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## **Vegetal politics**

A postanthropocentric account on urban gardening in  
Rome

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## Summary

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Theoretical and conceptual framework</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2.1 Feminist newmaterialisms and postanthropocentric theories: overcoming the dichotomy between social construction and realism</b> .....	<b>12</b>
2.1.2 From anti-humanism to posthumanisms.....	14
2.1.3 Agency, politics, and the role of critique .....	26
<b>2.2 Questioning environmentalism in the city through Marxist political ecology</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>2.3 Understanding the city as a more-than-human space</b> .....	<b>35</b>
2.3.1 Environmentalism of everyday life.....	36
<b>2.4 Methodology</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>2.5 Conclusions</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>3. The Roman context</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>3.1 Recent history and contemporaneity of Roman green spaces and urban gardens</b> .....	<b>50</b>
3.1.1 The historical roots of urban gardening in Rome.....	51
3.1.2 Current extent of urban gardening in Rome.....	54
<b>3.2 The role of Roman public institutions and current regulations</b> .....	<b>59</b>
3.2.1 Relationships between public institutions and citizens: the urban garden regulation process and the role of volunteers in the management of green spaces.....	66
<b>3.3 Urban gardening, a multifarious set of practices. Different actors and some examples</b> .....	<b>77</b>
<b>4. The case study: Urban Garden Tre Fontane</b> .....	<b>94</b>
<b>4.1 Location, history, and composition of the area</b> .....	<b>94</b>
4.1.1 The local urban tissue.....	95
4.1.2 Some statistical data .....	98
<b>4.2 Environmental Activism in the VIII Municipality</b> .....	<b>99</b>
<b>4.3 The Garden Tre Fontane</b> .....	<b>105</b>
4.3.1 Historical roots of the Garden Tre Fontane .....	105
4.3.2 Contemporaneity of the Tre Fontane Shared Garden.....	107
<b>4.4 Main activities</b> .....	<b>111</b>
<b>4.5 Conclusions</b> .....	<b>119</b>
<b>5. From the militancy to the neighbourhood's activism. Reading the garden through alliances, conflicts and new arrangements</b> .....	<b>121</b>
<b>5.1 The creation of a space in becoming through the daily practice</b> .....	<b>121</b>
5.1.1 Gardeners' profiles.....	125
5.1.2 Taking action in the common area.....	130
5.1.3 Self-management and spatial control .....	136
5.1.4 Critical remarks.....	142
<b>5.2 Interactions between human and nonhuman living beings in the co-construction of the garden. Materiality and language</b> .....	<b>144</b>
5.2.2 Critical remarks on humans-nonhumans interactions in the garden.	172

5.3 Environmentalism of everyday life and newmaterialist politics.....	178
5.3.1 Environmental politics in the VIII Municipality .....	179
5.3.2 From militancy to local activism.....	180
5.4 Conclusions .....	182
<b>6. Vegetal politics between decorum and decay .....</b>	<b>188</b>
6.1 Decorum, decay, and environmental politics in the city .....	191
6.2 Decorum and decay in the Garden Tre Fontane .....	201
6.2.1 Decay: a pertinent category? .....	203
6.3 Vegetal politics.....	211
6.3.1 Vegetal politics and environmental justice: a posthuman political ecology.....	215
6.3.2 The agential and symbolic power of vegetal life.....	220
6.4 Conclusions .....	223
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>243</b>

### **Graphs, Images, Maps**

Graph 1 Roman Urban Gardens.....	55
Graph 2 Current expense for the management of Roman green areas.....	61
Graph 3 Number of gardening staff for the period 1995-2015 .....	63
Graph 4 Number of gardening staff in the period 1995-2018 .....	63
Graph 5 Number of trees planted in the period 2012-2018.....	65
Graph 6 Number of trees pruned in the period 2012-2018.....	65
Graph 7 Score assigned by Roman citizens to the state of Roman parks and villas.....	67
Graph 8 Age distribution of interviewed gardeners.....	204
Graph 9 Decay and the city of Rome.....	209
Graph 10 Decay and the VIII Municipality .....	209
Graph 11 Decay and the Tre Fontane Park.....	210
Graph 12 Tre Fontane Park.....	218
Graph 13 A conversation around the Symposium Tree.....	222

Image 1 Wild boars in Rome.....	79
Image 2 Malvas in Piazza di Spagna, Rome .....	80
Image 3 Eviction of informal settlements in Rome .....	81
Image 4 Urban Garden in SNIA.....	92
Image 5 Demonstration against the project I-60 .....	102
Image 6 Flyer promoting a cleaning day in the Tre Fontane Park.....	105
Image 7 One of the entrances of the Tre Fontane garden, July 2018.....	109
Image 8 Beekeeping area .....	113

Image 9 Winter garden.....	115
Image 10 Tomato seeds and plants .....	116
Image 11 Seeds rebels .....	116
Image 12 The common area in the Tre Fontane garden.....	117
Image 13 The greenhouse on the Tre Fontane garden .....	118
Image 14 Didactic garden.....	118
Image 15 A gardener working in her parcel .....	128
Image 16 A public initiative on 25 April in the garden .....	129
Image 17 Beehives in the Tre Fontane garden .....	149
Image 18 Bee on broccoli flower.....	152
Image 19 Black cabbage in Carlo's plot.....	156
Image 20 Pak choi in Carlo's plot.....	159
Image 21 Tools in the garden Tre Fontane.....	162
Image 22 Tishtle in Franco's plot.....	164
Image 23 Didactic garden.....	169
Image 24 Flyer that compares bees and wasps .....	175
Image 25 Roman trees in a local newspaper .....	188
Image 26 Eviction of wild plants.....	193
Image 27 Eviction of informal settlements.....	194
Image 28 Eviction of informal settlements.....	195
Image 29 Eviction of informal settlements.....	196
Image 30 Eviction of informal settlements.....	197
Image 31 Eviction of informal settlements.....	198
Image 32 Removal of weeds .....	199

Map 1 Roman Urban Gardens (area delimited by the Great Ring Road). 59	
Map 2 The city divided in urban areas. ....	95
Map 3 The area of the Tre Fontane Park .....	97
Map 4 Area of the Tre Fontane Park, 1660, Alessandrino land register....	106
Map 5 Map of the Tre Fontane garden .....	123
Map 6 Tre Fontane garden.....	139



# 1. Introduction

“I find myself surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs. I argue that only an appreciation of current precarity as an earthwide condition allows us to notice this - the situation of our world” (Tsing 2015: 4).

When I started envisioning the research project that underpins this thesis, environmental social movements and environmental activism practices were experiencing a long period of stasis at a global level, also partly due to the inability to connect with other movements for social and economic justice. So much so that many scholars and activists had come to provocatively proclaim the "death of environmentalism" as it had been known in its most vigorous phase, that is, between 1960 and 1990 (Certomà 2016b: 20). Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 21st century, movements and citizens based groups have begun to spread, in many highly urbanized and industrialized territories, that carry out environmental micropolitics (Barua, Sinha 2017; Brombin 2015; Yates 2015; Riffaud, Recours 2015) of everyday life, focusing on the co-creation and management of the territories in which they live. These are social movements composed by activists who do not usually rely on shared values and ideological backgrounds, but are rather largely focused on material action and on the achievement of specific objectives (Marres 2012; Schlosberg, Cole 2015). The aim of this thesis will be precisely to explore some of these micropolitical practices carried out starting from 2009 within the Roman context, analysing them through a postanthropocentric perspective.

While I am writing this introduction, environmentalism has undertaken, finally after decades, a prominent but heterogeneous role in the debate at a global level. In the last year (2019) there were three global strikes against climate change (February 15th, May 24th and September 27th 2019), following the explosion in the autumn of 2018 of the global environmental movement Fridays For Future<sup>1</sup>. The movement, largely formed by very young people (students aged 10 to 25), is also spreading in the Italian context. For the third global strike, in September 2019, demonstrations were held in 185 countries around the world. In Italy, where the strike was held on 27 September, one million people took part in the demonstrations throughout the national territory. Some of the Roman activists groups on which I focused my research have also joined the demonstrations, as well as many historically settled environmental committees. In the Italian context, in the latest weeks, the movement is placing an emphasis on the intertwining of social justice and climate change and has called for governments to declare a climate crisis. A non-violent global movement, Extinction Rebellion<sup>2</sup>, which focuses its action against climate change by emphasizing the loss of global biodiversity and the possible risk of extinction of the human species - if action is not taken quickly with a radical change in the production and consumption system- is also starting to spread. Alongside my doctoral research, in the past months, I have followed, for research purposes and as an activist, several assemblies, initiatives and demonstrations of these groups in the area of Rome. These are very heterogeneous movements, not always clearly anti-capitalist, mainly white, and certainly largely anthropocentric. Also, since they have been experimenting and structuring themselves during the last few

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<sup>1</sup> Fridays For Future Italian website: <https://www.fridaysforfutureitalia.it/27-settembre>

<sup>2</sup> Extinction Rebellion website: <https://rebellion.earth>

months, after decades of marginalization of the environmental issues, it will be possible to carry out a detailed analysis only in the next future. Anyway, these movements testify the political relevance assumed at a global level by the current climate and environmental crisis, whose existence is now almost entirely accepted by the scientific community, so that scholars and activists even coined a new term to designate it: “anthropocene” (Haraway 2015). The term anthropocene has been criticized for individuating humanity as a whole as responsible for the current ecological crisis, ending up with invisibilising actual responsibilities and different ways of being in the world according to culture, class, gender, race and others.<sup>3</sup> Besides the preferred term, there seems now to be agreement on the fact that human activity is leaving incontrovertible traces on the planet's biophysical and geological equilibrium. This human is the anthropos. It is the Man, the human subject that has been deconstructed as a non-neutral category by posthuman feminisms, the theoretical and methodological framework I will be using for carrying out my analysis. The examination of the causes and responsibilities of the ecological crisis are part of the political conflict. It is on this terrain that political ecology, an analytical lens that I will use in my investigation, is implanted. Political ecology highlights the connection between social and economic poverty, environmental degradation and conflicts, giving social sciences the possibility to speak about environmental issues, which have remained restricted domain of natural sciences until very recent times (I'll come back to this soon). What I consider fundamental from a socio-political point of view is to focus not only on the effects in place (climate change, inequality and environmental devastation), but also on the power relations that determine them (Moore 2017). It is precisely these relations of power, naturalized, but in fact

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Tsing (2015), Moore (2017) and Haraway (2015).

eminently historical and political, which determine injustice and inequalities between and within species. Environmental inequalities are not experienced or generated by everyone with the same intensity, and it is fundamental that the focus of the analysis is centred on these historicized power relations.

For this reason, in constructing my research project, I took inspiration from the invitation of the anthropologist Anne Tsing (2015), of whom I reported an excerpt at the beginning of this introduction, to appreciate the precariousness of the contingency in which we are living, always in the awareness of one's own privileges of the structural inequalities experienced by different actors. Starting from the awareness of the fragility of the human subject, understood not as a closed subject, but as a more-than-human assemblage in continuous relationship and transformation (Braidotti 2016; Haraway 2016), through the decentralization of one's gaze, it is possible to try to imagine and build new located ways to stay in the world and conceptualize it. In the elaboration of my research project, I inserted myself in the process of knowledge construction opened by posthumanist and post-anthropocentric feminist neomaterialisms (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Braidotti 2016; Dolphjin, Van der Tuin 2012; Ferrando 2016). The choice of enrooting posthumanism and postanthropocentrism into the continental anti-humanist postmodern post-colonial and feminist legacy, as feminist neomaterialisms do, it is not an inevitable one. It is the pathway in which I situate myself, from an epistemological and ethical point of view. I assume that knowledge production is always multiple and collective (Braidotti 2018) relational and situated (Rich 1987). That is, my account of research, relational and transforming, has been continually influenced by encounters, readings, people, groups as well as human and nonhuman actors with whom I have been relating for the last ten years, as

a researcher, a student and as an ecotransfeminist and antispecist activist (I will return to this term in chapter five). In particular, my encounter, for reasons of research, study, work, and activism with human groups located in rural areas of the so-called south of the planet, has allowed me to get in touch with ways of being in the world, of conceptualizing it, and experiencing it which diverge from the hypercapitalist and anthropocentric systems typical of the context in which I grew up. Indeed, as Descola reminds us (2007: 29) in fact “while maintaining relations of co-dependence and complicity with nonhuman inhabitants of the world, many cultures (...) have been able to avoid the irresponsible exploitation of the planet that has been carried out by the westerns since the beginning of the XX Century”. I am absolutely far from conceptualising human groups of rural areas of the so-called south of the world as an indistinct continuum or as always identical to themselves, or to express value judgments and idealizations that could deny or invisibilise material inequalities and power relations. Still, these meetings were fundamental for me become aware that other ways of life and relationship between humans and the nonhuman world can exist (and can therefore be imagined and materially constructed). Starting from this background, my research project arose from what I considered an urgency, namely to investigate whether within highly industrialized, capitalist, and urbanized areas experiences could exist that are somehow challenging the onto-epistemological prevailing way of engaging among humans and with the nonhuman world. That is, I wanted to investigate whether material experiments could exist that are, to some extent, materially and semantically transforming relations of power, exploitation, and objectification of human and nonhuman actors based on the modern dichotomous paradigm of Cartesian and Enlightenment derivation (Latour 1993).

In Europe and in many highly industrialized areas, what have been defined as environmental practices of everyday life have been spreading for at least a decade (Marres 2012; Schlosberg, Cole 2015). Such practices, which include in situ environmental protests, urban gardening, guerrilla gardening, self-management of green spaces and creation of sanctuaries for nonhuman animals, while being practiced through interactions between human and nonhuman actors, can allow to investigate urbanity as a more-than-human political space. In fact, the modern onto-epistemological system of Cartesian derivation, reinforced by the Enlightenment, is structured around a rigidly dichotomous system that divides the real into nature and society/culture, urbanity and nature, human and nonhuman, subjects and objects, male and female, white and racialized, shaping one pole of the opposition as superior to the other and, therefore, justifying the systematic exploitation of one pole on the other. The consequence of this separation is also the division between human and social sciences and natural sciences as incommunicable poles of knowledge, which has made the investigation of the pole of nature a prerogative of natural sciences only. Precisely for this reason environmental sociology, the branch of the discipline in which my study is situated, has remained strongly marginal until very recent times. Since the nineties, many scholars have begun to question the neutrality of this subdivision, highlighting instead its historical, political, and colonialist connotation. Among the theoretical strands that emerged in this context we find feminist, postanthropocentric, and posthumanist neomaterialisms, from which I drew inspiration from my research process. These theories challenge the neutrality of the human subject as a falsely universal category as well as human exceptionalism, trying to overcome dichotomies and understanding the world as a material-discursive continuum (Haraway 2003), taking seriously into account relations of power, agency

of bodies and the material world (Alaimo, Heckman 2008; Oppermann 2013). To maintain a pre-eminent focus on power relations between the actors that co-construct the space analysed in my research, I enriched an approach inspired by feminist neomaterialisms with some insights from the field of political ecology. This field of study, focusing on inequalities and environmental conflicts, is particularly useful for the investigation of situated hierarchizations that emerge from interactions (Bierasck 1999). Having used a postanthropocentric approach in my research has enriched the whole process, allowing me to focus on the role of actors (human and nonhuman ones) otherwise at risk of marginalization in the research and writing process.

According to the modern Eurocentric paradigm (Latour 1993), the city has been conceptually and materially produced as a highly anthropocentric space, purified from the nonhuman, welcoming and traversable only for a certain type of human: resident, skilled, and owner. All those actors constructed as "ecological others" (Ray 2013, in Oppermann 2015), humans, plants, and nonhuman animals, are therefore materially discouraged to cross the urban space and discursively elicited. Conversely, as it will emerge from the analysis that I will carry out in the next chapters, through the bodily presence in the public space (Butler 2017) these actors formally excluded from the processes of co-creation of reality (Bennett 2010; Descola 2013; Latour 1993), show instead their capacity of action, undermining the conceptualization of cities as a necessarily anthropocentric space. Starting from these premises, I chose to focus my study on some environmental practices of everyday life carried out by associations and groups of citizens in the area of Rome. As I will detail in chapter four, the city of Rome has been experiencing at least since the beginning of 2000 a withdrawal of public institutions in charge of the

management of urban spaces, and in particular, of the management of public parks and green areas. This withdrawal, which has occurred since the 1990s, has become increasingly structural. In this context, starting from 2009 (when they were initially devised in the first self-managed garden of the city, in the Garbatella district), experiences of self-management of parks, flower beds, and green spaces carried out by groups of citizens and associations have multiplied. With my ethnographic research I have therefore investigated whether these contingencies were generating transformations in the interactions between humans and nonhuman actors, and in the modalities of construction of the urban space, always taking into account the analysis of situated power relations as a widespread mechanism. My research has focused on vegetal politics (Head et al. 2014). With this term I defined the set of policies and politics implemented in the management of green spaces by public institutions and groups of citizens (vegetal politics on the vegetal) as well as political interactions between human and nonhuman actors (with a specific focus on the agency of the vegetable) through which public green spaces are co-constructed in the Roman context (vegetal politics of the vegetal). Specifically, I then focused my ethnographic analysis on the daily co-construction of a shared urban garden, the Tre Fontane garden, a project self-managed by a local association since 2014, located on the southern periphery of the city. More precisely, the lines of inquiry that guided the investigation were:

- How the garden is co-created through material actions conducted by human and nonhuman actors;
- Which interactions between human and nonhuman actors take place within the garden and how the perception that human

actors have of nonhuman living beings (plants, insects) influences their action;

- How reciprocal interactions between humans and nonhumans affect both the conception that humans have of nonhuman actors present in the garden and their way of relating materially to them (analyzing the material and discursive dimension);
- In what terms the garden initiative can be configured as a political mobilization (always questioning the action in light of the presence of power relations in the co-construction of the urban space).
- What kind of alliances, conflicts, and exclusions emerge in the garden through the interaction of human and nonhuman actors.

