

Cannabis and the Undercommons of Care: Producing Fugitive Value in Punitive Los Angeles

Robert Chlala

California State University, Long Beach
robert.chlala@csulb.edu

Abstract

In the last two decades, shuttered warehouse-manufacturing sites and emptied retail across Los Angeles/Tovaangar were repurposed into the largest medical cannabis dispensary and indoor cultivation economy in the US. Drawing from more than twelve years of ethnographic participation, this paper bridges Black radical theory, disability studies and Buddhist humanist geographic perspectives to understand how cannabis workers, owner-operators, and patients produced fugitive forms of value. These forms of care, collective relationships, and material benefit challenge racial capitalist accumulation and offer distinct, even if fleeting moments of freedom. Facing death-dealing violence, marginalized communities created places of care at the “outlaw edge” that housed an undercommons of health practices and knowledge that include pleasure and non-hierarchical solidarities. These created respite and relief from interrelated geographies of abandonment, broken windows urban governance, and dispossession defining early 21st Century LA. Exploring cannabis economies offers a means to reconceptualize criminalization as a singular relation to carcerality, and to deepen our understanding of law, capitalism, and the forms of value generation being targeted. Ultimately, legalization in this context poses critical conundrums for participants in fugitive economies on what is gained and lost in further assimilation into racial capitalist urban economies. In other words, cannabis begs the question: can freedom only be found in flight?

Keywords

fugitivity, abolition, cannabis, drug war, Black geographies, carceral geographies, race



Introduction

A Black woman with Midwest roots, Athena was one of the first storefront cannabis dispensary operators in the unceded Gabrielino and Tongva lands (Tovaangar) of Los Angeles, opening her shop on the top floor of a South Bay strip-mall in the mid-2000s - when she was in her 30s. Athena's dispensary began as a hydroponics shop, a means to supply dozens of small cultivators in the region with unique technologies meant to grow cannabis clandestinely (and sustainably). However, she was quick to take advantage when the California state legislature opened up the possibilities for storefront medical marijuana dispensaries¹ in 2004. One of the first Black women operators in the U.S. of a public-facing dispensary, Athena was an unapologetic advocate with a penchant for facing down federal agents and state inspectors. "I would let them into my shops, make them walk around, and dare them to figure out how to cite me - I could do their jobs better than them," she laughed.

When I spoke to her in 2019, the many iterations of the businesses she had built over fifteen years were changing shape once again, shuttering her dispensary and moving to new models to escape state scrutiny. Her shops had been raided by police, re-opened, and re-created across multiple locations. California's Proposition 64- ostensibly legalizing recreational cannabis in 2016 - had not delivered on the promises to calm the turbulent regulatory landscape for cannabis and was met with continued divergent opinions in cannabis communities, especially in Black, Latinx and Asian and Pacific-Islander (API) neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Athena - like many of her colleagues - saw no room for her or other "legacy operators" in this formal market. To her, the processes by which cannabis was being re-articulated were still deeming critical elements of this market illegal, and it was essential to operate one step ahead of the law, always in flight to preserve "the work of community."

That community labor - as she described - involved cannabis economies that were at once capitalist transactions but also involved a willingness to eschew massive profits in order to serve patients, many from marginalized communities. For more than a decade, the social club model that her dispensary followed included a price board which shifted based upon income. She maintained free medicine programs that served unhoused and poor members. As a trained cannabis cook, she also worked carefully to produce new recipes beyond market demands (i.e. "stoner snacks") but in fact to create organic and safe products that could be consumed by medical patients that were struggling with HIV/AIDS, cancer, and other illnesses where a sensitive diet was key. Other profits were diverted to support local rural economies where cannabis was grown, paying for schools and other services in towns "off the grid".

To Athena, part of the "magic" of non-commercial cannabis work was the ways "we connect. We talk to each other, from the soul [but] with the Reefer Madness they made you the outcast, okay? You have to be the outlaw and the rest of the world looks at you that way." Athena underscored that cannabis was a fugitive enterprise. This was not simply because it involved a drug on the federal list of Schedule 1 controlled substances or allowed the state to incarcerate more Black and Brown residents. Even with California-level shifts permitting (in

¹ The term dispensary refers to cannabis retail storefronts, and was adopted during the rise of medical marijuana legalization on the premise that while cannabis cannot be sold legally, these operations could instead dispense cannabis in exchange for a monetary or labor donation.

a bounded way) this drug's production and sale, multiple participants I spoke with saw government and market forces targeting relationships, knowledge and places in cannabis that countered racial capitalist commercialization/corporatization and eschewed state control. Indeed Proposition 64 (2016) legalizing "adult-use" cannabis in California banned practices like free medicine and limited cooperatives. Further integration into the licit economy increasingly foreclosed the kinds of individual and social value that many produced via cannabis, with rising rents, high costs of operation, and tense competition emerging in the formalizing market.

