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**Earthcare on damaged lands; initial reflections on how
to move from ego-numbness to eco-belonging**

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List of Acronyms

CSA Community Supported Agriculture

Abstract

This paper focuses on the question of care in post-industrial urban Amsterdam. With the current crises of biodiversity, inequality, climate and meaning we here in the modern world have to ask questions of how we belong both locally and globally and how we might change that in a materially and experientially meaningful manner. Following degrowth we can confront our mode of living's complicity in these issues and through feminist political ecology we can ask how care can be a guiding principle for undoing our failing growth-based society and building in the interstices what comes after growth.

This paper asks from a highly personal position what it means to belong differently in urban landscapes in the Netherlands and what caring for earth might look like. Specifically, this paper looks at care as manifested through physical labour in urban agriculture. This is done through interviews, personal stories and slices of ethnobotanical history through which initial reflections and tensions are teased out that practitioners of earth care have encountered. Given the primacy of ontological dualisms prevalent in western thinking and the barriers that imposes on ethical treatment of 'others' and 'elsewheres' ontological transformations through earth care practices are a main focus of this paper.

The research shows that participants engage in affective labour in which their embodied experience with urban agriculture leads to different ways of being and relating to earth-others and how they conceptualize their role as humans. Global/local considerations and implications for degrowth of these effects are analyzed.

Relevance to Development Studies

This topic relevant to Development Studies insofar as the affluent global north economies still appropriates and exploits labour and resources from the global south and natural beings are still categorized exclusively as resource. Truly sustainable societies will require a high degree of respect, humility and willingness to engage in non-hierarchical cooperation among humans and interspecies relations. Development can no longer be a top down, north to south, colonial enterprise. The work of undoing that is personal as well, this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of personal and local experiences with new ways of being in the world that might start to undo anthropocentrism and eurocentrism that are attempted from people operating within those frameworks.

Keywords

Belonging, earth care, more than human, affective labour, urban agriculture

Chapter 1 Caring for the Netherlands

1.1 From numbness to care, and the question of how to do that

There are different kinds of care. One can care about something and care for something. The first one is more of an attitude and the other seems more of an action, including physical engagement. 70 percent of young people in the Netherlands are ‘worried about climate change’, (www.nji.nl) they care about it one might say. But what does it mean to care about something, are we worried or full of affection? And what if caring attitudes about something were to include caring for something, especially something so impersonal and vague as the climate or the earth. Government reports state that popular strategies of young people include showering for shorter durations and buying less clothing, with flying less and eating less meat as less popular options. Incredibly sad and humorous at the same time when one compares these ‘strategies’ to the scale of the problem. But it tells us many important things, firstly, to my mind this is very indicative of the way we are locked into consumer-mindset (the only possible route of action is to consume less). Secondly, it shows a lack of experienced closeness to the earth’s natural systems, i.e.; we don’t talk about animals, we talk about meat.

I could go on but I won’t, the point is that I am part of this demographic; young people in the Netherlands worried about climate change and our relation to ‘elsewhere’ on earth in general. Climate is not our only woe, increasingly we have to contend that almost all of the products and resources that make up our lives and increasingly our identities are products of exploitation of nature and people and built upon centuries of colonialism. In the face of this strategies like taking less showers don’t really do the trick, both materially and experientially. The rise of climate activism here shows I think a growing need to feel meaningfully engaged with these problems, a caring that is more passionate, more fitting of being a human, a creature of meaning. We are now pressed to enlarge our circle of care to distant places (e.g. worker rights in China) and whole ecosystems (e.g. save the jungle!) and do so in materially and experientially meaningful ways, how do we go about that?

The scale and indirect nature of the above and many of the big narratives in general seems in a sense counterproductive to a more careful treatment of the ‘other’. Care is mostly a rather intimate affair it seems. Furthermore, perhaps to the same point, is it possible to affect a caring relationship to the damaged landscape we are physically embedded in right now? Shouldn’t the Dutch landscape be included in the care circle or is it impossible to appreciate landscapes so shaped by utilitarian relationships to land, animal and people? Would a careful relationship to this land include careful consideration or even an ethical letting be of other peoples and landscapes more distant? In modern Dutch politics with anti-immigration policy and protectionist economic policy as part of “Netherlands first”, it seems not self-evident that’s the case. But might a more caring relationship to the landscape of the Netherlands also provide fertile ground for a less destructive relationship to the ‘others’ and ‘elsewheres’ to which our current life-style is so indebted? Perhaps even for the generation of a mutually sustaining relationships between the here and the there? Under what conditions does care for this land not become exclusionary? How do we make sense of our local, other localities and global levels of analysis?

1.1.1 Combining the themes

Above I've tried to sketch out some themes, namely: how do we (here in the urban Netherlands) confront global problems? How do we confront our complicity? How might we include caring for this landscape into our lives without that becoming an exclusionary affair? How do we confront our crisis of meaning that modern lifestyles combined with the awareness of its external 'costs'? For years now I have lived with the question of how to belong on this earth in a way that is not based on violence elsewhere and meaningfully connected to the landscape of the Netherlands. Given that I have personally found the strategies of consuming different and activism inadequate to answer the above to any satisfaction, I ventured other ways. This research is a small exploration into earth care through physical labour in urban agriculture. I attempt to weave together themes that have revealed themselves: belonging in a postindustrial landscape; ontological shifts from duality into relationality; the relation between local and global, 'here' and 'elsewhere' and; doing life in less capitalist ways.

1.2 Speaking from the imperial mode of living

I think belonging differently and finding new modes of being human are essential parts of transitioning to a more just world, but Urban Agriculture alone won't save the world of course. That is why I embed this exploration in the project of degrowth which goes beyond the idea that slight tweaks to the current system will do much towards the ends of sustainability and a just world for all and explicitly thinks from a complicity we have here in the global north rather than seeing these problems as one of humanity such as the popular term 'Anthropocene' suggests. For justice and efficacy, it is important to think which humans and which systems are responsible. Now we are in a moment where capitalism, "a dynamic crystallization of capital, power, and nature that has endured for five centuries is now generalizing what it's always been to some: an intergenerational system of mass murder" (Moore, 2017). The problems, the violence, are becoming so visible that even those (me included) that have built a sense of normalcy around the insanity of the imperial mode of living must either acknowledge the need for radical change, subdue themselves or be subdued by ever more indulgent consumption or through violent negation by those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. As transition discourses have been on the rise it seems that more and more people are doing the first; recognizing the need for radical change.

Becoming aware of the way our economic, political and social systems are based on and perpetuate deep violence's on different levels is not an easy pill to swallow. But the fact that I had to realize it or confront myself with it means that I speak from a highly privileged position. The conditions of normal life here in the global north, and increasingly in areas of the global south can be called 'the imperial mode of living'. Coined by Ulrich Brand et al. (2021), the term describes a mode of living that is dependent on a global exploitation of nature (what/who counts as nature?) and labour (both free and paid) whilst externalizing the harmful consequences arising from it to a usually invisible 'elsewhere'. Furthermore, disproportionate use of natural 'resources' here demands an 'elsewhere' where people are forced to abstain from resource use and where negative costs can be externalized to. The concept of 'the imperial mode of living' aims to make visible "the forces that facilitate the everyday life of production and consumption of people in the global North," (Ulrich Brand et al., 2021, p. 25). How is this everyday violence normalized even in the face of accumulating crisis? How is this mode of living succeeding whilst also undermining the conditions of its existence?

