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Revisiting My Grandmother's Garden: Christian Moral Imagination of Cohabitation

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Abstract

In the interface of Christian ethics, autoethnography and Indigenous knowledge, I propose a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation based on interdependence and enablement. I use non-archival community knowledge and oral memory to excavate moral wisdom from my grandmother's garden. I argue that to be interdependent is to be human, and the creation of a "social condition of livable lives" is a necessary requirement of cohabitation. Methodologically, this paper builds on liberative ethics and its emphasis on moral oughts as "derivatives of survivals". I conclude that the deep-seated intentionality to live well and be *fully human* is the soul of Christian ethics. Though the story centers on my grandmother and her kitchen garden, the paper is transnational and contributes to the global discussion on what it means to live well. It adds moral knowledge centered on Indigenous people's world-making paradigm. This paper is not an Indigenous perspective of Christian ethics. Rather, it is a paradigmatic paper built on the way that Indigenous people engage with the world (relationality) and with each other.

Keywords: everyday ethics; cohabitation; Indigenous knowledge; womanist; Latina ethics; autoethnography; interdependence

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Academic Editor: Andrew M. Nedd

Received: 13 March 2025
Revised: 3 November 2025
Accepted: 6 November 2025
Published: 8 November 2025

Citation: Jamir, Shiluinla. 2025. Revisiting My Grandmother's Garden: Christian Moral Imagination of Cohabitation. *Arts* 14: 136. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14060136

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1. Introduction

The *politics of othering* and the desire to own and control bodies—including geo-bodies—on which colonialism was founded did not stop with the formal ending of colonialism (Go 2024). These strategies continue to be seen in the ways people and their places are imagined and interpreted. Postcolonial nation-states replicate this thinking in their state-making projects and the in categorization of their citizens (Prakash 2015). Places that Indigenous people call home are labeled as "difficult to access" (Ibid.), for example, as forest land, reserve forest, or protected land. During colonial rule, these places were imagined as *frontiers* (Mackenzie 1979, reprint), *blank spaces* (Hiatt 2002), and *empty spaces* (Campbell et al. 2019). These conceptual constructions impacted how people understood Indigenous spaces. The people who lived in those spaces were often described (Hussain 2015; Pachuau 2014; Haokip 2024, p. 21) as backward, uncivilized, and primitive. Such thinking is driven by *seeing* and *imagining* the "empty" land as colonizable (Çapan and dos Reis 2024), as resource frontiers (Karlsson 2022), and its people as "disposable people" (Bales 2012).

The ways the world is sensed and imagined may originate in the moral imagination of a few, but these perceptions can become a collective understanding over time (Taylor 2007, p. 159). Theologian Willie Jennings (2010), though speaking in the context of race relations, called such divisive thinking "diseased social imagination" (p. 4). By this, he meant a "distorted relational imagination" that emerges out of "racial and cultural difference

inconsequently related to its geography, often imaginatively detached from its surroundings of both people and spaces" (p. 4). Jennings observed that these manifestations are "symptomatic of not knowing, of not sensing, of not imagining" (p. 4).

Therefore, we need a compelling vision of a moral order that offers a new way of seeing, sensing, and imagining the world. To do this, I turn to my grandmother's kitchen garden, one of the most intimate everyday practices of Indigenous women. There are multiple reasons for looking to a kitchen garden as a source of moral wisdom. Indigenous women's activities like gardening, weaving, or other artistic and nurturing practices not only display a "sophisticated system of knowledge" (Smith 2019, p. 3) and express an aesthetic sense, but they also contain moral guidance on how one ought to live. African American writer Alice Walker (1994) found her mother's creativity and wisdom in the garden. For her mother, her garden was a space where she could unleash her creative energy while also providing food and satisfying her aesthetic sense. Similarly, Jennings experienced what it means to be free in the garden. The garden announced to the world that those who kept them were free to be themselves. In the garden, they found what they needed to have human freedom (p. 2). Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), an Indigenous woman and a botanist, learned about the balance of life from the garden. She observed this in the way the plants supported each other. She saw it in the way gifts from the earth were received. She saw it in the way the gifts established an obligation to receive and to reciprocate. Philosopher David Cooper observed in the garden an exemplification of "recognized dependence of the human creative activity upon the cooperation of the natural world. . .embodying... an intimate co-dependence" (Cooper 2006, pp. 135–36). He not only saw dependency there; he saw intimate dependency, a mark of species living entangled lives. For Cooper, the garden was an epiphany and an example of how one ought to live. All over the world, the kitchen garden is where the Indigenous woman finds her truest self. In the garden, unintentionally or intentionally, she creates a space of her own, away from the prying eyes of patriarchy. In the garden, she not only plants and enables life to flourish, but she also interacts with other species tenderly. She uses the gifts that she receives from the garden to build herself, her kinship, and her community. For Indigenous women, in addition to being sources of food, kitchen gardens often represent "counter-sites" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, p. 3).

Due to these compelling reasons, I find the kitchen garden to be an important source of moral wisdom for developing a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation. In the interface of Christian ethics, autoethnography, and Indigenous knowledge, I propose a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation. I use *non-archival community knowledge* and *oral memory* to excavate moral wisdom from my grandmother's garden. I argue that to be interdependent is to be human and that the creation of the "social conditions of livable lives" (Butler 2016, p.121) is a requirement of cohabitation. Methodologically, this paper builds on liberative ethics with an emphasis on everyday lives. In line with liberative thinking, I restate that moral *oughts* are "derivatives of survivals" (Anscombe 1958, p. 1), and I conclude that the deep-seated intentionality to live well is the soul of Christian ethics.

Though the story centers on my grandmother and her kitchen garden, the paper is transnational and contributes to the global discussion on what it means to live well. It brings moral knowledge centered on Indigenous people's world-making paradigm. This paper is not an Indigenous perspective on Christian ethics. It is a paradigmatic paper built on the ways Indigenous people engage with the world (relationality) and with each other.