Athena's analysis reveals the ways in which critical processes of social reproduction and collective care have been rooted in markets circumscribed as illicit and experienced as fugitive, even as they create value beyond the transactional exchange of money and goods (cf. Harney and Moten 2013; Hartman 2019). Often thought of in terms of flight, escape or maroonage, fugitivity here refers to interrelated "relational, iterative practice of mobility and place-making" that challenge the "logics of containment, dehumanization, and capitalist dispossessions or expropriation" (Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton 2023: 1259, 1268). The kinds of human connection produced in cannabis, Athena surmised, were exactly why they were outlawed under regimes of drug prohibition that included culturally portraying the plant as a threat to social order (shorthanded as "Reefer Madness," from the white racial propaganda 1936 film that linked weed and jazz to imagined violent teen criminality.) Cannabis' potentialities informed why federal officers showed up routinely to her dispensary, attempted to close it down and raid all of its goods and cash, and surveilled her and many of her comrades. She continually re-opened in new locations around the city and for a while, exiled to rural California for safety. She brought to light how cannabis produces what can be seen as undercommons of care that includes distinct ways of relating, knowing and making place (cf. Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton 2023). Cannabis workers generated solutions for multiple crises, regimes of death and governance as debt, testing intimate practices of care often in direct opposition with the forces of urban development and carceral state power in California. These generated *fugitive forms of value* - forms of life-sustenance, aesthetic pleasure and collective benefit produced in commodity and labor exchange that are not sanctioned by the state and elite economic power, and require continual flight, movement or concealment.

Ultimately this paper seeks to ask deeper questions of why and how criminalization and legalization function in relationship to racial capitalist markets and to the social production of value. Practically, Athena and other cannabis market participant interviews shed light on a fundamental question: what is actually being criminalized in illicit markets under contemporary capitalism? How does legalization then change the ways value is generated in such markets - including in fugitive practices of knowledge, connection and places of freedom?

Methods & A Fugitive Conceptual Toolkit

I met Athena in the course of nearly six years of in-depth ethnographic research in Los Angeles' changing cannabis industry, from 2012 to 2020 (and continuing in other forms to 2024). Through the course of this, I conducted more than 75 interviews with participants in the cannabis economy and related urban policymakers and organizers. I attended meetings and participated in the nearly two years of regulation creation for the local legalization ordinances, and most of my time was spent in shops or organizing alongside cannabis front-

line workers via a growing unionization effort and coalition to reinvest cannabis taxes in specific communities affected by the war on drugs. These eight years of in-depth ethnography came out of my own experiences growing up queer and with precarious migration status in working class communities in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, and moving in and out of the cannabis economy. My experiences constantly required me to assess the contradictions of making this fugitive practice legible in my writing and activism. This required making room for what participants chose to reveal while obscuring what they preferred to keep hidden. As such, I consulted closely with participants on how they chose to be represented and used only pseudonyms, while and obfuscating location and spatial information.

Los Angeles is a critical site to understand cannabis. During the last decades of the 20th century, the US's cross-border war on drugs concentrated production and distribution networks more densely in California. Dispensaries became key nodes in this market with the quasi-legalization of medical cannabis via the Compassionate Use Act (Proposition 215) statewide in 1996, that tacitly permitted a model of collectives registered as non-profit organizations where medical marijuana patients participated in the cultivation and manufacturing of the plant. Patients could designate a collective to do so on their behalf and "donate" cash for product instead. A 2004 state law affirmed the right to create storefront dispensaries, after which Los Angeles saw a slow and then exponential climb from a few dozen - including Athena's - to some 2,000-plus in the city in the years of the Great Recession (2008-2010).

New comprehensive worker data from a team I helped lead confirms California's dispensaries have been and (as of 2025) are predominantly staffed by non-white, and a disproportionately high percentage of queer and trans, workers, with dispensaries particularly relying upon women-identified staff (Arana et al. 2025). Ownership in Los Angeles skews increasingly white, but historically has included Black, Latinx, Armenian, Korean and other communities. Dispensary expansion conjoined with a rapid increase in indoor cannabis production in the greater Los Angeles area.

The legalization of recreational or "adult-use" cannabis through Proposition 64 (2016) brought new actors into this economy, including venture capitalist firms, multi-national corporations, real estate agents, more mainstream entrepreneurs of color, and others seeking to profit from a further expanding industry. For numerous reasons, including the fact California has granted municipalities the chance to either ban the industry or offer a limited number of licenses and tight regulations, many like Athena have either forced to or chosen actively (or both) to remain outside of the bounds of the regulated market.

Legalization, in this sense, brings to the fore relations between the law and capitalism. In this case, cannabis speaks to the ways legal regimes and the law structure and order society to govern activity for profit. Carmen Gonzales and Athena Mutua synthesize the fundamental role of law in the logics of racial capitalism, in terms of profit-making via governing exploitation, expropriation and expulsion or exclusion (2022). The critical transformations in cannabis economies Athena and other experiences speak to the processes by which the law serves to reshape these markets to produce profit especially for certain racialized elites, but their navigation of these processes opens a window to the ways fugitive practices break with the law in their attempt to move beyond the profit motive alone and produce other forms of value.

