# Working *with* Nature, not against!



Planting broccoli seedlings
Photo taken by Yara Hostettler

How a socioecological network shapes the human-Nature relationships and informs ecological citizenship in a community in Switzerland

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Yara Hostettler

Student number: 6843204

Supervisor: Lisa Ausic

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When I moved to Utrecht for the Master's programme *Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship,* I did not yet imagine all the challenges that would await me. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the lectures and seminars had to be held online, and I spent most of my time alone in my room, in front of my laptop screen, with little chance of physically meeting up with my classmates. Despite these dire circumstances, I am grateful for the academic training I have received during this past year, which guided me in my journey to becoming an anthropologist. For this, I thank the professors of the Cultural Anthropology Department for making the best out of the situation and designing engaging online lectures to teach me the knowledge and skills that have enabled me to complete this thesis. I also thank my fellow students – for the many hours of intense (virtual) discussions and for creating a great support system where no question was considered stupid or left unanswered.

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# 1. Introduction

*As I am finalising this thesis, the new IPCC report is being released. Immediately, countless national and international media outlets report on it, and my social media feed is marked by an atmosphere of general outrage. As I read through a few articles to get an overview of the report's outcomes, I realise that the findings do not shock, not even surprise me. Instead, they fuel my despair, frustration and anger – emotions I often feel when thinking about climate change. The same old questions come to my mind: How are we going to overcome these enormous challenges? How much longer can people ignore the fact that our lifestyle is destroying the planet? And what are the alternatives and potential solutions?*

*Personal reflection, August 10th, 2021*

In the past few decades, Western Europe has experienced an unprecedented shift in climate awareness. The fourth IPCC assessment report, published in 2007, catapulted climate protection to the top of national and international agendas (Blühdorn 2009), thereby reflecting a new political awareness translated into new environmental policies to delay hitting that 1.5-degree point of no return. Simultaneously, we are experiencing an unparalleled societal awareness visible in global movements such as the climate strikes demanding action from their government to address climate change or the zero-waste movement that encourages the consumption of products without creating further pollution. It is thus unsurprising that this new awareness also transpires as a change in consumer products and behaviour – more vegetarian and vegan diets and more sustainable alternatives to conventional products. A sustainable lifestyle has become a trend (Black and Smith 2008) and is most commonly understood and practised as sustainable consumption.

However, this approach to sustainability has rightfully been criticised as a form of greenwashed capitalism (Blühdorn 2009). The most widespread understanding of sustainability stems from the Brundtland definition that describes sustainability in terms of sustainable development, which is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987). Such

a definition, however, remains stuck in a capitalist growth paradigm. It aims at preserving Nature[1] not for itself but for indefinitely sustained resource extraction.

This relates to Patel and Moore's (2018) conceptual analysis of capitalism. As they have shown, capitalism has forged a (conceptual) binary separation between humans and Nature. By conceptualizing Nature as a separate, external entity and abstracting it as a commodifiable resource suitable for economic growth, without considering our interdependence with the ecological system, the Western Nature-culture duality has arguably been at the root of many of the ecological crises we now face (Lockyer and Veteto 2013; Wright 2012). Regarding this dualism, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) even goes as far as describing it as "the single, underlying fault upon which the entire edifice of Western thought and science has been built" (1).

Hence, to effectively deal with environmental problems, a cultural change is needed – one that challenges the Western anthropocentric worldview, economic system, and consumer behaviour (Blühdorn 2009). If we view the capitalist systems and the Nature-culture dichotomy as causes of environmental crises, it only makes sense to look for solutions from outside this system (Lockyer and Veteto 2013). For this, Adams (2006) suggests that we need "new concepts, new ideas, new ways of engaging citizens and opinion leaders" (10). Similarly, Escribano et al. (2020) deem it "essential to study alternative, more sustainable models of living" (1) and propose that ecological intentional communities constitute good examples for doing so.

Ecological communities or ecovillages, such as the one I will further analyse in this thesis, are consciously designed communities that aim to constitute "an alternative to mainstream culture [...] a place of hope in a world of destructive capitalism" (Andreas 2013, 10). In the case of the research community, this means taking on individual responsibility and creating a space that allows for the exploration of new and more sustainable ways of living and coming together. Typically, eco-communities strive for a "smaller ecological footprint and a greater coexistence with nature" (Escribano et al. 2020, 1) to regenerate social and Natural environments (GEN n.d.).

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[1] Using a capital 'N' when referring to Nature allows me to highlight its abstraction as a concept and points towards some of the term's critical implications regarding the human-Nature dichotomy. I will elaborate on this further below when outlining some of the terminology used in this thesis.

But how do they achieve this ambitious goal? To analyse this, I will examine how ecological practices in an eco-community shape the human-Nature relationships and its effect on their forms of (eco-)citizenship.


**Academic Debate**

While intentional communities have been around since the 18th century, communities that emphasise ecological motivations and ideals had only emerged in the 1960s, when environmentalism entered the political arena (Dunlap, 2006). Since then, ecological intentional communities (EICs) have been popping up all over the world and have increasingly become a subject of study. By studying the alternative lifestyles of such communities, scholars argue, it is possible to contribute to "an understanding not only of how the world is and how it got that way but also of how the world could be and how we can get there" (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 104).

Related to this, a new concept of citizenship has been introduced to reshape social-environmental relations. Resulting from the combination of political discourse and environmental theory, *ecological citizenship* is centred around the idea of reducing one's ecological footprint – a responsibility that expands the duties of citizenship beyond the public and into the private sphere (Dobson 2003). Stressing not only the idea of rights but that of responsibilities, the main contribution of this new notion is that it "suggests an individual environmental responsibility based on interpersonal political relationships" (Jagers et al. 2014, 436). Broader in scope than conventional understandings of citizenship, this responsibility is aimed at the "fundamental reshaping of social-environmental relations and targeting lifestyles rather than single activities" (ibid.). However, following the same problem previously outline regarding sustainability and sustainable development, ecological citizenship has been criticised for "reduc[ing] the human subject to a critical consumer-citizen" (Spannring 2019, 1). In doing so, it is an approach to citizenship and ecology that remains, once more, stuck in capitalist thinking and neglects to recognise solutions that lie outside this hegemonic logic.

While the notion of ecological citizenship is increasingly gaining attention, few (if any) [2] studies have linked it to empirical research on intentional ecological communities. Moreover,

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[2] A literature search with the keywords "ecological citizenship" and "intentional community"/"ecovillage" yielded no results.

little has been done to understand how communities' collective and individual eco-practices are shaped by and simultaneously shape their conceptualisations of Nature and human-Nature relationships, and how this informs their political awareness.

In this thesis, based on two months of fieldwork in an eco-community in Switzerland, I seek to fill this gap by exploring the connections between ecological practices, eco-imaginaries, and ecological citizenship. Specifically, through people's stories, I will illustrate how ecological practices form a more extensive socioecological network that entangles community member's ideas of Nature, their relationship with it, and their sense of responsibility towards their ecological surroundings, thus producing forms of ecological citizenship.

**Nature and Ecological Practices**

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term 'Nature' with a capital 'N' to highlight some of the problematic implications the term has when used from a Nature-Culture division perspective, wherein Nature is viewed as something separate from human existence[3]. As mentioned in the problem statement, this distinction has often been used to justify excessive resource extraction and led to the destruction of large parts of the planet's biodiversity.

Further, capitalising Nature underscores it as a socioculturally constructed concept and stresses how the conceptualization of Nature in a Nature-Culture binary is historically and culturally specific instead of universal, as often claimed by Eurocentric sciences.

Corresponding to my use of capital-N Nature, I also approach the term 'ecological practices' or 'eco-practices' to describe actions directed towards protecting the environment.

To overcome the Nature-culture divide, my conceptualisation of ecological practices is inspired by a post-humanist political ecology approach. Previous work in this direction has advanced a relational ontological approach, wherein the human and other-than-humans are framed as mutually constituted in and through social relations (Castree 2003; Hobbson 2007; Sundberg 2011). Hence, human and nonhuman communities, like the ecological intentional community I researched, can be viewed as "contingent constructions that emerge from continuous [human and other-than-human] interaction" (Sundberg 2011, 321).

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[3] With this, I follow numerous anthropologists who have challenged this perspective and outlined its problems. See for example Ingold (2002), Moore (2016), or the workings of Anna Tsing.

Based on this, I define ecological practices as the intentional means and actions that contribute to the protection and promotion of biodiversity in its broadest way, such as:

- Relations and interactions with land, biosphere, and ecological environment in general
- Conscious use and consumption of resources
- Practices that strive to create awareness for the Nature-Culture divide and work towards overcoming it

With this definition, I further seek to draw a distinction to the more commonly used term of "sustainability" or "sustainable practices" and its political implications. As Dunlap (2006) and Fairhead (2014), as well as Blühdorn (2009), point out, the discussion around sustainable development is closely linked to neoliberal market mechanisms and is based on the capitalist growth paradigm. Although it is difficult to detach from something so deeply embedded in Western society, presenting itself as the only reality, I will aim to move beyond the mainstream notion of sustainable development by applying a more comprehensive approach to ecological practices. For this, I will follow Kasper (2009), who recommends putting the study focus on the principles of relations and processes. These principles also constitute the basis of environmental sociology, which asserts that "humans are interdependently involved in the biotic communities that shape and are shaped by human social life" (315). In line with Kasper, I thus take on a holistic approach that recognises the interconnectedness of all things within the web of life and acknowledges that everybody – humans and other-than-humans alike – "lives in, depends on, affects, and is affected by their ecosystem and the wider biosphere" (ibid., 320).

**Thesis Outline**

This thesis examines the broader socioecological network of a Swiss community and its relevance in shaping the human-Nature relationships and informing ecological citizenship. Its structure seeks to reflect the complexities of this network by presenting it from different angles.

First, I will contextualise my research with a section on the researched community, outlining its main characteristics and their relevance for my subject. Subsequently, I will briefly

introduce my entrance to the field, my methods and share some thoughts on the research process and my positionality.

Then, having portrayed how I started my research by digging into the field, each chapter will examine different elements of the community's ecological network. In chapter 3, following Taylor's notion of social imaginaries, I will first delineate community member's different conceptualisations of Nature along three main themes that emerged in my fieldwork: Nature within, Nature without and spiritualised Nature. Moreover, I will address how my participants related to Nature and viewed the human-Nature relationship.

In chapter 4, using an example of the daily morning circles, I will introduce Law's material-semiotic approach to outline the basic workings of the ecological network and its constituting elements. I will unpack how the different imaginaries are linked to a range of collectivised and individual eco-practices. Furthermore, I will show how these practices shape community member's ecological or even ecopolitical subjectivities.

Next, in chapter 5, I will direct the attention towards the permaculture garden, the specific practices it entails and how they shape the human-Nature relationships. Here, I will first present two permaculture principles – (1) Working with Nature and (2) closing circuits – before elaborating on the idea of an embodied ecological awareness. In addition, I will discuss the permaculture project's impact and inspiring aspects by building on Hage's concept of alter-politics.

In a final chapter, chapter 6, I will reflect on the socioecological network and its elements in relation to Dobson's notion of ecological citizenship. I will explore how my participants understood and enacted ecological responsibility in different ways. I will further describe how the community's eco-practices align with ecological citizenship's interpretation of responsibility and propose to expand the notion with Haraway's concept of response-ability. Finally, I will review the *community's* potential and limitations in shaping ecological citizenship by addressing the question of whether it should be labelled as an 'ecovillage'.

Ultimately, drawing together the relevant points of my analysis, I will end this thesis with some concluding remarks and thoughts.

