

Foraging Response-ability: Between Individual Profit and Multispecies Commons

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Abstract

In reaction to the economic and energy precarity that started in 2021, a portion of the Czech public turned to the forest as a source of wild crops and other free resources. In public debates, citizens have been encouraged to supplement their household income by collecting forest resources to partially make up for the deficiencies in social policies. Building upon ethnographic research on foraging practices in the Czech Republic and the concept of response-ability (Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Hofman 2023), this paper analyses how everyday foraging can transform forests from mere natural resources for fulfilling individual responsibility into sites of more-than-human response-ability. The analysis examines what is required to exercise a response-able approach towards forests as a commoning practice. The way in which foragers establish their relation to the forest is traced on three levels: 1) the *non-linear* attunement of foragers to forest collectives, 2) a *non-innocent* form of care for common-pool resources that lies outside the extractivist-activist binary, and 3) the passing on of *non-instrumental* place-based knowledge to others. The article discusses how foraging response-ability can prevent the privatisation and enclosure of the commons by means of practices that operate beyond the state-market duopoly, yet without an explicit activist agenda.

Keywords

commons; response-ability; care; foraging; forests; multispecies relations.

1. Introduction

The commons have been the source of much hope and negotiation on a global scale in recent years. The commons are conceptualised and experimented with as a promising framework for the distribution of resources as they offer the possibility to execute distributive justice beyond the duopoly of state-market resource management (Mattei 2012). Some scholars point out that the state-market dichotomy is false because even government-managed public goods are transferred to the private sphere and privatised (Quilligan 2012). Contemporary theories and practices in the Global North seek to overcome privatisation by doing the commons through community action, where resources are collectively cared for and the produce is

shared (Bollier and Helfrich 2021). The commons are thus conceived of as a necessary alternative to the state-market tandem as the commons are the “resources that belong to the people as a matter of life necessity” (Mattei 2012). Drawing upon an analysis of the mundane politics of the commons and care, I aim to contribute to the commons debate by analysing foraging as an activity that co-constitutes forest resources through everyday human-nonhuman encounters.

This study is based on research conducted in the Czech Republic, where forests cover 34% of the country’s area. Altogether, 54% of Czech forests are owned by the state, 29% are privately owned, and municipalities and forest cooperatives own 18% of Czech forests (eagri.cz *n.d.*). Between 2010 and 2022, Czech foragers collected an average of almost 25,000 tonnes of mushrooms annually, with an estimated value of 161 million EUR (Ministry of Agriculture 2021; Bílý 2023). Czech legislation allows them to do so because the forests are considered public goods and forest crops are treated as common-pool resources. Unlike commons, where people negotiate (often informally) over norms and rules of use (Quilligan 2012), common-pool resources are open access and there is no system of communal rights and rules for their management.

Yet, while most Czech forests are not managed as commons in the narrow definition of the term, certain activities that foragers engage in could be described as commoning. As Bollier (2020) noted, it is important to recognise “the reality of a commons as a dynamic, evolving social activity: commoning. In practice, a commons consists not just of a resource, but of a community that manages a resource by devising its own rules, traditions, and values”. The concept of commoning makes it possible to emphasise the processual and relational nature of commons enactment. In the case of foragers, they have their own informal rules, traditions, and ethics, even though they are not a standard and formally established community.

In this paper, I seek answers to the following questions: How can foraging for forest crops be conceptualised beyond the commodity/commons dualism? How do foragers take care of the forests and how do the forests take care of foragers? How can foraging-related human-nonhuman encounters contribute to the theories and practices of the commons? The paper shows how foragers relate to the forest as more than just a source of crops and that they also engage in multispecies care. I argue that the everyday response-ability practices of foragers include both the use of the forests (but not extractivism) and care for the forests (but not activism). This article is organised as follows. In the second section, immediately below, I describe the ethnographic terrain to which the research relates. In the third section I introduce the conceptual debates that I seek to engage with, and in the fourth section I present my methodological approaches. In the fifth section I offer an analysis of how foragers practice “foraging response-ability” toward forests. In the final section I identify where forest foraging figures in the theories of commons management and why “foraging response-ability” matters in the debate on maintaining the openness of the commons and preventing their enclosure.

2. Whose Responsibility? Between Enterprising Consumers and Irresponsible Plunderers

“When the mushrooms stop growing, we feel it because we are just getting by on the money we have,” Julius, one of my interviewees, told me. He and his wife have a huge family and

the money they make from picking and selling mushrooms is an important addition to the family budget. Their children join them in mushroom foraging and Julius began teaching them how to forage in their early childhood. The family gives away and sells mushrooms, uses them as gifts and commodities, and keeps and processes some of the mushrooms they find for themselves. This practice is not uncommon in Czechia, where mushrooms form a considerable part of the non-market and informal food economy.

