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# Going back-to-the-land in the Anthropocene: a more-than-human journey into anarchist geography

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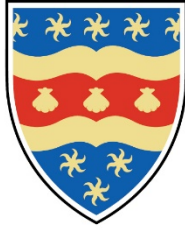
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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

Going back-to-the-land in the Anthropocene:  
a more-than-human journey into anarchist geography

By

Carlotta Molfese

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for  
the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences

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## Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

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## Publications

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**Abstract**

This thesis is a theoretical and empirical journey into the more-than-human worlds of countercultural back-to-the-land farmers: radical environmentalists who migrate to rural places and take up farming as a way of living. It investigates their everyday life and relations to the land as a key dimension of their political radicalism and it interrogates the transformative potential of a back-to-the-land way of living. It does so by examining their lived experience of (post)migration and by paying attention to their affective experiences, encounters and everyday doings with the land and the non-human beings, objects and forces that are enrolled and shape their everyday life.

The thesis is based upon a situated, yet empirically rich, (auto)ethnographic account of the researcher's own back-to-the-land journey from the UK to southern Italy and her experience and practice as a back-to-the-land farmer. On a conceptual level, the thesis brings together more-than-human and anarchist geography to conceptualise the becomings and doings of back-to-the-land farmers in relational and more-than-human terms. More specifically, it draws upon the "more-than-human turn" in geographical theory to move beyond the human-centric frameworks of a (re)emerging anarchist geography. The thesis develops a distinctive theoretical trajectory that rethinks the subjects and transformative potentiality of anarchist prefigurative politics by foregrounding and attending to the agency of place, non-human beings and infrastructures.

This thesis offers a thick ethnographic account of the affective experiences and contextual dimensions of back-to-the-land migration and everyday living, and it generates novel insights into the back-to-the-land movement. More specifically, it problematises the instrumental rationality that is often associated with radical subjects like back-to-the-land farmers, and it reveals the importance of intimate and radical connections and affective (dis)attachments in their becoming. Moreover, it rethinks the back-to-the-land movement from a lifestyle to a form-of-life, a whole way of living based on values, knowledge, skills and practices of ecological care, (self-)sufficiency and animal autonomy, and it draws attention to two generous infrastructures that it generates.

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## **List of acronyms used in this thesis**

Actor-Network Theory - ANT

Alternative Food Network - AFN

Back-To-The-Land - BTTL

Community-Supported Agriculture - CSA

Do-It-Yourself - DIY

Genuino Clandestino - GC

Low Impact Development - LID

Non-Representational Theory - NRT



# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Going “back-to-the-land”: the thesis-as-journey

In many ways, this thesis is a journey. It is most straightforwardly a research and theoretical journey, but it is also a physical and personal one. “Embarking on a PhD” in my case was a quite literal act, involving boarding an actual ferry, moving to the Italian countryside and becoming a graduate student *and* a farmer. Understanding this journey – including how it came about and what it entails – is the main focus of this thesis. However, on this thesis-as-journey, I do not travel alone.

Migrants like me who move to the countryside and take up farming are commonly referred to as “back-to-the-land” (BTTL) farmers and they have been primarily studied in geography within the counter-urbanisation literature. However, the term “back-to-the-land” is “a very diffusive concept” (Halfacree, 2007a, p. 3) that encompasses a variety of subjectivities, ideologies, practices and geographies. For instance, the name recalls the “pioneer” imagery and agrarian values at the heart of the American homesteading tradition (Campbell, 2016; Jacob, 1997), but outside the Anglo-phone world, terms such as neo-farmers (Mailfert, 2007) and new peasants (Brunori and Rossi, 2010) are more commonly used. Moreover, BTTL migrations can comprise both *individual* initiatives (smallholding and homesteads), and more *communal* projects like eco-villages, intentional communes and spiritual and religious communities (Halfacree, 2006; Meijering, Huigen, *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, there are *mainstream* BTTL migrants driven primarily by economic or amenity reasons, and politically *radical* ones. Radical BTTL farmers, in turn, can espouse both a reactionary anti-urbanism based on conservative or even far-right values, and a more progressive “pro-ruralism” based on left-leaning, green and anti-capitalist political agendas (Wilbur, 2013).

In this thesis, I am specifically interested in this latter group with which I identify, and that can take both individual and communal forms. This radical strand of counterurbanisation is often associated with the “counterculture” of the 60s as well as the individual libertarianism and agrarian socialism of nineteenth and early

twentieth century writers such as Henry David Thoreau, William Morris and Charles Fourier (Pepper, 1991; Halfacree, 2006; Wilbur, 2013). Following Halfacree (2006, p. 313), *countercultural* BTTL farmers are defined here by three key characteristics: (1) a progressive and left-leaning political agenda which rejects key features of modern capitalist society; (2) a primarily rural and land-based livelihood; and (3) a pursuit of “consubstantiality” with the land. Halfacree (2006) borrows this concept from Gray (1998, p. 345) who defines it as a “spatial relation ... between beings and a place, such that the distinct existence and form of both partake of or become united in a common substance”. Put differently, consubstantiality is about attaining a degree of *embeddedness* and *embodiment* with the ecology of a place such that “everyday lives and ‘the land’ mutually constitute one another” (Halfacree, 2006, p. 313).

However, countercultural BTTL initiatives have been scarcely studied in geography. According to Halfacree (2001), this neglect is partly the result of “taxonomic practices” that have simplified and reduced the phenomenon to more mainstream stories of middle-class amenity migrations. Additionally, their remote rural locations and low profiles, make BTTL initiatives methodologically difficult to find and access for research (Wilbur, 2013). Nevertheless, the few studies available have foregrounded the importance of cultural representations of rurality in migrants’ motivations (Escribano, 2007; Halfacree, 2004) and the role that spatial and temporal context (Halfacree, 2006) as well as social and knowledge networks (Mailfert, 2007; Wilbur, 2014) play in the development of BTTL initiatives. Research outside geography has also deployed historical, sociological and political analyses to understand the history of the phenomenon, the demographic profile of those involved and the values, ideology and discourses that they embrace and promote (Edgington, 2008; Jacob, 1997; Pepper, 1991). Within this broad literature, a number of characteristics and key themes have emerged.

First, studies have documented a good number of highly educated and middle-class migrants in both Europe and North America, but many have also concluded that it would not be appropriate to apply a categorical class distinction to this group due to

their social heterogeneity (Pepper 1991, Jacob 1997, Brown 2011, Wilbur 2012). In fact, their post-migration livelihoods complicates such class categorisation, with many becoming worse-off after leaving structured employment, and/or working simultaneously as wage labourers, semi-subsistence farmers and small capitalist entrepreneurs (Pepper 1991, Wilbur 2012). Second, a number of “environmental dispositions” have been identified, including a yearning to reconnect materially and spiritually with the land and natural cycles, an interest in growing one’s own food organically, a passion for and commitment to environmental care, animal welfare and biodiversity protection, and a more general desire to live a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle (Jacob, 1991, Wilbur, 2013). Third, in their pursuit of a land-based livelihood, BTTL farmers also aim to distance themselves from authoritarian and capitalist logics and structures that promote dependency, limitless exploitation and production, disposability, commodification and careerism, and they embrace ideals such as anti-consumerism, pacifism, decentralisation, cooperative and meaningful work, voluntary simplicity and self-sufficiency (Halfacree, 2006; Meijering, van Hoven, *et al.*, 2007; Pepper, 1991; Wilbur, 2013).

And yet, as Halfacree (2006, p. 329-330) has noted, the “acting subject” – his/her motivations, intentions, knowledge and skills – remains under-researched in the literature “due in part to inadequate attention being paid to the nuts-and-bolts of working the land”. Indeed, there is very little on the actual “‘the back-to-the-land’ aspect of back-to-the-land experimentation” (2006, p. 330), or as Wilbur puts it, on “how ‘nature’ is performed” on BTTL farms (Wilbur, 2013, p. 155). What BTTL farmers actually do and how they interact with nature as part of their land-based livelihoods has barely been explored in the literature, despite the importance this material and practical aspect plays in individuals’ motivations to migrate, their radicalism and everyday life. Moreover, where the land is and how BTTL farmers’ migration experiences and post-migration lives are shaped by its ecology and the broader spatial and temporal context in which it is situated, has been completely overlooked. Put differently, the actual everyday living *and* lived experiences of BTTL farmers have been overlooked in favour of producing more generalised accounts of

the movement. Hence, in this thesis, I enquire into my own journey and experience of going BTTL to bring a more “situated” - as in spatially, temporally and materially-aware - account of these countercultural initiatives and explore the more embodied and practical aspects of going BTTL.

For Wilbur (2013) and Halfacree (2006), this is a particularly important avenue of research because BTTL land-based livelihoods and everyday interactions with nature are a key dimension of their political radicalism. For Halfacree (2006, p. 313) a consubstantial life with the land is “radical within contemporary society as the dominant tendency within our society is towards a distancing of people from the soil”, and for Wilbur (2013, p. 155) “back-to-the-landers perform reciprocal interactions with nature to promote particular ideals (e.g. self-sufficiency, cooperative economic relationships, soil sustainability, biodiversity)” and this “material interaction with nature empowers broader, less immediate agendas”. Land and nature are terms that often get conflated in academic discussions on the BTTL movement, Halfacree and Wilbur’s studies being a case in point, whereby the former speaks of “consubstantiality with the land” and the latter of “performance of nature”. Nevertheless, both framings point to everyday doings with the “natural” entities or non-human beings and materials of the land they move to as a key dimension of their radicalism and everyday life, and they both suggest a relational and contextual perspective in which situated (i.e. *emplaced*) humans and non-humans become together in mundane everyday doings to research BTTL initiatives. Moreover, to frame their political radicalism, Wilbur (2013: 158) suggests considering “back-to-the-land as a process of seeding alternatives. Through the literal act of seeding, back-to-the-landers aim to create something both new and different. On occasion this desire for change may be limited to personal lifestyles but in many cases it speaks to issues of social and economic organisation, the nurturing of the environment and a sustained, creative appreciation of Earth’s edible bounty”. Hence, very clearly, but without naming it, Wilbur hints at anarchist prefigurative politics in his review, and Halfacree clearly situates BTTL initiatives within “anarchistic variants of radical politics” (Halfacree, 2006, p. 313).

Hence, to pursue this line of enquiry, at the conceptual level, I bring into conversation two geographical scholarships that can help to engage with the ways in which nature and politics intersect with the everyday lives and practices of BTTL farmers: posthumanist geography – more commonly referred to as more-than-human geography - and anarchist geography. However, before I introduce these travelling companions further and chart this thesis’ theoretical and empirical trajectory, I situate it within a broader theoretical and material context by turning to the concept of the Anthropocene and the ways in which it guides this thesis-as-journey.

## 1.2 Confronting the Anthropocene “event”: the intrusion of Gaia in theory and everyday life

*“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories”*

Donna J. Haraway (2016, p. 12)

The above quote is the cautionary advice of a prominent feminist and more-than-human scholar about how to best come to understand and confront the socio-ecological crisis of our time, broadly encapsulated by the idea of “the Anthropocene”. The concept was first put forward by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (2002, p. 23) two decades ago, to suggest the end of the Holocene epoch (a period of relatively stable climatic conditions that has allowed the flourishing of a number of species, including *Homo sapiens*) and the beginning of a new geological epoch in which humanity has become “a major environmental force”. While the exact beginning of this new epoch is still hotly debated, the Anthropocene concept has since gain momentum in both scientific and public discourse as “a rough placeholder” (Johnson *et al.*, 2014, p. 2) for an unprecedented historical condition

characterised by significant environmental change brought about by human activities.

Among the drivers and changes that characterise this new epoch are: a record high atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> as a result of human emission of greenhouse gases which in turn have caused global mean temperatures to rise up to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels (IPCC 2018); an unprecedented loss of species that could parallel previous Mass Extinction events due to climate disruptions, habitat alterations, overexploitation and pollution (Barnosky et al. 2011, Ceballos et al. 2017); an extraordinary change in sedimentary patterns due to the modification of rivers and coastlines, urban development, bottom trawling, deforestation and agriculture, including the loss of half of the world's top-soil (FAO 2015); and a simultaneous increase in modified and novel materials such as concrete and plastic as well as chemicals such as reactive nitrogen, organic pollutants and nuclear fission products (Zalasiewicz et al. 2011). Many of these biophysical alterations have long-term, cascading and largely unpredictable effects that threaten the survival of most planetary life as well as that of the human species (Steffen *et al.*, 2015).

However, since the formulation of the Anthropocene concept, many social scientists have engaged in its interrogation, producing a plethora of alternative names, diagnoses and possibilities for its past, current and future unfolding. For instance, many are critical of the name itself – “the Age of the Human” – as it perpetrates modern beliefs in human exceptionalism, autonomy and control, while also concealing profound inequalities in the production and distribution of environmental goods and harms behind a universalised notion of “humanity” (Baskin, 2015; Crist, 2013; Malm and Hornborg, 2014; Moore, 2017). Against apolitical scientific renditions, some have foregrounded its embeddedness in and entanglement with historical and ongoing forms of violence and injustices related to modernist ideologies, capitalist and colonial projects, and have proposed alternative names such as the “Capitalocene” and the “Plantationocene”<sup>1</sup> (Haraway, 2016;

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<sup>1</sup> Both concepts suggest a longer history of socio-ecological change and stress the role of particular socio-economic processes and political and ethical rationalities in the unravelling of current

Moore, 2017). Others fear the Anthropocene concept could trigger a “post-political” regime in which environmental issues are depoliticised through a “techno-managerial eco-consensus” that leaves no space for political dispute alongside increased securitisation and militarisation (Dalby, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 264).

However, some have also pointed out that by recognising the mutability, heterogeneity and unpredictability of the natural world, and by embedding humanity within its systems and processes, the concept actually challenges one of the most fundamental philosophical underpinnings of the “modern constitution” (Latour, 1993, p. 29) of Western societies: the ontological separation between Nature and Society (Clark, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 2011; Lorimer, 2012). Having recognised humanity as a “geological agent” embedded within Earth processes, the Anthropocene concept provokes “the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 201). Moreover, having recognised the complexity and unpredictability of the non-human world of nature and the threat it poses to human survival, the Anthropocene concept also points to inconsistencies and ruptures with the Enlightenment paradigm of human superiority and ability to fully know and control, challenging “fossilised” liberal definitions of the human as a biological, autonomous and individuated self (Yusoff, 2013, p. 781) These scholars have thus embraced the pronouncements regarding the “end of Nature” in the Anthropocene - not as the end of the biophysical world *per se*, but as the “demise of particular imaginings of Nature” (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 256)

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conditions. However, the Capitalocene emphasises the role of capital and unequal power relations in the production of adverse socio-ecological change (Malm and Hornborg 2014, Moore 2017), while the Plantationocene focuses on the image and legacy of plantation agriculture to suggest an overarching logic of discipline and control in human-to-human and human-to-non-human relations (Haraway et al. 2016). These two alternative conceptualisations are closely related insofar they both point to “an historically situated complex of metabolisms and assemblages” (Haraway et al. 2016: 555) built upon the physical and conceptual “abstraction” and “alienation” of both humans and non-humans from their “life-worlds” to become resources for capital investment and colonial projects.

that have traditionally constructed it as a passive, separate and inferior realm to that of human society<sup>2</sup>.

Hence, while the Anthropocene is far from being a settled, unproblematic or even universally accepted concept, its formulation and ongoing contestation across academic fields suggests it ought be regarded as an “event”: “a moment pregnant with risks as well as generative opportunities” (Blok and Jensen, 2019; Johnson *et al.*, 2014, p. 2). Understood as such, the concept offers a provocative theoretical and material ground on which to re-assess the ways in which we conceptually and materially relate to the Earth and each other in our own academic research and practices. But how so?

Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers (2017) approaches this problematic by turning to the figure of Gaia and postulating its “intrusion” into collective historicity. Gaia is neither Nature nor Earth. It is a hybrid figure steeped in Greek mythology and ancient paganism and re-born with modern environmental movements and climate science, but also a *being* with its own regime of activity and sensitivity. Gaia thus refers to “the radical historicity and exceptionality of the atmosphere, soils, and oceans of the earth, both sustaining and sustained by life ... that today’s climatologists are discovering as prone to global mutations” (2017, p. 386). For Stengers, the intrusion of Gaia heralds indeterminacy in science, culture, politics, economics, and civic practices and foregrounds the need to both “slow down reasoning” to reconsider inherited concepts, and invent new ways of coupling divergent forms of knowledge and practices. Put differently, it calls for a rethinking of our academic theories with regards to what has normally been referred to as Nature, and for experimenting and taking risks in our modes of enquiry by placing our research *in* the world and doing it *with* and *for* a diversity of actors, human-non-human, activist-public and otherwise.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use Nature with capital N to refer to this particular construction of the natural world as a “timeless” and spatially “out there” ontological entity that is separate from the world of human societies.



Similarly, for feminist geographers Gibson-Graham (2011, p. 1) “the reframing of our living worlds as vast uncontrolled experiments is inspiring us to reposition ourselves as learners, increasingly open to our interconnections with earth others and more willing to intervene in adventurous ways”. For them too, confronting the Anthropocene “event” in theory and everyday life, requires more than proposing alternative names and diagnoses, or pointing to those responsible: it demands an experimental ethos and to actively and deeply connect and experiment with human and non-human communities and new practices of living and being together as they emerge *in* and *with* specific places and concerns. Put differently, these interventions demand putting inherited academic practices and socio-theoretical certainties at risk and work towards practices of inquiry that involve transformations in our conceptualisations and ways of knowing Nature, as well as our ways of being, feeling, committing, and living in the world. As Haraway suggests in the introductory quote, it matters *what* stories we tell and *how* we think and do if we want to “stay with the trouble” of our time.

Heeding their advice, this thesis-as-journey rests on two key theoretical and methodological moves: 1) “slowing down reasoning” to scrutinise and reconsider inherited ideas and conceptualisation about Nature, and 2) “doing geography differently” by personally and directly experimenting with alternative ways of living in and with a more-than-human world. I pursue the first move by bringing more-than-human and anarchist geography into conversation, and the second one by grounding this thesis in my own personal and academic journey as a PhD student and a BTTL farmer.

### 1.3 A theoretical journey: crafting paths, bridging worlds

#### 1.3.1 *Anarchist geography in more-than-human worlds*

The worlds I bring together in this thesis to study the BTTL movement are posthumanism and anarchism. These two big “isms” are far from being internally homogenous and consistent, encompassing a diversity of theoretical lineages and ethico-political positions, so a little clarification is needed first.

The posthumanism I refer to here does not indicate an historical moment or empirical condition in which the category of the human has been “transcended” by developments in technoscience (e.g. artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, genetic engineering and biotechnology) or a position that celebrates human superiority and exceptionalism. While it has been partly triggered by historical conditions that are troubling the foundational figure of the human (such as the Anthropocene), the posthumanism of interest here also rejects the idea that there ever was an independent and autonomous human to begin with. Moreover, it is an analytical and ethico-political perspective in social theory that has emerged as a *critique* of anthropocentrism and therefore it is concerned with “displacing the hubris of humanism so as to admit others into the calculus of the world” (Braun, 2004, p. 273). These others include non-human animals, plants, objects, technologies, ecosystems, bacteria, elements and all other beings and forces that have normally been included in the category of “Nature”. As a major inspirational figure of this turn in social theory has suggested: “we have never been human” (Haraway 2008), but always entangled in a dance of becoming with a myriad of organic and inorganic bodies and social and material processes - we have always been “more-than-human”<sup>3</sup>.

Posthumanist perspectives are being developed and articulated in human geography in a growing and diverse body of literature variously termed “hybrid” (Whatmore, 2002), “multinatural” (Lorimer, 2012), “vitalist” (Greenhough, 2010), “materialist” (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004), and more commonly “more-than-human geography”. I review this diverse scholarship further in Chapter 2, but at its core, it challenges the passivity traditionally ascribed to the non-human world of nature by recognising its *agency* and *interconnectedness* with human societies. As Whatmore (2006, p. 604) explains, a “more-than-human” mode of enquiry should “neither presume that socio-material change is an exclusively human achievement nor exclude the ‘human’ from the stuff of fabrication”, and so it describes and studies the world in its dynamic co-constitution of human and non-human beings and agencies.

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<sup>3</sup> The label “more-than-human” was put forward by geographer Sarah Whatmore (2002) to highlight this particular posthumanist position, whereby humans have always been *co-constituted* and *exceeded* by non-human natures.

Put differently, more-than-human geographies refuse to treat the non-human world of nature as an entity “out there”, or as a passive material resource and cultural symbol, and they have developed relational approaches to account for the ways in which different materials, technologies, animals, plants, chemicals, elemental forces, physical landscapes, etc. participate in the constitution of our social, cultural and political worlds.

Anarchism is also a social and political philosophy that is incredibly diverse. While it is hard to provide a singular definition because it is by its very nature anti-dogmatic (Marshall 2008) and “there are as many varieties of anarchism as there are anarchists” (Amster et al. 2008: 2), a rejection of all systems of rule (“archy”) is its most defining characteristic. Even though anarchism has been more commonly understood as opposing relations of domination emanating from the state, it actually concerns itself with hierarchical relations wherever they may appear, be in the workplace, governing bodies, the home, the school or other social settings and situations. It thus encompasses critiques of capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia as well as speciesism, and the intersections between these systems. In their stead, anarchist theory and practice propose forms of social, economic and political organisation based on the voluntary associations of free and equal individuals around common social and economic interests, and it embraces principles of solidarity, cooperation, horizontality, mutual aid, decentralization and autonomy for achieving them.

In recent years, anarchism has been attracting a growing interest in many social science disciplines, partly as a result of to the rise of so-called “new social movements” since the new millennium which display anarchist tendencies in their ideological character and organizational tactics (e.g. Occupy!) (Amster et al., 2009; Graeber, 2002). Within geography, it has also seen a recent (re)turn, with Simon Springer (2012, 2016) charting the “anarchist roots” of the discipline and laying out a “manifesto” for a radical anarchist geography in the twenty-first century. Springer has noted that anarchism has a long, yet disjointed, history with the discipline of geography, with two of the most eminent anarchists of the nineteenth century - Peter

Kropotkin (1841-1921) and Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) - being also esteemed geographers of their time, although they were often marginalised due to their radical ideas (Ferretti, 2017). After their passing, anarchist ideas took a back stage in geography and other radical currents such as Marxism and feminism became more prominent within the discipline. Springer (2012, p. 1606) summarises anarchism as “a theory and practice that seeks to produce a society wherein individuals may freely co-operate together as equals in every respect, not before a law or sovereign guarantee ... but before themselves in solidarity and mutual respect” .

A number of recent interventions by anarchist geographers have claimed anarchism’s ethical and theoretical correspondence with relational and more-than-human perspectives in geography, particularly in their sharing of non-anthropocentric concerns and theoretical approaches (Clark and Martin, 2013; Ferretti, 2017; Springer *et al.*, 2021). However, more-than-human geographies are incredibly diverse, drawing upon a range of theoretical sources and ethico-political perspectives, from vitalism and Actor-Network-Theory, to feminism and indigenous ontologies. There is also considerable diversity and even quite stark disagreements between various strands of green anarchism regarding its normative and ideological position towards nature, which challenge any singular ethico-political position or understanding (Hall, 2011; Smith, 2007). Moreover, despite claims of affinity, there hasn’t been any detailed and explicit attempt at fleshing out assumed similarities in thinking, or any critical examinations of anarchist ideas and concepts in light of such non-dualist and non-anthropocentric theorising. Even though anarchism has a long and significant history of environmental thought and activism, and for some it even “implies and incorporates an ecological attitude towards nature” (Morris 1996: 58), it is also a social and political philosophy that has emerged during the Enlightenment period and so many of its conceptual resources and theoretical tools are actually embedded within modernist and Eurocentric framings that reproduce Nature and Society as two separate ontological categories.

Hence, in this thesis I aim to “slow down reasoning” to rethink some of the key conceptual frames in anarchist geography and carve a *less*-anthropocentric path in

the form of a theoretical trajectory based upon more-than-human theories. The “less” of this path/trajectory recognises that we “cannot not want” something called humanity, but also that “nobody is self-made, least of all humans” (Whatmore, 1997, p. 46), and so while human goals, rights and needs are not denied in absolute terms, they are situated in more-than-human communities that are “practically constructed and corporeally embedded” (1997, p. 50). Also, I call it a path because the theoretical trajectory I trace in this thesis is not meant to be definitive or prescriptive, but to work as an opening for a broader journey of anarchist geography in more-than-human worlds and contribute to the development of a more “integral anarchism” that sees humanity “as intimately intertwined within all the processes and flows of the entire planet” (Springer, 2012, p. 1619).

### 1.3.2 *Slowing down reasoning: a (re)emerging anarchist geography*

Since Springer’s manifesto, literature identifying under the label of anarchist geography has grown rapidly. Multiple edited collections have been published, covering questions of pedagogy in anarchist geography (Springer *et al.*, 2016), theorisations of anarchist spaces of resistance (Souza *et al.*, 2016), and case-studies of anarchist spatial practices (White *et al.*, 2016). More recently, another three edited collections have been published charting and developing an Anarchist Political Ecology (Locret-Collet *et al.*, 2021; Mateer *et al.*, 2022; Springer *et al.*, 2021). This literature has developed with and alongside the autonomous Marxist tradition (Clough and Blumberg, 2012; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Springer *et al.*, 2012) and geographical scholarship interested in the spatialities of resistance and social movements (Featherstone, 2003; Routledge, 2000; Sharp *et al.*, 2000). Across these works, a number of themes, theoretical lenses and epistemological positions are emerging, including autonomy, prefiguration and praxis.

First, the concept of “autonomy” is a central empirical and theoretical focus of anarchist (and autonomous Marxist) geographies. Indeed, Springer (2012, p. 1607, my emphasis) defines “anarchist geographies” as “kaleidoscopic spatialities that allow for multiple, nonhierarchical, and protean connections between *autonomous*

entities, wherein solidarities, bonds, and affinities are voluntarily assembled in opposition to and free from the presence of sovereign violence, predetermined norms, and assigned categories of belonging". According to Ince (2019, p. 151) quoting Colson: "[A]narchist autonomy refers to the forces constitutive of beings, to the capacity to develop in themselves the totality of resources which they need in order 1) to affirm their existence, and 2) to associate with others, and to thus constitute an ever more powerful force of life". Chatterton and Pickerill (2006, p. 733-34) also relate it to both individual and collective agencies and projects: "individual autonomy implies individuals' capacity to make choices in freedom, while collective autonomy implies a given society's or group's self-rule through the freedom of its institutions and equal participation in institutions".

Anarchist geographers have investigated autonomous thought and practices as they emerge in the spaces of protests (Chatterton, 2005; Heynen, 2010), in the digital commons (Curran and Gibson, 2013; Pickerill, 2007), and in more permanent spaces and movements such as social centres and workers' unions (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Lopes de Souza, 2016; Mudu, 2004; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). The emphasis in these studies is on the creation of spaces and spatialities of "self-management" to resist authoritarian and market-driven imperatives and to create alternatives based on principles of equality, voluntary association and mutual aid. However, many have also highlighted the messy and often contradictory character and development of these autonomous spatialities, resulting from their negotiations with local/global dimensions, state-capitalist structures, colonial relations and other internal power dynamics (Barker and Pickerill, 2012; Featherstone, 2005; Ince, 2012). Autonomy can thus be understood to be a *process*, rather than a state of being, that develops in a delicate tension between individual and collective agency in the interstitial spaces of state and capitalist logics and structures, and therefore through a constant negotiation of competing tendencies.

Second, and in order to understand how autonomous spaces and practices are created and hierarchical structures and oppressive relations challenged, the anarchist concept of prefiguration is key. Prefiguration can be broadly defined "as

the practice by a group or individual of operating in the present according to the principles and values that they promote for the future functioning of society” (Ince, 2022, in press). Hence, it articulates a politics of direct action grounded in the inseparability of *means* and *ends*, i.e. the methods used to achieve social change must be consistent with the intended goals (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, Springer 2016). Indeed, for Maeckelbergh “prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present.” (2011: 4). Prefigurative politics can thus be enacted both as *resistance* to authoritarian structures and relations and as *creation* of alternative modes of relating and organising (or indeed both) (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). It can thus include spectacular forms of direct action activism, such as protests, sabotages and occupations, as well as experiments in direct democracy and collective decision-making in social movements, and collective projects like intentional communes, cooperatives, social centres, etc (Ince, 2022).

For many proponents and practitioners, the conceptual and practical value of prefiguration lie in its embodiment of a “radically different political ontology” (van de Sande, 2015, p. 178), that challenges many binaries characteristic of modern political philosophies, including micro/macro, private/public, revolution/reform, slow/fast, individuality/collectivity (Ince, 2022). For instance, by grounding politics in the sphere of everyday life and relations, it opposes the distinction between activists and ordinary citizens as well as private and public spaces (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Although this everyday and place-based focus makes prefiguration subject to critiques of micro and lifestyle politics and limited scalability, the spatiality of prefigurative politics has been shown to be more complex and diverse than simple micro/macro distinctions, being guided by the needs, particularities and potentialities of a given context (Ince, 2022). Similarly, while prefiguration is woven into the temporality of everyday life, the rhythms and speeds of different initiatives vary according to their specific circumstances and goals (Ince, 2022). This spatial and temporal “malleability” indicates a different conception of politics as an

experimental and “protean process” with multiple forms and directions rather than a singular and coherent project (Springer, 2014, p. 249); and of social change as *evolutionary* rather than revolutionary: not a linear accumulation but a cyclical and continuous process that needs to be continually reinvented according to specific contexts, inequalities and goals (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Hence, unlike a Marxist “politics of waiting” (for the revolution, for the withering away of the state, for the stages of history to pass to bring an egalitarian society), an anarchist prefigurative politics is grounded in the revolutionary potential of everyday life, embracing “the immediacy of the *here and now* as the most emancipatory spatio-temporal dimension” (Springer, 2012, p. 1607).

Third, and related to the notion of prefiguration in anarchist geography, is also that of *praxis* understood as the merging of anarchist theory with practice: “thought (anarchist geographies) is never separable from practice (geographies of anarchism)” (Springer, 2016: 27). Anarchist geographers thus advocate for the application of critical pedagogies and alternative learning models within neoliberal institutions (Rouhani 2012) and for scholars to politically and collectively engage with struggles and initiatives on the ground (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, Cantor and Roth 2018). To be fair, *praxis* is not restricted to the anarchist tradition, having played and continuing to play an important role also in Marxist and feminist geography. Indeed, radical geographers have combined academic theory with action through diverse forms of “engaged” research approaches, including “scholar-activism”, “militant research” and “participatory-action research” among others (Kindon *et al.*, 2010; Routledge and Derickson, 2015).

However, what is made very present by its absence within anarchist geography so far, is a theoretical and empirical engagement with the “vitality” of the non-human world of nature. Despite alleged similarities with more-than-human theories and concerns, empirical studies in anarchist geography are singularly focused upon social (as in human-to-human) relations, and conceptualisations of prefiguration and autonomy remain materially and corporeally abstracted from the more-than-human worlds in which individuals and political collectives emerge from and are entangled



with. Indeed, while prefiguration's multiple forms, rhizomatic spaces and "fuzzy" temporalities are ontologically radical (Ince, 2022, in press), anarchist prefigurative subjects and their collectivities are always and inescapably human. This is partly because alongside broader conceptualisations of resistance in geography (Hugh, 2020), prefiguration relies upon and "requires an explicit element of intentionality: one must have a fair idea – even if contested, vague or shifting – of what kind of future is being sought". And yet, as Hughes (2020, p. 1143) has noted, acknowledging the vitality of the non-human can "unsettle the assumption of an intentional, resistant subject". Hence, recognising the reciprocity and agency of non-humans actually raise a number of important conceptual questions for anarchist geography, including: who/what constitutes a prefigurative subject? What happens to their intentionality? And what does prefiguration and autonomy look like in a more-than-human world?

Addressing these questions is important not just to theoretically advance anarchist geography. Forms of oppression, exclusion, exploitation, appropriation and commodification are often mediated by the material world, and they extend to and intersect with non-human animals, plants, landscapes and ecosystems (Buller, 2014; Gibbs, 2020). Remaining within an anthropocentric framing that denies non-humans any agency and overlooks how the lives and vulnerabilities of humans, animals and ecosystems are materially mediated and inter-related, reduces political possibilities and undermines efforts to contest intersectional injustices and build more convivial ways of living with non-human others. As Gibson (2014, p. 286) has argued, if "we are seriously interested in the prefiguration of other worlds, we are being invited by many other schools of contemporary thinking to look for 'undetermined stories so far' not exclusively within human society, but within more than human assemblages".

Put differently, the ethos of anarchist geography may feel right, but the way key theoretical categories – intentionality, prefiguration, autonomy – are used and conceptualised betrays any alignment with more-than-human perspectives and concerns of how to think and live with multiple earth others. As Gibson-Graham

(2011, p. 2) have noted: “no matter that we treat these categories as empty of prior meaning, as potentialities, as openings for a politics of possibility and becoming, they are still fully human-centred. Each time we invoke them we perform the human/nonhuman binary alongside that of subject/object, constituting a world made up of conscious and acting humans and unconscious or passive others”. Instead, “what critics of separateness and separation thinking are asking us to do is to think connection rather than separation, interdependence rather than autonomy. In this way we may imbue our categories and practices with a ‘different mode of humanity’” (Gibson-Graham, 2011, p. 2).

Hence, recognising the reciprocity and vitality of non-human nature in the constitution of our cultural and political worlds requires a “slowing down of reasoning” that includes a more thorough scrutiny of inherited concepts and the building of alliances to learn from multiple sites of theorisations and struggles. Avoiding such critical scrutiny in anarchist geography runs the risk of producing another “ideological posturing” (Pickerill, 2017a, p. 251) that in its determination to be oppositional, simplifies what is at stake, hides numerous assumptions and risks becoming exclusionary and dogmatic. Hence, one of the main arguments of this thesis is that attending more care-fully to more-than-human perspectives can strengthen rather than limit the radical potential of an anarchist geography. As Pickerill (2017a, p. 255) has argued, in the fight against domination and oppression, we need “different kinds of politics and conversations. We need a plurality of potential answers”, and these potential answers do not lie exclusively within human societies and groups, but within more-than-human collectives.

I therefore embark on a more-than-human journey into anarchist geography to scrutinise some of the conceptual frameworks, not to give them a clear and universal definition, but to explore other potential paths and follow some of these paths to deeper, more surprising places. This journey is also informed by my praxis that includes digging (figuratively and literally) into the work, visions and prefigurative politics being produced on BTTL farms.

### 1.3.3 *Doing geography differently: becoming a BTTL farmer*

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, this thesis-as-journey has emerged from, and is based upon, my own physical and personal journey BTTL, but it is also informed and inspired by the theoretical debates and interventions detailed in Section 1.2 about how to confront and address the ever-increasing inequalities, injustices and unsustainabilities of our age in our practices as researchers. Hence, the second move that this thesis adopts is an attempt at “doing geography differently” by experimenting with research methods and ways of doing geographical research that take seriously the more-than-human composition of the worlds we study, but also our own place and contribution to their (un)doing in and through our research practices. As Dowling et al. (2017, p. 2) succinctly explains, theorising “the world as projects of human and more-than-human inhabitation ... challenges researchers to *do* geography differently – to perform, to engage, to embody, to image and imagine, to witness, to sense, to analyse – across, through, with and as, more-than-humans”.

Indeed, following more-than-human perspectives, research methods in human geography have been criticised for being too “human-centred” (Dowling et al. 2017, p. 4), raising the “urgent need to supplement the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject” (Whatmore, 2006, p. 606-607). Hence, geographers have been using and innovating conventional qualitative research methods as well as experimenting with ways of *doing* research that not only “give voice” to non-human others but engage directly with them to stimulate “world-changing processes” (Graham and Roelvink, 2010, p. 343). In the first instance, human geographers have been using a variety of embodied and creative techniques that allow them to access, engage and register the “vitality” of non-human others and the “messiness” of more-than-human interactions and entanglements through an attention to sensory experiences, emotions, affects and practices (for a review see Buller, 2015 and Dowling et al. 2017). In the second instance, they have also begun decentring and challenging the privileging and

“author-ity” of the human researcher by engaging and collaborating *with* and *as* more-than-human research collectives (Bastian *et al.*, 2017; Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2015; Cameron *et al.*, 2014).

These two methodological moves are not mutually exclusive, but the latter concerns itself not just with geographical *methods* but research *praxis*, i.e. what geographers’ “doings are actually creating in terms of relationships to the human and more-than-human world, internal identities, and attachments to powerful political assemblages” (Barker and Pickerill, 2020, p. 2). The idea of “doings frame embodied actions as complex, relational (between people, but also with the more-than-human world), and transformative of both self and space” (2020, p. 2, my emphasis), and so it directly and explicitly connects the practice of geographical research and the production of geographical knowledge with the ethical and political concerns of particular more-than-human collectives as they emerge in and with specific places. Hence, doing more-than-human geography as praxis challenges the separation between researchers and their subjects/objects of study, and it “requires researchers to open themselves up to the reality of their connections with the world” (Country *et al.*, 2015, p. 270) in order to take more responsibility and care for the epistemological and ontological worlds that are enacted and represented through research (Sundberg, 2014). By locating ourselves, our bodies and knowledge within the human and more-than-human communities and relations we are entangled with, “we can begin to better understand our role in making worlds possible. And in doing this, we can become more mindful of the worlds we partake in creating” (Carolan, 2013, p. 423). Most importantly, the “success” of conducting geography as a form of more-than-human praxis is not about producing better or more accurate representations of the world, but about changing engagements and making new connections between people, places and non-human things and beings possible, transforming self, others and places in the process.

Hence, in this thesis, I use autoethnography as both *method* and form of *praxis* that allows me to attend to and explore more closely the more-than-human worlds that BTTL farmers inhabit and enact, and produce a form of geographical scholarship

that grounds knowledge in long-term collaborations and doings in and with specific places and more-than-human communities. In becoming and doing geography as a BTTL farmer, in this thesis-as-journey I follow the ethico-political and epistemic path laid out before me by feminist and radical geographers as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (Barker and Pickerill, 2020; Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2015; Chatterton, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2011). I take inspiration from their journeys and join them across the divide between academic and personal-political life to produce a “more respectful, responsible, collaborative and creative more-than-human geographical praxis in the Anthropocene” (Dowling *et al.*, 2017, p. 6).

#### 1.4 Research aim and questions

In light of these various literatures, theoretical discussions and personal motivations, it is now possible to articulate the overall aim of this thesis, which is to explore the more-than-human geographies of countercultural BTTL farms and the kind of transformative potential that they engender. I do so by attending to the *becoming* and *doings* of BTTL farmers, that is, their affective experiences and everyday practices with the more-than-human worlds they encounter and inhabit, and by addressing the following research questions:

- 1) *How does one become a BTTL farmer and what shapes his/her intentionality?*
- 2) *How is “nature performed” on BTTL farms and what kind of transformative potential does it engender?*
- 3) *How can the human-centric nature of anarchist geography be rethought to account for the agency of a more-than-human world without losing sight of its emancipatory framework(s)?*

The first line of enquiry (RQ1) is an exploration of the process by which individuals *become* BTTL farmers, that is, how their (radical) subjectivity (including their goals and intentions) emerge from and is shaped by the wider field of (more-than-human) relations in which they are situated and entangled. The second line of enquiry (RQ2)

attends to the everyday *doings* of BTTL farmers with the land and the non-human beings and agencies that compose it, and it theorises and explores the transformative potential that these more-than-human performances produce. Finally, RQ3 brings these two themes together (*becoming* and *doing*) to ask a broader and more conceptual question about the “nature” of anarchist geography.

## 1.5 The structure of the thesis

In Chapter 2, I introduce and discuss a number of more-than-human perspectives in geography and the ways in which they are reconfiguring notions of political subjectivity and agency, and I trace a theoretical trajectory for anarchist geography based on rethinking prefigurative subjects and their intentionality and the form and transformative potentiality of prefigurative politics. In Chapter 3, I outline the methodological framework of this thesis, including the use and framing of autoethnography as both more-than-human method and praxis, and the specific data collection techniques that I have used within this approach. The main discussion chapters (Chapter 4 – 7) delve into the more-than-human geographies of BTTL farm/ers, with Chapter 4 and 5 focusing on the *becoming* of BTTL farmers (prefigurative subjects), and Chapter 6 and 7 on the *doings* of BTTL farming and living (prefigurative politics).

More specifically, in Chapter 4, I analyse the events and encounters that led to my journey BTTL from the UK to southern Italy, paying attention to biographical entanglements, socio-spatial dynamics and affective experiences with humans and non-humans to trace how my intentionality to migrate BTTL came about. In Chapter 5, I shift my attention to the experience of dwelling on the land in southern Italy and I explore and discuss how my intentions and goals were affected and shaped by the wider rural context and the agency of the place I moved to. In Chapter 6, I attend to everyday doings on the farm to explore and theorise the prefigurative politics of BTTL farms, paying attention to the values, knowledge, skills and practices that emerge and are performed with and alongside non-human others and the kind of transformative potentiality that these co-performances engender. In Chapter 7, I inquire into BTTL farms as “multi-species contact zones” and I shift my attention to

relationships and everyday doings with farm animals through the concept of animal autonomy.

## Chapter 2 For a more-than-human anarchist geography: tracing a less-anthropocentric theoretical journey

### 2.1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, human geography has been undergoing a profound re-evaluation of its ontological foundations that is transforming both its object(s) of study and the ways in which they are apprehended (Braun, 2008a; Castree, 2004; Lorimer, 2012). This follows a number of theoretical developments within the discipline associated with posthumanist theories and approaches that have challenged deterministic and anthropocentric interpretations of the world and have sought to “re-vitalise” and “re-materialise” its disciplinary focus and practice (Thrift, 2008a; Whatmore, 2006). To be more precise, this “posthuman turn” – or better yet, “more-than-human turn” as argued in Chapter 1 - has been decentring the human subject in geographical accounts and analytical approaches and foregrounding the “vitality” - or agency - of the non-human world in the constitution of our social and political worlds. In doing so, geographers also aim to address the epistemological, political, and ethical limitations that the use of deterministic and essentialised ontological categories such as Nature carry with them and engage more fully with the politics of knowledge production. In fact, while more-than-human perspectives and approaches in geography draw upon different theoretical influences and resources, they all start from a critique of the Nature-Society dualism that underpins modern Western thought, and the ways in which it has informed and produced the exploitation of the natural world as well as the marginalisation and subjugation of particular humans within society, such as women, black and indigenous people (Castree and Braun, 2001).

Nevertheless, I refer to this body of work as “more-than-human geographies” in the plural to highlight the diversity of theoretical sources, approaches and understandings that inform and characterise this scholarship. Among them is Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the vitalist philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, the works of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and feminist scholar



Donna Haraway, and the development of phenomenological approaches such as Non-Representational Theory (NRT) (Greenhough, 2010). More-than-human geographers have drawn and built upon these theoretical sources (among others) to move past dualistic understandings that separate Nature from Society, humans from non-humans, and advance methodological and theoretical approaches that take seriously the agency of a multiplicity of non-human beings and forces in the constitution of the world (Bingham, 1996; Braun, 2008b; Hinchliffe, 2001; Whatmore, 2002). However, the idea that non-humans have agency and that the world(s) of animals, plants, soils, water, climate and so on, are not separate from humans, is actually far from new, being at the core of many Indigenous cosmologies as well as animist currents within Western history and thought (Ingold, 2000). This is often unrecognised by more-than-human scholars in geography and beyond, who either present Western thought as homogenous in its anthropocentric framings, or ignore the significance of Indigenous philosophies and concepts in the development of (Western) posthumanist currents of thought (Sundberg, 2014).

In this chapter, I chart a journey through these more-than-human geographies to highlight the ways in which these approaches trouble and reframe some key categories of (Western) social theory and political thought. However, the aim of this journey, and this chapter more generally, is to trace a less-anthropocentric theoretical path for anarchist geography in light of these more-than-human developments in order to more adequately conceptualise and engage with the more-than-human world that BTTL farmers inhabit. The chapter begins by tracing the posthuman turn in human geography in section 2.2. Here, I review scholarship that, over the last two decades, has unpacked and problematized the ontological dualism of Nature-Society that underpins modern, Eurocentric philosophies, and discuss a number of posthumanist perspectives and approaches being used in geography to move beyond dualistic interpretations of the world.

In Section 2.3, I outline the theoretical contours of a less-anthropocentric theoretical trajectory/path for a (re)emerging anarchist geography in an effort to try and go beyond human-centric framings inherited from modernist and dualistic thinking

and integrate ideas of non-human agency. However, this chapter does not aim to develop an explicit and universal theoretical framework for a more-than-human anarchist geography, but to rethink some of its key conceptual frames so that they can be opened up to be further complicated in the future.

## 2.2 More-than-human geographies: relational ontologies and hybrid politics

### 2.2.1 *Problematizing the Nature/Society dualism*

As Raymond Williams (1980) has famously studied, the idea of Nature has a long and significant lineage in Western history and societies, and constitutes one of the most fundamental categories of Western thought and language. Indeed, it is part and parcel of the modern *dualistic ontology* that assumes reality to be composed of a natural and a social realm which are separate from each other. This ontological dualism has received sustained critique from social scientists because it does not equate with a simple affirmation of difference: a dualism is built upon a hierarchical relationship between two categories, where one is defined in opposition to and through the negation of the other. As ecofeminist Val Plumwood (1993, p. 47) observed: “a dualism is a relation of *separation* and *domination* inscribed and naturalised in culture” (my emphasis). Hence, if Society has traditionally been conceived as being composed of rational human *subjects* with agency and intentionality, Nature has historically been defined as the opposite of Culture, “the Other” of the Human, and therefore, a mere collection of passive and inanimate *objects* inferior to the world of human societies.

While some commentators have rightfully denied its totalising presence throughout Western history and societies (Cosgrove, 1990; Pepper, 1996), the Nature-Society dichotomy has underpinned to different degrees classical thought, religious metaphysics, scientific epistemology and modern political philosophies, including modern environmentalism (Latour, 1993). This dualism has found its strongest philosophical and material expression in the scientific revolutions of the Enlightenment period with the rise of industrial and mercantile capitalism, “technocentrism” and individualism (Pepper, 1996). The ideological and material

conditions of this period gave rise to a “mechanistic” view of the natural world that reduced it into a passive and inanimate machine amenable to calculation, prediction and therefore also control and domination by rational human beings (Cosgrove, 1990; Merchant, 1982; Pepper, 1996).

In addition to generating a deterministic view of the natural world that justified its manipulation and subjugation by a superior human being, the belief in a separate and inferior realm that could be known objectively by an external and rational observer, also installed a belief in the existence of fundamental laws and universal moral principles on which to define what is right (or “natural”) and what is not. Dualistic conceptions based on essentialist entities such as Nature have thus allowed for boundaries, both physical and semantic, to be drawn and for classification systems to be created with the aim to subdue, appropriate and assimilate the “Other” (Cresswell, 1996; Plumwood, 1993; Sibley, 1998). Hence, the idea of Nature has been central to the creation of normative difference and in transmitting ideological values, becoming “a source of authority to a whole language of domination”, simultaneously “domination of nature, but also the domination of human reality *by* Nature” (Fitzsimmons, 1989). Indeed, the Nature-Society dichotomy has allowed the unfolding of a series of interlinked dualisms - mind/body, reason/emotion, objective/subjective, civilised/wild, masculine/feminine, native/non-native - that have caused the subjugation of all those beings, and ways of being, falling closer to the category of Nature (Merchant, 1982; Plumwood, 1993). Ultimately, appeals to a singular and external Nature that can be known objectively by an external and rational observer - what Haraway (1988, p. 576) has famously called “the God-trick” - not only give Western science epistemological authority over knowledge of the world, marginalising non-cognitive and non-Western ways of knowing, but they also contribute to the neutralisation of politics (Latour, 2004). For example, in his seminal work, the environmental historian, William Cronon (1996) has shown how the Nature-Society dichotomy is enshrined in the notion of “wilderness” that has driven modern environmental movements in Europe and North America and nature conservation around the world. “The trouble with wilderness”, he argues, is that far from being a pristine and

untouched nature devoid of humans, wilderness is a cultural construct built upon a romantic idea of separation between civilised and wild spaces, and colonial projects of exclusion and dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands.

Building upon these critiques, throughout the 1990s and more recently, human geographers have challenged the “politics of Nature” from many critical perspectives, revealing the power relations hidden in its social construction and material production and demonstrating how appeals to a singular, abstract and universal Nature contribute to the subjugation and marginalisation of non-human others and “othered” humans (Castree and Braun, 2001). For instance, Marxist geographers have challenged the Nature-Society dichotomy by demonstrating that nature and society are metabolically related through material exchanges in production processes, and that through the commodification process, capitalism appropriates, transforms and destroys nature while also producing geographically uneven social and economic injustices (Harvey, 1974; Smith, 1984). Post-structuralist geographers have challenged the Nature-Society dichotomy by deconstructing discourses and cultural representations and showing that ideas of nature “draw upon a wide repertoire of other social images and norms – whether of a gender, racial, colonial, national, or other type” (Castree and Braun, 2001, p. 12). For instance, feminist and decolonial geographers have shown how cultural representations of Nature as wild, passive and inferior have contributed not only to the exploitation of non-human animals, but also to the othering and subjugation of particular social groups within society presumed to be closer to the natural world, such as women and indigenous people (Anderson, 1995, 2000; Rose, 1993).

These social (de)constructions have been extremely valuable in problematizing the Nature-Society dichotomy by showing how ideas of Nature are deeply entrenched in power relations, and that histories, cultural representations, belief systems and political economies mediate and structure understandings and experiences of nature as well as the logics and rationales that are deployed to govern humans and non-humans. However, by conceptualising nature as a mere resource, commodity, cultural symbol or passive background on which humans inscribe their meanings

and will, these approaches re-inscribed the dualism by collapsing the natural category into the social one and shifting the ontological arrow from Nature to Culture. After all, the world(s) of plants, animals, rocks and soils are not just human constructions and productions. Hence, in presenting a homogenous view of non-human nature, and disregarding its diversity and agency, these early approaches once again silenced the material world of nature.

### 2.2.2 *More-than-human natures: relational becoming(s) and embodied performance*

In an effort to move beyond the Nature-Society dichotomy, some geographers have been advancing *relational ontologies* and approaches that acknowledge the “vitality” or “livingness” (Whatmore, 2006, p. 603) of the non-human world of nature and frame the human and the non-human as constituted in and through their relations. As Lorimer (2012, p. 595, my emphasis) explains it: “Nature, Society and other identities have been rethought as *relational achievements*, power-laden constructions emergent from ‘assemblages’ of interacting ‘actants’ – not all of whom are human or alive”.

The concepts of “assemblage” and “actant” originate from different theoretical sources but they are related in their endeavour to reframe both agency and form in relational terms. More specifically, the term “actant” was developed by Bruno Latour in his formulation of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and it is a modification of the term “actor” with the aim to include non-humans as sources of action. The term “assemblage” (an English translation of the French term “agencement”) emerged from Deleuze and Guattari’s work, and it relates agency with the *coming together* or the “gathering” of different entities and beings (Braun, 2008). Hence, more-than-human geographers describe the world in its *hybrid* form, as being constituted by historically contingent and heterogeneous networks or assemblages of human and non-human actors (Braun, 2006; Lorimer, 2012; Whatmore, 2002). In these more-than-human assemblages, no subject or quality precedes its relations but these are emergent within the process of relating: *to be* is really a process of “becoming with” (Haraway, 2008, p. 17). Relatedly, *agency*, or the capacity to act, is not conceived as a

pre-existing and exclusively human property based on reason, will and intentionality but as being distributed across relations. More specifically, agency is conceived as the capacity of bodies (both human and non-human) *to affect* and *be affected* by each other (Braun, 2008). However, affect is not reducible to, or interchangeable with, emotions or feelings; it is rather what gives rise to them (Pile, 2010). As Whatmore explains, affect is “the force of intensive relationality - intensities that are felt but not personal; visceral but not confined to an individuated body” (2006, 604). Put differently, affect is a “force” that emerges from the interactions of different bodies and that increases (or decreases) a subject's capacity to act, move and think (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2015). The reframing of bodies and agencies in relational and “affective” terms, also brings a shift in analytical focus from meaning and discourses to the practical and performative aspect of life: to what people and things *do*, and how this (intra)action contributes to the co-fabrication of different socio-material worlds (Braun, 2008b; Thrift, 2008b).

More-than-human geographers have used ANT and Assemblage Theory to chart the networks of association between humans and non-humans across space and to develop a more acute sense of how non-human partake in the (un)making of particular networks and assemblages. However, ANT has been critiqued for lacking “thickness and depth” (Lulka, 2009, p. 391) and for producing both humans and nonhumans as abstract, homogenous and passive agents, both detached from the particular worlds they inhabit and empty of interests, agendas, capacities and dispositions (Cloke and Jones, 2001). Hence, to (re)animate the worlds and actors of more-than-human networks and assemblages, geographers have also turned to feminist and phenomenological-inspired approaches. Haraway’s (2003, 2008) work on “companion species” has been particularly valuable for addressing the “residual humanism” (Lulka, 2009, p. 378) of hybridity and ANT by drawing attention to the *specificity* of bodies in relation. Indeed, her work has been used in animal geography to both study animals’ “beastly places” - the bodies, ecologies, and lived experiences of animals themselves - and the becoming of human and non-human animals in their everyday and bodily encounters within particular discursive and material contexts (Lorimer and Srinivasan, 2013).

