



## **When we talk about trees.**

An ethnography of People and Trees.

Sarah Steendam

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MSc thesis Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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Wordcount: 21655 (excluding bibliography and appendices)

July 2022

Cover photo: 'A tree just as fickle as a human life' by Merel Waagmeester.



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## Bomen

W i n d s t i l i n h e t o n d r a a g l i j k

v e r m o g e n o m b e w e e g l i j k s t i l

t e s t a a n , v a n n i e t s t e l e v e n d a n

v a n l u c h t , v a n a a r d e e n

t o t h u m u s t e v e r g a a n .

CHR. J. Van Geel (*Het Zinrijk* 1971)

## Trees

Windless, in the  
unbearable  
ability to move  
silently  
to stand, to live of  
nothing but  
of air, of earth and  
to decay into humus.

## Abstract

This thesis, written for the MSc in Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship, describes and explains relationships between people and trees in the context of ‘nominating trees’ for two projects. Looking at people’s narratives and practices about trees, this research examines the meanings of human-tree relationships from a project-organisational, human (people) and multispecies (the tree) perspective. The affective encounters in a co-habited urban environment and reciprocal connections between trees and people are explained by reviewing the human experience of tree symbolism, historicity and different temporalities, the identification (identity-making) of people with trees, the practices of exchanging care and services and feelings of affection, respect or pride for trees.

Seeing trees as agents in producing these outcomes, this study explores the space they inhabit (tree-space) and uses the terms ‘life network’ and ‘cohabitation’ to examine human-tree relationships. On the one hand the practice of ‘tree nomination’ is a response to processes of commodification of trees, urbanization, and a bureaucratic and anthropocentric take on life in cities (tree bureaucracy) in the Anthropocene. On the other hands, this thesis also acknowledges shifting ideas on how to describe the cultural division between human and non-human life from a multispecies perspective and introduces the idea of a continuum to describe these shifts. To expand the applicability of this study beyond academia, local authorities could embrace dialogues with residents to acknowledge the roles that trees play in the life networks of urban co-inhabitants.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism, Anthropocene, human-nature relationships, affective encounters, narratives, tree symbolism, multispecies ethnography, life network, cohabitation, nonhuman actant

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## Talking about trees with human voices

I have been exploring a world filled with trees. Trees that were always there, but whom I never perceived through the lenses of anthropology. With these lenses, I discovered a world of tree-relationships and -narratives. Tree-stories will from now on always remind me of this remarkable and intensive time in my life.

I would like to thank the project coordinators of Accidental Green and European Tree of the Year wholeheartedly. Entering a world of tree lovers, tree talkers and above all tree nominators would not have been possible without your support and networks to make- and know that trees matter. Also, thank you for being kind persons, being there for me and my research. Then, I would like to thank the people who so kindly participated in this research. Thank you for sharing with me why you care about trees. Special thanks also go out to my thesis supervisor and the MSc programme staff for guiding me into the world of ethnographic methodology.

Finally, a big hug to family and friends for their patience and contributions in thinking, brainstorming and noticing beautiful trees. We made it through this year together.

The question that will haunt me is: “How to interview a tree?”.

Thank you, Sarah.

## 1. Anthropology of trees in the Anthropocene

“You know, this tree means a lot to me. When I see it, it makes me happy. It is part of my home. When I feel sad, I look outside, it gives me comfort to realise that it has been there long before and will stay. I listen to its leaves rustling, I enjoy its shade, it makes me feel calm. I am its biggest fan!” Talking to Mirjam from the fragment above, made me smile. She does not just refer to the tree impacting her mood, but she also discusses tree-features (longevity, leaves, shade) that give her comfort. Above all, she calls herself a fan. The latter is a word that we would normally not use to describe ourselves in relation to a tree. Can someone be a fan of a tree? Why would Mirjam say this and what does this relationship mean to her? These questions inspired me to dedicate my research to the relationship between humans and trees.

Looking for what trees mean to people, I found that simply opening the newspaper provided data on a daily basis. I found countless popular publications, websites, documentaries and blogposts that highlighted trees as for example wise creatures in myths, saga and religious rituals, as symbols of birth and life, as healers, as gatekeepers of a bio-diverse landscape, as carbon absorbers, as building material and also simply as trees that impress humans with their size, age and calm presence (e.g. Haskell 2018, Bunting and Abels 2022)<sup>1</sup>. I even found trees in the context of health disparities brought on by colonialism when Marya and Patel (2021, 175) write about how most cultures have a story about a ‘tree of life’ and how it often relates to health and nutrition. I was also pleased to find *Famous Trees*, by Randall and Edgerton, published in 1938 in the university library that discusses US trees associated with notable persons, events and places. It shows a long-time history of interest in human-tree relationships! But, how to interpret this interest and explain the meaning of these relations?

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<sup>1</sup> See appendices for a more expansive list of additional, affiliated literature, data and publications that are not cited or referred to in my thesis.



One of the most famous trees in the Netherlands, winner of the Tree of the Year (Dutch election) in 2018, ‘Troeteleik’ –, an Oak tree grows in the middle of the highway A58.

Exploring these questions, this study is situated in a classical topic in the social sciences: the relationships between human societies and the natural environment. In this field, anthropologists have mainly concerned themselves with the practices, meanings and symbolism of these relationships. Laura Rival’s work *The social life of trees* (1998) examines ethnographies by different authors who show that ‘trees function as metaphors for identity and act like long-living mediators’. The book features local ‘stories’ about individual characters and mystic life-regenerative powers of trees, symbolic representations of trees (tree of life, portal to heaven) or on trees as living creatures with qualities and functions (e.g. housing other life, transforming carbon dioxide into oxygen, etc.). However, at the time of publication, the meaning-giving features of trees in the modern, European, urban context remained understudied and Rival’s work comes across as a traditional study, mainly comparing different ethnographies (Strang 1999). The idea that human-nature relationships can also be seen as mutually impactful and somehow reciprocal was however already explored by ecological anthropologists Salzman and Atwood (1996). They saw how the natural environment is shaped by people, but how people are in return also simultaneously shaped by the natural environment.

Placing my study in their line of thinking around impactful, meaningful and balanced relationships between nature and people and how these can be ‘sustainable’, I entered the conceptual domain of the ‘Anthropology of the Anthropocene’. Chakrabarty (2021), Tsing (2017) and Hornborg (2020), among others, describe the time that we live in as an ‘era that

puts ‘human concerns first’. They demonstrate that the Anthropocene is characterised by human-made processes of commodification of nature, consumerism and privatisation. This produced a dichotomy between people and nature, allowing humans to distance themselves from the natural environment. In that sense, the Anthropocene shows that nature has long been culture’s ‘Other’ (Haraway 1992) and ‘humans can no longer be what classical anthropology and human sciences thought they were’ (Haraway et.al. 2015, 2-3). According to these authors, we need to ‘radically extend the scope of human sense-making of the world beyond the human-nature divide’. The definition of sustainability would then take place in a post-humanist society that unsettles dualistic conceptions and moves into a holistic ‘natureculture’ (Haraway 2008), disrupting the anthropogenic concept of ‘sustainability’ (Fox and Alldred 2019, 3-4).

Concluding from this literature that one of the dominant narratives in the Anthropocene is the dualistic dimension of human-tree relationships, I was inspired by the idea that there might be people who already practise ‘unsettling dualistic conceptions’ and tell alternative narratives. Aspiring to contribute to the anthropological field of meanings of sustainable relationships between ‘nature’ and ‘humanity’, I selected a small and accessible research population that concerns itself with trees: people who nominated trees for the (art) project *Accidental Green* or for the *Tree of the Year* contest. Below, I shortly introduce these projects, but I elaborate on them and the research population in further chapters.

The purpose of the **Tree of the Year (European Tree of the Year, ETY)** is to highlight the significance of trees in the natural and cultural heritage that deserves care and protection. The *Tree of the Year* doesn't focus on beauty, size or age but rather on the tree's story and its connection to people. People are stimulated to nominate a tree and compete for the title ‘*Tree of the Year*’. A tree may win by means of popular vote in national and European selection rounds.

The Utrecht based art project **Accidental Green -Seedlings of the City**, by artist Hans van Lunteren, expresses the affection of people for trees, particularly those that grow unofficially (not planted by the municipality) in Utrecht. For this project, stories of people about seedling-trees are collected. The project hopes to inspire the city of Utrecht to change the perspective on -and policies about seedling-trees.

My study explores the meanings that can be derived from the practices and narratives related to nominated trees, mainly in the urban context of the city of Utrecht. It asks: what and who are the projects and people that engage in tree nomination? How is the relationship with trees lived, experienced and told by people? And finally, what does that mean in the backdrop of the scholarly debate on the Anthropocene? In my study, I aimed to approach this theme from an ethnographically relevant, everyday level, using the projects as an entrance to access the research community, to see how people feel, talk about and behave in relationships with trees.

Discussing trees as representations of the natural environment, Rival acknowledged that 'while much anthropological writing [on theorising interactions between human societies and their natural environments] deals with animals and landscapes, very little concerns trees per se'. This is still the case. More than twenty years later, the ethnographic research domain on human-nature relationships has been enriched with interesting work, -connecting the topic to an understanding of the Anthropocene and everyday urban life. Still, very few studies discuss trees specifically. While this thesis adds to the work of Rival, I also build on more recent work of scholars such as Descola (2013) who explains that entering into meaningful relationships with the 'Other' people need to be able to enter a process of 'identification' with this 'Other' 'beyond nature and culture'. I also refer to Archambault (2016), on affective encounters between plant-owners and plants to explain human love for trees. Her use of the notion of affection demonstrates that love between plants and trees should be taken seriously and shows how intimacies emerge and take shape in a post-humanist perspective by representing 'the transformative potential of everyday engagement with the natural world' (Archambault 2016, 265). Finally, I will refer to the work of Kohn (2013) on the agency of trees in forest-thinking. Kohn wants to 'reimagine our relationship to a larger living world that really –but in sometimes counter-intuitive ways– also thinks', representing trees as 'selves'. Kohn stresses that anthropologists have been short-sighted in excluding how nonhuman life may provide signs on understanding what it constitutes 'to be human'. He uses semiotic theory (departing from the notion that also nonhuman life produces signs) to understand the individual selves, agency and relationships of trees (Fisher 2018). Building on ethnographic work with the Runa people in the Amazon, his holistic and multidisciplinary method opens up a different reality that I will try to integrate in this study. Yet, similar to the work of Rival (1998), as he does not discuss the validity of his approach in an urban, western environment, it also leaves space for interpretation for my research.

The concepts in the work of Descola, Archambault and Kohn can be characterised as multispecies perspectives that fill a gap in ethnographic conceptual lines of thinking until now. Whereas the study of relationships between the natural environment and human societies has had the attention of anthropologists for a long time (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), there has been little attention to the role and autonomy of the natural elements themselves. Multispecies anthropologists such as Kirksey (2014), Descola (2013) and Tsing (2017) ask social scientists to address reciprocal aspects of relationships, by including the agency of the natural environment. To understand the dynamics of agency, I base my study on the actor-network theory (Latour 1987, 1996) that asserts that ‘agency is manifest in the relation of actors to each other’. In my study, I intertwine three methodological resources that Latour distinguishes, considering the 1) natural growth and life of a natural entity (like a tree) to exist as a form of ‘agency’, 2) by discussing the agency of a tree in the context of ‘social fabric’ in the ‘life network’ of people and 3) by relating agency with the building of meaning as semiotic constructions in a narrative, similar to what Eduardo Kohn did with his work in the Amazon. Still, we can ask ourselves: ‘But what does it *mean* to say that nonhumans have agency?’ (Sayes 2013). Where possible in my thesis, I try to approach this question by putting trees at the centre of the action as narrated by humans interacting with them. I will now further situate my research in the ethnographic exploration of narratives and reflect on my positionality.

### **Collecting and analysing narratives**

I explored how the meanings of relationships between humans and trees can be explained by studying narratives and practices of people in the context of the two projects mentioned above. I thought that a narrative research approach would allow me to find ‘alternative’ stories in the Anthropocene and possibly represent tree-perspectives. As a volunteer for both projects during my fieldwork, I contacted interlocutors to collect narratives in three different ways: first, I actively followed up on people that I randomly met at project events. Secondly, the project organizations suggested candidates (whom they thought would be open to talk to me) and thirdly, people responded to an open call, issued by the projects. As such, the project contact-persons functioned as gatekeepers for access into the research population. The population was mostly located in the city or vicinity of Utrecht. At the end of my fieldwork, I had interviewed twenty-one people, of which several on multiple occasions.

For this study, the narrative approach (Moen 2006) in open interviews provided the richest data in the sense that I found much meaning and ‘life’ in them, recognizing the work of Bruner (2004) on ‘life as narrative’. In this type of ethnographic exploration, the narrative is the vehicle of the ‘construction of recollected events, dynamics, and their interconnected experiences’ (Cremers 2022). In that sense, collecting narrative data enabled me to draw out concepts about human-tree relationships that held meaning, according to the interlocutors *themselves*. Kohler Riessman (2008, 3-4) describes this as follows ‘... a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful to the audience’. Consequently, I experienced how narrative research data was produced in collaboration with me; it is rooted in shared experiences emerging from conversations, meetings and interviews with people. In other words, most of the data in my study is developed in ‘dialogue and collaborative interpretation, as well as by the analysis of individual and communal stories and experiences’ (Cremers 2022).

So, applying this research method, I entered into what Karen O’Reilly (2015) describes as every-day conversations and active listening within informal settings. These conversations often took place outdoors during walks through urban parks, residential neighbourhoods or work places (in the case of professional arborists). Key to this method was not to approach conversations with structured interview questions, but to open a space for people to tell about and reflect on their lives and selves in relation to the topic. Trying to ‘follow the actor’, the interlocutors for this study took the lead and I was ‘tracing or following the narrative’ (Graugaard 2014) about nominated trees.