## 2. Digging into the field

*When I first came to my research location, I was both nervous and excited. Nervous about my first experience as an anthropologist doing field research, about how to build up connections with my research participants, and about living in this community, where I was the 'outsider' and knew no one. But I was also excited about all those things, about immersing myself into the community and discovering what it means to live there and getting my hands dirty in the permaculture garden – digging into the field, both figuratively and literally.*

After having been picked up by Veronika[4], who worked in the ecovillage's permaculture garden, at the closest train station and driven to my fieldwork site, I stepped outside the car and tilted my head up in awe. I already knew that the community's central building was an impressive 18th-century castle as I had seen pictures of it on the internet. Seeing it in person, however, was a different thing. The four-story edifice stood prominently in the ecovillage's geographical centre. To its left is the parking lot and the camping ground for visitors; to its right, the permaculture garden with a stunning view over the lake. Veronika guided me to the garden, where I briefly was introduced to the rest of the garden team – Bill and Lilli, who were laying out a new structure for this year's vegetable beds, and Stella, who was holding a freshly replanted rose bush with one hand and waving at me with the other. As they were currently right in the middle of work, Veronika offered to show me around the premises. Walking among the different buildings, she explained to me the functions of each one of them: The castle and the old school building were where most of the community members lived; a smaller yellow building functioned as the school for kids from the community and neighbouring village; the seminar house with its many rooms used for a variety of workshops; and the guesthouse where the workshop's visitors were usually accommodated. As we approached the ground floor of the seminar house, I could see a wooden sign hanging above the door that spelled "Food-Lädeli" ("food shop") in bold, red letters. We entered a cool corridor, took the first door to our left, and stepped into a small room that had a funky smell to it. "This is where you can get all the goods in stock," Veronika told me by pointing at many glass and plastic bulk containers, "from pasta and rice, different types of flour and plant-based milk, to organic dish and washing detergents".

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[4] For confidentiality reasons, all names of my research participants have been changed to a randomly generated pseudonym.

Later, we finished our tour back in the garden where the others were still working. I was impressed and slightly intimidated by the large size of the community but also by its different gardens and its spectacular surroundings of forest and lake. I brought my backpack to room 104 in the guesthouse and felt my nervousness fade away slowly as enthusiasm over the coming two months took the upper hand.

## 2.1. The *Gemeinschaft*

The *Gemeinschaft*[5] is located at the edge of a small village in Western Switzerland, close to the German border. With the nearest train station at a fifteen-minute walking distance, the community is quite easily accessible by public transport. It is beautifully situated between a forest, meadows, and the shores of a lake, occupying around 5.2 hectares of land. The community was founded in 2003 to create a "place for encounter and awareness". Currently, the ecovillage has approximately 50 permanent members, of which a little less than one third are kids between the ages of 2 and 18. In addition, both the seminar centre and permaculture garden regularly take in (international) volunteers who reside within the community during their stay.

While the community members come from a broad range of professional and ideological backgrounds, they are united by the "desire to take on individual responsibility and face the challenges of our times"[6]. One of the community's central goals is to create a space that allows for exploring new and more sustainable ways of living and coming together. A focus on consciousness and the spiritual development of individuals and the group form the community's foundation. According to their homepage, the *Gemeinschaft*'s vision is that "to create change, one must not fight the existing but instead build new models to supersede the old ones". For this, the *Gemeinschaft* relies on four main pillars around which their philosophy is built:

- *'Kreiskultur'* ("circle culture"): Refers to a specific method of communication, decision-making, and working or living together, wherein the focus is placed on the authentic

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[5] For reasons of confidentiality, I will use the German word *Gemeinschaft* ("community") as a pseudonym for the researched community. I will keep writing it in italics to highlight it as an emic term as this thesis progresses and becomes my personal interpretation of how to understand this particular community.
[6] As state on community's website.

exchange of feelings, opinions, and ideas. Community members come together in a daily morning circle, and community meetings are held regularly to discuss and take decisions that affect everyone

- *Creativity and Spirituality*: Here, the focus lies in the healing powers of creative expression as a form of experiencing spirituality in everyday life.

- *Peace and Ecology*: Emphasises the respectful treatment of the inner and external resources by thinking and acting responsibly and sustainably towards future generations.

- *Healing Space and Openness*: Invokes the community as a tolerant space for healing and development that welcomes people from all spiritual and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, the members themselves highlighted the importance of living *together* as one of the *Gemeinschaft*'s central elements. For them, this implied the regularly held circles, authentic communication, and the aspect of reciprocal acknowledgement and recognition. Next to the prominent social aspect, the community's ecological efforts seem to have a somewhat secondary role. However, I will demonstrate that the high value placed on the community's social dimension plays a crucial role in shaping the collectivised eco-practices at hand.

Since I will be looking at the *Gemeinschaft*'s ecological aspects, this thesis will mainly centre around the third pillar (*Peace and Ecology*). However, instead of treating it as a separate category, I will show how elements from the other pillars, like the daily morning circles or different understandings of spirituality, come together to form a larger socioecological network.

**From Ecological Intentional Communities to Ecovillages – a Terminological Overview**
While many of my research participants mainly pointed out the community's social dimension, the *Gemeinschaft* also demonstrates an affinity with ecological aspirations.

In the literature, ecological intentional communities (EIC) are characterised as a subtype of intentional communities and represent a "model for more sustainable communities" (Escribano et al. 2020, 1) as they strive for a "smaller ecological footprint and a greater coexistence with nature" (ibid.). While grounded in the definition of intentional communities, which can be described as a "deliberate attempt to realise a common, alternative way of life

outside mainstream society" (Meijering et al. 2007, 42), the emphasis here is put on a sustainability dimension.

Another common term used for ecological intentional communities is the label of 'ecovillages', underlining the community's link to the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) (Escribano et al. 2020). The network was founded in 1995 to unify the ecovillage movement. It intends to "create an alternative to mainstream culture: green islands, lifeboats, a place of hope in a world of destructive capitalism" (Andreas 2013, 10). Hildur Jackson, one of the founders of the GEN, defined the term ecovillage as "a human scale, full-featured settlement, in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world, in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future" (Jackson 1998; in Singh et al. 2019, 240). While this anthropocentric description of an ecovillage is still relying on the problematic sustainable development discourse, a more contemporary definition of the term can be found on the official GEN website: "An ecovillage is an intentional, traditional, or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate social and natural environments" (GEN n.d.).

Since 2012, the *Gemeinschaft* has been part of the Global Ecovillage Network of Switzerland, called GEN Suisse, whose members meet twice a year to discuss, exchange and support each other. The members of GEN Suisse are communities that strive for a lifestyle that is peaceful, intentional, and close to Nature (GEN Suisse n.d.). As these are very normative categories, they can be laid out and interpreted very differently, leaving room for debates on whether a particular community should or should not be considered an ecovillage. This will be discussed towards the end of the thesis, where I will reflect on how ecological awareness, responsibility and citizenship are produced and shaped through *Gemeinschaft'*s ecological practices.

Due to their intentionality, aspiration, and official involvement in GEN Suisse, I will continue to use the terms (eco-)community, ecological intentional community, and ecovillage interchangeably to refer to the *Gemeinschaft* throughout this thesis.

## 2.2.    Entrance to the field, research population and methods

In exchange for conducting research live on-site, I offered to help out in the community's permaculture garden. This implied that I worked alongside the garden team Monday to Friday for usually around 6-7 hours, except Wednesdays when we worked only 2-3 hours. The garden chores included various activities ranging from getting the beds ready for spring and sowing the seeds to weeding and layering new compost piles. The garden team consists of roughly 5-7 people, including myself. Bill, who has been living in the community for about two years, oversees the garden project and was my primary contact person together with Veronika, who lives outside the community and is the only one officially employed and financially compensated for her garden work. Lilli and Stella are two young volunteers that found their way to the community through the European Voluntary Service programme and stayed in the project for one entire season. Depending on the day, this core team would be complemented by one or two community members who want to support the garden team in their work. Working alongside each other in the garden almost every day, as well as usually eating lunch together, helped me to quickly establish trustful and open relationships with the garden team that later developed into friendships. My engagement in the garden was not only appreciated by the members of the garden team but was also noticed by community members outside that circle. Every now and then, people would come up to me and say: "You are the one that is helping out in the garden and writing her thesis, right?". This not only proved that they were informed about my research but also invited further conversation. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I had a deep connection to the garden team and one or two community members, as well as good relations with many other members of the *Gemeinschaft*. On several occasions, I got feedback that my presence was positively received by my research participants.

My daily work in the garden not only helped me to build my relationships with the members of the garden team but also provided me with a routine and an optimal space to observe how community members interact with their ecological surroundings. To do so, I primarily relied on the method of apprenticeship ethnography. Since field research usually requires the researcher to immerse themself in an unfamiliar setting and learn how to function in it effectively, apprenticeship takes place in virtually all field settings (Downey et al. 2015). However, contrary to other types of field research, apprenticeship research emphasises the

*participating* dimension of fieldwork – making the researcher more "observing participant" than "participant observer" (ibid., 184). Not only is apprenticeship ethnography believed to be an ideal ethnographic point of entry into a community, but it is also an excellent way to learn a skill, and even more so, "an ideal way to *learn about it*, and to *learn about how one learns*" (ibid., 185). One of the core strengths of apprenticeship ethnography, therefore, lies in understanding how specific practices are carried out and how those practices are learned, taught, and passed on to others. I experienced this first-hand when arriving in the community without much gardening skill or knowledge of permaculture. Under Bill and Veronika's patient guidance and alongside many other-than-human species, I immersed myself in the garden work.

I would not have guessed how much my bodily experience would shape my research. Yet, it was mainly through my physical presence in the garden and the constant interaction with many other-than-human beings – most prominently the two ducks, billions of tiny insects, and worms, but also the weather and the soil itself – that shaped my research and understanding. I learned that permaculture implies working *with* Nature and paying attention to the intertwined processes in the garden.

This helped me to understand my participants better, especially the ones in the garden, as I could experience on my own body what it meant to be physically engaged in the ecological practices of permaculture gardening.

Through my apprenticeship ethnography, I thus managed to observe many ecological practices in the garden and noticed some ecologic ideologies expressed, especially by the garden team. Further, walking around the premises and keeping my eyes and senses open or looking out the windows of my rooms and into the garden has allowed me to spot some ecological practices, or at least certain tools/products that would suggest specific practices (e.g., organic cleaning products, recycling bins, clothes sharing spaces and an organic community grocery shop). By occasionally participating in the community's morning circles and some small, spontaneous community activities – like the women evenings, picnics, movie nights or martial arts practice – I quickly got to know more community members outside the garden team. In doing so, I got a better understanding of their motivations and interests in being part of the *Gemeinschaft*, their roles in the community and ideas they have about Nature and their relationship with it. Through my engagement in the permaculture garden, I

got to meet and observe many people in an inspiring ecological environment while also giving back to the community.

During the second half of my fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews, wherein my research participants would share their personal views, experiences, and opinions. To have a broader scope, I decided to interview people from the garden team, as well as people I would not often see in the garden. I approached the participants directly and explained to them that the interview should be viewed as an informal conversation to relieve some of the pressure they might associate with the word 'interview'. Eventually, I managed to collect information from a total of 12 interviewees from a broad range of national and educational backgrounds, ages, professions, and levels of engagement in the permaculture project. Holding myself to a high personal and professional standard, I sought to be very considerate about each person's individual needs and boundaries. All interviews were conducted in a relaxed, informal setting, either over a cup of tea inside or outside in the garden or at the lake. Many of my research participants enjoyed the interviewing process and thanked me for the inspiring reflections and discussion that came out of it. Through the interviews, I started to see how my preconceived ideas of an ecovillage compared to people's answers about their eco-imaginaries, -practices and -subjectivities.

During my time in the *Gemeinschaft*, I got very used to my routine of waking up, having breakfast, spending the day in the garden, and writing my fieldnotes at the end of the day. Over two months, I fully immersed myself into the community – I was very engaged in the garden work, joined many community evenings and events, conducted semi-structured interviews, and had private meetings with people from the community. Like a sponge, I soaked up all the experiences, impressions, talks and discussions I could. Yet, I feel like I have barely scratched the surface - there is still so much more to discover.

As an anthropological researcher living in the community, it was important for me to be aware of and reflect on my own presence while conducting research. Due to the inductive and circular approach I used, critical reflection on my position as a researcher, the methods I used, and the ethics of my research overall was an ongoing process, taking place during all phases of my research.

While my Swiss nationality and socioeconomic status may have facilitated my access to the field, they, together with my gender (cis-female) and my sexual orientation (hetero),

proved to have little (direct) influence on the research, as the community itself is very open-minded and non-discriminatory. However, all these aspects naturally form part of my personality and thus influence the perspective I brought into the field and my writing. A more significant influence on this personal perspective stems from my ethnicity and level of education. A Euro- and anthropocentric worldview comes to me most intuitively. The research made me aware of my own conceptualisation and, despite striving to move beyond it, I sometimes caught myself trapped back into certain dualisms I wished to overcome. This became apparent to me as I had to constantly remind myself to observe not just the humans in the community but all things that are connected in the web of life during my fieldwork. But it also re-emerged in the subsequent analysis and writing of the thesis when carefully evaluating the terminology I wanted to use. Overall, researching the community did not seem to influence it. This may partly be due to the community members' general openness and interest and partly to the fact that they are used to host and interact with visitors, including other researchers before me.