Another influential relational approach in geography is the “dwelling perspective” developed by anthropologist Tim Ingold through his studies of Indigenous societies alongside phenomenological and practice-based theories. At its core, and alongside other posthumanist theories, a dwelling perspective challenges the division between Nature and Society and advances an ontology of life that is emergent, relational and performative: an ongoing process that unfolds through the everyday practices and interactions of human and non-human bodies *in place* and *through times* (Ingold, 2000). However, unlike network approaches, dwelling also takes place and temporality seriously, so that “the qualities and forms of dwelt life ... are bound into specific relational and dwelt spatiotemporal patterns of life” (Jones, 2020, pp. 401–402). Hence, a dwelling perspective helps “account for the intimate, rich, intense, making of the world, where networks fold and form and interact in particular formations which include what we know as ‘places’” (Cloke and Jones, 2001, p. 652).

Alongside a dwelling perspective, another important theoretical influence in the development of more-than-human geographies is non-representational theory (NRT). NRT has become as an umbrella term for diverse work in geography that seeks to understand the non-cognitive, more-than-textual and multisensual (i.e. *non-representational*) dimensions of subjectivity and experience (Anderson and Harrison, 2010). It emphasises the body as a medium of knowing and interacting with the world, and so through notions of embodiment and performance, it draws attention to the *affective* dimensions between humans and non-humans in their embodied encounters and everyday practices, and how they shape and are shaped by everyday discourses and social norms (Thrift, 2008b). Hence, in NRT-inspired work “the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions” (Lorimer, 2005, p. 84).

Hence, more-than-human geographies refuse to treat the non-human world of nature as an entity “out there”, or as a passive material resource and cultural symbol, and they have used and developed relational and performative approaches

to account for the ways in which different materials, technologies, animals, plants, chemicals, elemental forces, physical landscapes, etc. participate in the constitution and formation of subjects and worlds. Thus, there is no singular Nature, but multiple hybrid natures in the plural: multiple realities or worlds that are enacted through the co-performance of assemblages of human and non-human actors (Braun, 2006; Hinchliffe, 2008; Whatmore, 2002). However, in their reformulation of form and agency in hybrid and fluid terms, more-than-human perspectives and approaches have since their inception raised important ethical and political concerns. For instance, ANT has been critiqued for a “flattening out of agency” (Laurier and Philo, 1999, p. 1047) that obscures social difference and overlooks power asymmetries in the constitution of hybrid networks (Castree, 2002; Kirsch and Mitchell, 2004). NRT has also been critiqued for not paying enough attention to how societal attitudes, discourses and categorisations shape human subjectivity, experiences and encounters (Wilson, 2016). A dwelling perspective too, “sounds altogether too cosy and comfortable, conjuring up a haven of rest where all tensions are resolved, and where the solitary inhabitant can be at peace with the world – and with him or herself” (Ingold, 2005, p. 503). Nevertheless, there is now a growing literature in geography that has begun to consider the implications of more-than-human perspectives for political theories, concepts and practices.

### 2.2.3 *More-than-human politics: affective subjects and relational power*

Almost two decades ago, critical geographers espoused the need for “a new “political theory of nature” that can reconceptualise the means and ends of politics in an increasingly hybrid world” (Castree 2003, 203). While this is in no way a *fait accompli*, there is a growing literature in geography that has begun to consider the implications of more-than-human perspectives for political theories, concepts and practices. Above all, more-than-human scholars recognise that politics cannot be separated from the myriad of things and beings that constitute our common world, so they turn their attention, quite literally, to the “stuff” of politics: the material and affective relations between humans, objects, technologies, organisms and ecologies



and how they contribute to the (un)making of political subjects, collectives, practices and orders (Braun and Whatmore, 2010a; Hobson, 2007). In doing so, they also develop more heterogeneous, performative and dynamic accounts of the political and enrich traditional political registers based on discursive, representative and procedural terms with practices, arrangements and affects (Law and Mol, 2008; Philo, 2005). Most importantly, they have done so by reworking notions of political subjectivity and power to account for non-humans and their agency.

Modern notions of political subjectivity originate in Enlightenment thinking that posits a self-conscious and autonomous (human) individual that possesses reason, intentionality and other deliberative capacities necessary to institute a social contract and contribute to a polity (Whatmore, 1997). The ability to speak in particular is what has conventionally defined a political subject because through speech a person is believed to manifest will and intentionality (Driessen, 2014). However, this has resulted in the privileging of defined and contained political spaces, scales, actors and processes in political geography, including “the false distinctions between the global and public (‘Politics’), and the local and private (‘politics’)” (Hobson, 2007, p. 253). Over the last two decades, this ontology of the subject has been thoroughly problematized in geography from many critical perspectives (Simpson, 2017). There is now a broad recognition that subjects are not only produced by deeply structured historical processes (political economy, colonialism, patriarchy, etc.) and social mechanisms (language, culture, discourses, knowledge, etc.), but also emerge from embodied experiences and “encounters with various more-than-human others/alterity” (Simpson, 2017, p. 2). When it comes to political subjectivity, a number of interventions have already begun to foreground the importance of emotions (Bosco, 2007; Sziarto and Leitner, 2010), affects and experiences (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Clough, 2012; Juris, 2008), as well as socio-material networks (Featherstone, 2004; Routledge, 2008) in the formation of political identities and practices.

More-than-human scholars add to this literature by foregrounding the ways in which non-humans have the capacity to “spark new publics into being” (Braun and

Whatmore, 2010a, p. xxvi) and generate new forms of knowledge and action. For instance, in her seminal paper that calls for enlarging political geography's ambit to include animals as political subjects, Hobson (2007) examines the politics surrounding the Asiatic black bear, its bile farming networks and conservation groups as they emerge in relation to the bears' own history, ecology, behaviour, and physiology. She argues that the bears are not just *objects* of global capitalist networks and animal welfare and conservation groups, but active agents in their formation and operation. More specifically, she reveals how through their charismatic appeal, physiological amenability and behavioural placidity, the bears became constituted in *and* constituted the networks of care and politics surrounding them: "whilst their ability to be farmed in the first place constituted the bear bile farming trade, their ability (and perhaps willingness?) to be healthy, happy and active once freed has constituted a driving force in the regions animal welfare debates" (Hobson, 2007, p. 263).

Similarly, in the Chilean mobilisation against the destruction of a wetland ecosystem investigated by Sepúlveda-Luque (2018, p. 335), it was the agency of swans, and in particular their suffering, that turned out to be "the most agentic force within the struggle, displaying a capacity to 'move' all sorts of actors to 'do' things in response". Besides charismatic animals, Whatmore (2013, p. 36) has argued for the "earthly powers" of floods as affective events that can force thought in those affected by them and create new knowledge polities and civic associations that can challenge established practices and claims around flood risk and management. Similarly, Armiero and Fava (2016) tell the tragic, yet also transformative, tale of how a dying shepherd and his sheep living and working in the toxic landscapes on the periphery of Naples (Italy) contributed to the formation of a local and regional environmental justice movement. Here, the corporeal experiences of, and encounters with, contaminated environments and more-than-human bodies had "transformative power, contributing to uncovering the unjust distribution of environmental burdens and converting victims into activists" (Armiero and Fava, 2016, pp. 67-69).

More-than-human scholars have also built upon Foucauldian notions of biopower and biopolitics<sup>4</sup> to take seriously “the entanglement” of humans and non-humans in forms of power and governance (Rutherford and Rutherford, 2013). In these perspectives, power is no longer understood as a reified and unified totality but as a “relational effect” (Allen, 2004, p. 19) emerging from assemblages of human and non-human beings and forces. This line of enquiry has been pursued most effectively in the study of infrastructure and politics. However, far from being passive material substrates or technical networks on which social life unfolds, infrastructures are increasingly being conceptualised in relational and ecological terms (Star, 1999) as socio-material assemblages “with diverse agentive powers” (Larkin, 2013; Amin, 2014, p. 139; Knox, 2017). They are social and material, as well as technical and affective formations: they involve material objects but also people, cultural imaginaries, knowledge(s), practices, ideologies and desires (Simone, 2004; Harvey and Knox, 2012; Wilson and Bayón, 2017; Truelove and Ruszczyk, 2022). As Larkin (2013, p. 329) puts it: infrastructures are “things but also the relations between things”. For instance, a water supply infrastructure involves water and its flow, technologies such as pumps and pipes, but also engineers, maintenance workers, their knowledge and skills; bureaucratic apparatuses such as regulatory standards and protocols, financial mechanisms as well as social expectations and desires.

However, how power operates through infrastructure varies across the literature. For those using a governmentality and biopolitical lens, infrastructure is “materialised governance” (Nolte, 2016, p. 446), a political tool that includes and excludes, connects and disconnects, controls and disciplines subjects and spaces. It does so through both technological and affective means: “they form us as subjects

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault never provided a clear definition for these terms, employing them within a broader historical and genealogical investigation into the changing character and modalities of governance since the 1700. He maintained that “sovereign power” had been gradually replaced by “biopower”, a mode of governance that “encourages” and directs living. Unlike “sovereign power” often associated with monarchic rule and exercised primarily as a negative and coercive power (i.e. the power to take life and let live), biopower focuses on the creation of the *norm* through a series of technologies of government, including various physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures (systems of surveillance and recording, and institutions such as the barracks, the prison, the hospital, the school, the factory, etc.) with the aim to discipline and regulate life rather than eliminate it.

not just on a technopolitical level but also through ... affect and the senses of desire, pride, and frustration, feelings which can be deeply political" (Larkin, 2013, p. 333). Infrastructure is thus both a technological and aesthetic vehicle invested with political ideologies, values and agendas, used to assemble and stabilise particular political regimes, subjectivities and ideologies, or to negotiate and contest them (Von Schnitzler, 2013; Nolte, 2016; Shlomo, 2017; Barnes, 2017; Millington, 2018).

However, while Foucault's notion of biopower acknowledges the ways in which objects, technologies, environments, natural resources, and infrastructure are used in the operation of power and governance, non-humans remain mere *objects* of political deliberations and struggles, entering politics only to the extent that they have *instrumental* value in the form of resources and tools (Braun and Whatmore 2010). Instead, more-than-human scholars suggest non-humans should be considered as political *subjects*, but not in the rational, liberal sense of entities capable of participating in institutionalised decision-making processes or as subjects deserving rights, but as active agents of political life from the outset. From this perspective, non-humans – be they animals, plants, technologies, infrastructures – are not just objects or tools of power, but they are *constitutive* of it: they can act as catalysts, "intermediary devices" or "power-brokers" (Meehan, 2014, p. 217) that mediate, produce and reconfigure power relations, political arrangements and practice by shaping people's perceptions, desires, affective sensibilities, social conduct, knowledge and experiences.

Hence, for some, rather than infrastructure being determined by politics or being the *object* of it, it is *constitutive* of politics and power (Amin, 2014; Jensen and Morita, 2017; Knox, 2017). This perspective considers infrastructures as "ontological experiments" (Jensen and Morita, 2017, p. 615), that is, experimental systems that "produce novel configurations of the world" (Jensen and Morita, 2017, p. 618). By assembling and transforming, both temporally and spatially, entities, material flows and the relations and practices associated with them, infrastructures reconfigure – however imperceptibly – environments, agencies, social relations, understandings, imaginations and experiences, and therefore the very possibility and form of

political orders, practices and claims (Harvey and Knox, 2012; Amin, 2014; Silver, 2014; Jensen and Morita, 2017; Nakyagaba *et al.*, 2021).

For instance, in her study of the water infrastructures of Tijuana, Mexico, Meehan (2014) examines objects not just as “tools” of states, but as conduits of power that help produce, arrange and consolidate state authority. Hence, the complex assemblage of laws, engineers, scientific data, dams, rivers, aqueducts and pumps that went into constituting the municipal water infrastructure, materially reconfigured the hydrosocial cycle of the city, paving the way for capital accumulation and federal state control, while cultivating people’s dependency on a distant and centralised water source. At the same time, though, she notes how the “raw empirics of water – its divisibility, flow regime, and weight” in conjunction with household objects like rain barrels, cisterns and buckets “permit alternative infrastructural and institutional configurations to proliferate alongside and in spite of state control” (Meehan, 2014, p. 222). She ultimately puts forward the case for moving past “anthropocentric notion of infrastructure as “power tools” – handy implements used by humans to exercise dominion – toward tool-power: the idea that objects-in-themselves are wellsprings of power” (Meehan 2014: 215).

Ultimately for more-than-human scholars, engaging non-humans in politics is less about *inclusiveness* than *recognition* that they were always already part of political life (Stengers 2010). They have “constitutive power” (Braun and Whatmore 2010: 25), or “thing-power” (Bennett, 2010, p. 6): “the curious ability ... to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” in socio-political life, and therefore “to fully shape the contours of existence through the production of difference and affectivity in the world” (Shaw and Meehan, 2013, p. 216). In their materiality, relational affectivity and enrolment in particular relations and practices, they contribute to the formation and/or disruption of political collectives, practices and orders (Hobson 2007, Braun and Whatmore 2010). However, in order to avoid returning to a material essentialism, many have been insisting that non-humans are not political *in themselves*: the material and affective properties of non-humans are the outcomes of *specific* relations and arrangements and therefore their political capacities are

normatively variable, they can open up as well as constrict political opportunities (Abrahamsson *et al.*, 2015; Hawkins, 2009; Marres and Lezaun, 2011; Meehan *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, the emerging literature suggests a generative tension between cases in which non-humans become part of majoritarian movements of political control and ordering, and cases in which they open up the possibility for minoritarian movements of contestation and innovation.

## 2.3 Anarchist geography after Nature

### 2.3.1 *Dwelling on anarchist geography*

I have named this section “dwelling” on anarchist geography to both refer back to the idea of “slowing down reasoning” regarding the use of Nature/Society binaries in anarchist geography discussed in Chapter 1, and because I start from Ingold’s (2000) “dwelling perspective” to sketch a less-anthropocentric theoretical trajectory. As I noted in Chapter 1, many of the key conceptual resources on which an anarchist geography is being developed continue to rely upon modernist and human-centric frames that are “ontologically dissonant” (Hughes, 2020, p. 3) with recent more-than-human developments in the discipline. Above all, traditional conceptualisations of prefiguration and autonomy rests on modernist notions of political subjectivity and agency that separate the *subjects* of politics (human) from the *objects* of politics (materials, technologies, infrastructures, non-human animals, natural resources, ecosystems, landscapes, places, etc.), denying the latter agency. For instance, prefigurative subjects and collectives are always and exclusively human, and practices are understood and analysed as means to inscribe alternative values and understandings onto a passive and inert material background. Moreover, while the goals of prefigurative subjects are often presented as open, contingent, plural and dynamic (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Swain, 2019; Yates, 2015), intentionality itself is largely treated as an ideological abstraction, pre-existing encounters and experiences and therefore disconnected from the more-than-human worlds in which it develops. Finally, while prefigurative politics are often recognised as being

situated in particular places (Ince, 2022), these are often treated as passive sites and their role in shaping prefigurative initiatives is rarely considered.

Such human-centric framings are not only theoretically problematic as they continue to rely upon philosophical hierarchies based on exclusionary and narrow definitions, but they are unable to grasp the role that non-humans play in shaping our social and political worlds and therefore reduce, rather than multiply, political possibilities by making invisible the coming together and agency of more-than-human collectivities and the forms of emancipation and transformative potential that they might engender. If the purpose of anarchist geography is to dissolve and reject all forms of categorization, classification schemes and segmented political goals that attempt “to tame, order, restrain, partition, and contain the irreducible whole” (Springer, 2012, p. 1619), then it must also begin to think *beyond* humanist framings. As argued in the previous section, for more-than-human scholars, it is “no longer possible to imagine either the human as a living being or the collectivities in which we live apart from the more-than-human company that is now so self-evidently internal to what it means to be human and from which collectivities are made” (Braun and Whatmore, 2010b, pp. ix–xi). Hence, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2010, p. 167) has argued, living in more-than-human worlds “requires a perspective on the personal-collective that, without forgetting human individual bodies, doesn’t start *from* these bodies but from awareness of their interdependency”.

Hence, in what follows, I draw upon a number of more-than-human perspectives to rethink the subjects and doings of prefigurative politics and its transformative potential. More specifically, I build upon Ingold’s dwelling perspective and indigenous place-thought to rethink and place the subjects of prefiguration and their intentionality within more-than-human worlds. The significance of these perspectives for developing a less-anthropocentric anarchist geography lies in its reconceptualization of Eurocentric and anthropocentric framing of subjectivity and intentionality by recognising the agency of non-humans and places, and because it shifts attention away from individual subjects to “forms-of-life”. To explore the kind of transformative potential this reframing can generate, I turn to the work of a

number of scholars who have been extending political agency to forms-of-life or relational ways of being, doing and knowing (Escobar, 2018, Pellizzoni, 2020), and the infrastructures they create (Papadopoulos, 2018).

### 2.3.2 *Prefigurative subjects and their intentionality: on dwelling, encounters and place*

Ingold (2000) developed a “dwelling perspective” through his anthropological studies of Indigenous societies alongside phenomenological and practice-based theories, and he opposed it to the “building perspective” of the Cartesian Western tradition. The latter separates humans from their environments (and also mind from body, subject from object) and assumes that they must “construct the world, in consciousness, before they can act in it” (2000, p. 153), and consequently, that “worlds are made [built] before they are lived in” (2000, p. 179). For Ingold, the opposite is the case: the ontological starting point is the inescapable “immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld”, and so *to be* is actually an active process of “dwelling” within an environment which is itself alive because it is constituted by the dwelling activity of both humans and non-humans *in place* and *through times* (2000, p. 153).

Hence, from a dwelling perspective, organisms-persons are understood “not as externally bounded entities but as bundles of interwoven lines of growth and movement, together constituting a meshwork in fluid space. The environment, then, comprises not the surroundings of the organism but a zone of entanglement” (Ingold, 2008, p. 1796). It follows that subjects “grow or “issue forth” along the lines of their relationships” (Ingold, 2008, p. 1807), that is, from an *involution* (in the sense of entanglement/enfoldment) with a dwelt-in world rather than through *evolution*. It is through the very acts of dwelling, i.e. everyday practical and embodied engagements with the world, that subjects develop their skills, knowledge, sensibilities, dispositions and intentions (Jones, 2020). Relatedly, mind and body “are not two separate things but two ways of describing the same thing – or better, the same process – namely the environmentally situated activity of the human organism-person” (Ingold, 2000, p. 171).



Consequently, from a dwelling perspective, human intentions are not understood as *mental representations* that pre-exist a bodily engagement with a dwelt-in world, but as *embodied acts* themselves: “modes of action” that emerge from the *affordances* of things, beings or events in an environment. They are movements of *incorporation* (involution) rather than *inscription*: they “are not imposed from above but grow from the mutual involvement of people and materials in an environment” (Ingold, 2000, p. 347). It is worthwhile citing Ingold (2000, p. 186) at length here: “the forms people build, whether in their imagination or on the ground, arise in the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings. Building, then, cannot be understood as a simple process of transcription, of a pre-existing design of the final product onto a raw material substance. It is true that human beings – perhaps uniquely among animals – have the capacity to envision forms in advance of their implementation, but this envisioning is itself an activity carried on by real people in real-world environment, rather than by a disembodied intellect moving in a subjective space in which are represented the problems it seeks to solve. In short, people do not import their ideals, plans or mental representations into the world, since that very world ... is the homeland of their thoughts. Only because they already dwell therein can they think the thoughts they do”.

Alongside a dwelling perspective, other posthumanist perspectives are also leading to a conceptualisation of intentionality in non-anthropocentric terms. For instance, in their post-phenomenological reading of subjectivity, Ash and Simpson (2016) argue that: “rather than suggesting that human life and agency be considered in a hierarchical relationship against the non-human, we would argue that the appearance of human life and agency is only ever an outcome gifted to us through a relationship with non-human” (2016, p. 55). Building upon this reframing, Hughes (2002) has argued that: “any relationship between a subject’s apparent intention and outcome is non-linear and materially mediated ... As a subject emerges through and with the world, so too does any apparent volition” (Hughes 2019: 12). Hence, from intentionality being understood as a pre-existing state of mind that resides within an individual subject, posthuman and post-phenomenological understandings reframe

intentionality “as an emergent relation with the world, rather than an a priori condition of experience” (Ash and Simpson, 2016, p. 48).

Indeed, a dwelling perspective aligns with a broader theoretical shift in geography away from traditional notions of subjectivity based around the Cartesian ideal of an autonomous, self-reflexive and rational individual which is abstracted and disembedded from social and material relations, towards an understanding of subjectivity as an “intersubjective” *encounter* (Simpson 2017, p. 4). The notion of encounter too foregrounds how subjects and objects are produced, remade and given meaning through “intra- and interaction” (Haraway, 2008, p. 4). Encounters are fundamentally about difference: they are “events of relations” in which different bodies come together, but also “*produce* such difference” and “*make a difference*” (Wilson, 2016, p. 14). Hence, in encounters lies the potential to become “*otherwise*”: they have a transformative capacity to shape subjectivities, destabilise cultural norms and power relations, and produce new forms of knowledge and actions. However, unlike the notion of dwelling which can shore up romantic ideas of authenticity and harmony in the becoming together of humans and non-humans<sup>5</sup>, the notion of encounter also takes seriously “the inequalities and relations of power that operate on and within geographies of encounter to shape their effects and potential” (2016, p. 10). Hence, while emphasising openness, emergence and fluidity, the notion of encounter also recognises that subjects are also caught up in fields of power, social categories of difference, habits and attitudes, representations and discourses, and the social, economic and political structures and processes that shape and constraint them.

As noted in Section 2.2.2, unlike other posthumanist approaches, a dwelling perspective also emphasises place as an important dimension in the becoming of human and non-human subjects through the ways in which it shapes and is shaped

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<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, Ingold (2005, p. 503) himself has later recognised that “human lives are lived collectively within fields of power”. Geographers too have observed that dwelling “rubs against institutional orderings and landscape design” (Barua, 2014, p. 928) and therefore it “can take bitter, tragic, and contested forms just as it can take more harmonious or hopeful forms” (Cloke and Jones, 2001, p. 652).

by their everyday activities. For Ingold, place is neither a bounded space, nor an inert background over which human and non-human activities merely unfold. Building upon Indigenous ontologies and understandings, place is an active participant in the becoming world of human subjects: “knowledge is gained by moving about in it, exploring it, attending to it, ever alert to the signs by which it is revealed” (Ingold, 2000: 55). Hence, through embodied engagement and acts of dwelling, place and self become co-constituted: the “boundaries between person and place, or between self and the landscape, dissolve altogether” (Ingold, 2000: 56). This in turn allows non-human beings, animate and inanimate forces a creative role in the making of humans and their dwelt-in worlds. This reconceptualization of self and place as relational entities that are co-constituted through everyday practices is also a useful step towards bridging Western and Indigenous philosophies and deconstructing Eurocentric and anthropocentric epistemologies (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2016; Larsen and Johnson, 2016).

Indeed, a dwelling perspective has been (implicitly and explicitly) used by geographers to develop more phenomenological understandings of self and place (Larsen and Johnson, 2016). For instance, in Casey’s (2001, p. 684) conceptualisation of “the geographical self”, it is a body’s situatedness in and inhabitation of its immediate environment (place) that allows it to think, do and be, and place becomes through the subject embodied being and activity. However, as Larsen and Johnson (2016, p. 3) note, in phenomenological conceptualisations like this one, humans often take precedence: “places require human agents. Without human agency, places do not exist”, so they actually diverge in important ways with Indigenous place-thought. Most importantly, in many Indigenous ontologies the relationship between self and place is not symmetrical: place has seniority, it has *agency* prior to and independent of human selfhood, “in fact, human embodiment and awareness are an extension of the agency of place” (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2016; Larsen and Johnson, 2016, p. 3). Hence, place in Indigenous ontologies is more than a site of engagement/entanglement or “an arena of action” (Casey, 2001, p. 683), it is “an active participant in the world, shaping and creating it” (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2015,

p. 270). As such, more than people working on place, it is place that “works on people and determines something of human actions and social conditions” (Barker and Pickerill, 2020, p. 9; Larsen and Johnson, 2016). Most importantly, Larsen and Johnson (2016) have summarised the agency of place as the capacity *to speak, create and teach* about the protocols of reciprocity, obligation and responsibility that bind humans to more-than-human beings and forces and therefore it can guide people’s autonomous thought and action in life-sustaining ways.

Hence, rather than conceiving non-humans as passive beings and assuming intentionality to be pre-existing within prefigurative subjects, a less-anthropocentric framework pays attention to how they are enrolled *by* non-human others or how their intentionality emerges from their embeddedness within particular socio-material contexts and more-than-human affective encounters and relations. This reframing does not deny human agency and intentionality, but it accounts for and takes seriously the role that non-humans play in the *formation* of prefigurative subjects and their intentionality. Put differently, a less-anthropocentric framework recognises non-humans as having “the capacity of *making others act*” (Rodríguez-Giralt *et al.*, 2018, p. 260) by shaping their affective dispositions, identities and intentions. Hence, through the notion of dwelling and encounter, it becomes possible to recognise the multiplicity and agency of non-human beings that make up prefigurative subjects’ dwelt-in world, including their intentionality, as well as the power relations and social structures in which they are entangled.

Hence, following these posthumanist perspectives and interventions, it becomes possible to reconceptualise the subjects of prefiguration not as autonomous (human) individuals detached and dis-embedded from their material and social relations, but as “forms of life” (Ingold, 2000, p. 407), *weavings* of humans and non-humans that are geographically and historically situated within fields of relationships, and whose form develops from embodied encounters and everyday practices *in* and *with* places. Accordingly, the intentionality of prefigurative subjects is not an ideological abstraction that exists independently from their fields of (more-than-human and

power) relations, but it is immanent in their practical involvement and everyday encounters with the world.

### 2.3.3 *Prefigurative politics: from alternative lifestyles to forms-of-life*

In accordance with anarchist politics' emphasis on direct forms of action, most theoretical considerations of prefiguration often associate the concept to "practice", i.e. the *doing* of alternative things, and how this is guided by alternative values and ideals such as cooperation, autonomy, solidarity, justice and equality (Koenler, 2020; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Naegler, 2018; Yates, 2015). Hence, prefiguration is often framed as a form of "cultural politics" whereby alternative everyday practices are the *means* through which *ends* are given material embodiment. However, as Pellizzoni (2020, p. 12) has noted, and activists are painfully aware of (Naegler, 2018), alternatives practices (*means*) can be easily recuperated by capitalism to be turned into "innocuous lifestyle choices" that are detached from goals and values (*ends*). The most obvious example is the transformation of environmental concerns/values into practices of sustainable consumerism; or to use another example relevant to BTTL ideals and practices: equating self-sufficiency with the mere purchase and use of green technologies.

However, a form-of-life is not a lifestyle but its opposite (Pellizzoni, 2020). Unlike a lifestyle which is based on a logic of choice that separates the subject from the objects of their doings, a form-of-life is based on a logic of care in which a subject's values, knowledge, skills, and practices emerge from and are performed *with* a more-than-human collectivity. Hence, a lifestyle and a form of life are driven by different logic. While in the logic of choice the actor is separate from the world of action, and can leave the engagement at any time, the logic of care implies a continuity, an interdependence. Following Agamben (2014, p. 73), a form-of-life is "a life that can never be separated from its form ... a life for which, in its way of living, what is at stake is living itself, and, in its living, what is at stake above all else is its mode of living". A form-of-life then is not a set of (in)different practices that make up a lifestyle, but a mode of existence: a modality of being, knowing and acting that

grows *in* and *with* the more-than-human world one inhabits and which guides and constraints its development. A form-of-life “comes from dwelling in a place and from a commitment to a community with which we engage in pragmatic activity around a shared concern, or around a disharmony” (Escobar, 2018, p. 112). Hence, in a reconceptualization of prefigurative subjects as forms-of-life, the means and ends (practices and goals) of prefigurative politics are re-united through a commitment to place and its more-than-human collectivity.

Following this framing, prefiguration becomes less a matter of giving embodiment to one’s intentions by inscribing them onto a passive material world, than about *crafting* “alternative lifeworlds of existence” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 203) or “alterontologies” (2018, p. 19) with a more-than-human collectivity. Papadopoulos’ (2018) conceptualisation of crafting is similar to Ingold’s (2000, p. 346) understanding as “a modality of weaving” which recognises material and non-human agency. The weaver may start with an idea of the form they wish to create but is also caught up into a dialogue with the material (e.g. the fibres of the strand), and therefore they have to contend with forces that exceed their intentions. Hence, unlike “construction” and “building”, crafting “presupposes the careful retreat of the self” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 181) and it implies a level of indeterminacy and learning arising from these more-than-human interactions<sup>6</sup>. Put differently, crafting is a collaborative endeavour, an interactive co-performance that takes seriously the power of non-humans and places in guiding our practices and shaping worlds.

The crafting of alterontologies requires both disconnections and reconnections (Papadopoulos, 2018). Disconnection entails the unmaking of connections from certain relations, entities, spaces and temporalities, that is, particular ontological arrangements. While often unrecognised or overlooked in favour of its *affirmative* dimension, the negating element of prefigurative politics - otherwise referred to as withdrawal, subtraction or refusal - is key to “counter the capitalist thrust to endless

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<sup>6</sup> His notion of crafting is also theoretically and ethically close to Escobar’s (2018, p. 4) formulation of “ontological design” as design after the “subject”: “we design our world, and our world designs us back - in short, design designs”.

(self-)valorization” (Pellizzoni, 2020, p. 1). Negation, though, is not the same as passivity: it is an “activity building on the capacity to *not being* or *not doing* something, that is, to leave potentials unused, unrealised and in a non-actualized state, and thus to resist the lure of endless (self-)valorization” (2020, p. 2). When it comes to crafting alternative forms-of-life, negating is “about liberating from dominative, self-enhancing intents the relationship with things, people and oneself” (2020, p. 12), it is about subtracting them from the obsession with domination, growth, consumption and relentless achievement in order to disclose different relations, temporalities and value-practices.

Indeed, the other side is experimentally recomposing, recombining, recreating, reorganising and rearranging our socio-material existence and “practically reconnecting to the ontologies of the Earth, the land, and its Earth-beings” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 173). This in turn demands an “intense involvement with a collectivity” of a place (Escobar, 2018, p. 112) - which is always more-than-human - and developing an obligation to its flourishing and care by dwelling there and learning about and from its agency (Larsen and Johnson, 2016). Indeed, crafting - as a situated everyday activity with an agentic more-than-human world - also implies “caring for the worlds we live in by acting in accordance with the intensities and the limits that matter [and place] imposes in each concrete situation” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 23). Hence, crafting alterontologies starts from an obligation to a collectivity, it has care as its ethical compass, and it takes material and place constraints and potentials as its creative fuel. It is in this subtraction and more-than-human re-composition *in* and *with* places, that prefiguration “departs from lifestyle to become a form-of-life” (Pellizzoni, 2020, p. 12).

#### 2.3.4 *Prefiguring autonomy through generous infrastructures*

Following Papadopoulos framework, prefiguration can be understood as a form of “ontological organising” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 22), an experimental and compositional politics for the autonomy of forms-of-life, and the ways in which

forms-of-life can create and defend their autonomy is through the creation of “generous infrastructures” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 203).

Papadopoulos’ conceptualisation of infrastructure is not theoretically far from more-than-human interventions in political geography and beyond that conceive them as “socio-material processes with diverse agentive powers” (Amin, 2014, p. 139; Knox, 2017; Jensen and Morita, 2017). He too understands infrastructures relationally or “ecologically”, not as mere material buildings, devices or technical systems, but as always involving “the entanglement of human and non-human others, materiality and sociality” (Papadopoulos, 2018, pp. 203–204). However, he is also interested in infrastructures that can generate more autonomous trajectories for social movements and communities around the world dealing with the injustices produced by imperial and capitalist infrastructures. But infrastructures are also not “tools” of social movements: they are complex “alliances between *engaged* groups of animals and plants, *committed* groups of humans, and *accessible* material objects” that come together through a process of “creative involution” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 203). This idea, borrowed from the work of Deleuze, connotes “affectively charged” (Hustak and Myers, 2012, p. 78) partnerships between humans and non-humans and it is meant to draw attention to the creative agencies of these more-than-human formations in the making of worlds.

Minuchin (2016, p. 910, 2021) has more recently advanced a more materialist notion of prefiguration through a “politics of construction”, and more specifically, the building of infrastructures. However, he uses the terminology of “construction” and “building” which belongs to the rationalistic and anthropocentric tradition that implies the presence of an empty and inert material surface waiting to be transformed by the inscription of a human design. Indeed, his theorisation ultimately aims to “rescue the issue of authorship” (Minuchin, 2016, p. 909) from more “vitalist” approaches and restore political agency within human collectives. However, from a posthumanist perspective, materiality is not fixed or passive, it is not a tool or a mere effect of human agency and intentionality.



Papadopoulos framing emphasises the dynamic and experimental character of infrastructures and their ontological effects, or “world-changing capacities” as Jensen and Morita (2017, p. 615) put it. Hence, instead of giving material embodiment to power, human ideals or designs, infrastructures are themselves *constitutive* of politics: in their entanglement of people, matter, spaces, and imaginations, infrastructural arrangements actively contribute to the production of spaces, subjects, modes of circulation, production, habitation and codes of practices (Harvey and Knox, 2012, Amin, 2014, Silver, 2014, Jensen and Morita, 2017). Because of their more-than-human composition, infrastructures are open and experimental systems that are difficult to coordinate and routinely diverge from the intentions of planners, and the ontological transformations they produce can often be imperceptible or “silent” (Jensen and Morita, 2015, p. 84). In Papadopoulos’ theorisation of infrastructure, transformative potentiality does not lie in a defined political programme or in the intention of human actors - although he does not negate them either - but in their *generosity*.

The generosity of infrastructures rests on three key qualities. First, infrastructures are generous if they allow communities “to maintain and defend the ontological conditions of their forms of life even when instituted infrastructures break down by failure or by intent” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 204). Put differently, they are generous if they allow forms-of-life to “be practiced autonomously” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 173). However, autonomy for Papadopoulos is more than a social affair: it is “a practical and ontological affair that goes as far as to change the materiality of the lived spaces and the bodies, human and non-human, of communities” (2018, p. 3). Hence, autonomy here paradoxically means “organizing interdependences” (2018, p. 43) for the flourishing of human and non-human communities in ordinary, everyday relations in particular places. As Escobar (2018, p. 175) notes, from a relational perspective, autonomy becomes “a theory and practice of *interexistence* and *interbeing*”, a matter of association and of assembling that turns material and multi-species interdependences into active constraints (see also Stengers, 2017). As such, prefiguring autonomy requires “interactions, ways of knowing, forms of practice that involve the material world, plants and the soil, chemical compounds and

energies, other groups of humans and their surroundings, and other species and machines” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 3).

Second, generous infrastructures are materially open and flexible. Unlike enclosed, private or state-owned and managed infrastructures, they can be borrowed, shared, tweaked, modified, extended, connected to other infrastructures, easily transferred across spatial and temporal locations and claimed by other forms-of-life. They are thus also *translocal*: “more than local and less than global” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2022, p. 685). Hence, while their emergence and composition is specific to particular ecological contexts and situations, they do not need to be reinvented every time because they are part of a broader “infrastructural imagination” that spans spaces and times (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 203). Accordingly, they are also “infrastructures of the commons” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2022, p. 697): through their traffic, circulation, mutations, adaptations and re-composition across spatial and temporal locations, they allow forms-of-life to respond to the constraints and specificity of their places and ecologies, and therefore maintain and defend their autonomy.

Third, infrastructures are also generous in their capacity to trigger “generous encounters” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2022, p. 688). According to Star (1999, p. 381), one of the properties of infrastructures is that they are “learned as part of membership”, that is, “strangers and outsiders encounter infrastructure as a target object to be learned about. New participants acquire a naturalized familiarity with its objects, as they become members”. Generous encounters can thus be thought as affectively charged interventions that mediate between those for whom infrastructures are typically foregrounded and those for whom they tend to be backgrounded (Jensen and Morita, 2017). These generous encounters extend the “reach or scope” of infrastructure “beyond a single event or one-site practice” (Star, 1999, p. 381), allowing them to travel across spaces and times. Hence, through the crafting of generous infrastructures, forms-of-life can change the horizon that shapes individual and collective understandings, and in so doing they “inevitably generate human’ (and other Earth beings’) structures of possibility” (Escobar, 2018, p. 111)

and can contribute to the multiplication of autonomous spaces and modes of existence. Hence, in generous infrastructures “transformative potentiality is not a human privilege, but rather a relational matter dispersed in the connections and labor among people, as well as other kinds of beings and things” (Lyons, 2020, p. 134).

Papadopoulos’ leading example of generous infrastructures is “seed bombs”. As he explains: “they rely on complex human and non-human labor to exist; they are readily transferable; they can be applied differently in varying environments; they carry knowledge, material potentiality, and learning within them without imposing it as a closed system in each different location in which they are used; they are self-sufficient – clay protects the encapsulated seeds, and nutrients support them in their first growth – until they melt in the soil; and they can travel easily” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 204). He also mentions self-managed water systems, hackerspaces, cooperative farms, open-access bike workshops, self-organised food markets and community emporiums, alternative collective agricultural projects, complementary currencies and participatory practices of decision-making (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2022). However, how these generous infrastructures are composed, and whether or in what ways they are able to produce more autonomous socio-material reconfigurations in actual places and times and/or allow communities to defend their autonomy, is up to ethnographic accounts to elucidate.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed and discussed the “more-than-human turn” in geography and some of the ways in which more-than-human perspectives are reworking some key categories of geographical and political thought by recognising and attending to the agency of non-human beings and forces in the making of social and political worlds. I have then moved to trace a more specific theoretical trajectory for anarchist geography using Ingold’s and Indigenous’ dwelling perspectives to foreground the everyday encounters and practical, everyday engagements with non-humans and places in the *becoming* of prefigurative subjects, and Papadopoulos’

framework of alterontologies and generous infrastructures to rethink the *doings* of prefigurative politics and their transformative potential.

This path – or theoretical trajectory - does not treat the non-human world as a thing over which humans struggle or as a passive site/background on which they take place, and instead builds on and enacts a relational approach in which both human and non-human bodies are participants in constituting and changing the world. Hence, this path/trajectory does not erase or deny human subjectivity, agency and intentionality, but it both decentres and reworks them in less-anthropocentric terms by situating them in the more-than-human worlds that they emerge from and are entangled with.

More specifically, I have built upon a dwelling perspective to reconceptualise the subjects of prefiguration as “forms-of-life”: not bounded and autonomous individuals, but ways of being, doing and knowing that emerge from and are constituted by the field of (more-than-human) relations in which a subject dwells. Ingold’s emphasis on temporality and place also brings this reframing of subjectivity closer to Indigenous conceptions of self and place, and therefore it can contribute to bringing anarchist geography in conversation with wider efforts to decolonise the discipline (Panelli, 2008; Sundberg, 2014). This reframing allows to recognise the agency of non-humans and place in the *becoming* of prefigurative subjects and their intentionality. However, as noted in Section 2.2.2, a dwelling perspective does not fully take into account how subjects and the places they dwell in are also entangled in and shaped by relations of power and social structures. Hence, I have brought in the notion of “encounter” as it has been examined and reviewed by Wilson (2016), to stress that the meeting and becoming of subjects thorough everyday encounters with more-than-human others/alterity also happens within wider socio-spatial contexts and power geometries. Finally, to conceptualise the *doing* of prefigurative politics and the transformative potential that emerge from this revision of prefigurative subjects as forms-of-life, I have turned to Papadopolous’ (2018) framework of alterontologies and “generous infrastructure”.

Hence, this trajectory follows the *growing* of prefigurative subjects into forms-of-life, it attends to the *crafting* of prefigurative politics with a more-than-human collectivity, and the *cultivation* of autonomy through generous infrastructures. I will use this trajectory to attend to the *becoming* of BTTL farmers and their intentionality by “placing” them in the field of relations in which they dwell, which includes the multiplicity of human and non-human beings and agencies they encounter as well as the power relations and social structures in which they are entangled; and the *doing* of BTTL living and farming by paying attention to the humans involved (their values, intentions, skills, knowledge and practices) but also the more-than-human worlds and agencies that gives shape to their everyday living, and the infrastructures and transformative potential that this everyday co-performance gives rise to.

## Chapter 3 Researching BTTL farms through and as doing

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework of this thesis, the methods used and how they relate to the broader objectives of the thesis. As introduced in Chapter 1, this thesis has emerged from and constitute both a research and personal journey into the more-than-human geographies of BTTL farms: it thus involves studying BTTL ways of being and doing, while also being and living as a BTTL farmer. Hence, in this thesis, the boundaries between researcher and research subjects/objects, personal and academic life are thoroughly blurred. However, the methodological framework I discuss and pursue in this thesis, does not aim to resolve the tensions and complexities that arise in the dissolution of such boundaries. Aiming to do so would be counterproductive to the purpose of addressing this thesis' research objectives, which include the exploration of the *becoming* of BTTL farmers and their everyday *doings* with the land in specific spatio-temporal contexts. These research objectives require a highly immersive methodology that can attend to the situated experience and more-than-human and more-than-representational dimensions of BTTL farming and living. Moreover, as argued in Chapter 1, confronting the Anthropocene event in theory and everyday life demands modes of enquiries that are risky and experimental and that are able to attend to the web of more-than-human relationality in which human subjects - including the researcher - are situated.

Hence, this thesis' methodological framework combines the relational approaches discussed in Chapter 2 with critical and reflexive approaches advanced by feminist and other radical geographers through the use of autoethnography as both more-than-human *method* and form of *praxis*. As a method, autoethnography allows me to use my journey, experience and practice as a BTTL farmer as a "vantage point" to produce a situated, evocative and also theoretically insightful account into the worlds that BTTL farmers inhabit, and particularly the more-than-human, more-than-representational and place-based dimensions of BTTL being and doing(s); and

as praxis, autoethnography allows me to “do geography differently” by grounding my knowledge into actual “doings” with human and non-human others in specific places.

I begin this chapter by briefly introducing autoethnography and outlining how and why it was used in this thesis. I then introduce “the field” of the autoethnography and what it entailed in terms of formulating the research design as well as discussing some of the challenges that have arisen during the process of research. I then outline the specific methods used and the rationales behind them. Towards the end, reference is also made to the writing/presentation strategies employed and how they relate to the thesis’ broader goals.

### 3.2 Using autoethnography as more-than-human method and praxis

Autoethnography is a methodology that seeks to describe and interpret (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural texts, experiences, beliefs and practices (*ethno*) (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2013). It is “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9), or as Adams et al. (2015, p. 46) put it: “we look *inward* – into our identities, thoughts, feelings and experiences – and *outward* – into our relationships, communities and cultures”. As a methodology, autoethnography combines characteristics of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to interrogate the intersections between self and a wider social and cultural context, and it entails a common set of priorities, concerns and ways of doing research (Adams et al., 2015). These include:

- (1) foregrounding the researchers’ body, emotions and personal experience in research and writing;
- (2) using insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon or experience, particularly those understudied, hidden or marginalised, to offer comprehensive but nuanced accounts of taken-for-granted norms, cultural beliefs and practices;
- (3) offering accounts of “sense-making” processes to show how and why particular experiences or events are challenging/important/transformational;

- (4) using reflexivity to explicitly acknowledge and critically reflect on their knowledge, position, experience and relationships in their research;
- (5) cultivating reciprocal relationships with their participants as well as with their readers by making their work accessible to multiple audiences using evocative narratives and stories.

Autoethnography is often critiqued for not being sufficiently rigorous and analytical, and autoethnographers are criticised for being narcissistic and biased, for not doing enough fieldwork or engaging with enough research subjects (Ellis, 2011). However, alongside other forms of “engaged” and “embodied” scholarship (feminist, scholar-activist, indigenous, militant, etc.), an autoethnographic approach “treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273), and uses research and writing “to facilitate social consciousness and societal change, aid emancipatory goals and negate repressive cultural influences” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 34). Hence, done with critical reflexivity, autoethnography has the potential to generate significant theoretical insights while also enriching research practices through acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection.

Nevertheless, most autoethnographies are generally “humanist” in orientation, but I frame it and employ it in this thesis as a more-than-human method and praxis. Arguably, this move appears paradoxical in light of more-than-human concerns regarding the decentring of the human in both theories and methodological practices. However, autoethnography is a thoroughly *relational methodology* that aims to investigate *the self in relation to others* and the wider contexts in which they are situated. Hence, these “others” can also include non-human beings and forces, and the contexts can be multiple – social, cultural, political, material, environmental, economic etc. As such, it can be aligned with the relational approaches and perspectives discussed in Chapter 2 that understand human and non-human subjects as coming into being through their interactions and co-performances in fields of relations. Moreover, with its focus on personal experience, emotions and the body, autoethnography can be mobilised to study the affective capacities of non-humans as they shape and catalyse human experience and everyday practices.



Hence, the use of autoethnography was deemed valuable in this thesis for a number of reasons (Table 3.1). First, one of the reasons why BTTL initiatives have been significantly understudied relates to their low-profile, geographical diffusion and isolation, which makes finding and accessing them particularly difficult (Wilbur, 2013). An autoethnographic approach provided access to a social movement that has been notoriously difficult to identify and therefore hardly studied. Second, and alongside more conventional ethnographic approaches, autoethnography allows a more immersive and long-term exploration of BTTL initiatives that can take into account the place and wider spatial and temporal contexts in which they unfold, as well as attending to the more mundane practices and everyday doings that take place on BTTL farms. Third, autoethnography can provide access to the “acting subject” behind BTTL initiatives in a way that more traditional research methods such as interviews and conventional ethnographies might not allow, including how a BTTL farmer sees, hears, thinks and feels. This insider knowledge does not mean that I can provide a more “truthful” or more accurate account compared to outsiders, but that I can witness, explore and describe events and experiences that other researchers may not be able to know or access easily, and therefore complement and fill in gaps in existing research. Fourth, by employing it as a more-than-human method, autoethnography allows me to bring a more intimate lens and care-fully attuned understandings to the non-humans that are entangled with, and fill the worlds of, BTTL farmers.

Table 3.2 Research questions as they relate to the methods used and the theoretical trajectory pursued.

Research Question	Focus	Methods/ Materials	Chapter	Theoretical trajectory
How does one become a BTTL farmer and what shapes his/her intentionality?	Embodied experience  Socio-spatial context(s)	Autobiography, embodied methods, visual methods  Autobiography, observant participation, embodied methods	Chapter 4 & 5	The <i>becoming</i> of prefigurative subjects

How is “nature performed” on BTTL farms and what kind of transformative potential does it engender?	Everyday doings/ materiality of the farm  Multi-species interactions	Observant participation, embodied methods, visual methods  Multi-species ethnography, embodied methods, visual methods	Chapter 6 & 7	The <i>doing</i> of prefigurative politics
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Finally, and perhaps the most important dimension of conducting this thesis as an autoethnography, is that it allowed me to conduct this research “in, with and as more-than-human worlds” (Dowling, 2017, p. 7). Put differently, it allowed me to “walk the talk” of more-than-human theories by living, feeling, struggling, learning, sharing and caring with the more-than-humans I share my life with as a BTTL farmer. First, by centring and exploring the self as a relational subject, autoethnography allowed me to address my human and non-human kins as collaborators in constituting knowledge, and so it also decentres the (human) “author-ity” of the research (Country et al., 2015, p. 278). Second, by grounding knowledge in my place-based, more-than-human relationships, I enacted a more respectful, responsible and collaborative more-than-human geographical praxis.

These methodological advantages notwithstanding, an autoethnographic approach is ethically and practically far from simple to conduct, raising a number of ethical and practical issues that other research strategies and methods do not. Hence, before I go on to explore the data collection methods and techniques in more details, I first introduce how this thesis-as-journey came about and what it entailed in terms of formulating the research design and enacting the methodological approach.

### 3.3 An autoethnographic journey BTTL

#### 3.3.1 *Introducing “the field”: tracing relations*

Traditional ethnographic approaches are often based on case-studies of particular communities, places or cultures. Autoethnographies are no different but the case-study - including “the field” of research - is thoroughly entangled with the researcher’s life, her intimate surroundings and relations. In a sense, “the field” follows the (auto)ethnographer across spaces, times and relations rather than the other way around. In fact, autoethnographies generally – but not exclusively - begin with “epiphanies”, that is, moments or intense experiences, such as a crises or major life events, that are perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of the researcher’s life. These moments, events or experiences “prompt us to pause and reflect; they encourage us to explore aspects of our identities, relationships, and communities that, before the incident, we might not have had the occasion or courage to explore” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 47).

When I applied for this PhD, I was indeed undergoing a major life transition and I wanted to understand my experience in relation to the experience of others and those I met and encountered along the way. More specifically, my partner Bill and I had just bought a piece of land in southern Italy near my family home, and we were organising our relocation there. However, at the time, we were living on a small piece of land with a small group of friends in a river valley in North Devon called Leah. We were not a commune in a very strict sense, but we did share some of the living spaces and infrastructures and we worked together to grow food on the land. Bill and I lived there for three years in a small low impact development (LID) we built ourselves in a small woodland clearing, but we had no planning permission for it and our friends had been negotiating their living arrangements with the local council for almost twenty years (Figure 3.1). We were living under the constant threat of eviction and, over time, internal tensions and disagreements started brewing, so Bill and I decided to move. We relocated to southern Italy in February 2017, and a few months later, our friends received an eviction notice for our LID in the woods. A few months after that, I received an offer for a PhD and I accepted it.



Figure 3.1 Our LID in the woods at Leah.

This is when the thesis-as-journey officially started, but my journey BTTL had already begun, and it had taken me across different lands and spatial contexts. Hence, “the field” of my autoethnography extends to the time I spent living at Leah, and it includes my biographical entanglement with that particular place, the socio-spatial context in which I was entangled and the humans and non-humans I encountered there. The autoethnography then starts in the UK and follows me in southern Italy, and Chapter 4 specifically traces and analyses this geographical *and* personal transition from being a graduate student living on a piece of land in the British countryside to becoming a postgraduate student and a BTTL farmer in rural southern Italy. However, after Chapter 4, the geographical and empirical focus of the autoethnography shifts to my smallholding and experience in southern Italy where I have collected most of my primary data.

The smallholding is located in Piedemonte, a small rural village on the southern Apennine range of Italy and it consists of about two hectares of terraced land planted with olive trees, grapevines and multiple fruit trees (Figure 3.2). The local spatial context, the history of the place in which the smallholding is situated as well

as the agroecology of the land are the main focus of the analysis in Chapter 5, so I will not introduce them here. Moreover, for reasons related to confidentiality, and in order to retain at least some of my privacy and that of others connected to me, I have decided to change the name of the village and omit a geographical map. In section 3.2.5, I explore in more details the practical and ethical issues that have emerged while planning and conducting my autoethnography and how I have tried to address them.



Figure 3.2 Our smallholding in southern Italy.

As it should have become clear by now, while the autoethnography is based upon *my* journey and experience, this is situated within a wider context and field of social, material, spatial and historical relations. Within this network of relations, multiple others have become entangled in my autoethnography, including: “intimate others” (those most proximate to me, e.g. my partner, family, friends, but also our animal kins, the land and its more-than-human agencies), “others of similarity” (those that belong to the same community as self and share values and perspectives e.g. fellow BTTL farmers), and “others of difference” and/or “opposition” (those who have different backgrounds and possess and operate by different and/or opposing frames of reference to the self, e.g. my neighbours, residents of the village, conventional farmers). This categorisation is helpful in understanding the self and its

interconnectedness with others, but it is worth noting that similarities and differences between self and others also shift with time, distance, and perspective (more on this in Section 3.2.2). Moreover, the extent and type of involvement of these numerous others in the autoethnography varies greatly, with some being more directly involved and intimately interwoven in the research than others. Decisions about who to include, but also how and to what extent, were informed by the quality and positionality of the information that could be acquired (i.e. theoretical relevance) as well as a number of practical and ethical issues that emerged during the research process (Crang and Cook, 2007).

One “key participant” is, of course, my partner Bill, who has been with me across the entire length of this personal and research journey. His involvement and contribution was inevitable practically due to his close proximity to me, but it was also theoretically and empirically significant as he taught me most of what I know about alternative farming practices and off-grid living, and he has shared his thoughts, feelings and experiences with me throughout the journey. Hence, he was both a “key informant” and a “mentor”, but also a research “collaborator” as he helped me collect data, check and clarify facts, fill in gaps by adding comments, details and observations, and discussing my interpretations of events and everyday doings. Similarly, the farm itself and the ecology of the land I worked and lived with during the course of this research was not a mere backdrop to the autoethnography, but a “‘key informant’, a research partner, a partner in theorizing, an author-ity” of this research (Country et al., 2015, p. 278). Its soils, trees, plants, weather, birds, insects, wild and farmed animals, have significantly shaped my everyday life and contributed to my farming experience, practices, knowledge and skills. Hence, “the ethnographic I” (Ellis, 2004) of this autoethnography is more like an “ethnographic *we*”, and this “we” is also more-than-human (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3 Working with a more-than-human ethnographic “we”.

Others, like the fellow BTTL farmers I have encountered during the research (“others of similarity”) as well as my neighbours, local farmers and residents of Piedemonte (“others of difference and/or opposition”), have also participated in the autoethnography and have both enriched *and* troubled my understandings and experiences of BTTL farming and living. However, these various others did not contribute in the data collection process as directly as I initially planned for a number of reasons. Their involvement and contribution was significantly affected by the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns, but it was also the result of ethical and practical considerations that emerged during the research (more on these in Section 3.2.3 and 3.2.4). Nevertheless, the former helped me situate my journey, experience and practices within a wider cultural and social context of BTTL farming and living, while the latter helped me understand how our farm, experiences and practices were entangled and intersected with broader historical processes, social structures, cultural norms and understandings.