According to official estimates from 2020, 70.5% of the Czech population visited the forest at least once a month and approximately 83.5% of households collected mushrooms (Ministry of Agriculture 2021). Most of the mushrooms that people collect are kept by the pickers or are given away to their extended family and friends. Czech legislation does not limit the number of crops that foragers can take from the forest (as long as the crops are being collected for one's own use and people are not picking protected species or foraging in highly protected areas of the landscape). It is possible to enter and collect mushrooms in both private and state-owned forests, and the right to the "general use of forests" is established in the Forest Act (No. 289/1995) (zakonyprolidi.cz *n.d.*). To sell mushrooms, a person must possess a trade license and a certificate proving they possess the required knowledge, and they must have permission from the owner of the forest in which the mushrooms are being collected for sale.

The economic and energy insecurity that began to emerge in 2021 made the forests more engaged as a co-creator of the Czech economy and sociality. In 2022 the average inflation rate in the country was 15.1% (czso.cz *n.d.*). Moreover, in the first quarter of 2023 the purchasing power of real wages fell to almost what it was in 2017 (Miler 2023). In autumn 2022, the Czech press reported that Czechs were "stocking up for the winter" (Špačková 2022) by collecting forest crops and growing more food in their gardens. A newspaper reported that people were stealing wood from the forests to use it as firewood (Očenášková 2022). One of the most visited news website published an article titled "Inexpensive Recipes for Times of Crisis," featuring mushroom recipes (iDNES.cz 2022). The food magazine *Apetit* published an article titled "The Modest Diet of [Our] Great-Grandmothers" in 2023, which mentions forest crops as a significant source of sustenance that people supplied their households with in the past (Vávrová 2023).

In one of the thematic research interviews I conducted in 2022, a ministry official said to me that "precarious times are ahead" and stressed the importance of the availability of forest crops because "salaries are low in rural areas" and "according to official estimates 20 percent of people are not eating properly." He illustrated the situation with this example: "Take an old lady in a cottage – she's happy to grab a wheelbarrow and fetch wood she doesn't have to pay for, and to pick more mushrooms, raspberries, blueberries...". In this light, the availability of forest crops is considered a way of dealing with the economic crisis, especially in more impoverished parts of the country. Foragers' responsibility for the use of forest produce has thus begun to be discussed more intensively in the public sphere.

Professional foraging has been highlighted as an innovative business model (Němý 2022) but has also been criticised as forest plundering. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture issued the following warning: "Commercial mushroom pickers tend to plunder the forests. This is a dangerous trend and can endanger local ecosystems" (Ministry of Agriculture 2023). Mushroom foragers are then caught between two contradictory responsibilities: on the one hand, they are supposed to perform "self-care" (Rose 1996); on the other hand, they are confronted with the

specter of plundered ecosystems and burdened with the responsibility for preserving natural resources. In the fifth section I analyse how foragers respond to these contradictory obligations by performing their response-ability for forests. To begin, however, it is first necessary to introduce the conceptual grounding of my analysis of foraging practices in the theories of the commons.

3. Conceptual Grounding

Although the commons has been theorised in multiple ways, there are two characteristics that most scholars are likely to agree on. First, the commons is managed through self-organised collaboration, and second, the commons as a theoretical model and a material practice offers an alternative to how the state and market players approach issues of education, health, food production, and environmental sustainability (Velicu and García-López 2018). One of the leading commons scholars, Elinor Ostrom, challenges the reduction of human behaviour to the purely rational choices of an egoistic individual (Ostrom 1990). In contrast to state-market solutions based on individuals attempting to maximise their profits, commons approaches highlight cooperation, reciprocity, and the collective production of conditions and outcomes. Emphasising collective activities as constitutive of the commons, Linebaugh (2008) uses the verb “commoning” for its ability to express the collaborative processuality that is involved in maintaining the commons.

