# The Ontology and Epistemologies of a Plant

## The cannabis community in Buenos Aires, Argentina

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# The Ontology and Epistemologies of a Plant

## The cannabis community in Buenos Aires, Argentina

LUCIA AMARANTA THOMPSON
GENDER STUDIES | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY

**GROUNDED IN FEMINIST** decolonial theory and ethnographic methods, the research explores the lived experiences of cannabis users, cultivators, and activists revealing how the cannabis plant emerges not only as a medical resource but also as a relational being with cultural, spiritual, and political significance. Tracing engagements with organisations like Mama Cultiva, the study interrogates how human-plant relationships shape collective identities, alternative epistemologies, and communal forms of resistance. By centring intersectionality and subaltern knowledge systems, it challenges prohibitionist narratives and exposes structural inequalities along lines of gender, class, race, and ability in cannabis regulation and use, offering a nuanced portrait of cannabis politics as both personal and political.

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LUND
UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:**

Cannabis activism, which is embedded in Argentina's broader tradition of social movements, has become a dynamic field of resistance and advocacy, particularly regarding medicinal cannabis, which came into focus in 2015. Indeed, the research for my thesis began by establishing contact with Mama Cultiva, a mothers' organisation that played an active role in the creation of a new cannabis law and drafting subsequent regulations for medicinal marijuana. Through Mama Cultiva, I was introduced to the history of the cannabis movement and immersed in what I came to understand as a cannabis community with a culture centred around a particular plant – the cannabis plant.

Plants often surrounded me during meetings with interlocutors, whether in work or private environments. Observing how people spoke about the cannabis plant, I gradually became familiar with it as an entity whose agency was conveyed to me through its cultivators and users. The plant held significant meaning; it was spoken of and listened to with care, seen as a giving being that interacts throughout its life and beyond with those who grow and use it. In this sense, the plant is thought of as 'alive and thinking'. Through these human–plant relationships, where a space of conviviality is created, the plant's existence and attributes are translated into communitarian values, fostering a cannabis culture. The people I engaged with ranged from users and cultivators to activists working across policy, medical, and legal spheres. Each contributed to the tapestry of a cannabis community revolving around the plant, its ontology, and how it shapes values, connections, and epistemologies.

**Key words:** Argentina, Buenos Aires, cannabis cultivation, cannabis culture, cannabis plant, decolonialism, ethnography, intersectionality, medicinal cannabis, more-than-human, plant epistemologies, plant ontology

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*A la Pachamama*

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Although this marks the end of one journey, it also opens the door to new beginnings. I step forward with humility, with hope, and with profound appreciation for everyone who made this milestone possible.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

During my fieldwork in Buenos Aires, I often found myself sitting with groups of cannabis users and cultivators, observing not just how they were engaging in the act of smoking cannabis but also the intricate rituals and social practices surrounding it (Becker, 1963; Holm et al., 2014). I came to realise that these gatherings offered insights into the epistemological and ontological ways in which cannabis is crafted through daily life practices as both an experience and a materiality, which extended far beyond simply consuming the substance. From an epistemological perspective, these gatherings illuminate how the plant is rendered intelligible and meaningful by being formed, exchanged, and refined – whether through communitarian practices, scientific inquiry, or experiential learning. This includes understanding its properties, effects, and potential applications, as well as the broader social, historical, and political contexts that shape these perceptions while functioning at the 'borderlands' of society (Anzaldua, 1987).

Ontologically, the gatherings highlighted the ways in which cannabis exists beyond being a mere consumable substance. They reveal the plant's role as a living organism, which grows and changes and thereby has an existence in its own right. Thus, the plant is interagential in processes of shaping identities, social bonds, and ritualistic or spiritual engagements through its very existence (Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018). As Barad (2003) argues, matter plays an active role in meaning-making and agency which emerges through intra-action – mutual entanglements through which boundaries and identities are constituted. The cannabis plant's materiality is central – the sensory experiences of growing, handling, and interacting with it – as well as the personal and communal relationships that emerge from these interactions (Díaz, 2020a). Such social gatherings, which I attended throughout my fieldwork, underscored that cannabis is not just something that people use, but an entity

that they live with, engage with, and integrate into their daily realities in multifaceted ways while recognising the being and agency of the plant.

I noticed that a key moment in gatherings amongst cannabis smokers was the preparation of the cannabis cigarette, or *porro*, a task often entrusted to one person in the group. This act was carried out with care and often drew the attention of others, who observed the skill and technique involved. Meanwhile, others in the group would examine the cannabis flower, taking in its smell, appearance, and texture. The act of commenting on the flower's aroma and aesthetic qualities became a shared experience, sparking conversations and reinforcing a sense of community. Typically, one person would bring cannabis to share with the group, a gesture that was met with appreciation. It was appreciated as an indication of the communal spirit and unspoken rule of reciprocity that underpinned these gatherings (Sandberg, 2012a). The person sharing the flower would often receive compliments and inquiries about its origins, as others in the group sought to learn more about the source.

Experienced growers and long-time cannabis users brought an additional layer of expertise to these gatherings. Participants had developed refined techniques for appreciating the nuances of cannabis, such as evaluating its smell, its consistency, and even the stickiness of its resin. This practice of tasting and evaluating cannabis was often likened to wine tasting – a process that required experience and training to fully master. Those who had honed their skills in this area earned recognition as what one of my interlocutors, Carlos, calls: '*sumiller de cannabis*' (cannabis sommeliers), experts who could differentiate between strains, assess quality, and articulate the complex flavours and aromas present in the flower.

Ayelen and Roberto, for instance, clearly wanted me to learn about cannabis tasting. During one of the afternoons that I am spending with them, Roberto passes me the flower, asking me to smell it and describe the aromas I can recognise. Unsure of what to say, my inexperience leaves me unable to identify any aromas and I look at them, puzzled. Roberto then instructs me to squish the flower and feel how the resin sticks to my fingers, noting that this is another indicator of the cannabis's quality. He then proceeds to build and then inhale an unlit cigarette, describing the taste as having notes of chocolate with a hint of citrus.

As this unfolds, Ayelen explains that this process mirrors what professional cannabis tasters do during cannabis cups. At these events, she tells me, when growers present their flowers, judges follow this procedure to determine which flowers are the best. This professionalisation of cannabis tasting lends legitimacy to the culture, I learned, in its bid to be accepted by wider society. To me, Ayelen and Roberto seemed proud to share that the increasing ability to openly discuss and engage in cannabis use is the result of how they, along with other cannabis users and growers, have created a cannabis culture, which has gradually challenged and reshaped social attitudes towards cannabis and the practices surrounding it. The formalisation of cannabis tasting, likened to wine tasting, added a sense of legitimacy to the practice amongst those involved and served as a way for the community to challenge prevailing social attitudes towards cannabis. This was not just a casual pastime, it was a deliberate effort to frame cannabis use within a space of expertise, artistry, and significance in order to contest stereotypical images of the morally and socially depraved 'drug user' (Romero, 2020).

As I learned about the variety of ritualised cannabis-related practices, it became increasingly obvious to me that cannabis culture is far more than just a recreational activity; it is a rich, evolving social practice requiring skills, knowledge, and community participation and in that sense it represents a specific cannabis culture (Wanke et al., 2022). The ritualised practices embedded in people's interactions with, and sentiments about, the cannabis plant reflect not only what appears to be a deep appreciation for cannabis as such, but also the values and traditions that have developed around cannabis over time. People like Ayelen and Roberto represent a sociality and community that is as much about connection and shared experience as it is about the substance of cannabis itself. What struck me most was how these gatherings reflected broader dynamics in terms of 'webs of significance' (Geertz, 2017, p. 5); that is, culture constructions spun by people interacting in a specific context. These webs involve the intertwining of shared ideas, symbols, and practices (Bourdieu, 1990). All to produce a space where different social groups create, share, and struggle over meaning (Hall, 2016) as they engage with a plant which they see as a more-than-human materiality with its own ontology and the qualities of a living organism (Latour, 2017; Tsing, 2015).

By emphasising and sharing their knowledge, experience, and expertise with me, my interlocutors demonstrated, as I understood it, a sense of pride, which seemed to be widely prevalent within the community. This pride concerned not only people's knowledge of cannabis but also how it inevitably challenges social norms, redefines stigmas, and fosters a community built on collaboration, shared appreciation, and mutual generosity while embracing the plant (Sandberg, 2012c).

During my fieldwork, I often found myself in social spaces where, to my astonishment, people openly smoked cannabis. The ease and normality with which they partook was striking, a marked departure from the stigmatised perception of cannabis that is so widespread elsewhere. However, as I delved further into my fieldwork, I realised that this sense of normality was a recurring feature across the settings I encountered. The people I met – both smokers and growers – came from a wide range of backgrounds, reflecting the diverse and multifaceted nature of the people coming together to engage with the cannabis plant (Wanke et al., 2022).

Among these people were men who had been smoking since adolescence, their familiarity with the substance producing male-dominated long-term practices and rituals (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). I also encountered women who had discovered and cultivated a strong connection with cannabis later in life, often viewing it as a source of comfort, healing, or recreation. These women also often tended to cultivate it for medicinal purposes, thereby providing access to medicinal cannabis for those who cannot cultivate it themselves for various reasons (Palumbo, 2025; Weber Suardiaz, 2024). Adding to this diversity were mothers who had found cannabis to be an effective remedy for managing their children's medical needs, navigating the complexities of stigma and legality to advocate for their families' treatment (Díaz, 2020b). These tendencies among cannabis users and producers reflect the gender dynamics inherent in the cannabis community with which I engaged throughout my fieldwork (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). One significant observation I made concerns the ways in which women are usually those who both care for people with illnesses and provide them with medicinal cannabis, whilst men are generally those who cultivate the plant for themselves and recreational use within their social circles.

This diversity in people's engagement with the cannabis plant was brought into sharp focus when I spent an afternoon in a grow shop, observing the ebb and flow of customers. The shop, with its well-stocked shelves of smoking paraphernalia, growing equipment, and soil, acted as a hub for the local cannabis community (Reid, 2024). Over the course of the afternoon, a wide array of people filtered in and out of the shop. Elderly customers came by, some stopping to chat with the shopkeeper, clearly familiar with the environment. Parents, some accompanied by their children, browsed the products, their presence revealing the normalisation of cannabis-related practices in their lives.

The grow shop served as a commercial space but also as a space for the crafting of cannabis in terms both of cannabis epistemologies and the consolidation of an ontology of the plant. The shop revealed the changing relationship between cannabis and society while emerging as a space where cannabis use, and cultivation, were no longer confined to secrecy but instead embraced by people from all walks of life. The setting revealed that such shops had evolved into a focal point for the integration of cannabis into daily life, thereby breaking down stereotypes and fostering a sense of shared identity among its users. In this same shop, however, there had been many instances of police harassment, I was told. There was even some hostility from neighbours, which reminds us of the conditions under which the cannabis business works and how it provokes both social and moral questions.

However, as the shopkeeper Elias told me, the harassment experienced by the shop has decreased as the community has become more open to the use of cannabis. It was clear that the reduction in police harassment and neighbour hostility had not occurred overnight, but were results of ongoing efforts by users, growers, and advocates to influence and change societal attitudes by bringing cannabis use into the mainstream of Argentinian society (Díaz, 2024). These efforts included the creation of spaces like grow shops, which provide not only resources but also a sense of legitimacy and belonging for cannabis users and cultivators.

As I highlight throughout my thesis, the cannabis plant and the people engaging with it have transformative powers, not just in redefining individual relationships with the plant but also in challenging stigmas and opening up new

possibilities for dialogue, not only with the authorities but also amongst people within the community.

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The ontology of the cannabis plant and the epistemologies developed around it are fostered through the nurturing of the cannabis plant, which has therefore come to take centre stage in my thesis. The plant emerges as the point of convergence for all cannabis activists, underscoring its importance in understanding how these activists and their communities conceptualise the spirit of the movement (Palumbo, 2025). I examine cannabis through a focus on communities and their interactions with the plant. In doing so, I show how human relationships with this plant produce a cannabis community – and a culture in terms of the webs mentioned above – which is imbued with shared practices and beliefs, not unlike the findings of Anna Tsing (2015) in her study on human relationships with the Matsutake mushroom in the context of Japan. In my work, the cannabis plant serves as both a physical and symbolic entity, connecting a wide range of discourses and practices (Palumbo, 2025; Tsing, 2015). The role of the cannabis plant extends beyond its practical uses for medicinal, recreational, or industrial purposes; it also acts as a focal point for broader political, social, and economic debates, as I came to realise as my study progressed.

What surprised me was how the cannabis plant was referred to and described as having character, agency, and the ability to interact with human beings (Kawa, 2024) throughout all stages of its lifecycle: planting, cultivation, and eventual consumption. As I came to understand during my fieldwork, the plants were rendered intelligible due to their ontology as plants, as more-than-human existences (Karlsson, 2018; Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018). Their relationship with the plant was often depicted by my interlocutors as a collaborative process of interaction, with growth and subsequent use unfolding in tandem rather than being entirely controlled by humans. This invites a rethinking of the complex interrelationship between nature and humans which extends beyond a typical western-centric way of thinking about being and engages a critical decolonial gaze that encourages an acknowledgment of multiple forms of existence, from people to plants and animals (Öhman & Tengö, 2024).

The cultivators I met employed various technologies to influence the development of their cannabis plants. I recall hanging out at a grow facility in the centre of Buenos Aires with a group of men and one woman. The woman was watering and caring for the plants, while the men were smoking, drinking *mate,*[1] and sharing '*facturas*' (pastries) around a small table, where I also sat for my observations. This grow facility was relatively small, allowing me to see the various rooms containing plants at different stages of growth. In one room, I noticed several large plants with thick trunks, prompting me to ask what kind of plant it was, as I had never seen anything like it before. The men explained to me that the cannabis plant typically survives for only a single season. However, to maintain the genetic profile, certain plants are preserved for years under controlled conditions, from which clones are extracted and cultivated. These plants are carefully nurtured in environments that ensure their health and the ability to continuously reproduce consistent products. Due to their stable genetic makeup, this product can be reliably brought to market and, I was told, maintain the cultivators' reputation for high-quality yields (see also Romero, 2020). These grow facilities and techniques were originally developed by cultivators who were operating illegally, but they have become increasingly legitimised in the context of Argentina as cannabis gains formal acceptance.

In contrast to the technological expertise involved in these processes – often associated with a masculine domain, according to my data – these plants are referred to as *plantas madres* (mother plants). In the cannabis community, this is a term that emphasises the plant's 'natural' qualities, which are associated with femininity (Haraway, 1991). The cannabis plant thus emerges ontologically as a nurturing and life-giving being that is central to the reproduction of the valued genetic profiles developed by its cultivators (Romero, 2020). The association of the cannabis plant with femininity, tied to the concept of motherhood, reflects longstanding perceptions in the context of Argentina, and beyond, of nature as being inherently feminine (see also Latour, 2017; Ortner, 1974; Plumwood, 1991).

[1] A herbal tea traditionally consumed in the southern cone of Latin America in a specific kind of mug.

The plant is meticulously cared for to ensure high-quality and consistent genetics, and this care mirrors broader social and cultural narratives about femininity, motherhood, and the provision of care (Palumbo, 2025; Shiva, 1988). By providing the foundations for new plant growth, these mother plants contribute to the ongoing production of reliable and marketable products, reinforcing their value within both agricultural and industrial contexts.

While the technological expertise used to sustain and optimise the growth of these mother plants is often perceived amongst my interlocutors as part of a masculine domain, the plants themselves are feminised as beings beyond humans, with their reproductive capacity celebrated as an essential aspect of their identity. This juxtaposition indicates the ways in which gendered epistemologies and ontologies saturate cannabis practices and interactions in the location where I collected data for my research.

Thus, different populations interact with the cannabis plant in distinctly gendered ways. Men often approach its production through an industrial lens, focusing on efficiency and market demands. Women, in contrast, tend to engage with the plant from a reproductive and even rather emotional perspective compared to men by perpetually referencing its nurturing qualities as well as its medicinal, or caring, properties. Despite these differing and gender stereotypical approaches, what remains consistent across the cannabis communities is that they all shared an appreciation for the cannabis plant regardless of their own gender. Generally, the cannabis plant was appreciated and referred to as a *regalo de la naturaleza* (gift from nature) which provides the means to lead fulfilling lives through meaningful interactions with it (Virtanen & Apurinã, 2024).

Examining the cannabis movement in Argentina includes exploring how the plant is positioned within discourses of health, legality, social justice, and economic opportunity. Activists often drew upon the plant's therapeutic and cultural significance to challenge prohibitionist narratives that have historically marginalised and criminalised cannabis use in Argentina (Díaz, 2020b). At the same time, the movement reflects tensions and negotiations over issues such as commercialisation, access, and the preservation of traditional practices. Not unlike the findings of Bengt Karlsson (2022) in his exploration of tea through the passage of time, cannabis has transformed and been transformed by social worlds, as indicated by the experiences of those

people who are closely connected to the plant. The relationship between plants and activism can be seen as a form of 'quiet activism' (Pottinger, 2017), which is conducted through the slow and calm process of growing. In relation to the particular cannabis community that I focused on, such growing supports a repertoire of forms of resistance that bind the community together.

As I touched upon above, the cannabis plant is often described as providing a direct connection to nature and as an entity that provides and even calls for, love and care. In this sense, the cannabis plant becomes agentic and displays a materiality of conviviality. Whether I was communicating with users, cultivators, or professional allies, the values of care and solidarity consistently emerged as central to the community, regardless of whether I spoke with women or men. In a context where the community is at risk of being subjected to police violence and judicial harm, these shared principles become vital to the collective defence of people's rights as cannabis users and growers. The plant exists with many facets and even symbolises a broader struggle for recognition, legitimacy, and autonomy within shifting social and political landscapes that are heavily influenced by colonial histories in Latin America (Mignolo, 2005).[2] By exploring the cannabis plant and its central role, I provide insights into how activism shapes, and is shaped by, the epistemologies and ontology of the cannabis plant, which in turn support community-building and produce a culture that revolves around a plant (Virtanen & Apurinã, 2024).

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Argentina's cannabis movement is influenced by the growing international medicinal cannabis movements, and from 2015 began to prominently feature the mothers of children using medicinal cannabis. Mothers were finding themselves engaging in an illicit activity by using cannabis to alleviate their children's various health issues – and sometimes their own – and therefore they established several different organisations through which various claims for justice were made (Salech, 2018). The two main organisations were CAMEDA and Mama Cultiva, with the latter serving as the entry point for my fieldwork. The cannabis movement subsequently shifted towards a focus on medicinal

[2] The colonial 'discovery' and invasion of Latin America was carried out with the help of hemp, which was used for many purposes, including making sails, ropes, and clothing.

cannabis and advocated for changes in cannabis legislation to favour its use (Salech, 2018; Pellagatti & Suardias, 2018).

In my study, I show how medicinal cannabis users often face significant health challenges for which adequate conventional treatment is unavailable, leaving these people with limited opportunities for healing. Their experience of a lack of access to effective treatment options frequently drives patients to seek out alternative solutions, and they often turn to cannabis as a way to manage their various health challenges and conditions (Salech, 2018). However, despite the growing body of evidence supporting the medicinal benefits of cannabis, the dominant prohibitionist discourse continues to stigmatise its use, creating substantial barriers for those who rely on it for medicinal purposes (Bone et al., 2018).

As I elucidate throughout my thesis, the medicinal cannabis users frequently described encountering scepticism and dismissal within the established medical system (Pellagatti & Suardiaz, 2018). Yael Keshet and Dalit Simchai (2014), for instance, found that patients from socially or economically marginalised populations tend to not be taken seriously by healthcare professionals, something which, according to my findings, is aggravated in relation to those who use cannabis. These rejections not only leave conditions untreated but seem to also exacerbate existing health issues, as patients are left to navigate their illnesses without the support or guidance of medical professionals. My research has found that prejudice against medicinal cannabis users often forces patients to 'shop around' for doctors who are open-minded or willing to work with them to find solutions that include cannabis treatment. This can be time-consuming, emotionally draining, and financially burdensome (Salech, 2018). The effect of an established medical framework is significant for our understanding of how cannabis is configured as a knowledge-imbued materiality while also enabling the production of knowledge about the plant, its inherent effects, impact, and being. Furthermore, people's experiences of living with a body in pain and their interagency with the cannabis plant becomes an ontologically substantial inquiry about 'what there is' (Burman, 2022b) and the divergent situating of humans, animals, and plants.

Moreover, this dynamic also epitomises a broader issue within healthcare systems in Argentina and beyond that remain bound by prohibitionist ideologies (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2008). Rather than

centring the needs and well-being of patients, these systems usually prioritise adherence to drug policies that criminalise cannabis use, as my interlocutors often discovered. This approach not only marginalises medicinal cannabis users but also perpetuates structural inequalities within the healthcare system in Argentina, which disproportionately affect those who are already vulnerable due to their health conditions and further marginalised by virtue of their cannabis use (Nissen, 2011).

When examining these intersections of health, stigma, and policy, it is crucial to analyse how medicinal cannabis users navigate the various challenges and develop strategies for advocacy. Despite their marginalised position within the medical system, many medicinal cannabis users demonstrate resilience and agency in their efforts to access care. By forming supportive networks and sharing knowledge, they seek to make their voices heard, pushing for recognition of their right to use cannabis for therapeutic and healing purposes (Díaz, 2016).

In my thesis, I discuss how, together, the broader cannabis and medicinal cannabis movements have provided a foundation for rethinking medicine and reimagining political engagement (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013). Cannabis becomes a question of health for many who are unable to find or access effective treatments through medical institutions. Addressing the barriers faced by medicinal cannabis users, as my study suggests, encourages a shift in approach in both cannabis discourse and policy in the context of Argentina (Dioun, 2018). My research, in line with other studies, indicates that moving away from prohibitionist frameworks and towards patient-centred approaches can ensure greater sensitivity to local ways of coping through cannabis use for health purposes and what patients experience as helpful solutions (Dioun, 2018). Through my analysis of the data I gathered in the field, my study helps to shed light on the complex ways in which people engage with cannabis use and activism, while also facing systemic resistance and sometimes oppression from various societal sectors.

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From a global perspective, the question of drugs has long been a provocative issue, sparking moral debates and raising important ethical questions (Adler, 1990). Prohibitionist approaches argue that drugs are inherently linked to

violence, crime, and societal decay whilst other interest groups argue that drug-taking is a normal human activity (Brewster, 2022; Ritter, 2021). As a result, prohibitionist perspectives advocate the complete elimination of drugs, including cannabis, from society, often through the implementation of harsh, repressive measures designed to suppress the illegal drug industry (Corva & Meisel, 2022). However, these measures have been subject to criticism from both scholars and activists, who argue that such approaches disproportionately target socially and economically marginalised populations. This is exemplified by widespread mass incarcerations, particularly within communities that are already vulnerable to social and economic inequities (Alexander, 2010; Boiteux, 2015).

On a global scale, repressive drug policies have often been shaped and enforced by countries in the Global North, particularly the USA, with consequences for countries in the Global South (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Within this context, any questioning of the prohibitionist discourse is frequently misinterpreted and condemned as a defence of drug trafficking or criminal activity, casting those who challenge prohibition in a morally dubious light (Bancroft, 2009). Consequently, prohibitionist rhetoric usually frames alternative approaches as 'liberal', hedonistic solutions that will inevitably lead to societal chaos, moral decay, and the breakdown of order (Brewster, 2022).

Cannabis in particular has become a focal point of these debates, increasingly drawing attention across many countries (Ritter, 2021). Over the past few decades, societal perceptions of cannabis have shifted dramatically, sparking conversations about its medicinal, recreational, and cultural uses. This has led to significant legislative changes, with cannabis becoming legalised for medical – and in some cases, recreational – use in various parts of the world. The ways in which cannabis regulation has been implemented globally vary greatly, highlighting the diversity of approaches taken by different governments and societies (Wanke et al., 2022).

Some countries have introduced limited licensing frameworks that permit the medical use of cannabis under strict controls, while others have moved towards full legalisation, permitting both medical and recreational use. Different policies have resulted in a wide range of social, economic, and political impacts (Krcevski-Skvarc et al., 2017; Shover et al., 2019). These initiatives reflect a growing willingness to reconsider and reframe

longstanding conceptualisations of drugs, particularly cannabis, and to move away from the punitive measures that have historically governed its regulation.

Legalisation has led to shifts in public perceptions, reducing stigma and changing how cannabis users are perceived by society more officially. For instance, in some contexts legalisation has brought cannabis into the formal economy, creating new industries and generating significant tax revenues, such as in the USA. However, the entry into industry has been fraught with racial inequalities (Kittel, 2018). In Argentina, the cannabis medicinal law (23.750) opened up use for a wide range of users, including those who hover on the boundaries of recreational use (Dioun, 2018). However, these changes are not without challenges because the impacts of regulation depend on how policies are implemented (Brewster, 2022), generating questions around inequalities, health, and industry.

The global cannabis movement has played an active role in petitioning various governments across the globe to reconsider laws prohibiting cannabis (Bone et al., 2018). The extent to which cannabis movements have influenced change has varied depending on political contexts and the relationship between individual states and international prohibition regimes, often shaped by economic interests (García Bernado et al., 2022). As a result, international exchanges of information and the growth of community-based politics have become integral to the movement.

In Argentina, cannabis activism has historically focused on ensuring that the interests of users and independent cannabis cultivators are recognised in the formulation of drug legalisation and regulation policies (Corbelle, 2018). Since 2015, as introduced above, there has been a medicinal cannabis movement, which has centred its demands on the regulation of medicinal use. More recently, there has been increasing interest in the development of a large-scale commercial cannabis industry, attracting significant investments in large cannabis projects. However, while cannabis activists have participated in the emerging cannabis economy, there is growing concern among them that they are being pushed out of the more financially lucrative segments of this industry (Hendy et al., 2023).

There is an extensive body of scholarship on Argentinean social movements, which encompasses various forms of activism, including those centred on cannabis. These movements have often been characterised by their ability to

respond to and resist societal and political structures, reflecting broader patterns of social, cultural, and economic transformation within the country (Medina, 2023; Mulinari, 2018; Tarducci, 2010). Cannabis activism, as a subset of these movements, has emerged as a dynamic and multifaceted field of resistance, advocacy, and community building.

Argentinian activism for changes in cannabis laws is an ongoing, dynamic, and sociopolitical project that reflects diverse positions and contestations (Dioun, 2018). In Argentina, legalisation efforts have primarily focused on medicinal cannabis and have relied on the participation of various social actors, including social movements, professionals, and medicinal and recreational users (Aguilar & Romero, 2022). Ultimately, the evolving conversation around cannabis in the country underscores the importance of exploring alternative approaches to drug policy. It challenges the notion that prohibition is the only solution, while opening up a space for broader discussions about public health and the need to address systemic inequalities in the enforcement of drug laws (Corbelle, 2023).

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Having introduced the wider backdrop against which my fieldwork was carried out, I now turn to the analytical perspective of my research. Theoretically, as indicated earlier, my study is situated within a feminist decolonial tradition, which I use here to explore plural ontologies and alternative knowledge production in terms of a variety of epistemes (Shiva, 2015; Visweswaran, 1997). Inspired by Anibal Quijano (2007), and Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018), I approach colonialism as persisting in postcolonial states, where the domination and manipulation of bodies remains fundamental to the maintenance of power, and these dynamics run through the debate around cannabis regulation. This approach, supported by my data, inspires me to turn away from hegemonic understandings of drugs to explore the diversity, complexity, and nuanced nature of knowledge and knowing with respect to the cannabis plant and its use in the context of Argentina. For example, the homogenisation and gendering of cannabis users impose particular characteristics, such as a stereotypical portrayal of the white user being a victim and the trafficker a dangerous, non-white male from the Global South – categorised as the other (Alexander, 2010). The effect of these constructions,

as also highlighted by McCorkel (2013), could be that those whose bodies do not conform to an overarching idea of the 'normal', white, male body, may be rendered deviant and dysfunctional. In turn, such people's agency and abilities tend to be rendered invisible in public debates and discourses.

By focusing on the lived experiences of my interlocutors in relation to cannabis and its use, my study seeks to understand the meanings they ascribe to these practices and the sociopolitical contexts in which they take place (Hill Collins, 2009). Feminist ethnography, as a methodological approach, informs how I engage with the field and my data. It has guided me towards practices that are reflexive, and strive to be ethically grounded and attentive to the power dynamics inherent in research relationships (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). These principles have influenced how I established rapport with my interlocutors, how I interpreted their narratives, and how I approached my own role as a researcher.

The researcher's relationship with both interlocutors and the field itself has been addressed in detail by feminist ethnographers (Madison, 2020; Narayan, 2014). Conducting research is never a neutral act; it is always shaped by the researcher's positionality, including their cultural, linguistic, and historical ties to the field (Mulinari & Räthzel, 2007). This process of self-reflection ties into broader discussions of positionality within feminist research. Positionality acknowledges that researchers are not neutral observers but are instead embedded in the field and influenced by their own identities, experiences, and perspectives (Crenshaw, 1991; Haraway, 1991; Hill Collins, 2009). In my study, exploring questions of insider/outsider dynamics allows me to critically assess how my own positionality has shaped the research process and the knowledge it generates. This includes recognising the privileges and limitations that come with my position and striving to navigate these complexities in an ethical and reflexive manner (Skeggs, 2001).

In my case, my fluency in Spanish and my longstanding relationship with Latin America, including Argentina, have played a pivotal role in shaping my experiences as a researcher. Argentina feels like a second home to me, and my familiarity with its social and cultural contexts has influenced my understanding of and engagement with the field. However, this familiarity also brings with it questions about my relationship to the field of research (Narayan, 2014). To what extent does my connection to Argentina position me as an

insider within this context? And, conversely, to what extent do factors such as my academic training, institutional affiliations, or personal background mark me as an outsider? These are important questions that I grappled with throughout my study, because they impact upon how I interact with interlocutors, interpret data, and produce knowledge (Skeggs, 2001). By reflecting upon these dynamics, I have tried to ensure that my research is both self-aware and contextually grounded.

Furthermore, feminist ethnography offers valuable tools for analysing the multiple and intersecting identities of my interlocutors, which significantly shape their access to power and their ability to navigate the world as cannabis users. These intersections – of class, gender and bodyableness, among others – highlight the complexity of their lived experiences and bring to light the structural inequalities that influence their interactions with both social and institutional spaces.

Many of my interlocutors are activists, and their participation in cannabis activism is often facilitated by their solid socioeconomic backgrounds, which afford them a degree of privilege and safety in society. These backgrounds allow them to advocate for changes in cannabis-related policies and practices without necessarily facing the same levels of vulnerability or danger as those with fewer economic means. However, this does not exempt them from being subjected to various kinds of risks. Activism around cannabis – particularly in contexts where prohibitionist policies prevail – remains fraught with challenges and can be dangerous, even for people from relatively privileged backgrounds. This indicates that even those from a middle-class background, as most of my interlocutors are, can be marginalised due to their cannabis consumption for both recreational and health purposes.

Intersectionality provides an important framework for addressing the complex ways in which class, gender and health factors intersect in allowing us to capture nuances and complexities. While class, and thus access to economic resources, affords certain opportunities and privileges, my interlocutors come across as vulnerable to systemic issues such as police surveillance and judicial harm due to their involvement in cannabis-related activities. Regardless of their class, the people involved in my research face stigmatisation and criminalisation, which continually put them at risk and thus marginalise them vis-à-vis mainstream society. This demonstrates how

overlapping systems of oppression operate in ways that cannot be fully understood through class alone, as also argued by Anders Burman (2022b) in his research on ecological movements in urban environments in Bolivia. Some of my interlocutors shared stories of difficult and even traumatic encounters with law enforcement, which had left them with a profound sense of insecurity and, in their opinions, compromised health.

These narratives illustrate the importance of using feminist ethnography to explore the intersectionality of identity and oppression, all whilst understanding the partiality of the perspectives of those involved in a piece of research, including the researcher (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Haraway, 1991). Foregrounding the realities of my interlocutors not only highlights the structural barriers they face, but also reveals the resilience and agency with which they navigate their social worlds and 'talk back' (hooks, 1989) to hegemonic structures of power, including those with a colonial heritage.

My analysis reveals the broader societal and institutional dynamics that shape the experiences of cannabis users and activists. By interrogating these intersections, my study contributes a nuanced understanding of the relationships between identity, power, and policy while amplifying the voices and experiences of those who are often overlooked or silenced in dominant narratives (Haraway, 1991). By foregrounding feminist ethnography, my study aims to produce insights that are both meaningful and reflective of the diverse realities of those whose lives intersect with cannabis use and its sociopolitical dimensions.

Hegemonic drug discourses tend to render the complexities and plural understandings of the cannabis issue invisible, a gap which my research attempts to explore and fill (cf. Dunford, 2017). It does so by focusing on practices that challenge dominant discourses by examining the experiences of cannabis cultivators and users as well as those involved in grassroots activism in the Global South. Therefore, my fieldwork focused on how diverse social actors conceptualise knowledge at the crossroads between the public and the private, human and nature, alternative and 'scientific' medicine, and other binaries related to locally and globally dominant discourse and legislation in relation to the cannabis plant and its capacities as a growing and sensing material organism with which people interact.

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Turning to my data, which provides the foundation of my research for this thesis, I conducted a combination of online interviews and in-person fieldwork. I spent six months not in Argentina but in southern Brazil, near Porto Alegre, speaking with organisations and activists advocating for the release and reintegration of individuals incarcerated on drug charges. However, the data from this period only provides a backdrop for my study in and about Argentina. As well as having spent various extended periods of time in Argentina over the past 10 years, the fieldwork for this thesis involved about three years of digital ethnographic fieldwork (2021-2024) combined with onsite fieldwork including one period in 2022 (ten weeks) and another in 2024 (four weeks). During online and onsite fieldwork, I carried out in-depth interviews to explore the ways in which cannabis users navigated the social dynamics surrounding the cannabis community, both historically and currently. Ethnographic methods allowed me to take a comprehensive approach to data collection, blending both digital and physical interactions to capture the experiences and perspectives of participants, an approach made necessary as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Pink et al., 2016). The online part of my fieldwork and data collection included interviews, which provided a flexible means of engaging with interlocutors from different geographical locations beyond the city of Buenos Aires, enabling the inclusion of a diverse range of voices (Fung, 2024). In contrast, the in-person fieldwork offered valuable opportunities for immersive engagement with the field and the communities involved (Emerson et al., 2001).

I conducted both online and in-person participant observations at various events organised by different cannabis-related organisations. These events represented a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from community-driven festivals highlighting the cultural and social aspects of cannabis to formal, graduate-level courses focused on cannabis cultivation, which offered technical and educational insights. The diversity of these settings enabled the collection of rich data, reflecting the broad and multifaceted aspects of cannabis activism (O'Reilly, 2015). Participatory observations extend beyond the act of the detached observer to also produce embodied experiences for the researcher, and this invites different analytical approaches. In the case of this

research, sensory experiences were evident in the relationship between my interlocutors and the plant (Pink, 2015). Its various smells, aesthetics, properties, and effects and notions of the plant as a sentient being that interacts with the human in various ways are central to the participatory observations I carried out for my thesis. In addition, my own sensory approach guided how I have conducted my fieldwork and interacted with interlocutors.

The interviews I conducted have been transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the nuances of the conversations (Hesse-Biber, 2014). I carried out the processing and analysis with careful attention to detail, beginning with an examination of the interviews to identify the key discussions and recurring patterns, always considering the context within which the research was being carried out (Kamlongera & Katenga-Kaunda, 2023). Through this iterative process, the main themes emerged, providing an analytical framework for interpreting the data. These themes formed the foundations for a further exploration of the research questions.

To deepen the analysis, I revisited the transcripts to systematically code them. This was a process that involved organising the data into categories aligned with the emerging themes, concepts, and theoretical frameworks. It is important to recognise at this point that these themes surfaced as a consequence of the knowledge that I brought into the equation, therefore providing a partial perspective on the data that has been gathered (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). This stage of the research sought to root the findings in both the lived realities of the participants and the broader theoretical context (Mignolo, 2021). The integration of concepts and theories allowed me to gather an increasingly complex understanding of the dynamics and ambiguities relating to cannabis-related events, practices, and narratives.

By combining interviews, participant observation, practices, and narratives, I have aimed to conduct a nuanced exploration of how cannabis is rendered meaningful within the community surrounding the plant. This allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of the intersections between the cannabis plant, activism, and broader societal dynamics, striving for my research to be both empirically rich and theoretically informed.

Summing up the outline of my thesis, I apply a feminist decolonial perspective to capture local ideas and practices with respect to drugs and drug use. In doing so, I identify conceptualisations of drugs that reach beyond

prohibitionist perspectives. I highlight the complex relationship between humans and the plant as knowledge and being, in terms of epistemologies and ontologies, matter and materiality. I take an intersectional perspective to explore Argentinian voices from the field as well as academics like Florencia Corbelle (2023), Maria Cecilia Díaz (2024), and Mariana Palumbo (2025). These voices are concerned with the legalisation and regulation of cannabis and refer to data from various movements, organisations, and networks to examine the cannabis movement at the crossroads between cannabis communities, the medical profession, and political parliamentary decisions. Furthermore, my material shows how knowledge systems are crafted, navigated, and confronted by exploring how cannabis users' forms of knowledge are rendered significant in the process of developing cannabis legislation and regulation in Argentina.

My overarching research question, informed by previous research in combination with my ethnographic findings, is:

> How are hegemonic discourses around cannabis challenged through the experiences of marginalised social groups in Argentina?

I break this down into four sub-questions:

1) How does a decolonial feminist theoretical approach, as related to conceptualisations of knowledge and being, enable a critical study of the cannabis plant?
2) How are cannabis plant epistemologies and ontologies taking shape amongst cultivators and users in relation to medical professionals and governmental policies?
3) In what ways are competing knowledge systems concerning cannabis, health, and recovery navigated by various cannabis users?
4) What are the impacts of cannabis activism on the development of cannabis legislation and regulation?

The thesis is organised into six further chapters, which I briefly introduce below:

**Chapter 2** sets the scene by starting with a discussion of cannabis and its history. It provides a background to the war on drugs and its relevance to the Argentinian context. It examines the history of the war on drugs, which

originated in the USA and the UK before spreading globally through conditionalities imposed by international institutions and enforced via loans (Bewley-Taylor, 2003). Prohibitionist policies have dictated how states intervene in drug use, production, and sale (Mabry, 1988). However, some countries, such as Portugal, have emerged as challengers to this prohibitionist discourse by implementing laws or regulations that decriminalise some, if not all, forms of use (Greenwald, 2009). Argentina too has seen its drug policies challenged through campaigns advocating for the legalisation of cannabis and, later, the regulation of medicinal cannabis.

The next section of this chapter examines Argentina's history of colonialism and its lasting impact on the country's social structure (Kerr, 2020). It explores Argentina's political history, including a discussion with an interlocutor on the significance of Peronismo in national struggles (Elena, 2011). It also traces the histories of Argentine social movements, particularly the medicinal cannabis movement (Burchianti, 2004). This section then addresses the history of drug laws, followed by the evolution of cannabis legislation and its effects. With the beginning of the presidency of Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007) and subsequently Cristina Fernándes de Kirchner (2007–2015), social justice became a central focus, leading to significant progress towards a more equitable society (Levitsky & Murillo, 2008). During this period, cannabis activists began organising to demand the right to consume cannabis freely and without being criminalised (Corbelle, 2018).

I describe how the involvement of mothers (from 2015 onwards) transformed the cannabis movement, shifting its focus towards medicinal cannabis and advocacy for legalisation (Morante & Morante, 2017). Steps towards this goal were taken by the Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) government, which passed legislation allowing medicinal cannabis (De Vito, 2017). Within the cannabis movement, medicinal cannabis was considered a stepping-stone towards full legalisation. However, with the rise of Javier Milei (2023–present), previously secured rights have gradually been rolled back; funding has been cut, licences are no longer being distributed, and the future of medicinal cannabis patients remains uncertain.

**Chapter 3** firstly delves into decolonial and feminist theory, examining how these frameworks explore knowledge production, science, and their relevance to the global drug debate, which often marginalises drug-using populations. By

adopting a decolonial and feminist lens, I critically analyse the colonial foundations of the drug industry and the inequalities that emerge as a result. The chapter employs the concepts of *post/abyssal* knowledges, which outline what are considered 'valid' knowledges (Santos, 2010), *contact zones* between hegemonic and other knowledges (Pratt, 1991), and *intersectionality*, which refers to the multiple categorisations that bodies inhabit (Crenshaw, 1991), to explore how cannabis users' knowledges challenge colonial structures. These concepts provide a lens through which to examine the ways in which human relationships with the cannabis plant are reimagined, resisting hegemonic narratives and opening up space for diverse epistemologies.

I also consider medicine to be an institution that is positioned as 'true science', in contrast to other ways of understanding health (Cunningham & Andrews, 1997). The chapter explores how biomedicine seeks to 'normalise' bodies to function within a productivist society, excluding those who do not conform (Roberts, 2010). Additionally, I discuss the mind/body division through an exploration of patients' embodied knowledges (Rogers, 2006). I also apply an intersectional perspective on medicine to investigate how people are excluded from health services and may become increasingly marginalised from mainstream society, care, and treatment.

Importantly for the analysis of the cannabis plant, this chapter then goes on to discuss the concept of 'nature'. I examine the colonial histories of notions of nature that posit it as something to be conquered and exploited (Watts, 2013). However, I argue that dominant knowledge regimes render nature and its integral role in the reproduction of the social world incomprehensible. It is into this discussion that I bring the plant into focus. Backed up by scholarship, I argue that nature has agency, transforms, and is transformed through its relationship to human beings, thus criticising the very idea of a distinction between the thing called 'nature' and what is called 'culture' (Elton, 2021).

The chapter ends with a discussion on drugs as substances that hold different significance according to cultural context (Escohotado, 1999). Drug-taking under a prohibitionist regime is deemed backward and barbaric and detrimental to a civilised society. Further along in this section, I discuss the issue of intoxication and how it plays a part in the construction of cannabis production and use (Bancroft, 2020). In order to move away from dominant discourses on

intoxication, I also address the meaning of pleasure concerning the use of cannabis, as encouraged by my data (Race, 2009).

**Chapter 4** focuses on the methodological and practical data-collection dimensions of the thesis, taking feminist ethnography as the central approach. The chapter examines the philosophy underpinning decolonial and feminist ethnography, including its emphasis on reflexivity, collaboration, and ethical research practices (Göransson, 2019; Mignolo, 2021; Skeggs, 2001). This framework informs the methods used in my thesis and shapes the ways in which my material was collected, processed, analysed, and presented (O'Reilly, 2015).

A key aspect of this chapter is the exploration of positionality, an integral concept in feminist research, as I have already touched upon in this introduction. Reflecting more profoundly upon positionality allows the researcher to critically assess the power dynamics at play during the research process and to navigate the complexities of conducting research in a drug-related field (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Adler, 1990). I explore my own position as a researcher, how my fluency in Spanish, cultural familiarity with Argentina, and longstanding relationship with Latin America have shaped my interactions and understanding of the field, while also acknowledging the ways in which these factors position me as both an insider and an outsider (Narayan, 2014).

Additionally, this chapter discusses the ethical challenges and responsibilities involved in conducting research in a drug-related field. The stigmatisation and criminalisation of cannabis use create particular vulnerabilities for participants, requiring researchers to approach the field with care, sensitivity, and a commitment to protecting the privacy and safety of their interlocutors (hooks, 2000; Madison, 2020). I reflect upon the strategies employed to address these ethical considerations, such as maintaining confidentiality, seeking informed consent, and building trust with participants (O'Reilly, 2015; Vetenskapsrådet, 2024).

The methods I have applied include a combination of interviews, participant observation, and exploration of my interlocutors' accounts. I conducted interviews with a diverse range of interlocutors, including cannabis users, cultivators, activists, and professional allies. These interviews provided qualitative insights into their lived experiences, perspectives, and practices (Haraway, 1988; Pink, 2015). I carried out participant observation both online

and in person, allowing for an immersive engagement with the communities and events central to the cannabis movement (Emerson et al., 2001). I then examined the stories I had collected in order to systematically analyse my data, identifying key themes and patterns that informed the study's overall findings.

This chapter argues that methods are not merely tools for data collection but are deeply intertwined with theoretical frameworks and the situatedness of the researcher (Kamlongera & Katenga-Kaunda, 2023). Feminist ethnography's emphasis on reflexivity and ethical engagement challenges hierarchies in research and underscores the importance of developing knowledge alongside participants. By adopting this approach, the study aims to produce findings that are not only academically rigorous but also socially and politically meaningful (Hill Collins, 2009).

