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The Prefigurative and Settler-Colonial Politics of Relational Commons

Ethnographic insights from an urban grower collective in Alberta

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ABSTRACT | In an era of environmental degradation and social inequality, the concept of the 'commons' offers a framework for reimagining resource management through shared stewardship and collective care. This article, co-authored by an agrarian anthropologist and a guiding Mapuche Elder, examines the prefigurative politics of a Grower Activist Collective in Calgary, Canada, where critical urban gardening functions as both ecological care and political resistance. Using participatory methods, the study explores how everyday acts of sharing seeds, labour, and knowledge cultivate relationality as the foundation of communal solidarity. We argue that practices of seed saving, gift economies, participatory governance, and intercultural knowledge exchange enact alternative socio-political relations rooted in the commons, challenging capitalist enclosure and market-oriented food systems. Integrating intersectional and anti-colonial approaches, the research highlights how grassroots initiatives can transform food systems, foster mutual aid, and build resilience, contributing to broader struggles for social justice and environmental regeneration.

Keywords: Prefigurative politics; commons; critical urban gardening; settler-colonialism; activist ethnography.

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Introduction: Commoning in a Settler-Colonial Context

In an epoch marked by globalization, environmental degradation, and deepening social inequality, the concept of the 'commons' has re-emerged as a rallying point for imagining alternative futures. Historically rooted in agrarian lifeways, the commons describes shared stewardship grounded in reciprocity and responsibility. While Garrett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons (1968) framed communal management as inherently flawed, Elinor Ostrom and colleagues (1999) countered by showing how communities successfully self-organize through consensus and accountability. Such debates animate contemporary struggles over environmental conservation, social equity, and the decommodification of everyday life (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Basu 2016; Basu Jongerden and Ruivenkamp 2017; De Angelis 2014; Ruiz-Ballesteros and Gual 2012). For Paul Chatterton and Andre Pusey (2020), the commons is a lens for cultivating democratic decision-making and relations of care.

Today, the commons extends beyond physical landscapes to encompass socio-ecological relations; that is, how communities sustain life in ways that resist extractive and commodified logics (Feinberg, Ghorbani, and Herder 2021). This viability is continually tested by monopolistic industrialism, urban sprawl, and other forces of enclosure. Food is a particularly charged terrain. To treat food as a commons—as nourishment, heritage, and ecological relation rather than commodity—is to reweave the social fabric through gifting, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Henderson 2004; Kimmerer 2024). Grassroots collectives often stand at the forefront of these transformations, cultivating solidarities that challenge entrenched hierarchies (Staples 2012).

This article examines one such initiative: a Grower Activist Collective in Greater Forest Lawn (GFL), a diverse and entrepreneurial region of Calgary (Treaty 7). GFL is characterized by relative affordability with high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and housing precarity, while also sustaining vibrant solidarities at the margins. Both the theoretical and methodological practices of this work unfold on land shaped by uneven geographies of colonial power. Southern Alberta is the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Îyârhe Nakoda, the Tsuut'ina Dene, and is homeland to the Northwest and Otipemisiwak Métis. Recognising this research as situated within an ongoing settler-colonial project of dispossession is essential to understanding both the possibilities and limitations of 'commoning' (Linebaugh 2008). Our own positionalities—as a settler agrarian anthropologist (Rozanski) and an exiled Mapuche Elder (Huenchullan)—shape this collaborative inquiry and our commitments to work in solidarity with marginalized communities.

Drawing on a multi-year ethnography, this paper demonstrates how the Collective enacts urban commoning through daily practices of seed saving, labour sharing, gift exchange, participatory governance, and intercultural knowledge exchange, while navigating the pressures of enclosure, precarity, and settler-colonial contradictions. Through this lens, we argue that commoning functions not only as a resource management strategy but as a prefigurative politics of care, solidarity, and resistance, offering alternatives to capitalist enclosure and market-oriented food systems. The sections that follow situate commoning within key theoretical debates on prefigurative politics and food as a terrain of struggle, outline our participatory methodology—including experiential farming, farm exchanges, storytelling, and group sharing circles—and trace the Collective's organization, governance, seasonal rhythms, and relational politics. The paper

then examines how practices such as gift economies, seed saving, and intercultural knowledge sharing constitute everyday prefiguration before turning to a discussion of commoning as an ongoing process. We conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of urban commoning for food justice, decolonization, and collective futures.