I and many others are firmly situated within the normalcy of the imperial mode of living. However, increasingly, we need to contend with information that undoes that sense of normalcy. That leaves one with the not-so-simple and dual task of recognizing what exactly is the matter and how we might get out of it. How do we go about challenging the system that we are so deeply imbedded in and in many ways profiting from?

1.3 Degrowth

Degrowth encompasses an academic debate as well as social and political movements predominantly active in the global north that responds to the multiple crises of our time. Central to degrowth is a critique of the capitalist system and the pursuit of growth at all cost. It acknowledges that this imperative is built upon human exploitation and environmental destruction mostly in the global south (degrowth.info, 2022). Degrowth thinkers and practitioners acknowledge that this exploitation and destruction are not being caused by everyone equally but overwhelmingly by a few high-income societies from within which degrowth largely operates (intra-national differences left aside though not unimportant). Hickel (2020) outlines the outsized role of high income countries in ecological breakdown and the colonial dimensions of our economies and their environmental impact. Currently, high income nations use 10 times more resources (Hickel et al., 2022). The global north is responsible for 92 percent of emissions, as such these countries have appropriated the atmosphere for their own enrichment whilst the consequences are largely faced somewhere else, a process he terms atmospheric colonization. In terms of resource use colonial dimensions are equally visible; the global north appropriates a net of 12 billion tons of raw material, 188-million-person years of labour, 820 million hectares of land and 21 exajoules of energy from the global south (Millward-Hopkins et al., 2020). Through disproportionate control of developmental institutions such as the International monetary fund and the world trade organization Northern states and corporation have the power to artificially decrease prices for goods and labour from the south (McIntyre, 2017). This in turn means that for every unit of goods that the south imports from the north requires many more units to be produced and exported to the north to pay for it. This results in the large net outflow of labour and resources from south to north. With this information, the idea that degrowing material and energy flows in high-income nations seems like a no-brainer if one has any sense of justice and preserving the planet's ecosystems.

Although degrowth critique is principally oriented toward democratic and redistributive downscaling of the biophysical throughput of the economic system, the term has become used in a wider critique of modern society. For instance, Latouche (2004) has commented on instrumental mentality and the inverting of the means-goals relation in modern life where efficiency becomes a goal in itself, exclusively focusing on perpetuating means. Degrowth, with evidence that growth does not always imply more wellbeing asks not how much we produce but if what we are producing leads to well-being, whether people have access to essentials in a fairly distributed way (Hickel, 2020). This instrumentalism also seeps through in the way human agency is thought of, exemplified in the concept of the *Homo oeconomicus*, the idea that humans are utility maximizing and act mainly out of self-interest and instrumental rationality (Caille, 2004). Degrowth's critique is anti-systemic because it questions the basic functioning of capitalist economy as well as 'imaginary fundamentals (instrumental rationality, consumerism, productivity, utilitarianism, efficiency, etc.)...What has to be abandoned is 'the capitalist imaginary of pseudo-rational pseudo-mastery and of unlimited expansion' (Castoriadis 2010, taken from Muraca, p.165) Latouche summarizes

succinctly that we are living not only in a growth economy, but in a growth society (Latouche, 2009).

As mentioned, in this research I want to investigate how Urban agriculture is an avenue for structural transformation as well as changing social and cultural imaginaries. Degrowth provides a framework to apprehend the physical reality of my felt disconnection and re-politicize that, so disconnection becomes more than just me not fitting in with the rest of the world, it connects personal grievances with consumerism and environmental destruction to a call for justice on material, ontological and epistemic grounds.

1.4 The role of care in a just transition

“To achieve socio-ecological transformation towards a degrowth society, it is imperative to overcome and decenter the growth-imaginary and to build a new imaginary with fresh images, concepts and narratives. But where do we get them or how do we construct them?”. From my position in the affluent global north thinking about care for earth also needs to include an acknowledgement of complicity in ecological breakdown and injustice toward humans and more-than-human world, degrowth provides that. How do I act response-able from where I stand, how do I care? Feminist political ecology engages specifically with the question of care in degrowth. “Part of the vision and challenge is to re-situate and re-value care at the center of socio-ecological processes and systems” ((Harcourt et al., 2023, p. 180).

Central to why I have found Urban agriculture a good avenue to think about, experience and enact care, caring for, caring with, being cared for, and belonging differently is reflected in Giovanna Di Chiro’s radical question of “*who* we imagine as members of our community and who we see as partners in co-creating a more caring world.” (Di Chiro, taken from Harcourt et al., 2023, p. 182)

This question points us towards ontology and epistemology. How do we see and place ourselves within the world that surrounds us? Who do we include in our communities and who are our partners in creating ways of knowing that lead to care and belonging differently? The ontological dimension of transition is also of paramount importance in my own journey here in the Netherlands, especially with regards to the role urban agriculture plays in my life and that of others I see around me. I will illuminate that through a story:

1.5 On ontology; the experience of shifts and ontologies of disconnection

I went to the mountains in Mexico, in the same village where 50 years ago Maria Sabina had provided the teononatl (the flesh of the gods) a psychedelic mushroom to R. Gordon Wasson. This meeting and the popularization of the ritual and the Mexican entheogen have been described, from an indigenous perspective, as "a story of extraction, cultural appropriation, bioprospecting, and colonization." (Gerber et al., 2021). Me engaging with the mushroom in this place is probably a nice carrying on of appropriating the cultural practices of faraway people. It is also a story of globalization, development and my position within this matrix of power. But what I experienced is important for my story on a personal level too, because standing in that forest with this sacrament infused into my system, I had an experience that would shape my life going forward. Here is a short recounting.

A tree in the forest spoke to me, without words, asking me to come closer. It said that it was okay for me to touch, I didn’t need to keep distance. So I put my hand on its moss covered bark. After a while it told me (still without words) that I should hug it. And I did. It

didn't take long for my awareness to travel down the roots of the tree, and without any pause these roots revealed their deep interconnections, with the entire forest, with the entire world. After that it wasn't the tree that spoke, a new entity was revealed, it was mother earth (I refrain from analyzing the fact that I had the experience of a symbolic maternity here although undoubtedly important). Again, communication happened not through words but through revelation. The revelation was this: for the first time ever, I felt complete belonging as this loving presence showed me that she (or it) cared for me, for every being in fact. What she revealed to me was that I was loved unconditionally and, even if I didn't realize it, it was so in every moment of my existence. Finally, on that mountain, I wasn't a stranger on this earth but one of the children, very much accepted and loved. I cried uncontrollably; it was all I could do. I cried because for the first time I felt I was home. I cried more because it was the point beyond all searching and wanting, I had arrived.

As I was hugging that tree I also cried because in that same instance of revelation of being loved and cared for unconditionally, I realized the extent of my failure to reciprocate up to that point. That despite the seemingly self-evident nature of a caring, loving and belonging world I operated from an egocentric separateness. The earth-spirit revealed she cared for me as the archetypal mother and I saw immediately I didn't do my part in returning the favor. She still loved me but I was at odds with myself. At that moment it became vividly clear that the only point in me being alive was to reciprocate that unconditional love that is always abundantly and immediately given, here and now. So, I vowed to try and live reciprocally with that love from that point on.

