility, what the perspective of Gibson-Graham and colleagues adds is that it is not *only* responsibility that is important – but a range of things alongside responsibility including labour, access, use, benefit, and care as discussed above. In this section I focus in on care: drawing on care theorists and on practice theory, I think a bit more about what care might be and how practices of care – and the nitty-gritty negotiations around what that care looks like – might contribute to building both community and commons. I explore this through the case study of *Life in Vacant Spaces*, a charitable trust that brokers access to land and buildings for community projects, many of which are art interventions.

Feminist theorists have long insisted that care is more of a doing than a feeling, which fits well with how the commons scholars already mentioned think about the role of care in commoning – it is primarily care *work*, a doing. Feminist Marxist scholars have highlighted the important role of care work or 'social reproduction' in our economies[29]. The concept of social reproduction asks us to consider the investment that is put into reproducing the labour force by caregivers and society more widely. Important as this point is, care is clearly about more than 'reproducing' labour. Care is also *itself* labour. For Katharine McKinnon, the key concerns for labour in this time is not just the «myriad stuff that must be done for survival» but also «what must be done in order to survive 'well', as individuals, as families, and as communities with human and non-human planetary others»[30]. This echoes Joan Tronto's definition of care as «a species activity that includes all we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so we might live in it as well as possible»[31]. While such care work may *emerge* from affect and ethics, it is still an activity expending energy: it is work and it is necessary work.

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[29] K. Mitchell *et al.*, *Life's work: Geographies of Social Reproduction*, Haboken (NJ), Wiley-Blackwell, 2004.

[30] K. McKinnon, *Framing Essay: The Diversity of Labour*, in *The Handbook of Diverse Economies*, ed. by J.K. Gibson-Graham – K. Dombroski, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2020, p. 117.

[31] J. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, New York, New York University Press, 2013.

Care is different from other forms of work in that it is primarily relational. While we can frame it as productive (via social reproduction), it is, as Tronto's definition emphasises, more about maintenance[32]. Maintenance requires responding to what is already there – it requires listening or observing, paying attention to what is needed, and carrying out acts of labour to achieve that, potentially with others. For Bawaka Country, a collective of Indigenous Australian Yolŋu and non-Indigenous Ŋäpaki authors, caring for Country and being cared for by Country involve all of these responses, where Country is understood as follows:

> Country is the way humans and non-humans co-become, the way we emerge together, have always emerged together and will always emerge together. It is all the feelings, the songs and ceremonies, the things we cannot understand and cannot touch, the things that go beyond us, that anchor us in eternity, in the infinite cycles of kinship, sharing and responsibility[33].

While care is often analysed in Western feminist literature in an individualised and productivist way and primarily centred on human actions, here we can see care, feeling, practices, and relationality understood as deeply interwoven and more-than-human[34]. There are elements also in Sarah Ruddick's work on the particular nurturing and care work of mothering, framed as a practice[35] full of 'concrete' nitty-gritty decision-making and action. This action connects with affect through the way in such a practice «gives rise to a specific discipline of thought – a cluster of metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and values that Ruddick calls 'maternal thinking'» which include varied tasks and affective stances such as «scrutinizing, cheerfulness, holding, welcoming of change, concrete thinking (…) and many more»[36]. What connects these two examples is that care is something that can be extravagantly unequal: Country does more care work for humans than humans might do for Country, while the care work of mothers is often out of proportion to any future care they might receive from their child. Yet this extravagant inequality is only significant if you take care out of its holistic and reciprocal relations – where care is given and received in extravagant circulation between many bodies in relationship, with affective components alongside labour.

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[32] Of course, Tronto's approach is not *only* about maintenance, which would imply maintaining terrible things, the definition also includes the line 'as well as possible', gesturing towards futures of care that might be better. See M. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 7.

[33] Bawaka Country *et al.*, *Nature culture*, in *Introducing Human Geographies 4th Edition*, ed. by K. Dombroski *et al.,* London, Routledge, 2024, pp. 574-585.

[34] See the discussion on hybrid collectives caring for commons in K. Dombroski *et al., Care-full Community Economies*, in *Feminist Political Ecology and the Economics of Care: In Search of Economic Alternatives*, ed. by W. Harcourt – C. Bauhardt, London, Routledge, 2019, pp. 99-115.