To carry out this study on vegetal politics in the city of Rome I used ethnographic methods. Still, there are few qualitative studies on the current self-managed gardening practices of everyday life in the Roman context (see Attili 2013; Certomà 2016a; Lupia, Pulighe 2016). Situated practices can be prolifically investigated through qualitative fieldwork. For this reason, I have therefore chosen to use the ethnographic methodology for my research. A focus on materiality and on material practices is particularly useful in understanding space production and power dynamics between human and nonhuman actors. I therefore combined a more classical ethnographic approach (that is, participant observation and semi-structured interviews) with multispecies ethnography, a nonanthropocentric research practice which, refuting the ontoepistemological nature/culture-society dualism, investigates the role

of human and nonhuman actors in the co-construction of the world as a continuous flowing hybrid assemblage (Brombin 2015; Haraway 2016; Kirksey, Helmreich 2010, Odgen et a. 2013). Throughout the research process, I have always explained my role as a researcher to the people I interacted with, actively participating in the Tre Fontane garden activities, on which I focused the main part of ethnography. My involvement in the field, including material participation (cultivating, participating in initiatives, debates, and moments of space modification) throughout the research process, allowed me to experiment and learn by doing and being with, through what has been defined observing participation (Bastien 2017), emphasising the continuous interconnection of the researcher with the research assemblage (Fox, Alldred 2015). In fact, according to Tsing (2015), assemblages are open-ended gatherings that include human and nonhuman actors, which are constantly mutually transforming. Therefore, doing ethnography through assemblage thinking means focusing on the interaction between the different world-making processes that go through the assemblage-research, which also include the researcher. My approach is therefore aimed at the production of a non-neutral and positioned knowledge, which has no pretence of universality, but is a specific perspective in the world, and also transforms it in the interaction.

Starting from the grounds set out so far, in the next chapter I will outline in detail the theoretical framework that led to the investigation I carried out on the field between September 2018 and December 2019 in Rome. Specifically, I will introduce elements of postanthropocentric feminist neomaterialisms, enlarging them with the contribution of political ecology in examining power relations and spatial hierarchies. In the same chapter, I will proceed to delineate more specifically the research topics and the ethnographic methodology used. In chapters three and four I will then

proceed to deepen the context, focusing on institutional and citizens' based management of the Roman green areas over the last ten years, providing, in chapter four, more in-depth material such as historical and territorial information on the area where the Tre Fontane garden is located, where I performed the main part of my ethnography. Chapters five and six will focus on vegetal politics, presenting the analysis of the interaction and co-construction of the garden assemblage as a neomaterialist political space. The analysis will concentrate on situated hierarchies that emerge from the interaction and on the relationships between human and nonhuman actors, with a specific focus on vegetal agency.

## **2. Theoretical and conceptual framework**

### **2.1 Feminist newmaterialisms and postanthropocentric theories: overcoming the dichotomy between social construction and realism**

This thesis is situated in the field of environmental sociology, a field that remained marginal in the discipline until recent times. This is due to the fact that the classical sociological tradition was created around a humanistic worldview which underlined human uniqueness in relation to nature, erecting a “barrier” between nature and society, between biology and sociology, and dividing “the classical sociologies of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim from the biological and naturalistic concerns that played a central role in the pre-classical sociology” (Foster, Holleman 1999: 367). Nevertheless, in the last two decades, an increased interest in environmental issues, and in the role of human and nonhuman interactions is largely spreading, due to the diffusion, among social and human sciences, of posthumanist and postanthropocentric approaches, which can be located in the so called ontological turn (Bogost 2012; Holbraad, Pedersen 2017; Kirksey, Helmreich 2010).

In order to conduct my field research and the analysis that will be exposed in the next chapters I decided therefore to adopt an approach informed by the emerging realm of the so called new materialist posthumanist and postanthropocentric theories (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Descola 2007; Latour 1993; Tsing 2015) with a well-established critical approach to the study of social movements and collective action (Della Porta 2014; Harvey 1996; Farro, Lustiger-Thaler, 2014; Melucci 1989). All these new approaches to sociological

investigation are, despite their diversity, radically questioning the exceptionalism of human actors and are trying to challenge the dichotomies nature/society, nature/culture, men/women, subjects/objects, which lie at the basis of the western “modern” system of thought. All these dichotomies, which Latour (1993) defines as the “great divide”, are the product of a particular system of thought, which is enrooted in the Enlightenment period (and particularly in the Cartesian model), hinging on the principle of objectivity of scientific knowledge as the unique form of rational explanation of the natural world. According to this assumption, the Eurocentric system of thought operates an insurmountable separation between the subjects (humans) and the objects (nonhumans, including living beings), which, shaped as naturally dominated, are excluded from the process of management of the reality (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Latour 2004; Oppermann 2016). This new sociological approach, while shifting the core of investigation of sociological analysis from human action to humans and nonhumans collectively, can be particularly useful in revealing the frequently hidden role of nonhumans in co-constructing the world. Indeed, in an attempt to overcome the possible limits of some posthumanist approaches (Lemke 2017), I will always address social inequalities and power asymmetries within humans and between human and nonhuman living beings emerging from the relations explored.

In this chapter, I will proceed to give a possible overview of the realm of newmaterialist, posthumanist, and postanthropocentric theories, specifying which theories have mostly inspired this study. I will, then, expose some concepts which I deem particularly relevant for my analysis (that is, the concepts of politics and agency). Finally, I will close this section by giving an overview of urban gardening initiatives as everyday political

practices, and reflecting on the possibility to read them through the critical lens of posthuman approaches, enriched by the frame of Marxist political ecology.

### **2.1.2 From anti-humanism to posthumanisms**

I will now proceed to trace a potential genealogy of posthuman thoughts, giving an account of some of its major developments and reflecting on the possible role of critique and political action envisioned through a posthuman and postanthropocentric perspective. Posthuman paradigms started to spread among human and social sciences (especially philosophy, anthropology, and sociology) in the nineties pushing further the critique and radical deconstruction of the “human” started in the seventies by postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist theories (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Coole, Frost 2010; Ferrando 2016). They emerged as a further critique to the Eurocentric idea of a universal rational Cartesian human subject, which was a legacy of the Enlightenment period (Oppermann 2017). To put it broadly, posthuman theories can be read as a set of ethical and onto-epistemological approaches that refuse hierarchical systems and confrontational dualisms, while also decentring the human from the core of the analysis (Ferrando 2016). The concept of onto-epistemology blurs the traditional boundaries of epistemology and ontology. This means moving from a separation between immanence and transcendence (Bennett 2010) to a materialdiscursive continuum (Haraway 2016). Practices of knowing and being in the world are understood as nondualistic inseparable processes (Barad 2007). Moreover, posthuman approaches share with postmodern anti-humanist feminisms a radical critique to the idea of the existence of a universal human subject meant as a “neutral subject”. As well put by Ferrando (2016: 26-17)

Posthumanism is indebted to the reflections developed out of the “margins” of such a centralized human subject, which emphasized the human as a process, more than as a given, inherently characterized by differences and shifting identities: Women's and Gender Studies, Gay and Lesbians' Studies, Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Post-Colonial Studies, Intersectionality, Disability Studies, among others.

Humanism is a Eurocentric paradigm that is based on a binary logic of “identity and otherness”, where the concept of difference acquires an essentialist and pejorative status. That is, all the people designed as “sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others” are reduced to less than humans and become therefore “disposable bodies” (Braidotti 2013:15). In fact, as postmodern feminists and anti-colonial scholars pointed out, the classical abstract human of humanist universalism, constructed as a neutral subject, is actually a white, European, abled, heterosexual man (Braidotti 2016; Coole, Frost 2010). Deconstruction made explicit that all the dichotomies that informed European thought, such as male/female, nature/culture, subject/object, mind/body, among others, which were conceptualised as essentialist ones, were actually not universal at all. They are ethnocentric and patriarchal categories constructed through political and historical processes, and have been used to legitimize and invisibilise processes of domination. As a political and historical construct, the “human” of European thought became a normative convention to legitimize exclusion and discrimination, spreading transcendental norms of “normality, normalcy, and normativity”, transposing a “specific mode of being human into a generalised standard” (Braidotti 2013: 26). Feminisms refused the idea of fixed unitary identities resting on the humanist ideal of Man as Eurocentric and normative, preferring, instead, to highlight the differences and diversity of voices and bodies among women, natives, and other marginalised subjects (Braidotti 2013; 2016). Indeed, one of the

most interesting lessons of postmodern feminisms was precisely not to attempt a reversal of the privileges these categories owned, but to deconstruct the dichotomies themselves, moving to an understanding based on recognition, rather than on assimilation (Ferrando 2016) and oppositions (Alaimo, Hekman 2008).

Relying on postmodern feminisms, posthumanism does not assume the end of humanity, but of the humanistic idea of the human subject expressed above. According to posthuman approaches, the human subject becomes instead “a complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities” (Braidotti 2013: 26), and should be intended as an emerging “shared field of existence marked by interdependency” (Oppermann 2016: 276). The main project of posthumanism becomes, therefore, trying to overcome humanism as “an intellectual tradition, a normative frame and an institutionalised practice” (Braidotti 2013: 30) and reject all the dichotomic categories through which humanism had organised the world.

However, as underlined by Alaimo and Hekman (2008), Braidotti (2016), Ferrando (2016) and Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2018), the choice of enrooting posthumanism into the continental anti-humanist postmodern post-colonial and feminist legacy is not an inevitable one. This is only one of the possible genealogies. Actually, as we shall see soon, some branches of posthuman thought (mainly the ones focusing on science and technology studies, and the stream labelled as ‘transhumanism’) are oriented by supposed political neutrality and critically close to the analytic tradition (Pellizzoni 2015). I choose to root my account of a possible posthuman filiation in feminist and postcolonial history of thought because this is the pathway in which I situate myself, from an epistemological and

ethical point of view, being aware of the fact that this is only one of the possible choices.

*Materiality in posthuman theories and its consequences in building postanthropocentric approaches*

While based on this heritage, posthumanist theories actually diverge from postmodernist ones when it comes to the role of materiality and the nonhuman world. In fact, postmoderns were very uncomfortable with the notions of matter and real because of their centrality in modernist positivist thought (Alaimo, Hekman 2008:2), that could potentially lead to essentialist and deterministic readings of the world. In fact, according to modernist positivistic theories, which are known as realist positions,

scientific evidence not only portrays reality but also provides implicit suggestions for deducing how things have to be (...) in their natural state. According to this, scientific evidence becomes the basis for legitimating political advice on socioeconomic strategies (Certomà 2016b: 25)

thus constructing scientific knowledge as the only rational explanation of the natural world. A direct consequence of this approach is the tendency to inferiorize all the other ways of knowing and being in the world (such as, for instance, indigenous or minorities knowledge) and an understanding of science as a non-contested “neutral” setting of experience. Postmodernism, conversely, made explicit the historical, situated, and political status of science. Moreover, its versions of social constructivism depicted reality as the product of our categories of thought and language (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Braidotti 2013). However, in its attempt at challenging the apparent objectivity and neutrality of scientific knowledge and at eradicating the binary systems of modern Eurocentric

worldview, postmodernism ended up creating an insurmountable dichotomy between reality and language (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Dophjin, Van der Tuin 2012).

On the contrary, posthumanisms reclaim a central role of materiality in co-constructing the world and emphasize the importance of accounting for it in social inquiries. Posthumanisms give emphasis to the material relevance of both bodies<sup>4</sup> and the world, trying to move beyond discursive construction and materiality divisions. A particularly interesting attempt is the one made by posthuman material feminisms, that try to build on the lessons learned in the linguistic turn, avoiding a “return to modernism”, but fostering the “deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy” in a way that preserves “both elements without privileging either” (Alaimo, Hekman 2008: 6). For posthuman theories bodies, matter and the nonhuman world are not a passive realm. They are rather characterised by self-organising, living, vital yet non-naturalistic, and anti-essentialist structures (Bennett 2010, Braidotti 2016, Oppermann 2014). This vision clearly rests on a monistic and radically immanent philosophy that rejects all dualisms, especially the reality-language and nature-culture ones (Braidotti 2013:3). Particularly enlightening in this sense is the notion of “material-discursive” created by Donna Haraway (in Alaimo, Hekman 2008), which, refusing to separate them, clearly underlines the deep and continuous co-influences of the two. Still, resting on the experience of postmodernism, posthuman scholars do not claim for any kind of biological determinism, universality or objectivity, highlighting the fact that every knowledge is always relational, embodied, and that reality is contingent

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<sup>4</sup> As pointed out by Iovino and Oppermann (2012: 76) body does not only refer to “the human body but to the concrete entanglements (...) in both human and more-than-human realms”.

and constantly in flux (Barad 2007; Haraway 2008; Iovino, Oppermann 2012; Rich 1987).

Because of their interest in materiality and the nonhuman world, and their wish to decentre the human subject from the core of action and social investigation, most of posthuman accounts (especially the feminist newmaterialist stream) are also postanthropocentric ones. However, as I am going to show, not every posthuman approach is also postanthropocentric, nor the opposite is true, that is, the two categories do not always overlap. Anthropocentrism is the principle that theoretically justifies human exploitation of the nonhuman world, putting the anthropos at the top of a hierarchical scale. It is an ethnocentric principle (meaning that it is not universal at all), and it has been identified by many environmental scholars and activists (such as ecofeminisms, deep ecology, antispecies movements) as the main cause of the current ecological crisis (Lanternari 2003). Lanternari (2003: 53) convincingly identifies three possible ways of understanding and being in the world:

**Anthropocentrism:** it puts the human at the centre. According to Lanternari, it can be either dogmatic and blind and have an ecological negative impact, or critical and moderated, and have a possibly positive ecological impact.

**Ecocentrism:** theoretical paradigm that is opposed to anthropocentrism.

**Ierocentrism:** theoretical paradigm that implies the sacrality of “nature”.

Posing that the anthropos of the anthropocentric paradigm, naturalised as representative of the whole humanity, is mainly a white, western, heterosexual man, I find Gaard's critique of the concept quite convincing (1993: 16). As underlined by the ecofeminist scholar, postanthropocentric accounts risk failing their goal if they focus solely on the responsibility of humans as a species, without addressing power-based structures and relations that occur within humans and between humans and nonhumans. In this perspective, there could be postanthropocentric theories or movements that never address issues of power and therefore remain fully androcentric, and gender-blind (Gaard 1993).

As Braidotti (2016: 13-15) puts it, the posthuman turn can be broadly envisaged as the merging of anti-humanist and anti-anthropocentric traditions. Where

anti-humanism focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the universal representative of the human, (...) anti-anthropocentrism criticizes species hierarchy and advances ecological justice.

Posthumanism in its newmaterialist feminist version defines both the humanist "Man" and the anthropos as non-neutral subjects exposing their hierarchical statuses that give them access to "privileges and entitlements". Postanthropocentrism in general challenges the separation between human life (that is bios) and animals' and nonhumans' life (that is zoe) (Braidotti 2013; 2016). In this vision, life stops being "the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given", to become a "process, interactive and open-ended" (Braidotti 2013: 60). The human body itself is read as an open-ended more-than-human assemblage that exceeds human

consciousness and life as bios. More important, as a consequence of the objection to human exceptionalism, all the naturalised others (such as nonhuman animals, plants, bacteria, fungi...) are revealed as vital actors of the social world (Bennett 2010; Latour 2004; Oppermann 2013).