The truth of that experience has since resonated on into my life's path. After I came down from that mountain, I was now tasked with the difficult quest of finding out how the hell one actually cares for earth. But the important switch, the thing that makes it bearable, is that it now comes from a sense of belonging, rather than alienation. I don't have to realize relationality, yet I still have to do the work of undoing ontological structures of separation and duality and I have to figure out what 'right' relations look like, for me, in this body, this locality, this timeline.

Ontologies form the basis of how we move through life (Kimmerer, 2013) and they arise in dialogue with the way we act in the world. The story above reflects how ontological shifts have been of great importance for me in recentering care with regards to global problems. How to stop climate change becomes how to reciprocate care for the earth and its creatures. Why was this realization of care so profound? Escobar succinctly summarizes the dominant ontological position of western thought in relation to such experiences thusly; "This ontology of disconnection ends up disqualifying those knowledges produced not *about*, but *from* the relation. It is thus that social theory comes to silence much of what brings life into being. To re-enliven critical thought thus requires bringing it again closer to life and the Earth" (Escobar, 2016, p.29). The type of experience I had in Mexico was 'from relation', and therefore invalid from the dominant frameworks I have been brought up in. Let's take a look at the broader relevance of ontological assumptions in transition thinking and degrowth.

The first clue to the importance of ontology comes when we ask; what are the foundations of modernity that make capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy possible and ensures their continuation? And what is necessary for care to be re-centered in envisioned degrowth transformations with regards to our relationality to earth-others? And what constitutes a meaningful life? Escobar's argument in *Designs for the Pluriverse* is that the contemporary crises are a direct result of 'deeply entrenched ways of being, knowing and doing' (Escobar, 2018, p.19). And that these contemporary crises of the ecological and social kind 'summons

critical thought to think actively about cultural transformations’ (Escobar, 2018, p.20. In de Sousa Santos’ ‘epistemologies of the south’ (2016), similarly, the argument is put forth that the unfolding catastrophe on the ecological front and enduring injustices to humans and earth-others is fundamentally made possible through a divisive rationality endemic to western ontological and epistemological frameworks. Ontology and epistemology are therefore foundational aspects of any attempt to diagnose the origins of the current malaise and the imaginaries for sustainable futures for all.

The western mind has been conditioned to think dualistically and these dualisms are intrinsic and necessary for the continuation of the world system. Our de-animated worldview of the subject/object dualism denies felt and enacted kinship relations with earth-others, they are merely objects in a mechanical worldview and this removes ethical considerations of those other beings. The psyche/society dualism depoliticizes and privatizes human suffering and is critical to maintaining egoic being (Kovel, 1999) as exemplified in the rational actor models of Homo oeconomicus.

“these dualisms create an ontology of disconnection” (Escobar 2015, p 29), and disconnection is the precursor to violence onto other beings, human and otherwise. But what does an ontology of disconnection feel like? I employ the concept of numbness to categorize that experience of disconnection. Kae tempest in their book ‘On Connection’ (2020) describes Numbness as a logical response to ‘the onslaught of the age’. They argue that they need to walk a line between connection and disconnection and attempts to find acceptance in her numbness as part of their particular experience. they quickly follow by reflecting on this as part of their privilege, they are “in a position of being able to ignore the reality of what the system does and continues to do is to be wholly complicit in it. Is to benefit hugely from it.... To be able to ignore inequality is to prosper from that inequality” (Tempest, 2020, p20).

Numbness has been a pervasive feeling in my life, which was illuminated to me in part by the revelation of its opposite; deep belonging, and it is indicative of my position in the destructive system of modernity. Caring is a way out of numbness and seeing earth-others as kin opens up avenues for caring relationality between them and us.

1.6 How to bring ontology into degrowth

Contemporary degrowth movements and authors have emphasized systems change by focusing mostly on changing production relations or reducing resource throughputs. (degrowth.info). Therein Degrowth presents a convincing argument and provides a way of thinking about meaningful ecological futures. But how do we get there, how do we undo these systems of oppression while being deeply embedded in them? What can and needs to be done? If we follow the ontological basis of modernity just outlined than the undoing of these divisive ontologies is necessary for a profound decoupling from dominant paradigms and engendering the transformations that degrowth envisions. It is also clear that the changes required are more than just economic or material, that those changes are tied to transformations of the way we place ourselves in the world and make knowledge.

Degrowth has received critiques on its onto-epistemological foundations. Richter (2019) shows that the ecological critique of degrowth is still situated in a Cartesian dualism of nature/culture mind/body that it carries over from ecological economics, therefore perpetuating a “coloniality of nature”. Working with ontological levels is important to think about belonging on a personal level, also with regards to earth others and what truly radical

departures from the status quo are involved in a degrowth scenario. Furthermore, I argue that foregrounding ontological dimensions with regards to transition discourses such as Degrowth might enable particular bridgebuilding and solidarity in the form of mutual learning and understanding with environmental justice movements and landbased knowledge carriers of the global South.

While degrowth here in the global north is often concerned with finding new modes of being within the postindustrial landscape, there is a multiverse of ‘other modes of humanity’ that struggle for ontological and epistemic justice. Recognizing and honoring that struggle elsewhere might benefit from involving oneself in the work of making relational ontologies here in our landscape. I hope to see a time where we can exchange knowledge about earth care with others involved in the same work in different biocultural constellations. Movements and cultures that dispel “nature-culture” duality, human mastery and exceptionalism already exist. Our quest here for other-than-capitalist subjectivities will hopefully be inspired by ontologies that foreground a similar humility, gratitude and connectedness with lifeworld’s we share and interact with, close or distant. Lastly, the ontological dimension is important on a personal level because the ontology of disconnection and western rationality have never really felt ‘right’ to my mind and body. They don’t honor the art and struggle of being human in my opinion and unlearning them in my own life has been important for realizing meaningful and response-able living.

1.7 Doing ontology differently and how I found care through labour

Recognizing the aliveness of this world is important in transforming our society; ‘There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects.’ (Bennet, 2010, p.19). But merely recognizing aliveness and a caring earth is not enough, it makes the question of reciprocity real and significant but it does not answer the ‘how’. ‘Without a basis to sense how things ‘agree or disagree with us’ on this wider scale, we cannot move beyond a generalized appreciation of a lively earth’ (Ruddick, 2017, p. 121). How do we create a basis to sense how the things in this world agree or disagree with us, and how do we do that in an urban landscape?

As I was searching for a way to foster a belonging in ‘right relations’ through a caring relationship to earth-others I stumbled across food forests. I could join a 4-month work/learn process where I would work in urban food forests once a week. This was the start of realizing the importance of manual labor and hands on interaction with ecological systems and living beings. Gradually I started looking at earth-others differently. Looking at them as working creatures too, with specific wishes and capabilities and an agency to act within those. More and more, I found a community that was interested in ‘nature’ not as a totality but as an infinitely complex dance of entities that we could engage with, be a part of. Knowledge was a precondition for this engagement, knowledge that was made through observation, theory and practice. It was about taking the time to observe and learn how a specific place works or how communities of plants, trees and animals are in communication with each other.

We eagerly learned about soil types and soil life, about different species of trees, shrub and herb and wildlife. We didn’t only learn from books, we learned by talking and mostly through just observing. That is the first principle of permaculture, to observe. When you’re observing ‘permaculture-style; smelling the earth becomes about recognizing the

presence of fungi and the PH-level, looking at a tree became about observing its location in relation to others, how healthy it was and why it was growing the way it was, a buzzard became an indication of a thriving ecosystem and the presence of rodents. ‘Nature’ was gently broken up into parts, or I should say, into relations. And I/we are part of those relations, through digging, planting, observing, designing, composting we were involving ourselves deeper into the functioning of those relations and becoming experientially more attached as well.