To summarise, the spatial and temporal boundaries of “the field” are fluid, the autoethnography being intensive, yet also extensive, cutting through biographical histories, spatial contexts and networks of relations. The field is more accurately “the field of relations” in and across which my journey, experiences, and practices as

BTTL farmer have emerged and unfolded. It is an “expanded field” as Cook (2001, p. 104) calls it, and the autoethnography is more akin to a “reflexive multilocal ethnography” (Cook, 2001, p. 104) that includes an examination of distant but interconnected places, intense but shifting relations, and connected but divergent experiences and practices. Consequently, the autoethnography is not a “me-me-me-me-me-type narrative”, it’s an “it-me-them-you-here-me-that-you-there-her-us-then-so- ... narrative” (Cook, 2001, p. 120), situated in and entangled with places, histories and more-than-human relations.

In the following sections, I further introduce and discuss how the research was designed and conducted alongside these relations and contexts before moving onto the methods used for data collection.

### *3.3.2 A fluid research design: building relations, shifting positions, balancing commitments*

Autoethnographic research entails careful planning like any other research approaches, but like most ethnographic research, the process is neither linear nor rigid. As O’Reilly (2012, p. 41) puts it: “ethnographic research proceeds in more of a spiral than a straight line. It has to start and end somewhere, but in the meantime it can go around in a few circles; its design is thus continuous”. The fluid and flexible nature of ethnographic research is linked to the fact that ethnography is first and foremost “a relation-building exercise” (2012, p. 100). An ethnographer needs to build relationships in the field in order to gain access, find participants and more generally immerse in the culture and place under study, and ideally, these should be based on respect, mutual trust and understanding. So while the initial research design is guided by the research questions, this often changes once the ethnographer enters the field, and it is largely dependent upon the context, opportunities and challenges that he/she encounters there.

Building relationship with participants based on trust and rapport takes time, so this process might be quicker and easier if the researcher is an “insider” in the community under study, as in the case of autoethnographies. Indeed, when we first



moved to southern Italy, I approached an alternative food network (AFN) in the nearby city for the purpose of making friends, build connections with like-minded people and sell our farm produce, and this network later became part of my research plan and design. However, on closer inspection, the insider/outsider dualism is not a helpful frame for understanding the complexity of relationships in the field, as it overlooks the dynamism of identities and positions over time and through space<sup>7</sup>. For instance, when I started this research, I was both an insider and outsider of the communities I was studying, that is, some of the relations in the field were both familiar and unfamiliar. I knew some of the participants around me well (most obviously my friends and family), but when it came to Piedemonte I did not know anyone, as I was completely new to the place and its community. In a sense, I was more like a conventional ethnographer entering a completely unfamiliar setting and community, and only over time did I become more of an insider. Similarly, in the context of the local AFN I joined during the research, I started as an outsider and over time I became more of an insider, but then I become an outsider again (more on this in the next section).

Indeed, the insider/outsider binary was highly unstable throughout the autoethnography, and I found it more useful to think of my role and practice in terms of multiple and shifting identities and positions, including that of a researcher, farmer, friend, daughter, partner, neighbour, colleague, etc. Indeed, most of the time, I was neither inside nor outside, but in a “space of betweenness” (Katz, 1994, p. 72). Nevertheless, researching in such space is not easy, not least because I was “always already in the field” (Katz, 1994, p. 67) and every interaction, doing or encounter could potentially become research, and because “in home fieldwork, multiple axes of commitment must be integrated with one’s research agenda” (Delyser, 2001, p. 444). Indeed, the AFN, the village of Piedemonte, and my own smallholding were for me not just about research, and yet, my research was also not secondary. Moreover,

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably, through long-term fieldwork and immersion into a community/setting, even in more traditional ethnographies the researcher is/become to some extent both insider and outsider (O’Reilly 2012).

autoethnographic research carries “a powerful emotional bond of ethical obligations that cannot be ignored in the research process” (De Nardi, 2015, p. 22). Most importantly, my relationship and obligations towards Bill and our commitment to live off-grid, farm the land, take care of the animals, the soil, the trees, were also my priorities and they guided and accompanied my research choices and practices.

These multiple commitments and interpersonal obligations carried important implications for how the research was (un)done. In what follows, I discuss in more detail some of the practical, ethical and emotional difficulties I encountered as a result of my personal and direct involvement in the research and how I tried to address and balance my multiple positions, relations, commitments and responsibilities during the research.

### 3.3.3 *Fieldwork (un)done: negotiating internal and external disruptions*

Alternative food networks (AFN) are a significant dimension of the radical BTTL movement and an important source of knowledge and social relations for individual BTTL farmers (Wilbur, 2013). As touched in the previous section, when we relocated to southern Italy we did not have many social connections, so we approached an AFN in the nearby city to meet other small producers and find an outlet for our farm produce. The primary form of AFNs in Italy are “GAS” which stands for “Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale” or “Solidarity Purchase Groups”. They are similar to US and UK Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) but also different in their collective self-management and focus on relations of *solidarity* rather than just food<sup>8</sup>. As Grasseni (2014, p. 189) has observed “in the Italian smallholders scenario, GAS play an increasingly important role in offering a survival opportunity to small farms, as they

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<sup>8</sup> GAS were first started in 1994 by groups and families of consumers for the purpose of collectively buying food products directly from local farmers following the criteria and ethical principles of: respect for people, respect for the environment, health, solidarity, sustainability, taste, and rediscovering natural rhythms (GAS 1999). As the founding document puts it: “when a group of people decides to meet up to reflect upon its consumption and to buy everyday products using criteria of justice and solidarity, it gives rise to a GAS” (GAS, 1999, p. 5). Ultimately, though, each GAS establishes its own practical routines and solidarity criteria based on the local context and its members. For instance, some GAS may choose to favour organic products regardless of their origin of production, while other may support the local and small dimension of production regardless of its organic status (Grasseni, 2014).

recruit them to reconstruct local food chains, while shielding these often family-run entrepreneurs from the worst effects of the financial crisis”.

Joining and participating in the AFN connected me to “others of similarity” and so I decided to engage some producers in the (auto)ethnography to collect data on their everyday activities, farming practices and interactions with nature. However, being a fellow farmer, I knew that time on the farm is always short and jobs always too many, so I planned a series of day visits to their smallholdings where I would either help them with some farm work or simply spend the day with them at their farm, being shown around, taking pictures and videos and undertake interviews with them. A lot of work went into preparing and planning my fieldwork and devising my methods in the spring and summer of 2019, but not long after I started my first farm visits, Covid-19 happened. Farmers markets and group meetings were forced to stop and I was unable to visit any farms to collect data for about six months.

During the first lockdown in 2020, I kept in contact with the group and individual farmers through WhatsApp, I had some preliminary interviews on the phone with some of them in the spring, and some shared with me some pictures that they took on their farms during the lockdowns. However, it was a very stressful and anxious time for everyone (including me), so I did not force any of the farmers to collect data during the lockdown. I applied for an extension to my research instead to try and recover the time lost and I prepared myself to (re)start when restrictions got lifted.

However, by the time I was able to get back to doing fieldwork again, internal dynamics within the group had changed. These were brought about by internal tensions and disagreements within the group that existed from before the pandemic and regarded primarily (but not exclusively) the lack of written and collectively agreed upon rules and criteria for how the network should be run and organised, as well as the methods of production, the products, prices, and packaging that would be allowed at the market or not. These issues and disagreements remained unresolved throughout the lockdown and resurfaced with the lifting of restrictions. In the group discussions that ensued I offered my own perspective and opinion, but

tensions ran high, and no agreement could be reached. In the end *I took a side* and felt compelled to leave the group alongside other producers.

Perhaps, an outsider researcher would have not taken a position in the debates and therefore they would have been able to carry on with the fieldwork as if nothing had happened, but I did not and could not take a neutral position. Even though I was a relatively new member in the group, I was nonetheless a member, and I was also passionate about our collective work and I cared about the people in it, many of whom had become friends. I could not *not* take a position in the discussions, and yet this personal involvement and my subsequent decision resulted in me losing most of my “research participants” and having to rethink my data collection strategy. Maybe I could have used this “fieldwork incident” to generate critical insights into the internal dynamics and power issues within AFNs, or how Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns have affected alternative networks and spaces of food exchange that depend on unrestricted mobility, face-to-face encounters and spaces of sharing. However, the experience left me with a certain degree of sadness and disappointment, and it did not feel right or fair for me to use the episode for a doctoral thesis, or at least, not without the permission and consent of all those involved, which at the time I did not have or wish to seek.

Hence, I decided to exclude that collective experience and the data I collected from my participation in the network for ethical reasons. This being said, I have kept in contact and met with other producers in the group (and beyond it) after the incident, and I have included these observations and conversations in my analysis for a more critical reading and insights into the BTTL movement in the context of southern Italy.

#### 3.3.4 *Living and working “in the field”*

The research design and process was also largely dictated by the rhythms and needs of the farm, including the daily chores, seasonal activities and extra-ordinary work that emerged as part of and in the process of being a farmer while conducting a PhD research. When I started, I imagined the two could be easily integrated and even complement each other, with the hard, physical work on the farm productively

balancing the more intellectual work of a PhD. However, the reality of living and working “in the field”, turned out to be very different and it was characterised by a high degree of both physical and emotional fatigue.

Everyday routines and daily chores like taking the dogs for a walk, feeding the animals, doing some weeding in the garden, watering plants, and so on, were the easiest to integrate in a research work schedule. Then there was seasonal activities like planting crops, pruning trees, chopping wood, harvesting and processing fruit and vegetables, clearing grass to reduce fire risk, etc. (Figure 3.4 and 3.5). Spring, summer and autumn were the busiest, but while these activities could not be postponed or avoided, they could be planned ahead of time so as to better organise and allocate time for research. However, some of these seasonal activities would last for weeks and their duration and intensity often affected my research productivity. For instance, the olive harvest in the autumn often goes on for a whole month, and after a full day of strenuous physical work picking olives, I would often feel too tired to think and write, and at the end of the harvest, I often felt I needed a few days to recover.



Figure 3.4 Taking a break while harvesting olives.



Figure 3.5 Stacking wood for the winter.

Then there was “extra-ordinary” activities that were completely unexpected and often threw off my research plans and schedules entirely. These were the most difficult to negotiate. For instance, the attack of a predator (a fox, a snake, a bird of prey) often meant we would have to spend time erecting, fixing and/or strengthening fences, patrolling the land more frequently with the dogs, and keeping more alert to animals’ calls. Similarly, a malfunctioning in our off-grid energy system or our irrigation system would require immediate repairs, visits to the shop to buy replacement parts, and more generally a lot of involved activity to do with thinking, discussing and testing solutions. Sometimes, my field diaries - which were always close at hand - would turn into convenient writing devices for scribbling down ideas of construction designs, lists of farm jobs, or things we needed to do or get (Figure 3.6). These extra-ordinary activities either meant that I had to take time off my research and/or adapt around them. Sometimes this meant a few hours, other times it was more like weeks of what I perceived to be lost research time.

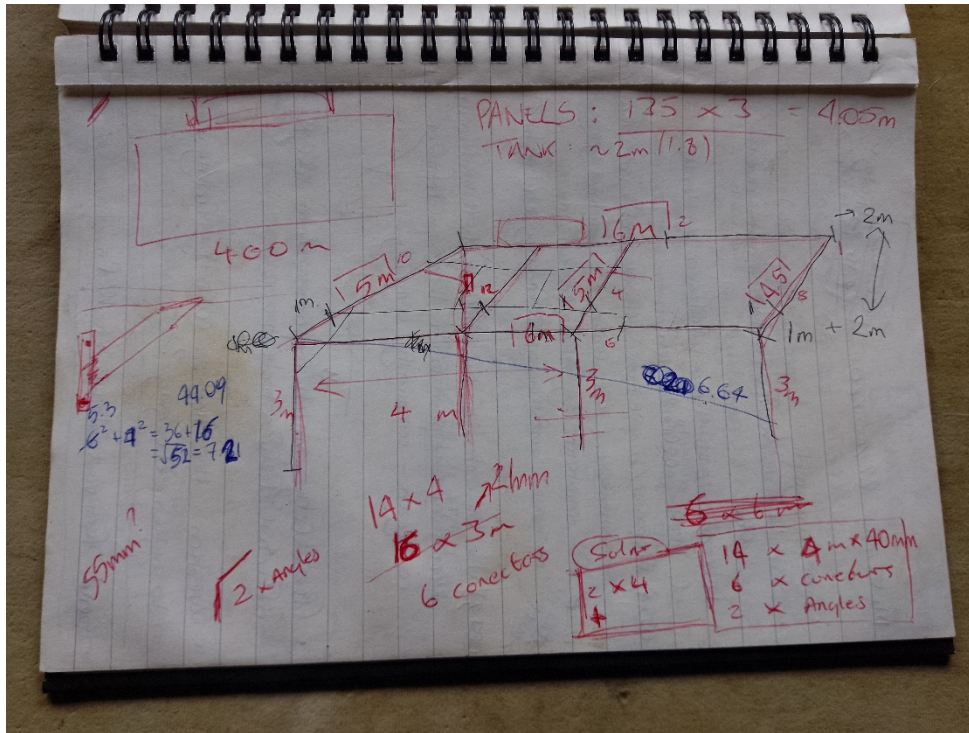


Figure 3.6 My field journal turning into a handy implement for the design of new constructions on the farm.

These “intrusions” of farm life into research life, were not only physically challenging, but also emotionally demanding. I often felt guilty if I had to do some research work in light of a deadline and had to leave Bill to deal with the animals, repair a system or do other tasks on his own. I often felt like I was not fulfilling my commitments to them and our way of living, and that my research work was affecting my ability to care and be more response-able to them. Yet, while doing work on the farm, I sometimes also felt under pressure to get back to research work and I felt envious of fellow PhD students who could spend a lot more time on their research than I could. Perhaps the vignette below can better evoke the emotional and practical complexities and degree of labour involved in living and researching on the farm (Box. 3.1). The vignette is an account derived from one of my field journals where I have recorded interruptions to my “research time” occurred in one (extra)ordinary morning. It was (extra)ordinary because it included the performance of ordinary, daily activities like tending to the animals, picking up the post, taking the dogs for a walk and doing research-related activities like writing, but it was also exceptional in that our dogs recently had a litter and only a few days earlier we lost a

baby rabbit to a snake, which made me both exceptionally tired *and* alert to animals' sounds.

### Box 3.1 An (extra)ordinary morning researching on the farm.

*10<sup>th</sup> August 2020*

*06:10 - I have two days on my own so I'm thinking I can finally get some writing done. I have just sat down at my desk and the kitten has already climbed on my laps looking for a stroke and some attention.*

*07:03 - The dogs are getting restless, maybe I'll take them for a quick walk around before it gets too hot, or else they'll do it themselves and then I'll have the neighbours calling me to complain.*

*09:22 - The guinea fowl is sounding an alarm call - what if she has spotted a snake? I'm worried about the rabbits. I better go and check what she is screaming about.*

*09:30 - False alarm, the rabbits and the chickens are ok, I can go back to work now.*

*09:44 - Butter is meowing and I'm trying to ignore her. She won't stop - she might have run out of food. I also just remembered that I forgot to water the polytunnel earlier. I'd better do that before it gets too hot - I'm getting up anyways.*

*10:08 - It's mid-morning, I'm going to have a coffee. The dishes are starting to pile up on the sink but I'll do them later this afternoon before the sun goes down.*

*11:37 - I think I just heard the call of a bird of prey, and it sounded pretty close. Here it goes again. I don't think it's a buzzard. I'll step out to see if I can catch a glimpse or get a sound location on it.*

*11:42 - Nope, whatever bird it was, it's gone - I don't need to go check on the animals.*

*12:10 - A car is honking at the gate. It must be the postman, I got to get that.*

*12:33 - What was that? I heard a loud noise but I was deep in my thoughts. Was it a thunder or a car? The dogs are kicking off. I'll check it out.*

*12:56 - Not sure what I heard, but Ness looked hungry. She's feeding four young puppies after all, so I've whipper her up a quick meal while I was up. The morning is basically gone and I have managed to write only a couple of paragraphs ... but at least everyone is ok.*

After more than three years, I am still figuring out *if* and *how* research and farming could have been better integrated in order to reduce physical and emotional stress, but I have gradually come to realise that I could have never completely resolved the tensions and difficulties I encountered because the way I have conducted this thesis was unconventional. Hence, I was also battling with the norms, institutional standards and demands of doctoral research which do not accommodate or



encourage this or other types of embodied and “engaged” research (e.g. militant and scholar-activist). Hence, even though I often perceived farm activities as “eating into” my research time, affecting my productivity, emotional and physical state, they were also a fundamental and inevitable part of my attempt at “doing geography differently” (Fuller, 1999; Routledge, 1996). The feelings of guilt, anxiety, exhaustion and frustration that I often felt trying to balance my multiple identities and obligations as researcher, farmer, partner, etc. were the literal embodiment of my commitment to Bill, the land and the animals, but also to my research. Both farming and research were “manifestations of care and connection” (Country et al., 2015, p. 274) and I have eventually come to embrace and use the ambiguous feelings, contradictions and problems that arose during the research for what they could reveal about BTTL farming and living (e.g. a commitment to animal welfare).

Besides, I also felt exhilaration, satisfaction, love, joy, contentment, and inspiration in carrying out research while farming, watching plants and animals grow, listening to the land and seeing it change, making new kins and acquiring new skills, experiencing creative breakthroughs and developing new understandings (Figure 3.7 and 3.8). Indeed, the autoethnography was as much about providing a window into the more intimate and mundane worlds of BTTL farmers and advancing geographical theory, as it was learning to farm and care for the land, developing self-reliance by acquiring new skills and knowledge, building long-lasting and respectful relations in and with places, and becoming a different person in the process.



Figure 3.7 Appreciating the fruits of our labour.



Figure 3.8 Developing intimate connections.

### 3.3.5 *Researching with and representing intimate others*

As I noted in the Section 3.2.1, even though autoethnographies are grounded in the experience of the researcher, they also involve the participation of a number of “intimate others” (family, friends, partners, co-workers, neighbours, etc.) which

complexify ethical considerations. Moreover “when we write about ourselves, we also write about others” (Ellis, 2007, p. 14) and our accounts and interpretations may embarrass, harm or expose them, so ethical considerations during *and* after fieldwork are a crucial aspect of any autoethnography. Hence, besides adopting conventional and institutional ethical frameworks and protocols, autoethnographers also abide to other ethical principles and strategies for seeking consent, limiting risks, maximising benefits and protecting participants that are more appropriate to the nature and context of the research (Adams et al., 2015).

In this study, I have thus used a *relational ethic* which “recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work” (Ellis, 2007: 4). In more practical terms this meant adopting a “friendship-as-method” approach (Tillmann-healy 2003) which is less about becoming friends with participants than about living up to the obligations and requirements of friendship: that is putting fieldwork relationships on par with the project. As I have discussed in Section 3.2.3 in relation to the AFN, this meant reflecting regularly on my research practices and shifting positions at every step of the research and adopting situated strategies that engaged participants ethically as the project unfolded and our relationship developed and changed. This relational and situated approach was crucial to help me navigate the tension and power dynamics between my multiple identities, positions and obligations and enact a more just and ethical research practice (Ellis 2004).

Moreover, the autoethnography was completely overt and I was open about my status as researcher from the start. However, how my position and research were disclosed to others differed across relations, and it was informed by a number of ethical and practical considerations that emerged during the fieldwork. For instance, my family and friends were all introduced to the study well before its start to gather their feelings and inclinations towards being part of it. The study would have not taken place without their full understanding, consent and support. Moreover, with Bill, an “implicit trust provision” (Ellis, 2007, p. 15) was also enacted, which included

discussing the study aims, methods and writing outputs with him regularly, and agreeing together over what it said and revealed about his and our life together. As for newer and less intimate relationships, such as with the local community and fellow BTTL farmers, it very much depended on the type of relation we had, as well as the wider circumstances of our encounters and interactions. For instance, while most people I met and spoke to in Piedemonte were curious about who I was and what I was doing, some did not seem to care about the research when I introduced it to them, and they were more interested in other aspects of my life, including where I was from, who my family was, why I wasn't married or had kids. Most saw me as a neighbour, a fellow resident and friend more than a researcher, and some seemed to forget I was doing "research" and did not respond as though that was a salient part of my identity or our relationship (Maxey, 1999). Hence, I discussed my project in more detail with some rather than others, and various participants were introduced to the study during the course of the research in a manner that was appropriate to them and the circumstances under hand.

Similarly, seeking written consent from everyone involved was not only practically difficult but also ethically insufficient in light of the length and depth of the project and inadequate to the particular cultural context. Most importantly, formalising consent with a written signature had the potential to breach cultural etiquette and damage interpersonal relations. The act of signing one's name on a piece of paper had the potential to build misunderstandings and mistrust by putting into question the trust and rapport that I had built with multiple others. Hence, another strategy I employed was "process consent" which understands consent to be a dynamic and on-going process that happens within a form and context that is appropriate and comfortable for the researcher and the participants (Adams et al., 2015). This was enacted by checking in regularly and at each stage of the research process with participants to remind them of my multiple roles and positions and ensure their continued willingness to partake in the project.

Finally, protecting the identity and privacy of participants in autoethnographies is a difficult task given the proximity of some to the researcher. While every attempt has

been made by using pseudonyms, changing the name of places and their locations, I have also omitted certain things, altered some details and used other distancing or abstracting techniques to protect participants (Ellis 2007, Adams et al. 2015).

However, given the importance of place to the analysis in Chapter 5, some specific details will emerge there and connections to a broad geographical area in southern Italy might be possible by those familiar with it. Moreover, while it is unlikely that many of the participants will read the work - given that, among other things, it is written in a foreign language - in writing this thesis, I have applied an “ethics of consequence” (Adams et al. 2015) that assumes that everyone included in the study will read the work.

### 3.4 Doing autoethnography

#### 3.4.1 *Autobiography through “artefacts”*

As I noted in Section 3.1.1, autobiography is a building block of autoethnography because as Chang (2008, p. 71) elegantly puts it “the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past”. In this thesis I have used autobiographical methods to trace and make sense of how my journey BTTL came about and to develop an account of BTTL migrations that is rich in affective experiences and encounters, including pains and pleasures.

Autobiographical methods allowed me to situate my journey in a longer time frame, consider the wider socio-spatial contexts in which it unfolded and draw out the most significant experiences and encounters in the “growth” of my intention to migrate BTTL and become a farmer.

In geography, autobiography has been used primarily to chronicle the history and development of the discipline, but feminist geographers have long been advocating for its value and use as a method and source of qualitative data on embodied experiences, emotions, everyday lived geographies and the relationship between self/identity and place (Longhurst, 2012; Moss, 2001; Valentine, 1998).

Autobiographical data can provide insights into the processes and practices of individual and community formation, and give access to the less tangible, embodied and more-than-representational aspects of agencies, identities and experiences, such

as feelings, sensations and affects (Bloch, 2022; De Nardi, 2015; Gorman-Murray, 2007). Moreover, with subjects understood as more than individual selves - as mutually and continually (re)constituted with multiple others across spaces and times - autobiographical methods and data can also be used as entry points to shed light on and examine historical developments and events, systems and structures of power, social norms and discourses, cultural representations and practices (Moss and Besio, 2019).

Autobiographical data comes in the form of both *personal memories* and *experiences* and sources may include texts such as field notes, personal journals, maps, prose, poetry, blogs, sketches, tweets, but also images, photographs, audio and video recordings as well as everyday objects and other “souvenirs” of one’s life (Moss and Besio, 2019, p. 319). Moreover, these various material “artefacts” do not just record data but they also *produce* it by triggering emotions, affects and memories in the process of their interpretation and analysis. Hence, autobiographical methods are better understood as a *process* in which the research and the researcher are transformed through a (re)engagement with the past that brings new understandings of previously held truths and facts about the self and the wider worlds he/she inhabits.

In this thesis, I have used autobiographical methods to explore how my past and present are connected, and therefore to trace and make sense of my personal development as a BTTL farmer in relation to multiple human and non-human others I have encountered along the way and the wider socio-spatial and temporal contexts in which my journey unfolded. For this purpose, I have considered and reflected upon the whole span of my life history, but I have not included and examined all major life events and experiences in my life. Trying to do so in the space and context of a doctoral thesis would have been challenging, and even the most comprehensive autobiography cannot contain every detail of one life. Hence, I have focused specifically on the time period between my higher education and the start of my doctorate (2010–2018) as this was a more workable timeframe and the point at which my journey BTTL can be more tangibly discerned.

The autobiographical data I have collected from this time period comes from a number of key sources: personal and research diaries I have written during my undergraduate studies and my time at Leah as well as personal archives of photographs taken across this period. I have used these various material artefacts to “rummage through the storehouse of [my] memory” (Chang, 2008, p. 76), recall significant personal and social events and experiences and give them a chronological order. By sieving through my diaries and photographs, organising them in particular time periods and themes (Figure 3.9), I was able to construct an approximate autobiographical timeline prior to my migration to southern Italy. This autobiographical timeline can be roughly divided into three phases: (1) going into higher education (2010-2013), (2) moving to and living at Leah (2013-2016), (3) moving to southern Italy and starting the PhD (2017-2018). This chronicling and sorting strategy was useful for giving a sequential order to events and experiences, and to make sense of a large amount of data accumulated in my diaries and photographs. I then zoomed in on each time period and created an inventory of people, places, events, activities, things, non-human beings and environments with which I became entangled, noting down the particular conversations, memories and feelings that were triggered as I went through the material.

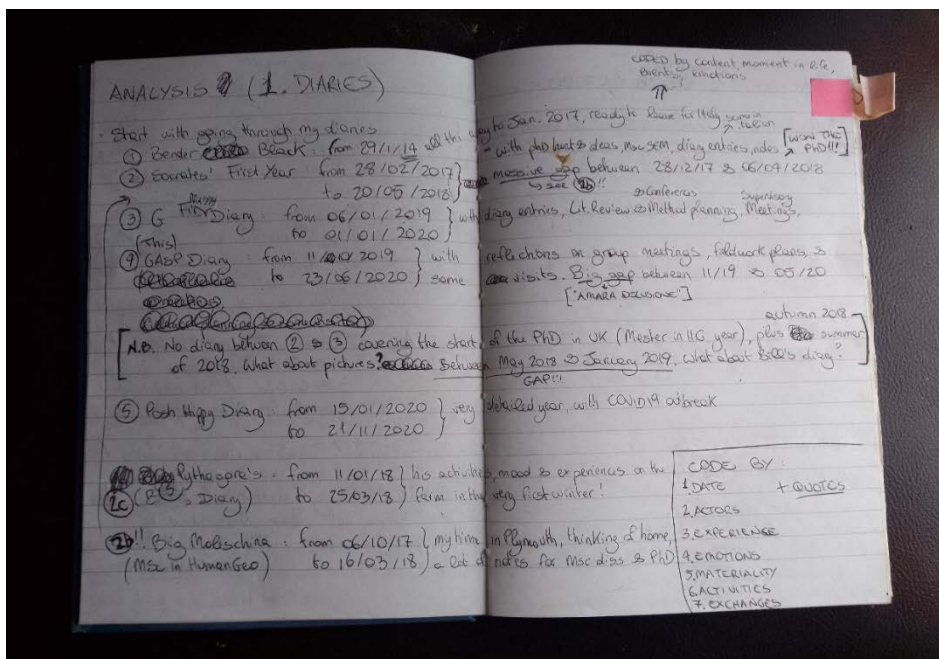


Figure 3.9 Sorting diaries in chronological order, identifying time periods and gaps in timeline.

Subsequently, I looked for what Chang (2008, p. 73) calls “border-crossing experiences” in order to narrow down and rank the most relevant memories, conversations and affective experiences to my journey BTTL and my becoming farmer. Border-crossing experiences arise from encounters with *difference* and may include encounters with significant human and non-human others as well as with unfamiliar cultural characteristics, places and situations. Most importantly, these experiences involve moments of disorientation that challenge previously held truths, cultural “standards” and behaviours and cause someone to re-adjust his/her way of thinking, perceiving and behaving. Focusing specifically on experiences of and encounters with difference, allowed me to identify those people, events, environments and non-humans that prompted significant changes in my character, ideals, knowledge and bodily dispositions. For instance, it has allowed me to identify people that have made a durable impressions on me and from whom I have learned new knowledge, skills and perspectives (e.g. about farming and alternative ways of living at Leah) and to detect changes to my character and bodily dispositions brought about by non-human beings and environments (e.g. living off the grid in a woodland and farming the land). While sorting and interpreting this autobiographical data, I again drew out particular conversations as well as feelings and sensations that have emerged as a result of my relationships with these various others and multiple contexts.

### *3.4.2 Three methods of participant observation*

Most ethnographies are based upon what is conventionally known as “participant observation”, which entails a researcher’s deep immersion in and active observation of the culture/setting/community under study (Crang and Cook 2007). Participant observation often involves different techniques and methods of data collection, including observations from direct participation in activities and events, informal conversations and formal interviews, archival/historical research, analysis of documents, material artefacts and other secondary sources like pictures or websites. Field notes are the primary way for capturing and transforming observations into data and may include records of what is observed, including informal conversations



with participants, records of activities and ceremonies, as well as the thoughts, emotions and experiences of the researcher.

The participant observation I have carried out as part of my autoethnography is divided into three sub-categories of methods, each of which captures and puts the accent on slightly different but interconnected aspects of BTTL farming and living: (a) “observant participation”, (b) embodied methods and (c) multi-species ethnography. More specifically, observant participation was used to learn about and collect data on the wider cultural and socio-spatial context in which our BTTL farm is situated; embodied methods were used to explore and investigate my embodied experience and everyday practice as a BTTL farmer; and multi-species ethnography was used to examine more directly multi-species interactions on the farm. In practice these three methods overlapped, and data collection took place casually and informally as I went about my life, but it was nonetheless focused and directed by my research objectives and these different themes.

To record my observations across these sites and themes, I have used three different types of field journals. The first one takes the form of a personal diary and it has been written chronologically and consistently since moving to southern Italy and for the entire duration of the thesis. Recordings were written in a “free format” and included detailed observations of events and activities occurred over the course of a day or a week, the unfolding of specific interactions with animals, particular conversations with neighbours, as well as personal thoughts and feelings. The second journal is more of a field diary and consists of a small pocket-size notebook that I carried around while working on the land and visiting different places and settings and used to scribble down activities, observations and snippets of conversations as activities, events and interactions occurred or immediately after. The third one is a journal I used to capture our involvement with the broader alternative food movement in Italy and, in particular, our interactions and participation in the local AFN. However, due to the ethical issues and dilemmas discussed in Section 3.2.3, this diary has not been analysed.

Excluding the latter, six journals were produced in total (four personal diaries and two field diaries). I undertook an initial preliminary coding of these journals using the three main themes noted above (1. socio-spatial context, 2. embodied experience and everyday practices and 3. multi-species relations), and then I went through them again and allowed more specific theme and topics to emerge from each diary entry following a grounded theory approach (Figure 3.10).

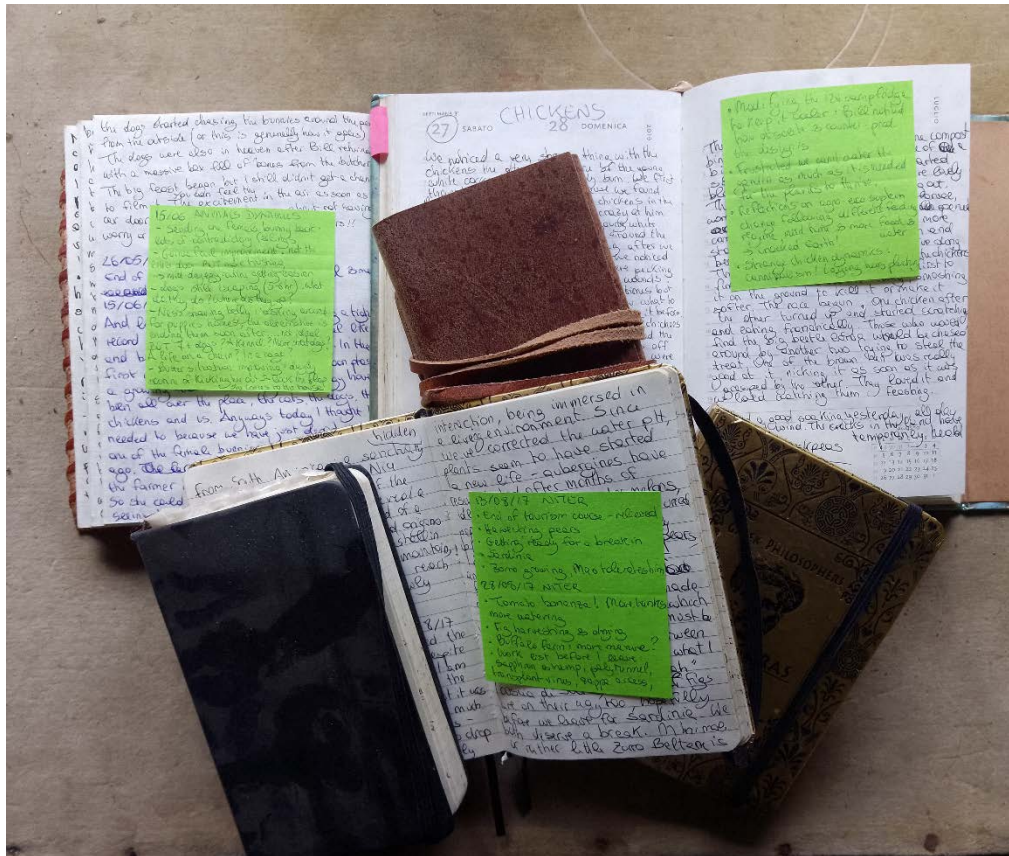


Figure 3.10 The process of coding field journals.

**(a) “Observant participation”**

Given my intimate connection to the community and place I was studying, the first method of participant observation I carried out is “observant participation” (Thrift 2000: 252), a mode of observation that implies and recognises a higher degree of *interaction*, *responsiveness* as well as *response-ability* on the part of the researcher.

Observant participation was directed to the study of the history of Piedemonte, the local farming context and culture, as well as the alternative farmers’ movements I became involved with during the course of the thesis. At the practical level, it has

involved spending time in the different socio-cultural communities I was part of, participating in cultural events and activities, talking to neighbours, friends, family members and local residents as well as visiting other BTTL farms, conventional and alternative farmers' markets, agricultural offices and participating in protests, informal dinners and celebrations.

Moreover, to gain information about the history of the village and the wider geographical area in which our smallholding is located, I conducted historical research in the local library and online, I have read books about particular historical events occurred in the area, and I have talked to local people to learn about the history of the village and of our smallholding from their memories, stories and experiences. I have drawn observation on the local culture and farming traditions from direct participation in local events (e.g. religious celebrations, food festivals) as well as through everyday and mundane activities like going to the shop, attending the weekly farmers market, speaking to my neighbours, friends and local farmers. During the course of the research, I also participated in a month-long tourism course offered by the local council. During the course, I attended classrooms with other local residents on how to identify opportunities, organise and promote tourist activities in the area, I talked to local people about their perceptions of, and feelings towards, tourism, and I participated in various activities like visiting potential sites of tourist interests in the area (Figure 3.11). I used this opportunity to learn about the history of the place and its culture, get a picture of the issues that affect small rural villages in Italy's marginal areas, and understand how our farming activities and efforts were perceived by the local community and if and how they could be of value.



Figure 3.11 Trekking up the mountain to get to know Piedemonte and its history.

I considered conducting interviews with local residents, neighbours, and other members of the community, but as the research progressed, I decided against the use of traditional and formal interviews for ethical and theoretical reasons. First, given the research focus on the experiences and everyday doings of BTTL farmers, interviews with local members of the community could only have been useful in addressing questions relating to the wider cultural and socio-spatial context in which BTTL initiatives take place. Second, using formal interviewing methods with local residents and neighbours raised issues of power and ethics related to my insider position in the community. The perspectives of “others of difference” and “opposition” are important for providing a more critical reflection and understanding of BTTL initiatives, but my personal involvement, proximity and connection to these various others made accessing their views through traditional interviewing techniques ethically and practically problematic.

As noted in Section 3.2.2, I was new in the community and I needed to build relationships based on trust and respect for the long-term. Setting up formal interviews with direct questions, tape recorders and so on felt forced, obtrusive, impractical and even counterproductive for the purpose of building “common ground” with others of difference and even opposition, having the potential to jeopardise our relationships by breaching cultural etiquette and trust and by putting me in a position of power. As Delyser (2001, p. 444) has argued, “insider researchers need strategic alternatives to the traditional interview” that are not as fraught with tensions and power differentials as interview methods are. Moreover, asking my neighbours or other acquaintances what they thought about “us” and what we were doing in a formal interview setting not only appeared odd, but it would have very likely inhibited honest exchanges. As a matter of fact, many expressed their views quite openly to us and commented on our farming practices and way of living without the need for direct questions and interviews. I therefore relied largely on informal conversations, discussions and observational data which are not as fraught with tension, ethical dilemmas, and practical difficulties as formal interviews, but could nonetheless provide access to valuable knowledge and information.

Another important site of my observant participation was the AFN we joined. My participation here consisted in joining the weekly farmer market, group meetings and less formal events like dinners (Figure 3.12). However, following the circumstances detailed in Section 3.2.3, I have only used these observations to think more broadly and critically about the experiences, opportunities and challenges that BTTL farmers face in southern Italy rather than the more specific dynamics, relations and circumstances of the group and individual producers within it. For this general purpose, I have also engaged and spoken to other BTTL farmers and I have attended and participated in larger, national events like “the March for the Earth” organised by Italy’s largest new peasants movement called “Genuino Clandestino” (GC) (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.12 Participating in the local AFN farmers' market.



Figure 3.13 The "March for the Earth" that I attended in Florence in 2021.

## **(b) Embodied methods**

To collect data on BTTL farmers' embodied experience and everyday doings with the land I used embodied methods. Embodied methods are "modes of problem framing, field observation, and data collection that engage the senses and the body; in which sensory perception and physical actions are explicitly recognised" (Wilbur and Gibbs, 2020, p. 3). For this thesis, I used embodied methods to pay attention to the physical labour involved in BTTL farming and living, and the practical, sensual and affective dimensions of human-non-human interactions on BTTL.

Geographers have used embodied methods to attend to the bodies, feelings and sensations of their research subjects and explore the "more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds" of human practices, experiences and relationships (Lorimer, 2005, p. 83). Some have also used their own body as "instrument[s] of research" (Longhurst et al., 2008, p. 208) and have used walking (Wylie, 2005), cooking and eating (Hayes-Conroy, 2010; Longhurst et al., 2009; Wilbur and Gibbs, 2020), gardening (Pitt, 2015), making and crafting with materials (Carr and Gibson, 2017) as performative methods and data collection techniques for accessing the embodied knowledges and experiences involved in carrying out particular practices and as a way to register non-human agency through its *affects* on human bodies. Others have turned to various non-human "experts" or "intermediaries", that is, people who share their lives with non-humans for food, companionship or work (e.g. farmers, scientists, anglers, gardeners, etc.), in order to overcome skills and knowledge deficits and fine-tune their own (bodily) perception of non-human agencies (Greenhough and Roe, 2019; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Lorimer, 2006; Pitt, 2015). Indeed, there is a growing interest in more-than-human geography in the use of the human body - of both researchers and research subjects - as a "medium" to "bring background or previously undetected non-human objects and forces to the forefront and so enable them to be studied and analysed" (Ash, 2017, p. 206). Indeed, many have begun to use "embodied" and "visceral" methods to study how non-humans affect the practices, everyday life and experiences of humans (Hayes-Conroy, 2010; Roe, 2006; Wilbur and Gibbs, 2020), while

I have used embodied methods to collect data on the more material and felt aspect of BTTL living and farming, including everyday doings but also “the feeling of doing” as a way “of grasping the world and making sense of what it feels like” as a BTTL farmer (Crouch, 2001, p. 62). I have also used embodied methods to attend to the materiality of farm, including its soils, weather, wildlife, biodiversity, etc. and how non-humans interrupt, restrict or add to the unfolding of everyday life and practices on BTTL farms. Put differently, I have paid attention to the “performance” of everyday farming and domestic activities on our farm to both unravel the values, knowledge(s) and skills that underpin them and draw out the ways in which non-humans affect and shape them.

Hence, this method has involved recording observations on the everyday spatiotemporal patterns of our smallholding, including our everyday routines and how they unfolded and were performed in relation to the rhythms of the seasons, the materiality and ecology of the farm, and our particular goals, values and ideals. It has also entailed collecting observations on how interactions with particular non-humans made me feel and how they shaped my knowledge, moods, bodily skills, perceptions and dispositions. Activities that I have performed to gather this data range from planting crops, harvesting and processing food, caring for different animals, composting and applying manure, pruning trees and chopping firewood, to building and taking care of material infrastructures on the farm, including restoring the house, experimenting with off-grid energy and water systems, building animal shelters and so on (Figure 3.14 and 3.15).





Figure 3.14 Planting onions and pruning willows.

Figure 3.15 Building a chicken coop.

By *doing* these different activities, I have not only gathered data on the practical, corporeal, and emotional labours involved in BTTL living and farming and what practices of animal welfare, self-sufficiency and environmentally-friendly ways of farming actually mean on a practical and embodied level. By watching, listening,

planting, harvesting, building, watering, composting, weeding, storing, walking, sitting, chopping, stacking, digging, shovelling, and repeating these activities over and over again, making mistakes and learning from them, I have also developed new knowledge(s), manual and perceptual skills, and bodily sensibilities (Pitt, 2015). Indeed, over time, my body gradually attuned to the rhythms of the land, I became more competent and fluent in the performance of farm tasks, and also more attentive, open and response-able to the needs of animals, plants and the land (Country, 2015). Hence, embodied methods were essential to gather data about the becoming and doing of BTTL farmers in their embodied engagements with non-humans, but also in my/our actual mutual co-becoming: I co-became a better farmer with and alongside the more-than-human worlds I have studied (Figure 3.16).

Figure 3.16 Transplanting plants early in the morning before the hot summer sun hits the field.

### **(c) Multi-species ethnography**

The third and final method of participant observation was more explicitly directed towards the collection of data on multi-species interactions on BTTL farms using multi-species ethnography (MSE). As I discuss in Chapter 7, during the course of the research, multiple non-human animals, both domestic and wild, became intentionally and unintentionally involved in our everyday life on the farm,

including dogs, cats, chickens, guinea fowls, rabbits, Muscovy ducks, but also predatory animals like foxes, birds of prey, snakes and rats (Figure 3.17) Hence, I have used MSE to explore how different animals are entangled in and shape the performance of BTTL living and farming, but also how multi-species relations and practices on BTTL farms are affected by the broader socio-spatial context in which they are situated.



Figure 3.17 Studying multi-species relations on the farm.

An interest in MSE in human geography has partly emerged from a general lack of engagement with the “beastly places” of non-human animals, including their lifeworlds and embodied experiences, and because animals remain “shadowy presences” in many ethnographic accounts (Philo, 2005, p. 829). Indeed, MSE has been defined as “ethnographic research and writing that is attuned to life’s emergence within a shifting assemblage of agentic beings ... both biophysical entities as well as the magical ways objects animate life itself” (Ogden et al., 2013, p. 6). However, contrary to its name and this definition, studies based on MSE have not been very *multi-species* in character so far, with the majority exploring *dyadic* relations, that is, relations between humans and another species of animal (e.g. humans and dogs, humans and fish etc.) and rarely consider more than one animal in relation to humans, or *between-species* and *within-species* relations (Hovorka, 2019).

In this thesis, I have used MSE to collect data on *multi-species relations* on BTTL farms. These included relations between humans and wild and domestic species of animals, but also relations between different species of animals (e.g. fox and dogs, dogs and chickens, chickens and rabbits) and between individual animals belonging to the same and/or different species grouping. I have thus focused my attention on both individual animals as well as intra- and inter-species relations to explore both the role that different non-human animals species play in BTTL farmers' values and everyday doings, but also how individual animals and their multi-species relations disrupt and/or enhance the goals and practices of BTTL farmers. Paying attention to "actual" individual animals on the farm and not treating them as undifferentiated beings merely belonging to a species grouping, aims to both acknowledge the importance of "re-politicising animals as bodies and voices" (Johnston, 2008, p. 634), and to enable a better understanding of how BTTL farms are produced and experienced by multiple, yet *specific*, actors in their individuality and relations. On a more practical level, I have spent time observing and learning about different individuals and species of animals, their needs, ways of behaving, communicating and interacting with each other, and recording our interactions with them on the farm (Figure 3.18).



Figure 3.18 Dogs, chickens and ducks getting familiar with each other and their surroundings.

In the context of MSE, the most pressing issue is related to how social scientists can know animals behaviours or what they need, and to what extent they can “speak for” them, raising the issue of whether “anthropomorphism” is outright wrong or simply unavoidable. Many more-than-human geographers agree that the latter is the case, but that efforts should be made to avoid inappropriate assumptions and the use of narrow frameworks of perception to work towards a more critical and “responsible anthropomorphism”: “a way of knowing about and knowing with animals not based on our shared sentience, our shared place in the world or any other such abstract philosophical argument, but on our actual relationships, our day-to-day living and working” (Johnston, 2008, p. 646). For some, producing more responsible representations and critical understandings of animal lives and relations with humans entails spending fairly long periods of time immersed in particular settings, taking part in practices or relations themselves, “following” and engaging people who share their lives with non-humans or enacting interdisciplinary collaborations with natural scientists (Bull, 2011; Greenhough and Roe, 2019; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2015; Lorimer, 2006; Pitt, 2015;

Thompson, 2011). These multi-species engagements often produce “entwined biographies of human and animal subjects” (Braun, 2008, p. 674) and include the process by which researchers’ themselves learn to witness and interpret animals’ behaviours and communication by developing new knowledge, skills and bodily sensibilities (Hinchliffe et al., 2005).

In my multi-species ethnography, I was obviously not a detached observer and many of my observations derived from direct interactions with the animals and embodied practices such as feeding them, training them, and sometimes also killing some of them for food. Even though some of these interactions were characterised by instrumental and asymmetrical relations, they still offered “distinctively visceral, performative and affective opportunities for exploring co-presence and mutual becoming” (Buller, 2015, p. 6). Indeed, through my everyday and embodied engagements as a farmer, I gained a “time- and experience-deepened” (Johnston, 2008, p. 644) understanding of their individual personalities, needs and intra- and inter-species relations. I learned to become sensitive and attuned to their sounds, bodily communications and needs, I developed ways of communicating with them, trained some of them and also trained myself to their individual and social needs. Nevertheless, to better understand the behaviours I was observing (and to better enact my care practices as a farmer), I also used books and published articles on animal biology, ecology, behaviour and welfare (Castellini et al., 2016; Trocino et al., 2022; Vastrade, 1986), spoke to neighbours and other BTTL farmers, read discussions on internet forums, watched online videos and so on.

Hence, in interpreting different animals’ behaviour and their social interactions, I also coupled and tempered my personal and intimate understandings and knowledge with continuous self-reflection, critique and assessment of my views, understandings and interpretations with the aim of enacting a more critical and “responsible anthropomorphism”. Ultimately, as Buller (2015, p. 6) has noted “whether or not that knowing is, at heart, a human autobiographical project, with it comes a voice and, with a voice, the possibility of mattering”.

### 3.4.3 *Visual methods*

Visual methods and methodologies have undergone a sustained critique in human geography due to their associations with a colonial and gendered “scopic regime of knowledge” that promotes a detached, objectifying, authoritarian and masculinist way of knowing (Crang, 2010, p. 213; Rose, 2007). However, a revived interest in non-cognitive/embodied ways of knowing and non-human agencies has spurred a more critical examination and use of visual methods and methodologies in the discipline. More specifically, videos and pictures have the potential to: (1) enhance a researcher ability to “witness” nonhuman behaviours and cultures, as well as material interrelationships between humans and nonhumans; (2) draw attention to the ethics and micropolitics of particular more-than-human encounters; and (3) evoke (as outputs) the affective exchanges between humans and non-humans (Alam et al., 2018; Brown and Dilley, 2012; Hitchings and Jones, 2004; Laurier et al., 2006; Lorimer, 2010; Pitt, 2015).

Hence, in the autoethnography I have used visual methods primarily in the form of pictures to collect data on the materiality of the farm, for thinking through our everyday doings in relation to the ecology of the land, for producing affective archives of our multi-species and more-than-human encounters and interactions with the land. Just as a tape recorder can aid in recording data, I have used photos to capture the finer details that would otherwise be forgotten or go unnoticed.

However, the decision to use visual methods in the autoethnography was driven by the research objectives but also by Bill’s and my own personal desire to chronicle our journey BTTL, to capture seasonal and yearly changes in the materiality of the farm and record our everyday doings on the land. Indeed, we have been taking pictures of our life and work on the farm since we moved to southern Italy, and so I decided to use the opportunity to integrate the needs of the research with those of our day-to-day life on the farm. In producing these visual data, we have primarily used our smartphones because they are easy to carry around in the busy activities of the farm.

However, anticipating a large amount of visual data being produced in such a way, early on in the thesis, I decided to create a photobook for every year since we moved

to the smallholding and use them instead for my analysis. The composition of the photobooks was driven primarily by aesthetic criteria (e.g. I discarded blurry pictures), and the intention behind them was to both condense and organise our photo archives and show temporal changes in the materiality of the farm. Hence, the pictures in the photobooks are in chronological order and include images that capture: our everyday practices on the farm (e.g. olive picking, planting crops and harvesting food, restoring the house, installing solar panels and wind turbine, etc.), significant events (e.g. visits from friends and family) as well as our animals companions and the ecology of the land, including its soils, animal and plant diversity. For the purpose of the thesis, I have focused my attention on the four photobooks that cover the official beginning of the autoethnography until the end of the fieldwork period (2018-2021), with every photobook containing 100 pictures each (Figure 3.19).

I have used these photobooks and the pictures within them in three main ways. First, I have used them as data and analysed their content by looking for patterns in our domestic and farming activities and by drawing out the values, knowledge and skills involved, but also how decisions were taken, what our intentions were and what guided our interactions with the land and particular non-humans. Second, I have used them as “memory-prompting devices” that produced further data by evoking emotions and experiences regarding particular activities, events, encounters and interactions with non-humans and the wider context in which they took place. Finally, I have used the images produced to visually support the discussion and I have integrated them into the narrative as a way to convey the “feel” of particular doings and locations, to evoke affective experiences and more-than-human relations, and to convey more-than-human agencies beyond my own narrative and interpretations of them.





Figure 3.19 The four photobooks (2018-2021) that I produced and analysed for the thesis.

### *3.3.5 Analysing and storying a journey*

Like most ethnographic approaches, analysis in autoethnography is an ongoing, non-linear and iterative process in which data collection, interpretation and writing intersect and proceed alongside each other (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Spry, 2001). However, from the moment I decided to study my own journey and experience BTTL, I strove to be conscious of and sensitive to my multiple and complex roles and relationships, and critical of my own perspective and position within the research in an ongoing reflexive process. Hence, in analysing data and writing this thesis, I have not attempted to cancel out my knowledge and perspective, but I have directly and explicitly integrated them through critical and continuous self-reflections and by having a two-way and ongoing dialogue with the theoretical literature and with the different worlds and positions I have inhabited and encountered throughout.

I have thus approached the autoethnography in a critical and reflexive manner, by working evidence and theory together in an iterative-inductive process alongside my own critical self-reflections and interpretations. This was enacted through arduous self-examination but also by moving beyond self-contemplation and shifting my attention back and forth between myself and others, between the personal and the wider socio-spatial context, between data and theoretical concepts, and between theory and action. At the practical level, this process involved listening to what others had to say, reading, re-reading and re-re-reading my notes and diaries, going through and analysing pictures and artefacts multiple times, reflecting openly and critically upon my own experiences, interpretations and practices, creating conceptual maps and chronological sequences of events, and going back to the academic literature and seeing how my data spoke to it. This was not an easy process, and sometimes it involved going through painful memories, re-experiencing distressing and uncomfortable events and experiences, and questioning my own sense of self and understanding.

Moreover, writing the autoethnography into a linear and systematic fashion - as the format of a PhD partially dictates - was not easy and the data itself seemed to resist it. Autoethnographies are most often and most effectively conveyed in narrative form in order to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences. However, autoethnographies have also been written using a variety of writing styles, including descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive, imaginative-creative, or a mix of all of these, depending on the researcher writing abilities as well as the purpose of the study (Chang, 2008). As Spry (2001, p. 713) has noted, "good autoethnography is not simply a confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a provocative weave of story and theory" (p. 713). Hence, alongside other geographers who have begun to take seriously and experiment with different forms of writing (Vannini, 2015), in this thesis I use a creative writing style in order to better express and evoke, rather than simply describe and analyse, the more-than-human and more-than-representational worlds that BTTL farmers inhabit.

Each discussion chapter (Chapter 4 - 7) has been written as a “layered account” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278) that grafts theory into rich and detailed accounts that are also reflexive in nature. However, in each chapter I use slightly different techniques and styles to weave stories and experiences in their richness of details, emotions and relations, with observational and self-reflective data, abstract analysis and relevant literature. For example, in order to trace and analyse the start and unfolding of my journey BTTL, in Chapter 4, I use a form of storytelling that allows me to both condense events and encounters that have occurred over a decade and present them in their richness of emotions and experiences before analysing them more directly. Instead in Chapter 7, I use multi-species vignettes as both descriptive and analytical devices that allow me to both introduce multiple non-human animals on the farm and evoke the messiness and dynamicity of multi-species interactions which are the key themes of the discussion. Moreover, all of the discussion chapters are accompanied by photographs that both support the discussion and enrich it, and they all begin with a vignette as a way of creatively introducing and summarising the theme of the chapter and/or the focus of the analysis and discussion to come. These introductory vignettes are either compact sketches derived from observational data or brief excerpt from conversations and field journals that have been trimmed and blended to fit within the overall structure and argument of the chapter.