Prefigurative Politics and Commoning: Theoretical Framing

Prefigurative politics offers a critical theoretical lens for understanding grassroots movements that strive to embody their envisioned social futures in present-day practices (Monticelli 2021). Central to this framework is the idea that the means of political action must coherently reflect the desired ends, creating living models of justice, equity, and solidarity within existing social contexts (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021). This alignment challenges traditional political strategies that privilege institutional engagement or top-down reforms, emphasizing instead direct action, participatory democracy, and communal governance. In practice, prefigurative politics manifests through the creation of autonomous spaces and social relations that prefigure alternative modes of belonging and resource sharing (Maeckelbergh 2011). For example, grassroots collectives often practice horizontal decision-making, consensus-building, and mutual aid, enacting democratic principles that resist hierarchical and capitalist logics (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, Maeckelbergh 2011). Such microcosms serve both as sites of resistance and as prototypes for more just futures, making visible the socio-political possibilities embedded in everyday communal practices.

This article contributes to the existing literature by providing sustained ethnographic attention to one such form of prefigurative politics: critical urban gardening among an Activist Collective in Calgary. Here, urban growing transcends its function as food production, becoming a deliberate act of commoning—a daily practice that prioritizes shared resources and fosters relational governance based on care, reciprocity, and collaboration. The Collective resists dominant food systems shaped by neoliberal commodification and settler-colonial land regimes by nurturing socio-ecological resilience through embodied and place-based practices.

Moreover, this case offers insight into how prefigurative politics negotiates tensions between sustainability, social equity, and decolonial aspirations in settler-colonial urban contexts. By examining governance structures, everyday practices, and the symbolic meanings of shared urban land, the study advances theoretical understanding of how commons-based initiatives enact decommodification in concrete, grounded ways. In doing so, it responds to calls for ethnographically rich analyses of prefigurative forms that are attentive to intersectional inequalities and political-economic constraints (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, Jeffrey and Dyson 2021).

Such initiatives are particularly vital in urban contexts where food insecurity—defined as the lack of reliable access to sufficient, nutritious, and affordable food—remains a pressing challenge disproportionately impacting marginalized communities (PROOF 2020, Tarasuk, Fafard St-Germain and Mitchell 2019). The GFL Grower Activist Collective confronts these issues through communal stewardship of urban land, fostering intercultural and intergenerational solidarity as a means to both alleviate immediate food needs and build long-term food justice. By centering lived experience and embodied relations to land, this study contributes a nuanced perspective on how critical

urban gardening can function as a prefigurative politics of care and commons reassertion within capitalist settler-colonial cities.

From Seed to System: Research Design and Methodological Commitments

Our research methodology was co-designed with members of the Grower Activist Collective and guided by principles of participatory ethics. Adhering to a Protocol for Experiential Research,[1] we sought explicit informed consent[2] at each stage—not as a one-off signature or verbal agreement, but through ongoing check-ins, transparent communication about research aims, our roles as community members/researchers, and member-led decision-making about what could be documented. From the onset, we emphasized that our work is embedded within a broader social-political movement extending far beyond this research (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell 2008). This methodological stance aligns with prefigurative politics by enacting within research the democratic, collaborative, and justice-oriented processes that the Collective embodies in its everyday activism.

Departing from Western research techniques such as surveys and structured interviews, we were intentional about centering the agency and voices of our collaborators through multi-pronged methodology. The Collective's organisation of work was itself a method; one that blurred the lines between research, activism, and everyday life. In ethnographic terms, experiential farming resembled participant observation, but with a crucial difference: we (the researchers) were not only embedded observers but accountable participants whose agricultural labour materially shaped the success (or not) of the season (Price and Palis 2016, Veteto and Crane 2014). This methodological approach required investing in crop planning, irrigation, bed preparation, and animal care alongside other members. These embodied practices offer rich insight into the interplay of ecological, socioeconomic, and cultural factors shaping urban agrarian praxis (Hilton 2018, Mwaseba et al. 2015). Moreover, we argue that this kind of deeper engagement disrupts hierarchical researcher-subject dynamics, fostering trust, empathy, and collaborative co-production of knowledge grounded in lived experience.

Another methodological approach was farm exchanges, which facilitated horizontal knowledge-sharing between diverse producers, revealing how cultural contexts shape farming practices and social hierarchies (Adamsone-Fiskovica and Grivins 2021, Ahmed and Kirtuniya 2024, Agnoletti and Santoro 2022, Silvert et al. 2022). By participating in both urban and rural exchanges—including seasonal activities such as lambing, hide tanning, yak tagging, and wild medicine gathering—we deepened our understanding of ecosystem resilience and the socio-economic struggles faced by small-scale growers in the region (Knezevic et al. 2017). These exchanges also helped disrupt perceived boundaries between 'experts' and 'non-experts' (Dale 2021), reinforcing the commons-based ethos of shared stewardship and knowledge co-creation.

