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## The Mother Herb: Plant Storywork, Grief & More-Than-Human Care in Compromised Times

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### Abstract

*Herbalists and plants have healing relationships that shape cultures throughout collapse and regeneration. Indeed, the herbalist was once a highly esteemed role in communities, thinking-with plants to facilitate relational care and healing of human and non-human kin alike. This article explores the ethics of mothering and kinship, as experienced through the lens of a herbalist, by disrupting standardized notions of mothering as a human-to-human biological reality and embracing an understanding of mothering as an interspecies and multi-generational practice. To do so, we engage in an animist and ecofeminist auto-ethnographic process of thinking-with Mugwort (*Artemisia Vulgaris*) to re-story our own relationships with mothering without biologically being mothers and how this shapes our relationships with grief, loss, and love in contemporary times. We look to Mugwort as an important ancestral 'plant mother' in each of our cultural lineages and draw on herbal folklore and practices to think through the complexities of more-than-human care. We argue that mothering is a subjective and contextual practice of kin-making, and how herbalists have ritually engaged in this since time immemorial. Herbalism can thus be framed as an ecological praxis that takes seriously multispecies mothering and gestures toward future(s) where mutual flourishing can be enacted in plural forms.*

**Keywords:** Herbalism; mothering; storywork, ecofeminism; post-human care

*Remember, Mugwort, what you revealed*

*What you prepared at Regenmeld.*

*Una, you are called, mother of the herbs.*

*You avail against three and against thirty,*

*You avail against poison and against infectious sickness,*

*You avail against the loathsome fiend that wanders through the land.*

From the Nine Herbs Charm, *Lacnunga*

(10th Century Old English Manuscript, reprinted in Spearing 2017, p. 77)

### Introduction

Herbalists and plants have long-standing healing relationships that have shaped and moved with cultures, past and present, throughout myriad times of collapse and regeneration. In fact, the folk herbalist and healer was once a highly esteemed role in communities all over the

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world, working with plants, as sentient beings within their own right, to facilitate relational care and healing of human and non-human kin alike (Wood 1997; Geniusz 2015). As such, old herbal practices and lore (transmitted orally via ancestral lineages or via manuscripts that have now been compiled into iterations of *materia medica*) offer insight to contemporary humans of the healing powers contained within existing relations with the vegetal world, reminding humans of their sacred place within a web of life, thus demolishing the boundaries between human ‘culture’ and non-human ‘nature’ (Tsing, 2015). Medicine plants, in this sense, can be woven with humans through intimate kinship, shapeshifting from roots, shoots and leaves into non-human mothers who transform, transmute and heal ailments of human and Earth body alike.<sup>3</sup> As Anishinaabe Citizen Potawatomi elder and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes, “in some native languages, the term for plants are those who take care of us” (p. 229). Plants, from this perspective, have always beckoned their human kin to come into closer healing relationships with Earth-as-mother.

References to mothering plants and ‘plant mothers’ are aplenty within herbal lore and plant stories that span multiple cultures and places the world over (for example, see Geniusz 2015; Spearing 2017).<sup>4</sup> As evidenced in the *Nine Herbs Charm*, Mugwort has long been acknowledged and engaged with as a mother and powerful healer. Inspired by this, this article seeks to take seriously the notion of a ‘plant mother’ to explore some affective ethics and contemporary practices of more-than-human mothering and kinship with the vegetal world, as personally experienced through the lives of two women researchers engaged with folk herbalism and ethnobotany. By disrupting standardized notions of mothering as a purely human-to-human, biological reality, we embrace an understanding of mothering as an inherently interspecies and multi-generational praxis to challenge hetero-patriarchal readings of the diverse relationships between women and nature (see Alaimo 2008). To understand this within human worldings, we engage in a new animist and ecofeminist auto-ethnographic dialogical process of thinking-with<sup>5</sup> Mugwort (*Artemisia Vulgaris*) to reflect on and re-story our own experiences of ‘other-mothering’ (Hill Collins, 2005; Michaels, 1996) both human and non-human subjects without biologically being human mothers ourselves. This process allows us to explore how mothering alongside Mugwort, as an ecological praxis of reproduction, shapes our relationships with grief, loss, and love in contemporary times.

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<sup>3</sup> We draw on the notion of kinship from Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) posthumanist perspective that sees kinship as a “transformative connection” that enlarges the “sense of alliance beyond humanity” (p. 73). We do, however, also acknowledge that kinship is an explicitly non-anthropocentric process of reciprocity-in-action that is informed by multi-generational, emplaced relations. As such, we take seriously the theory of kinship as developed and reclaimed by Indigenous scholars and activists worldwide (Kimmerer, 2013; Nelson, 2021). Posthuman kinship is therefore about human expressions of care toward an ‘other’, but must be attentive of the ancestrally intact relationships that have existed over time that have and continue to inform colonially marginalized cosmovisions of interdependency and kinship across time, species, materialities and spiritualities among contemporary Indigenous communities (for further ‘troubling’ of the notion of kinship from an Indigenous perspective, see Liboiron 2021). Choosing to explore our own experiences and expressions of other-mothering with Mugwort have been deliberately sought as Mugwort is an ancestrally embedded medicine plant within each of our cultural genealogies. In this sense, cultivating an ecological praxis of mothering and thinking-with Mugwort thus implicitly acknowledges the need to “transform silence into language and action” (Lorde 1984, cited in Lara 1995, p. 29) in order to highlight healing practices that have long been subjugated, endangered, and erased by dominant Euro-patriarchal world-making processes.