**Chapter 5** is the first of the ethnographically informed analytical chapters. Here, I delve into the role of the cannabis plant through the experiences and practices of cannabis cultivators, users, and other interested parties. This chapter foregrounds the ways in which people engage with the plant, not simply as a commodity or substance but as a being imbued with agency and meaning (Burman, 2022b; Tsing, 2015). Their interactions with the cannabis plant often reflect forms of personification, framing it as more than just a plant and elevating it into a symbol of care, healing, and connection (Palumbo, 2025). Alternative forms of knowledge regarding the relationship between humans and nature emerge as lenses through which we perceive the world (Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018). I discuss how diverse properties of nature can foreground alternative ways of thinking about, conceptualising, and engaging with the world and thereby to contest established binaries such as nature/culture and human/non-human by rather referring to socioeconomic cultures, communities, ecologies, and the more-than-human (Latour, 2017).

These practices of personification and interaction reveal alternative ways of conceptualising drugs – ways that diverge from and actively challenge dominant hegemonic discourses around drug use. Traditional prohibitionist narratives often depict drugs in binary terms, as harmful substances that cause degradation and crime (Escohotado, 1999). By contrast, the relationships explored in this chapter illustrate how the cannabis plant can be viewed as a source of care, reciprocity, and community. These perspectives not only resist prohibitionist framings but also open up space for reimagining human–nature

relationships and the political and social meanings attached to cannabis that inform the production of a cannabis culture amongst my research participants.

Through ethnographic data, I examine the crafting of cannabis. For cultivators, the act of growing the plant is often described by interlocutors as deeply nurturing, involving an emotional connection that intertwines care for the plant with a broader sense of purpose and fulfilment. Users frequently speak of the plant's therapeutic and recreational benefits in ways that blur the boundaries between medicinal and recreational use. Professional allies, such as those advocating for drug policy reforms, further contribute to this dialogue, highlighting the potential of cannabis to catalyse discussions on broader issues of social justice.

This chapter not only explores the ways in which the cannabis plant is integrated into people's lives but also examines the broader implications of these relationships for challenging dominant narratives. By analysing the values and meanings ascribed to the cannabis plant, I argue that these interactions disrupt and deconstruct hegemonic medical discourses, encouraging new forms of thinking about human–environment relations and the agency of nature (Tsing, 2015). The cannabis plant becomes a materiality of resistance, illustrating how alternative understandings can emerge from practices and relationships that centre upon care, connection, and community.

**Chapter 6** investigates community and the production of a cannabis culture. I explore the social dynamics and practices that revolve around the cannabis plant. My interlocutors create a sense of community built upon shared values revolving around the plant, while they also navigate the complexities of diversity and difference within the group (Mey et al., 2017). The chapter considers the importance of acknowledging how cannabis use brings together a diverse set of people and agents who are otherwise situated within a wider societal context. Thus, it is a heterogeneous group that may, however, experience a shared marginalisation due to their relationship to the plant (Sandberg, 2012a).

This chapter critically examines the ongoing discussions about what constitutes the cannabis community, with a particular focus on the ways in which the plant shapes and unites people. These discussions reveal a spectrum of views on how cannabis practices define community membership, emphasising that engagements with cannabis are as much about relationships

and values as about the plant itself. Ritualised and shared practices play a pivotal role in strengthening this sense of belonging, with rules and norms forming an unspoken framework for participation (Sandberg, 2012a).

I depict how these rules and rituals define the boundaries of the community, influencing who is considered an insider. The outsider status of the cannabis user in society is reflected in certain practices surrounding its cultivation, sharing, or use which are seen as essential to demonstrating respect for the plant and commitment to the community. However, breaking these unwritten rules can lead to exclusion from cannabis social circles, highlighting the fragile balance between people's inclusion and exclusion (Becker, 1963; Bræmer & Søgaard, 2023).

Gender and class are central to this discussion, because they intersect with cannabis culture in significant ways. Gender dynamics influence the roles and expectations placed on people within cannabis communities, often reflecting broader societal inequalities. For example, women may face unique challenges in communities that have been historically male-dominated, while also contributing new perspectives and practices that reshape the community (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). Similarly, class plays a key role in shaping access to the cannabis community, which often prides itself on values of care and solidarity. However, these principles can sometimes obscure underlying class differences that affect participation (Berger et al., 2023). I show how people from more privileged backgrounds may have greater access to resources, knowledge, and networks, enabling them to engage more fully with the cannabis community. At the same time, class-based inequalities can influence perceptions of who belongs and whose contributions are valued, creating tensions that must be navigated within the community. By analysing these dynamics, the chapter shows how cannabis engagement fosters solidarity and connection between people while also reflecting the broader societal structures and inequalities by which it is influenced.

**Chapter 7** focuses on medicinal cannabis and the pivotal role played by the cannabis plant and cannabis culture in supporting the development of a medicinal community. This community has been instrumental in challenging and breaking through deeply entrenched social prejudices surrounding cannabis. By drawing on shared experiences and values, medicinal cannabis users have gradually built up the legitimacy of cannabis as a therapeutic tool,

advocating for its acceptance within both social and institutional frameworks. While progress in this area has been uneven and, at times, unsatisfactory, medicinal cannabis users recently achieved a significant milestone with the ability to apply for licences allowing them to legally hold and use cannabis for therapeutic purposes (Calvo & Lampolio, 2021). This development marked a shift in public discourse and policy, providing a pathway for medicinal cannabis to gain recognition within formal legal and medical contexts.

However, as already mentioned, these gains have come under threat with the election of the new Milei government, which has defunded the registration system (Revista Cañamo, 2025). The disruption caused has left the medicinal cannabis community in a state of uncertainty, with users and advocates awaiting clarity on whether, and how, the government will address the regulation of medicinal cannabis moving forward. This chapter also examines how these policy changes and the uncertainties surrounding them underscore the precarious nature of progress in the fight for medicinal cannabis rights. The chapter concludes that, despite such challenges, the resilience of the medicinal cannabis community remains a key focus, as people and organisations continue to navigate the shifting political landscape and advocate for the right to use cannabis.

**Chapter 8** brings together the material and analysis presented throughout the study. This final chapter synthesises the insights gained from my exploration of cannabis to reflect upon the broader implications of the findings, emphasising the significance of alternative discourses and practices in challenging prohibitionist frameworks and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable approach to cannabis use.

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The first contribution of this thesis is the application of a feminist and decolonial lens to critical drug studies. I seek to interrogate the colonial roots of drug prohibition, illustrating how regulatory frameworks have enforced racialised, gendered, and class-based exclusions. By repositioning drug use within broader sociopolitical contexts, I examine how power structures dictate who is considered a legitimate or illegitimate user. I introduce feminist decolonial methodologies that centre relations, resistance, and agency, offering an alternative model of knowledge production in drug studies. By

foregrounding historically suppressed perspectives, this research challenges dominant frameworks that often privilege criminological or biomedical analysis over lived experiences and structural inequalities.
This thesis also seeks to expand drug studies by focusing on people who are middle-class yet vulnerable as cannabis users. By analysing cannabis use as embedded in professional, family, and activist spheres, I reframe user identity, questioning hegemonic narratives that associate drug use exclusively with deviance or pathology. Additionally, I highlight how middle-class cannabis users strategically navigate criminalisation, employing expert knowledge, legal loopholes, and advocacy networks to protect their practices. This focus challenges assumptions that drug-related vulnerability is strictly tied to economic marginalisation, demonstrating how legal and social stigmatisation impact upon middle-class cultivators and users.

My research offers a feminist critique of cannabis discourse to reconsider how the cannabis plant functions as an agent in human relations. I challenge rigid binaries between nature and culture, framing cannabis not just as an object of consumption but also as an inter-agential force actively contributing to shaping identity, community, and resistance. I examine how gendered perceptions of cannabis – such as its feminisation in medical discourses or masculinisation in industrial cultivation – reflect broader gendered hierarchies in knowledge production. Additionally, I explore how women-led medicinal cannabis advocacy disrupts conventional narratives around drug use, care, and legality, challenging gender norms within both activist spaces and policymaking structures.

Finally, this research broadens the scope of drug studies, gender studies, and cannabis discourse by situating the production of a cannabis culture within broader debates on resilience, resistance, and agency. To do so, I examine how cannabis cultivators, users, and activists actively reshape regulatory discourses, contest criminalisation, and legitimise alternative forms of knowledge.

# Chapter 2: The Plant in Argentina and Beyond: Setting the Scene

This chapter begins by introducing cannabis as a plant, exploring its historical relationship with humans and the transformation of these interactions over time. Cannabis has been used for medicinal, recreational, spiritual, and therapeutic purposes for millennia, and this continues today as communities reclaim inherited practices and reaffirm its historical significance. Cannabis has an evolving relationship with colonial power structures, having been harnessed in European projects of conquest. The plant has also contributed to environmental destruction, as colonial initiatives sought to produce hemp for export, leading to the degradation of local ecologies. However, cannabis also has deep medicinal roots within the African populations who were enslaved and brought to Latin America. These traditions and uses were subsequently passed on and incorporated into indigenous knowledge systems. Human relationships with cannabis have continuously adapted to social structures that shape perceptions of drug use. The prohibition against drugs and subsequent efforts to legalise cannabis have further transformed human interactions with the plant, even as racialised structures persist within drug policy and societal attitudes.

The chapter then discusses the War on Drugs, which serves as the foundations for global and local drug legislation. During the early 20th century, there was a growing global focus on drugs as harmful to society. Prohibition was gradually implemented, culminating in what has been termed the contemporary 'War on Drugs' (Stowe et al., 2024) – a discourse that continues to shape global politics and influence public perceptions of drugs, including cannabis. Critical research on prohibition has been conducted since its inception; for instance, by Nahas and Greenwood (1974) and Carl Hart (2014), both of whom argue that prohibition reinforces power structures and further

excludes marginalised populations. Debates among cannabis scholars and activists regarding the categorisation of drugs have led some countries, such as Portugal and the Netherlands, to explore alternative approaches to drug regulation, particularly concerning cannabis. The legal frameworks surrounding cannabis are complex and vary according to context. Cannabis has been legalised for recreational use in countries such as South Africa or, more specifically, for medicinal use, as is the case with Argentina (Anderfuhren-Biget et al., 2020; Araña & Parés, 2020; Seddon & Floodgate, 2020).

The next section examines the Argentinian context, outlining a historical-political map of drug policies as shaped within the field of study. Cannabis in Argentina is deeply embedded within ideas, values, and political dynamics. Argentina's colonial history continues to shape the country's social fabric today. Its colonial past has profoundly influenced its racial, social, and economic structures, shaping policies related to migration, indigenous relations, and national identity.

Argentina has a longstanding tradition of social movements, dating back to the early 20th century, and the cannabis movement is deeply embedded within this history. Historically, the treatment of drug users has been violent, with them either being criminalised or institutionalised in mental health facilities that my interlocutors called '*granjas*' (farms), where they endured dire conditions and systemic violence. However, the increasing visibility of cannabis users and their growing access to governmental structures has led to a shift in drug policy discussions in Argentina, challenging outdated approaches and promoting reforms, thanks to the efforts of the cannabis movement. The final section of this chapter discusses medicinal cannabis in Argentina, focusing on its legalisation and policy development.

## The Cannabis Plant

The earliest evidence of cannabis use dates back 12,000 years with archaeological findings of cannabis use in continents such as Asia, particularly in what is today China (Russo, 2007). Ancient texts from China, Greece, Rome, and India refer to its medicinal, spiritual, and industrial applications (see: Crocq, 2020). This millennia-old relationship between humans and

cannabis continues today, with modern cannabis communities reclaiming inherited practices and reaffirming its historical significance (Ordoñez, 2025). Cannabis in Latin America has an evolving relationship with colonial structures, indigenous traditions, prohibitionist policies, and ongoing legalisation efforts (Gootenberg & Campos, 2015). In general, cannabis is assumed to have arrived in Latin America during colonisation, as it was a fundamental tool for the colonial powers.[3] Besides being consumed, cannabis was widely used in the production of ropes, clothing, and textiles, all essential to the voyages made to 'discover' the Americas (Ordoñez, 2025). Cannabis practices, among them medicinal, were also part of the transatlantic slave trade and cannabis pervaded society, including indigenous communities, as a psychoactive plant (Duvall, 2019). As cannabis spread through trade, trafficking, and migration, societies adapted its use for medicine, spirituality, and industry, integrating it into diverse traditions (Hidden Leaf Cannabis Co, 2025).

Throughout the 20th century, a series of international conventions, largely driven by US policy, formed the foundation of the War on Drugs, which posited certain plants as illegal substances (Soberón, 2013). This led to the prohibition of not only cannabis but also other ancestral plants, such as coca and poppy. In Latin America, these policies resulted in the racialised and classed criminalisation of users and cultivators, contributing to mass incarceration and social marginalisation, with Argentina demonstrating similar trends (Manzano, 2015).

Historically, cannabis has played a significant role in countercultural resistance, serving as both a symbol of defiance and a source of creative inspiration across various artistic movements. One example is the Jazz Underground of 1920s and 1930s New Orleans, Chicago, and New York, where, through their consumption, musicians rejected mainstream societal norms within a context that negatively associated Black culture and artistic rebellion with cannabis (Becker, 1963). An example that is more relevant to our discussion is the Argentinian artistic echelon that emerged during the 1990s, where cannabis was embraced as a tool for challenging conservative norms and exploring alternative creative processes (Soriano, 2020). For these

[3] Cannabis was widely used in Europe for medicinal purposes as well as industrial ones.

populations, cannabis served as not only a substance of cultural significance but also a symbol of defiance and a mechanism of resistance against state-imposed regulations that sought to control behaviour and suppress dissent (Manzano, 2015). Under prohibition, cannabis has functioned as a mechanism to resist repression, expand artistic and intellectual horizons, and redefine cultural narratives.

The discovery of the endocannabinoid system by Raphael Mechoulam, in the 1960s, marked a significant transition in understandings of cannabis by demonstrating the integral relationship between humans and the cannabis plant (Mechoulam & Parker, 2013). This research was carried out inadvertently using funding targeted at drug abuse, ultimately leading to the discovery and exploration of the endocannabinoid system, a finding that Mechoulam himself argued would not have been possible without working closely with the cannabis plant (Lee, 2010). The study revealed that the body produces natural cannabinoids (endocannabinoids) that interact with cannabinoid receptors, much like CBD (cannabidiol) and THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) from the cannabis plant (Crocq, 2020). The endocannabinoid system restores the body's internal balance, playing a crucial role in regulating sleep, appetite, pain, and other physiological functions, such as the immune system. When people consume cannabis, the compounds CBD and THC apparently interact with the body's endocannabinoid system with an impact on pain, relaxation, and mood. Cannabis has also been found to have some positive effects on illnesses such as epilepsy, Parkinson's disease, and chronic pain (Bilbao & Spanagel, 2022). The endocannabinoid system, therefore, has become a principal focus of research into the medicinal effects of cannabis (Balant et al., 2021).

However, medicinal cannabis research has faced significant challenges, largely due to the classification of cannabis as a schedule 1[4] drug across the world, which has slowed scientific advancements in relation to medicinal cannabis (Bostwick, 2012; Leghissa et al., 2018). Medicinal cannabis has often been a medicine reclaimed by society, meaning that scientific developments are lagging behind grassroots knowledge of the plant's benefits (Schlag et al.,

[4] Drug scheduling is carried out by international organisations such as the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration). Drugs are categorised under schedules 1 to 5, ranging from schedule 1 drugs, which are considered to have no medical benefit and are therefore highly illegal, to schedule 5 drugs, which are considered to have lower potentials for abuse (DEA, n.d.).

2020). Pharmaceutical medicinal cannabis production has primarily focused on synthetic derivatives and distancing the medication thus produced from the plant thought of as a drug (Bancroft, 2009). Nevertheless, the cost of these pharmaceutical products means that they remain inaccessible to many populations, especially in the Global South, who then continue to source medicinal cannabis outside regulated markets (Salech, 2018).

Additionally, medicinal cannabis presents unique complexities; its potency and strains vary widely, and different administration methods influence how it is experienced (Poudel et al., 2021). These factors complicate clinical testing and the establishment of standardised prescription guidelines. The lack of a comprehensive understanding of the plant and its diverse mechanisms of action has also hindered conventional medical institutions from successfully integrating cannabis into mainstream healthcare (Schlag et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research around the cannabis plant continues to be produced, especially surrounding medicinal aspects, such as studies into autoimmune diseases. Yet, there remain few in-depth ethnographic studies of the epistemologies and ontology of the cannabis plant, despite their importance for understanding how the interface between people and the plant shapes and is shaped by practices within specific communities.

Cannabis has also become a significant economic force, with legalisation driving industry development, job creation, and revenue generation. Countries such as Canada and Uruguay have served as models for balancing public health, regulation, and market stability (Hammond et al., 2020). However, these models come with limitations, with access to high-quality cannabis remaining restricted for certain groups, who continue to resort to the illegal market (Stoa, 2023). One major challenge is the monopolisation of the cannabis market by large corporations, which often leaves small-scale cultivators struggling to compete. Additionally, sustainability concerns arise within the industry, as large-scale cannabis cultivation requires significant amounts of water and energy, and results in waste production while also engaging with questions about the legacy of land appropriation and degradation (Ordoñez, 2025). In response, small-scale cultivators are pioneering organic farming methods and energy-efficient grow techniques, thus helping to shape more sustainable practices within the sector.

The 2010s saw governments such as the US, Canada, Uruguay, South Africa, and Colombia implementing an exceptional number of new cannabis laws. Questioning the prohibitionist scheduling of cannabis has been at the centre of legal policy debates and developments as a way of countering more restrictive legislation implemented by various governments. As argued by the Transnational Institute (2016), the scheduling of cannabis as a schedule 1 drug does not reflect the results of research. In fact, there has been a plethora of studies showing the benefits of cannabis and the ineffectiveness of prohibition, all of which have been disregarded in official drug policy (Corva & Meisel, 2022). A key example of this is the Shafer Report, commissioned by Richard Nixon in 1972, which argued that cannabis prohibition is counterproductive (Nahas & Greenwood, 1974). Whilst this study was ignored by the US government, it has informed the movement working for the regulation/legalisation/decriminalisation of cannabis.

Studies criticising prohibitionist cannabis policies are increasing, and the world is becoming more responsive and open to thinking about cannabis in alternative ways. This has meant that various countries have begun to regulate cannabis for medical use, with some countries, such as Uruguay, Canada, Thailand, and South Africa as well as some US states, even legalising it for recreational use (Greenwald, 2009; Guerra, 2018; Pardal, 2016; Regan & Olarn, 2025). Furthermore, in December 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reclassified cannabis as a schedule 3 drug, which indicates that its medical use is acknowledged.

Perceptions of the cannabis plant have been shifting worldwide, fuelling legalisation efforts for recreational and medicinal use, the fight for social justice of those criminalised for cannabis use, the development of a cannabis industry, and the future of medicinal cannabis. The ways in which these efforts have manifested have varied, as have the approaches to achieving legalisation (Wanke et al., 2022). Activism has generally focused on the terms medicinal and recreational, but other terms have emerged, such as therapeutic, that challenge this distinction (Zarhin et al., 2020).

Issues of racial justice have also been fundamental to the cannabis movement, with its prohibition having roots in the marginalisation of certain populations (Alexander, 2010; Ordoñez, 2025), such as political dissidents and impoverished populations in Argentina. Part of this mobilisation has involved

requests for the release and halting of judicial proceedings against people jailed or imprisoned for drug charges for quantities sufficient for personal use, as well as the expunging of their criminal records (Corbelle, 2023). The opening up of industry has been found not to provide the same opportunities, with those who previously participated in the illegal industry unable to gain access to economic and social resources. Therefore, some governments, such as Uruguay, South Africa and many states in the US such as California, have implemented programmes providing support for marginalised communities to enter and survive in the market (Stoa, 2023).

Grassroots cannabis cultivation movements, like in Argentina, have been key to changing social perceptions of cannabis and the push for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis. By supporting the move towards this legalisation of medicinal cannabis, they have found a way of challenging prohibitionist and biomedical approaches to drugs, by exploring new ways of interacting with the cannabis plant. These movements have advocated for working closely with the plant, participating in its cultivation and processing it for medicinal purposes on a communitarian basis (Palumbo, 2025). This network is served by '*cultivadores solidarios'* (solidary cultivators). They supply seeds, plants, oils, and other products to medicinal users (Corbelle, 2016). The closeness of the plant to the body is emphasised through discussions of the relationship between the cannabis plant and the human endocannabinoid system. Questions around cannabis concern how to ensure a person's right to cultivate and access their own medicine without the intervention of a pharmaceutical company. In Argentina, an alternative approach to health-seeking signified a further transformation of the human–cannabis relationship, regulated by the state.

## The War on Drugs

The history of prohibition, as Michelle Alexander (2010) argues, includes gendered, racist, and xenophobic components, as indicated by the ways in which the drug user/dealer has been constructed by a dominant public discourse as being dangerous. Carl Hart (2014), for instance, proposes that such tendencies are evident from the ways in which cannabis has been prohibited historically. Taking a broad global view, drug prohibition and

control go back to the early 20th century and have been imbued with contradictions. Politics, practices, and approaches to cannabis in the US are relevant for my study due to Argentina's proximity to the country and its influence in the region (and worldwide). Ideas around punishment and cannabis in the US plainly targeted black men (symbolised by the jazz musician)[5] and Mexican immigrants, with whom smokable cannabis was associated (Montgomery & Allen, 2023).

Between the 1910s and 1970s, we saw a great migratory pattern of Mexicans into the South of the US and African Americans to the North of the US. This allowed for a complex connection between common perceptions of migration and cannabis use. Such ideas fed into the perception of the cannabis user as lazy, dysfunctional, and a danger to society (Solomon, 2020). Through public and political debates, the US government contributed to stoking fear in the public by portraying marginalised populations as intoxicated and dangerous to society, threatening to turn white teenagers into 'dopefiends' (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). Drug regulation became an important means for the state to control, discipline, and punish critical voices (Coyne & Hall, 2017).

Harry Anslinger, a US politician, worked in positions of power relevant to the banning of drugs for over 30 years. In 1930, he became the first head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and then later was a representative to the UN Narcotics Commission (United Nations, 1961). He was one of the most vociferous promoters of banning cannabis. In this vein, he defined drug prohibition as a war against the 'despicable, dope-peddling vulture who preys on the weakness of his fellow men' (WNYC Studios, 2017:n.p.). As New York State director of the Drug Policy Alliance, Kassandra Frederique, notes in the film *13th* (2016) by DuVerney, Anslinger was 'one of the biggest architects of marijuana prohibition'.

The US became an important agent in the development of drug prohibition as its policies spread globally through conditions on loans made by international organisations such as the World Bank, that debtor countries make efforts to repress and eliminate drug trafficking (Bewley-Taylor, 2003).

[5] Many prominent jazz musicians were made examples of and arrested and jailed for using cannabis, including Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Duke Ellington (Singer & Mirhej, 2006).

Geopolitical studies examining the war on drugs, such as that of Rosa del Olmo (1993), argue that it reproduces global power relations, which are enforced in the form of loans provided to pay for military interventions. Loans also come with other conditions, such as the reduction of the state's role in public services and the privatisation of government services (Toledo, 2014; Villar & Cottle, 2011).

Antonio Escohotado (1999) argues that the groundwork for the current war on drugs originates in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which culminated in President Nixon's (1969–1974) 1973 declaration of drugs as an enemy of the state. Nixon built upon previous tax regulations for narcotics, crafted by Anslinger, by passing acts that categorised specific substances as illegal. In this spirit, he created the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) (Hawdon et al., 2022). John Ehrlichman, a Nixon aid, was quoted in Baum's (2016) article as saying:

> The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the anti-war left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. (n.p.)

Whilst Nixon carried out the groundwork, it was President Ronald Reagan's Republican administration (1981–1989) that more explicitly waged a war on drugs and led a campaign to eliminate the illegal drug trade in the US[6] through prohibition and criminalisation, supported by military aid and intervention (Mabry, 1988). These measures have led to a punitive approach globally towards drug-related crimes, associating drugs with marginalised communities in order to persecute and criminalise them (UNDP, 2015). The war on drugs has produced a politicised categorisation of certain substances as illegal drugs, constructions that have been propagated through various international institutions and formed the basis of global anti-drug laws and policy (Buxton et al., 2020).

[6] Economically poor communities were repeatedly targeted by prohibitionist drug policies. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, the crack pandemic rampaged through impoverished communities (Alexander, 2010; Hart, 2014b).

The declaration by President Reagan of the war on drugs, a project that sought to eliminate drug trafficking and drug use, culminated in the eventual development of the UNODC (the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime) in 1997, the body that was put in charge of carrying out the project.[7] The creation of the UNODC links drugs and crime as intertwined global issues, emphasising the implication that where there are illegal drugs there is crime, and vice-versa. Since then, the UNODC has played a central role in the dissemination of information as well as being involved in the development and implementation of the international war on drugs policy. The UNODC claims authority and relevance by '[O]ffer[ing] practical assistance and encourag[ing] transnational approaches to action […]. Because the scale of these problems is often too great for states to confront alone.' (UNODC, 2019:n.p.)

Positioning itself as the major authority for dealing with the global nature of the issue of drugs, the UNODC intervenes in negotiations between states in the Global North and Global South, especially the US and countries in Latin America. Overall, 50% of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs budget has been assigned to initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean (Baum, 2016; Francis & Mauser, 2011). The war on drugs initially focused on Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia, which are the main coca/cocaine-producing countries (Burger & Kapron, 2017; Potter & Potter, 2003). The ever-changing and expanding Latin American trafficking routes, one example being routes through the south of Brazil, Paraguay, and northern Argentina (to the US and Europe), would later lead to other states becoming an additional focus for war-on-drugs initiatives. Prominent interventions carried out by the US in relation to the war on drugs are the infamous intervention programmes of Plan Colombia 2000–2017, which ended with the implementation of the Peace Agreement with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), and the Merida Initiative/Plan Mexico (2006–2021) (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

Charges of corruption and trafficking are often used by various political parties and alliances to try to delegitimise presidential power and position and furthermore to wage war on drug policies. An example of US intervention

[7] An amalgamation of the United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention (founded in 1994) and the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (founded in 1991).

justified by a war-on-drugs initiative is the 1989 overthrow of Manuel Noriega in Panama (President from 1983 to 1989). Noriega was subsequently convicted in the US of drug trafficking, racketeering, and money laundering (Ricordeau, 2020). The Panamanian case is an example of a pattern of US endeavours to depose leaders and thereafter insert US allies into positions of power. After Noriega, the US strengthened its military presence in the country and established control over the Panama Canal (Davidson, 2013).

Drug interventions have involved funding for the eradication of plantations growing coca and cannabis, as well as raiding and confiscating products and money gained through drug trafficking. The illicit drug industry has responded to these military interventions with evolving violence. Broader socioeconomic issues, such as poverty, loss of income, loss of land, and corruption are consequences of the way in which the war on drugs tends to ostracise marginalised groups, including the small-scale cultivators I spoke to in the field (Gootenberg, 2009).

Studies such as that of Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley (2020) show that organised drug crime includes government officials and politicians, meaning that traffickers[8] are integrated into spheres of power within formal institutions. Financial gains from drug trafficking have been found to be reinvested in financial markets and businesses, providing legitimacy to their income and integration into society (Hulme et al., 2021). Military interventions carried out by collaborations between Latin American and US forces, rather than curbing the drug industry, have led to an increase in violence and an expansion in the consumption, production, sale, and trafficking of drugs in Latin America (Mejia & Restrepo, 2016; Singer, 2008).

Various studies examining how a range of socioeconomic parameters intersect in the shaping of the politics of drugs have analysed how, over the years, definitions of substances as illegal or bad have been influenced by the US (Bourgois, 2017). Research by Nancy D. Campbell and Elizabeth Ettorre (2011) has identified the tension between the production of plant-based materials grown in the Global South and how these are connected to distribution and consumption in the Global North. The increasing awareness about the importance of drugs

[8] Trafficking routes from Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay run through Argentina, as well as Buenos Aires being one of the ports used for the trafficking of drugs to Europe.

and their effects on the Global South can be seen in various publications, including a special issue of *Third World Quarterly* on Drugs, politics, and society in the Global South (Ghiabi, 2018) and Jennifer Fleetwood's (2014) ethnographic analysis of drug mules from all over the world jailed in Ecuador (also see: Boiteux, 2014; Giacomello, 2017; Younger & Pieris, 2016).

Argentina's drug policy is intimately entwined with wider geopolitical tendencies in relation to drug use and is therefore relevant to examine. Much research on drugs and drug policy and its gendered, racialised, and classed structures has been conducted within the Latin American context (Almeda Samaranch & Di Nella, 2017; Barra, 2015; del Olmo, 1993). Researchers such as Corbelle (2018) and Maria Cecilia Díaz (2020b) have worked for more than a decade with cannabis activists in Argentina, long before the medicinal movement came into focus. Thus, it is fundamental for my research to consider not only my contribution to academia in the Global North, where my main audience is located, but also the context that I am writing about and to ensure that I recognise and build upon work that has already been carried out in Argentina.

Latin American drug policies are strongly shaped by local histories, cultural narratives, and sociopolitical dynamics, rather than simply being dictated by external influences (Gootenberg & Campos, 2015). Argentina's approach to cannabis reflects shifts in public attitudes, legal frameworks, and grassroots activism that distinguish it from broader international trends, something that I turn to next.

## The Argentinian Context

What is today the territory of Argentina was colonised in the early 1500s by Spanish conquistadors and became part of the Spanish colony. Colonial structures of power were built upon the imaginaries of the natives as barbarians and the Spanish as the sophisticated race who should be providing civilisation (Kerr, 2020). The extraction of minerals, the grabbing of land from indigenous populations, and the slave trade ensured the continuance of colonial domination (Taylor, 2020). Following the wave of struggles in Latin America by Spanish descendants seeking independence from Europe, Argentina gained

its independence in 1816. An active government project aimed to attract Europeans during a period known as the Great Migration would mark the Argentinian imaginary of 'whiteness' due to ideas concerning a national European heritage (Citro, 2017).

Between 1869 and 1895, an the proportion of immigrants rose from 12.1 percent to 25.2 percent, mostly migrating from Southern and Eastern Europe, fleeing poverty and persecution (Grimson & Guizardi, 2023). Colonial power relations governed Argentinian society and established racialised, gendered, and classed social hierarchies. The *peninsulares* (those of direct Spanish origin) formed the ruling elite, while indigenous populations and slaves were barely considered human. Later, through miscegenation, new ethno-racial categories were created by the Spanish elite, all the while keeping the descendants of Spaniards, known as *criollos*, at the top of the social hierarchy. The process of *mestizaje* – the blending of Indigenous and European populations – was not a deliberate policy orchestrated by the Spanish elite but rather an organic and inevitable outcome of colonial society. Despite attempts by the ruling class to maintain racial hierarchies and social divisions, interactions between different groups, whether through necessity, resistance, or cultural exchange, led to a deep and lasting fusion that has shaped Argentinian society until today (Alberto & Elena, 2016).

Whilst European immigrants were generally welcomed as a means of 'whitening' and 'civilising' Argentina, many of those fleeing poverty and persecution were also pursued for their anarchist, leftist ideals and frequently deported or exiled back to Europe (Jensen, 2009). Many of those deported or exiled found that they were also not welcome in their home countries due to their perceived threat to society and ended up roaming Europe and Latin America until they could find a way back to Argentina (Domenech, 2015). Another significant proportion of immigrants came from the neighbouring countries of Paraguay and Bolivia. These, along with indigenous populations, were subject to persecution, clustered into a group which was seen by the government as an obstacle to national advancement/modernisation (Elena, 2011; Goebel, 2023).

The project of creating a 'white' Argentina involved a series of wars during the early 19th century. This culminated in *La campana del desierto* (The conquest of the desert), a campaign initiated by the central government in Buenos Aires under President Roca which aimed to take control over southern

territories by attempting to eradicate all indigenous people from the country (Larson, 2020). The campaign also coincided with a mass migration from Europe and strongly shaped Argentina's ethno-racial makeup, leading many Argentineans to claim European origins (*los hijos de los barcos*/the children of the boats), and even citizenship. This has led to extreme, albeit societally masked, racial and ethnic inequalities that continue to shape how the country's social and economic relations and power structures are organised even in today's Argentina (Kerr, 2020).

The Argentinian economy grew rapidly during the first half of the 19th century with the investment of capital from Europe into infrastructure, which was constructed by the aid of cheap labour provided by marginalised and exploited populations (Elena, 2011). The success of these projects led to a dynamic economy and, for a few decades, from the 1910s to the 1930s, positioned Argentina as one of the richest nations in the world (Cavarozzi, 2023). Despite the relative prosperity and progressiveness characterising the country at the turn of the 20th century, political and economic chaos would come to mark its future. Numerous military coups marred the first half of the century – a poignant indicator of worsening economic conditions and general social discontent (Belini & Korol, 2012).

## Social Movements in Argentina

Sitting in a typical Buenos Aires coffee shop, I am sipping a hot cup of tea whilst Guillermo, a journalist, eats his *media luna.*[9] It is the second time we have met, and we are having an inspiring conversation based on his extensive knowledge of the field. The topic turns to Peron, a key political figure in Argentinian history, who, in the late 1940s, emerged as a politician at a time of societal turmoil and produced a form of politics that still permeates Argentinian society to this day. Soon known as the head of the 'Peronist movement', he advocated for workers' rights, stronger democratic institutions, and general progressive measures promoting socioeconomic equality (Elena, 2011).

[9] A sweet croissant-like pastry that is consumed alongside a *mate*.

Guillermo tells me that, in order to understand the cannabis movement, I need to understand *peronismo*. He explains that *peronismo* has defined the ways in which politics is carried out in public by Argentinians:[10]

> As a political phenomenon, *peronismo* produced in Argentina a specific form of living politics, whether or not one is a *peronista*. *Peronismo* generated, in Argentina, a dynamic link between the state and what happens outside of the state, a relationship which determines political decisions […]. There's an effervescent activism in Argentina and every person in Argentina considers that they have a right to claim rights.

While I recognise Guillermo's point, Peron's political principles generated strong resistance from the conservative, and especially the military, echelons which, after 30 years of on-off Peronist rule, culminated in a coup-d'état in 1976 (Grigera & Zorzoli, 2020). Considered one of the most violent military dictatorships in modern Latin America, during the junta's seven-year rule, an estimated 30,000 citizens were kidnapped and disappeared, principally targeting left-wing activists, students and labour movements. In addition, tens of thousands of people were forced to leave the country as exiles. Human rights organisations emerged to resist the regime, advocating for justice and exposing the widespread forced disappearances. While this period, widely known as the 'dirty war', suppressed virtually all social dissent, it also gave birth to one of the most emblematic resistance movements in the country, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (from here on '*las Madres*'). Maternal activism, therefore, has had a special significance in Argentinian collective memory, having at its roots the protests of mothers whose children had been disappeared during the dictatorship (Koven & Michel, 1993; Poe, 2016).

This movement, founded in 1977, started as a protest against the military government's reluctance to release information about the protesters' children who had been kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the military police (Bellucci, 1999). In their repeated organised protests, which still continue today, *las Madres* mobilised an image of suffering, yet heroic mothers whose life is dedicated to caring and fighting for their children. One of the symbols used by

[10] Whilst Peron was a key political figure in the historical struggles for rights in Argentina, there have been labour movements that created political projects for labour rights for the working class throughout Argentina's history (Camarero, 2013).

*las Madres* was a white headscarf, representing the diapers of their children; something that has been appropriated by feminist movements in Argentina. The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* challenged constructions of motherhood and defied hegemonic perceptions of the weak, emotional, and defenceless mother in order to challenge the military dictatorship in public space (Burchianti, 2004). The historical symbol of the suffering but resilient and heroic mother, including the use of the white headscarf, has since been harnessed by Argentinian feminist movements as a way of garnering public sympathy and support.

However, to focus only on *las Madres* would be to obscure the rich and extensive experiences of social movements in Argentina. As already mentioned, the early 20th century witnessed strong anarchist organisations and labour struggles. These anarchist movements were involved in workers' fights for their rights (Bordagaray, 2012). The workers' movement traces its historical roots to this period and has posed a threat to subsequent authoritarian and right-wing governments to this day. At the same time, feminist anarchist movements were also questioning the institution of marriage, fighting for the right to vote and led the struggle against the rampant sex trafficking of women from Europe, lured to emigrate with promises of a better future (Bellucci, 1990). These feminist movements questioned the primacy of patriarchy and heralded the beginnings of an Argentinian feminist movement.

Amongst more contemporary movements and alongside the *piqueteros* (which refers to the organisation of unemployed workers) we have the '*asambleas barriales*' that surfaced after the crisis in 2001 – spontaneous gatherings in neighbourhoods coming together to seek solutions to the issues that arose because of the crisis. Feminist movements, such as the pro-abortion campaigns, have managed to effect social and political change, with abortion being legalised in 2020 (Anzorena, 2024). Human rights movements have played a prominent role in Argentina's political imaginary, with everyone feeling, as my journalist interlocutor, Guillermo argues, that they have the freedom to fight for human rights. The cannabis movement, while embodying a specific agenda, shares and benefits from this rich history of strong social movements in Argentina.

# Argentinian Drug Policy

The theme of drugs as a problematic issue and matter of political concern first surfaced in Argentina during the 1920s, when politician Leopaldo Bard managed to pass a law that prohibited the sale of specific substances without prescription. This was later extended to the holding of drugs without legitimate justification (Labiano, 2018), influenced by US drug policy. In 1961, the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was signed by Argentina, alongside another 100 countries (United Nations, 1961). This convention targeted drugs derived from the poppy, coca, and cannabis plants. In 1963, the Argentinian government ratified the treaty by prohibiting these drugs nationally. Throughout the 1960s, the drug addict was viewed as sick, and the focus was on reforming these people. This led to the forced internment of addicts in *granjas* that were known for ill-treating their patients (Fanton, 2014). One of my interlocutors remembered how she had run away from such reformatories in the 1980s on various occasions, preferring what she perceived as the freedom and safety of the streets.

Coming back to cannabis, a reform enacted in 1968 to the law 17756 permitted the carrying of an amount considered sufficient for personal use. However, this was once again prohibited in the changes made to the law in 1973, following a new convention pushed by the US in the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Canabal, 2014). As discussed by Florencia Corbelle (2018), an Argentinian anthropologist who studies the cannabis movement, prohibitionist policies institutionalise the relationship between rights and morals, which allows for infringement upon the private sphere (Delrio, 2017).

In this spirit, Argentinian drug policy became increasingly stringent and punitive (Steinberg, 2022). The drug trafficker began to be linked to the '*Guerillero/militante*', who is associated in political discourse with violence and criminality. This meant that those perceived as *Guerilleros* were targeted as drug addicts and/or trafficking drugs to finance terrorist resistance against the military government (Canabal, 2014). Drugs then became associated with resistance in a similar manner to what happened in the US against black and brown populations (Ordoñez, 2025). The persecution of marginalised populations, as claimed by my interlocutors, has also seemed to satisfy a need for statistical proof of police action to maintain law and order.

Despite prohibition, cannabis users and cultivators throughout the world maintained their relationship with the plant and advocated for the legalisation of its use, particularly as a result of the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Slonecker, 2017). By continuing to use and advocate for cannabis, these groups defied efforts to criminalise nonconformity, reinforcing broader struggles for freedom of expression, bodily autonomy, and political resistance. The underground nature of these movements encouraged solidarity among activists, as cannabis use became intertwined with their broader fight against state repression (Manzano, 2015). During Argentina's military dictatorship (1976–1983), cannabis was closely associated with these movements by the military government. Strict drug laws framing cannabis as inherently dangerous were weaponised as a mechanism for surveillance and control, justifying the dictatorship's crackdown on dissident groups and reinforcing the broader repression of political opposition (Corbelle, 2019).

After the return to democracy in Argentina in 1983, increasing restrictions were imposed upon cannabis users and cultivators. This culminated in the 1989 drug law (Ley 23737), which included the criminalisation of possession, cultivation, and distribution of cannabis (Corbelle, 2024). Possession of even small amounts of cannabis could lead to criminal charges and the possibility of being imprisoned for between four and 15 years. Nevertheless, many of these charges are withdrawn by the courts, ruling that the drug is for personal use and not for sale.

In 1994, a media controversy arose surrounding renowned guitarist Andres Calamaro, who was accused of condoning drug use after stating during a concert that he could "use a *porro*". His remark was a nod to his fanbase and their connection to cannabis, which was further stressed when he stated that he was certain someone in the audience was indulging. He was charged under Argentina's drug law (Law 23737), which imposes sentences of two to six years for people who 'advocate or publicly disseminate the use of drugs or induce others to consume them' (infobae, 2017, n.p.). It took more than 10 years for Calamaro to be absolved, with the court ultimately ruling that the charges were unconstitutional, because his statement was a form of personal expression protected under his rights. However, during this period, increasingly prohibitionist international agreements and a shift in government policies – particularly under Carlos Menem's administration (1989–1999) –

led to strict and repressive drug regulations. Drug-related laws, such as Argentinian national penal drug law 23737 passed in 1989 by Menem's presidency and still in force today, have played a role in reinforcing prohibitionist frameworks, often disproportionately targeting marginalised populations as part of the broader war on drugs.

In the early 2000s, attitudes towards cannabis began to shift, with increased activism and organised movements pushing for policy changes. In Argentina, grassroots groups advocated for medicinal access and decriminalisation, reflecting a broader regional trend towards rethinking prohibitionist policies (Díaz et al., 2021). In 2009, the Arriola Supreme Court ruling declared the prosecution of individuals for personal cannabis use to be unconstitutional (Fusero, 2021). In 2017, Argentina legalised medicinal cannabis (Law 27350), allowing limited access to CBD oil. The subsequent decree in 2020 (883/2020), legalised self-cultivation, regulated production and distribution, promoted research, and subsidised access to medicinal cannabis (Díaz et al., 2021). In 2023, a regulatory framework (Decree 405/2023) was launched that oversaw licensing for cannabis production and trade (Díaz, 2024).

## Shifting Focus: The Kirchner Era

Nestor Kirchner came into government in 2003 with a commitment to listening to social movements, signalling an increase in rights gained through grassroots activism, particularly human rights. Drug policy was no exception. Government discourses on drugs sought to move away from the criminalisation and pathologisation of users, shifting towards discussions about decriminalisation, particularly regarding the possession of drugs for personal use (Güelman et al., 2022). Under the subsequent Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's presidency, significant strides were made in expanding social, gender, and human rights, such as same-sex marriage and abortion rights claimed through social justice movements. Therefore, the growth of cannabis activism took place in a political context of extensive mobilisation across the country (Levitsky & Murillo, 2008).

During Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's presidency (2007–2015), debates on drug laws gained traction within Congress, with human rights becoming

central to the discussion (Díaz, 2020a). The Arriola ruling exemplified this shift when the defendant was acquitted on the basis of the right to privacy, whilst the judge also criticised the misuse of funds targeting users rather than organised trafficking structures (Canabal, 2014; CELS, 2019; Fusero, 2015). The case was built upon the right enshrined in the Argentinian Constitution stating that any citizen can do what they want within the privacy of their own home without state intervention, provided they do not harm any third person. Consequently, debates intensified, and social movements and activists became actively engaged in shaping drug policy discussions (Corbelle, 2019).

In the late 2000s, cannabis users began to come together to organise a march for the legalisation of cannabis (which would not happen until 2010). In 2011, the National Congress debated the penal law 23737, which prohibits the possession and trafficking of illegal drugs. Project proposals were submitted by ministers in collaboration with activists for laws that would, for example, decriminalise cannabis for personal use and cultivation within the home. Cannabis activists were able to attend public debates, but activists and members of the public were not given time to share their opinions. As Corbelle (2018) argues, opportunities to talk were distributed unevenly, with ministers being able to walk in, speak, and then leave, while activists were waiting the whole session to be given just a brief time to speak, if at all. This illustration of the ability of activists to intervene within governmental spheres is indicative of the power inequalities that structured the intervention. Despite their efforts to reach congress, Argentinian cannabis activists, like those participating in my study, felt both unheard and underestimated on multiple occasions.

Whilst the public debate in Argentina has been prominently organised by cannabis cultivators and users, there are also organisations that focus on other elements of the cannabis industry, such as legal professionals who provide aid to activists and organisations that develop strains and products to sell on national and international markets. These populations have differing levels of access to public and private spheres of power. The Argentinian cannabis movement is diverse (Dioun, 2018; Harris, 2021).