For the analysis of the narrative data, I applied Bruner’s (1984) theory that looks at: the content (reflection on the meanings of ‘the experienced’), the language within social and cultural contexts (‘the told’) and ‘the lived’ (the facts). ‘It is possible to imagine that a life is lived, experienced, and told about in a way that depicts a complete relationship between these three terms’ (Moen 2006, 63) and I tried to ethnographically capture the particularities of how to distinguish between what has been lived, what has been experienced, and how people talk about this. However, to maintain a focus on meaning-making and not enter into the domain of linguistic analysis, I concentrated on the ‘experienced’ and the ‘lived’ and only briefly touched on the characteristics of narratives in language as ‘told’ stories. Also, following Bruner (1984) I realized that as a researcher, I would always interpret narratives in terms of my own life experiences and background. In my study, I integrate this ‘fourth’ layer

of narratives by also, where appropriate, reflecting on my positionality. Furthermore, as I translated selected parts of the narratives into English, I considered this as another layer of interpretation that influenced the analysis.

Besides open interviews, I used a number of other methods of data-collection: observation, participation and reviewing documents and information on- and offline on the project organizations and (previously) nominated trees. I also visited trees on my own. During these visits, I talked to people who frequented those places and trees too, in line with what Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) identify as ‘unsolicited oral accounts’. Furthermore, I practised ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998) by participating as a volunteer for the projects. By immersing myself into the organisational cultures, meetings and events, I was able to collect different types of data (pictures, observations, behaviour) on the projects’ practices and project staff. For example, I could observe and participate in the processes of tree-nomination, election and the ETY award ceremony by recording, sharing, telling, re-telling and describing the stories and events that took place (Pfaelzer 2010).

I obtained additional data by reviewing information about the winning trees, profiles and stories on- and offline about the tree of the year election and the art project. Also, the art project exhibited several stories about people and their trees in the Utrecht Central Museum and the Utrecht online newspaper DUIC featured a monthly section on the project. During fieldwork, I participated in several art performances on trees and encountered other forms of data from sources outside the studied projects, such as literature, poetry, paintings, film, and documentary, etc. from different domains (forestry, economy, history, ecology, art, etc.). Where appropriate, I also referred to this data to exemplify meanings and elaborate on the broader context of the findings on human-tree relationships<sup>2</sup>.

### **My own relationship with trees: positionality and reflexivity**

I was about 7 years old. It was an extremely harsh winter in the North of the Netherlands, in a little village called ‘Roden’ where I spent part of my childhood. The trees in the little park in front of my house were covered with snow and their branches hung down from the weight of ice pinnacles. I could hear them breaking. Observing the scene of trees suffering in these cold and icy conditions; I imagined they were ‘cracking limbs’. It was an emotional experience for me. I have ever since cherished a ‘tree’ connection. I perceive trees as manifestations of earth-life with innate energy to grow and survive. Other people might look at trees and see

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<sup>2</sup> See also appendices for a list on additional literature on human-tree relationships.

carbon absorbers, timber, natural elements in need of protection or aesthetic features of the landscape. I appreciate how these perspectives are fair and true, but to me they are not complete without also seeing trees as living organisms with whom we share life on this planet. I therefore side with Nancy Scheper Hughes (1995) who asks anthropologists to not refrain from taking a stance towards the ‘public good’ and contribute ethically next to academically. I position myself in line with Chakrabarty (2021), concerning myself with the ‘planetary good’ rather than the ‘public good’, the latter term, to me signalling an anthropocentric understanding. ‘Do no harm’ would then also concern other nonhuman life; I do not feel happy, damaging a tree.

In his article on narratives for change, Werner Krauss writes that: ‘...interdisciplinary researchers have to learn telling their own narratives of change, too. They have to situate themselves carefully in the respective settings to get access to the specific configurations of space and time that make up the local’ (Krauss 2020, 1-2). Agreeing with Kraus, when asked, I did not hide my positionality and motivation as a researcher, hopefully creating an honest, informal and open setting for my interlocutors to also share their ideas openly. This worked out well most of the time. However, in a few cases, I was also confronted with my own positionality and personal engagement during fieldwork. For example, when Shani invited me to hug a tree, I hesitated and felt awkward. I felt sorry that I let both her down and the chance to experience the tree-love that according to Shani, our world needs. Another example occurred when I honestly told the project staff of the ETY contest that I was somewhat disappointed in the event and that I wished there had been more attention for the nominating people and tree-stories. In hindsight, I was very direct in my answer as I felt how my critical reflection was not constructive and badly timed. I mention these examples to illustrate how during fieldwork, I had to navigate my own positionality as a researcher and as a person, staying true to what I believe is a form of engaged ethnographic research and at the same time, respecting interlocutors and opening up to new experiences that may seem strange to me.

Finally, though most interlocutors did not see a particular need for anonymity, I believe it opened up a freer flow of conversation. Asking for consent for data storage and recording, keeping the data confidential and labelling data correctly ensured the preservation of my own integrity, thereby using the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (2012). During the fieldwork, I built up relationships with the project organizers, but also with several interlocutors. I developed a particularly warm relationship with the people who worked on rescuing a particular walnut tree. Their loyalty and willingness to

share, became precious to me. Through them, I also gained access to other research participants and the updates on the recovery of the walnut in spring deepened the multi-species dimensions of my study.

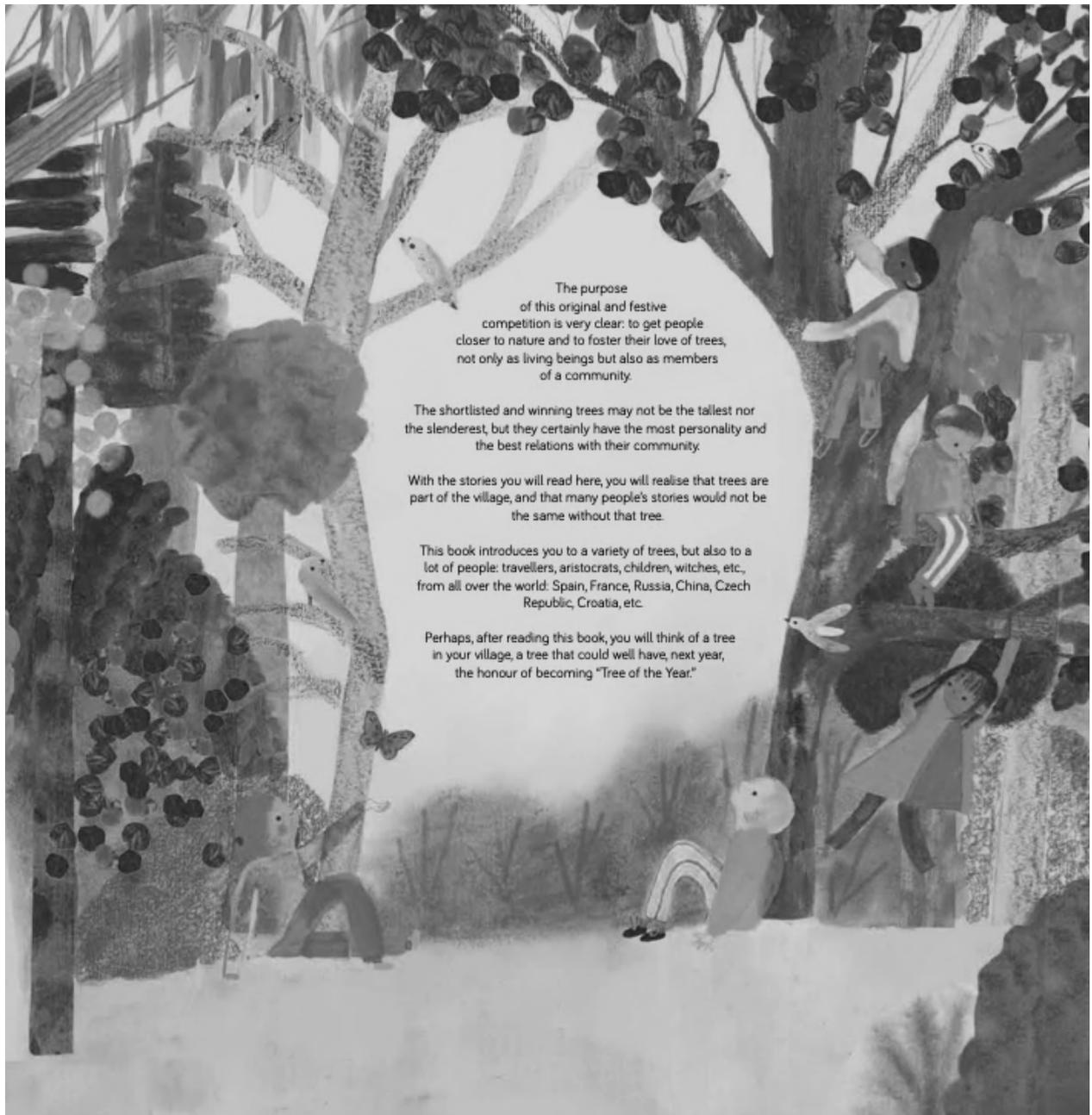
### **Outline of the chapters**

The next chapter examines the main features of the studied projects. In a number of sections, I explore the importance of the ‘place’ of a tree in an urban and social environment, how ‘tree-care’ and ‘tree-maintenance’ are part of the projects and I describe the role or involvement of ‘tree bureaucracy’ and other stakeholders for the projects. Finally, I explain the process and motives for tree nomination.

The third chapter discusses the profiles, relevant affiliations and ideas of research participants. I explore the following questions: ‘who are people who nominate trees?’, ‘what do they have in common?’, and ‘is there something in their backgrounds or profiles that explains their relationship with trees?’. The fourth chapter discusses the meanings and symbolism of human-tree relationships in the Anthropocene. Here, I explore the agency of trees to produce human emotions such as feelings of home and belonging, the experience of temporalities and historicity in relationship to trees and the process of identification with trees. In the fifth chapter, I present the perspective of trees and apply the concepts of ‘cohabitation’ and ‘reciprocal’ relationships. Finally, this thesis concludes by acknowledging the involved parties and projects, an appreciation and critical review of the study’s challenges and ends with the bibliography and appendices.

Throughout the thesis, I will guide the reader with the story of the walnut tree. In a number of vignettes, my acquaintance with the tree, the project and the profiles and considerations of the tree-nominators Ana and Ilja is shared. I selected the story of the walnut as an exemplifying story as I had the chance to attend several meetings and conversations regarding the tree with various involved parties and met with its nominators multiple times. Because it is a small, insignificant tree, whose life and body coexist in an urban environment filled with tree-bureaucracy and with loving neighbours, I believed it adequately portrays the different stakeholders and aspects of human-tree relationships in Utrecht in the context of the art project Accidental Green. I included a small photo-series of the walnut tree in the appendices. In contrast, the images that I placed within the chapters are mostly derived from the ETY contest. I hope that by doing so the vignettes of the walnut of Accidental Green are

balanced with the images of the Tree of the Year contest. Together, I hope they serve the reader with an illustration of the fieldwork I conducted for my thesis.



Page from a children's book on The Tree of the Year (2023) by Lucas Riera and Olivia Holden.

## 2. How and why would people nominate trees?

This chapter describes and explains the Tree of the Year project and art project Accidental Green and how people nominate trees. Below, I will first introduce the two different projects. They are referred to as ‘the projects’ or ‘art project’ or ‘contest’ or abbreviated as ETY (European Tree of the Year). In the next section, I introduce the term ‘tree-space’ to discuss the importance of the space trees inhabit. I further review how the projects perceive ‘tree-care’, ‘tree-maintenance’ and tree-protection and -promotion in relation to (global) processes of deforestation or bureaucracy and with other stakeholders such as the general audience (influencing public opinion), the urban greenery maintenance workers and politicians. Finally, this chapter looks at the motives of tree nominators and explains what nomination of a tree means to them.

### **The European Tree of the Year (ETY)<sup>3</sup>**

The ETY is organised annually as a contest to select the most 'loveable tree' in Europe. It is organized by the Czech Environmental Partnership Association (EPA), an organization that is supported by the European Land Owners Association. The competition has been running since 2011 and it awards a winning tree from a selection of trees from participating European countries (now 15 in number) by public vote. The national organizations are responsible for their own selection procedures, but most countries hold a national poll to select their yearly candidate. As part of the competition and to engage the European audience, the contest website displays a live, online track of the votes cast for each tree. The winner of 2022 was announced during a conference and a ceremony at the end of February 2022 at the headquarters of the Czech EU representation in Brussels.

To boost this event, the project invites its European network and national partners and nominators to come to Brussels. In pre-Covid times, there used to be a promotional tree tour visiting candidate trees. Making use of a professional photographer, ETY would make appealing portraits of trees and invite the community and political representatives to participate in the contest actively (promoting the local tree and contest). This year, the organisation made use of online media and digital representation and promotion of trees. The

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.treeoftheyear.org/> and <https://www.deboomvanhetjaar.nl/>

contest is dedicated towards ‘highlighting the plight of numerous trees across Europe which are under threat of destruction (ETY website 2022). The Dutch ETY partner is the SBNL Natuurfonds (formerly known as the ‘Stichting Behoud Natuur en Leefmilieu). Managing the Dutch edition of the contest, its ambition is to highlight the significance of trees for people culturally. In doing so it hopes to call attention to the natural heritage and qualities that trees and forests represent. Next to the managing the contest, the SBNL Natuurfonds represents private landowners and distributes funds (as a charity foundation) towards educational and restorative projects in heritage landscapes.

### **Accidental Green –Seedlings of the City<sup>4</sup>**

The natural environment is strictly controlled and managed in urban areas in the Netherlands. But nature takes over in unexpected places, for example where the municipal mower cannot reach. Hans van Lunteren, an artist and project coordinator of ‘Accidental Green’ is fascinated by these uncontrolled manifestations of nature, whose ultimate expression is the seedling: a young plant that self-seeded under the right conditions. Hans van Lunteren is particularly interested in how urban green spaces interact with inhabitants and vice versa. As a professional gardener, his projects evolve around notions of gardening, public management of green spaces and the involvement of residents in creating their own habitats.