<sup>4</sup> The mythic and literal archetype of a ‘plant mother’ can be traced in many cultures spanning from Greco-Roman traditions, to the ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ within Amazonian *curanderismo* (Luna, 1986), to the more recent writings of Canadian ecologist Suzanne Simard (2021) on the ‘Mother Tree’ to describe nutrient distribution between trees within forests.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘thinking-with’ is drawn from Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2012) article, where she builds her theory of care upon Donna Haraway’s feminist exploration of the situated character of knowledge and the fact that ‘nothing comes without its world.’ As such, Puig de la Bellacasa asserts here that transformational care is “articulated through a series of concrete moves: *thinking-with*, *dissenting-within*, and *thinking-for*” (p. 197).



We look to Mugwort as a revered ancestral ‘plant mother’ within both of our cultural lineages (European and Chinese) and draw on diverse Mugwort folklore and herbal practices that have been employed for generations to think and move through the fluidity and complexities of contemporary ‘more-than-human care’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Through restor(y)ing personal encounters, dreams and herbal ritual-making, new (and simultaneously very old) pathways for making kin through love and loss are realised, traversed through, and enacted. Indeed, as ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan (cited in Kimmerer, 2013, p. 9) writes, “there is no restoration without re-story-ation”. At the same time, we support the notion that mothering is a subjective, sensuous, and situated practice of kin-making, and in this sense, is something that herbalists have ritually engaged in since time immemorial (Levins Morales 2019). As such, we explore the agency and figure of the healer, the witch and the storyteller in posthuman articulations of care through an ecofeminist lens. By weaving together and exploring the deep interconnections between plants, women, healing and mothering, this conversational auto-ethnographic journey attempts to re-story and restore our embodied and intimate relationships with Mugwort and our own human mothers, grandmothers and children, as well as contributing to the transformation of what it means to be a mother in contemporary times.

### **Framing Motherhood: New Animism and Ecofeminism**

Animism, despite its colonial legacy and (a)historical conflation with ‘primitive cultures,’ is now being recovered by scholars in the humanities and social sciences and increasingly employed in new, relational and decolonizing ways (see Rose, 2013; Harvey, 2013; 2017; Descola, 2005). According to the scholar of religions, Graham Harvey, ‘animists’ are “people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others” (2017, xiii). By acknowledging that relationality and interdependence are at the core of life, animistic worldviews, stories, ceremonies and practices are grounded, embodied ways to weave and (re)conceptualize relationships with the broader-than-human community, particularly within ‘Westernized’ forms of scholarship that are increasingly divorced from their Indigenous framings of multispecies life through ongoing colonization (for an exploration between animism and Indigenous worldings, see TallBear, 2011). From an animist perspective, hierarchies between species are dismantled, and the world is restor(y)ed as an enlivened and interdependent “web of life” (Capra, 1996, 1).<sup>6</sup> In this sense, animism becomes a practical philosophy that radically challenges the dominant ontology of the Anthropocene with its systemic project of de-animating the living world. Both authors self-identify as animists, and thus resonate with feminist science philosopher Isabelle Stengers’ (2012) intentions in the project of ‘reclaiming animism’:

“Reclaiming animism is not reclaiming the ‘idea’ of animism, even if for people like me it may start with the realization that my experience of writing is an animist experience, attesting to a ‘more than human’ world. It is rather a matter of recovering the capacity to honor experience, any experience we care for, as ‘not ours’ but rather as ‘animating’ us, making us witness to what is not us” (p.8).

By reclaiming animism, we do not only seek to re-enchant ourselves within the ‘web of life,’ but actively seek to restore and re-story mothering and caregiving as an inherently interspecies

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<sup>6</sup> There are many renderings of what ecological storytelling looks like in contemporary contexts. For example, see Fabrizio Terranova’s (2016) film ‘Donna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival’, or Skawennati’s (2016) film ‘She Falls for Ages’.