2. Methodology

2.1. Ethics

The English word *ethics* etymologically comes from Greek and *morals* from Latin. Both imply customs (Gill 2020, p. 4). In Western tradition, "ethics studies the morality of human

conduct" (Porter 2014, p. 1). The starting point of an ethical discourse is "What should we do? How ought we to live? What sort of person should I be? It is concerned with critical reflections on what is good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy, moral and immoral" (Porter 2014, pp. 1–2). Ethics happens when one begins to think critically in freedom as a moral agent (Frankena 1963, pp. 3–4). Thus, in Western ethics, freedom and autonomy are important conditions for making ethical choices.

2.2. Christian Ethics

Christian ethics, on the other hand, are based on the question, "What is the will of God?" (Dietrich 2009, p. 47). This can be seen as an inquiry into what God, through Jesus, is doing. The Christian religion is "essentially a revelation of the nature of God" (Mortimer 2013, p. 7). It tells of what God has done, and from the nature of his actions, one can infer what God is like. As a revelatory religion, it reveals God's will to human beings as well as how they must live if they are to please God (Mortimer). Beach and Niebuhr (1973) have stated that the integrity of Christian ethics is derived from a shared faith about the nature of God and human beings' response to the divine. In light of this, Waldo and Niebuhr deduced that God's will is for the love of neighbor to model the manner of God's love for [hu]mankind (5). Based on the definition of Christian ethics proposed by Mortimer, Beach, and Niebuhr, one may claim that the premise of Christian ethics is derived from one's faith about the nature of God and the human response to God in light of who God is and what he has done for us.

Contemporary Christian ethicist Luke Bretherton (2023) expanded the scope of understanding of Christian ethics by focusing on *living* a purposeful life with God and the rest of creation. According to Bretherton (2023, p. 8), Christian ethics is "born out of careful consideration of the meaning and purpose of life with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation, and how to live a life that is true to and directed toward this meaning and purpose". In Bretherton's definition, Christian ethics is seen as both living and reflecting. Such a definition of Christian ethics situates ethics in everyday life, in meaningful existence, and pursues what it means to truly live in the midst of the contradictions of life. Thus, following Bretherton, one can agree that Christian ethics is about living a meaningful life, one that is aligned with the purpose of life with God.

Christian ethicists offer different approaches to "deciding how to decide in moral situations" (Carey 1968). Joseph Fletcher (1966), in his book *Situation Ethics*, argued that *obedient love* should direct Christian moral behavior. Paul Ramsey (1950) also proposed that the central ethical notion or category within Christian ethics is "obedient love"—the sort of love the gospel describes as "love filling the law" and that St. Paul designates as "faith that works through love" (Ramsey 1950, p. xi). Another approach to Christian ethics is *virtue ethics*, which stresses the formation of character, practical wisdom, and happiness. Although traditionally attributed to Aristotle, a contemporary interest in virtue ethics was renewed after the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Within the framework of virtue ethics, virtues are considered to be central to achieving a meaningful ethical life. According to MacIntyre (2007), the tradition of virtue ethics is embedded in everyday life. It is concerned with character formation and habituation.

However, ethicists such as Enrique Dussel, K. C. Abraham, Miguel De la Torre, and Katie Cannon have critiqued the way Christian ethics has been taught in Western academia. They have critiqued the reformist stances of the early theologians, arguing that the social and political context needed structural change (Dussel 1985; Abraham 1996, pp. 73–77; De La Torre 2013, 2014). They proposed examining ethics from people's experiences and their social locations with a liberational thrust. Womanist ethicist Cannon found the Protestant theological ethics to be irrelevant, immoral, and amoral in relation to the Black community.

She argued that the cherished ethical ideals of freedom and having a wide range of choices, often upheld in Protestant traditions, proved to be meaningless in the context of oppression. The lived realities of Black communities, Cannon (1988) stated, required a moral agency that ran contrary to the ethical boundaries of Protestantism. Barbara Andolson (1981) and Margaret Farley (2015) found problems in the usage of *agape* in dominant thinking and asked for a reconsideration of ethics based on mutual love. These criticisms led to the inclusion of sources of Christian ethics that were not traditionally considered earlier. Personal experiences or social experiences—informal knowledge of the world acquired through living—became important ways of doing Christian ethics. Critics also realized that social locations (places and gender) shaped all moral experiences and yielded diverse moral views (Traina 2023; De La Torre 2013). In the alternative approaches that began to take shape, the context was studied using an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991), combining factors such as class, race, and gender; caste, class, and gender; or place, race, and gender.

2.3. Sources of Christian Ethics

In the 1980s, Christian feminist ethics began to question the validity of applying rules, norms, principles, or virtues from a male perspective. Farley (1993, 2015) critiqued that the notions of common morality and universality that moral philosophy purports exclude the needs and claims of marginalized groups. Therefore, she put forth women's experience as an important source of doing Christian ethics. Beverly Harrison (1985), a Christian feminist whose work impacted Christian feminist thinking on the body, conceptualized embodiment as the starting point of Christian ethics. For her, it was not just about experience but about bodily experience; embodiment became the starting point of doing feminist ethics.

Feminist ethicists introduced into moral reasoning the importance of women's experiences, bodies, sensuality, and nurturance. The emphasis on bodies as a source of Christian ethics was taken up by feminists from different parts of the globe. A female body became an important moral and theological text (S. Jamir 2021; Chong 2013; Kamalini 1999; Copeland 2010) and was interpreted as a site of violence and resistance (S. Jamir 2021; Kamalini 1999). The paradoxical nature of bodies as sites of violence and resistance became significant in further analyzing marginality, marginal spaces, frontiers, borderlands, and homes or domestic places as paradoxical sites or "counter sites" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986).[1] However, questions arose about the types of bodies—radicalized bodies, colonized bodies, and bruised bodies—which influenced the way Christian ethical themes were understood and interpreted (A. Jamir 2019; S. Jamir 2021; Chong 2013; Copeland 2010). These interpretations were shaped by individuals' social experiences, histories, and locations. For instance, postcolonial feminist theologian Pui-lan Kwok (2000) argued that the experience of colonialism impacted how Asian feminists approached theology and ethics. Similarly, Copeland (2010, 2018) considered the experiences of suffering under chattel slavery and racism as the greatest evil, freedom as the greatest good, and women and men struggling, suffering, and enduring in the pursuit of freedom as acts of redemption. Indian Dalit women theologians considered Dalit women's bodies, experiences of caste violence, and resistance to be key methodological tools in Dalit theology and ethics (Prasunna 2019). Variations in epistemological locations gave rise to different strands of feminist/womanist ethics.