Before entering the field, I was somewhat concerned that my position as a young researcher and inexperienced garden worker might put me in a position of social subordination. However, this was not the case. From the beginning on, I was taken seriously by the community members, and my work in the garden was valued and much appreciated. It felt that I was on par with all my interlocutors, who often showed genuine interest and gave authentic answers to my interview questions. Lastly, I assume my political ideologies to have quite some influence on the research altogether. It is well known that the theoretical frameworks we use and empirical phenomena we choose to explore as researchers are influenced by the political, economic, and cultural circumstances in which the research is carried out as well as by the researcher's personal interests (Ortner 2016). The choice of my research topic is thus heavily influenced by my belief that many of the socioecological problems we face today are a cause of the Western capitalist worldview and connected lifestyle. While my anti-capitalist and pro-environmental mindset was quite similar to the ideology of several community members, I was careful not to have a too idealistic conception of such communities as not to create analytical blind spots that would discount a critical evaluation of the research data. Further, the motive behind this research is not to simply oppose Capitalist systems and structures but instead to take a solution-oriented approach by studying alternative ways of living and making sense of the world.

## 3. Nature in anything and everything – Ecological imaginaries

Stella, the 22-year-old EVS-Volunteer and member of the garden team, and I sat together in my living room on a cloudy afternoon. Next to us was a large window front that granted a stunning view of the garden's green grass fields. We were drinking a warm cup of fresh mint tea. I had just asked Stella what Nature meant to her, and she briefly laughed and countered with: "…and the meaning of life?" With a smirk, she let me know that this was a rhetorical reply to mirror the complexity of the question I had just posed her. She took a sip of tea and looked out the window. After a few moments of silence, she repeated the question, more towards herself than to me: "Nature? Huh. That is a good question!"

When I told my interview participants that one of the main themes I wanted to discuss was Nature, they usually seemed very excited, started to smile, and their eyes lit up. However, when I confronted them with the rather large question of "What is Nature to you?" many of their reactions were similar to Stella's – they sighed, raised their eyebrows as if surprised or laughed about how broad this question was. It was evident that many of them had not thought about this before.

One time, the middle-aged community member Rahim passed me by when I was sitting at a table outside in the garden, typing up my daily reflections. He asked me what my research was about, and I vaguely answered that it was about the eco-community and Nature. He raised his eyebrows, started grinning and said: "This is a big topic. It can range from 'people and plants' to 'everything is one'. Nature can be anything and everything". As Rahim suggests, there lies a certain complexity in talking about Nature, and the term can mean different things for different people. As stated in the introduction, the ways in which we understand and relate to Nature underlies and simultaneously is shaped by our ecological practices. In this chapter, I will outline the diverse ways the members of the *Gemeinschaft* imagine Nature and how they relate to it. Building on Taylor's notion of social imaginaries, I will summarise people's conceptualisations of Nature, divided into three main themes that emerged in my fieldwork: without, within, and spiritual. In a similar fashion, I will then examine community member's understanding of the human-Nature relationship, outlining where they imagine human's place in relation to Nature. Finally, I will briefly elaborate on the ambiguities and contradictions that can be found when looking at Nature conceptions before transitioning to the expression of ecological imaginaries in everyday eco-practices of the *Gemeinschaft* (chapter 4.).

## 3.1.    Nature without

I was sitting next to Bill in the corner of the castle's garden. Most of the luscious green lawn already lied in the shadow of the colossal four-story building. The paved seating area opposite the castle's grand dining room was the only still illuminated space. Our wooden chairs were turned towards the west so that we could soak up the warmth of the evening sun on our faces. Behind us was a well-kept herb garden, and I smelled the sweet scent of lavender in the air. Bill was wearing a simple pair of grey jeans and a beige shirt. He had his hands folded in his lap and his eyes closed. Sitting there in complete stillness, he emitted a relaxed and peaceful aura, and I could feel my own restlessness fade away slowly. Bill took a deep breath through the nose, opened his eyes and responded to my question of what comes to his mind when thinking of Nature: "Nature is…a place where I go to again and again. Whether it be the forest or the lake. It's a place where I feel good, where I come to myself, where I can be calm[…] relax and regain my energy."

When asked about it, several community members described Nature to me in terms of a location: the outside. By characterising it as "a place", Bill portrays Nature as something external or separate from himself – something *without*. Tying in with this externalised conception of Nature, my research participants often described Nature to me as something that is "unchanged" or "in its original state". Several also used elements they associate with Nature to describe it: the "trees", "forest", "lake", or "animals". The words they use in their descriptions give insight into their ecological imaginaries, parallel to what Taylor proposes in the form of "social imaginaries" (2002).

Taylor's notion of "social imaginaries" provides an understanding of the multiple ways through which a group of people constructs, imagines, and gives meaning to their collective social life. Taylor explains imaginaries as "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, […] the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (2002: 106). This includes ideas about their relationships, their interactions, and a sense of how they fit together in carrying out collective and individual practices.

In this thesis, I will broaden Taylor's approach by applying ecological/eco-imaginaries to the ways that my participants imagine and conceptualise Nature and their relationship with it.

Many community members, like Bill, described Nature as an external place or something "unchanged", thus relying on defining it in opposition to the 'human sphere' or something 'human-made'. This externalised view of Nature addresses the Nature-culture dualism, wherein Nature is viewed as separate from (human) culture. However, this does not necessarily imply an emotional distance.

When Bill described Nature as something separate from himself, it simultaneously constituted something that brings him closer to "himself". In his free time, Bill regularly went to these outdoor locations – for fishing on the lake or for long walks in the nearby forest. They were places that he went to "again and again". Visiting this externalised Nature, therefore, constituted an iterative practice that speaks to a particular intimate relationship. Through his continuous visitation of Nature, Bill found relaxation and felt like he could connect to himself. This habit further allowed him to disconnect from the often hectic life of the community and "regain [his] energy".

This feeling of connecting to oneself by being in an external(ised) Nature was a desire that other community members sometimes experienced. The yoga-instructor Sahib, for example, once told me how she would love just to get rid of all the "superficial materials" that "we" humans have created and return to a more simplistic lifestyle. What she described to me as a "deep longing of getting rid of all the [superficial, 'human-made'] shit" can be linked to an "ecological nostalgia for an imagined past" (Gandy 2006, 66) or what Robert Fletcher identifies as a form of romanticising Nature when not being in it. In his article *Nature is a nice place to save but I wouldn't want to live there*, Fletcher (2015) explains how, when working with a Western perspective, the individual self-conception is divided into opposing elements of mind and body. It is assumed that in a 'civilised' society, self-discipline keeps the latter under control, whereas the outside or the 'wilderness' provides a "liminal space where one can be freed" (342). It is thus more the longing for freedom, rather than that of genuinely being outside in Nature, that stands in the foreground. This might explain why all my participants highlighted the importance they ascribe to being in this beautiful location and Natural setting even if it was not equally important for all community members to actively spend much time in this setting, for example, by working in the garden or regularly going to the woods or the lake.

This tendency towards over romanticisation also became apparent in the ways different

community members expressed a feeling of deep appreciation and gratitude towards Nature. It found particular expression in Sahib's descriptions as she explained to me that "it is the greatest gift that Nature produces out of itself (*aus sich heraus produziert*)" and "allows humans to live, to grow old, to have something to eat". This appreciation towards Nature and viewing it as a gift was shared by several other community members. Depending on what different people connected with the term, they expressed gratitude for various things. They were thankful to have "a place [to] harvest a lot of things", like Bill, or they felt that it was a "gift to [simply be able to] observe and be present", like Lilli. Fabian, one of the older community members, explained how an ecological setting contributed positively to his physical and mental health and described Nature as "the source of life".

Thus, Nature was often imagined through a sense and sensation of gratitude. Frequently, this feeling of appreciation stemmed from viewing Nature as an abundant supply of food, a fascinating ecosystem and "the source of life" itself. Such Nature conceptions automatically resulted in imaginaries of how other people should treat Nature, in this case, by being thankful.

It is in this way that imaginaries bear expectations – from others and oneself – and demand practices that are in accordance with these imaginaries. As Taylor notes, the imaginaries are usually tightly linked to "expectations … and normative notions" (2002: 106). In the context of this thesis, this means that the ecological imaginaries underlie people's perceptions of what Nature is, which, in turn, influences their actions in relation to it. This will be highlighted in chapters 4 and 5, where I explore how different imaginaries are connected to various ecological practices that are carried out in the *Gemeinschaft*.

Like in the case of Sahib, who almost sensed a feeling of duty in the face of the "immense gift" Nature presented to her, the imaginaries tied to Nature are also connected to a certain sense of responsibility towards the ecological environment, I will comment more on how the two relate in chapter 6.

While the externalisation of Nature only constitutes one potential imaginary, there was a vast range of other imaginaries present in the *Gemeinschaft*. Consequently, the debate around the human-Nature divide is not only highly controversial in academia but also among the community members.

## 3.2.      Nature within

While some community members view Nature as an independent system outside the human sphere, others explicitly reject this separation. The seasoned community member Rebekka, for example, put it this way: "Nature is everything! Everything and nothing! The most important thing for me to point out here is that: there is no Nature!"

Contrary to other community members, for her, the mere term Nature comes with a separation that (re)produces the human-Nature dualism. She explains it like this: "The problem is that we created this separation, and we created 'Nature'. But I think that this is part of a process that humanity always goes through – they always want to be more differentiated, clearer, more precisely defined […] and this is also okay." "So now we just have to live with this separation?" I ask her with slight resignation. "Yes, or you overcome it within yourself. You dissolve the separation within yourself. If you are connected with yourself as part of Nature, then you are also connected with Nature and don't have to chase after something."

By describing how humanity always goes through the process of differentiating itself from other beings and things, Rebekka hints at neoliberal tendencies, which she criticises. This stance is in line with the idea that ecovillages, like the *Gemeinschaft*, offer a (partial) escape from mainstream capitalist societies.

It is together with this critique of capitalist systems that Rebekka rejected the human-nature dichotomy and found a way of dealing with it. By removing the separation *within* herself, her ways of connecting to Nature change. When asserting that Nature is "everything and nothing" and that humans are "part of Nature", Rebekka points to the interconnectedness of life and comes closer to a notion of ecology in which 'human' is part of a bigger web of life. Unlike Bill and Sahib, Rebekka does not feel the longing to go 'outside' to experience Nature but instead feels part of that web regardless of her physical location.


Going one step further in her definition of Nature, Alba explains: "Nature is everything … it's the air you breathe and the water you drink and the shit we shit and the food we eat and the apples and this table – because this was a tree before – and the dinosaurs that created the petrol that is feeding our cars. And there is nothing that is not Nature. Even plastic is Nature". As such, Alba's view is that of an all-encompassing Nature that even includes non-living things, like plastic and petrol, as part of it and thus strives to fully erase the human-Nature dichotomy.

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Unlike Rebekka, who engages with Nature more through Nature as a concept, Alba imagines Nature through material entanglements, metabolic processes and webs of relations. In chapter 4.2, I will examine how these two eco-imaginaries find their way into different forms of ecological practices.

## 3.3.      Spiritualised Nature

Multiple community members connected Nature to a form of spirituality. However, what exactly that meant was very individual and thus perfectly reflects the heterogeneity of the imaginaries present in the *Gemeinschaft* overall.

On the evening of my first day in the ecovillage, I was standing in the poorly lit community kitchen. It is a rather elongated space with wooden walls and three doorways that connect it to the community room, the castle's stairway, and the outside. On the counter stood three clay dishes to grow sprouts in, and next to the stove hangs a sticker that reads: "Vegetarian cooking only". A community member came in through the back entrance and looked at me with an interested and kind gaze. With a half-smile, she asked me who I was and introduced herself as Leandra. When I presented myself and told her about my research here and that I wanted to focus on the connection between people and Nature in an eco-community, she looked intrigued. In her opinion, more people that lived in such a community were close to Nature. When I asked her why she thought that, she replied: "Well, spirituality also means a certain connection with Nature." Then, she told me the story of an old man she once met in the mountains, who had asked her about her religion. When she did not answer right away, the old man smiled and said he already knew – she was, like him: a 'Nature-Christian' (Natur-Christin). Yes, she replied to him; she probably was.