Additionally, group sharing circles—rooted in Indigenous and community traditions (including Mapuche practices)—provided safe spaces for open dialogue, emotions, reflection, and relational connection (Absolon 2011, Hunt and Young 2021). Facilitated by Elder Sara and her partner, Oscar, sharing circles offered ethnographic insight into social networks, power relations, and emotional landscapes. Around a fire or under a tree, and always with ample food, members of the Collective discussed colonial legacies, land relations, food insecurity, and

economic precarity, among other topics. These gatherings became vital sites where participants assessed their capacity to meet communal needs and nurture a living commons through solidarity and mutual care (Blay-Palmer et al. 2013, Derickson 2016).

To complement group discussion, individual and paired storytelling sessions captured personal narratives that reveal cultural values, histories, and resilience strategies (Adese 2014, Cruikshank 2007). Storytelling allowed participants to prioritize themes important to them—ranging from relationality with land and food to experiences of disobedience in response to systemic inequalities (e.g., raising rabbits in urban backyards to increase accessible protein). This method fostered relational engagement by foregrounding the intersections of cultural, spiritual, political, and ecological relationships (Caxaj 2015).

Throughout, our methodology enacted prefigurative politics by modeling within research the collaborative, non-hierarchical, and care-based relations that underpin the Collective's efforts to common urban food systems. This embodied approach challenges extractive, colonial research paradigms by centering reciprocity, relational accountability, and the co-creation of knowledge. While each method entails limitations (i.e., physical demands, ethical complexities, and subjective biases), the combined, long-term engagement offers a rich ethnoecological perspective on the everyday enactment of the commons in an urban settler-colonial context.

Commoning in Practice: Collective Formation and Organization

From its inception, the Grower Activist Collective has approached cultivation not only as a means of producing food but as a form of prefigurative politics—a deliberate attempt to enact, in the present, the egalitarian, decommodified, and ecologically grounded future we wish to see. Organizing according to principles of commoning, members steward resources, skills, and responsibilities, challenging the logics of private ownership and commodification. In doing so, the Collective moves from what Sneath (2006) terms transactional socialities—relations mediated by exchange value and formal agreements—towards enactive socialities, in which relationships and shared activity constitute the primary value, with goods and services flowing as a natural extension of these relations. The Collective is also conscientious of the realities of the place it served: an urban region with relatively higher rates of lone parents, renters, newcomers, racialized minorities, and unhoused peoples. Understanding the everyday challenges, cultural richness, and structural inequities of the GFL community is not simply background context; it actively shapes how the Collective is organized, what work it prioritizes, and how it imagines commoning in practice. It is within this layered social and ecological landscape that the Collective's work unfolds.

Community Context

Located east of the Bow River and Elbow River confluence (called Mohkinsstsis by the Blackfoot, Wîchîspa by the Nakoda, and Guts'ists'i by Tsuut'ina), the GFL region is among Calgary's most socioeconomically and ethnoculturally diverse districts. Drawing from the 2021 City of Calgary Community Hub Profile, the region's population stands at approximately 47,335 individuals in private households, making it a dense urban neighbourhood. Residents are notably young, with 17% aged 0–14 and 13% being 65 or older—close to citywide proportions.

Yet, economic precarity is a marked challenge: 27% of households spend 30% or more of their total income on shelter (compared to 23% across Calgary), reflecting affordability stress. The median household income in 2020 was $70,500—below city averages, reinforcing the financial constraints many families face.

Cultural diversity in GFL is vibrant—34% of residents are immigrants, and 26% most often speak a language other than English at home, signaling both linguistic diversity and integration dynamics. This rich mosaic of backgrounds includes strong Filipino, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, and Black communities, alongside Indigenous residents (7%, compared to 3% across Calgary), generational settlers, and over 4,000 refugees. Importantly, the area is characterized by high levels of food insecurity and poverty. Recent citywide data indicates that Calgary faces an alarming 31.9% food insecurity rate—a challenge that disproportionately impacts community hubs like GFL (James and Merlin 2025).

The combination of economic stress, rental housing pressure, and demographic complexity frames the context in which the Grower Activist Collective acts—not merely as an urban garden, but as a form of communal care and resource-sharing amidst daily hardship. The GFL neighbourhood also embodies deep histories of settler-colonial dispossession and ongoing struggles for equity. The Collective's efforts to 'common' food systems emerge within this terrain, seeking to cultivate solidarity across cultural, linguistic, generational, and economic divides.

Origins and Governance

The Grower Activist Collective emerged in 2020, catalyzed by conversations among neighbours and community organizers who saw food as both a material necessity and a site of political possibility. Unlike projects that launch with rigid plans and external funding targets, the Collective's founding principle was to avoid dependence on grants and instead rebuild the relational fabric of the neighbourhood through shared labour, mutual aid, and a gifting economy. This intentional choice was shaped in no small part by the life experiences of Sara, a Mapuche Elder and founding member, whose personal history of political exile, street survival, and community organizing spanning multiple countries remains central to how governance is envisioned and enacted. 'I am now 88 years old. My partner and I have lived in Greater Forest Lawn for a long time. It is a beautiful community, but you still find pockets of poverty.' Sara's narrative situates the Collective's origins in solidarity and resistance to systems of exploitation informed by her Mapuche traditions of sustainable foodways and communal stewardship of resources. Her teachings of polycultures, crop rotation, seed exchange, and medicinal plant harvesting is more than agronomic technique; it is a framework for relational governance. In this vision, the land and the people are not resources to be extracted but kin to be nurtured.