[35] S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, London, The Women's Press, 1989.

If care is framed as a holistic 'practice', it can easily expand beyond both labour and affect. The concept of practice allows a lot more to be said for an activity beyond its productivity or expenditure of energy. A practice can be intentionally creative, as in artistic practice. And a practice involves attentive labour, as in when an individual or team practice a new skill until it is perfected. A practice is also something that can be a life-long discipline – one's yoga practice, or meditation practice, for example. It can also refer to a group practice – a collective of midwives or doctors might refer to their cooperative as a 'practice'. It is a word that at once centres the individual or group doing the activity, while also situating it in a wider context and set of meanings. Elizabeth Shove's work on practices is illuminating here. For Shove and colleagues, a practice involves three things: competences, meanings, and materials[37]. Competences include skills, know-how and technique; meanings include symbolic meaning, ideas and aspirations; and materials include things, technologies and tangible physical entities – the stuff of which objects are made[38]. If we think of care as a practice, it clearly includes the competencies of caring for others or caring for a commons – wiping bottoms of wriggling toddlers, or negotiating decision-making over a waterway. But it also should then include the meanings of that care – perhaps love for said toddler or Indigenous sovereignty or co-governance in water care. Care as a practice must also include the materialities of said care – the toilet paper or wipes, and the piped water I might use in toddler bottom-wiping, or the riverbed, plantings, microbes, water flows and so forth in the waterway example[39]. For me, it is these specific and contextualised details of competency, meaning and materials that form part of what I mean by ‘nitty-gritty’. The tension between the affective aspects of care and the labour aspects of care were highlighted effectively in a case study on the charitable trust Life in Vacant Spaces and their work in earthquake recovery in Ōtautahi Christchurch.

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[36] A. O'Reilly, *"I Envision a Future in Which Maternal Thinkers are Respected and Self-respecting": The Legacy of Sara Ruddick's "Maternal Thinking"*, «Women's Studies Quarterly», XXXVII (2009) 3/4.

[37] E. Shove *et al.*, *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How It Changes,* London, Sage, 2012.

[38] *Ibidem*, 12.

[39] K. Dombroski, *Caring for Life: A Postdevelopment Politics of Infant Hygiene*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2024.

After a series of devastating earthquakes in 2010 and 2011, Christchurch was faced with the destruction and demolition of some 80 percent of the central city, and countless family homes, schools and other public amenities throughout the eastern side of the city[40]. In the central city, pop-up and transitional place-making projects were started by artists and urbanists interested in returning ‘life’ to the gravel acres there. Over ten years, more than 700 such projects were enabled by *Life in Vacant Spaces*, set up to broker land use for educational, entrepreneurial, community or arts-based projects. LiVS set up relationships between landowners (private, council, and nationalised red-zoned land that could no longer be built on) and people with ideas for transitional projects. In 2021, I worked with LiVS to develop an exhibition, book and report based on their work, interviewing and doing archival research on 34 different projects that occurred (and were still occurring) across a period of ten years[41]. The projects covered a huge range of intentions, from starting small businesses such as Mamacita’s Mexican food truck, to challenging urban dwellers’ ideas of what is possible in a city, as demonstrated by projects such as GapFiller’s Dance-o-mat. But what I am interested in highlighting here are the projects that were about city residents’ affective sense of well-being and hope. These projects highlight the tensions between the affective dimensions of care and the labour dimensions of care in caring for commons.

The rupture of the earthquake in many ways created an affective space for different kinds of engagements in the place of the city[42]. It also created an affective space for commons-type activities right in the heart of what used to be the commercial district of the city. After an initial burst of commons-type care activities during the immediate aftermath (shared cleanups, shared generators, shared meals), the next period of time was more about people grieving over the loss of key landmarks, insurance battles, moving house, repairs, school closures and workplace difficulties. Businesses failed, and tens of thousands of people moved out of the city within the years following the earthquakes[43]. Many of the temporary and transitional commoning examples emerging during this time were responses to a lack of public space to connect, as well as the closure of the traditional arts sites of museums, galleries, theatres, studios and more. In this example, the resource being commoned was much less well-defined than what we might see in traditional examples of commoning such as a shared database or a mahinga kai (food-gathering wetland). Here the commons is in part the affective atmosphere of the city, as enacted in a mish-mash of public and private spaces, with different time geometries and different levels of community engagement. Here the commoning work was the care work of artists and creatives, and the owners of walls and sites, and the brokers that enabled the art[44]. But the benefits of such care work were shared and wide, because the accessibility was shared and wide and over an extended period of time (see Figure 3). Art spoke to the affective side of earthquake recovery and other terrible events such as the 2019 terrorist attacks on two mosques. Art acknowledged trauma, shared hopes and dreams, challenged viewers to see the city and themselves differently.