and intergenerational project. Indeed, giving and receiving the labor of a ‘mother’ comes in plural forms, and deserves significant consideration within scholarly understandings of how mothering is constructed and operationalized in order to capture how emotional labors of love are enacted and valued across time and space. Thinking about motherhood from an animist perspective, however, requires care-full reflection of gender within the context of multispecies relationships. In this attempt, we embrace ecofeminism as a theoretical framework that has contributed a great deal to both activist struggles and theory that links gendered oppression and the domination of nature over the last few decades (Plumwood 2003, 1). As such, we recognize that ongoing cultures of violence, as perpetuated by colonial-patriarchy, are inextricably linked to the subjugation of women’s bodies as well as earthly bodies.<sup>7</sup> To help us think about gender and interspecies mothering, we call on ecofeminist understandings of the ‘witch’ to explore all those who practiced care throughout generations for humans and other-than-humans alike (Hutton, 2017). The figure of the healer and herbalist has merged with that of the witch for thousands of years in most human cultures (Hutton, 2017; Spearing, 2019). Despite the many attempts to oppose and annihilate what the witch has represented and embodied throughout history, her worldviews and ways to live in the world are still alive. She stands in stark contrast to the project of Modernity, with its patriarchal, colonial, racist personality (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). The witch, and so the healer, can thus be conceptualized as one who cultivates “an art of immanent attention” in a radically pragmatic way that involves “care, protection, and experience” (Stengers, 2012, 9-10). Following this, we hold the figure of the witch “as the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the obeha woman who poisoned the master’s food and inspired the slaves to revolt” (Federici 2004, 11). In many ways, the ‘witch’ thus represents both an archetype of, and a real human person, who engaged in an ongoing relational ethic and practice that included the mothering of non-human subjects, as well as took seriously the fact that plants, animals, and the very Earth herself held the capacity to mother human beings. As such, the witch embodies a bridge between humans and non-humans whose agencies and voices challenge the hegemonic anthropocentric epistemic. It is from this ‘witchy epistemology’<sup>8</sup> that we explore our personal experiences of mothering in contemporary times (Lara, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> It is worthy to note here that we are not alone in our desires to re-frame and animate the experience of mothering. Indeed, we owe a great debt to the generations of Indigenous, feminist, and LGBTQIA+ scholars who preceded us in laying the path for such inquiry (for example, see Hill Collins 1990; TallBear 2011).

<sup>8</sup> This ‘witchy epistemology’ has emerged from Irene Lara’s (2005) work on articulating a ‘bruja positionality’ within spiritual activism in Chicana and Latina communities. Here, Lara (2005) explains how the position of a ‘bruja’ opens possibilities for ancestrally-grounded, yet entirely new forms of knowing, being and doing with the world in academia that directly confronts Western/capitalist onto-epistemologies. Given that neither of us descend from specifically bruja lineages, we have adapted the term to read as ‘witchy epistemology,’ to reflect our commitment to tending to our own culturally appropriate terms. As Lara (2005) explains, “the etymology of ‘witch’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon *witga*, the short form of *witega*, meaning a seer or diviner” (Walker 1983, cited in Lara 2005, p. 39). “‘Witch’ is perhaps also related to the Old High German *wib* that means ‘holy’ (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “witch,” cited in Lara 2005, p. 39).



## The Mother Herb: The Mothering of Mugwort

Mugwort, also sometimes called Motherwort or Croneswort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), is one of the most important herbs in traditional European medicine. The *Nine Herbs Charm*, a text belonging to a 10<sup>th</sup> century Old English manuscript called *Lacnunga*, preserves a cycle of Pagan charms that describe the healing agency and personality of local wild herbs. As the charm we open this article with invokes, the first plant to be addressed is Mugwort, which is called upon for its powerful agency against several diseases and enemies (Spearing 2018, 77). Its name *Artemisia* places the plant in the domain of Artemis, the Greek goddess of lunar cycles, forests, hunting and wilderness. Artemis also presided over childbirth, along with women's transitions in life, all occasions where Mugwort was used. In fact, it was widely utilized in the treatment of menstrual and childbearing difficulties. One practice reports standing over a steaming pot of Mugwort after giving birth to help expel the afterbirth. This practice draws on knowledge of using Mugwort to cleanse and restore one's body to its original state. Due to these effects upon women's bodies, Mugwort earned the name of 'Mother of Herbs' (Spearing, 2018). Mugwort has also been used for conditions of the digestive system, circulation and muscle pain after prolonged exercise. The roots are antispasmodic and have traditionally been used for epilepsy. Some herbalists, due to its bitter taste, regard it as a digestive tonic and hormone regulator (Wood, 2008). Contemporary phytotherapeutic uses see Mugwort as antiseptic, antispasmodic, sedative, expectorant, anti-inflammatory, anti-diabetic and with bitter-tonic properties (Wood, 2008; Scortegagna, 2008), effectively rendering Mugwort as an essential herb for ushering, nourishing and indeed, 'mothering' human bodies through processes of cyclical transformation and illness.