The project states that seedlings symbolise nature’s powerful potential to re-establish itself, living with people in urban conditions, finding niches in this habitat. The key idea of the project is that people nominate seedling-trees. In return, the nominator receives a label to tag the seedling to mark its existence as a ‘desired seedling’. Furthermore, the affection that people feel for trees is expressed in a series of interviews with local residents about favourite seedling-trees. In phase two of the project, the project aims to involve and influence urban greenery teams and policy-makers of the Utrecht municipality to increase the appreciation for the existence of ‘accidental trees’. The project partners with Utrecht Natuurlijk, an organisation that aims to bring people in Utrecht ‘closer to nature’. It does so by sharing knowledge, activities and courses at ‘natural farms’/ communal gardens in the city of Utrecht, together with residents, corporations, volunteers, social organizations and the municipality of Utrecht.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.utrechtnatuurlijk.nl/toevalliggroen/>

## Trees and their space

In this section, I discuss the relevance of the physical space that trees inhabit for the projects in this study by introducing the term tree-space (Cihanger 2013). I will first illustrate this notion in a fragment of ‘the story of the walnut’ where the urban, hide-away location of a seedling-tree is a key aspect of why it was nominated in the first place.

It was an early Saturday morning. The rain was pouring down on me, the city of Utrecht, its trees. Everything and everybody was wet, grey and in a state of winter. I felt excited and awkward. I was meeting with Hans, coordinating artist of Accidental Green, Ana and Ilja, neighbourhood residents, two greenery men, - and an accidental walnut tree: the subject of the meeting.

I arrived first at the indicated site of the tree, a small green patch, zoned by streets and houses. The area was quiet. No passers-by, no bird sounds yet in early February, far-away car-noise. The ground was covered in muddy grass and several medium sized fruit trees lined the patch. I could not spot anything that remotely looked like a walnut tree. It confused me; I was looking for a landmark, a particular tree that would probably be standing out for its size or location. Then, I spotted the label of Accidental Green, hanging low by the ground in a bushy area next to the street.

At the time of nomination, the walnut tree was considerably larger, at an age of 8 years already standing out as a multi-trunked seedling, standing at the edge of a green patch. However, last year, it’s top half was cut off by Utrecht greenery men in an effort to remove it and now it was difficult to discern it, growing in between the bushy hedge. A door opened. Ana stepped out sporting an umbrella and raincoat. Two people on foot arrived.

The urban -human connections with unexpected trees that sprout from seedlings fascinate Hans, coordinator of Accidental Green: “I approach the maintenance and management of green spaces as a movement in tai chi -, you move softly along with each-other and smoothly and respectfully take or give space. All trees are stuck and set at the place that they happen to be at and all human action, -to the tree, relates to this specific place”. Here, Hans refers to what Cihanger (2013) calls a ‘tree-space’; reviewing trees not just as tree-bodies, but also acknowledging the space they occupy in natural and social (urban) environments and as entities relating to these environments (including human interactions). Surrounded by other

trees and houses, the area of the walnut is distinctly urban and man-made. It's nominating neighbours need to just open their front doors to visit the walnut tree. This is key for the art-project as I found that it particularly searches for nominations in environments where accidental seedlings hatch and take on significance for people.

The concept of 'tree-space' is not just relevant in the light of Accidental Green. Also, for the ETY contest, the tree-space is recognized in tree stories that feature the community-places that trees occupy physically. These stories showcase the places where trees stand and how places and trees can culturally and historically be important. An example may be helpful. The story of the oak in Spain that competed in the ETY 2022 refers to how the site of the tree has been used since 1856 for a festival to discuss democracy. It shows how the tree was captured in poems by revolutionary poets to represent a new democratic era. Until this very day, a yearly community festival to discuss societal issues is organized at this site in Catalunya. This finding is in line with how anthropologists Lee, Sunjoo, Seokyung Kim and Timm Donke (2021) review tree-spaces: 'On Earth, trees cultivate places with stories, rituals, and dwellings. A tree is a living body and, at the same time, a home. It is an architect and architecture. It is a space and place.' So, the projects seek to not just tell the story of trees, but also the story of the space that trees occupy and how that matters to people.

### **Tree-promotion and public opinion**

The projects aim to influence public opinion about the presence and particularities of trees and their significance for people in our cities and countries. By telling the stories of different trees and putting them out to audiences in an art- exhibition<sup>5</sup> or in a competition, the organizers wish to create public awareness of the value of trees. A single nominated tree is used to represent a forest (or the importance of forested areas and trees in general), or to represent similar 'accidental' trees in urban environments. The ETY explains this as follows: 'The Tree of the Year doesn't focus on beauty, size or age but rather on the tree's story and its connection to people. We are looking for trees that have become a part of the wider community' (ETY 2022).

The efforts of both projects are relatively successful. Though Accidental Green and ETY are small, they achieved a number of milestones during the short-term (5 months) course of my study. Accidental Green successfully protected the walnut tree and Hans van

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<sup>5</sup> Accidental Green –Seedlings of the City was presented during an art exhibition at the Centraal Museum Utrecht called 'The Botanical Revolution: On the Necessity of Art and Gardening'.

Lunteren was asked to give a presentation to the greenery maintenance team in Utrecht and the ETY contest saw the highest number of voters ever in the history of ETY contests. Still, the projects studied in this research are run by small scale, not for profit organisations that work with a minimum of staff and budget. It is therefore that the ETY organization also cooperates with other tree-projects. Examples include tree planting initiatives and a research project focusing on climate change mitigation with heatwave absorbing qualities of trees. The annual European Tree of the Year -ceremony, that I attended in February 2022 in Brussels was combined with a conference on forest- and tree management. One of the conference presenters described trees as allies in the climate crisis: “Trees are our allies, we need to foster the relationship with trees and protect them in our cities as a means to counter climate change related effects of heat”. I was also struck by the presentation of the tree check app<sup>6</sup>. A mobile application, the programme allows people to ‘check up on trees, look after them, and build a relationship with them by knowing them better’. With the application, people can create a personal tree collection of different trees and species in Europe. It enables people to appreciate a tree more, learn about its particularities (also how much carbon it absorbs) and by registering it in the application and caring for it, hopefully also protect it from felling. Interestingly, the users and builders of this application use a similar approach to tree-protection as the studied projects do by means of tree nomination. I therefore conclude that tree promotion and engaging people to influence public opinion is an important shared basis for these projects and their partners.

### **Tree care and maintenance**

For both projects, the relations with decision-makers in the context of tree-cutting and tree-preservation are important. The story of the walnut, with which I started this chapter, the presence of six people (two neighbours, one project coordinator, one researcher and two greenery men) during a rainy visit illustrated that these projects are often about the ‘care’ and ‘worry’ concerning trees. I further explored how the walnut tells a story of urban planning, safety, nuisance and systems of maintenance. First, the life and death of the walnut is handled in the domain of the bureaucratic protocols and powers that determine the presence and maintenance of trees in Utrecht. In other contexts, anthropologists such as Wacquant (2009) have explored the role of a powerful bureaucracy that can punish and retract care. These studies were done to describe societal systems that negatively affect an underprivileged class

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lifetreecheck.eu/en/TreeCheck/TreeCheckApp>

of society and so it would seem problematic to use them to describe how seedlings are treated bureaucratically. However, one could state that trees in Utrecht are subjected to maintenance protocols that hold decision-making power over life and death. I discovered that almost all trees in Utrecht are registered in a ‘tree directory’ (Gemeente Utrecht n.d.) that keeps track of their species, location, health and size. This website also announces and describes trees that are nominated to be cut down (rooilijst). This list is composed by tree experts who work for the municipality of Utrecht and advise the city on safety, health and maintenance of urban trees. I was told by one of them that they make annual rounds, visiting all trees in their jurisdiction on a yearly basis. After felling, the bodies of trees are also useful. Ruth, owner of Tafelboom (carpenter atelier in Utrecht): “We always get this list of trees beforehand so we can determine how much timber from Utrecht city trees we may expect in the next period to create furniture”. The walnut was not on this list as a seedling tree, but an attempt had been done to remove it.

That mankind manages, protects, uses and separates itself from nature is a perspective that has been a long-time object of study of anthropological research recently gaining attention in the framework of ‘sustainability’ and human-nature relationships (such as Ingold 2020, Descola 2013, Patel and Moore 2018). They demonstrated how ‘a view of sustainability that is based on the objectification of nature is grounded in the very same ontology that has produced the global ecological crisis’ (Brightman and Lewis 2021, 1). In this context, I also observed that in the ETY project office, there were posters detailing the economic value (expressed in euros) of trees for different aspects such as timber, oxygen, fruit harvest, etc., reducing trees to economically managed entities. However, returning to the story of the walnut below, we also see how policies and practices of municipal caretakers contain loopholes.

During that first visit, we did not only meet to share ideas about how to move along with the walnut, the green care-taker for the area was also invited to ‘formalize’ the informal decisions. The group quickly reached a conclusion about the fate of the tree. We would all chip in to do what was needed to allow it to stay where it was. Hans would build an iron frame to give it an aura of official protection, Ana and Ilja would see to its growth, relating to the tree as its neighbours and the green maintenance team would not again cut it, but let it be, unless it would hamper the safety of the traffic of people, being so close to the street. To me, it came as no surprise that when the maintenance team emailed us that after having given it a second thought, they thought it wiser to replant the tree to a safer location, this was rejected by the group unanimously. I noted that the e-mail was strikingly mild though: “I am suggesting to replant the walnut, because it is in the best interest of the tree. My main concern is to provide it with a safe life and due to it being close to the underground garbage containers, I am afraid, we might have to remove it at a later stage when it grows too big”.

The involvement of residents in the process of maintenance of the walnut and the fact that an ‘accidentally’ seeded tree grew unharmed in an urban park, show that here is space for alternative views and to accept the presence of meaningful, but accidental trees. The Dutch NGO ‘Bomenstichting’ highlights this role of local politics to acknowledge trees as ‘focal points of emotional human processes’ (Wolthuis, Stobbelaar, and van Koppen 2007). It seems important to motivate policy-makers to: ‘encourage dynamic relationships with nature, and provide varied ways of engaging with urban green spaces that foster stewardship’ (Lisa de Kleyn (2019, 3-4). People can foster this relationship by nominating trees. The various arborists I interviewed testified that professionally and personally they cared more for certain trees in their jurisdiction than for others. These individuals became ‘more than numbers’ to them.

Nevertheless, the fragment above also shows the presence of tensions that tree-care and maintenance can conjure, caused by conflicting bureaucratic interests. Though the walnut tree becomes more than a number, tree-care in an urban context also means to care for urban safety and maintaining accessible urban infrastructure, whilst navigating different interests from human residents. In the next section, I will further explore my findings in terms of these processes that I would like to call tree bureaucracy.

### **Tree bureaucracy**

The act of tree-nomination can also be examined from a more globally economic perspective. When we reflect on these projects as responses to a society that is characterised by the commodification and control of nature (Patel and Moore 2018) with a global focus on (economic) value driven relationships (Harvey 2007), we see how economic factors influence them. It explains how tourism interests or the fear of deforestation for agricultural profits become important external motives for tree nomination. It also explains why the ETY focuses on the economic value of trees as carbon absorbers and heat-wave managers in cities to protect trees. Furthermore, in *Accidental Green*, trees occupy space that cannot be used for economic purposes and the common idea is that accidental seedlings need to be removed, because the land is claimed and managed by people. It is often out of fear for these forces that have shaped tree-policies or a tree-bureaucracy that people nominate trees. They simply wish to protect a favourite tree. This is illustrated in another fragment of the walnut story where the personal relationship with the walnut tree is deepened with the project idea to influence urban greenery policies in Utrecht.

Ilja continued: "...because the tree had accidentally landed here, it is not in the 'tree directory' of Utrecht city trees. It is not monitored, maintained, supervised, pruned or registered officially." This is why Hans felt particularly satisfied with the agreed outcome with the municipal caretakers (leaving it standing and protecting it) and he responded: "We would like to promote this pathway of recognizing seedlings by residents and municipality, the contact with the green management service should be prioritized. Their supervisors (top-down) should support policy and practises towards a more flexible and seedling-oriented greening management."

The atmosphere was celebratory, we were happy that the walnut would stay. Ana sent us pictures by e-mail of how the garbage truck, collecting garbage with a big iron arm, could possibly drive right past the tree. With luck, the tree would be pruned correctly, growing towards the green patch, missing the garbage container area and growing large enough over the street, with cars and bicycles able to pass underneath.

This fragment shows that navigating 'tree bureaucracy', -understanding and influencing the municipal policies and processes is at the heart of the project. Nomination ensures that trees

become ‘known’ and are protected or cared for. For both projects, it does not stop here. I saw how nominated trees became exhibited story- and art pieces in the Utrecht Central Museum and participants in a competition with other trees, even representing countries. I see this as a process of ‘personification’ or ‘humanization’ of trees. In these activities, individual trees became objects of (bureaucratic) discussions and even politically relevant. For example, council representatives of a Spanish community used the nomination of a tree in their district to gain more national attention for the needs of the underprivileged residents. Furthermore, the political aspects that can be uploaded on individual trees, is also an interesting feature in the context of the global events at large. An example of this political appreciation of a tree happened during the ETY ceremony, where one of the trees was cancelled because of its nationality (Russian). As a representative of a nation that is currently politically blocked, the tree needed to be approached with care and political sensitivity.



The Turgenev Oak: Russian entrant for Tree of the Year 2022. ETY: “We, organizers of the ETY are appalled by the aggression of the Russian Federation. With immediate effect, we are putting the Russian Federation out of the running for the international European Tree of the Year contest.”

That trees are thus politically approached or politicized was apparent during the entire conference. The key figures at this event were European political delegates who discussed the European forestry agenda and took speech-time to acknowledge political relations. To me,

this was puzzling, as I expected the conference to be about trees and their nominators rather than to be politically eventful. However, the political presence and relevance for the cause of the ETY contest should not be underestimated and is perhaps also key for the project. The ETY coordinator: “We are a small organization with limited funds and in the end the goal is to have trees protected and to influence policy-makers”.