## Medicinal Cannabis

The next seminal moment in the Argentinian cannabis movement was the entry of mothers, who found in cannabis a treatment for various ailments suffered by their children (Morante & Morante, 2017). With the entry of these mothers, the cannabis movement began to shift its focus towards medicinal cannabis. Whilst the cannabis user movement had worked under a prohibitionist regime, the mothers, arriving in 2015, came into a context in which there were increasing changes in attitudes towards cannabis at an international level. In fact, Mama Cultiva Argentina has its roots in Mama Cultiva Chile, an organisation that has spread to other countries in Latin America, including Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, as well as Spain. Users and cultivators were also essential to the beginnings of Mama Cultiva Argentina, providing them with seeds, and teaching them how to cultivate as well as how to prepare oils (Salech, 2018). The mothers, inspired by *Las Madres*, became a driving force behind the progress in cannabis laws (Féliz & Basso, 2021).

Mothers using cannabis as a treatment for their children resembled the cannabis activist movement that had begun in the late 2000s. They sought ways to gain access to cannabis oil as an alternative treatment to pharmaceutical medication. With the support offered by cultivators, many people suffering from various illnesses began to rely on experienced growers to provide cannabis oils, with the mothers organising their activism from 2015 onwards.

The mothers associated their struggle with feminist movements; for instance, feminist struggles for the right to abortion and other feminist movements where issues of health, gender, and bodily autonomy are politicised (Daby & Moseley, 2022). As stated on Mama Cultiva Argentina's website when discussing the courses that they offer:

> During these courses we bring into question the idea of healthy/ill, the links with hegemonic medical systems, the naturalisation of care roles being those of women (more than 60% of the people who approach our organisation are female carers), the socially discriminatory construction of disability as limiting access to citizenship, and prejudices, worries, and fears about cannabis. Meanwhile we germinate, plant, transplant, cultivate, and extract resin for the preparations of oils, creams, and natural salves to treat different symptoms. (Mama Cultiva, 2023, n.p., my translation)

In 2017, under President Maricio Macris's government (2015–2019), Law 27350 was passed, which permitted the use of medicinal cannabis, although only through the importing of cannabis oil and for the treatment of refractory epilepsy. The passing of this law was a disappointment for the cannabis movement because it focused on the use of cannabis only for a certain form of epilepsy as well as research into the medicinal properties of the cannabis plant. Furthermore, the financial costs and bureaucratic process made the importing of cannabis oil inaccessible to most mothers. The law invisibilised the ways in which mothers were accessing medicinal cannabis while those cultivating cannabis continued to work illegally. However, one focus for the stakeholders involved in the legislative work was the inclusion of article 8, which reads:

> 8th article – Registry. The nation's Health Ministry will create a national voluntary registry with the objective of authorising, pursuant to the provisions of article 5 in law 23737, an inscription of patients and their family members who, presenting the pathologies included in the regulation and/or prescribed by doctors in public hospitals, are users of hemp oil and other derivatives from the cannabis plant. With the protection of confidential information. (My translation)

Article 8 was seen by my interlocutors as a loophole that allows the construction of a registration system of medical professionals, cultivators, and users of medicinal cannabis. In 2020, different stakeholders such as research groups, industry chambers, and medicinal and user cannabis organisations were invited to participate in the drafting of a new regulation for the medicinal cannabis law. The mothers were important drivers of this initiative, and the movement argued that illnesses other than refractory epilepsy could be managed by using cannabis. As Elena, a leader of one of the mothers' organisations, tells me:

> A wider range of health conditions were included [in the legislation]. This is important, because before it only mentioned refractory epilepsy, as if cannabis was only an anti-convulsant […]. Now, the range has expanded significantly, which is basically what we want. I think the majority of people don't even approach [the organisation] for epilepsy. I don't know why they focused on that [in the law]. Maybe there are more [scientific] studies, I don't know.

Under the government of President Alberto Fernandez (2019–2023), a network named RACME (*Red Argentina de Cannabis Medicinal*/Argentinian Network for Medicinal Cannabis) was created. It brought together experts, grassroots-level movements, and government entities to develop knowledge, influence laws and regulations, and draft a regulation that was presented to the Ministry of Health. The objective of the cannabis movement was to make access to medicinal cannabis as easy as possible through regulation, (Romero et al., 2023). However, some form of registration system was demanded by the state. This involved negotiation between those advocating state control and those seeking free access to medicinal cannabis without the intervention of the state. The 'middle ground' therefore manifested as the *Registro del Programa de Cannabis* – REPROCANN[11] (Register for the Cannabis Programme), which required three elements to gain a licence: the registration of the user, the cultivator, and an indication (not a prescription) from a medical professional (Acosta & Lavagnino, 2022; Calvo & Lampolio, 2021). The use of an indication rather than a prescription meant that patients were able to get a licence for various types of symptoms, such as headaches and anxiety, which cannabis has not been scientifically proven to benefit but where it has been observed by medicinal cannabis practitioners as improving quality of life. The registration system was key to the development of trust in the state from the medicinal cannabis movement and constituted a significant change in the dynamics of the cannabis community.

On 19 November 2023, anarcho-capitalist Javier Milei was elected as President in Argentina. This was a man who had campaigned with a chainsaw (Criales, 2023) and even insulted many political figures. His promises were to peg the peso to the dollar once more, to liberalise the economy, and privatise public services and state infrastructure. Within his first week in office, Milei released a decree with over 664 articles addressing the economy and public services, amongst other things (Página 12, 2023). The resulting protests were met with repressive enforcement measures by his government. Having Milei as president may mean the dismantling of hard-earned Argentinian social security, public education, and healthcare infrastructures, which would lead to an increasingly socioeconomically polarised society (Página 12, 2025a).

[11] https://reprocann.salud.gob.ar/

Since the current government has been in power, REPROCANN has been defunded and as a consequence the processing and approval of licences has been brought to a halt. Although there were some renewals of licences during my fieldwork, I was told by Nicolas, one of my interlocutors, that these renewals were issued because the government, due to pressure, had implemented AI to recognise keywords and automatically approve batches of applications. Since I spoke to Nicolas, however, REPROCANN has been dismantled (Página 12, 2025b). Other gains made by the movements, such as the legalisation of the sale of cannabis plant clones, has been withdrawn and the future of the progress made in cannabis laws is uncertain.

## Concluding Reflections

Cannabis has been deeply intertwined with human history for over 12,000 years, evolving through medicinal, spiritual, industrial, and recreational uses (Escohotado, 1999). Its relationship with colonial structures, indigenous traditions, and prohibitionist policies has shaped global and regional attitudes towards the plant. In Latin America, cannabis became embedded in colonial economics while also being part of indigenous and African medicinal traditions (Gootenberg & Campos, 2015). The 20th-century War on Drugs, driven by international conventions, criminalised the plant and disproportionately affected racialised and marginalised communities (Alexander, 2010). Despite its prohibition, cannabis has served as a tool for resistance, exemplified by the case of Argentinian activist movements of the 1990s (infobae, 2017). It has remained a symbol of defiance, challenging state-imposed regulations that seek to control behaviour and suppress dissent.

The history of drug prohibition has been deeply rooted in gendered, racialised, and xenophobic narratives (Alexander, 2010). These frameworks have constructed drug users and dealers as dangerous figures, reinforcing systems of punishment and exclusion. Hart (2014) has traced how cannabis prohibition reflects these broader social dynamics, particularly in the US, which has played a pivotal role in shaping global drug policies.

The War on Drugs has not only failed to eradicate trafficking, it has also deepened inequalities, criminalised marginalised communities, and led to

widespread violence across Latin America (Singer, 2008). As growing evidence challenges prohibitionist frameworks, many scholars, policymakers, and activists in the cannabis movement argue for alternative approaches, such as harm reduction, decriminalisation, and regulation, in order to address the realities of drug use and trafficking in a way that prioritises social justice and public health (Bourgois, 2017; Ordoñez, 2025).

Argentina, like other countries in South America, has historically adopted war-on-drugs policies due to economic pressure from international organisations, but it also has its own history and context surrounding drug policy (Fanton, 2014; Labiano, 2018). Argentinian political history has shaped the ways in which cannabis activism has influenced government regulations on drugs and society. Historically, the cannabis movement has pushed for regulation that decriminalises both the user and cultivator (Corbelle, 2018). However, it was the inception of the medicinal cannabis movement, particularly led by mothers, which led to a serious consideration of how to decriminalise and regulate medicinal cannabis.

Cannabis has remained a deeply contested yet resilient force throughout history, shaped by colonial economies, indigenous traditions, and prohibitionist policies that has had a disproportionate impact upon marginalised communities. The War on Drugs reinforced systemic inequalities, criminalising users rather than addressing broader social issues, yet cannabis persisted as a form of resistance in the Argentinian context. Argentina's political history reflects these tensions, with activism pushing for decriminalisation and regulation, especially in the realm of medicinal cannabis. As debates evolve and global perspectives shift, cannabis continues to symbolise defiance, social justice, and the ongoing struggle for equitable drug policies.

# Chapter 3: Coloniality, Knowledge, and Drugs

This chapter opens with an exploration of colonialism, examined through anticolonial scholarship, and explores how colonial structures have continued to shape social hierarchies. These hierarchies regulate bodies, knowledge, and nature, which is understood as our ecological environment within the framework of the more-than-human (Burman, 2022). Anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1986), Achille Mbembe (2019), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010) underscore the importance of recognising and including knowledge systems beyond the epicentre of globally influential western epistemology, and this is what I consider in this chapter.

In the chapter, the notion of the 'abyssal', as coined by Santos (2010), aids in analysing the construction of knowledge in the Argentinian context. I also draw upon the concept of contact zones (Pratt, 1991, 2007) to illustrate the spaces of encounter and disruption that occur at the borders of abyssal knowledge. Another key concept for my study is intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991), which facilitates an understanding of the multiple categories that marginalise communities. Through these frameworks, I aim to develop an analytical approach that will inform my ethnographic chapters, examining how people render the cannabis plant intelligible and engage with it in their social and cultural contexts.

I present three important facets for understanding the cannabis plant: medicine, nature, and drugs. These facets are significant because they provide distinct yet interconnected avenues for analysing the cultural, social, and political dimensions of cannabis. Through these discussions, I aim to identify the critical points or junctures at which resistance and transformative change take place, challenging dominant narratives and structures. The exploration of these three elements is grounded in a decolonial and feminist framework that

seeks to interrogate the histories, ideologies, and power dynamics embedded within the cannabis discourse. By employing the concepts of post/abyssal thinking, contact zones, and intersectionality, I work to problematise the binaries that shape the perceptions and practices associated with cannabis. These binaries – such as legal/illegal, nature/culture, and therapeutic/recreational – not only structure the public debates surrounding cannabis but also obscure the complexities and nuances of its social significance. The scholarship that I introduce here allows me to explore how the cannabis plant produces culture in terms of how 'webs of significance' are spun by people in context through situated epistemologies and ontologies (Geertz, 2017). These webs involve the intertwining of shared ideas and symbols that generate meaning in order to shape how people perceive and interact with the world in terms of a space where social groups create, share, and struggle over meanings and practices (Bourdieu, 1990; Geertz, 2017; Hall, 2016).

## Colonial Structures of Power

Oppressive violence in the colonies operated as a 'civilising' mission, which has continued to hold power over not just social and economic relations but also epistemologies and philosophies (Mbembe, 2019). According to Walter Mignolo (2021), the colonisation of Latin America commenced with the invasion by European colonisers who faced what, for them, were unrecognisable lands, peoples, and societies. Research has shown that indigenous populations were seen as a hindrance to European access to resources, which led to violence and aggression towards local people built on racialised and sexualised worldviews (Lazar, 2022). A set of social and spatial relations, based on elimination, oppression, and alienation, took form as a way to brutally govern the occupied lands and the people living there (Ioris, 2023). Local populations were subjected to racism, rendered inferior, and reduced to the other, marginalised and thus not recognised as equal human beings (Mbembe, 2019).

Scholars such as Gurminder Bhambra (2023) have highlighted how Europe has been posited by colonisers and global powers as the modern and civilised

ideal, setting the example for other nations to follow. Such worldviews, as, for instance, Santos (2010) has argued, resulted in a stereotyped and categorised understanding of territories and their inhabitants as being 'primitive/backward, traditional, the pre-modern, the simple, the obsolete or the underdeveloped' (p. 23). Experiences, epistemologies, perspectives, beliefs, emotions, practices, and ways of organising life were all posited by the colonising imperial forces as inferior, trivial, and inadequate for understanding the world, as Wanderson Flor do Nascimento and Volnei Garrafa (2011) and Anne Stoler (2010) have shown in their studies.

The Catholic Church was also a means by which indigenous people were rendered inferior, as being without a god (Dussel, 1981; Grosfoguel, 2013). This theological basis for oppression encouraged essentialising categorisations informed by larger binaries, dividing the world into nature/culture and body/mind, amongst many other categories (see also: Derrida, 1998). These binaries were governed by racialised, gendered, and classed structures and were enforced with the aid of a repertoire of violent tools, as also analysed in relation to other countries that have been subjected to colonisation (Ioris, 2023; Mbembe, 2019; Rydstrom, 2015). These constructions of power structure not just material life but also epistemologies – distinct forms of thinking that shape subjectivities as well as 'related existential dilemmas of social selfhood' (Go, 2023, p. 287).

Indigenous groups in Latin America have been subjected to massacres, diseases, and brutality in a history of dispossession and marginalisation (Ioris, 2023; Khanmalek & Restrepo Rhodes, 2020; Lazar, 2022). Santos (2010), drawing on Giorgio Agamben (1998), has argued that colonised people have not only been constructed as the other but also rendered bare in the sense that they are being dehumanised, stripped of their rights as equal human beings. This is the perspective from which rights became the realm of the white colonial man, differentiated from the other, that is, the indigenous population. Mignolo (2005) sums up such hierarchical constructions as being intertwined with suppression and informed by racism (see also: Stoler, 2010). Introducing the notion of the Colonial Matrix of Power, Mignolo (2021) argues that 'racism is not a question of blood or skin colour but rather of the logic of discursive classification entrenched in the foundation of the Colonial Matrix of Power'

(p. 258). Colonialism is the backdrop against which anticolonial, decolonial, and postcolonial debates have played out, which I discuss further below.

## Decolonial and Postcolonial Thought

Postcolonial theory originates from the Subaltern Studies Group, a group of South Asian intellectuals who, from within the discipline of cultural studies have highlighted and critically analysed legacies from the 19th- and 20th-century colonial regimes in Southern Asia (Mendoza, 2020). Their analysis involves an exploration of how racialised political and socioeconomic structures in the postcolonial world are framed by historical processes which perpetually work to naturalise western dominance (Colpani et al., 2022).

The Gramscian term 'subaltern' has been used by postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) to show how colonial structures marginalise certain voices, rendering them subaltern and unrecognisable. The central contribution of postcolonial scholarship has been to bring subaltern voices forward as political actors and resistors of oppression and to challenge western historiographies. Frantz Fanon (1986), and various others, have critically theorised colonial structures from their own experience as colonial subjects (Connell et al., 2017).

Decolonial theory has built on postcolonial insights but pushed the arguments further to call for the consequent inclusion of Global South perspectives in terms of both experiences and scholarship in order to decentre ideas about epistemologies and ontologies (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). Decolonialism in Latin America has been conceptualised by thinkers such as Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018) as well as Aníbal Quijano (2007). Quijano (2000), for instance, introduces the expression 'coloniality of power' to capture how colonial power structures continue to permeate global socioeconomic and political orders and calls for a decentring of conceptualisations and understandings. This should be key to our analysis of various ontologies – ways of being in the world – and epistemological ways of rendering the world meaningful, in the region of Latin America and beyond.

A decolonial perspective directs our attention towards the importance of a multiplicity of knowledges, emphasising the significance of being sensitive to local epistemologies, scholarship, and insights (Colpani et al., 2022).

Decolonial theorists such as Ramon Grosfoguel (2012) suggest that, in order to decentre western epistemologies and dominance, it is essential to bring forward knowledges of othered populations and, furthermore, to work together with scholars, activists, and political movements in the Global South.

This encourages scholars to pay attention to marginalised populations. By marginalised populations, I am referring to people who do not conform to or agree with hegemonic understandings of, in the case of this thesis, cannabis. Located at the margins of a dominant western realm, these groups can challenge a social conceptual order by offering alternative views, producing a specific cannabis culture, teaching us about the capacities of more-than-human materialities such as the cannabis plant, and thereby decentring knowledge production.

This reminds us that western epistemologies are not necessarily at the centre of the world (Grosfoguel, 2012). Raewyn Connell and colleagues (2017), for instance, suggest that we should try to carve out a third space of thinking, reminding us of what Santos (2010) refers to as 'a general epistemology of the impossibility of a general epistemology' (pp. 49–50). It is only by analysing the impact of colonial histories that global structures of inequality and marginalisation can be unravelled (De Oto, 2017).

## Knowledges

Colonial oppression has manifested in innumerable ways, one of them being the suppression of local knowledges (Medina, 2013). Anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1986), Achille Mbembe (2019), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010) have emphasised the need to recognise the ways in which western-defined epistemologies have silenced local knowledges. Western-defined knowledge systems and their perceived universality have rendered other epistemic frameworks inferior, something that anticolonial scholars have criticised and decolonial scholars have challenged by bringing local epistemological and ontological frameworks to the fore.

Hence, a discussion of epistemology is crucial, forming an entry point to acknowledging a multitude of alternatives for thinking about divergent worlds. Here, I draw on Santos' (2010) concept of post/abyssal thinking and Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) concept of contact zones to examine knowledges that

exist at the borders of dominant western-centric epistemology and the dynamics with which they are imbued. This applies not only analytically but also with respect to how we understand local worlds, humans, and more-than-humans such as plants. Investigating spaces of encounter between various knowledge systems involves uncovering the critical junctures at which resistance and change occur in daily life in the spaces where I conducted fieldwork, and beyond.

According to Donna Haraway (1988, 1991), power relations embedded in the production of science have come to posit scientific knowledge paradigms as rational, objective, and neutral and therefore as producing valid knowledge. In a similar vein, Julian Go (2023) suggests that social science as a category 'was born in, of and for empire' (p. 281), thus underpinning western knowledge development as an intrinsically Eurocentric framework. This knowledge hierarchy permeates and shapes how 'correct' science is done and who is considered to hold the authority to produce valid knowledge. Notions such as rationality and validity have led to the subjugation of whole knowledge systems and understandings of the relations between plants, animals, and humans. Hence, these other knowledges and peoples have been deemed uncivilised and reduced to objects (Lugones, 2010; Narayan, 2004; Quijano, 2007).

Grosfoguel (2012) emphasises that the construction of a universal western system of knowledge presupposes the eradication and invisibilisation of the divergent bodies of knowledge that make up the social world across the globe (Abadia-Barrero, 2022; Bhambra, 2023; De Oto, 2017). Other knowledges have been, and in many cases remain, oppressed precisely because of the contradictions they pose to established 'universal' histories, discourses, and actualities (Connell et al., 2017; Santos, 2010). Mignolo (2021) and Santos (2010) contend that thinking beyond hegemonic economic, political, and social structures means exploring the ways in which multiple epistemologies contest dominant paradigms.

Mignolo (2021) argues that reimagining not only epistemic but also ontological hierarchical orders inevitably means 'decolonising authority, decolonising the economy, decolonising knowledge and being' (p. 125). Knowledge development can come from the in-between sites of multiple worlds and locations. These can enable counter-hegemonic spaces or

opportunities to 'talk back', as bell hooks (1989) suggests, in terms of 'open[ing] up space for [a] counter-hegemonic political strategy' (Martinsson & Mulinari, 2018 p. 12)

According to Gurminder Bhambra (2023), knowledges should be analysed within the context in which they are produced in order to unpack the histories and ideas by which they are shaped and come into meaning. This will enable us to understand the ways in which they hold potential to counter hegemonic epistemic discourses. Marginalised populations have made social justice claims through the telling of experiences as forms of knowledge that challenge hegemonic ways of perceiving truth and society (Brissette & King, 2023; Goodwin & Jasper, 2006). Framing knowledge and activism in ways that both appeal to and question dominant forms of knowledge provides a way forward that people may be able to use to engage in transformation and seek social justice (Mignolo, 2005).

## Post/abyssal knowledges

Santos (2010) introduces the concepts of the 'post-abyssal' and 'abyssal thinking' as analytical tools to identify the knowledge constructions that lie beyond dominant epistemologies. Abyssal thinking, Santos (2010) argues, is a framework rooted in modern western thought. It is characterised by dividing understandings of the world into two distinct realms: that which exists on one side of the line and that which is deemed invalid, irrelevant, or non-existent and thus placed on the other side of the line.

The framework reconsiders colonial binaries that prioritise certain knowledges while rendering others invisible. Santos (2010) defines the distinction between western and other knowledges as an abyssal line,[12] highlighting the porous boundaries between two spheres and demarcating the dominant realm. Epistemologies that exist beyond a dominant western paradigm have historically been rendered irrational and ridiculed by dominant epistemologies as 'magical thinking' with no foundation in 'objective truth'. Such views, as I discussed above, reverberate across time and space,

[12] These lines are not static but rather adapt and reproduce inequalities in their different mutations.

continuing to shape and reshape ideas about rational and irrational beliefs, even today. In the words of Santos (2007):

> Modern western thinking goes on operating through abyssal lines that divide the human from the sub-human in such a way that human principles do not get compromised by inhuman practices. (pp. 52–53)

Santos (2010) argues that post-abyssal thinking involves exploring beyond Eurocentric traditions to open up 'analytical spaces for surprising realities' (p. 19). Such realities may surprise us 'because they have been produced as not existing' (p. 19). Achieving social justice requires recognising the diversity of knowledges and ways of living, which in turn necessitates new forms of thinking, which Santos defines as post-abyssal thinking. This form of thinking exists on the margins of constructions of normality, incorporating knowledges that challenge abyssal thinking (Santos, 2010). This perspective is important for my analysis of local ways of construing knowledge and living with the cannabis plant, in ways that acknowledge its ontologies as existences that are more-than-human (Haraway, 2015; Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018).

According to Antonio Ioris (2023), being emerges as a consequence of violent classifications of colonised people and things as those without the right to their epistemologies and ontologies, and in this sense rendered exterior to the accepted realm of intelligibility (Grosfoguel, 2012). This approach is a critique of universalism that rather embraces the diversity of knowledges. By doing so, it encourages plural understandings of the world and values the contributions of contrasting perspectives on ideas and existence. Social justice, as Santos (2007, 2019) contends, cannot be achieved without acknowledging and incorporating these diverse ways of knowing and being.

## Contact zones

The concept of contact zones was coined by Pratt (1991) when conducting a literary analysis of a letter sent from Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala from Cuzco, Peru, to the king of Spain in the early 1600s. Pratt (1991, 2007) defines contact zones as points of connection, where struggles occur under unequal conditions between previously separated arenas. These zones are not merely physical or geographical spaces, but epistemological arenas where alternative

knowledge systems confront and clash with one another (Vélez-Posada, 2024). With this in mind, I use the notion of contact zones to represent spaces of interaction where abyssal knowledges – rooted in dominant, exclusionary paradigms – and post-abyssal knowledges – emerging from lived local experiences – converge, collide, and transform. Within these spaces, transformations occur through the negotiation, contestation, and creative reimagining of entrenched power relations.

The contestations within these zones can encourage the emergence of alternative worldviews critical of dominant assumptions about being and knowing (Somerville & Perkins, 2003). As I show in the ethnographic chapters, people engage in acts of resistance, developing and employing perspectives as counter-knowledges that contest and subvert the premises upon which western-centric scientific paradigms are built (Vélez-Posada, 2024). This process of adaptation and resistance highlights the agency of people and communities in reconfiguring dominant narratives about their often sick and suffering bodies, their identities as cannabis users, and their ways of knowing about releasing pain, being a user, and perhaps even a producer.

Applying the concept of contact zones to the analysis of my findings raises critical questions about how local people navigate and negotiate social, cultural, and political institutions (Somerville & Perkins, 2003). This becomes particularly salient in the three primary areas of focus of this thesis: the cannabis plant, cannabis culture, and medicinal cannabis. Each of these areas provides a lens through which binaries such as nature/human, body/mind, and drugs/medicine are interrogated and redefined by my interlocutors, as I discuss in greater depth later in this chapter.

The contact zones I explore in the ethnographic chapters underscore the ways in which marginalised populations engage with and resist dominant structures. By doing so, they not only challenge existing power dynamics but also create new possibilities for understanding and enacting social and cultural change. Therefore, these zones serve as critical spaces for reimagining relationships between the body, knowledge, and power, and for envisioning more equitable and inclusive futures.

## Intersectionality

Feminist theorists such as bell hooks (1989), Maria Lugones (2010), and Anne McClintock (1995) highlight the role of intersectionality as both a lens and a conceptual tool to understand imperialism and colonialism. The colonial politics of exclusion were contingent upon constructing categories; therefore, colonial control was predicated upon identifying who was 'white', who was 'native', and which children could become citizens rather than subjects, distinguishing between those who were legitimate progeny and those who were not (Stoler, 2010). To control the reproduction of race, both European women and colonised populations were subjected to strict gendered and racialised rules that were designed and enforced to police and govern interpersonal relations (Stoler, 2010). Ann McClintock (1995) has demonstrated how bodies were inscribed with multiple colonial constructions that reduced gendered bodies to reproducers of the nation, confining women within the constraints of the feminine, traditional, and natural realm, dependent upon men to belong.

Intersectionality thus serves as a valuable analytical tool for examining how the body is shaped by overlapping categorisations. These intersecting factors determine which spaces people and their bodies can, or cannot, occupy within the social world. Intersectional perspectives argue that knowledge emerging from subordinate locations is constructed by socioeconomic and political conditions, while also providing alternative ways of rendering the world intelligible and meaningful (Nash, 2016). Through this lens, intersectionality offers a way to grasp social heterogeneity and the diverse array of subject positions and agendas arising from this diversity (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

In a similar vein, Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso (2014) emphasises the importance of recognising the gendered and racialised spaces of privilege from which analysis is often conducted. The exclusion of classed and racialised women has resulted in western feminism rendering the gendered 'other' unintelligible within dominant feminist frameworks (McClintock, 1995; Spivak, 1988). Maria Lugones (2010), and Diana Mulinari & Kirsten Sandell (2009), similarly stress the importance of exploring the colonial structures underpinning western feminisms in order to strengthen intersectional analyses of the multiple exclusionary spaces inhabited by marginalised groups.

Indigenous decolonial studies may run the risk of invisibilising the multiple positionalities of indigenous women if their heterogeneity is not taken into

consideration (Soria, 2021). While indigenous rights often focus on land extraction and state/political violence, women face other concerns, such as femicide. The construction of an 'othered' imagined community invisibilises the gendered nature of colonial violence and power structures, as well as the ways in which women were colonised twice: firstly as part of the local population and secondly as women (Rydstrom, 2015).

Using concepts such as post-abyssal thinking, contact zones, and intersectionality enhances my analytical framework for the examination of medicine, nature, and drugs.

## Medicine and Colonialism

César Ernesto Abadia-Barrero (2022) sheds light on the ways in which the institution of scientific medicine was built upon colonial concerns about controlling and curing tropical diseases in the colonies. Diseases, both those already existing in the area and others brought over from the west, ravaged both indigenous and colonial populations. This led to the development of colonial medicine, a tool used to control public health and health practices in the colonies (Adams, 2010; Cunningham & Andrews, 1997). Medicine and Christianity were spread together by missionaries who functioned in both religious and health-related roles that ensured sufficiently healthy slaves to labour in colonial interests (Abadia-Barrero, 2022). Scientific medicine was taking shape as a useful institution that could force health measures upon local people in a 'purely scientific' spirit, construed as the greater good – what Cunningham and Andrews (1997) refer to as a 'medicine of domination' (see also: Jaarsma & Berhout, 2019; Klein, 2010).

Medicinal technologies became efficient tools of colonial governance, used to reinforce hierarchal systems of power and epistemic domination through which it was possible to 'teach' indigenous people about hygiene and health (Adams, 2010). Medical technologies, particularly those developed to address 'tropical' diseases, became instrumental in ensuring the health of colonisers. Through this process, indigenous people and their bodies were construed as sites that were subjected to control and experimentation, such as gynaecological experiments (Abadia-Barrero, 2022; Washington, 2008). It is

relevant to highlight this dynamic in my thesis because of the way in which it exemplifies the imbrication of colonial power structures within the medical field, where biomedicine becomes a mechanism for the reproduction of inequalities tied to gender, race, class, and geography.

Historically, the study of tropical diseases has been a study of diseases prevalent in poorer regions of the world. However, Feasey et al. (2010) contend that the prevalence of tropical diseases is not predominantly influenced by geographical factors but is instead strongly related to factors such as poverty and social inequalities. Bio-scientific research prioritises diseases that align with the interests of dominant populations and ends up neglecting conditions affecting populations marginalised due to geography, social class, amongst other factors. The medical system and its politics support what Wanderson Flor do Nascimento and Volnei Garrafa (2011), for instance, refer to as the 'coloniality of life', understood as scientific framework that seeks to justify the valuation of some humans more highly than others.

These arguments reveal biomedicine as an extension of colonial rationalities that stratify the worth of human lives. By centring western epistemologies, medical systems perpetuate the valuation of colonisers' health over the lives of those deemed subordinate – or subaltern. In this way, biomedicine not only addresses illness but also re-inscribes hierarchies and thereby privileges particular social groups while invisibilising others. The exclusion of diseases that disproportionately affect low-income populations limits their ability to participate in scientific research and shape its priorities. Medical interventions reflect the broader colonial patterns that structure global health priorities, which also underpin my material from the Argentinian field site.

Biosciences are portrayed in dominant discourse as superior to other forms of knowledge and as having supposedly surpassed health-related practices that function outside of their framework (Cunningham & Andrews, 1997). Alternative practices are frequently dismissed by biosciences as irrational, unscientific, and medically ineffective; they are often characterised as being informed by superstition and even as potentially dangerous (Abadia-Barrero, 2022; Adams, 2010; Khanmalek & Restrepo Rhodes, 2020). As I show later, communities and their historical health practices serve as valuable sources of knowledge about structurally informed health inequalities (Rogers, 2006). In order to contest influential bioscientific notions of health alternative practices

need to be brought to the forefront as relevant knowledge, allowing for the production of multiple understandings of medicine (Nascimento & Martorell, 2013). Bringing marginalised medicinal practices into discussions of health perceptions and experiences disrupts the epistemic authority assigned to hegemonic medical discourse, as also indicated by the material presented in my ethnographic chapters (Oliveira & Osman, 2017).

## Medicine and the Body

As Jonathan Metzl (2010) shows, the moral body is rendered meaningful as well-kept in a scientific medical tradition. Conversely, sick, reclining bodies are deemed unproductive vis-à-vis the upright, productive body. Therefore, those who cannot produce are marginalised as existing outside of the norm of the healthy body (Khanmalek & Restrepo Rhodes, 2020). Medical science has paved the way for developing certain understandings of human bodies. For instance, the feminised, racialised, and sick body has been controlled through reproductive programmes not uncommonly enforced upon local, indigenous, and vulnerable groups during colonialism, and even today, by governments around the world (Schwartz & Maurice, 2023).

For example, the legacies of gendered and racialised structures are evident in the regulation and pathologisation of women's reproductive systems, as seen in the over-medicalisation of childbirth (Lindemann, 2023). Contraceptives and public sterilisation projects have historically been used to control the growth of marginalised populations, specifically targeting those of limited economic means, racialised groups, and women, including in Argentina (Mulinari, 2023). Women, often seen as reproducers, are frequently positioned as the corporeal site of intervention (Washington, 2008). Western men emerge as the ideal and the norm, which invites the relegation of anyone falling outside this idea of the normal body, who is thus rendered abnormal (Roberts, 2010). By determining corporeality, ability, and normality, the biosciences thus come to govern life and death (Adams, 2010; Foucault, 1989; Naidu, 2021).

Experience is inherently embodied, as are the ways in which we come to know and understand the world we inhabit (Rydstrom, 2003). Ada Jaarsma and Suze Berhout (2019) have examined colonial violence through the lens of the nocebo effect. This phenomenon occurs when a patient believes that a harmless

medication will do them harm, which can lead to actual negative effects. They connect this to racialised and colonial histories of oppression, demonstrating how systemic inequalities have influenced medical and psychological outcomes. Therefore, the nocebo effect challenges the reductionist view of the body as a purely physical entity devoid of context – a perspective often adopted by the biosciences. Jaarsma and Berhout (2019) contend that the material body is always in interaction with its context, making an awareness of social structures of power essential to understanding how bodies are situated. By introducing the term 'nocebo', Jaarsma and Berhout (2019) reject the mind/body dualism, a division that is countered in places such as Brazil and China (see also: Braga et al., 2018; Yue & Weicheng, 2021).

Khanmalek and Restrepo Rhodes (2020) stress that only by challenging the body/mind binary and the curative focus of scientific medicine can alternative understandings of healing be embraced. They advocate an approach to health and remedy that is transformative rather than merely curative, prioritising improvements in quality of life over the normalisation of bodies deemed 'abnormal'. Within this framework, health emerges as a social process shaped by the interplay of the biosciences, alternative medicinal knowledge systems, and embodied experiences, which collectively influence how people perceive their wellbeing. Wendy Rogers (2006), for instance, underscores that we can see the body as a political site of knowledge, asserting that embodied experiences can challenge dominant epistemologies and advance social justice (see also: Bordo, 1993; Martin, 1992).

## Gender and Biomedicine

Spivak (1988) highlights the significance of examining the politicisation of marginalised people, such as those using medicinal cannabis in my study. Users emphasise the ways in which medicine, public health practices, and politics are intersected by categories such as gender, race, class and, particularly relevant to medicine, ability, all of which need to be addressed in order to achieve social justice.

Carina Fourie (2023) argues that there is a lack of research addressing how western male-centred medical science operates as an exclusive standard framework that reproduces unequal social structures. According to Debora

Lupton (2003), patients are socialised within medicinal structures that assign epistemic authority to medical professionals, who are perceived as possessing education and knowledge unavailable to patients or laypersons. As my material shows, and as I discuss in the ethnographic chapters, populations suffering from chronic diseases often have symptoms and experiences that are unintelligible within bioscientific frameworks (Bluhm, 2022).

Chronic illnesses have a disproportionate impact upon vulnerable populations facing various social and health challenges, with women – such as those in my study – being particularly affected. The disease/cure framework attempts to make chronic conditions understandable, yet their subjective and immeasurable nature often eludes biomedical explanations, leaving gaps that bioscience cannot fully address (Cunningham & Andrews, 1997). Chronic diseases, as Robyn Bluhm (2022) argues, are often overlooked, while those suffering from them are perceived as lacking an understanding of their own health. Consequently, patients seeking medical assistance are frequently labelled as 'hysterical', in search of drugs, or dismissed as having mental health conditions (Showalter, 2024). Even when patients are experiencing significant visible pain, medical staff are often impatient and do not take chronic pain seriously (Stewart & Freeman, 2022).

Mary Dusenbery (2018), speaking from the US context, highlights how women's negative experiences with medical doctors have necessitated the development of strategies to ensure that their health concerns are taken seriously. As my data also indicates, biomedicine's focus on the physical aspects of illness means that these strategies tend to involve visual demonstrations of sickness, such as appearing visibly tired. Such bodies are deemed abnormal and difficult to cure, according to established biomedicine, making women vulnerable, as research shows, to the inability of doctors to understand their conditions. As Bluhm (2022) notes:

> Those who actually have those conditions [e.g. chronic pain], and thus first-hand knowledge of their own quality of life with them, are considered to be too biased by their own experience to offer credible evaluations. (p. 332)

Intersecting categories such as class, gender, race, and bodyableness determine who holds cognitive authority, as examined by Lindemann (2023), and such intersecting categories affect those who are unable to access the care that they

need within the realm of biomedicine and healthcare (Hoffmann et al., 2022; Scott, 1998). Movements advocating for the visibility of the health needs of marginalised populations have fought for access to, and the development of, medicines for illnesses that disproportionally affect these groups, such as chronic illnesses and HIV/AIDS. This effort has included seeking epistemic justice by striving for the recognition of a patient's authority over their own bodily experience and thus control over medical interventions. A tendency to neglect the interconnectedness between body and mind, as in biomedicine, limits the ability of a doctor to see and recognise the problems encountered by their patient (Jaarsma & Berhout, 2019). Consequently, acknowledging a patient's authority over their own body is inseparable from matters of social justice.

Socially and medically marginalised groups, such as those included in my study, have often given up on the established healthcare system. Therefore, their problems remain invisible within biomedical tradition and discourse. Post-abyssal knowledges challenge bioscience by emphasising the importance of factors that extend beyond medical conceptualisations of illness, focusing instead on social environments and processes that impact upon one's health, such as employment, the environment, and sanitation (Shahvisi, 2023). In tandem with a larger societal contextualisation of health and illness, care ethics, as discussed in feminist bioethical thinking, emerges as an entry point for analysing the ways in which people are embedded within social relationships that are significant for their individual and collective (self-)care, well-being, and health (Donchin & Scully, 2015; Lindemann, 2023).

## 'Nature'

Western science, and thus colonial histories, have positioned humans as the holders of agency over nature. Nature has been considered a materiality to be exploited, dominated, and manipulated to serve specific human needs and goals, thereby indicating an instrumentalist view of what is referred to as 'nature' (Haraway et al., 2016; Monte-Mór & Limonad, 2023; Watts, 2013). In Latin America, this approach has facilitated the appropriation and devastation of indigenous lands, as well as the silencing of indigenous

relationships with nature, including their cosmologies (Burman, 2022a). The colonial foundation of the human/more-than-human relationship – such as those between humans and plants – frames the civilised and intellectual human as superior, advancing civilisation through the domination and use of more-than-human bodies in nature, from animals to plants (Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018; Rosales, 2023).

Control over lands and peoples has been achieved through the imposition of territorial boundaries that restructured pre-existing social and territorial formations (Tsing, 2015). Such control brings our discussion back to questions about colonial power structures and how they have been reproduced through the domination of colonised territories and the people living there (Ojeda et al., 2022). Colonial perceptions of nature have facilitated the uncontrolled extraction of resources with little regard for the regeneration of these landscapes, which has led to the depletion of resources and ecological environments (Karlsson, 2022). Whilst, historically, indigenous populations have been displaced, today, these mechanisms of exclusion have broadened to affect socially precarious groups more generally. The dominance of western discourses about nature continues to perpetuate inequalities, often dismissing alternative or community-based knowledge systems, particularly those rooted in non-western traditions (Todd, 2016).

In this context, appropriated land is perceived as devoid of societies or ecologies that will be affected, but the consequences of extraction place 'real people, other living beings and whole worlds […] at stake' (Rocheleau, 2015, p. 696). Colonial appropriation and exploitation have often left indigenous lands barren, with little consideration given to the ecologies that sustain life and how these provide alternative worldviews to typical western dichotomies (Burman, 2022a). Human/more-than-human, culture/nature and subject/object binaries have encouraged a perception of plants as objects without agency, to be studied, dominated, and manipulated (Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018). This perspective silences considerations of whether plants and other elements in our surroundings may have agency. Other understandings of plants, such as the cannabis plant, ascribe it agency, character, and even gender, thus providing perspectives on nature that contest established western-centric conceptualisations. Cannabis, as I show in the ethnographic chapters, is often

associated with the feminine qualities attributed to nature (Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018).

The inability to be sensitive to the qualities of plants may mean overlooking their integral – and active – role in sustaining a world upon which humans depend (Tsing, 2015). As Ojeda et al. (2022) point out, 'prior worlds persist and even flourish, in spite of the overlay of imperial or colonial rule and countless regimes of occupation and extraction across time and place' (p. 158). Hegemonic understandings of nature are shaped by abyssal thinking, to reconnect to Santos (2010), which creates a binary between the living and non-living that renders invisible the dynamic connections between humans and their environment and all more-than-human organisms, which are reduced to just sitting there in what is usually categorised as 'nature'. That which is deemed non-human is made meaningful only as resources that are 'expendable in the service of production and imperial or state power' (Ojeda et al., 2022, p. 154), ideas that are pervaded with gendered and colonial hierarchies.

The difference between agentic and non-agentic ontologies is often assessed on the basis of the assumption that human language, communication, and agential spectrum are superior to those of other, non-human entities (Rosales, 2023). Other forms of communication through nature and plants take shape as incomprehensible to humans and therefore devoid of agency (Kohn, 2013). However, linguistic and other forms of agency can manifest in diverse ways as plants and nature actively engage in communication and interact with wider ecologies (Creasy, 2020). Plants perceive their surroundings and transform through constant interactions with wider ecologies and beings, demonstrating that 'their eloquence can be found in their material growth and the ways in which they live', as Lawrence (2020) notes, and 'context allows for the acknowledgement of different instantiations of intelligence or sentience; plant intelligence is not "lacking", but is proper to the world of the plant' (Lawrence, 2022, pp. 629, 636). This is an insight of which my interlocutors are very aware, as I show in the ethnographic chapters.

By experimenting with the mimosa plant, Gagliano and colleagues (2014) demonstrate that plants learn and adapt based on their experiences and environments, revealing forms of learning and adaptation through memory. Whilst this may not precisely mirror the ways in which agency and memory manifest in animals, Gagliano and colleagues (2014) identify forms of

knowing that challenge conventional understandings of intelligence in both humans and more-than-humans like plants. These findings reveal that plants can learn and adapt, utilising both long-term and short-term memory, responding to the environments within which they are situated. Furthermore, this emphasises the importance of learning to 'listen' to plants in order to learn who we are as human (Rosales, 2023).

The fact that plants exert agency, Elton (2021) observes, is manifested through their responses to the environments in which they are placed, operating within their own time and space. While humans often place plants in controlled environments to shape their growth, as is the case with cannabis, plants function within parameters that support their reproduction and development in optimal ways that can be invigorated by human carers (Karlsson, 2022; Rosales, 2023). This dynamic creates a human/plant relationship mediated by the plant's responsiveness and ability to grow. Plant agency invites us to think with nature and acknowledge its inherent importance for both human and more-than-human lifecycles. As Watts (2013) expands: 'Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts. (p. 21)

In her study of the Matsutake mushroom, Anna Tsing (2015) explores how ecologies continue to regenerate even in the ruins of environmental extraction. Her work shows that these mushrooms thrive after environmental destruction and, furthermore, provide livelihoods for communities engaged in a global market. Humankind's reliance upon nature extends beyond the instrumentalisation and utilisation of various materials, including its use as a source of food and medicine (Harvey, 2019). Nature has long played a role in nurturing, caring for, and sustaining well-being, fostering interconnected relationships between human and ecological communities (Elton, 2021).

Wichterich (2015) examines the rise of urban agriculture in public spaces, gardens, and balconies, which is aimed at sustaining ecologies and promoting localised food production, including the cultivation of medicinal plants. The growth of ecological practices in urban areas in my study draws inspiration from inherited knowledge, which can enable the creation of ecological systems, however modest, within city boundaries such as my field site. Relationships with the cannabis plant remain integral to everyday life, and resistance to its destruction has emerged across both urban and rural areas,

creating contact zones where notions of civilisation and barbarity are perpetually contested (Pratt, 2007). Contact with the cannabis plant in urban contexts, like those I study in Argentina, requires and involves constant negotiation with a society that often perceives nature as primal and inconsistent with civilisation, as something to control and use in instrumental ways (Monte-Mór & Limonad, 2023). Consequently, alternative configurations of epistemologies and ontologies emerge as traditional practices adapt and evolve alongside the changing urban landscape (Ojeda et al., 2022).

By recognising the agency of plants and land, we can challenge perceptions of nature as without agency, enabling new forms of being with nature to surface (Rosales, 2023). Returning to my discussion of contact zones, we can see those interfaces and interactions as positioned between abyssal and post-abyssal thinking and practices (Pratt, 1991; Santos, 2010). They take shape as transformative spaces where understandings can evolve, and negotiations can occur between institutions of power and alternative forms of knowledge about the more-than-human.

## Drugs

The banning of a variety of plants, both in Argentina and worldwide, whose derivatives are classified as illegal drugs, is intertwined with colonial dynamics of race, gender, class, and ability, while also encompassing economic, political, and cultural spheres. The colonial relationship between humans and the more-than-human, here understood primarily as plants, plays a pivotal role in shaping how drugs are conceptualised, studied, and commodified (Bourgois, 2017). Plants used for drug production have travelled along with people for millennia, being replanted and used according to knowledges passed down through the generations. The pursuit of altered states of consciousness has held cultural and social significance for humans throughout history, with psychoactive plants playing key roles in spiritual and social rituals (Bourgois, 2017; Escohotado, 1999).

The historical relationship between humans and intoxicants has been rendered invisible by prohibitionist discourses that have criminalised psychoactive plants, such as cannabis, coca, and the poppy flower (Bancroft,

2009). The strict regulation of psychoactive plants and drugs has come to marginalise other forms of medicinal, social, and spiritual consumption that play significant roles in the social lives of various groups and communities (Sherratt, 1995). For example, the use of coca in Bolivia is widespread, with both urban and rural communities using it as a way of warding off altitude sickness and as a stimulant. Additionally, coca also forms the basis for social and spiritual rituals that are central to community life in Bolivia and the broader Andean context (Burman, 2022a; Pearson, 2020).