Central to this theoretical development appears the questioning of the nature-culture/society divide seen as a historically and politically ethnocentric principle (which, as already mentioned, has also resulted, until recent times, in the marginalization of environmental sociology within the discipline). In “We have never been moderns” Latour (1993) explains that through a process of “purification”, Western modern system of thought has created a division between humans (society) and nonhumans<sup>5</sup> (nature). Through this process what was labelled under the category of nature became freely exploitable by Western humans and completely excluded from the process of management of our common world. As largely reported by several anthropologists, this is a clearly Eurocentric category that is not pertinent at all in many other systems of thought and of being in the world (Descola 2007; De Castro 2009; Khon 2013; Rival 1998). Nature is a very problematic term that, as clearly acknowledged by Pellizzoni (2016: 1), can be variously identified as “the essence of an entity; as the opposite to culture and human artefacts; as everything there is”. In their being anti-essentialist approaches, posthuman postanthropocentric theories decisively reject the idea of the existence of such a thing as “the essence of an entity”. The world (and the human itself) is understood as a nature-culture continuum, as a non-essentialist hybrid,

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<sup>5</sup> As Latour (2004) explains, this definition does not indicate any ontological property and it is meaningless in itself. It is just useful in order to substitute another conceptual difference (the nature/society divide). However, I fully agree with Barnett (2017: 21) when she highlights that this is still an imperfect terminological choice, as it “reproduces the effect of measuring what is not human against or in relation to what is human”.

and the term nature is conveniently abandoned in favour of the concept of agentic matter.

The main task of the sociological approaches driven by this theoretical framework becomes therefore bringing to light how human and nonhuman assemblages actually create our hybrid common world (Latour 2004). This approach assumes that both humans and nonhumans can appear as actors in a social context and have a role in the creation of politics (Passoth et al. 2012). However, if some among posthuman and postanthropocentric scholars seem to have a clear political and ethical commitment (as it is for Braidotti, Haraway, Opperman, and Tsing, among many others) some others are primarily focusing on creating methodological and theoretical transformations among social sciences while giving descriptivist portrayals of the world (as Actor-Network-Theory<sup>6</sup> scholars and Latour mainly do).

Posthumanisms try to overcome all anthropocentric dualisms and the “‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category” (Braidotti 2013: 66), fostering a situated and embodied knowledge that gets rid of the “species barriers” (Oppermann 2016: 277), and making the human body an open-ended assemblage of more-than-human agencies. Posthumanisms reject therefore the dialectical paradigms “where difference or otherness played a constitutive role, marking off the sexualized other (woman), the

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<sup>6</sup> One of the main contributions of Latour to the investigation of social action is his Actor-Network-theory (ANT), created with his colleagues Callon and Law, which is actually more a methodology than a proper theory. ANT is characterised by a strong empirical orientation. It has an anti-essentialist approach, which sees both materiality and the subject as relational effects of situated practices. It is an anti-anthropocentric and anti-dualistic kind of constructivism. In ANT the dualism between subject and object is suspended. As everything is a relational effect, then the characteristics of elements are not essential and given a priori but can be studied in their emergence from heterogeneous material assemblages. The fact of being a subject or an object is the result of interaction, not its premise (Beetz 2016).

racialized other (the native) and the naturalized other (animals, the environment or earth)” (Braidotti 2013: 26). This is particularly true for its feminist newmaterialist variant, which discards the nature-culture divide as a ruinous dualism not only for “nonhuman nature”, imagined as “an inert ground for the exploit of Man” but also for women, indigenous people, and other “marked groups” (Alaimo, Hekman 2008: 4-5). In this sense, in the case of feminist theory, the convergence between posthumanism and postanthropocentric theories has been read as a radicalisation of “the very premises of feminist philosophy” (Dolphijn, Van der Tuin 2012: 25) and of its ethical and political commitments. However, as mentioned above, there are streams of postanthropocentric theories and political approaches, such as, for instance, deep ecology and some streams of ecological and animalist movements, which do not question gender based discriminations and other power imbalances, but remain, instead within humanistic paradigms (that is, they are not posthumanists).

To conclude this overview of possible convergences and distances among different posthumanist and postanthropocentric approaches, it is relevant to mention the case of cultural posthumanism, and more specifically, the field of research called animal studies. In fact, as underlined by Ferrando (2016: 29), this kind of social investigations, while centring the analysis on the role of nonhuman world (and particularly on nonhuman animals, as it is in the case of animal studies) still rests on an entirely humanistic worldview, namely on humanistic liberalism, remaining therefore absolutely anthropocentric. In fact, for these theories, “animals are accorded standing because they embody, in diminished form, some normative concept of the ‘human’” (Wolfe 2018: 357).

*Posthumanism, transhumanism, critical posthumanism*

In this section, I will briefly outline some of the main streams of posthumanism. This is only one of the possible ways to classify different branches of this very heterogeneous set of approaches and fields of study. This tripartition is inspired by the classification proposed by Braidotti (2013; 2018), both in her book on posthuman and during her school on posthuman ethics I attended in Utrecht in 2018. It is a classification that specifically distinguishes critical posthumanism (and its branch of material feminisms) from other streams of posthumanist theories as maintaining a certain degree of critical surveillance, which is the reason why I privileged to be inspired by this approach while conducting my field-study and my analysis.

**Posthumanism:** It is a set of sociological and philosophical approaches that refuses all those dichotomies informing humanistic worldview enrooted in Cartesian and Enlightenment system of thought, in order to radically deconstruct the concept of human (Ferrando 2016). It moves the human from the centre of the action (Braidotti 2016, Oppermann 2012), while also recognising agency to nonhuman actors.

**Cultural posthumanism:** As we have seen above, posthumanism in its cultural variance still remains a humanistic way of producing knowledge and being in the world. For this stream, it is only the object of knowledge that is posthuman (such as the study of human-nonhuman animals and other-than-human beings), while the process of thought is still totally humanistic (Wolfe 2018).

**STS:** Science and technology studies (STS) are an interdisciplinary field of studies on the posthuman condition that mainly focus on the

relationships between sciences, humans, and technologies/nonhuman objects through practice-oriented accounts (Pellizzoni 2015). STS are a field of studies that has been highly influenced by the works of Bruno Latour, and particularly by his anti-epistemology and anti-subjectivity positions, and his Actor-Network-Theory. Moreover, diverging from critical and feminist posthumanist accounts, many STS posthumanist scholars rest on analytic traditions and genealogies. They are also often driven by a supposed scientific and political neutrality, that fails to neutralise theoretical critiques (Braidotti 2013).

**Transhumanism:** It is a theoretical approach that could be defined as a humanist posthumanism. In fact, while drawing on a posthuman condition (Wolfe 2018), it is clearly enrooted in the Enlightenment tradition, as it focuses on human enactment through the use of technology (Ferrando 2018). Transhumanist accounts aspire to reach the point of transcending human “animal origins” overcoming “diseases and infermities” of the human body through rational material manipulation (Wolfe 2018: 356). They are fully humanistic and anthropocentric. Within transhuman thought the term ‘posthuman’ refers to a stage humans might reach through evolution after the current transhuman era. However, according to posthumanism, the posthuman can be seen as a paradigm shift which is already occurring by approaching and performing the human in post-humanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualistic ways (Ferrando 2018: 439).

**Critical posthumanism:** It is a branch of posthumanism that does not renounce, in its social and philosophical inquiry, to the role of subjectivity and critique. Diverging from negative traditional critique (Pellizzoni 2015), it is not normative and dialectical, but affirmative, relational, and situated

(Coole, Frost 2010). It is characterised for its explicit ethical and political commitment. Feminist newmaterialisms are a branch of critical posthumanism that highly focuses on the role of materiality of the bodies (both human and nonhuman) and on matter, while addressing environmental issues and power imbalances through anti-essentialist non-normative accounts.

### **2.1.3 Agency, politics, and the role of critique**

According to traditional sociological conceptions of agency, social actors are exclusively humans, and agency without humans is meaningless, as it is identified as the source of action and the power through which human actors could resist structures and norms (Passoth 2012). Diverging from this notion of agency, as I mentioned above, posthuman newmaterialist approaches highly diverge from traditional sociological accounts. Thanks to the contribution of a high number of studies on nonhuman animals, environment and technologies, these approaches decentred human rational actors as the only source of social action (Murdoch 1997). Both humans and nonhumans can appear as actors in a social context and have a role in the creation of the social, in clear opposition to Kantian thought (Passoth et al. 2012: 33). All actors are always defined by their relationality and never act alone. In this perspective, agency is therefore disconnected from anthropocentrism, in which it does not necessarily originate from a human intentional subject (Iovino, Oppermann 2012). Disconnected from human intentionality, agency becomes the capacity to relationally affect the co-constructed world. For newmaterialists, nonhuman world is agentic, and its actions affect both human and nonhuman actors (Alaimo, Hekman 2008). Nonhuman actors can change the ways in which our social world is created and organised, however the fact of taking account of these dimensions does not mean ending up in a new “physical determinism of social phenomena” (Passoth 2012: 6).

### *Newmaterialist power, politics, and political action*

In this perspective, also the classical sociological conceptions of power are decisively redrawn. Classical sociology conceived power as inherently related to the realm of the human subject. Prominent variants in well-established sociological traditions are action-oriented theories of power, neo-Marxist, and Foucaultian poststructuralist accounts. Action-oriented perspectives strongly relate power to the agency of human actors and to their intentionality, being highly influenced by Weber theorisations of power as “the ability of individuals to realize their will, despite resistance from others” (Svarstad et al. 2018: 351; Alldred, Fox 2017). In neo-Marxist theorisations of power, human agency is also at the core. Agency though is conceived as largely constrained and produced by historically founded social structures. There is also a broad range of sociological works that develop “complex actors-structure relations” (eg. Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1977, 1989, in Svarstad et al. 2018). A third stream, which can be identified as poststructuralist, relies on a Foucaultian conception of power as a relational and distributed mechanism, which produces subjectivities and bodies. This understanding does not identify single-bounded human actors as the only source of power. Instead, society and individuals are relationally constituted by power relations (Ahlborg, Nightingale 2018). Power is conceived as omnipresent in social relations, both restrictively and productively (Lemke 2015).

Newmaterialist and postanthropocentric accounts in social and (post)human sciences extend the concept of power to nonhuman actors, as they do with agency. In this respect, poststructuralist theorisations of power, and particularly Foucault’s works, are extremely influential (even if still identified as anthropocentric), especially his work on the body and “on

the productivity of power relations”, (Lemke 2015: 4) questioning “the idea of a coercive top-down power” (Fox, Alldred 2018). Pushing poststructuralist theorization on power further, neomaterialisms reject any transcendental structural power and question the centrality of the human and human agency in politics and in social world. As expressed by Braidotti (2016: 23):

Power formations are time-bound and consequently temporary and contingent upon relational action and interaction. (...) Social constructivist binary oppositions are replaced by rhizomic dynamics of repetition and difference (Deleuze 1994; Williams 2013) within a nature–culture continuum that approaches power as both a restrictive (potestas) and productive (potentia) force.

This means that power is conceptualised as relational, situated, embodied and contingent, and so are power hierarchies. Power has to be researched and conceived as “radically empirical (...), focusing upon the affects between both human and nonhuman relational materialities within events, actions and interactions (assemblages). (...) Power regards the interactions between assembled relations as they affect and are affected” (Fox, Alldred 2018: 323), power which deploys through material and discursive effects (Braidotti 2016). However, power differentials are not flattened (Braidotti 2013; 2016), and should be investigated and understood in their immanent and material becoming. “Only if replicated in multiple events over time and space, [power] acquires a more regular patterning (structure)” (Alldred, Fox 2017). Yet, power only lasts as far as “it is reproduced in the next event, and may quickly evaporate when affects in an assemblage alter” (Coole, Frost 2010; Fox, Alldred 2018). Structures are therefore grasped as material-discursive phenomena, “re(produced) through ongoing material-discursive intra-actions (Dolphin, Van der Tuin

2012), always contingent and transforming. They are “the outcomes of micropolitical material forces and intensities operating within the daily round of events” (Fox, Alldred 2018: 323). Most radical newmaterialist accounts (eg. Latour 2005) argue that there is not such a thing as “social structures (for instance, ‘patriarchy’, ‘neo-liberalism’ or ‘masculinity’)”, but only “an endless cascade of events” (Alldred, Fox 2017: 1163). Critical posthumanism instead, maintains that existing hierarchical imbalances based on race, class, gender, species are extremely significant in structuring society through the reproduction of normativity and exclusion (Braidotti 2013; 2016) but takes them into account as relational, radically immanent, embodied processes. This also means the overcoming of dichotomic understandings of difference as pejoration (Braidotti 2013). Situated hierarchies are therefore not pre-existing essences of actors. They emerge from the contingent interactions, which replicating over time, can become structural. This means that contingent assemblages are influenced by power imbalances as historicised relations. Still, hierarchies are not pre-determined and unavoidable courses, but always transform emerging through embodied more-than-human relations and practices. This approach is very much in line with my wish to investigate embodied and situated humans and humans-nonhumans relationships and the co-production of co-habited spaces unfolding in their everyday life.

It follows that the conception of politics and political action does not respond anymore to a classical vision, which was clearly logocentric and centred on human actors. This set of theories produces a conception of politics intended as a continuous interaction of different actors (both humans and nonhumans) in a public forum (Certomà 2016b; Bennett 2010; Latour 2004). In fact, these agents are politically active in locally gathering and transforming in interaction a contingent space that becomes

political through their material action (Marres 2012). Rather than focusing on narratives and universal ideologies, newmaterial politics is relational, “embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere, according to feminist ‘politics of location’” (Braidotti 2013: 51). The focus of political action and ethics shifts from principles to sociomaterial practices (Pellizzoni 2015), that is, embodied situated actions. For this way of conceiving politics and action, power relations and their effects on the world are radically immanent, and power is not only negative, but also affirmative and “productive of alternative subject positions and social relations” (Dolphijn, Van der Tuin 2012:22). Nonhuman actors clearly can contribute to the realm of politics intervening in nondiscursive ways. As expressed by Alaimo and Hekman (2008: 8), this conception of politics and action can fruitfully contribute to rethink environmentalism itself. In fact,

Rather than centring environmental politics on a wilderness model, which severs human from nature and undergirds anti-environmentalist formulations (...) beginning with the co-extensive materiality of humans and nonhumans offers multiple possibilities for forging new environmental paths. Environmental justice movements, for example, locate “the environment” not in some distant place, but within homes, schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods.

This is the kind of environmental politics that inform - at least in intent - the initiatives of urban gardening on which I focused my field study and that I am going to explore in the next chapters of this thesis. This is why I find particularly relevant to position my theoretical framework into the realm of newmaterialist feminism in an attempt to put theory and field research in a continuous dialogue.

Newmaterialist monistic philosophy also posits that matter is self-organizing and therefore not dialectically opposed but continuous to culture, producing a scheme of emancipation and liberation which is based on a non-dialectical politics (Braidotti 2006). As a consequence of this conception of politics and collective action, also the notion of critique results structurally transformed, if compared with the notion of negative critique central to critical theory in sociology, anthropology and geography, among others, as inherited by the philosophical tradition that Bennett identifies as “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (Bennett 2010: XIV). In this vision, critique stops being based on negative dialectical processes as it was traditionally inherited from Marxist/Hegelian tradition (Rebughini 2018). It moves from operating a critical deconstruction to conveying an affirmative critique understood as production of alternatives, imagination and creativity (Braidotti 2013), as “affirmative standpoints building on thingness and corporeality as sites of resistance, creativity, subversion of stable identities and positions” (Pellizzoni 2016:1). In this account of critique the notion of conflict is dismissed, in favour of the concept of controversies. I still think that a focus on conflict and power imbalances should be essential for social sciences. In the next section, I will therefore turn to the deconstructive critical approach of Marxist political ecology in order to complete my referential theoretical framework. In the analytical sections and in the conclusions of this text, I will hence enrich newmaterialist feminism with relational Marxist political ecology, in order to develop my critical analysis, questioning limitations of newmaterialist approaches in addressing power imbalances and conflicts.

## 2.2 Questioning environmentalism in the city through Marxist political ecology

As a materialist critical deconstructivist approach, Marxist political ecology<sup>7</sup> seems very much in line with my attempt to complete my to posthumanist newmaterialist framework with the contribution of a critical approach to the study of collective action, in order to maintain critical surveillance on conflicts and power unbalances. Moreover, being an approach that has made explicit that in capitalist cities nature not only does not disappear, but is actually subject to hidden relations of subordination and exploitation, Marxist political ecology seems fairly consonant with posthumanist newmaterialism. Nevertheless, it remains fundamentally anthropocentric in its ends, risking “to tell us very little about the nonhumans with whom humans cohabit and the part they play in coproducing landscapes” (Barua 2014: 916). I will therefore enrich the feminist newmaterialist approach<sup>8</sup> with Marxist political ecology in order to outline power imbalances and possible hierarchies as a result of studied interactions.

Political ecology can be broadly defined as the study of the relations between humans, environment, development and social movements (Escobar 1997). Emerging mainly from political economy tradition, Marxist

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<sup>7</sup> As it has been properly pointed out, new materialist theories can be read as a third wave of political ecology (Biersack 1999; Escobar in Pellizzoni: 2015). For instance, Bennett (2010) and Latour (1996) explicitly refer to political ecology inside their theories. However, diverging from the political ecology branch coming from poststructuralist Marxism, the concepts of conflict and opposition are essentially absent from these theories. On the other hand, Pellizzoni (2015) reads Marxist political ecology as a possible stream of the ontological turn.