Beyond the physical qualities, however, Mugwort has also long been considered a magical and sacred herb, used as an apotropaic to enhance prophetic dreaming and psychic abilities in human peoples (Wallis, 2011; Vianello and Bozzato, 2022). The Romans inherited the knowledge of this plant as an apotropaic from the Greeks, and there are many references within Western herbal *materia medica* that point to Mugwort's protective capacity in a spiritual sense (Grieve, 1931; Sales, 1981). Mugwort, in this context, was ritually used to braid into crowns, worn to dispel any evil and bad luck, particularly during times when ecosystems were noted for their frenetic energy, generally in the summer months. Its magical and evil-dispelling agency was considered especially potent during Saint John's night, on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> June (Vianello and Bozzato, 2022). During that night, Mugwort would be gathered, along with other herbs, to set rituals to enhance a sense of safety within individual people, homes, and communities. Clues to such traditions have been retained in folk names attributed to Mugwort, for example, in Italy, Mugwort has been called "*scaccia diavoli*" (the one for dispelling devils) and "*scaccia streghe*" (the one for dispelling witches) across centuries. Botanical texts also mention an old custom of keeping a sprig of Mugwort in one's clothes or in a bag to protect oneself from lightning. It was also hung on chariots, and drawn on the home doors as a protective amulet while travelling or at home (Scortegagna, 2008; Vianello and Bozzato, 2022). It has been used for centuries in the European Alpine pharmacopeia, not only consumed as tinctures and infusions, but also smoked and smudged. Smudging Mugwort has been used especially in contexts of tensions, for releasing physical and emotional knots, and bringing things back into flow, as much as for protecting against bad influences and energies.

Knowledge of Mugwort's protective power is, however, not isolated to European herbalism (Tierra, 1998; Watts, 2009). Mugwort was also highly revered amongst practitioners of the



traditional Chinese herbal arts, having been used, again, when *yang* energy is at its highest.<sup>9</sup> Times of high *yang* were known as times when the spirits are at their peak liveliness and therefore require specific tending via ritual in order to maintain balance within the animate world and protect human peoples from “demons and beasts” (Junqueira, 2020, 456). The role of protection and nourishment—core aspects of mothering—are highlighted in such practices, and deserve some deeper engagement in for the purposes of understanding herbalism as an ecological praxis in contemporary worldings. Of particular import was the gathering and ritualistic offerings to Mugwort during the Dragon Boat Festival (*dwan wu jie*), that was held on the “fifth day of the fifth month,” to appease and honour ancestor spirits in order to starve malevolent spiritual forces, many of whom were considered the primary agents of illness and misfortune (Junqueira, 2020, 456).<sup>10</sup> As Junqueira (2020) goes on to explain, “invoked through herbal incense, gods and spirits were [therefore brought into the ecology as] active agents in the processes of healing” (456), thus engaging a relational understanding of human health and healing that was rooted in a common desire for mutual flourishing that included life within and beyond Earthly realms. Mugwort, in Chinese herbal traditions, was also frequently used through a technique called ‘moxabustion’ (Strickmann, 2002; Deng and Shen, 2013). Moxabustion involves the grinding and shaping of dried Mugwort into balls or cones that were burnt and smudged along certain meridian channels (in accordance with a sophisticated mapping of how each organ corresponds with another in the intact ecosystem of a human body), allowing for the recipient of the healing to access the inherent *yang* energy that Mugwort held and moving any stagnant *qi* stored within the body (Deng and Shen, 2013). Herbal uses of Mugwort within Chinese traditional herbalism, whether used in a ritualistic or practical manner, thus inextricably placed the human subject within an animate world of interspecies interdependence and symbiosis.

Across space and time, Mugwort has thus been revered for its role in clearing, tending, protecting and nourishing human bodies within the larger ecosystems to which we belong. To the modern mind however, such herbal practices with Mugwort have been written off as ‘superstitious,’ and rendered at worst “primitive religious non-sense,” (Fujiansheng, 1977, cited in Junqueira, 2020, 469) or at best, ‘alternative medicine’ under the gaze of colonial modernity (Bivins, 2007). However, from each of our standpoints, such practices are in fact deep manifestations of making relationship with ourselves, ‘nature’ and our unique heritage(s) and our place in the world.<sup>11</sup> For example, Alice remembers, as a child of the Chinese diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand, the abundant patches of Mugwort growing in her maternal Grandmother’s garden. Given that her family’s new home was now in the Southern hemisphere, the marking of *dwan wu jie* followed a seasonal rhythm that was opposite to her ancestral homelands. Indeed, it was Mugwort, through the maintenance of intact ethnobotanical rituals and careful observation of plant growth patterns in new lands, who

<sup>9</sup> *Yang*, or the ‘essence of heaven’ is sometimes associated with masculine energy and rising ‘heat’, and considered one of two primordial cosmic energies [*yin* and *yang*] from a Chinese worldview (Stanley-Baker 2020). It is imperative to note here that *yin* and *yang* are not prescriptively defined as terms to enforce the kind of dual binary logic that manifests with colonial modernity. Rather, *yin* and *yang* are conceived of as fluid energetic states that are constantly in mutual relationship with one another, reflecting the Chinese cosmological understanding of life on Earth as a perpetual task of balance and harmony between all beings of a living Earth. As the *Dao De Jing* (Ames and Hall 2003) mentions, ‘nothing and everything co-exist’ in universal flow, and it is precisely this flow that mediates the wellbeing of life in perpetuity.