Womanists emphasized the importance of considering survival, coping, everyday life, and resistance as methodological sources of Christian moral imagination (Cannon 1988, p. 4), with survival lessons learned from foremothers and Black feminist writers (Cannon 1988; Floyd-Thomas 2006). These moral sources were termed "subjugated knowledge" (Collins 2000, p. 13; Collins 2013, pp. 11–14). Another important methodological source

emerged from the Latina/o context. Theologians in this tradition used ethnography and daily life as moral sources, and they developed ethical themes and norms from *lo cotidiano*—the everyday experience (Isasi-Diaz 2004; De La Torre 2010). In Latina ethics, the lived experience of Latinas that deals with the struggle to survive is not only a theological locus; it is also the primary source of *Mujeristatheology*. For *Mujeristatheology*, survival is not "barely living" but "the struggle to *be* fully" (Isasi-Diaz 2004, p. 34). It is about sustaining one's physical life and the social dimension of life as well as community survival (Ibid).

The liberative strand of Christian ethics interpreted ethical living to mean *living well*; these kinds of ethics are "derivates from survivals" from people's way of imagining their moral world. Moral wisdom was to be found in the wisdom and survival skills of foremothers, the literature, and everyday life. Latina bodies, Dalit bodies, and New Social Movements (Zachariah 2011) became important sources of Christian moral imaginations and practices. Alice Walker proposed that the truest answer to questions that intimately matter can be found very close; they show up in the most unlikely places. She critiqued the tendency to only look "high" when one should look both "high and low" (pp. 106–7). This critique marked a methodological shift away from perceiving ethics as a highly theoretical enterprise. The moral sources of Christian ethics were found in the most common places and in practices of everyday life: in the kitchen garden, in the stories of foremothers, in their survival skills, and in their struggle to be alive. This article is centered on the premise of finding moral wisdom in the everyday practices of Indigenous women. Building on these approaches to Christian ethics, I explore the kitchen garden as a counter site and as a way of being fully human. As moral wisdom can be gathered through an autoethnographic method, I have used such a method here, inspired by contemporary works on everyday ethics and ethnography (Isasi-Diaz 2004; Du Boulay 2009; Scharen and Vigen 2011; Banner 2014; Lamb and Williams 2019; Bretherton 2019).

Autoethnography falls within the field of ethnography. In autoethnography, the researcher—the I—is the subject, whereas in ethnography, there are research subjects whom the researcher studies. This work is an autoethnographic description of growing up as an Indigenous woman surrounded by mothers and grandmothers who are primary knowledge givers in Indigenous communities. Autoethnography is defined as "an approach to research and writing that describes and systematically analyze (*graphy*), personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis et al. 2010, NP). It challenges the dominant/canonical ways of doing research and representing others (Ibid). The process of doing autoethnography includes retrospectively and selectively writing about epiphanies that one encounters by being a part of a culture or while processing a particular cultural identity. Autoethnography also requires analyzing one's own experiences using methodological tools and research literature (Ibid). Autoethnography is considered a decolonizing and decolonial methodology (Augustus 2022, p. 146; Chawla and Atay 2018). It is also regarded as a postcolonial turn in research, marking an insertion of the researcher as an integral participant in the research (Chawla and Rodriguez 2008).

For Indigenous researchers and communities, autoethnography is a powerful tool for" giving voice to the voiceless that places the lived experience of Indigenous people at the *center* of the study, using the lens of Indigenous people and respecting the cultural values, beliefs, and teachings of the communities" (Pham and Gothberg 2020, p. 4095). An autoethnographic approach is important for Indigenous researchers, given the long history of erasure, silencing, and always being spoken for (Russell 2005). It is only in the recent past that Indigenous people, using research methods that align with our own epistemologies and paradigms, have started to theorize how we imagine our world. The use of autoethnography as a method is also a conscious movement towards being Indigenous, as being Indigenous is "derived from the relationships established with place, spiritual

beings, humans, and the environment" (Kermoal and Altamirano-Jimenez 2016, p. 9). Shaped by the insights that Indigenous researchers find in autoethnography, I seek to tell the story of my grandmother's garden, which stems from her everyday lived experiences. I use the lens of Indigenous epistemology of relationality in my autoethnographic account. I do this mindful of my own people's culture, beliefs, and teachings.

Autoethnography, when approached from an Indigenous paradigm, can be called *non-archival community knowledge*.[2] I use this term here to refer to knowledge that is passed from our community elders and foremothers to younger generations through *oral memory* (Russell 2005, p. 168). Such knowledge is also learned through observation and lived experience. Because of the nature of its transmission, it cannot be archived or stored in archives (Russell 2005, p. 162). Autoethnographic methods thus provide one way through which non-archival knowledge can be transferred.

3. Revisiting My Grandmother's Garden

I belong to the Ao Naga community, an ethnic group native to Nagaland, India. In almost every Ao Naga home in the rural villages in the 1980s, there would be a kitchen garden. Mothers would also plant flowers and other plants on the edges of their bamboo fences or stone-lined walls. Empty fish tins and old aluminum pots with holes due to overuse were used for planting vegetables or flowers. I also remember split bamboo being used for planting flowers. They were either aesthetically hung or lined along the exterior of homes.