The governance structure of the Collective reflects this ethos. Membership is flexible, with no formal hierarchy, but decisions are made communally in seasonal planning meetings where work roles (e.g., planting, watering, composting) are assigned or volunteered for in open discussion. Tasks are organized not as 'transactions' but as acts of enaction (Sneath 2006), where work is inseparable from relationship-building, storytelling, and skill-sharing. For instance, children learn to build a pea trellis from reclaimed materials while

parents exchange recipes for herbal teas; seed-saving days double as potlucks, belly laughs, and impassioned tears.

This governance model underpins daily and seasonal work practices: rather than fixed roles and a formal board, participation ebbs and flows with people's capacities, weather, and life events. At any given time, between 10 and 20 people consider themselves 'active' members, but dozens more cycle in and out, contributing labour, materials, creativity, or knowledge when they are able. This flexibility enables members with varying work schedules, childcare responsibilities, and health constraints to participate meaningfully. As Janet, a parent of two who grows a small garden in her backyard and occasionally joins harvest days, explains: 'I don't need to be here every week to be part of this. When I come, I work hard, and when I can't, I send seeds or food. We all give in different ways.'

The degree of prior agricultural knowledge also varies between members. Some have degrees in horticulture or grew up on a farm, while others are entirely new to cultivation. Some are apartment renters or homeowners, while others are transient; there are university students, working professionals, caregivers, and unemployed individuals. Members identify as First Nations, Métis, generational settlers, newcomer immigrants, refugees, and international students on permits, bringing a wide range of cultural knowledges, migration histories, and relationships to land into the Collective's work.

Seasonal planting schedules are co-created with attention to cultural food preferences, seed availability, and ecological succession. During harvest periods, produce is distributed first to participants and their neighbours, with surplus shared through informal networks rather than sold. These patterns of governance and practice enact the prefigurative politics the Collective strives for: creating, in miniature, the social and ecological relations we want to see writ large.

Work Practices and Seasonal Rhythms

Following the seasonal rhythms of Southern Alberta, warmer months are dedicated to hands-on cultivation: transplanting seedlings, managing compost, caring for egg-laying hens, and maintaining perennial pollinator beds. Colder months shift our focus to planning, skill-sharing workshops, and reflective dialogue. Members describe this seasonal cadence as essential for sustaining commitment without burnout. Sky, a Blackfoot First Nations member, notes: 'In winter, we talk more. In summer, we do more. Both are important. One without the other, the garden doesn't grow.'

These cycles are guided by the principles of permaculture—rooted in Indigenous Ways of Knowing—which shape both daily tasks and long-term visions (Caradonna and Apffel-Marglin 2018). Each season, we observe and interact with the landspace, listening before acting. Where is there full sun, partial sun, or full shade? How does snowmelt and rainwater flow across the land? Which avian, mammalian, and insect neighbours already call this place home? Such observations inform strategies for catching and storing energy (e.g., installing rain barrels and solar panels), encouraging biodiversity (e.g., building bumblebee boxes, leaving organic matter piles, and planting mixed flowers), and prioritizing sustainable resources (e.g., laying mulched pathways, composting, and relying on low-to-no machinery).

Starting with broad ecological patterns, the Collective refines them into seasonal planting plans. We select crops suited to Calgary's climate, integrating

companion planting and crop rotation to enhance soil fertility and naturally deter pests. In spring, beds are prepared with organic compost, seedlings hardened off, and perennials pruned. One spring, we joined two members—Lachlan, an Albertan horticulturalist, and Marta, a social worker new to gardening—as we experimented with frost-protection methods for early seedlings. Instead of merely recording their strategies, we were on our knees alongside them, draping row covers, checking soil thermometers at dawn, and debating whether to risk transplanting tomatoes before the May long weekend. During this process, decisions emerged from a combination of local meteorological knowledge, traditional planting calendars, and trial-and-error in our microclimate. By engaging in this process, we experienced first-hand how ecological uncertainty shapes collective decision-making.

The summer months bring successive plantings, pollinator care, and the tending of bumblebee and butterfly habitats. For instance, while weeding around echinacea and bee balm, Sara explained how Indigenous planting traditions in Chile integrated pollinator stewardship with food cultivation, linking her relocated Indigenous identity to broader decolonisation struggles in Canada. This exchange, made possible by working side-by-side, wove personal narrative, cultural continuity, and ecological practice into a single ethnographic moment that would have been flattened in a more extractive research framework.