<sup>10</sup> The fifth day of the fifth month’ refers to the summer solstice of the Chinese lunar calendar, as the ‘new year’ is marked by the first dark moon of winter. Understanding this requires a fundamental realignment to temporalities based upon lunar cycles rather than the solar worldview that underpins the now-dominant Western Gregorian calendaric notion of time.

<sup>11</sup> This is in line with the work of other research collectives bridging the roles of scholar, activist and healer, such as in Gonzales et al. (2015), ‘Passing the Sage: Our Sacred Testimonio as CuranderasScholarActivists in Academia.



(re)taught the more recent generations of her ‘motherline’ the vital ecological lesson of cultivating place by attuning to contextually-appropriate lunar and seasonal cycles after experiences of traumatic displacement and loss of belonging to place. Together, with Mugwort, human people can relationally move through grief, longing, and loss to re-member their place in a dis-membered world. Given Mugwort’s omnipresence globally, some simply consider it a ‘weed,’ but within lineages of healing lie stories and relationships of ecological tending, balance, and an ethic of mothering that transcend presumed boundaries of species, generations, time and place. Stories and ongoing practices of mothering with Mugwort can thus be conceived of as situated repositories of codified knowledge, bringing human persons into deeper relations with Earth; an increasing imperative as we move through life in the Anthropocene. What follows is a conversation between us about our embodied stories and mothering practices with Mugwort.

### **Mother Mugwort: Multigenerational and Multispecies Mothering**

Mugwort’s stories and place in the world brings us back, materially, into ancient and deep-time dimensions of herbalism and healing. Be it in forests, pastures or cultivated spaces, the folk herbalist (and witch) embodies a way of being and of living in the world that is inescapably animist (Storl, 2012; Blackie, 2018). Attuning to lunar cycles, seasons, the weather, plant and animal lives, the folk herbalist is continuously aware and in relation with the interconnection and interdependence of all life, and is capable of listening to vegetal voices and seeing from the perspective of different human and non-human persons (Spearing, 2018). She thus acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological community, “ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth” (Abram, 1996, 7). Indeed, her work and life goal is to nurture the alliance with plants, for reciprocal healing and caring.<sup>12</sup>

The healing witch bridges worlds and aims at taking care of the restoration of human and other-than-human wellbeing, much as the storyteller does. By telling a story or singing a song the storyteller touches our fleshy cords, our deep feelings of connection with the more-than-human world. Stories are “the fabric of our humanity” (Salmón, 2020, 11) and give voice to non-humans. Stories thus become powerful human ways to show gratitude to plants, trees and other beings. They are acts of co-creation, hymns for enchanting the world together with the other-than-humans. As Robin Kimmerer writes, “we might not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility,” and writing is thus “an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words to tell new ones, stories that bring science and spirit back together” (Kimmerer, 2013, 347), and nurture our (re)connection to a more-than-human world. Moreover, Val Plumwood (2013) adds that art, writing and storytelling are crucial for re-animating the world and for allowing nature to speak “in the active voice” (441). At the same time, story is our medicine and writing is an experience of metamorphosis in concert with a more-than-human world. Storytelling enables us to re-learn how to deeply listen to others, as we must pause and listen to the voices of other-than-human beings with *all* our human senses (see Myers 2020). By doing so, we are reminded of the inter-dependency of the web of life, and that we all exist within a dynamic, polyphonic place of mutual learning. Be(com)ing custodians of the land means taking on the

<sup>12</sup> For an example of contemporary herbal practices see, for example, Aimilia Efthimiou’s anti-patriarchal healing human-herbal illustrations.

journey of learning from and taking care of the other inhabitants of the Earth. In this pathway, Mugwort can tell us multiple stories, with one of her favorite communication channels being through dreams.