My grandmother's name is Takola (meaning bitter). Her kitchen garden was at the edge of the village Unger in *Mongsenmepu* (Mongsen locality), Nagaland, India. When I was young, almost every summer I would visit my grandparents in the village. I roamed the village with my friends, climbing fruit trees and visiting elderly people. I also ran around the huge log drum at *MangkoTerong* (meaning the place where the heads of the enemies are kept). In the pre-Christian era, the Ao Naga practiced headhunting as a form of warfare. The heads of the enemies were brought to the village and kept in a specific place. When headhunting was part of society, this place was considered sacred, and running around it or climbing on it would not have been possible. As a child in the village, I also actively participated in Sunday School. I would also fetch water from the village spring with my friends on bamboo hollows, aesthetically tied to a basket—we would carry it on our heads. Sometimes, my friends would laugh at the way I carried mine; I was not carrying it "properly". Being proper was being aesthetic. In all the villagers' activities, beauty was the benchmark.

My grandparents, like many others, were *jhum* cultivators who practiced the slash-and-burn method of agriculture. This form of shifting cultivation is commonly practiced among some of the Indigenous communities in the uplands of Northeast India. Before the introduction of clocks and watches, our sense of seasons was based on the *jhum* cycle(clearing the jungle, sowing, weeding, harvest). This system of agriculture involved collective labor and exchange of labor. Different varieties of crops were cultivated on one patch of land. As the main livelihood activity of the villagers, the *jhum* system of agriculture not only gave them food, but it also knitted the community together through labor exchange, community work, and the sharing of seeds and produce. *Jhum* was also intimately linked to our Indigenous spirituality. Every *jhum* activity began with sacrifices.[3] In my village, Unger, the current local pastor, told me that during the sowing season, he would visit the villagers' *jhums*, bringing along some food and offering prayers. This practice, now framed within a Christian context, has carried over from the pre-Christian era. In subtle ways, villagers continue practices that were once considered "animistic" by the early Christian missionaries. For example, during Christian funerals, the eldest relative of

the departed normally tells the departed soul, "Go without hesitation to the land of death, where our forefathers and relatives live, go there proudly saying I am so and so coming to you all." Thus, the Ao Naga live in the intersection of two worlds, between Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking and living.

It was routine for my grandmother and the village folk to wake up early in the morning as the rooster crowed.[4] She would then head towards the hearth and light the fire by blowing into the hot ember from the previous night that she had kept covered with ash. Sometimes, the amber would be dead (*tasu*). In such cases, she would get a piece of burning firewood, called *melongsang*, from her next-door neighbor—this was a rare occurrence. She would then cook, eat, and get ready to go to the field. For her lunch, she would pack rice in a particular leaf used for that purpose or in young banana leaves. She would also throw dry fish, salt, tea leaves, jaggery, or whatever was needed for cooking that day into the basket. Taking her cane or a bamboo basket, which had straps attached to it, my grandmother walked along with her *lo tanger* (meaning neighbors in the field) to the field. Neighbors at home were known as *kidanger* (near home). *Lo tanger* was not necessarily *ki tanger*.

Many animated conversations around moral lessons and even gossiping would take place along the path to the field. Elders would impart life lessons or moral teachings to their children or the younger folks. For example, they would warn of the severity of stealing by emphasizing the enduring stigma that one has to carry for a generation. The elders would also share wisdom through anecdotes. For example, they would say, "An elephant is not bothered by the bark of the dogs" (don't be bothered by small talk of others) or "The mithun (a horned type of cattle and the most prized animal among the Ao Nagas) of a thief does not gore therefore not to fear it" (reinforcing the stigma of stealing). They would also teach about courage, love, and wisdom through stories and testimonies. Thus, the walk to the field was not simply walking. It also required one to be alert to clear things that might have fallen, such as twigs and sticks, or cut-off branches that might be protruding into the road. The journey was a moving library and classroom. Men would walk ahead while going to the field, and while returning, men would be behind, and women would walk ahead. This gesture indicated the protective role of men.

Fieldwork was their main source of income and was the property of the man, or the male head, of the family. The *jhum* was the political and public sphere. Men had access to it as a right and had control over it. There was much masculinity and family pride attached to the *jhum*. In between the field and the home was the kitchen garden, the feminine space, or the private sphere. The kitchen garden was an extension of the kitchen. In traditional Ao Naga society, the kitchen is regarded as a woman's space. I use the term *space* to reflect that there is no permanent place for a kitchen garden. One can turn any open space around the house into a kitchen garden. Women typically worked in these gardens on days they "rested"; "rest" in this context meant that they were free from working in the field. On these days, women would dry their grains, collect pig feed, fetch water from the village spring, pound and winnow grain, or fetch firewood. They did this in groups as friends. During the time between the sowing and weeding periods, women would weave, knit, and stitch and sell their work for extra income to benefit their livelihood. They did these things (work) during the resting period. Among the Ao Nagas, there was a clear distinction between *alu mapa* and *ki mapa* (fieldwork and housework). The kitchen garden fell in between these two strict worlds that defined their economy and even their gendered roles.

My grandmother's garden was four or five houses away from her house, near the church granary.[5] It was on a tiny slope with pear and peach trees nearby. My grandmother had fenced it in with bamboo sticks to ward off pigs and cattle. She had also installed a small ladder chiseled out of tiny wooden logs, used to climb into and out of the garden. I have never understood why my grandmother added these ladders; even without them,

she could have just walked in and out comfortably without the extra effort of climbing up and down the log stairs. Maybe that was her way of framing the garden or enclosing it, a way of asserting her space in a culture where land and place are gendered. Maybe it was her way of being a person. Like Black women in the US, whose voices "were muted by laws, tradition, and kin" (Larry Ellis 2025, p. 25), my grandmother and others insurrected their subjugated knowledge (Michel 1980, p. 182) and creative energy in the small plots of land that they technically did not own (Ellis). They cared for it and worked on it with their souls. They found in the garden a homegrown hope—a hope that emerged out of the many complexities of their lives. Thus, like the Black women who, from the sufferings and experiences of oppression, wove hope, my grandmother and others found in this garden a sense of being in the world. The kitchen garden was a survival practice, to be *fully alive*.