Sherratt (1995) defines drugs as substances consumed for purposes other than nutrition, generally categorised as either medicinal or 'hedonistic': 'where changes in body chemistry are sought for their psychological rather than physiological effects' (p. 1). Both medicinal and 'hedonistic' drugs are subject to strict controls and even prohibition, particularly when used for pleasure. The abyssal medicinal/hedonistic binary informs drug classifications and how drugs are perceived. Either they are providing positive, and what are seen as harmless, effects and are socially acceptable and therefore deemed beneficial, or they are associated with perceived negative effects as dangerous and commonly linked to social degradation.

The effects of 'hedonistic' drug consumption are commonly referred to as intoxication, which influences behaviour, judgement, and cognitive clarity. Intoxication can be understood as the manifestation of effects and practices related to drug use that serve to 'manage, maintain or change the experience of the self in the world' (Bancroft, 2009, p. 5). From this perspective, many substances can be considered intoxicants, ranging from the obvious such as alcohol to the less apparent, like tea or coffee. However, notions of intoxication, such as loss of control, are often associated with illegal drugs and judged negatively by society (Hutton, 2020a). Some substances, in particular, have emerged through prohibitionist discourses as negative intoxicants, and many of these have had detrimental or even fatal consequences, such as fentanyl. Therefore, they are prohibited (Room, 2020).

Cannabis is frequently categorised by prohibitionist discourse as a drug that undermines productivity, thus emphasising its sedative and relaxing effects while disregarding its broader social, medicinal, and creative dimensions. This characterisation has historically been tied to political and racial narratives, reinforcing stereotypes about laziness and dysfunction among certain groups

(Solomon, 2020). A parallel can be drawn between stereotypical portrayals of the drug user as lazy and those linked to the 'unproductive' poor (Barton, 2020). Such perceptions have led to questions about whether substance users share the same 'moral' values as society at large and whether they have any legitimate claim to social rights (Becker, 1963).

In Argentina, and beyond, cannabis communities make a distinction between a 'responsible' and rational drug user, who operates within social parameters vis-à-vis the 'irresponsible' user, whose morality is subject to critical scrutiny. This moral evaluation suggests that cannabis users wish to make it clear what type of user they want to associate with (Ayres & Taylor, 2020). Not only can people be marginalised from wider society due to their engagement with cannabis, but they can also be excluded from cannabis communities because they impose their own moral boundaries.

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Drugs are a global commodity consumed worldwide and encompass complex issues of trade, money, and medicine (Ghiabi, 2018). The war on the consumption and sale of illicit narcotics has legitimated the unquestioned intervention of 'higher powers' into areas of sovereign control that would not be permitted otherwise (Ferraiolo, 2007). Moreover, the war on drugs is rooted in exclusionary policies and laws that justify the infringement of marginalised populations' rights.

Whilst the Latin American region has been a participant in these developments, the war on drugs has predominately been waged by the Global North, particularly the US and the UK (Cruz, 2017). For instance, the US has historically interfered with national sovereignty by blocking attempts to legalise drugs while, simultaneously, it has tolerated or facilitated the use of drugs to finance counterinsurgency in other countries that align with US interests (Aase, 2024). In turn, the narcotrafficking industry operates within global capitalist dynamics, capitalising on the illegality of drugs to sustain high prices while relying on cheap labour excluded from the formal jobs market, such as undocumented and unemployed people. Structures of inequality permeate the drug industry at local, national, and global levels, spanning social, economic, and political spheres (Bourgois, 2017). The people targeted by the war on drugs are often those who are already socioeconomically vulnerable,

exploited, and portrayed as needing reform to become functional members of society (Becker, 1963; Earp et al., 2021).

Whilst the drug industry permeates all sectors of society, only certain groups have the resources to handle their drug use and address any related problems (Bancroft, 2020; Barton, 2020). The well-off are perceived as regulating their use better, allowing them to maintain their status as 'moral' citizens. Substances associated with the well-off are often characterised as refined, sophisticated, and civilised (Ayres & Taylor, 2020). Conversely, poorer drug users and small-scale sellers frequently become the primary targets of anti-drug-trafficking laws (Bourgois, 2017; Ghiabi, 2018) with their rights denied due to their association with drugs, in whatever capacity. This denial of rights effectively removes the right to self-determination from marginalised populations who are linked to drugs (Bunton & Coveney, 2010).

According to social norms, intoxication among men is often deemed acceptable within certain bounds and contexts, which contributes to drug-taking environments being predominantly male-dominated. Intoxication tends to be condemned as unfeminine and is thus restricted for women through societal notions of respectability and restraint (Hutton, 2020b). A drug-taking woman is therefore construed within both drug-using circles and society at large as doubly deviant, for defying gender expectations about morality and control, and for engaging in drug use (Ettorre, 2007; Hutton, 2020b).

> Where intoxication is discussed, it is often located in binary divisions around 'good' intoxication and 'bad' intoxication as well as having a heavily gendered subtext depending on whether males or females are intoxicated. (Barton, 2020, pp. 315–316)

Psychoactive drug users are constantly negotiating their place in society through their engagement in activities that are both illegal and heavily persecuted. Bancroft (2020) highlights that the value of intoxication for humans lies not only in its potential to alter states of consciousness but also in its ability to provide alternative experiences and ways of being; thus, different understandings can be gained by examining the lived experiences of drug users.

Dominant discourses surrounding drugs often conceal alternative rationales and practices related to drug use, such as the pursuit of pleasure. Instead, these

narratives portray drug use as involving a loss of personal control, with users depicted as being at the mercy of the substance. Women are also sexualised because they are pushing the boundaries of what is considered feminine (Quaglietta, 2022). Pleasure through intoxication is typically framed as a reward for rational and responsible behaviour and is contingent upon adherence to social norms. The discussion of pleasure in relation to drug use has largely been silenced within drug studies, because pleasure proves difficult to address within the framework of medical science. Race (2009), for instance, argues that examining drug use through the perspective of the pleasure-seeking individual can illuminate contradictions in hegemonic constructions of drugs. This approach also provides a deeper understanding of the structures that oppress practices deemed 'barbaric' (O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). Shifting the focus to the experience of drug use, rather than stereotypes perpetuated by the war on drugs, allows for a re-evaluation of both legal and illegal substances (Ghiabi, 2018).

The differentiation of acceptable forms of intoxication is shaped by medical narratives, which contrast them with the notion of bad, hedonistic, and pleasurable intoxication taking place outside of the medical domain. The primary aim of scientific medicine is to strengthen the perception that substances produced in pharmaceutical contexts do not induce the pleasurable effects typically attributed to illegal drugs. This perspective effectively invisibilises the enjoyment that populations derive from drug use (Ghiabi, 2018; Walker, 2020). Thus, medical attention surrounding intoxicants often extends beyond the biological effects of substances – despite scientific claims of objectivity – to include considerations of who is consuming them and under what circumstances (Bancroft, 2020; Barton, 2020).

## Concluding Reflections

Colonial violence, rooted in the civilising mission, has perpetuated power dynamics that shape social, economic, epistemological, and philosophical hierarchies (Mbembe, 2019). Colonial binaries, such as nature/culture and body/mind (Derrida, 1998), justified a variety of forms of violence, including elimination, appropriation, and classification under the 'colonial matrix of

power', where intersecting parameters functioned as a logic of exclusion (Mignolo, 2021).

As I have discussed in this chapter, Santos' (2010) concept of post/abyssal thinking offers a critical lens for understanding how dominant epistemologies have invisibilised alternative knowledges through employing abyssal lines, which separate what is deemed rational and human from what is classified as irrational and non-human. Similarly, the concept of contact zones (Pratt, 1991, 2007) highlights epistemological arenas where alternative knowledges and lived experiences converge with and contest hegemonic paradigms. These spaces of interaction demonstrate the capacity of marginalised populations to resist, adapt, and reimagine entrenched power structures, thus blurring binaries such as nature/human, body/mind, and drugs/medicine. By engaging with these frameworks, we can uncover new possibilities for understanding the dynamics of knowledge, power, and resistance, paving the way for more inclusive and equitable futures.

Intersectionality provides an analytical concept for understanding how colonialism operated through the construction and policing of categories, enforcing racialised and gendered hierarchies in order to control bodies and interpersonal relations (McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 2010). Decolonial feminism, which emphasises the voices and experiences of the marginalised, challenges the epistemological power structures that underpin colonial and imperial systems. Lugones (2010) stresses the importance of recognising these intersecting oppressions, particularly when critiquing western feminist frames that often exclude marginalised women.

The institution of scientific medicine, shaped by colonial concerns, has historically functioned as a tool to control and discipline marginalised populations through public health practices and medical experimentation (Abadia-Barrero, 2022; Adams, 2010). Colonial power structures persist in biomedicine, reproducing inequalities through the valuation of certain bodies and diseases over others (Cunningham & Andrews, 1997; Nascimento & Garrafa, 2011). Bioscience has entrenched notions of 'normality', aligning health standards with gendered, racialised, and classed constructions that marginalise many people (Metzl, 2010; Schwartz & Maurice, 2023). Decolonial responses emphasise the need for decentring perspectives, acknowledging Global South epistemologies and ontologies by drawing on

decolonial insights concerning intersecting categories – such as gender, race, and class – that impact upon access to healthcare and health outcomes (Lindemann, 2023; Washington, 2008).

Colonial histories have shaped the relationship between humans and nature, strengthening binaries that position humans as agents and nature as inanimate, subjugated, and available for exploitation and domination (Watts, 2013). However, alternative perspectives challenge these abyssal frameworks by recognising the agency of plants and the relational dynamics of territories as multispecies spaces (Lawrence, 2022; Watts, 2013). Plants, through their capacity to perceive, adapt, and communicate, reveal forms of ontology and agency that transcend human-centric paradigms and thus direct our attention towards more-than-human organisms and materialities.

The banning and regulation of psychoactive plants, along with their derivatives, is embedded in colonial dynamics of race, gender, class, and ability, and intersects with economic, political, and cultural spheres. These practices invisibilise the historical relationship between humans and psychoactive plants, as well as the cultural and spiritual significance of altered states of consciousness (Bourgois, 2017; Escohotado, 1999). By reframing drugs as integral to cultural, social, and economic contexts, we can reconsider prohibitionist narratives and bring nuance to our understanding of the cannabis plant as an intra-agential force.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter begins by discussing decolonial methodological frameworks in order to engage with local experiences from my field site as well as scholarship from the region. My methodology has helped me to uncover how power imbues both the research process and its subject matter by applying an intersectional approach. This is concerned with factors such as gender, class, and ability to explore how they shape the ways in which we conduct research embedded in larger structures of power. I have employed ethnography as an avenue to gain in-depth insight into cannabis users and producers and to examine their struggles in confronting cannabis-related epistemologies and the ways in which these come to marginalise cannabis users and growers in the context of Argentina.

The closeness required by ethnography renders it both a personal and collective process, while simultaneously enabling engagement with broader global structures. This requires solidarity and collaboration with research participants. In this spirit, I discuss how ethnography has facilitated my exploration of the field and how I have employed the collection of stories as a tool for empowerment and critique, enabling participants to share their accounts and confront intersecting inequalities. I reflect upon how the field has influenced both the type of data collected and how this has shaped my research process. In addition, I consider how the researcher's positionality is key to understanding the perspective from which a study is conducted.

I then outline the methods I employed when collecting data for my thesis. These were primarily interviews and participatory observations, which yielded rich data. I detail how my entry into the field brought unexpected outcomes and the strategies I used to ensure that I remained as faithful as possible to the issues brought up by my interlocutors. Finally, I conclude with a brief reflection upon ethics and the ethical procedures followed throughout the research.

As noted in the introduction, my aim is to challenge dominant discourses surrounding cannabis and its users by shifting the focus from stigmatisation and prohibitionist narratives to a more nuanced understanding of cannabis as a sociocultural and political phenomenon. Instead of examining the potential negative effects of cannabis, I critically engage with how cannabis use is framed within legal, medical, and social structures, questioning the power dynamics that regulate and define users. By centring the experiences, identities, and resistance strategies of cannabis users, cultivators, and activists, the thesis repositions cannabis as an interagential force – one that shapes and is shaped by community, identity, and knowledge production.

## Decolonial and Feminist Methodology

Methodology and methods are constantly in interaction with how we as scholars contribute to the production of knowledge (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Therefore, the fundamental epistemes upon which we base our methodological work need to be reflected upon (De Oto, 2017; Guerra Pérez, 2018; Madison, 2020). As Haraway (1991) argues, the positivist roots of research led to limited understandings by reducing research participants into subjects of research and assumed categories that do not accurately represent the social world. Therefore, as Raminder Kaur and Victoria Louisa Klinkert (2021) stress, there must be 'a process of humbling epistemological regimes' (p. 252) in order to highlight the power structures that underlie various western-centric epistemologies.

According to Stacey Skeggs (2001), researchers enter the field with pre-existing theoretical and methodological frameworks, which inherently shape and limit the ways in which people and their lives can be studied and the outcomes that can be achieved by the researcher. Taking such reflections into consideration, I have attempted to work in collaboration with my interlocutors to explore the ways in which they challenge dominant epistemologies. This has allowed me to capture local cannabis users' and producers' resistance, resilience, and struggles for social justice (Kennemore & Postero, 2020).

This approach, furthermore, provides an entry into striving for epistemological decolonisation to thereby contesting inequality, power

relations, and political frameworks, while addressing the interplay of voice, place, and privilege throughout the research process (Manning, 2021). Investigation should not abide by epistemic regimes but rather create new frames of critical analyses to identify multiple forms of thinking that cannot be understood through preconceived analytical categorisation (De Oto, 2017).

Here, a key point is to reflect upon the limitations that surface as a result of the research process, as well as the power relations underlying the production of knowledge, which affect a researcher's situatedness within the academic disciplines and the field (Bejarano et al., 2019; Davies & Spencer, 2010). Therefore, a decolonial and feminist ethnography requires a reflexive practice that analyses the positionality of the researcher and how this affects research processes and outcomes (Guerra, 2018; Kaur & Klinkert, 2021; Lazar, 2022).

Situated knowledges provide a glimpse of the tensions, contradictions, and challenges that arise when social justice claims are made (Haraway, 1991). Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2009), bell hooks (2001), and Chandra Mohanty (2003) emphasise that intersectional theory, methodology, and analysis can identify the multiplicity of constructions that enable the conditions which may lead to the invisibilisation of how race-gender-class (among other factors) are co-constitutive of the realities within which people live. Intersectionality seeks to understand both unequal structures between groups and the ways in which social structures shape people's lives, identities, and communities (Mattsson, 2014; Sager, 2011).

Here, Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) concept of border thinking is inspiring. It refers to spaces in which plural epistemologies are encouraged, which can challenge hegemonic knowledge. Indeed, in my thesis, the situatedness of cannabis users and producers exists at the borders of legal, rational, and medicinal epistemologies, where people live with the ambiguity of struggling with the contradiction of being human but not treated as such in their society (Mignolo, 2000). Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins (2014) consider 'working the hyphen' which, they argue, means being alert to how in-between positions can push the boundaries of dominant epistemologies by identifying knowledges that are unaccounted for (see also: Kennemore & Postero, 2020).

Decolonial and feminist ethnographies can challenge dominant academic structures by developing a critical analysis that learns from engaging and critiquing dominant, western-centric intellectual development, social

hierarchies, and socioeconomic inequities (Bejarano et al., 2019; Kolankiewicz et al., 2024). Feminist methodology has been central to the challenge of hegemonic hierarchical power structures generally and also within ethnography; crucially, by challenging the idea of the objective and rational observer-researcher (Stacey, 1988).

After the Foucault-inspired volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), anthropology and ethnography embarked upon a 'reflexive turn'. This turn contested the idea of objectivity and rationality to instead emphasise the importance of recognising the researcher's situatedness and active involvement in the production of knowledge (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Kaur & Klinkert, 2021). Ethnography opens up the opportunity to produce engaged, sensitive, and even political research that addresses the realities of daily life in local contexts. These realities may not be listened to by majority worlds and social theory may not be able to tackle them due to their heterogeneity and contextual composition (Göransson, 2019; Rajan, 2017, 2021). As Kaushik Sunder Rajan (2021) summarises '[E]thnography is a practice that is suited to intimate, experience-proximal observation and interpretation, yet it increasingly tackles and theorises problems of global scale and complexity.' (p. 1)

Ethnography, by enabling an 'intimate' relationship and collaborations with interlocutors, can be a political approach to be used in conjunction with struggles for representation and resources. Rajan (2021), for instance, begins his book by stating that, when combined with a decolonial approach, it may be possible to generate instruments of power that can be placed in the hands of local communities, optimally allowing them to produce knowledge about themselves, for themselves. Thus, Bejarano and colleagues (2019) suggest that we see ethnography as a critical tool for understanding and addressing social inequalities. By engaging deeply with lived experiences, ethnography can articulate complex social conditions whilst also serving as a form of advocacy in the pursuit of social justice.

Inspired by Hill Collins (2009), I see a feminist ethnographic approach as an entry point into exploring relations of power that – in the study of cannabis in Argentina – concern hegemonic drug discourses and intersecting socioeconomic inequalities. I strive to work within the framework of an ethics of care, in which moral obligations are heightened by the personal relationships

that researchers develop with their interlocutors (Madison, 2020; Stacey, 1988). I am particularly concerned about learning from experience, which can help us to understand the wider social inequalities at play in relation to the issues at the heart of my study. I focus on the importance of building a rapport and relationship with participants in order to work together to guide research that is founded upon ethical principles of mutual respect and the recognition of potential power biases and incongruent conditions between interlocutors and researcher.

The senses have become increasingly central to ethnographic inquiry, not least mine, in offering deeper insights into the lived experiences of research participants (Pink, 2015). Working with the cannabis plant is not merely a technical practice, it is an immersive sensory engagement that intertwines sight, sound, smell, touch, and atmosphere, shaping how cultivators and users relate to it (Machado-Borges, 2012; Palumbo, 2025). For example, I was invited into lush expanses of green, where cannabis plants stood in various stages of life: some in their infancy, delicate and fragile, while others were robust, with sprawling leaves and intricate buds. These plants, which varied in type, colour, and size, stretched across spaces dedicated to their growth and care. The constant hum of the artificial lights that bathed them in an almost surreal glow, working to nourish the plants as they matured. The potent aroma of cannabis was omnipresent, saturating the air and marking nearly every space I entered. It clung to fabric, seeped into walls, and settled over me in a way that made it impossible to ignore. The plumes of smoke from cannabis cigarettes drifted through the air, adding to the sensory landscape of these settings, while the plant itself was elevated beyond mere cultivation, becoming a symbol of healing, ritual, and interconnectedness. In some instances, irrigation systems provided conditions allowing for a humid environment, creating an atmosphere that was not only rich with scent but thick with moisture, reinforcing the impression that these spaces were carefully engineered ecosystems designed to optimise the plants' development.

Beyond the botanical and environmental elements, my fieldwork experience was shaped by the places and moods in which these interactions unfolded. At times, I was welcomed into cosy, sunlit rooms, where soft cushions and the warmth of natural light generated an ambiance of relaxation and openness. In these moments, conversations flowed, reflecting a connection between the

space, the people, and the plant itself. In contrast, other encounters took place in controlled indoor environments, where cultivators adjusted temperature, light, and humidity to cultivate optimal growing conditions. In these enclosed spaces, the relationship between human and plant became more technical, yet still deeply personal; an exchange of care, knowledge, and dedication. These sensory elements shaped not only the physical experience of engaging with the cannabis plant but also the emotional and social dynamics surrounding it. The plant was not just something to be grown or consumed – it was something alive to be felt, experienced, and lived with, weaving itself into the rhythms of daily existence in multifaceted ways (Karlsson, 2022; Virtanen & Apurinã, 2024).

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Rajan (2021) explains that his perspective as an anthropologist is influenced by his experiences of various borders. These include those he faced when growing up, those encountered during his career in the western world, as well as borders in relation to the field in which he works. Rajan (2021) refers to these borders as diasporic spaces that '[shuttle] back and forth between different locales and commitments' (p. 21). Rajan (2021) reflects upon these multiple worlds that he inhabits as a critical researcher, such as the disciplinary, his relationship to the past and present, and not the least his relationship to the field.

What it means to be a researcher who navigates other worlds from an outsider's perspective, and the extent to which one can be an insider are important questions that concern critical researchers' reflexive practices (Narayan, 2014). The dilemma of the outsider-researcher and the insider-subject does not adequately reflect the reality of researchers, who must perpetually navigate multiple worlds and relationships to their field(s) (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016). The notion of the insider/outsider also applies to how interlocutors may be situated by the researcher (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Sandra Meike Bucerius (2013) suggests that it is precisely in the in-between spaces that critical research lies. Alejandro De Oto (2017) refers to these spaces as *lineas de fuga* (lines of flight), the spaces through which the researcher connects with other experiences.

While I write from the Global North, I have a lifelong connection with Latin America, being half-English and half-Bolivian. As a child, I lived in Bolivia

for many years and later, as an adult, I lived in the southern part of Argentina. Furthermore, I grew up speaking Spanish and Portuguese with my mother and her side of the family. As an activist, I have worked previously with feminist and gender-focused topics regarding sex-work in Argentina, where issues of oppression, gender, and the body were strongly present (Thompson, 2017). Following social anthropologist Kirin Narayan (2014) in her argument on hybridity in the field, my personal location creates a space of outsider/within in relation to Argentina and the topic of my thesis' research.

## Working with Drugs

Legislative categorisations of drugs in Argentina position them as being for either medicinal or recreational purposes. This frames them in opposition to one another as medicinal use is deemed acceptable, while recreational use is considered unacceptable. Although the initial focus of my study was on medicinal cannabis users, the snowball sampling method led me to include other user groups, such as recreational, adult, and therapeutic users.

My access to research participants was primarily limited to people who were publicly involved in cannabis culture, and often directly linked to activism. Activism requires one to possess the necessary resources to navigate potential issues arising from the visibility of one's involvement in an illegal activity. Consequently, those most targeted by war-on-drugs policies – often those who do not take part in activist spheres, their organisation, or capacities to formulate political demands – fell outside the scope of those I interviewed.

Nevertheless, a proportion of those involved in my research had experienced police violence. I became aware of these cases because the cannabis movement, which provided support and resources, drew my attention to these specific experiences. Many of these people were mothers or patients who were using cannabis for medicinal purposes, garnering public sympathy and challenging dominant perceptions of cannabis users. Accessing users who had been jailed for reasons other than medicinal use proved more difficult. However, I managed to speak with a few people who had been charged for carrying or growing cannabis for non-medicinal purposes.

Studying cannabis has required some manoeuvring in various respects. Due to the level of legal recognition of cannabis in Argentinian society, being identified as 'somebody researching drugs' often meant that both researchers (even in feminist contexts in Sweden and abroad) and people on the ground in Argentina assumed that I was a 'user'. The sharing of a cannabis cigarette is a social ritual and a way of offering hospitality and it was therefore a sensitive situation for me to navigate. I would often bring out the form of e-cigarettes I smoke, to 'keep them company'. Interlocutors were sometimes curious about this type of cigarette and how it worked, which often led to conversations about smoking in general. Whilst there were some uncomfortable situations, where I felt awkward, I was mostly met with a very relaxed, understanding, and laid-back approach without judgement, or at least that is how it felt to me.

James Davies (2010) discusses the dissonance experienced by researchers during the process of entering the field, which can be disorienting. Part of this transition involves emotions such as discomfort, which contribute to the development of a deeper understanding of the field. After returning from fieldwork, I reflected upon my initial sense of awkwardness and recognised that it stemmed from the transition from a strictly prohibitionist environment in Sweden (see the Narcotics Penal Code 1968:64) (Regeringskansliet, 2015) to one where cannabis was fully integrated into the daily lives of my interlocutors.

A significant factor contributing to my discomfort was the disparity between my expectations and the realities of the field. I had not anticipated encountering recreational cannabis spaces, which initially provoked discomfort as I navigated unfamiliar environments, uncertain of what to expect. While I did not hold any explicit prejudice against cannabis, I was nonetheless subtly influenced by stereotypes regarding typical cannabis users: perhaps individuals perceived as coasting through life. Yet, through continued engagement, I found these preconceived notions being consistently challenged. What began as discomfort gradually transformed into a sense of familiarity with the broader movement. My initial discomfort with recreational cannabis led me towards an exploration of how my interlocutors challenge prohibitionist regimes by navigating the world as cannabis users.

Whilst drugs are often referred to in academia and beyond as a controversial and risky area of study, the environments I visited were often laid back,

involving big couches, a *mate*, and a comfortable atmosphere that often made me feel safe. Whilst using cannabis is still illegal for those not holding a licence, the police in Buenos Aires (at least during my fieldwork) took a somewhat relaxed approach to such activities, even though there were some cases of arrests and harassment. Nevertheless, I did not become involved in any activities other than speaking with interlocutors for my study of cannabis as a plant in a community, thus ensuring that I was functioning within the law.

## Exploring the Field

Fieldwork is significant to ethnography as a method because it provides both cognitive and non-cognitive data through the exploration of experiences within social structures of power (Atkinson et al., 2000). To this end, I applied a range of ethnographic techniques, such as interviews, observations, conversations, participatory observations, and analysing material obtained at meetings, events, and online through websites and social media (Madison, 2020; O'Reilly, 2015).

Just before the pandemic, in 2019, I conducted an initial phase of fieldwork in Santa Maria, a small town in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil. During this time, I interviewed women who had recently been released from prison on drug charges, as well as activists, social workers working in prisons, and academics. Those I spoke with shared first-hand experiences of Brazil's criminal justice system, exposing the realities of incarceration, systemic inequalities, and the broader consequences of prohibitionist policies.

Santa Maria was particularly relevant for my thesis due to its position along a major drug trafficking route that extends through Brazil and Paraguay. This geographical factor has contributed to rising incarceration rates for drug-related charges, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Many of the discussions I had in Brazil, it would later turn out, resonated with those I encountered in Argentina, where cannabis users similarly criticised punitive drug policies. These conversations revealed how drug laws often fail to dismantle organised trafficking networks, instead criminalising users, many of whom come from marginalised backgrounds. Rather than addressing the societal root causes of illicit drug economies, prohibitionist frameworks

frequently serve as mechanisms of social control, exacerbating inequalities rather than reducing drug-related harms.

The women I spoke with in Brazil illustrated how drug-related incarceration extends beyond individual punishment, affecting families and whole communities by perpetuating cycles of economic hardship, social stigma, and legal exclusion. Many struggled with reintegration after release, facing barriers to employment, housing, and social support due to their criminal records. These systemic challenges are further compounded by economic policies that neglect rehabilitation, favouring punitive approaches over harm-reduction strategies.

The insights I gained from both Brazil and Argentina revealed critical intersections between drug prohibition, incarceration, economic inequality, and social exclusion. As I examined these dynamics across different contexts, it became clear throughout my research that prohibitionist drug laws do not effectively curtail trafficking but instead reinforce existing hierarchies of power, disproportionately targeting users rather than dismantling the networks of those who profit from the illicit industry. The material from this collection provided a strong foundation for my entry into the field in Argentina, where the focus of this thesis shifted to the cannabis plant and the activism that emerged in resistance to punitive drug policies.

## Collecting Data

The pandemic surprised us all and a concern at the time was how research would have to adapt to the inability to travel and conduct fieldwork (Paupini et al., 2022). However, this turned out to be less of a problem than I had initially feared. Online activism had already been important in expanding the Argentine cannabis movement's ability to reach audiences and exchange information, both nationally and internationally. During the pandemic, the cannabis movement could do nothing but shift to online activities. This increased the ease of access for me as a researcher, and throughout the epidemic it provided opportunities for carrying out interviews and observations online (Forberg & Schilt, 2023, Pink et al., 2016). Therefore, for the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, my fieldwork transferred online. During this time, I carried out

interviews and attended various online courses and workshops and was also invited to organisation meetings. Social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, served as critical resources to understand how these organisations frame their activism and disseminate knowledge (Pink et al., 2016).

The mothers' organisation in Buenos Aires, Mama Cultiva, which I introduced briefly in the Introduction to this thesis, piqued my interest as it had been at the forefront of a movement that had managed to push for a reconsideration of cannabis drug laws. Entering the field through Mama Cultiva was different to what I had imagined. When contacting the movement, I was immediately referred to patients suffering from chronic pain. This initially confused me until I realised that the organisation was largely populated by those suffering from chronic illnesses. As the fieldwork progressed, I established contacts with other forms of medicinal organisations that were not necessarily led by mothers, but also by cultivators. However, Mama Cultiva became an entry point into the study of cannabis, the plant, and the culture by which it is surrounded.

Organisations with a medicinal focus have a disproportionate number of women among their organisers and users. However, this is not the case among cannabis users and activists from the more established recreational/adult use movement. Here, the majority are men. Following the direction of my fieldwork, the scope of my study expanded from talking with medicinal cannabis users and organisers to contacting activists from the recreational/adult cannabis movement. It was these earlier cannabis activists who, in diverse ways, had provided the foundation which spurred the medicinal movement. These forms of activism and movements became important entry points for my thesis research.

In 2021, I interviewed one of the organisers of Mama Cultiva, who then referred me on to others who would be interested in talking to me. In this way, I began carrying out digital ethnographic fieldwork with online interviews, which continued to take place for three years throughout 2021–2024. The first instance of onsite fieldwork that I was able to carry out lasted for ten weeks in Buenos Aires at the end of 2022. The people I had interviewed during the pandemic provided me with further contacts among mothers, pain patients, and 'experts'. The latter included academics, lawyers, and health professionals working within and together with social movements. In 2024, I carried out a

second period of onsite fieldwork lasting for four weeks, again in Buenos Aires. Interviewees in 2024 included previous interlocutors and new contacts, whom I had identified through social media or by referrals. The shortest interviews lasted about thirty minutes, with others sometimes expanding into taking a whole afternoon. Interviews took place in cafés, offices, homes, and online both from Sweden and during onsite fieldwork.

To ensure that I could depict the interviewees' arguments as accurately as possible, I recorded all the interviews in Spanish with the permission of participants. The recordings were then stored safely and transcribed verbatim. All quotations appearing in my thesis, I thus have translated from Spanish into English. In total, I conducted 43 interviews, with 21 women and 21 men.[13] All names have been changed to protect the interviewees' identities. I conducted 25 interviews with people who are cannabis users and cultivators for a variety of types of uses, including medicinal, as well as independent/family cultivators, and organisations. The remaining interviews were with professionals, such as lawyers, government workers, and researchers.

Below is a list of participants with their aliases and main activities/roles related to cannabis. In addition, I have indicated whether the interviews were conducted online or in person. As shown, there are as many online interviews as those in person because, after the COVID-19 pandemic, online communication was increasingly seen as more convenient, even when I was in Buenos Aires. This confidence with digital ethnography allowed me to continue conducting interviews after I had returned to Sweden, gathering more data than I would have been able to otherwise (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Pink et al., 2016).

[13] The number of interviews includes repeat interviews and groups, which means that the numbers of men/women and the total number of interviews do not coincide.

| Interviewees | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Alias** | **Description** | **Online/In person** |
| Agustin | Film maker | In person |
| Alfredo | Doctor | In person |
| Alma | Mother cultivator | Online |
| Angela | Cultivator and first activist to be able to sell clones | In person |
| Antonio | Public servant | In person |
| Astrid | Doctor, public health | In person |
| Ayelen and Roberto | Asociación Cultural cannaclub | In person |
| Belen | Organisation leader – cultivators | Online |
| Benjamin | Researcher | In person |
| Blanca | Mother of a child with a disability | Online |
| Carla | Grower | Online |
| Carlos | Grower and activist | In person |
| Carolina | Organisation leader – HIV | Online |
| Cecilia | Doctor | Online |
| Clara | Organisation leader – mothers' movements | Online |
| Daniel | Grower and activist | In person |
| Debora | Mother of a child with a disability | Online |
| Diego | Lawyer owner of a cannabis social club | In person |
| Elena | Organisation leader – mothers' movements | Online |
| Eva | Activist and cultivator | In person |
| Felipe | Grower and user of medicinal cannabis | In person |
| Frida | Grower with chronic pain | Online |
| Guillermo | Journalist | In person |
| Isabella | Lawyer and activist | Online |
| Julian | Grower with HIV | Online |
| Lautaro | Organisation leader – technology and innovations | Online |
| Lucas | Cannabis doctor | Online |

| Alias | Description | Online/In person |
|---|---|---|
| Luz | Grower and activist | Online |
| Maria | Mother of a child with a disability and cannabis entrepreneur | Online |
| Mariela | Doctor, public health | In person |
| Mateo | Journalist | In person |
| Nicolas | Lawyer and activist | In person |
| Ramiro and Joaquin | Growers | In person |
| Rita | Woman cultivating for her grandchild | In person |
| Rosa | Organisation leader – - grower feminist movement | Online |
| Santiago | Researcher | In person |
| Santino | Journalist | In person |
| Sergio, Juan, and Alberto | Cultivators and cannabis business owners | Online |

I conducted in-depth interviews to allow my interlocutors the opportunity to express their ideas and concerns with minimal intervention (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This approach ensured that interviewees' voices were not constrained by the limitations of predetermined questions. At the beginning of the interview, I outlined three main points: firstly, the interviewees' relationship to the cannabis plant; secondly, their experience with medicinal cannabis; and, thirdly, what they thought about current regulations and whether those regulations could be improved. I made sure to outline these three points at the beginning of each conversation just as a guide and a point of departure for the interview. I expected that this would give my interviewees freedom to talk whilst feeling secure in being able to go back to the points outlined at the outset. This worked quite well as interlocutors would quickly venture into their own areas of interest and would come back to these three points whenever they felt it was relevant to the discussion. The different focuses that arose during our conversations then guided my analysis (Kamlongera & Katenga-Kaunda, 2023).

I mostly took notes after conducting the interviews, and the same holds for notes of my participatory observations. Ethnographic methods entail intimate encounters and interactions with research participants in specific contexts and

the developing of nurturing relationships (Rydstrom, 2003, 2012). In my encounters and interactions with those involved in my research, I found that, without the intervention of my notepad, interlocutors were more responsive and relaxed around me. Therefore, notes made after encounters were important, and often included impressions, feelings, and anything else that stood out. I have used these notes as a way of contextualising conversations when analysing the data. As Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie (2010) argue, 'a recording is never comprehensive, there will always be "blind spots"' (p. 36). Therefore, notes jotted down during and after can help to remind one of the circumstances around the interview and the non-verbal cues that might provide a better understanding of the point of analysis.

I conducted participatory observations at various events, including online and in-person seminars, postgraduate courses, introductory cultivation workshops, and grow shops, among others. I deemed such participatory observations important to enable me to situate the interviews within a social context, to learn the jargon, and gain a further understanding of the main debates highlighted by the cannabis community. One such observation took place at an association called Cannaclub, which invited me to observe their interview process for potential new members. When I arrived, they did not initially mention that an interview would take place, instead informing me that they were expecting a visitor.

I was therefore caught by surprise when they began explaining the membership process to the visitor. The association was very clear that all prospective members were vetted before being allowed to join. Most importantly, they emphasised that new applicants had to be recommended and accompanied to the interview by an existing member. The interview, with both the member and prospective member participating, was less of a formal process with set questions and more of a discussion. They explained that this approach helped them assess whether the individual was trustworthy and would fit into the membership group.

This vetting process was significant because the association organised *asados* (barbecues) and other events aimed at fostering camaraderie and friendship among members. They shared examples of instances where members had misbehaved, leading to the revocation of their memberships. Respect, they emphasised, was one of the fundamental conditions for

membership of their organisation. Both during and after this observation, I grappled with the decision about whether or not to include these details in my thesis. The association was very open and clear that it did not engage in any illegal activities, a stance supported by a court case it had undergone and won. Ultimately, my interlocutors clarified what I could and could not mention in my thesis, and I have respected and remained loyal to their requests (Madison, 2020; Pink, 2015).

Similarly, the power relations among my interlocutors were central to my understanding of the field. For instance, a lawyer I spoke to became defensive when I mentioned the issues around the regulation for the registration of medicinal cannabis users. This lawyer, whilst not directly being a medicinal user, saw the regulation in terms of the intention behind it, dismissing, to a certain extent, the issues that had arisen with the implementation of the registration system. In contrast, medicinal users identified the fractures in the regulation's implementation, particularly how it overlooked users' varying abilities to access the necessary resources for compliance. These dynamics underscore the importance of examining the intersection of power, perspective, and accessibility in regulatory frameworks.

This circumstance also highlights the dynamics of power relations, both between me as the researcher and my interlocutors and among my research participants themselves. Within the interview format, the researcher has the power to decide which questions are asked and how the interview will progress (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In this case, my question about the limitations of the regulation revealed how a researcher can unintentionally provoke a defensive response, placing the person approached in a position where they feel compelled to justify their own stance. This experience taught me to be careful when phrasing my questions, tailoring them to the person I was speaking with, which was crucial for enabling open discussions with interlocutors holding differing perspectives – in this case, on the regulation of cannabis – and, by extension, building rapport.

As I explored the field, it became increasingly clear to me how central the cannabis plant was to my interlocutors and how deeply connected they felt to the plant as a living organism with specific qualities and properties. Consequently, a significant part of my fieldwork and data collection came to focus on participants' relationship with the plant and the ways in which they

assigned it agency and an ontology in its own right. Throughout my fieldwork, I often found myself engaged in discussions about the cannabis plants around us; conversations about strains and their effects, cultivation practices, and the specific conditions required for the plant to thrive. The cannabis plant, it increasingly became clear to me, was portrayed as something that provides for and cares for its cultivators, as well as for those who consume its products. Therefore, observing the cannabis plant, its growing conditions, and its processing became central to the discussions I had with my interlocutors as well as the analysis in this thesis.

Finally, during my fieldwork, I collected a variety of materials from interlocutors and through participatory observations, including the membership contract used by the Cannaclub association. The collection of images, magazines, social media posts, and other documents was largely facilitated by my interlocutors, who shared materials they deemed relevant to my project. As a result, my document analysis has been primarily guided by those who participated in my research project.

The analysis stage involved an initial review and categorisation of all the documentation I had gathered throughout my fieldwork. This process was crucial for organising the information collected and structuring the subsequent analysis. The recordings were transcribed using voice recognition software, which facilitated memory recall as well as enabling early identification of the main themes and concepts within the data (Mikkelsen, 2005). To bring out these main themes, I examined the patterns and contradictions presented by my interlocutors, seeking connections across different narratives and experiences. This phase required careful attention to recurring ideas, disparities in perspectives, and the underlying assumptions embedded in the discourse surrounding cannabis.

Through an ongoing dialogue between data and theory, I identified three central themes: the cannabis plant, cannabis culture, and medicinal cannabis. These themes emerged through continuous engagement with the material, reflecting both the social significance of cannabis and the diverse ways in which its use, regulation, and cultural meanings are negotiated. The theme of the cannabis plant focuses on cannabis as both a botanical entity and a symbol within social movements. Examining its classification, cultivation, and the ways in which it is discussed by various actors reveals broad tensions between

regulation and resistance. Cannabis culture then focuses on discussions of how cannabis use is deeply embedded within distinct social and cultural networks. The discourse surrounding cannabis communities, user identity, and shared practices underscores how social belonging is constructed through moral, political, and ideological lenses. Finally, medicinal cannabis explored cannabis framed medically and how this has led to changes in its legal and social status. Through narratives of therapeutic use, the positioning of cannabis as medicine challenges prohibitionist policies while reshaping the broader conversation around drug regulation and harm reduction.

The research, in this case, has not been linear but rather operated as a dynamic, iterative-inductive process, where my interpretation evolved through cycles of data collection, analysis, reading, thinking, and writing (O'Reilly, 2012). This approach enabled greater flexibility in exploring emerging themes, ensuring that key insights were developed in response to the complexities presented through participants' lived experience. Moreover, this iterative engagement reinforced the importance of reflexivity – recognising how my position as a researcher shaped the interactions and interpretations that emerged throughout the study (Skeggs, 2001).

Constantly shifting between empirical material, theoretical perspectives, and historical contexts allowed for a nuanced understanding of cannabis policy, community dynamics, and the broader implications of drug regulation. The analysis stage was not merely about classification but also about uncovering the deeper social, political, and economic structures that influence cannabis-related discourse and policy. This fluid engagement between data and theory ensured that the research remained open to multiple interpretations and evolving perspectives, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of cannabis within its sociopolitical landscape.

Interpreting my data and choosing the focus for my analysis has been a challenging and difficult process. On the one hand, I wanted to work near the interviews, showing solidarity with the difficulties people encounter and the courage they demonstrate in their daily lives. On the other hand, the more I listened to the recordings and read my transcripts, the more the tensions and fractures within the cannabis community became evident, as I highlight in the chapters to come.

# Ethics

This research project has been approved by the Swedish Ethics Board (Etikprövningsmyndigheten – approval number 2022-02768-01), ensuring that the benefits and risks were thoroughly evaluated. The ethical review concluded that the project does not entail physical risks, while psychological risks were deemed minor (Iphofen, 2021). Consideration was given to the nature of the interviews and the potential discomfort that open-ended questions might provoke, given that cannabis consumption remains criminalised under the Argentine Penal Code (23737). As emphasised by the Association of Social Anthropologists (2012), it is essential to consider the well-being of research participants and to ensure that research does no harm. Therefore, making sure that they were not placed in any legal jeopardy in Argentina has been a critical ethical responsibility.

To address this discomfort, participants were informed that they were not required to disclose any information they found uncomfortable. Additionally, they were assured of their right to withdraw from the research – either partially or entirely – at any point during the interviews or afterwards without any implications for those involved (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024). In line with the GDPR regulations, all interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality throughout the research process to protect any potentially sensitive data that may be related to my study (Integritetsskyddsmyndigheten, 2025). Data was encrypted, separated from the key codes (i.e. pseudonyms), password protected, and securely stored within a safe at Lund University, to which only I, as the main researcher, had access (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024). Research participants were invited to reach out with any concerns or reflections regarding their participation. While the project deals with a controversial topic, active listening techniques allowed participants to discuss delicate matters within a space that I strived to make safe. As a critical analysis, my study may involve exposing power dynamics, which can be uncomfortable both for those in positions of power and those in subordinate roles, and sometimes even for the ethnographer (Iphofen, 2021).

Overall, by maintaining transparency about the project's purpose, carefully managing the data, and taking robust measures to anonymise participants, it has been possible to contribute new knowledge about an understudied topic. In

addition, participants were given the opportunity to reflect upon key societal issues, their worldview, and their identity without being studied as 'drug abusers'.

## Concluding Reflections

This chapter has highlighted the transformative potential of decolonial feminist theory and critical ethnography. I argue that epistemological humility, reflexivity, and the recognition of plural knowledges can challenge hegemonic structures that marginalise populations (hooks, 1989; Skeggs, 2001). I have engaged with concepts such as intersectionality and situated knowledges in order to centre the voices of those involved in my study (Crenshaw, 1991; Haraway, 1988). Thus, I suggest that ethnography can serve as a tool for empowerment and social justice, emphasising solidarity, ethics, and political praxis.

Inspired by the tradition of feminist ethnography, I have discussed my endeavours to examine a variety of voices, many of whom challenge hegemonic discourses around cannabis, which has historically been classified as a dangerous drug posing harm to users and communities (Campbell & Herzberg, 2017; Lather, 2002; Skeggs, 2001). In doing so, I have aimed to offer alternative, bottom-up perspectives, bringing these to the forefront of my study by drawing upon ethnographic research methods and fieldwork conducted among people experiencing marginalisation due to their cannabis use, often compounded by socioeconomic vulnerability (Madison, 2020; O'Reilly, 2012). Through interviews, participatory observations, and critical reflections, I have strived to amplify their perspectives and provide an analysis of cannabis production and use, cannabis plant epistemologies and ontologies, and cannabis advocacy in contemporary Argentinian society. In my study, I have navigated the complex terrain of drug use by centring the lived experiences and perspectives of users and cultivators, revealing how they manoeuvre as active agents within a sociocultural realm defined by the cannabis plant.