## Chapter 4: The more-than-human becoming of a BTTL farmer

### 4.1 Introduction

*It must have been 10pm when we got back to the farm from Naples' airport. Tess arrived safe and sound. Last time we saw her, we were still living in the woods at Leah, so there was plenty to catch up on. She is the daughter of two very good friends of Bill from the times of Tinkers Bubble, born and raised in an eco-commune. She didn't seem tired by the long journey and as soon as we sat down she excitedly asked: "so guys, how did you get here??"*

*It seemed like a pretty straightforward question but it took me a moment to answer. For a few seconds, my mind started meandering back in time, zigzagging through all the events and decisions that have led us here, trying to find the cause or the beginning of it all. But it was getting late and I was starting to feel the day's work chipping olive pruning. Besides, I don't think Tess was looking for a long-winded and complicated answer. So I abruptly stopped my cerebral meandering and to cut the story short, I ended up explaining to her how we acquired the land. As Bill carried on the conversation, I retreated into my thoughts again: "of course there was a land purchase involved, but that's not how we got here, is it?" I asked myself. I wish it was that simple really, but the reality of our migration is much more complex than that.*

From the author's field diary

Tess' question presented in the brief excerpt above has bugged me ever since, but I am not alone in the quest for an answer. Population geographers in particular have long been enquiring into why some people move from the city to the countryside and the implications of these relocations for the people and communities involved. However, until recently, this academic line of enquiry was thought to be done and dusted, the topic being saturated and exhausted (Halfacree, 2008). According to Halfacree, rather than from a lack of academic relevance or diversity of empirical examples, counterurbanisation scholarship has suffered from an over-reliance upon "taxonomic practices" (Halfacree, 2001) that have reduced the phenomenon to well-rehearsed stories of middle-class lifestyle migrations. It has also been slow to take up

novel theoretical and methodological developments in the wider geographical discipline that emphasise the role of the material and the more-than-representational in lived experiences and practices of migration (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012; Mai and King, 2009). The counterurbanisation literature has thus neglected a fuller and more complex picture made up of different geographies, (more-than-)human agencies, histories and affective experiences (Halfacree, 2008). In particular, radical counterurbanisation, also referred to as countercultural BTTL migration, has received very little attention within the literature.

This chapter builds upon this gap in the literature by engaging with the more-than-human and more-than-representational turn in the discipline to produce an evocative and critical account of a radical BTTL migration. Instead of simply asking *who* BTTL migrants are or *why* they migrate, this chapter takes a “contextual perspective” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012) to enquire into the *how* of countercultural BTTL migration. While orthodox (sedentarist) understandings of migration often present it as a temporally and spatially bounded episode that can be explained dualistically as either structurally-forced or deliberately intended, a contextual perspective recognises it as an “event” that straddles a range of spaces and temporalities and holds life-changing possibilities for those involved. Understanding migration as such, requires an examination of the biographical trajectories of the individuals involved, their lived experiences pre- and post-migration, and their entanglements with both social and material contexts. Hence, while the main empirical focus of this thesis is our smallholding in southern Italy, in this Chapter I begin to follow and explore our “lines of growth” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 92), or how we became BTTL farmers.

The title of the chapter - “the more-than-human becoming of a radical BTTL farmer” - exemplifies this particular approach by recognising the multiplicity and agency of both human and non-human beings and forces as well as the always emergent and relational nature of being. With its focus on a *radical* BTTL migration, this chapter also explores the more-than-human and more-than-representational dimensions of political subjectivities. More specifically, and together with the following chapter

(Chapter 5), it enquires into the notion of “intent”, one of the defining attribute of prefigurative subjects and BTTL migrants themselves. While this and the following chapter do not reject the importance of intent, they decentre it and rework it as “an emergent relation with the world, rather than an a priori condition of experience” (Ash and Simpson, 2016, p. 48). In this and the following chapter, I therefore attend to the “growth” of our intentions (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993) in two different geographical contexts and places.

Overall, the chapter has two aims: (1) to shed some light on the more-than-representational and more-than-economic dimensions of radical counterurbanisation; and (2) to problematize the voluntarism and instrumental rationality implicit in many romanticised accounts of radical BTTL farmers, and resistant and prefigurative subjects more generally. Hence, in conjunction with the following chapter (Chapter 5), this chapter works towards answering the first research question of the thesis (RQ1a): *“how does one become a BTTL farmer and what shapes his/her intentionality”?*

In terms of methodology, this chapter employs an autobiographical and autoethnographical approach that recounts my own BTTL migration(s), first to the UK countryside and then to rural southern Italy. It draws upon personal diaries, memories, conversations, reflexive writing and pictures (not as visual data but supporting devices) to develop a creative narrative based on four encounters that blends descriptions of incidents, places and people, to foreground the specific spatial context, entangled histories, materialities, affects, and experiences leading to our BTTL journey(s). While the facts and events reported in the encounters have actually happened, they have been creatively re-assembled and re-constructed to create a more evocative account.

Before I delve into the story, I situate the chapter within the counterurbanisation literature and the broader field of migration studies in geography, and I outline a contextual and more-than-representational approach to migration. The main body of the chapter is a creative narrative that brings to light the entangled life histories, (more-than) human agencies and affective experiences pre- and post-migration and

the socio-cultural forces involved in our journey(s) BTTL. I then discuss this narrative by relating it back to the literature and consider what it reveals about countercultural counterurbanisation and subjects' intentionality, and how a contextual perspective of migration enacted through a creative, autobiographical and autoethnographical account can help reveal the more-than-human and more-than-representational dimensions of radical migrations.

## 4.2 Storying the event-fullness of BTTL migration

### 4.2.1 *Counterurbanisation: from numbers to rich experiences*

The BTTL movement has primarily been studied in geography within the subfield of population geography, and more precisely, as part of a wider interest in the "counterurbanisation" phenomenon (Halfacree, 2006; Meijering *et al.*, 2007; Wilbur, 2013). This has been broadly defined as a particular demographic pattern of "urban-to-rural migration" affecting developed societies in the Western world (Mitchell, 2004). Population geographers have examined this type of migration in relation to socio-economic changes, including processes of globalization and rural restructuring, and the socio-economic status and motivations of the subjects involved (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998). Initial studies revealed a predominance of middle-class migrants with "idyllic" representations of rural space, and uncovered issues such as rural gentrification, resource conflicts, spatial marginalisation and economic inequalities (Halfacree, 1994; Nelson, 2001; Paniagua, 2002; Smith and Phillips, 2001; Stockdale *et al.*, 2000; Walker and Fortmann, 2003).

However, the tendency of scientific enterprises, including geography, to simplify and purify social and natural phenomenon in order to make them amenable to causal explanations – what Halfacree (2001, pp. 395–396) has termed "taxonomic practices" – has gradually transformed the phenomenon into a "docile object" of enquiry. Accordingly, a "counterurbanisation story" (2001, p. 396) was constructed that presented it as a primarily class-based phenomenon constituted by people seeking better employment conditions and/or a perceived better quality of life according to a specific representation of rural space as a "pastoral idyll". This has

resulted in the neglect of an “international and fuller picture” made up of more marginal but distinct groups of counterurbanisers with diverse cultural imaginaries and within varied geographical contexts that do not fit the Anglophone model of counterurbanisation and its representational categories (Halfacree, 2008, p. 479). Countercultural BTTL migrants are one of these more marginal, but also marginalised, group of counterurbanisers that have been incorporated into more mainstream stories of middle-class amenity migration to the countryside.

Following this critique, population geographers have begun to recognise a wider breadth of people, causes, motivations, and geographical contexts of counterurbanisation, including return migrations (Ní Laoire, 2007), crisis migrations (Gkartzios, 2013), entrepreneurial migrations (Herslund, 2012), migrations in post-socialist contexts (Šimon, 2014; Tammaru, 2003), less popular rural areas (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012), and countercultural BTTL migrations (Wilbur, 2013, 2012).

However, most counterurbanisation studies continue to focus on the *who* and the *why* of migration, favouring statistical and discursive approaches as well as socio-economic and representational perspectives (Halfacree, 2011). These approaches are underpinned by a conceptualisation of migration “as a clearly-bounded, discrete action: a clean-cut move from A to B, from ‘origin’ to ‘destination’” (Halfacree, 2011, p. 4; King, 2012). Accordingly, the locus of explanations for migration has either been placed on “the stresses - the ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’ of the origin and destination”, or on human agency and intentionality, treated primarily in terms of discursive consciousness and economic rationality (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993, p. 335). This is despite a common-sense recognition that migration is an extremely important cultural event for those involved, and that decisions to migrate are certainly rational but also more than that (McHugh, 2000).

As Fielding (1992, p. 201, quoted in Halfacree and Rivera, 2012) noted more than two decades ago: “There is something strange about the way in which we study migration. We know, often from personal experience ... that moving from one place to another is nearly always a major event. It is one of those events around which an individual’s biography is built. The feelings associated with migration are usually



complicated, the decision to migrate is typically difficult to make, and the outcome usually involves mixed emotions. An anticipatory excitement about life in the new place often coexists with anxieties about the move; pleasure at leaving the old place is often disturbed by the feeling that one has almost betrayed those remaining behind ... And yet, when we study migration scientifically, we seem to forget all this". Put differently, a search for patterns and regularities in migrant characteristics and casual factors, have tended to conceal counterurbanisation diversity and complexity.

Initially, a biographical approach to migration brought a corrective to more instrumentalist and behavioural approaches, by accounting for the relationship between migration and the past, present and projected future life of migrants, multiple and "synchronic" reasons for moving, and the wider cultural milieu in which relocations are envisioned and made (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Laoire, 2000). More recently, and following a number of theoretical developments within the discipline, including the "mobilities paradigm", feminist and non-representational theories, geographers have also begun to delve deeper into the cultural geographies of migration, usually employing qualitative methodologies (King, 2012). Studies have considered not only people's biographies and cultural representations, but also their place relations, everyday practices and lived experiences, revealing the importance of geographies of belonging, transnational social networks and identity formation in migration experiences (Blunt, 2007; Gilmartin, 2008; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011). Moreover, having recognised that "migration is at base corporeal movement" (King 2012: 143), many are paying attention to the embodied and emotional experiences of migrants, "fleshing out" the more-than-representational dimensions of migration (Allon and Anderson, 2010; Dunn, 2009; O'Connor, 2010; Walsh, 2009). In these studies, affects such as love in particular - "whether it is for a partner, lover or friend, or for a child, parents or other kin" - play a crucial role in the desire and the decision to move (Mai and King, 2009, p. 296).

These studies suggest that migration and migration decision-making are more complex than simple push and pull factors and/or exclusively rational choices.

There are often a “myriad of influences” (Thompson, 2017, p. 82) involved in a migration: from socio-economic factors and cultural representations, to life histories, social networks and lived experiences. Hence, in the next sub-section, I build upon the wider migration literature in geography to outline an approach that can better capture (countercultural) counterurbanisation in its richness of experiences and diversity of contexts, histories and agencies.

#### *4.2.2 BTTL migration: a contextual and more-than-representational approach*

The radical or countercultural trend of counterurbanisation continues to be considerably understudied in geography despite repeated invitations (Halfacree, 2008, 2009; Wilbur, 2013). Nevertheless, available studies have documented a good number of highly educated and middle-class migrants engaging in this type of migration, in both Europe and North America. However, they have also concluded that it would not be appropriate to apply a categorical class distinction to this group of migrants given their social heterogeneity (Brown, 2011; Jacob, 1997; Pepper, 1991; Wilbur, 2012). Besides, their post-migration livelihoods complicates such class categorisation, with many becoming worse-off after leaving structured employment, and/or working simultaneously as wage labourers, semi-subsistence farmers and small capitalist entrepreneurs (Pepper, 1991; Wilbur, 2012).

Additionally, a number of “environmental dispositions” and pro-rural imaginaries have also been associated with BTTL migrants. These include a yearning to reconnect materially and spiritually with the land and natural cycles, an interest in growing one’s own food organically, a passion for, and commitment to, animal welfare and biodiversity, and a more general desire to live a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle (Halfacree, 2006; Jacob, 1997; Pepper, 1991; Wilbur, 2013, 2012). Hence, as for other counterurbanisers, a number of “push” and “pull” factors can be identified as key drivers in their migrations to rural areas. Above all, a rejection of capitalist work structure and its associated ethics, routine and consumption norms, is what “pushes” countercultural BTTL farmers away from city life; while, the lure of farming and its association with a higher degree of autonomy and connection to nature, is what “pulls” them to the countryside (Jacob, 1997; Wilbur, 2012).

Finally, mirroring the emphasis placed on *intentionality* in broader conceptualisations of resistance and prefiguration (Hughes, 2020, Ince, 2022), human agency is considered to be a key factor driving BTTL migrants (Jacob, 1997; Pepper, 1991; Wilbur, 2013). As Jacob (1997, p. 18) puts it: “rather than unconsciously submit to the social forces that move most of their fellow citizens in the same direction, back-to-the-landers turn counter clockwise against the grain of prevailing fashion”. Similarly for off-gridders - a group of radical rurals closely associated with countercultural BTTLs - living without grid-connected infrastructure is discursively presented “as a rational, instrumental, calculated choice” (Vannini and Taggart, 2013, p. 304). The importance of intentionality for understanding this type of migration is also evident in the terminology used to describe them, such as Jacob’s (1997) “new pioneers” and self-identified “*intentional* communes” (Meijering *et al.*, 2007).

However, no one wakes up one morning and decides to migrate out of pure instrumental rationality or clear and pre-existing intentions, not even politically-motivated BTTL migrants. As Halfacree and Rivera (2012, pp. 94–95) reminds: “no matter how rationally it seems to be calculated, [migration] has a history, a geography and a sociocultural dimension; it is always situated in the multiple currents of experience, sensation, emotion and encounter, and memory, reflection, hope and anticipation that is life”. In light of the studies reviewed in the previous section, an examination of BTTL migrations cannot stop at the discursive and representational register but must delve deeper to uncover the “lines of growth” of a BTTL migrant. Hence, rather than simply asking *who* BTTL migrants are or *why* they migrate, I enquire into *how* they become BTTL migrants. I do so using a contextual perspective and a more-than-representational narrative of my own migration BTTL. A “contextual perspective” of migration, as put forward by Halfacree and Rivera (2012), recognises migration to be inextricably and constitutively entangled with the biographies and everyday life of those involved, and the temporal and spatial context in which it takes place. Moreover, it is underpinned by the idea that migration is always and inescapably “encultured”, and that it is also “event-like”

(2012, p. 95). Drawing upon non-representational theory, migration as event means it is a multi-layered, multi-faceted and multi-textured *process* that has the potential to bring about significant, and often totally unanticipated, life changes to those involved. As they summarise it: “in becoming event-like a migration can shift both ontologically and epistemologically from a clearly and discretely bounded action to something diffused into the ever-unresolved and unresolvable unfolding of the open world the migrant inhabits” (2012, pp. 95–96). Hence, from a contextual perspective, migration neither starts nor stops at the physical act of relocation, and it is both *embedded* in particular spatial and socio-cultural contexts, and *embodied* in migrants’ biographies and lived experiences pre- *and* post-migration.

Moreover, while it does not deny human agency in migration, a contextual perspective both reworks and decentres migrants’ intentionality. It reworks it in the sense that rather than assuming intentionality to be pre-existing in migrant subjectivities, it attends to its unfolding and development over a migrant life-course, situating its emergence in “the flow of everyday life” (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993, p. 336). Moreover, while a contextual perspective “does not deny that migrants can be calculating subjects” it also “recognises this is not all they are” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 101), and so it also decentres intentionality by bringing forward the role and significance of more-than-representational experiences. In so doing, it also brings to the fore the role that non-humans (landscapes, places, objects, non-human animals) and their affective relations play in the formation of migrants’ subjectivities and trajectories. In the context of pro-rural migrations, such as BTTL migrations, this is particularly important as the “affective dimensions of the rural environment” can assume special prominence and “may afford profound biographical consequences” for these migrants (2012, p. 109). Therefore, a contextual perspective of migration considers “the lines of growth” (2012, p. 106) of a migrant and how they are shaped by biographical histories, social structures, (more-than-)human agencies and affective experiences.

Moreover, to examine and foreground the “event-fullness” of my BTTL migration, I develop a creative narrative and I use the notion of encounter as a lens. Following

Wilson (2016, p. 14), I understand encounters to be “events of relations” that are structurally mediated, contextually situated but also affective and emotive. They are about the coming together of different bodies and “about meetings that also make (a) difference” (2016, p. 14). While often overlooked, migration experiences are often characterised by significant cultural exchanges and encounters that can challenge and/or transform individual values, beliefs and attitudes (Gawlewicz, 2016). Encounters with difference during and after a migration can “feed into life-changing directions” and “open worlds of possibilities for those involved” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 95). Hence, in encounters lies “the potential to become otherwise” (Wilson, 2016, p. 2), but their process and outcome are unpredictable and contingent. Hence, in shifting my enquiry to the *how* of BTTL migrations, I aim to both enrich my analysis by paying attention to biographical and contextual factors, and also situate human agency and intentionality in the fluid, messy and affective flow of everyday life. And by presenting my journey as a story that unravels through successive encounters I evoke and reflect upon its fluid, emergent and messy character, “whilst retaining a critical eye on the structures, histories, and subjectivities that constrain and shape them, but that also allow them to live on” (Wilson, 2016, p. 14).

### 4.3 A journey BTTL in four encounters

#### 4.3.1 *An imprecise beginning*

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” is something that people often ask kids. I now find the question obsolete, but I remember wanting to be a rockstar at one point in my childhood and then a professional basketball player, but never a farmer. Even though I grew up in a small rural village in the south of Italy, farming was never something I thought I would end up doing in my adulthood. Southern Italy has a strong family farming tradition, so I used to think that farming is not something you choose. Besides, cultural representations of farming, and rural life more generally, have traditionally carried images of drudgery, poverty and underdevelopment, with farmers portrayed as backward, hostile and uneducated

people. So, in progressive, middle-class families like mine, farming was never presented as an option. Going to school, getting a university degree and then a mind-stimulating - and preferably economically secure - job was my expected path.

And I followed my pre-established path for a while and, to a certain extent, I am still following it, but the journey has not been as straight and clear as anticipated. After a continental migration to Norway following my parents' divorce in my early teens, I ended up in London volunteering for the Natural History Museum and Greenpeace Camden. I then went onto pursue my passion for the environment with a degree in marine biology and oceanography at the University of Plymouth.

Looking back now, my time in Plymouth was one of the best of my life, but it didn't always feel so. After a fairly smooth and enjoyable first year, I started to feel uneasy and disappointed with my studies. I was becoming ever more knowledgeable and aware of environmental issues but I was not satisfied with the answers and solutions that science was able to provide, let alone its methods. My personal diary from the time is full of critical, but also depressing, commentaries on the state of planet and how "science and scientists play into the hands of the capitalist system" (author's personal diary). I began questioning my chosen path, asking myself how electrocuting fish or dissecting mussels in a lab would give me a better knowledge of nature or better tools to fight for what I cared about. My discontent and dissatisfaction reached a peak in the second year, while trawling the sea floor of the Plymouth Sound to learn about the most modern techniques of scientific investigation and collect data on its benthic life. As I stood there on the boat deck, wet and miserable, helping to retrieve the trawler net and reluctantly counting, identifying and logging the dead and dying marine creatures, I told myself "there must be another way".

Luckily, I could at least share my thoughts and feelings with my housemates who were studying cognate disciplines and were pretty much "on the same boat" so to speak. We used to stay up all night drinking, smoking and discussing the state of the planet and our education. We began reading all kinds of radical texts, from Marx to Zerzan, and we participated in numerous marches and protests around the city in

the hope of finding a solution to environmental problems and a way to fight back. But as we stood on the Hoe and watched war ship after war ship coming in and out of Plymouth Sound every day, we felt completely hopeless and powerless. Winter 2011 was the most depressing time for me. I started reading esoteric texts with the hope of finding something more than critique, but I kept sinking deeper into a big black hole of depression.

This is when Bill showed up, or rather, he was already around. He was a fellow student, a friend of a friend who used to turn up at the house, hang around for a smoke and a beer and fix everyone's laptops. Bill was a mature student when he enrolled at university, and he did not have an upbringing as comfortable as mine. He grew up in the North of England in a working-class family during the Thatcherite era. He started working from a very early age in a number of informal trades, including hunting wild rabbits with his ferret to sell to the local butcher and scrapping metal with his mates. "Copper preferably" he once told me "'bright wire", as we would call it, with no plastic coating was the best; otherwise we would pile it up, cover it in diesel and old tyres, burn it and come back the next day".

Bill was a bit of "a rogue kid" (his own words), but a very clever one too. He was the first and only one in his family to receive a scholarship for a grammar school but, being the oldest brother of four, he dropped out early to help his family out. When he eventually left home, he started travelling across the South West and met "old biker Sam", who took him under his wing and taught him how to make furniture from old wood and everything there is to know about motorbikes. He then went to work on a cider farm and numerous building sites across the country; he lived on the streets of London for a while, moved into squats, took part in the rave scene and a number of direct action environmental protests, and lived on and off in a number of "hippie" sites.

This was all unknown to me and irrelevant when we first met. Around Bill, there was never time for depression. He used to take me out on crazy adventures around Plymouth, Cornwall, Dartmoor, the Tamar, and everything in between, in all kinds of weather. While cycling around Plymouth with him and sailing the Tamar and

Plymouth Sound on a tiny rubber dinghy he owned, I began discovering parts of the city, surrounding landscapes *and* myself that were previously unknown to me and highly undervalued. I remember one day he helped me collect data on the marine ecology of a rocky shore for a university assignment. I was in a bad mood as usual, finding the exercise utterly useless. I had monitored plenty of rock pools over the years, there was nothing there that would surprise or interest me. But something was different that day, the rock pools and the marine creatures living in them appeared in a completely different light. A poetic interpretation of some of the pictures I took on the day may be able to better capture this unexpected change (Figure 4.1, 4.2, 4.3).

While the scientific establishment and its culture were slowly extinguishing the fire of passion and curiosity in me, Bill had managed to light it again. With his passion and uncompromising – but not naïve – reverence for all life, he showed me how to be curious again. And by pushing me out of my comfort zone, he helped me break away from my normal pattern of being, thinking and feeling, encouraging me to cherish moments and encounters in their fleeting beauty “because life is too short and unpredictable, but that’s what makes it special” (Bill’s quote). With Bill I began to see glimpses of “the other way”, and I started climbing out of my hole of misery and depression with newly found vigour.





Figure 4.1. A delicate-looking starfish concealing its majestic power of regeneration.



Figure 4.2 A nudibranch taken by surprise by a sudden swell, but resolutely holding on.



Figure 4.3 A snake anemone shining in its beautiful elegance through a dull, grey day.

#### 4.3.2 *Encountering the counterculture*

I visited Leah for the first time in December 2012. Bill asked me to spend the Christmas holidays with his affective family in “the woods in Devon”, as he used to say. We took two trains and a bus to get to a small rural village in North Devon and then walked for about half hour on a small, winding countryside road into the heart of the valley. I remember it getting damper and darker as we moved further in, with cottages and fields of sheep giving way to a thick woodland with a fern undergrowth and a loud and energetic stream bursting onto the damaged concrete road. A carved wooden totem at the bottom of the forest – representing a water goddess, as I later learned - signalled our imminent arrival at the Birch Tree Barn, an old stone barn that Bill and his friends restored many years back from a pile of rubbles.

In the barn, Rose was tinkering with bits of scrap metal and what looked like bird feathers, while Trevor was busy getting the kids to bed, it was a school night after all. Trevor and Rose had been living there since the barn was built and both their

kids were born and raised there. However, they were actually residing in a little caravan outside because the council had been rejecting their planning permission for the past 20 odd years due to its “visual impact”. Bill met Trevor before Birch Tree Barn, on an environmental protest, and more precisely, while digging a tunnel under a road construction outside of Bristol. Trevor bought the barn and the land surrounding it from an old farmer soon after, and it became a site where travellers, activists, anarchists, campaigners and friends could get a respite from the cat-and-mouse games with the police that were going on at the time. We sat around in the barn chatting for a little while and then we headed up to Bill’s bender in the woods.

It was not raining that night but it was really dark, and I felt extremely clumsy walking in the dark. After leaving the tarmac road, we ventured off into a country path and descended into a little vale. We crossed two small streams and entered into a woodland, and there it was: the bender (Figure 4.4). Bill told me a bender takes inspiration from the small, temporary dwellings that travellers used to build on their carts with “bendy” hazel branches and tarps. It was a humble abode indeed, probably only 6m<sup>2</sup> of space with basic necessities like a wood burner and a bed, but it was an incredibly warm and cosy space.



Figure 4.4 Bill’s bender in the woods at Leah.

Early next morning we went back down to the barn for breakfast. I could now see my surroundings clearly, and we were indeed in the middle of a woodland. I could hear the water rushing in a nearby stream and there was a loud chorus of birds getting on with their own breakfast routines. The guys were already up and busy, going in and out of the little caravan to get the kids ready for school. A camp fire was lit: “the kettle is on, help yourself to coffee and tea” said Trevor. I sat down on the sofa near the fire to warm up my cold hands and realised that most of everyday life there happens outside, around the campfire. It was nothing I had ever experienced before (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5 The camp fire that was the heart of the community at Leah.

“Eeyip!” - a loud call from the car park. “Eeyip!” Bill answered back. “What is that?” I asked puzzled, and then a couple of people emerged from the bush. Dom and Robin heard Bill was in town, “so we dropped the kids off at school and thought of popping by to say hello and invite you and Carlotta for dinner tonight” said Dom. Him and Robin had recently (and with some reluctance) moved into a house in the nearby village after being horse-drawn travellers for many years. It had not been an

easy transition for them, but the growing pressure and stress from being constantly harassed by the police, a lack of access to land and the kids being in school, eventually pushed them back into “the rat race”, as Dom would resentfully call it.

That night we had fascinating conversations over Robin’s sumptuous home-cooked dinner. She recounted their years and adventures on the road “bringing up the kids on fresh, raw goat milk and plenty of outdoor entertainment” with much fondness, if not a bit of nostalgia. Dom talked about the Diggers, the Levellers and all the other radical movements that have been fighting for the right to land in Britain since the enclosures. He also chronicled the times of the Peace Convoy in the 80s and the infamous Battle of the Beanfield<sup>9</sup> at Stonehenge, and I finally found out the origin and meaning of the “eeyip” call. It went back to the times of the Donga Tribe, a group of direct action eco-activist that mounted an historic protest against the construction of a section of the M3 motorway in Twyford Down in 1992. The call was part of a larger set of verbal signals used on the protest camp signalling a friendly arrival on the site. Dom and Robin joined the Dongas on their Freedom Trail after the protest was dismantled, travelling the South of England from hill fort to hill fort on foot, hand carts, bicycles, horses and wagons.

For them and the other travellers I met at Leah (Figure 4.6), a travelling lifestyle was a way “to tread lightly on the Earth” (Dom) and to live more inter-dependently with the surrounding environment. It was also a way to reclaim access to land and the right to move freely and live communally across the countryside. Sometimes they would explain it to me as a deliberate act, but also as a “falling into it” (Trevor) or as being “pushed into it” by socio-economic circumstances (Bill). “If you couldn’t afford to pay rent and bills, the easiest way was to buy a small van and live in it” Lance once told me. Whatever the reasons or forces involved, they all agreed that travelling and adopting a more land-based livelihood in communal sites like Leah

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<sup>9</sup> The Peace Convoy was a fleet of mobile homes, mostly converted vans, buses and trucks, that travelled to peace camps and spiritual sites across the country during the 80s. The Battle of the Beanfield was the last of a series of clashes between the police and the New Age travellers, druids, pagans and eco-activists of the Convoy who were trying to set up their yearly Stonehenge Free Festival at Stonehenge. It took place on 1 June 1985 on a bean field adjacent to this highly spiritual public site, hence the name.

was something that revolutionised their worldviews and radically transformed their lives. The slower pace of life, the more direct physical connection to the land, the sharing of space with other fellow travellers, animals and wider communities, allowed them to achieve a certain degree of autonomy and freedom while also developing deeper connections and affective bonds with the land and the



communities hosting them.

Figure 4.6 Riding with Kate on a countryside lane.

Indeed, they all had an incredibly rich and complex understanding of nature. However, unlike my abstract and detached knowledge acquired at university, theirs was much more experiential and intuitive. It was often supported by scientific data, but it was also spiritual in the sense that it recognised and respected its complexity and dynamicity. Little four-year old Mary taught me by showing me that “you can eat yew berries but you have to spit the stone cause it’s poisonous”. Robin was as knowledgeable in the kitchen as she was foraging wild food, while Emily taught me some of the secrets behind some obscure but widely available medicinal plants and trees. They were all extremely practical people too, which I suppose you have to be(come) if you live outside of modern society’s infrastructures and comforts. You

have to know how to light a fire, but also how to find and chop wood, which one is good to burn and when. Apple wood burns the hottest and oak is great too; you can burn ash when it's green but forget resinous ones like pine. Willow, hazel, older are ok if you haven't got anything else; but never, ever burn elder. You will enrage a powerful goddess. You also need to know how to wire solar panels and 12V batteries if you want a minimum of electricity; some basic knowledge of how to use various tools if you need to make some structural repairs; and finally, a lot of creativity and resourcefulness as well as strength of spirit for when things go wrong, because they often do.

That first night, Dom and Robin left me with a riddle that you may or may not wish to answer. After my three-year long experience at Leah, I didn't have to.

*Earth, water, fire and air  
Get together in the garden fair  
Put in a basket bound with skin  
If you answer this riddle, you'll never begin.*

#### 4.3.3 *More-than-human becoming in the woods*

After graduating, Bill and I decided to move to Leah while we figured out our next move. We spent the first winter in the little bender and then decided to build a bigger one for a bit more comfort. We didn't have much money and I had never build anything, let alone a house, but it wasn't going to be a mansion, just a larger bender (Figure 4.7).

We bought some timber and plywood and erected a 6 by 3m bender off the ground on concrete blocks. We installed windows and doors reclaimed from the local recycling site and we skinned it with layers of cotton sheets, then wool, and finally a green, military-grade, waterproof tarpaulin. We bought a new wood burner from "burner George" in Glastonbury, who has been making them for years using old gas bottles and Bill swears by them, and we built a small kitchen and a dry compost toilet outside. In the only forest opening available, we put up a solar panel and

connected it to two 12V batteries for basic energy needs. Later on Bill also transformed an old wind generator into a micro-hydro turbine to harvest energy from the stream nearby. It didn't produce massive amount of power but it trickled energy 24/7, keeping the batteries always topped up - a life saver in cloudy Britain.



Figure 4.7 Our low impact dwelling in the woods.

It was a very humble dwelling but extremely comfy too, or so it felt to me. When I told my family and friends where and how I lived, most were shocked and could not understand what I was talking about: "You live in a tent? In the woods? Isn't it cold? Aren't you scared?". I don't actually remember ever feeling scared, but I'll admit it took me a while to adjust to cooking outside, keeping the burner going, washing with buckets and walking in the dark. It was all completely new to me, but over time I came to cherish our new home and those everyday routines for the moments and encounters they offered (Figure 4.8). For instance, a couple of wrens moved in with us the first year. We watched them quietly all winter building a nest in a fold of the tarp outside the back window of the bender. They would bring bits of moss very diligently every morning until it was ready. Then one day in the spring, we woke up



to the sound of chicks and we laid down in bed to watch them taking their first flying lessons.



Figure 4.8 The path leading to our bender.

The bird feeders located a couple of metres away from our door was also a favourite spot of other woodland inhabitants. In the mornings, as we waited for our coffee to brew on the burner, we would silently wait and watch them taking turns on the feeders. First, it was a very punctual flock of ten long-tailed tits - I used to call them “the breakfast club” - followed by great tits, blue tits and coal tits. Then a family of greater spotted woodpecker, a mother with her young, would announce themselves quite loudly before their arrival, but would quickly fly off when squirrels turned up (Figure 4.9). Less frequent visitors were nut hatches and tree crawlers, way shier than the rest. Then, there was Herbert, a male pheasant that regularly visited us in the winter to eat the food droppings of smaller birds. He became used to our presence there (once almost accepting food from my hand) and later in the season he started bringing a female to the feast. Night life was as busy, and I effortlessly learned the difference between the calls of little owls and tawny owls as well as the different noises made by nocturnal mammals. Deer are quite soft in their steps, and

you can only really hear them when they break a branch; foxes make very loud and chilling barks that reverberate through the forest, while badgers trample through the woodland floor, snuffling quite loudly without a care in the world. Human steps, on the other hand, can be quite heavy and sloppy if they aren't carrying a torch. As for the littler ones - mice, shrews, and the odd rat - I learned about their presence after being adopted by a cat, Butter Mouser (Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.9 The woodpecker family on the bird feeder.



Figure 4.10 Butter Mouser on her daily hunt.

She turned up at the end of the first summer, and we only noticed her presence because we kept finding all our dirty dishes magically clean in the morning. We then caught glimpses of her in the forest brush and realised we were being stalked and studied by a cat. She was extremely shy and skinny, so we offered her a lump of butter (hence the name) and later bought some cat food. Our efforts notwithstanding she was having a hard time trusting us, but winter was on its way, so one evening we lured her in the bender with a meat packet and shut the door behind her. She freaked out instantly, hid under the bed and moaned all night. The next morning we let her out and repeated the same drill for a few nights, until she realised we meant no harm and she decided to live with us. Butter and I became best mates: we would adventure out in the woods together and while I studied the local flora she would be hunting the local fauna. She was a brilliant huntress indeed, hence her second name. Once, we went away for a week and came back to find the floor of the bender covered in blood: a headless wood pigeon, a half chewed rat, a dead wood pecker, mice stomachs everywhere, and weirdest of all, an intact but surgically skinned mouse.

As soon as we moved to Leah, we also begun working on a vegetable garden with Rose and Trevor. Bill had always wanted to build a forest garden in the orchard field and he was definitely the driving force behind it. I was eager too after being introduced to the permaculture method by a very enthusiastic friend, but I had no clue where to start. The field was heavy clay, so Bill decided to hire a digger and order two trucks of cow manure from a local farmer. We dug some beds and planted pumpkins, courgettes and melons in the fresh manure (Figure 4.11). They loved growing in such rich medium and we ended up with more than we could eat, so we bartered them with the local veggie shops, cafes and restaurants. The second year the manure had turned into finer soil, and we planted a variety of spring and summer crops as well as some aromatic kitchen herbs in a little DIY cloche (Figure 4.12). We tapped into the spring at the top of the field for irrigation and we mulched the beds and the fruit trees with reclaimed cardboards and woodchips donated by a gardener friend. We also experimented with more sun-loving crops like tomatoes, peppers and aubergines but they struggled to grow without a greenhouse or a

polytunnel. “We can’t put one up, the council won’t allow it because of its visual impact” Trevor reminded us.



Figure 4.11 Learning to farm.



Figure 4.12 Growing aromatic herbs in the orchard field.

#### 4.3.4 *Moving on: “out of place” in the British countryside*

Bill and I lived at Leah for almost four years. When we first moved there, we did not expect to stay that long, but over time we had come to call and think of that place as our home. We had built a modest dwelling, formed connections with the land that was hosting us, developed everyday routines and emotional attachments to it, matured bonds with the local community, cemented friendships, and we found meaning in what we were doing and the way we were living. To an extent, we felt we belonged there. However, deep down we also knew our situation was always going to be temporary and precarious. Others before us had tried to make a home at Leah, but they all eventually moved on.

The bender had no planning permission and Trevor and Rose had been struggling for years to get a more permanent and secure arrangement for their family to no avail. I was pretty naïve back then, but I slowly came to realise that the problems facing Leah were about more than planning issues. After all, the new neighbours – another rich family moved in from London - had managed to build a swimming pool, a horse manege and multiple large barns for rare breeds of cows and sheep in a matter of few years. Their environmental footprint and visual impact on the landscape was nothing like ours, so I was baffled as to why we couldn't live in a small bender in the woods. And it's not that we didn't try to be part of the local community either. Trevor and Rose had been long-term residents there, their kids attended the local school, Trevor was even a village councillor for a few years, and we were slowly beginning to supply the local community with cheap, locally grown, organic food. But despite our efforts, our community at Leah didn't quite fit with the imagined “rural idyll” of stone cottages and manicured, empty green fields, of quiet and passive leisure activities. “We” - with our benders, caravans, camp fires, wild parties, messy gardens and loud chainsaws - were “out of place” in the countryside.

The threat of eviction became more real when we received a surprise visit in the woods in the summer of the second year (Figure 4.13). It was a lovely, bright, sunny day, and Bill and I were sitting outside the bender in the little forest garden, drinking a beer and bathing in the sun, when this unfamiliar figure suddenly

emerged out of the bushes. He introduced himself as someone who worked for the local council and asked if we were living there, to which Bill answered yes. He then looked around and asked: “How do you live? Have you got electricity? Services?”. “No” answered Bill “we cook on the fire and we wash dishes with the water from the stream”. And that was it! As swiftly as he appeared, he faded away in the woods understorey like an odd mirage. But it was not a mirage, and we were now feeling extremely insecure about our home.



Figure 4.13 The garden area where we received our surprise visit.

Bill was devastated, really, it was not the first time he “lost everything”: Tinkers’ Bubble was another communal venture that had left him with nothing. I also couldn’t face going back to living in a house or a flat, so we started looking for land in Cornwall and Wales, but we could barely afford one acre in sites completely unsuitable to farming, or anything else really. “What about Italy?” I suggested at one point. “Land is way cheaper back home. Unlike Britain, we took down the monarchy ages ago and we had an agrarian reform” I said jokingly. But it was true: land tenure, availability and access are different in Italy, especially in the rural south, but

so was everything else, culture, language, economy and connections. It would have been quite a change indeed.

Nevertheless, we sluggishly and dreamily begun searching for land while visiting my family during the holidays. There were plenty of properties cheap enough in the most remote and depopulated mountain areas, but those within our budget were all caught up in family disputes, making the purchase a massive legal puzzle. We were about to give up when something interesting popped up on the second-hand trading website I was using for our “modest” quest. I called the number and an old man answered. He could barely hear me – he was a bit deaf - and I could barely understand him in his strong dialect, but somehow we managed to arrange a visit for the next day. I got up early really excited. The old man sounded genuine and the description on the website was promising: two hectares of land with olive trees and fruit trees, three wells and a big house built after the 1980 earthquake.

The property was in a mountain village a couple of hours away from my family home, and it was exactly as it was described, but better. The old couple took us for a walk around the land, pointing to different features in the landscape and telling us the stories behind them: “that well you can rely on all year, we dug it deep. It always keeps a metre of water even in the driest of summers”. The old man proudly showed us the grafts he had made on various fruit trees, and the two vineyards he used to make tons of wine from, and said “you will never go hungry on this land, there is a fruit for every month of the year”. The house was also pretty “new” for what we had seen around, and larger than we even wanted. We sat under the shade of a persimmon tree near the house and the old woman told us she brought up four kids there while the husband was away working in Europe and South America. They were old now and had enough work on properties nearby. Besides, that land was titled to their two daughters who were living and working in the North of Italy and not interested in keeping. Three months and a few consultations and negotiations later, we bought it. It must have been the fastest and swiftest land purchase in the whole history of southern Italy.

Back at Leah, we announced our imminent departure and suddenly went through feelings of excitement, melancholy and apprehension. We were leaving what had been our home for the past three years and we were now heading towards the unknown, a land, a place, a community we knew nothing about. “Now what?” I asked confused and perplexed. “We buy a lorry and we go” was Bill’s peculiar reassurance. And so we did: a second-hand fridge lorry that we converted into a campervan to live in while we restored the old house. We loaded the truck with the few belongings we had, got a passport for Butter Mouser and left Leah in February 2017 (Figure 4.14). The eviction notice for our bender arrived at the Birch Tree Barn two months after our departure.



Figure 4.14 “Moving on” to the mountains of southern Italy.

#### 4.4 The becoming-with of BTTL migrants

*“How did you guys get here?”* was the question posed by my friend when she first came to visit us on the farm in southern Italy. I have used it to introduce the theme of this chapter and to ask a broader question about the BTTL movement (RQ1): *“how does one become a BTTL farmer and what shapes his/her intentionality?”*.



I have approached the answering of this question using a more-than-representational writing style based upon a creative narrative of my migration to rural southern Italy. The narrative consists of four key encounters that have occurred since my entry into higher education in the UK, but they are also situated within wider temporal and spatial contexts. Each encounter reveals different factors that have shaped my personal transformation and decision to migrate to southern Italy to be a farmer, but they do so indirectly, through a form of story-telling that aims to evoke the complexity and unpredictability of BTTL journeys. So who or what exactly have I encountered on my journey BTTL? And how have these encounters influenced my intentionality to migrate to southern Italy and become a BTTL farmer? In this section, I offer a more structured analysis of the encounters narrated above and I discuss them in relation to the literature reviewed in Section 4.2.

#### *4.4.1 Intimate journeys and radical connections*

The first encounter in my story occurred around 2012 when Bill and I first met at university, and it foregrounds the role of biographical histories, social-economic structures and affects such as love in the becoming of BTTL migrants. In narrating this encounter, I have both creatively introduced and situated Bill's and my biographies in their wider cultural and socio-economic contexts, and I have evoked the circumstances and affective implications of the crossing of our paths.

On the surface, our meeting appears pretty unremarkable: we are a standard heterosexual couple who met and fell in love at university while studying environmental sciences, confirming the trends found in the BTTL literature towards couples, high level of education and environmental interests (Jacob, 1997; Wilbur, 2012). In fact, for my part, you can also tick the middle-class background category. However, such a superficial demographic profile overlooks the more complex histories and affective experiences that shape a migrant "lines of growth" (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 92). And yet, this does not mean that "the social pathways" - to use a life-course perspective term - in which a migrant is embedded, including the cultural or the socio-economic context of one's upbringing, are not important in shaping future life trajectories, and an (auto)biographical and more-than-

representational approach is particularly apt in revealing their influence (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Laoire, 2000).

For instance, I started the narrative with a very silly and privileged question: “what do you want to be when you grow up?” to foreground the sorts of concerns that were made to matter to me when I was growing up. Indeed, my middle-class upbringing and early migration to Europe set me on a particular educational path that eventually brought me to a UK university. However, my gradual disenchantment and disillusionment with positivist scientific culture and the structures and values of the labour market and the education system led to a period of serious depression and unhappiness. As detailed by other studies, dissatisfaction with capitalist work routines, norms and values are important push factors for BTTL migrants (Brown, 2011; Jacob, 1997; Wilbur, 2012). However, they do not on their own shape a migrant intentionality to move: if I had not encountered Bill at that particular context in time, my life journey might have taken a different turn.

Many BTTL migrations are often undertaken by couples, but as for studies of migration more generally, the emotional dimensions and affective implications of such relationships for migration decision-making are often overlooked (Mai and King, 2009). Our intimate relationship was important not just in terms of actual and anticipated changes, such as marriage, cohabitation, or even starting a family (Stockdale and Catney, 2014). Meeting Bill, and falling in love with him, prompted a more profound change in me that representational and discursive approaches would never be able to capture. In fact, I am not even sure I was able to give it justice in my own narrative. Before Bill, I felt hopeless and powerless about social and environmental injustices and my own future prospects. Bill reinvigorated my radical spirit - which until then was buried under a heavy load of cynicism - and he triggered a desire and a strength that spurred me to change my life - and dismal outlook - around. With his passion and love, so many of the things that I had once overlooked or taken for granted were suddenly charged with fresh power and importance.

And yet, this first encounter alone has not on its own shaped my intention and our future decision to migrate to Italy and become farmers, but it did trigger a first migration to rural Britain, and more precisely, to a rural community in North Devon called Leah. While I did not consider it as such back then, this was my *first* BTTL migration and it was partly spurred by “idyllic” representations of the countryside, but not the common type. As a European migrant who had primarily lived in UK cities, before meeting Bill and moving to Leah, I did not know and did not make much of rural Britain. In fact, at university I used to refer to the “green and pleasant land” of the British “rural idyll” as a “green biological desert”. Our move there was a combination of: not knowing what to do after university, Bill’s affective ties to his friends and home in the woods, and my curiosity to stay in what I had come to think of a wild and free eco-commune from Bill’s narrations and our sporadic visits there.

All three following encounters occurred while I lived there, and although they are presented separately in the narrative for reasons of writing style and analytical clarity, they overlap temporally. This “middle migration” to Leah, and my experience of living in a rural community and setting were key in further shaping my subjectivity and prompting our later decision to move. As Halfacree and Rivera (2012, p. 109) have argued, a migration can act “as metaphorical gateway to a diverse range of subsequent experiences and existential awakenings, many of which cannot be seen as either anticipated or predicted”. My migration to Leah *and* the transformative encounters that occurred while living there, foreground the importance of understanding migration as an “*unfinished*” event (2012, p. 109) that continues into a migrant subsequent inhabitation of a (rural) place and how a migrant life *becomes* changed in profound ways as a consequence of a move.

The second encounter is presented as a semi-fictional first visit to Leah in which I have condensed and narrated episodes, conversations and exchanges that occurred over more than three years. This encounter narrates my mingling in an activist space, learning about resistant histories and radical ways of living, and developing friendships and emotional bonds that have further shaped my radical subjectivity and intentionality to migrate there. At Leah, I met the road protest and travelling

movements and I was passionately pulled into the world of the British counterculture. I encountered a form of direct action environmental activism that I was completely unfamiliar with, and I was introduced to the history of land struggles in Britain, travelling ways of living, permaculture, do-it-yourself cultures, and alternative knowledge systems (McKay, 1996, 1998). During my stay at Leah, I met people radically different from me who moved and inspired me, and I gradually “learned to be affected” by their beliefs and values, their histories and journeys, and their ways of living and knowing. Just as their lives were radically transformed when they took to the road, fought environmental destruction, shared community life and goals, and more broadly mingled in various activist spaces, my life was “reworked, refocused and redirected” once I moved to Leah (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 107). Similarly, Bill’s upbringing in an environmentally degraded, chemical-industrial town during austere economic times has certainly motivated his interest in environmental issues, but it was his experiences after that, including meeting radical others, travelling and participating in environmental direct action protests, that eventually brought him to Tinkers’ Bubble and Leah. Hence, this encounter creatively foregrounds the role that affinity networks, emotional bonds and connections to past struggles and radical histories play in the formation of radical subjectivities (Bosco, 2007; Clough, 2012; Featherstone, 2005; Sziarto and Leitner, 2010). These wider affinity networks and affective experiences are generally overlooked in studies of radical countercultural BTTL migration.

#### *4.4.2 Rural bonds and their dissolution*

The third encounter overlaps with the previous one, but it is presented separately in the narrative because it focuses more specifically on the more-than-human community of the woodland I lived in for three years in Leah. This encounter narrates my experience of building and dwelling in a self-built Low Impact Development (LID), my everyday interactions with woodlands residents, the development of emotional bonds and growing attachment to place, and finally, my introduction to the world of farming. My subjectivity changes further in this encounter, but this time the transformation is prompted by the materiality and

affective agency of the woodland and wider rural environment I inhabited for three years (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012).

My practical engagement in building and living in an off-grid dwelling in the woods, not only taught me some basic DIY skills and knowledge, but also attuned my body to different ideals and practices of comforts (Pickerill, 2015; Vannini and Taggart, 2013). As Pickerill (2015, p. 1061) argued, comfort is “an ongoing process, a negotiation between different elements (e.g., climate, materials and bodies) in a particular place”. For my Mediterranean “pedigree” and middle-class “sheltered” upbringing, the materiality of living outdoors in cold, rainy Britain with none of the comforts I was used to, was a true body shock at first. Washing dishes in the rain, living in mud throughout winter, walking in the dark or going to the toilet outside, were not particularly enjoyable experiences at first. However, over time, I became more proficient in certain tasks, found ways to adapt to my new environment and my body gradually acclimatised. Besides, the affective intensity of the woodland environment was such that those initial discomforts slowly took backstage and I began cherishing my new home and everyday routines. Waking up to a nest of wren chicks taking their first flying lessons, falling asleep to the calls of owls, breathing in the powerful aroma of wild garlic carpeting the forest floor in the early spring, following the trail of wild currents shining like little red gems in the woodland understory. After a while, I did not wish to exchange those experiences and encounters for a hot shower: that’s how significant they were in shaping my becoming.

Hence, during my stay at Leah, I developed emotional bonds with the land and its non-human inhabitants and I attuned my body to its cycles and rhythms. I was also introduced to farming through our communal venture of trying to turn the orchard field into a permaculture forest garden. My scientific background and superficial knowledge of permaculture were certainly handy when it came to understanding why we would do certain things, like applying cow manure or woodchip mulch to the ground. However, the how of doing it, the actual bodily act of digging, shovelling, planting, chopping, watering, fencing, and observing and noticing

changes, was also a gradual and embodied attunement. Corporeally engaging in this farm work and learning from and with human and non-human others gave me a different appreciation of farming and the practices of care it involves (Krzywoszynska, 2016; Pitt, 2018). Hence, the experiential knowledge I acquired from dwelling and experimenting with alternative ways of living and farming at Leah was not just about new practical skills and competences, but also novel affective dispositions and sensibilities.

This encounter with the more-than-human community at Leah highlights the role and significance of the affective agency of the rural environment - and the everyday acts of dwelling there - in shaping the “lines of growth that entangle a [BTTL] migrant in-place” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 106). It also demonstrates the importance of embodied and visceral experiences with human and non-human others in the making of radical subjectivities (Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010; Roelvink and Zolkos, 2015). Together with the previous one, this encounter marked a “transition phase” in my life-course trajectory and an unexpected “existential reorientation” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 107) brought about by the more-than-human community I encountered at Leah. Here I developed “a heightened feeling of place-based dwelling” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 107) and a desire *to stay*, to live in the woods and farm the land.

Finally, the fourth and last encounter - which remained largely within the geographical confines of Leah - considers our relationship with the local community and the wider spatial context in which we were entangled. It foregrounds issues of power arising from hegemonic representations of rural space and their social (re)production as additional dimensions in the becoming (or not) of BTTL migrants. “In principle”, a post-productivist countryside should open up more space for radical rurals like BTTL migrants (Halfacree, 2006, p. 328). However, the last encounter reveals that cultural representations of the countryside as a “rural idyll” remain powerful imaginaries and potential obstacles to BTTL initiatives in Britain. As Halfacree (1996, p. 52) argued: “the rural idyll is exclusive in its class, race and status connotations, and in the demands for conformity which it places on its

adherents” but “at stake are not just conflicting representations of space but fundamental issues of power” (1996, p. 66). Indeed, the Leah community was not just “impacting” upon the dominant aesthetic of the countryside, but the production of the rural as a commodified and privatised space, disturbing all those that had a stake in it and were involved in its maintenance (including our rich neighbours and planning authorities). These power dynamics hindered further developments of our site and community, causing hostilities and tensions and, in the end, also our eviction.

Meanwhile, the different socio-economic context of rural southern Italy (which I explore in more detail in the next Chapter), its affective charisma and family proximity, appeared as an affordable and inspiring option, if not somewhat risky. Hence, this encounter represented another turning point in my journey BTTL, but it also highlights the “*involuntary complexities*” (Vannini and Taggart, 2013, p. 295) that often drive BTTL migrations. Indeed, we never intended to move to southern Italy until external (and internal) circumstances *forced* us to. We chose not to go back to living in a flat or a house in a city, but Leah had become our home and if we could have chosen, we would never have left. As for the many travellers across the British countryside, and other friends who lived at Leah before us and eventually migrated out of the UK, “moving on” was not always a completely free choice. While some “drop out” of mainstream society, other are also “pushed” into the margins of society by economic necessity, institutional barriers and powerful spatial orderings (McKay, 1996).

For us, it was “a necessity of sorts” (Vannini and Taggart, 2013, p. 309) that combined with serendipity (finding land in Italy), vocation (wanting to pursue a land-based livelihood), and various other motives (moving closer to family) took us to rural southern Italy. Hence, these factors and experience further problematize the instrumental rationality and voluntarism that is often discursively emphasised in BTTL migrations and related initiatives (Vannini and Taggart, 2013), and instead promote a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the motives and forces behind these radical migrations. In short, my migration to Leah and my subsequent

encounters with its (more-than)human community and wider spatial context - however temporary and precarious - contributed significantly to the “growth of [my] intention” (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993) to migrate to southern Italy and farm the land. It thus “opened a metaphorical door but the route taken was not pre-scripted” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 107).

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have narrated and analysed one story of BTTL migration. The story was not meant to be representative of the whole movement but to enrich and complexify understandings of the motives and forces involved in a BTTL migration. As for other experiences of migration, what leads people to migrate BTTL is not as rational and clear-cut as it is often discursively presented. BTTL journeys and their decision-making processes are complex, textured and, to some extent, also unforeseen because they involve unanticipated and radical changes in the subjectivities of those involved. A combination of contextual, biographical and more-than-representational factors contribute to shaping a subject’s intentionality to migrate. Through an (auto)biographical and more-than-representational account of my own BTTL migration, I have tried to evoke rather than prescribe, and to animate rather than reduce, what are highly emotional, multifaceted and unpredictable journeys for those involved.

A more-than-representational approach and writing style, centred around four encounters, helped me capture the fluid, unpredictable and affective nature of BTTL migrations, while a contextual and biographical perspective allowed for a more geographically and temporally broad consideration of the (more-than-)human agencies, histories and structures involved. Through a creative narrative and its subsequent analysis, the chapter has exposed - *and* evoked - the multiple forces and influences involved in the decision to migrate, as well as their more-than-human dimensions and affective implications that are often obscured by representational approaches. To return to the first Research Question (RQ1) of the thesis, the four encounters presented and analysed in this chapter have respectively revealed the



significance of: biographical entanglements, affinity networks, affective rural environments and socio-spatial contexts. More specifically, it has highlighted intimate and radical connections as well as rural attachments and their dissolution, as significant and largely overlooked factors in the becoming of BTTL migrants.