<sup>8</sup> The attempt to merge Marxist political ecology and feminist newmaterialism has been suggested by Lave (2015) as a possible and more convincing alternative with respect to the widespread tendency inside political ecology to use ANT methodology in order to account for the role of materiality and nonhuman actors inside the discipline. In her words, it seems “a much more productive basis for an emancipatory politics of the Anthropocene” (Lave 2015: 221).

political ecology is particularly interested in investigating power relations that lead “human uses of the environment” as historical processes. It conceives humans-nature relations as power relations, always taking into account differences of gender, race and class, among others (Biersack 1999: 10). In this vision, space is intended as the contingent historical product of continuous power relations among situated subjects (Harvey 1996). As it is for feminist newmaterialisms, Marxist political ecology, too stresses the importance of focusing both on practices and discourses. Moreover, it is highly in debt with post-colonial scholars for making apparent the violence of purely conservationist accounts sustained by a certain mainstream environmentalism, which end up “imposing a single vision of truth supported by scientific results” (...) a vision which “is often reputed as nonsensical in non-western cultures” (Certomà 2016b: 44).

In an attempt to contribute to a radical reconsideration of the role of interactions between human and nonhuman living beings in environmental activities and urban gardening initiatives, it is crucial to point out that, under capitalism in anthropocentric cities, these relations have been, for the most part, historically imprinted by a systematic and often hidden exploitation (Heynen et al., 2006). Cities have been erroneously seen as places where ‘nature ends and where urbanism begins’ (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012) and the role played by ‘nature’ has been under-considered. Urban political ecology instead (that is, the branch of political ecology that extensively focuses on urbanity) has recognised the hidden role that nonhuman actors have in co-creating the city as a political arena. Indeed, ‘nature’ is recently gaining centrality in social analysis and in urban planning and governance interventions. Still, most of these interventions conceive nature as a commodity as they embrace an exploitative conception of humans’ position towards nonhuman living

beings. For instance, many local governments, through the implementation of environmental policies, still tend to consider nature as instrumental in purifying water and air or improving the atmosphere and citizens' quality of life. By seeking to restore the city to make it more desirable for residents, local administrations give 'nature' a merely instrumental role as they only consider its potential of improving citizens' quality of life (Rudolf and Taverne 2012). Another central dimension for urban political ecology (UPE) is the different degree of access to urban green spaces. In fact, relationships between nature and human beings in urban contexts are historically and socially determined through relational processes, which favour dominant elites at the expense of marginalised actors. As shown by Angelo and Wachsmuth (2015:18), 'instead of seeing cities as social rather than natural, or urban injustice and inequality as natural rather than social, UPE made cities visible as political worlds, the politics of which are constitutively socionatural', as 'socionatural material assemblages'. Urban spaces should thus be studied as political and relational products of unbalanced socio-ecological power relations (Harvey 1996) that are the result of the interconnections between humans, nonhumans and objects (Heynen et al., 2006) enacted through material and embodied practices.

#### *Towards a posthumanist political ecology*

Marxist UPE has therefore a clear relational approach, and is, to a certain degree, challenging the nature-society divide in the construction of urban spaces. Being a relational version of Marxism and political ecology, UPE relational Marxism can be profitably used for enlarging my theoretical framework. Indeed, some influential scholars in Marxist political ecology (eg. David Harvey and Neil Smith, in Castree 2002; Gareau 2005) have moved from a more classical dualistic Marxist approach to the study of nature-society relations to a radically situated one, which conceives

humans and nonhumans as both co-shaped and co-productive actors (however still mainly putting humans at the core of the investigations), providing conceptualisations of power that are highly compatible with my feminist newmaterialist framework. My study will benefit of UPE contribution in providing a focus on conflicts, injustice, and critical surveillance. Therefore, profiting from the enrichment given by this approach, my postanthropocentric study will conceive power as relational, situated and in flux, still considering, however, (more-than-human) historical dimensions (Lave 2015) of local hierarchies. Agential power of human and nonhuman actors will be investigated as radically immanent (Braidotti 2006), emerging from the field but not flattened and eventually conflictual.

### **2.3 Understanding the city as a more-than-human space**

The study of social reality as a more-than-human assemblage is a task that both newmaterialist feminisms and political ecology have in common. As outlined above, this means that both human and other-than-human entities can appear as actors and transform the world through their relational agencies. A growing number of ethnographers are starting to apply more-than-human lenses to the study of social phenomena in sociology, anthropology, and geography often with a particular focus, on urban contexts (Barua, Sinha 2017; Bingham 2006; Hinchliffe 2005; Hinchliffe, Whatmore 2006; Ferolmack 2013; Moore, Kosut 2013). According to European thought the city has been extensively conceived as the human space purified from 'nature' (Rudolf, Taverne 2012), as the triumph of the 'Man' (Franklin 2017). However, contradicting these modernist narratives, other-than-human entities actually continuously cross and transform urban space, even far behind human intentionality, and in many cases, they are object of invisibilised processes of exploitation

(Heynen et al., 2006). Moreover, in the past decades, other-than-human species previously categorised as wild are increasingly materializing inside urban spaces with their agencies. This is due to the blurring of rural/urban borders and to other environmental problems (such as the erosion of their habitats, insufficient urban systems of trash collection, etc...). These dynamics are theoretically and materially questioning urbanity as a purified human environment, opening up to the study of cities as more-than-human spaces, that is, the study of how “species, natural forces, materialities (...) became entangled in the social, cultural and political life” (Franklin 2017: 202) of cities. Agency of more-than-human beings

challenges the prevalent practice of “thingification” (in Barad’s terms), which, in this case, means the reduction of lively, emergent, intra-acting phenomena into passive, distinct resources for human use and control (Alaimo, Hekman 2008 :251).

In this understanding, urban spaces can be read as public spheres where humans and nonhumans relate through practices of resistance, resilience and equilibrium (Certomà 2016b: 97). An emerging branch in this field of social sciences is currently starting to focus on collaborative and conflictual relations between humans, plants and others. This field has been recently defined as “vegetal politics” (Head et al. 2014). In this perspective, urban space cannot therefore be read as a background for human action, but as the result of continuous interactions between human and nonhuman living beings, an interaction which can be characterised either by respect or by abuse (Breda 2015; Kull 2008; Patrick 2014).

### **2.3.1 Environmentalism of everyday life**

I will now provide an overview of the subject of this thesis, that is, urban gardening initiatives that take place in urban spaces through interactions

between human and nonhuman living beings. These initiatives are a part of a broader range of environmental citizen-based activities (guerrilla gardening, movements for the right to access to lands, environmentalist *in situ* protests, animal sanctuaries) that take place more and more in everyday life spaces of highly industrialised countries (Marres 2012; Schlosberg, Cole 2015). These set of practices, behind their plurality, are characterized by being enacted through material practices of engagement, production and exchange<sup>9</sup> (Aria 2015). New environmental citizen-based practices are often seen as being not politicised (Certomà 2016b). In fact, if we compare them to more conventional environmental and social movements of the twentieth century (Melucci 1989; Roggero 2016), they frequently do not rely on a strong ideology that drives their collective action. Nevertheless, their daily practices and engagements, which materialize around a specific concern in local urban spaces, can be interpreted as political acts. These assemblages constitute a new form of politics, an “environmentalism of everyday life”, carried out by local citizens “by embodying alternatives rather than just supporting values” (Schlosberg, Cole 2015: 161-178). Moreover, while being practices created through daily interactions of human and nonhuman living beings, they allow to study urbanity as an ever transforming more-than-human political space.

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<sup>9</sup> These initiatives have been associated to the broader set of economic practices enclosed under the label of “sharing economy”. However, as shown by Mora and Pais (2015), this label includes a range of very different activities, from initiatives that focus on intimacy, voluntarism, mutual trust and self-management, and are mainly non-monetary-based (Aria 2015: 64; Aria, Favole 2015) to practices such as on demand platform economies, which follow traditional market logics and, as such, can be read as new processes of commodification and domination (Mora, Pais 2015: 52). While carrying out my study, I am therefore keeping in mind the differences that could guide practices broadly included under this label.

In the last decade the role of urban public spaces has been largely analysed (Bianchetti 2016; Staeheli, Mitchel 2007; Spini 2010; Tornaghi, Knierbein 2016). There is a broad body of literature on urban gardens that recognises them as public spaces of social (Bock, Caraher 2012; Mougeot 2005; Ferris et al. 2001) and political (Follmann, Viehoff 2014; McClintock 2014) experimentation, individuating them as examples of “new commons” (Eizenberg 2012) that can contrast urban social injustice (Barron 2016). However, in this body of literature, there are also some positions that identify urban gardening as practices that could enhance the neoliberalisation of cities (Pudup 2012) I am mainly referring to a set of initiatives that interpret urban gardening primarily as a tool of beautification and greening of the urban space. Situating my view within this debate, I will start from the assumption that public space has to be considered as a differentiated product of continuous interactions, collectively generated through relational modalities (Tornaghi, Knierbein 2016), and collectively re-defined everyday through material practices. It is therefore constituted by continuous interactions among different actors (humans and nonhumans). Thus, urban public spaces can be planned from top down, controlled, designed for being destined to leisure and assigned to particular social categories, or they can be spaces of encounter, self-managed experimentation and sharing. It is possible here to envisage two different materialisations of what a city can be: a city for us or a city we make (Harvey 2008). In the case of urban gardening, it has been noticed that differences among its various approaches and outputs in transforming urban public spaces have to do less with the kind of greening or gardening planned by the various projects “than with the type of decision-making process and with the way the residents’ community is engaged” (Marche 2015:10). Consequently, even a gardening project started as a top-down greening initiative can become a self-managed initiative, if it is

appropriated by local citizens through everyday practices (the opposite can happen as well). In other words, the question is whether the local citizens will actually become an active part of the process of management and transformation of the initiatives (the city we make) or they will just engage with it as consumers (the city for us). This is always the (provisional) result of an on-going transformative process, and not an essentialist output of a top-down policy.

### *Defining urban gardening*

Urban gardening is a set of citizen-based practices that have become well established in several areas of the world and are now part of the political agendas of many cities. Even though it has not been extensively studied yet in Southern Europe, urban gardening is increasingly recognised as a pertinent initiative to address a variety of issues, including food security, health improvement, and environmental preservation (M'Baye, Moustier 2000). Food production remains an important aspect in the development of urban gardening in North American and European cities, but it is rarely the only reason that leads urban gardening initiatives. Indeed, the experiences of urban gardening are manifold: professional or amateur, on individual or collective plots, on urban or peri-urban lands, soil-ground or vertical cultivation. The most common categories of urban gardening include:

- “allotted gardens (portions of public land provided, planned, and regulated by the local authorities);
- Shared collective gardens (areas of public or neglected private land where citizens create self-managed gardening initiatives);

- Guerrilla gardening (flash mob-kind actions of gardening)” (Certomà 2016b: 109).

As will be widely described in the next chapter, I will centre my investigation on a number of different urban gardening and environmental citizen-based practices, extensively focusing on shared collective gardens, which have been the main focus of my investigation.

## 2.4 Methodology

I focused my investigation on environmental citizen-based practices of everyday life selecting the Roman context as a case study. As I will point out in the next chapters, the city of Rome has been facing in the past decades (at least starting from the beginning of 2000) an intense withdrawal of public institutions in charge of the management of urban spaces, and in particular in the management of public parks and green areas. This withdrawal began in the 1990s and has become progressively structural. In this context, starting from 2009 (when the first self-managed garden of the city was created in the Garbatella district), groups of citizens and associations that collectively self-manage public parks, gardens, flowerbeds, and green areas started to spread in the city. With my study I wanted therefore to investigate whether these contingencies were generating transformations in the interactions between human and nonhuman actors, and in the production of urban space, always considering situated power relations as a widespread mechanism.

I therefore investigated vegetal politics in the urban space, following citizen-based environmental initiatives emerging in Rome (as I will detail shortly). I focused most of my ethnographic analysis on the daily co-construction of a shared urban garden, the Tre Fontane Garden. This is a

project self-managed by a local association since 2012. It is located in the southern periphery of the city, inside a neighbourhood that is characterised by a high presence of citizen-based environmental initiatives. I decided to select this garden as a focal case study because this is one of the first and most extended shared gardens established in the city (it started in 2012 and it now covers a surface of around 2.5 hectares). Moreover, in 2014-2015 I had already carried out a six-months ethnographic study on urban gardening in the Garden Tre Fontane, through a scholarship funded by ARSIAL (Regional Agency for the Agricultural Development and Innovation of the Latium region). This granted me easy access to the fieldwork, as I had already conducted a research in that specific setting. Moreover, I could also benefit from the fact of having already collected some background documents and data concerning this specific gardening initiative and the neighbourhood where it is located in the past years, before starting the PhD research process.

To accomplish my study on vegetal politics in the city of Rome I used ethnographic methods (Cappelletto, Piasere 2004), since situated practices, which are at the core of my analysis, can be at best investigated using qualitative fieldwork. I decided to focus most of this ethnographic enquiry on one specific shared urban garden, as only a long-term case study qualitative research could bring to light dimensions of everyday life, material transformations, situated interactions, and the specific role of nonhuman actors. A focus on materiality and on material practices was particularly useful in understanding space production and power dynamics between human and nonhuman actors. I, thus, combined a more classical ethnographic approach (that is participant observation (Semi 2010), fieldnotes writing (Emerson et al. 2011) and semi-structured interviews

(Bryman 2004)) with multispecies ethnography (Brombin 2017; Haraway 2017; Kirksey, Helmreich 2010).

Newmaterialist feminist posthuman methodologies challenge the idea that structures and scales are given (Blok, Jensen 2019; Haraway 2016; Tsing 2012; 2015), seeing them as emergent effects of heterogeneous interactions between human and nonhuman actors. As specified by Cole and Frost (2012: 36):

In a multimodal materialist analysis of relationships of power, it is important to recognize their diverse temporalities by examining their more enduring structures and operations as well as their vulnerability to ruptures and transformation - all the while acknowledging that they have no predestined, necessary, or predictable trajectory.

The main limits of such an approach are the risk of flattening diversities and the difficulty of including nonhuman actors in the picture while avoiding determinism (Ferrando 2012). However, the desire to study more-than-human assemblages requires modes of knowledge attentive to their emergent, heterogeneous and contingent gathering. This is the main challenge and contribution of using multispecies, non-universalistic ethnography as a method (Tsing 2012). Marxist political ecology will enrich the picture providing support in the analysis of power relations through an historical and multiscalar lens. Still, drawing from the work of Tsing (2015), I will investigate, in my fieldwork, the everyday life of human and nonhuman encounters, considering that unexpected assemblages that could challenge historicised hierarchies can always emerge.

### *Research as a relational practice*

My fieldwork formally started in September 2017 and concluded in September 2018, even if I occasionally took part in initiatives and came back to the garden till September 2019. I wanted to investigate vegetal politics in the city as an open-ended assemblage (Tsing 2015) of politics and policies carried out by local public institutions, citizen-based groups and associations, and human and nonhuman actors in the Roman context. During the process of ethnographic research I therefore collected official documents and regulations produced by public institutions in charge of the management of green spaces. I monitored Facebook pages of environmental citizen-based local groups and of local institutions' representatives. I analysed articles of local newspapers that were reporting information on the management of green spaces in the city and on the role of nonhuman animals and plants appearing in the city. I participated in three meetings held by the Environmental Commission of the Municipality of Rome that were specifically focused on urban gardening and in two more meetings on the same topic held by the local VIII Municipality (where the Garden Tre Fontane is located). I visited and conducted interviews in eight shared urban gardens, in two urban gardens created by the Municipality of Rome and in two self-managed small parks in the city. As I will explain more in depth below, I also carried out interviews with representatives of the Municipality. I attended five meetings of the network of self-managed Roman urban gardens initiatives.

The main part of this ethnography, performed in the Tre Fontane Shared Urban Garden, was made through participant observation/ observant participation (Bastien 2017), which is a process of learning by doing and being with the assemblage-research. This approach, which includes material participation, allows the production of a situated knowledge

based on a high level of involvement of the researcher in the studied assemblage. This implies that the result of the study it is not a universal crystallised understanding of the experiences studied, but a relational, embodied and transforming knowledge. More specifically, I have been following the activities (from 2 to 4 times a week), conversations and daily interactions carried out inside the garden, following materiality of both human and nonhuman actors (mainly insects and plants). I cultivated a plot of land (I will better explain the importance assumed by this practice for my fieldwork in the next paragraph). I took part in the activities of the greenhouse, in beekeeping, harvesting and in weeding groups in the garden. I attended assemblies, meetings and public events taking place during the period of my fieldwork. Starting from March 2018, I proposed to create in the garden a project for preserving and incentivising the use of ancient local varieties of seeds. I became the voluntary coordinator of this project, which has been named “rebel seeds”. This project, gave me on the one hand, the chance to be actively involved in the gardening initiative; on the other hand, it allowed me to somehow reciprocate the Tre Fontane gardeners for being extremely present and helpful during my fieldwork.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews (Bryman 2004) during my fieldwork. I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with gardeners of the Garden Tre Fontane, focusing on their socio-political backgrounds, on what had made them decide to start being involved in the gardening initiative and on how they perceived this experience. I conducted three interviews to the person in charge of the Office for Urban Gardens of the Roman Municipality (Ufficio Orti Urbani), one interview to one of the members of the Municipal Environmental Commission, one interview with a person from the Municipal Gardening Service (Servizio Giardini), eight interviews with founding members of eight Roman urban gardens, two to

members of self-managed green spaces/ parks, one to the president of the Environmental Committee “Romasinalbera”.