While some commons scholars draw a strict line between the privatisation of the commons and the commoning of self-organised communities (Linebaugh 2008; Quilligan 2012; Bollier and Helfrich 2021), the dichotomy between the neoliberal and anti-capitalist approaches to the commons is questioned by Zapata Campos and colleagues (2020). In their analysis of the commoning routine in the repair movement in Göteborg they argue that commoning is not necessarily driven by a political agenda. Individuals might be “ideologically heterogeneous” (Zapata Campos et al. 2020), but they become commoners by commoning. As well as expanding the potential of the commons, a number of scholars have begun to explore more extensively the positioning of the commoners against an individualistic and/or anthropocentric ontology. Singh (2017) explores the communicative and affective aspects of commoning practices between humans and nonhumans in forest ecosystems. Federici (2012) focuses on cooperation and responsibility, which apply not only to human collectives but also to ecosystems and animals. Velicu and García-López (2018) link the theoretical work of Ostrom and Butler to emphasise humans’ mutual vulnerability as a “constitutive part of the common(s)” (2018, 66). Velicu and García-López propose seeing mutual vulnerability as a condition for response-ability, i.e., the capacity to respond collectively to violence, to invisibility, and to the transformation of some individuals into disposables.

The way responsibility is conceptualised is an important analytical step for my research. Citizens who are each supposed to turn into an “enterprising self” (Rose 1992) are subjected to a process of “responsibilisation” (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017). They are assigned the responsibility of providing for basic needs but are not given the power and decision-making authority to negotiate their situation at the political level (Dobrynin et al. 2020). Responsibilisation assigns responsibility to the individual, who must make decisions based on “consumer choice” (Allen and Guthman 2006). Mustalahti and colleagues (2020) point out that responsibilisation stems from a conception of agency as a rational, economically motivated, and individual action.

A more appropriate conception of agency, however, is as an “accounting for actions” (*ibid.*, 8), since this understanding of agency may include relational dynamics between subjects and render it possible to respond in a non-individualistic mode.

Following STS and feminist scholars’ analysis of relational agency, I want to underscore how the liberal focus on individual actors obscures not only human relational dynamics but also nonhuman beings as active members of forest collectives. The concept of response-ability as developed by STS and new materialist scholars allows nonhuman collectives to be included in my analysis (cf. Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Hofman 2023). Response-ability acknowledges the interdependence of the shared world and the resulting accountability. Response-ability, as Haraway (2016) describes it, is generated as a response to the entanglement of the world’s human and nonhuman inhabitants and through the care we exercise towards those with whom we share the conditions of life. Response-ability is never complete, it is precarious and non-innocent, but it can strive for “multispecies recuperation” (*ibid.*, 114).

Thinking about the commons engages with the concept of response-ability along several lines. The approaches that are important for this text are the ones that link response-ability and the commons through an emphasis on mutual vulnerability. Velicu and García-López (2018) draw on Butler’s notion of vulnerability, according to which the assumption of actor autonomy and norms must be systematically challenged “with the ‘response-ability’ of all as equal political agents” (*ibid.*, 66). Consequently, they proclaim that changes in the management of ecosystems cannot occur without a radical change in social and ecological inequalities. Ng and Walsh (2019) use the concept of response-ability to examine the possibility of creating a more-than-human refuge for the vulnerable within the commons, drawing attention to “the need to variously inhabit passion and action, detachment and attachment to cultivate ‘response-ability’” (*ibid.*, 7). Of importance for using response-ability as an analytical tool to explore the ecological commons is Barad’s (2007) and Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) conceptualisation of the unintentional ethos.

María Puig de la Bellacasa draws upon Barad’s critique of the reduction of “ethicality to intentional agency” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 219). Consequently, Puig de la Bellacasa ascribes ethical agency beyond humans since she conceptualises care as activities that participate in the continuation of the world. Care practices help to maintain life. They don’t require subjective intentionality. Drawing upon Puig de la Bellacasa’s conception of more-than-human and worldmaking care, Hofman (2023) develops the concept of everyday response-ability and proposes response-ability as a non-professional and everyday practice that is produced by care. I draw primarily upon the multispecies character of response-ability and recognise that it is enacted with nonhuman collectives in foragers’ practices of commoning.

4. Methods and Fieldwork

This article builds on my four years of PhD research on coexistence between humans and fungi in the Czech Republic. A significant part of the research was undertaken with a research team working on a project called “Microbiological citizenship between antibiotic and probiotic regimes,” conducted between 2020 and 2022 at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy

of Sciences.¹ My own position was initially influenced by my romanticisation of mushroom picking practices. We foraged for mushrooms with my parents when I was a child, and these were my first encounters with forest animals and plants. Therefore, during the research, I purposefully focused also on ambivalent aspects of foraging as a practice that combines environmental ethics with personal economic benefits. Analysing the ambiguous behaviours of foragers who strive to utilise and yet care for the forests helped me to not idealise foraging and to conceptualise more accurately situations that can inspire multispecies flourishing.