Illustrated by the quote above, I found that bureaucratic forces did not only affect trees, but also the organisations themselves. Watching project staff work, opened up a world of demanding tasks and constraints. For example, in the period of voting, the ETY coordinator dealt with serious complaints concerning fraudulent voting behaviour and simultaneously managed multiple social media accounts: hectic work and task-environments for a single staff member. I would therefore like to place the political and bureaucratic aspects of these projects in the everyday realities of small-scale environmental organizations, coping with lacking funds and manpower. At times, this was a sobering realisation for the project staff: “I am just on my own. Though I feel it is an important tool to create a different perspective on what trees mean to us, I do not think it is taken seriously enough”. Further connecting with the idea of tree-bureaucracy, the next section explains the process and motives of people regarding tree nomination.

### **The process of nomination**

Both projects are relatively unknown. The promotional effort is the biggest challenge for the project organisations. Building a community and staying in touch with tree-nominators requires hard work. The SBNL Natuurfonds, first sends out a call for nominations for a regional (at the level of the Dutch provinces) Tree of the Year. In a small team of one project coordinator and a community of volunteers, they promote the option to nominate trees and vote for winning trees. As Mariska put it: “I did not know this project existed, but I read about it in the newspaper and my son pointed out to me that the story about our tree might be meaningful to others, so I decided to honour [the memory of my grandfathers] and the relationship my family has with this tree”. SBNL Natuurfonds: “We always have to work tremendously hard to get nominations from the northern provinces from the Netherlands, whereas people in Noord-Brabant are very active in submitting nominations. It means that it is not necessarily the ‘best’ tree, with the ‘nicest’ story that wins, but the one with the most volunteering supporters”.

After a regional nominee is selected, people in the region can vote for their local tree of the year. The twelve winners from all Dutch provinces subsequently participate in the national contest. The national edition always receives moderate attention from national media as the call to vote is issued and when the winner is announced. Also, the art-project in Utrecht concerns itself actively with finding and selecting relevant and promising nomination candidate trees/ seedlings. Hans weekly scouts the city of Utrecht looking for interesting tree/people interactions and tree-spaces to promote the art project and collect nominations. When he finds an interesting tree, he may decide to just knock on someone's door. Doris, who nominated an elm in front of her house: "Hans rang my doorbell and inquired after the well-being and origins of the tree. I enjoyed talking to him and we decided to nominate my elm to protect its future". Here, Doris gives a glimpse of her motives behind nomination. The next section further explores this and other motives.

### **Motives for tree-nomination**

Nomination of trees for ETY or Accidental Green is often because people feel protective of their favourite tree and somehow see it threatened by others (tree bureaucracy). Diana from France told me: "I care immensely about this tree [it was on private land which was for sale, I was afraid it would be cut], I could even say I love it, and I would also protect it where I can, so when the chance came along to call for attention for my tree, I decided to go for it and nominate it". The winning tree of the year 2022 was a Polish tree, nominated by two tree activists who wished to preserve the remains of the ancient Bailowieza Primeval forest. The sole tree standing at the edge of the forest is a good example of a tree that matters to the villagers for its size and beauty, but that stands out specifically to the nominators because of its representation of a larger narrative: one of deforestation, of destruction and the perspective of looking at trees and the land that they occupy as commodities. In a *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2018), Patel and Moore describe how the cheapening or commodification of the value of 'nature' has created our societies. It is these processes that the young Polish activists fight against. However, they also spoke of how the attention for their winning tree made them even more aware of the individuality of this tree. They would now regularly visit and enquire after the well-being of the tree. So, even though their motives for nominating this tree might have been beyond this particular tree, by winning and receiving attention for this tree, they started caring and relating to this tree more specifically. Similar to other nominators, the participation of their tree in the ETY contest enhanced the

perceived relationship and practices towards their tree. Visiting the forest on a daily round they pause at their tree and take a moment to ‘be with it’. Polish couple: “We nominated this tree to protect the forest, now we are so proud of our tree and we think about it a lot when we fight for more justice for trees. We hope it will be here for a long time and continues to inspire us.”



Oak Dunin, winning tree of the ETY contest 2022 in Poland.

The case of the Polish tree is an example of how external motives, caused by social or global developments for tree nomination such as deforestation connect with internally rooted motives and personal relations with particular trees. This process also happened with other external motives to nominate such as ‘tourism interests’ or competition between regions. I also found an interesting example in the centre of Utrecht where an ancient plane tree resides in a medieval courtyard. Its nominator is called the ‘tree mayor’ of Utrecht and works as senior tree-advisor for the municipality. He searched for promotional ways to highlight the importance of urban trees in tourist tours and this is why he nominated the tree. In fact, the two times that I visited, I witnessed a number of tourist tours passing by, stopping at the tree-

site, taking pictures and discussing its appearance and historical environment (a former convent courtyard; with the convent having completely disappeared and the tree still standing). However, he was also personally extremely fond of this particular tree, awed by its size, stamina and species and simply felt it was a nice thing to do because of his pride for the tree: “I always visit this plane and put my hand on its trunk. It is so beautifully shaped, it always makes me happy when I see her.” A similar example I found in the story submitted by the Portuguese competitor for the ETY contest who told me that the cork oak on his mother’s private land was nominated by the local municipality to attract tourists, but how his mother’s love for the tree on her ancestral lands drove the number of votes. The tree became a source of pride for the entire community, representing the hard work of the community in the cork-sector and their increased community appreciation after it won the Portuguese national competition.

So, I conclude, whereas the triggers to nominate trees are mostly externally oriented (protection or economic interests), they are usually rooted in personal histories and experiences. These aspects of tree-affection, pride and sense of ownership are discussed in more detail later on. First, to understand the process of nomination better, it is important to properly introduce the research population. In the next chapter, I explore who these people are by looking at their profiles, backgrounds and affiliations.

### **3. Who nominates trees?**

In this chapter, I introduce the research population. Most of my twenty-one research participants live in the city of Utrecht. Who are they? While preparing for my study I anticipated on possibly speaking with ‘tree-huggers’, an often derisively used term to describe people who care more for plants than humans (Gershon 2019), or with ‘spirituals’, people who affiliate with ‘healing energies’ of trees (for example in Eckhaus 2016). I also imagined meeting environmental activists or professional and amateur tree-specialists/ arborists; people whose profession and hobby it might be to categorize, find, maintain and care for trees. I wondered whether the research population would share affiliations, educational or religious backgrounds or relations that would explain their engagement with nominating trees. Exploring the ideas and involvements of people regarding themes of ‘sustainability’, human-tree relationships’ and life in the city, in this chapter, I arrive at the concept of tree-love and a certain form of ‘environmental citizenship’ (Rego 2019).

#### **Profiles of tree-nominators**

Writing this chapter, it occurred to me that I was not just writing about people behind tree-nomination, but that it was also relevant to acknowledge differences and commonalities of nominated trees. This may be relevant because it supports the argument that affection for trees may occur regardless of how trees look. In this section, I therefore refer occasionally to the features, species or particularities of nominated trees. I also show that beyond the different basic demographic profiles of people, I found a few commonalities among the research population, such as a love for the outdoors. First, I would like to return to the walnut as an example of the finding that the physical appearance of a tree does not always matter and that the people in this study do not have much in common at first sight.

Ana, parent of two young children, owner of a graphic design company, -promised to daily check on the walnut and to keep us updated on its recovery. She loyally sent pictures of its progress into spring. I found that she has a sensitive and activist character. Ana: “The walnut is not the first special tree in my life; as a child, I used to adore the tree in our garden. I regarded it as a special friend that I could always count on being there for me. Now, I try to be sensible and simply rescue and give space to green organisms such as trees. The climate crisis is the biggest thing happening to us and the planet and I cannot sit idle.” Ilja, the other nominator is a retired landscape architect who cares for a liveable planet, and wants to contribute to healthy beneficial relationships with nature. Talking with her is rather academic: “So we identify the a-biotic process, and the biotic process shaping our natural landscape, and there is the anthropocentric process, -man-made influence on our environments. Trees are important elements in how we can make a landscape work for us. In the end, to me the functionality of the walnut tree for us is to provide us with walnuts....and ehm oxygen and shade and a lot of other things [smiles].”

The fragment above shows how Ana and Ilja’s profiles and backgrounds differ significantly. The differences in their profiles and the insignificant size of the walnut tree that they nominated is telling. On paper, demographic backgrounds of the people I met are as diverse as the trees that were nominated. Also, I did not find that people are necessarily locally active or particularly involved in community projects. Nominating a neighbourhood tree people care for does not mean that they are actively involved in other environmental, social or activist initiatives. Some people, like Ana do participate in tree-planting projects and rescue trees in the context of other environmental projects (in Utrecht), but many others keep to themselves and are perhaps socially somewhat secluded. William, a retired shop-owner who nominated a tree growing just outside a designated area next to his house, told me: “I don’t have many friends, and I do not go out much, I find trees are much easier to relate to”.

However, a closer look at the profiles reveals a few interesting, -you could say, ‘sub-group’ profiles. First, a special group among the tree nominators were professional arborists. They combine a deep personal connection with specific trees with expert knowledge. As professional care-takers, the arborists also decide about life or death of trees. One of them, the tree mayor of Utrecht, told me that he is also responsible for the ‘rooilijst’, trees that are nominated to be cut down’ in the city. Klaas, a young arborist confessed: “I care for all trees

in my jurisdiction, I have to make sure that they are okay and healthy, so all somewhat 20.000 trees are dear to me, but this one [nominated tree], is most meaningful of all, because of what we went through together". The tree in a local municipal garden that Klaas refers to, fell down in a storm, but remained connected with its roots and through intensive political lobby Klaas convinced the local council to leave it as 'The tree that lied-down'.

The 'special trees' in arborists' lives can usually be characterized as this type of monumental trees, mostly free-standing and magnificent. One of the most striking examples is the story of the 'Red Beech' in the Utrecht Wilhelminapark. It was once nominated by the Utrecht tree mayor and under his protection the life of the sick tree was prolonged with at least five years. It held so much meaning for the neighbourhood residents that a book was written about the love between the tree and the neighbourhood by Eefting, Van Gijtenbeek, and Van Heel (2016). Its beautiful red colours, location, size and age (170 years old) also inspired a farewell ritual with the community when it was finally cut down (RTV Utrecht 2020).

This is also how and where the two research projects differ from each other. For the ETY contest people nominate trees that are remarkable in size and story. The French organization even hosts the contest under the header 'remarkable trees' (Arbres Remarquables n.d.). In order to have a chance to win the competition and become Tree of the Year, not only the nominating story should catch the voting audience' attention, it is also the aesthetics of a tree that needs to be outstanding. Many of these tree-spaces also have 'plaquettes', informing passers-by of their history and importance to people. Also in Utrecht, these trees often belong to the category of 'famous trees' that Randall and Edgerton researched (1938). In contrast to remarkable trees, there are the seedlings and urban trees of Accidental Green. The portraits of seedling-trees have meaning because of the personal stories of the people that nominated them and the special conditions in which they managed to grow (for example, in the stone wall of an Utrecht canal or just outside a designated area).

Secondly, I found that the jury members and project professionals working with and around the nominated trees also form a special subgroup. It struck me that many are artists and approach the projects from a conceptual, artistic point of view, capturing the meaning of trees in poems and as statements of public art. One of the jury members phrased her involvement with the project: "Reflecting with art on the way that people relate to trees and that we can understand trees, capturing their beauty and personality, I feel I can contribute to the goal of the project." Using the art of imagination and the narrative power of images,

sensations and language, the story of trees and human-tree relationships is approached differently by them than by other tree-nominators. Looking through their (artistic) eyes at the projects, a different perspective opened up to me. This perspective connects with the book *The long, long life of trees* of Fiona Stafford (2016) who describes how different species of trees have inspired stories, songs, poems and religious work of art. She also shows that throughout history people distinguished between tree-species and aesthetics of trees to create meaning in art. On a similar note, in his article on ‘Trees of Knowledge of Self and Other in Culture’ (in Rival 1998), Fernandez discusses how people in Asturias, nicknamed ‘carbayan’ (Great Oaks) identify with oak trees and feature it in art productions, actively creating their own selves in relation to the tree species.

What then do the research population have in common? The answer that I found is simple. People nominated trees because they care for trees that are registered or non-registered and remarkable or insignificant in size, but meaningful in brick- and –cement based *urban environments*. They referred to how they sometimes feel stuck or unhealthy, surrounded by human built environments. Here, my findings touch the field of urban anthropologists, with interesting work done by Hillary Angelo. In her book, *How Green Became Good: Urbanized Nature and the Making of Cities and Citizens* (2021) she explains how we arrived at the idea that we ‘need green space’ in our lives. Indeed, I found that to the people in my study visiting a special tree feels like an escape of hectic environments. In the presence of their tree they feel the opportunity to breathe, prioritize and balance with non-human life. Shani, a fifty-year old mother of two, working as a business consultant told me: “I always visit my tree when I feel overwhelmed by all the people, houses, traffic and demands in my life. I take a stroll, a few blocks away from where I live to visit the tree and find some relaxation”.

A second commonality that I found is that people share similar childhood stories about being ‘outdoor oriented’ children, having faced a time in life with few friends and remembering from an early age that trees could be friends that give comfort and solace. Reflecting on their affection my interlocutors told me that there were seeds planted in their early years of upbringing. In the story of the walnut, Ana gives a good example of this when she refers to how it is not her first affection for a tree, but that she still fondly remembers a tree from her childhood that was dear to her too. In their current lives, people like going outdoors and enjoy spending time in natural environments. They often go for strolls in parks

for relaxation and generally take care of not damaging non-human life. This gives a hint on their ideas regarding ‘nature’, the next section of this chapter.

### **Ideas and attitudes on nature and sustainability**

In this section, I am interested in the ideas and attitudes of people. How do they see ‘nature’ and what does it mean to them? The start of an answer to these questions I found in what generally binds tree nominators: a certain attitude towards the natural environment (internal motives to nominate trees). These are ideas about the ‘value of trees’, a sense of love for ‘nature’ and the wish to ‘protect’ it. Anita, looking at her pear tree told me: “I am simply amazed by how nature works, the intricacies of eco-systems and the roles that different species and bio-diverse environments play together to create wonderful things”.