Unfortunately, then and there, I did not get the chance to ask Leandra what a 'Nature-Christian' is or what that means to her. A few weeks later, however, we were sitting at the lake together, and I asked her what Nature was for her, what she connects with this term. She paused, laughed a hearty laughter and then answers: "Everything godly!" For her, this did not necessarily imply a certain practice of worship towards Nature, which is common among Pagans, for example, but rather expressed a feeling of deep appreciation and 'awe' towards

it. I asked her about her spirituality, and she told me that she simply thought of it as a "connection to God". She explained how seeing the "divine" (*das Göttliche*) in everything created a special awareness in the interaction with oneself and others.

I invited her to describe how she experiences her relationship with Nature. "Back when I was living in the mountains", she sayd, "I used to go meditate next to a stream every day. Through this, I connected with the water, the stones, and the air around me. This place made me feel at home. Back then, I used to say I was outside in Nature, but I was in myself."

The way Leandra described her shift from seeing Nature as something that is "outside" to recognising that she connects to something within "herself" is a good example of the blurry line of where Nature starts and where it ends. Her description further shows the fluidity of imaginaries and how they can change over time and through specific experiences.

Similar to the aforementioned understanding of Nature as something bigger and all-encompassing, Leandra's ecospiritual imaginary points to the immanence of the divine. For her, Nature is "everything godly", and God existing in and throughout everything.

Like Leandra, Alba related Nature to God; without linking this to any specific religion. Instead, she connected it to an awareness of "knowing that I'm not alone and that the universe does not revolve around me, but that there is a bigger, greater force somewhere, somehow, which is spirit." She explained that this spirit exists in everything, that it is the essence of everything and that it can be called different names, like Pachamama[7] or Great Spirit.

Finally, few community members described Nature to me as "animated" or "spirited". For Veronika, for example, it was logical that Nature is alive but also "spirited" (*beseelt*[8]). To her, this did not only stretch out to things that are obviously living and have personality but also to static objects like stones. Where other people might see dead tree branches or a lifeless boulder, Veronika sensed "elementals" or "nature beings" (*Elementarwesen*, *Naturwesenheiten*). To live in accordance with this belief, Veronika did her best to treat each and every human, animal and element with equal respect, acceptance and tolerance. She told me that she did not only find her spirituality in Nature but also her purpose – working in the *Gemeinschaft*'s permaculture garden and having this connection to her ecological environment.

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[7] I will further explain her usage of this term and its implication in chapter 4.2.1.
[8] Much more than the English translation, *beseelt* emphasises the idea of something having a soul, like a living being.

As these examples show, spiritualised eco-imaginaries are not uncommon among the members of the *Gemeinschaft*. In chapter 4, I will further explain how these spiritualised imaginaries find their expression in particular ritualised eco-practices.

## 3.4.  The human-Nature relationship

Another type of eco-imaginary lies in how people view their relationship with Nature. This can be found in the ways they imagine their place in relation to Nature – both what is and what should be. Although human's place in Nature was implicit in some of the stories above on people's definitions of Nature, I will tease this notion of the human-Nature relationship here. I believe that the ideas we have about our place in/within Nature inform our actions and behaviour. Also, while some of my participants defined Nature through their imaginaries of Nature and tried to account for it directly, others have done so indirectly via how they see their place in it.

**Being (too) distanced from Nature**

Several community members, especially ones who described Nature to me as something external or without themselves, expressed the feeling of humans being too distanced from Nature. This was often linked to a romantic idealisation of Nature and the longing of being "in Nature". Limited by the human-Nature dichotomy, Sahib felt that all the "superficial" materials that humans created kept her from (re)connecting to Nature.

A step further than identifying a separation between humans and Nature laid in recognising human's (negative) impact on Nature. Whilst sitting in the sunlight in the castle's garden, Fabian told me: "Humans take up too much space in nature. They leave too little space for Nature and the Natural processes." He criticised the fact that humans often view Nature solely in terms of resources that can be extracted to make a profit and, with sadness in his voice, acknowledged the exploitative relationship this creates: "They [humans] just get as much out of Nature as they can".

**Being part of Nature**

Most of my research participants, however, viewed themselves as "part of Nature"[9] thus levelling the field by putting humans and other-than-humans on the same level. Many of them pictured the ideal co-living with Nature as a collaboration that is flat in terms of power relations.

Stella described this to me as a "middle-ground" between the two extremes of elevating Nature to a superior level – wherein "we [humans] are a speck of dust and Nature is this huge, vast and great thing" – and viewing humans as "rulers of Nature" (*Herr der Natur*).

For those considering themselves as "part of Nature", it was more challenging to respond to my question of "human's place in Nature" – a question that did not make much sense to them because, "you cannot have a static place in something that you are yourself part of", as Alba put it.

Though many of my participants described their relationship with Nature to me in terms of a flat hierarchy, I often found discrepancies between this vision and people's actions.[10]

**Concluding remarks**

This chapter has shown how diversely the *Gemeinschaft*'s members perceive Nature and their relationship with it. Although the eco-imaginaries shared common ground – like the general sense of fascination, in the face of Nature's beauty, and appreciation towards it – they diverged in certain aspects, for example, on the question of whether Nature is external to humans or something we ourselves are part of. Of course, my attempt of outlining the different ecological imaginaries shared among members of the *Gemeinschaft* does not come close to justly representing all the complexities, ambiguities and even contradictions that characterise real life.

For example, when asked about Nature, Bill instantly replied by describing a location that is external to him but at the same time brings him closer to "himself". Only a few moments later, however, he adds that he views Nature as something that he himself is part of and to which he cannot be in opposition. Considering himself a "symbiotic being", he

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[9] In one form or another, this view was expressed by Alba, Bill, Daisie, Fabian, Leandra Stella, and Veronika.
[10] More on this in chapter 6.2. where I will discuss the potential but also the limitation of the ecovillage in shaping ecological citizenship

explains that he is in constant connection with other species and "part of a larger whole". So, although starting out with an eco-imaginary that describes Nature without, he seamlessly transitions to an understanding of Nature within.

Another example of this type of ambiguity becomes apparent when looking at Alba's eco-imaginaries. She mainly approaches Nature through material entanglements, metabolic processes and webs of relations. However, she also partially adopts an ecospiritual Nature conception by using the notion of 'Pachamama', thus expressing an affinity with Quechua/Aymara cosmology. By telling me that "Nature is God", she further hints at a more spiritualised connection to Nature that 'goes beyond' the material processes.

Holding on to different, sometimes even contrasting, eco-imaginaries at the same time was not uncommon among my research participants. This goes to show that the imaginaries are not only highly dynamic and fluid but also ambivalent and sometimes seem contradictory. In line with this, Roux-Rosier et al. (2018) point to the concept's dynamic properties and describe imaginaries as "evolving systems of symbols and meanings that enable agency and shape social and economic systems" (Roux-Rosier et al. 2018, 551).

According to Taylor, the imaginaries described above are not just sets of ideas but enable certain practices of a group of people: in this context, ecological actions among the members of the *Gemeinschaft*. However, given the complex ways in which Nature is perceived differently, the practices that emerge from people's eco-imaginaries are diverse and expressed in many different ways – from worshipping Nature with specific rituals to small ecological acts in people's everyday lives. In the next chapter, I will outline community member's diverse eco-practices and elaborate on how they make up a larger socioecologic network.

# 4. Outlining the elements of the socioecological network

In this chapter, I will show how the eco-imaginaries in the *Gemeinschaft* gave rise to different collectivised and individualised eco-practices. For this, I will be building on John Law's (2019) notion of 'material semiotics' to outline the basic elements that make up the socioecological network present in the community. Law's approach can be best described as a set of tools and sensibilities that help explore how practices in the social world are woven out of threads to form weaves or networks. It is important to note that when referring to 'the social', material semiotics does not only imply people or human collectivities but also includes the 'materials' of the world (implying both living and non-living, biotic and abiotic things, e.g., non-human species, geological matter, the weather etc.) as they are seen as equally 'social'.

I will first introduce the basic workings of the network based on the ritual practice of the morning circles. Then, each subchapter will provide more insight into the dynamics of the network: on how it fluctuates and, consequently, also crafts different kinds of subjectivities and political awareness.

## 4.1.     Morning circles

It was on a sunny morning, and I was swiftly walking through the castle hallway and its spacious dining hall. As I stepped through the enormous glass doors out into the castle garden, I saw that several community members were already gathered on the green grass field. It must have been 10 o'clock, and we started to form a big circle without anyone instructing us to do so. In the centre of the circle stood a small altar. It was covered with velvet cloth and held a sound bowl, a thin book, and a small box with inspiration cards inside. Next to it, on the grass, stood two opened folders that presented the lyrics of a song – it was about the 'holy ground', the forests, the mountains and the rivers, and about the 'spirit' that surrounds us all. A community member picked up the guitar and started to play the chords to the song. Although I was not familiar with the tune, I could quickly pick it up and sing along with the others. While singing, I looked around the circle. Some people had their eyes closed, others gently rocked from side to side with the flow of the music, and some returned my gaze with a smile. After the song, two people stepped into the circle to put aside the folders and then returned to their spots. Once people were done moving around, a calm and peaceful atmosphere spread. I saw

that more people had closed their eyes by then and, knowing what was going to happen next, I too closed my eyes. Then I heard the expected ring of the sound bowl – a soft, harmonic tone. I brought my awareness inwards and started to feel how I was standing on my feet and how they were connected to the ground below. After a few moments of silence, the gentle tone of the sound bowl rang for the second time, and I knew that it was time for me to open my eyes again. Marie, who had been the one ringing the bowl, placed it back on the altar and picked up the thin booklet. She turned slowly on her axis and looked around in the circle. Then she walked up to Daisie and handed over the book. Daisie flipped through the pages, stopped at a random page, and started to read out an inspirational quote about the energy of life, which she concluded with a decisive 'Ahey'. Marie asked for the announcements of the day: "Introductions? Happenings? Revelations?" Rebekka held up a camping mat and said: "For community members: you can pick up one of these mats that are standing in front of the school and glue them behind your radiator. Leandra tried it out for us and could turn down her heating to save fuel oil." Leandra nodded and added: "Before, I always had my heating on level 5. Now I have it on 2." "So, go and get your camping mats. They are cheaper than heating mats and work the same", Rebekka said with a cheeky grin. After the announcements, we all stretched by lifting our arms to the ceiling, then bowing heads and hands down to the grass. As we came back up, we raised our arms one more time, shook our hands with the palms facing towards the circle and wished everyone a pleasant day. This marked the end of the morning circle.

The morning circles were a daily routine in the *Gemeinschaft*. Every morning at 10 am, people gathered in the grand dining hall or outside, depending on the weather. They greeted each other, sang, enjoyed a moment of silence, listened attentively to the quote of the day, exchanged what is going on that day, stretched together, and wished each other a pleasant day. It was a space that allowed community members to come together, connect to each other, and share what is on their minds. As such, the daily morning circles not only constitute a central aspect of the *Gemeinschaft*'s community life but are also part of and shape the community's broader socioecological network.

According to Law (2019), material-semiotic networks are, on the one hand, *semiotic* since they are related and/or carry meanings. They are also, however, *material* because they concern material things caught up and shaped by those relations. Standing in the morning

circle and letting my eyes wander, certain material elements stood out: the velvet-covered altar with the sound bowl on it, the simple yet meaningful song lyrics, the community members standing with me in the circle, the green grass I was standing on, and the warm sunshine on my face and bare forearms.

In the ritual of the morning circle, all these elements are provided with meaning and, thus, find a material life that socialises the community's practices and people's ways of interacting with Nature. It is important to note that these meanings, attributed to certain material elements, are not fixed or static. Rather, they should be understood as dynamic elements that only exist in relation to each other and the specific situation they find themselves in. The gong of the sound bowl that invites to direct one's attention inwards, the lyrics of the song that paint a romantic, somewhat spiritualised picture of the Nature around us and our connection to it, and the way in which community members have gathered around in a circle to share this moment together – in the morning circle, all these elements are contributing to each other to form part of a larger network.

The eco-imaginaries introduced in the previous chapter, in fact, already constitute one of the central elements of the socioecological network. Not only do they provide an understanding of how people imagine their social existence, but they also give rise to specific, in this case ecological, practices.

While the eco-imaginaries are the ideas and expectations that underpin the ecological practices, the latter are the elements that bring the network into being. In the story of the morning circle, we can already identify different collectivised and individual eco-practices, for example, the common practice of singing about Nature. This can be considered as a collectivised, ritualised, and somewhat spiritualised eco-practice that I will unpack further in the next section. Then, there is the individual practice of finding ways to reduce one's carbon footprint by putting an iso-mat behind the heating to save oil. The sharing of this information with the rest of the group, again, can be understood as a collectivised practice that is facilitated by the morning circle's setting and a tradition of sharing one's own learning with others.