The research participants were selected using the snowball sampling method (Parker et al. 2019). The project was presented to the respondents as research focusing on the coexistence of humans and fungi and the related social and interspecies aspects of this relationship. Twenty-six thematic interviews were carried out mainly with mushroom foragers, growers, and mycological researchers. This set of data includes seven follow-up interviews with participants whose experiences were found to significantly contribute to the analysis of human-fungal relationships and multispecies ethics. The interview questions covered environmental ethics, the cultivation and sharing of knowledge on mushrooms and their habitats, the sale of mushrooms, and the gift economy. A semi-structured questionnaire was fielded to members of the Czech Mycological Society and 41 completed surveys were collected. The questionnaire was relevant to the research, especially as it revealed that foragers give away many of the mushrooms they collect, which was an important impetus for analysing non-market economic activities in more detail.

I conducted 10 participant observations: I joined the foragers when they were foraging for mushrooms and I visited cultivation facilities, mushroom exhibitions, and research facilities either on my own or together with members of the research team. Participant observations were a crucial source of data for this paper, as I included the presence (and absence) of smell particles, human and nonhuman sounds, and choreographies of touch as relevant participants in my research. During the participant observations, I decided to walk with foragers across the landscape as a method that could be used to assemble additional data on their relationship with nonhuman collectives (Springgay and Truman 2018). The dialogue between myself, the participant, and the location (Anderson et al. 2010) was an important strategy for observing the interactions between humans and the landscape and documenting the sensory relationality of human-nonhuman encounters.

The following sections represent the experiences of foragers whose practices and thinking about and with mushrooms embody important modes of foraging. I selected them because their approaches to forest collectives have a “prototypical value” (Flyvbjerg 2006). I consider them representative since they represent situated place-based knowledge (Pontius 2020), which emerges in the multispecies collectives of a particular location and is shaped by human-nonhuman collaborations and temporalities. Data were generated between 2020 and 2023, and interviews were recorded and transcribed or processed into summaries. The research was carried out according to the Code of Research Ethics of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology and informed consent protocols were followed. The research materials are in Czech, and the quotes included in the paper are translated into English from the original Czech. An additional four thematic interviews were held with experts on microfungi, and this set of interviews was part of an artistic project I participated in with a Czech documentary filmmaker. The total number of participants was twenty-three. All data are anonymised.

The production and analysis of the ethnographic data were influenced by the “thinking with theory” approach (Jackson and Mazzei 2018). I did not consider concepts and theories as models that needed to be “applied.” The generation, analysis, and interaction of the data with conceptual frameworks were circular: I sought relevant theorisations for the data, which I incorporated back into the design of further interviews and participant observations. The fieldwork led me to concepts and the concepts directed me to other fieldwork, the exploration of which allowed me to think more precisely about my chosen theories (Stöckelová and Abu Ghosh 2014). Examining concepts with the data and gradually selecting key topics with the help of appropriate theories generated the topic of the ability of foragers to perform response-ability without top-down norms. I identified the concept of response-ability as the one most effective for exploring three qualities that characterise the human-nonhuman relations that emerge in foraging practices.

Some pickers have a sense of accountability to forest collectives. “When I’m in the woods, I should act like it,” said Julius of the foragers who scream, handle mushrooms inappropriately, and listen to the radio in the forest, and he concluded by saying “I’d kick them in the ass with a pointy boot.” Following foragers’ practices, I conceptualise foraging as a response to the obligations that are co-created by nonhuman collectives and are enacted without adopting a stance of “paternalistic stewardship” towards ecosystems or committing destructive extractivism (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 144). I call this approach “foraging response-ability.” I purposely use the word “foraging,” and not a “forager’s,” response-ability in order to highlight the process of human-nonhuman interactions itself, instead of the individual subject of a human forager.

5. Foraging Response-ability: Three Responses

In this section, I explore “foraging response-ability” as an activity that involves cultivating foragers’ attunement to nonhuman collectives. Firstly, I show the activity of foragers as intensively linked to the sensory communication of ecosystems. Second, I analyse “foraging response-ability” as a type of care that is neither extractivist nor innocent and conceptualise it beyond the dualism of capitalist and anti-capitalist practices. Third, I examine the transfer of knowledge on ecosystems that is focused on the reciprocal care performed between foragers and nonhumans and has a significant non-instrumental quality. These three analytical foci lead me to conceptualise “foraging response-ability” as *non-linear*, *non-innocent*, and *non-instrumental*. I present these characteristics of “foraging response-ability” as activities that have the potential to contribute to a more general debate about thinking and doing commons.