Defining Care in the Undercommons

In conversation with cannabis interlocutors, participants often shared an analysis of fugitivity that went beyond how the state deemed cannabis itself illegal (a history briefly noted below) but how participating in this economy held a larger set of relationships, knowledge and place-making that generated distinct, more-than-capitalist value. As one worker shared, "If you say you're a cannabis consultant or I'm a cannabis nurse you're a nurse, that I advocate for this plant, that I know how to properly make a treatment plan for a specialized patient, because I'm an actual nurse, but I also understand cannabis more in depth and intimately...we are the black sheep, right? And for so long we've been told by big government and big pharma that this is bad and this is wrong. But when we now see everybody changing their tune it should raise red flags." In other words, some saw the plant's criminalization as deeply tied to the alternatives it offered beyond state-sanctioned medicine, economics and social relations. Their positioning often reverberated with articulations of fugitivity by theorist Fred Moten, "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed... for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge" (2018; Harney and Moten 2013). Similarly, scholar of Black radicalism Saidiya Hartman's work further helps make sense of cannabis, underscoring fugitivity as an intimate scale of urban politics and shared rebellion. Her scholarship opens the door to the histories of queer Black women's urban practices of "mutuality and creativity necessary to sustain life in the context of intermittent wages, controlled deprivation, economic exclusion, coercion, and antiblack violence often bordered on the extralegal and the criminal" (2018).

While not directly addressing fugitivity, critical historiographies of different criminalized labor in and beyond the US underscores how certain forms of work are marked as illicit due to the transgressive nature of relationships and hierarchies contained in these economic exchanges (Harris 2016; Capó 2017). What this broader literature - and cannabis experiences in Los Angeles even within a legalizing space tell us - is that these drug economies can be spaces of insubordinate action against racial, gender, class hierarchies. The concept of fugitivity allows us to interrogate these creative, generative processes at the "outlaw edge" (paraphrasing Moten). Importantly, these are not unified by one "pure, ethical stance". They entail everyday ways in which people create spaces, knowledge and intimacies that "refuse the logics of their own dehumanization and aspire to freedom despite tremendous legal, material, and social constraints" (Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton 2023: 1264). In the case of cannabis, I suggest its fugitive nature is tied to how it channels energy beyond solely profit-oriented accumulation to the sustaining of alternative value (including different relationships, knowledge, and spatial practices) through an undercommons of care and redistribution of resources.

I recognize there are many larger debates about the application of fugitivity, including the importance of not diluting material histories of enslavement (Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton 2023). In part, cannabis economic participants engaged with these afterlives in their discussions of the carceral state as an extension of enslavement and speaking of social equity programs (detailed below) as similar to sharecropping. Fugitivity also offers a means to situate cannabis in the large plantation geographies shaping California agriculture, but also to trace the lineages of the acts of flight and rebellion that defined the evolution of the cannabis economy. Through Hartman (2019) or Harney and Moten (2013) one can see a two-fold movement: understanding fugitivity as a response by Black diasporic and intertwined

marginalized communities to racial capitalist exploitation and violence, but also recognizing how these transgressive practices produce new material and social relations. Geographers Leslie Gross-Wyrtzen and Alex Moulton (2023) and the authors they dialogue with offer a means to understand how fugitive practices link and move across time and space, and the ways geographers can trace these distinct forms of “knowledge-making, kin-making, and place-making” by which freedom is made practice across past, present, and future.

Cannabis workers generated, in this case an “undercommons” of care – offering remedies for multiple crises and regimes of death, testing intimate practices of support and creating places of temporary refuge from the forces of urban development and carceral state power in California. Such fugitive notion of care spurs engagement with disability justice scholars and activists. Jina Kim takes Audre Lorde’s understanding of self-care as “political warfare” to open up the possibilities in care work as knowledge, practices and relationships pushing beyond capitalist imperatives and productivity (in fact rooted in “crip time”) (2021; Kim and Schalk 2021). Cannabis has been historically cast in the US by lawmakers and anti-drug crusaders as a drug that makes one less productive, as opposed to pharmaceuticals. To the point of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, radical care can include pleasure (a significant part of cannabis medical consumption), that includes joy and allows for “wildly intimate, healing relationships” (2019). Likewise, cannabis workers recast the relationship among practitioner and consumer in less-hierarchical, more informed and collaborative relations that included, yes, a good high.

Criminalizing and Spatializing Alternative Value

Discussing cannabis as an undercommons of care sparks an important question: is this market anything more than just capitalism without regulation? After all, commodified carework is integral to contemporary globalized economies, and cannabis produces, as Polson elucidates, excess rents (inflated value) given heightened prices due to racialized policing and hyper-commodified land markets in California (2013; 2015). Cannabis workers – in their care for patients – to some extent keep customers engaged and drum up consumption, benefitting dispensaries and cultivation operators alike.