As such I have found physical labor with earth-others to be an answer to undoing ontologies of disconnection and embody a caring relation to the world which engenders a sense of belonging in the landscapes of the city. In my 4 years being active in the foodforest movement as well as other local food initiatives in the Netherlands I have met people that have had similar stories and entry points. For this research I worked with 4 of those people on their respective projects, all some form of (peri-) urban agriculture, to talk about what it means to care for the Netherlands and what they are learning in communication with their respective landscape. It has been the commonalities in experience that lead me to an exploration of Labor in urban agriculture as a way to think through strategies for experimenting with a new ‘mode of humanity’ (Plumwood, 2002) on material, epistemic and ontological levels that are relevant to and spoken from urban life in hyper technocivility, i.e. an extreme human-centric urbanism (Jones and Ulman, 2021).

Chapter 2 Exploring urban agriculture in Amsterdam

2.1 People part of my exploration/short reflection on method

I have interviewed 4 people, Naomi, Rens and Wicher and Rosa. They are people I have connected with whilst circling around the Amsterdam communities involved in urban agriculture. I picked them specifically because they represent different avenues of the practice and engage in different kinds of labor. For Wicher and Rosa their garden is the main source of income and a testing ground for their vision on food-systems transformation. For Naomi her involvement is based mainly around education and running a volunteer project that is decidedly focused on a neighborhood level. Rens is a foodforest designer and wildcrafter, his focus is on health and the overlap between human health and ecosystem health and he is the most involved with less heavily ‘cultured’ landscapes. I have spoken and worked with them on their respective projects to connect the words to the everyday activities that comprise their work. In our conversations I focused on the role of physical interaction with nature through labor, how it impacted their sense of belonging and how they view their work in relation to the global nature of the crises their work deals with.

2.2 Wicher and Rosa

I visited the farm on the outskirts of Amsterdam of my two friends (wicher and Rosa) on a windy but sunny morning, our job for the day was to prepare vegetable beds for the winter. Their small plot of land of 0.7 ha is considerably smaller in comparison to the average farm size in the Netherlands. Every job is done by hand, placing compost, seeding, harvesting, transplanting. Their project is just finishing its first season of vegetable production however the land has been tilled similarly for a few years by the previous tenant, meaning they did not have to make large-scale investments into infrastructure (i.e. a greenhouse) or soil amelioration. Their small farm is a community supported agriculture project (CSA) organized through the lens of regenerative agriculture. Customers buy a seasonal subscription before the growing season and pick up their produce every week. This way most investments necessary can be made with minimal extra loans and customer and farmer share both in the risk and reward of the seasonal output. If output is low, the farmer does not go bankrupt, if the output is high, the customers get extra at no additional costs. The couple have little experience with market gardening, Wicher has done volunteering for a few years and worked professionally in a market garden for one season. Rosa had even less experience, mostly volunteering here and there in neighborhood gardens.

2.2.1 Why are they here?

In our conversations they both note that they have experienced burnouts at multiple stages in their adult lives and both stated that trying to follow the usual career path proved a heavy burden. Rosa relates to me that she wanted to be a good member of society but just couldn’t really see a positive way to contribute. She was ‘too aware’ that the models of our society were failing with regards to climate change and justice and trying to fit into a ‘societal picture’ was not good for her health nor the wider field of her awareness. Although their motivations are similar, they approach the farm work differently, for Wicher in our conversation he makes it clear that the farm project is a way to be more directly be involved in the

food transition. he recognizes that if other industrial farmers will convert than they will take advice only from other farmers who have experience and proof of the benefits of working the land differently. Thus, the farm is a way into larger influence within that system. For Wicher this focus on 'system change' was more prominent in our conversation and his main motivation for instigating this project.

For Rosa, her view of the farm work centers around embodiment and she is thinking more from the question of how her work could be good for herself and the world, she describes this as a search for meaning in which she has had setbacks and breakthroughs. An important motivation for her to work on a farm was her affinity for cooking, she recounts that through cooking she wanted to get to know the ingredients, where they come from. She started by going to local markets and buying directly from farmers. She continues by stating the importance of having a visceral connection to the food (smells, taste, touch) is for her well-being and why she enjoys working on the land so much. She feels a lot more connected to the food she eats and feels more integrated into the landscape through working on the farm.

2.2.3 Considerations of the visit

This was their first year working only at their farm, both had left their day jobs, only one of them had more extensive experience in market gardening. I was interested to see how and why they made such a big switch of lifestyle and what they encountered along the way, I wanted to know how it changed them. According to them, spending so much time with a small piece of land affords them a more intimate relation to the plants, they could look at all plants individually and assess their needs. Being so closely involved invokes feelings of home; Rosa told me she wanted to learn to love the rain, the grey skies and de beauty of nature right here since many people in her surroundings with similar ideas were always looking at starting such projects in Portugal. She recounts to me her pleasure in growing rhubarb, the same vegetable her grandma always grew. She tells me she is getting to know the native species around her much more and realizing a deeper feeling of belonging here because of that. She feels that would have not been the case if she went to Portugal.

Continuing the theme of care, they host working days for care-workers, recognizing the healing potential of working in the garden. They both have experienced burnout and this feels like a logical connection for them to make as burnouts are common in that line of work. They have hosted multiple of such days where workers from the healthcare sector come to spend a day working in the garden and make a meal with the produce they harvest that day.

Their motivation for starting a CSA differs among the two of them. Both depart by saying that they feel that changing the system begins with changing yourself. On a personal level they desire a sense of gratification from labour, a clear conscience, to contribute meaningfully to society and to be entrepreneurial in a sustainable way and to eat healthy food. On a societal level they want to see a food system transformation within the larger scope of climate change and injustice. Wicher emphasizes the societal level most. For him this project is meant mainly to be an entry point into contributing to a food-system transformation. Because of this he has started a foundation which aims at erecting more CSA farms and foodforests according to a regenerative agriculture approach. He spends half of his working hours on that project whereas Rosa works full time on the project. Rosa's focus subsequently is more on the CSA as it currently stands, talking about reciprocity she mentioned that 'I learned in this garden that love means trying your best, making your best effort'. Gardenwork taught her about the material, enflashed quality of care work in

relation to earth-others. Because the farm is their main source of income, they are very actively trying to work between sometimes conflicting goals such as profitability and careful land practices.