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[40] Paul Cloke *et al.*, *The Post-Earthquake City: Disaster and Recovery in Christchurch, New Zealand*, New York, Routledge, 2023.

[41] See K. Dombroski *et al.*, *Enabling Life in Vacant Spaces: Documenting Holistic Wellbeing Returns in Ōtautahi Christchurch*, Wellington, Building Research Association NZ, 2023.

[42] This idea has been explored by many writing in the context of Ōtautahi Christchurch, see for example: R. Cretney – S. Nissen, *What Is Generated through Rupture?*, «Dialogues in Human Geography», XIII (2023) 2.

Figure 3: A commons analysis of art in post-earthquake Ōtautahi Christchurch

| | **COMMONS OF LIFE IN VACANT SPACES** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 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) |
| LIFE IN VACANT SPACES | Public | Public | Public | Specific community members, artists, staff, volunteers, private owners | Specific community members, artists, staff, volunteers, private owners, board of trustees. | Various – mainly temporary use |

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

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[43] Statistics New Zealand reported a drop of 21,000 people between 2010 and 2020 in the city.

[44] While Ngāi Tahu, the iwi who have mana whenua in the Christchurch region, were a key player in the formal rebuild of the city, Life in Vacant Spaces at the time of writing did not have a formal relationship or consultation with Ngāi Tahu around these informal installations.

In an interview with Reuben Wood, artist and founder of urban art organisation Watch This Space, the relationship between imagination, affect and labour was highlighted:

> It just became apparent that Christchurch is going to be in massive need of reimagination and intervention and transformation. The timing seemed to me inevitable that urban art would have a role to play because of the opportunity, the landscape was inviting people to do that.

For Wood, this reimagination came in the form of the invitation of the bare and concrete ruins to be host to urban art that invited residents to think differently about what Christchurch was, is and could be. Rone's evocative 2014 portrait painted on exposed brick with a worn visage, for example, appears to «have been unveiled by the destruction of the Christchurch earthquakes rather than painted in their wake (…)» speaking to «the uncertainty facing the recovering cityscape»[45]. Paste-ups were also important post-quake art forms, spilling over into the aftermath of the 2019 terrorist attacks on two Christchurch Mosques. The urban art speaks to both the silly and the serious- playful gestures towards retro comic strips and video games, but also political messages, hopes and dreams for the environment, for Indigenous self-determination. One deeply affecting project was the *Temple for Christchurch*, a large temporary wooden structure shaped into the jagged seismic wave of the Richter scale reading of the most devastating earthquake. This wooden structure was built by artist Hippathy Valentine in a central city location in 2013. The community were invited to write their woes on the structure before it was taken out to a rural area and burned in a shared cathartic experience[46]. Artists working in the post-quake environment thus cared for the affective and individual aspects of the city's recovery and reimagination in collective ways.

For some, art was mainly a bonus to the practicalities of getting food, water, electricity and other basic services like education restored. Yet both urban street art and other kinds of performance and propositional placemaking spoke to the deep needs of humans to feel joy, to connect, and to see beauty – particularly in difficult times where venues for meeting and experiencing art or entertainment were closed, and the city looked terrible. Some people had no energy to be concerned about those needs, focusing on basic needs only. But some – many of whom were young – had the space to think about those needs. Artist and place-maker Hannah Watkinson put it this way:

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[45] R. Woods, https://watchthisspace.org.nz/artwork/531, last accessed 19 March 2024. See also R. Woods, *Painting Ruins: Graffiti and Street Art in Post-earthquake Christchurch,* Christchurch, University of Canterbury, 2016.