Interestingly, I saw that this attitude and love for ‘nature’ does not mean that they can be necessarily categorized as living ‘sustainable lifestyles’. Although some people are concerned about the impact of human lifestyles on the natural environment and engage in recycling, change-making, organic food, waste-reduction, fair fashion, or other activities, many people in my study are not necessarily frontrunners in terms of their ideas regarding sustainability. Rather, they are focused on trees specifically and how they relate to them, or even more specifically to the tree that they nominated that sits in front of their house. As I expected this to be different, I found support in an article by Eriksen about sustainability (2022). Here, he warns anthropologists to keep an open eye on how we think people navigate sustainable practices in changing times in terms of sustainability in the Anthropocene. Also, the notion of ‘environmental citizenship’ (Dobson and Bell 2005) that Rego (2021, 3) defines ‘...as building a bottom up citizenship perspective as an anthropology of hope in order to forge an ethics of responsibility towards nature’, is not so clear-cut for my research participants. You could say that by navigating ‘tree bureaucracy’ in order to protect trees, they are expressing a form of environmental citizenship, but this form can be so focused towards a single tree for some people that I find it problematic to apply the notion to the research population.

Returning to the story of the walnut again to illustrate this point. Ilja talked about the functionality of trees and how ‘tree-caring’ simply is a smart thing to do as a human-being, describing that trees have plenty of things to provide such as shade, walnuts, oxygen, pleasant aesthetics, etc. During our conversation, she referenced to her ideas on trees in a human-centred perspective (humans use the services of trees for their own benefits). The urban

environmental motives of tree-nomination (escaping the city) can be seen in the same light. Also, caring for trees is a relevant activity in an anthropocentric worldview (e.g. Haraway et.al), again because its intention is to benefit humans. Less anthropocentric, but also not socially regarded as a ‘sustainable lifestyle practice’ is the more everyday perspective on trees that I found. Let me illustrate this with a conversation that I had with the neighbour of Doris in front of her doorstep. She told me: “I care for this tree, because it sits in front of my house and I like trees in general. They have the right to live on this planet, just like us”. In this conversation, the human-tree relationship displays less hierarchy and is not based on the tree as a resource. However, Doris nor her neighbour do not engage in other ‘sustainable practices’, nor do they affiliate with certain ideologies. I can explain this by referring to the data that will be discussed in chapter three on explaining human-tree-relationships, such as a tree’s quality to provide a sense of belonging and historicity.



The Elm in front of the house of Doris and the street they live in.

Finally, I would like to mention that because I did not find a clear-cut connection between certain ideologies or lifestyles among the research population this does not mean that the ‘larger’ idea of why one would relate to trees was entirely absent. Meeting a few ‘tree-

activists', I noted how for them, a relationship with a tree can also be socially and philosophically important. They nominated trees that are specifically dear to them, but also have an affinity with the idea of being part of a larger 'whole', a planetary eco-system where trees and humans equally depend on each other. Drawing from these ideas, but also basing myself on the more practical reality of people that care for trees, I would like to introduce the concept of a relationship between people and trees that is based on affection: tree-love.

### **Affective encounters – tree love**

Scholarly work on the meanings of affection between humanity and nature naturally discusses the 'hypothesis of biophilia', a term by Edward O. Wilson to describe what he believes is 'humanity's innate affinity for the natural world'. He examined our tendency to focus on 'life and lifelike processes as a possibly biologically based need, integral to our development as individuals as a species' (Wilson and Kellert 1993). In their article 'Nature and I are two', Joye and De Block (2011) demonstrate that (natural) science has not been able to accurately prove it. However, through anthropologic lenses, the existence of affective companionship of people for natural entities has been explored widely (for example Stewart 2007, Lowenhaupt Tsing 2012, Kiik 2018). These studies show that an anthropology of affect, focusing on relationships between people and nature is more sensory, narrative and philosophical in its methods and descriptions. Here, I see how my research findings correspond with Pramova et al. (2021) who demonstrate that the presence of affect for nature is something that is lived and experienced, rather than reasoned.

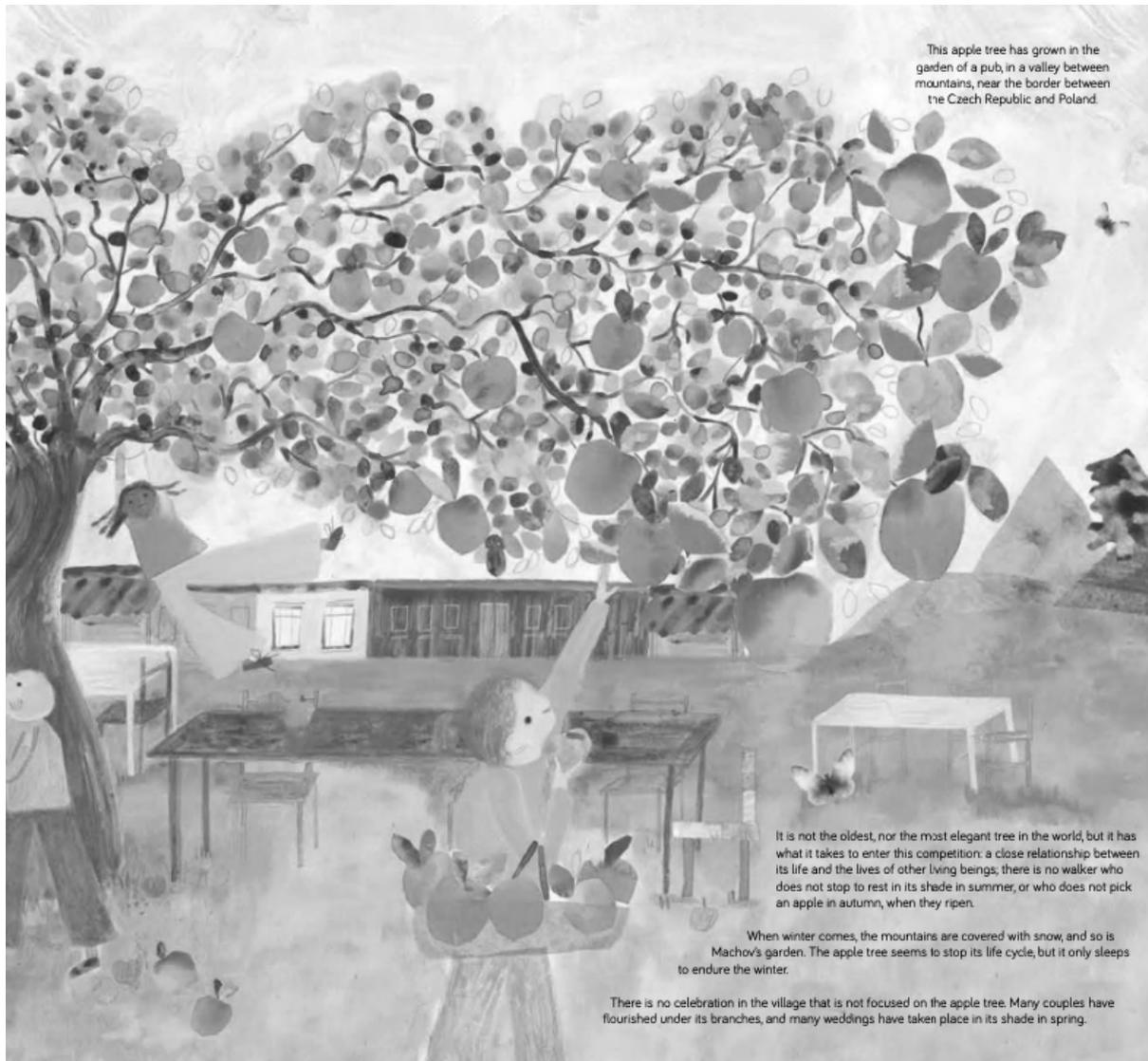
The authors also show that affection may be caused by stress. A world of deforestation hazards and climate crisis (heatwaves in cities) may be important to explain human-nature affection. Tidball (2012, 4-5) suggests in his work on biophilia that: 'when humans are faced with a disaster, they seek engagement with nature to further their efforts to summon and demonstrate resilience in the face of this crisis'. Care, love and companionship between trees and people could then be responses to the social and environmental conditions of the Anthropocene. I will illustrate how this works in my study with two brief examples. First, Ana told me how she knows it is silly to rescue the small walnut-tree, but how she feels like she needs to do something in the changing climate conditions. Secondly, the entire project of the ETY contest, to nominate trees to call for more awareness on tree preservation, is connected to an idea of a looming crisis that must be stopped, herewith using and inspiring personal tree-love.

Nominated trees are daily representations or active relationships that people entertain to express a general affection for nature. Archambault (2016) used the notion of ‘affective encounters’ to describe relationships between humans and plants. In the same spirit, I would like to use the notion of ‘tree love’ to bring the notion of ‘biophilia’ down to the everyday level of affection for trees in the daily routines of people. I do so, because the term ‘tree-love’ more adequately expresses the position of specific trees in this relationship than the notion of ‘affective encounters’, which I understand as a more general concept. Archambault demonstrates that plant-relationships can be experienced as more authentic (not tainted by ulterior motives) than human relationships. In her study, plant-loving even becomes a substitute for human love. Suggesting that ‘plant-loving’ is a construct born from the commodification or lack of human intimacy, she describes how human-plant relations are not only ontological, but how affection is actually lived by people. In my study, some of the conversations that I had and practices I observed support the point that Archambault makes. For example, William told me that he finds trees are much easier to relate to than people. Rud, the forester enjoys his work with trees and loves ‘hanging out’ at the tree-space of his nominated tree on a daily base more than being in an office with people. And the elderly widowed lady Doris sits in front of her house everyday together with an elm, saying she ‘lives here with her tree’. Also, as mentioned earlier, many of the people in this study were lonely sensitive children, seeing trees as their friends. In a way, also for them the love for a tree could then be seen as substitutes for human affection or in a form of companionship (Haraway 2008).

How special ‘tree love’ can be for people, I found beautifully illustrated by the idea of caring for its offspring. This is from the conversation I had with Klaas, a professional arborist who collected seedlings from his special tree: “I took these seeds with me when I moved to Groningen. I love the idea that my trees will have babies growing in this province too!”. And Doris told me: “This is a baby of the tree that used to stand in the backyard. I have lived here such a long time, I find it comforting to know that the tree in front of my house descends from a tree that used to be part of my life as well”. And also, Ilja from the walnut tree mentioned it: “I think it was my tree who might have mothered this walnut”. These examples also illustrate how different dimensions of tree-love are experienced. A ‘love for nature’, results in love for a particular tree, which is then again extended to its offspring.

In this chapter, I concluded that people’s profiles differ significantly, but how ‘tree-love’ and its foundations in a ‘love for outdoors, is the common basis for the research

population. In the next chapter, I will examine the understandings and meanings of the relationship people have with their nominated trees. I therefore focus on the narratives and practices they share and carry out and what that means.



Apple tree. Page from a children's book by Lucas Riera and Olivia Holden on the Tree of the Year (2023).

## 4. When we talk about trees

In the previous chapters I have reported on the findings about the execution and organization of the projects and the profile of the people who nominate trees. This chapter focuses on the narratives and practices of the research population regarding their relationship with trees. The guiding question is: ‘how can the symbolic meanings of trees for people be described and explained?’. I approached the data using Bruner’s (1984) theory of narratives, in which he distinguishes between the content (reflection on the meanings of ‘the experienced’), the language (‘the told’) and ‘the lived’ (the facts).

### **The tree as an agent that produces human feelings**

I will start with a fragment from the story of the walnut to illustrate how people talk about how they experience their relationship with a tree.

Sitting with a cup of tea, Ilja and I discussed her relationship with the walnut tree: “Well, no, I don’t think that the tree really cares about me, it just grows, but it does touch me when I cycle past it. You know, I pass by several times a week and then it makes me happy that it is there. The other day when we were there with the walnut, putting the frame, I remember feeling satisfied. It is rewarding to have this outlook...you know, the walnuts we will be able to harvest when it grows to its full size. I think we should be more mindful about the benefits ‘green life’ brings to our environments. It should be more integrated into our urban policies. This is also why I am so enthusiastic about this project about nominating seedlings.”

This fragment shows how the daily routine of passing by the tree connects Ilja with meaningful experiences and ideas. She refers to how the tree affects her emotions, the role of the tree in her routine experience of navigating in her neighbourhood and she mentions a future, wondering what it will be like when the tree produces walnuts. When we consider trees as entities capable of influencing people’s emotions, this perspective opens up a new realm of thinking about ‘things’ and non-human life. Already in 1991, Latour critically evaluated the distinction between nature and society. ‘[Latour] states that our sciences emphasise the subject-object and nature-culture dichotomies, whereas in actuality,

phenomena often cross these lines' (Feldman 2021). Latour argued that the perceived dichotomy is in fact a make-shift story that mankind created to look at the world. It does not represent every-day realities as most things in this world exist in relationship with each-other. According to his social-network theory (1987), these natural 'subjects-objects' have agency too and influence, act and engage in relationships (function as actants). In the story of the walnut, we see how Ilja makes a direct reference to the actant quality of the walnut. The tree does something to her when 'she cycles past', she says: "it does touch me". It is this ability of nonhuman life to influence actions, feelings and experiences of a person that Latour says, we need to understand better.

In the cases of nominated trees in this study, it depends on the profile and background of a tree-nominator which actant characteristics a tree possesses. In other words; how trees are experienced or perceived by people, defines them as actants. For example, people may visit their tree, protect it, find comfort in being with it, or talk to it, hug it, share it, talk about it, take a detour to cycle past it, look at it, etc. The walnut tree is relatively small and insignificant, yet it has a large impact on neighbourhood residents. As an example: just a by-standing researcher, I received multiple e-mails and attended at least four events in its name. The narrative that the involved residents have constructed around the walnut is a powerful story of care, protection and future orientation that actively sets them in motion and shapes their daily routine. To name a few of the emotions that were shared with me concerning the walnut: there is pride, feelings of ownership, parental sensations (caring for offspring of the tree), anger, fear and protective energies towards the future of the life of the tree and sensations of connectivity (with nature).