2.3 Naomi

Naomi works at the Stadsboerderij Osdorp, an urban agriculture experiment in Amsterdam that foregrounds nature, good food and a liveable neighborhood. The project has been around for a decade and hosts a vegetable garden, community kitchen, chicken coop, tiny forest, herb garden and larger community room as well as a woodworking shop. The garden was initiated by locals who wanted to create more social cohesion and offer an inspiring green space for the neighborhood. All produce is used in the community kitchen to supply meals for the neighbors once a week and other cooking workshops. On my visits the public it attracted was varied, there was a group of Moroccan women making traditional dishes as a workshop. The garden volunteers were mostly older ladies and one man, half of them came as part of an activity day for a home for disabled people. The wood working shop was manned by a Syrian refugee who spoke almost no Dutch or English. Visitors ranged from families with kids and adolescents coming alone to walk around. Most people present seemed to come from north-African descent which reflects the neighborhood demographic. I worked together with the garden volunteers in harvesting the last mustard leaf, arugula and figleaf pumpkins of the season. Following is a short summary of what Naomi discussed in relation to her work on the project

2.3.1 considerations of the visit

Knowledge is in your hands, not in words

In my conversation with Naomi we discussed her transition from academia to working on the urban farm and her experiences doing so. She keeps reiterating that the experience of working on the land is hard to put into words. ‘It feels so logical that there is not really a need for words’. She exemplifies this with a recent experience of harvesting carrots with some kids a while ago, she saw the kids pulling them out of the ground without much sensitivity and realized that she had to explain a sensitivity while harvesting that she never put into words. ‘You have to wiggle them to feel if they are ready, I can’t explain in words how a ‘ready’ carrot feels, you just have to feel it and you know, but how do I explain that to kids?’. Over the years she has developed ‘knowledge in her hands’ rather than her mind. It’s not facts, it’s a sensory relationship to the plants and animals that she interacts with beyond words. ‘I was tired of just talking about sustainability in university, talking only ever raised more questions, working the soil is an answer’. She reflects an attitude I have encountered often in other projects in that she wants to be involved directly with questions of sustainability. ‘People always ask me why I don’t go to climate protests on days that I work in the garden, I tell them I’m being more constructive with regards to climate change there than in a protest’.

Friendship

Naomi’s relationship to the plants and animals is described as friendship, she talks about a reciprocity that results in a sense of both beings being allowed to just be there. We

both have experienced this in garden-work, a sense of being allowed to be just as you are, like plants are also okay as they are no matter their shape. 'I talk to everything, I tell the worm I catch for my kids lesson that its for a greater purpose but I am sorry to disturb you'. Enacting reciprocity for her is about giving and taking and making a balance between what you give and what you take, also in relation to the 'bigger picture' of what the urban farm is trying to achieve. For her the role of the worm in introducing kids to their environment is taking something from this being but she feels it is justified because it serves a larger purpose. 'Maybe it will contribute to a better future for worms in Amsterdam if the kids know them better.'

Escapism and the identity of the city

We spoke about belonging in relation to her work in the urban farm. She describes that when she was twelve, she felt very confused about life. Asking her mom if life really was about going to school, then working and then retiring. Her mom said yes and that is just what life is. This confused Naomi for years, even doubting whether there was even any reason to be alive. 'Finding this work has been like finding myself really'. The work she does to her is going back to an essence, people need shelter, food, water and compassion from a group in her words, it feels good to be involved on that level. 'Food really connects me to the other beings, it's an interface between me and them'. With regards to feeling at home her work has progressively led to seeing the beauty in what is already here around her in the city in terms of nature rather than focusing on what is not here and wanting to escape the city on holidays. She notes that this was a process of 'seeing clearer', paying attention because her knowledge of local biodiversity grew, and it became important through the work she does. 'I like looking at grass fields and seeing the diversity besides just grass, I didn't pay attention to that before. 'Sometimes I spend time admiring moss on a bridge and take pictures, I can lose myself a little in that'. She says that she sees a lot more beauty in Amsterdam, a lot more aliveness. This 'seeing clearer' seems to contradict growth mindset, a stance that is about appreciating what is and not wanting to consume her way out of feelings of lack.

2.4 Rens

I meet Rens in de 'Plukbos', a small agroforestry project in the center of Amsterdam initiated by the local inhabitants. The Plukbos is located in Wittenburg, a neighborhood with a high crime rate and few 'green spaces'. The initiative for the Plukbos came to be as part of a municipal effort to decrease criminal activity in the neighborhood and directly in response to the killing of Mohammed Bouchicki, a youth worker volunteer, after a series of shooting incidents in the neighborhood. Local initiatives pleaded, organized and coordinated the execution of a plan for a more comfortable living environment in Wittenburg. The local initiative takers stressed the importance of 'green' in decreasing criminal activity. As such a dilapidated piece of land called 'dogpoop field' in between apartment blocks was turned into a small foodforest and foodgarden. The volunteers are mostly direct neighbors and products are harvested for community dinners or personal use. The name Plukbos refers to the fact that it is intended for people to walk through and pick (or 'pluk' in Dutch) a few berries and herbs along their path.

Rens is an ecological designer and experienced wildcrafter. he has designed various food forests and does guided walks centered around (urban) foraging and consciously connecting to nature. We start in a short silence, like we are settling into each other's presence. Throughout our time in the Plukbos, we are greeted by many people walking past us into the garden.

It seems as though the plants here provide comfort to many and are a common place of rest in many urban pilgrimages. Our conversation starts with how he came to the work that he does now, why I find him always in a foodforest.

For him his story is one of seeking personal healing and realizing that healing self and healing earth were two sides of the same coin. His job as a sous-chef and resulting lifestyle of overworking and overdrinking left him with mounting health-problems. After a dream where he took all of his material possessions in his car and drove it into the water was the kickstart to a massive shift. He figured he needed to get away, to escape, if he was to live well. He decided to go to Australia, where he found a hippy commune and lived in the sub-tropic rainforest for some time. He recalls the wonder of living so intimately with the natural world, the spiders and snakes he would find in his tree hut. He returned to the Netherlands for family, for his mom. His experience in Australia set his life in a new direction and he went to study biodynamic agriculture. Despite the importance of his experience in Australia he dislikes that so many people around him talk about ‘real nature’ as something exotic, something that one finds in rainforests. He tells me that what motivates his wildcrafting in urban areas is how it opens him up to the multitude of ‘nature’ that is already here and relatively easy to interact with. He recounts a workshop he gave on urban wildcrafting in Westerpark. How after one hour the group had become enchanted with a piece of land that they cycle through daily. ‘It was lovely seeing their curiosity sparked and their energy was calmer and more receptive. It only took an hour!’. Like me he is asking the question how we can see the ‘magic’ in the Dutch landscape.

An important plant that helps him think about belonging is sea-buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*), a plant that was here before humans settled after the last ice age. ‘It is one of our oldest neighbours’. Harvesting and eating its berries was one of his first experiences with the healing potential of native plants. Through wildcrafting sea-buckthorn he realized his quest for personal healing had natural allies here in the Netherlands and restoring landscapes here would be a way for him to reciprocate that healing. Labour in this sense is an avenue where Rens can explore reciprocity rather than a view of nature that anthropocentrically provides us with care and healing free of charge (Adams, 2010).

Lastly, we spoke of the difficulty that an open heart is confronted with and letting in the suffering we are confronted with. We talked about his difficulty he faces in the work he does. Becoming aware of the massive scale and the horror of separation. Interestingly he says he actually does not like driving through the Netherlands, it makes him sad to see the state of nature and all the monoculture and cow pasture, the lack of hedgerows and what is colloquially called ‘green asphalt’ pointing to the fields were only one particular kind of grass grows. For him the intimacy of small places like the ‘plukbos’ and other places around Amsterdam is where he feels its easiest to feel connected. He also stresses that it is in these places where ‘something different’ is happening, in the face of all the destruction it is these places that give him a certain peace of mind.

Chapter 3

Preliminary syntheses, reflecting on common themes

3.1 thinking through labour

Like I mentioned in the beginning, what I find startling is the discrepancy between what people feel empowered to do (e.g. showering less) and what might be required of us to move to a more just way of living on this earth. Like feminist political ecology I retain the point of view that care is an essential part reconceiving our relations to the world and that this has ontological and epistemological consequences. Care is also an embodied interaction that needs an avenue for expression. Labor as an everyday activity I have found in making caring for or caring about materially meaningful beyond mere celebration or mourning. To think about how labor can attune us to care both in ontological and material ways I have found it useful to employ the concept of affective labor.