### ***Dreaming with Mugwort***

Mugwort has long been known to enhance a human person's capacity to dream and access liminal realms of consciousness (O'Donoghue, 2021). Assumed in an infusion or smoked, Mugwort induces lucid visions and thoughts, and revelatory dreams, enhancing one's ecological insight, past, present and future. Cultural anthropologist Barbara Tedlock (2006, 20) conceptualizes dreams as a "cross roads location," halfway between the sensuous and intuitive worlds. Ecopsychologist Lewis Williams (2012, 99) builds upon this by explaining how "this location in consciousness signifies a departure from the normal waking state in which one only perceives through the senses, to encompass a form of 'inner vision' or 'seeing' that transcends the immediate physicality of being." Dreams and dreaming have thus long been considered vital sources of wisdom in terms of their capacity to allow the human dreamer to access a "World Unconscious" and see how "all beings are ensouled in and of themselves" (Aizenstat 1995, p. 96). Indeed, taking seriously "the dreaming" can ground human subjects within a worldview that has, at its heart, a relational "ethic of *how to be* in the world" (Sepie, 2017, 16, emphasis added). Dreams often become reminders to the human that "*you are not alone in the world,*" inviting in a deep sense of belonging within an unfolding web of life despite the traumatic materialities of the waking world (16). When Alice and Anna first met as two transdisciplinary scholars working on different aspects of plant lore, sharing our stories of dreaming with Mugwort with one another became a language unto itself, and allowed for our friendship and working relationship to flourish despite being located on opposite sides of the Earth. In many ways, it was our dreams that revealed the fertile ground upon which we could collaborate as scholars and friends to bring attention to our embodied impulses and experiences of being 'other-mothers' with Earth. Below, we share vignettes that outline two particularly vivid Mugwort dreams that we shared with each other in those initial conversations via Zoom at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both dreams brought forth potent instructions for us during difficult times, and just as any mother does, guided us both down a path of nourishment and belonging.

### ***Anna's dream***

It was an afternoon late in the Autumn of 2021, and I was at a herbalist shop by the Venetian lagoon. My gaze went straight to the *Artemisia vulgaris* tincture on the shelf. I bought it without thinking twice. It didn't take too long after consuming the drops—a week or so—to receive a potent dream. Just before All Hallows' Eve, a vivid dream, full of light, manifested. What I still remember is myself walking near a small house in a village. I was looking for somebody and suddenly I noticed a group of old ladies running through the woods, all trying to escape something behind them. An urge to rush rose in me, but there was no actual feeling of threat.

Suddenly, I found myself inside a room. A room filled with light. The light permeates from everywhere within the white walls. And it seems to filter from an open window. The window looks like a painting, but instead, the warm colors entering the room come from the Beech and Larch forest outside. The warm light of fall embracing everything with its soft touch. I realize I'm not alone: at my side I sense the presence of a young man, and a voice breaks the silence: "You will become a healer". It fades away as quickly as it arrives.





I wake up.

Since then, my journey with Mugwort has guided me forwards, and the inner call of learning and engaging with plants and their stories has kept growing. I can say that ever since that dream, sometimes I just feel plants are showing me the way and moving the invisible threads of my life, as much as of the human and non-human people I have encountered through the last months.

### *Alice's dream*

This dream came to me as I was 'dieting' Mugwort in 2019.<sup>13</sup> In the dream, I was at my PhD defence, and terrified. In front of me was a row of seats filled with stern looking women, furrowed brows and dark eyes staring at me as if I were about to be hung in the gallows. Anxiety coursed through me, and suddenly, a trap door opened beneath me and I fell into a meadow of tall Mugwort, swaying in the sun. My anxiety instantly calmed. I was safe. Sinking into the Earth, I exhaled.

And then I heard something. In the distance, I could hear the drone of chanting in the distance. I stood up, making my way through the dense Mugwort bush to get closer. Hiding behind the Mugwort, I saw a circle of women, among the Mugwort, chanting one word—'shu'—over and over again.

"Shu... shu... shuuuu...."

I hid silently, watching, when I heard a distinct voice calling: "xiao Ai, lai, lai"<sup>14</sup>—I had been noticed. I walked over and a space was created for me in the circle. I joined in with the chanting, not knowing what 'shu' actually meant, but feeling deeply at home; a deep contrast to moments earlier in the PhD defense.

"Shu... shu... shuuuu!" Resounding in my ears and heart.

I wake up, remembering this word. Shu.

A few weeks later, I was reading an ethnographic account of my Grandmother's tribe, the Naxi from Southwest China, and noticed the word 'shu' in an account of our ancestral stories. Shu, in this telling of our cosmology, referred to the primordial Earth diety who gave birth to humanity. I gasped. Could I have been given the name of one of my ancestral spirits via a dream? I was taken aback with gratitude and awe for Mugwort's revelations.

Since that moment, I have tended to Mugwort in my garden, knowing that through my relationship with this plant, I am always connected to the sacred mountains and rivers that my ancestors once occupied. Mugwort mothers me as I mother Mugwort. Indeed, through that dream, a pathway to reconnection with a long-forgotten "blood memory" opened up for me (Sheridan and Longboat, 2014, 317), allowing me to know, deep inside, that I am always with my Grandmothers of body and spirit, past and present.

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<sup>13</sup> Dieting is a dedicated period of ritual engagement with plants and an emergent multispecies research methodology (McSherry 2023, publication forthcoming) that involves surrendering the human self to the vegetal world in order to receive direct communication and healing from plants.

<sup>14</sup> This translates as "little Alice, come, come!" in Mandarin Chinese, one of Alice's mother-tongues.