[46] Dombroski *et al.*, *Enabling Life in Vacant Spaces.*

> We were young, we didn't have massive responsibility to think about survival kinds of things for our city, but we had the space to think about what could make it better. We weren't bogged down …by the actual human basic needs side of things. People were doing that.

We could read this in two ways – one is that the reimagining work of art was also enabled by the nitty-gritty practical labour of others in the community, who were doing things like providing water trucks to households without water, cleaning up silt off the streets, helping people find housing, and providing long term mental health support. It was this labour that enabled the affective (and nitty-gritty) work of art to happen too. Yet on the other hand, the labour of artists is also labour and is often under recognised, unpaid or underpaid. Artists are assumed to find meaning in the affective aspects of doing their work and are therefore often exploited in problematic ways[47]. These tensions between affect and labour include the ways in which artists and place-makers were caring about and for affect in a post-quake situation, and the assumptions around affect and care that are highlighted when art-labour is present but undervalued.

In our research, we found that the equally nitty-gritty but creative work of caring for Christchurch's affective atmosphere was hugely important both to residents' individual recovery, and also the ten-year process of city recovery. This nitty-gritty creative artistic work played a part in Christchurch subsequently emerging as a major centre for street art internationally – an ongoing affective atmosphere that enables other businesses to make money from tourists visiting for the vibe. What we can say then, is that the various kinds of art projects invoke care for the affective commons of Christchurch as a practice, in the same way that art is a practice – it is composed of both labour and affect, of nitty-gritty skills and knowhow and materials, but also meaning. The tension between labour and affect, in this case, is where the ethical negotiation lies – in honouring both labour and affect, new negotiations for caring for commons and communities emerge. One example is the ongoing City Council funding going to *Life in Vacant Spaces* for its work curating city spaces for art (among other projects), which has some requirements in terms of the nitty-gritty of where the projects should be sited, and how reporting should occur.

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[47] H. McLean, *Creative Arts-based Geographies: Some Cautionary and Hopeful Reflections,* «ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies», XXI (2022) 3, pp. 311-326.

In many ways, thinking of care as a nitty-gritty practice enables us to get at both the affective dimensions of care, and the labour dimensions of care, without diminishing either. But we must also consider the darker side of care: when care is framed as a practice, it seems intentional and voluntary – and yes, often it is. But while care work can be deeply meaningful and a source of delight, it is also embedded in relationships of power and some of the drudge-work of care in particular can be forced onto others who have little choice but to do it, while being necessary to maintain systems of inequality and exploitation. Thinking of care as a practice also enables us to get at the 'tensions', especially between collective and individual aspects of care in community. As Shove has shown in her work on cleanliness and comfort, practices are embedded in wider social and economic networks of meaning and materiality as well as circulating competencies[48]. But the spread of practices in communities that negotiate the nitty-gritties of what such practices entail is what I am thinking of here: where communities work out the details of caring for commons in experimental ways, the tensions are revealed in some detail, often with no real right answer.

In sum, then, we can think of commons-care as practice. When it is collectivised, as it is when caring for a commons with others, it can be understood as an «inessential commonality»[49] that binds a (dynamic, fluid) community together with both affect and labour. Who is called to care for such a commons might follow different rules, of course – for Indigenous communities this might include genealogical connections with place, for other commons it might include competences such as computer programming or agriculture. For yet others, people who share significant parts of their identity may common together thus reinforcing those affective community ties – Queer choirs, women's craft collectives, a city Chinese Association or a professional body for geographers – yet there is generally still caring and shared responsibilities for some kind of commons in some way.

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[48] E. Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*, Oxford, Berg, 2003.

[49] G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

## 4. *Conclusion*

For those of us raised in settler-colonial Western cultures, it sometimes seems impossible to reconfigure ourselves around concepts of communities and care. For too long, the norms of rational economic man or *homo economicus* have been assumed to be universal, and built into the structures and fabrics that make up our places and economies. But care has also been with us from the beginning – we are born into a multiplicity of interdependencies and we go through life both relying on and providing care within communities[50]. Those who assume that we cannot work together and that communities of care are not possible need simply look at the multiple, overlapping communities of care in which they are embedded and participate and already perform the collective caring subject of *homines curans*[51]. That is not to say that these communities of care are perfect or complete – as I have explored in this article, there are inherent tensions within commoning communities of all kinds. Reclaiming care requires us to recognise these tensions and refuse to smooth them out, to keep care «grounded in practical engagements with situated material conditions that often expose tensions»[52]. In other words, to keep the nitty-gritties of care front and centre.