Dualistic thinking means that we in the west live in a world full of objects. Thinking of the natural world in terms of resources, energy, landmass, carbon storage etc. denies that we are talking about communities of life, of things that exist not merely for the purpose of human exploitation. These dualisms relieve us from an ethical responsibility to take into account these other beings and it is costing us the earth quite literally. Thinking about human affect in labor provides a tangible method to re-embed us in a world that is alive with agency. Affect, in a Spinozian formulation, “is defined as a dynamic relationality between bodies of various kinds that enhances or diminishes the capacity of a body to affect and be affected” (Deleuze 1988, cited from Singh 2018, p.1). This implies that agency is a relational aspect of our world and not merely one that is immanent to the human body alone. Rather, it exists through “rhizomatic interconnections, assemblages, or a complex ‘coming together’ of things and beings” (2018, Singh, p.1). As such, Singh (2013, p. 190) argues that paying attention to affect in labor (or everyday practices) “draws attention to the potential of these practices to produce new ways of being, new subjectivities, and new forms of human communication and cooperation.”. Affective labor refers to work that engages at once our rational intelligence as well as passions, emotions and feelings and produces, besides material output, also immaterial outputs such as knowledge, relationships and emotional responses.

I argue that Urban agriculture is a form of affective labour that opens up to urban people a dynamic relationality between themselves and more-than-human others. The labor is affective because the output exceeds that of material output alone; knowledge, personal fulfillment and ontological shifts are consciously included in the outputs participants in this research observe. Whilst working on the farm with my friends I overheard one of them say to a volunteer ‘it’s not us, it’s the plants that do the real work, we just support them’. This exemplifies the kind of ontological shift that working up close and personal with earth-others provides. The relationship the couple has to this land and earth-others is multidimensional, in their own recounting of their first season of working full time at the farm they name one of the tensions they deal with is the need to produce a certain amount of material output in the form of vegetables which they sell to customers and the desire to heal the soil and take the time to care for each plant individually and letting them ‘do their thing’. In our work that day I saw this first hand because we had to pull out bean plants from one of the beds. They were not productive enough and we discarded them to the compost pile

with bean pods still attached. The woman of the couple told me she thinks it's sad that some plants need to make way because they are not productive enough but that it is necessary to ensure the economic viability of their business model. Speaking of the tomato plants she tells me she spent a lot of time asking them what she could do to help them grow better as they were struggling with the spring rains. The plants in their garden are at once resources, objects of affection and beings with a right to exist and agency. their multi-dimensional relationality with plants signifies an affective relationship that is created through the couples' labor on the farm. Furthermore, their relationality is one that shows a practical expression of ethical considerations where productivity does not always win but sometimes still does as in the case of the beans.

Bennet (2010, p.18) argues that it is "moments of sensuous enchantment with the everyday world' might generate motivation needed to 'move selves from the endorsement of ethical principles to the actual practice of ethical behaviors". Labour in Urban agriculture provides a space for this enchantment as well as a direct link to ethical behaviour. In working with nature in Urban agriculture one's enchantment with a piece of land, the drive to care for it because of that response and the actual behaviour of care happen parallel to one another. This produces certain tensions such as mentioned above in the different ontological representations of beans as productive resources, as beings with their agency and value, as beings to which one has an emotional response. All existing and considered interactions the couple have with them, they all matter to some degree in the choices the couple makes with regards to their farm activities.

3.2 A note on controlling nature and the principle of self-organization

I want to reflect briefly on a certain aspect of the way the people I have worked with in Amsterdam expressed their relation to earth-others and natural systems. All of them realize that their work is to differing an imposition of control upon a piece of land and earth-others. They realize they are imposing certain amounts of structure, they have executive decision-making power, come in with specific wishes. There is an awareness of a global/western cultural tendency to want to control nature like expressed in monoculture and chemicals and a wish to depart from that yet also a realization of it because they are in direct interaction with living things in a productive relationship, i.e. one that 'produces' multiple harvests; knowledge; emotion, but also the plant itself. Normally in urban environments the relationship is more of a passive control, our imperial mode of living normalized the control of nature to the point where it is unquestioned. Language like 'natural resources' exemplifies this predetermined and unquestioned sense of ownership. The language of friendship with which Naomi categorizes her relations to different entities in the garden, as well as her conceiving of the space of the Stadsboerderij as one where both she and other beings can 'just be' tells a very different story.

The human goals of the particular initiatives matter in terms of the amount of control that is exercised. For instance, Rosa and Wicher are economically dependent on their farm. As such, the layout of that landscape is therefore more geared to efficiency of production, with straight garden beds hosting one or two vegetables each for easy harvesting. The landscape of the Stadsboerderij reflects different values and a lesser degree of control; garden beds take different shapes and host a wider variety of different species, some planted and others arriving on their own accord. Pumpkin plants run amuck criss crossing the garden

and even up into the hedgerow. The landscape is less efficient for production; I spent an hour fishing for pumpkins hiding in the branches of the hedgerow, but it does reflect Naomi's experience of 'being allowed to just be'. The landscape does not need to be economically profitable. Rens and I worked together in a foodforest a year back and we were debating whether to take out some willows as they were taking up a lot of space, he was against removing them and suggested just periodically harvesting their branches instead. He saw the trees as having a right to be there and co-exist. Harvesting the branches was a way of compromising, the trees could stay but they are taken up into the human-nonhuman field of interactions. Thinking with affect as a dynamic relationality in which bodies are not a predefined entity but an open-ended process of becoming (Singh, 2018) we can think of the body of the foodforest as open-ended, new parts arrive (in the form of willows). The way Rens views the presence of willows is not through a predefined sense of what is part of the landscape and what isn't. Instead he wanted to integrate these becomings into the functional whole through a relation of labour, i.e. us harvesting the branches and the willows growing them.

3.3 belonging

The landscape still carries memories of our belonging

After the ice receded in Europe after the last ice age our ancestors made their ways up north, there was one tree that travelled with them more than any other; Hazel (*coryllus avellana*) (Paschall, 2020). Why did these people plant hazels? It was a veritable tree of life to those Mesolithic Europeans making their way up north who used it for tools, fire, shelter and of course, food. This fact reminds me that agroforestry is an old tradition here. Hazels are still very prevalent in the Netherlands and considered native although rarely cultivated or wild-harvested anymore. Now, within the food-forest movement they are again becoming a companion species in trying to imagine new landscapes. I wonder if there is some resemblance here between the imagination of those travelers encountering a landscape in the Netherlands lost for so long beneath ice and snow and us food-forest enthusiasts encountering a landscape so deeply shaped by monocultural cultivation. I wonder if our hopes and dreams for this piece of land coincide somewhere. And after Hazel came grain. The younger dryas event that lasted from 10800 BCE till 9600 BCE brought temperatures down so significantly that grasses and legumes became the only reliable food source. That is until the temperatures rose sufficiently after this 1200-year cold spill. Grain cultivation was an answer to climate chaos, offering immediate food security as they can be sown and harvested within the season. How ironic that grain cultivation is now one of the biggest facilitators of impending climate chaos. Tack this to the old growth culture stories of sweetgrass

The story of Hazels migration alongside ours provides a different perspective to our roots here in northern Europe. We weren't always completely reliant on annual agriculture, let alone industrial agriculture or grains. We all know that but to see specific assemblages that we were part of provides concrete links to start connecting new threats of story to. Like the continuation of planting hazels in modern agroforestry. They story the landscape. We used to live in close symbioses with certain trees and forests generally, these are roots that archeology has uncovered and allow us to tell new stories, stories of many thousands of years of

our belonging to this landscape and co-evolving with it. Stories that our ancestors forgot to tell throughout the years. In honor of Kimmerer's call to enact old growth culture perhaps we are now again pressed to rely on trees like hazel and more durable relationships and alliances alike. Personally, today, it is the labor of planting hazel trees that connect me somewhat meaningfully to stories of my ancestor's relation to this landscape. Reconnecting our food production to the principles of old growth forests might put us in the environment that enables interactions which foster true sustainability and cooperation.

