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Degrowth and the anarcha-feminist politics of mutual aid herbalisms: Landed relations of care, solidarity and responsibility

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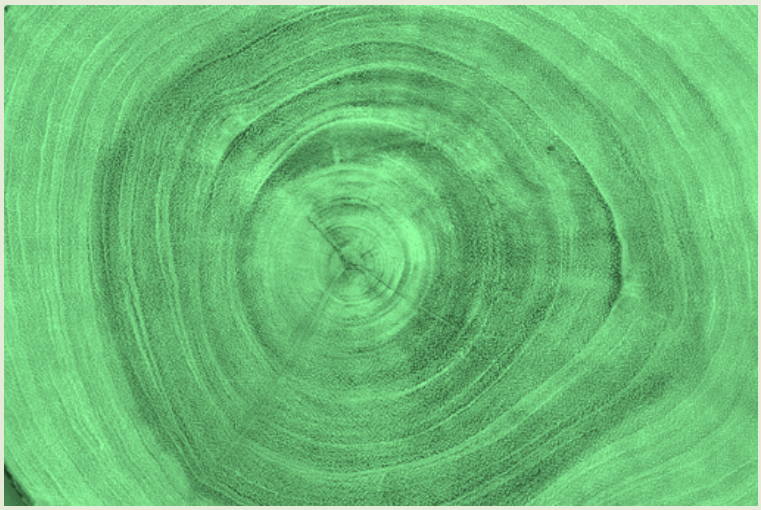
Abstract

This article explores herbal mutual aid projects and approaches to better understand degrowth as strategy towards radical abundance centring care and social reproduction. Herbal mutual aid contributes to degrowth by strengthening analysis of the commons via communising care and unsettling dominant property relations by inviting new forms of being with land. This paper explores the ethics and practices of mutual aid herbalists and herbalism projects as contributions to existing critical conversations on transformative care commoning (Dengler & Lang, 2022; Federici, 2019; Woodly et al., 2021). I draw on decolonial concepts of solidarity and interrelationality to understand how friendship, joy, and care create the basis for lived politics in, against, and beyond contemporary propertied relations to land. Anarcha-feminist values of autonomy, mutual aid, and solidarity underlie many approaches to mutual aid herbalism, and this article contributes to the expanding literature analysing the connections between anarchistic practices and degrowth values and strategies. Through analysis of articles, podcasts, zines, conversations, interviews, and my personal participation in herbal mutual aid and gardening projects, I examine the work of practitioners creating decommodified and autonomous health solutions and advocating for greater respect for human-plant interrelationality through land-defence, gardening, and socioecological transformation. The everyday practices of mutual aid herbalists remind us of the relevance of anarcha-feminist practice and theories beyond niche activist communities and help address how degrowth solutions can spread from below.



Introduction

The imperative of degrowth to immediately, and with collective fervor, challenge the behemoth of compounded socioecological crises of our time is increasingly embraced by many parts of the world. Degrowth thinkers interrogate how movements and theories can seriously engage with the idea that growth, as a hegemonic concept, "obscures more ecologically friendly and egalitarian alternatives" (Demaria et al., 2019, p. 432). Again and again, however we see strategies such as large-scale industrial alternative energy production or the development of new green markets advocated as part of a degrowth agenda to address climate change and environmental degradation. These are a return to the growth ideology of capitalist modernity that ultimately depends on economic systems in which scarcity is socially produced under capitalist and state property relations. To actually achieve the goals of degrowth there is a need to further explore tactics, strategies, and approaches that align with what Hickel (2019) calls a theory of radical abundance. We must ask how degrowth can move beyond 'necessary sacrifices' and compromises, towards imperatives that create cultural re-alignments, and strategies that reject partial solutions—solution which, if accepted in the face of an ecocidal and genocidal world system, would mean we have already lost (Benally, 2023). Following Harris, (in Woodly et al., 2021), this article argues degrowth must be taken up as a horizon of ethics—for the future of care and a world disentangled from dominant dynamics of harm. To better understand actually existing ways that collectivities are creating degrowth in practice, I turn to mutual aid herbalism as a means of producing decommodified and autonomous health solutions, while advocating for deeper respect for human-plant interrelationality. Herbal mutual aid contributes to degrowth by deepening analyses of the commons through collectivising of care and unsettling dominant property relations by inviting new ways of being with land. This article explores the ethics and practices of mutual aid herbalists and herbalism projects as contributions to existing critical conversations on transformative care commoning (Dengler & Lang, 2022; Federici, 2019; Woodly et al., 2021).

As a starting point, this article examines the centrality of care politics and the care economy to degrowth, defining degrowth through activist-scholar perspectives. To develop a description of joyful care—the relational foundation underpinning land tending and solidarity organising among mutual aid herbalists—I build on herbalist-scholar Charis Boke's (2018) exploration of friendship as a key mechanism for understanding herbalists' relationships with plants. Drawing on decolonial concepts of solidarity and interrelationality, I consider how friendship and care form the basis for lived politics that operates in, against, and beyond contemporary propertied relations to land. These everyday practices of mutual aid herbalists point to the relevance of anarcha-feminist practice and theories beyond niche activist communities and offer insight into how degrowth solutions can emerge and spread from below. To explore the contributions of herbalists to degrowth thinking, I draw from a range of sources: articles, podcasts, zines, conversations, interviews, and my own participation in herbal mutual aid and gardening projects. The gravitational centre of these activities is in the United States, where I am located (Santa Cruz, California), though projects and examples from the UK, Spain, Brazil, and Mexico are also highlighted. These sources offer reflections and narratives on the political work of community herbalism clinics and projects, frontline herbalist medic efforts, and spaces of cultivation and harvesting. Contrary to some popular conceptions of herbalism, most of the perspectives I have encountered present herbalism not in opposition to Western medicine but as a complement to it—emphasising the use of simple plants either as food or in the form of teas, tinctures, salves, and other preparations to support wholistic health.

Mutual aid herbalism, while not exclusively shaped by anarchist ideologies and practice, often centres anarchistic—and specifically anarcha-feminist—values and practices such as autonomy, mutual aid, and solidarity. Many mutual aid herbalist projects explicitly or implicitly embrace anarchist ethos in prefigurative, insurrectionary, and communalist forms. In learning with these projects, I draw on the approaches of Roman-Alcalá (2025), Ramnath (2011), and others',

who understand anarchism not merely as a European-derived political lineage, but as a set of inclinations and practices that emerge from diverse historical and material conditions. In the context of herbal mutual aid, these inclinations refer to politics of anti-state autonomy, anti-colonial practices and relations of non-domination, non-commodified collectivised care, and interrelational ways of being. There exist many, incredibly inspiring community herbalism projects focused on the intersections of healing and decolonial and anti-racist politics that overlap in some cases with mutual aid herbalisms although for the purpose of this article I will focus on herbalism in social movement spaces and with more explicit mutual aid orientations (see for example Lara et al. (2023) study of trans-territorial ecology, kinship, and Boricuir healers). This article approaches the framework of degrowth as a strategic orientation and future vision that invites us into asking, how does degrowth work in various socioecological contexts, and how do herbal mutual aid projects see themselves as part of broader ecosystems of revolt?