My grandmother would carry one of her smaller woven bamboo baskets on her head. She also carried a small *dao* (knife), a hoe, or any instrument that she thought she might need that day and walked off to her garden. Approaching her garden, one could begin to hear "music" from the garden and the nearby forest, which became louder as one moved closer. The cicadas, dragonflies, crickets, and grasshoppers were singing. In Ao Naga, the sounds made by birds, insects, and other such creatures are referred to as singing. As my grandmother and I got closer to the garden, my grandmother would remove the two bamboo latches that functioned as a gate, which she had strategically placed in the middle of the wooden ladder. Inside the garden, one could see some insects flying around and some resting. In the Ao Naga tradition, there is a connection between insects, birds, and other animals in the *jhum* system. For instance, after the seeds are sown, as they begin to germinate, cicadas could be heard singing. The singing of the cicadas (*matsungi*) is believed to be a sign of encouragement to the plants to grow faster. *Tsung* means to encourage or advise (Jamir and Lanunungsang 2005, p. 162). Another insect called *maning* appears in the last part of July and early August and sings to encourage the plants (specifically paddy) to stand firm and ready for a rich harvest (Ibid, p. 162). Maybe the insects in my grandmother's garden did the same job as those in the field: encouraging the plants to germinate and grow tall and strong. There was a sense of mutual support, an enabling environment created among the plants and between humans and other species. The singing of the insects that nurtured, tended, and cohabited my grandmother's garden became quieter as my grandmother and I began to move inside the heart of the garden.

My grandmother had planted the plants aesthetically in small patches; all of them were in different stages of growth. My grandmother planted the seeds in such a way that creepers would climb onto the corn plant or onto the bamboo fencing of the garden or just crawl along the ground. While most types of beans climbed into the corn and the bamboo twigs that had been carefully placed in between, cucumber and pumpkin spread over the land between the corn or yams, and sometimes onto some dead tree stumps. The plants supported each other. The stones lined along the pathways within the garden acted as support for the soil. The plants, insects, my grandmother, and even inanimate objects like logs, stones, and pebbles did their jobs, organically enabling and contributing to the life and beauty of the garden and to each other. Together, they created a world different from the world of patriarchy and marginality outside of the garden. My grandmother depended on the soil, the weather, the bees, and the plants for the garden to achieve its purpose of bearing fruit, of bringing forth life. This creative space mirrored my grandmother's vulnerability. It also reflected dependency on others and the necessity of cohabitation.

My grandmother's garden looked chaotic from afar. However, as one hopped into the garden, one would see a tiny laid-out lane, just wide enough for my grandmother's tiny tattooed (*teptsu* in Ao Naga) feet, which would weave in between the twigs, corn, beanstalks, chives, and yams. The tattoo stood out as a reminder of who she was.[6] It was a

mark of her rite of passage into adulthood, of becoming a member of *Tsuki* (girls' dormitory where girls in my village were taught the "art" of being a woman). Her tattooed face (three vertical lines on her chin) peered through the plants as she looked for mature vegetables to be plucked, inspected the plants that needed extra care, or removed weeds. She always plucked her vegetables, mindful of the animals, birds, and insects that also depended on the vegetables. This idea of mindfulness embodies the consideration of others beyond the present moment. "Do not pick everything, leave some for the animals" is a common phrase one might hear when foraging for food in the Indigenous world.

She moved around the garden, speaking to the plants and to the insects. Communicating with the plants was commonplace. Similar practices can be found among other Indigenous communities. For instance, Lewis Daly, in his study of cassava gardening among Indigenous Mukashi people in Amazonian Guyana, observed that among the gardeners, plant–human communication includes both verbal—in the form of poetic language and songs—and tactical engagement. Such practices, he argues, "create and nourish human persons, and, ultimately, reproduce society through relations with alterity" (Daly 2021, p. 390). Talking to plants and insects is natural among Indigenous peoples, as relationality is a defining aspect of their ways of life. I also noticed that there was a sense of elation on my grandmother's face when she was in the kitchen garden. She became spirited, no longer the docile and subservient woman I saw in the kitchen. She was fire.

The garden's produce also formed a part of her rituals as a Christian and sustained kinship and friendship. Most of all, it gave her a sense of identity. Every Thursday morning, the day when the women's fellowship (church service) of our local church was held, women would bring their vegetables, chicken, eggs, or small amounts of money to the women's fellowship as tithes. Some of these things would be sold immediately after the church service was over. The remaining ones would then be taken to the house of the treasurer of the women's fellowship, where they were either sold or gifted. The money they received from selling the items was used for activities of the women's fellowship. These activities included sending money to missionaries and mission organizations, visiting the sick, and many other purposes that contributed to community life. My grandmother was the treasurer of the women's fellowship in my village for many years. I was fortunate to witness this exchange. I remember green chilies, cucumbers, other vegetables, and fruits laid out in bamboo-knitted baskets in one of the corners of her house. Just as there is an intimate connection between the kitchen and kitchen garden due to gender roles, the kitchen garden was similarly connected with her religiosity and gifts. She would never eat something from the garden without first offering the most beautiful, healthiest selection to the church. She performed her identity as a Christian woman through these rituals. They allowed her to continually recast that identity. There was a sense of achievement, a feeling of having been able to do something. There was also a strong sense of receptivity and gifting. She received gifts from her garden in gratitude and shared them with her neighbors and friends. These offerings and gifts were "a gesture of abundance of happiness to God for the blessing."[7] The gift she received was also the gift she shared.