How does an agriculture based on primarily on annuals, or pioneer species, inform our views of the way the world works. Kimmerer (2013) tells us that pioneer cultures, whether enacted by plants or people, are based on principals of unlimited growth, competition, high resource use. Europe adopted grains as their staple food in times of climatic upheaval, when tree species and systems based on balance and cooperation could not cope. Grains and other annuals thrive in these conditions as it provides an emptier playing field upon which unlimited growth is a feasible strategy for a short while. But we decided to design our land to be in a constant state of upheaval, the ploughing of the fields serves to replicate the environment in which unlimited growth culture is perpetually repeated. I see a resemblance to the boom/bust cycles of modern capitalism.

My point is not to discount pioneer culture as always a bad thing. Pioneer culture is necessary, the climate will never be absolutely stable, ecosystems change. Even if we live totally carbon neutral, upheaval and change is part of the cycles that drum the beat of life on a space-traveling piece of molten rock. Pioneer culture plays a major role in regeneration (be careful exporting this observation to human pioneers). but it is a system that is impossible to keep up indefinitely as we are showing ourselves ever more clearly. Right now, we are supporting our pioneer culture in the Netherlands by relying on the exploitation of 'elsewhere' to amend our tired soils and feed our hungry livestock. Kimmerer writes "if we are looking for models of self-sustaining communities, we need look no further than an old growth forest. Or the old growth cultures they raised in symbiosis with them" (p. 284). Hazels are remnants of an old-growth culture. I feel a need to re-root not only to landscapes but also to stories of ancestors that make possible a more meaningful history of the landscapes of the Netherlands and our inclusion in it. Knowing the history of hazel might serve to enliven the work that I do, planting hazel trees in Amsterdam.

3.4 Confronting the local/global dualism

In our metropolitan mindscapes who we are and where we are from have become separated. Thinking about belonging in metropolitan urban spaces with regards to nature is tricky, there is a highly personal component to it, an intimacy of relationships formed to the tangible surroundings we inhabit and physically interact with. However, much of what we interact with in metropolitan urban environments has a global character with a higher degree of abstraction to it. Hornborg (1993) linked a personal sense of identity to the perception of meaning in our relationships. Meaning to Hornborg depends on experiences of recognition and reassurance, perceptions of order and familiarity, conversely, the opposite of meaning is chaos and arbitrariness a reaction to which might be numbness. A relation to the natural might provide a sense of 'ongoingness' and order, like an awareness of seasonal succession amidst the ever-changing trends of urban life. For Hornborg, meaning arises through our engagement with the world around us and the quality of meaning and concomitantly its ability to provide a secure sense of identity depends on reference points of which he distinguishes two categories; global and local. Local reference points refer to

everyday relations to the tangible surroundings from which they cannot be disentangled. Global reference points consider movable things such as commodities and conceptual abstractions like occupation. In urban life these global references are increasingly important determinants of our identity. This decontextualizing of our identity is a current that urban agriculture opposes through sustained and repeated interactions with our tangible surroundings. But like I mentioned in the introduction; care for this landscape cannot exclude a careful relating to those places distant to us yet intricately woven into our lives and spheres of influence. Plumwood (2008) investigates the discourse of place in relation to ecological consciousness. She acknowledges that “recovering a storied sense of land and place is a crucial part of restoring meaning” (p.1). But as we are situated in commodity culture this sense of place can become false, the idyllic singular homeplace is problematic as it creates a split between our ‘idealised homeplace and the places delineated by our ecological footprint’. How do we honour our place here whilst keeping a regard for the many places we are connected through to global markets and might urban agriculture and placebased culture form a steppingstone for a relation to other places based on reciprocity and solidarity?

Tacking back to western dualisms, plumwood (2008) notes that the dislocation of the affective place from the economic place as a feature of global markets is a manifestation of the mind/body split and helps to erase an awareness of the material conditions upon which our lives depend. Losing touch with these material conditions to Plumwood means we lose track of the labour of other people and the labour and agency of earth-others. It allows us to ignore that we are being picked up after by the biosphere. I remember one of the first discussions on this I had with regards to an urban foodforest planted on polluted soil, it was one of the first times I was confronted directly with the ‘mess’ we leave behind AND being responsible for cleaning up after ourselves. Plumwood quotes Ehrenreich saying; “to be cleaned up after, is to achieve a certain magical weightlessness and immateriality (Ehrenreich, 103, taken from plumwood 2008). Working in urban agriculture undid that immateriality slightly in my life; we are directly confronted with the mess we made but also with the labor that other humans and earth-others perform. Plumwood advocates for a sense of place that is ‘thicker’ than merely the place where one resides, it needs to include all those places that “produce or are affected by the commodities you consume” (Plumwood, 2008, p. 3), justice requires we take into account at least some of these ‘elsewheres’.

In my conversation with Rens, he revealed that his attraction to small local urban initiatives is motivated by a repulsion to the destruction he is faced with when driving through the Netherlands and seeing the monocultural landscape. He would rather avoid such confrontations and stick to the small projects that carry a sense of hope. Urban agriculture labour provides him with a hope that is at the same time a sort of coping mechanism for dealing with the onslaught of modernity. For Rosa and Wicher their project has expressly global motivations. Their locally oriented project is a steppingstone into their participation in a food system transformation. They ultimately would like to see many more projects like their own forming a locally rooted food system. They believe that if other farmers are to listen to them, they will need to speak from experience, their CSA is their way of gaining the experience necessary to speak meaningfully and convincingly within that larger transition discourse and not a way for them to individually disconnect from the larger system.

I want to reflect briefly on the word elsewhere which I a few times in this text. With it I am hinting at the fact that from our position here these ‘elsewheres’ which are both locations and beings alive and complex, are usually unnamed and invisible. Something that my

participants and I have in common is the influence that travel has had on our current involvement with urban agriculture. This mobility is a privilege that also brings with it a particular choice. There is a chance to escape our surroundings; Naomi went to work in Australia as did Rens, Wicher spent longer periods of time with his family in Sicily working on their olive farm, I travelled to Mexico. For all of us these were defining moments in our trajectory as they made visible and tangible to an extent these elsewhere. For Naomi working on farms in Australia she realized how deeply wrong industrial agriculture is, for Rens living in a subtropic forest he experienced living closely to nature, for me it brought the sense of being cared for by earth and raised question of how to care in return. All of us speak about a certain enchantment experienced in relation to nature in faraway places that was never had in the Netherlands. Our work here in the Netherlands seems partially motivated by the vision of cultivating 'magical' places here in the landscape. Doing so both through, in the words of Naomi, 'seeing clearly' and by actively shaping places where enchantment can be fostered.