5.1 Searching: A Non-linear Response

Zac, a professional forager, was explaining to me the importance of smell for foraging. I had to remind him of my questions because the different scents of the forest were attracting his attention and distracting him from the interview (or: drawing him to the forest’s sensuality):

All the senses are used. You can smell the aspen, for example, because the leaves give off this specific smell when they're rotting, so you can smell the leaves and you think: there should be *Leccinum* mushrooms here.

Foragers do not follow a linear path in the forest. Foraging is not harvesting. Foragers must be able to attune themselves to the heterogeneous forest semiosis (Kohn 2013), which is what can lead them to edible mushrooms. As seen in the example of aspen, trees can be helpful index signs indicating the presence of a specific mushroom. Roa, Julius's daughter, told me that the rare, culinary, and financially valued cauliflower fungus (*Sparassis crispa*) grows almost exclusively near pine trees. It is useful to combine knowledge of mycorrhizal alliances with olfactory skills. Recognising scents helps orient foragers' movement through the forest and helps them to identify whether the mushrooms they find are edible. Zac instructed me:

The sweetbread mushroom is edible and smells like semen – it signals the presence of wild mushroom mycelia. So you know there's a good chance of finding mushrooms within two metres.

Sometimes the smell of the mushroom cap helps to identify the mushroom species. "Sheathed woodtuft has a beautiful smell – like a flower," Zac explained to me in a passionate voice. Having knowledge of the geological subsoil beneath the forest floor is similarly helpful. Zac got used to using online sources to find out what type of soil and rocks make up the subsoil of the forest he is going to forage in. "It's too sour here, there aren't any microelements, and you won't find morels here," he remarked about one specific location during our foraging trip. Mushroom pickers sometimes experiment with practices that depend on nonhuman dynamics, without any expert knowledge having validated these practices. Julius decides whether to go foraging based on the phases of the moon. If the moon is full, the mushrooms are healthier, and not as bent or mouldy. He is not sure why the growth of mushrooms is related to the phase of the moon, but he has "verified this through observation."

However, successful mapping of the terrain involves more than just the sum of a person's ecological knowledge. Zac describes the forests as "dynamic systems," meaning that the complexity of the systems exceeds the rational capacities of individual human foragers. "No forager dies clever," Zac noted. Further, he mentioned that the forager is guided by intuition at some point: it's "a kind of sixth sense." A conception of forests as dynamic, complex systems that transcend human rational capacities escapes the reduction of forests to resource-producing object. It comes closer to an approach that Shiho Satsuka (2018) conceptualises as "koto." The term koto ("events") conceptualises events happening simultaneously and beyond human cognition. For example, simultaneous processes in the human body can take place in multiple locations without our awareness while they nevertheless still impact our mood and activities. Only by cognitively capturing the results of these events can humans transform them into a "mono" form, which means that they become a separate object localised in singular space-time coordinates. According to Satsuka, koto "evades the modernist desire of being captured in a spatial representational scheme" (*ibid.*, 82). Satsuka met nature science students in Japan who were able to sense that mushrooms

were growing in the forest around them before they saw them. The students could operate with a cultivated ability to feel fungi-related events.

At a specific spot, the forager sometimes has to rely on a sixth sense – on calibrated capacities beyond instrumental knowledge and rational decision-making. Cultivating “koto” perception means transcending the dichotomies of “animist” and “scientific” or “traditional” and “modern” systems of knowledge (*ibid.*, 95) and making room for a foraging intuition connected to multispecies events. The sixth sense of a mushroom forager can be described as a cultivated skill, wherein one is attuned to events occurring simultaneously in the forest – it is an intuition that can lead the forager to the place where these elusive events are perpetuated in the form of a “mono,” that is, in the form of the particular macromycete of the given fungus. Response-able foragers do not experience the forest as a homogenous object of natural resources. They are attuned to the “koto” of local collectives, which enables them to be guided by multispecies and multidirectional events, instead of reducing the forest to a field for linear crop harvesting. Engaging forest collectives in foraging strategies not only increases the amount of mushrooms collected but also enhances foragers’ response-ability towards the forest’s more-than-human inhabitants as I will explain in the following section.