Degrowth Futures, Health Industries and the Centrality of Care

Degrowth scholars continue to debate the terms and terrain of degrowth as vision and strategy. From a social movement perspective, degrowth is most fundamentally defined as "democratically deliberated absolute reduction of material and energy throughput, which ensures well-being for all within planetary boundaries" (Schulken et al., 2022, p. 11). This has meant questioning the sanctity of economic growth writ large. Hickel and Kallis (2020), among others, have discredited claims that absolute permanent decoupling of resource use from GDP is anything more than an extremely optimistic theory. An effective degrowth strategy will therefore require coordinated structural shifts away from social infrastructure that relies on the use of large amounts of raw materials and energy (Dunlap, 2024). As Schulken et al. (2022) emphasise, degrowth starts with the acknowledgement of the consequences of colonialism, which means recognising that the burdens and responsibilities of degrowth will differ across contexts—between the Global North and South, as well as between peripheral and core regions within them. Within the Global North scholars connect degrowth to long histories of movements for environmental justice which lay bare the unequal distribution of impacts of pollution and environmental destruction on oppressed communities. Nirmal and Rocheleau (2019) propose a decolonial transition rooted in Indigenous and other resistance movements that prioritise autonomy, sufficiency, and the resurgence of relational territories and worlds.

It is not important that 'degrowth' be taken up as an organising banner by the various movements and actors already engaging in practices aligned with degrowth principles. Instead, we might encourage movements to include degrowth in their strategising, to think with degrowth to imagine and act in more collective coordination, and as Nirmal and Rocheleau suggest help transform "degrowth into an interdisciplinary and international field bridging a rising network of social and environmental justice movements" (2019, p. 1). Barlow (2022) contends that degrowth can be seen a strategy for social change, the end goal or vision for change, or a specific quality of a strategy for change. These diverse orientations can create room for debate under the umbrella:

> *Degrowth is one strategic vantage point for movements that explicitly aim at a society and economy beyond growth, industrialism and capitalism – not because it is or should be a key term for all movements in the mosaic, but because degrowth symbolises the most radical rejection of the eco-modernist mainstream of growth-centredness, extractivism, and industrialism.* (Burkhart et al., 2022, p. 129)

Degrowth can serve both as a strategy and vision that compels us to think beyond false solutions and capitalist mechanisms of continued privatisation, financialization, and dangerous forms of techno-optimism—mechanisms that deepen earth and human exploitation under the guise of environmentally friendly industry. Mutual aid herbalism can

intersect with certain orientations of degrowth towards the radical rejection of green capitalist futures within medical systems, offering alternatives to both capitalist, western medical systems and to the increasingly commodified herbal medicine markets supplying natural medicine enthusiasts. This intersection with degrowth principals, echoes Diné anarchist and theorist Klee rejection of "green futures that are still dead futures for Mother Earth" (2023, p. 202).

Mutual aid herbalism offers critical perspectives of medical systems under capitalism. Some of these critiques are shared by degrowth scholars who examine the current impact of medical systems on the global environment. Today, healthcare has become one of the largest and most complex industries globally. Medical systems function not only as sites of healing but also as arenas of capital accumulation, exploitation, and ecological destruction. While modern healthcare provides essential, life saving strategies, it is simultaneously embedded within and shaped by growth-oriented economic logics. Hensher (2023) identifies the US as an extreme case: in the 1920s and 30s expenditure on health and medical care appears to have been around 2 to 3% of GDP, but by 2016 that jumped to around 17% (p. 2). Despite enormous expenditures and complex systems of mixed public and private pharmaceutical and medical equipment production and distribution, the US also boasts some of the highest levels of healthcare inequality in the Global North. As Hensher (2023) argues, healthcare epitomises the "central challenge of the degrowth transition," namely how to:

> *transform the scale and ecological footprint of key sectors of the economy, localise and expand democratic control while still retaining and safeguarding the essential, minimum levels of complexity required to deliver the benefits of modern technologies which are most important to health, well-being and human flourishing.* (p. 35) *Within this broader challenge, degrowth must also consider the potential role of scaled up herbal medicine and peoples' medicines access to decrease the footprint of medical industries.*

While herbalism is not intended to replace modern healthcare, it can serve as a complementary and a first line of defence by offering both preventative and accessible forms of health support. In some cases, less resource intensive options exist in the form of garden-grown, plant-based medicines. However, the conditions under which herbal medicines are produced remain an important concern. Monoculture herb farms using industrial inputs and exploited labour only contribute to a commodified and extractive medical system, albeit one emphasising plant medicines. The herbal medicine market has become one of the fastest growing sectors over the past decade and is projected to continue expanding (Smith et al., 2024). In 2023, consumers in the US spent approximately $12.55 billion on herbal products, a 4.4% increase from the year before (Smith et al., 2024). The Covid 19 pandemic, coupled with rising rates of chronic illness in the US, have many turning to herbal approaches to support overall health, and markets are expanding to address this rise in interest. Herbal mutual aid approaches can provide a counter to these market-based health strategies.

Herbalists have, in some instances, been vocal opponents of the commodification and privatisation of plant medicines and herbalism practices (see, for example, the London Anarcha-feminist Kolektiv, 2012). While a comprehensive history of biopiracy and capitalist enclosure of herbalist knowledge and relationships lies beyond the scope of this article, the story of 'fire cider' offers a pertinent example. In 2012, the small herbalism company, Shire City Herbals, trademarked the name "fire cider" and began claiming proprietary use of the term. Fire cider—a broad category for a remedy including apple cider vinegar, honey, and herbs—is a version of vinegar oxymel, medicines that have been used in various cultural contexts for millennia. In response to this move to trademark the term and resultant lawsuits against three prominent herbals using the title, herbalists who had been using fire cider in their teaching and herbal businesses since the 1970's organised a campaign, starting two organisations: 'Free Fire Cider' and 'Tradition Not Trademark'. In 2019 they won, both rejecting the $100,000 claim for damages levelled against them, and winning the declaration of the term 'fire cider' as generic (Sorell, 2020). The 8 yearlong campaign represented the view that herbal recipes and

knowledge should not be privatised for proprietary profit. It resonates with a degrowth-informed vision of medicine that interrogates ownership, centralisation and decision-making, and ecological relationship whether in the context of synthetic compounds or in herbal remedies.

I approach degrowth alongside those who have been calling for a more radical, feminist, decolonial, and, at times, explicitly anarchist alignment (Sheorey, 2023; this special issue). What an anarchistic lens might mean for degrowth strategy remains an open and generative question. Schulken et al. (2022) argue that "degrowth strategies are guided by degrowth values like autonomy, care, conviviality, democracy, and equity even as their applicability in a specific context might be challenged" (p. 21). Sheorey (2023) emphasises the centrality of decommodification and (re)commoning of everything. Whilst Xander Dunlap (2024) describes degrowth as:

> *The organised and planned reduction of energy and material consumption with the intention of improving the qua!ity of peop!e's !ives by moving toward more convivia! – grounded and socially developed – technologies and fulfilling lifeways rooted in community-supported agriculture, commoning land, cooperative economies, switching to localised renewable energy production, and political systems built around direct democracy and more.* (p. 11)

A radical or anarchistic approach to degrowth draws from the important work of those living in ways which counter the dominant growth ideology to build broader visions and opportunities for collective strategising and resist ecocidal colonial-capitalist ideology.