Yet the experiences of participants suggest that workers in Los Angeles’ criminalized dispensaries produced more than just an increase in material profits, generating more extensive forms of social and individual value. Understanding the impact of these larger notions of care requires a larger philosophical framework for understanding how value is generated. Humanist geographer Tsunesaburo Makaguchi, for example, drew from Nichiren Buddhist philosophy to suggest that value is in fact as Marx noted a social relationship, one that measures the relationships between evaluating subject and evaluating object (Gebert and Joffe 2019; Goulah and Gebert 2009). Like Marx, he challenged the reliance on any simplified notion of utility and emphasized the ways human create value with their bodies and minds. For Makaguchi, the ways in which value was measured, experienced and generated ultimately is dialectical and dialogic, and he offers three broad categorizations of the kind of value generated: beauty, gain or benefit and good (Gebert and Joffe 2019). Critiquing neo-Kantian ideas circulating at the time, Makaguchi eschewed a notion of inherent truth or singular morality to show the ways in which value is embodied in these partial moments of perceived beauty; in gain, in adding to the material benefit and vital survival of a living being;

and good, to benefitting the social collective. His ideas reflect Buddhist humanist notions of interdependence, transience, and continual potentiality in each moment of life.

Applying Makaguchi offers an understanding of the production of value in cannabis care – surfacing the ways in which the “surplus” of labor must be understood as forms of fulfillment and well-being. In this undercommons, cannabis workers generated not just individualized forms of health or pleasure, but more holistic forms of community and mutual aid that resonate with collective and social relations. These at times were fleeting or temporary, but their impermanence does not diminish their importance for those who participate in this economy.

Interlocutors in cannabis pointed to the expansive forms of value present, such as knowledge and relations that break beyond narrow forms of commodified, pharmaceutical care or institutionalized medicine, as shaping precisely why cannabis then becomes illegalized. The plant’s criminalization is tied to the ways in which cannabis created forms of value that make it a danger to racial capitalist power, breaking the illusory hold of systems like pharmaceuticals or corporate consumption on health and well-being. While this requires more extensive historical analysis beyond the scope of this paper, we can start with an understanding from the ground up of what was happening in this fugitive undercommons in the early 21st Century to make sense of how more expansive forms of value are generated in such illicit spaces, and why and how legalization threatened to eradicate the relationships and forms of knowledge there embedded.

Such an analysis also requires attending to the spatial realities by which undercommons are made concrete and alternative forms of value are produced, i.e. place-making. Retail shops and warehouses emptied by the Great Recession were also re-purposed and re-created for fugitive economic practices –to produce life, joy, deviant practice, and relationships that didn’t easily fit into dominant forms of health or service labor. Importantly, movement and flight, Moten emphasizes, are central to an ethos of fugitivity: “Knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a break” (Moten 2018, 51). Many dispensary spaces in Los Angeles were set up as temporary, fleeting and ready to move after the next raid. The value created, too, then is also a momentary one that blends all kinds of pleasures. Integrating here the perspective on value from Makaguchi, the production of value becomes not a linear accumulation process but a far more temporary and at times circular one. Cannabis compels a conversation on the “incalculable” forms of value and how they find space and form in the city, even if fleeting.

Flight and Fugitivity Under Broken Windows

Cannabis’ fugitive practices emerge in relationship to the policing of cannabis, well documented with its roots as a tool of Euro-American settler colonial projects, carceral class politics in Mexico and racial violence tying together the South and Southwest (Campos 2012; Guba 2020; Marez 2004). Following the urban uprisings of the late 1960s, then-President Richard Nixon began to directly target New Left and Black movements and further repress racialized populations through cannabis law, steepening penalties for personal use and militarizing the border (Frydl 2013).

The transborder war on drugs in many ways helped concentrate and expand home-grown production in California, especially in Humboldt, Mendocino, and Trinity Counties in

Northern California (Hernandez 2010; Corva 2014). Throughout this time, cannabis was sought out as an economic livelihood not just by “countercultural refugees” but a wide swath of Black, Latinx, Asian-Pacific Islander and other migrant communities in Los Angeles that had long relied upon the plant in various ways (Corva 2014). In the 1980s and 1990s, queer cannabis networks expanded as communities being ravaged by the HIV/AIDS crisis began experimenting with the plant. While much distribution happened in homes, streets, “head shops,” and in cultural venues, expansion of medical cannabis opened up new place for fugitive cannabis to find home, the Cannabis Buyer Club (CBC).