As winter approached, my grandmother would allow her garden to rest (*anisungzuk*), as she would herself. During this time, the garden would not die or lie dormant. The plants and creepers would slowly decay and nourish the soil in preparation for new life in the spring. Life in my grandmother's garden functioned with each life giving life to another so that all lived well. It has been nearly forty years now since I visited my grandmother's garden. Today, it has become a *land*, an inheritance of one of her sons. The trees, creepers, plants, insects, and birds still cohabit, but without the nurturing hand of my grandmother. However, her legacy remains. Among the elders, that land is still known in the village as the land where my grandmother did her kitchen gardening.

4. Christian Moral Imagination of Cohabitation

Drawing from the kitchen garden, this section develops a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation. It situates the kitchen garden as a site for discerning the purpose and meaning of living well in a world burdened by suffering. Women's engagement with the kitchen garden is interpreted as a search for the intentionality to live well. From the interactions that occur in the kitchen garden, the paper draws important moral lessons that contribute to the developmentof a Christian moral imagination.

Liberative ethics informs Christian ethics as the pursuit of being fully human. Christian ethics is therefore the struggle to *fully* be. This approach to ethics helps interpret the kitchen garden as a strategy for women to be fully human and have the intentionality to live well. As Bretherton succinctly states, "At its core, Christian ethics is a way of naming the purpose and practice of living well, even in the most difficult circumstances and challenging times" (p. 8). The kitchen garden, therefore, can be described as the place/space/activity/practice that, besides sourcing food for the family, serves as a way for my grandmother to release herself and her pain. Korean theologian (Kyung 1993, [Fourth Reprint]) in her book *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, states that Korean women realize their sense of being fully human through untanglements of suffering (*han*) called *han-puri*, involving gentle practices such as songs, dances, and rituals. The kitchen is a gentle medium through which women release their pain and suffering.[8] Further, women's engagement with the kitchen garden as a safe space can also be considered a strategy of survival within concrete constraints (Kandiyoti 1988), a concept that Kandiyoti refers to as "patriarchal bargains" (p. 274). Such practices can even be regarded as following the patriarchal script (Macleod 1992, pp. 552–53) or "hidden transcripts" of the poor (marginalized) (Scott 1990, p. xxi), which serves as a form of resistance in extremely oppressive situations. Despite the predatory and transient nature that exists in the garden, the Indigenous woman engages with the kitchen garden to experience a sense of being fully human. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes calls this "tough-minded hope" (2020): a hope that "refuses to believe that evil and suffering and sorrow and hatred are God's final words to us in a world that is a spinning top of war and violence" (Townes). The kitchen garden is the Indigenous woman's heterotopia, a counter site, "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, p. 24). In a context where patriarchy controls a woman's bodily gestures and keeps them under constant surveillance, the creation of a counter site represents an intentional effort to live well. The kitchen garden reconnects the Indigenous woman with her soul and energizes her. My grandmother learned to weave justice by doing things that she could not in public life, such as giving, participating, and cementing kinship from what she produced in cooperation with other species. Being precluded from the political life of the village, the kitchen garden provided her a sense of dignity. She worked on it on the days she rested. On these days, she did what mattered to her and regained her dignity and pride, and in doing so, reasserted her humanity. Here she healed herself. *Healing*, according to Mignolo, is "a process of delinking, or regaining your pride, your dignity, assuming your entire humanity in front of an un-human being that makes you believe you were abnormal, lesser, that you lack something" (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, p. 207). Thus, the overall activity in the kitchen garden, even the very creation of the kitchen garden, represents *the intentionality to live well*. From the relationship and the engagement women have with the kitchen garden, one can discern that *the crux of Christian ethics is the intentionality to live well*. It is a way of seeking to flourish despite the experiences of erasure and marginality. To borrow from Martin Heidegger, the intentionality to live well means to dwell, which is to be at peace, to protect, to preserve, and to give care (Heidegger 2001). Thus, Christian ethics entails creating conditions in which life can be at peace, where

people can care and enable the growth of others and accept conditions of interdependence. The intentionality to live well, or to dwell, is to be fully alive in an interdependent and entangled world, creating conditions that promote cohabitation. Cohabitation here refers to co-inhabiting the earth with a sense of nurturing others, not annihilation.

The ethics that come from the kitchen garden provide a moral imagination that is based on interdependence. They prioritize the creation of conditions that enable cohabitation, opening the possibility of creaturely cohabitation and encouraging a sense of responsibility to one another.

Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun assert that the desire to flourish is not limited to the rich; all humans seek to flourish. Infact, Volf and Croasmun maintain that to live well or to flourish is a basic human need; a meaningful life requires more than satisfying physical needs. They contend that all human beings in all cultures, in their own ways, aspire to genuine flourishing, their own and that of those with whom they coexist (Volf and Matthew 2019). Therefore, Christian ethics is fundamentally oriented toward what is most human: to live well. But how do we live well? The kitchen garden provides a model for such: it provides a sense of cohabitation of all species in interdependency and in mutual enablement. This paper's introduction describes how the contemporary world is marked by a relation that is diseased, one in which entities feed on each other's bodies and erasures. But the kitchen garden provides an example of cohabitation in which beings build each other up and enable the flourishing of others. This is the kind of moral imagination that is needed in a world dictated by hierarchies and erasures and the creation of disposable bodies.

The observations made about multi-species engagement in the kitchen garden provide a picture of how various species cohabitate the world through interdependence and practices of enablement. This suggests that Christian ethics is about cohabitating in the world—living together or dwelling in ways that create conditions for livable lives. Considering that flawed moral imaginaries fashion our social and political realities, it is important that we develop new ways of cohabitation through practices of interdependence and enablement. The call for this alternative moral imagination is necessitated by the precarious existence of the majority of human beings (Butler 2016) and by the "tactical distribution of precarity" through "dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting" (Butler 2012, p. 119). We need ethical norms and practices that can create "social conditions of livable life" (Butler 2012, p. 121).

The discussion in the next section addresses what a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation based on interdependence looks like. The theological imperative for creating a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation is so that we can be at home in "God's home" (Volf and Matthew 2019).