Mutual-aid based degrowth projects offer a lens that challenges the logic of charity and conditions that differentiate between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipient. Spade (2020) outlines three key elements of mutual aid. First, mutual aid projects expose that people do not have what they need to live well and work to both meet those needs and develop shared ways of understanding the problem. Second, mutual aid work fosters mobilisation and solidarity as the basis for sustained movement building. Third, mutual aid is done together, without saviours and with participatory and community-based structures. Ticktin (in Woodly et al., 2021) argues "mutual aid is about radical collective care and it is feminist in that it works against forms of paternalism or top-down giving" (p. 920). Mitchell Cowen Verter brings a lens of nurturance and kindness to understand Kropotkin's mutual aid and solidarity. Verter characterises solidarity as "the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of everyone's happiness upon the happiness of all" (Kropotkin, 1902, pp. xliii–xliv, as cited in Verter, 2013, p. 106). Nurturance, in this sense, does not arise from paternalism but from a recognition of common dependency upon each other. It entails working or struggling together, supporting each other, and building relationships beyond and against unidirectional giving or transactional encounters. This brings together concepts of mutual aid and solidarity within anarchistic organising approaches. Klee Benally (2023) describes 'solidarity means action' as a succinct anarchist aphorism. Benally and others with Indigenous Action Media (2014) emphasise relating as accomplices, "when we fight back or forward, together, becoming complicit in a struggle towards liberation, we are accomplices." This article explicitly focuses on herbalists' relationships to solidaristic and mutual aid focused care work and land relations as anarcha-feminist contributions to degrowth thinking and strategy. However, we must first take a brief foray into a critique of capitalist medical systems and the care economy's relationship to degrowth.

Degrowth Links with Feminist Politics of Care and Commoning

I take as a starting point the assertion that care work is essential work—both today and in future degrowth societies. Care work lies at the heart of meeting individual and collective needs, encompassing both material and emotional aspects.

Kōhei Saitō (2020/2024), in Slow Down: the degrowth manifesto, proposes five pillars of degrowth communism. His fifth pillar prioritises essential work precisely because it foregrounds use-value. This stands in clear opposition to prioritising exchange-value, which is the basis of profit accumulation and has led to economies of secondary markets and the financialization and speculation of non-material goods. Unlike profit-driven labour, care work is oriented towards meeting direct needs. This does not suggest that care work has gone uncommodified in the current economic system, but that relations of care ultimately are tied to use-values. Saitō draws on Graeber (2018) to emphasise the immense rise in what he terms "bullshit jobs"—work that is detached of real needs. The problems with bureaucratisation, administrative bloat, and the expansion of meaningless jobs are problems degrowth has proposed to address through redefining essential work and how much and how long we should be at "work."

To better understand the terrain of revolutionary care work, it is important to unpack what is meant by politics of care. Brown and Woodly (in Woodly et al., 2021) describe that the 21st century approach to the politics of care challenges liberal notions that "situates care as a finite resource to be distributed among autonomous individuals" (p. 891). Instead, they conceptualise care as "an inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organising, and a prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive" (Woodly et al., 2021, p. 891). In this sense, politics of care links directly to the concept of mutual aid and to anarcha-feminst positions. Beyond mutual aid, politics of care draws on diverse origins of thought in women of colour theorising and political action (see Lorde, 1988; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Raghuram, 2016). These accounts of care draw out distinctions in how power operates within experiences of caring for and being cared for, unsettling a simplified universal call for care.

Herbalist and abolition activist, Nicole Rose (2024), in the new anarcha-feminist compilation Constellations of Care, describes how care is a central part of revolutionary struggle:

> *Care is a radical act, and one of our biggest weapons. Collective care points beyond all the structures we fight against while simultaneously already embodying the alternatives we fight and yearn for. Yet for too long, the centrality of care to life itself has been downplayed or erased, including within anarchist circles. Anarcha-feminists have challenged the invizibilisation of care even as they've typically been the ones to engage in the myriad types of "care work" that form the backbone of anarchist infrastructure and are essential to everything that anarchists believe in and practice.* (pp. 191–192)

For Milstein (2024), editor and organising force behind Constellations of Care, an anarchist approach to politics—one that does not try to take power, profit or control, but instead enacts and embodies care for life and emphasises love and solidarity—makes clear that the word feminism "should be self-evident in the word anarchism" (p. 9).

An analysis of care can help steer degrowth towards more intersectional feminist perspectives. A growing body of feminist scholarship have articulated the need to combining feminist and degrowth theorising (Akbulut, 2016; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Dengler & Strunk, 2018; Gregoratti & Raphael, 2019; Hoffmann, 2017; Mehta & Harcourt, 2021). Dengler and Lang (2022, p. 5) argue that both feminism and degrowth share an emphasis on work outside "formal, male-coded wage work and put an emphasis on other forms of work such as reproductive, care, community, informal, and subsistence work" (Himmelweit, 1995; Hoffmann, 2017). Moreover, the Feminism(s) and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA) highlighted the importance of coordinated care activism for the sustainability of life from individuals' bodies to global ecosystems, recalling ecofeminist discourse from the last several decades (see DiChiro, 2008).

Feminist scholars have pointed to studies of commoning as a means towards these everyday mechanisms of sustaining life. Federici (2019) describes the commons as having a feminist orientation as commons are frequently the basis for meeting reproductive needs. While the concept of the commons is contextually variable and practiced differently across communities, a general meaning can be articulated as the meeting of community needs to sustain daily life, often in struggles against privatisation or enclosure of the spaces or relationships that sustain. Ticktin (2021) calls for a decolonial, feminist commons. In this articulation of the commons, care is inseparable:

> *There is a version of care at the heart of the commons, insofar as the commons are about radical resource redistribution and undoing forms of domination and enclosure to produce horizontal relationships of equality, mutuality and responsibility. Care is one of the methods used to imagine, prefigure and enact alternative ways of being together in a fundamentally non-exclusionary, non-sentimental manner.* (p. 916)

In these articulations of the commons, we are not just referring to a "resource" or a good or service. Rather, commons entail social relations that nurture non-capitalist political subjects. Commoning, understood as a verb, is "a crucial socio-spatial process in the struggle for a better world" (Chatterton, 2010, p. 901). Commoning, a term Linebaugh (2008) came across in his research on commons, describes (re)production that is embedded in the ecology of a place and collective labour process that is independent from the state. Furthermore, Touray (2021) proposes commoning as a mechanism of reparations in resistance to the ongoing structure of settler colonialism, and of creating opportunities to center care and radical belonging with the land.