The nature of the relationships that tree-actants and human-actors develop is full of these emotions. In fact, the projects also use emotions to negotiate, explore or promote human-tree relationships. I can illustrate this with the experience I had during the performative art-event, called 'On missing trees'<sup>7</sup>, that took place in the context of Accidental Green. The goal of the performance was to explore the concept of 'missing' (the emotion) a tree when it is no longer there (felled or removed). This exploration enables a person to make sense and reflect on the relationship they have with this tree. The artist invited us to experience a large plane tree and 'feel' how it stretches, moves, communicates, works and connects with people on site. After this, we discussed how we 'miss' trees that we used to

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<sup>7</sup> <https://urbantreefestival.org/on-missing-trees>

connect similarly with. I then remembered the tall pine tree that used to stand in my mother's backyard. I used to look out for it when crossing the river, the IJssel by railway-bridge on the train. Seeing it from afar made me feel proud and at home. My brother and I used to climb in it, he once fell hard. We also hammered nails in its bark to build a tree-house, I remember feeling sorry for it must have hurt. It was quickly felled after we sold the house. I still miss it when I travel from Deventer to Utrecht by train.

As illustrated by my own experience, the inclusion of the agency of non-human life in the formation of human environments and personal lives is clearly experienced, yet it also comes across as strange to many people. Even though my interlocutors describe naturally how they are set in motion by their favourite tree in terms of emotions or actions, they are hesitant to see this as an actant quality of trees. For example, Anita: "I am proud of this old pear tree. It gives me pears ever year. We almost removed it for its age and the risk of it toppling during a storm, but I could not do it [sitting in the sun looking at it]. Now I am so happy it is still there, the poor old tree did not have any saying about its future. This home would not be the same without it", or Frida: "No, the tree is not doing something, actually, I don't think it has any relationships, it just exists". Here, Anita and Frida both voice that they do not think their tree has the ability to act or influence its life, let alone people's lives.

Perhaps it is the contrast with a conscious or purposeful actionable influence that we are familiar with in human relationships that confuses Anita and Frida. It is hard to consider the idea that a tree 'does' something, for 'doing' to my interlocutors is a conscious action, just like 'engaging in a relationship' is something that you would actively do. However, I would like to cite Gregory Bateson to point at how people are in themselves limited by their human capacity to think and act to really understand natural eco-systems: 'The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think' (Bateson 2010). I suggest that Anita and Frida might be afraid to be caught in 'an anthropomorphic pitfall' (Ben-Yonatan 2017) when they would regard the tree as a being that acts. I agree with anthropologist Anke Tonneer (in Niessen 2021) who has said that there still seems to be a 'huge taboo among people and scientists alike to even consider the idea that trees might also have agency and engage communicatively in interspecies relationships'. In chapter five, I will further explore this dimension from a tree's perspective.

### **Feelings of home and belonging**

Continuing this chapter on how a tree produces human experiences, I would like to reflect on how people referenced to trees in terms of ‘home and belonging’, like I did with my own experience, missing the tree in my backyard in Deventer. I would like to illustrate this with an excerpt from the conversation I had with Doris.

*Me: How do you look at this tree now?*

*Doris: Yes, surely as one that belongs to me. I would not. Yeah, look, when it's gone, I'm not going to die right away. No, but I mean life without that tree, which of course is offspring of the tree that was in the backyard.*

*Me: Yes.*

*Doris: Because actually, as long as I have lived here, there was a bush, I thought hey that is nice, at least there is a bush here. But then it turned out to be an elm. So, I've always lived with this elm as long as I've lived here that's since 1985.'*

For Doris, the tree is part of her life and space ‘at home’. Caring for the tree and its space gives her a sense of belonging in the street. She says: “I live here with this elm”.

The sense of home-feeling builds on the idea of a physical ‘tree-space’. People told me that they know they are close to home when they see certain trees. The story of the Portuguese cork-oak is also an excellent example of how this works. The cork oak is part of the local history, the landscape and cultural identities relating to working in the cork-sector. Situated in the dry inlands of Portugal, it is an integral part of their homes and origins. People also observed feeling at home when they witness the seasonal changes that a tree communicates to them. Mirjam, whom I shared a walk with gave a nice example of this feeling: “There are a number of these trees close to my house, in spring they produce the loveliest scent. It makes me feel at home and happy when spring arrives in my neighbourhood”.

Additionally, I found that the locality of a tree (at home) is meaningful to tree-nominators who experience the space as a literal and symbolic landmark. The tree is a place of visit, talk and social and private encounters to experience relaxation or meaning in the structure of a day or week. The walnut seedling stands in the street as a ‘neighbourhood resident’, it is part of the daily life and space ‘at home’ for Ilja and Ana. Passing by on a bike and looking out of the window, they witness its seasonal life and growth as part of where they live.

## **Trees and the experience of time**

Further studying the effect of trees on people, I noticed the significance of the references to time or to people's sense of the time scales of trees. It is fundamental in explaining human-tree relationships. As living organisms, trees embody a completely different sensation of time, growing much older and slower than much other animal and plant life. Other than historical sites, objects, buildings or artefacts that are of age, the fact that trees are 'alive' and therefore somehow 'conscious' witnesses, adds a meaningful dimension. Research participants told me that their tree represents a living memory of times passed. Some revered to trees as 'monuments or eye-witnesses'. People value tree connections to historical, local or even ancestral stories.

Mariska, nominated a tree in the vicinity of Baarn: "My great-grandparents cut their names into the bark in 1870, they were best friends and their children married and became my grandparents. My son wants to give a bbq at this tree-site when I turn 70, though we live nowhere near this tree currently. I think it is special that my family has this relationship with this land where our ancestors come from, with this tree actually bearing these historical marks". For Mariska, this tree embodies her family history, connects past with present and projects a future. I also experienced this sense of time myself during my fieldwork when I spent time with a large tree that was located at a school playground in Utrecht. First, I was intrigued by the fact that it was part of a website listing monumental trees<sup>8</sup>, realising that it is great research material. Then, sinking into the moment, seeing the wind rustle its leaves and its amazing trunk width (7m) in the middle of suburban hustle of Utrecht, I opened up to the understanding how this tree connects an older history of this part of Utrecht with the present and how exciting it is to be in touch with something that is alive and historic at the same time. It made me reflect on the reality of my own short life.

Many other people are inspired by this notion. Rud, the forester that takes care of Makke Janne (the chestnut tree): "I am awed by how long this tree has stood here. Standing at this estate, it has witnessed several historical events that took place here, did you know that Wilhelm II, the German emperor stayed here for two years after he fled the 1<sup>st</sup> World War? He could have also sat here with Makke Janne, just like us". As such, trees play active roles in the sense of passage of time of people, connecting (family) history with their own aging and local historic events. This is a profound experience of historicity as it shows people that a

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.monumentaltrees.com/nl/>

story is not just local folklore or a family saga of how two grandparents met; trees can show markings and age as proof it must have actually happened. In another fragment, we saw how Doris referred to how the tree in front of her house was a seedling of a tree that used to be in her backyard. By connecting her with the time lived at this home address, the tree acquired meanings of times past.

The meaning of historicity of a story from an anthropological perspective has been studied by Charles Stewart in his overview article (2016, 80). He sees that historicity serves to: ‘discover the ways in which people construe and represent the past. Grounded on a notion of temporality, it offers a framework for approaching time as nonlinear’. This is also experienced by people in my study. The nominating party had the Portuguese cork oak in a video<sup>9</sup> say: “I am time’s silent accomplice and a proud parent with my wrinkles and scars and arms that are tired from having held so many. All these are memories that feed fragile new branches, promises of future trunks where unborn children will play”. The cork oak refers to her body that is wrinkled (old age; the past), but still feeds new branches (the present) and represents promises of unborn children (the future). Here, the acting self of a tree (see also previous chapter) shapes human experiences of time. Trouillot (1995) described this as the process of how historical narratives are formed in a present on the basis of historicity. Stewart (2016, 82) considers this as ‘the manifold interdependencies between a present (always sensing the future) and the pasts it elects to consider’. This ‘sensing past, present and future simultaneously’ is also apparent in the narratives of my research participants, for example when they reference to a birthday that will be celebrated or to future family members or estate keepers who might watch over a tree. The idea that trees as living beings used to be there, are currently there and might still be there in future times, inspires people. Some voice the belief that the nature of their tree as a living and also aging organism, gives it a monumental status of ‘wisdom’. Shani: ‘...it has been here long before you and me and will be here long after you and me. It goes beyond our comprehension and lifetime’.

The presence and sensation of historicity and future orientation that the tree activates in people is also represented by the immobility of the tree as a tree-space. Stewart and Strathern (2003) explain that by looking at trees as elements in a landscape or as ‘environmentally present’, we find how people perceive the land around them and how that perception is changed by their understanding and experience of history. Contributors to their book *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* argue that a landscape

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<sup>9</sup> Portuguese cork oak ETY contest 2021 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_m-FmOIXq0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_m-FmOIXq0).

becomes a form of codification of history itself, seen from the viewpoints of personal expression and experience. I think this is what happens in the fragment from ‘Makke Janne’, the tree that shared a space in time with emperor Wilhem II or with the tree in the convent, - in the middle of historic Utrecht. Seeing trees through the eyes of their nominators, connects them with the history of the site.

Though not always relevant or necessary to inspire human-tree relationships, the features, size and age of a tree are important when it comes to their symbolic representation. This is explored in the next section of this chapter.

### **Talking about trees: producing symbolic representations**

When we talk about trees, trees may also mean or stand for something else (Rival 1998). Here, I would like to shortly explore the role of identification with trees and the language people use to talk about trees and examine the value of these approaches to interpret the relationship between people and trees.

For example, the winning Polish tree represented the fight for forest preservation. The individual oak became a protagonist in a story that did not feature itself, but rather symbolized a worldview or ideology. Similarly, also the walnut tree symbolizes the rights of nonhuman life in urban environments. It is presented by the project to engage in a conversation with authorities for more autonomy and respect for accidental tree life and what that means to people. I also found that people refer to trees as symbolic vehicles for exploring human conditions. Shani: “When I sit with the tree, it makes me feel humble. I realise, I can be like the tree. It’s a calm being, it helps me to put things in perspective”. Or Hans (coordinator of Accidental Green): “In accidental trees, growing at impossible places in a city, I see a metaphor of how we as human beings relate to our human existence”.

Here the work of Rival connects with Descola’s work (2013) who describes how trees become triggers for reflecting on what it means to be alive. As living beings, trees possess, as Eduardo Kohn (2013, 92) points out, ‘distinctive and personal characteristics that make them *‘selves’*. This identity of trees can create an affective power as we saw in the previous chapter, but their ability as actants to develop relational significance also contributes to the identity-making of a person. Important here is how people can individually reflect on similarities and differences in appearance, behaviour and characteristics between themselves and a tree. This process of ‘identification’ (Descola 2013) enables a person to enter into a relationship with a tree. When I visited Makke Janne, Rud told me that people always refer to

the lightning bolt that must have hit her. Having been split in two, but surviving gave her a tormented, aged and inspiring body. Forester Rud: “People visit her and find calmness. They find that she inspires them to accept life and survive”. Mirjam imagines she shares a mood with a tree: “Today I see he rustles his leaves in the wind, I imagine he is also enjoying the weather, just like me”. During our walks, I also saw many tree-nominators greet their trees, either in gesture or in word. People put their hand on the trunk of a tree, or even shortly hugged it and sometimes murmured to it. They explained their behaviour by saying that they would like to simply make contact with the tree and say ‘hi’. Francesca Mezzenzana (2018) found similar results in human-nonhuman relationships with the Runa in the Amazon, where she saw that the ability to produce ‘movement’ is an interesting starting point to address ‘identification’. I believe this is the idea that Mirjam refers to when she describes herself and the tree, both moving leaves or limbs and enjoy wind and sun similarly.



‘I am Tilia’, lime tree in Maasniel, the Netherlands, competing in the ETY contest 2022.

The symbolic meaning of trees is also visible in the language that people use to refer to trees. For example, I found that some trees had been given names and in the context of the ETY

Ana touched the tree's amputated trunk while telling me how it shocked her what happened to the tree: "It does feel stupid, he is a living being, growing here". And Ilja: "When we let it grow into the potentially healthy walnut tree it can be, we can benefit much more from its fruits, shade and green qualities (absorbing CO2). To me this is a matter of living together and enjoying what a tree like this can offer us, rather than treating it as an unwanted organism."

Being an accidental sprout of a walnut, it could well have landed here via bird transport. But which tree could have mothered this particular walnut? Ilja was amused to share her firm belief that the walnut tree in her backyard must have surely been the provider of the walnut seed that sprouted here. Somehow to her, the idea sounded meaningful to have been a supporting factor in the birth and existence of this tree and feel some sort of ownership and pride for it, growing here.

contest, trees were represented as identifiable creatures. A great example was already mentioned: Makke Janne<sup>10</sup>, the chestnut that was struck by lightning. Competing in the ETY contest in 2022 was a tree called 'Tilia'<sup>11</sup>. She was also promoted in a video, showing the face of a blond lady through the branches, speaking directly to the audience. In this context, I also enjoyed the video of the Portuguese cork oak, that speaks and says that she is nicknamed 'mother'. Returning to the story of the walnut I will show another example of the use of language.

In chapter three, I mentioned how Ilja uses a more academic conversational vocabulary and Ana a more emotional language. The most obvious finding that I did while looking at the language that people use, is actually related to this observation. People either refer to trees as objects or as subjects. They do so by use of the pronouns 'it' or 'he' or 'she'. 'It' is a term that is used for objectification, usually enabling people to distance themselves from the object of conversation. Using 'he' or 'she', people create a tree- 'subject'. In the fragment of the

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<sup>10</sup> See for example Makke Janne In Amerongen <https://www.gelderlander.nl/utrechtse-heuvelrug/amerongse-kastanjeboom-makke-janne-in-de-race-voor-nederlands-mooiste~af84b4d8/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

<sup>11</sup> See for example "I am Tilia", Dutch competing tree for the ETY contest in 2022. <https://www.treeoftheyear.org/Previous-Years/2022/I-am-Tilia>

walnut Ana uses 'he'. This pronoun expresses emotional meaning to Ana and the walnut acquires certain personhood to her by doing so. It is a way of humanizing or personifying trees. On the occasions that people used 'he' or 'she' as pronouns, people told me that they use these subject pronouns naturally to honour the individuality of the tree.