# Chapter 5: The Plant, its Use and Gender

> The bond with marijuana in particular is millennia old and ancestral because the knowledges that were particularly acquired by women were passed on from generations to generation, and then, in the last 200 years where there is prohibition, this stigma. (Ayelen, user and cannabis association leader)

During my fieldwork, a frequent topic of discussion was 'the plant', which was spoken of as a more-than-human organism with its own ontology and able to interact with human beings in multiple ways. The cannabis plant emerged as a materiality of epistemologies, including being a source of inspiration and healing, a form of experiencing pleasure, or an object that could provide economic gain. The connection to nature that they gained through interactions with the plant was considered by many of my interlocutors to be the cornerstone of their activism. The plant, as I show in this chapter, emerges as a subject capable of interacting and transforming the social world. This relationship with the cannabis plant dates back millennia and has been constantly transforming due to the context in which it is embedded. In this chapter, I explore how the cannabis plant is configured to influence wider communitarian practices and values revolving around it. I discuss how the plant is credited with character and emotional intelligence and imbued with identity as an interacting entity that influences the shaping of the cannabis community. Relationships of care with the plant are developed through cultivation, which brings people closer to the benefits that nature is thought to offer.

Cannabis use is intertwined with gendered norms and identities, influencing how men and women interact with the plant and the spaces in which they consume it. Unlike other substances, cannabis enables a subtle negotiation of femininities and masculinities, as reflected in its cultural feminisation: it is

usually referred to as *ella,* meaning 'she', and ascribed nurturing and caring attributes. While men often occupy public spaces, engaging in visible forms of cannabis use and cultivation, women tend to navigate private spheres, frequently framing their use through therapeutic and medicinal lenses. These gendered dynamics reflect broader societal expectations regarding risk, pleasure, and respectability, revealing that women face heightened moral scrutiny for engaging in the recreational use of cannabis.

The emergence of medicinal cannabis activism in 2015, led primarily by mothers advocating for their children's health, marked a significant shift in the visibility of female cannabis users. By positioning care and healing at the forefront of legalisation efforts, these women leveraged historical feminist movements to challenge the legal restrictions and reshape public perceptions of cannabis consumption.[14]

The last section of this chapter discusses the gendered nature of the cannabis movement as related to the plant. It highlights how gendered norms shape consumption patterns, participation in cannabis industries, and the wider discourse surrounding pleasure and deviance. The association of cannabis with femininity and caregiving contrasts with the masculine-coded risk-taking aspects of drug use. Meanwhile, women participating in cannabis culture must navigate patriarchal structures both within and outside cannabis spaces. It is particularly striking that women are often pushed to justify their use in therapeutic terms while men dominate the public sphere of cannabis cultivation, commerce, and activism. These observations about how women provide the backbone of care and labour in the industry, often going unrecognised, echo wider gender inequalities across many sectors in Argentina. The emergence of feminist cannabis associations demonstrates how women are challenging these norms and carving out their own spaces within the culture. It is a reminder of how gender intersects with social movements and the cannabis communities.

[14] Their activism mirrors Argentina's longstanding tradition of maternal resistance, drawing parallels with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who mobilised to demand justice for their disappeared children during the Dirty War (1976–1983).

# The Plant

*Figure 1:Cannabis flower, or 'cogollo/bud'.*[15]

Participants in my study often highlighted the millennia-old relationship between humans and the cannabis plant. Proof of use has been found, many of them argue, that date back millennia indicating that, up until the early 19th century, cannabis was being used as medicine in various cultures (Giraudo, 2020). The encounter of the plant with prohibition imposed by nation states, I was told, changes social relations with the plant because it is turned into a dangerous drug that needs to be controlled and kept away from susceptible hegemonic populations.

Perhaps because the great majority of my research participants were based in the city of Buenos Aires, the plant was seen as ensuring a connection to nature and, furthermore, creating a sense of community within an overpopulated urban centre often experienced as an anonymous space. This connection with nature, I learned, is perceived as significant and as having been lost in today's world, even though their conceptualisation of the plant challenges ideas about nature being a separate entity. When they spoke of nature, they were referring to the environment, ecology, and closeness to the soil and madre tierra (mother earth) as they sought to develop quality spaces

[15] Image from fieldwork (by Lucia Amaranta Thompson).

through human engagement with plants – specifically with the cannabis plant. They stressed the importance of such a connection to bring out certain human dimensions that might otherwise be lost when we become distanced from other organisms. This is the backdrop against which my interlocutors were fighting for social justice for those cultivating and using cannabis (Giraudo, 2020). For instance, Clara, a representative of a mothers' organisation, explained:

> In our urban, middle-class context, putting our hands in the earth is something that we've lost, we weren't taught […] and that does us and others good […] but it has to do with thinking of a horizon of social justice.

This is the spirit in which plants are grown on balconies across the city as well as in gardens, spare bathrooms, and closets – or any indoor space that allows for the growing of cannabis (i.e., a controlled environment).[16] The fact that the plant can thrive in virtually any space within the home means that any type of user can grow their own cannabis and control the substance they ingest. This is preferable to having to resort to the illegal drug market, which gives no guarantee of a good product and can be fraught with dangers (Fusero, 2015). My research participants kept emphasising to me that home cultivation means that the plants are grown under safe and healthy conditions and the product to be consumed is of good quality. Similarly to Díaz' (2020a) findings, during my fieldwork people told me how the cultivation of cannabis has meant that they have developed a relationship with a living organism based on caring for the plant and a sense of wonder about the capacities of that plant.[17] For instance, Luz, a medicinal cannabis user, activist, and cultivator, told me that the plant selflessly returns love by giving so plentifully:

> Cannabis also teaches us [about] sharing […] from a place of solidarity […]. I feel that she [i.e., the plant] is like that. I get emotional [because] the plant is very loyal […]. You give it a little love and it returns so many things, and that's

[16] By controlled environments, I am referring to indoor grows in which temperature and lighting, among other things, are regulated to provide the best conditions for cannabis plants to survive.

[17] The time invested in caring for the plant is significant and involves year-round nurturing to get from seed to plant.

> what moves me […]. I think that the only queen here, the only magic, always comes from cannabis, the plant.

Cultivating is appreciated by cultivators and users as a natural and peaceful practice that becomes a way of life and living. By speaking of the plant as a 'queen' and 'magic', Luz evokes the ontology of cannabis as feminine and its mystical essence, which for her comes in the form of an exchange of loving energy. The plant's feminine qualities are associated with peacefulness and relaxation. My experience in the field with cannabis users often did involve relaxed milieus in which we warmed into different conversations. Cultivators, users, and/or activists in different areas generally took a humble and laid-back approach. Their success, they often told me, was because of the plant.

As Maria Cecilia Díaz (2020a) also found in her study, people spoke of the plant with admiration and appreciation, not just for what it provides but also as an aesthetically beautiful part of our environment. In this way, Luz was assigning the plant an identity and personality, as do the multiple characterisations of the plant, as illustrated below.


18 19 20 21

*Figure 2: The Marijuana leaf as happy, peaceful, spiritual, and rebellious.*

The above images, which I found online, illustrate various forms in which cannabis is depicted. I read them as images of the ways in which the marijuana leaf is appreciated as a symbol that pervades a community, binding it together through assumptions about the plant's character and the properties with which

[18] Designed by HitToon.

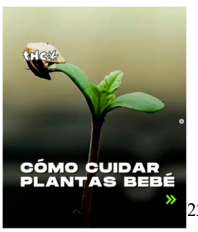
[19] https://www.instagram.com/p/CUFCwZNv3bG/

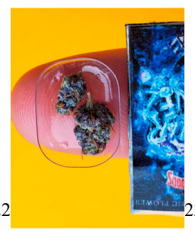
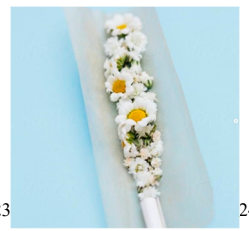
[20] https://www.instagram.com/p/C3LEP9wqLTT/?img_index=5

[21] Image taken from: https://fineartamerica.com/featured/1-stoned-cannabis-leaf-weed-smoking-cartoon-mister-tee.html?phoneCaseType=iphone13

it is associated, such as friendliness, happiness, peacefulness, spirituality, and a rebellious nature (Gabriel, 2019). Beyond the traditional and transgressive symbolism of the marijuana leaf, images of cannabis evoke different aspects of cannabis culture and its varied capacities.

Some depictions, closely related to medicinal and therapeutic consumption, link the plant to earth and nature (Asquith, 2021). The pictures below, from a cannabis magazine, *THC's*, Instagram, show the nature of the seedling and flower. The third image uses daisies to represent the cannabis flower as it is gently laid out in rolling paper, positioning the cannabis plant in the category of garden flowers. Furthermore, the paper cradling the flowers and the colours bring in a feminine touch, which indicates the feminine nature of the plant. These images convey information about the plant's calming, creative, and therapeutic effects, as argued by Kyle Asquith (2021), who suggests that such images, which are shown on Instagram, for instance, attempt to make wider populations think of cannabis as an uncontroversial part of our everyday lives. In the last image, the well-groomed bud is presented in a scientific manner, zooming in to show the intricacies and beauty of this flower that is subtly associated with pleasure (Ekendahl et al., 2020).



[22]

[23]

[24]

[25]

*Figure 3: Representations of the plant that link it to the softness of nature.*

As introductions to the plant range into the recreational, the focus becomes large plants and flowers and elaborate cannabis cigarettes. In the first image below (both images are from Instagram), we see an indoor grow with many

[22] https://www.instagram.com/p/DATlrXRtV21/?img_index=1

[23] https://www.instagram.com/p/C_DpJwWv4g3/?img_index=1

[24] https://www.instagram.com/p/C-2qSGwP6Nn/

[25] https://www.instagram.com/p/DATlrXRtV21/?img_index=1

plants in the flowering stage (probably almost at the point of harvest).[26] The indoor space is well equipped, which demonstrates a level of professionalism (Asquith, 2021).

*Figure 4: A room full of cannabis plants flowering* [27]

*Figure 5: An artisanal cannabis cigarette made with cannabis flowers, hash, and resin (the black resin outside the cigarette). In fact, even the paper is infused with cannabis.*[28]

The second image, from a cultivator's Instagram account, shows an artisanal joint created by an artist, HernanArk, based in Buenos Aires. This joint is made entirely from cannabis, including the rolling paper and cannabis resin used for the decoration on the outside. Note that it has a phallic form and its large size, indicated against the hand holding it, signals the cigarette's potency. These representations contest the feminine characterisations of the cannabis plant as

[26] The flower is the part that is smoked. Although most of the rest of the plant can also be smoked, the buds are the most sought after.

[27] Image from fieldwork (by Lucia Amaranta Thompson).

[28] Image provided by artist HernanArk https://www.instagram.com/hernanark/?hl=en

such. The plant has been transformed, and the images are now referring to its use as pleasurable, appealing to the cannabis user, who is not uncommonly a man.

When the cannabis plant is presented as natural, feminine, and peaceful, it appears as demure and soft, which indicates attempts to counter notions of cannabis as dangerous. Conversely, images directed at the recreational cannabis movement openly showcase large quantities of plants and bold, phallic symbols, which may be impactful to outsiders but resonate with people immersed in cannabis cultivation and use in a gender-specific way.

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Most of the people I met who carried out large-scale cultivation or engaged in cannabis businesses began their participation in cannabis production in the late 2000s. These members of the community take a pragmatic approach to the plant, building expertise and using it to participate in the cannabis industry, as described by Carlos, who told me:

> I met an agricultural engineer at the *Rural*[29] working with a very large cultivation in Misiones. He showed me [a picture] of a harvest and told me they have problems with the genetics of those plants. 'No', I told him: 'That's light pollution. You have a clear light that's coming from the left, right there.' That engineer didn't know anything!

Whilst Carlos was focusing on his expertise in this quote, much of our conversation revolved around his perception of the plant as a giving and caring entity – one that had given him so much that he wanted to work with it exclusively. He also told me that his relationship with the plant had provided him with passion, happiness, and tranquillity, feelings he did not experience in any other work situation. This was all due to the plant in his mind.

However, it was not only industrial cultivators who spoke about their technical expertise; others also described the plant as interacting and negotiating with the cultivator to achieve ideal outcomes. Maria, a mother and entrepreneur, told me about her techniques, learned from experienced cultivators to 'fool' the plants into going through various stages of growth at a

[29] An exhibition centre in Buenos Aires.

faster speed than they would when growing in sunlight. She 'fooled the plants' in the following way:

> [A]t six o'clock [in the evening], I'll turn on the light until midnight and *ellas* ['they' referring to the plants in the feminine in Spanish] think that it's still daytime; they grow and grow for a month. I then switch off the light and they begin to flower. It's lovely!

Maria personifies the plant as a being that thrives within an environment controlled by the carer. Caring for the plant is a responsibility that cultivators take very seriously and they engage in researching the best way of nurturing their plants (Díaz, 2020a). When speaking of the medicinal cannabis movement, these techniques and approaches were passed on by '*cultivadores solidarios*' (solidarity cultivators), a term used to refer to user cultivators and their solidarity with medicinal users. As they told me: *dando la cara* (exposing their faces) or *poniendo el cuerpo* (putting the body) into the public eye means confronting and challenging notions of the cannabis user by demonstrating their own 'normality'.

The harvest is referred to as a *regalo de la planta* (gift from the plant), and many spoke of how they could taste the love given to the plant in the produce. The relationship with the plant brings a better quality of life for both the user and the community at large. As Frida, a chronic pain patient, pointed out, the plant has a power that reaches beyond its central effects and using medicinal cannabis involves a relationship of care. In her words:

> We look after the plant […]. If you use it in a specific manner you have to, of course, take care of it […]. It saved me from madness, and I think of the mothers with children who have severe [symptoms]. I get so emotional, because it's a plant and there's nothing more powerful than this plant.

In contrast to user activists, many of the mothers and the sick people with whom I spoke had their first experiences of the cannabis plant when they began to consider it as medicine and to participate in organisations and cultivation (Acosta & Lavagnino, 2022). Whilst some of the interviewees had occasional recreational experiences, others, such as Debora, the mother of a child with a disability, had not even known what a cannabis plant looked like until she found herself in need of learning more about it:

> Look, I didn't know about cannabis […]. I knew the name marijuana, but I didn't even know what the plant looks like […]. I didn't know anything […], not even that cannabis came from the marijuana [plant]. That's how ignorant I was!

A few of my research participants had observed that people approached medicinal cannabis as something different to marijuana, which is generally perceived to be a dangerous drug. Not knowing that 'cannabis came from the marijuana [plant]' was a frequent source of confusion, and people made the assumption that medicinal cannabis is somehow a different substance from marijuana. Many, consequently, thought that it was not addictive but rather beneficial for its users (Duff, 2024).

The solidarity and community-oriented qualities associated with cannabis are attributed to the properties of the plant. These are personified in the sense that the plant is recognised as a living being with agency and part of an interagential relationship with people. The idea of the plant as having its own agency, coming from *la madre tierra*, and providing natural therapies influences the ways in which people relate to both the plant and each other.

## Naming the Plant

Cannabis and marijuana are amongst a range of terminologies used by my research participants. Other expressions, such as *porro*, *faso*, and *churro*, are street terms and used extensively as part of my interlocutors' vernacular. The term cannabis is applied to move away from the negative historical representation of the plant within a prohibitionist context. Within the scientific sphere, cannabis refers to both the plant and its product, which means that it is not only the drug that is included under regulations but also the plant (Riboulet-Zemouli, 2020).[30] This term was used by activists who were more closely related to the medicinal movement, but also in medicinal scientific research, industry, and government policies. The term cannabis is often used to distinguish the plant from its associations with recreational drug use (Duff, 2024). Santino, a journalist, explained that the term marijuana is stigmatised

[30] That the plant itself cannot be prohibited is one of the main arguments of the movement.

and used in xenophobic and racist ways against Mexicans in the United States. Therefore, using the term cannabis instead of marijuana is applied as a strategy to counter the cultural and racial connotations imposed upon the plant in order to suggest a 'scientific' understanding (MacDonald, 2023; Duff, 2024). According to Santino:

> [W]e stopped saying marijuana and instead [began to] use cannabis, because marijuana is associated with drugs, cannabis isn't, it's a new world [in terms of attitudes towards cannabis], a little more scientific. So, we stopped saying marijuana, [because] that was stigmatising. [We] began using cannabis instead.

Cannabis has become the common term used by biomedical and governmental institutions to signal that medicinal cannabis can be thought of as a scientific product (De Vito, 2017). This shift to medicinal cannabis brought cannabis under the remit of the medical sphere, which has meant that bioscientific research by biomedical professionals has become a form of producing knowledge that is perceived to be valid about the medicinal effects of cannabis (Rubens, 2014; Rivera, 2019). Within the biomedical context, the intoxicating effects appreciated in recreational use are seen as detrimental to health (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013). Hence, medical research into cannabis has focused on removing the psychoactive effects of cannabis substances, thus attempting to eliminate the side effects experienced through the consumption of the cannabis plant without biomedical intervention.

Duff (2024) observes that the term cannabis used within political and scientific institutions limits understandings of the plant by positing it as a static, uniform object. Therefore, the interpretations of what is medicinal made by scientific institutions has controlled the ways in which cannabis can be legitimately used as medicine in Argentina. Limiting understandings of the plant to the 'scientific' realm excludes other types of cannabis knowledge, such as the *porro*[31] consumed by those involved in my study. The term cannabis includes users and cultivators and furthermore the knowledge that has been developed over the years within the cannabis community.

Medicinal cannabis organisations have strategically appropriated scientific vernacular in order to speak to, and be heard by, medical institutions

[31] The equivalent of *joint* and *weed* in English.

(MacDonald, 2023). The movement's increased legibility with respect to scientific drug discourses has meant an increased influence over the ways in which the plant is perceived in the wider society. By underscoring the scientific dimension of cannabis, both users and the movement circumvent the negative connotations of other ways of naming the plant. The experience and knowledges of medicinal cultivators have been more difficult to promote as a valid contribution and the exclusion of these knowledges is clear in the construction of the 2017 law entitled 23750, as it only approved the use of medicinal marijuana for refractory epilepsy (Corbelle, 2023). In some cases, the use of medicinal cannabis has been shown to reduce the number and severity of epileptic seizures in children, with some parents seeing an almost complete elimination (Acosta & Lavagnino, 2022). Cannabis has also been observed by my research participants to have positive effects even on Alzheimer's and other chronic illnesses, as well as pain. As a consequence of these observations medical professionals I spoke to have worked alongside cultivators to explore cannabis as a viable alternative adopting these knowledges and integrating them into their own practices. Cecilia, a doctor who worked with palliative patients that used cannabis, repeatedly highlighted that the problem with the medical sector, defined by natural sciences, is its tendency to perceive the plant in a narrow way, as a substance rather than a living complex organism with therapeutic effects. This, she argued, means that it is necessary to think beyond bioscientific frames to understand the wider benefits of the plant.

The medicinal cannabis movement has strategically used the term cannabis to indicate a professional and rational relationship to the plant and wider sociopolitical contexts. At the same time, using the term cannabis instead of marijuana differentiates medicinal users from the stereotype of the relaxed and languid recreational cannabis user (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013). The people I spoke to frequently told me that the term cannabis made them feel safer and more secure in exploring the plant as medicine. They had understood it as a herbal medicine different from the substance used recreationally for pleasure. Nevertheless, the term *marijuana* was still widely used by people participating in my research. Activists used the word pointedly as a way of resisting what they see as an appropriation of the plant by the bioscientific industry. Using the term marijuana, they argue, implies histories of oppression in Argentina as

well as the ancestral knowledge embedded in society. Carla, a cultivator, told me about what she described as a genuine relationship between people and the plant:

> [Plants] were created because they're key to telling stories. And the power that they have! [It] is part of the history of the relationship between human beings and the plant in all its varieties.

Whilst many used the terms cannabis and marijuana interchangeably, colloquial terms such as *faso*, *churro* or, the already mentioned *porro* were used more often by non-medicinal cannabis users. The use of colloquial terms, my data suggests, is a way of manifesting resistance and retaining a culture in the face of social and political change.

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Shifting perspectives on cannabis as a drug and the linking of cannabis to nature and holistic health leads to questions about the arbitrariness of the categorisation of il/legal drugs (Duff, 2024). In a meeting organised by Mama Cultiva, the speakers stressed that the legal and the legitimate are two different things, with 'legitimacy being aligned with what is considered just and reasonable'. Thus, I began to understand how medicinal users navigate the boundaries of legality. Their experiences of being forced to live as someone engaging in a criminal activity in order to provide medication for a loved one through the cultivation of a plant has become a legitimate claim within Argentinian society. The argument that the right to cultivate a plant is 'just and reasonable', therefore cultivating cannot be legitimately considered a crime. Resounding throughout my data was the claim that the ancestral relationship between humans and the cannabis plant supersedes current legal constructions of drugs (Rivera, 2019). These arguments, therefore, blur the boundaries between what a drug is vis-à-vis the cannabis plant. Thus, I heard other forms of categorisation of drugs being used, such as the notion of a positive/negative dichotomy related to natural/chemical drugs.

Studies such as that by Móró et al. (2011) on auto-gnostic drug users have noted that they are used as a form of 'training situation' in which the user is exposed to scenarios that lead to new notions of self and how to confront the world. Throughout the interviews, my research participants discussed how the

plant itself has an important role to play in addressing both physical and mental health, for example with respect to HIV/AIDS. According to Carolina, a founder of an HIV organisation:

> There was no [HIV] medication, and we were dying. [Marijuana] was the only connection that we had with desire […] and it made us laugh, made us look into each other's eyes. It made us want to cook, to look after ourselves. It gave us inspiration!

Carolina's description of the ability to experience life differently, despite carrying an illness, through the use of cannabis implies that cannabis has had a transformational power that has been helpful for the participants with HIV and AIDS in my study. The interactive process of care and influence between the person and the plant throughout its relationship extends beyond cultivation and across many different aspects of people's lives, as the sentiment of gratitude indicates when my interlocutors talked about their experiences. This led me to explore cannabis use, which takes many different forms.

## Terming Cannabis Use

The naming of types of use was a matter of controversy amongst the activists in my study. The recreational use of marijuana has historically been depicted, by prohibitionist discourse, as causing debauchery, violence, addiction, and even death (Giraudo, 2020).[32] Films such as *Reefer Madness* (which has since been re-appropriated by cannabis activism) show the xenophobic and racialised roots of prohibitionist policies, which commence with the demonisation of marijuana and its user (MacDonald, 2023). Whilst 'recreational use' was referred to throughout my fieldwork, 'adult use' was a preferred alternative because it draws away from the historically negative depiction of the recreational user. Adult use is a way of stressing that users are

[32] *Reefer Madness* is a 1936 American film directed by Louis J. Gasnier. Originally entitled *Tell Your Children*, the film was intended to warn parents about the dangers of marijuana use. It depicts a group of young people who, as a consequence of addiction, descend into a life of crime. In the 1970s, the film was reappropriated by the cannabis legalisation movement, with its comical exaggerations becoming a source of amusement within the cannabis community.

capable of making their own decisions, in contrast to young adults, who are referred to as victims of cannabis in public discourse in Argentina and beyond.

The notion of adult use was mainly brought up by experienced cultivators who led cooperatives and other businesses linked to the cultivation of cannabis. The adult use of cannabis was organised by cannabis clubs, which were on the verge/cusp of legality. These organisations usually had a group of members who would receive a predetermined quantity of cannabis in return for a monthly contribution. Some of the organisations I spoke to worked by bringing together REPROCANN licence holders to cultivate and produce together on a larger scale. This ranged from members' clubs in which members contributed equally to the costs of production and a wage for the cultivator, to forms of cooperatives where all members invested time and money to create cannabis products together.

REPROCANN, which I introduced in the chapter where I was setting the scene for my entire thesis, provides licences for both therapeutic and medicinal cannabis. Adult users mainly seek out these licences for issues such as headaches, sleep issues, and stress, thus challenging the boundaries of what can be considered legitimate medicinal or therapeutic use. Whilst these users are seeking to benefit from the medicinal or therapeutic effects of the plant, they do not solely apply for licences for that reason. The ease with which users have been able to access licences to cultivate cannabis has been widely criticised in Argentinian society. To those with whom I spoke, adult use involves the free use of cannabis to the extent deemed adequate, whether or not it is medicinal. Sergio, a cultivator and member of a cannabis cooperative explained:

> Adult use […] was a big political task, beyond the laws, it was a won cultural battle. [T]he people who use it for medical reasons are also adults who choose […] secure and guaranteed access through the [cannabis] community. The state doesn't need to intervene.

Recreational/adult use is seen by my interlocutors as a responsible, controlled, and regulated form of use (Mey et al., 2017). My contacts in the association Cannaclub pointed out that, in their experience, members rarely increase their consumption. Therefore, they argued, seeing marijuana as a highly addictive drug is inaccurate. Responsible use is associated with adults who pragmatically

find alternative ways of including cannabis into their lives (Hathaway, 1997a). Responsible use is thought to mean avoiding risky situations in relation to their cannabis use. Rather than the substance being the issue, it is all a matter of the ways in which people manage their use of cannabis, I was told, by people who seemed to be protecting and defending the cannabis plant (Bottorff et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2015).

Corbelle (2016) suggests that an underlying objective when claiming responsible cannabis use is the attempt to distance oneself from the irresponsible user, who is often posited as disruptive and reinforcing negative prohibitionist stereotypes of the cannabis user (Duff et al., 2012). The responsible user is characterised as being an accountable member of society and a representative of the cannabis community. The term 'responsible' has moral implications which, for the cannabis community, include the implication of abiding by social norms so they can be accepted in society and public discourse more broadly. By claiming this moral normalcy, cannabis users argue that they have the same rights as any conventionally defined 'moral citizen' (Corbelle, 2023). Interlocutors saw responsible recreational/adult use as a means of de-stressing, in the same way as other people may have a glass of wine or smoke a cigarette.

Research participants spoke of the ways in which cannabis helped them with issues such as insomnia and concentration, among other benefits (Pearson, 2001; Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013). Many also felt that cannabis use had helped them to relate to those around them in a more positive way, as they would explain to me (in somewhat glorifying terms) how the plant facilitated unity and solidarity, as well as patience within social relationships that might otherwise be strained due to the stresses of everyday life (Guyonnet et al., 2023). As Blanca, a mother and cultivator, told me, cannabis helps to 'take the edge off' daily life challenges:

> Sometimes, I use marijuana recreationally. I like to use it because, if I didn't, I would be on the verge of a heart attack, I would have devoured myself from the inside. I use it medicinally in this respect.

As in my material, participants often spoke of the plant as 'saving' them. By this, they were not only referring to cannabis as literally keeping them from 'dying', but also the way in which the plant also gives them, in their accounts,

the ability to live their day-to-day lives without the aches, pains, and anxieties that risk overtaking their lives. As Blanca told us, above, the medicinal, for her, is also about the pleasure and relaxation that she associates with the use of cannabis (Lancaster et al., 2017). Describing the use of cannabis through the medicinal and recreational binary was criticised by research participants, who said it showed a limited understanding of cannabis and its use. The term 'recreational' was seen as reductive for other reasons, as Clara told me:

> To call it recreational is to devaluate a plant [that has been] used for 5000 years for spiritual, recreational, and therapeutic [purposes]. [A]nd then prohibition suddenly. This is a lack of respect for the plant!

Medicinal use, which has come to dominate the cannabis debate in Argentina, is constructed in opposition to recreational use, meaning that its use for pleasure is toned down or even invisibilised (Lancaster et al., 2017). Willy Pedersen and Sveinung Sandberg (2013) observe that medicinal users often downplay the importance of what can be defined as the recreational effects of cannabis. This implies that medicinal use is not focused on intoxication and thus not a matter of abuse. Placing cannabis use within the remit of a health debate, it is constructed as a medicine, with the patient and the preparations at the centre (Corbelle, 2023). In my data, however, recreational and medical use were intertwined in discussions that do not fit neatly into the medicinal/recreational binary.

Many of my interlocutors stressed the importance of therapeutic use. Participants in my study argued that therapeutic treatment focuses on the patient and seeks to treat basic symptoms that affect quality of life, such as problems with sleep and appetite. These are annoyances that do not necessarily require contact with a medical doctor (Corbelle, 2023). Therefore, therapeutic use is not necessarily linked to a medical diagnosis but rather focuses on symptoms and improving quality of life (Díaz, 2020a). Many of the people with whom I spoke, such as Roberto, a cannabis association representative, rejected the idea of medicinal use and instead suggested the term 'therapeutic use', arguing that all use of cannabis is therapeutic. Roberto explained that the point of the term 'therapeutic' is to draw cannabis use away from hegemonic notions of medicine:

> That's why we never talk about medicinal marijuana and that's why the Argentinian therapeutic strains are not called medicinal; they're called therapeutic. Because therapy goes beyond medicine, which is under the hegemonic control of the doctors. And the doctors have always been involved in prohibition and naming people as sick […], always a term to disqualify people as sick.

The term 'therapeutic use' challenges medical science, moving away from scientific notions of diagnosis and cure by focusing instead on the therapeutic benefits of cannabis (Lancaster et al., 2017). Users tailor their cannabis use, they explained to me, to help them deal with chronic illnesses, anxiety, headaches, and the stress of the many activities they carry out daily (Bottorff et al., 2011). According to Nicolas, a lawyer I spoke to, the Argentinian medicinal cannabis law 23750 was redrafted by activists to refer to therapeutic use, to make an opening in the law for a more expansive use of cannabis. Nicolas, a cannabis lawyer, explained why this is important:

> Therapeutic is a very broad term, and it's associated with a state of pure well-being, not just physical, but the status of being well, of happiness. Then, the laboratory doesn't fit, only cannabis fits […] in the meantime the concept of therapeutic cannabis, which is named in the law, allows us to have a therapeutic REPROCANN. I don't have an illness or any symptoms, but it is a therapy in my life.

Furthermore, the term therapeutic is argued to refer more closely to how the plant, and its properties as an organism, interacts with the human body to produce a variety of positive effects which cannot be generated through pharmaceutical medicine. As a consequence, cultivators approach health from a therapeutic and palliative angle, looking to treat basic symptoms and thus improve quality of life (Corbelle, 2023). By highlighting therapeutic use, attention is drawn away from the polarities generated by the recreational and medicinal categories (Lancaster et al., 2017). Interviewees such as Clara, a mothers' organisation representative, argued that all use is therapeutic.

> The feeling of wellbeing it gives you! The crazy thing is that I used cannabis recreationally for many years. One intuitively knew [that] there is no recreational use, it's therapeutic […]. I'm using the plant to relax and I want to laugh. What's healthier than [a good laugh], or more related to health and well-being?

According to Clara, it is all the same plant that provides different therapeutic benefits to the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Alfredo, a doctor, tells me how cannabis, which he explored whilst a student, changed his perceptions of his profession and how he provides healthcare. His discussion is built on scientific medical research – such as that on the endocannabinoid system, which responds to cannabis by balancing the whole body – and his own experiences as a doctor, cultivator, and user. He thus explained that cannabis means:

> [T]o pose [a] lifestyle as concrete interventions in the search to optimise your health and well-being. To accompany them with cannabis, with pills, whatever's required. Reflecting upon lifestyles, little by little I began to understand that [the plant] is enhancing the endocannabinoid system. So, one always works on this system with cannabis and lifestyles to seek better answers and allow the person to be the protagonist and creator of their own health. No one should tell you what or what not to take – because it doesn't last and doesn't generate change.

Drawing on his medical education and his explorations of health, Alfredo veered between science and the conclusions he has drawn through his experiences with the plant. Debates around the use of the terms recreational and medicinal indicate that cannabis use does not fit neatly into these categorisations. The interactions that my interlocutors have with the plant reveal how the plant is credited with properties and agency (Barad, 2003) that impact upon and transform health and well-being, as well as the knowledge produced about such conditions (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013).

The terms recreational, medicinal, and therapeutic that are used to denote different types of use thus have different connotations and implications for cannabis users. Recreational use has historically been perceived negatively, which is why bringing medicinal cannabis into focus makes such as strong statement. Medicinal cannabis brings a substance considered dangerous and harmful into the realm of health and medicine. Therapeutic use has further paved the way for new cannabis epistemologies and a space for negotiation between the different ways of viewing the human relationship with the cannabis plant.

## Gender, Drugs, and the Cannabis Plant

Gendered patterns are more subtle in cannabis use than with others drugs, permitting different forms of enacting femininities and masculinities (Measham et al., 2011). As already mentioned, the plant is referred to as *ella* (she/her), and ascribed natural feminine emotional caring traits – in line with stereotypical gender categorisations that see women as more caring than men (Measham, 2002). Cannabis, by being a feminised drug, juxtaposes gender and ideas about *madre tierra* with nurture and pleasure (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015; Shiva, 1988). Gendered structures are particularly clear in the relationships between the user/cultivator and the plant.

Male respondents tended to be experienced cultivators and users involved in some sort of business and/or profitable interactions, outspoken and public about their involvement with the community and the industry. They placed more emphasis on the use of cannabis for pleasure, openly making and smoking joints. Dahl and Sandberg (2015) argue that drug use is often associated with masculine notions of risk-taking and violence. This was mirrored in the conversations I had with men who spoke of risky and violent experiences with the police.

Women were less likely to smoke whilst talking to me and spoke of their use as mainly being carried out in private spaces and small circles. They referred to their use of cannabis for pleasure as a way of augmenting an experience such as watching a film – making the experience funnier – enjoying a meal in expanded ways, or just taking the edge off the challenges of daily life.

Roberto, who we met in the introduction, criticised what he referred to as the social control and commodification of pleasure, rather than it being freely accessible. He argued that people are expected to deserve pleasure, and who can have it and how much is determined by those in power. By regulating access to pleasure, i.e. the cannabis plant, dominant structures reinforce submission to authority and economic productivity.

In response however, Ayelen highlighted that, for women, seeking pleasure has always been policed, restricted, or stigmatised, reinforcing patriarchal norms that define acceptable behaviour. Cannabis-using women who break these norms risk being associated with sexual promiscuity and facing rejection

by family and friends (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). As Ayelen said: 'We choose to smoke *porro*, because I like to smoke porro, without excuses. And I'm not a drug addict who has problems in society.'

Ayelen's view on the pleasure provided by the plant is less acceptable when voiced by women than by men. By being a woman and claiming to smoke because she liked it, Ayelen is challenging widespread feminine norms that stress 'moderation and respectability' in patriarchally organised Argentina (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015, p. 705). Therefore, women must negotiate patriarchal boundaries in relation to their cannabis use both within and outside of cannabis culture (Hutton, 2020b). Fiona Hutton (2006) argues that the drug-using woman is doubly deviant because:

> Society ha[s] difficulty categorising women who use drugs recreationally because they are an 'in between' category. There is only language for describing female drugs users as bad both in the criminological sense and in the feminine sense, they are seen as 'doubly deviant'. (p. 71)

Whilst women spoke about the pleasure that cannabis gave them, they often justified their use by talking of insomnia, or aches and pains, terming their use therapeutic or medicinal. Most of the female cannabis users in my study began to engage more seriously with the plant when seeking its medicinal or therapeutic benefits, but usually within private environments and as a personal enhancer (Agoff et al., 2022). These gendered patterns entwined with the use of cannabis resemble wider ideas of men being associated with public spaces and women as caregivers within the space of the home (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015).

Men dominate in research on cannabis, in large-scale cultivation, and in the sale of products such as earth and fertilizers (Sclani Horrac et al., 2024). There is a masculine-focused market when it comes to the sale of seeds, paraphernalia, and cultivating infrastructure, as can be seen in the following Instagram post about the qualities of a seed variety sold by Sweed Lab, a seed developer and seller. Following the image, I have included a translation of the text in this advertisement for a seed called Superlemon Face.

[33]

*Figure 6: Advertisement for a seed named 'Superlemon Face'.*

The advertisement includes the following promotional description:

> *At Sweed lab, for more than 15 years, we have kept the best clone of the superlemon haze … this phenotype has the excellence of the super silver haze, and the lethal hit of the super silver haze, making this mother plant an annihilator, gives a very good high and a good producer.*
> *Which is why crossing it with our famous face 7 improves its production and taste.*
> *A humble homage to Sweed lab's favourite plant: Superlemon Haze.*
> *Great for barbeques (asados) and birthdays,*
> *not medicinal at all,*
> *super recreational,*
> *pure fun,*
> *super high THC,*
> *memories and stories to be created…*
> *that's what life is all about.*

The acidic colours, bold capital letters, and cartoonish design depict a super-lemon punching a same-size joint. The hedonistic text describes the produce

[33] https://www.instagram.com/p/Cye0aMsMKJcTGYTi0VNH4S6sRVPMuXEimDolYY0/

as being strong and not medicinal, but rather recreational, while linking the recreational to masculinity. Sandberg (2012a) contends that it is impossible to understand cannabis culture without recognising its hedonistic and relaxed values, which reject what are considered to be hegemonic capitalist and materialist values. The description above therefore emphasises its intoxicating effect as a matter of 'fun', which creates great memories.

It was striking that, whenever I was in an indoor grow space where both men and women were present, the men would often sit comfortably and chat with me, while the women remained at the borders of the gathering, tending to the plants or handling other business rather than engaging in the conversation. When I invited the women to participate, they often seemed to prefer to continue with their work. This observation, I would suggest, reflects a broader tendency within the cannabis user movement and industry. Gendered structures persist, with women often occupying roles related to caring for the plant as well as the sale of artisanal cannabis-based products, such as medicinal oils, while men dominate fields such as industry, research, and law. Women face significant barriers to inclusion in cannabis culture, as they are frequently rejected or marginalised within male-dominated spaces. In their interviews with me, female users and cultivators shared experiences of harassment and exclusion, describing instances when they were pushed out of organisational spaces dominated by men. Some recounted being questioned about their presence and roles in these environments, making them feel excluded from cannabis culture. In their study on teenage users, Dahl and Sandberg (2015) found that young females are often at the sidelines of cannabis culture, with access being governed by young males. These patterns of cannabis use and cultivation are also clearly indicated in my data, where women are pushed to the margins (Hutton, 2006).

This is the backdrop against which only a few women remain within the ambit of cannabis cultivation and activism. The majority of the women I spoke to were primarily linked to the medicinal cannabis community as cultivators, mothers of children in need of help from medicinal cannabis, or patients trying to take care of themselves by using medicinal cannabis. Capturing such tendencies, Ayelen, whom I introduced above, made an observation concerning the roles of women and men by emphasising that men occupy the public spaces of cultivation and social events associated with culture. In

contrast, women carry the major burden of domestic chores, including care responsibilities. According to Ayelen, cannabis culture and industry are built on the backs of caring women:

> What does feminism have to do with smoking a *porro*? Everything! I'll start with these *machos* who are in the cannabis culture, they are who they are because there are people behind them […] who support their knowledge. As always happens with women: 'I'll stay home, take care of the kids whilst you go and do social [stuff] with your work buddies. Whilst you establish a career, whilst you graduate, I'll continue washing the dishes and taking care of the children'.

Women remain on the margins, Ayelen stressed, telling me how women offer free labour for men and families. For the reasons brought up by Ayelen, many female users have taken part in establishing women's grower associations and thereby building a feminist cannabis culture. Female user activists spoke of the importance of feminism in enabling them to grasp and understand the social constructions in which they are situated as cannabis users. All of this, they said, had empowered them to find ways to navigate a male-dominated cannabis community. Women in the cannabis community have challenged the ways in which the female cannabis user has been perceived, at the risk of being marginalised (Measham, 2002). Cannabis use gives women a venue through which they can engage in other forms of masculinities and femininities than the more fixed varieties practised within the cannabis community (Haines et al., 2009; Agoff et al., 2022).

The medicinal cannabis movement in Argentina began with groups of mothers of children who used cannabis, who had been campaigning since 2015 for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis. This culminated in bringing health and femininities into focus by placing the mothers of sick children at the front of the 2016 march. These mothers tried to legitimate their own interventions in relation to their children's health in their capacity as caregivers vis-à-vis a political system that held the power to remove their custody over their own children for giving minors an illicit substance. Mothers, as Luis Rivera (2019) suggests, are listened to because, as caregivers, they are the ones through whom community experiences are put forward and demands are made. This might be one reason why many mothers have been able, to a certain extent,

circumvent barriers such as the penal law that have long been directed against cannabis users (Weber Suardiaz, 2024).

Whilst, historically, there has been a predominantly male recreational culture of growers in Argentina, the medicinal law led to a surge in women beginning to cultivate for themselves and their families, as happened in Uruguay after their cannabis law was implemented in 2013 (Aguiar & Musto, 2022). The medicinal use of cannabis has been practised by minority groups, such as HIV-positive populations, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, with key activists such as Brenda Chignoli fighting for the use of cannabis in HIV treatment (Carrizo et al., 2021). Cannabis practitioners began to pass on medicinal cannabis products, thereby turning into solidarity cultivators, which is a term that came to be used in regulations and policies after 2017 (Aguilar et al., 2022).

## Mothers' Movement

I am sitting with Santino, the journalist introduced above, outside a coffee shop. Santino has written extensively about the cannabis movement, especially the mothers' movement, and I am interested to hear what he has to say about the parallels between the mothers' medicinal movement and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo.[34] Becoming emotional, he elaborates about these mothers:

> Argentina has a very strong history with the mothers. The mother Hebe [one of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo] died just recently, I get emotional. But you see that here the mothers, the white handkerchief, kind of Italian, that Italian thing about the mother, how do you say no? Whether you're a media outlet, government, minister, deputy, police, journalist, how do you say no to a mother? The history of the mothers is very important here, everything that happened with the disappeared wouldn't have happened without the mothers [de Plaza de Mayo], [the legalisation of medicinal cannabis] wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for the mothers [and their medicinal cannabis movement]. Furthermore, think that there isn't much distance between state terrorism, think that, in the mothers' fight for the legalisation of cannabis, many kids died. So, very often, we're here, but many are no longer here, so we can't

[34] In 1977, this group was created by mothers looking for their disappeared children during the Dirty War (1976–1983). It has become one of the most important human rights movements in Argentina.

> wait anymore, pain doesn't wait. It was a fight against time, the kids are dying […] beyond the pain of the mothers, it was the only way of breaking through the prejudice, that barrier.

Santino's parallel between the history of the dictatorship and the struggles of the mothers in the cannabis movement is a powerful and deeply unsettling comparison. The reference to the 'disappeared' – victims of state repression – draws attention to how systemic violence manifests not only in explicit acts of brutality but also in the neglect and denial of resources. The framing of medicinal cannabis prohibition as a form of 'state terrorism' underscores the idea that government inaction or restrictive policies can have life-and-death consequences. In this interpretation, the repression of cannabis use is not just about regulating substances, it is also about controlling bodies, choices, and access to a very specific idea of care. The pain of those waiting for medicinal cannabis becomes emblematic of a broader failure, according to Santino. Even in discussions unrelated to overt political repression, the spectre of historical violence continues to shape how people interpret injustice, especially when it involves state control over health and well-being.

The entry of the mothers into cannabis culture brought carers, the sick, and the elderly into focus. Bringing vulnerable people to the fore of cannabis use meant that they could not be as easily dismissed by the public as, for instance, the deviant recreational users or HIV and AIDS sufferers who, until that point, had been the main groups fighting for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis. Children are exempt from contempt and instead are seen as victims needing protection, as are their mothers, and therefore 'deserving' of empathy. The mothers' movements have been able to build on their femininity as mothers and carers to break through the barriers of society's perceptions of cannabis and did so on the basis of a rich history of critical feminist social movements in Argentina (Belloti, 2019). Their identity as mothers and carers is at the centre of their agenda, something which Clara, a member of Mama Cultiva, explained to me:

> We manage the situation politically, using the role of maternity, as the mothers did in their time, to politicise maternity as a place from which to defend and obtain rights […], so then these policies stop just being for mothers and become rights for society in general.

Having mothers and children at the helm of the medicinal cannabis movement has challenged general stereotypical public perceptions of 'the deviant cannabis user', associated with laziness and crime, and generated awareness of how a cannabis user could also be a vulnerable child who relies on cannabis as medication to improve their quality of life (Díaz, 2016). The medicinal cannabis community encourages sympathy by providing awareness of this other form of cannabis use, which is not related to the hedonism usually applied to the typically imagined male cannabis user (Penn, 2014).

Mama Cultiva, one of the most prominent mothers' medicinal cannabis organisations, underscores the importance of feminism for understanding the social structures that underlie the legalisation of medical marijuana. As Elena, a medicinal organisation leader, tells us, those who use and cultivate medicinal cannabis are femininities, carers, and those who need care.

> Feminism, a fundamental basis [for our work]. It's super clear to us, how feminism and cannabis go hand in hand […]. We understood that, alongside fighting for the cannabis law, we have to fight for a law for carers. We shouldn't take their work away; we should recognise it […]. Many people who come to the workshops are women, femininities, or non-conforming bodies. These carers are the ones who've gained knowledge [because they are] working as carers and cultivators.

However, this change has not come without controversy. In 2021, Julia Mengolini polemically announced on her radio show that she had smoked cannabis throughout her pregnancy to ease nausea and improve appetite (infobae, 2021). This brought the question of motherhood and intoxication to the forefront of the news, and she was all over the media justifying her use and her openness about it. Even for mothers, there are lines that society is not ready to cross.