These practices are constituted and shaped by a combination of various elements – such as the community's space and its materiality, the humans and other-than-humans that inhabit it, their imaginaries, and practices – that come together to form a larger web.

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Law (2019) describes that the core sensibility of material semiotics lies in the ways it explores how these "heterogeneous elements of the social-and-material overlap, influence one another, and generally *fit themselves together* or not" (3). As such, it is about exploring the webs' empirical and theoretical complexity. Furthermore, material semiotics assumes that the weaves of social life are "messy and multiple" and that "*different realities are being woven into being in different practices*" (ibid. 9). In this sense, many different elements and practices can be analysed to make up the ecological network present at the *Gemeinschaft*. Depending on who looks at them, they may be understood and interpreted differently. Thus, in the same way, one might look at Nature as a 'web of life', we can look at the different eco-practices present in the *Gemeinschaft* to understand that they form a larger sociocultural and socioecological network.

In the following, I will outline some of the collectivised and individualised eco-practices that I found most prevalent in the *Gemeinschaft*. The ecological practices mentioned under the subsequent subchapters exclude the garden practices, which I will view separately in the next chapter to highlight how they are both shaped by and shape the human-other-than-human relationships through a specific form of bodily experience.

## 4.2.    Collectivised ecological practices

### 4.2.1.  Ritualised Nature celebrations

Although the *Gemeinschaft* does not explicitly describe itself as a spiritual community, I found that spirituality and ritualised Nature celebrations played an important role in shaping community member's intentional and unintentional collective eco-practices.

Already after a few morning circles, I realised that many of the songs we sang together were characterised by a Nature theme – often romanticising it, using it as a metaphor for life's journey or relating it to some form of spirituality.

One day after the morning circle, I asked Daisie, one of the founding community members, about the songs. She informed me that the collection of songs had been growing organically over time: "We always enjoyed singing together…over the years, we learned new songs – from exchanges with other communities, from GEN gatherings, or when community

members returned home from travelling." I was surprised that she did not mention the Nature theme at all, as it seemed so obvious to me.

On a different occasion, I stood with a few community members around a bonfire at the community's ritual place to celebrate Walpurgis Night[11].  The bright orange flames lit up the night and heated our faces as we stood around the fire in our raincoats. It was pouring. Aliza, a rather new community member, tapped a soft, rhythmic beat on a hand drum. Following her lead, we sang a song for each element – fire, water, air, and earth – followed by a song for Mother Earth and Father Heaven to celebrate the arrival of spring.

As the two examples show, ritualised eco-practices can be found in the form of intentional acts but can also be routinised. In both cases, however, community members – consciously or not – related to Nature in a ritualised form.

Siragusa et al. (2020) examine how humans relate to nonhuman beings through ritual practices. In their article, the authors introduce the concept of "shared breath" as a "way of understanding human and nonhuman copresence through ritualized verbal and nonverbal communicative practices" (471). Based on fieldwork among different forest-dwelling Indigenous groups, they describe how the "intangible" aspects of shared breaths offer a way to "imagine – and, paradoxically, solidify and sustain – alliances between humans and nonhumans" (ibid.). In this sense, we can understand the ritualised practices as a way for community members to relate to Nature – either on a daily basis or through singular events.

Besides the singing in the daily morning circle, it was mainly through collective Nature celebrations, like the one on Walpurgis Night or the annual harvest fest in autumn, that constituted specific occasions where people expressed their appreciation and gratitude for Nature and the "gift" it presents.

Certainly, not all community members related in the same way to these ritualised eco-practices. Whether they understood these practices as a conscious way to connect with Nature or not depended not only on their individual spiritual orientation but also on the day and setting.

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[11] Celebrated on the eve of May Day, Walpurgis Night is a festivity that is used for different things, depending on the sociocultural setting – whether it be the commemoration of blooming spring, to ward of evil spirits and witches, or bless young couples.

Regardless of their intention, however, the ritualised Nature celebrations, like the singing in the morning circles and the bonfire, constitute highly socialised practices. As such, they give the feeling of connecting to Nature as a group or community.

The morning circles, thus, constitute both a highly socialised and ritualised practice. However, not all ecological practices in the *Gemeinschaft*'s everyday life are ritualised. As we will see in the next chapter, it is not only ritualised practices that are shared among community members but also various material and immaterial products.

### 4.2.2. The sharing of resources

Together with Sahib, I helped to stow away the utensils for the morning circle – the guitar, sound bowl, citation book and box, and the lyrics folders. On our way back, we passed the give-away corner (Geschenke-Ecke), and Sahib paused to look at a brown cotton blouse. We looked through the clothes that were hanging on the rack – a couple of blouses, shirts, sweaters, two pairs of pants, and a small dark blue handbag. "I pick out something that would fit you, and you pick out something for me", Sahib proposed. Jokingly, I passed her a hideous pink denim vest from the rack. She grinned and said that she actually got this from her "lover" and that she had donated it to the gift corner pretty quickly. For me, Sahib chose a 90s style rain jacket, mostly red with one green and one yellow sleeve. It still looked to be in good condition. I found myself wondering whether I should keep it before deciding against it. I did not need yet another piece of clothing.

During my two months in the *Gemeinschaft*, I often experienced how material things were handed around and repurposed: If someone had a vest they never wore, they donated it to the give-away corner; if it was a piece of furniture or household item, a message was sent around asking if someone else had a use for it. This way, the objects did not simply end up in the trash but instead were being redistributed, given away, recycled, or eventually brought to the second-hand store. Similarly, if a community member needed something – for example, new cutlery for the outside kitchen – they asked during the morning circle if someone else had the desired item. If there was the need for something that was not currently available in the community, things were often purchased from the local second-hand shop.

Such actions connected to recycling, reusing, and reducing the use of (new) resources can be summarised under the concept of *circular economy* (CE). Together with its sub-category of *sharing economy*, CE is suggested to "foster sustainability" by providing alternative solutions for products, services and socioeconomic models with the aim of "preserv[ing] natural resources for humanity's and the planet's sakes, rather than substitut[ing] resources through human capital" (Henry et al. 2021, 1) [12]. In other words, these concepts allow us to imagine and experience alternative ways of allocating (economic) goods besides that of commercial market exchange (Widlok 2016) [13].

Like the ritualised eco-practices, sharing must be understood as a highly socialised practice. It is in this sense that Widlok (2016) explains how sharing creates and maintains social bonds through "a pattern of opportunities to ask, to respond and to renounce" (xvii). According to Widlok, the practice is facilitated by a physical, and even more so practical, presence[14]. Thinking back to our network, it is an interplay of the social practices – like the morning circles – and the shared space and specific locations within that space – like the give-away corner – that enable the practice of resource sharing.

In the *Gemeinschaft*, the act of sharing is further motivated by two main factors. The first one is mere practicality, and the second one is to reduce one's own consumption by reusing already available resources. As Alba stresses, "it feels inefficient, at this point in time where society is, not to share resources together."

The *Gemeinschaft*, with its diverse members, also provides the opportunity of sharing immaterial resources like information or services.  Like in the example with the iso-mats, this can enable information about ecological practices to circle around the community and motivate others to adjust their practices accordingly. At best, this creates a learning environment in which ecological practices are shared and foster more eco-friendly behaviour by the *Gemeinschaft*'s collective.

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[12] Nevertheless, both concepts have been criticised for deviating from the sustainability idea, due to exaggerated neoclassical and neoliberal interpretations (Martin 2016; Murillo et al. 2017).

[13] It is important to note, that the sharing of goods and resources is not a new concept. Many ethnographic studies examine sharing and gift-giving in hunter-gatherer communities. For an overview see Widlok (2016).

[14] "Practical presence is presence that is recognized by both parties in the encounter" (Widlok 2016, 72)

### 4.3. Individualised ecological practices

#### 4.3.1. Composting for Pachamama

The garden team – that day consisting of Bill, Lilli, Stella, Alba and me – were sitting around the dining table in Bill's flat. Some of us had to be careful not to sit back too much in our chairs in order to keep a safe distance from the dozens of tomato plants that were growing on the windowsill behind us. After all the care they have been given, we certainly did not want to hurt their delicate branches. After a morning of planting new salads and kohlrabi, we were all very hungry. Luckily, lunch was already served – a risotto with the last brussels sprouts from the previous season and a delicious salad from the garden. Before we started eating, Alba invited everyone to hold each other's hands. She gently closed her eyes, took a deep inhale, and, with a soft sigh and slight smile on her lips, said: "Thank you so much for this food. Thank you to the garden, and thanks to Pachamama! Enjoy!"

It was only later, during one of our many inspiring talks, that I had asked Alba what she meant when she addressed 'Pachamama'. She explained: "Pachamama is in Spanish. It's the spirit of the mother, which is Mother Earth, which tribal cultures have seen as the spirit of Nature. They have recognised that the jaguar and the tree and the snake, trees, water, fire – they all have spirit. And Pachamama is the regenerative power of all this spirit. […] And Pachamama is everything that is holding this together." [15]

Alba's way of expressing her thanks before every meal is directly linked to her ecospiritual imaginaries. By adopting the notion of "Pachamama", Alba expresses an affinity with Quechua/Aymara cosmology and understands it as the "Spirit of Nature" and "Mother Earth" that is "the regenerative power of all this spirit". Through these imaginaries, Alba relates to Nature affectionately and appreciatively which informs her practices, such as speaking out her thanks to Pachamama and being appreciative of the resources she receives from Her.

However, Alba not only connected with Nature on an ecospiritual level but also through material-metabolic processes.

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[15] Alba's understanding of „Pachamama", labelling it as "Spanish" and attributing it to "tribal cultures" is a relatively European way of reading/translating the Quechua/Aymara cosmology and does not take into account the critical colonial history related to it.

It was on a sunny afternoon that Alba explained to me the importance of small, individual eco-practices: "Us[ing] a compost toilet, shop[ping] second-hand, buy[ing] second-hand furniture, do[ing] car sharing. Like, every small solution, on a bigger scale of things, will have an impact. I assure you. If you use a compost toilet once per day – so not all the time – once per day, you save 40 litres of water. Over 30 days, it's 1200 litres of water per month. Times 12, per year, how much water did you save per year? So, every little action counts." I asked her if this meant that she always came down to the garden to use the compost toilet then. "I'm coming to this toilet, yeah. Or, for example, I pee in a bucket and then I bring it here." My eyes widened in surprise "Really?" I asked, "Like, in your room?". "Sometimes, yeah", Alba responded. Overtly amused by my incredulous facial expression, she added, "why would I flush 40 litres of water for 100ml of pee?"

Alba's example, again, highlights how in ecological practices, various elements are at play, interacting with each other. The aspect of spatiality manifests itself in the fact that Alba's room, situated on the third floor of the castle, is far away from the compost toilet, thus pushing her to be creative in thinking about other solutions for composting her urine. In the network, this eco-practice links the aspect of spatiality together with the imaginary of Nature as "Pachamama" and "the Great Spirit", the material presence of the bucket and the metabolic processes of peeing in it.

The effort Alba takes on with this practice further reveals the intimate and emotional bond she shares with Nature. Because of it, she feels the need of giving back to "Pachamama" and goes to great lengths to collect and compost her urine. Moreover, Alba described to me how "everything is soil" and that we will all eventually die, decompose and "go back into the soil". According to Puig de la Bellacasa (2019), affirming that humans are made of soil makes them "one kind in a broader material genre" (402). Thus, by considering herself as a "moist package of animated soil", Alba places herself on the same level as other biotic things.

As such, Alba's ecological practice constitutes an enactment of her ecological subjectivity. It is an expression of her socioecologically situated, shaped and organised modes of perception, thinking, feeling etc. (Ortner 2005) as well as her ecological imaginaries. Furthermore, Alba understands her eco-practices, like composting her urine and occasionally helping in the permaculture garden, as a form of ecological activism. She explained to me how important it is for her to grow her own food as we had become too dependent on the food

system and forgot where our food is coming from. Calling it "[her] activism" illustrates how eco-practices can not only constitute an enactment of ecological but even ecopolitical subjectivity. Moreover, this subjectivity is continuously formed and crafted, and Alba is thus in a constant state of becoming when engaging in these practices.