5.2 Care: A Non-innocent Response

For the participants in my research, foraging is not apolitical and detached from capitalist economic connections. Financial crises can intensify the need to use forest resources. Some foragers commodify the mushrooms they collect on the market or exchange them in the informal economy. In contrast to commoning communities in the Global North, which position themselves as forms of anti-capitalist subversion and an alternative to the power of the state, the participants in my research do not forage in order to engage in “edible activism” (Chang and Bai 2020). Foragers coordinate their approaches outside the extractivism-activism binary. They care for the forest and they benefit from it. The response-ability they perform as everyday care is not innocent (Hofman 2023) or destructive and it is based on presence-absence dynamics (Haraway 2016). I will follow this dynamic from top to bottom: from the sounds emerging and disappearing among the trees to the mycelial networks in the forest soil.

The forager’s approach is guided by the rules defined by law (289/1995 Coll.): visitors to the forest should not disturb the peace, destroy plants, drive in the forest, or start fires. In the foraging routine, everyday adherence to the rules is combined with some subtler habits. Julius taught his children that they should not shout in the forest unless someone in the group is in danger of getting lost. However, remaining a silent presence in the forest is more than just an obligation, because when there is silence one’s senses can grow sharper and the ability to listen better develops. Silence in this case means the absence of sounds produced by humans. This silence allows a person to become more attuned to nonhuman voices. Janice, Julius’s daughter, pointed out that the silence is the reason she likes foraging in the forest and Julius remarked that when he is in the forest with his children they ask him with fascination: “Dad, can you hear the birds singing?”. Being in a forest landscape requires the tuning down of human-produced sounds, which has a shared benefit: the animals are not disturbed and the humans can listen to nonhuman

voices. Foragers “rebuild quiet places” (Haraway 2016, 1) by being quiet and by making room for nonhuman soundscapes.

Presence-absence dynamics affect not only the forest soundscape but also microscopic mycelial networks in the forest soil. The presence-absence calibration determines the health of the mycelium. In a research interview, a representative of the Czech Mycological Society was reluctant to encourage people to do too much mushroom collecting because crowds of foragers could squash the forest soil and damage the mycelium. This is why he is also hesitant to invite professional mushroom pickers to give public talks at events hosted by the Czech Mycological Society. He doesn’t want everyone to go out collecting mass amounts of forest crops. However, regulating the presence of humans is not enough to protect the mycelium. Forests are made up of multispecies collectives and humans are not the only non-innocent users of the forests who are negotiating their presence in the forest. “Hectares of forest land ploughed up by wild boars will do more damage inhibiting the further growth of mushrooms than a thousand mushroom pickers,” one mycologist claimed in a newspaper article (novinky.cz 2009). Mycologists want the forest soil preserved as much as possible, wild boars need to plough it, and foragers require an abundance of mushrooms growing from mycelium. The forager’s response to the conundrum of conflicting interests is their response-ability.

The health of the mycelium is essential for mushroom foragers who collect extensively to supplement their household supplies or budget. According to some foragers, the survival of mycelial life can be affected by the way in which a mushroom is removed from the forest undergrowth and disconnected from mycelial networks. I was given instructions on how to pick a mushroom correctly. The whole mushroom needs to be removed from the soil, the end of the stipe must be cut off, and the pit created after the mushroom is removed needs to be covered with soil. If the stipe were cut while the mushroom was still in the soil, the end of the stipe would rot. “The mycelium would be damaged,” Roa remarked, highlighting the importance of the removal process. If foragers collect mushrooms without caring for the mycelia, they will damage the site, and the next time there will be a limited number to collect. Such response-ability fosters the biological growth of the mycelium and the economic growth of the forager’s business.

Taking careful account of the materiality of the mushrooms is an ethical obligation towards the mycelium, but also towards the people who receive or buy the mushrooms. Julius prides himself on his supplier ethic:

All (our) mushrooms are fresh and we take pride in the fact that I have taught the girls to do this – that the mushrooms are usable, nice, and, most importantly, thoroughly cleaned. Those we bring mushrooms to know that I won’t bring them any crap that they then have to clean.

In general, to uphold the ethical and economic commitment to the people who are to receive the mushrooms it is necessary to forage for mushrooms that have not yet been consumed by slugs and insects. Some mushroom pickers compete with other organisms for intact mushrooms: they want to avoid having their mushrooms taken by another forager or a slug or wild pigs tearing up the site.