Dengler and Lang (2022) offer a useful framework for conceptualising the work of commoning by distinguishing between communitarian caring commons and transformative caring commons. The former are associated with social groups and populations that have long been engaged in collective care as a means of social reproduction. These include decolonial feminists in Latin America who have challenged feminist economic analysis that do not account for the various communitarian caring commons that exist in different contexts of the Global South (Dengler & Lang 2022, p. 13). In contrast, transformative caring commons, come more explicitly out of social movement organising and include examples such as the community-based solidarity healthcare clinics and health care systems, commonised childcare in movements, and popular kitchens at actions and beyond. They exemplify what the authors call "commonisation of care."

M. E. O'Brien (2019), scholar of family abolition and liberation, describes 'communes' as the spontaneously formed and self-organised communities engaged in collectivising reproductive labour during prolonged periods of insurgency. These seeds, early forms that could succeed in future liberated societies. During major occupations of land defence—campaigns such as Standing Rock and the ZAD—forms of commonised care, including collective cooking and shared child rearing responsibilities, often arise (O'Brien, 2019). Kristin Ross's (2024) book, The Commune Form, explores an often-underappreciated side to insurrectionary communes. She describes a reliance on and the necessity for agrarian peasants, as well as the role of the 'subsistence perspective', in commune revolutionary culture. This roots revolution in a culture that feeds and sustains life. Communes, such as the Paris Commune and the ZAD explored in Ross's book, remind us that the act of taking control of a territory for community defence communicates values—not the values of the state or the market, but an expression of community needs, desires, and a "revaluation of what counts as wealth, what well-being looks and feels like" (Ross, 2024, p. 84). This revaluation comes out of defence of land, as the basis for alternative ecological societies, community autonomy and self-provisioning, and "the struggle to make non-accumulative processes prevail" (Ross, 2024, p. 88). The commune form is grounded in the defence or reclamation of land.

While commoning does occur in a wide range of domains—including material and immaterial commons such as knowledge commons—commoning as a question of access to and relationship to land is especially pertinent to herbal mutual aid. Land is central to building towards degrowth futures today. As Grubačić et al. (2022, p. 154) note, within anarchist tradition "land is a necessary condition for freedom, even if not always a sufficient one." Drawing on Kropotkin (1906/2011), Grubačić et al. (2022) emphasise that food provisioning, and thus land access, will be essential for any social revolution to succeed. Grubačić and colleagues (2022, p. 160) argue that "from an anarchist perspective, there is no doubt that degrowth needs to put the decommodification of land and labour at the centre." Others have argued that degrowth needs to strengthen the attention given to land and land access as part of a degrowth transition (Baumann et al., 2020).

One way to center relations of care and belonging is by turning to communities that fought for or maintained tending and stewarding relationships to land. Grubačić et al. (2022) use the concept of "usufruct" to explain community rights to lands that are productively worked over time, sometimes over many generations or millennia. They argue that usufruct implies a reunification of ownership and political deliberation, or access rights and governance processes of decision-making. In doing so, it takes property out of being an "economic relation" and solidly embeds it in the social domain. Usufruct, as deliberated by Murray Bookchin (2005) in The Ecology of Freedom, can be seen at work in pre-capitalist and non-capitalist societies where land is not held as collective or communal property, but instead outside property relations entirely. Usufruct emphasises "the freedom of individuals in a community to appropriate resources merely by virtue of the fact that they are using them" (Bookchin, 2005, p. 116).

The land relations practiced by the Zapatistas, an Indigenous led revolutionary movement that emerged in the 1980s, as well examples from the French, Russian, and Spanish anarchists, can be read as enactments of usufruct as autonomy in practice—socialised self-management, care of both people and the land (Grubačić et al., 2022). In the Twentieth and Last Part: The Common and Non-Property Communique, the Zapatistas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, El Capitan, 2023) describe this relation as "extensions of the recovered land as common. That is, without property. Neither private, nor ejidal, nor communal, nor federal, nor state, nor business, nor anything. A non-ownership of land. As they say: "land without papers." This is land worked in common serving the common good for the autonomous communities. Autonomy, in this context, implies self-management, as a socialised process of active care of both the people and of the land. Food sovereignty scholar Devon Peña (2017) describes this as autonomía (indigenous autonomy), which draws upon indigenous conceptions of property that are relational and frequently embrace "earth-care" obligations. The Zapatistas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, El Capitan, 2023) also elaborate their long-standing approach to autonomous health systems based on earth-care relations and land-based relationality. This approach highlights their embrace of preventative and herbal medicine, beginning with recovering the land, recovering health diets and herbal knowledge, and pairing that with western medicine enacting community medicine through a health promoter's approach.

Herbalism as Commoning and Care: A different basis for land

The practices of herbal mutual aid offer a tangible site for observing these intersections of commoning and enactments of care as they are situated within land-based politics. Herbalism and street medicine played a vital role in the everyday work and defence of the commune at the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. Equipemediczad (2017) documented the experiences of those working with herbal medicine at the commune and described the multiple efforts that were made between 2012 and 2017, some of which include creating a medicinal garden, hosting medicinal plant walks, creating a

dispensary of herbal remedies, piloting a clinic, and providing trainings in herbalism. They articulate the connection between landed relationships and autonomy through their approach to herbalism:

> *As many other projects which co-inhabit this zone, care by plants is rooted for us in a logic of long-term struggle and autonomy, in conflict with the State and capitalist logics. As we try different ways to live, to resolve conflicts without legal intervention, to organise with many people with a diversity of positions and practices in the same territory, we take the liberty to be autonomous in care. We don't want the world of the pharmaceutical industry, and of the disempowerment of bodies by a vertical and imposed system. We want to play an active role in the expansion of a method of accessible, understandable, and participative care which opens up new paths towards more knowledge of our bodies and the plants that surround us.* (Equipemediczad, 2017)

Through embodied, territorially dependent relationship building with medicinal plants developed to meet community health needs in the ZAD, the communards enact Ross's (2024) revaluation process of highlighting the value of non-market and non-state-based relations to each other and land.

Across the globe, numerous land-based movements recognise and integrate herbalism as a part of their struggles. Gelderloos (2022) describes the efforts of Guaraní communities alongside a rural anarchist collective, Cultive Resistencia, who work collaboratively to reclaim old indigenous territory, revitalise the Tupi-Guarani language and knowledge, and sustain traditional healthcare through practices such as harvesting herbs for medicinal tea. In these efforts, land is centred as the basis for autonomy and struggle. Drawing from his own experience in Catalunya, Gelderloos (2022) recounts participating in a gardening land squat cultivating medicinal herbs to share with a broader network of movement projects. He writes, "attempts to heal and recover the land, to gain local control over food, are serving as a springboard for some of the most exciting resistance and the most intelligent alternatives in this terrain" (Gelderloos, 2022, p. 108). Gelderloos connects these efforts with other land-based struggles such as the Teia dos Povos network. Erahsto Felício, organiser with the network, outlines their collective efforts to reclaim and occupy territories, grow food, and support community autonomy: "Our elders," Felício adds, "have been teaching us that the land is the foundations, the principle, it's where the great struggle is born" (Gelderloos, 2022, pp. 110–111). In their case, gaining access to land for food production feeds the struggle to continue to fight for land-based autonomous living. These examples illustrate communitarian and transformative caring commons that engage with land-based production for collective material needs.