<b>Interviews in the city of Rome</b>	
<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>
Local institutions representatives	5
Roman self-managed shared urban gardens	8
Roman urban gardens created by the municipality	2
Roman self-managed parks/ green spaces	2
Tot	17

<b>Interviews in Tre Fontane Garden</b>		
<b>Age classes</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male<sup>10</sup></b>
26-35	2	
36-48		1
49-65	4	6
Over 65	2	3
Tot		18

In the last part of my ethnographic period I also decided to submit to thirty gardeners a questionnaire with a few questions related to the categories of decay and decorum, which are terms that frequently emerged during my fieldwork, and on which I wanted to gather more specific information. I chose to submit this questionnaire anonymously, rather than proceeding through recorded interviews, because, in my opinion, with the first method the possibility to obtain truthful answers was higher. I

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<sup>10</sup> I only enlisted male and female as genders in the table, as in the garden Tre Fontane there are not people who do not identify in a binary gender system.

submitted the questionnaire at the end of my fieldwork period, so that the answers given would not risk guiding the direction of my investigation.

### *More-than-human ethnography*

The use of a classical, entirely anthropocentric, qualitative method is not sufficient to analyse urban space as co-constructed by the action of human and nonhuman actors. For this reason, I chose to enrich the methodology used for my research by implementing it with multispecies ethnography, that is a non-anthropocentric investigation practice which, by refuting the ontoepistemological duality of nature and culture-society, investigates the role of human and nonhuman actors in the co-construction of the world as a continuous flowing hybrid assemblage (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010). This is a research practice largely influenced by the Harawayan conceptualization of multispecies encounters (Haraway 2003; 2017) understood as meetings between fluid, relational bodies, in becoming. I conducted my fieldwork accordingly, by practicing observing participation, learning with and being in the entanglement of human and nonhuman actors (Moore, Kosut 2014). Initially it was very difficult for me to learn how to read the action of the nonhumans in the garden. Being shaped myself by a humanist and logocentric background, during the first months on the field I struggled with learning how to reveal the presence of the nonhuman as significant (Hartigan 2015; 2017). Hence, at the beginning of my field research I decided to let myself be guided in the interaction with the nonhuman by some garden activists who had been practicing cultivation in the area for a few years and by an activist who is in charge of managing some hives in the Tre Fontane Garden. After a few months, I learned through their mediation how to interact and read the transformations carried out by the nonhuman actors who co-build and cross the garden, which initially were almost invisible to me. Moreover, I had to constantly resist the risk of identifying

nonhuman situated actors as universal representatives of the species in which they are categorized by the scientific taxonomic system. "Species are generally just specimens" (Bowker 2000, in Hinchliffe et al. 2005) and not universal essences. Fundamental in learning how to decentralize my anthropocentric gaze was to start cultivating myself a piece of land within the garden, which I did from March 2018. This allowed me to experience the interaction with the nonhuman with a daily and material approach, learning to read capacity for action no longer as an exclusive prerogative of the human but as a widespread and relational mechanism. In particular, the focus of my ethnographic analysis became, then, the action of plants as political actors within the investigated urban space.

*Translating the research-assemblage through the writing process*

"Feminism loves another science: the sciences and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood" (Haraway 1991: 95). Positioning myself into the framework of feminist knowledge-practice, I experienced the process of writing this thesis as an interpretative translation path, which rejected objectivizing authority and reductionist universality, in favour of the production of a partial and situated knowledge (Haraway 1991). This text is therefore an emerging and intra-active translation process (Barad 2007), which involved human and nonhuman actors. The purpose of this form of ethnography "is not to represent nonhumans by speaking for them, but to tell stories of them to enable others" (Pitt 2015: 52) to experiment their political power.

I did not develop a specific research hypothesis, but always combined materials emerging from my fieldwork with the theoretical framework concentrating my investigation around some analytical areas of study (as outlined in the introduction) which were continually transmuted in the

daily interaction. This allowed me to always be surprised by and learn from the fieldwork. During the process of writing, I tried to translate the research development, bringing to light the material-discursive garden-assemblage, while combining my intra-subjective activity in the garden, the materiality of human and nonhuman bodies and institutional actions, the discursive dimensions materialized in the interviews, in public documents, newspapers and regulations.

## 2.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have been exploring posthumanist and postanthropocentric theories, leaning extensively on feminist newmaterialisms as one of the main sources of conceptual inspiration for my theoretical background. In fact, I assume that the application of a theoretical and methodological approach inspired by new materialisms could lead to unforeseen results in the investigation of both locally based political initiatives and humans-nonhumans relationships in urban contexts. Indeed, it can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of nonhuman living beings in the production of politicized urban spaces, both from a theoretical and an ethical point of view. Moreover, I believe that it could lead to the elaboration of new interpretative models regarding the modalities of interactions and the ontological systems generated by citizens' practices that this study aims to analyse. I agree with the fact that a critical theory that has become only a deconstruction of existing reality is at risk of putting social sciences in a very marginal position, that of producing powerless social analysis. A certain degree of affirmative and creative critique can be incredibly fruitful for social sciences. Still, I argue that a focus on conflicts must remain crucial for political sociology. Affirmative critique is very much in line with the narratives emerged at a discursive level (that is, through interviews) and in the practices (that is,

through observation) during my fieldwork. Emphasis on material practices and contingency, as well as on engagement fostered through everyday practice rather than through conflict, resulted to be central in the initiatives observed during the research process, as I will argue more in depth in chapter four, which will be dedicated to the fieldwork analysis. Nevertheless, I assume that a focus on conflicts is fundamental in order to unveil power imbalances, possible inequalities and exploitative practices, within humans and towards nonhuman living beings. In my opinion, this should remain one of the main tasks of critical theory. If we put aside the concept of conflict in favour of that of controversies (Pellizzoni 2015), we take the risk of invisibilising these dynamics, ending up with analyses that are dangerously close to be “de-politicized neoliberal modes of governing” (Rebughini 2018: 14). This is the reason why, while recognising the precious and innovative capacity, from an ethical, theoretical and methodological point of view, of newmaterialist theories, I deem it essential to combine them with a critical social-constructivist approach to the study of collective action (Melucci 1989). This is the reason why I dedicated the second part of this chapter to outlining the main features of urban political ecology that, while maintaining an anthropocentric and deconstructive approach to the study of social phenomena – which can help in analysing possible conflicts and power imbalances – is very much in line with newmaterialisms for what concerns the understanding of the world as relationally produced, and the importance of focusing on nonhumans and materiality.

### **3. The Roman context**

This chapter will be dedicated to the description of the Roman context, where I have been conducting my field study. More specifically, I will start presenting some information about the role of urban gardening and green spaces management over the course of the city planning history, starting from the late Republican period. I will, then, explore the current extent of the phenomenon, and provide some data about the changes occurred in the management of green areas and greenery carried out by local public institutions and citizens' groups in the last decade. Afterwards I will move to analyse some specific legislation issued by Roman Municipality to regulate volunteer participation in the management of green spaces of the city. I will conclude the chapter giving an overview of the multifarious set of citizen-based groups involved in environmental activities in the city, briefly highlighting some differences in the vision that guides their practices and actions.

#### **3.1 Recent history and contemporaneity of Roman green spaces and urban gardens<sup>11</sup>**

In the following section I will explore the history of the presence of urban gardening in the city of Rome. I have decided to briefly evoke it, as it is a set of practices that has characterised the shaping of the urban pattern since ancient times. Indeed, this is a peculiarity of the Roman urban fabric, which has been characterised over the time by a high presence of green spaces and edible plants. Still, as we shall see, the current urban agriculture experiments that are discussed in this thesis are essentially different from those of the experiences operating in previous historical phases. In fact, besides individual officially assigned or occupied plots, cultivated by

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<sup>11</sup> The following paragraph is a revision of some parts of two articles that I published in co-authoring in 2017 and 2018 (Del Monte, Sachsé, 2017; Del Monte, Sachsé 2018).

individuals or family groups for personal consumption purposes, new practices of urban agriculture are currently spreading. These new practices, which constitute the core theme of investigation of this thesis, are carried out by groups of citizens and associations, which, inspired by common purposes, run shared surfaces of land cultivated or managed collectively. My analysis will be concentrated on these new practices as they might assume an important social and spatial value, while changing the management of urban space. The second section of this paragraph will therefore be devoted at giving an overview of the current expansion of Roman urban gardens, particularly focusing on collective urban gardening experiences inside the Roman territory.

### **3.1.1 The historical roots of urban gardening in Rome<sup>12</sup>**

In the Roman cityscape, gardens are an element that historically appears to be well established. In the late Republican period, they often had an important role in the *domus* of great Roman families in the centre of the *urbe* (Purcell 2007; von Stackelberg 2009). However, from the middle of the first century BC the residences of aristocrats tended to be on the fringes of the city, meeting characteristics that made them similar to country houses, with vast parks and gardens surrounding the luxurious homes. In the first century AD, these houses reached to constitute an opulent green belt situated around the urban core (Stambaugh 1988). Among those, very famous is the case of the *horti Luculliani*, created by Lucullo and located on the Pincio Hill (Fattorosi Barnaba 2015). Many of these *horti*, born as residences of wealthy patrician families, in imperial times moved under the domain of the Empire (Claridge et al. 2010). This was the case of *horti Sallustiani*, located on the Quirinal Hill, left by the

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<sup>12</sup> Most of the information contained in this paragraph comes from an interview to Doctor Maialetti (who works for the Roman Municipality) made in November 2014 and is the result of an historical reconstruction realised by him, not yet published. Some additional bibliographical references are also included.

grandson of the historian Sallust to the Emperor Tiberius (Barrett et al. 2016), the Esquiline Hill *horti*, *horti* of *Mecenate* (Fattorosi Barnaba 2015), those *Tauriani* and *Lamiani* (Purcell 2007). The most common plants in this period were cypresses, laurel, myrtle, holm, oak and fruit trees. These forms of *horti* remained in effect until late antiquity, and a trace of their presence has been recorded in the properties passed to the Church (Ensoli, La Rocca 2000) and in the parks of the seventh and eighth centuries. In early Middle Ages, along the consular streets appeared concentrated sets of spontaneous gardens, where groups of people gathered and cultivated (Wickham 2015). With the arrival of flows of people from Northern Europe, which caused the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the idea of the flower garden, typical of the northern countries, enriched the edible *horti*. It is in this type of flower gardens that love chivalric novels unfolded. From the thirteenth century, the city got filled up by cloisters with vegetable and edible gardens attached to ecclesiastical structures. In the nineteenth century, the urban area was still largely characterized by the presence of spontaneous vegetable gardens. In 1810, under the French administration, a specific garden service in charge of the management of green areas and vegetation was created. Dates back to the same period, a plant nursery in S. Sisto (Fattorosi Barnaba 2015) where it is still located nowadays. From San Giovanni to Porta Maggiore, the area was crossed by cultivated areas, as in the Parioli neighbourhood, in Trastevere, Prati, Esquiline Hill. Much of the city was divided between vineyards, orchards and gardens. With the arrival of the Piedmonts, to build the capital, numerous cultivated areas were eliminated, justifying this decision with ornamental and safety reasons. Prati and Esquilino became the residential areas of state elites (Cerasoli 2008), and the gardens were pushed far away, in suburban areas beyond the city perimeter. Piedmonts also planted sycamores as a symbol of the new Rome capital city (Fattorosi Barnaba 2015). From the 1880s,

the area beyond the street Palmiro Togliatti till Porta Maggiore was occupied by the fruit and vegetable market and filled with vegetable plots, because of the richness of moats. In the 1920s and 1930s, populations of southern and central Italy began to converge in the city (Dan, Fornasin 2013). The districts of Centocelle, La Rustica, Alessandrino reflected the typical estate model of the time, filling with small two-storey buildings, inhabited by people of peasant origins and surrounded by gardens. It was possible to find there wisteria, palm trees and roses combined with beans and peas. The presence of these constructions proves to be, even to present day, the most distinguishing feature of the area. In the 1920s, fascist institutional rhetoric promoted the idea of a return to ruralisation of the city (Dunnage 2002), by teaching agriculture in elementary schools. In the reality, this time was characterised by a greater centralisation of populations in towns, with a higher density of housing than in the past. Within church structures the presence of vegetable and edible gardens was maintained, especially on the side of the city around the Gianicolo. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was still a strong presence of spontaneous urban gardens, which however, suffered a sharp reduction and simplification of cultivations. From the 1980s, the abandonment of cultivated areas increased, although the presence of land devoted to vegetable gardens scattered throughout the city persisted.

The short historical description just exposed was intended to show the long-standing presence of city gardening practices towards the construction of the Roman urban fabric. As expressed above, it is still possible to recall the existence of spontaneous plots cultivated by single individuals for edible ends, a practice that, as we have seen, is strongly rooted in the history of the city. Indeed, it is important to underline here that the self-managed collective gardening practices examined by the field

work are a new phenomenon, which has exploded in the contemporary age. As we will see, collective gardening practices are led by groups of citizens who, in addition to being sensible to the role of environmental and land protection, are also motivated by the desire to strengthen neighbourhood ties by working together. Many experiments were born on abandoned land, occupied by groups of citizens acting in informal ways and claiming the right to reclaim land or green urban areas.

Below, I will expose the current configurations reached by Roman urban gardening practices, which have undergone a new phase of spreading at the beginning of 2000s (Marzi 2018), proliferating further in the recent years. The role played by these activities in managing urban public spaces will be underlined, as well as their social and political dimensions, that make them different from the horticultural practices described above.

### **3.1.2 Current extent of urban gardening in Rome**

Contemporary Rome is a tangle of urban and green<sup>13</sup> areas. There are around 2000 Km of street trees around the city and 3000 hectares of green spaces (Fattorosi Barnaba 2015). A large part of these green spaces is composed of “residual portions of the *Agro Romano*, Roman countryside and covers around 68% of the urban surface” (Certomà 2016). If we consider the great ring road limit, this number lowers to 33% (Giarè et al. 2015), which is still an important number<sup>14</sup>. Roman green areas are composed of:

- Protected green areas;
- Flood plain areas (Tevere; Aniene and other tributaries);

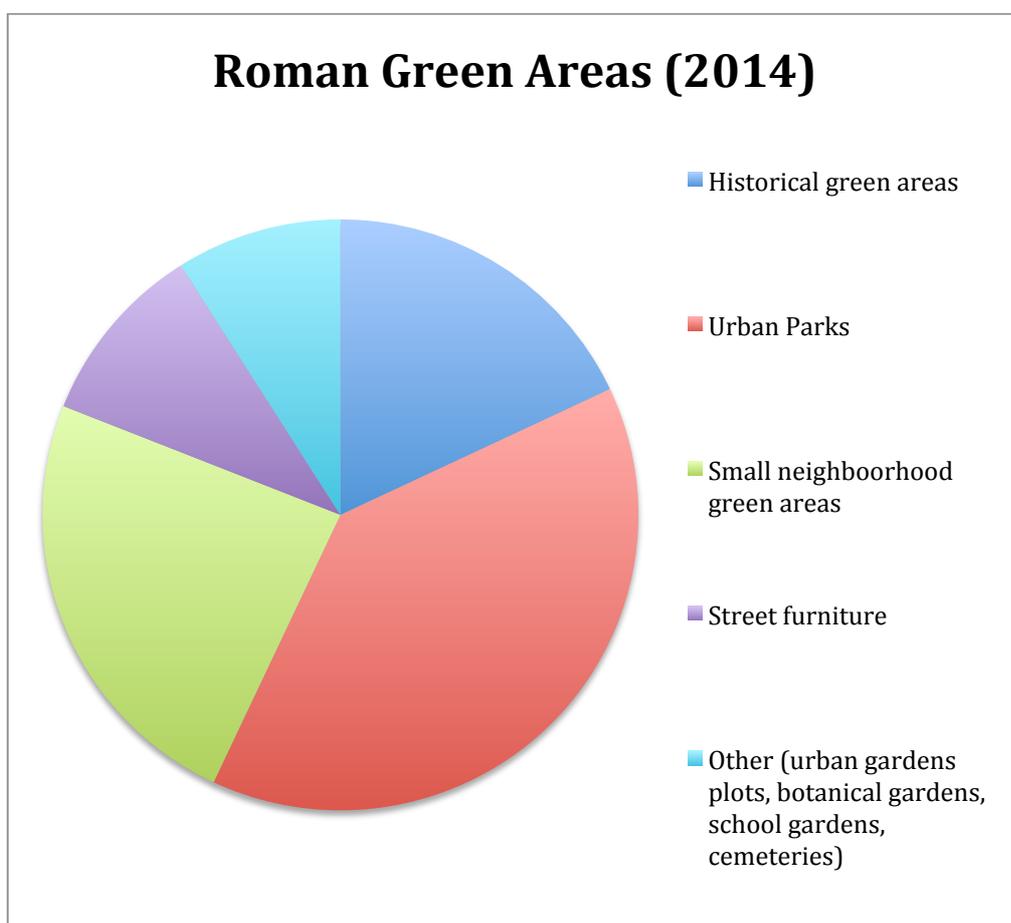
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<sup>13</sup> The term green was chosen because it covers many kind of spaces: parks, nature reserves, urban farms, urban gardens, abandoned areas.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Paris' green areas cover 20% of the total city surface.