During autumn, the Collective preserves surplus harvest, winterizes beds, and saves seeds, all of which offer more examples of participatory depth. One October evening, gathered around a table covered in drying sunflower heads and cups of mate, we sorted seeds for next year's planting, for the community seed library, and for a friend with a household garden on Siksika First Nation Reserve. We weighed the merits of heritage tomato varieties that had thrived in our raised beds against the novelty of trialing drought-tolerant beans gifted by a visiting farmer. These deliberations intertwined ecological resilience with political values; choosing seeds was also choosing a future food system.

Winter, though quiet in the soil, is always busy in the mind: evenings are devoted to mapping the next year's garden, reflecting on successes and failures, and holding skill-sharing workshops on topics from herbal medicine to carpentry. With each turn around the sun, the Collective's analytical framing of the commons evolves through dialogue, particularly in sharing circles where members articulate and contest what commoning means in their lived experience (Figure Set 1, next page). For many participants, especially those rooted in activist networks like Idle No More, the commons signifies a commitment to collective stewardship, mutual aid, and resistance to commodification. These discussions shape the Collective's practices into the following year, as the commons is simultaneously a theoretical framework and a tangible practice circulating within the group. This annual cycle of doing and thinking keeps the work both ecologically responsive and socially regenerative.

Participation in work practices and seasonal rhythms within the Collective vary widely, ranging from occasional help on planting or harvest days to ongoing commitments such as daily animal care or irrigation management. The division of labour is intentionally flexible, allowing members to shift roles according to their capacities, interests, and life demands. This fluidity is viewed by many as a strength, fostering openness and adaptability within the Collective. However, frequent participation (contributing more than one day a week) is often limited by the competing demands of work, school, childcare, summer camps, family visits,

vacations, emergencies, and health concerns. Some members express feeling too exhausted after long workdays to engage in manual labour, creative activities, or political discussions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, scheduling group work days proved challenging, which led to organizing monthly gatherings alongside an open-door policy inviting neighbours to participate at their convenience. These realities meant that a core group of dedicated individuals assumed the bulk of ongoing upkeep tasks—watering, weeding, thinning, and light harvesting—and led to scaling down the original vision of a network of cooperatively managed urban gardens. Initially, the Collective imagined a sharing of resources such as compost, seeds, irrigation, and tools across multiple yards, working collaboratively to maximize impact. Instead, the commons garden remains concentrated in one household yard, with some neighbours maintaining their own personal gardens nearby and engaging in a gift economy.

Figure Set 1: Sharing circles (left and right)

Relational Politics and Everyday Prefiguration

Gift Economies and Relational Fabric

The choice to avoid grant funding is not simply a rejection of bureaucracy; it is a political-economic stance. Grant cycles often impose accelerated timelines, quantifiable outputs, and the need to 'perform' success for funders; these are pressures that can undermine trust and horizontal relations. Instead, the Collective relies on gifting economies: seeds saved from last year's harvest, tools shared between neighbours, surplus eggs exchanged for baked bread. A network of friends from the broader urban and rural agricultural community also contribute materials, time, skills, and design insight.

For instance, during the first growing season, Richmond of Regenera Ranch—a sheep farmer and long-time friend of Sara and Oscar—brought truckloads of organic compost, stayed to help sift and fill raised beds, and suggested planting hedgerows of native perennials to support pollinators. Corinne and Darrel of Winter's Turkeys Farm—where we authors first met while loading turkeys onto transport trucks—brought containers full of flowering perennial transplants to add around a strawberry patch. Students from the University of Calgary Community Garden gifted seeds for vegetables, flowers, medicinal plants, and cover crops, sharing the uses of each. Michael, an urban regenerative farmer, prepared rows with his broadfork and Jang seeder, built a two-compartment compost system, and brought carloads of discarded pallets, tires for planters, and cardboard for mulch (Figure Set 2). That same season, wood chips

were donated by a local arborist, and a chicken coop was built with the help of a friend who had carpentry expertise. Members gathered a variety of free mulches (e.g., hemp, straw, and dried wood chips) from around the city to protect seedlings and conserve moisture; these are just a handful of examples.

Figure Set 2: Gifted seeds (left) and recycled materials (right) for the garden

In this way, the Collective's goal of rebuilding society's relational fabric is inseparable from food production; the act of giving reinforces social ties, and the reciprocity embedded in those ties ensures that resources circulate within the commons. This is not an exclusion of economic exchange, but rather a reorientation of it: value is measured in sustained relationships, not in monetary return.