The land relations of the Salt Lake City-based herbalist cooperative and herb farm, the Mobile Moon Co-op, exemplifies the complicated and multiple dimensions of property and land relations in production-focused herbal mutual aid projects. In an interview, cooperative member Yasi Shaker shared their perspective on the collective's relationships to land (Y. Shaker, personal communication, September 19, 2024). Shaker reflected the broader problem of private property, "I wish there were more direct connections between the land and people. Now it feels like because of privatisation you can't develop a relationship without permission of the 'owner'" [making air quotes] (Y. Shaker, personal communication, September 19, 2024). At the same time, their co-op benefits from secure access to land where one cooperative member owns the farm parcel—a place that they describe as 'another home'—where all co-op members have decision-making power together over the land project. Shaker acknowledged the tension of being critical of the impact of property on how we hold relationships to land while also being grateful for a sense of tenure security when so many projects end up being displaced or losing access to land. They recounted a moment of another person writing a love letter to the land and placing it somewhere on the farm. The person commented that they probably should have asked the owner for permission. In reaction, Shaker emphatically responded:

> *No, this land is for all of us, if the land speaks to you, the land speaks to you. If you truly believe in land stewardship and moving away from land ownership, then anybody can build a relationship with this land as long as they are seeing themselves as a steward of it and are deeply listening.* (Y. Shaker, personal communication, September 19, 2024)

Having moved from Iran to the US at age 17, Shaker reflects the complicated positionality of wanting to secure access to developing relationship with this land while "sitting with being neither settler nor native" (Y. Shaker, personal communication, September 19, 2024). The question looms large: how can such projects support land back efforts and acknowledge settler colonial legacies, while also rooting themselves ethically in the places they inhabit and seek to heal?

Herbalisms centring interrelationship to land as relationship of friendship, kin, and care Herbal mutual aid—herbalist approaches in general—are an entry point for exploring embodied practices of land relationships based on intentional care. In their dissertation Ecologies of Friendship, Charis Ford Boke (2018) develops the idea that western herbalism emphasises that plants are friends, and that beyond plants themselves herbalism encourages people to understand socioecological relationships through care and friendship. Lucy, an herbalist and teacher that Boke interviews, describes that:

> *More than just using them for healing, an herbalist is a friend to the plants. A good herbalist is someone with good connection to plants, a good understanding of plants. The more deeply and completely you understand the plant, the more you can relate it to someone who needs that plant.* (Boke, 2018, p. 221)

Building on such insights, Boke (2018) identifies five ways that herbalists enact care ethics in friendship: 1) selective alignment with plants; 2) responsibility to medicinal plants and plants more broadly; 3) solidarity with humans and plants living under the conditions of capitalism; 4) empathy with plants; and 5) material mutual aid with plants and humans. This final form of mutual aid is exemplified through herbalist support at action camps and other social movement spaces and through the actions of herbalists to tend and cultivate herbs with care. These topics are explored after engaging further with the concept of care as response-ability.

Boke (2018) draws on feminist scholarship to argue that plant friendships help people see the possibilities of empathy with and beyond humans, and the processes of becoming together. Care, in this framing, helps us recognise that socioecological relationships are constructed through unequal power relations and the agency we can possess to address these. Boke writes, "Care ethics suggests that we build spatially extensive connections of interdependence and mutuality, that we attend to the ways in which historical and institutional relationships produce the need for care [...] and that we take social responsibility" (Lawson, 2007, as cited in Boke, 2018, p. 55). This framing calls forth conceptions of response-ability—a term that describes human co-creation with the non-human world as well as that the body is always in process of crafting relations with other-than-humans (Barad, 2012; Haraway, 2016; Hustak & Myers, 2012). Referring to both other humans and non-humans, Boke (2018) states that "By developing practices of attention to affect and entanglement, and expanding their curiosity and willingness to engage, herbalists come to an embodied understanding of the sufferings, vulnerabilities, and risks of intimate others" (p. 221). Thus, herbalists highly value this sense of interconnection and the cultivation of skills of stepping into response-ability and obligation to others and to earth. Lucy explains that plants help us experience our bodies as part of "nature" and without this "we cannot understand our relationship with planetary issues like climate change" (Boke, 2018, p. 221).

Anarcha-herbalist Laurel Luddite extends this by describing that when we ingest herbal medicine, we are physically taking part in what a plant has experienced—its soil, water, and other environmental conditions come to interact with our bodies (Luddite, 2009). For Luddite (2009) this builds a deep sense of responsibility to medicinal plants:

> *When we are healed by plants, we owe it to them to look out for their kind and the places where they live. Traditional plant-gatherers often have a prayer they recite before they take anything from the wild. I usually say something along the lines of 'OK, plant. You heal me and I'll look out for you. I got your back. No one's gonna build over you, or log you, or pick too much while I'm around.'* (p. 13)

This reflects a form of landed relationship—a connection to plants that brings a sense of responsibility to others, not rooted in a property relation. Luddite's (2009) approach resonates with the current within green anarchism that connects animism—a recognition of the spiritual essence of living and non-living beings—to an ethics of responsibility and care. Luddite's sentiment is echoed in a recent social media post from renowned US herbalist, Rosemary Gladstar (2025), quoting 11th century Christian mythic and herbalist Hildegard of Bingen: "If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper, we will respond to its endangerment with passion." Creation in Gladstar's reference, or medicinal plants tended in gardens or collected in wild places as in Luddite's statement, evoke a commitment to defending the abilities of medicinal plants to live and thrive.

The ethics of wildcrafting—the harvesting plants from the 'wild'—has been a topic of deep and ongoing debate in herbalist communities for many years, as evidenced in the many letters, articles, and workshops in various North American herbalism spaces including the United Plant Savers publication The Journal of Medicinal Plant Conservation, and the International Herb Symposium, among others. Yasi Shaker articulated the feeling of tension:

> *Sometimes harvest feels better sometimes than other times. I always try to follow the honorable harvest principles and even with that sometimes it feels like a question if I should be harvesting. It takes some attunement, attuning to yourself and the land.* (Y. Shaker, personal communication, September 19, 2024)

Shaker is referencing the popularisation of the honorable harvest principals through Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) work, highlighting the need to relate to plants and the Earth as kin, as persons themselves. While a full engagement with the ethics of wildcrafting is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to highlight the thoughts of Karyn Sanders as shared on the KPFA radio show The Herbal Highway. Sanders is a co-founder of the Blue Otter School of Herbalism and taught and influenced thousands of herbalists along the West Coast and beyond since the late 90s. In one episode of The Herbal Highway, Sanders (2017) takes on the question of rethinking wildcrafting. She begins by rearticulating a common critique of what she considers an uncaring approach to harvests or foraging: the problem of entitlement. The phenomenon here are herbalists taking from plant populations without developing a deeper sense of knowledge of the well-being of those plants or who else (human or beyond) may be dependent on or in relation to these plants. Drawing on her training, as well as her Native American perspective, she argues that firstly one should learn to listen to and understand a plant before harvesting. For her this meant a four-year process of tending and properly caring for a plant patch before her teachers allowed her to harvest. She advocates for herbalists to think through the perspective of care giving not care taking. She explains:

> *From a Native perspective, humans made an agreement with the creator because everybody made an agreement as to what is my purpose, that we would care give the earth, that we would tend the earth because we were given so many gifts and that that would be our give back, that we would care give.* (Sanders, 2017)

Sanders' perspective on herb harvesting extends to a broader responsibility to a care-based land ethic. Other Indigenous activists and scholars echo this sentiment. The late Klee Benally (2023), Diné anarchist and land defender, foregrounded the concept of "interrelationality" to build upon and go beyond limitations of the popular organising framework of intersectionality. Interrelationality takes intersectionality as an important analytic tool and contributes to it by bringing in relations with more than human societies, urging "us to meaningfully consider non-human beings, spirits, and Mother Earth. To put this another way: the sacred does not live in the intersections of human political domination and exploitation, it is expressed in and through our relationality with existence" (Benally, 2023, p. 212). He describes interrealtionality as an "anti-political recuperation of who and how we are, with each other and existence" (Benally, 2023, 213). Part of this is learning or emphasising how to establish consent and kinship with the land. Benally was influenced in this thinking through teachings from his father who shared with him his herbal practices and knowledge. When they would gather herbs together his father would caution, "We don't just go pick herbs at random. We have to know their names and make an offering. Otherwise, it is like sayin' 'Hey you!' at someone. You might pick a fight" (Benally, 2023, p. 30). Benally (2023) and Sanders (2017) both emphasise a spiritual relationship to land as a central element of understanding humans' place and responsibility. Furthermore, Gelderloos (2022) quotes Niillas Somby, a prominent Sámi justice advocate, in talking about a consistent pattern of colonialism:

> *Traditional spirituality was the first element of the culture to be attacked... the land doesn't belong to us, We belong to the land, and it is our responsibility to take care of it.. ... Practicing traditional spirituality is not only about healing and medicine, it is about understanding how everything is connected, about being able to relate to nature and be its guardian.* (p. 59)

Extensive scholarship has highlighted the diverse and significant contributions various Indigenous perspectives bring to conversations on property and land relations (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2017). Nimal and Rocheleau (2019, p. 17) suggest that "to recognise territories as living worlds" and "struggles over dignity, autonomy, integrity of ecologies and territories as extensions of bodies/lives" embraces a decolonial way of seeing. I do not intend to flatten or generalise these conversations with this brief engagement. Rather, I bring forward these words to show how Indigenous herbalist approaches contribute to conversations on responsibility to land in broader herbalist communities (Hausermann, 2021; Lara et al., 2023; Miller 2019).

In her reflections on wildcrafting, Sanders (2017) considers how some herbalists have, in her opinion, developed a misguided, romanticised idea that herbs taken from "the wild" are inherently more potent. She calls this a Western misconception and points out that Indigenous peoples of North American who did not migrate with game or due to harsh weather were largely more tied to particular sites, and "our people, we raised gardens and we also had medicinal gardens close to where people live because you want your medicine close to you" (Sanders, 2017). For Sanders, these practices of tending plants close to home equates to a form of gardening. She advocates that garden-tended plants are just as powerful medicinally and benefit from and give the benefit of more direct and consistent connection and care. This can strengthen the medicine. This perspective aligns with long-standing critiques of the 'wilderness' concept which erases the reality that landscapes have been tended and influenced by Indigenous people since time immemorial (see Cronon, 1996). Further expanding on the dominant wild-harvesting practices, Sanders (2017) proposes a reorientation: wild-planting. Rather than only harvesting, the emphasis can be placed on supporting wild populations of plants by spreading seeds and roots of wild plants and asking oneself what will help a plant thrive.

These provocations invite herbalists to reconceptualise plant tending outside of property relations. They return us to the anarcha-herbalist perspective thinking about responsibility to care for and act in defence of the land—that means not

relating to land as under ownership, but seeing land as part of beings we are in relationships of responsibility to. Working with medicinal and other plants in gardens and other spaces builds connection and sense of care. Sanders' perspective echoes that of Luddite, "You know, you really care too where you will defend a place because that is necessary. And I think if people started to have that connection, then things would change" (Sanders, 2017). From these assertions we can dive more deeply into the connection between herbalism, mutual aid, and movement organising.

Land-defense, Self-defense

For many radical herbalists and herbal mutual aid projects the interrelationality of humans with broader environments and worlds is at the core of their practice. Herbalisms, in this context, seek to situate humans in nature not as a being apart from the rest of life. Advocating a radical vitalist approach, Meesters and Kent (2016), ask herbalists to consider how the revitalisation of humanity is based in the revitalisation of Nature as a whole; seeing health through a holistic lens that considers the health of the beyond human as well grounds us as part of nature. They offer these examples of how this perspective can reshape herbalist practice:

> *Nigerians without potable water thanks to Shell Oil, Louisianans in Cancer Alley sick from proximity to oil refineries, Appalachian folks poisoned from the runoff of mountaintop removal know their fate is tied to that of the environment. It is time for herbalists and other holistic practitioners to broaden their scope. Our selves do not end at the boundary of our own skin. We must look to the systems we are part of to create an approach to health that is truly holistic.* (Meesters & Kent, 2016)

They conclude herbalists must engage in the "calling of our generation to end the war against Nature" (Meesters & Kent, 2016). This can mean participating in frontline environmental defence, embracing gardening to weave nature closer into our lives, or participating in addressing this war in "any way outside of work and family life" (Meesters & Kent, 2016). The authors argue everyone should consider the additional ways we can contribute to the struggle, including supporting others who are on the frontlines if one cannot be. These actions, they assert, constitute forms of 'therapies', radical vitalist approaches to healing and health beyond individualism.

This vision of herbalism stands in sharp contrast to what is often popularised through Instagram and health food stores. It is not the cottage-core femme taking care of herself and her immediate family through another fad of green capitalist aesthetic. Nor is it the older, still popular version of herbal medicine that reduces plants to constituent parts and the ability to name and market particular medicinal qualities. Instead, these new systems of holistic and vitalist health blend together more attuned attention to personal and family well-being or disease, with explicit calls to work towards new medical systems in a society re-grounded in our relationship to nature. Or as anarcha-herbalist Laurel Luddite (2009) puts it,

> *Medicine is just one part of the machine that we have to take back and re-create into a form that works for the society we will become. We can start with ourselves, within our communities and circles, but should never stop expanding outwards until industrial medicine rusts in a forgotten grave, a victim of its own imbalances.* (p. 13)

Radical vitalism invites herbalists and all of us into this arguably degrowth process of the deliberate dismantling of capitalist medical systems.