Care is a practice – and so is the commoning that is at the heart of becoming community. The practice of care is both affect and labour, and includes both the openness and boundedness of community. Such a practice is always under negotiation in the nitty-gritty details of working out how to care for commons and for each other. This paper has argued that it is in the tensions arising in the nitty-gritty details that spaces of ethical negotiation are found. And it is in these spaces of ethical negotiation that we might indeed care, in all the specific, complex, unresolved aspects of maintenance and repair that care entails. I have worked through two kinds of tension in care, community and commoning in the examples of two commoning communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have discussed the ways in which the tensions and the nitty-gritty decision-making have not ever 'resolved' the question of what a community of care might entail in the abstract – but instead, I have put forward the idea that care itself requires a nitty-gritty, back and forth, unresolved openness to tension and incompleteness in specific places with specific peoples. The radical particularity of care is what makes it distinctive.

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[50] K. McKinnon *et al., Care from the Beginning: Birthing Collective Origins, Interdependent Cities, and New Community Economies,* in *Care and the City: Encounters with Urban Studies*, ed. by A. Gabauer *et al.*, New York – London, Routledge, 2021.

[51] J. Tronto, *There Is an Alternative: Homines Curans and the Limits of Neoliberalism,* «International Journal of Care and Caring», I (2017) 1, pp. 27-43.

[52] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 4.

The diverse interdependencies inherent in care suggest «interdependency as the ontological state in which humans and countless other beings unavoidably live»[53]. Interdependency is also a core concern at the heart of both community and commoning – and this becomes evident in definitions of community that see caring for commons as the thing which binds communities together – even if sometimes temporarily as in the case of some of the examples used from post-quake Christchurch. It is in the nitty-gritty details of communities caring for commons that we learn, and re-learn, and learn again, how to care for each other and our world in radical particularity. It is a project of subjectification and resubjectification, of affective transformation and exhausting labour, of joyful moments, of considering others far and near to ourselves, and of acknowledging our own reliance on interdependent and particular networks of care. Acknowledging the nitty-gritty practicalities of commoning is important in scholarship on care and communities so that the important work of community organising is not written off as always already contaminated, but rather, is seen in all its interdependent specificity and radical particularity as always already negotiating with others in building and maintaining communities of care.

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[53] *Ibidem.*

*Azimuth* is a highly-scientific review headed for an international public, that would be interested in the double orientation of philosophy, as it is conceived by the editors: it is genealogy of problems and themes in the modern Age as well as reinterpretation of them in the present days. This two-dimensional attitude also explains the name chosen, *Azimuth*, that's the english translation from arabic term *as-sûmut* indicating the distance from a point to the plane of reference, which gives the necessary coordinates to determine the position of a celestial body.
The aim is to provide the necessary coordinates to guide human thinking through the elaborate, stratified reality of the present days, which requires an intersection of different knowledges and approaches in order to be understood in its complexity.

*Azimuth* è una pubblicazione scientifica di carattere internazionale, attenta alla questione filosofica nella sua duplice vettorialità: rivolta da un lato alla genealogia di idee e problemi nel mondo moderno, e dall'altro proiettata sulla riformulazione e applicazione contemporanea di forme e dinamiche del pensiero. Questa vocazione bidimensionale spiega il nome prescelto, *Azimuth*: trascrizione inglese del termine arabo *as-sûmut*, che indica in astronomia la distanza tra un punto e il piano di riferimento, fornendo le coordinate indispensabili per determinare univocamente la posizione di un corpo nella sfera celeste.
L'obiettivo è quello di offrire al pensiero, esaminando in numeri monografici i nodi fondamentali della coscienza filosofica e culturale odierna, le coordinate necessarie per un orientamento critico nella società umana, la cui stratificazione rende indispensabile un pensiero a sua volta composito, che non sia solo comprensione ma anche un tentativo di posizionamento nel mondo.

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