Diversity of Perspectives

To raise awareness about the Collective's commoning efforts and increase the diversity of perspectives involved, we embrace a slow, relational approach to outreach. With baskets full of Oscar's homemade rolls and our dogs in tow, we continually visit neighbours—sometimes meeting them on the street while they work in their gardens, sometimes knocking on doors. These visits are as much about listening as they are about inviting. At times we are met with hesitancy, but more often we are welcomed in for conversation.

At the beginning, participation grew parallel to relationship-building. Families began visiting Sara and Oscar's house to see the gardens and chickens, learn more about the Collective, and explore how they could contribute. While some curious neighbours came only once, others became regular collaborators—bringing lawn clippings for compost, raspberry cuttings for the property's edge, or kitchen scraps for the hens. They donated old tools, moved mulch onto pathways, and weeded the strawberry bed. In return, they often went home with fresh eggs or produce, which would be reciprocated with potted tomato plants, homemade meals, or other small gifts. Even neighbourhood children became active participants, urging their parents: 'Let's go to Sara's farm!' These continued interactions broaden the Collective's perspective, drawing in people with different cultural backgrounds, gardening knowledge, and life experiences. And the process is iterative: every conversation, visit, and shared task not only expands the network but also deepens our shared understanding of what commoning looks like in practice.

Beyond everyday exchanges, the Collective engages in practices that further challenge traditional hierarchical roles between researcher and participant. For example, one year we co-designed a multi-species companion planting trial,

where decisions about crop combinations emerged from collective knowledge rather than top-down directives. During a winter sharing circle, Sky told us about the Haudenosaunee legend of the Three Sisters, suggesting we plant one bed with squash, corn, and climbing beans. Another member, Sian from Vietnam, proposed a row of bok choy, cabbage, and other brassicas under row cover. Michael and Lachlan shared their expertise on native pollinators and perennial flowers, connecting the group with ACLCA Native Plants, who now happen to operate at Regenera Ranch with Richmond. This co-creative planning process embodies a truly collaborative ethnography, with the garden serving as a living laboratory for ecological, social, and cultural learning.

Throughout the growing season, the Collective holds regular observation sessions where members document plant growth, pest activity, and soil conditions, reflecting together on challenges such as drought, hail damage, or pest outbreaks. These sessions foster an atmosphere of mutual trust and iterative learning, enabling real-time adaptation of practices. By working shoulder-to-shoulder in these trials, the Collective enacts not only ecological stewardship but also an alternative model of research grounded in shared power and knowledge co-production.

While many members speak of the Collective in glowing terms, experiences are not uniformly positive. Nina, a young artist, sometimes finds the informality challenging: 'I like the freedom, but sometimes I wish there was more structure…like a calendar we all stuck to. Things can fall through the cracks.' Similarly, Minh, an elderly neighbour, feels uneasy about the political framing: 'Sometimes, I just want to garden, not talk politics. But I still help because we grow good food together.' These tensions illustrate that commoning is not a utopia but an ongoing negotiation of differences; this is precisely what gives it political depth.

Prefiguration in Action

Whether transplanting tomatoes, sharing meals in a neighbour's driveway, or debating urban livestock regulations, members are not simply producing food—we are rehearsing forms of social organisation rooted in mutual care, non-hierarchical governance, and ecological stewardship. These acts, however small, constitute a living prefiguration of an alternative food system guided by the commons (Figure Set 3).

Figure Set 3: Transforming a lawn (left) into a community growing space (right)

For Sara and Oscar, the garden is more than a site of cultivation; it is a tool for critical education and collective transformation:

> For years, we have imagined a neighbourhood where everyone could contribute to one another's gardens, sharing the harvest not only within the Collective but also across their blocks. Families might take turns watering, weeding, and maintaining plots, while elders and youth came together to exchange stories, songs, and teachings. Seasonal activities could deepen ecological literacy—learning about soil health, native plants, pollinators, seed saving, food preservation, and herbal medicine—while creative events like plays or puppet shows would engage children in joyful participation. In this vision, production itself would be reconfigured: meeting people's needs at the community level, fostering pride in systems more sustainable than the industrial food model, and drawing in more participants each year as neighbours recognised the gifts they had within themselves to effect change.

Now, as the Collective enacts the commons, we demonstrate that political transformation can germinate in the everyday, nourished by the labour, imagination, and care of many hands.

Commoning as Practice

Working with members of the Grower Activist Collective to build technical skills in urban gardening has led to tangible improvements in food access, security, and sovereignty over locally grown foods, medicines, and seeds. Access has increased because members can regularly harvest fresh vegetables, herbs, and fruits—many of which are culturally significant or prohibitively expensive in local markets—directly from the shared neighbourhood garden. We co-produce dozens of varieties each season, reducing the need to purchase from grocery stores and bypassing the transportation and cost barriers often faced in GFL.