Moreover, by attending to the “growth” of my intention in embodied and affective encounters and experiences with place, humans, non-humans, as well as the power and social structures in which I was entangled, this chapter has begun to decentre and rework notions of intentionality associated with resistant and prefigurative subjects. Rather than rejecting intentionality, or assuming it was pre-formed and/or the results of exclusively rational processes, I have enquired into its emergence “within the flow of everyday life” (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993, p. 336). It was thus both reworked to account for biographical histories, socio-economic forces and more-than-human agencies, and decentred, in the sense of being complemented by the influence of emotional and more-than-representational experiences.

Indeed, the moment in which I have decided to stay at Leah or, later on, to migrate to southern Italy is difficult to locate and isolate. At one point, Bill and I discussed with Trevor and Rose the possibility of staying, and at a later point, I suggested southern Italy as an option, but these two moments did not determine, on their own, my later decisions and actions. Instead, my intentionality and (double) migration was part of a broader process of *becoming* occurring across a spatially and temporally wider context and resulting from transformative encounters and experiences with multiple agencies and structures (e.g. university, Bill, friends at Leah, the bender in the woods, my neighbours, local planning authorities, my eviction). Indeed, my eventual migration to southern Italy was affected by ruptures, discontinuities and accidents, as well as convergences, stabilities and rational choices: it was thus intentional as much as contingent, desired as well as forced, and gradual but not linear.

Finally, by exploring my subjective experience in its messy and embodied character, this chapter problematizes the instrumental rationality that often accompanies BTTL and other resistant and prefigurative subjects, foregrounding the unpredictability,

complexity and affective intensity of such life transitions. Ultimately, this chapter has developed a creative and evocative account of the “more-than-human becoming of a radical BTTL farmer” to advocate a more nuanced and rich understanding of how individuals become BTTL migrants, one that goes beyond representational perspectives and simplistic readings, and accounts for and evokes the “event-fullness” of these radical migrations.

## Chapter 5 Going back-to-the-land (again): developing place literacy in rural southern Italy

### 5.1 Introduction

*“What are two lovely young people like you doing here?”* Asked the owner of the local restaurant on our first visit there.

*“We just moved here”* I answered promptly.

*“You moved here?? In Piedelmonte?”* He asked puzzled.

*“Ehm ... yes, we bought a piece of land and we moved here from the UK”.* I answered more hesitantly.

*“You moved here to Piedelmonte? You live here now??”* He asked again baffled.

This short excerpt from a conversation we had with a local resident and restaurant owner in the village of Piedelmonte is representative of the reaction we commonly received when we first introduced ourselves to local people and informed them of our recent move to their village. The puzzled reaction stems from the fact that Piedelmonte has been subject to processes of outmigration and land abandonment for more than a century. A series of migratory waves, beginning with the unification of Italy, peaking in the post-war period and continuing unabated after a disastrous earthquake in 1980, have literally decimated the village population. Over this time, entire families have left the village and established small communities in many cities around the world, including London, and many more plan to do the same.

Unsurprisingly, our counter-migration *from* the UK *to* Piedelmonte was a puzzle to many local residents.

While in the previous chapter I explored *how* we ended up migrating to a small rural village in southern Italy, in this chapter I am interested in examining in more empirical detail *where* we moved to and how our intentionality and dispositions have changed as a result of our entanglement with this particular rural context and

place. Halfacree (2006, p. 310) has argued that “placing” BTTL initiatives in particular spatial and temporal contexts is key to understanding the character and trajectories of these radical rural projects. Different rural contexts and places provide different opportunities and constraints to BTTL initiatives, so examining *where* they “go back-to” can help “explain the stories that emerge” (2006, p. 310). Similarly, as Wilbur (2013, p. 149) has noted, rural space has the potential to both “host and catalyse radical ambitions”, requiring an investigation into “the more recently formed ambitions and values that have developed as a consequence of migration” (2013, p. 155). Put differently, BTTL migrants “cannot be assumed to know their destinations nor the lives they will lead there when they in-migrate” (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012, p. 102), so their experiences of dwelling in particular rural contexts and places become of analytical importance for understanding their becoming and the shape of their prefigurative politics.

However, besides Halfacree’s (2006) analysis of BTTL experimentations in the British rural context, little academic attention has been paid to how rural spaces and places influence their development and experiences. This neglect is particularly troubling in the case of BTTL initiatives since their radicalism is primarily grounded in the attainment of a relation of “consubstantiality with the land”. This is a “spatial relation . . . between beings and a place, such that the distinct existence and form of both partake of or become united in a common substance” (Gray, 1998, p. 345, quoted in Halfacree 2006). However, *where* this land is, who/what composes it, or what building this relationship entails in different rural contexts and places have been largely overlooked in favour of sociological and political analyses such as their demographic profile and ideological positions (Jacob, 1997; Pepper, 1991). More recent studies have focused on the ways in which BTTL farmers acquire or develop their knowledge and skills (Ingram, 2007; Mailfert, 2007; Wilbur, 2014), but have left unexamined the more intimate and embodied process and experiences of learning about the land and the places they moved to.

Hence, while in Chapter 4 I focused on the becoming of BTTL farmers through a series of affective encounters, in this chapter I focus my analytical attention more

squarely on the experience of dwelling in a rural place and how it has shaped and affected our dispositions and intentions. The aim of the chapter is to “place” BTTL initiatives in the more-than-human relational network of the land they move to in order to interrogate the processual, embodied and situated character of prefigurative initiatives (Gordon, 2020; Koensler, 2020). Theoretical interventions on notions of prefiguration and prefigurative politics have been stressing the open, contingent and provisional character of prefigurative goals and intentions (Gordon, 2020; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Swain, 2019). However, these remain little examined empirically and there has been no direct engagement with places (and their more-than-human agencies) in theories and examinations of prefigurative politics and anarchist geographies more generally. Hence, in conjunction with Chapter 4, this chapter contributes to reworking notions of intentionality in non-anthropocentric terms by demonstrating how it emerges and develops *with* the more-than-human agencies of the places BTTL farmers encounter and inhabit. Hence, following on from the previous chapter, this chapter brings in an additional dimension and answer to the first research question of the thesis: *“how does one become a BTTL farmer and what shapes his/her intentionality?”*.

I start by situating the chapter within debates of agrarian and rural change in geography to introduce some of the historical and socio-spatial dynamics that characterise rural spaces in Italy. In the main empirical section of this chapter, I present an autoethnographic account of Piedemonte to introduce the place and the spatialities and agencies we encountered there. I then explore how we tried to work on the place and how the place has worked on us, that is, how our initial goals and dispositions became affected by the place we inhabited.

## 5.2 Placing BTTL initiatives in rural contexts

Halfacree (2007b) situates BTTL experimentations within radical rural projects that have the potential to challenge capitalist spatialities by producing alternative trajectories of rural development. However, this potential hinges as much on the agency of those involved (their motivations, intentions, dispositions, resources, skills, etc.) as on the rural context in which they are situated. Before I delve into a

more place-based account of the rural place we moved to and our experience of dwelling there, in this section I outline and discuss Italy's rural development history in relation to a number of theoretical framework in rural geography in order to situate the BTTL movement in the Italian context.

For a long time, discussions in rural geography have revolved around a possible shift from a *productivist* to a *post-productivist* paradigm in rural areas of the Global North, in which agricultural production assumes a less important role compared to consumption-based activities and economies (Cloke and Goodwin, 1992; Lowe *et al.*, 1993; Marsden, 2000; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Ward, 1993). The productivist regime is alleged to have taken shape after World War II and was characterised by an ideological commitment to an intensive and industrially driven agriculture supported by state institutions (Lowe *et al.*, 1993). However, by the mid-1980s "the logic, rationale and morality of the productivist regime were increasingly questioned by various state and non-state actors on the basis of ideological, environmental, economic and structural problems" (Wilson, 2001, p. 81), leading to theorisations of the emergence of a post-productivist countryside. While no singular definition of a post-productivist countryside exists, a number of characteristics have been identified (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Some key characteristics of the productivist and post-productivist countryside. Adapted from Wilson (2001).

Productivism (1950s-1980s)	Post-productivism (1980s-)
Agriculture has a central hegemonic position in society, with "rurality" defined primarily in terms of agriculture	Loss of central position of agriculture in society and "rurality" increasingly separated from agriculture
Rural idyll ethos in which farmers play a key role as protectors of the countryside, and urban and industrial developments are perceived as the main threats	Social representations of the rural are contested with farmers now perceived as a threat to the countryside, following changing consuming behaviours and public attitudes of primarily urban actors (e.g. tourists, counterurbanisers)
Farmers have ideological, financial and material security thanks to a strong state support (e.g. price guarantees and property and land use rights and concessions)	Farmers lose ideological and economic security following the demise of state-supported model of agricultural development and market liberalization

Securing national self-sufficiency for agricultural commodities by encouraging farming communities to expand production and join the agricultural “treadmill”	Move from agricultural production to consumption of the countryside and greening of agricultural policy (e.g. voluntary agri-environmental schemes)
Agricultural production characterised by industrialization, commercialization, intensification, increased use of biochemical inputs, increased mechanization and decline in labour inputs	Agricultural production characterised by a critique of industrialization and moving towards sustainable methods (e.g. extensification, organic), farm diversification and pluriactivity.
Agriculture has a deleterious impact on environmental resources and is incompatible with nature conservation	Move toward environmental conservation on farms and valorisation of agricultural and non-agricultural character of rural landscapes

Halfacree (2006) has argued that these two paradigms can provide both opportunities and barriers to BTTL experiments. However, in a UK context, productivism proved to be “inimical” to their development in the 1960s-70s, and most were only able to exist in its “interstices”, experiencing estrangement, disempowerment and insecurity (Table 5.2). Post-productivism can provide more opportunities thanks to its greater inclusivity, but this same heterogeneity can also produce conflicts with more “powerful” species of post-productivism. The first two in Table 5.2 (super-productivism and consuming idyll) represent a reworking of the productivist spatiality based on the separation of productivism from its moralising “rural idyll”, which results in either a more intensified form or its consumption-based opposite. Effaced rurality describes rural spaces that have been eroded by the geographical development of capitalism and where rurality exists only as “a ghostly presence, experienced through folk memory, nostalgia, hearsay, etc” (Halfacree, 2007b, p. 131).

Halfacree’s contribution is important not only for being one of the few examinations available on BTTL initiatives in rural space (see also Meijering, 2007), but also for acknowledging the differentiated and contested character of contemporary rural spaces. In his consideration of different types of post-productivist spatialities, Halfacree joins a larger literature in rural geography that is questioning the linearity and universality of the productivist-post-productivist regime shift and is revealing a

much more “differentiated” picture unfolding across rural spaces around the globe and within individual countries (Argent, 2002; Murdoch *et al.*, 2003; Wilson, 2001; Wilson and Rigg, 2003).

Table 5.2: The opportunities and barriers to BTTL experimentations in productivist and post-productivist rural spaces in the UK.

	Opportunities	Barriers
Productivism	Land and property access in the countryside is both easy and cheap	Most available and affordable land is marginal and of poor quality.
	Focus on agricultural production aligns with BTTL desire to work the land.	Alternative agricultural methods and farm self-sufficiency do not fit with farm specialisation and energy and capital-intensive agriculture.
	Labour demand on nearby farms provides BTTL farmers with casual work, extra income and learning opportunities.	A strong normative urban-rural dichotomy and representations of “rural idyll” produce experiences of estrangement, marginalisation and feeling “out of place”.
Post-productivism	Essentialist ideas of the “rural” are contested and the countryside is a more heterogeneous and inclusive space towards newcomers.	BTTL have to contend rural space with other “species” of post-productivism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Super-productivism</li> <li>• Consuming idylls</li> <li>• Effaced rurality</li> </ul>
	With industrial agricultural production questioned and alternative methods valorised in policies and discourses, BTTL initiatives gain more public legitimacy and institutional support (e.g. agri-environment schemes).	Risk of recuperation and co-optation by capitalist spatialities.
	Closer links between urban-rural, consumers-producers in alternative farming networks benefit BTTL farmers.	
	A new imaginative space of possibility allows BTTL farmers to interact and engage with mainstream society and directly challenge structural constraints (e.g. low impact development in planning regulations).	



In the context of Italy, Sotte (2013) has proposed three types of rurality since the post-war period: an “agrarian rurality” in the 50s and 60s, an “industrial rurality” in the 70s and 80s and a “post-industrial rurality” since the 90s. His conceptualisation is analogous to a productivist-post-productivist shift, but with an intermediate “industrial” regime involving both a shift in focus towards the development of industrial districts *in* rural areas and a further industrialisation and professionalization of agriculture. However, such linear and universal progression also hides a more diverse picture of rural change driven by historical processes of uneven development and varied responses to globalisation processes by differently positioned rural localities (Woods, 2007). Most importantly in the case of Italy is a deep disparity in rural development trajectories between areas in the North and the South of the country, and between those on the coast and river plains, and those in inland and mountain areas (Figure 5.1).

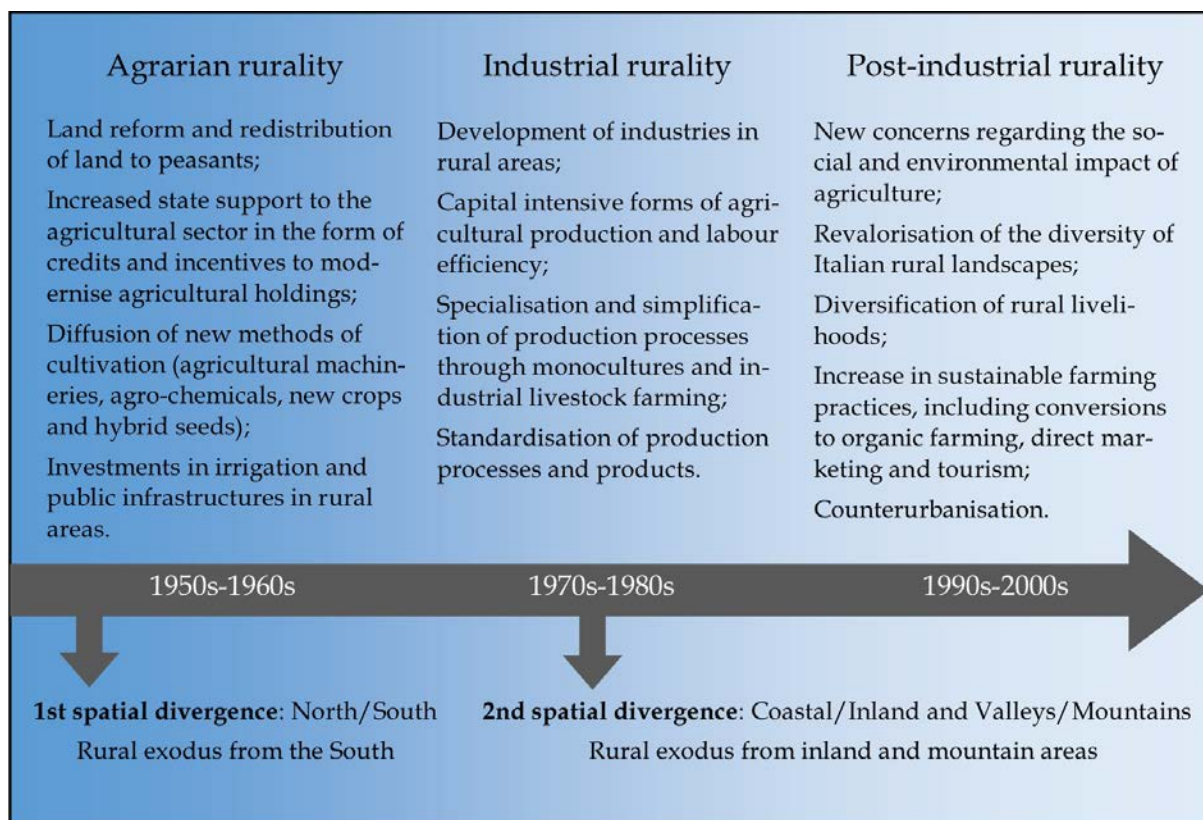


Figure 5.1. Italy’s rural development following Sotte (2013) and highlighting spatial divergences.

To explain the first geographical disparity, scholars have put forward lack of natural resources, low social capital, culture and institutional rigidity (including a tradition of nepotism and clientelism) in southern Italy (Felice, 2010; Pescosolido, 2019).

However, this regional dichotomy can also be traced back to the socio-economic and political marginalisation of the South in Italy's state-building efforts which left southern regions with a polarized land ownership pattern, lack of capital, overpopulation and underemployment (Rodgers, 1970; Spooner, 1984). This resulted in mass migrations and land abandonment across vast areas of the rural South at the end of the nineteenth century up to the post-war era (Pazzagli and Bonini, 2018).

Another development fissure also emerged across the 70s and 80s between rural areas on the coast and in the valleys and those in more remote inland and mountain regions. This development divergence has been captured most famously by Rossi-Doria's peasant metaphor of "polpa e osso" ("flesh and bone"). The "flesh" representing the more supple coastline and river valleys which benefited from modernisation and industrial developments in craft industries, agriculture and tourism; whilst the "bone" constituted by the harsher inland mountain regions suffered immense losses of capital, land and agricultural labour (De Benedictis, 2002). Farmers in the "bone" areas were unable to "modernise" and compete due to the environmental and geographical characteristics of their lands (small plots, harsh mountain terrain, distant from urban centres, processing facilities, markets), and were forced to sell up and migrate, or alternatively remain and take up jobs in industries and other non-agricultural activities in nearby towns and cities, turning agriculture into a *part-time* activity (Moragues-Faus *et al.*, 2013; Pazzagli and Bonini, 2018).

Overall, Italian rural landscapes have been gradually transformed by processes of "depeasantisation" (Wilson and Rigg, 2003) driven by agrarian modernisation and capitalist developments which have subordinated and marginalised the complexity and diversity of peasant landscapes and lifeworlds to the "Northern model" of agricultural development based on land concentration, specialisation, intensification and mechanisation (Arnalte-Alegre and Ortiz-Miranda, 2013, p. 67; Pazzagli and Bonini, 2018; van der Ploeg, 2018). However, they did so in a fragmented and

uneven way, giving rise to different agrarian development trajectories. Using the typology developed by Arnalte-Alegre and Ortiz-Miranda (2013) for the wider Mediterranean region, it is possible to identify three main farming systems in Italy today: (1) large, more professionalised and competitive holdings that reflect many of the characteristics found in Northern Europe (e.g. in the Po valley and other river plains); (2) small-holdings where productive intensification is occurring but production remains small, well integrated into local labour markets, and benefits from nearby cities and tourist destinations (e.g. in the North-East and Centre); and (3) small farms in mountain and inland areas poorly connected to urban centres, where outmigration is resulting in land abandonment and where opportunities for environmental valorisation exist but are poorly developed (in most rural mountain areas in the South).

In the meantime, a new regime of “post-industrial rurality” (i.e. post-productivism) seems to be taking shape (Sotte, 2013) and a gradual (and still numerically marginal) “return to the land” by young people has been reported recently by Italy’s largest Farmer Union (Coldiretti, 2020). However, already in the 1970s and 1980s, a first wave of BTTL farmers composed of former ‘68 students, metropolitan activists from *autonomia operaia* and squatting movements, and foreign in-migrants (especially Germans), took advantage of cheap smallholdings in marginal rural areas to practice organic agriculture and build alternative micro-economies (Agostini, 2015; Koensler, 2020). This dispersed network of BTTL farms has developed over time into local and regional groups, movements and cooperatives which organize alternative farmers markets, coordinate solidarity purchasing groups (e.g. GAS) and engage in a range of other forms of political activism across rural and urban contexts (Potito *et al.*, 2015). (Potito *et al.*, 2015). In 2010, a national umbrella movement composed of these new farmers and their allies (students, artisans, metropolitan food activists, consumers), was formally constituted with the name of “Genuino Clandestino” (GC) (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2 Logo and map of Genuino Clandestino nodes across Italy. Available at <https://genuinoclandestino.it/chisiamo/>

The main goal of the movement is to “propose concrete alternatives to the current capitalist system” through experimental practices in the realm of peasant agroecology and food sovereignty based on horizontality, decentralisation and autonomy<sup>10</sup> (Genuino Clandestino, n.d.). However, as Figure 5.2 shows, the movement reflects the same regional disparities discussed so far, with the majority of nodes being located in the North and Centre of Italy, alongside the coast, and near major urban centres. In more peripheral rural areas, groups of new peasants are composed of more loosely connected associations between individual farmers and urban consumers, have less frequent and less well-organized activities, and face different constraints and opportunities. Moreover, as Dourian (2021, p. 72) has argued, rural places “can be at once an advantage and a constraint”, with local environmental characteristics, socio-cultural norms and practices shaping and constraining new farmers’ efforts.

<sup>10</sup> Unlike other food movements such as Slow Food, GC openly embraces “clandestinity” as a subversive strategy against the strict and unjust European regulatory frameworks that marginalises small farmers and push them to operate in the “clandestine” economy (Koenlsler, 2020). Above all, they contest the framework for food safety and hygiene which was originally meant to regulate big industrial producers and processors of food, but which has affected small farmers the most, making their produce illegal. Trying to abide by such rules is not only practically and economically impossible for small farmers (a system for processing one’s food products in full compliance with legal standards can cost up to 10,000 euros), but it also goes against artisanal production that follows specific practices of care and place-based knowledge and skills (Agostini, 2015; Potito et al., 2015).

### 5.3 Going back-to ...

When we arrived in Piedelmonte, we knew very little about its history, culture and ecology. In fact, even though I grew up in a small town only an hour away from the village, I barely knew it existed. The only reference I had were stories I heard during my childhood of a devastating earthquake that in 1980 had destroyed entire villages in the mountains where Piedelmonte is located.

As argued in the previous chapter, our migration here was far from straightforward and fully intended, involving both unforeseen events, external forces, affective entanglements and their ruptures. However, it did entail a number of rational choices with regards to our destination at least, including family proximity, affordability and particular environmental and geographical characteristics. The former restricted our range to a single region in the South, and our economic resources pushed us towards remote mountain areas within the region. As for the latter, we were primarily concerned with moving to a place that had some existing infrastructural and agricultural “assets” (ideally a house, or at the very least, planning permission, some fruit trees and most importantly water), and that it was close enough (but not too close) to major urban centres. These “requirements” eventually led us to a piece of land in Piedelmonte (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3 The village of Piedelmonte in the mountain landscape.

Admittedly, our first visit there was as important in “affecting” our choice as those more practical requirements. The land is nestled amongst terraced hills of small olive groves, vineyards and patches of broadleaf forests with a wide open view of a river valley on one side, and mountains of lush green forests on the other (Figure 5.4). We were stunned by the beauty of the surrounding landscape and fascinated by the abundance and agro-diversity of the land the previous owners had cultivated. Their stories of “hard labour but sweet fruits” only added to our “idyllic” representations of the place and fuelled our utopic vision of an autonomous peasant community in the middle of the mountains. After years of insecurity and uncertainty at Leah, we were filled with hope and optimism that our visions had now found a *place* to grow. And they did grow, although not in the way we anticipated.



Figure 5.4 The property overseeing the river valley.

However, before I move on to explore more directly how our experience of dwelling in Piedemonte has affected our intentions and dispositions, I offer a situated understanding of the historical and contemporary socio-spatial dynamics that have contributed to this place (re)constitution, and how the place has responded. I do so

by presenting some of the (auto)ethnographic materials I have gathered through direct observations and experiences, conversations with local people, secondary sources and theoretical insights, and by gradually zooming in from Piedelmonte's wider socio-spatial context (5.3.1) to its history (5.3.2), to the local farming context and culture (5.3.3) and finally to the land we moved to (5.3.4). This provides a necessary background to my subsequent analysis, as well as being an important part of the learning process that I will call "place literacy".

### *5.3.1 ... an effacing rurality*

The village of Piedelmonte is located on a mountain of the Southern Apennine range of Italy, and it is at least an hour away from any major urban centres. Its population has been declining steadily since 1951 and a lot of farmland is abandoned.

The land we bought belonged to a local family, but the two sisters it was titled to had been living and working in the North of Italy for many years. The land was of no use to them and their parents were getting old and struggling to look after it, so they decided to sell it. Cristina, the mother, told us she raised four kids on the land while her husband was away working in Venezuela and Germany throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The house on the property was built after the 1980 earthquake, but the family never moved in.

We soon learned that stories of migration and family separation like theirs are not uncommon in Piedelmonte. Many in the village have emigrated looking for work and better living prospects elsewhere, sometimes entire families have relocated, and while some have returned, the majority have not. Between 1951 and 2021, the village has lost half of its population, with 2,270 inhabitants registered in 2021 and an average population age of 49 (Figure 5.5) (ISTAT, 2021). The real population numbers, however, are probably half of that, as many keep their residence in the village after migrating, and people are still leaving today using the social networks that have been built over the years by emigrated families and friends in cities across Italy, Northern Europe and the Americas.

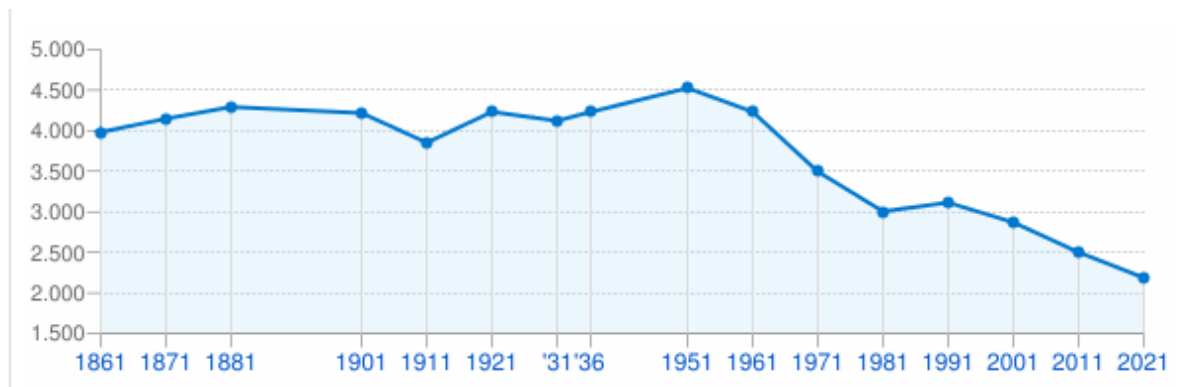


Figure 5.5 Demographic change in Piedemonte since 1861 from national statistics elaborated by TUTTITALIA.IT.

There aren't many employment opportunities in Piedemonte and surrounding areas besides farm work, and most young people I have met and spoken to in the village are not interested in farming and would rather leave to go and work in Italian restaurants in big metropolises like London. Others have taken over their family farming business and work full-time raising cattle, processing wood, making wine or olive oil on their families' smallholdings. However, some struggle to make a living from farming alone, and are forced to migrate seasonally to Switzerland or Germany to work on large vineyard estates, or they take up temporary jobs in construction companies, food processing plants and large polytunnel farming businesses in the lower river valley.

This depopulation and ageing trend has also been accompanied by a gradual abandonment of farmland. In fact, when we first arrived, we were repeatedly approached by local residents asking us if we were interested in buying their land. The majority of would-be sellers were relatives of families that have long left the village, or people that could no longer take care of their smallholdings due to ageing and ill health. According to the 2010 census, the wider territorial unit in which the village is located has seen a 30% decrease in the number of registered farms over a decade, but only a loss of 1.5% of cultivated farmland. This discrepancy can be explained by a process of land concentration, including an almost doubling in the average size of farms (from 2.87 to 4.13 ha), a 34% increase in farms of >10 hectares, and a loss of 44% of smallholdings (0-2 ha).



This reality is also reflected on a micro-scale in our own neighbourhood where eight families live in smallholdings, but only four of them actively farm the land and make a living from it. In fact, during the time of this thesis, one of these families has moved to a house in the main village and given up on raising goats and planting crops. “What’s the point? It’s hard work and you can’t make a living from it anymore”, the mother used to tell me in a frustrated tone. In the meantime, two of the other families have begun buying up nearby plots of abandoned farmland in order to claim more EU subsidies. The rest of the land around our property is either completely abandoned or farmed *part-time* by people living in the main village. These are mainly retired farmers living off their agricultural pensions, or people employed in non-agricultural work that continue to tend to their families’ smallholdings on a part-time basis. They mostly have olive trees and vineyards which they visit and tend to regularly both for pleasure and to produce enough olive oil and wine for their family. However, many are also getting old and worn out by the work that gets harder and more expensive every year and farm labour is getting scarcer in the area. “No one wants to work nowadays” some say, others claim, “it is not paid well enough”.

As it happens, despite its agricultural vocation, the village weekly farmer market has become a ghost of what it used to be, a local producer told me. He is in his late 60s and retired but continues to bring small quantities of produce that he grows on his smallholding to the market every week without fail. The rest of the stands sell cheap clothes, plastic toys, and agricultural produce bought from the main agricultural market in the nearby city. Local commercial and part-time farmers prefer selling their products in bulk to third parties to be resold or processed. For instance, every year during fig season, a number of traders turn up in the village with small vans to buy up crates after crates of figs from local families and farmers and resell them at markets in urban centres across the region and beyond. Like others, we ended up receiving 70 cents per kilo of figs, but they end up fetching 2-3 euros per kg in the city. Nevertheless, many feel it is more convenient for offloading large quantities of produce since every family in the village has at least some land and food growing going on, so there isn’t enough demand locally.

Unsurprisingly, some local residents and farmers expressed a little scepticism about our decision to move there to farm the land. However, others appeared pleased to see young people moving to the village, and local administrators were particularly enthusiastic about our plans to do organic agriculture and maybe build an “agriturismo”<sup>11</sup>. The local council has been wanting to take advantage of the cultural and natural capital of the village to boost the local economy through tourism for some time. Besides its distinctive food culture, most of Piedemonte’s mountains are part of a Nature Park and there are several mountain trails that lead to stunning waterfalls, natural water springs and religious shrines hidden away in caves and forests openings (Figure 5.6). However, most of these mountain paths have been hardly maintained over the years, they lack signs and safety measures like handrails, and most are overgrown or crumbling away. Despite its intentions, the local council is financially dependent upon private capital and regional funding to invest in such initiatives, and the wider community is also divided on the topic of tourism. Many residents and shop owners feel uncertain about the costs and benefits of tourism to the community, and those owning farmland in the mountains fear increased regulations and the potential aggravation of wealth inequalities.

As we mingled in the village, talking to people and listening to their stories, walking past its modern apartment buildings that lay unfinished or unoccupied since the earthquake, all I could think of was a place undergoing “effacement” (Halfacree, 2007b). Its rural character, agricultural identity and affective ties being eroded by processes of outmigration and land abandonment, but I could not understand why or how until I delved deeper into Piedemonte’s troubled history.

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<sup>11</sup> The word agriturismo is a blend of the Italian words for agriculture and tourism. In English it is generally referred to as “farmstay” and it entails a working farm that also receives guests for meals and/or overnight stays. Most of the food served needs to come from the farm itself (or close by), but otherwise farms can offer different types of vacation experiences, from a simple traditional lunch to relaxed holidays retreats.

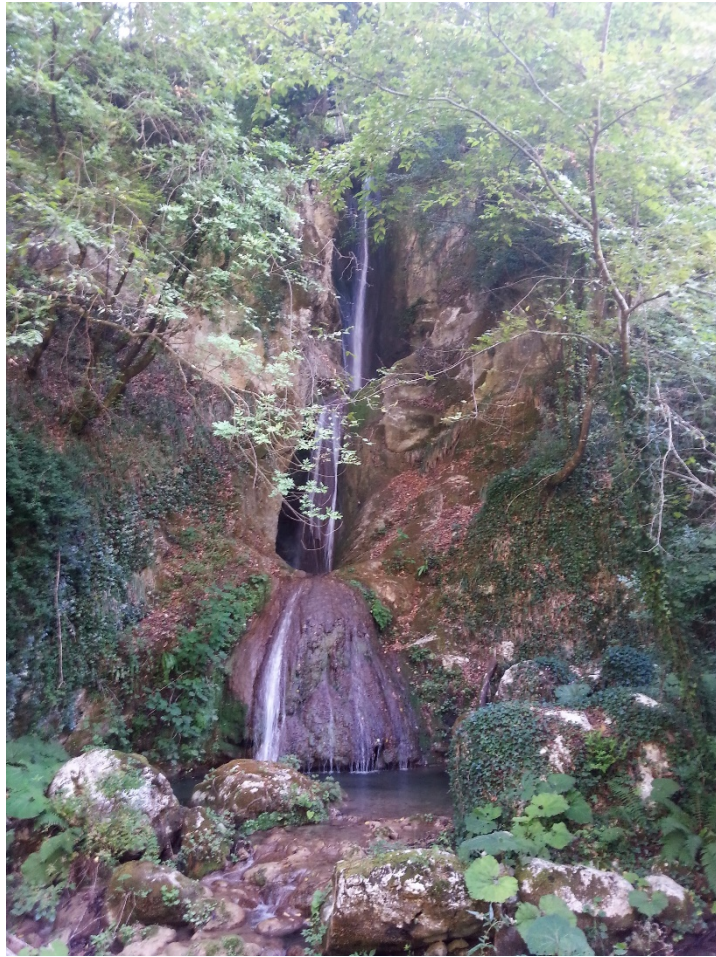


Figure 5.6 One of the waterfalls hidden in the mountains of Piedelmonte.

### 5.3.2 ... *marginal(ised) lands*

*"No one has ever come to this land except as an enemy,  
a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding."*

"Cristo si e fermato ad Eboli" by Carlo Levi (1946)

Like many BTTL farmers before us, we moved to a place that has largely been neglected and abandoned by mainstream society, a place where "others did not want to live in" (Pickerill, 2016, p. 129), for both practical and affective reasons. However, remote rural places like Piedelmonte are not just marginal in the sense of being physically remote: they are often "forgotten places" (Gilmore, 2008, p. 31) that

have been marginalised in the wider geography of capitalist development. Indeed, Piedemonte and the surrounding rural area are classified as a “less favoured area” in the European Rural Development Programme (RDP) (Council Directive 1999/1257/EC, 1999, p. 89). This category includes both mountain areas and their associated “limitations of the possibilities for using the land” due to either their altitude and climatic conditions or the presence of slopes too steep to use machinery; and areas subject to abandonment as a result of low soil productivity or depopulation. Unbeknown to us, Piedemonte ticked both, leading to its classification as a “rural area with overall development problems” in Italy’s own application of the EU regulation.

The causes and forces behind Piedemonte’s “development problems” and “rural effacement” are multiple and complex, but they can be related to historical processes of socio-economic and political marginalisation that have affected rural mountain areas in the South of Italy since the country unification in 1861<sup>12</sup>. Since then, regions in the South of the country have been subject to persistent state intervention to solve what has been historically known as the “Southern Problem” (“*Questione Meridionale*”). This is a profound socio-economic gap between the North and South of the country that has often been explained as the latter’s inherent weaknesses. These include a “natural” lack of resources and locational disadvantages for industrial development, and the legacy of its former ruling monarchy which left a “backward” agricultural economy and a pre-capitalist society organised around the family and regulated by tradition and religion (Spooner, 1984). This discursive and material production of regional inferiority has also been accompanied by cultural - and sometimes even ethnic - prejudices towards southern people, presented as superstitious, lazy, ignorant, backward, corrupt and desperately needing “modern progress”. According to critical and decolonial readings, the construction of the “Southern Problem” was a form of colonial orientalism that was structurally and

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<sup>12</sup> Before the unification, the Italian peninsula was divided into numerous kingdoms and states. The largest one was the “Kingdom of the Two Sicilies” which spanned the entirety of the southern peninsula, from the Papal States to Sicily, covering what is now the South of Italy, also known as “*Mezzogiorno*” or “*Meridione*”.

ideologically fundamental to Italy's state-building efforts and capitalist development (Orizzonti meridiani, 2014; Schneider, 1998), and a key factor contributing to "the development of under-development" in the South (Spooner, 1984, p. 12).

Indeed, the unification period was a turbulent time that saw both widespread social unrest in the form of banditry and the first "rural exodus" of southern Italians. The former is historically known as "brigandage", and it was a form of armed and organised guerrilla that reached civil war proportions across southern regions during this time (Guerra, 2010). While "briganti" - as they are known in Italian - were a "multicultural" group of people with diverse motives, including soldiers and loyalists of the former kingdom, prisoners, foreign mercenaries and clergymen (Iacovella, 2013, p. 196); the majority were landless and illiterate peasants demanding land reforms. Indeed, according to Pescosolido (2019), these rebellions are best understood in terms of grievances that were rooted in deep inequalities and decades of tensions between *cafoni* and *galantuomini* (peasants and landowners) which became accentuated with the unification. Many pictures of brigands such as those in Figure 5.7 were taken by photographers contracted by the new government in an effort to both identify them and carry out a propaganda campaign based on fear and defamation (Guerra, 2010). During this turbulent time, the mountains of Piedemonte, with their dense vegetation and hidden caves, became important sites of refuge and resistance for groups of briganti, and the figure of the brigand is (not uncontroversially) part of the historical and cultural identity of the village. Here and in many other mountain rural communities across the South, briganti often represent popular heroes that have fought for freedom and land against foreign invaders and local despots.



Figure 5.7 Pictures of brigands circulated by the Italian State. On the left: members of the brigand band led by Agostino Sacchitiello (in the centre), a shepherd and ex-soldier of the Royal Bourbon Army (image from [vallata.org](http://vallata.org)). On the right: Michelina De Cesare (infamously) known as “druda” (from the celtic “druid”) to recall her rebellious spirit (image from [visselli.it](http://visselli.it)). Both images are public domain.

After the rebellions were violently quenched – with estimates ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 people killed in the first decade only (1861-1871) (Ciocca, 2013; Molfese, 1974) – many rural villages in the South were left with wounded and disintegrated communities living in conditions of deprivation, dispossession and discontent. Hence, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost 8 million people left the South of Italy for Europe and the Americas, the majority of whom were landless and illiterate peasants from remote rural areas (Cortese, 2020). With the promise of land, bread and work, many boarded steamboats and trains to become the labour force for projects of colonisation and industrialisation in faraway countries. The graffiti I have captured on a trip to a rural village that is even more geographically remote than Piedemonte, are a powerful reminder of the scale of displacement and loss suffered by people in these remote mountain communities during this time (Figure 5.8 and 5.9).



Figure 5.8 Street art depicting the trans-oceanic diaspora of Southern Italians in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The top right writings reads: “Colonisation - free concession of land to agricultural workers. Departures from Naples to Montevideo every month”.



Figure 5.9 This graffiti evocatively depicts a trade partnership between Italy and Belgium in 1946 that drove 200,000 Italians to work in the coal mines of Northern Europe in appalling conditions.

Outmigration slowed down during the war period and numerous state policies and massive financial investments were subsequently implemented in the South to change the prevailing latifundist agrarian economy, create infrastructure, eradicate illiteracy and combat organized crime (Felice, 2010; Pescosolido, 2019). However, these were largely ineffective in remote mountain areas where living conditions remained poor with little to no infrastructure and services, and where the redistribution of land created parcels too small to provide enough economic income for a family, let alone compete in the growing European agricultural market.

Moreover, mountain places like Piedimonte were geographically and environmentally unsuitable to large-scale cultivation and mechanisation as well as being distant and badly connected to agricultural markets (Pazzagli and Bonini, 2018). Hence, between 1951 and 1971, 1,000 people left the village of Piedimonte for the growing cities and industrial districts of Italy and beyond. However, the factors



driving rural people to urban centres during this period were socio-cultural as well as economic. New urban modes of inhabitation and consumption were being promoted through the introduction of mass media, which together with better infrastructural services and rights (free time, healthcare, pensions, etc.), and the promise of a secure income in industrial jobs unaffected by the unpredictability of the seasons, drove many to leave the misery of farm life behind (Pazzagli and Bonini, 2018). People in remote places like Piedemonte experienced their rural lives as a form of social inferiority, and so while they left their homes reluctantly, they also had residual hope of finding better living prospects and opportunities elsewhere.

Outmigration in Piedemonte was tragically (and only temporarily) stopped on the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1980, when the earth beneath the village shook for about 90 seconds. What became known as the “Irpinia-Basilicata earthquake”<sup>13</sup> was “the strongest seismic event to hit the Southern Apennines in the last 100 years” (Porfido *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). The entire village of Piedemonte was razed to the ground and hundreds of people lost their lives. Here, like in other rural mountain villages hit by the earthquake, no effort was made to try and recover the material and cultural heritage of the village or maintain its original urban planning during the reconstruction<sup>14</sup>. Natural stone buildings, wooden floors, and narrow cobbled streets and alleyways gave way to reinforced concrete, wide roads and oversized areas for new housing development that drastically altered the material fabric of the village and, with it, memories and affective ties built over generations were lost. After the earthquake *and* the reconstruction, more people left Piedemonte without looking back.

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<sup>13</sup> With a magnitude of 6.9 Mw, it caused the death of 3,000 people and the destruction of 800 localities across Italy, but primarily in mountain and rural areas of the South (Porfido *et al.*, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Scholarly and media reports have highlighted a mixture of top-down decisions, exported urban socio-economic models, financial speculation, political corruption and the involvement of criminal organisations behind the failure and mismanagement of the reconstruction (Forino *et al.*, 2015; Littlewood, 1985).

### 5.3.3 ... *productivist agri-cultural landscapes*

Despite processes of outmigration and farmland abandonment, smallholdings continue to predominate Piedemonte's farming landscapes: 338 farms are officially registered as a business in the village dedicated to permanent woody crops (olive trees, followed by fruit trees and grape vines) and livestock (especially sheep and cattle). The majority of them are on privately owned land and use almost exclusive family labour; and they are conducted by an equal percentage of men and women. Beyond registered farms, most people in Piedemonte also engage in what is referred to as part-time farming (Ortiz Miranda, 2013).

Some agrarian and rural scholars see in landscapes of smallholdings and part-time farming like those in Piedemonte the potential for the emergence of a new rural paradigm based on diversified forms and strategies for rural livelihoods beyond agricultural production. However, these landscapes do not straightforwardly equate with agricultural multifunctionality or pluriactivity. In fact, in Mediterranean countries they are more often constituted by "part-time *non-pluriactive* holdings" (Moragues-Faus *et al.*, 2013, p. 26), that is, smallholdings that are too small to provide full-time employment and economic income, forcing farmers to rely upon agricultural and non-agricultural work *elsewhere*, or on national welfare and international subsidy systems.

In Piedemonte, these farming landscapes are the direct result of the historical processes of marginalisation and uneven economic development discussed earlier. Those families that did not migrate during Italy's agrarian and industrial rural regimes responded to agrarian modernisation and its capitalist market economy in two main ways. Unable to compete and survive on agricultural production alone due to a lack of capital and geographical and environmental limitations, many took up jobs in industries and non-agricultural activities in nearby towns, turning agriculture into a part-time activity. Others responded by attempting the intensification route and joining the agricultural treadmill. However, being limited by geographical and environmental characteristics, and with large polytunnel businesses multiplying and expanding in the lower river valley, their modernisation

became a “race to the bottom” as Marsden (2003) put it (quoted in Moragues-Faus et al., 2013, p. 11), with many farmers becoming reliant upon welfare systems and EU subsidies to survive.

Moreover, even though Piedemonte’s farmscapes never did become fully productivist, local farmers have gradually adopted the technological, administrative and financial apparatuses of agrarian modernisation and its underpinning productivist rationality. Indeed, crop specialisation, intensification, mechanisation and chemical consumption are widespread in Piedemonte, and productivity (in terms of crop yields) and efficiency (in terms of costs and labour) remain central concerns for most local people, guiding the way in which they manage their land. At the landscape level, this productivist rationality manifests in tidily kept and regularly arranged monocultures of olive trees and vineyards that allow for easy management and harvesting; and at the practical level, in regular mechanical interventions and in the frequent and indiscriminate use of synthetic chemicals to increase productivity and efficiency. The former involves either the systematic tilling of the soil or a comprehensive clearing of all non-valuable vegetation (e.g. brambles, grass, shrubs, wild flowers, etc.); while the latter comprises primarily synthetic fertilisers (NPK) and a pesticide known vernacularly as “verderame” or “Bordeaux mixture”. This is a copper-based bactericide and fungicide that is widely used locally for the treatment of a number of mildew infections that have become persistent and endemic on European varieties of grapes (Figure 5.10). Another “green revolution” technology that was introduced during agrarian modernisation which holds a particularly significant presence in local agri-cultural landscapes and practices is the “motozappa” (Figure 5.11). This is a petrol-driven, pedestrian-operated tiller with a force equivalent to three horses that is able to chew its way across the rockiest of grounds and climb the steepest of slopes. This machine holds a particular importance in farming communities like Piedemonte because it freed people from the dreadful work of manually digging and cultivating the hard, rocky soil of these mountains, and it allowed them to cultivate land that was inaccessible to large tractors and ploughs.



Figure 5.10 Grapes that have not been treated with verderame shrivel into ghastly looking raisins.



Figure 5.11 Bill running a motozappa to break down cow manure.

Hence, over time, productivist ethos and practices have gradually seeped into local agri-cultural landscape, with “tidiness”, yields and many industrial technologies like the motozappa holding a significant social and cultural value in the community. They have become part and parcel of local farmers’ identities, representing their ability and skills, a way of obtaining social status and maintaining one’s reputation and self-esteem as a “good farmer” on these mountains (Burton, 2004). We know so because we have openly rejected some (e.g. verderame) and reframed others (e.g. productivity in terms of biodiversity-friendly farming) in our land management practices, and we have been openly dismissed or criticised by some for it. Similarly, not many farmers could give us a reason for why they manage the land in such a way, except for being “the traditional way of doing things here”, suggesting agricultural productivism has become culturally entrenched in local farmers’ knowledge and identities.

However, when it comes to commercial farmers, they are also obligated by regulations to maintain their land in a “productive state” in order to receive EU subsidies, which in practical terms means either tilling the soil or clearing all “unproductive” vegetation, i.e. biodiversity. Even organic producers have to and they are also limited by regulations in the type of methods and products they can use. For instance, a neighbour who recently converted to organic production told us that he is prevented from using animal manure on his land as it is not “certified” by approved bodies, and if caught using it, he risks losing his organic certification. Similarly, while copper-based compounds have been recognised to be highly toxic for farm workers, soil and aquatic life by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) (Arena et al., 2018), they are considered to be “indispensable” (Commission Regulation 473, 2002, p. 22) for the survival and viability of European viticulture, so they are still allowed in both conventional *and* organic agriculture. Hence, local farmers have become both culturally *and* economically tied to external actors and inputs in their farming practices, including capital from EU subsidies, regional institutions or private financial credits, knowledge from agronomists and farmers’ associations, and agricultural resources like fertilisers, seeds and machineries from big agro-tech companies.

#### 5.3.4 ... a cracked earth

The land we bought is a two hectares smallholdings with two small vineyards and about 200 olive trees mixed with a variety of fruit trees, including different varieties of cherries, plums, apples, pears, figs, apricots, mulberries, and a number of walnut and hazelnut trees. It is practically a forest of fruit on a hilly and terraced landscape with a few flat and open areas suitable for planting crops (Figure 5.12). Our neighbours advised us straightaway that farming this land and its clay soils is really hard work, but we didn't get discouraged, and with spring approaching we dived into preparing the soil and planting some crops (Figure 5.13). Following permaculture principles, we were going to get to know the land through careful observation and by doing (Mollison and Holmgren, 1991).



Figure 5.12 Terraced landscape of olive and fruit trees.



Figure 5.13 Preparing beds to plant crops.

However, something didn't feel quite right from the start. Hard physical labour is well and good, but burying your hands in the soil was more agony than pleasure. An act as gentle as transplanting young seedlings would result in chipped nails, shuttered cuticles and bloody fingers. Moreover, our farming experience the first year was a puzzle: we harvested lots of fruit but most of our vegetable crops struggled to grow or got attacked by different insects. For instance, the strawberries and courgettes barely survived into the beginning of summer, the carrots and aubergines hardly grew, the onions bolted straight away, the broad beans and French beans got attacked by black aphids, and we lost all of our potato crop to the Colorado potato beetle. Moreover, in the middle of the summer and after only a month of drought, deep cracks began showing in the earth throughout the land, some almost two centimetres wide and almost 30 centimetres deep. In the winter, the opposite happened, with the rain quickly saturating the soil and turning the fields into ferocious rivers (Figure 5.14). Walking in the wet clay soil was like marching with heavy concrete boots.



Figure 5.14: On the left: the land showing deep cracks and signs of salinization in the summer; and on the right: the land flooded in winter.

The following spring, multiple fruit trees began dying for no apparent reason, until we noticed large scars at the bottom of tree trunks likely caused by the use of the motozappa near the base of trees (Figure 5.15), and different fungi, bacterial diseases and insect infestations eating them from the inside out<sup>15</sup>. So we began paying attention to the diversity of plants - the so-called “weeds” - growing across the land to see what they could tell us. Besides numerous bald patches where nothing actually grew, there were thistles (primarily *Cirsium arvense*), borage (*Borago officinalis*) and a wide variety of “yellow flowers” - known locally with the name of “chicories”<sup>16</sup> - which suggest a highly disturbed and nutritionally poor soil (Figure

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<sup>15</sup> Powdery mildew on grapes (*Peronospera* sp. and *Oidium*), the codling and goat moth on apple trees (*Cydia pomonella* and *Cossus cossus*), cotton root rot fungus and wax scale infestations on figs (*Phymatotrichum* sp. and *Ceroplastes ruscion*), fruit flies and canker on olive (*Bactrocera oleae* and *Pseudomonas syringae*), pocket plum gall (*Taphrina pruni*), peach leaf curl (*Taphrina deformans*) are only some of those that we have been able to identify.

<sup>16</sup> We gave them the general name of “yellow flowers” because they all look very much alike: basal rosette of leaves, hairy stems and yellow flowers, but they are different varieties of the



5.16). Similarly, the very pretty love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*) and wild carrot (*Daucus carota*) were the most abundant in the summer, but also a sign of very arid and poor soils. Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*), couch grass (*Elymus repens*) and plantain (*Plantago* spp.) were widespread and indicated compacted and low fertile soil, while dock (*Rumex* sp.), coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*) and lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*) indicate wet and poorly drained soil.



Figure 5.15 Scars on the bottom of tree trunks.

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dandelion/chicory tribe within the daisy family. They have been an important source of food in Italy's peasant tradition for centuries and locals forage them regularly in the spring and autumn when they are a young rosette of leaves.



Figure 5.16 “Yellow flowers” and borage growing in one of the vineyards amongst bald patches of earth.

Moreover, we had not encountered any earthworms, woodlice or any other soil life in the preparation of our vegetable gardens. They could not have survived the devouring blades of the motozappa, or the consequent exposure to the beaming hot sun of the summer. In fact, we slowly realised that there was no topsoil left at all: all organic matter had been eroded and consumed. “We’re basically farming *subsoil!*!” I used to shout at Bill in desperation. We gradually began to build a picture of the state of the land and we came to the painful conclusion that we were dealing with “a cracked earth” as Bill called it: a desertified land with a *biologically dead* soil. Not much life can thrive on desertified land<sup>17</sup>, never mind trying to farm it organically.

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<sup>17</sup> Desertification implies a process of land degradation that includes “the loss of the structural and functional integrity of soils, vegetation, other biota, and those ecological, biogeochemical, and hydrological processes that operate therein” (Reynolds, 2013, p. 479). It is basically an ecological system that has been simplified through the loss of biodiversity and therefore it does not have the same structural and functional characteristics of the previous one.

Local people told us that these lands are not particularly suitable for agriculture, except maybe for olive trees and grape vines, and they have repeatedly warned us that farming them was going to be hard. We did not disagree: we felt their tough and demanding character on our own aching bodies and bleeding fingers, and we experienced their low productivity in our multiple failed attempts at growing food. However, we didn't believe them to be "naturally" poor and unproductive lands; after all, they have been cultivated for millennia and they have sustained people for as long. Arid climatic conditions, soil type and topography have certainly made these lands more "naturally" sensitive and vulnerable to land degradation processes such as erosion, but the uncultivated soil of the mountains is more than a foot deep; it is dark, soft, full of moisture and bursting with soil life. Local people even have a name for it: "*terra puglia*".

## 5.4 The place of BTTL initiatives

### 5.4.1 *Going back-to-a-place of slow violence*

Like many rural places with a peasant history, Piedemonte's identity used to be rooted in the land. Dry stone walls carefully crafted on its terraced hills, shepherds' huts clinging onto sheer mountain faces, and olive trees hundreds of years old dotting its farmscapes suggests its mountains and hills have been cultivated and inhabited for millennia. Only a century ago, the lands around Piedemonte would have been occupied by hundreds of peasant families working the land. Now stone walls are slowly crumbling away, shepherds' huts in the mountains lay idle, and ancient olive groves are gradually being reclaimed by regenerating patches of forest. However, over time we have learned not to romanticise this place: life here, for the past 150 years at least, has been no "rural idyll"; and even now, it doesn't call for much celebration.

The village of Piedemonte has been subject to processes of uneven capitalist development that have dispossessed its people, desertified – very literally – its lands, and triggered a process of "rural effacement" (Halfacree, 2007b) through depopulation, land degradation and abandonment. The violence of this effacement

has targeted both its human and more-than-human communities, but it has not been spectacular and immediate; it has been gradual and out of the sight of many - including us for a while. It is best described by Nixon's (2011, p. 2) notion of "slow violence": "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all".