Composting and recycling 'waste materials' was one of the most visible eco-practices present in the *Gemeinschaft*. With the availability of multiple compost piles, the organic waste and coffee grounds from community members and the seminar house were diligently collected and regularly brought out into the garden. Likewise, people separated different materials like paper, aluminium, or glass and brought them to the nearby recycling station – a very normal habit in Switzerland.

However, collecting one's urine in a bucket to later bring it down to the compost toilet was an extra effort that was not common among my participants. This underlines that not all community members go to the same lengths when it comes to ecological practices. Furthermore, different people have different priorities and, connected to their imaginaries, enact different eco-practices.

### 4.3.2. Responsible food consumption

It was during a delicious lunch in Kaylee's cosy living room where the whole garden team – Bill, Lilli, Stella, Veronika and me – plus the hostess herself were gathered around the wooden table when a conversation over food consumption started: "Well, I believe that the way we nourish ourselves is right", Kaylee stated. I was not 100% sure if by 'we' she meant everyone that is sitting around the table or people from this community in general. Bill asked what Kaylee meant by 'right'. "Being respectful towards Nature, not exploiting the soil; organic, regional, seasonal and sustainable. This is what I think is right" she responded decisively. Bill agreed with her and echoed that he also considers these the most important values: "organic, regional, and seasonal – this is important! Instead of being vegan and then eating avocados and quinoa from I don't know where."

For community members like Kaylee and Bill, who are holding on to these values, it is essential that there are several options for buying locally sourced, organic, and seasonal food in the community and its close surrounding. For one, the permaculture garden provides the

community members with fresh vegetables and fruits throughout the year. Especially during the winter and early spring months, however, the permaculture garden has not much to offer besides the variety of salads and wild herbs. In those times, the organic farm shop right across the street offers a slightly bigger selection of vegetables, as well as some dairy and meat products. The 'Food-Lädeli' (Food-Shop) further provides community members with basic food products like different grains, flowers, nuts, etc., as well as some cleaning products like various detergents – all in big containers where people can fill up their jars.

Discussions like the above, debating what type of diet was 'right', were quite common among my participants, especially within the garden team. While some people, like me, might struggle choosing alternatives that would be least damaging to the environment, others, like Bill and Kaylee, seemed to have a rather clear idea about what is 'right'.

What is more, their idea of a 'right' way implies a certain moral standard. This ties back to the imaginaries, which provide a framework of "expectations […] and normative notions" (Taylor 2002, 106) on how to behave.

In Kaylee and Bill's case, their decisions about food consumption are guided by their eco-imaginaries. Furthermore, the consumption itself becomes an example of eco-practices and an expression of their eco-subjectivity. Spannring (2019) describes (food) consumption as "a way of being in and relating to the world" (1), and Garine (2004) further states that people's attitudes and behaviour in relation to food are "largely a product of a learning process in the framework of their own society and culture" (15).

Despite sharing the same values, Bill and Kaylee have different approaches to it. After stating how important it is to her to eat regional and seasonal food, Kaylee admits that in winter, after a few meals of savoy cabbage – one of the few vegetable community members could harvest during those months – she got a bit sick and tired of it. She then would switch it up with nonseasonal food bought at the nearest supermarket.[16] Bill, on the other hand, is more consistent with matching his practices to his beliefs. As a bowl of salad was handed around, Bill rejected it with thanks, as it had dried tomatoes in it, adding: "I'll eat tomatoes when they grow here in the garden!"

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[16] Despite the available options of locally sourced organic food, several community members preferred shopping at conventional grocery shops. Why that is will be discussed in chapter 6.3.

This shows that Kaylee and Bill, although holding the same values, differ significantly in how strictly they apply these values to their own decisions and practices – with Bill declining certain vegetables when they were offered to him out of season whereas Kaylee would make more exceptions and allow herself to occasionally cook with non-seasonal foods from overseas. This further illustrates how the socioecologic network is not rigidly defined, and different elements can pop in and out, depending on the individualised enactment of the eco-practices.

**Concluding remarks**

This chapter has shown how the eco-imaginaries outlined in chapter 3 give rise to different ecological practices to form a larger socioecologic network in the *Gemeinschaft*. As ways of relating to Nature in everyday life, they constitute a variety of practices that contribute to the protection and promotion of biodiversity, such as ritualised Nature celebrations, the sharing of resources, recycling, composting and conscious food consumption.

By outlining the basic workings of the network and demonstrating how it works in collectivised and individualised practices, I have further illustrated how the ecological practices are always made up and influenced by multiple interacting components. Elements like the space and its materiality – including the ritual place, give-away corner, the nearby recycling station or the community food shop (*Food-Lädeli*) – have a stationary quality and seem to facilitate and normalise certain eco-practices. However, this is highly dependent on how they are individually or collectively appropriated – for example, through ritualised celebration, practical presence, personal motivations, or fixed ideas about what is "right". The socioecologic network is thus in a continuous and dynamic flow.

Finally, the community member's eco-practices both express and constitute certain eco(political)-subjectivities. They too are fluid, hybrid and continuously formed *and* manifested through praxis. In this case, it is ecological practices that link together the different elements of the network.

In the next chapter, I will elucidate how the permaculture garden – with its specific set of eco-practices – can function as a space for more intimate reactions between humans and other-than-humans, thus shaping the human-Nature relationships by cultivating an embodied sense of ecological awareness.

## 5. Permaculture and the embodiment of ecological awareness

It was during one of the community garden mornings that I listened to Veronika explain what permaculture is. "The term stems from the English words 'permanent' and 'agriculture', and it is all about closing Natural circuits. For this, we always look to Nature because that is where the Natural cycles exist. The best example is the forest: it is a self-sustaining ecosystem that functions smoothly without external intervention." Veronika further explained how important it is to look at the surrounding elements when working with permaculture – at the direction of the wind, at how the water flows, but also considering which animals and people are present.

Permaculture represents both an agroecological practice and holistic life philosophy. Regarding its practices, Veteto and Lockyer (2008) describe permaculture as a set of "tools for translating the ecovillage concept from idealism into practice" (48). In an attempt to overcome the human-Nature divide, permaculture movements focus on cultivating "a non-exploitative relationship with land" (Ray 2020, 56) and developing communities that live "in harmony with natural ecosystems" (Fadaee 2019, 720). As such, the permaculture ideology differs from conventional gardening practices in several ways: most importantly, by placing the focus on a more intimate interaction *with* Nature.

The *Gemeinschaft*'s monthly organised garden mornings were a fundamental way of drawing community members and people from outside together in the permaculture garden. As such, it constituted a highly socialised practice. In fact, many participants of the garden mornings highlighted the social aspect as a key motivation to join the event. Of course, another motivation was the opportunity to physically engage in the permaculture garden and learn something about its workings. In this setting, people got the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in the ecological practice of permaculture gardening and have an experience-based interaction with Nature that might differ from their daily practices.

Whereas, for the most part, community members only worked in the permaculture garden a few times a year as part of the garden mornings, there was a small group of people involved in the permaculture garden on a daily basis: the garden team.

In this chapter, I will outline how the permaculture garden project, together with the specific practices and ideologies it entails, influences how community members, especially the garden team, interact with Nature. To do so, I will first dive into some of the essential permaculture principles and demonstrate how they connect to specific eco-imaginaries that become enacted through eco-practice. Then, I will build on the concept of embodiment to describe the particular bodily-sensory engagement that is produced through these practices. Finally, I will elaborate on the project's inspirational aspects and its reach beyond the *Gemeinschaft*.

## 5.1.    Working with Nature and closing circuits – Permaculture principles

It was a very windy day in mid-March. Stella, Lilli, and I were standing at one end of the newly prepared bed. Bill instructed us about what was going to happen next: "Here, we're going to plant two rows of carrots on the side and one row of onions in the middle. The carrots and onions go well together because they keep each other's vermin away." Bill drew a groove in the earth, and we started to comminute the soil in the groove with our hands. "The carrots really like loose soil", Bill said, "if there are pieces that are too loamy or clump together too much, take them out and put them aside." Once we were done with the entire row, the carrot seeds were mixed with fertilising compost earth and spread out evenly in the groove. "When you already mix the seeds with the compost, it is easier to distribute them evenly and with sufficient spacing. The carrots need enough space to grow", Bill explained.

One of the main principles in permaculture is to observe and understand the natural processes and support them – working "not against, but in harmony with Nature", as Bill phrased it. For him, this implied following the natural rhythms and being aware of the plants' needs. This was evident by how carefully he chose which crops were planted next to each other, as well as in the attention he paid to the loose soil and generous spacing used for the carrots to make them feel 'comfortable' and support their growth. It is this understanding of the plants' needs that maked Bill a competent permaculturist.

Working alongside Bill in the permaculture garden, I could see how his eco-imaginaries directly translated into his garden work. His conception of himself as a "symbiotic being" that is "in constant connection with other species" became apparent in the way he related to other-than-humans. When Bill was thinking of where the vegetables would be planted, he was

not just thinking about himself but took an array of elements into account: which plants would support each other; how much sunlight and water they required, what the best soil consistency was for them and so on. In this sense, Bill viewed the garden work as a collaborative process between himself and many other-than-human species.

For Bill, one element that linked all these different species together is soil. He considered it one of the most precious elements in the garden because "healthy soil means healthy plants". To him, it was evident that monocultures exploit the soil by drawing specific minerals from it without balance. In contrast, by planting mixed cultures – a variety of plants in one bed – the assortment of minerals that the different plants take out of the soil is bigger and more stabilised. To this end, Bill deemed it of utmost importance to come up with elaborate planting plans to assure that no vegetable was planted in the same bed two years in a row, which would leave the soil poor in specific minerals. He further explained that using compost earth for planting new seeds was not about fertilising the plants but about "adding to the soil life". For Bill, this concept contrasts to conventional agriculture and gardening practices, wherein the plants are fertilised to make them grow as fast as possible. "This, however, destroys the humus, sets free more $CO_2$ and ultimately leads to a less healthy soil", he explained. While the conventional methods follow short-sighted aspirations for a quick profit, permaculture adopts a more long-lasting vision aimed at the regeneration of the soil.

The compost earth, however, not only serves for the fertilisation of the soil but also to close natural circuits – another permaculture principle.

It was on a dry and hot day that we collected the fresh organic waste from the seminar kitchen to bring it outside and use it for our new compost. Under Veronika's instructions, we started to build up the compost by layering different materials – dry branches, clumps of green grass, chicken manure mixed with sawdust, leaves, and the organic waste from the community. While we were working on layering the compost, Veronika told us how much she enjoyed this work because of its circular character. "I take something there and give it [back] here", she said. Judging by the glow that lit up in her eyes and the soft smile on her face, it was obvious that this circularity and knowing that everything flows back into the natural circuit gave her a great feeling of contentment. Once we were done layering the compost, the only thing left to do was to water it every other day. From this point on, it was the small insects, worms, and microorganisms that would do all the work by breaking down the organic material, thus

transforming the household and garden 'waste' into fertile humus. "The compost is super important", Veronika stressed, "it is the garden's black gold."

The label of the "garden's black gold" indicates the high value (both material and symbolic) that Veronika sees in it. Like Bill, she views the compost as an essential part of the permaculture garden and necessary for the regeneration of healthy soil life. At the same time, "gold" typically has a commodity value and is an object of exchange. In this case, the exchange is organic waste for soil. This relates to the circular character Veronika talked about. The "gold" as a valuable material further underlines the favourable outcomes it produces. The fertilising compost earth will eventually translate into strong plants and delicious vegetables that the community members get 'in return' for their work.

In her article on human-soil affections, Puig de la Bellacasa (2019) explains how the transmission of soil-centred knowledge for care and repair embeds a particular angle to soil aliveness. She further argues that these imaginaries of soil's aliveness intensify a sense of entangled and intimate human-soil interdependency.

It is in this way that we must understand how the garden practices shape the human-Nature relationship and influence people's eco-subjectivity. Through its multispecies collaborative approach, permaculture creates a sense of "shared aliveness" (ibid.) between humans and other-than-human species.

It is thus the permaculture principles, such as observing and working with Nature and creating synergies and closing circuits, which shape the garden team's interaction with Nature. By working with the natural processes, learning about their functioning, and exchanging ideas during intense lunch discussions, the garden team internalise these principles.

Moreover, the repetition of the permaculture principles and the practical translation of them into physical garden work leads to a more intensified embodied experience of ecological awareness. The permaculture garden thus functions as a site of interaction between humans and other-than-human species, which can foster a more embodied sense of ecological awareness.