Food security has been strengthened by saving heirloom seeds, propagating perennials, and building soil health through regenerative mulching. This ensures a reliable, diverse, and climate-resilient supply for future seasons. The Collective also contributes to a community seed library, part of a broader regional effort to steward open-pollinated varieties (see Table 1). This living library anchors a vital resistance to the consolidation of large commercial seed companies that increasingly dominate the market with hybrids and patented strains, threatening regionally adapted genetic diversity unique to our prairie climate. Beyond seed exchange, events like Calgary's Seedy Saturday provide crucial spaces to expand skills in related practices such as vermicomposting, beekeeping, and mushroom cultivation, while strengthening regional grower networks.

Food sovereignty has grown as members gain the skills, tools, and collective infrastructure to decide what to plant, how to grow it, and how to distribute the harvest without reliance on corporate supply chains. This sovereignty is not only material but political: by keeping decision-making within the Collective, prioritizing culturally relevant crops, and resisting commodification through gifting, we assert control over our own food systems. In doing so, the project mirrors broader food sovereignty movements that link ecological stewardship with community self-determination.

In addition to cultivating diverse vegetables, herbs, and flowers in low-tilled plots and raised beds, the Collective cares for a small flock of hens and tends medicinal plants, learning together about their properties and uses. Farm exchanges between rural and urban growers deepen members' ecological knowledge, particularly regarding climatic challenges facing regional farmers: from diminished snowpack and erratic rainfall to increased wildfires and air pollution. We also navigate complex agrarian policies and regulations that constrain urban and small-scale farming, highlighting dependencies on, and resistances to, the capitalist economy.

Crop Category	Crop Types
Vegetables & Fruits	Arugula, Bean, Fava Bean, Beet, Broccolini, Cabbage, Carrot, Collard, Cucumber, Endive, Fennel, Garlic, Green Onion, Kale, Kohlrabi, Leek, Lettuce, Misuna, Onion, Pea, Pepper, Potato, Radish, Spinach, Squash, Swiss Chard, Tomatillo, Tomato, Turnip, Zucchini
Herbs, Berries & Perennials	Basil, Cilantro, Concord Grape, Coriander, Cress, Dill, Lovage, Parsley, Raspberries, Rhubarb, Strawberries
Flowers, Medicines & Grains	Amaranth, Aster, Calendula, Catnip, Chicory, Comfrey, Delphinium, Hollyhock, Iris, Lupin, Quinoa, Sunflower, Tobacco, Yarrow, Valerian, Vetch, Wild Mint

Table 1: The Collective also contributes to a community seed library.

The relational approach central to the Collective's commoning movement not only meets immediate needs for fresh food but fosters critical awareness of the environmental costs of conventional agriculture, including biodiversity loss and soil degradation. By adopting regenerative principles such as soil restoration, water conservation, and biodiversity promotion, the Collective embodies alternatives to industrial agriculture that are more ecologically sustainable—transforming food production from a transactional act into a relational process grounded in stewardship.

As members collaborate towards shared goals, a sense of belonging and collective responsibility deepens, strengthening community resilience. Intergenerational knowledge exchange is foundational, with children, adults, and elders learning together through shared activities like pruning, feeding hens, and harvesting berries (Akbulut 2017). These interactions nurture not only food growing skills but interpersonal connections, creativity, and critical thinking. The trust developed through mutual care extends beyond the garden: neighbours watch children and pets, water plants during absences, and support each other through challenges. Social gatherings—whether around shared meals, storytelling under a spruce tree, or creating political art—reinforce these bonds. Through such embodied practices, the Collective's prefigurative politics stresses the importance of living the desired future in the present.

Crucially, the Collective's practices resonate with anthropological understandings of gift economies (Mauss 1925), in which value lies in relationships rather than monetary exchange. Gifting seeds, labour, knowledge, and produce fosters reciprocal ties grounded in trust, obligation, and mutual care—the relational fabric that sustains community life. Such exchanges resist commodification by embedding value in social connection and collective well-being, echoing Indigenous and small-scale agrarian traditions where gifting is inseparable from kinship and reciprocal care (Kimmerer 2024, Tsing 2015). As Sara reflects:

> My Mapuche identity is rooted in the land and waters of Wallmapu (what is now southern Chile and Argentina), yet living here in Canada means carrying my Native knowledge into this settler colonial context. For me, growing food together is not just about feeding ourselves; it's a small act of refusal against systems that have tried to sever our relationships to the land. These gardens become places where we honour and learn from Indigenous stewardship—from the North and South—while also challenging the legal and political structures that keep land in private, colonial ownership.'