The mothers' movement has carried on with the fight for the legitimation of the home cultivation and processing of cannabis so that growers would no longer be forced to grow under precarious conditions. Therefore, alongside lobbying for medicinal cannabis policies, the medicinal cannabis organisations have been holding workshops about the plant and cultivation. The people who participated in my research highlighted that these workshops were provided and taken mainly by women in the mothers' organisations.

The main objectives of these workshops are to teach participants how to cultivate and process their own medication, to enable them to take full control over their healing in a natural way through the plant (Aguilar et al., 2022). It also means that patients may possibly become less reliant upon the expensive products of the pharmaceutical industry as patients have tapered off medication due to their use of cannabis (Boehnke et al., 2019).

Whilst learning to cultivate has been made increasingly accessible through workshops, cultivators continue to supply patients with cannabis oil in exchange for donations. Not everyone is able to cultivate because doing so requires an investment of capacity, time, and space, among other things, to which many medicinal cannabis users do not have access. In relation to this, as I sat side by side with Rita at her table whilst sipping a hot cup of tea, she explained how cultivators, more often women, have found that they are unable to keep up with demand, not just for the oil, but also for treatments which they feel are beyond their capacities as cultivators. This has led to bottlenecks where demand outstrips supply. For this reason, there has been a push from some organisations for patients to cultivate cannabis themselves and take control over their own treatment. Therefore, returning to the discussion with Ayelen, tensions have arisen with those who do not cultivate, who are seen as less connected to the plant and not 'real' '*cannabicos*'. As Ayelen insisted, cultivation is simply not for everyone; in fact, the choice not to cultivate is a valid one and this does not mean that they are not part of the community.

> [Some people claim]: 'I don't want to cultivate'. [It] seems as though, if you don't cultivate, they look at you differently. But as an organisation, we re-vindicate all freedoms, we re-vindicate the freedom that if you want to smoke a *porro*, you have the right to do so without any conditions.

Rita told me about the repercussions of these attitudes, most importantly placing the treatment of those who are unable to cultivate at risk. Consequently, Rita withdrew from the organisation she had been affiliated with to launch a different organisation where, together with her colleagues, she attempted to supply those who sought help with cannabis cultivation and gaining access to medicinal cannabis.

# Concluding Reflections

The cannabis plant comes to signify a closeness to Mother Earth that people feel has been lost within the barren space of the city. The plant creates a community through its interactions with carers and users because it is seen as a subject with agency that interacts with humans through processes of cultivation and consumption (Díaz, 2020a). The plant's materiality and properties are linked to ideas of its peaceful, relaxed, happy, and pleasurable effects, which come to permeate the characteristics of the cannabis community. Nevertheless, relationships with the plant vary, with some people adopting a pragmatic approach, particularly those involved in the industry, while smaller cultivators tend to emphasise the emotional aspects of their connection to cannabis.

However, expertise and personal ties with the plant vary. One of the most significant discussions that emerged from my data was how to refer to the plant, with terminology ranging from the scientific name 'cannabis' to vernacular terms such as '*porro*' and '*faso*'. Another central debate around the plant was whether the cultivation of cannabis should fall within the jurisdiction of the state. Ultimately, it is through the blurring of boundaries between what is deemed 'legitimate' and 'legal' and what is not that cannabis users and cultivators navigate and negotiate their everyday lives (Pratt, 1991; Santos, 2010).

This chapter has also discussed the forms in which use is referred to. Different uses – such as recreational, medicinal, and therapeutic – surface throughout the data and challenge the ways in which these create pockets of isolated users and the cost of the exclusion of other historical forms of use that, in the case of Argentina, have been struggling for recognition since the late 2000s (Corbelle, 2018). The question of who the user is, and different ways of referring to use, blurs the boundaries between different forms of relating to the plant. The concept of the responsible user becomes relevant as a way of distancing the adult user from the irresponsible user. In this sense, people argue that they are not irresponsible users with problems of addiction but rather everyday people of good morals and values.

Gender structures permeate discussions about the plant and its use, which led to many discussions about femininities and masculinities in relation to the

plant. The plant itself is seen as a 'she', and is assigned feminine characteristics such as being natural, emotional, and caring, amongst others. This has influenced the construction of the cannabis user, who is assumed to have particular approaches to life and community, possessing qualities such as being laid-back, open-minded, and peaceful (Hathaway, 1997a). Through the association of a masculine culture engaging with a plant rendered feminine, gender binaries are challenged in the enactment of different masculinities and femininities.

Nevertheless, men tend to engage in the industrial and pleasurable aspects of the plant, whilst women tend to remain within private spheres or smaller-scale artisanal businesses. Few women participate in the male-dominated cannabis production. In part, this is because women's approaches and knowledges of the plant are relegated as emotional, irrational, and therefore less relevant when it comes to building businesses and other, more 'scientific' approaches to cannabis. Constructions of gender and care saturate the struggle for the legalisation of cannabis, leading to the current focus on medicinal cannabis. The face of the movement becomes mothers who grow and care for their plants within their homes.

# Chapter 6: Cannabis Culture, Epistemologies, and Ontologies

'*La cultura tiene saberes*' (Culture has knowledge)
Roberto, grower from a cannabis association

Cannabis activists in Argentina have strived to find common ground and use their experiences to push for societal and political change. A term that was often brought up amongst the cannabis users I talked to was *cultura cannábica* (cannabis culture). In this chapter, I show how a cannabis culture is produced by exploring the way in which cannabis is configured, epistemologically and ontologically. In doing so, I focus on the experiences of users, cultivators, mothers, and others in the cannabis movement to examine their visions for transformation in relation to social and legal issues related to cannabis. Cannabis culture often centres around activism but, as many of my interlocutors told me, cannabis is embedded in a chain of activities, which include tending and growing the plants, as well as exchanging and using cannabis in a field framed by users, activists, industry, and professionals.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the roots of current Argentinian cannabis culture which, according to my research participants, is intertwined with ideas of solidarity and protection of its members. In Argentina, cannabis culture has transformed into a collective movement, shaped by shared values of solidarity, activism, and resistance to punitive drug policies. The principle of solidarity within cannabis communities manifests in grassroots initiatives, where users, growers, and advocates work together to exchange knowledges and to support and protect one another. Cannabis users have engaged in activism as they strive for the acceptance and general legalisation of cannabis for all forms of use, both medicinal and recreational, which are generally posited as opposites. The political organisation of cannabis cultivators and

users, as well as expert-activists, led to the organisation of the World Marijuana March in Buenos Aires, with the first taking place in 2010.

The increasing public presence of the cannabis movement is trying to change societal perceptions of cannabis as a drug through making cannabis lifestyles more visible, thus signalling that it is part of the lives of a collective of 'ordinary people'. The chapter ends with a discussion of the regulation of the use of medicinal cannabis, REPROCANN, and its impact on how alternative ways of being and interacting with the plant are produced. By tracing these historical and sociopolitical dimensions, the chapter highlights how Argentinian cannabis culture is built not only on consumption but also on a collective consciousness that fosters community resilience, advocacy, and knowledge-sharing.

## Cannabis Community

Medicinal cannabis has long been part of cannabis culture in Argentina, with HIV organisations using it since the 1980s. This is the situation within which the cannabis movement has developed a rich body of knowledge about the cannabis plant, its cultivation, and both its recreational and medicinal use.

The movement working towards social and legal change around cannabis in Argentina took off in the late 2000s. It focused on the right to freely consume cannabis recreationally within the private sphere of the home, strategically placing emphasis on trying to raise public awareness of what they saw as a harmless plant, in an attempt to demystify its use. The movement sought to differentiate itself from the narcotrafficking industry by emphasising the small-scale and artisanal nature of their work.

Since it began to take shape in the late 2000s, cannabis culture in Argentina has been organised by various interest groups demanding protection of their rights to cultivate and use cannabis within their homes. My interlocutors see cannabis as a force that holds the power to build a culture at the interface between users, communities, and networks across the country. According to them, cannabis culture is based on a certain set of values whilst also denoting that a cannabis user is simply an ordinary person who successfully goes about their daily life whilst smoking cannabis. This image contrasts with the negative

stereotypes assigned to users, as I discussed in the previous chapter. As Juan, a cultivator and business owner told me:

> I can have a highly productive lifestyle and smoke a *porro* […]. This, I think, is thanks to the culture. I like it, I want to live off it […]. People who like it, [they] will try to find a way to live off whatever makes them happy.

Mats Ekendhal and colleagues (2020) found that the cannabis user 'describes cannabis use as an identity marker similar to having a family and a career'. This is a way of trying to normalise the use of cannabis by stressing that people from all walks of life use it. This also includes medical doctors and politicians, who are generally assumed to be well-informed and representing people who 'know best'. By claiming normality, cannabis users and cultivators challenge constructions of intoxication and its place in the everyday.

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A week into my first instance of fieldwork, I go to meet Diego, whom I am told is a lawyer working with cannabis. I find myself on a busy road outside a typical traditional Buenos Aires building with large imposing wooden doors. I imagine that I will enter a formal lawyer's office and wonder about the conversation I am going to have with Diego about cannabis legislation. When Diego comes out to meet me, he ushers me into the building, and the smell of cannabis immediately hits me. We introduce ourselves to one another in the inner courtyard and a man with a cannabis cigarette in his hand pops out from the back of the house to greet me.

Diego leads me towards the back of the building, where he shows me rooms full of cannabis plants in different phases of growth. Looking at this indoor cultivation, I feel not only surprised but also confused, not really knowing how to react except to praise how large and beautiful the plants are and how impressed I am with the entire set-up. Diego wonders if I would like to sit in his colleague's office for a chat. He directs me towards a very formal office with a huge desk and leather armchairs, which looks just like an office that most people would typically associate with a lawyer. Together with Diego, I sit in front of the desk whilst his colleague sits on the other side while yet another of Diego's colleagues lounges on the arm of one of the armchairs. They

all talk about their recently published book on cannabis law while a large cannabis cigarette is passed around between them.

*Figure 7: Indoor grow*[35].

Cannabis is used to connect people, as was clear when I was visiting Diego's office – or rather, his production site. People engage with cannabis as something social, as a practice where people get together. As Sandberg (2012a) notes in his research on cannabis culture:

> [P]assing something from lip to lip emits strong signals of togetherness and friendship. Smoking the same joint is therefore a more potent marker of solidarity, group belonging and difference than buying rounds at the pub or offering cigarettes to other smokers. (p. 73)

In a classic study, Becker (1963) observed that the use of cannabis is learned and enjoyed through interactions with other people. Amary Mey et al. (2017) found that social connectedness is just as important to the use of recreational drugs as the intoxicating effects. Sharing is the cornerstone of cannabis culture as the experiencing of pleasure is intimately intertwined with the ways in which it is perceived to bond people and build friendships (Bancroft, 2020; Berger et al., 2023; Bræmer & Søgaard, 2023; Sandberg, 2012a). Cannabis

[35] Image from fieldwork (by Lucia Amaranta Thompson).

rituals maintain social cohesiveness by means of underlying rules, such as solidarity.[36]

Power relations within cannabis culture, on the other hand, can function to exclude cannabis users who do not comply with the rules, resulting in the othering of already marginalised groups (Sandberg, 2012a). For example, those users who do not share, or even worse share with a calculated interest in mind, for instance to earn money, are not looked upon favourably. Breaking established rules around solidarity and sharing can result in exclusion (Bræmer & Søgaard, 2023). When I met Benjamin, a cannabis user and researcher, in a coffee shop he told me about the significance of solidarity and protection in the cannabis community:

> It's a good vibe, good cannabis vibe that's basically solidarity between a group of people living in illegal circumstances. They take care of each other, protect each other, share!

Sandberg (2012a) suggests that cannabis use creates a culture, which refers to the practices, ideas, and rituals that have developed around cannabis, denoting a marginal relationship with, and resistance to, mainstream culture (see also: Berger et al., 2023). Such a culture concerns the experiences of users, in terms of their internal social interactions as well as interactions with the cannabis plant and its properties. Carlos, a grower and activist, explained the complexity within the cannabis community, emphasising that cannabis use itself does not indicate a unified political stance.

> The *Cannábico* [i.e., cannabis user] […] could be anyone, someone with a right-wing ideology, a left-wing ideology, a fascist, anything, so there can't be harmony in this zoo!

His metaphor of a 'zoo' suggests a chaotic and varied landscape where people from vastly different ideological backgrounds coexist yet struggle to find

[36] For example, demonstrations of solidarity when sharing cannabis provide higher status and respect. A key figure in La Plata (a city in the Province of Buenos Aires) was 'Profe Loza'. He worked in solidarity with medicinal users, providing oils whilst at the same time developing different plant genetics, one of which is now used in research in CONICET, the government's research centre. His death, which occurred after a period in jail, brought together the whole cannabis community, not least those who had benefitted from his medicine (*THC*, 2020).

common ground. This challenges the assumption that cultures, such as those formed around cannabis, share the same social or political values. Instead, cannabis consumption intersects with broader ideological frameworks, shaping people's engagement with activism, law, and social movements in distinct ways. Carlos also argued that they share a cannabis culture rooted in solidarity. This presents an intriguing paradox: on one level, cannabis users want to be perceived as being like everyone else, engaging in consumption within the same legal, social, and cultural frameworks as any other group. But on another level, cannabis culture is distinguished by its ideas about ethos and care, forming a community with shared values that extend beyond mere consumption. By exploring these tensions, it becomes clear that cannabis culture operates within a fluid, evolving space**,** one that balances individual autonomy with collective responsibility while also being pervaded by contestations and power relations, indeed because it is not homogeneous, as Carlos pointed out so vividly.

## Cannabis Culture and Law Enforcement

As early as 1997, Andrew Hathaway (1997a, 1997b) observed that cannabis culture is not simply about the use of cannabis but is interwoven within structures of difference. Social constructions (such as social standing, gender, and race, among others) influence the ways in which people can navigate cannabis cultures (Sandberg, 2012a). Cannabis activists have a wide range of backgrounds and relationships to cannabis culture – populations from all socioeconomic levels, activist-experts such as researchers or doctors, as well as users of medicinal and recreational marijuana – people who ingest cannabis negotiate their relationships with cannabis culture in different ways (Berger et al., 2023). As Carolina, the leader of an HIV organisation whom I referred to in the previous chapter, told me, those who approach her organisation are from different circles:

> [E]ven from the judiciary, the judge comes to get cannabis, the police, councillors, the politician, the grandfather, the grandmother, see, from every sector [of society] […] also people who have nothing, are destitute, we also give them cannabis […]. We're seen as trustworthy, [and] doctors refer directly to us. (Carolina, Leader of HIV organisation).

Whilst there has been lot of work on the perceived normalisation of the use and social acceptance of cannabis, people who use cannabis are still facing the illegality of their actions and are therefore not living a 'normal' life (Pearson, 2001; Sandberg, 2012b). Whilst Carolina spoke of the various echelons that support her organisation, the conflict between their work and the law kept surfacing throughout our conversation, with Carolina telling me about various occasions when the organisation was targeted by law enforcement. As Diego also highlighted, some groups tend to be the targets of law enforcement more often than others, speaking to the broader issue of how drug laws function as a mechanism of social control, rather than addressing the drug trade.

> [In Buenos Aires, there] are zones that are nicer and others with a larger incidence of poverty, which is noticeably visible. [M]ost of the criminalised groups having illegal drugs mainly live in the '*barrios*' [slums]. These people are in a situation of vulnerability […], even more so in Argentina, which, regardless of the rulings that prohibit searches or raids based on the olfactory system of the police, questions of race, smells, physical aspects [mean you can be stopped]. [That is] because you look like a robber and you could possibly have *porro*, crack, or anything. This way, they operate social control mechanisms and generate false statistics that include a lot of people who have nothing to do with distribution […], but they all know about those who really operate the drug industry.

Diego suggested that there exists an embedded system of racial and class-based profiling. These patterns in Argentina mirror global trends in which the most marginalised are the targets of law enforcement while those profiting from the drug trade largely remain under the radar. Neighbours were often mentioned during my fieldwork due to many cases of neighbours calling the police when they found out about the growing of cannabis by people participating in my study. Neighbours were also accused of stealing flowers at the point of harvest, further intensifying tensions within the community. As the plants matured, growers became increasingly vigilant, fearing theft from both outsiders and those within their immediate surroundings. The theft of mature plants not only resulted in the wasting of the significant time and effort invested in cultivation but, for many, it also meant the loss of treatments for various illnesses and problems for themselves and their families. Therefore, there were two main threats to the cultivators: from law enforcement and neighbours. For this reason, a few of the cultivators I spoke to, such as Luz, took extreme measures

to protect themselves due to their experiences of theft and police violence. Luz was a public persona and felt exposed and unsafe and, as she told me:

> [T]he fear continues to exist because I'm politically active in the associations here. I'm well known and a public persona, which is why people know that I have plants. [The] neighbours steal from you. They wait until the plants are flowering, when they're ready for harvest. This is a difficult time of year because we must be on the alert during the night […]. Being exposed, at one point, is detrimental for you. Well, it's just a question of being alert, prepared, I have the dogs to warn me and have good security.

As a medicinal cannabis cultivator, Luz clearly felt the need to protect herself through the use of cameras and dogs. As a public person, she was exposed and had to take extra care of her personal safety whilst defending the legitimacy of her work.

Class emerges as an important aspect of the politics embedded in questions about drugs in Argentina and is evident in the differentiated ways in which people are treated by the judicial system. A number of studies by the Human Rights organisation Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (2018a, 2018b), for instance, have identified high levels of detentions, with police officers targeting marginalised populations, particularly young men, with humiliation, racial profiling, and violence. Such profiling is illustrated by Andrea Bonvillani (2022), who discusses *gatillo facil* (easy trigger) in Argentina and how certain people are seen as deserving of being subjected to the harsh and even lethal enforcement of police operations due to ideas about the delinquent. Profiling of what is characterised as the typical drug user frequently leads to cannabis users or other marginalised groups facing violence and punishment from the police and judicial system (Earp et al., 2021; Walker, 2020). As Corbelle (2018) argues, the law not only punishes cannabis users but also restricts their movements, lifestyles, and access to health services.

> The actual law not only punishes the personal use of cannabis but also forces those called 'addicts' into treatment as a form of punishment. This leads to a number of repressive juridical and police practices, most of them of an arbitrary character, that threaten the rights of users to mobility, access to health systems, and their right to choose a lifestyle and use their own bodies without the risk of being detained or ending up with a penal case. (p. 26, my translation)

Regardless of their history with the police, a lot of the participants in my study spoke about their own privilege as educated and middle-class citizens with resources to help them deal with law enforcement and avoid detention. These resources involve knowledge of the law, but also the safety and support provided by the cannabis community. Eirik Jerven Berger and colleagues (2023) found that the participants in their research hold a 'hybrid social position that combine[s] both privilege and disadvantage' (p. 900). This pattern can also be observed within the mothers' movement. Clara told me that the medicinal cannabis movement is dominated by white, middle-class women. Access to economic resources determines who can grow the plant for their own use if they face various health issues. In Clara's words, 'in general, it's very complex for women in poverty who [are caregivers] and who suffer from diseases that could be helped by cannabis [because] it's hard to take care of a plant'. She continued:

> I'm always talking from my privileges. Our organisation's leadership are white middle-class women, you know that whiteness is relative here in Argentina, well, a middle-class white urban person. Now, with the internet, we've been able to reach other places in the country [and other social groups].

Clara highlighted the difficulties of marginalised populations being able to take care of a plant by sharing the experience of a woman who lived in a poverty-stricken area. Her house had been raided by the police when they came to search the house for her brother-in-law (due to a legal violation). The police discovered the cannabis plants she was growing to reduce her child's pain. Living with less, Clara explained, meant that the household could not count on their annual cannabis yield, especially if a harvest was confiscated by the authorities. They did not have the resources to start all over again, and therefore generally ended up relying on organisations and other cultivators.

The complex structure of cannabis culture in Argentina extends beyond mere consumption to encompass activism, social solidarity, and resistance to punitive drug policies. Hathaway's (1997b, 1997a) observation that cannabis culture is interwoven with structures of difference is relevant in this context, because class, race, and social standing shape people's access to cannabis, their risk of criminalisation, and their place within the broader cannabis movement (Sandberg, 2012a). The narratives of activists like Carolina and Diego, above, highlight how cannabis communities exist at the intersection of privilege and

vulnerability – where users, growers, and advocates negotiate their relationship with the law, state repression, and public perceptions.

The experiences of cultivators like Rosa and Luz further illustrate that cannabis activism is not solely about drug reform but also about protecting oneself from institutional and community threats, including police violence and theft by neighbours. This interconnected web of criminalisation, activism, and class struggles underscores how cannabis culture in Argentina operates as both a site of resistance and a space shaped by socioeconomic inequalities. While solidarity is a defining characteristic, it exists alongside conflict, surveillance, and structural oppression, complicating and contesting the notion that cannabis culture is purely an inclusive and protective community.

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I find myself in an indoor grow, surrounded by plants at all stages of growth, where two *mates* are being passed around as I talk with three cultivators who are developing various cannabis businesses and cooperatives. We have been talking for about two hours, and I want to ask a question about cannabis culture. I am trying to find some space to speak as they talk over each other across the room. Finally, there is a pause, and I quickly ask about it, linking to something that was said earlier. Sergio answers by speaking of an organised movement resembling the Peronist politics of collective action. Here, this political stance is taken against a prohibitionist regime that marginalises cannabis users:

> So, cannabis culture grew a lot in Argentina because even if there was a lack of laws there was a government that permitted expression. So, they were the years when we went to make loads of noise everywhere and it was an organised community, like I said before, Peron. When there was a raid, we were all there, when a comrade was jailed, we went to the jail […]. We began to strengthen the network, because during the first years we only knew each other as acquaintances.

As Sergio explains, the movement is constructed on the principle of solidarity in response to the victimisation of cannabis users, providing a space for collective organising and community support. As shown in the quote below, he emphasises that the movement's aim is to shift public perceptions away from making associations with illicit and dangerous trafficking. Instead, it seeks to highlight the artisanal nature of their work, rooted in community-based values. The rise of

an artisanal cannabis market has contributed to the sale of high-quality cannabis, leading to the marginalisation of *Paraguay prensado*[37].

> The *Paraguay prensado* that we used to smoke when we were young no longer exists. People don't consume it [any longer] […]. Today, it's much easier for young people to buy flowers […], not like us. We had to go into a *villa* and be exposed to problems. Now, you just ask any friend if they have a couple of flowers.

In Sergio's mind, cannabis use cannot be repressed because, he tells me, it is a practice that saturates the lives of 1.5 million users in Argentina. Rejoining the discussion after taking a phone call, Juan, who is standing with a *mate* and a thermos in his hands, adds that cannabis culture is about a way of life, which manifests through use, cultivation, and business owners organising around the cannabis plant.

> Cannabis culture encompasses more than the social need to destigmatise the way of life: [it] takes into consideration the user, the producer, the grow shop, the cultivator. We have many users who don't cultivate and still live this lifestyle, be it medicinal or recreational […]. At one point, we had the culture of the [*Paraguay*] *prensado*, then we went on to auto cultivation, then the extractions, the increase in access to knowledge helped in harm reduction, whether it be in relation to consumption, social, penal […]. That knowledge made the industry much larger, the clubs, every time the cultural and social movement grows.

As Juan tells us, cannabis communities are (ideally) defined by an economy of exchange and solidarity that requires trust to ensure their protection from a system which, in reality, marginalises them. The movement that began to organise in the late 2000s and early 2010s, have built communities of cultivators who developed and shared specialised knowledge, technologies and tools. Cannabis culture is composed of people who consume the same illegal substance and share a fear of being penalised by the legal system. However, cannabis users engage in multiple forms of relating to cannabis culture and use, creating alternative lifestyles by navigating their relationship with the plant alongside other responsibilities (Sandberg, 2012a).

[37] Poor-quality cannabis, which for decades was the only product available to users.

While many people engage in cannabis culture, advocacy, community-building, and resistance against punitive drug policies, others do not necessarily create alternative lifestyles; they simply consume cannabis without engaging deeply in its broader cultural or political dimensions. This distinction highlights a spectrum of participation, with some embracing cannabis as a tool for social change, while others treat it as a personal habit with little connection to activism or solidarity networks. Thus, the idea of a unified cannabis culture becomes rather complex; while solidarity is a defining characteristic among activists and community organisers, casual users who do not engage with the movement challenge the notion that all cannabis consumers share the same values, experiences, or social commitments.

This raises questions about inclusion and identity within cannabis communities: does consumption alone make someone part of cannabis culture, or is meaningful engagement necessary? Additionally, the legal and social risks associated with cannabis use differ depending on one's class, race, and social environment. This means that some users may be forced into activism through necessity, while others may navigate their consumption with relative ease, unaffected by broader legal struggles. This complexity suggests that, while cannabis culture often revolves around notions of solidarity and protection, it is also shaped by diverse and sometimes conflicting experiences that reveal the uneven realities of legalisation, criminalisation, and privilege.

## Cultivation

Early user activists often remembered a time during which the only cannabis available to purchase was the '*Paraguay prensado*' – a cannabis full of chemicals that needed to be washed out to make it consumable.[38] In seeking better quality, people began experimenting with cultivation amongst

[38] According to my interlocutors, the *Paraguay prensado* is poor-quality cannabis, which has been pressed into blocks with chemicals used to cover the scent from sniffer dogs at the border. It came, as the name suggests, from Paraguay and was the only cannabis available during the 1990s and 2000s. It was an important reason why cannabis cultivators began to grow the plant themselves and organise as a community. Today, *Paraguay prensado* is still consumed marginally by users who cannot access flowers, despite the market being flooded with high-quality flowers from cultivators.

themselves. Alberto, a businessman who appeared in a previous interview, told me that growers came together online in private forums for Argentinian cultivators who all used pseudonyms to protect their identities. Through these forums, they exchanged knowledge and experiences whilst working under prohibition and established a network to support one another. They stressed that they had nothing to do with narcotrafficking and worked in small groups that did not participate in the wider violence entwined with the illegal drug industry. Despite access to small communities, which made cultivators feel safer in relation to growing and using cannabis, they still spoke of their feelings of isolation. Agustin, a filmmaker and cannabis activist, talked to me about his first experiences with other '*cannabicos*':

> They all smoked, we had our first experiences of cultivating, virtually without any knowledge. Nowadays, we laugh because we remember the mistakes we made […]. The truth is that there wasn't much information, and it wasn't like today. It wasn't common to ask someone [for advice], because in those days […] everything was more controlled, we were scared, we were also young. Well, we made a lot of mistakes!

Community has been essential to the dissemination of information and the development of activities, especially under a prohibitionist regime that targets growers and users with law enforcement (Adinoff & Reiman, 2019; Harris, 2021; Hathaway 1997a, 1997b) found that cannabis users prefer to interact, exchange, and share use within closed groups of friends that require some form of trust. In the Argentinian case, small groups carefully developed trust within the online forums before meeting in person. Belen, a member of a cultivator association and activist, discussed the importance of protection in these early groupings:

> I participate in a space […] founded in 2010 with the intention of getting together and meeting other people who've been cultivating cannabis plants. But it's also a way of protecting […] each other collectively, exchanging varieties and knowledge related to cultivating because that used to take place in private forums and closed spaces.

These groups were often organised according to geographical areas (such as the east or west of Buenos Aires, or other localities in the country), thus establishing spaces in which to safely carry out their activities and circumvent

social controls. Cultivators come together because of their link to the plant, around which the organisation of these communities revolves. These small communities became sites for knowledge exchange, and strong cultivating associations formed around them. The sense of safety within these communities served to expand political positions, leading to the establishment of a broad collective of cannabis users and growers. Cultivation has been central to the movement from its inception, with the goal of ensuring access to high-quality cannabis, not just for the cultivators, but also for the user community. As Sergio, a cannabis business owner, pointed out:

> In the Argentinian case, [cannabis culture] was a phenomenon, it was the growth of the militancy, but the visibilisation of the marches, the cultivators' network, the exchange of varieties [were all components in] huge progress [taking place during] a short time.

Throughout the years, cultivators have exchanged and developed knowledge and technologies relating to the cultivation and processing of cannabis to be consumed for various purposes, including medicinal. Medicinal cannabis users and cultivators have challenged scientific knowledge by producing their own epistemologies through accumulated experience.

Growing, processing, and treating techniques have been passed on amongst cannabis growers. This has involved extensive recordings of treatments and patients' experiences to be used as tools to prove the benefits of medicinal cannabis (Díaz et al., 2021). These cultivators were often referred to by my interlocutors as *cultivadores solidarios*, who donate both time and resources to set medicinal users up with their own cultivations and provide medicinal cannabis products in exchange for contributions. Corbelle (2023) found that 'solidarity is central to the ways in which these activists see themselves, and value, conceive, and orient their daily practices, their lives, and thus their political praxis' (p. 150, my translation).

**Becoming Public**

Groups of cultivators that had begun to take shape within the forums, along with a group of journalists from *THC*,[39] a magazine that was founded in 2006 on cannabis culture, slowly began to come together to form regional associations and begin a militant campaign. Shortly after the first issues of *THC* were published in 2006, there was a demonstration in Palermo Park outside the planetarium on International Marijuana Day in 2007. These demonstrations were met with severe repression by the police, who raided a peaceful protest and detained 37 people for holding cannabis (Echeverría, 2021). Fifteen people were imprisoned for carrying cannabis and participating in the demonstration. After the march, the movement became increasingly public, with various activists being outed for the benefit of the movement. Many of my research participants had been publicly exposed because they were detained due to police violence and/or due to legal battles placing them in vulnerable positions. Whilst the media supported these people by providing coverage, it also meant that their lives were opened up to public scrutiny.

Whilst there were small protests between 2007 and 2010 against the penalisation of cannabis, it was with the 2010 march that the organisation of the marijuana movement began to enter the Argentinian social imaginary. This led to a conversation between representatives of the movement and the state in 2010 (Labiano, 2018). Guillermo, a journalist, told me that the group of cannabis growers who came together to organise the 2010 march had two key ideas for the decriminalisation of cannabis. Firstly, to refocus and increase awareness-raising and harm-reduction activities and, secondly, to begin to march along one of the traditional routes in Buenos Aires.[40] As Guillermo explained, the organisation of the march entailed a lot of work. Getting the necessary documentation and permissions required extensive negotiations with the government. At the same time, being a stigmatised community, these activists were taking a risk by becoming visible to government officials. They did not know how much support the march would receive from wider society, but nevertheless it was set to take place on 8 May 2010.

[39] TCH also refers to one of the main active components found in marijuana: tetrahydrocannabinol.

[40] This begins in the central Plaza de Mayo and finishes at the Palace of Congress.


*Figure 8: The front of the World Marijuana March in Buenos Aires 2010.*[41]

A major focus of the march was to differentiate cannabis users from narcotraffickers. This was done by underscoring the small-scale nature of cultivations as well as the small, trusted groups within which cannabis was exchanged. Their artisanal nature was emphasised and the direct link between the cultivator and consumer stressed as factors that would ensure a good-quality product. This was portrayed as contrasting with what is found on the illegal market. Due to the small-scale nature of the work and the community, a good reputation formed by the adoption of communitarian values became important for maintaining social cohesiveness.

The cannabis activists I spoke to differentiated themselves from narcotraffickers, who distribute large quantities of drugs to generate profit, with little consideration of the health of the consumer, as with the '*Paraguay prensado*' mentioned earlier. Yet, cannabis cultivators remain equated to traffickers and distributors in the public perception and, therefore, they are persecuted by law enforcement and subjected to long legal procedures (Harris, 2021). Cannabis users and activists see themselves as easy pickings for an institution that, in their view, protects the narcotrafficking racket and sustains the illegal drug industry (Soriano, 2017). When I was talking with Carlos in

[41] https://stopthedrugwar.org/chronicle/2010/dec/28/thousand_march_marijuana_buenos

his shop, he laughed and said: 'The law doesn't affect narcotrafficking. What the law does is create a state of coexistence with narcotrafficking.'[42]

Marchers carried the banner 'no to narcotraffickers' on the 2010 march; the slogan declares a rejection of what they identify as real organised criminal structures (see also: Klein & Potter, 2018). They make the claim that the legalisation of cannabis can contest and reduce the illegal (and dangerous) drug economy by providing legitimate ways of working with the plant (von Hoffmann, 2020). Their strategy, therefore, was to convey a distance from organised crime by claiming their identification with a cannabis culture established on a community basis and distanced from illegal drug economies. As Roberto, a cultivator and leader of a cannabis association, argued, violence comes from other spheres, rather than the local cannabis community:

> For us, narcotrafficking is where there's violence. What violence is there in cultivating and selling to friends? There is no violence, they're adults who say: 'I want, you have', 'I have and will sell to you'. An exchange! Where's the violence there? Nowhere! For us, narcotrafficking is violence!


*Figure 9: Banner at a cannabis exposition that says 'Self-cultivation now. We are not criminals.'*[43]

[42] Drug trafficking accounts for approximately 80% of the illicit drug industry. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that on a world scale, drug trafficking generated $1.7 trillion in 2023 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023).

[43] Image from fieldwork (by Lucia Amaranta Thompson).

Cannabis culture is intimately intertwined with principles of non-violence, which have been shaped by both historical movements and contemporary activism. Often, when discussing other activists who had been arrested by law enforcement, interlocutors would underline that these people had been caught just smoking peacefully, relaxed, and not bothering anyone. Across different contexts, cannabis users and advocates have often framed their engagement with the plant as part of a broader ethos of peace, healing, and resistance to punitive systems. Many cannabis communities emphasise cooperation, mutual aid, and harm reduction, opposing aggressive state policies that criminalise users and disproportionately target marginalised populations.

In activist spaces, particularly those advocating legalisation, cannabis movements have historically employed civil disobedience, education campaigns, and community organising rather than confrontational methods, highlighting a preference for dialogue over aggression. Even within more contentious debates about legalisation and policing, cannabis activism tends to encourage non-violent responses to criminalisation, focusing on legislative reform, public awareness, and the promotion of harm-reduction models. Furthermore, medicinal cannabis advocacy stresses the idea of cannabis as a therapeutic and restorative substance, aligning with narratives of wellness and non-violent resistance to drug laws with socially biased consequences. Hence, the cultural, medicinal, and political dimensions of cannabis use reinforce a connection between cannabis and peaceful resistance, making non-violence a defining characteristic of the cannabis movement in Argentina.

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Guillermo and I are meeting up in the same café as the last time I was in Buenos Aires, and the conversation is going smoothly. We are talking about the different marches, and he goes through the earlier protests (the first being in 2007) and then jumps to the 2010 march. He tells me that, even in a prohibitionist environment, the cannabis movement marched in 2010 without encountering any form of repression from the police. In part, this was because they had made sure to comply with all the regulations regarding demonstrations in Buenos Aires but also, as Guillermo argues, because the government of the time had been encouraging increasing civil society participation in governmental policy development (Corbelle, 2023). This

means that, at that point, the state allowed demonstrations without repression, enabling the social movement to march peacefully.[44] The march was a success, with over 11,000 people in attendance in Buenos Aires, showing the broad range and large number of people campaigning for the right to consume cannabis (Echeverría, 2021).[45]

Guillermo further explains about the legal/institutional and symbolic importance of the 2010 march. He tells me that the organisers obtained permission from the state to conduct the march legitimately. The licence to demonstrate came at the cost of a lot of time and resources which the organisation was able to bring together, and they felt it to be a huge achievement. The symbolic achievement was the ability to march in the footsteps of historical Argentinian marches claiming rights. The march brought a marginalised community together, and out of this emerged an increasingly public militancy in the fight for the legalisation of cannabis (Corbelle, 2018, 2023). A number of associations organised geographically, such as Cogollos del Oeste and grow shops like Pulpot (which was one of the first grow shops in Latin America), began to sprout as all of these agents intensified their demands to the state. Filmmaker and cultivator Agustin thus explained:

> So, you've already started to manage another level of knowledge, another level of organisation. The first march was organised in 2010 […] and I think that was when everything exploded, because seeing that there were so many of us, that we were all there in the square, one gains more courage. And the fight, the militancy, becomes clearer and has a more specific direction.

The march became a further catalyst for the expansion of the cannabis movement in Argentina. As Agustin put it, at this point they found a point of connection, and began to further mobilise as a community, which was able to present a proposal to decriminalise cannabis users in congress the following year (Corbelle, 2023). As the years went on, the World Marijuana March continued to attract increasingly bigger crowds, which culminated in the 2016 march when the mothers came into public focus. Through their interactions

[44] This was during the Kirchner presidency, which supported social movements and their rights to a voice.

[45] At this point, the marches focused on the right to use cannabis for any reason without discrimination.

with cultivators, they began to meet and organise as mothers specifically seeking out medicinal cannabis and forged a space of safety and knowledge exchange. The mothers were public about their experiences, giving testimonials in congress and coming out in the media. They expected that their strategy of keeping their experiences on the public agenda would lead to a social and political shift in perceptions of cannabis (Díaz, 2020b). This meant that they were placed front and centre of the march. Appealing to the memories of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, whilst carrying a banner for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis, the mothers were able to challenge the dominant typology of the cannabis user as a young, rebellious, or dangerous man. Carlos, a cultivator who was involved in the associations during the late 2000s, told me his memories of the mothers and the march:

> The fire was lit with the children in wheelchairs at the front of the march. The truth is that it was like that! Low blows according to the groups that make the decisions in government […]. The truth is that they aren't low blows, but about the lives of the many people who find an alternative in the plant to carry on. It was a way of creating empathy. At that point, the motto was 'put yourself in my shoes!'

Mothers fighting for their children challenge negative images of the cannabis user (Rivera, 2019). As Polletta and Jasper (2001, 2019) argue, these mothers emerge as 'worthy victims' because they inspire compassion and the harm they have suffered triggers moral outrage, which in turn inspires a desire to support and help the cause. As Carlos told me, the government perceived the positioning of children at the front of the 2016 marijuana march as a low blow because the state cannot defend any kind of harm done to children, their mothers, or other vulnerable groups such as the sick or the elderly.

Mothers, though, were taking a risk when cultivating under illegal conditions. The next research participant, Alma, came into the public eye because of a raid on her home where she was cultivating medicinal cannabis. Her case became well known because the cannabis community (activists and professionals) rallied around her. Alma shared her experience with law enforcement:

> They broke down my door […], they came into my room, and they pointed at me and my husband with [a gun saying it was a raid]. My husband had left the

> bedroom, and they had him on the ground. I was panicking because the first thing I thought was that they were burglars, not police. They were in unmarked clothes and there was no police car, or anything. Then a police officer shows me a paper and tells me that it's a police raid […]. I feared they would kill us!

Alma's fear was palpable when telling me her story, as she became very emotional. The violence that she experienced at the hands of the police led her to delve further into her activism. Her personal story dominated the tabloids, achieving the exposure that led to her own and her husband's release.

The mobilisation of mothers also challenged the role of the state and medical institutions in determining what a drug is. By arguing for the legitimate use of cannabis as medicine, the mothers confronted over a century of drug prohibition that has posited cannabis as a dangerous object. As Luis Miguel Rivera (2019) argues:

> By highlighting the possible beneficial effects of an illegal substance (cannabis), by pointing out the problems of internal legitimacy in the medical world (not legal, so not to be studied), by criticising the access to health (prices of medicines too high), mothers put on the agenda an innovative medical governance that came from illegality. (p. 100)

Through its activism, the cannabis movement increasingly influenced public opinion by addressing social perceptions of cannabis, and more specifically by challenging the ways in which society perceived the user. As Roberto, the leader of a cannabis association, argued, activism engages in questioning current frames in order to critically reconsider social beliefs (Snow et al., 2019).

> A person is an activist when you make other people uncomfortable and put them into situations they're not used to. It moves and shakes you from your place, your centre, which forces you to look at things from another angle.

As we sat together on a comfortable sofa on the mezzanine of Carlos' grow shop, he told me about his experiences of being an activist and the resistance he had faced. He described the effort involved in organising a lecture on cannabis at the public hospital in his neighbourhood. He told me that he felt proud because of how the cannabis movement's flag and the flag of the municipality underlined a togetherness. But he also seemed confused about the

ways in which the cannabis debate was moving from the private to the public sphere and how it was met and handled by public institutions. In Carlos' words:

> I went to the municipality to tell them that I was an activist, and I wanted to do something for the municipality. I managed to get the education secretary, social development, and secretary of health together and they gave me the hospital's hall to give a lecture. I spoke to the municipality. I sold them the event […]. The day of the lecture, which was going to be at 2pm, I came by at 11 to set the place up. At 11:30, the first people arrived. We had our banners up and I asked [the municipality] whether they wanted to put the municipal banners up, they said no. Fine! It gets to midday and there were a lot of people sitting down, I asked myself whether all these people were coming for the lecture? By 2pm, people weren't able to get into the hall. I'd requested some gazebos to organise a fair and they said they didn't have any […] At 1pm, a woman comes up with the municipality's banner and puts it next to [the organisation's banner]. She brought me the gazebos […]. On Facebook, there were [photos of] people hanging out of the windows. More than 500 people!

It seems to me that, by emphasising a 'we', Carlos was attempting to create a sense of belonging to a community and a culture. In his reflections upon the relationship between the constitution of *colectivos* (collectives) and their passage into public spaces, Mariano Fernandez (2019) argues for the importance of analytically differentiating between what he defines as the identity moment, i.e., the establishment of a field of inter-collective relations, and the transformation of the community when entering public space. Cannabis culture, as it becomes public, begins to be increasingly shaped by its interactions with public institutions.

Medicinal cannabis users also began to make their way into different spaces, such as congress and the media, in their attempts to influence policy development, and in this way activists became 'policy entrepreneurs' (Rivera, 2019). The diversity of cannabis users has been a window through which the movement has been able to access resources and establish links with institutions. The ability of expert professionals to navigate and interact with cannabis culture was evident throughout my data, with activist-experts creating an acceptable frame through which to examine and develop knowledge around cannabis. However, the experience and knowledge of cannabis growers and users have been undervalued, frequently deemed irrelevant and ignored in diverse spaces such as academia (Corbelle, 2023). This even occurred when

collaborating with other social movements, as Ayelen, a cannabis association leader, told me when speaking of her group's participation in a gathering of different Argentinian social movement:

> [P]eople who use substances are looked at weirdly everywhere. They look at you sideways, even if they're acting as if everything's OK; everywhere, with politicians, scientist, doctors. They look at you weirdly everywhere. So here we fight for a re-vindication, there are so many struggles for personal choices within a culture. Us too! And this space gave us the tools, over time, to be understood as suffering the same that these other groups did. Vulnerability, police persecution, the laws, edicts or decrees that take away rights.

In her reference to 'other groups', Ayelen was talking about interactions in activist spheres that fight for social justice, such as the trans movement. Finding common ground with these movements has been a matter of convincing other groups that they all experience persecution in a similar way to other marginalised populations.

Historically, the mainstream conservative media has been hostile to the cannabis movement and in many instances has worked in conjunction with the state to stigmatise cannabis users. This has meant that, in conjunction with powerful institutions, the portrayal of cannabis users in the media has demonised cannabis and, as a consequence, its users. While sitting in his cannabis club, Agustin told me about a recent case of hostility from a mainstream newspaper:

> There's an internal support system, which has always existed, between the police, judiciary, and some journalists. Instead of being a [proper] journalist, journalism is instructed by the police, and it stigmatises and violates all types of guarantees […]. I remember they [i.e., the media] had a headline: 'The destruction of a cannabis oil laboratory'. They said the person was a narcotrafficker. But it provoked a lot of outrage and the newspaper, instead of retracting, began to write about our reality, which they should have done [in the first place]. Other newspapers were great [though] and [the police] had to reduce the charges to personal consumption, even though this man had many, many plants.

Sergio also mentioned the protest response of cannabis activists, which had led to the journalist in question writing a piece in the newspaper that introduced the other side of the issue. Activism was crucial in ensuring that those who had

fallen victim to the law were offered a media space to raise their voices, highlighting that the relationship between cannabis users and the law is far more nuanced than simply being about crime.

## Cannabis Culture and Magazines

Going public has included the publication of magazines catering to the cannabis community, as well as providing different perspectives on the cannabis user to the general public. Magazines sought to demonstrate that cannabis users were a respectable part of different communities, embracing positive qualities such as respect, calmness, good mood, and solidarity. *THC* magazine, published since 2006, has historically been a pivotal source of information about cannabis and cannabis culture in Argentina. Its widespread distribution ensured that it became an important source of information for cannabis growers who felt isolated across the country. Cannabis magazines, such as *THC*, became essential to the communication of activist experiences and alternative political narratives. Guillermo, who has worked with the magazine, clarified its overarching goals to me:

> *THC*'s main objective was to […] make visible something that was already happening […] it was the first Argentinian media to make the decision to illustrate the phenomenon of cannabis in Argentina in all its breadth and complexity. Somehow, *THC* transformed the discussion into a space of debate, of exchange […]. So, in that sense, I think that *THC* has been and is a fantastic portal […] that informs society about cannabis culture.