Caring properly for the mycelium helps macromycetes flourish again. It creates the potential for more foraging and more flourishing, but also for conflict and competition between humans and nonhumans. This care is not altruistic, innocent, or selfless. Instead, it is working for the “everyday continuation of life” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 135) – the economic life of the foragers and the biological life of the forest’s inhabitants. Care of the foragers is a mundane routine whose purpose is to sustain the forest collectives, with all their conflicting obligations and competing world-making practices. It is an everyday tinkering and enacting of the world “so that *all* (rather than ‘we’) can live in it as well as possible” (*ibid.*, 161). Foraging is not utopian activism or cynical exploitation, it is doing commoning activities “as well as possible.”

5.3 Transmission: A Non-instrumental Response

One of the research participants, Viola, grew up in South Bohemia, where she regularly went foraging with her grandmother. After returning from the forest, Viola, her grandmother, and her mother would prepare the collected mushrooms for dinner. The whole extended family would gather at the family house during the mushroom picking season and would forage and eat there. Mushrooms became a “family affair.” She owes her “passion” for mushrooms and her knowledge of them to her grandmother, who used to pick mushrooms when meat was scarce when she was young. Viola currently lives abroad, where she has adapted her knowledge of mushroom foraging to local conditions and publishes mushroom recipes on her blog. Some of the recipes have been passed down to her from her grandmother. Similarly, Julius was introduced to mushroom picking by his grandfather, to whom he is so grateful that he asked me to be sure to mention his grandfather’s role.

His daughter Janice said to me, “Since I was a kid, we’ve gone mushroom picking, and gradually it [the knowledge about mushroom species] was uploaded into my brain.” Not only do Julius’s children learn to identify mushroom species and their relationships with other forest entities, but Julius also teaches them work habits so they know that “money isn’t printed by ATMs.” Julius’s children already know that making money by foraging requires mycological knowledge but is also physically exhausting. Julius said, “Sometimes they whine in the woods that the baskets are heavy, that their feet hurt, but they just have to keep trying.” Knowledge is shared and useful work habits imparted while foragers are present in a particular location and with the nonhumans who are present in that location. “When the kids are tired, they build little houses out of moss and branches, they observe anthills, they look at birds, they learn about nature,” Julius remarked.

However, it is not only the transmission of knowledge and skills that is essential for forming relationships with forest collectives. Foragers transfer affective bonds. The forest is not merely a source of crops, it is a place that offers emotional relief – a place for the situational absence of the obligations of life outside the forest. One of the research participants has begun visiting the forests more often precisely for the respite they offer from the demands of caring for an ill relative whom he has to look after all night. In the mornings, he is able to escape into the woods for a few hours, where he can “heal his wounds and his soul.” In that moment, the forest, for him, is “another world.”

One goes into the forest, sits on a stump, cries for a while, and then one can move on. There is peace in the forest, it is a balm for the soul. You're alone there, you enter another world.

Janice does not think visiting the forest is a waste of time, even if they do not find many mushrooms, because the forest is so tranquil: "I usually clear my head in the forest because it's quiet." Another research participant, a priest, who is also a passionate mushroom picker, directly emphasised that his relationship with nature had been shaped since childhood by his frequent visits to the woods. He "always escaped to the forest" and considered it a place of "relaxation," where he gradually became familiar with "every stone." The participants' relationship to the forest is shaped and transmitted as a relationship to a place that is "responsive to vulnerability" and provides not only crops but also the potential to create a refuge (Ng and Walsh 2019, 4). For my participants, forests are a place that they care for and that responds to their own vulnerability. The mutuality of vulnerability, which Velicu and García-López (2018) define as a constitutive aspect of the commons, is extended beyond the strictly human relationality in foraging practices. Mundane foraging can transform forests from mere natural resources for instrumental use into places of "trust and safety" (Ng and Walsh 2019, 11).

The psychological relief provided by forests, as appreciated by some of the research participants, transcends the conventional ecosystem service category of "recreation." These landscapes are not generic forests that provide a "service" as a uniform instrument but familiar places – "other worlds" – connected to foragers through long-term relationships. Consequently, foraging knowledge is not passed on as a form of universal knowledge about generic ecosystems but instead consists of knowledge about specific places, specific species of forest crops, and local ecologies. Similarly, Tsing (2015, 91) has described how Hmong mushroom pickers make the landscape familiar "by hiking and foraging" and Singh (2017, 765) has shown how villagers in Odisha cultivate attunement and embody affective relationships with local forests through everyday practices such as caring for the forest and gathering berries. A physical presence in the forest that is attentive to nonhuman inhabitants makes the forest landscape familiar and intimate. This is a precondition for the creation of a refuge. The transfer of this kind of knowledge and skills is enacted through "place-based learning" (Pontius 2020), which recognises that the learning process involves nonhumans who participate in shaping knowledge at both the informational and affective levels. Foragers learn how to collect mushrooms without destroying the mycelium, they know how to care for the forest and how to accept care from the forest. This kind of commoning practice opens up forests as caring collectives beyond instrumental utilisation.