It is worth now giving further examples of mutual aid herbalism practiced on the ground —in the frontlines of the war against nature. Some community herbalists have combined their skills with the specific training and orientation of the

'protest medic'. Olympia Beltran and Dixie Pauline shared their experiences as protest medics and herbalists on the Herbal Highway radio show (Holmes, 2020). Like many community herbalists who also have training as nurses, wilderness first aid responders, EMTs, trained protest medics, etc., Olympia Beltran is a nurse. She is also a member of the Yaqui Nation of Southern California and the American Indian Movement. She brings together her approaches to ancestral medicine, herbalism, and frontline medic support in her work with environmental justice movements. Beltran notes:

> *A lot of the herbal medicines that I integrate into frontline medic work came from learnings that I received while at Standing Rock at the herbalist tent and the medic tent. And it has kind of been reinforced throughout my experience with Run4Salmon.* (Holmes, 2020)

She explains that her work, showing up to different protest camps, continues to shape her work as a healthcare provider and to teach her more about herbalism—just as herbalism teaches her how to show up for the movements: "[I work] honouring our ancestors and honouring the struggles that are here on these lands. And a lot of these medicines, these medicines carry stories of the legacies of these lands" (Holmes, 2020). Ann, an Olympia, Washington based herbalist, gives an example of the issues addressed by the herbalist medics at Standing Rock:

> *The herbalists were able to support protectors in a way that many people were coming in for ailments they had not had access to care for outside of camp. It was really cool to see people getting that care, having someone listen and take care of them in a way that our western system does not allow for (assuming the person had access to healthcare at all in the first place).* (Duncan, 2017, p. 18)

Beltran emphasises that the protest medic training goes into topics of safety and police violence that many herbalism trainings do not, and that herbalists that are interested should get trained and bring whatever they can offer to these moments of need (Holmes, 2020).

Community Clinics and Herbal Health Autonomy as Commonized Care

Pop-up herbalist tents and protest medics are frequently connected to more sustained presences in local communities through community herb clinics. These projects link individuals with various trainings in herbalism, or those pursuing self-learning in folk or ancestral medicine, to their communities' needs. Such clinics may offer herbal teas, cleansing foot baths, remedies such as fire cider, nerve support tincture, or herbs for colds and flus. Some focus on first aid treatments for minor injuries or wounds. Atlanta Duncan (2017) offers several examples of community clinics, including: the community apothecary and herb farm Farmacy Herbs on Rhode Island; the Herbalista Free Clinic in Atlanta; the Stone Cabin Collective, Díne led project that supports resistors of coal and uranium mining and forced displacement of Díne people lifeways; traveling or pop-up apothecaries and herbal support organised for Black Lives Matter protests; survivors of the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland; and other movements. Duncan (2017, p. 17) asserts, "Community herb clinics are spaces of resilience, resistance, and support in a bleak and tumultuous climate." A mutual aid disaster relief effort, the Common Ground Health Clinic, in Louisiana provides an important and lasting example.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, community activists Sharon Johnson and Malik Rahim recognised the dire need for medical support in the Algiers and Gretna neighbourhoods of New Orleans (Anarchy in Action, 2024). They issued a call for healthcare workers to show up with street medics, some with herbal training coming to provide the immediate disaster relief mutual aid work under the title of the Common Ground Health Clinic. What began as an emergency response effort grew into a long-lasting community-run clinic that is still active today,

almost two decades later, and has seen tens of thousands of patients through their work. From its inception, the clinic was grounded in an approach of street medicine and anarchism—committed to provide quality healthcare through solidarity, not charity (Stern, 2007). Its initial focus included first aid, testing blood pressure and for diabetes, and working with community members to address the impacts of long-term and acute stress, anxiety, and depression (Shorrock, 2006). Herbalism played a key role in the Clinic's ethic to promote both individual self-reliance and well-being, and community-level self-reliance and well-being. Herbalist practitioners offered classes on herbalism for community members interested in preparing their own herbal remedies—one class even sparked the development of a community garden to provide medicinal herbs and healthy foods through the Clinic—and the herbalist medical providers also worked directly with patients (Stern, 2007). Herbalism provided additional tools that counteracted the stress of living in the existing system and created mechanisms to "an ill patient's agency and increase their ability to fight for themselves – so healthcare becomes a tool for "survival pending revolution," as the Black Panthers phrased it" (Stern, 2007, p. 8).

Herbalist training varies, and some schools encourage students to think about their work beyond individual-to-individual client-based relationships. Boke (2018) describes the work of 'The Center', a popular herbalism school in Vermont, where community service and direct mutual aid support to community-based herbalism groups, health justice, and earth justice efforts are part of the curriculum. Boke describes that students work with a variety of projects, including a local group called Remedios who provides holistic health care to migrant workers in Vermont, where some of participants grow their own medicinal plant gardens with support from other gardeners. Other students contribute by providing herbs or working at further afield projects like The Stone Cabin; working in mutual aid response to disasters such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti; participating in the wellness/herb tent at the No DAPL protests; and being involved in anti-mining camps. A similar ethos is visible in California's Now and Then Herb School which is running its second cohort of a certificate program specifically focused on community herbalism. This model is distinct both from individual and family-oriented herbalism on one hand, and a path to clinical herbalism serving clients through a professional approach on the other. From a degrowth perspective, such training programs represent an exciting shift—an example of the commonisation of care that challenges extractive, commodified models of health, and instead builds localised, resilient infrastructures of solidarity.

Other decolonial spaces of herbalism offer vital visions of collective pedagogies for liberatory herbalism. Lara et al. (2023) in their article Boricuir Trans-territorial Ecologies: Archipelagic Cimarronaje and Hemispheric Resurgence in Abya Yala reflect on their practices and politics as Boricuir healers and herbalists who are committed to healing themselves, their relations to other people, and their relations to territories in the context of ongoing colonialism. They recount post-disaster mutual aid efforts, for example like the ones after the Pulse nightclub shooting and Hurricane Maria. One significant initiative they describe is the formation of a BIPOC medicine makers virtual community, with over 180 members worldwide. This network supports herbalists in conversations on care in times of multiple crises. This and other networks of support developed through teaching have created spaces where healers are able to practice deep listening, unlearn western herbalism, and take care of each other as well as each other's plants.

Whether on the frontlines or in home communities, herbal mutual aid projects fit into a long history of 'free' projects aligned with social solidarity. Leena Unger (2022) of Spoonful Herbals wrote a call for mutual aid during the pandemic and other moments of crisis, while also emphasising the need for sustained mutual aid efforts—what they coin as "herbal justice." Unger (2022) writes:

> *Organising power is built from relationships of community, but rest and self-care are equally important and revolutionary. In the midst of a pandemic layered on an inadequate health care system, herbal remedies sustain our health and by extension, sustain mutual aid. So, what is herbal justice? It's a term used to refer to the interconnection of herbalism to social and environmental justice. Collective healing is part of collective liberation and our health is deeply intertwined with the health of both our communities and the earth.* (p. 3)

As the examples illustrate, herbal mutual aid is a tool and approach that individuals are using to show up in solidarity and develop long-term, healthy relationships as accomplices.