A product of queer relationships of mutual aid during the HIV/AIDS crisis, numerous Black and brown men, women, and transgender people ran or worked in CBCs in Los Angeles (Oganessian 2020; Romero 2013; cf. Brown 2016; Cohen 1997). The CBCs provided the institutional framework for what would become dispensaries, organized often in a collective structure, with minimal hierarchy. While each one had a “price board,” costs were flexible, and patients could get free bags of weed if needed; growers would come drop off and donate free bags of cannabis as well. Some CBCs offered other medical services, as well as food and clothes. CBCs hired staff at the clubs who were HIV-positive or terminally ill. While often derided as a “circus” in media, the spaces themselves also included areas to “gather, relax and consume their medications” (Feldman and Mandel 1998, 181; Dioun 2017; Reiman 2008) for those with debilitating or terminal illness and with free medicine. CBCs also became hubs for disabled organizing. They mirror, in many ways, the vision outlined in disability studies by Kim and Schalk, of a “more active and informed participation in medicine,” and sharing support and resources in ways that support collective, social life (2021, 51).

CBC and dispensary storefronts also became a visible target for policing. Rarely discussed are the ways the war on drugs evolved with shifting urban processes of disinvestment and re-investment, particularly during the rise of “broken windows” policing in the 1990s (Murch 2015). US broken windows proponents claimed that any marker of disorder, such as an empty lot or graffiti, were magnets for crime that would spin off into larger urban chaos. Numerous scholars document how “broken windows” police practices were wielded to clear the city of undesirables to make way for new, whiter and wealthier residents, while policing the labor that sustains neighborhoods (Camp and Heatherton 2016; Gilmore and Gilmore 2016; Gilmore and Heatherton 2012; Mitchell, Attoh, and Staeheli 2016). Cannabis policing folded in broken windows models, with then-Los Angeles Police Department chief William Bratton and local precinct heads citing broken windows theories in ramping up of raids on cannabis dispensaries in the late 2000s. A “complaint-driven” policy pegged weed shops as supposed magnets of crime and violence. Policing extended beyond the blunt violence of raids to the many regulatory barriers medical marijuana dispensaries seeking legalization encountered across different city institutions, including from the City Attorney and Planning and Land Use Committee.

In response, groups of disability rights, queer organizations like the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), and anarchist Occupy elements came to support workers and patients through direct action during raids in the mid-2000s. For the most part, shops became used to salvaging what they could and finding the next empty storefront. At the peak of medical cannabis expansion, during the late 2000s Great Recession, operators I interviewed found a plethora of empty storefronts of closed restaurants or shops, many from small businessowners of colors who were decimated by the 2008 crash and cycles of rising

commercial real estate prices in a gentrifying city. Dispensary operators also expanded to include a wide range of entrepreneurs, from former furniture and restaurant owners to entertainment industry participants, seeing the potential for profits created in part by the quasi-legitimization of medical use. Patterns of fugitive flight both responded to and were made possible by urban neoliberal governance and debt, which intensified punitive violence but also opened new spaces for this economy.

Fugitive Cannabis Health Practices and the Undercommons

Identifying broken windows policing opens a door to ask: why was cannabis still being treated as illicit, even as the laws changed to mark these as (somewhat) legal? What did it represent in the racial capitalist city? Within the embattled context of the CBC and later dispensary, an undercommons of fugitive care knowledge and practices emerged (cf. Moten and Harney 2013). Athena described how she witnessed workers at the front lines expand the ways cannabis was understood and used in new, generative ways in the early 2000s:

I would train the budtenders, you know: when they come in there, ask [the patients] what ails them because they need to make the recommendations. We would say, it's very important to know what meds you're taking, where it is that you're coming from, so, all of these questions went into weekly quizzes that the patients had to take.

Athena's patient questionnaires also tackled the felt effects and experiences with different varieties of the plant. With data from these surveys and the information from patient encounters, budtenders started to form an idea of how different strains were affecting patients: "We would form books where I would take the strains [and] spread the news with the others and share with the rest of the community." In the now-closed shop, she explains, "If anybody wanted to flip through the strains, not only would they get that, but they also got the documentation from other patients...I was formulating data that I was sharing with everybody that walked in the door." Her data was public, not proprietary, and accessible and was predicated on trusting her patients' grassroots experiments. It formed its own fugitive archive of knowledge, banned by the US state - which at the time only allowed for cannabis research that would further the punitive project of the war on drugs. Her end goal: "always about education."

Within shops, front-line cannabis workers served as a critical nexus for knowledge and learning, building intimate relationships with their patients. Connections hinged often on a mutual appreciation for the plant or shared experiences under the violence of displacement, dispossession and disinvestment marking Los Angeles in the first decades of the 2000s. Gina worked in cannabis over a decade across California, and shared a particular experience as a budtender where she first came to discover the importance of cannabis with a high percentage of cannabidiol (CBD) for health:

I remember this older black gentleman with Tourette's came in...I remember I first heard about CBD from him. I had it on the [daily strains] board; we often put a note, here's what we got, ask us about them. He specifically asked for it; word had got out on the street about it. I remember him and I having a forty-five minute conversation... we were like, hold up, let's learn more about this, tell us what it's doing to you.