4.1. Interdependency and Entanglements

The interdependence and entanglement of lives, illustrated in my grandmother's kitchen garden by the beanstalks climbing onto the corn or humans harvesting food from the garden, can be described as "intimate co-dependence" (Cooper 2006, p. 135). This entanglement of life exemplifies how human beings also depend on each other; this is the only way one can create the "social conditions of livable lives". Therefore, interdependence is an important ethical way of being in the world—it is a mark of the intentionality to live well. Through the conditions of interdependency, my grandmother received an abundant harvest from the plants and the soil. In turn, with a joyful heart, she gave to the women's fellowship in her church and to her neighbors.[9] The plants that relied on the soil for growth gave back in abundance to the soil when the time came. Interdependence enables practices of generosity and gifting. These practices help sustain life in the commu-

nity, reduce experiences of precarity, and offset imaginations that perpetuate precarious existence. Interdependence stretches beyond human-to-human relationships. It includes interdependence with other species, including inanimate things. An ethical framework of interspecies dependency may help overcome the limits of communitarianism and the logic of territoriality that Butler highlights (p. 120). Rather, it can be used to conceptualize life within the larger cosmos, including the spirit world. Daly's study of the cassava farmers of the Makushi tribe supports this argument. In his study, he found that the Makushi cassava farmers consider plants as persons and that gardening is predicated on maintaining interspecies care through human-plant communication. Gardens are forged not only by human actions and intentionality but also by the interaction between humans and other species (p. 390). Daly concluded that "gardens are sites of human-vegetal ontogenesis, in which people, plants, animals, and spirits continually produce and reproduce one another in the perpetual regeneration of life" (p. 390).The cassava farmers' relationship with plants, like my grandmother's story, illustrates the profound emergence of interspecies dependency.

4.2. Enabling Life

The intentionality to live well as interdependent beings—the crux of Christian ethics—is to provide conditions in which "disposable people" are no longer treated as disposable. It is to create conditions in which precarity is not distributed according to the dominant norm, where justice is not granted or denied justice—including epistemic justice—based on gender (Fricker 2007). In the kitchen garden, we observe that species and inanimate objects alike enabled the becoming of each other. The insects singing to the plants and the soil nourishing the plants exemplify the creation of enabling conditions. In the dominant moral norm, the idea of enablement is premised on development and national security. Development is portrayed as a project that will enable Indigenous people to live well. However, it has often manifested as a sad story of exploitation and dispossession. It promises happiness, offered to the "uncivilized" and the "backward" as a pill to ward off all ailments. The existence of their miseries among Indigenous people is often framed through the absence of development, which is portrayed as the most desirable good necessary for their well-being (S. Jamir 2025). Nation-states reiterate this discourse from a moralistic standpoint: the security of the nation-state. "In the name of the nation" (Baruah 2020), nation-states advocate development as a matter of national security. They exploit natural resources, resulting in displacement, conflict, and homelessness. Asian theologian C.-S. Song (1981) wrote, "What is national security? What does it look like? What shape does it have? It is a god-a cruel, savage god! It is a god that feeds on human flesh and blood" (p. 31). Indeed, it preys on Indigenous bodies and their lands (S. Jamir 2025). It has also been observed that human rights and democracy are used as means to commit crimes against people and to control their resources. Such practices do not create enabling conditions; rather, they kill. Therefore, the promise of development, as well as democracy and human rights, should be grounded in the creation of enabling conditions. Creating enabling environments includes creating spaces for women, the displaced, and the exiled to speak and to be heard. Creating enabling conditions involves deprivileging oneself. The call to deprivilege is necessary; otherwise, justice is hampered when the privileged few rest on the fruits produced through practices of injustice against the underprivileged many. The ethical demands of creating enabling conditions provide fertile ground and a yielding soil for doing justice and taking responsibility for one's actions.

4.3. Rest as a Condition for Life-Affirming Cohabitation

Rest was an important element in my grandmother's garden. The capitalism-driven morality that shapes our lives and our relationships considers rest nonproductive. A di-

chotomy is created between rest, where work is valued above rest, and work, which is often equated with laziness. Those who work "hard" are rewarded. This view has led to the exploitation of bodies and their labor. In the Indigenous worldview, there is no dichotomization of rest and work; therefore, rest is not the cessation of work (Onesimo 2024). On the day my grandmother would rest, she would reconnect with the things that mattered to her the most. It is on the day of rest that an Ao woman reconnects with her kitchen garden and takes care of things that lighten her soul. The equivalent of rest in Ao Naga is *anisungzuk*. It also means a sense of well-being. I remember parents and elders telling us when we were young, "If you want to live a life of *anisungzuk*, work hard and don't harm others." Working hard meant doing things at the right time: for instance, collecting firewood and preserving it for when it was needed, and fetching water from the village spring early in the morning or in the afternoon. These activities were done in groups with friends. This collective activity was their sense of work. Work was an activity that complemented their lives in relationality. When my grandmother left the garden to rest in winter, it did not mean that life was halted. Plants withered, decayed, and nourished the soil during this time of rest. Seeds rested on the soil, waiting to sprout life in due course. Life was going on in the rest. A holistic life is one that regards work and rest as a symbiotic way of being in the world. It is about living in a state of *anisungzuk*. Such an ethos of rest provides the grounds on which bodies can be respected and their sacredness upheld. The scriptural term *shalom* resonates closely with *anisungzuk*. According to Bretherton, "*Shalom* denotes wholeness, prosperity, peace, well-being, and a state of blessing for the community as a whole, including the soil, plants and animals with whom human share a life" (Bretherton 2023, p. 9). Thus, a Christian moral imagination of cohabitation includes a *shalom*-like condition in which species interact and coalesce joyfully and restfully.