*Figure 10: Range of THC covers extracted from Instagram.*[46]

[46] https://www.instagram.com/revistathc/

*THC* has supported activists in legal trouble by providing exposure, publishing legal, political, and social debates around marijuana, as well as growing tips, among other topics. Its strength lies in its diversity as it is accessible to a wider cannabis culture (Labiano, 2018). When discussing *THC* with my interlocutors, I was often presented with *Haze* magazine which, having been edited (the magazine went out of circulation) by an experienced cultivator, was seen as a publication directed at experienced growers. Its material was seen by cannabis cultivators to be relevant and progressive even though they recognised that it was not accessible to the casual grower. The objective of *Haze* magazine, as described on its website, was a matter of showing:

> The plant exactly how it is, with all its charms and secrets out in the open. This way, we can find texts and photos showing how to cultivate the never-ending spectrum of varieties that exist today. We appreciate its recreational, medicinal, social, and even religious sides. HAZE is a collection magazine, elaborated visually from the intense and exotic tonalities of the flower in all its splendour and conceptually in its embodied histories with poetry and charm. (*Haze* Magazine, n.d., my translation)


*Figure 11: Range of* Haze *magazine covers, taken from its Instagram account.*[47]

Magazines have approached cannabis in different ways. *THC* has focused on presenting an acceptable image to the public and shifting general attitudes, whereas *Haze* served as a key reference for cultivators, rather than aiming to engage broader society. This distinction is evident in their mission statements: *THC* emphasises its goal of demystifying cannabis and its use, while *Haze* concentrated on the plant itself and its various facets. The statement above includes words such as 'charm' and 'embodied histories', while personifying

[47] https://www.instagram.com/revistahaze/?hl=en

the plant as a living entity that interacts with humans to create a community by virtue of its inherent properties. These magazines and their content became pivotal to the development of a growing cannabis culture and have served to present the plant to society in ways that challenge hegemonic constructions of drugs, and particularly the cannabis plant (Giraudo, 2020).

A key journalist often mentioned by the research participants was Fernando Soriano who, despite being censured by his editors, pushed for greater coverage of the cannabis movement (Hasse & Sasturain, 2020). Sergio and Juan, two cultivators, stressed in our conversation that, whilst mainstream newspapers gave the movement little space in their publications, in 2014, Soriano had fought back to get the movement onto the cover of *Clarin*, one of Argentina's major newspapers. Many of those involved in my study mentioned that, whilst Soriano was being censured by the Argentinian media, he managed to publish an article on the cannabis activist Matias Faray in the magazine *Rolling Stone* (Hasse & Sasturain, 2020). He later worked with the medicinal mothers' movement and covered their early beginnings through interviews with mothers and their families.


EL SIGLO VERDE

Héroe de la clase cultivadora

Matías Faray estuvo quince días encerrado en un calabozo por cultivar marihuana en su balcón. Procesado, este rasta bonaerense que se convirtió en líder de base de la lucha por la legalización convoca a todo el mundo a plantar y regalar sus cogollos Por Fernando Soriano

"Por cada cultivcta que caiga, mil más vamos a plantar. Abajo el negocio del porro prensado."

*Figure 12: Picture of* Rolling Stone *article by Fernando Soriano.*[48]

[48] Image from fieldwork (by Lucia Amaranta Thompson).

Soriano is one of various allies who carried out their own forms of activism by using his profession to collaborate with the cannabis movement. As Steven Epstein (1996) also found in relation to the HIV/AIDS movement in the US, the cannabis community in Argentina has drawn upon the expertise of cannabis users who also populate professional, public, and private spheres to challenge the hegemonic prohibitionist discourse that dominates the political discussion.

## Locations within Cannabis Culture

Interviewees who were approaching cannabis from legal, medical, and other professional perspectives had mostly been part of the movement since the early cannabis associations were formed and supported various collective activities. The medicinal cannabis movement benefited from these already established networks, with professionals often providing their services for free (Corbelle, 2023). The professionals I spoke with only rarely touched upon personal encounters with the police, despite their work being visible and accessible to wider society. Corbelle (2018) argues that professionals can reduce the risks connected to their drug consumption due to their political and material capital. Furthermore, their activism does not entail a public relationship with growing or consuming cannabis. Rather, their public work is that of assisting members of the movement, conducting research, and other indirect activities. As I found in my study, and throughout social movement research, 'professionals/experts' have not only contributed by providing relevant services such as legal assistance but also by highlighting the relevance of their knowledge to the debate. As David Snow and colleagues (2019) posit, for example, activism engages in questioning current frameworks in order to critically build and extend upon social beliefs. Finding themselves within a conservative legal system, cannabis movement allies such as lawyers and government officials have been key to the questioning that has reframed drugs, as well as assisting cultivators and users to navigate tough legal situations. As Luz, a grower and activist, told me:

> There was a person, the new chief of police, and he told us everything, he said: 'We didn't want to raid your home because we knew you didn't sell, and you gave the oil workshop at the congress annex in November'. I was very exposed,

> and they knew who each one of us was. We had nothing to do with narcotrafficking or anything of that sort.

In contrast to user activists, medicinal activists often suggested that public exposure provided security for the mothers because they can create positive messages and garner support from the public. The mothers, specifically Mama Cultiva, pushed public perceptions by being even more brash and outspoken about medicinal cannabis. Whilst previous cannabis activists had been very careful to hide their identities, covering their faces when coming out in the media, the mothers sauntered in to all the conferences, congress meetings, and media events/shows holding cannabis plants. At these shows, they told compelling stories about their children and the benefits of using medical marijuana, disseminating their own knowledge to others with health issues, whilst at the same time making an effort to destigmatise the use of medicinal cannabis (Díaz, 2018).

By bringing to the forefront knowledge developed through experience, medicinal cannabis users, growers, and their families sought to challenge stereotypes about the drug user and cannabis. The mobilisations and visibility of marginalised populations struggling for the legalisation of medicinal use make it a social issue that needs intervention, not one that can be solved simply through the production of scientific knowledge (Aguilar et al., 2022). In this way, they begin to question and transform the ways in which medical science is conducted and on what terms. For this reason, they have allied themselves with researchers and scientists to collaborate and disseminate their findings in various domains, including interventions in a number of university disciplines.

According to my findings, cannabis culture stems from the emergence of small groups who met online to develop cannabis epistemologies and appreciate the ontology of the cannabis plant. The engagement of social movements with hegemonic institutions, such as universities and government agents, inevitably led to the transformation of their identities and priorities (Epstein, 1996). As the cannabis movement increasingly began to access spheres of power, the agenda of the wider movement shifted away from activism that challenged hegemonic framings to a focus on policy interventions and lobbying. Consequently, cannabis user activists often feel marginalised and unrepresented in policy developments.

Throughout my fieldwork, I met and saw the work of many cannabis artisans who formed part of a cannabis economy created around the plant, a discussion to which I now turn.

## Cannabis Economy

Sergio once emphasised to me that the exchange of cannabis is carried out between friends within a network of trust. Interlocutors rarely touched upon the topic of buying and selling cannabis flowers for profit, but rather spoke of a community of friends within which they exchanged artisanal products such as flowers at cost or through exchange (Sandberg, 2012c). As Elrik Jerven Berger and colleagues (2023) observe in their study of middle-class Norwegian cannabis dealers, these networks of trust involve developing close relationships between the supplier and the receiver, activities that are in tune with underlying cultural values of solidarity and friendship (see also: Berger et al., 2023; Sandberg, 2012c).

Interlocutors did not view the sale of cannabis as a business for profit, but rather as an integrated aspect of relations between a community of friends who do favours for each other by sourcing, supplying, and sharing cannabis, and the culture that comes with it (Berger et al., 2023). One of the principle challenges for the cannabis community has been to resist the il/legal commercialisation of cannabis by producing good-quality cannabis in a communitarian and artisanal way (Bancroft, 2020). My research participants, however, did focus more on the popular economy of artisanal products, such as the sale of oils, creams, and soaps, made on a small scale and usually by women to sell in markets. Ayelen explained:

> A popular cannabis economy exists. It's mainly populated by women sellers at fairs to support their families, who cultivate or make brownies, and make decorations with cannabis leaves. They go out and sell [all of this], which is part of a popular [i.e., informal] economy, that we revindicate.

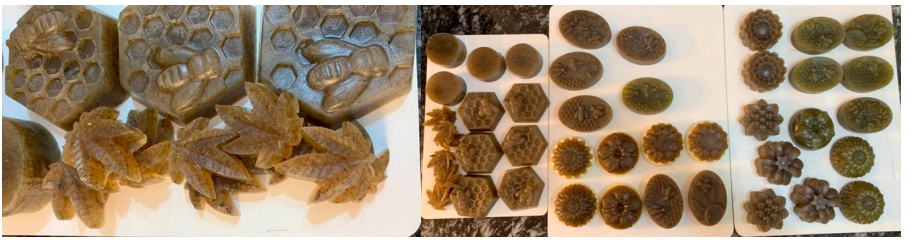

*Figure 13: Artisanal cannabis soaps. Photos taken after observing how they were made in an interlocutor's kitchen.*[49]

Many of the activists also spoke of a medicinal solidarity economy in which many cultivators grew cannabis and made medicine for others in need. This can be seen as a form of solidarity, which spread through the mothers' cannabis community, as Maria, a mother activist and cultivator, summarised:

> What always happens is that one cultivates for oneself. [Then] you have a neighbour who can't sleep, and their joints are hurting and, well, [they take] a few drops. Then [maybe I] have a large quantity, maybe a three-litre jar, which is a lot! Maybe oil is more difficult, resin you have less of, but you also give that away.

Maria described an informal system of exchange and support between cultivators and medicinal users. Not only do they provide cannabis to those in need, but they also encourage those with various illnesses to consider it as a potential alternative treatment. In this sense, they see themselves as obliged to care for others, viewing their activism as a way to demystify the use of cannabis.

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Berger and colleagues (2023) highlight that people's links to the cannabis market and their relations with wider society involve different levels of access to resources and institutions. In this case, those who have access to these various resources have been able to transfer more easily into legitimate cannabis activities. This means that small-scale cultivators and producers are marginalised because they continue to work illegally and are excluded from the fledgling cannabis industry. Carlos (grower and activist) argued that these

[49] Images from fieldwork (by Lucia Amaranta Thompson).

experienced growers are suffering and facing violence. As someone with a low income, Carlos was not able to participate in the industry despite his experience and skills in cultivation.

> [T]o be a cultivator, for example, you have to pay the subscriptions, which cost almost 100,000 pesos, [and] you need the signature of an agricultural engineer. Almost all my comrades already are [legitimate cultivators], they ask me why I'm not. I always say the same: 'I have no money'. I would love to have that peace and start working with what I like, but I don't have the money. The industrial law, which came out before decriminalisation, creates more interest but at the same time it creates more vulnerability in the populations that don't have access to these resources.

The shift towards an industrialised cannabis market has marginalised small-scale cultivators, particularly those who have been growing cannabis illicitly since the early 2000s. The requirement for government-issued licences creates significant financial barriers, often making legal entry into the market unattainable for traditional growers. Meanwhile, those with substantial economic resources, often affluent white men, are able to invest in the infrastructure and regulatory costs necessary to establish large-scale cannabis businesses, despite lacking the generational expertise of smaller cultivators.

Activist cannabis cultivators have historically operated within improvised spaces, relying on communitarian knowledge developed in the shadows, often under conditions of illegality and state hostility. The transition to legality has introduced a complex, often unequal form of 'collaborative relationship', whereby these cultivators strive to adapt while navigating restrictive laws. Although legalisation offers opportunities for recognition, it also imposes bureaucratic and financial barriers, challenging their ability to fully integrate into the legal cannabis economy while preserving their expertise and autonomy. With the *mates* doing the rounds, Juan and Sergio explained to me what the transition into legality has meant for them. Juan thus tells me:

> [Cannabis] has always been illegal, but on the way, comrades [cultivated] illegally and had a previous trajectory. But from a commercial perspective […] that paradigm is tough, I grew up in the shadows, I always had to hide. And then from one day to the next, I become responsible, have a licensed shop, I invoice […]. You're suddenly asking someone who's always used a made-up nickname to show their face, give their name, their address and with all […] the

> benefits but also obligations, responsibilities, expose yourself to all kinds of situations.

Juan discussed the challenges of transitioning into a regulated industry that now permits activities that were previously illegal. Registering with the state poses potential risks, because exposure could be challenging in the long term. Furthermore, as Juan said, registering as a business also comes with many 'obligations' and 'responsibilities', for an activity that they previously carried out without any controls. Sergio expanded on Juan's comments by saying:

> When dealing with cannabis, we have to do everything legally because we know they're watching us. But we have everything in order, we have AFIP [a fiscal code], we pay all the taxes.

Sergio made it clear that growers are strictly adhering to the law. This serves as a form of protection ensuring that, should the regulations be rescinded under a new government, they can prove their legitimacy and the permissions granted to them by the state. Despite the hope for a growing cannabis economy, these same interlocutors spoke of how the prohibitionist regime has stunted the growth of the large-scale cannabis industry, meaning that Argentina has to catch up with international advances in order to secure a share of the international market. Prohibitionist policy has meant that the development of cannabis research and cannabis technologies has been restricted within formal institutions (Chouvy, 2019). However, whilst working illegally, the cannabis community has developed knowledge and technologies upon which science and industry are now drawing. For example, the three national strains studied in CONICET[50] were developed and donated by local cultivators. Juan stressed that a marginalised cannabis culture:

> [L]ed Argentina to have a standard quality of marijuana similar to Amsterdam, California, and Barcelona […]. It was able to get to this high standard without a law that permitted the development of the industry.

Cannabis cultivators encourage a community of knowledge, which is shared freely amongst those involved. This knowledge has suddenly become

[50] The Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, is Argentina's public research institution.

profitable; however, not everyone is able to profit from it. New cannabis businesses are investing in technologically advanced infrastructure to earn profit from the mass production of cannabis, something which strays far away from the values underlying cannabis culture (Giraudo, 2020). These initiatives often engage in large production projects with which small-scale growers or makers of products such as earth and fertilisers cannot compete.

In Argentina, scientific projects on cannabis cultivation and laboratory experimentation have started to be carried out in both public (e.g., universities, NGOs) and private spaces. A luxurious cannabis tourist circuit has also developed, where tourists can stay amongst cannabis plants and try the growers' wares. Furthermore, large projects, such as CANNAVA[51] in Jujuy province, have focused on creating plantations for the scientific and technological development of cannabis for medicinal and industrial purposes (Reuters, 2023). This manifested among my research participants in a contradictory manner, with some expressing concern about their own ability to compete with large investors, whilst at the same time recognising that these projects further the development of a cannabis industry that could strengthen the Argentinian economy. However, large industrial projects have faced challenges with laws and regulations that, while permitting their development, have restricted the sale and distribution of cannabis. Although this contradiction prompted a campaign seeking its resolution, the current Milei government has defunded the registration system, leaving it and other cannabis-related policies at a standstill.

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I am sitting in a kind of boardroom littered with small figurines and posters from marijuana marches propped up against office folders, which I am later told are collections of cannabis magazines. It is my second meeting with Nicolas, the cannabis lawyer, and we are talking about the current Milei government, which is one of the discussions that always arise during my interviews.[52] Nicolas explains to me that the government is seeking ways to

[51] A state-owned company dedicated to medicinal cannabis production.

[52] The party currently in power, from its very inception, has been a violent one, therefore a topic almost always touched upon in interviews (Rodríguez Pérez, 2024).

appropriate the cannabis industry and in the meantime it is blocking the development of businesses that have been emerging since the changes in the law in 2017 and then 2020.

> Ignorance! They don't understand. They want to know where the business is and take it over. And they don't understand that it's much larger than just a business […] and while they try to figure out how they can take everything, they've stopped everything […]. There's huge commercial activity around cannabis that's not just about cannabis flowers. There are a lot of tourist attractions, shows, food, seeds, clones, cosmetics, which are all functioning, not because of a regulation, but because of the effort.

In saying that cannabis is much larger than a business, Nicolas is critiquing the narrow perspective taken by institutions, which associate it only with profit and seek to control its economy without understanding the broader cultural, social, and community-driven aspects that sustain it. He argues that cannabis is more than just a flower. Rather, it is embedded within a whole ecosystem of commerce, entertainment, and medicinal products that exist because of the cannabis community rather than formal regulations. The control that the government is attempting to secure over the cannabis industry disrupts an industry that is formed around human relationships with the plant.

Nicolas further tells me that the current government has led to different ways of interacting with cannabis. With the increasing institutional interest, scientific studies have produced, for example, an economic analysis of the cannabis industry, in order to be able to present information that is legible and appealing to the state (Ferraiolo, 2007; García Bernado et al., 2022). According to Nicolas:

> [T]hey're generating things on another level because they're carrying out economic studies, so they can go to meetings when the government asks. You know how it is; a government comes in and you must adapt to what it likes. This government wants a folder and a website, so everyone is adapting.

For this reason, various chambers of commerce have surfaced to protect the cannabis industry – a forum through which Nicolas believes future activism will come. This includes the protection of national and small-scale cannabis associations which are seeking their own forms of socioeconomic structures that continue to produce the knowledge upon which the cannabis industry is developed.

# REPROCANN[53]

The establishment of REPROCANN came with the change in social perceptions of cannabis, resulting in a large population seeking out medicinal cannabis and the licences to be able to grow and consume it. Blanca, the mother of a child without diagnosis who has had health issues since birth, told me that there used to be a taboo concerning marijuana, which, however, is changing today:

> [A]t least in Argentina in the circles I'm in, you no longer talk about cannabis in that way [i.e. as dangerous or evil]. I think the fear [around cannabis] has dissipated and it's understood that it's not bad and not prohibited […] it improves quality of life, is that bad? And that's the perspective from which we speak about the plant.

Blanca was describing a shift in perceptions of cannabis within certain circles in Argentina where it is no longer seen as dangerous and criminal but rather as something that can improve quality of life. Her question of whether it is bad or not reveals a pragmatic approach rather than one based on outdated moral values. Her framing of cannabis as something that enhances wellbeing, rather than as a prohibited substance, speaks to the successes of activism and shifting public attitudes.

Many of the people with whom I spoke during my fieldwork told me that being registered on REPROCANN gave them a feeling of being liberated from the instability and insecurities they had faced when growing and using cannabis under a prohibitionist regime. For example, Rosa, a feminist cannabis activist and cultivator, explained that the legitimisation achieved when registered on REPROCANN meant that medicinal users felt protected by the state. In the words of Rosa:

> [Now] you have more freedom smoking and [when] the police come [we say]: 'No, we have REPROCANN, and it's my therapy, and you have to respect that'. And it's not like we're marginal because REPROCANN, with its 170,000

[53] Registro del Programa Nacional de Cannabis Medicinal/ National Register for the Medicinal Cannabis Programme.

> subscribers, shows that people want to be within the law. They don't want to cultivate at home in fear.

As a cannabis activist, Rosa was shifting the focus towards access and legitimacy rather than defiance against the state. She highlighted the progress that REPROCANN has provided for medicinal cannabis users, introducing regulations that allow them to operate within the law. However, her reference to fear underscores the lingering concerns about legal uncertainty despite the advances that have been made. By citing the number of subscribers, she was effectively arguing for the necessity of regulated access to cannabis. REPROCANN, therefore, becomes an added safety measure for cultivators and users who want to circumvent legal controls. It has also meant that they feel they can now resort to the police without being doubly victimised, as Rosa explained:

> With REPROCANN, [if thieves] steal your plants, which has already happened here, you can report the theft as though it were any other. And the police, if you know who it was, must raid the house of the person who now has the plants. It has happened that plants have been given back to the owner […]. Before REPROCANN, if anything was stolen, you couldn't report it because you had [illegal] plants. So, let's say that someone steals your TV, fridge, whatever, and you have a plantation of marijuana in your house, you can't report it because the police would find your plants, you would be in trouble […]. Look at everything that was solved with this licence.

However, there is an ambivalent relationship between the cultivator/user and seeking legitimacy through a state-controlled registration system. Whilst REPROCANN has been seen as progress, some participants worried about the future of the registration system, which they find very suspect. Rita (a cultivator for her grandchild), described the struggle she went through when considering registration on REPROCANN:

> Yes, I finally registered on REPROCANN, but I didn't want to. Because I don't think it was logical to restrict the number of plants.[54] Register for whom? Or for what? And to have to be linked to a doctor, my doctor didn't give me a hand when I needed it. I myself was in denial about accepting that regulation.

[54] REPROCANN permits the cultivation of 9 flowering plants per patient at the same time.

> Afterwards, I understood, because I'm stubborn. It was difficult for me to understand that it was progress. It was all I had. I registered to feel more at ease.

For this reason, many of the cultivators struggled to feel safe when registering on REPROCANN, citing issues of mistrust and safety. Having their names on a public registration system did not make them feel safe from possible negative repercussions (Lau et al., 2015). Carla, a cultivator, told me that there is a mistrust of the state, which could turn on them at any point:

> To think that not many years ago we had a terrible coup d'état, [one] of the many that have happened in Argentinian history, and the right [wing] has always been associated with a more reactionary coup d'état, let's say. And you hear the police […] and their behaviour. That's why I still have doubts. What does a register of cultivators have to do with anything? I think there's no need to have a registration, it should simply no longer be illegal to produce it. That each person has their plants. Why do I have to give all my information to someone? I don't know what to expect […] The truth is that in this country you don't know how long you'll have that permission. If someone feels like it, or they change the political angle, take advantage and destroy everything. It's very common here.

Sergio, Juan, and Alberto suggested that there are around 1.5 million cannabis users in Argentina alone (Flores, 2021). Therefore, the number of people registered on REPROCANN – more than 300 000 in 2024 (Cannábica Argentina, 2024) – actually represents only a small percentage of Argentinian cannabis users. Not only do people fear the dangers of registering, but the limitation of the system to medicinal cannabis has meant that users who do not qualify their use as medicinal have not seen REPROCANN as an option. At the same time, registration was also seen by some as an opportunity for users who registered to be able to use cannabis recreationally under the guise of medicinal use.

Despite the registration itself and the reference from the doctor being free (indications are meant to be provided by the public health service), patients are often asked to attend their doctors' private clinics, where they have to pay. This means that registration on a supposedly free system is inaccessible to many, who cannot afford the rates of unethical doctors. A conversation that took place between Ayelen and Roberto illustrates the different views on the creation of REPROCANN:

> Ayelen: The arrival of REPROCANN for those who have money to pay for a health professional to enrol them in that registration system for medicinal use ended up being a tool for the protection of cannabis culture […] REPROCANN, with only giving permission for medicinal use, there's no penalty […]. You can have *porro* on you, you can carry up to 40 grams all across the country, you can travel by plane, have your nine plants at home.

Here, Ayelen was referring to the registration system's dual role, one of protecting certain users whilst being a tool for the exclusion of others. Whilst medicinal users are protected, the registration system is not available for those without economic privilege, who are therefore unable to benefit from its development. Roberto expanded upon this dual standard:

> Roberto: Well, if you're from [one of the] hegemonic groups [i.e. the privileged] travel by plane, if you're on a coach, lost in the middle of the country, you have a problem. So, yet again it's the same, who has hegemonic power […] defend themselves, they're the ones who have rights. Rights can't only be for one group of people. Rights are for everyone. For me personally, it isn't progress, it's a way of implementing an economic model that benefits those with most privilege, they're making money with this, or they will make a lot of money. In the meantime, everyone [else] is imprisoned.

Other interviewees laughed at the ease with which one can get a REPROCANN indication, which requires minimal, seemingly unrelated issues. They questioned what kinds of use justifiably fall within the category of medicinal use (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013). It was often mentioned that, for someone who can afford to pay off doctors to provide them with the indications required by the registration, it is easily accessible. This means middle-class people with adequate financial resources. Consequently, REPROCANN registrations are dominated by users complaining of symptoms that are seen by medical doctors as minor issues. Therefore, opponents have taken advantage of this ambivalence and have accused the REPROCANN administration of giving a licence to just anyone, as Rosa, a feminist cannabis organisation and cultivator, pointed out: 'So, it's then that accusers appear […]: REPROCANN has become a tool for a non-medicinal user to cultivate legitimately'. Defending REPROCANN has been an important task of the medicinal cannabis movement.

REPROCANN has facilitated the emergence of new forms of organisation within cannabis culture. Some of the cannabis clubs I approached have pooled multiple REPROCANN licences to hire cultivators, allowing them to produce for all the licence holders within a shared space. These organisations, which are on the cusp of legality, were seen to be taking space and resources from the 'real' medicinal cannabis users and providers, who needed to be prioritised by the registration system. Whilst recognising the importance of the new law and regulation, many have pointed out that it does not resolve the issues produced by the unsatisfactory regulations, which fail to protect those who cultivate cannabis for both recreational and medicinal purposes (Corda, 2021). Juan argued about the fractures, which he described as provoked by the creation of REPROCANN.

> In my case, I understand that the medicinal stance is somewhat urgent, but it's also urgent that there not be kids in jail. Or dead kids in the police station, or the police beating them […] but I also think that, as a movement, the [cannabis] associations had empathy as a key principle, so we embraced [the medicinal cannabis movement], and we moved forward together. The truth is that it empowered us in all senses, […]. I don't know how many indoor cultivations in Buenos Aires are registered on REPROCANN. But REPROCANN was a tool developed to help people access cannabis knowing that the drug law is still in force. And many have come out of illegality, but today we want to be able to achieve our main objective and our key motto: 'no one else jailed for cannabis'.

The emphasis on empathy shows that cannabis communities are aware of the urgency of people having access to medicinal cannabis. However, according to Juan, this is not enough because cannabis users continue to experience systemic violence and criminalisation. REPROCANN has signified a move towards legitimacy for the cannabis movement, but this has not come without problems. Issues of trust pervade my findings, informed by the instability of Argentinian political history. The registration system has proved inaccessible to the great majority of the cannabis users, due either to their non-medical use, their lack of access to the registration system, or their ignorance about their right to consume medicinal cannabis. The move towards the legitimation of medicinal cannabis use is unsatisfactory in the face of the nonsensical criminalisation of a plant and the right of people to ingest substances of their

choice. This is the argument that forms the basis of Argentina's cannabis culture, as shaped in Buenos Aires.

## Concluding Reflections

This chapter has focused on cannabis culture, examined through discussions with my interlocutors. Cannabis culture has been based around the cultivators who began to organise during the 2000s through anonymous online forums. The members of these forums were people who sought to grow high-quality cannabis and share it with other people who enjoyed the same thing. Furthermore, as well as generating community, the groups also served as a protected space where people could share without fear of getting into trouble with the police.

The groups protected and supported each other as well as creating spaces in which to exchange knowledge and flowers on a solidarity basis (Díaz et al., 2021). Once they began to organise, they focused on presenting the cannabis user as just a 'normal' person trying to educate the public about what they describe as the harmless properties of the cannabis plant, as compared to other kinds of drugs. On this basis, they claimed the right to privacy and to do what one wishes with one's own body as long as it does not affect third parties.

Whilst the cannabis movement had been carrying out small protests since 2007, which involved violent confrontations with the police in 2008, it was the 2010 march that catapulted the movement forward. Importantly, the movement marched under the banner 'no to narcotraffickers', thus differentiating themselves from the narcotraffickers by excluding 'narcos' from the cannabis community. This was similar to claims made in other locations, such as Uruguay (von Hoffmann, 2020). Significantly, these populations speak of 'narcos' in terms of their experiences with the police, who would protect the real traffickers and victimise the user or the cultivator who works in solidarity with others.

Carlos told me of the slippery definition of the cannabis user, which also extends to the use of cannabis in professional fields by people whom society sees as upstanding citizens who are assumed to 'know best'. Some of these professionals in various spheres have come out and publicly defended and

worked with cannabis users and cultivators, supporting their demands for the decriminalisation of cannabis. Expert activists' status and access to institutions has meant that the cannabis user community has been able to access structures of power and fight for the ability to speak from their experience as carriers of different knowledges (Epstein, 1996). Access to spheres of power, however, creates structures of inequality within the cannabis community between groups with unequal access to resources.

The media has become a significant tool for cannabis culture, from political and social magazines such as *THC*, to magazines focusing on cultivation such as *Haze*, to the journalist Fernando Soriano who pushed for coverage in the mainstream media. All of these have worked towards increasing the visibility of the fight for the legalisation of cannabis and reframing social perceptions of the cannabis user (Snow et al., 2019). The visibilisation of cannabis has also been achieved through the development of a cannabis economy, which ranges from artisanal products to larger-scale industry that has changed the traditional economic dynamics of the cannabis movement. Experienced cultivators have developed businesses selling earth, seeds, and paraphernalia, but there have also been large investments in research within partnerships between the state and private institutions that are geared towards the development of a national Argentinian cannabis industry.

The entry of mothers brought medicinal cannabis and its users into focus, which in turn changed the public imaginary of the cannabis user. The highlighting of children along with their mothers, as well as patients, forced the government to take action (Díaz, 2016). An important moment in cannabis culture has been the development of the registration system REPROCANN, which grants licences for the use of medicinal cannabis. Whilst this system has been met positively, it has also been criticised as not being sufficient to ensure that those who cultivate for both medicinal and recreational purposes are protected (Corda, 2021). Furthermore, access to REPROCANN has been taken advantage of by medical professionals, who are charging to give recommendations for the use of medicinal cannabis. Though, the program has been dismantled by the minister of security, Patricia Bullrich under the current Milei government.

From its beginnings, cannabis culture has been constructed upon the foundations of a diverse community that has in common the use of cannabis.

The beginnings of the movement were based on small communities of solidarity and protection, which continue to be fundamental values of cannabis culture. Throughout the years, cannabis culture has challenged the social imaginary of the cannabis user as lazy and dangerous through the participation of expert-activists who have provided access to different hegemonic institutions. The arrival of the mothers has further transformed the social imaginary of the cannabis user and shifted the focus onto the medicinal uses of cannabis and the patients who use it. The law relating to industrial cannabis has led to the development of various actors in the cannabis industry, ranging from artisanal cannabis products to the development of cannabis tourist attractions. The current Milei government has been trying to defund the progress of the cannabis movement. Nevertheless, the cannabis community continues to fight to retain the rights it has already been given, as well as the goal that the movement has fought for from its very beginnings – the legalisation of cannabis.

# Chapter 7: Medicinal Cannabis

Ideas about medicine and health shape how individuals initially perceive cannabis as a medicinal option. For many, the search for cures requires patients and organisations to reshape expectations, prompting a re-evaluation of illness and the body that extends beyond conventional biomedical frameworks. As traditional divisions between body and mind are questioned, patients are increasingly seeking care outside mainstream medical systems, often turning to alternative therapies, like cannabis, both for relief and as a means of escaping the rigid structures of institutionalised healthcare. This shift highlights the tension between biomedicine and holistic healing, with cannabis offering an avenue for exploring more patient-centred care models. Within these spaces, patients often find comfort and warmth, contrasting with the sterility of biomedical institutions. While many still engage with biomedical technologies, they also integrate cannabis use into their healing process, constructing a more personal and empowering approach to managing illness.

At the same time, healthcare professionals are grappling with the intersection between their formal medical training and emerging cannabis treatments. Doctors, who have traditionally relied on evidence-based medicine, must now negotiate their experiences with cannabis, gaining new insights into illness, treatment paradigms, and the limitations of biomedical frameworks. The medicinal cannabis movement has transformed the conversation around cannabis, shifting its public image from a penal issue to a matter of health accessibility. By highlighting the therapeutic benefits of cannabis, activists are challenging prohibitionist narratives, advocating for legal frameworks that serve vulnerable populations rather than criminalising them. This chapter examines the experiences of medicinal cannabis users within biomedical institutions, exploring how they confront, challenge, and resist dominant medical regimes in their pursuit of the cannabis plant as medicine.

## Bioscience and Medicinal Cannabis

I spoke with Elena on Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is a mothers' organisation leader and cannabis cultivator. She told me that people who approach the organisation seeking to use medicinal cannabis hold certain ideas about medicine and health. According to Elena, bio-scientific discourse permeates patients' identity to such an extent that, when introducing themselves, they first introduce their diagnosis and only then their name. Identifying with an illness means that potential cannabis users approach organisations and cultivators with ideas of finding a cure for the ailments from which they are suffering. Carla, a mother who works with a medicinal cannabis organisation, for instance, explains:

> People come and think the plant will perform miracles, save their lives, change them […]. We need to change that perspective, because the plant isn't miraculous, nor does it cure everything. What it does is [to] make what [is] there a little better. It doesn't make people without legs walk. Do you understand?

Cannabis does not seem to work in ways that the conventional biosciences can grasp. Understanding the meaning with which medicinal cannabis and other alternative medicines are imbued, I came to understand, involves questioning dominant forms of how care is perceived, health is construed, and the human body is experienced (Móró et al., 2011). Therefore, medicinal cannabis organisations have been debating and problematising biomedicine in workshops focused on medicinal cannabis.

Elena, whom I mentioned earlier, argued that dominant medical discourse leads people to seek out medicine to 'save their lives'. By this, she was not necessarily referring only to facing the fatal consequences of an illness, but also how their bodies are construed as not being 'normal' and the need to recover. According to Elena, medical cannabis improves quality of life, rather than 'curing'. The idea of the 'normal' body permeated my conversation with Elena, who told me that she did not know what a normal body is because, as she pointed out, 'I don't believe in normality'. She referred to various values being ascribed to a body, depending on whether it can work, produce, study, and even reproduce. As discussed in the theory chapter, dominant medical and political discourse inform how the 'normal' body is constructed and the

meaning of being a productive body is one critical dimension in my material. Elena challenged this conception by questioning the very term 'normality'.

A common feeling expressed by my interlocutors who used medical cannabis was a sense of being misunderstood by a medical system devoted to 'normalising' those who seek help as patients to have a range of health problems fixed. My conversation with Elena was cut off due to low signal and we regrouped a little later on the same day to continue our discussion on the meaning of health vis-à-vis illness and normality vis-à-vis pathology. In Elena's mind, medical doctors 'cover up' what they do not understand in respect to patients' health. Doctors may struggle to categorise an illness that falls outside the ordinary diagnostic parameters. As Elena told me:

> [A] child [for instance, when] on public transport, maybe wouldn't behave like the rest. Or a kid [for instance] in a classroom [doesn't behave like the rest]. What do you do? You give them a pill [from the pharmacy] that numbs them, appeases them.

Research participants told me that doctors come up with vague diagnoses in their minds and provide people in their capacity as patients with a variety of solutions/treatments/surgeries. These solutions are always focused on improving the body and its functionality, thus ignoring the social structures that marginalise people who may be more susceptible than others to becoming ill in the first place. When one has few financial means, it is challenging to take care of one's own body in optimal ways.

Many of those involved in my study had been prescribed medication that in turn may require additional medication to address the side effects of the first medication they were given. Interlocutors often expressed a feeling that the process of medicalisation was compromising their well-being and said that they generally felt exhausted after being referred to one specialist after another and the multiple medications prescribed as a consequence. There are several illustrations in my material of people who ended up feeling that they were worse off after medical treatment. Luz, for instance, a cannabis grower and activist remembered:

> I never had a good experience with traditional medicine.[55] No! Traditional medicine takes you to a worse place. They fill you with medicine; it's the first thing they do, give you all [types] of medication. By giving me medication, there's something that disturbs my stomach. And they don't take me off [the medicine], despite it being so harmful to my stomach.

Luz's experiences with medicine had been negative, as her body had gradually become dependent upon medications which led her to experience difficult stomach problems. She felt that doctors had harmed her through excessive medication, something that is addressed by my interlocutors throughout my data. Going back to my conversation with Elena, she told me that she had found that negative experiences with bioscientific medical professionals emerge as the main reason why people begin to consider using cannabis as an alternative medication.

> Unfortunately, a lot of the time [people approach the organisation] because they're fed up […]. What's happening? They get to a point in their lives where they've taken so many pills that their bodies have had enough. [Then] one starts to look for alternatives.

Common to my interviewees is the sense of being misunderstood by bioscientific ways of approaching illness. Their conditions are often labelled as 'incurable'. As Elena explained, illnesses tend to be treated with an amalgamation of different medications in line with a physician's judgement (Ho, 2011). This could involve a vicious circle due to the secondary effects of this medication, as in Luz's case. Elena noted that, when people approach her organisation, their 'bodies have had enough', thus underscoring how medications take a toll on the body. After years of using prescription medication pragmatically, patients look for alternative forms of health seeking. It is within this context that patients resort to cannabis as a response to the limitations of biomedicine. As Elena explained:

> Eventually, they get to the plant and are told: 'Look, some secondary effects may include feeling tired or hungry. Or you'll laugh a lot'. Who would be bothered by that?

[55] By traditional medicine, Luz is referring to biomedicine.

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I met Frida, a medicinal user for chronic pain, for the first time in a Zoom meeting. She was both happy and upbeat throughout the conversation, despite often telling me that she was feeling pain. She recalled that her condition had been so much worse when her doctor had put her on a variety of medications.

> Well, with all the medication the doctor gave me, I didn't sleep! I couldn't do anything, getting up took a lot of energy, even with all the new medication. The pain started [after a procedure]. So I moved from the bed to an armchair in the dining room. I would position myself like this [demonstrates an uncomfortable position] and that's how I would stay in the armchair. My husband tried to find a way of feeding me. I would tear my covers [and clothes] from the wear and tear of staying in the same place. I have a pair of pyjamas that were blue with green flowers; the flowers are no longer there.

Medical doctors define health with reference to hegemonic natural science understandings of the healthy body, which excludes experiences that do not correspond with these clear-cut premises and parameters (Werner et al., 2004; Zeiler, 2023). Bioscience then intervenes, sometimes in dangerous ways (Scully, 2023), as illustrated by Frida. According to Frida, potential medicinal users who approach *Cannabis for All,* a medicinal cannabis organisation in La Plata, often perceive themselves as needing to be cured in order to live a full life again (Bê, 2019). While being cured may be a common expectation when seeing a medical doctor, those who reach out to the cannabis community have frequently experienced that they are not being taken seriously. Rather, they feel that they are perceived as emotional and irrational, and thus not seen by physicians as fully capable of assessing their own symptoms 'objectively' (Hoffmann et al., 2022). Rice et al. (2018), for instance, observe that medical students found treating chronic pain difficult due to its subjective character, the lack of a validated established 'cure', and the struggle they face in treating patients who are often seen as being irritating and difficult. People seeking help from medicinal cannabis fall in between various diagnoses and therefore may have been living with pain for years, struggling to manage their lives.

Frida posited that the concept of normality is irrelevant when it comes to medicinal cannabis. Treatment with medicinal cannabis involves logics that focus on well-being and quality of life, rather than providing a diagnosis that categorises people as 'sick'. Frida illustrated this by talking about the ways in

which medicinal cannabis had helped her to manage everyday life, as well as gathering more energy and being able to prioritise her time so that she was able to live a full life despite her chronic pain. Learning to work with her hurting body may be seen as a form of agency. People like Frida are challenging biomedicine by finding ways in which they can experience a greater sense of health and strength after using cannabis. In Frida's account:

> I'm insulin resistant, not diabetic because I walk and changed my diet. My values are good. And in relation to pain, I would even say I don't have pain […]. Sometimes I'll sweep the floor […] and move a flowerpot and my husband will find me and I need to sit down and stay still so the pain passes. But everyone who sees me move around stresses [how well I move] and [they] don't let me forget it.

Chronic pain patients are not uncommonly prescribed psychiatric pharmaceutics alongside strong painkillers, which come with a risk of becoming dependent (Ayub et al., 2024). From time to time, pain that falls outside medical diagnostic manuals is categorised as a mental health issue. This reiterates my previous discussion about a mind/body binary, which hampers a more holistic understanding of the body. The separation between mind and body, which is deeply ingrained in biomedicine, can narrow the scope of knowledge regarding pain (Micozzi, 2002). In contrast, alternative therapies such as medicinal cannabis approach health through an integrative lens, aiming to balance body and mind. Rather than seeing health as a fixed state, a more holistic perspective views the human body and health as a dynamic process aimed at restoring equilibrium by activating internal resources to respond effectively to external disturbances (Móró et al., 2011).[56]

Within Argentina's dominant medical framework, medicinal cannabis is classified as an 'alternative therapy' rather than a scientifically proven form of medicine. However, as Anna Maria Ross (2021) suggests: 'What is deemed alternative at a particular time and place is often a mainstream practice in another time and place' (p. 5). While medicinal value is currently determined through scientific development, alternative therapies, such as medicinal cannabis, have been practised for millennia and continue to play an important

[56] However, people of few economic means may fall prey to quackery and being capitalised upon.

role in health seeking. Nevertheless, biomedical frameworks continue to dominate perceptions of health seeking and the body. In agreement with Ayelen, Roberto, the association leader introduced earlier, stated that bioscience functions as a means of controlling the body through pathologisation.

> First was the appropriation of medicine, because before there were the witch doctors,[57] and women witch doctors, the shamans and all those people. A hundred and seventy years, I think we've had medicine as an organised institution […], medicine is under the control of hegemonic doctors […] they've always participated in the prohibition of things in order to label people as sick.

Roberto situated medicine within the framework of colonial appropriation. By referencing female healers and shamans, he was highlighting traditional healing practices that, in his view, tend to be suppressed by biomedical regimes. In this way, he argued, medicine has functioned as a mechanism of social control, as is evident in the repression of cannabis use and its categorisation as an illness through medicalised notions of addiction.

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Once again, I am visiting the cannabis lawyer Nicolás in his office. Whilst he talks, I am watching him play with an empty *mate*. Nicolás has been a key lawyer for the cannabis movement; he has provided legal aid to cannabis growers and users and taken part in the formation of an organisation that specialises in cannabis law. He explains to me what he sees as the appropriation of nature by bioscience, and how this is limiting access to only substances that have been 'scientifically' developed, as he says, using quotation marks to indicate irony. Nicolás speaks about the need to maintain a balance between what he calls ancestral knowledge vis-à-vis the knowledge that has been produced by bioscientific research. Both are valued precisely because of their difference. In his words:

[57] Within the framework of ancestral wisdom, Roberto does not intend this term to be negative. Rather, it signifies a rich tradition of healing, spirituality, and resistance. Roberto's reference to 'witch doctors' can be read as an act of reclamation, challenging historical narratives that dismissed certain forms of knowledge as magical, irrational, or inferior.

> I don't think that anything from a laboratory is bad. There are things that are useful, which is also why laboratories have a business. But I understand that there has to be a balance with the ancestral [forces]. There were thousands of years of use [of alternative medication] before this.

The notion of ancestral use runs through my data and refers to the historical relationship between the cannabis plant and humans. Nicolás argues that that this relationship is precisely what biomedicine cannot appropriate and use for profit. Furthermore, the ability of patients to develop and establish a direct relationship with their medicine without the intervention of bioscience leaves no space for profit. Nicolás, meanwhile, continues to talk about substances and makes an interesting analogy by referring to the role of human memory in breaking away from influential health epistemologies to find other ways of being.

> The reality is that we humans have known about these substances for thousands of years, we don't need an explanation. Well, [it's like] you were in a coma for five years, but you lived before and after too. It's just a question of you remembering what happened before those five years […]. If, during those five years, you've had to pay a lot of money to stay in a clinic it's logical that the clinic wants to keep you there, or at least wants to continue selling their products. You see that [cannabis] will cost a quarter of all [the medication] you're taking and on top of that make you happy!

According to Nicolás, the pharmaceutical industry seems incapable of 'catching up' with knowledge produced by the medicinal cannabis community. This because the pharmaceutical industry rests on the principles of scientific notions of rationality and objectivity, as opposed to the perceived irrational nature of knowledge produced by those who interact more closely with the plant. For this reason, Nicolás suggests that bioscience cannot catch up or learn from the medicinal cannabis community. Instead, it blocks the medicinal cannabis industry in order to sustain its monopoly over medical products. I ask him to develop his argument further about the business of the pharmaceutical industry in Argentina. He explains that medicine is a matter of profit. In his understanding, cannabis is not profitable:

> [I]f I sell you something to take [for instance] after chemotherapy, something else to relieve [your] pain, something else so that your bones don't hurt, something else so you don't get nauseous, and some other placebo that will

> lengthen your life […]. And all of this costs a lot of money. You can do the same thing with a plant, a cup of tea, smoking happily. I don't know, but it clearly isn't profitable for the laboratories.