Queer and working class, Gina understood that getting this right and honing CBD could be a matter of life or death for the patient. She noted, "He was an older queer Black man on the street - driven by the illness, and having an episode, could lead to physical injury from the police and civilians." With his changes over time due to repeat treatment, she understood CBD could be a "game changer," and they began to order different strains. In shops around California, a complex science of CBD was developing through relationships that were always shadowed by racialized inequality, but also solidarities wherein this information was shared freely among practitioners including workers, owners, home providers and street dealers. At time of writing, CBD is increasingly recognized and studied in well-funded research institutions with little mention of how it was discovered in fugitive scientific encounters Gina described.

It's no coincidence that the growth of medical dispensaries happened during the 2008 global economic crisis or "Great Recession," with skyrocketing costs of care tied to the expansion of health care and ever-widening racialized and gendered health disparities across US cities. As Gina's comments also point out, several budtenders were aware of the fact many of their Black, Latinx, indigenous and migrant patients were experiencing now-heightened intergenerational precarity, affecting their prospects of survival and quality of life. Budtenders' desire to support forms of collective care and alternative value came in part due to their continual exposure California's carceral systems of "premature death." and the concomitant disinvestment in basic social and health protections that Gilmore maps across the 1980s and 1990s (2002; 2007).

Identifying as Dene, Chickasaw and Black, Dr. Hope also sought to document what was often referred to as the "self-medicating" Black, indigenous and other communities did with cannabis in response to health inequities and political and economic dislocations. She traces these realities beyond the Great Recession or the carceral expansion to intergenerational violence of settler-colonialism and enslavement. I met her when she was speaking at a packed grassroots event after Proposition 64 had passed and quickly learned that cannabis patients and advocates - and increasingly scientific researchers - around the country looked to her for knowledge. Dr. Hope was researching cannabis use in South Los Angeles (where there was a high concentration of dispensaries) and undiagnosed and diagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety. She was also organizing data to help public aid recipients access increasingly expensive cannabis medicine post-legalization. At the same time, Dr. Hope was constructing a fugitive network to provide such medication, producing cannabis products with different, healing components of cannabis plants like THC-A learned in trips back and forth to the Caribbean. Diasporic and queer and trans community health practices offered a significant backbone to cannabis's nexus of fugitive experiments in care and economic life.

The orientation of budtenders (and many owner-operators and cultivators) and the more convivial, non-clinical setting of the dispensary also helped maintain blurred lines among the medicinal and "adult-use" projects, a comfortable ambiguity that prevented any narrow version of commodification. "Sometimes it's just a regular, coming in to grab a joint and a little conversation," Erik, a young downtown LA budtender who fled the precarity of service labor, explains. Within this relationship, other social ends were met; Erik particularly recalls, in the first shop where he worked, engaging with many "downtown Los Angeles locals," some who were unhoused, who would buy just a little weed to get through the day,

and in some sense, find shelter. Within this – and considering the holistic experience many were cultivating through the plant – other desires were acceptable, including queer and subversive, non-productive joy (cf. Hwang 2010; Cohen 1997). What Erik speaks to are intimacies that expand beyond the boundaries of care beyond austere medical relations to a blend pleasure and healing (cf. Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019).

For numerous interlocutors, a counter-project of care is what kept cannabis criminalized. Not only did it offer queer communities respite during the HIV/AIDS crisis, but several explained that half a century prior to the CBCs, the American Medical Association and others actively participated in the plant's criminalization was due to its potential to upend hierarchies of care enshrined in the US medical system. Further, several workers shared that they had engaged with cannabis to actually kick their dependence on pharmaceutical drugs and felt more alive and in control then when on opioids or high-grade anti-depressants. "This is an amazing alternative to what Big Pharma has to offer," Laura, a 40s-something small scale cultivator, shared, "and what scares them is we can even grow it ourselves." These critiques shift the lens to the ways that cannabis criminalization was not simply a project to incarcerate but specifically in relation to the kinds of value this economy produced.

Considering Makaguchi's understanding of value-creation, cannabis dispensaries produced fugitive forms of well-being and aesthetic pleasure, collective connection but also comfortable material survival for workers. They reverberate with Hartman's words:

The forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it. This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation (2016).

During the HIV/AIDS crisis, the undercommons of care fed into and tied to the support of movements like ACT-UP. In the most recent iterations in Los Angeles from the mid-2000s forward, it offered a sense of solidarity and interconnection in the face of rapid gentrification and exclusion through intertwined healing and pleasure. This labor generated moments of recognition and humanity that felt otherwise impossible working in the service or warehouse sector, offering glimpses of beauty and joy that – while marked as illicit or unproductive – lifted spirits in the violence of everyday survival.