- Agricultural areas;
- Urban green areas (urban parks; historical villas; urban gardening plots and tree-lined streets owned by the Roman Municipality).

According to a survey conducted by the land register of the Roman municipality in 2014, this is the current division of green areas in the Roman territory (Report Assessorato Ambiente e Rifiuti 2015).



Graph 1 Roman Urban Gardens<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Graph made by the author.

According to the same survey, there are 1.792 urban green areas, 4.500 hectares of green spaces and more than 330 thousands trees. Therefore, urban gardens plots represent only a small area of the whole surface but they are very diversified, both in terms of location (some are interstitial, others in parks or abandoned green areas) and distinctive features (informal gardens, municipal gardens, shared gardens). As the responsible of the Roman Urban Gardens Office explains<sup>16</sup>, these spontaneous experiences exist in many “hidden” parts of the city, along canals, rivers, railways and in some cases inside public parks. There is a great diversity of experiences, some of them are individual initiatives, and some are collective. According to a study commissioned by the Roman municipality in 2008 (Lupia, Pulighe 2014) there were, at the time, 67 green areas informally cultivated in intramural Rome (within the GRA – Great Ring Road), that were divided into 2301 vegetable gardens. These kind of vegetable gardens were mainly created through the use of recycled materials, presented handmade water recycle containers, were dedicated to self-consumption production, and the gardeners did not use chemicals. Also, in many cases, animals such as chickens, geese, pigeons, rabbits were informally present in these areas, in violation of the city regulation that does not allow the presence of farm animals in urban areas (Marzi 2018). As Marzi (2018) highlights, the kind of urban vegetable gardens just described, which were the ones present in the city until the beginning of 2000s, were managed through an individual- and private-based approach, by single persons or family groups that cultivated a plot without associating in bigger groups or associations. These experiences focused on individual subsistence cultivation and were essentially located on interstitial peripheric areas.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with the responsible of Urban Gardens' Office of the Municipality of Rome (Ufficio Orti Urbani), 6 November 2014.

Diverging from the kind of individual vegetable urban gardens just described, a new type of urban garden started to spread from 2009 on (Attili 2013), that is the self-managed shared vegetable urban garden. In my thesis, I will mainly focus on this particular kind of urban garden, which is the urban *hortus* (orto urbano) as it is called in Italy (Mudu, Marini 2016) and in particular on the self-managed shared urban *hortus* (orto urbano condiviso autogestito). In this last category, fall gardens managed by more or less formally gathered groups of people, who claim a collective dimension in the garden's organisation. The first garden of this kind was created in 2009 in the Garbatella neighbourhood. Later in my exposition, I will briefly describe the history and peculiarities of this garden (p. 39), while now I will introduce this new kind of urban vegetable garden and provide some more information about it. The most widespread pattern is as follows: a part of the garden surface is dedicated to individual or small-group lots, the rest is dedicated to common areas which can be composed of various kind of spaces (for example, didactic garden, common crops, leisure areas for gathering moments, greenhouse, compost bin). The particularity of this type of garden is that it is not cultivated on an individual base, but collectively managed. Moreover, these gardens not only focus on food production, but also start to involve some other dimensions, such as environmental preservation and education, contrast to speculation and overbuilding, social inclusion of migrants, unemployed, retired and elderly people. Moreover, these new kind of gardens are not located on interstitial and marginal areas, but inside the consolidated urban tissue.

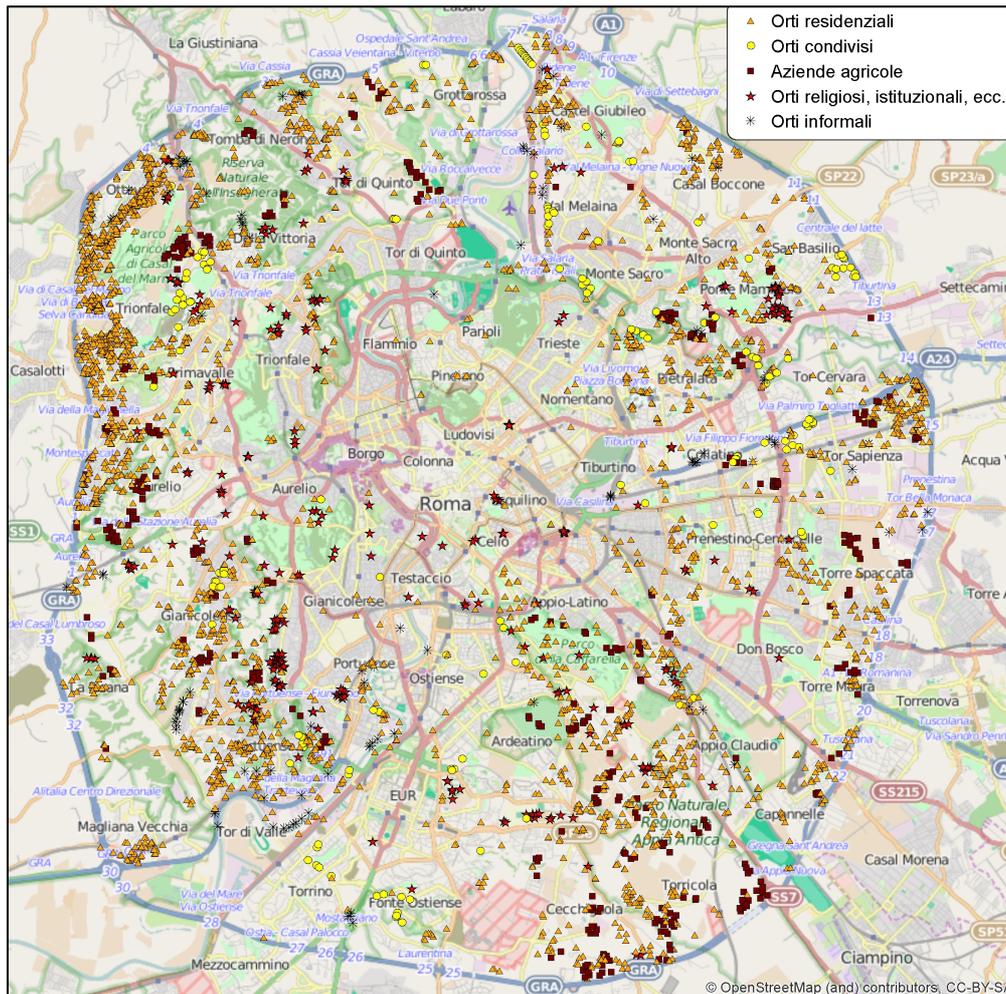
After the birth of the Garbatella Urban Garden, a huge number of shared self-managed urban gardens started to spread in the city (Marzi 2018). The

website *Zappata Romana*<sup>17</sup> published a map of the city where green areas with participatory management experiences are marked. The map currently (March 2018) indicates 155 green areas of which 58 are dedicated to communal gardens, 30 are "spot" gardens, and 66 are shared gardens. *Zappata Romana* is a project of the studio UAP (Urbanism, Architecture and Landscape) and being an on-going project the data provided must be taken with caution even though they still illustrate the vitality and interest that urban agriculture arouses. Today some of those experiences are over and some others have started. Still, it is clear that the phenomenon has largely spread throughout the city, thanks to experiences lead by socio-political claims.

In a report made by the Council for Agriculture Research and Analysis of Agrarian Economy (CREA - Consiglio per la ricerca in agricoltura e l'analisi dell'economia agraria), a typology of urban hortus is made underlining five types of gardens: residential gardens, farms, shared gardens, institutional gardens and informal gardens (2015). Various researches have been conducted in the last years to give a global vision of the situation regarding urban gardening in Rome. According to the criteria and methodologies applied, the results can vary but, at least, they show the diversity and the expansion of the phenomenon.

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<sup>17</sup> Which is an initiative from an architect studio, a participatory tool with many limits regarding the accuracy of the data collected and the updates. English version of the website: <http://www.zappataromana.net/en>.



Map 1 Roman Urban Gardens<sup>18</sup> (area delimited by the Great Ring Road)

### 3.2 The role of Roman public institutions and current regulations

The Roman municipality has an “Environmental Sustainability Department” (Assessorato alla sostenibilità ambientale)<sup>19</sup> which is a specific political department in charge of addressing environmental issues

<sup>18</sup> Source: Lupia, F., Pulighe, G., Giarè, F., (2016), Coltivare l'urbano: una lettura in chiave territoriale del fenomeno a Roma e Milano, *Agriregionieuropa*, anno 12, n°44.

<sup>19</sup> The department was previously named “Environment and Trash Collection Department” (Assessorato Ambiente e Rifiuti) under the previous political council lead by a center-left coalition.

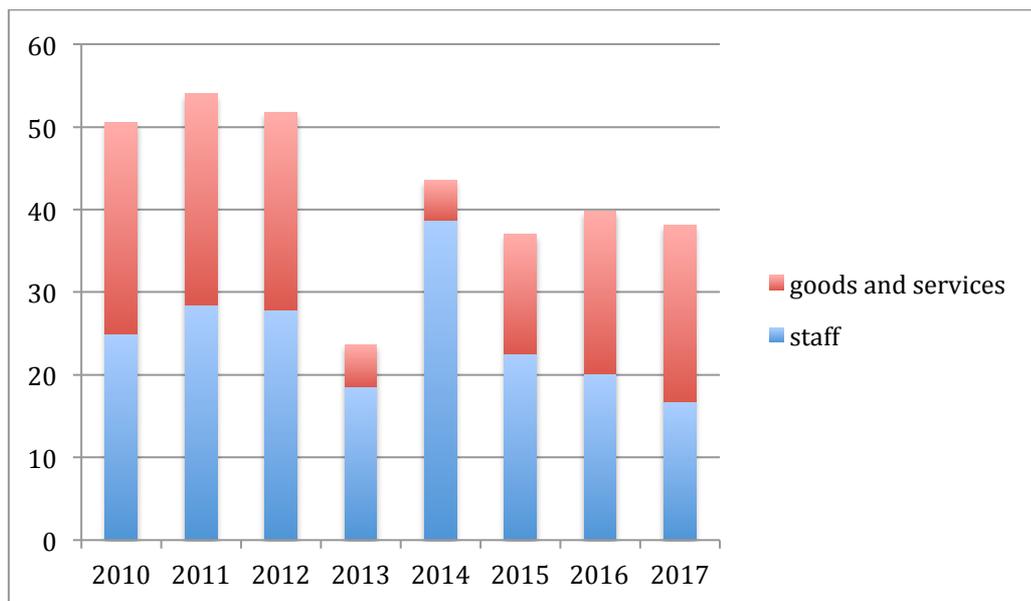
in a political perspective. The department was lead from July to December 2016 by Dr. Paola Muraro (5stars Movement- Movimento 5 Stelle), who in December 2016 resigned from her office, as she had been involved in a judicial investigation; then from December 2016 to February 2019 by Dr. Giuseppina Montanari. Montanari resigned in February 2019 as the financial plan of AMA (Environmental Municipal Company- Azienda Municipale Ambiente), the Roman Municipality’s company in charge of trash collection, waste treatment, and urban decorum, – a company which is also lead by the Environmental Sustainability Department –was not approved by the city council. The department is therefore currently (April 2019) lacking political guidance, and it is temporary under the city mayor’s responsibility.

The municipality structure has a technical department dedicated to environmental issues, which is named “Environmental Conservation Department” (Dipartimento Tutela Ambientale). It is currently located under the thematic area named “territorial services” (servizi al territorio) and it has three main sub-areas of action (see the table below). One area of action of the Environmental Conservation Department is named “Territorial Management of Environment and Green Spaces”, and is the area particularly related to the topic of this thesis.

<b>Env. Sustainability Department (Assessorato Sostenibilità Ambientale)</b> <b>Political area</b>	<b>Env. Conservation Department (Dipartimento Tutela Ambientale)</b> <b>Technical Area</b>
Main areas of action	Main areas of action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental and green areas policies;</li> <li>• Waste collection, treatment and environmental rehabilitation;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Territorial management of environment and green spaces;</li> <li>• Promotion of environmental conservation and animal</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politics for air and water quality control and conservation;</li> <li>• Agrifood policies;</li> <li>• Agricultural companies;</li> <li>• Animal protection;</li> <li>• Management of AMA;</li> <li>• Environmental education and information;</li> <li>• Environment and health observatory.</li> </ul>	<p>wellbeing;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waste collection, treatment and pollution.</li> </ul>
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The graph below shows the annual trend of the current expense for the management of the urban green, for the period 2010-2017. It clearly displays a decrease of the total expense, both for staff and for goods and services provision.



Graph 2 Current expense for the management of Roman green areas<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Graph elaborated by the author using data of the Agency for the Quality Control of Public Services of Roma Capitale.

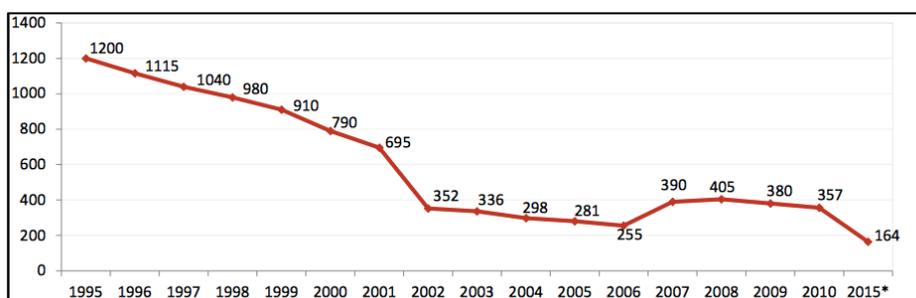
In December 2014 the Roman municipal administration was involved in a big investigation concerning the management of public services for the maintenance of green spaces. This fact additionally worsened the management of green areas, trees and general green care services, that were already experiencing a difficult situation due to the sensible decrease of funds assigned for this kind of public services compared to previous periods. Moreover, due to this big investigation the administration suspended and later cancelled all the already activated public tenders for externally assigned ordinary maintenance services, on which the Roman public system, has been relying for many years. These procedures were reactivated only in 2016. Also, the system is now increasingly based on extraordinary interventions rather than on ordinary ones (Agency for the quality control of public services of Roma Capitale 2018).

Under the area named “Territorial Management of Environment and Green Spaces” of the Environmental Conservation Department there are several specific offices in charge of managing matters related to urban environmental issues. I will now briefly expose some information about a few of these offices and operative divisions, which are particularly relevant for my thesis, that is:

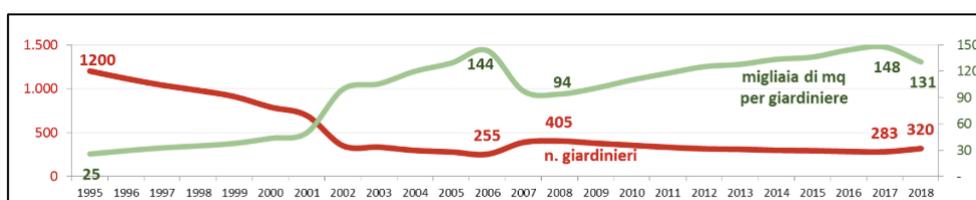
- Gardening service (Servizio Giardini)
- Urban Gardens Office (Ufficio Orti Urbani)
- Municipal Arboreal System Office (Ufficio Sistema Arboreo Cittadino)
- Urban Green Areas Adoption Office (Ufficio Adozioni Aree Verdi)

### *Gardening Service (Servizio Giardini)*

A first Roman gardening service was created during the French administration in 1810. This service was in charge of the management of green areas and vegetation (Fattorosi Barnaba 2015), and of the cultivation of plants and trees for Roman public parks and tree-lines streets (Servizio Giardini di Roma Capitale 2016). It was located in the park of San Sisto (Porta Metronia), where it is still currently located. The gardening service is still in charge of managing and maintaining the municipal green spaces and areas. More specifically, it is in charge of maintaining, monitoring and planting urban trees, horizontal green spaces, and of maintaining green areas and parks.



Graph 3 Number of gardening staff for the period 1995-2015<sup>21</sup>



Graph 4 Number of gardening staff in the period 1995-2018<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Source: Report 2016, Il verde pubblico di Roma Capitale, Municipal Statistics Office.

<sup>22</sup> Source: Report 2018 Ambiente, Agency for the Quality Control of Public Services of Roma Capitale using data of the Municipal Statistics Office.