## 5.2.     Embodiment of ecological awareness through ecological practices

Today was definitely the hottest day of the year so far. The weather app on my phone indicated that it was 25°C as Stella and I started with planting a row of leaks into one of the longer beds. I stabbed into the loamy soil with my small hand shovel. The earth was hard to pierce through, and the soil kept sticking to the shovel's blade. Once I had managed to dig a deep enough hole, I gently took the leak seedling into my hands. Its white roots seemed so delicate, and the scissors cut through them easily. It felt so wrong to do this, but Bill had explained that by doing so, the plants would "grow back even stronger". Soon, my legs and back responded to the uncomfortable crouched position I found myself in whilst planting. I shifted my weight from one leg to the other, trying to find out a more relaxed posture to work in. The sun was shining on my back with full intensity, and I regretted not wearing shorts. Next to me, Stella was using the back of her hand to wipe some sweat off her forehead. She grinned at me with exhaustion, filled her cheeks with a big breath of air, then released it with a loud sigh. Occasionally, we stood up to stretch our legs, took a sip of water or relaxed a few minutes in the shadow before getting back to work – after all, we wanted to get finished with the bed today. Towards the second half of the bed, the soil got softer and digging the holes required less effort. However, small grains of dirt had collected in the joints of my scissors and hindered the opening mechanism. As I started to develop a blister on the knuckle of my right thumb, I decided to drop the scissors and simply clip of the end of the roots with my fingernails. I jumped at Stella's sudden exclaim over a huge earthworm she dug up. "Woah," she cheered, "look at this big fellow!" Indeed, the length and size of this one was impressive. "Surely he's been working hard turning over the earth," I told Stella. She nodded without taking her eyes off the animal. Once we were done appreciating the little one, Stella put him next to one of the planted leak seedlings and sprinkled some loose soil on him to cover him up. A few hours later, we finished the entire row of leaks. Looking at it from the end of the bed, I felt fulfilled but exhausted.

Performing the physically intense garden work on a daily basis was a new experience for me and Stella, who had started only one month before me. After few weeks, I started noticing that my body slowly got used to the heavy work, and my muscles were not constantly sore anymore. In addition to that, however, I also sensed a change in my sensory perception of the natural surrounding.

The concept of embodiment describes a specific "mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas 1994, 12). Through it, the body, mind, and experience are linked to form a bridge from "the body as a source of perception into the realms of agency, practice, feeling, custom, the exercise of skills, performance" (Strathern & Stewart 2011, 388-389). It is this embodied perception that shapes not only how we experience but also how we interpret, understand and make sense of the world around us. Based on his experience, Bill advised us to cut the seedlings' roots for them to "grow back stronger". Clipping them off with our fingernails, Stella and I followed his advice and embodied the practice Bill applies to this type of plant. Barth (2002) further explains how this form of embodied knowledge, arising from experience based on how the physical body functions in the world,  informs "the ways to think and feel about the world" (4).

The garden work, through the active and physical engagement of the body, involves a specific mode of presence and being in the world that is tightly linked to interactions with Nature. Much like the human-soil interactions cultivate a sense of "shared aliveness", it is the sensory elements of the garden tasks – the sweating, backpains and physical effort – that have an effect on the human-Nature relationships. This type of embodiment thus encompasses a connectedness to Nature that is lived in a very active and bodily-sensory way.


While living in the *Gemeinschaft* and working in the garden every day, I personally experienced a change of my bodily-sensory awareness as a reaction to my lively natural surrounding. I woke up to the ducks' busy quacking in front of my window and eagerly got out of bed to see what the weather was doing. After getting dressed, I would step outside and into the small circle, we held every morning before starting work – not the communal morning circle, but our own little moment of sharing how we were feeling on this day. Often, I would relate my emotions to the things around me: the freezing cold creeping through the clothes and making me want to crawl back under the warm blankets of my bed; the rewarding feeling I got from seeing the plants grow in the garden; the sweet smell of the blooming cherry tree bringing out my excitement about spring. My fellow garden team members often had similar comments, and together we evaluated how the weather would influence our garden work and laughed at the curious waddle of the ducks.

While this type of awareness is much ingrained in the minds and bodies of the members of the garden team, it is not evident to all people living in the *Gemeinschaft*. Bill explained to me how he was often frustrated and saddened by community members who were not careful and stepped on the beds, harvested vegetables that were not fully grown yet, or did not follow the 'rules of composting (e.g. not removing the small stickers on fruits and vegetables). However, to not lose his mind, Bill had to accept this sort of behaviour. "Not everyone has the same awareness [...] and priorities. I can either get upset about it – which does not help – leave the *Gemeinschaft* or accept it". While Bill might sound resigned, the type of awareness he is talking about is something that can be learned.

One day, after a garden morning, Kaylee explained to me how she was starting to understand the permaculture principles. "Yesterday, I was cutting a lot of purslanes so that the kohlrabi has more space to grow. Just as I finished, Veronika came by and said, 'Good job. But now we also have to give back to the earth.' So, she took the purslanes I had cut and laid them around the young kohlrabi plants. I did not know this concept of directly giving back before", Kaylee explained. With a smile and youthful excitement in her eyes, she tells me how happy she was to have this opportunity to come work in the garden and "connect with things and look and learn and also just try".

This type of learning experience was shared by several community members that actively participated in garden practices – they learned that it was important to give back to the garden, the importance of composting and how to harvest the plants in a way that would facilitate further growth. This goes to show that the permaculture garden offers a safe setting for the community members to try things out, but also for them to enter in connection and interaction with the garden, the plants and animals within it, and the work they carry out together.

Through this bodily-sensory intense form of experienced eco-practices, people in the *Gemeinschaft*, especially those regularly working in the garden, internalise and cultivate a more intimate relationship with Nature that encompasses an alignment of thinking and feeling, of perceiving and performing, of being and doing. It is in this way that the permaculture's specific set of practices shapes their eco-subjectivity.

In the next section, I argue that it is this embodied experience of working with Nature that also draws people in from outside the community, thus expanding the permaculture project's inspiring reach beyond the borders of the *Gemeinschaft*.

## 5.3. Planting seeds of inspiration – The project's reach and alter-politics

Being a sizeable and established community, the *Gemeinschaft* and its permaculture garden is a well-known project that attracts people interested in alternative, more sustainably driven lifestyles. The community is aware of the interest in and educational value of their project and regularly organises workshops, tours and courses on the topics of communal living, ecovillage design, and permaculture gardening.

The monthly organised community garden mornings are open for everyone and thus draw community members and like-minded people together. On one occasion, I overheard a conversation between a visitor and a community member. Talking about alternative lifestyles and gardening practices, they discussed the responsibility humans have to take better care of their natural environment. I realised how working alongside each other in the garden often resulted in this type of exchange. However, the garden setting not only stimulates the exchange of ideas on ecological living but also provides the opportunity to live and enact the very eco-practices that go with it. This way, the Gemeinschaft's permaculture practices and connected eco-imaginaries are shared and passed on with the hope of fostering more ecological behaviour.

In fact, Roux-Rosier et al. (2018) argue that the permaculture movements "provide an interesting case of imaginaries that make it possible to reimagine the relations between humans, non-human species and the natural environment" (550). They further assert that focusing on ecological practices as sources of imaginaries can contribute to our understanding of how these two "combine in diverse ways, and how these combinations direct the social and political possibilities of alternative organizations" (ibid., 564). This is also connected to Hage's (2012) notion of alter-politics. In contrast to *anti*-politics, which can be understood as an oppositional politics characterised by resisting and defeating the existing order, *alter*-politics describes a form of politics aimed at "providing an *alternative* to the [dominant] political order" (292). Hage further explains how ecological crises has created and necessitated a

'green' political imaginary that calls for "new politics" coming from outside the existing space of conventional political possibilities (294). In response, certain socioecological spaces, like eco-communities, emerged to create new imaginaries and symbolic systems. Challenging the existing, hegemonic logics of modernity, they thus function as inspirational spaces that allow them to envision and experience an alternative way of living.

While the *Gemeinschaft* does not explicitly pursue any political goal, their project can be understood as an example of alter-politics. Particularly the permaculture, with its unconventional method of intimately working with Nature, can create an almost 'utopian' space that illustrates what a differently conceived human-Nature relation might be like.

For Veronika, it is essential that the permaculture garden serves as a site for learning and demonstration for people in and outside the community. During a break from the intense digging required for planting potatoes, she shared with me her dream of providing more workshops and garden activities for adults and children. With the goal of awareness creation, she views it as her life's mission to build bridges between humans and Nature, to facilitate the co-living and co-working of the two, and to build up the communication and connection between them. When I asked her how she does that, she responded that it is, on the one hand, through her work in the permaculture garden. There, she shares her skills, practices and views with the garden volunteers, the community members and visitors that come to work in the garden. On the other hand, she incorporates her mission of awareness creation into her private life by sharing her vision and knowledge with friends, neighbours and family. By working in the garden and raising awareness, Veronika is sowing actual and metaphorical seeds to inspire people to build more meaningful and intimate relationships with Nature.

**Concluding remarks**

For many members of the *Gemeinschaft*, the permaculture garden is first and foremost a place where they can grow their own organic vegetables.

Regarding the socioecological network, however, the *Gemeinschaft*'s permaculture garden is more than that. It incorporates the permaculture ideology and related eco-imaginaries and translates them into gardening practices of working *with* Nature. As such, the ecological practices carried out in the garden are an interplay between humans and other-

than-humans, which is shaped by and simultaneously shape the human-other-than-human-relationships. Further, the permaculture project provides a material space – the garden – where people can experience and enact these imaginaries and practices. Another layer is added through the garden's function as a site of learning and inspiration. With the monthly garden mornings, it is not only the community members but also visitors from outside the community who get to learn about *and* experience what it means to have a more intimate relationship with Nature.

To not over-idealise the permaculture garden's impact, it is important to state that the garden mornings also constitute a highly socialised practice. Further, the socioecological network must be understood as highly fluid and dynamic. It does, thus, not produce the same outcome for everyone but is also dependent on people's own eco-imaginaries and eco-subjectivities.

Nevertheless, it was my impression that community members who spend more time physically experiencing, interacting, and communicating with their Natural had a different, more embodied conception and relation to their ecological environment. Occasionally, I observed how this translated into a more embodied ecological awareness and a higher sense of responsibility towards it.

# 6. Ecological citizenship

In this last chapter, I will reflect on the previously outlined socioecological network and its constituting elements – imaginaries, practices, and subjectivities – in relation to the notion of ecological citizenship.

To do so, I will first introduce two different approaches of how my research participants understood and related to ecological responsibility. Next, I will elaborate on the notion of ecological citizenship and discuss how to broaden its scope using Haraway's (2008) concept of response-ability. Finally, I will review the *Gemeinschaft*'s potential and limitations in shaping ecological citizenship by addressing the question of whether or not it should be labelled as an 'ecovillage'.

## 6.1.    The responsibility to "chill the fuck out"

It was over a cup of tea that Alba explained to me how she understands her ecological responsibility. "I feel it's our responsibility to [...] deconstruct the systems that we have created to destroy Nature. And it's in our power and capacity to reinvent and reimagine and co-create systems that work for the planet, that work for us, and that work for all human beings – all beings, actually. I think it is our responsibility to question, challenge, and reinvent everything, right now. And I'm scared that if we don't do that, it may be, at some point, that we will not exist. [...] Nature will continue existing, but not us."

Through this reflection, Alba criticises the modern capitalist systems and their exploitative relationship with Nature. In line with alter-political thought, she suggests that humans need to rethink and potentially reinvent "everything", especially the way they interact with Nature. She continued explaining how, for her, eco-practices go "beyond protecting Nature" and are about "observing our actions in a system". By placing human actions in relation to a larger socioecological system, we recognise that they do not always imply direct spatial or temporal response. Frustrated over people who are (deliberately or not) unaware of this, Alba described how this could become problematic when it comes to actions affecting Nature: "Humans think they can act however they want, and the system will not change. [Because] we don't see our actions in a fast response. So, I think our responsibility is to calm down, slow the pace and chill the fuck out."

For Alba, to "chill out" and take the time to reflect is at the very core of understanding that humans are not alone in this socioecological system and that a person's actions always already affect others. This shapes her awareness towards other-than-human species and is expressed in her eco-practices of "giving back to the soil" and occasional gardening, which she describes to be her "eco-activism".