Legalization, Debt and the Price of Inclusion

When the process of "adult-use" legalization began to gain full steam in California after the passage of Proposition 64 (2016), contradictions deepened with cannabis market growth and formalization, among the fugitive position and full participation in the formal, global capitalist economy. Proposition 64's language and topline emphasis on a "system to legalize, control and regulate" the entire supply chain of cannabis spoke to a widening gulf between those advocating for legalization and those resistant to what would happen to their fugitive networks and practices. Fugitive value creation had in fact broadened the consumer base and applications of cannabis, and the industry attracted many new actors. California's tech venture, entertainment and real estate investors as well as US biotech companies and "Big Ag" giants like Scott's Miracle Gro were knocking at the door. New global multi-national operators also came from Canada where cannabis was federally legal, utilizing the stock market there to speculate and accrue capital, re-invested in US markets.

In Oakland, Los Angeles, and other California cities, advocates - some of whom came from abolition and drug legalization circles - called for a reparations agenda to deal with the generations of racialized violence wreaked by the drug war, and to stave off corporate capital. It is within this conversation that cannabis "social equity programs" emerged. They meant to find a way to give cannabis business license priority and support for those "disproportionately affected by the war on drugs," in the language of the Los Angeles social equity ordinance passed in 2018. Many participants instead held to a politics of refusal. Others attempted to comply and found this pathway brought debt and dispossession. Some decided their only hope was to discretely sell much of their business to larger investors and cash out of cannabis while they could.

The changing field of positions became clear in the hot, long summer in 2018, when initial adult-use (or recreational) licensing and social equity programs were just barely crawling to a start. I sat with Janet, a reparations advocate and lawyer, in an Inglewood coffee shop to meet with one of the more networked and old school (or "legacy") unlicensed retail operators in the city, Jerome. In record heat, we were just comfortable enough under the awning, and everyone talked through sunglasses, and it felt like a Hollywood back-door deal. Janet organized the meeting because, as she said, she was tired of "crabs in the barrel shit." City council meetings were a ground for fights among new and emerging industry groups trying to define the particulars of licensing and social equity policies. Janet sought to take action to reach the people cannabis reparations was first intended to benefit. Specifically, the many underground operators who had faced jail time and lived in predominantly Black, Latinx, and migrant neighborhoods hit by carceral-era disinvestment.

Jerome was affable, and warm. As excited as Janet and I were to figure out how to get the word out and perhaps put on some free legal clinics, he thought we might be missing the point, one of a fugitive positioning and a politics of refusal. He took us through it: "You tell me: Why register yourself, as a Black cannabis operator who had not had a record yet - or maybe you did - and just hand over your info to the police, to the government?" He elaborated, why bother with such a system when the entire legal contract system was illegitimate, built on broken treaties with indigenous tribes and on enslaved labor?

Jerome's skepticism was widely shared among many industry participants from diasporic and queer communities. In her 60s, Fay, a longtime LGBTQ+ operator, whose work had come out of the HIV/AIDS movement, explained in an interview, "Those committed to the plant weren't used to grabbing for power, and can't or don't want to compete in the legislative system where those with money play." She explained that many who survived in the legal market "also forgot those whose backs they walked on, those who languished in federal and county jails, who had their kids taken away, who lost everything. It became easier to line your pocket and forget why we fought for this."

To Jerome and Fay, those truly committed to cannabis as a fugitive phenomenon had already moved to the next space of survival, including to the world of hemp production, making clothes, soaps, other small products. "The real underground ones are long gone, they are already making something new," Jerome shared. Others turned to online cannabis spaces to promote "delivery," and still some went back to growing for friends in home-grows. He suggested - and research later confirmed - many of the unlicensed shops began also selling surplus products for some licensed shops, and the lines among formal and fugitive only became more blurred as legalization advanced.

For even those with the best intentions, market integration and even the project of social equity was a monumentally slow process producing debt and loss. Among these included the steep costs of licensing (starting at \$10,000 in city fees alone), as well as the long, drawn-out multi-agency approval process. Landlords took advantage to charge even higher amounts for available retail or cultivation space, knowing that zoning authorities had placed a very limited map of potential locations. In total, the City Council agreed to grant no more than 200 retail licenses in a city that had supported thousands of shops during the Great Recession. Rents, in this tight spatial market, began easily at \$10,000 to \$15,000 for even the smallest retail spaces and tens of thousands more for cultivation. Operators had to turn to loans from venture capitalists, real estate trusts, entertainment companies and other predatory interests entering the cannabis economy. Applicants encountered dynamics that reflected Harney and Moten's understandings where "the new regulation wants to give you back what you got, publicly, which is to say partly, what can only be owed" (2013: 52). Through the punitive urban governance apparatus, even social equity programs took what many grassroots, fugitive practitioners held in cannabis and painfully sold it back to them as debt.