### ***Other-mothering with Mugwort***

In our shared journey of mothering across time, space and biological boundaries, Mugwort has been and is our Plant Mother. In her unique way to establish a deep time connection, Mugwort claims us as kin, and in doing so, teaches us intimate lessons of reciprocity in loving, grieving, healing and tending. In this way, mothering reveals as a reciprocal relationship with human and non-human beings. Indeed, working with Mother Mugwort gave us both insight into how we are all interconnected and interdependent members of the same interspecies Earth family. Such kinship can, however, only be nourished through cultivating respectful and caring relationships “based on mutual respect, care and responsibility.” (Povinelli, 1994, 152). While speaking about their relationships with Mugwort, Alice and Anna shared the grief and loss that they had in their respective experiences of ‘other-mothering’ human lineages as well (Hill Collins, 2015).

In this journey, we both realized that what we seek to do in our everyday acts of ‘other-mothering’ is to embody Melissa Nelson’s words:

“I want to be ancestor who nourished legacies of health without forgetting the pain. I want to be remembered as someone who helped create space to nurture a sense of belonging, belonging to that fundamental fabric of wholeness that ultimately created us and will absorb us once again. I want to serve as a hospice worker to encourage the death of colonial, fragmented worldviews and practices that support separation and act as a midwife for a new/old consciousness of justice and harmony” (Nelson 2021, 221).

Below, we offer another two personal vignettes of everyday acts of ‘other-mothering’ with Mugwort. Alice shares how she navigated the grief losing a step-daughter through complicated co-parenting arrangements, while Anna shares her experiences of mothering her biological mother and Grandmother’s declining health. Both stories reflect on how Mugwort guides us to not only mother other humans that are biologically not our children, our relations with Earth, but also, how we have come to mother ourselves through periods of grief and loss in the Anthropocene.

#### ***Alice’s story***

Between 2017 and 2020, I was the step-mother of my partner’s daughter. Navigating mutual flourishing amongst non-nuclear families under modernity is in itself a challenging task, but thanks to the complicated entanglement of socially-imposed values and judgments that cast a collective shadow upon the role of step-mothers, I was reminded how “step-mothers have been viewed as evil, scheming interlopers who channel what little power they have into oppressing their step-children” on a near daily basis (Sukovaty, 2012, 151). Moreover, I often found myself tending to the emotional wellbeing of my partner who concurrently wrestled with the realities of becoming a father who was not aware he had sired a daughter up until she was two years old. Without the period of preparation that pregnancy provides two humans embarking on parenthood, we jumped head-first into the world of parenting.

At the time, I was in the throes of completing the fieldwork for my doctoral research. Accordingly, I often think of that period of my life as my time of shapeshifting into mother, herbalist and scholar. Towards the end of 2019, however, as our co-parenting arrangements increased in difficulty, I—after a great deal of legal and emotional turmoil—discovered that the



child I had helped to raise as my own was not biologically my partner's. Our entire worlds came crashing down in a single moment; all the dreams we had tended for our evolving family vanished with one line in an email from a DNA testing agency. And in the absence of a receptive co-parent in our child's biological mother, our parenting privileges disappeared as quickly as they had been granted to us. Overnight, my labors of mothering had been rendered invisible. Where to from here, I thought?

In the three precious years that I mothered my step-daughter, I spent a great deal of time with her in the garden, harvesting herbs, teaching her the names of weeds and the ethics of the honourable harvest that I had been gifted from my own ancestors. In my moments of grieving the loss of her as 'step-daughter,' I leaned on the wisdom I knew Mugwort could provide me. I prayed to, I smudged, and I drank infusions of Mugwort consistently during those dark moments of loss.

To this day, my special girl—irrespective of how she or society defines me as mother—still sends me the odd text message asking me to identify plants in her new home that is far away from where we live. We are bound through herbcraft. At eight years old, she knows Mugwort by sight, and knows that we have the power to meet up in 'dreams,' just as I taught her when she was younger. In many ways, Mugwort helped to mother me through the process of mothering, and thus make sense of the multifarious ways that we practice reproduction and care across bodies, bloodlines and space. Mugwort knows no human labels, for there is only care propelled forward when Mugwort is at the helm. All life is sacred.

### ***Anna's story***

As I co-write this article, I navigate the realities of the worsening health, my mother, and my Grandmother. For more than 30 years, my Grandmother has suffered from different diseases. She was first diagnosed with cancer when I was one-year old. Then she struggled with a series of other types of cancer and retinopathy. Three years ago, she began to have cardiovascular issues and dementia, along with a broken femur last month. Since she was transferred from hospital into a care home, we have not seen her due to a COVID-19 lockdown in her section. Prior to COVID, my mother has always taken care of her mother in a way that showed an incredible amount of care and love. At the same time, she sacrificed most of herself and her dreams, and even personality for a care that mingles with that over-presence and self-denial. Since the pandemic broke out, in the spring of 2020, my mother has been the only person to take care of an already not self-sufficient person. And in that spring, my mother started having pelvic and back pains that often spread throughout all her body. Despite a general diagnosis of fibromyalgia, nothing seems to work for her. So she has been living with chronic pain for the last two years. All while taking non-stop care of her mother. And now, in this whirl of changes, she is unable of coping with the emotional pain of not taking care her mother *properly*, as much as with the physical pain that keeps swallowing her. I was the other person who helped with the taking care of my grandmother for the first year and half of pandemic. I basically avoided to see anybody else to protect them both, in an attempt to prevent her entering the modern health system. It has not been an easy journey. As the excessive, enduring fatigue of dealing with dementia's obsessions, bodily fluids, my mother's pains endured, I experienced a constant state of grief.