In the fragment above, I discerned another interesting choice of language when Ilja refers to a walnut 'that is born', language that treats the tree as a subject. A second example stems from a conversation about an accidental fig tree in the middle of Utrecht. The tree-mayor: "I think I have known the tree for over 35 years. When I first met him, he was only 50 cm. tall. He grew with its tiny roots on a heating tube. The microclimate on the wharfs created perfect conditions for him. You can clearly see he enjoys it here. Did you know this is the oldest fig in the Netherlands? He is famous". Talking about 'his' fig tree, the tree mayor states that he has 'known' this tree for more than 35 years. By using the verb 'to know', and addressing the tree as 'he', he acknowledges the tree as a living organism that he is familiar or acquainted with; the tree becomes an 'old, famous friend'.

The practice of addressing nonhumans with human language adds a dimension to how we perceive them. Laura Rival (2021, 9-10) wrote that we need to 'redeploy our skills as storytelling analysts and ethnographers of embodied and collective experiences to help renew questions about our place in the Anthropocene'. In other words, the language that we use, the stories that we tell and how we talk about nonhuman life matters. In this chapter, I explored this by looking at trees as agents, that produce human emotions, perceptions and actions and explained those in notions of 'home feeling', 'historicity', 'symbolism' and 'identification'. In the next chapter, I will look at the perspective and narratives of trees themselves and how we can reflect on their roles in tree-human relationships.

## 5. When trees talk too

In Chakrabarty's (2021) view, anthropological research should not only focus on humans, but also concern 'multicellular life'. He introduced the term *planetary* perspective to describe a holistic anthropological approach. With this he avoids the dualistic notion of a 'human-nature' perspective. In line with his perspective that planetary relationships imply 'equality' or 'interdependence' of actors in an eco-system, I attempt to review the voice and role of the 'Other' in this chapter. I explore tree-human relationships from a tree's perspective, emphasizing the interspecies dimensions of these relationships. I hope to do justice to the reciprocity, agency and relational characteristics that were analysed in the previous chapters by using human narratives as a method. But how to interview a tree? This chapter starts by looking at what is lived in practice. After this, I revisit the human-nature dichotomy in the context of my findings to better represent tree-narratives.

### To be with a tree

During the walks with research participants, we took the time to 'be with a tree'. Simply sharing the wind, bird-sounds and each-other's presence. Using the art of imagination and awareness and what we know about 'tree communication', interlocutors tried to help me to interview their tree. According to Bruner (2004, 691) 'we seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative'. Spending time with urban trees to collect 'lived time', I realised that it is imperative that trees also relate to human beings, just like they do with other living creatures around them. How could they not, the way trees have no choice but to deal with their environment? I will explain how I reached this conclusion. Scholars from natural science domains such as biology, ecology and forestry have recently published on intricate interspecies relationships in forests (e.g. Simard 2021). They demonstrate that funghi nest between tree roots and transport messages from trees to signal empathy, facilitate strategic behaviour and cooperation with other species. However, is it possible to describe a tree's life with human cognition, language and sensations? Most of the criticism that Wohlleben<sup>12</sup> (*The Hidden Life of Trees* 2018) and Suzanne Simard (*Finding the Mother Tree* 2021) encountered, centred around anthropomorphism. When these authors

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<sup>12</sup> The forester Peter Wohlleben unchained a whole series in this field with additional writing on 'The secret wisdom of nature' (2019), 'Can you hear the trees talking' (2021), 'The heartbeat of trees: embracing the ancient bond between trees and men' (2021), inspiring social and natural scientists with his work.

write about how trees in a forest entertain interspecies relationships, they are looking at these processes through human eyes and how we interpret how trees ‘relate’ to their environments, remains a point of discussion. In my study, I encountered the same problematic anthropomorphic constraints while trying to represent the perspective of trees. In my search for more data to present the narrative of trees outside the academic realm, I followed a popular podcast by the Dutch forestry agency, Staatsbosbeheer. The podcast ‘Groene Oren’ (2021) clearly puts anthropomorphic lenses on nonhuman life, but also pays respect to their individuality and species. Here, trees tell their own story: what does their daily life look like and how do they experience the world? Paulien, the oak tree tells us that we got it all wrong about the nuisance of insects: “Oak processionary caterpillars? I am much more bothered by the oak leaf roller! But you never hear about that.” Following this approach, I return to the story of the walnut to zoom in on how it lives and get some glimpses of how it experiences life and relationships as a nonhuman.

Sitting with the walnut I realised that its environmental conditions are not necessarily very favourable. Having been severely injured last year, its proximity close to the street and the garbage container (materials that are difficult to penetrate with root systems, heavy and large vehicles passing closely by), not many peers (other walnuts) and the dog-poo area, among other elements, create a complex and tumultuous environment. Though its location in the bushes was not influenced by tree bureaucracies, its life seems to be intertwined with human decision-making. For example, it could not have grown here without another walnut having been condoned in the neighbourhood that mothered it.

The walnut is a demonstration of how trees’ lives are affected by people in man-made environments. First, I found that the walnut tree resonates a sense of indigenoussness and locality. The locally mothered and hatched tree belongs to this neighbourhood. It could not have grown elsewhere, accidentally dropped by a bird on that specific spot. This is also valid for another protagonist in this study (the elm) whose ‘mother’ ‘simply grew’ in the backyard of Doris. She tried to first plant another species of tree in front of her house, but that one did not settle. It turned out that the living conditions were more suitable for the elm. Secondly, also in an urban context, the characteristic of trees to inhabit spaces, stands out. Once a tree settles, it cannot move and is part of a habitat or an eco-system. It belongs to the place where it stands, producing life-giving conditions for a bio-diverse (insects, animals, plants and

people) landscape, expressed in sounds (wind rustling leaves, cracking branches, insects buzzing) and sensations (tough bark, nutritional leaves, shade). Appreciated by a majority of the street residents and the bird- and insect life, it is relevant where it stands; this is where it belongs. It is also the only tree in the street. When Doris says she ‘lives with the elm’, this is also valid for other creatures (insects, birds) that ‘live with it’ too. Her neighbours, living across the street told me: “It is so good to have a green tree in the street, it makes this street more cosy and liveable”. Looking at trees like this reveals a lived tree perspective of trees co-inhabiting space with other species. Exchanging services, living together in this space and depending on each other in that context refers to notions of ‘cohabitation’, and ‘reciprocity’. In the next section I will further explore these concepts.

### **A reciprocal relationship in a life network**

The topic of ‘reciprocity’ in human- tree relationships also becomes apparent in other fragments of the story of the walnut. In the previous section, I defined reciprocity of a tree not only with regards to the non-human relationships it entertains (insects and other bio-diverse life, pollinating, feeding, sowing, sharing space) but how I also see this in a tree-human relationship. For Ilja, the idea of ‘usefulness of the tree for people’ and giving care in return by saving the life of the tree, motivates her actions. First, people make sure that a seedling grows strong and healthy enough to provide these services. Once trees are mature they start giving back. Doris cared for her elm during the time that she witnessed its growth and is now very appreciative of the reciprocity it awards her in the form of shade, bird sounds and leaves rustling.

I also mentioned that this love for trees or ‘biophilia’ could also be seen as a response to the Anthropocene (Tidball 2012) or as equally anthropocentric (caring for a tree in order to retract benefits). However, I find that by looking at trees in a more reciprocal way, the people in this study place themselves in less hierarchical relationships with trees. They seem to move away from the dominant economic approach to trees, characteristic of the Anthropocene. Looking at it from a tree-perspective and reviewing the balance in human-tree relationships, I find that this is an example of what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) calls a more holistic view on human-nature relationships. With this view, she aims to describe life on earth inclusively: like other life forms humans can only live successfully on this planet by living together and by sustaining each other. Recognizing the mutual dependency of planetary life, her book demonstrates that the relationship between human foragers and mushrooms show a

promise of ‘cohabitation’. This concept describes the ways in which different life forms nurture each other and share space, food and care.

Returning to my findings, there were different signs of practices of cohabitation in the urban context of the city of Utrecht. The project Accidental Green is in fact entirely built around this concept. Hans van Lunteren: “I have long worked on the phenomenon of seedlings, because in them I see the power of nature, especially in urban areas. Once, in the past humans withdrew land from wild nature and urbanized it. Seedlings represent a form of nature that can adjust and share this created space”. Furthermore, connecting trees to the aesthetics and need for ‘green’ in the city, the project provides protection for accidental trees, claiming that there is space and a need to co-inhabit Utrecht. Meanwhile, trees already practise co-habitation with human and non-human urban residents. During my participation in different meetings and events of the project, we discussed ‘promising’ trees. ‘Promising’ meant that they were growing in places where they would not cause risk, damage or hamper human activities. As part of the project, I participated in a seedling-walk<sup>13</sup>, titled ‘Seedlings, Zocher and the Soft City’. Coordinating artist Hans: “Our way of doing things contain all kinds of habits that determine what we see and experience. Just outside the obvious, there is an area waiting to be entered – in cracks, between paving stones and steps, where seedlings find their way in a stony city”. As envisioned by the artists leading the walk, I found that there are many trees that have co-inhabited the city on their own and make use of human environments. A great example of this was a beautiful fig tree that was nominated by the tree mayor of Utrecht that grows out of the medieval brick wall of the Utrecht Oudegracht<sup>14</sup>. Where and how it gets nutrition? All we can see it that it has grown into a considerable size and how its autonomy and agency to live in the wall and the basement with humans, is fascinating. In exchange for care (it is regularly pruned now and protected through the project) it also provides figs, shade and a beautiful sight on the Oudegracht.

More signs of cohabitation are found in the personal narratives of people in relation to feelings of ‘home’ and meaning-making of human-tree relationships. With a pear tree in the backyard, an elm in front of a house or a particular tree that was planted for a life-event (birth or death of a person), people proclaim that they live together and share space and even food (rain, sunlight), nurturing each other. This idea of ‘living together’ brought me to consider the concept of a ‘life network’ to explain the importance of trees for people. Having discussed

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<sup>13</sup> <https://urbantreefestival.org/seedlings-zocher-and-the-soft-city>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.duic.nl/algemeen/toevallig-groen-bomenburgemeester-beschermt-illegale-vijg/>

trees as ‘agents’, the ‘symbolism’ of trees, notions of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘cohabitation’, I concluded that trees are a part of people’s lives. Using the term life network would be an inclusive and holistic notion to describe meaningful relationships between human and non-human life, specifically in their urban environments. In order to deepen these findings, I will finish this chapter with an exploration of why it might be that in contrast of ‘cohabitation’ and the presence of ‘life networks’, people hesitate to acknowledge them.



The tree mayor of Utrecht and the fig tree at the Oudegracht.

### **A human-tree relationship continuum**

Following the lived perspective of trees, this research has shown that nominated trees can be reviewed in human contexts with their lives and deaths closely linked to human social worlds. Eduardo Kohn (2013) framed this as the ‘Anthropology of Life’ in his book *How forests think: toward an anthropology beyond the human*. He argues that: ‘How other kinds of beings see us matters. That other kinds of beings see us, changes things’ (Kohn 2013, 1-2). Inspired by Kohn and the multispecies approach he took, I noted that people’s perception of what trees experience, can be interpreted as ‘moving on a continuum between human-centric and multispecies perspectives’. Below, I demonstrate that this continuum is a construct of

transitional, cultural understandings of what trees are and how interspecies relationships might work.

The dominant narrative in my study is that people feel strongly about enjoying and respecting natural elements in the world around them. However, most of the reflections and practices I collected were related to human-centred views on these relationships; talking about people on the one hand and trees on the other hand. This anthropocentric and dualistic narrative expressed itself in referrals to the need of tree-felling (rooilijst), using trees as heat mitigators and also often in the reason for nomination; tree protection against tree bureaucracy; both human endeavours. However, I experienced a shift during conversations with interlocutors when we tried to reflect on trees perspectives. When people referred to their relationship with trees in terms of reciprocity or equality, there were glimpses of transitional thinking towards post humanist or multi-species mind-sets (Smart and Smart 2017). For example, there are people who describe a connection beyond human culture. Shani: “When I see my tree, I feel I am part of it and the tree is part of me, we belong to the same world”, and Ilja: “Nature and people are not separated. We need each-other.” Also, I participated in a small ‘tree-ceremony’, in which the assignment was to ‘meditate’ on words to describe a tree’s perspective. It was an interesting experience, but also awkward, for how can I feel like a tree? ‘Awkward’ also accurately describes the general perception of this topic by my research participants. I noticed that many of the interviews started off with people questioning their own participation in my research saying that they were neither princess Irene (a member of the royal family who wrote books about tree-love<sup>15</sup>), nor tree experts and generally apologetic about whether they could contribute anything useful to my study. Informally talking about trees, people would say they cared for their tree and opened up to the idea that it might be possible to speak of a relationship. Similarly, people initially hesitated to share their answers to the question whether trees might also stand in relation to them. However, during the conversations and by jointly reflecting on their practices and ideas, respondents countered their hesitation. I asked myself whether it could be that people find themselves in the middle of a post-humanist development (Smart and Smart 2017) and struggle to transit from anthropocentrism towards a more planetary perspective on life on earth (Chakrabarty 2021). I found answers to this question in small signals. For example, when Anita recognizes that the pear tree in her backyard is a part of her home and that she

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<sup>15</sup> For example: *Dialogo Met de Natuur: Een Weg Naar Een Nieuw Evenwicht* (van Lippe-Biesterfeld, 1999).

would miss it like a dear friend when it is gone. Or, when William mentions that his elm also lives its life with him as a neighbour. I also remember the moment in the conversation with Mirjam, when I asked her whether the tree might also be a fan of her. She blinked an eye, turned to the tree as if pondering the idea and answered: “Yes, that could actually well be. I never thought of it in that way, but it could quite well be, seeing that I feel so strongly about it, I guess this type of love would not exist without reciprocity”. I found that by asking questions, a world of mutual and perhaps more egalitarian relationships is conceived in the minds of people. It is an exploration of aspects of human-tree relationships that are unknowingly acknowledged in practices, but now voiced in a particular vocabulary, such as the words ‘friend’, ‘neighbour’ and ‘fan’.