Chapter 4 conclusion

I have tried to think about the way people here in Amsterdam care for earth through manual labor in urban agriculture projects. I did so very messily so here is a messy conclusion. How do young people in Amsterdam go about facing the multiple crises they are confronted with? how do we confront the crisis of meaning within ourselves? I am currently wrestling with these questions and know others are too. In this paper I have looked at the need for degrowth, the need to recenter care in our society, the need for new ways of belonging and the ontological dimensions of those transformations. I am interested in how we can wrestle with those questions in an embodied way, a way that is not only abstractly involved with ideas of nature and climate and biodiversity. I am interested in the down to earth practices that make living in these specific circumstances of ideas, dreams and material realities a way of life that in some way enables a more just and flourishing life for all.

Who do we include in our communities of care? Who do we care for and who is doing the caring? These questions have to do with agency and ontology. An anthropocentric mindset plays a considerable role in the way we treat our 'environments'. The hyper separation between 'human' worlds and 'nature' worlds is a facet of western ontology that is based in dualisms. Urban environments may constitute a physical manifestation of this dualism par excellence. The task as Fischer (2019) outlines with regards to this dualism of human and nature is dual (oh irony our sweet friend); we need to recognize how nature is present in our humanness and our psyche and how classically human qualities of agency and interiority are present in nature.

Bennet (2010), helps us to think about decentering human agency through the concept of 'distributed agency' wherein "The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group." (p.83). She uses Spinoza's concept of affective bodies, in which any body is always affecting and being affected and the concept of assemblages; "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts... living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (p.84). Affective labor might then help us conceive of what our actions in assemblages of affective bodies could look like and provide a strategy for recognizing and experimenting with the affective assemblages in which we are embedded.

Through conversations, stories and personal experiences I looked at how embodied affective labour in urban agriculture might achieve the dual task of recognizing the human in nature and vice versa to a certain extent. Naomi acknowledges the work of a worm to help kids learn about the kinds of non-human labor that are involved in growing the vegetables we eat. As she weighs the disturbance of this worm with the 'greater good for all worms' she is acknowledging a value to this creature beyond an instrumental one. When Rosa says to the volunteer that it is the plants that do the work and we humans are assisting them she is quite radically decentering human agency.

I discussed with participants the complexities of realizing belonging. We looked at stories about hazels and grain; longstanding partners in our assemblages here in Europe. One could hopefully connect us to old growth culture, the other might help understand our present pioneer culture for what it is. Degrowth critique brings to light the unsustainable and destructive relationality that this pioneer culture relies on. Degrowth asks if living this way in the global north can be thought differently, not reliant on capitalist and colonial

expansion and appropriation. A degrown future, as feminist political ecology shows, might replace capital growth with care as the central guiding principle of our civilization. Concomitantly, replacing expansion with care leads to questions of ontology; who do we care for and who's labour is supporting life in invisible ways. In other words, who is in our caring communities? Invisibility has a rootedness in dualistic thinking, thinking the human out of nature and vice versa makes invalid or even impossible knowledge that is 'from' relation rather than 'about' relation.

Psychedelic experience was my introduction to that feeling of embeddedness and undoing pervasive numbness. All my participants have had strong reactions to the status quo (i.e. through burnout or illness) and it motivates their current involvement in urban agriculture. Through urban agriculture they gain a sense of belonging and get to experiment with enacting a caring relationality, with acknowledging and navigating the attribution of agency to the non-human world. But we also see the struggle that care for other beings can be painful at times such as the case is for Rens. Re-opening ourselves to the aliveness of our surroundings, a collection of interior experiences, is difficult. For him it means that urban agriculture also provided him a space to practice opening his heart to the trouble we are facing in practical engagement with small scale projects. This also raises tensions as our care cannot be focused solely on the physical place reside from the perspective of justice and working towards the good life for all. Our global relations require keeping ourselves accountable to those elsewhere that support our lives. They are the places that also grow us.

In Dutch politics we are witnessing a renewed surge in nationalistic rhetoric. following plumwood (2008) a renewed interest in place-based thinking cannot separate our affective place and our economic place. The parts of the world that 'grow us' are more globalized than ever before and acknowledging that dependency is key for a treatment of place that incorporates justice. Degrowth presents myriad ways of rethinking and re-doing our lifeways here in the affluent global north. It acknowledges our outsized role in the crises we are facing and the lack of responsibility we take in that currently. As I have shown urban agriculture presents a way to start interacting with the damaged landscapes in our urban environment and attempting a caring relation to it. But how do we not forget the globalized relations we are enmeshed in?

Degrowth could be framed as an ethical response of solidarity with environmental justice movements in the global south (Allier, 2009) and I argue that engagement in urban agriculture can form a contribution to the efficacy of that response. Transition discourses are quests for alternative ways of being and belonging and the ontological work of dispelling assumptions of duality is critical in that endeavor. Participants I have interviewed are engaging with earth-others and forming relations with them that are actively resisting ideas of human mastery over nature and recognizing the self-organizing power of ecosystems and the presence of multiple agencies. Ontological shifts that I have witnessed include thinking through balancing control and self-organization, conceptualizing earth-others as friends and linking personal health to ecosystem health. These ontological shifts I hope can form a bridge to the struggles that relational ways of being have been engaged with since the onset of capitalism and colonialism. An important discrepancy in these discourses is whether the struggle is conceived as defending a lived and affective ecological way of life or protecting an abstract global environment. I think that here in urban post-industrial landscapes our everyday interactions with earth-others are mostly abstract which could lead to very different conceptions of environmental stewardship. One of the more dangerous ones that comes mind is fortress conservation which exemplifies this society/nature split and abstract ideas of 'pristine nature'. My hope is that engaging directly and affectively with natural landscapes might provide

a fertile ground for acknowledging the possibility of a society that includes nature and more than humans more respectfully.

Foremost I have explored in this regard the act and thought of care in line with feminist political ecologies treatment of degrowth. Ontologically speaking care became something enacted with earth-others for my participants, a stance of solidarity in working towards broader goals of ecosystem health or long-term sustainability. Rosa exemplified this caring-with stance in posing our work as supporting the work of plants and soil life in regenerating the ecosystem, Rens showed an ecological conception of self where his health and the health of the wider ecosystem are intertwined. Urban agriculture in Amsterdam conceived as a practice with ontological consequences might then serve to marry global, more abstract conceptions of our place in the world to materially involved conceptions of our belonging. I am still wondering how urban agriculture or engagement with earth-others more generally could form a platform for thinking of who is included in our communities of care in a way keeps a double focus on both global and local embeddedness. Importantly these considerations are not merely intellectual exercise in the case of urban agriculture but embodied and practical in nature, the labor is not only celebratory but includes difficult questions. They concern the messiness of making life in different ways than what the city around you is pushing for relentlessly. As Singh (2019, p.141) iterates that the “Success of these diverse struggles in fostering collective subjectivity and postcapitalist alternatives will depend on the ability of these diverse movements to come together, stand in solidarity, learn from each other and tell alternate stories about how we are to live the Anthropocene.”. From numbness it is hard to tell new stories and enact solidarity to the lived struggles of ‘elsewheres’. Caring with earth others and local involvement in urban natural environments hopefully re-sensitizes us to the invisible labor that happens under our feet and the other side of the planet.

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