In addition to recent examples of community herb clinics, Black Panther Party's (BPP) health clinics offer important lessons in the work for health autonomy. The Black Panther Party explicitly identified racism, classism, and oppression as root causes of poor health (Nelson, 2011). Recognising health as a central concern, the BPP established People's Free Medical Centers in 13 cities across the US. Meng (2021) describes that at the clinic of the BBP headquarters, the George Jackson Medical Clinic in Oakland, California, "physicians and laypersons worked as "24-hour revolutionaries" to provide medical care" (p. 897). In the Los Angeles Bunchy Carter People's Free Medical Center, volunteers taught classes on treating tear gas and the clinic distributed and taught about herbal and natural medicines (Nelson, 2011). Norma Mtume (2016) (Armour, while she was a Panther) recalled being a 19-year-old who was trained to help run the LA clinic and was introduced to natural healing practices at that time. One of her key mentors, Marie Branch, a nurse and co-founder of the Bunchy Carter PFMC, believed in the integration of natural medicine into their work. In the early 70s, Branch had critiqued racism and lack of access to quality medical care for her community in LA. As part of an "ethical humanism" philosophy that she developed for improving nursing, she advocated for "holistic blends of traditional cultural and western healing practices" (Gatrall, 2020). In 1972, she traveled with a 20 member BBP delegation to China to learn about their medical practices (Branch, 1973). Among the delegation was Dr. Tolbert Small, the BPP's medical director from 1970 to 1974. In China, the delegation met "barefoot doctors who carried aspirin alongside "one silver needle and a bunch of herbs" in their medical toolkit" (Meng, 2021, p. 898) and witnessed children learning acupuncture and growing herbs in school gardens (Branch, 1973). They were introduced to a system blending traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine and were encouraged to "integrat[e] traditional Black medicine with modern medicine to serve people better" (Meng, 2021, p. 898). Branch and others brought back both the idea of integrative medicine and the inspiration to train and empower more care providers in the movement as part of a model of medicine to serve the people (Schiller, 2008).

Rojava's efforts—another struggle against colonial power and the expansion of capitalist modernity—while not explicitly anarchist, provides great inspiration to those envisioning herbalists roles in broader networks of care and communes on an expanded scale. The organising of nested commune structures in Democratic Federation of Northern Syria or Rojava, a territory famously influenced by the conception of democratic confederalism of Murray Bookchin, is a lived experiment with creating their own autonomous democratic self-organisation outside of a nation-state-focused administration. Central to this structure are communes, which are the basic level of political organisation from which other governance arises, thus emphasising the power of smaller-scale communities exercising participatory democratic control. Health assemblies and committees have been integral in the autonomous care practices developed in the territory, with each commune including committees on language, first aid, education, ecology, economy, journalism, youth, and defence (Davies, 2016). Heval Azad describes that one of the goals of this work is to return the ownership of health to society, taking it out of the hands of capitalism and the state which had privatised healthcare—making it less accessible and divided from traditional medicine (Davies, 2016). As part of this vision, communes have developed

gardens to grow medicinal plants and organised foraging for others; they have developed education highlighting body awareness and women's empowerment, including integrating traditional medicinal knowledge; and they have worked to bring a democratic and preventative emphasis to healthcare back to the region (Davies, 2016). Women centred projects of Kongra Star and the women-only village, Jinwar, have also embraced herbal plant cultivation and promotion of herbal knowledge as means of women's health autonomy (Rose, 2023)

Conclusion

This paper explored how herbal mutual aid approaches and projects contribute to degrowth—as a strategy, a vision, and an orientation towards particular strategies. By building upon conceptions of transformative care commons, this paper demonstrate how herbal mutual aid enacts practices of solidarity and expands community appreciation and knowledge of interdependencies. While most mutual aid herbalists do not explicitly identify with the term degrowth, their practices often align with its core principles. At the same time, some community herbalists express ambivalence toward the term degrowth, concerned that it may evoke a response of shame or alienate us from thinking of personal and ecological flourishing. While seeing the utility of challenging capitalist economic growth, some herbalists help question if degrowth creates a linguistic separation from being part of nature. Degrowth can bring to the fore questions of what we mean by growth and what kinds of relationality different forms of growth prioritise? Herbalist practices, build on a relation between humans and plants, invite an embodied reframing of response-ability to each other and to the land. Mutual aid within the approaches explored in the article center the indispensable role care plays in any society and the need to make visible these relations of care. By centring the indispensable role of care, the mutual aid practices examined in this article work to make visible and revalue the often-invisible labour and ethics of tending. These examples bridge together conversations between prefigurative, insurrectionary, and communitarian anarchism to further develop anarchistic understandings of degrowth.

A process of degrowth will necessarily require movements rooted in social and ecological defence. Roman-Alcalá (2025), in this issue, explores some of the oppositional organising and actions that put degrowth into action now. These anarchistic efforts assert agency and responsibility upon themselves, taking direct action in various forms to stop projects that further exploit and degrade—and, in doing so, defend territories upon which communities depend. Such actions require people to take care of each other through food, emotional support, security, etc. Herbal mutual aid is often embedded in a matrix of care, and many mutual aid herbalists take seriously the responsibility to care for 'nature' through engagement with land defence efforts. Mutual aid herbalism goes beyond this and is often primarily visible through community-based clinics, outreach efforts, and event support. Through these everyday forms of community care, herbal mutual aid offers one pathway to build toward decommodified health autonomy and partially address what Dunlap (2024) describes as taking "responsibility for dependence on and addiction to this system" (p. 196). There is much to learn from other anarchistic healthcare projects and from the history of community medic collectives and clinics developed by movements (see Essex, 2023; Fenney, 2024). This may help defend against attempts by companies or the state to offer incentives, such as medical clinics and support services, to break up movements and undermine permanent ecological conflict (Dunlap, 2024).

Herbal mutual aid efforts can offer a counterweight to the heaviness of a world in crisis which can in turn animate our movements. Dunlap (2020) has emphasised the exploration of joy in ecological defence movements for this very reason. Offering the examples of Fukuoka's writing on ecological farming praxis and insurrectionary anarchism, Dunlap explores how "Rooting struggle in joy and love, means emphasising qualitative dimensions of relationships and struggles, connecting means and ends and rejecting the quantitative logic of the economy, political parties, unions and their

monopolistic armed wings" (2020, p. 1000). This resonates deeply with how many herbalists and gardeners describe the joy of working with plants and community. Nicole Rose (n.d.) of Solidarity Apothecary names Joy as one of their nine core values and principles, noting that "joy, pleasure and nourishment that plant medicines gift us can help support people survive state violence while we work to tear oppressive systems down and rebuild anew." Efforts, movements, and communities supported by herbal and other forms of holistic health knowledge, spaces of care, and networks of responsible interrelationality can turn our lives towards more joyful and capable degrowth futures.

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- **About the author:** K. Michelle Glowa is currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Social Change at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. In her teaching she draws together the learning from land-based and land defense movements that work to cultivate other possible worlds. Michelle approaches her research with over two decades of experience working as part of environmental and food justice movements. She received her B.S. in Natural Resource Management and Political Science from Colorado State University and her PhD in Environmental Studies from University of California Santa Cruz. Michelle lives in Santa Cruz where she participates in a local herbal mutual aid project, lives on a mommune, and supports local gardens and anarchist organizing projects. Her most recent work has been in collaboration with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, conducting research and advocating against a proposed sand and gravel mine on their sacred land.

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