In this chapter, I argued that the perspective of trees can be found in its locality and in concepts of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘cohabitation’. These practices and narratives of trees in a ‘life network’ take place on a continuum, where people’s positions may shift between dualistic and holistic interpretations of human-tree relationships. Moving towards a summary and conclusion of my thesis, in the next chapters, I will return to my main findings, describing the profiles of the projects Accidental Green and ETY, the research population and how to describe and explain the meanings of human-tree relationships.

## **6. I am a fan of this tree**

Analysing the reasons and background of tree-nomination, this thesis explored the nature of relationships between people and trees and the meanings of their practices and narratives. The purpose of my research was to develop an understanding of 1) how narratives can be analysed to describe relationships between people and trees and 2) explain the meanings that people attach to those relationships. My purpose was that by acknowledging the actant (Latour 1987) quality of trees, my research would provide an entry point in understanding ways of how people look at trees and human-tree relationships are developed. By seeing trees as protagonists in their own narratives, I hoped to contribute to an understanding of anthropogenic ideas about trees and explaining human-tree relationships. In this chapter, I summarize the main findings.

### **Accidental Green, European Tree of the Year and the people**

I introduced the concept of ‘tree-space’ (Cihanger 2013) to approach trees not just as tree-bodies, but also as physical locations. As a tree-space, trees are part of a landscape that is used, visited, navigated and remembered. The relevance of this concept for the projects, their coordinators and tree-nominators is confirmed in my thesis as we saw in different chapters how nominated trees functioned as navigational landmarks, represented elements in landscapes full of memories or were places to visit, connect with oneself or with other neighbourhood residents. Also, I demonstrated how the tree-space is used in stories by the projects for promotional purposes and to influence public opinion. Describing the studied projects, I also found that they are successful in their efforts to draw public attention to the fate of trees and finding loopholes in tree bureaucracy. For example, the story of the walnut illustrated that the municipality of Utrecht also accepted the importance of the relationship that people may have with trees.

Generally, I found that bureaucratic forces in the context in which tree nomination takes place, leave a large mark on how the studied projects are organised. First, people nominate trees to protect them against ‘tree bureaucracy’. They are afraid that their tree might be harvested, cut, not protected, etc. Secondly, I identified that urban and national state representatives are important stakeholders that the projects aim to influence to change tree-policies. And thirdly, because the projects function in the -at times politically and economically challenged context of small-scale NGO’s. Both projects use the individual

symbolic value of nominated trees to call for attention for their cause: to appreciate human-tree relationships and protect trees.

Moving from observations on the bureaucratic context of the projects to the reality of people nominating trees, a more nuanced picture of human-tree relationships appeared. The practice of tree-nominating to honour and protect tree relationships goes beyond profiles that can be explained by human demographic features or tree aesthetics, although my research did find a few particular sub-profiles among the research population such as professional arborists and artists. Especially the artists' profile triggered my attention as I found that the agency of trees is also explored in different forms of (fictional) art, explored by tree nominators and also influencing the philosophy behind *Accidental Green*. As a commonality in the profiles of those involved in tree nomination, I found sensitive childhood personalities and love for nature and the outdoors. Many of the nominators live in urban environments and also mentioned their living environments as one of the reasons to feel affection for a tree, some explaining their relationship in terms of respect, others focusing more on the benefits that trees offer humanity, such as shade, fruit and pleasant (urban) landscape views and walks.

After describing the process of how people nominate trees, I further reviewed the reasons behind tree-nomination. I found that reasons could be labelled as internally or externally motivated, but that there was also a process of these internal and external motives mutually reinforcing each other. The external motives of general forest/ nature protection or tourism interests were often matched with personal (internal) motives where the individual relationship with specific tree-spaces was the core reason to nominate. For example, in the Polish nomination process, a tree was nominated mainly because it was good-looking and could be used as a symbol for an entire forest that faced deforestation, but during the process of rallying for public votes, people actually started to develop a 'tree-love'. I based this notion on the work of Archambault (2016) on 'affective encounters'.

### **A tree as an actant in a human life network**

Following the idea of accepting the notion of tree-space, the most important conclusion that I draw from this study is to review the tree-space as an entity with agency, able to impact human and nonhuman life. That trees can be regarded as capable of acting becomes clear in different examples, such as moving people into performing certain actions (such as cycle a detour to visit it) or influencing human emotions. I observed the effects of trees on people

during our walks, as we sat down together at tree-spaces, enjoying the presence of trees and how that made us feel or think. In line with this effect that a tree-space may have on people, I found evidence of trees that contribute to feelings of being at home and the identity making of people. The tree-space in a landscape connects people with historical, local or family memories and the longevity of trees gives people a sensation of different temporalities. The notion of historicity and scales of time define trees as if they are the living proof or even witnesses of events that took place in the past or might happen in the future. Because of this symbolic representation, people feel affection for trees. By means of ‘identification’ people used their relationship with trees to reflect on their own lives and selves. Their participation in the projects and engagement in my research are in that sense evidence of how people feel that their engagement with trees is meaningful and part of their identity.

Finally, the above-mentioned conclusions provide the arguments to speak of a *life network* that includes the presence of trees in human lives. As trees can be regarded meaningful, impacting moods and daily routines, trees are actors in the everyday lives of people. Similar to other human and nonhuman actors in life (friends, family, colleagues, pets) people relate to trees, care for trees and develop pride, anxiety and involvement for the wellbeing of trees. For example, one of the actions people took was to nominate favourite trees for the studied projects to protect or proudly present them. The term ‘life network’ wants to describe human-tree relationships beyond a dualistic understanding of a nature/human divide. It enables us to think more inclusively about human-nature relationships and the agency of both humans and trees to interact meaningfully and reciprocally in care, services and in different forms of cohabitation. The reciprocal exchange than does not have to end with the relationship between trees and people, giving benefits like shade, fruit and urban aesthetics, but could include the entire bio-diverse landscape, such as insects, birds and plants that inhabit a tree-space. Furthermore, even though it is the central theme of this study to look at the meanings and interactions of trees with people, trees of course also exist outside the narrative of human-tree relationships. The agency of a tree to co-inhabit the city of Utrecht jointly sharing space with a human built environment, spreading its seedlings for example through bird transport to unexpected and ‘undesired’ places, is also an example of its autonomy.

### **Tree-nomination in the Anthropocene; a shifting story?**

Anthropologist Tim Ingold described the perceived dualism between humans and nature as ‘the single, underlying fault upon which the entire edifice of Western thought and science has been built’ (Ingold 2020, 1). And in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Descola (2013) explains this separation between human and nature as ‘the great divide’. However, this study shows that seeing nature as a separate, external entity and trees as part of the ‘Other’ (Haraway 1992), does not yet consider the everyday relationships that people (can) have with living organisms such as trees. On the contrary, in the practice of nominating favourite trees, there is room for affective and reciprocal relationships between people and trees. In this sense, my data provides evidence to understand ‘the divide’ not as a clear-cut gap, but as a continuum. On this continuum between dualistic interpretations of the human-nature relations and convictions that do not categorize at all, I found that people constantly move positions to describe their relationship with trees. When people mention the reciprocity and what trees do to them, people unconsciously acknowledge the ‘selves’ of trees, as described by Eduardo Kohn (2013), but when they are asked whether a tree might have a relationship with them, they deny the idea. I thus conclude that within different topical contexts and practices, people take up various positions on this continuum, ranging from tree-hugging to tree-using and tree-loving to tree-respecting and ‘tree-object without autonomy’ to ‘tree-subject with clear agency’. Whilst navigating this continuum together with my interlocutors, I was also confronted with my own engagement with the topic. By means of an afterword, I therefore refer to the story of the walnut again in the next chapter to reflect on my methodology and positionality.

## **When we do research about people and trees**

In this chapter, I would like to take the chance to critically reflect on my methodology, the research process and my findings and do suggestions for future research. The fieldwork was carried out in three different phases that corresponded with different three perspectives: 1) the organizations, 2) the people and 3) the trees. Whereas I was frustrated with the lack of human observations and interactions in phase one of the fieldwork, I was able to collect empirical data through participation in project activities in phase two, even though I also experienced the limitations of those projects. I foresee that future research ‘let’s go’ of the projects and the practice of ‘nomination’ to focus on explaining human-tree relationships in their own right. In a tight research window, like I had with my thesis, more focus will also give the opportunity to ‘dig deeper’ into the literature and data. In the end, phase three proved to be most difficult. I tried to interweave the tree’s narrative in different interviews and tree-space observations, but I felt I often got blocked in a ‘grey’ area between imaginary narratives and artful exercises of experiencing the trees’ environment and data sampling through human told narratives.

Entering into a dialogue with multispecies literature was helpful, but also at times very conceptual and time-consuming. The difficulty of thinking about different approaches towards agency (Latour 1996) of nonhuman life and the blockage that my research participants and I experienced when we tried to enter this realm of perspectives was fascinating. If granted more time and more specifically a ‘slower’ sense of time, akin to trees, I believe the data could have become richer and thicker. This is valid for the fieldwork, but also for the writing process. Furthermore, I choose to limit myself to tree nominators for the scope of the projects that I selected as entry points into the research population, but during the fieldwork I encountered various moments where I could have ventured out into other directions. These included the perspectives of arborists, tree activists, artists, spiritual tree-lovers or culturally different (than western/ Dutch) groups and even particular tree-species or narratives (for example about healing trees). Looking back, I feel that I encountered enough data and literature to turn each separate (content) chapter into a thesis on its own: plenty of orientations for future studies.

The question that remained is ‘how to interview a tree?’ (Kirksey 2014b). My study showed that the interaction between humans and trees becomes part of a larger human experience that is not easily captured in narratives. Encompassing sensations of sounds,

rustling leaves, smells of rain and earth, insects and birds into the relationships and trying to review the perspectives of trees, this thesis encountered the limitations of human narratives. Let's explore the option to use artful imaginations in the last section of this chapter.

### **Discussing narratives and art**

Moen (2006) demonstrates that narrative research regards narratives as social constructs. As a unit of analysis, narratives provide valid insights because they represent human experiences in a socially complex context that shape identities, ideas, values and practices. Narratives can be vehicles for the construction and interpretation of relationships. This and the place-based perspective of a narrative approach was insightful for my thesis; telling stories about experiences and relationships with trees-spaces. However, it proved also to be limiting in a sense: by using narratives, we domesticate the natural environment around us. Looking at the work of Ghosh (2016), I understood that by capturing trees in human stories, we pull them into a human world and describe their presence culturally, rather than acknowledge them as actants. In response to this limitation, Ghosh advocates for multi- or cross-disciplinarity between research and expressions of art. Interestingly, this was also visible in one of the main organisations of this study: the art-project Accidental Green and in much of the additional data that I encountered outside the scope of the studied projects, exploring the agency of trees. A few examples: the organization 'Tafelboom' uses timber of urban trees in Utrecht for wooden furniture, connecting tree-bodies with stories and pictures of the living tree-spaces they used to be. Ruth, the owner wrote personal letters to honour and thank particular 'elms', 'oaks', and 'ash trees' (van Andel 2020), addressing them personally, missing them as tree-spaces, but also congratulating them with their new lives as tables or chairs. 'Forest' by theatre maker Emke Idema<sup>16</sup> (2020), imagines a timeframe where trees dominate, called the 'dendrocene'. Film maker Salomé Jashi (2021) follows tree-transport for a private garden in 'Taming the Garden'. And, the work on 'plants and speculative fiction' by Meeker and Szabari (2019) explores 'more than human encounters'<sup>17</sup>. I therefore think that, considering the limitations of speaking with trees, it is with other languages that allow creativity and imagination that narratives concerning the tree-perspective of tree-human relationships are constructed and become meaningful<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.emkeidema.nl/forest/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kaaitheater.be/nl/duiding/video-on-radical-botany-%e2%80%93-tendrillesque-writing>

<sup>18</sup> See also list of additional readings, literature and art-work human tree relationships in the appendices.

### **Final thoughts on positionality**

During my conversations with Ilja and Ana, I noticed a shift in our joint thinking, unravelling how it might be that Ilja sincerely felt that we should not think in human-nature divisions, but found it awkward to entertain the thought that the walnut has a relationship with her. Both Ilja and Ana acknowledged the importance of ‘caring’ for healthy relationships with non-human life. But, by asking them to consider and reflect on it, I attached weight and significance to possible reciprocal relationships with trees. Certainly, by weathering storm and rain, it felt as if the walnut tree also became important to me. It was as if by nominating the tree for Accidental Green and by working with Hans (the project coordinator) we considered the shared events and conversations about the walnut as part of building a new joint narrative. A narrative that created space for the agency of the walnut, the position of the walnut in our lives and its own perspective on life.

The question I then asked myself is how much did I influence the outcomes of my study by making it a study and topic of conversation? A beginning of an answer I found in what Zavyalova (2017) wrote about ‘embodied knowledge’, or the ethnographic experience, using the body and self of the researcher as an instrument. An ethnography is not necessarily supposed to be impersonal and detached (Lahiri, Mahmud, and Herron 2010, 9-10). The story of the walnut shows how I used my own awareness, reflection and body as an instrument, connecting an understanding of this ‘divide’ with my fieldwork. As such, as a researcher and as a human being, I can also be placed on this continuum between thinking and practicing a human-nature division and a holistic, planetary and post-humanist way of living and thinking in a narrative in which human-tree relationships are reciprocal and egalitarian in nature.

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**Appendix 1: photo-series**



Meeting between one project coordinator, two tree-nominators, two greenery men and one researcher. The walnut tree is located in the middle hedge next to the garbage container.



Protecting the walnut tree with an iron fence.



The walnut tree moving into spring.



The garbage container arches right over the walnut tree.

## Appendix 2: List of additional readings, expressions of art and organisations

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