6. Conclusion: Foraging Response-ability as a Process of Maintaining the Openness of the Multispecies Commons

Collecting mushrooms, which are given as a gift or processed within the household, can be considered an example of a "diverse economy" that attempts to include those economic practices that are mostly overlooked within the capitalist hegemony (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Nevertheless, I hesitate to label the foraging activities described above as “alternative” practices of food self-sufficiency since the term “alternative” reifies “a capitalocentric anchoring, which uses capitalism as a central point of reference” (White and Williams 2016). What’s more, some of the economic practices of foragers could be labeled nonmarket and even noncapitalist, while other types of economic activities operate within capitalist and market relations and cannot be characterised as “noncapitalist politics of place” (Gibson-Graham 2006). Rather, the practices examined in this paper constitute a hybrid foraging economy: they partly offset the negative effects of capitalist production and they involve market exchanges, but at the same time, some of these activities are performed outside the market and avoid any monetisation.

Foraging response-ability thus should not be conceptualised in the dualist terms of capitalism versus its subversive alternative but rather as a commoning practice that engages with the nonhuman inhabitants of the forest ecosystems. In this final section, I summarise how foraging response-ability, performed as *non-linear*, *non-innocent*, and *non-instrumental*, can enrich the theories and practices of everyday commoning in the multispecies realm of food-producing ecosystems. Building on the previous sections, I offer a threefold way in which foraging response-ability enables modes of openness within the practice of commoning. These include the openness of forest collectives to human members, the openness of ecosystems, which is maintained by preventing their political enclosure, and the openness of foragers to the potential care provided by forests.

Firstly, the non-linear responsiveness of foragers opens up the forest collectives to them. For my participants, belonging to a forest collective is not primarily about stewardship over the forests but about regularly sharing space and time with the forest dwellers and attuning themselves to their lives. The foragers’ knowledge and affective connections are small-scale and place-based (Pontius 2020), and they pass on their relationality with these collectives to the next generation of foragers. Their encounters, cooperation, and negotiations with nonhumans are not just another aspect of commoning management but a constitutive condition for foraging as a response-able approach to forests.

Secondly, non-innocent motivations can prevent the enclosure of the commons because the effort to benefit from forest crops keeps the forests open. State and mycological organisations are concerned about the extensive amount of foragers in the forests because the ecosystems could be damaged by the presence of so many people in the forest. Nevertheless, it is probably also because there are so many foragers and visitors that the forests remain accessible: politicians would not dare to place limits on foraging or on access to the forests because they would alienate a significant portion of Czech society. Foragers shape the politics of commoning not through direct political action (Zapata Campos et al. 2020) but through the act of foraging itself. Foragers don’t act on political grounds, but their actions of commoning have political consequences.

Thirdly, non-instrumental modes of human-nonhuman interactions enable foragers to become open to reciprocal care. Foragers use the forest crops they collect, replenish their stocks with them, exchange them, and sell them. They benefit from the forest’s resources, but foragers also take care of the forest. Such activities are not a form of one-way management of an ecosystem. The forests care for the foragers, too. They provide humans with crops and an emotional refuge. Barad’s (2007) asubjective “ethicity of matter” (Puig de la

Bellacasa 2017, 142) allows us to recognise forests as collectives that care for foragers since subjective intentionality is not a necessary precondition to perform care. By not obscuring forest processes with the notion of intentionality, it is possible to acknowledge the food and the emotional refuge that forests offer. Human-nonhuman interactions in forest collectives are reciprocal and mutually cooperative in sustaining the economic and emotional life of foragers and the biological life of forests.

Foraging as an everyday commoning practice can be constitutively multispecies, politically non-intentional, and reciprocal beyond the scope of human communities. Foraging response-ability thus co-constitutes the openness of ecological resources and negotiates the ways in which they are used. The small-scale maintenance of life in the forests is done by tinkering, interacting, and experimenting with nonhuman collectives. Foragers' activities in and with forest collectives are not reduced to economic calculations or environmental agendas. Foragers are neither entirely individualistic nor solely altruistic. If the forest commons are formed only by the dichotomy of state-market versus activist management, everyday foraging response-ability is overlooked.

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