Commercialization wore directly away at the kinds of fugitive value that many had sought within the cannabis economy. Free medicine practices were banned initially. Workers who had valued the relationships with patients saw how new owners or investors in dispensaries pushed more traditional retail practices, including the expectation to "upsell" and to favor particular new "brands" that had entered the market. Marketing influenced consumption more, pushing high-THC content above other elements. From a production perspective, cultivators reported how mass-scale agricultural practices sped up pesticide use, pest and mold proliferation and drop in quality, despite the promise of more regulated plant access. Many workers bounced regularly between licensed and unlicensed shops, finding challenges in both as the value derived narrowed. But relationships anchored many: one Latina budtender described, "One of the reasons that I stay in the industry, one of the things that's brought me to the industry is the community of people that I get to engage with and the people that I get to meet and realize that like cannabis impacts their life for a positive, even though it's so much work (laughs) to be a part of this industry and there's a lot of risk."

The obstacles to equity or even further reparations for the drug war had much to do with what shaped cannabis as an important source of fugitive care, science and value – rampant real estate extraction, police power over municipal policy, and other forms of historical and contemporary urbanized dispossession. Social equity policymakers and advocates did not account for how much being a fugitive project in fact protected cannabis actors from a wide range of *legal* predatory practices and siphons of value that would make cannabis less and less viable for under-resourced actors and less able to sustain generative knowledge, relations and places of care.

Mapping Value from the Undercommons

Athena – like Jerome and Janet – worried about the increasing in-fighting and individualism on the terrain of cannabis, including the turn among some to calling the police on other unlicensed operators. Enlivened by the legacies of fugitive care and science, she looked to the possibilities of finding common ground among "legacy" and new industry participants. The starting point was to exercise power against a common system, remembering where they had come from, and what and who they had lost along the way:

I teach people, and I ask them to remember. Nobody should forget, nobody should forget who we lost. I tell them, look at those pictures on the wall [pointing to a photos of cannabis patients and farmers]: remember who you are. We have to remind each other fighting a war and that war is not against our brothers and cousins and sisters who are running these shops. Our war is against the system. It's against the pharma; it's against the few select people that hold all their money offshore in islands; the people who own the banking systems and put people into debt... And how do you control a country? You let them believe their neighbor is the problem.

Her next path of flight and freedom was creating “cannabis churches” where exchange could be protected under the aegis of religious ceremony tied to diasporic Rastafarian communities. She spoke of taking up through this a continued “Robin Hood” position, where “you find yourself in a band of merry men,” using those resources to sustain your local communities directly, including funding local schools. She valued the opportunity to further mutual care relations with patients. In her eyes, “you are stealing from the rich to give to the poor” by refusing to give your surplus wages to federal taxes that are in turn used to police you. She was not ready to trade away to legalization the ability to enact redistribution in more autonomous forms that in her view, avoid sustaining state violence.

Athena, like many I spoke to, raises myriad questions about what it means to bring illicit spaces of communal care and social reproduction into broader processes of governance or even collaborative organizing for reparations. These questions hold implications not just for the ever-looming US federal legalization of cannabis but other decriminalization efforts, from other drugs, like psychedelics, to sex work. An ethnographic, geographic lens helps us to explore such questions firmly in place, and a Black radical and Buddhist humanist lens, lifts up the relationality and possibility of social reproduction practices at the edges of markets built on extractive violence. Cannabis workers generated solutions for multiple crises and regimes of death and governance as debt, testing intimate practices of care or cultivation in relationship and often in direct opposition with the forces of urban development and carceral state power in California. As fugitive, these forms of value were in many ways always in motion – fleeting, temporally bound and always changing. It is no wonder then that with expanding legalization, actors have adapted their practices into new spatial forms, including churches, “seshes” and new ways to deliver. Honing in on the creation of fugitive value opens the door to rethinking urban policy that renders the only pathway to ethical change further participation in carceral, debt-laden institutions, instead grappling with the ways life-generative practices operate in flight and dynamic motion not assimilable into formal governance or market mechanisms. Examining criminalized life and world-making in Black, indigenous, queer and trans and other communities also offers a chance to examine how formal policing processes and the law are also ways economic life is regulated. With legalization, cannabis spaces both faced punitive violence and the co-optation of ideas and relationships that gave them value for profit benefitting a new set of corporate actors. For Athena, the terrain of struggle had to be redefined by building common ground against the violence of debt and extractive capital, while making new places (like her cannabis churches) for shared life and politics in this changing landscape that were – in Moten and Harney’s words – “in but not of” the market (Harney and Moten 2013, 25).

Integrating an analysis of value also surfaces the ways some fugitive practices, even in their temporary nature, produce deeply meaningful beauty, collectivity and material benefit in the midst of dispossession and death. Linking theories of fugitivity with non-Western humanist geographic approaches to value speaks to the ever-present experimentation and creative sustenance of meaningful life forged in urban relationships among different marginalized communities. These are not easily subsumed in the calculus of labor and surplus value, or the impulse to create permanent "solutions" and to govern with rationality. Fugitivity reminds us how Black geographies are not a tool for simply reading marginality or uncovering something invisible to the liberal imaginary. Instead, Black geographies enable us to reconceptualize from where and how we begin to map, to analyze space or even to plan from multiple places, in continual relationship with and aware of the ever-present states of possibility through which value is generated and life is made worth living.

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