Indeed, after the bloody and intense brutality of the unification period, the imposition of a capitalist model of agrarian and industrial development has *slowly* but effectively dispossessed and displaced Piedemonte's peasant communities from their place of belonging and lifeworlds. Displacement here unfolded in two main ways: emigration of entire families to foreign lands, and a kind of "displacement without moving" resulting from "the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (Nixon, 2011, p. 19).

In less than a century, capitalist agricultural development has destroyed the "bioinfrastructure" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014) that had sustained Piedemonte's peasant communities for millennia and it has slowly erased the affective ties, cultural meanings and place-based knowledges that had been built over generations. However imperfect and vulnerable, Piedemonte's semi-subsistence peasant landscapes were tightly integrated with local agroecologies and adapted to their rhythms and needs. Productivist rationalities and introduced technologies (e.g. the *motozappa*, chemical fertilisers and *verderame*) have disrupted the co-evolution of knowledge between farmers and their agroecological environments and they have gradually supplanted locally-adapted knowledge and practices such as fallowing, crop rotations, polycultures and, most importantly, the use of animal manure that had long sustained soil fertility on these lands (Forino *et al.*, 2015). They have also made local farmers increasingly (but in varying degrees) dependent upon a number of external actors and inputs, and this relation of dependency has not only severely diminished farmers' autonomy (van der Ploeg, 2018) but also affected the way most of them value, know and relate to their land. Indeed, many perceive their land to be "naturally" poor and they believe the tough clay soil is a normal and unavoidable

condition of their farming landscapes, and not the outcome of land degradation processes.

The soils of Piedemonte's farmscapes have thus been literally "gutted of their capacity to sustain by an externalizing, instrumental logic" (Nixon, 2011, p. 19) and this is now culturally sedimented into local farming identities and practices, hindering processes and practices of ecological reparation. Local farmers are both economically *and* culturally tied to external inputs of capital, knowledge, technology and resources and they are unable to respond effectively to land degradation processes due to cultural barriers and a loss in agronomic knowledge(s) and autonomy. Slow violence in Piedemonte has thus become pervasive, both "embedded and entrenched", "intimate and institutional", "part and parcel of daily life, social relations, culture, and institutions" (Pain and Cahill, 2021, pp. 4-5), and therefore especially challenging to see and address.

The character of this violence became more conspicuous to us once we moved to Piedemonte and began paying attention to the ruins left, and once we began "*listening to its screams and feeling the pain*" ourselves. I employ this expression to both capture our embodied experience of dwelling in a place of slow violence and make sense of how our engagement with its human and more-than-human communities has shaped our goals and ambitions and affected the way we think about and relate to this place. I have coined it from a leaflet circulated by GC members for the "Marcia per la terra e la vita" ("March for the Earth and Life") that I attended in Florence in September 2021<sup>18</sup>. The leaflet read: "As peasants we hear *the screams of pain* that thunderously emerges from our fields, from the seas, from the rivers, from the mountains and its animals, in search for liberty and justice. Every day we touch the effects of the ecological catastrophe with our own hands, we watch the capitalist folly destroy territories near and far in the name of profit. We witness the

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<sup>18</sup> The march was an event organised by GC to welcome the arrival of the Zapatista convoy to Europe but also to protest the G-20 Global Summit on Agriculture that took place on the day in the city of Florence. The march symbolically turned its back to the city and walked towards "Mondeggi Bene Comune", a community of food activists and agroecological farmers that have been squatting and farming a large and abandoned public land estate in the rural periphery of the city for almost ten years.

dispossession and disintegration of entire communities, the systematic appropriation of places of sharing, knowledge, support and care.”

However, the process of listening to and feeling the ongoing effects of slow violence has not been smooth and linear, or for that matter finished. Indeed, some of the sounds were discordant and distorted, and for a while they did not make any sense: “Why are farmers tilling a highly degraded soil that is prone to erosion?”, “How can they use verderame and industrial fertilisers and still consider their farming practices organic?”. It was soon obvious that the land had been degraded through decades of unsuitable land management practices, but the picture was more complex than “evil farmers intentionally abusing the land with their machines and chemicals”. Most commercial farmers are economically dependent upon subsidies, they are obligated to comply with regulations, and they are encouraged by “official experts” to use some products over others. And yet, they are also not passive subjects or victims of harms and injustices. They know the chemicals they use are harmful or they wouldn’t wear protective clothing when they spray; and most part-time farmers are not reliant upon agricultural production for a living, nor are they obligated to abide by strict regulations in the products they use or the way they manage their lands.

Trying to make sense of what is going on with the land and the place we moved to has been a slow and piecemeal process. It has required spending time in the community in order to draw out less visible harms and injustices, listening to people’s stories and experiences, trying to make sense of contradictions, revisiting our associations and relationships and establishing reciprocities and obligations. It has also involved a lot of research as part of this thesis and beyond it, as well as our own exposure to experiences of insecurity and marginality. Ultimately, this process has enriched our understanding and intensified our commitment to this place, but it has also raised a lot of questions and doubts about who we are and what we are doing here.

#### *5.4.2 Listening to the screams, feeling the pain*

When we first arrived in Piedemonte, we assumed a degree of convergence between our vision and goals and the place we just moved to. After all, marginal geographies like forests, swamps and mountains that are unsuitable to becoming a playground for the rich or a plantation economy have been invaluable historically to people seeking radical transformation and liberatory possibilities (Scott, 2009; Winston, 2021). Piedemonte's mountains have themselves been places of shelter and refuge for communities escaping from invading marauders and tyrannical powers. They have harboured fugitive slaves and dispossessed peasants during Roman times, and they have also been the site of peasant rebellions and insurrectionary movements during and after the unification. However, over time we learned that remoteness and marginality do not straightforwardly translate into emancipatory possibilities, and smallholdings and part-time agriculture do not necessarily mean environmentally benign farming practices. In Piedemonte we have encountered a number of challenges that we did not anticipate, including environmental degradation, productivist farming cultures, socio-spatial marginalisation and structural barriers.

We had no specific plan when we arrived in Piedemonte, except for the intention to build "a consubstantial relationship with the land". We sought to achieve this by practising a sustainable form of agriculture and becoming self-reliant on food, energy and water resources, and by sharing our alternative knowledge and practices with local people to work towards food sovereignty and community autonomy. However, we did not know the land we just moved to, and our idealised "forest of fruit" turned out to be an Anthropocenic farmscape: a simplified agro-ecosystem characterised by soil degradation and a severe loss of biodiversity. We encountered a "cracked earth" and we listened to its screams of hunger in our own hopeless efforts to feed ourselves, and we felt its pain in on our own aching bodies and bleeding fingers. The painful realisation of the urgent need for ecological restoration deeply affected our moods and motivations, and made us question our goals and intentions. As we struggled to grow any food for the first few years, our intention to achieve

food self-sufficiency begun to feel like a distant dream, never mind trying to supply the local community. And even if we did - if the land wasn't so badly degraded and we could grow enough food for us *and* some surplus - we quickly realised that there wasn't going to be much demand for our produce in the village. Most people have access to land, food growing and foraging is widespread, and a good portion of people's food comes from informal exchanges of produce between friends and families.

However, most of this food *is not* grown organically and most of the land is highly degraded, so we saw an opportunity to share our alternative farming knowledge and practices with the community. The poor state of the land we encountered made us even more eager and committed to spreading our environmental knowledge and values in the community. Hence, during conversations with local people, I would often draw attention to the state of the soil, its lack of organic matter and biodiversity, and I would talk about the mysteries of soil biology and the miracles that compost-making, animal manure and mulch could perform on Piedemonte's soils. We assumed they would be something local people would value, but most farmers were largely uninterested, many appeared confused, and others were highly sceptical of our advices.

At first, our own optimism and passion, coupled with the community's own welcoming reception, blinded us to our position as newcomers in the community and how it would affect the way people perceived us, our knowledge and practices. For example, most people initially assumed we were a rich English couple who had bought a piece of land to build a holiday home, so many would visit and talk to us looking for work rather than farming advice. We were often referred to as "the English couple" even though I grew up in a nearby town and spoke Italian, but I was foreign enough to them in the way I spoke and carried myself. Indeed, I used to use a lot of scientific jargon and I would also speak a very "clean" Italian rather than the local dialect. However, perceived and real differences went beyond nationality and language: we had different values, histories and experiences, which made it extremely challenging to find any "common ground" (Chatterton, 2006).



For a start, we are an unmarried couple with no kids in what is a very traditional Catholic community that believes in traditional family values and strict gender roles. Men here are both the head of the family and the more public figure when it comes to community relations. Hence, in the beginning, people would often approach and talk to Bill first, but the only person they could communicate with was a very young and opinionated woman who had no formal experience or family background in farming. I could feel that many were uncomfortable speaking with me at first, and many questioned and showed reservations about everything I had to say about farming. Once a neighbour looked and pointed at the metre tall weeds growing across our land and told me quite bluntly and in a disapproving tone: “what you are doing is not agriculture!”. I felt extremely upset and tried to legitimise what we were doing in terms of soil and biodiversity restoration to no avail. I later realised that with our wildly kept land, our refusal to use chemicals, and our insistent talks about ecological restoration, we were indirectly (and sometimes directly) contesting their knowledge and practices, and in so doing, we were also questioning their social and cultural identity as “good farmers” (Burton, 2004)

On another occasion, a local made a joke about us becoming “the new landlords of the village”, which we found extremely disturbing until we learned about the history of dispossession and betrayal by foreign powers and expert elites that remote mountain communities like Piedemonte have experienced. We had been thinking of holding seminars and workshops on soil restoration for the farming community, but we scratched the idea after realising that we would be imposing our own “expert” knowledge in a potentially counterproductive and patronising way. As in other parts of the world (Lyons, 2020), we also found a more general cultural attitude among farmers best captured by the expression “I’ll believe it when I see it”. Anything we said and did, like suggesting that the soil was degraded and that using animal manure and mulch would improve their harvests, was of no consequence until we could show them that it worked. And for a long time we could not, and we felt both isolated and disempowered, as Halfacree (2006) has observed for BTTL farmers in productivist rural landscapes in the UK.

On top of our unsuccessful dialogues with the local community, we also quickly began to feel economically strained. We were trying to make a living from a severely degraded land while also trying to restore the house to make our life more comfortable; we had almost no tools and besides my PhD scholarship, we had no economic resources to rely upon. We hadn't even joined the agricultural treadmill and we were already feeling "the squeeze" (Ward, 1993). So we felt compelled to look for regional and EU subsidies to fund our farming efforts and perhaps "diversify" our goals beyond agricultural production. Formalising ourselves as a farming business would have also gained us some legitimacy with the local farming community. However, we found a politically corrupt, culturally rigid and structurally unjust institutional and policy system that would not support small farmers like us, or our "green" intentions (Mincyte, 2011).

First, and despite having a degree and multiple masters, I struggled to navigate the bureaucratic landscape behind the funds, which in itself is particularly concerning given that the average level of education in the farming population is much lower than mine. Second, I learned that their availability was for a large part dependent upon having the right connections in the right places - knowing *who* to speak to and *how* in regional offices and agricultural institutions - and spending a lot of time, money and effort on PR rather than writing actual applications or farming. Finally, I found subsidies to be neither economically fair nor consistent with green discourses and policy objectives, resulting in costly obligations for small farmers and contradictory results. For instance, the most accessible EU funds remain the CAP single payment subsidies which are assigned according to land size and agricultural production. Our proposals based on polyculture farming systems or unconventional "agriturismo" with off-the-grid renewable energies and compost toilets, were often met with blank stares in agricultural offices, or they would get dismissed as being incompatible with the standards and ambit of current regulations. One hectare of potatoes was the main alternative suggested to us by agricultural institutions in order to receive subsidies.

As for organic production, small farmers are required to comply with legally complex and financially costly bureaucratic procedures and regulations to acquire their certification without actually having to change their farming practices much at all. For instance, if you are certified organic but want to receive your CAP money, you still have to keep your land in a “productive state” and clear all “unproductive” vegetation. Moreover, organic farmers are allowed to use copper-based pesticides which accumulate in the soil and kill all soil life, but they are not allowed to use locally available animal manure or home-made compost on their land. Hence, during our brief engagement with agricultural institutions I realised the playing field was not level and was highly contradictory, and I worried we were going to go in with no money and come out with even less, while being restricted on the type of “organic” products and techniques we could use to restore the land.

#### *5.4.2 Dwelling on our intentionality: developing place literacy*

After five years of dwelling in Piedemonte, we have come to realise that we are not some “new pioneers” (Jacob, 1997) dealing with a blank slate that we can mould into existence just because we intend to. We are strangers in a land embedded in violent and unjust systems, newcomers to a place with a deep and complex history and sedimented patterns of being-doing-knowing; isolated *but not* cut off from the forces that have marginalised it. After five years, we are still trying to find our compass, trying to listen and feel *with* its lands and people, trying to develop what can be called “place literacy”. The notion of place literacy does not represent a form of “local” or “tacit knowledge” (Wilbur, 2014). It is more of a *learning process* predicated on the notion of dwelling *in* and *with* a place, acknowledging its agency and committing to its flourishing, and it is an essential step for growing a consubstantial relationship with the land.

Developing place literacy means recognising that places are not abstract surfaces on which we inscribe our wills, or passive backgrounds on which our intentionality plays out, but dynamic relational networks of human and more-than-human beings that teach, speak and create (Barker and Pickerill, 2012; Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2016;

Larsen and Johnson, 2016). Hence, developing place literacy requires conceding some loss of sovereign agency relative to a place's entangling forces, but also an obligation to its flourishing through practices of responsibility and care. Hence, our initial goals and intentions were not so much wrong or hopeless, they were literally *mis-placed*: disconnected and removed from the more-than-human agencies and relational networks of the place we moved to. We were, in other words, *place-illiterate*. But it was not simply a matter of keeping our goals open and provisional in order to account for the environmental, structural and cultural barriers we encountered (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Swain, 2019). We had to attune our intentions and plans to the place *own* needs and potentialities in order to understand what the place could afford us to do and how we should go about it.

As we dwelled on the land and we began paying care-full attention to its agroecology, to the elements and its soil, we learned that our intention of building a consubstantial relation with the land by practising sustainable agriculture and becoming self-reliant on food was absurd. The land was literally starving, it was screaming for food and water itself. We were not starting on equal ground in our reciprocal relation: we had an obligation to give before we could even think of taking something back. The "yellow flowers" and all the other weeds on the land were not mere "bioindicators" showing *us* that the soil was severely compacted, highly disturbed and lacking organic matter. They are the land's *own way* of regenerating itself. With their strong taproots, yellow flowers, borage, thistle and dock penetrate deep into the compacted soil, opening it up and drawing up nutrients and water from deep underground. Similarly, the rhizomatic roots of couch grass and bindweed form an extensive and intricate network of carbon and water storage that also aerates and protects the soil from erosion. The land literally spoke to us and showed us how to assist by discontinuing practices of soil disturbance and recreating the vital bio-geo-chemical cycles that had been severed by decades of tilling, erosion, carbon depletion and biological impoverishment. The land re-directed and re-focused our goals and efforts from trying to achieve food self-

sufficiency to soil and biodiversity restoration, it guided us on what it needed, while reminding us of our *shared* needs and vulnerabilities.

Moreover, through our engagement with the land's human and more-than-human networks we learned that slow violence in Piedemonte has permeated through both human and non-human bodies; it is both structural and mundane, intimate and institutional, cultural and material, requiring building of solidarities and alliances with both humans and non-humans in Piedemonte and beyond. Modern capitalist ways of being a farmer and doing agriculture are materially and culturally sedimented in its agro-ecologies and agri-cultural landscapes and therefore practices of community and ecological regeneration cannot be separated from one another, but instead demand caution and care. Indeed, our engagement with local agricultural institutions, regional authorities, local farmers and neighbours revealed to us the constraints and contradictions behind European agricultural policies and the enormous financial and bureaucratic burdens and injustices that small farmers are subject to in the neoliberal food system. This experience gave us a better understanding of the legislative and economic context in which our intentions and actions must be situated and projected to, and a greater sensitivity and appreciation of the vulnerabilities and needs we share (or not) with local farmers, if and how collaborations can be built, and where to look for "common ground" (Chatterton, 2006). It eventually also led us to recognise the importance of building and fostering urban-rural solidarities and to seek collaborations with networks, communities and individuals living and working outside of institutional and corporate channels of food production and exchange, such as national and international peasant movements and alternative farming networks in nearby towns and cities.

However, the place has also forced us to literally slow down and embrace a different pace (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012), and to consider time as an important tool of resistance and critical resource for practicing respect for the land and its human and more-than-human communities. The temporality of soils and the pace of their renewal is remarkably slow relative to anthropocentric timescales, taking up to 1000 years to build just an inch of topsoil. Doing soil restoration seems like engaging in a

losing battle, but “making time for soil time” is essential to reconnect to the ontologies of the Earth and challenge the temporalities of the productivist framework of technoscience and capitalism (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015, p. 15). It will also take time to unlearn almost a century of productivist rationalities and cultivate new farming subjectivities in Piedemonte and to do so with responsibility and care, as they have come to hold a significant cultural and social value in local farming communities. In Piedemonte, we have been reminded that “change is a cultural constant but the pace of change is not” (Nixon, 2011, p. 17), and that undoing certain connections and embedded ways of being-doing-knowing is going to take time and care. These protocols cannot be forced, but require persistence and ongoing effort.

We have since been trying to get the local farming community *interested* in land restoration by valorising the role of soil as a vital infrastructure for farming resilience and autonomy, but our approach has become more subtle than initially planned in order to gain people’s trust first and look for “common ground” (Chatterton, 2006). I have substantially reduced my scientific jargon and instead of using obscure terms like topsoil or humus, I make reference to the “terra puglia” of the mountains which local people know well and cherish. We have also been trying to render visible cultural and agroecological practices that have been devalued and/or forgotten through modernist logics and capitalist forces. For instance, we have been revalorising the use of animal manure as fertiliser and the use of tree pruning as mulch to restore the land by building friendships and working relations with local shepherds and neighbours (more on this in the next Chapter). We have also been participating in and promoting the informal and decommodified networks of skills and foods exchanges that already exist in the community but are often taken for granted, such as foraging, self-provisioning, bartering and gifts exchanges. And we are building common ground with some residents on other issues such as infrastructure, tourism and hunting, as well as starting conversations on and learning about forms of agricultural cooperativism and alternative market economies.

Ultimately, though, place literacy cannot make BTTL farmers “indigenous” to a place, but it can allow them to become at least “naturalised” as Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 215) has argued. This means “to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit ... here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities”. By developing place literacy, BTTL farmers (and prefigurative subjects more generally) can re-orient their autonomous thought and action in life-sustaining ways by learning how to exercise care and what their responsibilities are to other human and nonhuman forms of life in particular places (Larsen and Johnson, 2016). Building intense and caring relationships through place literacy is certainly a necessary requirement for any form of prefigurative politics in places of slow violence.

As we began dwelling and immersing ourselves in Piedemonte’s relational networks and more-than-human ways of being, it became clear that our ends and goals were “but landmarks on a journey” (Ingold, 2000, p. 172). And journeys have turns and twists and they can take unexpected directions as they get entangled with places and beings on the way, becoming “a constantly folding, unfolding and refolding story” (Springer, 2014, p. 263). It has been a turbulent but instructive journey for us thus far: we rushed in with ambitious plans and firm motivations, but the more-than-human community of the land and local people’s own caution and hesitancy forced us to slow down and ground ourselves in the ontologies of the place. We then got diverted out of economic necessity but found nourishment in the obstacles we encountered on the way, and we got redirected to a brighter yet difficult path, walking alongside other “resistant agri-cultures” (Potito *et al.*, 2015, p. 8).

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to investigate BTTL initiatives in their spatial context to examine how different rural spaces and places affect and shape them. I have done so through an autoethnographic exploration of our experience of living and farming in a small rural village in the mountains of southern Italy and by foregrounding the

agency of (rural) places in shaping BTTL farmers dispositions and intentionality. I have proceeded empirically by first developing a situated account of the historical, socio-spatial, cultural and environmental dynamics of the land and place we moved to, and then exploring how our intentions and dispositions have changed over time in relation to the specificities, potentialities and needs of the place we have been inhabiting. I have put forward the notion of “place literacy” to capture this ongoing journey of learning about, in and with place and I have argued that it was key to growing a consubstantial relationship with the land. Developing place literacy has been a slow process of attunement and commitment to the place we moved to, of listening to and feeling with it, and writing this chapter, reading and thinking through the literature, was also part of it. I cannot put it better than Lorimer (2019, p. 2), when he writes: “insofar as there is a research method to speak of, mine has been to contemplate this place for as long as it takes to understand it ... Activities have happened unmethodically. By fits and starts, on fair days and foul, in high summer and out of season, letting the place work on me, as much as me on it”, except perhaps that my contemplation of this place was complemented by also *doing* with the land and committing to its flourishing.

More broadly, this chapter argues for the need to “place” prefigurative subjects and their politics in the more-than-human relational networks they are entangled with, in order to take seriously the active contributions of places in their becoming and development trajectories. Developing place literacy is important in order to understand *what* places can afford prefigurative initiatives, but also *how* prefigurative subjects can/should go about pursuing their goals, such as understanding the temporalities of change that places offer, the kinds of ethical protocols that may be required, and the intersectional alliances and solidarities that can be cultivated (Barker and Pickerill, 2012; Larsen and Johnson, 2016). Indeed, recognising the agency of places in prefigurative politics also means recognising that we do not change places by impressing our preconceived designs onto a passive surface, but rather we take part from within, in places’ transformation of themselves (Ingold, 2000). Developing place literacy does not entail relinquishing one’s values



and goals or giving up when encountering difficulties. It is a tool for understanding where our responsibilities lie, a means for seeking “common ground”, and a guide for directing autonomous thought and action in ways that are just and respectful of places.

## Chapter 6 The political nature of BTTL farms

### 6.1 Introduction

*“What can a little leaf do?”*

These words have stuck with me for the past few years and have nagged me ever since. A neighbour stated them in a derisive tone when he saw us putting a lot of effort in collecting, processing and piling up bunches of leaves and woodchips around the bottom of trees. To him it appeared to be a futile practice, a waste of time and energy. I answered tentatively, noting the benefits of adding organic matter, promoting soil biota, improving water retention, providing temperature insulation and weed control, and ultimately, increasing our autonomy. But as I was listing all of these potential benefits, I realised they all seemed very ambitious goals for “a little leaf”. After all, a leaf on its own does not do any of those things, but then again, ecologically speaking, a leaf is never “on its own” and it is never “just” a leaf. So what exactly were we doing and how was a “little leaf” helping us?

In the previous two chapters I have attended to the *becoming* of BTTL farmers by focusing on our migration journey and dwelling experiences and attending to the growth of our intentions and goals in relation to the agency of place, affective encounters with non-humans and broader socio-spatial contexts. In this and the following chapter, I shift my attention to the *doing* of BTTL living and farming by paying attention to the values, knowledge, skills and practices as they emerge and get performed with and alongside the various non-human beings that constitute the domestic and farming spaces of BTTL farmers. Hence, in these chapters I attend to “how nature is performed” on BTTL farms: how they are enacted and lived *with* the various non-humans that compose them and the kind of transformative potential that these “reciprocal interactions with nature” give rise to (Wilbur, 2013, p. 155). To date there is no in depth study into BTTL farms’ everyday practices and relations with the land they inhabit and the non-human that compose it, but for commentators like Wilbur and Halfacree, they are essential for understanding the radicalism and political potential of BTTL initiatives.

Indeed, despite the radical intentions and values of BTTL farmers, students of the phenomenon have found difficulties in locating BTTL farmers within a familiar political landscape (Wilbur, 2013). Indeed, in his review, Wilbur (2013, p. 149) highlights the difficult and ambiguous relationship that this group of radicals holds in relation to contemporary political concerns and practices, noting how “the radical shift in lifestyle that characterises this kind of migration is often tethered to a political radicalism, but one that is not easily identifiable in visible social movements or organised political action”. As a result, the question of “whether it is appropriate to consider the phenomenon ... as a movement, or simply a collection of related but ultimately independent values and actions” has cropped up in several studies (Jacob, 1997; Pepper, 1991; Wilbur, 2012, p. 249). Additionally, they have also been subjected to critiques of “lifestyle politics”: individualised forms of political action that run the risk of either being completely ineffective in bringing about change or easily co-opted by the capitalist paradigm they oppose (Bookchin, 1995; Fotopoulos, 2000).

Indeed, within modern environmentalism, the BTTL movement is quite unique in its ideological beliefs and practices (Campbell, 2016). In contrast to the more “hands-off” environmentalism that seeks to protect a pristine natural environment through consumptive leisure activities and reformist strategies, and the direct action environmentalism that involves public contestations, sabotages and opposition, BTTL farmers immerse themselves in the more-than-human community of a rural environment to try and translate their values and ideals into forms of everyday living. They do so primarily through the development of environmentally-embedded and relatively self-reliant living patterns, which may include: the creation of low-impact dwellings (LIDs), the use of green(er) technologies and off-grid energy systems based on renewable sources of energy; the adoption of permaculture or other organic methods of farming, the development of do-it-yourself (DIY) skills and land-based economic activities (farming, crafting, forestry and environmental education), and the establishment of communal and cooperative work relations and living arrangements (Halfacree, 2007b).

Hence, BTTL initiatives do not challenge environmentally unsustainable cultural norms or authoritarian and capitalist structures directly but aim to create workable alternatives in the *here* and *now* by connecting their political ideals and goals to actual everyday practices. As Wilbur (2013, p. 157) has noted: “back-to-the-land migration is not a formula for working class revolution, collective seizure of the means of production, universal gender parity or an end, in itself, to discrimination or inequality. What the phenomenon instead reveals is the gradual opening of imagined and realised possibilities, of preconceived and spontaneous action that chips away (however incrementally) at structures that support coercive and hierarchical relationships”. Consequently, “we might consider back-to-the-land as a process of seeding alternatives. Through the literal act of seeding, back-to-the-landers aim to create something both new and different” (Wilbur, 2013, p. 158). This alignment of means and ends (ideals and practices) and the construction of alternatives in the everyday are key characteristics of anarchist prefigurative politics. However, current conceptualisations of prefiguration remain wedded to modernist notions of political agency and subjectivity that separate the *subjects* of politics (human) from the *objects* of politics (non-humans). Hence, everyday practices are treated as means to promote alternative values, ideals and goals or to inscribe alternative understandings on a passive and inert material background. Even Wilbur’s (2013) interpretation is largely in line with this conceptualisation, although with a more materialist inflection. For him “back-to-the-landers perform reciprocal interactions with nature to promote particular ideals (e.g. self-sufficiency, cooperative economic relationships, soil sustainability, biodiversity)” and this “material interaction with nature empowers broader, less immediate agendas” (Wilbur, 2013, p. 149). Consequently, “the material form of a back-to-the-land farm is an indicator of both intent and practice, an evolving landscape design that actively contests ‘conventional’ or modernist understandings of how rural space should be used, and a site at which alternative understandings can be given material embodiment” (Wilbur, 2013, p. 155).

However, this approach of “politicising ecology” (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005, p. 650) leaves non-humans as *objects* of political actions, mere resources or tools that bear instrumental value to human actors (Braun and Whatmore, 2010). Following relational and performative ontologies, materiality is not a given, nor a tool or a mere effect of human agency and intentionality, and “nature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances”, it is “intra-activity” (Barad, 2003, pp. 827–828) through and through. Moreover, this framing treats BTTL living and farming as a “lifestyle” based on a set of “(in)different” practices (Pellizzoni, 2020, p. 12) that are detached and disembodied from the more-than-human worlds that BTTL farmers inhabit. Hence, while I agree with Wilbur regarding the importance of everyday interactions with nature for understanding the political radicalism of BTTL farms, by reducing the materiality of the farm and its political significance to the ideals and practices of its human inhabitants alone, he ultimately obscures this relational agency and its transformative potential.

As I have argued in the previous chapter through the notion of place literacy, growing a consubstantial relationship with the land is a key dimension of BTTL living and farming and is pursued through reciprocity and care for its more-than-human community. Hence, to capture and attend to this relationality, in this chapter, I approach BTTL initiatives not as a lifestyle, but as the performance of a particular form-of-life: a way of living, knowing and doing that emerges and develops with and alongside the various non-human beings and forces of the land BTTL farmers inhabit. In the previous chapter, I have already shown how our goals and intentions were affected by the more-than-human agencies of the land and place we moved to, but not how they shape and guide our domestic living and farming. Hence, in this chapter, I pay attention to how our values, knowledge, skills and practices are entangled with the land and how various non-human objects, beings and elemental forces constitute and shape our domestic and farming spaces. To understand the transformative potentiality of a BTTL way of living, I turn to the “generous infrastructures” (Papadopoulos, 2018) that this relational co-performance gives rise to. As discussed in Chapter 2, infrastructures are understood here as socio-material

assemblages that come into being through the co-performance and interactions of both humans and non-humans (Amin, 2014; Carse, 2012; Star, 1999).

Hence, the phrase “political nature” in the title of the chapter has a double meaning and intent, speaking to the chapter’s twofold aims of (1) approaching prefiguration in more-than-human terms, and, through that, (2) reconsider the transformative potential of BTTL initiatives. These aims will assist in answering the second research question(s) of the thesis: *“How is nature performed on BTTL farms and what kind of transformative potential does it engender?”*. This question is addressed empirically by delving deep into the domestic and farming spaces of our farm to explore the non-human agencies involved, and how our values, knowledge, skills and everyday practices emerge and get performed with and alongside them and the infrastructures these intra-actions give rise to.

## 6.2 The performance of nature on a BTTL farm

### 6.2.1 *Living (self-)sufficiently*

*“What have you done?!”* remarked the old man looking at the piles of boxes, pallets and tools filling the ground floor of the farmhouse he just sold us (Figure 6.1). He expected a company to turn up to restore and refurbish it before we actually moved in. The previous owners built it after the 1980 earthquake, but since they never moved in, the building was not connected to any public utilities, and it had not been maintained for a while. I told him that we could not afford to pay someone to do the work, so we would slowly do it ourselves to save money. Admittedly, affordability was one of the reasons why we decided to carry the house works ourselves, but of equal importance was the prospect of being able to do it according to our needs, desires, skills and the possibilities that the land afforded us. We wanted to try to live self-sufficiently by creating interdependences with the land, that is, by adapting our everyday domestic needs and comforts to the resources available on the land (or as close to it as possible), its elemental forces and seasonal cycles. These include food but also water for drinking, irrigating, cleaning and washing; electricity for lighting, charging tools and appliances; heating for warmth and cooking; and also ways to reduce or re-use our waste. Like other radical rurals (Halfacree, 2007b), our idea of a

house could not be separated from the land itself, and not simply because as farmers we were going to grow food as part of our day-to-day living. For us, the land is not a material resource, a commodity or simply a mean of food production, but a more-than-human partner in a more self-sufficient form of living.



Figure 6.1 The ground floor of the house that became our storage space.

All houses in the local area are connected to a national or local grid infrastructure for their domestic needs of water, electricity, gas and waste disposal. However, besides the prohibitive costs of trying to receive public utilities on the site, connecting to these grids (especially national ones), defied the whole idea of trying to connect, relocate and adjust our existential needs and everyday lives to the land. Moreover, these geographically extensive socio-technical networks of energy, water and labour are “troublesome companions” to say the least (Vannini and Taggart, 2015, p. 9). They can make domestic life feel comfortable and convenient, but they also alienate residents from their surrounding landscapes and from the broader social and environmental implications of their everyday living, while allowing a concentration

of political-economic power to a few private and public companies, with consequences for the costs, access and control of resources and their utilisation (Hinchliffe, 1997; Vannini and Taggart, 2015; Pickerill, 2016). Hence, to build our house - or rather restore it and retrofit it - we have been experimenting with a number of “off-grid” arrangements that allow us to disconnect from corporate-state infrastructures, increase our self-reliance and grow a more consubstantial relationship with the land (Halfacree, 2006). Living off-grid entails severing some ties but also “a thorough reinvention and reassembling of the technologies and resources” needed to build a home and live comfortably (Vannini and Taggart, 2014a, p. 64). Unlike grid assemblages that aim (but not necessarily succeed) to tame and control natural resources and separate domestic activities from their surrounding environment (Kaika, 2004), living off-grid is about *weaving* one’s life with a place and its more-than-human beings and forces, “maximising *participation* within natural processes ... pulling the outdoors indoors and pushing the inside outside” (Vannini and Taggart, 2014a, p. 72).

Nothing challenges the indoor/outdoor, nature/culture boundary more than a compost toilet. It was the first off-grid arrangement that we built when we arrived and it hasn’t changed much since (Figure 6.2). While local houses are connected to local sewage infrastructures or septic tanks, we could neither afford nor desired the installation of such systems. Flushing toilets not only make excessive use of perfectly drinkable and usable water, but we also did not want to relinquish an important nutrient source to a treatment plant. Like other countercultural groups (Pickering, 2010), we don’t perceive human excrements as waste but as a perfectly good fertiliser for flowers, shrubs and fruit trees at least. In fact, composting our “humanure” is for us a “vital means of enacting connections to the land” (Pickering, 2010, p. 34) because it allows us to return carbon and nutrients back to the soil that fed us, while also conserving local water resources.

Indeed, even though there are three wells on the land, they are not particularly deep, and the summer here can be particularly dry, especially with climate change and the increasing frequency and duration of drought events. Besides collecting rainwater in



buckets, barrels, and a more recently added 5,000L container, we rely entirely on wells for our domestic and irrigation needs. We initially tapped into the well that was the highest on the land in order to harness the power of gravity to deliver the water to the house and the gardens (Figure 6.3). However, that well turned up to be the shallowest and after a couple of months of use, it went dry. The incident encouraged us to improve our electricity system that up until then consisted of only two solar panels and a couple of 12V car batteries so that we could run basic tools and an electric water pump to draw water from the deepest well which was *below* the house. Given the abundance of sun and wind, we decided to build a hybrid solar-wind system for the house, but this was neither easy nor cheap to do, and in fact, we are still working on it.



Figure 6.2 Our humble compost toilet.



Figure 6.3 Hooking up our irrigation system to the well at the top of the land.

Disconnecting from the grid and living *with* the land and its more-than-human beings and forces is not as straightforward as it sounds. In fact, even after we added a few solar panels and batteries, drawing water from the well and getting it to the house was still not easy. First, we had multiple leakages and we had to buy different types of fittings; then we had to add an anti-return valve so that gravity would not interfere with the pump pulling up water; finally, we had to add a pressure release valve because the pipe would get too hot in the sun and the water in it would expand and blow the cover off the pressure switch, getting it wet and not working. After a month of scratching our heads, multiple trials and errors, we got the system working. However, setting up a wind generator was a much longer learning curve that involved three attempts based on three different set-ups as well as several crashes (Figure 6.4). As Vannini and Taggart (2015, p. 15) put it: living off-grid is an exercise in “geographical choreography ... line-dancing with nature and technology”. It presupposes a level of indeterminacy, a higher degree of involvement with materials, technologies and elements, but also creativity to tackle

challenges and problems that inevitably arise, and patience and willingness to learn, make mistakes and adjust practices.



Figure 6.4 Three attempts and arrangements to set up a wind turbine after multiple failures.

As many of the pictures show, Bill was without a doubt the driving force behind all of these efforts thanks to his resourcefulness and handiness, but he was also not working alone. Besides friends, neighbours, family members and me often providing essential labour power, he also relies a lot on vernacular knowledge(s), occasional advice from friends as well as DIY manuals and YouTube videos. And as important as these social and knowledge networks are (Wilbur, 2014), elements, technologies, materials and their properties have an equally important role to play in the development of our skills and knowledge and in the crafting of our domestic arrangements. Our attempt at drawing water from the well is an example of learning with these non-human others: besides learning to wire an electric pump into a battery array, operate and modify a pressure gauge and switch, plumbing and fitting connections; there is also the slippery agency of water, its thermal mass in a black

pipe and the force of gravity that we had to learn about and work *with* in order to bring water to the house. Similarly, for our wind turbine we had to consider and navigate laws of physics and wind dynamics and learn to build *with* them. Hence, the “DIY” skills that many off-grid builders like us use are actually a form of “doing *with others*” (Vannini and Taggart, 2015, p. 129).

However, we are also aware that many of the technologies we use to harvest local resources rely upon rare earth metals, fossil fuels, industrial processes and their socially and environmentally questionable global supply chains, but this awareness shapes the ways in which we use and care for them in order to minimise their wear and need of replacement. As Pickerill (2017b) has critically argued, to think that technologies on their own can make homes more ecologically sustainable is a very dangerous myth, not only because all technologies - whether they are “green(er)” or not - require material resources and industrial processes to be produced, but also because the way they get *used* can undermine their environmental performance. Indeed, taking a shower every day or having lights and other electrical appliances on when not using them, are resource-consumptive activities even in a house powered by renewable energies. A similar argument can also be made for ideas of self-sufficiency and disconnection from state-corporate infrastructures. Nowadays you can acquire a good level of domestic self-reliance by purchasing new and innovative technologies, but if you rely solely on them and therefore have to go and buy more every time they break, it defies the purpose. Put differently, on their own, technologies do not afford ecological sustainability or self-sufficiency, they need to be tied in with particular knowledge, skills *and* practices.

We have learned this lesson ourselves with what we call “low energy days” in winter: cloudy, windless, short days *and* dangerously low batteries. Draining batteries means shortening their life span, which in turn means having to replace them more often, which is not only expensive, but it also goes against our idea of self-sufficiency and environmental sustainability. To try and minimise the use of our “dirty” and noisy petrol generator to top the batteries up in winter, we have also learned to adjust our everyday behaviours and routines. For instance, we do not turn

electrical appliances on until mid-morning to give the batteries a chance to charge, and we only carry out energy-intensive activities if the sun is shining or if the wind is blowing. We also spend most winter evenings in the dimmer light of candles and our rechargeable head torches - which we need to remember to charge during the day! Living off-grid demands a higher degree of involvement with the operation of a home and a “choreographing [of] bodily movements and activities with the naturally occurring movements of energy resources and with the technologies available to harness them, channel them and incorporate them into domestic lives” (Vannini and Taggart, 2015, p. 18). The compost toilet needs emptying and cleaning at least once a week and the compost bins need turning at least twice a year; wood needs chopping and stacking every year; and our water, wind and solar systems needs regular monitoring, maintenance and modifications.

Ingold’s (2000, p. 88) notion of *crafting* rather than *building* a house is perhaps more appropriate here: while the latter entails a process of inscription of human design on a raw material substrate, the former is more akin to “a process of growth” whereby a house emerges “within the relational contexts of the mutual involvement of people and their environment”. Crafting then, not only includes the actual act of constructing a shelter but also of growing with it: it is a mutual co-becoming with place and with the many human and non-human agencies, skills and knowledge(s) that (be)come together in the process. These constant re-adjustments and the regular work involved in producing our domestic needs and comforts do feel like hard work sometimes. However, living off-grid allows us to disconnect from corporate-state infrastructures and therefore reduce our use and dependence upon fossil fuels and other non-renewable energies and the impact that their extraction and use cause on distant lands, ecosystems and communities. Moreover, it provides us with opportunities for learning, for being creative and to be more connected, aware and involved with local climate, environmental resources, technologies and natural processes and become more sensitive towards our everyday needs and preferences (Vannini and Taggart, 2015). We also derive a lot of satisfaction and fulfilment from actively participating in the crafting of our home because as we make and re-make it

with off-grid infrastructures, we also make and re-make ourselves in the process (Vannini and Taggart, 2015).

### 6.2.2 *Farming with care*

As I noted in the previous chapter, the land we acquired has been undergoing desertification and associated processes of environmental degradation for a while. Productivist models and capitalist logics have slowly eradicated more ecological ways of farming in the area and fuelled agricultural practices that have slowly turned soils into biological deserts, and not much life can thrive on desertified lands. In fact, with a *biologically dead* soil, you can't grow a consubstantial life with the land. You can still produce some food, and people here do, but it requires intensive methods and an ever increasing amount of water and chemical inputs, which forces farmers into relations of dependence with external actors and socially and environmentally unjust agro-food systems. For us, the land is not a passive object or a commodity to be used and exploited, but a community of beings that has its own dispositions, needs and agencies and to which we have an obligation of responsibility. Obviously as farmers we do want to produce food, but our utilitarian goals are achieved through practices of care and collaboration with this more-than-human community rather than control and dominance. Care is underpinned by an ontology of *interdependence* in which beings have agency and are connected through relations of obligation and practical doings (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

However, our relationship of mutual interdependence with the land was fraught from the start, and the onus of care, at least to begin with, fell squarely on us. Practically speaking, to grow a consubstantial relation with the land by farming in an environmentally friendly way in our case was not enough. Instead, it required, first and foremost, for us to literally *grow* soil in order to create the conditions for organic farming to be practiced at all (Figure 6.5). So we began taking care of the land (and ourselves) by taking care of the soil. For many indigenous populations, agro-ecological farmers and new peasant, soil is not an inert substrate, or a resource, but a living entity and a key "*bioinfrastructure*" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014, p. 32) on which humans and many other living organisms depend on for their life and

survival. For us, taking care of the soil is not just a necessity for growing food and being self-sufficient, it is also an ethical obligation to the land and the more-than-human communities it is entangled with and supports (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2010; Shiva, 2015; Lyons, 2020; Pigott, 2020). As Tacchetti et al. (2021, p. 1) have argued “ecological reparation is essential for community resurgence and for re-establishing collectivities that sustain liveable worlds”.



Figure 6.5 Learning to grow soil.

Far from being a passive material substrate, soils are composed by a lively biological community of bacteria, fungi, protozoans, nematodes, mites, tardigrades, springtails, spiders, termites, ants, earthworms, woodlice, millipedes and more. In an underground feeding frenzy, these soil organisms bind and aggregate soil particles, they decompose organic matter, they ingest each other, they defecate, and they burrow and create channels, altering the chemical and physical properties of soils and making nutrients available to plants (Lowenfels and Lewis, 2010). Indeed, most trees and plants have evolved very specific symbiotic relationships with particular microorganisms in the area of soil surrounding their roots called “the rhizosphere”. These diverse and complex symbiotic relations assists plants in acquiring and exchanging nutrients and water and in responding to diseases, pests and environmental changes (Berendsen *et al.*, 2012; Philippot *et al.*, 2013). Decades of

tilling, mowing and applying chemical products, have annihilated soil biodiversity and impeded the growth of these vital relationships, affecting the overall productive capacity, health and biodiversity of the land.

The ways in which we repair and restore soils' vitality - growing soil as opposed to consuming it (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019) - is by crafting mulch. Generally speaking, mulch is considered a material - usually organic but not exclusively - that is applied to the surface of soils or around plants, to protect and improve the fertility of soils, increase water retention, prevent the growth of weeds and enhance the visual appearance of gardens (Chalker-Scott, 2007). From adding organic matter to the soil and shielding it from fluctuating temperatures, solar radiation and heavy rainfall to preventing compaction, runoff and desiccation, mulch both nourishes and protects a living soil. However, to compose mulch we had to both terminate certain connections and practices as well as craft new ones.

We started by quitting the ploughing, mowing and application of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides that the land had been subjected to for years. These (non)acts appeared trivial to locals, perhaps even counterproductive to the purpose of "making a living" *from* the land. However, discontinuing practices of soil disturbance, pollution and exposure is a necessary initial step to start nourishing a living soil and begin the slow work of recreating broken connections in the agro-ecosystem between soil biota-roots-flora-fauna, which in turn will sustain humans in the long-term. We also approached a family of herders living nearby to ask about cow manure. They would normally push it down a ravine at the edge of their land to get rid of it, so they were quite eager to share it with us. Besides bringing in an abundant source of organic matter to the land, cow manure is home to a rich assemblage of macroscopic and microscopic life and therefore it is the best kick-starter of soil life. So every year, before the shepherds return with their herds from their foraging grounds up in the mountains, we clear their sheds and transport around 20 tonnes of cow manure to our land (Figure 6.6). We let the manure mature for a year and use the older one both as an amendment in our vegetable gardens and as mulch around plants and at the bottom of trees (Figure 6.7).





Figure 6.6 Our yearly collection of cow manure.



Figure 6.7 Transporting soil made from well-rotted cow manure to our vegetable gardens.

However, besides cow manure which requires a lot of time, money and effort to move, we also collect whatever organic material is available locally and for free to lay it at the bottom of trees and in our vegetable gardens. We rescue bags of leaf litter and grass clippings discarded by local people; we salvage carload after carload of cardboard boxes from local shops; we “slash-and-mulch” our weeds, we broadcast seed mixtures of cover crops, apply firewood ash from the wood burner and soiled straw from the chicken pen, and we compost and use our kitchen and human “waste” (Figure 6.8). Moreover, every year brings a large amount of olive tree prunings, mainly the small and very spiky branches that are not worth the effort of processing for firewood. Like everyone else in the area, we used to pile them all up in the field in winter and burn them. We would watch the massive pile of carbon biomass that took years to build on trees - and that we so desperately needed in its elemental form in the soil - be consumed in seconds in a blaze of fire and vanish in the already carbon-full atmosphere; and every single time, we would feel mortified. So as soon as we saved enough money, we invested in a woodchipper and we now transform all of our olive tree prunings, and those of our neighbours’, into a thick woodchip mulch and we return the carbon back to the soil.



Figure 6.8 Mulching the soil with a mixture of cover crops.



Figure 6.9 Applying woodchips to our vegetable gardens.

However, making and applying mulch does require a lot more involvement than popping into a shop to buy synthetic fertilisers or burning tree pruning. We need to collect and transport manure every year, shovel it and move it several times around the land. Chipping tree pruning is no less physically demanding and involves months of work. Similarly, collecting and scavenging for “waste” materials require us to engage and collaborate with a number of people, sometimes trading time and work. However, these various mulches are also enacted by the relational co-performance of different forms of life (Figure 6.10 and 6.11). Alongside humans composting their kitchen and garden waste to mulch their crops, there are diverse communities of bacteria decomposing it, which are in turn ingested by protozoans and nematodes that release nutrients to plants. There are cows grazing grass and expelling it in the form of a rich mulch *and* humans tending to their health and shovelling their muck onto fields to improve their fertility. There are arthropods shredding and chewing woodchips laid out by humans around trees to retain water *and* fungi underneath, digesting them further and transporting nutrients across a complex underground network of plants’ roots and hyphae. There are humans recycling cardboard and paper waste, using it to stop weeds encroaching on their

vegetable gardens *and* earthworms pulling it down, digesting it and releasing it into warm castings, feeding the soil and creating tunnels that improve water retention and aeration. Hence, mulch allows us to work *with* a more diverse soil food web - to “team with microbes” as Lowenfels and Lewis (2010, p. 204) put it in their organic gardening book - to restore a degraded agroecosystems. It allows us to care for soils by extending our agency to communicate, sense *and* experiment with these (largely) invisible communities, actively *participating* in their cycles of decay and regeneration of life. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2014, p. 35) has noted in the case of composting, mulching “is our part of this collaborative and ongoing work of creation”.



Figure 6.10 A lump of cow manure crawling with worms (and more).



Figure 6.11 Larvae of the green chafer beetle (*Cetonia aurata*) processing our compost.

Moreover, by helping us disconnect from certain entities and actors, such as chemical fertilisers, pesticides, their global infrastructures and corporate manufactures, and by promoting a healthier and more diverse agroecological community on this land, these mulches are creating the conditions for our mutual interdependence (Papadopoulos, 2018). Indeed, in only four years, signs of improvement are already emerging: wherever we applied compost and cow manure as mulch, the soil underneath has become darker and crumblier (Figure 6.12), suggesting the soil community is hard at work, and a more diverse vegetation is beginning to grow besides dandelions and grass (Figure 6.13). Varieties of mushrooms are popping up from the olive woodchips around trees, and just underneath, white mycelium hyphae are growing, indicating symbiotic relations in the rhizosphere may already be forming. Moreover, we have since been using significantly less irrigation water in the summer, and the soil underneath woodchips remains moist for longer and shelters a ridiculous amount of critters (Figure 6.14). In turn, the birds, lizards, preying mantis, dragonflies, snakes, and other predators are also returning and appreciating the new bounty. Plant performance and productivity has yet to recover and re-adjust to the new conditions, but thanks to

these mulches, we are co-inventing new ways of inhabiting this land, remaking its agroecology and ourselves in the process (Lyons, 2020).



Figure 6.12 The changing structure of our clay soil.



Figure 6.13 Before and after applying cow manure to barren land.



Figure 6.14 Uncovering a soil ecosystem under woodchips.

### 6.3 Rethinking the (more-than-human) politics of BTTL farms

#### 6.3.1 *Growing a BTTL form-of-life*

“(R)esistenza contadina” literally means “peasant resistance” and it is the expression often used by the BTTL farmers of the Genuino Clandestino (GC) network in their internal communications and movement campaigns to describe their politics of resistance (pers. comm.). However, the “r” of the word “resistance” is bracketed in order to underscore another word that is concealed in that term: “esistenza”, the Italian word for “existence”. In other words, these new peasants’ form of resistance is their peasant *mode of existence*. As I have tried to show in the previous sections, becoming a BTTL farmer is neither a job, nor a lifestyle, but a form of living “in which self-subsistence and ecological care are inextricably intertwined” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2021, p. 6) with what one is and does.

A mode of existence, or form-of-life, is not a lifestyle but its opposite. A lifestyle is a set of (in)different practices where “being coincides with doing”, or where the action is detached from the actor who can always choose to do otherwise (Pellizzoni, 2020,

p. 12). In a form-of-life the actor and the action cannot be separated: “what one does ... coincides with what one is” (Pellizzoni, 2020, p. 12), or to put it differently, one cannot choose to do otherwise; being and doing are inseparable. Hence, a lifestyle and a form of life are driven by different logics: while in the logic of choice the actor is separate from the world of action, and can leave the engagement at any time, the logic of care implies a continuity, and an interdependence. As I have tried to show in the previous section, a BTTL form-of-life is not about environmental sustainability or self-sufficiency *per se* (although they are among the values being embraced), but it is about crafting a consubstantial relationship with the land, understood not just as a territory but as a more-than-human collectivity with which one is entangled and committed.

A BTTL form-of-life is thus driven by environmental concerns and a desire for self-sufficiency, but these are enacted/performed through practical and embodied knowledge and skills and care-full and response-able practices that emerge with, and are situated among, a more-than-human collectivity. Hence, the agencies involved in BTTL prefigurative politics are more-than-human: there are solar panels, batteries, water pumps, compost toilets, trees, cover crops, animal manure, worms, mycorrhizal fungi and many more. However, they are not *objects* and *tools* of an alternative lifestyle used to challenge unsustainable cultural norms and capitalist structures and logics. The technologies, plants, animals and elements they experiment and are entangled with are active *participants* in the making of their intentions, knowledge, skills, sensibilities, practices as well as their homes and farms. Moreover, this collectivity is not determined by physical or temporal distance, and our commitment is not purely utilitarian (Ghelfi, 2015). We maintain and look after our batteries for economic reasons, but also as a way to care for more *distant* communities and ecosystems; and we care for the land’s soils for the interest of food production and self-sufficiency, but also to promote a healthier and more biologically diverse landscape *to come*. Hence, what makes BTTL a form-of-life rather than a lifestyle is an “intense involvement with a collectivity” (Escobar, 2018, p. 112) - understood as being both more-than-*human* and more-than-*local* - and an obligation to its care and flourishing. What characterises this form-of-life is neither the



purchase of green(er) technologies nor the enactment of alternative farming practices *alone* (although they are important too), but the crafting of an “alternative lifeworld” of existence (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2021, p. 6) that is not driven by dominative, self-enhancing intents.

The ways in which we achieved this was through both disconnections from certain relations, entities, spaces and temporalities, and reconnections, rearrangements and recompositions of the entities, interactions and interdependences involved in the processes of farming and domestic living. For instance, by disconnecting from state-corporate infrastructures for the provision of basic domestic needs and comforts, and reconnecting, adjusting and attuning our everyday needs, practices, knowledge and skills to accessible elements, natural resources and technologies, we have crafted a form-of-(domestic)life that does not follow modern logics, routines and arrangements. By internalising rather than externalising the costs and externalities of our domestic living through experimental learning, daily re-adjustments and hard work, our home and domestic living is neither inscribed by a sharp division between outside/inside, nature/culture, consumption/production, leisure/work, nor by domination and unlimited, mindless consumption of natural resources.

Similarly, by disconnecting from “the monoculture of economic productivism” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2021, p. 6) that characterises modern ways of farming and reconnecting to the land as a community of beings that require responsibility and care, we have crafted a form-of-(farm)life that defies the modern-capitalist drive towards control, exploitation and commodification to maximise yields, efficiency and economic returns. More specifically, by engaging and caring for the soil and its inhabitants in our everyday living and working *with* the land, not as masters or protectors, but as ordinary participants in the regenerative cycles of the land, we are not only able to produce food “organically”, but we have reconfigured our farming practices as multispecies activities based on mutualistic relationships of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2010). It is through these material reconfigurations, care-full adjustments, and embodied and practical knowledge and skills that we are trying to grow a consubstantial relationship with the land.

Hence, the prefigurative politics of BTTL farmers is not about materially articulating ideals of environmental sustainability and self-sufficiency by inscribing them onto the materiality of the farm, but about embodying these goals and values *literally*, i.e. transforming one's bodily skills, knowledge, corporeal sensitivities as well as material environments.

Hence, BTTL farmers experiment with "the material world, plants and the soil, chemical compounds and energies, other groups of humans and their surroundings, and other species and machines" (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 3) in order to craft alternative modes of existence, alternative forms-of-life – or what (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 19) calls "alterontologies". Hence, BTTL farmers do not oppose or challenge modern and capitalist forces and structures directly (or at least not all the time), but by seeking and crafting relations of mutual interdependence with the land, they "attempt to establish forms-of-life impervious to any deal with capitalism" (Pellizzoni, 2020, p. 12). However, how this autonomy is created and defended is through the crafting of "generous infrastructures".