Moreover, Indigenous people, whose bodies are tired due to everyday experiences of marginalization and erasure, need to regain the spirit of rest to reconnect with things that matter to us most: our homes, our villages, our forest, and our fields. One way to live intentionally is to rest. Rest facilitates taking care of and creating spaces that enable us to heal and retain our dignity. It is an act of redeeming and loving ourselves in a world that teaches us that our bodies are not good enough or that we are not fully human beings.

The interactions in the kitchen garden provide a moral posture and an imperative of how one ought to live in a world that belongs to all beings, including the non-humans. The birds singing to the plants, encouraging them to grow strong, and my grandmother giving manure to the soil are practices that create enabling conditions. Plants offering food and gifts to my grandmother and other species are an exemplary practice of intentionally living well. A credible imagination of cohabitation that is Christian ought to be characterized by our intimate and entangled interdependence with all forms of life, an inclusive vision that unsettles all forms of hierarchies, acceptance of responsibility to nurture, and openness to change (McFague 1987, p. 32).

5. Conclusions

The garden that my grandmother created, like those created by Indigenous women across the world, is a moral script of how to intentionally live well in a world diseased by moral imaginations of exclusion. It is a practical guide for what it means to truly be creatures created by God. It provides a vision of a common life in God's garden. It provides a model of living together and an ethos of creating enabling conditions of living. The kitchen garden also offers a political vision of how to cohabitate in this world. Conversations on democracy or peace should be about creating conditions for others to flourish or live well, not about exploiting the resources of other countries or dispossessing people.

Secondly, this paper offers a vision for all of humanity, aimed at ending the creation of disposable lives. Generally, there are a number of conscientization programs carried out in the Global South with funds from the Global North and implemented by both churches and Christian organizations. However, calling upon the already bruised bodies (even literally bruised in detention camps, during protests, or simply while standing in the queue to receive food) to fight against oppression is to once again dispose of the disposable bodies in sites of vulnerability. This does not mean that the oppressed ought not protest against oppression. Rather, it is equally important that the churches and Christian organizations in the Global North also act in ways that challenge the planning and practices of exploitation of their governments and oligarchs. For instance, the construction of mega dam projects on Indigenous lands is normally carried out by multinational corporations based in the Global North. It is important that the churches and Christians in the Global North protest, condemn, boycott, and resist these empires. It also means that conversation on conscientization ought to revolve around deprivileging oneself and creating enabling conditions for others to be fully human. This can involve marching in the streets/places where decisions on whose lives are to be rendered vulnerable are made, not only protesting when lives have already been disposed of or are dangerously held. It means that the focus needs to be on prevention as much as on healing the bruises of violence.

Thirdly, this paper defines Christian ethics as the intentionality to live well. Living intentionally implies resisting othering mentalities and practices that lead to erasure and the creation of disposable bodies. The moral imperative for both the Global South and the Global North is to consider resistance as a way of living ethical lives. The intentionality to live well is therefore praxis-oriented, directed towards creating enabling conditions to be *fully human*. The moral imagination of cohabitation is to seek justice through practices of resistance and deprivileging so that we may co-inhabit the planet in peace and take responsibility for creating enabling conditions of life.

Funding: The symposia where this research was initiated was a collaboration between a study circle within the Nordic Summer University and the research project *Praxis of Social Imaginaries-a Theo-artistic Intervention for Transdisciplinary Knowledge* at the Polin Institute of Theological Research at Abo Akademi Foundation. For the work I received funding support from Inez and Julius Polin Institite of Theological Research at Abo Akademi Foundation, Sigtuna Foundation: Gustaf Packalens Minnesfond and Jubileumsfonden at Stiftelsen for Abo Akademi for Travel in the Nordic Region.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this project.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Borderland thinking, as proposed by Gloria Anzaldua (1987), brought to feminist and borderland discourse the importance of the paradoxical nature of borders.

2 This phrase was suggested by Laura Hellsten. I am thankful to her for this.

3 For instance, there is a ceremony called *Sungko meshi* (cleansing of a new *jhum land*). It is a one-day ceremony before a new area of land is cutfor *jhum*. On this day the village priest sprinkles new wine on the new path leading to the field. The main objective of the ceremony is to protect the villagers from danger and injury while working in the field. The village priest takes a rooster (they say one without any *terak*, meaning without any blemish) and offers it in a designated spot for protection from the evil eye, injury, and death while clearing the jungle and during the whole *jhum* season. According to Talitemjen and Lanunungsang, sinceChristianization, church members assemble in the church for a special prayer (Jamir and Lanunungsang 2005, pp. 125–26).

[4] When the rooster crows for the first time, it is an announcement that it is *time* to rise from bed; the second signals that they should *rise up* from bed and the third indicates that it is time to start cooking and getting ready for work. They would reach the field between seven andeight o'clock in the morning. See Jamir and Lanunungsang (2005), p. 163.

[5] In my village, like in many other Ao Naga villages, the granaries were constructed a short distance from the village. This was done to protect them from fire accidents. It was like a small hut. When Christianity introduced the tithing system, grains were given as tithes (the tenth tithe) to churches. The grains that were given as tithes were collected and kept in a granary. It was a big granary made of timber and a tinned roof, and it stood out amongst the othergranaries in the *MongsenMepu* (locality).

[6] Young girls were generally tattooed before puberty, when they were between the ages of 10 and 14. It was important for a girl to be tattooed;otherwise, she would be considered a disgrace in the society and could not be expected to be married. Once she was tattooed, she was recognized as a full-fledged member of the community. Female slaves were not tattooed and therefore received no respect (see Pursowa 2011, p. 7).

[7] As told by my mother.

[8] It can also be achievedthrough the reapproriation of degrading symbols that are assigned to women in traditional societies. For instance, Mizo feminist theologian Rini Ralte developed a feminist theology by reappropriating the crab. In Mizo societies, a crab is described as one that cannot walk straight. Women are assigned this metaphoricallybecause the "common sense" among Mizo men is that women can never be taught or that women can never learn (Ralte 1993).

[9] A similar thought was shared by (Kimmerer 2013) from her experience among her community (p. 381).

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