In 1980 the service employed more than 1800 staff members. As it is possible to see from the graph above, elaborated from the Statistics Office of the Roman municipality in 2016-2018, this number sensibly decreased in the past twenty years, reaching the number of 164 staff members in 2016, and slightly increasing to 320 staff members in 2018. At the same time, the number of tenders and external services has been constantly increasing. According to the 2015 Report made by the Municipal Environmental Department, the expense for the management of green spaces, parks and areas for the period 2011-2013 was 0,45 euros for m2, and 1,22 euros for m2 in 2015. The average expense for Italian municipalities in the same period was 2,2 euros for m2. In the European context, the city of Paris allots 4,5 euros for m2 for the management of urban green areas. The Roman gardening service is responsible for a surface six times bigger than the Paris public service, with 0,25 staff for hectare compared to 1,55 staff per hectare of Paris. (Agenzia per il controllo e la qualità dei servizi pubblici di Roma Capitale 2018).

#### *Urban Gardens Office (Ufficio Orti Urbani)*

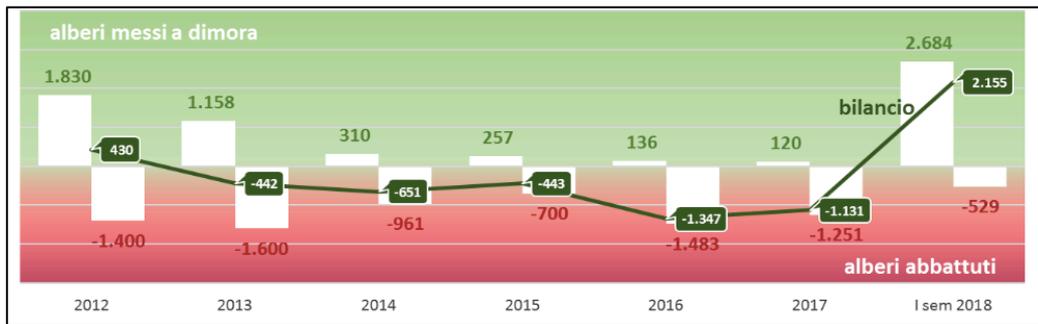
The Urban Gardens Office (which particularly focuses on urban *horti*) was created in 2002 by the Department for Protection of the Environment - Civil Protection. This office had only one board member<sup>23</sup> till 2018, when a second member was hired. The office works to strengthen and facilitate communication and links between urban gardens and the rest of the public institutions. In 2009, a regulation was launched that applies to crop areas within the city of Rome. In the next paragraph, I will further explore in detail the process of creation of a legal regulation of Roman urban gardens and its main features.

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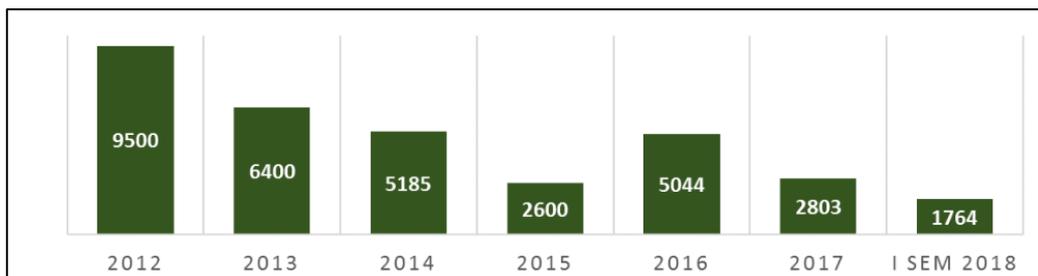
<sup>23</sup> Overall I carried four interviews with this person: one in 2014, another in 2016, and two in 2018.

*Municipal Arboreal System Office (Ufficio Sistema Arboreo Cittadino)*

The Roman municipality has a patrimony of around 315000 trees, divided between public parks (54%), street lines trees (36%) and school gardens (4%).



Graph 5 Number of trees planted in the period 2012-2018<sup>24</sup>



Graph 6 Number of trees pruned in the period 2012-2018<sup>25</sup>

The city established a specific office that is in charge of making surveys on Roman trees and of evaluating how many trees are cut and planted every year. It is also in charge of programming and monitoring the state of pruning and plantation of new trees in the Roman territory. As we can see from the graphs above, the number of pruning activities in the period 2012-2018 has dramatically decreased, as it has been for the

<sup>24</sup> Source: Agenzia per il controllo e la qualità dei servizi pubblici di Roma Capitale using data of the Municipal Statistics Office.

<sup>25</sup> Source: Agenzia per il controllo e la qualità dei servizi pubblici di Roma Capitale using data of the Municipal Statistics Office.

number of new trees planted in the period 2012-2016. The number of trees planted started to increase again in 2016. In paragraph 3.3, I will specifically dedicate a section to the connection between institutional politics related to tree management and citizen-based activism.

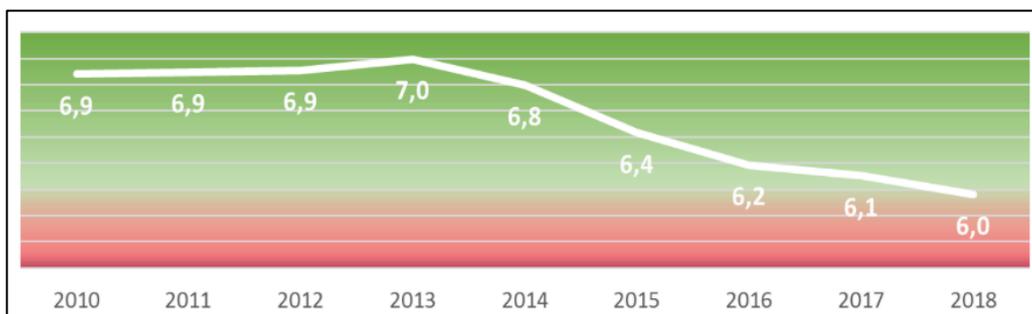
#### *Urban Green Areas Adoption Office*

The environmental conservation department has a dedicated office in charge of opening calls or stipulating direct agreements with associations, citizen-based groups and individuals for the adoption of flowerbeds, small green areas and small parks. A first legislative act (delibera 207) to allow individuals and groups of citizens to adopt small green areas was issued in July 2014 under the center-left coalition of the city council, when the environmental sustainability department was led from Dr. Estella Marino. According to the agreement, citizens must manage, clean up and maintain the green area strictly for no profit objectives, and the area should maintain the status of a public and open space. These interventions do not involve any kind of economical cost for the public administration. According to the Roman municipality website, there are currently 120 green areas that have been adopted by citizens and associations.

#### **3.2.1 Relationships between public institutions and citizens: the urban garden regulation process and the role of volunteers in the management of green spaces**

As we have seen, in the last decade the management of Roman public parks has seen a substantial erosion of resources. A reduction in the total and unitary expenditure (per inhabitant) for the management of greenery was accompanied by a strong decrease in specialized gardeners, with a consequent increase in the width of greenery that every single gardener must take care of. The number of tree prunings carried out in the 2012-2018 period has fallen dramatically. Also the ratio between fallen and planted trees appears to be decreasing, with a slight increase in 2018. As

shown in the graph below, even the vote given by the Roman population regarding the management of parks and city villas has dropped by almost one point in the last eight years. Furthermore, as seen above, from 2014 to 2016 there has been a total blockage of tenders, causing a sharp deterioration in the management of public green areas, which is now largely based on emergency rather than ordinary maintenance interventions.



Graph 7 Score assigned by Roman citizens to the state of Roman parks and villas<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, there has been a strong increase in the willingness of citizens-based groups to participate in the management of public green areas, in part, as noted in the interviews I conducted, precisely to compensate the lack of management of the public administration. Self-managed shared urban gardens are a clear example of this tendency, beginning to spread in 2009 and reaching about one hundred experiences at present. It is a universe of more or less structured and extremely varied contexts, ranging from informal groups that perform symbolic actions of guerrilla gardening, to neighbourhood committees that manage flowerbeds, small green areas or small parks. Precisely because of the multiformity of intents and actions that make up the scene of Roman environmental activism, in paragraph 3.3 I will briefly describe some of

<sup>26</sup> Source: Agenzia per il controllo e la qualità dei servizi pubblici di Roma Capitale.

these realities. In this section, I will focus instead on the relationship occurring between public institutions and some of these experiences, focusing more in detail on two regulations issued in recent years by the Central Municipal Assembly, that is, the Regulation of Urban Gardens and the Guidelines for the Regulations of the Green and Landscape of Rome Capital. These are two particularly interesting examples because they show the ambivalence of the relationships built between active citizenship and public institutions. In fact, while the latter seems willing to recognize the role played by volunteers in the management of public green spaces, – especially since the citizens involved provide a service for free – in some moments it seems to have exceeded in wanting to regulate the phenomenon limiting its widespread extension and participation.

*Urban gardens regulation: the center-left administration*

In 2009 a specific legislation to regulate urban vegetable gardens was requested to the Urban Gardens Office by the Environment Committee<sup>2728</sup>. In order to draft the regulation, the responsible office chose to work together with some preexisting experiences of urban gardening, because the power of urban farming phenomenon lies in its way of being self-managed and informal. This regulation, therefore, has been drafted through a close collaboration between the already existing Roman urban gardening realities and the Urban Garden Office. These are guidelines that were intended to regulate and protect the work of the associations and

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<sup>27</sup> Commissione Ambiente, that is the political body in charge of promoting and approving regulations and political documents related to environmental issues, that will then receive final approval from the city council (Assemblea Capitolina).

<sup>28</sup> All the information gathered about the «regulation» come from interviews with the responsible of the Urban Gardens Office, with founder members of the gardens and from the Municipality of Rome website. Since 2015, I am also registered to the basecamp platform of the informal roman urban gardens network, where I collected information exchanged among members about the process of creation of this regulation.

small groups of citizens that work to improve their territories. The original intention was to avoid limiting as much as possible the participatory and grassroots organizational model that characterize this phenomenon. All the interested entities were invited to participate. However, some groups<sup>29</sup> chose not to take part in this process because of mistrust towards the public administration, fearing that, despite its intentions, the administration would end up undermining the bases of horizontal participation in the specific contexts of action. For the preparation of the regulation, a committee was formed, made of groups and associations that had created shared vegetable gardens and, that in recent years, had worked together with the urban vegetable garden office. In July 2015, the final regulation issued through this process was approved and the mayor issued a formal document (Deliberazione 38/2015), entitled “Regulation for the Assignment on Loan (comodato d’uso gratuito) and for the Management of Green Areas Owned by the Roman Municipality Compatible with the Creation of Urban Vegetable Plots”. The regulation defined the conditions for establishing vegetable gardens and shared gardens in Rome. According to this regulation, an association or group of citizens could ask to receive for a period of six years (renewable for other six years) a specific green area owned by the municipality and, after the approval of the Environmental Department, create a shared vegetable garden. The regulation was also meant to legalize the already existing experiences. The communication was published on 20 July 2015. Although this regulation was the result of two years of work and collective development, it does not fully correspond to the expectations of the

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<sup>29</sup> When this process started I had not yet begun my fieldwork, and hence I do not have direct information about the group of gardens that decided not to take part in the regulation drafting process. From the information collected during interviews and informal conversations, emerged that a garden named Orto Insorto, located in the Eastern periphery of the city decided not to participate in this process, and so did the gardens located within occupied social centres.

initiatives involved in the process. For instance, the water issue was not specifically addressed in this regulation, despite the urban gardens initiatives having asked the municipality to take care of this matter.

I will now shortly proceed with a brief description of some of the most relevant parts of the normative text. The regulation is composed of four titles. The first title concerns the general provisions; the second concerns the modalities of reliance on the different areas; the third concerns the management of the same areas, and the last concerns the assignment of the single plots. The first title is particularly interesting because it broadly illustrates the aims and objectives that the Municipality intends to pursue by entrusting to groups of citizens and land associations some public urban areas. As indicated, centrality is given to the support of these initial attempts to create paths aimed at protecting the territory, green and agricultural heritage and the biodiversity in the city. Moreover, the public administration prospects that through urban vegetable gardens self-subsistence practices can be established, reducing the impact on the environment, providing support to individuals in conditions of economic difficulty, and producing food without the use of GMOs. Finally, the public administration bets on the importance that the presence of these realities can play in terms of active participation and sharing, working to "raise awareness of sustainability and environmental practices", and bringing out "a sense of belonging".

The second title is dedicated to the assignment of the areas, the duration of the assignment (six years), the conditions for renewal (for six more years) or for the revocation. Areas can only be granted to groups or associations, not to individual citizens. It is important to stress that the administration always maintains the possibility of "demanding the total or

partial return in the event of the occurrence of reasons of public interest ". The lands are given to the associations free of charge. The costs for utilities remain under the responsibility of the associations (water, electricity). The regulation specifies that on these lands only organic farming techniques can be used, and that the association that manages the area must deal with the disposal of waste, encouraging, if possible, "composting activities of plant residues ". In the third title the regulation focuses on the criteria that the associations must follow for the assignment of individual lots to citizens who request them. High scores are given to those who could more easily experiment social fragility: students, unemployed, pensioners, families with children. Additional points can be awarded to those residing in the nearby areas, in an attempt to strengthen territorial links. The regulation thus somehow highlights how the public administration recognizes to spontaneous urban gardens on the Roman territory a value in helping the municipality to manage the territory.

However, this regulation was almost never applied ( apart from the case of a specific urban garden named "Orto9", located in Spinaceto, in the southern periphery of the city) as in October 2015 the center-left administration lead from the mayor Ignazio Marino was dismissed before the end of the legislation and the new administration that won the elections in June 2016 decided to issue a new specific legislation.

#### *Urban gardens and green areas legislation: the 5stars Movement administration*

When the 5stars Movement (Ceccarini, Bordignon 2016; Conti, Tronconi 2017; Manucci, Amsler 2017; Movarelli 2016) administration became in charge of the Roman municipality, the Environmental Sustainability Department decided not to apply the regulation created from the previous

administration. In particular, initially the new administration was not convinced by the fact that green public areas could be directly assigned (comodato d'uso in convenzione) from the department or from local municipalities (municipi) to groups of citizens or associations without a specific competitive open call. In this first period (late 2016 - early 2017) the relationship between the municipality and the network of urban vegetable gardens groups that had participated in the process of creating the previous regulation (deliberazione 38/2015) became quite tense. In fact, the groups and associations involved in the previous participative legislation process interpreted this step as a lack of recognition of their activity, both on the field and concerning the specific work they had made with the previous administration. In the meanwhile, the 5stars administration approved in April 2017 the "Guidelines for the Green and the Landscape of Rome Capital". In these guidelines, there was a specific article that stated "gardens and urban gardens are subject to concessions for free use for a period not exceeding 6 years, which is renewable. The beneficiaries will be selected with a specific procedure, to be carried out following a public notice and in compliance with the principles of equal treatment, publicity, transparency and environmental protection". This statement was read by the urban vegetable gardens network as a way to overcome the previous regulation (deliberazione 38/2015) and to prevent the Environmental Department and the local municipality from directly assigning specific areas; it was also interpreted as a refusal to recognise the already existing experiences. In June 2017, the tension between the administration and the informal network of Roman vegetable urban gardens reached such a point that they even consulted a lawyer in order to see if the previous legislation should be mandatorily applied by the new administration.

In September 2017 the informal network of vegetable urban gardens was invited to take part in an environmental commission specifically called to discuss the regulation around urban vegetable gardens. In this occasion (I was present to this session of the commission) the approach of the public institutions representatives seemed to change. They openly expressed their will to legally recognise the gardening experiences already active in the city and to create a new regulation which could take account of the instances of the gardeners involved in the already existing projects. A new negotiation process started at this point. In December 2017, a specific forum on urban gardening initiatives was summoned, in order to receive the suggestions of local gardening groups and issue a new legislation accordingly. In this occasion (I was there for my fieldwork) the political head of the department (Dr. Giuseppina Montanari) was also there. Also in this occasion, the public institution representative remarked their will to support urban vegetable gardening initiatives and to keep their relationship with bureaucracy and legislation as smooth as possible, committing to create a new regulation in a short time. In fact, in February of 2018 a first final draft created from the urban gardening office was ready for starting the process into the bureaucratic offices of the department. At this point, again a transparent communication from the public administration about the process ceased, and this was particularly lamented from the gardening associations, that did not know anymore what was happening. Finally, in April 2018, the network was informed through an email from the urban gardening office that the regulation had been signed by Dr. Montanari and in May 2018 it was finally sent to the local municipalities of the city for any eventual modification.

The final draft of new regulation has currently been sent back to the department by the local municipalities that were given a period of time to

ask for specific modifications (28 December 2018). Finally, as the last step, the draft will need the final approval from the central municipal assembly. This version maintains the free loan for six years (renewable) for groups of citizens and associations. It seems to be quite similar to the previous one (Deliberazione 38/2015) and the process that has led to its creation seems to be quite chaotic and dispersive, probably due to the lack of continuity in the leadership of the political administration of the Environmental Department, which has changed twice since 2016 and has been devoid of political leadership since February 2019. However, the new regulation has received the specific instances presented by the informal network of vegetable urban gardens concerning the mediation of the municipality around the issue of the access to water for the gardeners and the possibility to build small containers to store farming tools. These two points were not present in the previous regulation and were deemed to be very important by the network. The point here was to show how the relationship between urban gardeners and the public administration has been particularly complex over time and to underline that urban gardening experiences seem to move forward even without a durable support of public actors.