### *6.3.2 The political generosity of BTTL infrastructures*

As a form-of-life, or modality of being, knowing and acting in the world, BTTL farms depend upon a set of values, knowledge, skills, materials and practices that together can be regarded as "infrastructures". However, all infrastructures need to be understood "ecologically", not in the sense of being environmentally friendly (although they can be too) but as emerging from specific contexts, communities and relations (Star, 1999). In our particular case, our environmental values, desire for self-sufficiency, and financial resources, together with the broader context and community we are entangled with, gave rise to mulch and off-grid. However, other infrastructures have also been associated to BTTL farms (see for example Ghelfi and Papadopoulos (2021) and Koensler (2020) on alternative farmers' markets).

Mulch is a quite common gardening material used in urban or ornamental landscapes to improve their aesthetic appearance and more recently in conventional agricultural productions in the form of black polyethylene or biodegradable plastic

sheeting to stop weeds, reduce irrigation needs and enhance the growth, yield and quality of crops (Chalker-Scott, 2007). Similarly, the term “off-grid” is often associated with expensive and highly efficient technologies like solar panels and lithium batteries that allow houses and their residents to disconnect from public utilities and achieve a certain level of domestic self-reliance. However, for us, both off-grid and mulch are more than passive *materials* and *technologies* used to achieve economic, environmental and aesthetic benefits. They are also more than “tools” used to advance a political programme, promote alternative understandings or challenge powerful infrastructural arrangements. They are key agents and collaborators in the crafting of a more consubstantial relationship with the land and they allow us to defend and preserve the autonomy of our way of living based on ecological care and self-sufficiency. However, autonomy here is about more than territory, identity and social relations: it is “a practical and ontological affair that goes as far as to change the materiality of the lived spaces and the bodies, human and non-human, of communities” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 3).

Hence, crafting off-grid and mulch is as much about disconnecting from corporate-state infrastructures as cultivating awareness of material interdependences, experimenting with new modes of production and consumption, growing embodied knowledge and skills, developing care-full and response-able practices, and transforming our material environments. Indeed, the use of off-grid technologies on our farm is not only about developing a more self-sufficient and sustainable way of living in relative independence from state-corporate infrastructures. It is also about reconfiguring the ways in which *we* interact with elements, technologies and materials, in order to develop knowledge, skills, sensibilities, everyday practices and meanings that are more in tune with the land and its “biophysical rhythms of abundance and scarcity”, and that might as well be needed in more uncertain and “volatile futures” (Gibson *et al.*, 2015, p. 422). By experimenting with different materials, tinkering and testing several arrangements, tweaking and (re)adjusting our behaviours and practices with various off-grid infrastructures, we are literally training our bodies and minds to live (self)sufficiently with the land, learning what a

more frugal existence might mean and entail in the face of economic vulnerabilities, climate change and wider infrastructural failures. Indeed, off-grid infrastructure is as much about technologies as it is about resourcefulness, creativity, constant re-adjustments, improvisation and “making-do” with whatever material arrangement is affordable, place-sensitive and meaning-full (Vannini and Taggart, 2015).

Similarly, mulch not only helps us to disconnect from certain material flows and actors (e.g. fossil fuels, agrochemicals and their manufacturers,) and environmentally harmful farming practices (tilling, spraying), but also to reconnect to and recompose local agroecologies. By using and re-purposing material resources locally considered “waste” (cow manure, olive clippings, cardboard, grass clippings, etc.), mulch has also altered the flows of energies and materials coming in and out of our land and transformed our farming practices to be more in tune with the land’s needs and potentialities. For instance, by improving soil structure, these mulches have largely eliminated the need to disturb the soil with tillers; by smothering and preventing the growth of weeds among our crops, they have reduced the amount of time we spend weeding around crops; and by reducing evaporation and holding water like a sponge, they have significantly reduced the amount of water we use for irrigation. Hence, mulch is reconfiguring the material conditions of existence of this land, creating the conditions for a more diverse and healthier agroecological landscape and new structures of possibility (Escobar, 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Indeed, stick by stick, shovel of manure after shovel of manure, and “a little leaf” after another, the soil physical and chemical structure is beginning to change, new biological relationships are growing, and with them, the health and autonomy of humans and non-humans that depend on them. Put differently, as we make and re-make our way of living with these infrastructures, we also make and re-make ourselves and the broader community we are entangled with towards more autonomous trajectories. Off-grid and mulch are thus *generous* infrastructure because they allow us to ontologically reconfigure our mode of existence so that we can live and farm with care and response-ability, and continue to do so when institutional infrastructures break down by failure or intent (Papadopoulos, 2018).

The question that may arise at this point is: “how do you amplify the reach and disruptive capacity of a prefigurative action limited to a single terrain or a single infrastructure?” (Minuchin, 2016, p. 910), that is, how to address the problem of scale and extrapolation. You do not. As Tsing (2015, p. 38) has argued “scalability banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things”. Forms-of-life and their infrastructures cannot be scaled because they emerge from specific ecologies and are shaped by the limits and possibilities that each concrete situation and place imposes. In fact, crafting these infrastructures is about “crafting scales too”, or “remaking the scale” in ways that matter and are responsive to the constraints and possibilities of each concrete situation, community and place (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 23). However, their reach or scope can be amplified by the crafting of infrastructures that are also *generous* in their (1) ontological openness and flexibility, and in their capacity to (2) trigger “generous encounters”.

Indeed, the generosity of mulch and off-grid infrastructures has not stopped at the boundary of our smallholding, agroecology and bodies. They have also instigated “generous encounters” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2021) in the form of significant moments of social interaction, sharing and collaborations with our neighbours and local community (Amin, 2014; Silver, 2014; Harvey, 2017). For instance, the neighbour who was initially sceptical about the power of “a little leaf” now actively brings us all of the pruning and clippings he gathers in landscaping jobs around the village, and he is astounded by the vitality of our land. Moreover, through our olive chipping efforts, we have not only stopped burning our tree prunings, but have also deterred some neighbours from doing so. We now collect and process their clippings too and most join us in the work and we share stories and experiences while carrying out the task together. Many recount the old times fondly, remembering when farming was a community and collective experience and not such hard work, and when there were more birds around keeping them company and providing experiences of amusement and wonder. Other times they have shared traditional farming techniques with us, and we, in turn, have explained the multiple benefits of mulch to the soil. Cow manure has also evoked similar moments of sharing and interaction with local people. During our yearly manure collection, the

shepherds tell us of their travels in the mountains, and we, in turn, report on the rewards of using their manure on the land, sparking lively discussions over the advantages and disadvantages of such rich nourishment to the ground. They have invited us to their mountain grounds several times, and after four years of discussions, we have finally convinced them to apply some manure to their highly compacted and heavily grazed fields.

Hence, directly and indirectly, mulch has also opened up new channels of communication, it has evoked memories of community traditions and past ways of living, it has elicited the sharing of materials, knowledge, values and experiences and it has prompted the reconsiderations of (and some minor re-adjustments to) local practices. Generous encounters thus extend the “reach and scope” of infrastructures “beyond a single event or practice” (Star, 1999, p. 381), but the effects can take time, they are often imperceptible (Jensen and Morita, 2017) and they can have multiple outcomes, from unsettlement and scepticism to curiosity and admiration (Kraftl, 2007)). For instance, many neighbours are still very sceptical about the use of mulch and manure on their land, and some small-scale commercial farmers are constrained by farming regulations (especially for cow manure). Similarly, our off-grid infrastructure has often sparked curiosity and fascination - particularly around more affordable living solutions - among neighbours and other local people, but it has also provoked unsettlement in the ways in which it challenges cultural conventions of homes and meanings of domestic comfort (Kraftl, 2007; Pickerill, 2015). The compost toilet has certainly deterred some members of my family from visiting us more often. Another example is when a local guy once came to visit us and noticed the wind turbine on the side of the house and was really excited: “So you are not connected to the grid and you don’t pay bills? That sounds amazing! I wish I could do that, but I don’t know... What about all of the sacrifices??”.

Hence, the political generosity of these infrastructures is also *unmade* and shaped by structural constraints, social norms and cultural conventions as well as individuals’ corporeal sensibilities and situated histories. Nevertheless, encountering them can

reveal “new aspects of the world” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014, p. 34) to the newcomers, such as the agency of “a little leaf” and its decomposition, and the hustle and bustle that goes on in the otherwise inert-looking world of soils, or the embodied skills, knowledge and care-full practices required for living with renewable energies. Hence, the value and efficacy of generous infrastructure like off-grid and mulch “is not in the model it would propose but in the imagination it may induce” (Stengers, 2017, p. 399).

Indeed, while these infrastructures have emerged out of our specific contexts and relations, we have not invented them and they are not restricted to our particular situation or the materials we have used. Both off-grid and mulch are materially flexible and they are part of a broader “infrastructural imagination” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 203) that carries within it knowledge, material potentiality and learning without imposing it as a closed system. Hence, “transformative potentiality is not a human privilege, but rather a relational matter dispersed in the connections and labor among people, as well as other kinds of beings and things” (Lyons, 2020, p. 134). Indeed, we have learned about them through generous encounters ourselves, and as I have shown in Section 6.2.1 and 6.2.2, they can be crafted from a diversity of materials. Off-grid infrastructure can range from a humble barrel to collect rainwater and a simple 12V battery connected to a solar panel, to more technically complex, higher maintenance and more expensive energy and water storage systems.

Likewise, mulch can be made from leaves, pine needles, grass clippings, crop residues (e.g. husks, stalks), straw, bark, woodchips, sawdust, home-made compost, humanure, animal manure, cover crops, seaweeds, newspapers, cardboards, ash, stones, gravel, old natural clothing, and even plastic sheeting and landscape fabric if needed. Moreover, they are not defined by a universal size or scale: they can be crafted at an individual and household level like in our case, or at a community or even larger scale.

Most importantly then, these infrastructures are also generous because they can be borrowed, shared, transferred, tweaked, modified, extended and recreated according to the contexts, specific needs and material resources of communities and their

ecologies, conferring them “the power to feel and think and decide together what a situation is demanding” (Stengers, 2017, p. 398). Hence, unlike enclosed, private or state-owned and managed infrastructures, both off-grid and mulch are ontologically open and flexible, and neither of them can be patented, owned or prohibited. The materials and technologies used, such as batteries and plastic sheeting, might but it is the values, knowledge and relational co-performance of both humans and non-humans in specific places and times that enact them as infrastructures and make them “travel” through space and time. These infrastructures are therefore also *translocal* - “more than local and less than global” (Ghelfi and Papadopoulos, 2021) - and thanks to their generosity, they can contribute to the creation of a “patchwork quilt” (Naylor, 2017, p. 27) of autonomous forms-of-life.

### 6.3.3 *The fungal politics of BTTL living*

Fungi are crucial participants in the performance of ecological care on BTTL farms (Figure 6.15), and over the years, they have inspired me to think about the prefigurative politics of BTTL farms through a fungal analogy.



Figure 6.15 A mushroom growing amongst pumpkins in the manure pile.



Just like fungi, BTTL farms are inconspicuous most of the time but they occur pretty much everywhere on the planet, although some places/environments are more conducive to their development than others. Just like the fungi that crop up in disturbed and environmentally degraded landscapes, BTTL farmers too often emerge in the ruins created by modern progress and capitalism.

Most fungi grow as hyphae, thread-like structures that multiply by *branching out* and occasionally *fusing* when they come into contact with other hyphae. We started off at Leah (and Tinkers' Bubble in Bill's case) and "branched out" to create a new growth structure elsewhere, and we have now come into contact and "fusing" with other farmers and networks in the new area. Similarly, other BTTL farmers may start from communal experiences such as eco-villages and urban gardening initiatives and branch out, or start individually by moving to the countryside, inheriting a piece of land, working in an allotment, undertaking a permaculture course and then fuse with other initiatives.

In a fungus, these growth processes eventually lead to the development of a mycelium, an interconnected network of hyphae that can sometimes reach across miles. In the case of BTTL farms, the development and growth of individual initiatives and their fusions has given rise to networks that can span from the local level (e.g. GAS, CSA, alternative food markets and farmers' cooperatives), to the national (e.g. GC in Italy, the Landworkers' Alliance in the UK) and international level (e.g. la Via Campesina). Moreover, just as fungi create symbiotic relationships with other organisms, BTTL farmers often interact with other forms-of-life in either a mutualistic or antagonistic fashion. As I have shown in this chapter, they create mutualistic relationships with other living organisms (including fungi themselves) as well as other social movements and networks; and sometimes, they may confront institutions and corporations with more direct and/or antagonistic methods (e.g. public protests, burning GMO fields).

Moreover, the way fungi reproduce or propagate is either through fragmentation (a fungal mycelium separates into pieces, and each component grows into a separate mycelium) or by producing fruiting bodies (mushrooms or moulds) that release

spores that travel through the air or water. The fruiting stage is when the fungus becomes more visible and the presence of its underground network can be recognised. This stage represents the gathering of BTTL farmers in public protests, peasant movements' campaigns, alternative food markets, etc., when the presence of this very inconspicuous movement can be more fully acknowledged. Finally, the spores of the fungus are like the generous infrastructures that BTTL farmers create which "contaminate" through encounters and allow more autonomous forms-of-life to propagate and new mycelium networks and mushrooms to grow elsewhere. Hence, BTTL farms branch out, multiply and contaminate; and while their hyphae, mycelia or underground networks are mostly imperceptible, they are vital for "fruits" to develop, for "spores" to travel, and for a diffused patchwork of autonomous "colonies" to be created.

#### 6.4 Conclusion

I started this chapter with the question of "*what can a little leaf do?*" in order to address a broader question about the political radicalism and transformative potential of BTTL farming and living. In order to answer these questions, I have empirically explored our farming and domestic living and I have theoretically engaged with the concepts of form-of-life and generous infrastructures.

Most importantly, by decentring - but not doing away with - human subjects and their practices and foregrounding their relations with and commitment to the more-than-human community of the land they inhabit, I have moved away from an understanding of the BTTL movement from a *lifestyle* to a *form-of-life*. I have argued that a BTTL form-of-life is driven by environmental concerns and a desire for self-sufficiency, but these are enacted/performed through practical and embodied knowledge and skills and care-full and response-able practices that emerge with and are situated among a more-than-human collectivity. BTTL living is thus about more than food production and cultural and political opposition. It includes these activities too, but it is first and foremost, about becoming and doing with the land, understood as a trans-local network of more-than-human agencies, responsibilities

and constraints. In BTTL living, there is an obligation to a more-than-human community and a sharing of its vulnerabilities and pleasures.

The autonomy of a BTTL form-of-life is created and maintained through the crafting of generous *infrastructures* that allow both disconnections and reconnections. While often unrecognised or overlooked in favour of its affirmative dimension, the negating element of prefigurative politics - often referred to as subtraction or withdrawal - is vital in order to subtract the relationship between people and things arising from the obsession with domination, growth, consumption and relentless achievement. The other side is experimentally recomposing, recombining, recreating, reorganising and rearranging these relationships to create more autonomous ways of living. Hence, autonomy here is a more-than-human affair, a matter of organising material *interdependences* with a more-than-human collectivity. It is about “turning interdependency, which is always the case, whether we like it or not, into an active constraint, a constraint that activates feeling, thinking, and imagining” (Stengers, 2017, p. 398).

Hence, the political radicalism and transformative potential of a BTTL way of living does not lie in a defined political programme or on the intention of the human actors (although it does not negate either of these), but in the *generosity* of the infrastructures they create. Here, “transformative potentiality is not a human privilege, but rather a relational matter dispersed in the connections and labor among people, as well as other kinds of beings and things” (Lyons, 2020, p. 134). In fact, BTTL living can be considered a generous infrastructure itself: a way of living that has been borrowed from peasants, infused by radical visions and ethical sensibilities, tweaked with technologies, vernacular and scientific knowledge(s), transported across and adapted to different spatial, temporal and socio-ecological contexts. Hence, this chapter contributes to a theoretical reconsideration of the radicalism and transformative potentiality of BTTL farms from a form of cultural politics that deals in alternative identities and practices (lifestyles), to a form of ontological politics that engages in the crafting and sharing of more autonomous ways of living. Put more simply, what BTTL farms prefigure is not an

environmentally sustainable society, but autonomous ways of living based on ecological care and (self)sufficiency, and through their generous infrastructures, they can contribute to the multiplication of autonomous spaces and modes of existence.

So “*what can a little leaf do?*”. In a short answer, it depends on its relations. As part of a generous infrastructure like mulch, it can improve the productivity and health of highly degraded soils, and in turn, support and defend the autonomy of the human and non-human collectives that live and work there. Of course, on its own, mulch cannot address the systemic factors that affect small-scale farmers in ruined agricultural landscapes. Nevertheless, in the “generous encounters” that its practical and relational performance instigates lies the potential for cultivating community collaborations, shared learning, experimental practices, new imaginaries and dispositions. It can thus begin “repairing ruptured relations and cultivating relations that have yet to come” (Lyons, 2020, p. 31), literally “from the ground up”.

## Chapter 7 Rewilding domestic relations on BTTL farms: exploring animal autonomy in a multi-species contact zone

### 7.1 Introduction

*It's 6 o'clock and it is still dark outside. The rooster has been crowing for a while, the cats have begun walking all over us and the dogs are getting restless outside. I get up, grab my head torch, feed the cats and head out for a wee. Cherry is waiting outside the truck door as usual with her big beautiful smile, while little Jackie is jumping and spinning very excitedly at a distance. Ness and Muller are barking loudly demanding to be freed from the chains. We enter the house and I prepare myself a coffee. While I wait I give the dogs some biscuits. I sit down on the sofa to have my coffee but the dogs are too restless, so I down the coffee, get my shoes and coat on, grab some dog treats, a bucket for the rabbits' breakfast, and we head off on our usual morning walk around the land.*

*I start collecting young greens and grasses for the bunnies, but the dogs are impatient. I browse the greens quickly and move on, there is more on the way. At the top of the land, Ness catches a smell in the air and rushes off towards the woods. I can smell it too - "musty" - and then I see a fox shit on the path. I call the dogs in as the fox is probably long gone and I don't want them to annoy the neighbours. We get back and head to the chickens and rabbits' pen for their breakfast. I lay the greens out for the bunnies and I head to the buckets of fermented grains for the chickens. Three tiny mice scatter out from underneath the bucket as I open the lid. Mary catches one and the other hens begin chasing her around the pen. I stop to watch as the chase continues and the little mouse is being snatched from one beak to the next, bashed violently on the ground a few times, and eventually swallowed up whole. In the meantime, the rooster is engaged in his own skirmish with Chuck that won't leave him alone. I check their water, and then I grab a shovel-full of fermented grains and lay it out in three different places so they won't argue over it as much. I will let them out in an hour when it's lighter and the foxes won't be as brave. I call Ness in from chasing the rabbits around the pen and we head to the garden for some weeding.*

In the previous chapter, I have explored BTTL farms as a particular form-of-life, or mode of existence, based on ecological care and self-sufficiency. However, I have not considered how farm animals figure and contribute to the making of this particular way of living. As the above vignette suggests, our farm is also a *multi-species* assemblage: there are *humans* interacting with a diversity of domestic animals (cats, dogs, chickens, rabbits), but also *different species* of non-human animals – both domestic and wild - mingling and grappling with each other (e.g. dogs and foxes, chickens and mice, chickens and foxes, dogs and rabbits, chickens and rabbits, etc.). There are also *individuals* of a species interacting with each other (e.g. Mary with other hens) and with other species and individuals of those species (e.g. Ness and the rabbits, Chuck and the rooster). There is currently no study of human-animal relations on BTTL farms, including farmers' experiences and practices of rearing, living with, and sometimes killing, animals.

From personal experience, it would be wrong to suggest that all BTTL farmers keep and raise domestic animals for either food production or companionship. I have met some who are vegan or vegetarian, and others who do not do it for economic and practical reasons. Nevertheless, as Wilbur (2012, 2013) infers from a comprehensively larger study, *most do* for economic, cultural, environmental, political and ethical reasons. For instance, we raise some animals to procure meat and eggs for our own consumption and, from time to time, to gift or sell to family, friends and local people. However, regardless of whether they are raised to fulfil subsistence needs or to gain an economic income, livestock animals tend to contribute quite considerably to BTTL farmers' livelihoods (Wilbur, 2012). In most cases, farm animals are also key to the cultural identity and practices of BTTL farmers: some enter farming as a result of their passion for animals and their wellbeing and because they wish to share their lives with them; while others see domestic animals as culturally meaningful in the creation of a land-based livelihood as well as essential for practising more environmentally sustainable farming (Jacob, 1997; Seymour, 1974; Wilbur, 2013, 2012). As Wilbur (2012, p. 99) reports "for economic as well as ecological reasons, [BTTL] farms with livestock tend to recycle

manure in pursuit of a 'closed circle', or self-supporting ecological cycle with an in-built economy that generates value and disincentives waste". Moreover, if livestock animals are present on a BTTL farm, then there is also a very good chance that both dogs and cats are present as both companion and working animals.

For Wilbur (2013), raising domestic animals is also a key dimension of the "radicalism" of BTTL farmers, contributing to both a critique of dominant norms and exploitative practices in modern farming and prefigurative efforts to subvert and reconfigure human-animal relationships on farms. However, what this entails and how it is enacted, have not been theoretically or empirically explored yet. Wilbur (2013) suggests attending to practices of "animal welfare" on BTTL farms, but as Porcher (2017) has argued, describing farmers' relationship to their animals in terms of welfare is problematic because it frames their relationship in terms of a legalistic contract composed of a set of rules that farmers should follow. Moreover, the notion of welfare follows a utilitarian logic that frames animals primarily as food, and therefore it reduces them and their lives into mere commodities and products (Miele and Bock, 2007). This is not to say that the concept has no use or value in alternative food politics or that BTTL farmers are not committed to animal wellbeing, on the contrary. However, as the introductory vignette suggests, human-animal relations on BTTL farms are not based upon a contractual agreement, but affective relations that arise from their being together, creating ties, and sharing a space and a livelihood. As Porcher (2017) has argued, unlike industrial animal farming, animal husbandry is a vocation, a desire to share a life with animals because of the enjoyments and pleasures it can bring; and earning a livelihood from it is what enables their shared co-existence.

In the interest of advancing theoretical discussions and radical visions of what more abundant multi-species futures might mean for farmers and domestic animals, I want to interrogate the radical spaces of BTTL farms using the concept of "animal autonomy" as it is being proposed by more-than-human and critical animal

geographers in the context of rewilding<sup>19</sup> (DeSilvey and Bartolini, 2019; Prior and Ward, 2016) and as part of broader anti-capitalist and decolonial visions and strategies for building more “abundant socioecological futures” (Collard et al., 2015, p. 322). For these geographers, animal autonomy has little to do with “its proximities to humans and everything to do with *the conditions of living*, such as spatial (can the animal come and go), subjective (can the animal express itself), energetic (can the animal work for itself), and social (can the animal form social networks)” (Collard et al., 2015, p. 328). Similarly, for Ward and Prior (2020, p. 104) “non-human autonomy, when applied to populations and communities of species, includes (but is not limited to) an ability to move, grow, procreate, and die”. Hence, animal autonomy is neither an abstract or “forced state of being”, but a condition of possibility that is “negotiated within multi-species shared spaces” (Ward and Prior, 2020, p. 111).

For some anarchists, farms are a dubious and inadequate space for such an investigation. In their extreme positions, anarcho-primitivists see in farming the quintessential “civilising technology” that has caused a fall from grace of both humans and non-humans through their respective loss of freedoms (Zerzan, 2012). Similarly, for vegan anarchists and animal liberationists, farms represent anthropocentrism and its violence par excellence, the ultimate subjugation of animals through their instrumental use, exploitation and killing in order to satisfy human needs and desires (Nocella et al., 2015). Anarchist interventions within Critical Animal Geography (CAG) and the closely associated field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) are also explicitly “liberationist” and “abolitionist” in their positions, calling for a complete ending of all animal abuses, including their use and killing for food (Springer et al., 2021; White, 2015). Noting that non-human animal domination intersect with other oppressive systems (racism, colonialism, classism, sexism, homophobia, etc.), they propose a politics of “*total liberation* ... which challenges all

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<sup>19</sup> Rewilding is a distinctive form of ecological restoration of both ecosystems and species populations through a variety of practices including, but not limited to, the creation of corridors and/or the removal of physical barriers (e.g. dams in rivers), and the re-introduction and/or the de-domestication of species. According to Prior and Ward (2016), rewilding differs from more traditional conservation and ecological restoration strategies because it is grounded in ideas of non-human autonomy.



forms of domination and exploitation that concern human, nonhuman animals and the Earth”, and they call on critical geographers to engage directly with these issues and struggles by adopting a vegan praxis (Springer, 2021; White, 2015, p. 23).

Indeed, for Springer (2021, p. 331) “veganism is the only ethical position to adopt against the holocaust that defines the lives of farmed animals”.

However, while a vegan position seems to holistically address the environmental and ethical challenges of industrial animal farming by imagining a world without human and animal bodies being used or exploited for food, it is also characterised by many absences and internal tensions (McGregor and Houston, 2018; Trauger, 2022).

For instance, vegan propositions have very little to say about potential impacts on farmers and their livelihoods and are often unclear on the fate of the animals themselves. Moreover, not all farms and farming systems are the same, and there is a whole world of difference between the livestock industry and what Porcher (2017) refers to as “animal husbandry”, that is, the living and working *with* animals. Hence, alongside other scholars, I want to probe into the ethico-political and practical possibilities that lie between veganism *and* factory farming as the only possible ways to live (or not) with domestic animals (Donati, 2019; Emel et al., 2015). By examining the intimate interactions that occur between farm animals and humans holding deep ecological values and a respect for animals’ radical otherness and wellbeing, I want to evaluate possibilities for “rewilding” domestic relations on farms through the crafting of animal autonomy. This alternative path aligns with Collard et al.’s (2015, p. 323) manifesto for more abundant socioecological futures understood as “futures with more diverse and autonomous forms of life and ways of living together”.

I do so by paying attention to our visions and everyday doings with domestic animals on our farm as well as the multiple factors that shape them. I thus approach our BTTL farm as a “multi-species contact zone”: a space in which cross-species encounters occur, where different species meet, mingle and grapple with each other, but also spaces shaped by unequal power relations emerging from domestication histories and their situatedness within wider cultural, socio-economic and political contexts. The term “contact zone” was first used by Mary Louise Pratt in her work

on imperial frontiers and colonial travels to both describe spaces of cultural encounters characterised by unequal power relations and as a “postcolonial tool of critique” (Wilson 712) to challenge unidirectional imperialist accounts and foreground subaltern voices and agencies in the constitution of meanings, cultural identities and (ex)changes. Haraway (2008) has since extended the concept to encounters between different species in her book *When Species Meet*. The two most important dimensions of the concept of “contact zone”, in both Pratt’s and Haraway’s conceptualisations, are power and difference. On one hand, a contact zone is a space saturated with uneven power relations: the different beings that meet are characterised by relationships of domination and subordination. On the other hand, their encounter and interaction in the contact zone has the potential to destabilise or challenge those hierarchies and divisions, allowing for communication across difference to occur and for alternative configurations of power and being(s) to emerge. As Haraway argues, a contact zone is both “fraught with power, knowledge and technique, moral questions – and the chance for joint, cross-species invention” (Haraway, 2008, p. 205). Hence, following Pratt’s emphasis on the interactive and transformative elements of contact, multi-species contact zones are also spaces where radical possibilities can emerge, where humans and animals can learn to live well together and imagine and enact spaces of multi-species flourishing.

In the empirical part of the chapter (Section 7.3), I explore how we envisioned and performed animal autonomy on our farm in relation to the multiple factors that make up our contact zone, including our livelihood needs, animals’ agencies as well as their personal and domestication histories, and a wider socio-spatial, multi-species and ecological context. For analytical simplicity, I have divided this section according to different species or groupings of animals, i.e. dogs, chickens, rabbits, but this partition is only a guiding device to help make sense of the different and complex multi-species interactions that take place on the farm. In this section I also use a number of multi-species vignettes weaved through the main narrative to both introduce some of the animals on the farm by narrating their personal histories and individual subjectivities and, through their/our stories, foreground some of the dynamics and multiple factors that shape our multi-species interactions in the

contact zone. I have chosen particular animals and their stories because of their capacity to illuminate certain dimensions of our living together that hold relevance to subsequent discussions. Functioning as both data and creative writing devices, these vignettes are an important research and writing tool for a number of reasons. First, they allow the reader to better appreciate some of the animal subjects in their individuality, to recognise them, as we do, as individual beings with their own peculiarities and needs, while also acknowledging their species-specific traits, requirements and behaviours. Second, they begin the work of contextualising our everyday living together and the ambiguity, messiness and complexity that this process necessarily entails, and so they offer a “livelier” - though somewhat unresolved and sometimes awkward - account of our multi-species contact zone. The vignettes are crafted from personal recollection and field diary entries and, in their writing, I have attempted a “responsible anthropomorphism” as discussed in Chapter 3.

In the analytical section (7.4), I first discuss our experience in relation to the literature to explore what animal autonomy might mean and entail on a farm contact zone, and then advance a theoretical understanding of animal autonomy on BTTL farms. In this Chapter, I therefore add another dimension to the previous chapter’s theme on the performance of nature on BTTL farms by focusing my attention on human-animal relations and addressing RQ3: *How is nature performed on BTTL farms and what kind of transformative potential does it engender?* In the conclusion, I both summarise the findings of the chapter in relation to the possibility of rewilding domestic relations on farms and the contribution of this investigation to the understanding of a BTTL way of living. This enquiry inevitably brings forth messy asymmetries, uncomfortable questions and ambiguous responses around questions of living and dying, nurturing and killing, freedom and control, but it is also an effort at “staying with the trouble” in a world that we must consume to survive.

## 7.3 Envisioning and performing animal autonomy on a BTTL farm

### 7.3.1 Living with/as a pack

#### Box 7.1 Ness: a turbulent year on the farm.



17/11/19 We have welcomed another canine member to the family: Ness. She was curled up in a ball at a petrol station and we decided to take her home. It was probably not the most sensible decision since we already have three dogs and tons of work ahead of us, but we couldn't resist her.

29/11/19 Ness is settling in quite nicely. After a little turbulent introduction, she seems to have accepted Cherry as an older guiding figure, and she interacts with Muller and Jackie like they've always been mates.

15/12/19 The dogs have started wandering off a lot. Cherry not as much but Jackie, Muller and Ness disappear for hours and they don't come back when we shout for them.

20/02/20 The dogs just had a skirmish with the neighbour's dogs. No one got hurt, but the neighbour was not happy and neither are we. The other day another neighbour complained about "the hunting dog" that keeps chasing and barking at his goats.

11/05/20 Dammit! We took our eyes off only for a second and that was it! Muller and Ness are going to be parents. The last thing we needed was puppies...I want to cry.

24/07/20 We have been desperately trying to find a home for the puppies, but it looks like we are going to have to keep at least three of them. Ness is getting neutered asap.

21/08/20 Cherry has left us. The vets have tried their best but there was too much internal bleeding. They could neither exclude rat poison nor a car hit. We are all devastated.

02/11/20 The dogs are driving us insane. Their outings have become longer and more frequent, our re-call training isn't working, and we are losing sleep and sanity worrying about them and getting no work done.

17/02/21 And when you thought things couldn't get any worse...Yesterday Jackie disappeared with the puppies for a couple of hours and when they got back she started convulsing uncontrollably and foaming from her mouth. She died in my arms 10 minutes later. This morning we found Kiwi's cold, lifeless body under an olive tree and then Olive showed the same symptoms: slug-pellet poisoning. The vet saved her by a miracle.

The reasons for having a dog on our farm were clear and obvious when we got our first dog Cherry, a Great Pyrenees Shepherd dog, from our neighbours. In an area where feral and wild animals roam free, a canine companion is both an ethically sound and effective deterrent of undesired attention. However, how we managed to get up to seven dogs in less than two years, and losing three in six months, is neither logically straightforward nor amusing (Box 1). This is where two human farmers, both “sovereign” *and* idealist, meet the charisma of non-human others, but clash and have to grapple with multiple animal agencies and a wider socio-economic and cultural context.

Nevertheless, the first part is clearer and more pleasant to recall. In a slight oversimplification, it went like this: “we already have one dog, what difference is two going to make?”. This is how we got Muller from our neighbours. “We have so much space, if we don’t give them a home, who will?”. This is how Jackie and Ness - two among the 80,000 dogs that get abandoned every year in Italy (LAV, 2022) - became part of the family. We are not an animal shelter, but we have plenty of outdoor space, and dogs can be of great help on a farm, especially in a sparsely populated area with high predatory pressure. Hence, how we ended up with multiple dogs was predominantly a combination of our capacity to care for them (financial and otherwise), be affected by them and their “condition” (abandoned, needing a home), as well as the dogs’ own doings, such as Jackie and Cherry becoming friends and Ness and Muller giving birth to Kiwi, Lemmy and Olive (Figure 7.1 and 7.2).



Figure 7.1 Cherry, Muller and little Jackie.



Figure 7.2 Ness and Muller with their three young puppies.

Like most pet-keepers, we wanted the dogs to be happy and to have a good life with opportunities to run around, explore, express themselves and create social bonds, not to spend their lives on a chain or caged in a pen. But we also wanted the dogs to be part of our family (Fox, 2006; Power, 2008), to share our home and everyday

routines, including working together to look after the farm and the other animals. We did not want to establish a relationship of domination and control over them, but of companionship and collaboration on the farm (Donati, 2019; Porcher, 2017). Power (2008) and Fox (2006) have observed that Western dog owners often use the popularised notion of dogs being “pack animals” with a hierarchical social structure to explain the importance for including them in their families and intimate spaces but also for establishing human leadership over them. While the idea of “pack” is based on a “limited and essentialised view of dog behaviour as defined through a biological inheritance” (Power, 2008, p. 542) that “ignore[s] animal agency and individual interaction in the relationship” (Fox, 2006, p. 529), it does recognise the otherness of the dog (its “dogginess”) and therefore it shows a willingness to engage with dogs on their own terms in order to explore new ways of being together.

We often refer to our dogs as a *pack*, not simply because there are four (and at one point seven) of them living together under the same roof, but because many of their behaviours do reflect pack dynamics. They regularly groom each other, they patrol, mark and protect the territory together, and if one catches a scent of a fox, polecat or wild boar, he/she signals to the others and they go off exploring the scent together. Moreover, they have developed specific roles and positions within the group, even though they have been subject to variation. For instance, Cherry was most definitely the leading figure at the start and, when she passed away, months of chaos unleashed in the group. Similarly, when Ness gave birth, Muller helped with taking care of the young puppies and, then when they got older, Jackie collaborated in their socialisation too. Moreover, the dogs extend these pack relations to us humans too. Muller, for instance, the older male of the group, regularly scents over *my* urine as he does with canine females of the pack.

However, in order to share a space more equitably with multiple large dogs, we had to establish some basic rules, everyday routines and ways of communicating with each other for both work and play. In the house, no dog is allowed on sofas and beds: “if you let one, all of them will want to and where would we sit?” was Bill’s pragmatic observation. We have also done some basic “sit and wait” and “re-call”

training with treats (Figure 7.3), not to “rigidly discipline them”, but to establish a language between us in case of need (herding chickens, crossing a road, etc.). Additionally, we walk around the land perimeter together twice a day and sometimes we go for longer walks at the beach, down the river or in the mountains (Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.3 Training the dogs and ourselves to learn to live and work together.





Figure 7.4 Taking the human-dog pack for a walk at the beach.

Most importantly, though, to live on a farm, the dogs had to learn to live with other farm animals that they would otherwise consider prey or fun things to play with (Figure 7.5). The cats were not interested in bonding and kept their distance for years. Learning to live with free-ranging chickens was surprisingly easier than cats, but not so much for *some* chickens. Cherry did not need much guidance because she already had guardianship inclinations bred into her, and little Jackie was more afraid of the chickens than they were of her. However, it took two dead hens and some telling-off for young Muller to learn not to chase and kill chickens. Teaching Ness, and later her puppies, was easier because they learned from the other dogs and so did we. Hence, we would rigorously tell them “no” whenever they showed any interest in chasing or attacking chickens. Similarly, in the gardens, a simple but strong “no” coupled with an equally eloquent “off the garden” was how all the dogs learned not to dig, trash and trample our vegetable beds.

Figure 7.5 Learning to live with other farm animals.

Whilst not tormenting or killing farm animals is a good start for dogs living on a farm, it is not enough for a collaborative working relationship. We never expected the dogs to shepherd the chickens around, but at least to stick around and have a presence on the farm to deter predators and guard the farm more generally. As Box 7.1 recounts, they all enjoyed roaming the hills together, exploring surrounding territories and following wild animals' scents, but this (almost) unrestricted freedom to move became problematic after a couple of minor incidents and complaints from neighbours. While the local spatial context is not as rigidly regulated as most urban areas (dogs barking and roosters crowing all day and night is considered socially acceptable), in their frequent wanderings around surrounding properties, the dogs were challenging many cultural norms and social expectations of "appropriate" dog behaviour (Fox and Gee, 2019). Our neighbours raised public health and safety concerns over dog faeces in their lands and a pack of "big dangerous dogs" roaming unattended and not respecting property boundaries. Moreover, it became almost impossible for us to work on the farm whilst being constantly watchful of their whereabouts and worried about their wellbeing.

However, we have been unwilling to keep the dogs on chains or locked in a pen as the neighbours have suggested, because their roaming is neither purposeless nor

completely unhelpful: in tracking and hunting wild animals, they keep them away from our free-ranging chickens. Moreover, controlling their movements has not been easy for a number of reasons. First, we could neither afford nor wish to make the perimeter fence of the land fully and solidly dog-proof as it would also prevent other wild animals from moving freely across the hills. Second, when Cherry passed away, Jackie took a more prominent role within the group, and her reluctance to follow our lead and guidance made our communication efforts with the other dogs more difficult. Nevertheless, to improve relations of conviviality with our neighbours, we did intensify our re-call training, we chained Muller and Ness at night, and we also restrained *our* own movement and altered our everyday and social activities to keep a more watchful eye on them. Hence, over time, we have been socially pressured to become more “responsible pet-owners” (Fox and Gee, 2019, p. 51) by keeping a tighter control over our dogs, but our initial unwillingness coupled with the dogs’ own desire to roam freely, have cost Jackie and Kiwi their lives.

### 7.3.2 Free-ranging tractors, winged fugitives and their hobbling mates

#### Box 7.2 Elvis: encountering a charming chicken.



01/06/19 We got chickens today: we did not have many options besides “red and white laying hens” and “red and white broiler chickens”, so we got three of each kind.

10/06/19 The hens have acclimatised quickly to free-ranging conditions, scratching, exploring and perching in the coop at night. The broiler chickens however are a lot goofier, some of them struggle to go in the coop and prefer gorging on grains rather than foraging. They are all putting on weight very fast, and one of them has started limping.

11/07/19 The limping chicken passed away last night, and now the other two white broiler have started limping too. The reds are putting on weight as well, but they don't seem to be doing as bad. They go out foraging with the rest of the flock and can easily hop in the coop at night.

18/08/19 We have killed the two white chickens yesterday. They had almost completely stopped walking and had developed a red bald spot on their chest from sitting in the pen all day. Also, the dynamics of the flock are getting a little perplexing. The three reds are now sexually mature and pretty heavy birds. I have seen them waiting for the hens to come out of the nest after having laid an egg and try to mate with them all at the same time. The hens are most certainly distressed.

22/11/19 We have taken two of the red broiler chickens out. All the hens have a bald, feather-less back because of their incessant “attention”. We have kept Elvis: he was not the best looking one of them, but he is less insistent with the hens and more submissive to the rooster. Besides, he makes some rather pleasing and melodious vocalisations for the hens.

27/12/19 The dynamics of the flock have become more harmonious. Elvis and the rooster have become good collaborators, accompanying the hens out foraging, calling them in for food, keeping an eye out for dangers and dust bathing with them.

12/09/20 We have killed Elvis yesterday. It was not an easy decision, but his bodily constitution had begun failing him. He was less active overall and less delicate with the hens, and with winter approaching, we thought the hens deserved to have some feathers on their backs.

For lack of options at the start, we purchased a dozen chickens of four different industrial breed: Ross and Cobb varieties for meat, and ISA brown and Leghorn for eggs. We only had a superficial knowledge of these breeds, but did our best to provide them with a comfortable and safe environment to live, eat and socialise in. We fenced a 50msq area shaded by three olive trees and a big rowan tree to give them protection from predators; and we built a large coop from scrap materials to protect them from the elements and arranged different options of perches and nest boxes to lay eggs in (Figure 7.6). However, we never intended for them to remain inside this enclosure. Keeping chickens in one place at all times is neither sanitary nor environmentally ideal, and it is also very limiting on the animals themselves.



Figure 7.6 The first chicken pen.

Chickens are cognitively, emotionally, communicative, socially and individually complex birds, and except for very recent breeding and genetic manipulation directed toward production traits, they remain cognitively and behaviourally very similar to their wild ancestor - the red jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*) - that inhabits field edges, groves, and scrubland in Southeast Asia (Marino, 2017). Hence, they are “naturally” very curious and active foragers with a varied diet that ranges from berries and seeds to insects and small vertebrates and, given the opportunity, they like roosting up high on tree branches. Because of these behavioural traits and

nutritional preferences, chickens can also be good working partners on a farm, adding nitrogen and precious phosphorus to the soil as well as regulating the populations of crop damaging vertebrate and invertebrate animals like crickets, slugs and mice, helping to avoid the use of synthetic fertilisers and more toxic “pest” management methods. Additionally, as pioneer British BTTL farmer and writer John Seymour (1974) famously suggested, chickens can be particularly helpful on farms with clay soil: their intense and powerful scratching action can literally till the soil for you.

For these multiple reasons, we never intended to keep the chickens locked up in a pen and, after gradually introducing and encouraging some familiarity between them and the dogs, we let the chickens free-range on the land. All the hens turned out to be eager foragers, calling at the pen door every morning waiting to be let out. However, sharing the farm with voracious free-ranging birds did not turn out to be as easy as imagined: everything tasty was up for grabs, including the lettuces, tomatoes, peppers, spinaches and cabbages we painstakingly grew in the garden (Figure 7.7). Similarly, their scratching powers can be a double-edge sword, as they can literally “fell down” plants by exposing and digging their roots up (Figure 7.8). However, in the highly degraded agro-ecosystem of this land in which crickets and other crop-loving insects abound, their foraging activity was very valuable to us, as it was their health and freedom to socialise and explore their surroundings. So we ended up changing the way *we* farmed to accommodate for their freedom to range. We have fenced in all of our major food growing spaces and, everywhere else on the farm, we only plant crops that we know chickens don’t like (e.g. potatoes, onions, garlic, beans, Cucurbitaceae) or won’t eat after a certain growth stage (e.g. corn and chickpeas). We have also learned and implemented various methods for protecting the roots of small shrubs, newly planted trees and flower beds (Figure 7.9). However, we don’t mind them “tilling” the cow manure mulch around trees and we also regularly share the abundance of worms, insects and juicy beetle larvae of our manure and compost piles (Figure 7.10). Hence, through hard lessons and repeated tinkering we have found ways to farm the land *with* and *alongside* our free-ranging tractors.



Figure 7.7 Free-ranging chickens helping themselves to tomatoes.



Figure 7.8 On the left: a pepper plant after being devoured by the chickens; on the right: the roots of a tomato plants unearthed by the chickens' scratching activity.



Figure 7.9 Fencing valuable plants against chickens.



Figure 7.10 Sharing the worm and insect abundance of the compost bins with the chickens.



However, as Box 7.2 foregrounds, not all chickens have fared well in the free-ranging conditions we have created. Broiler chickens of the white-feathered Cobb breed in particular, proved lethargic and disinterested in foraging, preferring to sit around in the pen and eat grains until their bodily constitution failed them. Most were also unable to hop in the coop at night to perch with the rest of the flock. Taking their life after one or two months of living with us was not how we expected to care for these animals. Donati (2019, p. 124) refers to these industrial broiler varieties as an “unconvivial biotechnology”: despite attentive care, they are designed to labour for the mass production of protein and are therefore ill-suited to more convivial farming contexts such as free-ranging environments. However, as the stories of Elvis suggests (Box 7.2), not all industrial breeds *and* individual chickens within those breed, are necessarily destined to a short and unconvivial life. Moreover, Ginger – a “spent hen” of the industrial ISA Brown breed we collected at the local agricultural shop - was the *only* broody hen we ever had on the farm (Figure 7.11). She successfully hatched and brought up two different broods despite her evolutionary *and* personal history involving years of exploitation in a factory-style setting. Hence, given the opportunity, hens can become more than egg-laying machines. Equally, we have industrial broiler hens who lay eggs and really enjoy free-ranging around the land, even though they are heavier and goofier than the rest.



Figure 7.11 Ginger with her chicks.

And then, there is the white-feathered, slim and incredibly agile Leghorn breed<sup>20</sup>: one of the most productive, and simultaneously, also the hardest and “wildest” breed in the egg-laying world. Living and working with them has proved challenging for other reasons. First, they tend to be very diffident of humans (unless you closely interact with them from an early age) and therefore they are also very difficult to catch for health inspections. Second, they like to sleep on trees and they often lay eggs wherever they find a suitable spot (e.g. in Muller’s kennel, under a shrub, behind a pile of logs), making our job of looking after them and collecting eggs much more difficult (Figure 7.12). Moreover, being light and agile, means that some learn early on how to “escape” their confinement and inadvertently also teach others (Figure 7.13). We wouldn’t mind this, if it wasn’t for predators. Some farmers would clip their wings, but we do see an advantage in chickens learning to sleep on trees and being more reactive to our and the dogs presence, as it can offer them better chances to escape dangers in our absence.

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<sup>20</sup> A heritage breed originating in the Tuscany region of Italy (their Italian name “Livornese” derives from the port city of Livorno), it has been exported worldwide and cross-bred with a diversity of local breeds since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to create highly productive egg-laying hybrids for commercial and industrial operations. However, as a result of their agile bodies and energetic personalities, they actually do not fare well in crowded and closed environments, developing anxious behaviours like feather pecking (Castellini et al., 2016; Kozak et al., 2019). They have instead thrived on our free-ranging farm, becoming the most active foragers, capable flyers as well as the most productive egg-laying chickens we have ever raised.



Figure 7.12 Hens roosting up an olive tree inside the pen.



Figure 7.13 White Leghorn hen escaping the pen.

They are not the only chickens who have been victim of predatory attacks outside *and* inside the pen. One very hot, dry summer, we lost numerous chickens to a fox who had learned and worked around our daily routines, and once a bird of prey killed two young chickens while they were resting inside the pen. Hence, over the years, we and the dogs have learned to become more vigilant and attentive to their noises and movements, and we constantly patrol and mark tracks around the land. I also like to think that some of the oldest chickens have become more cautious and vigilant themselves – our latest rooster Red seems to be doing a good job, and one of the “spent hens” we used to call Grandma was the best sentinel bird in the flock. However, despite our best efforts (and theirs), some chickens still go missing every once in a while; and sometimes, we kill and eat some of the chickens ourselves. However, as Box 7.2 alludes and as I further explore in the case of rabbits, the decision of *who* or *when* to slaughter animals is neither pre-determined nor strictly connected to our “craving” for meat (Springer, 2021, p. 341). It often depends upon a multiplicity of factors, including convivial relations within the flock, individual animals’ health condition (e.g. Cobb’s limping and becoming inactive), their character and disposition (e.g. Elvis) as well as our material resources and needs at the time.

### 7.3.3 Going down the rabbit hole

#### Box 7.3 A Lucky rabbit



05/05/20 Peach had her first litter last night, five kits in total. She has prepared a nest in the box with the straw we provided and added some of her own fur to it. However, this afternoon, we found three dead baby rabbits outside the box. It looks like she has accidentally dragged and dropped them while they were still feeding. We have now adjusted the entrance of the box so that she can't inadvertently carry them outside with her.

12/07/20 The modification to the box worked but none of the other baby rabbits survived. She has since built another nest and delivered another litter, but rats have raided the nest and decimated the litter. Only two baby rabbits have survived.

22/07/20 The baby rabbits are growing fast and they look healthy and happy. They run around the pen and do little jump-kicks in the air, they are a joy to watch!

28/07/20 Another crazy episode happened yesterday. I was inside working at the computer when I hear a squeaking noise coming from outside that I could not recognise. I poked my head outside but it was quiet. Two minutes later, I heard it again followed by Bill shouting loudly. I run out and found Bill in the rabbit pen facing a snake as tall as him with a baby rabbit poking out of its mouth! Bill frantically searched for something on the ground, found an old cow bone (courtesy of the dogs) and hit the snake a couple of times. The snake released the bunny and slid away in the corner of the pen. However, we noticed a bulge in its stomach: the other baby bunny, the earlier "squeaking noise". We caught the large four-lined snake (*Elaphe quatuorlineata*) in a pillow case and we released it at the edge of the woods. The other baby rabbit - Lucky - survived another predatory attack.

We had never really thought of raising rabbits on the farm until we found Chuck hiding in a bramble bush near the farm (Figure 7.14). We did not quite know what to make of it at the time, as there aren't many wild populations of rabbits left in Italy following their decimation by hunting as well as a number of viral diseases introduced to control their prolific reproduction in agricultural areas (e.g. myxomatosis and rabbit hemorrhagic disease) (Spagnesi and De Marinis, 2002). However, Italy is also one of the biggest producers of domestic rabbit meat in Europe, the majority of which is produced by large commercial farms in cage systems (Trocino et al., 2019). We later found out that a local had released a dozen rabbits in our area: he was raising them for meat in cages but he was unhappy with their productivity and keeping them was costing him more money than it was worth, so he "liberated" them in the countryside. Chuck was the buck of that colony and the only survivor when we found him.



Figure 7.14 Chuck, the found rabbit.

Most small farms I have visited in the local area raise domestic rabbits in small, indoor hutches because they allow easy cleaning and handling. Farmers generally keep one reproductive male and multiple females and they keep them separate at all times unless they need them to mate. In these systems, farmed rabbits are pretty much "meat on legs" (Buller, 2013, p. 160): their *lifeworld* is reduced to 1msq of space,

and they have forced and highly regulated social interactions. Moreover, as a result of their domestication, extended captivity and intensified methods of farming, domestic rabbits like Chuck tend to be tame and unreactive to dangers. However, not long after we introduced him to the chicken pen, he became very active, confident *and* sociable. He quickly learned to thump the ground to alert others of dangers (e.g. Ness running around the pen, a bird of prey flying over), he dug himself a nest in the straw pile, scented the pen with his urine and chin glands, and he made friends with some chickens and even escaped the pen a couple of times (Figure 7.15). However, he gradually became very territorial too, bossing the hens off the food, chasing the rooster around the pen and instigating chaos in the coop at night.



Figure 7.15 Chuck making himself at home with the chickens.

Just like chickens, domestic rabbits have retained many of the behaviours of their wild(er) European counterparts (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) (Vastrade, 1987, 1986). In wild populations, rabbits are both very social and territorial animals: they generally live in large social groups - which include one dominant buck, several females (does) and some subordinate males - around a multi-entrance burrow system known as a warren (DiVincenti and Rehrig, 2016). However, given our unfamiliarity with their particular needs, behaviours and vulnerabilities, the presence of multiple young

(and lively) dogs, and high predatory pressure in the area, we have kept and raised rabbits inside a pen.

However, after the unconvivial experience of having Chuck in the chicken pen, we gave up our fenced garden area next door to make a rabbit pen of about 30msq and received a young female rabbit – Peach - from a local farmer. We were going to (learn to) raise rabbits outdoors in a way in which both rabbits and farmers could benefit from the relationship. We built a shelter from scrap plywood, and twice a day I would bring them fresh food from the garden to complement shop-bought alfalfa pellets (Figure 7.16). The prolific “yellow flowers” turned out to be a welcome option in conjunction with plenty of fresh grasses and a variety of clovers and vetches. The leaves of cabbages and lettuces, as well as the tips of fennels were a much enjoyed treat, as were tomatoes, peach skins and parsley. After watching some of the rabbits making a modest attempt at digging the though clay, Bill decided to bury a series of pipes underground to (re)create a warren system and enrich their experience (Figure 7.17).



Figure 7.16 Feeding the rabbits with fresh greens foraged from the land.





Figure 7.17 Building an underground tunnel system in the rabbit pen.

Having the freedom to mate, it did not take long for Peach to get pregnant. However, as Box 7.3 recalls, only one “Lucky rabbit” survived from the first two litters. Predatory pressure notwithstanding, in only a year the rabbit population in the little pen expanded from two to eight individuals: three females and five males. It was a joyous and rewarding experience watching the baby rabbits playing in the pen, but as they grew, the little pen started feeling smaller and a bit crowded, and the labour and cost of harvesting and buying food for them became more substantial. With Peach getting ready for a new litter and for fear of inbreeding between siblings, we decided to keep Chuck and the three females, and kill the four younger males. However, one male proved particularly challenging to catch, and so after ten minutes of stumbling and diving across the pen unsuccessfully, we decided to leave him be. He became known as “Feral Boy”.



Figure 7.18 A growing rabbit colony.

Relations between Feral Boy and Chuck were amicable at first, but when we reintroduced Chuck back into the pen after a two-week quarantine for an ear mite infection, a brutal fight unleashed between the two. It was relentless and bloody, and it occurred at such a high speed that it took us a while to separate the two.