The approach of understanding responsibilities as an awareness of one's action was common among my participants. Daisie, for example, stressed the importance of starting with herself and the awareness she brings into her behaviour. "The way I behave can have a positive or negative influence on the world, depending on my awareness. […] The more I am in connection with my inner Nature; it can have a positive influence on my surrounding. The more I understand this and take on responsibility, the more it goes into the next ring: How am I with my children? Or how am I with my neighbourhood?"

Daisies explanation reminded me of the metaphor of a stone that is being dropped onto the flat surface of a lake. While the stone stands for the awareness Daisie brings into her actions, the ripples it creates represent the different "rings" this awareness and behaviour expands out to. She described how, after learning about the disastrous effects of pollution, she started to the topic of waste recycling in her work as an art teacher in a public school.

The way Daisie revered her "inner Nature" links back to what Rebekka described as being "in harmony" with Nature by being "in harmony" with herself. Contrary to Alba's material-metabolic approach to eco-citizenship,
Rebekka's focus on self-awareness is connected to how she relates to Nature in the form of a (spiritual) concept. Next to habitual practices of waste recycling, she, therefore, places high value on managing her "inner Nature" through meditation.

The two different approaches to responsibility are an example of how the socioecological network's elements can be assembled in diverse ways to produce various forms of ecopolitical engagement. In the *Gemeinschaft*, people's approaches, imaginaries, practices, intensities of embodiment, and levels of awareness thus produces different forms of ecological citizenship.

## 6.2.     From responsibility to response-ability

The concept of ecological citizenship is centred around the idea of reducing one's ecological footprint (Dobson 2003). As such, the notion moves beyond citizenship's formal inscription by stressing the idea of not only rights but responsibilities.

According to Dobson, there are four ways by which ecological citizenship (EC) extends beyond the liberal and civic republican notion of citizenship and relates to personal environmental obligations. In the following, I will outline the four dimensions and relate them each to a concrete example found in the *Gemeinschaft*.

First, the recognition of responsibilities rather than rights lies at the heart of ecological citizenship. It is linked to socioecological justice as a core virtue within EC and the idea that "all personal actions […] always already affect others" (Jagers et al. 2014, 436). For many of my participants, this was linked to the expectations and normative dimensions of their own eco-imaginaries. Their specific ideas of environmentally friendly behaviour often translated into more conscious and informed consumer choices. Several people expressed concerns they had regarding the money they invested and the impact this would have on people and the environment. In reaction to this, they often turned towards organic or second-hand alternatives.

Second, the justice-driven responsibilities and motivations of EC are "primarily other-regarding and accepted without any expected reciprocity" (ibid.). This is well illustrated by the sharing of (im)material resources in the community. When people gave their clothes, furniture or knowledge, they did it without expecting something in return.

Third, challenging the traditional confinement of citizenship to the public sphere, EC extends the citizenship notion to the private sphere on the basis that private acts can have public implications. An example of this is Daisie and Rebekka's view of responsibility as living "in harmony" with themselves to respectfully interact with their surroundings. Here, the starting point of responsibility is the intimate and personal self. Another example of this is Veronika sharing her knowledge and vision of human-Nature relationships with her private network.

Fourth, ecological citizenship expands the scope of civic responsibilities across both territorial borders and generations and thus proposes a notion of citizenship that is non-territorial and non-temporal (Jagers et al. 2014; Wolf et al. 2009). Being very familiar with the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, many of my participants commented on

how their ecologic responsibility is linked to an obligation of assuring the existence of future generations.

Through these dimensions, ecological citizenship puts the emphasis on responsibility, community, and care. Yet, with the ecological citizenship discourse often solely centring around the role of consumption in relation to community and care (Spannring 2019), the approach remains, once more, stuck in a hegemonic capitalist thinking.

However, Haraway (2008) suggests that responsibility in a multispecies existence is constituted through response-able practice. Following her approach, I propose to expand the concept of ecological citizenship with the notion of *response-ability*. Simply put, response-ability describes the capacity to form an adequate response in cross-species encounters. Building on Haraway's work, Brown and Dilley (2011) conducted studies of intimate relationships between humans and dogs. Their findings suggest that "responsible practice is not only a case of enabling animals [or other-than-humans] to be articulate but for humans to cultivate ways of co-knowing […] that enable response in a timely and geographically-attuned manner to such articulations" (44). Relying on anticipatory ways of "knowing *with*" (ibid., 43, emphasis added), response-ability thus puts an emphasis on response and mutual human-nonhuman agency. As such, this approach can be extremely valuable in understanding and transforming human-Nature interactions.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, many of the *Gemeinschaft*'s ecological practices, especially in the permaculture garden, are shaped by and rely on human-Nature interactions. Principles like "working with Nature" and "giving back" extend the idea of agency beyond the 'human sphere' and cultivate eco-practices that focus on co-knowing and collaboration. Response-ability – understood as a "set of connections and sensibilities that demand and enable response, and that are performed, nurtured and crafted in processes of intra-action" (Brown & Dilley 2011, 38) – thus lies at the core of these eco-practices.

This is why I propose that the notion of response-ability, rather than responsibility, should be the focus of an ecological citizenship discourse that aims at transforming the human-Nature interactions.

## 6.3. Ecovillage or not? – Potential and limitations of the community in shaping ecological citizenship

According to Jackson and Svensson (2002), ecovillagers ideally embody "a mindful lifestyle, which can be continued indefinitely in the future" and thus shape "a new culture, designed to restore the Earth and her people" (5). In chapter 5.3, I have already hinted towards ecovillages' capacity of providing an alternative to consumer society and its destructive lifestyle. In this last subchapter, however, I want to deliver a more nuanced account of the potentials and limitations the *Gemeinschaft* has in shaping ecological citizenship.

Although the *Gemeinschaft* officially belongs to the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), opinions on whether the community should be labelled as an ecovillage or not varied.

Several community members – especially the ones from the garden team and Fabian – explained to me that they rejected the label because they felt that it was not deserved. To them, it seemed ridiculous to call the *Gemeinschaft* an ecovillage. As I asked Bill about the community's involvement in GEN, he laughed. "Yeah, right," he said with bitter sarcasm in his tone, "just look at the buildings, the oil heating, and all the cars in the parking lot". Indeed, the huge building's poor energy efficiency, the infamous oil heating, and the excessive usage of cars were points of criticism raised by several of my research participants. But also individual's unecological practices and their lack of ecological awareness was brought up.

Initially, I was quite surprised to hear this criticism. But indeed, during the first weeks of my fieldwork, I observed very few shared ecological practices. This was not what I had expected when thinking of an ecovillage. In one of my last weeks in the *Gemeinschaft*, I brought it up in a conversation with Rebekka, who is the community's GEN representative. She told me about GEN's four pillars of sustainability (ecological, economic, cultural, and social) and explained that the *Gemeinschaft* excelled in the social aspects. This seemed logical. After all, the social dimension was most prominently highlighted as a central element of the community by the majority of my research participants. The permaculture garden and implementation of collectivised eco-practices, on the other hand, only played a secondary role. When asked about it, few community members said that being part of GEN played an important role in their decision to join the *Gemeinschaft*.

While the community can be a good example of a different form of living, together and in interaction with Nature, this does not automatically mean that such forms of co-living are

more environmentally friendly – even in a community labelled 'ecovillage'. Rather, it is the dynamics of the overall socioecological network that influences if, and to what extent, ecological citizenship is produced. Within it, different material and immaterial elements – like the space and location, the various eco-imaginaries, senses of awareness, and levels of embodiment – have the potential to foster or hinder ecological practices.

**Doing the small things that don't hurt – ideology vs convenience**

When it came to the 'ecovillage or not?' question, Fabian, who had been working in sustainable agriculture and agroforestry, was one of the most critical voices. Using a carbon emission calculator, he evaluated the *Gemeinschaft*'s ecological footprint. "The eco-balance here is way worse than when I lived in a modern single-family house in the city" he stated. He reckoned that, on the one hand, this had to do with the general, energy-inefficient infrastructure. On the other hand, he pointed out people's individual unecological practices of taking the car to work or shopping for non-organic food. I asked about the organic farm shop across the street and whether people went there. Fabian shook his head. "Many who live here try to live cheap. The farmer's vegetable offer is limited and extremely pricey. […] So, many community members even drive across the border to go shopping because there the products are cheaper," he said grimly.

Fabian's explanation of why certain community members choose unecological options over ecological ones points towards the influence of socioeconomic factors and structural inequalities. An example of this was Stella and Lilli's weekly trips to the supermarket. Despite their ecological awareness, the two garden volunteers would often cycle into town to buy non-organic vegetables and fruits in the supermarket[17] instead of the ones available at the farmer's shop. When I asked Lilli about it, she told me that she felt guilty about this but that the limited budget she got from the EVS programme was just not enough for the high prices that came with the organic label.

This illustrates that being more aware of one's ecological impact does not automatically lead to more environmentally friendly practices. Yet another factor playing into this is the willingness to change one's habits and potentially sacrificing the convenience one was accustomed to.

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[17] At least for as long as the fruits and vegetables from the garden were not yet ready to harvest.

After Fabian's critical comment on other people's unecological practices, he reflected on his own habits. He explained that for few years, he and his family started to fly a bit less, but, having family and a business in Latin America, still do so regularly. For Fabian, it is clear that paying the additional fee to 'compensate' his flight miles constitutes a rather symbolic gesture: "It relieves our consciousness a little," he explained. To reduce his carbon footprint, he only adopts behavioural changes that request relatively little effort and do not go against convenience – as he puts it: "I do everything that does not hurt a lot."

This further coincides with various people's comments on families being less 'ecological' because they have other priorities, like caring for their kids and less time to consider ecological options.

All of this is not to denounce the *Gemeinschaft's* ecological efforts and aspirations but rather underscores the fluid dynamic of the socioecological network. Within it, the different elements can continuously be assembled and reassembled to form various (un)ecological practices. As Jackson (2004) and Greenberg (2013) note – ecovillages should be seen as a process, striving towards a goal but never reaching the ideal.

## 7. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have offered a glimpse into the lives and ecological practices of members of the *Gemeinschaft*.

More specifically, I have argued that the community's ecological dimension is made up of a broader socioecological network which is comprised of different elements, such as the space and its materiality, people's eco-imaginaries and their practices etc. I have sketched out the ways in which people conceptualise Nature and their relationship with it and shown how some imaginaries are shared while others are individual. I then demonstrated how these eco-imaginaries give rise to a range of collectivised and individualised eco-practices. Finally, I illustrated how these practices, underpinned by the eco-imaginaries, both express and constitute certain eco-subjectivities, shape the human-Nature relationships and inform ecological citizenship.

The network's different elements, however, are not linked together in a stable and consistent flow. Rather, the socioecological configurations of this web move and act erratically due to the shifting manifestation of eco-subjectivity. These fluctuations bring about practices that alter between aware and unaware acts, ideology and convenience and ultimately raise the question of how "eco" the ecovillage really is.

As a central element of this network, I have highlighted the permaculture garden's crucial role in challenging the human-Nature divide. In providing a space for community members and visitors to observe and enact more intentionally caring relations with other-than-humans it invites to re-think and actively change them.

I argued that people who spend more time in the garden experience and maintain a more intimate human-Nature relationship where collaboration is placed in the centre. The intense bodily engagement in these eco-practices can further have the effect of fostering a heightened sense of ecological awareness. In the garden, humans and other-than humans mutually share and develop commitment and awareness, which allows the recognition of a responsibility/response-ability that produces ecological citizenship.

For the larger community of the *Gemeinschaft,* the main focus is on the social dimension, with the ecological aspects playing only a secondary role. Nevertheless – through the examples of the ritualised Nature celebrations, the sharing of resources and the communal garden mornings – I demonstrated that the high value placed on the community's sociality

played an important role in shaping the collectivised eco-practices at hand. Furthermore, I maintain that the communal setting can positively contribute to raising the ecological awareness of community members (and people outside of it) by providing them with the opportunity to interact with Nature in diverse ways, share these experiences and discuss them with each other. After all, it is easier to take ecological action together rather than each one for themselves.

Finally, following Veteto and Lockyer's (2013) suggestion – aiming to understand not only how the world *is*, but how it could *be* – this thesis constitutes an example of critical anthropological thought that enables us to "reflexively move outside of ourselves" (Hage 2012, 287). By focusing on human-Nature relationships, I wanted to show how ecological practices can inform ecological citizenship. It is in this sense that this thesis aims to challenge the dominant exploitative and destructive human-Nature division and invites to re-think our relationships with other-than-humans by working, not against, but *with* Nature.

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