During the process of drafting law 27350, a misunderstanding emerged concerning the nature of cannabis as medicine, I was told by research participants. This led to an unsatisfactory result, as reflected in this first version of the law, enacted in 2017. As a result of not taking the experiences and views of cultivators and users into consideration, the medicinal cannabis law, or as it is referred to by my interlocutors, *el veintitres-tres-cinquenta*, only permitted the use of medicinal cannabis for refractory epilepsy and scientific research (Hoy Día Córdoba, 2020). The effect of the 27350 law has been double-edged. Whilst the law brings the cannabis debate under the remit of the health ministry, directing it away from a penal focus, it is founded on scientific medical knowledge rather than the experiences of cannabis users and cultivators. Thus, legislation embedded within a biomedical tradition renders the experiences of medicinal users, cultivators, and organisations less relevant to the development of cannabis laws. As Elena says:

> The state has no experiences in cultivation, production or in anything, but the NGOs do. So, we want [our] knowledge to be valued. There's a belief that knowledge always comes with a degree, as though you need to be a graduate, with a postgraduate diploma.

Medicinal cannabis users, cultivators, and organisations have been dismissed by bioscience as not using the objective methods that are assumed to be necessary to produce knowledge about medical treatment and cures. However, there has been research carried out, which is attempting to capture the epistemologies of medicinal cannabis users and cultivators. Activists and organisations have worked together with researchers to translate cannabis community knowledges into language that is compatible with medical terminologies to facilitate communication with the state (Epstein, 1996).

The production of knowledge about treatment and struggles over what counts as valid medical solutions are imbued with history and power. Grosfoguel, for instance, argues that 'the old colonial episteme [is] reproduced, in which theory is produced by white-bourgeois-patriarchal-western elites and the masses are passive beings, objects rather than subjects of theory'

(Grosfoguel, 2012, p. 99). In this vein, Clara stressed that medicinal cannabis activism has as an explicit objective, namely to 'interpolate the health system so it changes its practices'.

## Health-Seeking and Medicinal Cannabis

Frida, the woman with chronic pain whom I introduced above, told me about encounters with numerous doctors who prescribed medication or carried out procedures that, at best, made no difference, and on some occasions even made things worse. She described her husband's anger over what he saw as the inability of doctors to be clear and consistent about her treatment.

> So much pain, so much suffering! If my problems can't be resolved, you must be realistic and tell us that, not give medication after medication […]. My husband wanted to beat up [the doctor], because for three months the doctor had me on some medication that I didn't even need!

Malpractice means that patients and their families go through feelings of powerlessness and anger in the face of an institution that has power over their health. As Rachel Jewkes and Loveday Penn-Kekana (2015) argue, the relationship between a doctor and their patient is founded on an asymmetrical power relation that governs the ways in which patients can engage with biomedical institutions. Patients' knowledge is often seen by established medical science as subjective in comparison with the knowledge of the educated physician, which is considered to be objective (Ho, 2011). Frida, who suffered from chronic pain, told me about an instance that she experienced. A doctor told her that he could remove a pain in her back with a simple surgical procedure. Unfortunately, the operation turned out to make matters much worse. Frida had to go to another doctor to figure out what had happened to her back and why she was suffering even more pain after the surgery. She recalled:

> He told me that the mass was attached to a nerve […]. He didn't cut anything but as he got hold of the tissue he pulled, and I screamed. He tore a bit of the surface of the nerve. And this was the only part that didn't regenerate […]. It's damaged for good!

In a similar vein, other interlocutors told me how they had visited various specialist doctors to get help with problems they were struggling with in relation to specific limbs or organs. They visited gastroenterologists, gynaecologists, and other specialists, who referred them to laboratories where a range of tests would be undertaken. Having specialised doctors examining different parts of the body leads to compartmentalisation, which easily means losing sight of the body as a whole. Research participants emphasised to me that, in the treatment of chronic illness, it is essential to view the body from a more holistic perspective. Chronic illness manifests throughout the body, producing differing symptoms, and therefore can only rarely be located to one specific body part. As Elena, the organisation leader, explained:

> I'm speaking from experience […]. So, your hand hurts, you go to a doctor who looks at your hand, you go to another doctor because your stomach hurts, and sometimes it's hard for them to see you as a whole person. My mother has an autoimmune disease, which actually attacks [the entire body] […]. Sometimes, it's difficult to deal with how doctors just patch everything up […]. If you can step back a little and see the whole, you start to understand a little more about how it works.

Elena was commenting on health practices shaped by biomedical institutions. She argued that the practice of visiting different doctors for different aspects of patients' bodies means that there is a blind spot when it comes to illnesses, such as autoimmune diseases, that attack the whole body. Her frustration at bodies being patched up is indicative of the development of different forms of medicinal approaches that surface in the encounter with people using cannabis as medicine. Maria, a mother with whom I spoke, looked back and analysed her experiences with scientific medicine when seeking treatment for her son, who was suffering from a severe phobia. She remembered seeing countless doctors and often being dismissed as an exaggerating mother:

> It took many years, really; you always look for some doctor […] and we went everywhere. [Finally, we] got to a doctor who diagnosed [my son]. [After getting] the diagnosis, he started seeing a psychologist […], but he continued to have that problem.

I had already met Frida on Zoom and when I arrived in Buenos Aires she invited me to a lecture at the Department of Agriculture at the University of La

Plata. The level of teaching was high and the discussion very complex when talking about the ontology of the cannabis plant and how to fertilise it. I watched and listened as the teacher lectured and the course participants contributed with their own experiences of growing cannabis. Frida told me after the lecture that many of those taking the course were cannabis cultivators who were attending graduate courses. This explained why it seemed as though the teacher was learning just as much as the students during the session.

In a coffee shop after the lecture, whilst eating a snack, Frida tells me that, since she began considering cannabis to be medicine, she has not only carried out some research of her own but also attended courses to learn more about the plant, how to care for it, and its ontological properties and medicinal effects. She reels off multiple courses and certifications that she has completed, which were offered by NGOs and various universities and faculties (including medicine). The ways in which Frida has navigated sources of knowledge means that she has acquired an in-depth knowledge of cannabis plant ontology and its effects on the human body. This has led her to take control over her own treatment.

Another discussion I had with interlocutors concerned the toxicity of pharmaceutical products, which they saw as opposed to the cannabis plant, which represents ecology and 'Mother Nature'. Debora, the mother of a child with disabilities, explained that she considered pharmaceutically developed medical treatments to be laboratory-based chemical products, which affect the body negatively.

> [Pharmaceutical medicine] is a chemical that you're putting into your body. You tell me, do you want to take this pill or do you want to take cannabis oil and you know that, in eight hours, [cannabis] will already have been eliminated by your body […]. It's something natural, something that you're producing and doing. I don't know what's in the pill they sell at the pharmacy. We know it's something produced in the laboratory, which in the long-term generates a dependence and is under prescription because it's a chemical drug.

Debora shed light on the contrast between the toxicity and addictive potential of what she referred to as chemical drugs and the perceived harmlessness of the cannabis plant. She emphasised that the body could benefit from medicinal cannabis without retaining residues, unlike pharmaceutical medications. This perspective reflects a broader mistrust of laboratory-based medicine,

particularly regarding dependency risks and the lack of transparency in pharmaceutical formulations. In contrast, cannabis is not only seen as harmless but also as a means by which people can create their own medicines and generate awareness of the substances that are involved in cultivation.

I understood that emphasising the harmlessness of the plant was her way of making clear to me that mothers are not harming their children by giving them herbal medicine, such as cannabis. This perspective on medicinal cannabis as a harmless treatment is due to the close relationship between the plant and the patient, which is established through cultivation and the processing of the plant into various derivatives, including herbs, oils, and ointments. However, this is not straightforward as illustrated by Debora, who told me about the process:

> Well, it's work, it isn't easy, it requires a lot of attention. You must take care of the plant, make sure that everything is as ecological as possible. Imagine, I'm producing something that my child will consume as medicine, so it must be as healthy and ecological possible. It's work!

Support from medical doctors is essential to patients' wellbeing. Maria's son was given his diagnosis by a psychologist. This required her to readdress the issues with which her son was struggling.[58] Nevertheless, throughout her experimentation with medicinal cannabis for her child, Maria could not avoid encountering hostile medical professionals, with some doctors vehemently disapproving of its use.

> I think there's still a way to go. I think maybe there's 50/50 [for and against the use of cannabis] […]. For example, my GP, who's my age, and I don't consider myself old. When I told him [about using cannabis], he almost shouted at me […]. He said: 'What are you giving your son?' […]. I said: 'No, you're my doctor! I ask that you respect my decision' […]. Why would I start an argument with a wall? See, I'd already realised that because of the way […] he shouted at me. So, I [simply] said 'no!'

[58] However, as already mentioned, there is a tension in the referral to psychologists or psychiatrists in relation to treatment for chronic illnesses. For example, other interviewees saw their referral to therapy as being dismissed by doctors, who tended to label people's symptoms as psychosomatic. Often this was a frustrating experience for patients, who struggled to persuade doctors to understand and recognise their pain.

Maria's encounter with her doctor was one of many that I heard about during my fieldwork. In her calculations, about 50% of doctors oppose the use of cannabis, which led her to approach medical doctors about her child's cannabis use with caution. However, in her story, she confronted the doctor, backed up by her confidence in her own knowledge of the plant.

Studies on health-seeking have found that increasing numbers of people, especially women, are approaching complementary and alternative medicine professionals for treatment (Keshet & Simchai, 2014).[59] As Maria Chao and colleagues (2006) explain, when consulting complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, patients usually feel listened to rather than dismissed, as happens when they enter the world of established medicine and doctors. By seeking alternative health services, ideally characterised by a horizontal relationship between patient and doctor, people feel that they can take more responsibility and greater control over their own health. These authors also note that alternative treatment options offer aspects that scientific medicine often misses, such as time and care. This indicates knowledge about a balance between mind and body, thus reflecting the holistic treatment perspective in which medicinal cannabis use is anchored (Hoffmann et al., 2022; Nissen, 2011).

Doctors who participate in cannabis experiments have observed a change in their own healthcare approaches and practices. Coming from the perspective of a doctor, Cecilia, who had worked with medicinal cannabis, explained that cannabis had taught her to think about health in alternative ways, which do not perceive biomedical sciences as the only valid perspective on health. Through her work in public institutions, Cecilia had observed a wide variety of patients and ideas about health:

> Here, there are many people from abroad, Bolivians, Paraguayans and they, for example, have their own herbal medicine. You may agree or not, but you must respect the patient. They have their own forms of medicine […] they study in a different way […]. Where I live and work, there are very poor people, people who live in slums so there are things they don't have access to. There are many medications that I can't prescribe [for instance] to someone who has asthma,

[59] 'Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) comprises a group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional biomedicine in western countries.' (Keshet and Simchai, 2014 p. 1).

> because that person can't sustain the treatment. You must adapt to the place where you work.

Cecilia emphasised the importance of respecting the diverse ways in which communities' approach medicinal treatment. She also discussed how she had learned to adapt to local socioeconomic circumstances, highlighting the need for flexibility in medical practice to ensure that treatments remain sustainable for patients. This approach had led her to incorporate cannabis as a viable option for managing various diseases and health-related problems.

Mariela, a doctor in a palliative care unit, explained that her unit was creating a space where patients feel comfortable discussing their use of medicinal cannabis. Their doctors, in fact, actively recommend its use. However, the ongoing challenges concerning the use of cannabis within the public health system mean that the plant is not given priority. As a result, the lack of access through public healthcare reinforces the need for cultivation as a means of securing reliable access to the plant.

The referral to medical professionals who are willing to work with patients using medical cannabis has become an important resource amongst members of medical organisations. As Elena, the leader of a mothers organisation, told me: 'Many professionals are open [to cannabis] and give medical support'. The benefits of these allies are that medical professionals can treat people better when they have knowledge of the substances the patient is taking. On the other hand, patients and their families can be candid when they feel safe thanks to a supportive doctor. As Cecilia explained:

> The patients bring [medicinal cannabis], suggesting it as a treatment […]. So, people are much more aware of and receptive to [medicinal cannabis], which is a paradigmatic change. Patients come with the oil and the plant to ask what we think about starting and trying [medicinal cannabis]. They have a lot of trust in the plant.

Cecilia had observed a shift in the doctor–patient dynamic, with patients taking the initiative by introducing alternative treatments, such as cannabis, to their doctor. This change reflects a growing awareness of and confidence in cannabis as a therapeutic option. By referring to a '*paradigmatic change',* Cecilia was suggesting that cannabis is a treatment that patients actively choose, often after years of undergoing pharmaceutical treatment.

Frida, who had found a doctor who supported her use of medicinal cannabis, talked very excitedly about how she had been able to make a journey that would have been impossible before she had access to cannabis oil. She was able to travel with the oil because her doctor was willing to write a certificate stating that the oil was critical for her treatment. This meant that she could take the oil when travelling and, in doing so, enjoy her trip. As Frida recalled:

> We were going to Machu Picchu by land, four days to get there, four days to get back. So, I asked the doctor: 'Could you write me a *historia clínica* [medical record] which says that I take [cannabis oil]?' And he wrote one for me […]. Well, I missed one of the excursions, but I thought I would save my energy for Machu Picchu […]. [It was exciting] to see myself hike all the way up!

The doctor supported Frida in travelling with cannabis as a medical treatment. She was able to participate in a challenging excursion, something she had had little hope of doing before taking medicinal cannabis. Therefore, Frida made it clear that cannabis allowed her to manage her health to be able to experience life in a more complete way.

## Working with the Plant

The collaboration between doctors and patients extends to the links between cannabis activists and organisations and medical scientists. These professionals may work on research initiatives alongside experienced cultivators and medicinal cannabis practitioners. This collaboration involves exchanging knowledge about cultivation and cannabis strains in order to develop knowledge about the qualities of the plant, as Elena explained:

> Professionals come from all specialities, from psychology, kinesiology, general practitioners, nurses […]. What we want to do is pass on our knowledge from the biochemist, grower, mothers, everyone approaching us, and the plant. What ends up happening, and what we want to happen, is the formation of […] professional networks that interact and work as a team.

Through interactions with professionals, Elena argued, collaborations create opportunities for different forms of knowledge exchange, thereby challenging binaries such as the nature/science divide that underlies notions of natural

science medication. She also shed light on a community of professionals whose cooperation reflects principles of cannabis culture, including solidarity and mutual respect for the co-existence of multiple epistemologies. These networks offer access to resources across research, political, and medical fields, creating additional pathways to support and recognition of user and cultivator knowledge about cannabis as a medical treatment (Brown et al., 2004). This knowledge exchange enables organisations to navigate multiple scientific 'languages', encouraging communication that blends formal scientific discourse with first-hand experiences of medicinal cannabis.

The role of social movements and citizen groups in knowledge production has been widely acknowledged in research (Collins & Evans, 2002; Epstein, 1996; Jasanoff, 2020). Aguilar and colleagues (2022) apply the concept of citizen science to examine how various technical and medical perspectives, alongside the lived experiences of cannabis users, cultivators, and organisations, contribute to the development of independent expertise. In the development of the 23750 medicinal cannabis law, there was an attempt to bring together different actors. The Argentinian government created a space where users and activists are able to collaborate with scientific institutions (such as the governmental research institution CONICET) to conduct science (Acosta & Lavagnino, 2022; Romero, 2020). Whilst the medicinal cannabis movement challenges the construction of what objective knowledge is and how it can be produced, maintaining a link with professional networks has opened up the possibility of pushing for knowledge development within medical institutions that play a hegemonic role in defining illness and treatment.

Research has been going on for a while within the cannabis community. I was told that knowledge is gathered by medicinal cannabis oil producers, who end up providing healthcare services to patients. Medicinal growers have compiled extensive records of symptoms, doses, and effects, which has increased their insights into the healing powers of the cannabis plant (Aguilar et al., 2022). In Luz's garden, beneath a beautiful winter sun, she started telling me about one of her first experiences of treating a person with Parkinson's disease.

> An elderly woman with Parkinson's came to see me. Her doctor, who understood about alternative medicine, had told her [to come and see me]. [She was a] very thin woman, who couldn't take the medication [prescribed to her].

> She said that it affected her digestive system […]. I asked her if she wanted to [try cannabis, but I did so] with a lot of fear […], because I was still internalising prejudices [about cannabis]. She vaporises [cannabis]. After the second bag, the shaking in her legs reduced [and eventually] it stopped. We couldn't believe it!

Luz was initially hesitant – her reluctance stemming from ingrained prejudices – about administering cannabis to a patient with Parkinson's disease. However, witnessing the patient's remarkable transformation strengthened Luz's confidence in medicinal cannabis, encouraging her to pursue further explorations of the plant. Her observations challenge conventional medical frameworks, which generally tend to suppress alternative health-seeking practices.

In Argentina, the passage of Law 27669 in 2021 significantly expanded access to cannabis for medical treatment, yet its implementation was met with challenges, particularly in the availability of public health services dedicated to medicinal cannabis. As a result, the demand for reliable information about cannabis as an alternative treatment has surged, creating an urgent need for education and guidance. In the absence of comprehensive public healthcare programmes, growers, advocacy groups, and grassroots organisations have played a crucial role in filling the knowledge gap. They became key sources of knowledge, which they shared by giving workshops, consultations, and first-hand expertise to patients seeking cannabis treatment. They provided access to medicinal cannabis, whether through home cultivation, shared growing spaces, or cooperative production models that pooled resources among licensed users.

Cannabis activists have played a role in shaping the regulatory framework for the development of a registration system for medicinal cannabis, advocating for a more inclusive and flexible approach to medicinal cannabis access. One of their central demands was the removal of a restricted list of so-called pathologies, arguing that treatment should not be limited to pre-approved conditions. Instead, they emphasised the importance of individual patient needs, ensuring that anyone who might be able to benefit from medicinal cannabis would have the right to access it, regardless of formal diagnostic classifications.

Additionally, activists pushed for a shift away from rigid prescription requirements in favour of a doctor's recommendation model. This approach allows physicians to assess whether a patient might benefit from medicinal

cannabis without the bureaucratic constraints of traditional prescribing practices. By advocating for medical autonomy and patient-centred care, these activists sought to challenge restrictive healthcare structures and expand treatment possibilities for those seeking cannabis-based therapies. Patients are guided by their medical doctor towards cannabis cultivators to fill the gap in provision. However, this can also be experienced as suddenly facing a heavy responsibility. According to Luz, the grower and activist:

> [The doctor] decided to send patients with different diseases to me so I could treat them. After some time, I realised that it wasn't right, because I'm not a doctor and don't want to become one.

Rather than forming collaborative partnerships, many doctors rely upon growers to manage patient treatment. Luz was producing medicine both for herself and for other medicinal cannabis users. As her reputation for cultivation and treatment grew, doctors began referring patients to her, thereby also shifting responsibility onto her, as she increasingly realised. While wishing for acknowledgement by the established medical world, activists perceive it as a double-edged sword in terms of redistributing responsibilities for patient care and healing. Their knowledge of the plant does not mean that cannabis growers are able to act as doctors or substitute for them.

Interviewees said that they feel the plant encourages a holistic view of the body, allowing them to think of bodies as a complex corporeality. Thus, the focus in cannabis medicine is on the interaction between the body and what is appreciated as the plant's ability to alleviate symptoms and improve quality of life. Such ideas reiterate people's relationship to the plant and its ontology. Clara explained how the human body interacts closely with the plant:

> We try not to talk in terms of illnesses, or health conditions, because the plant […] regulates symptoms by using the endocannabinoid system […]. Think of the plant as a complex *being* that interacts with another complex being, and in that sense the plant does what it must. It's like you put the plant somewhere [into the human body] and it sees what is a little broken. [The plant] functions as a stabiliser, [which] brings the system back into balance.

Here, Clara was reframing medicinal cannabis beyond the conventional model of illness treatment, instead emphasising its role in symptom regulation. She

described the plant as a complex being, as a more-than-human materiality with its own ontology and agency. It interacts dynamically with the human body, presenting an adaptive relationship, in contrast to biomedical interventions. By highlighting scientific evidence for the endocannabinoid system, Clara stressed what the medicinal cannabis community has long understood as the plant's role in maintaining bodily balance. This perspective promotes a holistic, fluid understanding of health and healing, moving beyond restrictive medical frameworks. Practising medicinal cannabis is a collaborative process between the patient and the practitioner. This personalised approach focuses on tailoring doses of medicinal cannabis to individual bodies in accordance with their symptoms, rather than following a standardised medical model. Thus, cultivators do act as a kind of doctors, or more precisely as healers. Elena explained in detail about how she measures doses for people seeking her support:

> You and I could have the same gender, sex, age, height, diagnosis, and symptoms, and the strain may work for you but not for me. That is because [medicinal] cannabis is very personal. There are studies, for example, of people who have a certain diagnosis and symptoms, but fare better with higher doses of THC [Tetrahydrocannabinol] than CBD [Cannabidiol].[60]

Above, Elena described medicinal cannabis practices, seeing them as an explorative process, framed by trial-and-error methods in collaboration between the grower and the patient. Rather than focusing on rigid diagnoses, these interactions prioritise symptom management and adaptability (Brown et al., 2004). If a cannabis patient does not achieve the expected and desired effect from one strain, they explore alternatives until they find the most effective solution. This personalised approach to medicine contrasts with the standardised biomedical model of treatment, which is designed for a kind of 'standard normal' body – usually understood as a white male body – rather than individual needs.

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I am talking with Blanca, she repeatedly becomes emotional throughout the interview because she has recently become a single mother of a small child

[60] THC and CBD are cannabinoids.

born with grave health conditions. Blanca speaks rapidly, with small bouts of sadness, telling me about her struggle with biomedicine. She describes her encounters with medical doctors and compares the relationship she developed with medical professionals to an abusive one. Whilst she felt that her child was being mistreated, she was reliant upon medical professionals to ensure her child's survival. In Blanca's words:

> It's like a relationship, that's what I relate it to. I don't want it to sound so shocking, but you know when one is in a kind of toxic relationship. [Like] when people ask you, does he treat you badly? And one says, well, he doesn't hit me […]. See?

Blanca also speaks of the sterility, coldness, and hostility that she feels she has encountered in biomedical institutions. A thread that ran throughout my data was the complaints of allopathic medicine users that they felt uncared for, rushed through the system, and not listened to in biomedical institutions. Therefore, people searched for and often found opportunities for comfort and care in the realms of alternative therapies, such as medicinal cannabis. Blanca tells me about her first meeting with a mother's medicinal cannabis organisation at one of their workshops, which contrasted with the treatment she had experienced from biomedicine:

> I was in the middle of a whirlwind, trying to do everything at the same time […]. I can't remember precisely […]. Things happened so quickly. I do remember the space, there was a huge mandala painted on the wall, which I thought was super lovely. Warmth […] was in the details of the space […]. The opposite of what happens in a medical office that's cold and structured […]. It was obvious that [the space] had been [designed, that] it wasn't a coincidence. Rather, it was created by people who were familiar with the violence of the medical industry. They'd made sure that it had a pleasant atmosphere so one felt supported in a different way [than in a hospital, for instance]. And I remember that there was like a round where we all talked about our experiences. It was the first place where there was a space in which to speak of one's experiences. As equals!

Users often noted the contrast between the medical environment and the warm and calming setting offered by medicinal cannabis organisations. A frequent differentiation made by users of complementary and alternative medicine referred to how they had found a place of peace and safety that had changed

their experience of illness and limited bodyableness (Martin, 1992). Blanca found an inviting space in a chaotic context where she was able to let go, express herself, and be listened to by a group of like-minded people. In these spaces, experiences of pain and illness become a form of knowing and understanding the world (Bê, 2019). The recounting of experiences and histories of the use of medicinal cannabis has an important place in medicinal cannabis organisations. The recognition of illness also stimulates the articulation of common goals. Narratives about health problems provide a way of dealing with and recognising the social structures within which patients are embedded (Järvinen & Ravn, 2015). This sharing often leads to the feeling of being in a space in which people with various health problems can share their health narratives as shaped through interconnections with the cannabis plant and what they appreciate as its character and qualities.

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Alternative medicine, as it is practised and used, tends to be dominated by women, who create nurturing, caring, private spaces, much like the setting experienced by Blanca (Sointu, 2011). The relationship between the medicinal cannabis practitioner and the patient is one of collaboration and subscribes to ideas about feminine traits such as emotional responsiveness and attentiveness (Keshet & Simchai, 2014). The practitioners in my research are mainly female cultivators, as I discussed earlier. They are the ones who approach treatment rooted in a vocabulary concerned with emotions, connections, and empathy. Beyond providing care, cultivators share their knowledge with both patients and the wider community, providing the tools for patients to assert agency over their own bodies. Through this exchange, they believe that they can ensure the right to one's own health through accessibility and feelings of empowerment as key principles central to medicinal cannabis practices.

However, the medicinal cannabis users I spoke with mostly viewed cannabis as complementary to medication developed by bioscience. Whilst some had found that cannabis could replace certain biochemical medications for specific patients, they still recognised that biomedicine serves a role alongside other health-seeking practices (Sointu, 2011). While Elena feels that cannabis oil is good for her health and well-being, in her view bioscientific medicine also has an important function in her treatment. She explained:

> In fact, we continue with the pills, [but] it's not so that cannabis entirely eliminates [all the symptoms]. Yes, cannabis can replace some pills, but others are necessary. We don't stop resorting to the medical systems. We insist on change, on an opening up, [b]ut we don't stop taking pills, because some are necessary. And cannabis isn't magical.

From Elena's perspective, cannabis is a complimentary opportunity within a broader healthcare framework that includes biomedicine. She highlighted that some pills serve a purpose that cannabis cannot cover, and she therefore recognised that medicinal cannabis also has its limitations, thus proposing a multifaceted approach to health.

In my interviews, many people mentioned the change in quality of life and reduction in stress and worry once they were able to use cannabis oil as a way to improve their health. Often, people's stories focused on before and after their use of medicinal cannabis and their narratives centred around the experience of healing. Maria discussed the changes she had noticed when she began giving her son medical cannabis for a severe phobia. Medicinal cannabis permitted her and the doctor to withdraw allopathic medications that she did not think were beneficial for her son. In Maria's account:

> The moment he began to take [cannabis oil], […] the truth is that he started to improve, feel much better. They'd given him an anti-depressant […] and we started to see that he no longer needed it. But we weren't going to stop giving him the pill from one moment to another. We saw that he had a better attitude when it came to eating, something that he didn't want [to do], but we could see that he was trying. From then on, he was able to stop taking the anti-depressant medication in the mornings and he eats much better. After the oil, [my son] had a much more positive outlook, the plant has a lot of effects on state of mind. And he began to improve in many respects, he was much calmer […]. Meals had been very tedious, really! So, we had many years of not being well as a family.

In a similar vein, Elena shared her experience of trying to help her son overcome a severe phobia by the use of antidepressants, only to find that these did not work. Upon discovering the benefits of cannabis as a mood and appetite regulator for her son, she gradually reduced his antidepressant intake, actually in agreement with his medical doctor, as she stressed to me. Her motivation to move away from pharmaceutical medicine – often labelled 'chemical' medicine – stemmed from a desire to reframe health as something that can be

balanced through natural remedies such as cannabis. This journey also underscores the emotional toll of navigating health challenges, from the desperation of struggling to feed her child to the sense of calm that emerged after incorporating cannabis into his treatment. Ultimately, the balance achieved through medicinal cannabis extended beyond her son's body, shaping the well-being of the whole family.

At Alma's kitchen table, she recounts to me the multiple ways in which cannabis has improved her son's quality of life. The benefits of cannabis use appear to extend beyond its positive physical and mental effects. More than just enabling an individual transformation, these changes have reshaped the family dynamics, influencing how those around her son experience daily life:

> [My son] began to sleep and connect [with others], he started being interested in socialising, he's started to like going to school, to have friends, which for us was very important. We didn't have that [before], we would take him to places with kids of his age, he would be at one end, and the other kids at the other […]. When we wanted to go out, he would want to go home and we couldn't enjoy being out, so we would feel bad. Not anymore, we can now enjoy […]! Well, he takes [cannabis oil] for autism, but it also improved other areas, such as his nutrition […]. There are changes […]. Doctors want something more scientific; they don't see the day-to-day changes because they don't live with their patients!

This brings up questions of who is experiencing illness, other than the person directly affected themselves, and who a certain treatment benefits. Various improvements for patients extend to family members, who experience that they can sleep better, socialise more, and not be completely conditioned by their loved one's health condition. Furthermore, as Carolina , the founder of an HIV organisation in Buenos Aires tells us how HIV-positive patients have experienced relief of their symptoms and the side effects of HIV medication through the use of medicinal cannabis. These benefits, she explained, have been important, not just for the individual, but also helping the community deal with the emotional stress related to living with HIV/AIDS:

> When we started, it mainly increased our appetites, we suffered from malnutrition. We also suffered from depression, so the first thing we used to say was: 'We laugh!' [Laughter] is the best tool to combat pain […]. Because after the loss, when someone had died, we needed to laugh […]. For us,

> marijuana was our daily bread, because if we didn't have marijuana, we couldn't relax.

Carolina was referring to the central role of cannabis for the HIV community during a time when the whole community was in severe pain and under tremendous stress. The same goes for other communities facing chronic health challenges. Beyond the physiological effects, cannabis has helped Carolina and her colleagues to cope with loss and continue to care for one another in a situation of emotional pain. By talking about cannabis as her 'daily bread', Carolina underscored how essential it is in the lives of herself and her colleagues, a general sentiment that was repeatedly shared with me by cannabis users.

## Concluding Reflections

Scholars have argued that the scientific medical industry often reduces the human body to an object requiring correction and normalisation, rather than recognising it as a living, dynamic being (Martin, 1992). Within this framework, medical doctors are positioned as figures of power due to their investigatory and academic authority, with patients expected to relinquish control in pursuit of a cure. However, doctors are often not trained to consider the body holistically, or as embedded within social contexts and personal histories, all of which have an impact on health and well-being, as I was told. As a result, many people seek alternative treatments, such as medicinal cannabis, as a way to explore new perspectives on health and medicine, perspectives that value autonomy, adaptability, and lived experience over rigid biomedical structures (Keshet & Simchai, 2014). Thinking outside of biomedical frames, as my interlocutors do, brings up notions of ancestral and alternative medicine, which involve different approaches to health and interactions between practitioners and patients. As I have discussed in this chapter, these are dynamics that are relevant to the development of medicinal cannabis and the ways in which it is rendered meaningful to users.

Access to medication is determined by biomedical systems that tend to exclude alternative approaches to health and healing (Elton, 2021). Medicinal cannabis practices raise important questions about hierarchies of power within

medical institutions, where patients are often positioned as passive subjects under physician expertise. Many of those with whom I spoke viewed bio-scientifically produced medicine as potentially harmful, arguing that it sometimes creates new health issues rather than resolving existing ones.

In contrast, medicinal cannabis is perceived by my interlocutors, sometimes in somewhat glorifying ways, as a natural, non-intoxicating substance. To influence knowledge production and shape policies regarding medicinal cannabis users, cultivators and organisations have formed collaborations with professionals, including research units and public servants. Through these partnerships, cannabis users have acquired medical and scientific vocabularies to help them navigate institutional power and ensure that their knowledge is recognised and valued.

The evolution of cannabis legislation has led to a greater demand for cultivators to produce medicine, which supports those exploring medicinal cannabis as a treatment option. As cultivators gain experience, they build up documentary records of treatments and their effects, developed through collaboration with users. This form of community-driven knowledge is rooted in shared experiences of illness and the therapeutic potential of the cannabis plant due to what is appreciated as its interagency with people in its capacity as a more-than-human materiality.

# Chapter 8: Conclusions

Let me try to summarise the main findings and arguments of my thesis in this conclusion. Decolonial traditions illuminate how, in the region that is today named Latin America, colonial structures have deeply influenced the formation of power dynamics across social, economic, epistemological, and philosophical spheres, shaping hierarchies that persist today. The violent legacies of colonisers self-defined 'civilising mission' (Rydstrom, 2015) justified racialised exclusions and binary classifications, reinforcing systems of elimination, appropriation, and classification under the colonial matrix of power. These binaries – such as nature/culture and body/mind – have long been used to legitimise hierarchical divisions, obscuring alternative knowledges and ways of being.

Theories such as Santos' (2010) post/abyssal thinking provide a lens for critically examining how dominant epistemologies have invisibilised marginalised perspectives, separating what is deemed rational and human from that which is classified as irrational or sub-human. Likewise, Pratt's (1991, 2007) concept of contact zones highlights how spaces of epistemological interaction create opportunities for contesting hegemonic paradigms, allowing marginalised populations to resist, adapt, and reimagine entrenched power structures. By critically engaging with these frameworks, I have uncovered possibilities for reshaping knowledge production, moving beyond colonial binaries to envision more inclusive and equitable futures. Intersectionality further elucidates how colonialism operated through the construction and policing of categories, enforcing racialised and gendered hierarchies to regulate bodies and interpersonal relations. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of the marginalised, decolonial feminism challenges epistemological power structures that sustain colonial and imperial systems. These critiques are particularly vital in reassessing western feminist frameworks, because these have often failed to incorporate the realities and struggles of marginalised women.

Colonial power structures continue to shape knowledge, governance, and everyday lived experience in the context of Argentina. By employing intersectional, decolonial, and feminist critiques, we can reveal the mechanisms through which historical exclusions and epistemic violence persist, while also uncovering avenues for resistance, transformation, and social justice. By recognising contact zones, abyssal lines, and relational ontologies between humans and plants, I have been able to move beyond static understandings of power to embrace a framework that centres plurality, agency, and decolonial possibility.

I have explored the transformative potential of decolonial feminist theory and critical ethnography, illustrating how epistemological humility, reflexivity, and the recognition of plural knowledges can challenge entrenched hegemonic structures that marginalise communities. By engaging with intersectionality and situated knowledges, I have sought to centre the voices and experiences of those directly impacted by the dynamics under study, demonstrating how critical ethnography can become part of processes concerned with empowerment, social justice, and political praxis through its commitment to solidarity, ethical engagement, and participatory methodologies.

Rethinking the ontology and epistemologies of cannabis through a decolonial feminist lens has enabled me to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the intersections between drug use, socioeconomic inequality, and knowledge production. By engaging with the lived experiences of those most affected, my research challenges established epistemic hierarchies, offering an alternative framework that acknowledges the relational, political, and cultural dimensions of cannabis, the focus of this thesis. Through this approach, I have underscored the importance of centring voices from the Global South as well as marginalised voices from within a specific location to show how these voices contest influential discourses on drug policy by engaging in advocacy and striving for social justice. My thesis demonstrates that, by doing so, they are paving the way for more equitable and inclusive perspectives on cannabis and the communities historically most impacted by regulation.

Inspired by feminist ethnographic traditions, my research foregrounds alternative narratives that contest the hegemonic discourses surrounding cannabis, a substance historically categorised as dangerous and harmful to both

users and communities. Through an ethnographic approach that privileges marginalised perspectives on cannabis, my thesis challenges prohibitionist narratives by bringing other perspectives to the forefront. My fieldwork shows how exploring experiences of social exclusion in Buenos Aires due to cannabis use, often compounded by socioeconomic vulnerability, enables a critical re-examination of cannabis cultures, epistemologies, and ontologies, revealing how users and producers actively negotiate the sociocultural landscape shaped by cannabis.

By incorporating interviews, participatory observations, and critical reflections, my research not only amplifies marginalised perspectives but also analyses the interplay between knowledge production, cannabis advocacy, and regulatory frameworks in contemporary Argentinian society. My study navigates the complex and sensitive terrain of drug use, highlighting the agency and resistance of cannabis users and producers, who, through their practices and experiences, are redefining and contesting dominant paradigms regarding cannabis consumption, regulation, and legitimacy.

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Colonial histories have shaped human/nature relationships, encouraging binaries that position humans as autonomous agents and nature as an inanimate resource ripe for exploitation and domination. In contrast, alternative epistemologies, such as those I share in this thesis, recognise the agency of plants and multispecies interactions, dismantling abyssal frameworks that reduce nature to a passive entity. The capacity of plants to perceive, adapt, and communicate challenges human-centric ontologies, offering new perspectives on ecological interconnectedness. Through my exploration of the experiences of cannabis users, cultivators, and producers, I have engaged with a field of research that explores the interfaces between humans and plants from a more ecological and holistic perspective.

The banning and regulation of psychoactive plants is similarly embedded in colonial dynamics of race, gender, class, and ability, reinforcing economic, political, and cultural exclusions. The analysis in this thesis has shown that prohibitive practices obscure historical human–plant relationships, erasing the cultural and spiritual significance of altered states of consciousness. By reframing drug use within broader cultural and social contexts, my research

suggests that we can challenge prohibitionist narratives and reposition psychoactive plants, such as cannabis, as interagential forces that contribute to alternative modes of knowledge production through their very existence, properties, and qualities.

My exploration of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of cannabis has revealed that its cultivation and use are deeply embedded in narratives of identity, community, and resistance. The cannabis plant emerges as a symbol of connection to a vision of nature; it is seen as offering a contrast to urban alienation while at the same time strengthening relationships amongst cultivators, users, and advocates. Through processes of cultivation and consumption, the cannabis plant becomes more than just a commodity: it is a being in its own right, an ontology with agency, which is shaping and being shaped by the people who engage with it.

The discussions surrounding cannabis terminology and legality, intertwined as they are with user identity, highlight the fluid and contested nature of cannabis cultures. The diverse ways in which many of the people whom I met during my fieldwork in Argentina refer to the cannabis plant, consider it as a being, and define its use illustrate the complex intersections of language, legality, and societal norms. As cannabis users and cultivators navigate the blurred boundaries around cannabis legitimacy and regulation, they engage in everyday negotiations of power that challenge dominant prohibitive discourses in contemporary Argentina.

My thesis shares new insights into the gendered dynamics within cannabis communities, thereby illustrating how feminine and masculine identities are constructed, contested, and reimagined through engagement with the plant. While cannabis is often assigned feminine attributes, gender hierarchies persist within the industry, where women face exclusion from larger-scale operations and scientific discourses. However, the role of mothers advocating for medicinal cannabis in Argentina has significantly reshaped the political landscape, challenging gender norms and dominant narratives around drug use and caregiving.

Cannabis operates as both an object of regulation and a site of resistance, out of which alternative knowledges, identities, and economies emerge. By engaging critically with intersectional, decolonial and feminist perspectives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the social complexities of cannabis use,

cultivation, and activism, pushing beyond reductive binaries to envision more inclusive and transformative futures.

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Tracing the evolution of cannabis culture highlights its roots in community-based solidarity, resistance, and activism. From its early beginnings in anonymous online forums, where cultivators exchanged knowledge and protected one another from legal repercussions, to the present-day push for legal recognition and industry development, cannabis culture has continuously challenged the hegemonic narratives surrounding drug use.

The movement's engagement in public discourse, particularly through protests, media visibility, and expert activism, has played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of cannabis users as ordinary people deserving of rights, privacy, and legal protection. The 2010 Marijuana Day march in Buenos Aires marked a pivotal moment, reinforcing important distinctions between cannabis users and narcotraffickers, while also exposing the complicity of law enforcement in protecting large-scale traffickers while criminalising cultivators and users.

Cannabis activism has expanded beyond grassroots organisation to institutional engagement, with professionals and expert activists advocating for decriminalisation from within positions of influence. However, this access to power has also generated internal inequalities within the cannabis community, as resources and decision-making capacities remain unequally distributed across the community.

The media has been instrumental in shaping public narratives, with political and social publications such as *THC* and *Haze*, alongside journalists such as Fernando Soriano, who are working to bring cannabis culture into mainstream discourse. At the same time, the economic transformation of cannabis, from artisanal cultivation to industrial investment, has redefined the traditional dynamics within the movement, signalling both new opportunities and new challenges.

The entrance of mothers advocating for medicinal cannabis marked another turning point, significantly reshaping the public perception of cannabis users. Their advocacy pushed the government to respond, leading to the establishment of REPROCANN, a registration system for medical cannabis.

Despite its positive reception, critics in my data voiced concerns regarding REPROCANN's inadequacy in terms of fully protecting cultivators or users.

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Colonial concerns have also shaped the institution of scientific medicine, which historically functioned as a mechanism of control and discipline over marginalised populations, utilising public health policies and medical experimentation as tools of governance. Contemporary biomedical discourses continue to reproduce inequalities, valuing certain bodies and diseases over others, thus reinforcing racialised, gendered, and class-based exclusions. Decolonial perspectives advocate for a transformative shift in medical practices, demanding social justice in healthcare by addressing the intersecting structural barriers that affect access and health outcomes.

Examining the power dynamics within biomedical institutions highlights how the reduction of the human body to an object of correction and normalisation reinforces hierarchical relationships between doctors and patients. The scientific medical industry often privileges biomedical authority, sidelining alternative approaches that embrace autonomy, adaptability, and lived experience in health and healing, as manifested amongst my interlocutors. As a result, many people seek out medicinal cannabis as an avenue for exploring ancestral and alternative medicine, challenging dominant paradigms that frame the body in rigid, clinical terms.

The discussion of medicinal cannabis practices underscores the hierarchies of expertise and access that characterise medical institutions, where patients frequently encounter barriers to self-determination in their treatment options. Many interlocutors expressed concerns about bioscientifically produced medicine, viewing its effects as potentially harmful due to its reliance upon standardised prescriptions that may inadvertently generate cycles of over-medication. In contrast, medicinal cannabis is perceived as a natural, non-intoxicating treatment, offering an alternative model of care that prioritises holistic well-being over symptom management. Crucially, cannabis users, cultivators, and organisations have played a vital role in shaping knowledge production and policy, forging collaborations with professionals, research units, and public servants to legitimise medicinal cannabis within institutional frameworks. These partnerships enable cannabis advocates to navigate

systems of power using scientific and medical vocabularies, thus ensuring that alternative knowledge systems are recognised and valued.

The evolution of cannabis legislation has further expanded the demand for cultivators to produce medicine, fuelling a community-driven knowledge exchange between users and growers. As cultivators document treatment effects and patient experiences, medicinal cannabis becomes a shared epistemic space, reinforcing solidarity among people seeking therapeutic alternatives. Ultimately, medicinal cannabis challenges traditional biomedical models, shifting the emphasis from cure to therapy, from rigid prescription-based treatment to holistic, patient-centred wellbeing. Through these transformations, users and cannabis advocates continue to redefine medicine, agency, and healing, resisting entrenched institutional power while constructing more inclusive and adaptable health paradigms.

## On Gender Studies

This PhD thesis firmly situates itself within gender studies by addressing how drug policy, cannabis culture, and medicinal cannabis use intersect with gendered structures, power relations, and epistemic exclusions. While cannabis studies have often been explored from a criminology, public health, or medical perspective, its social and cultural dimensions – particularly the gendered experiences of cannabis users, cultivators, and activists – have remained marginalised within gender studies.

By critically engaging with feminist, decolonial, and intersectional perspectives, my thesis expands gender studies by exploring the role of gender in shaping cannabis discourse, regulation, and identity formation. The feminisation of cannabis – its association with caregiving, healing, and naturalness – contrasts with the masculinisation of industrial cannabis production and market control, revealing gendered divisions in labour, expertise, and legitimacy. Additionally, women's roles in medicinal cannabis activism, particularly as caregivers advocating for legal reform, challenge traditional gender norms, reframing drug advocacy through feminist and maternal activism.

The thesis also contributes to gender studies by examining the ways in which cannabis use and cultivation disrupt binaries, such as legal/illegal, responsible/irresponsible, and recreational/medicinal, offering new conceptualisations of drug users that resist criminalising narratives. By taking a feminist ethnographic approach that centres marginalised voices, my thesis highlights how gender, race, class, and colonial histories intersect in shaping the cannabis plant, cannabis regulation, and activism, thereby underscoring the need for gendered analyses in drug studies, policy, and politics.

My research connects critical feminist thought with drug studies, asserting that cannabis culture, regulation, and activism are deeply embedded in gendered structures. By bringing cannabis research into gender studies, the thesis challenges disciplinary boundaries, positioning gender as a crucial analytical lens for understanding drug policy, regulation, and social movements. Through this contribution, my thesis emphasises how gender shapes beings, knowledge production, activism, and lived experiences within the cannabis culture of Buenos Aires as informed by the ontology of a plant imbued with controversies.

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The cannabis community and its culture in the Argentinian context has historically been defined by diversity, solidarity, and resistance, rooted in a commitment to protecting and legitimising the experiences of its members. Over the years, it has successfully challenged stereotypes of cannabis users as lazy or dangerous, gaining institutional footholds, reshaping public discourse, and driving legislative change. However, under the current Milei government, efforts to defund cannabis-related initiatives are threatening these hard-fought gains. Nevertheless, the cannabis community continues to fight, standing firm in its original mission: to achieve the legalisation of cannabis to end criminalisation, uphold individual rights, and affirm the freedom to consume cannabis without persecution. As the movement navigates political and economic transformations, its ideas of solidarity, education, and resistance remain central to making cannabis culture a powerful force in shaping policy, perceptions, and social justice in Argentina.

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