Unconvivial social relations between different animals can make co-habitation on a farm difficult and can test the beliefs and commitments of idealist BTTL farmers. Perhaps in “the wild”, the weaker rabbit would have fled the scene and lived at the edge of the colony, where he would have been more vulnerable to predators; or he would have died from fight injuries. In a farming context, though, the human ultimately makes the decision, and to avoid such episodes from occurring and meet economic and food necessities, they normally keep one or two males (generally the fittest ones) and kill and consume the rest. We have done so with all the other males but, having the spatial and economic possibility to accommodate two colonies on our farm, we decided to keep both males in separate pens. Again, when and which animals we kill for food is not set in stone and depends upon a multiplicity of factors, including animals’ relational agencies (in this case, Feral Boy’s “feral” charisma and breeding potential) and material and economic constraints and possibilities at particular points in time.

So we moved Chuck with his growing family back to the chicken pen and kept Feral Boy in the smaller pen with Lucky. The two had developed a strong bond and we learned that inbreeding can be done for a few generations before genetic problems occur. In fact, Lucky was raising her first litter then, and no kits got snatched by predators this time because she was able to successfully protect them in an underground nest she built herself (Figure 7.19). She dug a tunnel half a metre deep underground and built a wide room at the end of it; she then made a nest out of straw she collected in the pen and her own fur. She delivered and cared for the kits there without any intervention from us apart from a couple of quick and non-invasive inspections. Like her wild(er) cousins, she visited the nest to feed the kits only twice a day - early before sunrise and just after nightfall - and she closed the entrance to the tunnel after every visit to both stop them from coming out and conceal the nest. These were very brief but care-fully planned visits aimed at warding off predators' attention.



Figure 7.19 Lucky on her early morning visit to her underground nest.

At this point, though, we were already well deep into “the rabbit hole”: there were six rabbits about to reach sexual maturity, Lucky was raising another eight rabbits, and her sister was preparing her first underground nest too. There were two fast

growing rabbit colonies and not enough space for them. We killed three young males that winter, and then the following spring, we began building a bigger rabbit pen for Chuck's larger colony (Figure 7.20). In this new 200msq enclosure, located amongst olive trees, vines and oak trees, we constructed an underground warren system with pipes that connected an old bath tub, placed upside-down to create a large underground room, to two small top-loading freezers we found discarded in the streets. These would act as nest boxes that we could access from "above-ground" to inspect new litters (Figure 7.21). We also planned a rotation system in the pen that involved closing certain areas off with mobile fencing to grow food that rabbits could forage for themselves at different intervals throughout the year.



Figure 7.20 Chuck's colony in a newly built pen.



Figure 7.21 Experimenting with an underground warren system in the new pen.

In the meantime, Lucky and Feral Boy had access to the larger chicken pen for their growing family, but we were envisioning an even “wilder” set-up for them at the edge of our woodland. We would have initiated the digging of a warren in a clay terrace and provided some protection around the area with fencing, but the rabbits would have been free to come in and out of the enclosure to forage as they pleased and eventually build their colonies elsewhere. We pictured an expanding rabbit population that would: positively influence vegetation structure and composition through herbivory and seed dispersal; improve soil conditions and biodiversity with their latrines and digging efforts; and provide an abundant source of food for both wild predators and human farmers living nearby. In this mini-rewilding dream of ours, we imagined domestic rabbits becoming feral and contributing to the ecological enhancement of surrounding lands *and* more abundant land-based livelihoods.

However, our experimental project got cut short when all twenty rabbits in both pens died suddenly and horribly. Lucky was the first one to go: she emitted a powerful and atrocious scream in the middle of the night and expired in my arms a minute later. The following week, we woke up every morning to the sight, sound

and smell of death, feeling powerless and incapable to do anything about it. Both young and old died within a week, in the same horrific way. We suspect an outbreak of the highly lethal Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease, but we will never know for sure. Local farmers keep telling us that “it happens all the time because rabbits are very delicate animals” but they didn’t used to be until the introduction of deadly viruses by Man (Delibes-Mateos et al., 2008). So we must have taken the wrong turn somewhere in the rich and plentiful rabbit hole.

#### 7.4 On the possibilities of rewilding domestic relations

It is conventionally assumed that farmers “own” animals and that they are in control of their lives. Certainly in the case of big agricultural enterprises, most farm animals are formally owned - they are a property and a commodity - and efforts are made to control their lives in order to maximise productivity and economic returns.

However, in more marginal farming spaces such as smallholdings, BTTL and permaculture farms, farm animals are not necessarily formally owned or even used as commodities, and attempts to control their lives are less pronounced (Emel et al., 2015; Holloway, 2001). We have bought some animals and sometimes we share or sell some of their “products”, but as I have attempted to show in the previous section, our relationship with them is not based on, and enacted through, ownership and exploitation. In fact, to the best of our intentions and capabilities, we have actively tried to undo some of the power asymmetries inscribed in animals’ domestication histories and animal management practices that limit their autonomy and compromise their well-being.

And yet, there is no denying that even BTTL farms are characterised by instrumental relations between farmers and farm animals. We want the dogs to guard the farm and protect the other animals, the cats to catch mice and rats, the chickens and the rabbits to contribute to soil fertility and food production. However, as Haraway (2008, p. 74) has argued: “[t]o be in a relation of use to each other is not the definition of unfreedom and violation”. As evidenced in the previous section, animals on our farm are neither treated as objects nor “exploited” for their work, reproductive

capacities or “ecological services”. Moreover, what is often neglected, is that relations of use on farms do not go one way. Animals are not passive recipients but agents with specific needs, wants and dispositions that exert a demanding presence on the human farmer who has to provide them with food, shelter, protection, companionship, medical care, etc. In fact, because of the animals, we cannot leave the farm, or at least doing so requires a lot of planning and outside help. So what kind of autonomy is this for the animal (or even the human)? And is it possible to “rewild” relations between humans and domestic animals on farms so that both can flourish?

In this section, I first draw some insights into animal autonomy in a farm multi-species contact zone, and I then build upon the previous chapter’s argument to explore the implications of these insights for understanding BTTL farms as a particular form-of-life.

#### *7.4.1 Animal autonomy on farms*

Learning to live with dogs, chickens and rabbits on the farm and creating the conditions for their autonomy and our mutual flourishing has been a steep learning curve, riddled with mistakes and constant adjustments which have imparted important lessons on the limits and possibilities of domestic animal autonomy on a farm.

Porcher (2017, p. 110) has argued that, for farm animals: “freedom does not mean leaving them to their own devices and it is important that animals have at their disposal a habitat that “fits” them; one that does not just fit them physically, but fits in with *their world*” (Porcher, 2017, p. 110, my emphasis). The world of domestic animals intersects “with folded temporalities” that involve thousands of years of co-evolution as well as landscapes and livelihoods co-production and co-habitation with humans (DeSilvey and Bartolini, 2019, p. 98). Their lifeworlds are deeply entangled with the lives of humans, and in some places it is not possible for either humans or domestic animals to survive without the other. Hence, creating the conditions for animals’ autonomy on a farm is not a matter of just “letting animals

be" and ending all interactions and human interventions. Nevertheless, our experience suggests that it is possible to create a "flatter hierarchy" (Emel et al., 2015, p. 175) between humans and animals on farms and craft ways of living "within which animals have autonomy" (Collard et al., 2015, p. 328). So what does it entail and how can it be envisioned and enacted?

For a start, animals' radical otherness, sentience and individual subjectivities must be acknowledged and tended to in order to begin to disrupt hegemonic views of animals as dumb, inferior beasts or worse, mere things that can be exploited and abused on farms. This means recognising farm animals "not as resources or banks of natural capital that service humans but as beings with their own familial, social, and ecological networks, their own lookouts, agendas, and needs" (Collard et al., 2015, p. 328). However, knowing what animals want or need is not an easy task, even for idealist and committed farmers: it is "a moving target" (Emel et al., 2015, p. 167) that changes between *and* within species as well as with time and relations. For instance, dogs may be social and territorial animals that have evolved to like human companionship and be protective of their "pack" and territory, but they also like to explore and roam freely and their needs and dispositions also vary quite dramatically according to their evolutionary and personal histories. Cherry - a Great Pyrenees Shepherd dog - took pleasure in staying at home to guard the farm, but Ness - a German Shorthair Pointer - loves to run for hours chasing the scents of wild animals. Jackie, a miniature Pinscher, was "supposed" to be a protective and family-oriented dog but she was aloof and very afraid of us when we "adopted" her. Her history of abandonment and experience of having to be self-reliant for a while has most definitely altered her subjectivity and needs. Hence, animals' needs, disposition and personal agendas are "relational and dynamic" (Emel et al., 2015, p. 168) and learning about them is a continuous process of *co-becoming* with them (Despret, 2004; Haraway, 2003; Tsing, 2012).

Nevertheless, encouraging animal autonomy on farms requires, at the very least, "dramatically relaxing control" over their lives (Smith, 2003, p. 181) to facilitate their capacity for expression, movement and social life. This in turn entails a more equal



sharing of space, adaptations in farm life and work, and an experimental attitude to learn what the animal prefers and find mutually beneficial solutions. For instance, to allow chickens to free-range on the land, we fenced our food growing space, adapted our farming methods to *their* food preferences, and we trained ourselves and the dogs to patrol and mark the territory daily. In the case of rabbits, we relinquished a large area of the farm to give them plenty of space to live in and we spent hours of work collecting food for them and years improving their living space. Indeed, we have repeatedly tinkered with the material and spatial arrangements of both chickens' and rabbits' pens to offer them different options for resting, nesting and socialising. We have assembled perches in the chicken coop to encourage chickens to roost above ground and away from night predators, and we have buried pipes and fridge-shelters underground for the rabbits to run around in, hide and shelter. These experimental arrangements in turn have encouraged and enabled new behaviours in some animals, such as chickens perching high up on trees and learning to skilfully evade containment, and rabbits building their own burrows and giving birth and taking care of litters underground. These behavioural changes, in turn, have altered the way we engage and care for the animals: with chickens learning how to fly over fences, we and the dogs had to become more attentive and responsive to their movements and calls in order to avoid both predatory attacks and raids on our gardens. In contrast, with the rabbits digging their own private nests underground, we could no longer monitor the progress of their litters as easily and so we intervened less in the process. At the same time, catching a rabbit in a large pen full of hiding places, tripping hazards and spikey olive branches, has made health inspections and procuring meat a much more involved and challenging activity for us.

However, our experience and experiments in rewilding our relations with domestic animals also suggest that animal autonomy depends on a large extent on the animals themselves, and their personal and evolutionary histories and agencies. Again, because of her history of abandonment and issues of trust, Jackie claimed for herself a different kind of autonomy compared to the other dogs. Also, some chickens never learned to fly over fences or roost up trees, and some rabbits like Chuck never

became interested in digging and sheltering in underground burrows. In contrast, chickens and rabbits that were born and raised on the farm (e.g. Lucky and Feral Boy) were far less docile and defied our attempts at control through fencing and handling. However, they were not any more “natural” or “wild” than their industry-born and cage-raised mates. Our experience suggests that, given the right conditions, even animals raised in and for industrial settings and commercial purposes can lead richer and more autonomous lives. The only difference with more “feral” individuals is that the latter have encouraged us “to devise new ways of listening and responding to [their] propositions and making space for their interests and pleasures” (Donati, 2019, p. 125). Nevertheless, broiler chickens of the Cobb variety that mostly sit by a feeder and die within a month or two do pose significant challenges to “aspirations to live well with chickens” (Donati, 2019, p. 124) and raises questions about the limits and possibilities of autonomy for some domestic animals.

Hence, animal autonomy is different for different individuals but also for different species of farm animals, and it also depends upon the wider socio-spatial and multi-species context in which they are situated (Ward and Prior, 2020). On our farm, chickens are free to range and forage for themselves thanks in part to the protection provided by the dogs, but rabbits have lived enclosed in a pen because of predatory pressures and our (and the dogs’) own inexperience and unfamiliarity with their needs and vulnerabilities. Hence, more autonomy for rabbits meant increasing the size of their pen and providing them with opportunities to socialise and express themselves in a stimulating environment. In the case of dogs, having more autonomy was not a matter of letting them run around as they pleased (although they did do that), but about learning to live *safely* with other farm animals and in a wider socio-spatial context in which property boundaries matter and people are afraid of packs of large dogs roaming the hills unattended. Hence, training (of both humans and dogs) was necessary to create understanding between species and to produce a geographical and historically specific kind of freedom for dogs: “the freedom to live safely in multi-species urban and suburban environments with very little physical restraint” (Haraway, 2003, p. 46). Hence, the wider spatial and socio-environmental context (e.g. locational characteristics, land tenure, predatory

pressure, social and cultural norms) also shapes and constraints possibilities for animal autonomy on farms.

What these insights suggests is that rewilding domestic relations on farms is not a matter of “forcing” autonomy upon animals but about creating “conditions of possibility, of potential” (Collard et al., 2015, p. 328). This potential is negotiated between farmers and particular animals within shared social and multi-species spaces. Hence, animal autonomy on a farm is neither about severing ties between farmers and animals, nor about relinquishing all control, but about connecting and engaging differently to “allow animals to have a good life *as far as the animal condition, and the human condition, permits*” (Porcher, 2017, p. 110, my emphasis). This provision is an important one for domestic animals on farms because their lives are deeply entangled with the interests and needs of human farmers, and a number of factors shape farmers “availability” (Despret, 2004, p. 123) to animals and their capacity to envision and enact animal autonomy on their farms. As Emel et al (2015, p. 165) have argued, the equality of human-animal relationships on farms “depends upon more than a one-dimensional comparison ... there is still a ‘bottom line’ based upon weather, feed costs, and multiple other variables” that influence interactions in these multi-species contact zones. Most obviously, farmers still need to make a livelihood in order to be able to give animals a good life, but most are caught up in an economic system that actually “deprives *them* of autonomy” (Porcher, 2017, p. 50) and therefore constraints more abundant and autonomous ways of living.

#### 7.4.2 From “total liberation” to mutualistic autonomy on BTTL farms

Anarchist geographers have begun to use the notion of “total liberation” to advance a political perspective that recognises intersecting oppressions between humans and animals and provides tools to envision and enact more just “trans-species futures” (Springer, 2021; White, 2015). However, the language of “total liberation” is both too cloudy and analytically limiting in the context of a farm because it cannot adequately capture the long and complex history of mutual relations between humans, domestic animals and diverse ecosystems, and it also oversimplifies the contextual complexity that shapes and constraints possibilities on farms.

In this chapter, I have been considering a different path for more abundant multi-species futures on farms using the notion of animal autonomy and rich empirical material based on first-hand experiences. Here, I build upon the insights drawn so far regarding the constraints and possibilities for animal autonomy in a farm multi-species contact zone to outline the form that animal autonomy takes on BTTL farms and reflect more directly upon the power and ethics that underpin BTTL farmers' relations to farm animals. More-than-human geographers have argued for nuanced and situated understandings of animal autonomy that not only recognise different degrees but also variable *forms* of autonomy (e.g. "managed" and "unmanaged"); these coalesce in distinct ways in conjunction with locational characteristics and forms of power (DeSilvey and Bartolini, 2019; Ward and Prior, 2020, p. 111).

In the previous chapter, I have argued for an understanding of BTTL farms as particular forms-of-life based upon principles of ecological care and self-sufficiency that they enact through everyday practices with the land understood as a local and translocal network of more-than-human relations. In this chapter, I have shown through empirical material that animal autonomy is also valued and encouraged on BTTL farms. However, on BTTL farms animals matter simultaneously as *individuals* with particular histories, subjectivities and needs, as *members* of a wider social and multi-species grouping and ecology, and as *participants* in a particular form-of-life. This means that animal autonomy and mutual flourishing on BTTL farms are not mutually exclusive and that relations of mutual care and collaborative work between farmers and animals define a BTTL way of living.

As I have tried to evoke and show, our actions and decisions on the farm emerge out of a respect of animals' radical otherness, a recognition of our interdependence, a desire for our multi-species flourishing, *and also* a need to care for our collective way of living on the farm that takes place within a wider socio-spatial and multi-species context. Hence, while we have relaxed control over animals' lives, we still encourage them to perform certain jobs and functions on the farm for the purpose of crafting a more self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable way of living. We have done so by enrolling their agencies and co-evolutionary histories with humans through

training and particular spatial and material arrangements. For instance, dogs have evolved to be protective of their territory and family, so we have nurtured our familial bonds and their connection to this piece of land by providing them with food, shelter and companionship, and we have trained them to patrol the land, respond to our calls and not attack chickens. Their presence and agency on the farm, in turn, allows other farm animals to range freely on the land instead of being enclosed permanently in pens, and enables us to leave the farm for periods of time when required.

Similarly, chickens are voracious foragers and produce eggs almost on a daily basis and plenty of manure high in phosphorus, so we provide them with food, space to range in, shelter and protection. Their energetic foraging activity around the land, in turn, successfully replaces more toxic pest management methods and simultaneously increases soil fertility, enabling more environmentally friendly farming practices while also providing humans with a regular and rich source of nourishment. Likewise, being prey to a number of predatory species, rabbits are very prolific animals that have evolved to reach sexual maturity in a few months, have short gestation periods, produce a large number of offspring, and reproduce several times a year (Tablado et al., 2009). Hence, rabbits can easily support the meat requirements of a family over a year, while also producing manure for the land and recycling a lot of vegetable waste and weeds. So we do our best to care for them as well as we can, and to make sure they have long, healthy and enjoyable lives. But rabbits are also “more than food” on our farm: they enhance biodiversity, recycle weeds and food waste, and provide humans with inspiration to continue to pursue more abundant multi-species futures (Donati, 2019). Hence, on BTTL farms “past human-animal relations are enrolled to support projections of desired landscape futures” (DeSilvey and Bartolini, 2019, p. 95), one in which humans and animals *work together* to produce more autonomous and enriching farming lives that can also benefit the surrounding ecosystems.

According to Porcher (2017, p. 13), work in animal husbandry systems “oscillates between interest and disinterest, and between obligation and liberty; interest,

because the farmer's aims are production and revenue, which are both indispensable to economic survival; disinterest, because the ties are more important than the products. Work with animals fluctuates between obligation and liberty, because the context of the relationship is work with its constraints and its rules, but equally, because these rules are not absolute, and farmers and animals alike know how to contravene them". Hence, she suggests a reading of relations between farmers and their animals through "the gift paradigm" based on a triple obligation of "giving-receiving-returning" (Porcher, 2017, p. 12). Here, the animals "give their presence, their trust, and their affection ... Farmers also give affection to their animals, they give respect and admiration, they do all they can to offer them a good life" but they also take it away in order to feed themselves, other human beings and take care of the agroecosystem.

Death, it could be argued, is the end of animal autonomy. It is certainly the end of a life. Killing animals for food is not something BTTL farmers take lightly, but it is acceptable if the animals have been given autonomy in the form of a "good life". In the words of one of Wilbur's (2012, p. 176) interviewed BTTL farmers: "I hate it. But at least I know that the chickens had a good life". They of course also strive to give the animals a "good death" by minimising distress and suffering, and by situating the act "in place as part of routines that affect the economic and cultural attributes of those who perform it" (Wilbur, 2012, p. 176), which include practices of ecological care and self-sufficiency.

Following Porcher's (2017) gift theory, an animal's death on a BTTL farm can be understood as fulfilling the third obligation of farmers and animals' relations: *to return*. In the gift paradigm, returning is essential for continuing the cycle of a good life, not just because it allows farmers to survive, but it also allows him/her to give the herd/flock/colony and the wider multi-species network a good life, and therefore preserve a *collective* way of living on the farm. As Porcher has argued: "Gift relations are situated in different temporalities, and circulate between herds and individuals, between different types of animals, and between life and death". In the context of a BTTL farm, the death of an animal also contributes to caring for the land

and practising a more sustainable agriculture because if you give animals' freedom to mate and reproduce, then the wider agroecosystem may suffer. Moreover, unconvivial relations between different animal species and individuals have also taught us about the challenges of multi-species conviviality on a farm and that care is not an innocent practice (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Put more simply, their death "leaves space for life" (Porcher, 2017, p. 14) and for a way of farming and living with the land in which ecological care, self-sufficiency *and* animal autonomy can be practiced and shared.

The animal autonomy pursued and enacted by BTTL farmers can thus be regarded as a form of "mutualistic autonomy" based upon humans and animals sharing and co-producing a "good life" on the farm. The good life here *is* autonomy, but this is a relational and mutualistic achievement that is care-fully negotiated in everyday relations between humans and animals and within a wider socio-environmental and multi-species context. Hence, farm animals are neither pure instruments of BTTL farmers' autonomy nor completely liberated from instrumental ends, but they have an active role in the crafting of a more autonomous form-of-life by shaping present-day practices and future possibilities. Hence, the "mutualistic autonomy" crafted on BTTL farms is not a pure, asocial state of autonomy, but an ethically complex and practically messy performance of multi-species possibility.

#### *7.4.3 On living and dying well on a farm: complementing an anarchist vegan praxis*

The discussion so far has focused on the crafting of animal autonomy on BTTL farms through mutualistic relations, whereby autonomy is co-produced and negotiated by humans and animals in their everyday relations and interdependence in a shared multi-species farming space, wider context and way of life. This mutualistic autonomy is an ethically complex but also politically meaningful proposition for more abundant and autonomous multi-species futures for those humans involved.

So far, I have not touched upon the slaughtering of animals on our farm, but it is a significant, if somewhat occasional, aspect of our farming lives. A number of anarchist geographers have proposed a critical vegan praxis to end all exploitation

and cruelty towards both farm animals, human farmers and workers, but the broader anarchist activist and scholar community has long been divided over the topic of killing and eating animals (Nocella et al., 2015; Springer et al., 2021). The ethical debate on the subject is both intricate and passionate, but I do not aim to review or address it here. Instead, I want to offer some reflection on my personal and direct experience as a BTTL farmer who raises and kills some animals for food. These are not claims to authenticity, nor righteousness. However, as Wilbur (2020, p. 13) has noted: “the physical proximity and tangible relationships these farmers experience with their livestock presents them with a vocabulary to discuss animal welfare as more than a vague ideal, and life and death as more than philosophical abstractions”.

However, the fact that animal death is part of this proposition sits uneasily with a number of animal rights activists, vegans and some anarchist geographers. And yet, as I hope to have shown, the question of “animal liberation”, or even “total liberation”, is a complex one, and even more so for domestic animals whose histories and lives have been profoundly shaped by thousands of years of co-evolution and are deeply entangled with the lives of humans. We cannot go back in time to a pre-domestication period and in some places it is not possible for either humans or farmed animals to survive without the other. Moreover, the analysis also suggests that “liberating” domestic animals by either letting them “die out” or by relegating them to heritage museums and farm sanctuaries, is not necessarily a more morally just position because it ignores both individual animal lives and “the inescapability of the ecological human body and its embeddedness within complex economic and biological potentialities and constraints” (Emel et al., 2015, p. 164). Indeed, even in animal sanctuaries and museums, tensions and constraints of entrenched social and animal power asymmetries, the material limits of particular environments as well as the bodily needs, processes and ecological relations of non-human animals (eating, breeding, shitting, predation, etc.) cannot be wished away. Put simply, such calls avoid the thorny question of “the messy business of living together” (Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006, p. 134) in multi-species contact zones.



Moreover, killing and eating meat is not always and everywhere a symptom of human arrogance, supremacy, and “privilege” that contributes to the social system of attitudes, practices and institutions that maintain human entitlement over non-humans (Springer, 2021). As Porcher (2017) has argued, in animal husbandry systems, most farmers wish to keep animals for as long as possible - we certainly have - and do not find pleasure in the slaughter of an animal - we most definitely do not. This is because animals in these systems are not “meat-on-legs” or “cadavers” (Springer, 2021, p. 343) waiting to be dismembered, but living and agentic beings with which farmers share their everyday lives, both the pains and pleasures of it. Moreover, no animals on our farm is pre-destined to be slaughtered, and they are not “resources” that we exploit and “harvest” for a profit; and when we do decide to kill an animal it is never easy. It is generally preceded by weeks of deliberations, days of emotional preparation and practical organisation, and hours of inner tribulation: it is an event indeed, and a sad one at that. The grief and preparation that precedes it could be understood as being part of a “ritual” that wishes to foreground and honour our attachment and ties, but also the animal life and its contribution to giving life (Porcher, 2017). Certainly, the collective sharing of the meat that follows a slaughter on our farm signifies that “killing an animal is not nothing, and it should be collectively remembered” (Porcher, 2017, p. 82).

Other BTTL farmers probably experience the slaughter differently and have different rituals. Wilbur (2012, p. 102) reports about one BTTL farmer who sells his organic chickens to city dwellers on one condition: “buyers come to his farm and participate in the entire process of choosing the chicken and then slaughtering and cleaning it ... ‘I’m happy to sell my chickens to people from the city,’ he claims, ‘but I want them to know how it’s done. I don’t want to reinforce consumer ignorance by doing all the dirty work myself’”. It is often noted by animal rights campaigners advancing a *politics of visibility* that “if slaughterhouses had glass doors, not many people would eat meat”. Equally, though, if people had to share the “dirty work”, not many people would choose to eat meat, and those that did, would not do it as often as they do, contributing to a *politics of accountability*. Indeed, for BTTL farmers “killing is a visceral, sensorial act” (Wilbur, 2012, p. 100), but also one that is situated within a

broader strategy and way of living with farm animals that challenges social convention about animals just being meat and prefigures more diverse and autonomous multi-species futures. Raising, killing and eating animals on BTTL farms is far from being an ethically innocent and uncomplicated practice or even an emotionally void and detached experience; but so should be any eating practices, since we are all inescapably implicated in ways of living and dying when we eat.

As Haraway (2008, p. 295) has argued, “there is no way to eat and not to kill, no way to eat and not to become with other mortal beings to whom we are accountable, no way to pretend innocence and transcendence or a final peace”. Veganism is purported as the ultimate solution to end both human and animal exploitation and suffering, but it is far from being an ethically pure (and affordable) position in the machine of contemporary capitalism. According to Trauger (2022) “diets that preclude the consumption of animals do more to reproduce the violence of colonial relations than they do to mitigate them, against what their claims to nonviolence might suggest. Embedded in white supremacy, which is the logic of social organization premised on racial hierarchies, ethical diets privilege the “doing good” of the often, white, settler eater and do not acknowledge or prioritize the welfare of the “less than human””. In fact, the future and wellbeing of many agricultural ways of living (small-scale, family farms, indigenous, pastoralists and peasants ways of living) are currently uncertain, unjustly caught between the criticism of extreme abolitionist positions, and a new capitalist technological “fix” based on a world of meat-without-animals, and therefore also without farmers (Porcher, 2017). Either position is likely to cause the extinction of certain animal groups and breeds as well as millions of individual animals, and the disappearance of farmers, land workers, pastoralists, peasants and indigenous ways of living, and with them, more diverse and abundant agroecosystems and agroecological landscapes.

With these reflections, I do not wish to contribute to an ethical framework or arrive at a general conclusion on whether it is right or wrong to kill and eat animals, but I will argue that meat does not always and everywhere embody a “disrespectful category” (Plumwood 2003) and that finding ways to be accountable for and

response-able to the “messy business” (Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006, p. 134) of living and dying that we all share and are necessarily implicated in through eating, is an important mean for “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of our times. It is certainly worth considering possibilities beyond veganism in which relations between humans and animals are more equal, respectful, cooperative, care-full and mutually beneficial for both and a wider ecosystems, in order to reshape our entanglements with domestic animals and craft more diverse and abundant multi-species futures (Emel et al., 2015).

## 7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered a rich and detailed empirical account of human-animal relations on our BTTL farm to reflect upon the possibilities of rewilding domestic relations in a farming context and explore an alternative (anarchist) path for more abundant multi-species futures beyond veganism. Using the concept of multi-species contact zone and empirical vignettes, I have explored how relations get negotiated with three specific animal groups (dogs, chickens, rabbits) with which we share our farming lives, highlighting individual animal agencies, multi-species relations as well as wider contextual factors. This investigation has led me to a number of conclusions regarding animal autonomy in farms’ contact zones and to a theoretical exploration of its meaning and form in a BTTL way of living.

Most importantly, it has revealed that it is possible to craft ways of living on a farm in which animals have the possibility to live more autonomous lives. The process does not entail physical disengagement and spatial segregation, nor a total lack of control and disregard for animals. It requires recognition of their radical otherness, sentience and individuality, relaxing of control, care-full observations and engagements, embodied learning, as well as adaptations to farming lives and work. Animal autonomy on a farm is not about “letting animals be” but about crafting mutually beneficial relations so that both humans and animals can have a good life. However, it has also highlighted a number of factors that shape and constraint possibilities on farms, including: animals’ evolutionary and personal histories,

farmers' own dispositions and material capabilities, and wider socio-spatial and multi-species dynamics. Animal autonomy on farms is thus better understood and investigated as a variable and situated process that is negotiated and co-constituted by animals and farmers in uneven socio-spatial and multi-species contexts.

Moreover, building upon the previous chapter and alongside ecological care and self-sufficiency, I have argued that animal autonomy is another key dimension in the crafting and performance of a BTTL form-of-life. In this multi-species contact zone, animal autonomy - or "the good life" - is mutualistic in the sense of being both shared and laboured with human farmers but is not without tensions and ambiguity. Indeed, in the case of domestic animals and farming relations, "a temporal orientation" that both reckons with the ruins of the past and recognises humans and animals' mutual interdependencies is necessary to envision and enact more diverse and autonomous ways of living (Collard et al., 2015, p. 323).

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to examine the embodied experiences and everyday doings of BTTL farmers by examining my own journey and experience of going BTTL in relation to the contexts and more-than-human being and agencies I have encountered and inhabited. Studies of countercultural BTTL farms have so far produced “both uncritically celebratory and overly judgmental perspectives” (Wilbur, 2013, p.149). On one hand, they are hailed as examples of more sustainable lifestyles and alternative spaces of food politics, and on the other, they are criticised as being individualistic and largely ineffective political initiatives. However, not many studies have paid attention to the ways in which BTTL farms are embedded within, and shaped by, the specific places and more-than-human (agro)ecologies they inhabit, nor how BTTL farmers themselves become with and are affected by other humans and non-humans through encounters and everyday doings with the land. This is despite the fact that building a relationship of consubstantiality with the land is one of the most defining characteristic of BTTL initiatives, and that the wider spatial context and (more-than)human agencies involved contribute significantly to their unfolding and transformative potentiality. In this thesis, I have argued for a reconsideration of the BTTL movement using more-than-human perspectives that pays attention to the embodied and emplaced interactions between humans and non-humans and recognises their mutual co-constitution and relational agency. Shifting the theoretical and empirical focus to the *more-than-human* geographies of BTTL farms has broader relevance for understanding their alternative propositions because it reframes and reworks the terms of their political engagement.

In carrying out this investigation into the *becoming* and *doing* of BTTL farmers, I have drawn upon literature in geography and beyond that foregrounds the agency of non-humans in the making of (political) subjects and socio-material worlds and I have experimented with *doing* geography differently. Hence, “going back-to-the-land in the Anthropocene” - the first part that constitute the title of the thesis - was

the empirical focus and background of this research endeavour; whereas the remainder of the title - “a more-than-human journey into anarchist geography” - foregrounds the theoretical journey that was pursued. These journeys – physical and theoretical – have been united by and developed through my personal experience and practice as a BTTL farmer, and by attending to and addressing the following inter-related research questions:

- 1) *How does one become a BTTL farmer and what shapes his/her intentionality?*
- 2) *How is nature “performed” on BTTL farms and what kind of transformative potential does it engender?*
- 3) *How can the human-centric nature of anarchist geography be rethought to account for the agency of a more-than-human world without losing sight of its emancipatory framework(s)?*

In this concluding chapter, I return to each research questions in turn, summarizing the key findings, reflecting upon the thesis’ main contributions and suggesting future lines of work relating to both the BTTL movement, other empirical contexts and the future development of a more-than-human anarchist geography.

## 8.2 Key findings and future work

### *8.2.1 The becoming-with of BTTL farmers*

The first line of enquiry of this thesis was an exploration of the process by which individuals become BTTL farmers and how their (radical) subjectivity as well as their (post)migration goals and intentions emerge *and* change as a result of affective encounters with humans and non-humans and embodied experiences in particular places and contexts. I have pursued this investigation in Chapter 4 and 5 by going beyond demographic and discursive explorations of counterurbanisation journeys, and paying attention to biographical histories, encounters and lived experiences across rural contexts, places, and more-than-human relations. In these chapters, I have examined my personal journey of becoming a BTTL farmer and I have shown that both humans *and* non-humans play a transformative role in the becoming of

radical BTTL farmers and that the wider rural contexts and places they move also to shape their post-migration goals and provide both constraints and opportunities.

More specifically, in Chapter 4, I have attended to a number of affective encounters on my journey BTTL and I have highlighted intimate relations, radical connections, more-than-human environments and socio-spatial contexts as significant, yet largely overlooked factors in the becoming (or not) of BTTL farmers. I have shown how my journey BTTL did not start from one day to the next, but it came about *gradually*, and it was inextricably and constitutively entangled with the humans and non-humans I encountered along the way and with my embodied experience of dwelling in a rural environment. Meeting Bill, moving to a rural place and spending time in the community at Leah were all key factors in my later decision to become a farmer. Forging intimate relations and emotional connections with a rural place and its humans and more-than-human inhabitants contributed significantly to the development of my intentions and ideals by influencing my knowledge and affective dispositions and by shaping my bodily sensibilities and skills. These intimate relations, radical connections and rural attachments, *and also* their disruptions through my eviction, were all essential to the growth of my intention to migrate and become a farmer.

I have thus argued that the goals and intentions of BTTL farmers do not pre-exist fully-formed within individual subjects, but instead emerge within the flow of everyday life and across their biographical entanglements with people, places, contexts and affective rural environments. Moreover, it is not just rational decisions and instrumental choices that drive these politically-motivated migrants, but also emotions and affective (dis)connections with the more-than-human worlds they encounter and inhabit. I have thus problematized the instrumental rationality that often accompanies BTTL farmers (and other resistant/prefigurative subjects) by foregrounding the contingency, unpredictability, complexity and affective intensity of such life transitions and journeys. This chapter, then, not only contributes to an understanding of countercultural BTTL migrations from bounded episodes to affective events (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012), but it also starts to problematize and

rework notions of prefigurative subjects and their intentionality in terms of a processual *becoming-with*. Hence, it also contributes to work across geography that is beginning to question and rework narrow framings and understandings of resistant/activist/prefigurative subjectivities based on ideas of fixity, coherence and rational instrumentality by foregrounding the importance of emotions, affective experiences and more-than-human agencies (Askins, 2009; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Clough, 2012; Hughes, 2020; Vannini and Taggart, 2013).

The becoming-with of BTTL farmers is further explored and elaborated in Chapter 5, where I “place” our experience more squarely within the spatio-temporal dynamics and more-than-human agencies of the land we moved to. In this chapter, I have examined the first years of our dwelling in a remote, marginalised and environmentally degraded agricultural landscape in southern Italy and I have traced the development of our goals and intentions in relation to the specificities, potentialities and needs of the land we have been inhabiting using the notion of “place literacy”. Inspired by and taking on board Indigenous teachings and perspectives on the agency of place in geography (Barker and Pickerill, 2020; Bawaka Country et al., 2015; Larsen and Johnson, 2016), I have argued that this is a type of knowledge that emerges from listening to and feeling *with* a place and committing to its flourishing. Alongside other non-Indigenous scholars who are themselves learning to listen and become-with the places they inhabit and study, developing and acting upon this place literacy is an ongoing and embodied learning process, something I am still grappling with, but this understanding (and its ongoing development) provides support to Indigenous and non-Indigenous efforts in the discipline to take seriously the agency of place in our thinking and doings as geographers (Barker and Pickerill, 2020). More broadly, this chapter advances the idea that place is neither a spatial container nor a tool of BTTL initiatives, but an active (and unavoidable) player - and a potentially significant guidance - in their attempts at crafting a consubstantial relationship with the land. Relatedly, this chapter argues for the importance to attend to place in prefigurative initiatives to



understand what places affords them to do and how it can guide the efforts of prefigurative subjects in ways that are more just and respectful of places.

Chapter 5 also offers a first in-depth ethnographic account of a BTTL initiative in the marginal rural areas of southern Europe, contributing to a fuller international picture of this counterurbanisation phenomenon which to date remains little studied (Halfacree, 2008). Most importantly, this chapter has shed light on some of the uneven geographies and spatial dynamics of Italy's rural areas and it has opened a window into the study of BTTL farmers in non-Anglophone rural contexts.

Moreover, alongside Chapter 4, it demonstrates that different rural contexts provide different opportunities and challenges to the becomings (and doings) of BTTL farmers (Halfacree, 2006). More specifically, cultural representations of a "rural idyll" and its spatial orderings continue to hinder BTTL initiatives in the British (post-productivist) countryside, while the productivist and effacing trajectories of Italy's rural marginal areas bring different, but nonetheless significant, challenges to their development too. Above all, and despite the availability of cheap(er) land and more permissive planning regulations, BTTL farmers face spatial isolation, lack of access to markets, land degradation and productivist "agri-cultures". Together, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 contribute to a change in understanding and interpretations of BTTL farmers as either devoted activists ("pioneers") or solitary hermits ("lifestyle drop outs") to more ambiguous subjects navigating and experimenting *in* and *with* places, more-than-human agencies and contexts in their everyday lives.

This line of enquiry into the "becoming-with" of BTTL farmers could be pursued further in a number of ways. First, given the autoethnographic approach of this thesis and a more general lack of studies into countercultural BTTL initiatives, future work could productively expand to other BTTL farmers, their migration journeys and place-based experiences post-migration. As foregrounded in this thesis, BTTL journeys involve significant changes to one's (expected) life trajectory, and they are usually driven by experiences of disillusionment and inspiration, affective connections and ruptures, feelings of belonging and exclusion, but what these are and how they come about has yet to be fully investigated. Ideally, these journeys

would be explored using immersive methodologies and sustained engagements (e.g. participant observation with oral histories) in order to better attend to the affective and contextual nuances that have been revealed in this thesis. Second, in order to build a fuller international picture, future studies could expand to other rural contexts and geographies and attend more closely to the land, rural places and communities BTTL farmers move to. BTTL initiatives do not exclusively take place in remote, marginal rural areas, but also in peri-urban contexts, tourist areas, productive river plains, and so on. More situated accounts could not only reveal how experiences vary across rural places, communities and (more-than-human) geographies, but also what the opportunities and challenges are in different spatial contexts, what places afford them to do and how they affect their goals and development. AFNs could provide methodologically useful in this matter not only for actually finding individual BTTL initiatives - which remains a difficulty (Wilbur, 2013) - but also for carrying out larger-scale studies into the barriers and opportunities to BTTL initiatives in different geographical contexts.

Finally, and moving beyond the BTTL movement to prefigurative politics more generally, attending to the “more-than” (rational, human) of prefigurative subjects - their embodied *becoming-with* - can be a particularly useful line of enquiry to better understand the process by which individuals *become radicalised* (Pickerill, 2008), i.e. how they “learn to be affected” by others, what makes them want and seek change, and what feeds their desires, intentions and political imaginary. Attending to the “growth” of prefigurative subjects, to how radical subjectivities get formed, what kind of encounters, experiences, emotions and affects move and mobilise people - including radical geographers - is not a narrow or theoretically irrelevant research pursuit. As Carolan (2013, p. 422) pointedly puts it: “Social change requires bodies not only endowed with resources, like social, economic, cultural, and political capital ... Social change also requires bodies that think social change *ought* to occur. How do bodies become tuned to the status quo (or to alternatives)? What makes bodies want change? These are important questions; yet they go largely unanswered ... Lest we forget, at the heart of change/status quo are living bodies”. As some geographers

have begun to show, such enquiry and attention can contribute to a better understanding of what might be needed to find “common ground” (Chatterton, 2006), to cultivate new political imaginaries, registers and intensities (Mountz, 2015) and brew new political subjectivities and collectives within and outside the academy (Cameron et al., 2014).

### 8.2.2 A BTTL form-of-life and its infrastructures

The second line of enquiry of this thesis was an exploration of the *doings* of BTTL farmers in their everyday interactions with the land and the non-humans that compose it and the kind of transformative potential that these interactions engender. To pursue this line of enquiry, I have used the notion of “form-of-life” and countered it to the concept of “lifestyle” in order to move beyond subjects and their practices and attend to the performance of a *way of living* as it emerges and is crafted with a more-than-human collectivity. In Chapter 6 and 7, I have argued that a BTTL form-of-life is predicated upon *ecological care*, *self-sufficiency* and *animal autonomy*, but these values emerge and crystallise through the everyday performance of particular knowledge(s), skills and practices with and alongside the materials and non-human beings and forces of the land they inhabit.

More specifically, in Chapter 6, I have shown that a BTTL form-of-life emerges from attempts at developing a consubstantial relationship with the land and I have foregrounded the performance of ecological care and self-sufficiency in our everyday doings to achieve it. Most importantly, I have argued that the various non-humans that are enrolled into and compose a BTTL way of living (the batteries, the soil, the manure, the animals, the water containers, the wind, the fungi, and so on) are not just tools or objects of an (alternative) lifestyle but they are active participants in the making of their intentions, knowledge, skills, sensibilities, practices as well as their homes and farms. Put differently, crafting a BTTL form-of-life based on ecological care and self-sufficiency is a re-composition and re-assemblage of bodies and their relations, it is a re-invention of beings and doings through co-becomings and co-performances.

This reframing led me to suggest that the prefigurative politics of BTTL farms is not about materially articulating ideals of environmental sustainability and self-sufficiency by inscribing them onto a passive material substrate or background, but about crafting a way of living based on relations of care and mutual interdependence with the land they inhabit. Put more simply and explicitly in relation to the concept of prefiguration, what BTTL farms prefigure is not an environmentally sustainable society, but more autonomous ways of living based on ecological care, (self)sufficiency and animal autonomy. Here, the means and ends (practices and values) of prefigurative politics confluence in a form-of-life which cannot be co-opted by modern and capitalist paradigms because what is at stake is not practices or objects alone, but a whole modality of being, knowing and acting in the world that is indivisible from the field of (temporal, spatial and more-than-human) relations from which it emerges and develops. This chapter, then, contributes to wider efforts in geography and beyond to rethink prefiguration from a form of “lifestyle politics” to a political form-of-life (Joronen, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2018; Pellizzoni, 2020) in which prefigurative subjects, their values, knowledge, skills and practices are constitutively and inescapably intertwined with the places and more-than-human worlds they inhabit.

The corollary to this reframing and understanding however is that a form-of-life cannot be scaled “up” and “out”, but it can be *shared* through the infrastructures that it gives rise to. Hence, in Chapter 6, I have also attended to the crafting of two such infrastructures on our farm - mulch and off-grid - using relational and ecological understandings of infrastructure as situated and agentic socio-material assemblages consisting of values, knowledge, skills, practices, non-human materials and beings (Amin, 2014; Papadopoulos, 2018; Star, 1999), and I have outlined the ways in which they intervene politically through the notion of “generous infrastructures”. Building upon Papadopoulos’ (2018) framework, I have argued that the generosity of infrastructures rests on their (1) ontological openness and flexibility, and their capacity to (2) trigger “generous encounters” and (3) transform spaces and subjects towards more autonomous trajectories. In the case of BTTL farmers, I have argued that mulch and off-grid allows them to disconnect from

corporate-state infrastructures (of electricity, sewage, water, fertilisers, chemicals, tillers, etc.) and re-assemble their bodies, everyday lives and spaces in ways that allows them to take care and be more response-able towards the human and non-human others with which they share their lives and who are both geographically and temporally near and far. Put differently, mulch and off-grid help BTTL farmers perform ecological care and (self)sufficiency and therefore allow them to defend the autonomy of their form-of-life if and when institutional infrastructures fail. Moreover, in their material openness and flexibility and through generous encounters, these infrastructures travel across spaces and times, carrying with them the potential to “contaminate” other forms-of-life and contribute to the multiplication of autonomous spaces and modes of existence.

Hence, Chapter 6 contributes to a theoretical reconsideration of the political radicalism of BTTL farms from a form of cultural and lifestyle politics that deals in alternative identities and practices, to a form of ontological politics that engages in the crafting and sharing of more autonomous ways of living. However, autonomy here means co-fabrication; it is an experimental and ongoing process of mutual becoming and doing(s) that involves people and things, animals and plants, chemicals and energies, technologies and species, and it entails a re-organisation of a way of living through material and multi-species interdependences. More broadly, and alongside studies in geography and beyond that have begun to take seriously the political agency of non-humans (Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Hobson, 2007; Sundberg, 2011), this chapter contributes to the development of a more materialist understanding of prefiguration (Minuchin, 2016) in which knowledge, skills, practices and the agency of multiple non-humans contribute to the crafting of more autonomous modes of existence. Most importantly, in this theoretical reconsideration, the transformative potential of prefigurative politics lies less with the individuals and their alternative practices than with forms-of-life and the generosity of the infrastructures they create.

In Chapter 7, I have shifted and focused this line of enquiry to human-animal relations on BTTL farms to probe into the ethico-political and practical possibilities

of rewilding domestic relations on farms by engaging with the idea and performance of animal autonomy. Using the concept of “multi-species contact zone” and rich empirical material, I have argued that farm animals are neither tools used by BTTL farmers to craft a more autonomous form-of-life, nor completely “liberated” from instrumental ends, but active participants in a more autonomous form-of-life.

However, enacting animal autonomy on a farm is an ethically complex and practically messy performance of multi-species possibility that requires recognising animals’ radical otherness, sentience and individual subjectivities, a more equal sharing of space, adaptations in farm life and work, and an experimental attitude to learn what the animal prefers in order to find *mutually* beneficial solutions.

However, I have also highlighted that multiple factors shape and constraint possibilities for animal autonomy on farms, including the animals themselves (their personal histories and agencies), domestication histories, multi-species relations, the livelihood needs and autonomy of farmers, and a wider socio-spatial and environmental context (locational characteristics, predatory pressure, social and cultural norms, agroecosystem health).

This investigation opens up space for anarchist geographers to consider and examine more diverse political, ethical and practical engagements with the question of “the animal condition” (White, 2015, p. 20) beyond veganism. More specifically, this chapter problematises the notion of “total liberation” advanced by some anarchist geographers for being too analytically limiting and ethically simplistic in the context of farms and domestic animals, and it has advanced the concept of “mutualistic autonomy” as a potential path for building “more diverse and autonomous forms of life and ways of living together” with animal others (Collard et al. 2015, p. 323).

Hence, this chapter directly contributes to debates in critical animal geography on the possibilities that lie between abolitionist positions (i.e. veganism) and factory farming as the only possible ways to live (or not) with domestic animals (Collard et al., 2015; Emel et al., 2015; Gillespie and Collard, 2015).

There are some ways in which this research could be further expanded. Given the conceptual development undertaken in this thesis, it would be interesting to pursue

this line of enquiry further through more empirical research into the kinds of forms-of-life that are crafted in other prefigurative initiatives by paying attention to the values, knowledge, skills and practices that emerge from the relationships and performances of humans, places and non-human objects, beings and forces.

Additionally, more empirical examples drawn from other BTTL farms could further enrich and complement the insights produced in this thesis with regards to both generous infrastructures and animal autonomy. As I have argued, infrastructures are ecological and situated assemblages, so other types of infrastructures may emerge on BTTL farms in different contexts. Likewise, the temporal window of the study was limited to our first years of settling in, and other stages in the development of BTTL farms might produce additional and/or different infrastructures. For instance, if I pursued this thesis five years from now, mulch and off-grid would still be part of our infrastructural arrangements, but our everyday doings might also become more diversified from an exclusive focus on soil restoration and self-sufficiency as well as extending beyond the space of our farm. Similarly, animal autonomy will be performed differently on different farms and with different animals.

Future studies could also fruitfully apply this framework to the AFNs that BTTL farmers participate in and help shape, more collective initiatives such as eco-villages and intentional communes, as well as the generous infrastructures that other prefigurative initiatives produce. Moreover, little has been said in this thesis about how the generosity of infrastructure “travels” and/or “contaminates” other ways of living, besides pointing out that its effects are difficult to quantify, unpredictable and not immediately perceivable. Hence, future work could also further explore and elaborate on the factors that shape/catalyse the generosity of infrastructures, and more specifically, how their affects ripple (or not) to other bodies, spaces and ways of living. Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis have recently drawn more people to our infrastructural arrangements, pointing to external events and structural forces as potential mediators. This work would have to be based on immersive and temporally sustained engagements with the “others” of BTTL initiatives - something that was difficult to do due to my insider position but also the time restrictions on this thesis - to attend to the ways in which their generous infrastructures contribute

(or not) to changes in people's values, knowledge, skills and practices, and the factors that shape and constraint them.

### *8.2.3 Ecologising anarchist geography: following a more-than-human trajectory*

In relation to the last research question of this thesis, I have traced a more-than-human trajectory for anarchist geography based on a conceptual revision of prefigurative subjects and their intentionality, and the form and transformative potentiality of prefigurative politics. This trajectory has been pursued through an engagement with a number of more-than-human theories and perspectives that attend to the becoming and doing of subjects with the places and more-than-human worlds they encounter and inhabit. In line with an anarchist geography's commitment to praxis, this theoretical journey has also unfolded through actual *doings* with multiple human and non-human others as a form of more-than-human praxis.

Most importantly, instead of "politicising ecology" in anarchist geography, this trajectory advances a way of "ecologising politics" in anarchist geography (Hinchliffe et al., 2005, p. 650). While the former amounts to speaking *of* and *for* non-human others, which inadvertently re-inscribes the division between Nature and Society, the latter is an approach that recognises the mutual co-constitution of beings and socio-material worlds and allows non-humans to have a more significant and active role in the making of political subjects and their agency. Put differently, this path/trajectory does not treat the non-human world as a thing over which humans struggle or as a passive site/background on which they take place but builds upon and enacts a relational approach in which all kinds of bodies are participants in constituting and changing the world.

More specifically, in this trajectory, the human subject that is key to anarchist geography and conceptualisations of prefiguration more generally has been decentred and reworked - but not denied - by placing his/her intentionality in a dwelt-in ecology that includes the social but also the material context and the more-



than-human beings and agencies that compose and shape his/her subjectivity, everyday life and embodied experience. The subjects of prefiguration are thus not materially abstracted and corporeally disembedded humans, but *embodied* and *emplaced* forms-of-life, ways of living whose values, intentions, skills, knowledge and practices *grow* from and are entangled with the more-than-human collectivity in which a subject dwells and is entangled with. It follows that the intentionality of prefigurative subjects should not be thought as existing independently from where the subjects are and what they do, but as an embodied act itself, immanent in a particular form-of-life and in its more-than-human ecology. This reframing allows us to recognise the agency of non-humans and place in the becoming of prefigurative subjects and their intentionality, bringing anarchist geography closer to Indigenous conceptions of self and place and contributing to wider efforts to decolonise the discipline (Barker and Pickerill, 2020; Larsen and Johnson, 2016; Sundberg, 2014).

Moreover, by reconceptualising prefigurative subjects as forms-of-life and situating their becoming within their “field of relations”, this reframing does not deny humans’ political agency but it does redistribute it across wider spatio-temporal contexts and more-than-human relations. This “redistribution”, in turn, shifts attention away from the alternative practices of prefigurative subjects to the *crafting* of whole ways of being, doing and knowing, and their generous infrastructures. This theoretical shift also reframes prefigurative politics from a form of “cultural politics” in which materials, sites and everyday practices are invested/inscribed with alternative meanings and values to a form of “ontological politics” based on the reconfiguration of human and non-human bodies and their relations. Prefiguration thus becomes a world-making practice that is performed and immersed in the current of everyday living and in the doings of human and non-human actors. Consequently, political agency and transformative potentiality does not emerge (exclusively) from the intentions and activities of humans alone, but is dispersed across the relations, labours and affects of people, places, things and non-human beings, and the generous infrastructures they co-create. Autonomy here becomes a more-than-human affair, a skilled and care-full activity that is dependent upon the

crafting of material and multi-species interdependences to transform both (human and non-human) bodies and spaces towards more autonomous trajectories.

Hence, through the notions of (affective/generous) encounters, dwelling and the agency of place, this trajectory follows the *growing* of prefigurative subjects into forms-of-life, and through the notion of generous infrastructures it attends to the *crafting* of prefigurative politics as a reorganisation, reassembling and co-becoming of human and non-human bodies and spaces that aim to *cultivate* autonomy. This trajectory thus implies a theoretical and empirical shift from an examination of subjects and their alternative practices to an exploration of ways of living and the generous infrastructures they create.

Rather than advancing what an anarchist geography *should* be, this thesis builds upon work in more-than-human geography and beyond that challenges modern political binaries (human/non-human, subject/object, macro/micro, public/private, etc.) to offer one potential theoretical trajectory that can open up ways of thinking about and exploring the dynamicity and interconnectedness of the social and material worlds we inhabit and co-create. Hence, this trajectory does not provide a normative programme or an overarching theoretical framework, but an opening into debates about what a less-anthropocentric anarchist geography might mean and how it can be pursued in complex and diverse more-than-human worlds. By starting from the embodied and emplaced connections and co-performances of humans and nonhumans, i.e. by *placing* humans, their bodies and doings within more-than-human ecologies, this theoretical trajectory can make visible the histories and systems that exploits both humans and non-humans as well as those ways of living and infrastructures that are based on material interdependences, generous exchanges and multi-species reciprocity. It can thus support the relaying and sharing of stories, experiences and experiments of co-becoming and doing of more-than-human collectivities that are attempting to construct more autonomous ways of living and flourishing with non-human others.

Lastly, being a journey, this thesis doesn't really have an ending. A path in the form of a theoretical trajectory has been laid for others to walk on, rework and reroute to different places, or to be used to start new journeys, make new crossings, and lay new paths. As Horton and Freire (1990, p. 6) have famously observed: "I think that even though we need to have some outline, I am sure that *we make the road by walking*". So this thesis is ultimately a proposal for "walking the world into being" (Sundberg, 2014, p. 39) alongside others, human and non-human alike.

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