To and with Mugwort I ask: how can we heal our mothers and breaking the curse of pain? How can we care of our kin, human and non-human, without losing ourselves and

getting sick ourselves? How do we create a space of care and love that is reciprocal, based on joy, hope, dance, full-hearted laughter, warm tears, deep sharing? A space where to just be truly who we are, and who we are trying to become? And how do we cut the branches that must be cut? Not all the teachings and examples of care of our ancestors should be kept alive. In her lessons of bringing everything back into flow, Mugwort is a great teacher, ally, and mother. I have been trying my best to learn her lessons of letting things flow and accepting the transformations and challenges that life gifts us. I have been listening to her songs on how we can live with grief and love, with freedom and care, and on how to turn decadence into a new spring. Along this journey, I started perceiving my own taking care and mothering my mother line as that a wet nurse and hospice worker at the same time (see above, Nelson 2021, 221).

At a certain point toward the end of last year the need to be back into the sensuous world and recover my body and heart to the touch of light, wind, soil, dirt, plants, animals and other human beings won me. And I could not do anything than letting a warm, shy and impetuous flow craving for life to emerge from within. I have come to think that what I can do to care and love my mothers is to be present. To be gentle. To listen. To embrace the pain. The pain and grief will certainly submerge you. I must accept it shattering each fiber of myself. But then I should also let it go. Until the next wave. I know that I cannot identify with despair as my only identity. And that I want to do my best to carve a life that is different, while carrying with me and practicing my human mothers' teachings. I wish to learn the lessons of Mugwort's caring, and to become a healer—just as I was instructed in my dream. And this includes mothering all of my mothers, the human and non-human ones, as the plants and Earth herself are our kin.

### **Breaking the Curse: Concluding Thoughts**

In our playful auto-ethnographic conversation, we have been guided by Mugwort toward a pathway of (re)learning and restor(y)in our own engagements with motherhood and care. Along the journey, we asked ourselves the evocative question of 'what kind of ancestor *do you want to be?*' given that it is the labor of mothering in its multifarious manifestations – quite literally – that enables the ongoing perpetuity of life over time and space. In doing so, we both realized that we recognize ourselves as 'other-mothers,' who engage in the emotional labor of caring for and tending life across dominant notions of time, space and species. In this kin-making and healing pathway, we ally with Mugwort to explore the transformative, yet caring essence of motherhood. Artemisia, with its deep connection with vegetal goddesses is a mythic reminder that, as humans, we have always been inextricably linked to different bodies of ecology, and experimented with interspecies entanglements in the process of giving birth, mothering, healing and being with grief and loss. As such, we both relate to motherhood as an inter-generational, collective and inter-species practice: we are both children and caregivers of plants, as much as herbs are our mothers and should respectfully be taken care of. Remembering and taking seriously the inherited wisdom of herbal practices and rituals from our long-ago ancestors, we walk with Mugwort to guide us in the journey of mothering—whether that is biologically or otherwise—in the challenges of contemporary times. If, like Anna's herbalist friend shared, Mugwort "brings everything back into flow," then perhaps it is time for us to slow down, listen and (re)learn from the herbs in order to become better children to our ultimate Mother, Earth.



## Epilogue

It is the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2022 at 2pm. Alice is (re)working parts of this article in preparation for its submission to the editors. The phone rings, and it is an unknown number. She hesitates to answer the call as she is in the flow of writing, but there is a ghostly intuitive sensation that floats over her that tells her otherwise. She picks up. A somber voice on the other end asks if this is Alice. Heart racing, she says yes. The woman on the other end of the phone informs Alice that she has just found her young cat, Salem, dead, in a garden a few doors down from her house. Alice lets out a wail on the phone. Within minutes, this witch's familiar—a once-sprightly young black cat—is brought to her door and she is presented with the painful lesson of love and loss of a non-human child once again.

Over the next few days, people gather, Alice burns Mugwort, and a feline funeral rite is in full swing. Songs, poetry and craftly expressions of love flow through Alice's home as she mourns her familiar. Letting the Mugwort smoke engulf her, she knows that there is no turning back. The wheel of life turns on, and Salem metamorphoses into spirit, continuing to mother, alongside Mugwort, Alice from other realms.

In service of life, Mugwort teaches us.

Over and over.

The great Mother flows through us.

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