In line with Bryan Dale's (2021) argument that critiques of capitalism must be paired with tangible alternatives, the Collective intentionally sows, harvests, and shares food outside of market logics. This approach reflects what Jesse McEntee (2011: 254–255) terms 'traditional localism'—non-capitalist, decommodified means of securing fresh, affordable food not for profit but for sustenance. By redefining food as a communal, cultural, and ecological good, the Collective enacts a political economy that counters the alienation and fragmentation of capitalist food systems. Thus, through an ongoing process of commoning, the garden is both a site of production and a political project, aligning with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici's framing of commons as a terrain of struggle over the social relations that reproduce life (Barbagallo et al. 2019). The Collective's prefigurative orientation adds to current understandings of commoning by foregrounding how commons are not only reclaimed from enclosure but actively made through the cultivation of new moral economies, ecological sensibilities, and collective capacities.

Conclusion: What We Grew Together

This paper has shown how an urban grower activist collective enacts relational commons, while arguing that its practices constitute both prefigurative and settler-colonial politics, and demonstrating the value of participatory methodologies in researching collective food systems. The study advances critical urban gardening scholarship by showing how relationality underpins communal solidarity and transforms urban gardening from food production into a vibrant social and political practice. In reflecting on the cycles of collective practice—from seed saving to gift economies, participatory governance, and intercultural knowledge exchange—we see how everyday acts of cultivation can unsettle capitalist logics and open space for relational commons to flourish.

Practically, the Collective moves beyond typical community garden models by centering decommodification, participatory governance, and place-based ecological stewardship. Its focus on gift economies and consensus decision-

making directly challenges dominant paradigms of market exchange and private ownership, while conscious negotiation of local agrarian policies and integration of diverse cultural knowledges foregrounds intersectional and anti-colonial approaches rarely explored in urban agriculture literature.

Our participatory research was itself a prefigurative practice—fostering trust, horizontal governance, and relational accountability—while also surfacing tensions around uneven participation, pandemic disruptions, private property constraints, and funding ethics. Operating largely outside grant cycles allowed for a slower, community-aligned pace but limited resources and scope. Navigating the dual role of participants and academic researchers required deliberate efforts to center grassroots priorities while meeting institutional demands. This article's shared authorship reflects an ongoing commitment to ethical knowledge co-production and collective ownership. By grounding the research in anti-colonial, relational methodologies (Absolon and Willett 2005, Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg 2021, Wilson 2008), we challenge power hierarchies and demonstrate that rigorous scholarship can be inseparable from community-based action.

Future research should deepen analysis of the tensions and intersections between commoning and Indigenous Food Sovereignty movements in Canada (Grey and Patel 2014, Kepkiewicz and Dale 2019, Tuck and Yang 2012), and explore urban land-sharing, circular food economies, and innovative forms of social organization (Dale 2021, Claeys, Desmarais and Singh 2021, Sumner, McMurtry and Renglich 2014). Such work must center the perspectives of Indigenous, immigrant, gender diverse, disabled, and racialized gardeners, whose experiences are essential to building inclusive, just, and resilient urban food systems.

The Grower Activist Collective remains an evolving process, responsive to shifting memberships, needs, and political contexts. As it expands into cultural celebrations, political art, and ecological innovations, sustaining principles of inclusivity, shared care, and collective stewardship will be vital. Ultimately, the Collective illustrates how grassroots urban gardening can be a transformative politics of everyday life—reshaping how communities imagine and enact collective care, ecological responsibility, and political agency, while contributing to broader struggles for food sovereignty, social justice, and environmental regeneration.

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Notes

1. Protocol for Experiential Research: Prior informed, explicit written or oral consent will be received from community members wishing to participate in farming activities or tours. Similarly, the participants will have noted their preferences for the activity [not] being audio-taped prior to the start of the activity. They will also have expressed their consent for photographs to be taken of them during the activity. Participants will be reminded throughout data collection of their rights to stop the activity at any time, alter the original direction or intention of the activity, or withdraw from the study entirely. Participants will have the full authority to decide in which activity(ies) they will engage the researcher. A day, time and location that best suits the participants will be arranged for farming and tours to occur. Prior to the activity (i.e. planting, weeding, harvesting, etc., farm tour, learning walk.), the researcher will share what the general objectives, intended observations, and questions will be. The researcher and participants will begin engaging in the indicated activity for the duration of time approved by the participants. These activities should occur in public spaces where other people are present. The researcher and participants will review all field notes and/or audio-tapes together to ensure accurate data collection and representation. If the activity has ended but the researcher needs further clarifications or still has inquiries, participants can choose to address them at that moment or schedule another day and time that best suits their schedule. Participants will be reminded that they can withdraw their collected data within 90 days of the official end date of the fieldwork. If possible, follow-up farming activities and tours will occur following the exact same protocol.

2. Except for the authors and participants who chose to have their identity known, pseudonyms are used for Collective participants. Ethics approval was secured from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (Ethics ID: REB20-1681).

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