#### *The role of volunteers in managing green areas and the common's coalition*

As mentioned above, in April 2017 the Municipal Central Council approved a document entitled "Guidelines for the Regulation of the Greenery and Landscape of Rome Capital" (deliberation 66/2017). This document, aimed at regulating the management of green spaces and the city landscape, also explicitly mentioned the need to regulate the relationship between public institutions and volunteers active in the management and maintenance of green areas and urban public spaces in

the city. This regulation, in addition to generating disagreements with the realities involved in the self-management of urban gardens, alerted groups of volunteers who over the years have dealt, more or less informally, continuously or occasionally, with parks, flower beds, and the management of green areas in the Roman territory. In August 2017, with an administrative resolution issued by the Environmental Department, a specific form was prepared as an adjunct to the guidelines with which groups of citizens, neighbourhood committees and associations could request authorizations to proceed with green maintenance activities, offering to cover themselves the cost of the insurance for “the coverage of the risks necessary for volunteers, for any professional staff employed as well as for third parties, with a minimum coverage of 100,000.00 euros”. For this reason the regulation was highly contested by a great number of urban groups that deal with the management of the city green. In fact, they see in this path of institutionalization, issued by the administration in a unilateral manner and without consulting those who by voluntary and free means have dealt for years with the management of many green areas, a kind of aggravation rather than a facilitation and recognition of the work performed by them. To be specifically challenged is the strong institutionalization of volunteering that seems to structure this legislation, which requires to communicate clearly and precisely the specific activities implemented, the means used, the number of volunteers involved. In particular, volunteers who manage public parks and green areas contest the need to take out insurance coverage at their own expense, which risks transforming active citizenship and volunteering into a privilege. On the basis of these protests, in January 2018, the coalition of commons was born. This coalition, created on January 12, 2018, brings together more than 100 citizens' initiatives with the objective of creating a " Commons' participative regulation". The coalition for the commons presents itself as

an "informal network of initiatives (...) with the aim of having the City of Rome approve a regulation for shared management, maintenance and regeneration of commons". The coalition is made up of 167 relatively diversified initiatives: neighbourhood committees, urban gardening associations, various branches of Legambiente <sup>30</sup> , environmental associations, but also associations such as Retake Roma, which are marked by a quite hygienist and securitarian vision of the city. These experiences tend towards recognition and inclusion in the law but not necessarily towards institutionalization. They want to maintain a certain flexibility in the management and organization of their spaces and activities. These experiences would like to be recognized as legitimate but not limited by an overly restrictive legal framework. Moreover, they do not want to become workers for free, and this is why they actually fight for seeing their role recognised from the municipality and somehow economically facilitated by it.

At this point a period of mediation has begun with the Municipality of Rome, aimed not only at the abolition of the insurance paid by volunteers, but also at the recognition of a regulation for a shared management between public institutions and citizens, and the preservation of commons, that should clarify the role and tasks of public institutions avoiding to transform voluntary work of citizens in unpaid work (this negotiation is still in progress). In December 2018 the municipal administration has, in fact, partially acknowledged the requests made by these groups of citizens,

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<sup>30</sup> Legambiente was born in 1989, heir to the first ecological nuclei and the anti-nuclear movement that developed in Italy and around the world from the 1970s. (<https://www.legambiente.it/legambiente/chi-siamo>). It is a national association with local branches, among which the Garbatella branch (southern district of Rome) is very active and also contributed to the creation of the first Roman self-managed shared urban garden.

issuing a measure named "#adottailverde (#adoptthegreen), Rome insures you". This is a measure that guarantees free insurance coverage for adopters of green areas, for the organization of occasional events that established an office dedicated to volunteering, and for another association dedicated to the adoption of the green (already existing in the past, as seen above, but strengthened in its duties).

In the next section I will outline more in detail the characteristics of some of the informal groups and associations that in various forms deal with managing the Roman green with voluntaristic methods, many of which are part of the commons coalition. As already specified, these are also quite different realities, which have different ways of interacting with the territory and with public institutions. A central theme that differentiates their action, and the conceptualization that guides it, is the intertwining of the categories of decorum and decay and the management of the city green. It is this theme that I will begin to address in the next section and further scrutinize in the fifth chapter, which will be dedicated to the analysis of the case study.

### **3.3 Urban gardening, a multifarious set of practices. Different actors and some examples**

As we have seen, the city of Rome has experienced a decline in the role of the public administration in the management of green spaces, due to cuts to public funds and to a progressive decrease in operative staff. This has been a particularly evident trend in the last decade, even though it could already be observed at least from the second part of the nineties. Because of this lack of management of greenery, Rome is increasingly a more-than-human urban space. In fact, the city, due to the blurring between urban space and countryside, and to other environmental issues

such as the lack of trees and weeds cutterly, is more and more crossed by nonhuman animals, even by those varieties that were traditionally categorized as wild and spontaneous. In the period of my field-study (2017-2019) there were many cases of findings of wild boars and foxes, which today frequently reach the city centre, while in the past were only present in large parks and in the countryside. In May 2018, a sign appeared in the entrance hall of my building in Monteverde, a central district of the city, calling for the door to be kept closed to prevent two foxes spotted in the condominium courtyard from entering the building. I myself, at the end of June 2018, saw a fox from the balcony of my house rummaging through a trash bin along the road. Famous is the case of a group of wild boars walking in Trastevere, but this is now a highly recurrent phenomenon in many areas of the city. Even the number of gulls and mice in the city has become exponential, and walking around Rome, in the suburbs as in the centre, it is nowadays normal to encounter mice and seagulls intent on procuring food from trash bins. Many of these nonhuman animals are clearly attracted to the city due to the erosion of the countryside areas where they previously resided, and in any case from the ease with which they can find food in the garbage, due to the precarious conditions of the Roman system of waste collection.



Image 1 Wild boars in Rome<sup>31</sup>

Even plant species are increasingly present in the interstices of urban space, due to the lower frequency with which the pruning of trees and flowerbeds is performed. This is also valid for the situation of management of the trees in the city by the public institutions, a sector which, as we have seen, has also been greatly reduced. I will devote a separate section to this specific issue, talking about the work carried out by the "Roma si Inalbera" committee. This situation makes it clear that the city is experiencing unfamiliar circumstances, underlying the urgency, but also the possibilities of re-thinking new ways of co-inhabiting the city.

It is precisely in this context of partial retreat of public institutions from the management of the urban fabric and of the greenery that the work of the green volunteer groups is inserted. As mentioned, this is a strongly heterogeneous group of entities that implement diversified actions and have divergent visions of the city even within themselves. In the Roman public discourse on the management of green areas (eg. during the

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<sup>31</sup> Source: ilmessaggero.it.

environmental commissions I attended, in local newspapers such as *RomaToday* or *Il Messaggero*, but also in some interviews and informal conversations with volunteers), a connection often emerges among the categories of decorum and decay and the management of public parks. In many cases I have found that the category of decay tends to be associated with the presence of the so-called weeds (wild herbs that grow and develop beyond human will) and of non-domesticated animals.



Image 2 Malvas in Piazza di Spagna, Rome<sup>32</sup>

Another phenomenon frequently associated with the term degradation is the presence of informal settlements, conceived precisely as a form of environmental degradation. On the official Facebook pages of the president of the Environment Commission and of the former councillor for the environment, Dr. Montanari, it is possible to find almost daily posts that advertise evictions of informal housing settlements and slums demolitions

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<sup>32</sup> Source: picture made by the author in May 2018

as actions aimed at restoring the environmental decorum, and the sustainability and liveability of the city for its inhabitants.



Image 3 Eviction of informal settlements in Rome<sup>33</sup>

What is striking here is that in the photos of the actions taken by the Environmental Department in collaboration with the police of Rome, the humans that inhabited those informal camps are always absent. Their few belongings and jests, temporarily arranged or built over time, are referred to in the descriptions of the photos, as decay, material to be disposed of, obstacles to health and urban decorum. The risk of categorizing environmental regeneration in these terms is that it turns into a sort of criminalization of poverty, going to build liveable cities for the economically wealthy and documented people only, marginalizing and excluding for all others.

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<sup>33</sup> Source: Facebook page of the President of the Roman Environmental Commission, August 2018

The association between decorum and public green seems to be consolidated within the Capitoline public institutions, given that already in 2014 the garden service was renamed "Operational Unit for Public Green Spaces and Urban Decorum". Confirming this trend, the Mayor of the 5Stars Movement, Raggi, announced at the end of 2018 the creation of a new coordination office, specifically dedicated to the theme of "urban decorum", particularly focused on the implementation of urban regeneration practices. The aptitude to promote urban regeneration and decorum seems to justify conceptually the evictions of informal settlements present in many green areas of the city, thus creating a city that is excluding for those who find themselves in conditions of social marginality. This is very much in line with similar green gentrification dynamics already outlined in different European contexts (Anguelovski et al. 2018; Dooling 2009; Holifield et al. 2018; Pearsall, Anguelovski 2016). There is therefore a risk that the citizen-based environmental initiatives themselves may be transformed into possible instruments of exclusion, while framing their action between the two poles of decorum and decay. I will discuss this topic in detail in the fifth chapter of this thesis, through the exposition of the ethnographic material collected in the field. I will instead devote the last section of this chapter to a brief description of some of the urban environmental realities that I followed or crossed in the research period.

<b>Name of the initiative</b>	<b>Starting</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Area</b>
<b>Giovannipoli Committee</b>	2013	Self-managed park	Garbatella (South centre)
<b>Subversive Gardeners</b>	2010	Gardening collective	The whole city
<b>RomasiInalbera</b>	2017	Monitoring	The whole city

		group	
<b>Urban Garden Garbatella</b>	2009	Self-managed shared garden	Garbatella (South-centre)
<b>Urban Garden Consolata</b>	2010	Municipal shared garden	Bravetta (Ovest)
<b>Urban Garden Tor Sapienza</b>	2017	Municipal shared garden	Tor Sapienza (Est)
<b>Urban Garden Ex-Snia</b>	2011	Self-managed shared garden	Pigneto (Est-centre)
<b>Retake</b>	2014	Association	The whole city

#### *Giovannipoli Committee*

The Giovannipoli Committee, born in 2013, manages the Commodilla Park, located in the consolidated periphery in the South of the city. It is one of the founders of the commons coalition. It is managed by a group of volunteers who, due to the absence of the public administration, have formed a committee and have chosen to deal collectively and voluntarily with the management and maintenance of the area, also collaborating with other active associations in the neighbourhood. The situation of the park represents a case of management of a public space by citizens. The local administration which was in charge of the management of the park had ceased to take care of it due to a lack of funding. For this reason, a group of local citizens who usually frequented the park decided to form a committee and take care of the park's development. After a long negotiation with the public institutions, they obtained the authorization to manage the park, which for the moment only foresees the maintenance of the green space, an activity which they continue to carry out informally. For what concerns the administration and its response to such initiatives, it can be said to have an ambivalent role. Officials turn a blind eye to certain actions when they feel

the situation is preferable as well. Indeed, citizens volunteer, clean, maintain, animate a public space, which costs nothing to the administration. As explained in an interview I conducted in 2018, after a few years they were given the management of the place (even though) they still do not have a specific agreement or management contract signed between them and the municipality. As explained by Marco "Many actions we take are unauthorized. Tolerated, appreciated, but not allowed." (Interview with a representative of the Commodilla Park Committee, February 7, 2018). Also, during the interview Marco underlined several times that the vision that informs the group is that they would like to contribute to the creation of a public space as welcoming and inclusive for everyone, and that they are quite suspicious of the idea of decorum as tidiness and cleanliness proposed by groups such as Retake.

#### *The Subversive Gardeners*

The Subversive Gardeners were a group active in the Roman territory until 2016. They were part of the global movement of guerrilla gardening. In Italy, guerilla gardening made its appearance in 2006, in Milan. In Rome, it was the Subversive Gardeners who initiated guerrilla gardening activities, in March 2010. Initiative of a few people, the movement took shape progressively. Until 2016, the "fixed" activities of the group, ie the vegetable garden, the nursery, and a school that provided training on subjects related to cultivation were held in the Loa Acrobax social center. The objective pursued by the group was "to recover unused or neglected urban spaces through the reporting and participation of citizens, armed with plants, flowers and gardening tools". The specific operating mode of the Subversive Gardeners in performing guerilla gardening actions resulted in spot actions in previously defined places. Every now and then they took actions in places where they could contact someone, in order to

involve the inhabitants of the neighbourhood as much as possible. The prefixed goal was to insert some greenery, plants, flowers, and to ensure that those living nearby could appropriate the management of the new green created in these ways. Another central aim was the creation of new meeting spaces of collective management and respect for one's environment. On their website we can read "From the park to the sidewalk near home, from the uncultivated flowerbeds to the flyovers, from the extreme periphery to the historic center." These are the places where they tried to activate practices of collective reappropriation of the fragmented space of the metropolis.

### *RomasiInalbera*

RomasiInalbera (that in Italian means both "Rome becomes full of trees" and "Rome becomes angry") is a group of women who in 2017 created a Facebook page to collectively monitor and inform about the situation of Roman trees –specifically the situation of the public service of management of the greeneries and trees –but also about the good practices present in the city. As specified above, the situation of maintenance and care of trees in the city is quite compromised due to the sharp decrease in public funds. According to one of the activists of the committee, whom I interviewed in June 2018, this problem is now combined with the global problem of climate change, which makes trees grow faster but also makes them more fragile, and therefore in need of even more attention in their care and maintenance. As mentioned, this group is concerned with bringing to the attention of citizens through the use of internet issues related to the management and life of Roman trees. During the interview I made to one of the most active members of the group, Chiara, she claimed the use of an explicitly post-anthropocentric approach, which according to

her should guide the conception of the city, but which still seems to be extremely marginal. As she said in the interview Rome has

a problem of lack of tree care inherited from the previous administration. But there is also the problem of climate change. (...) There are researches that show how trees are growing up faster due to climate change, but they also grow up more fragile. Hence it is normal that some branches could fall or break. This means that there is a global issue that merges with local issues. The current administration is carrying out a policy of alarmism and limitation of risks (...) through this modality of cutting everything. But in this way we are losing our arboreal heritage. (...). Trees are living beings (Interview with Chiara, Romasinalbera Committee, September 2018).

Here below I will report now some of the cases followed and reported by the group, which I considered particularly interesting.

At the end of May 2018, just before the local town council elections, the Environmental Department planted 16 Chinese pear trees in Via Licata, Garbatella neighbourhood, Southern Rome (a cheap variety of tree that can be easily monitored due to its small size). May is not a suitable period for planting, which should be done in Fall. These elements already show the markedly anthropocentric view that, at least in this case, guided the action of the Environmental Department. By the end of June, 10 out of the 16 trees had already died, because a systematic watering service was not provided. Another interesting case is that of the locust trees in Via di Villa in Lucina (San Paolo, Southern Rome), demolished in January 2018. The Environmental Department had arranged for the cutting of the 40 locust trees that made up the tree-line, because they were sick. After the RomasInalbera group requested access to the documents, it emerged that at least 3 trees were not sick and could have been spared. Even in this case,

the trees seem to have been considered simple urban furniture by the Environmental Department, which decided to cut down also those trees that were not sick. Both cases have been reported in the local newspaper RomaToday (which in the case of Chinese pear trees titled "Garbatella: the Electoral Pears Have Died"). As for the management of pines, historic trees of the Roman landscape, the group reproaches the administration, through online periodicals, for a conduction based on risk management only - which works mainly on emergency, cutting trees massively when there are unforeseen precipitations (as it happened for example in January 2019) - rather than on ordinary and systematic management. It is also disputed that the trees are cut even during the nesting period, which would be prohibited by law.

With this way of handling things there is the risk of generating a massacre of trees by criminalising a tree species only because the management of the greenery is made on an emergency base and not through ordinary management and training of specialized personnel. I think that the city should be re-imagined as an inclusive space for humans, plants and nonhuman wild animals, rather than justifying exclusion through the rhetoric of decorum. And this discourse is valid also referring to practices of exclusion towards migrants. It is precisely anthropocentrism that has to be slowly dismissed. (Interview with Chiara, Romasiinalbera Committee, September 2018).

### *Urban Garden of Garbatella*

The Urban Gardens of Garbatella are located near the building of the Lazio Region. I decided to extensively report the experience, as these are explicitly defined as the first shared self-managed urban garden in Rome. As explained by one of the founders of the initiative, the gardens represent a "barrier between the Garbatella district and the Via Cristoforo

Colombo<sup>34</sup>" (Interview with Lucia, one of the founding members of the gardens, November 3, 2014, Rome), and are therefore a strategic place located between the historic center and the EUR district. The gardens consist of fifteen plots of about 40m<sup>2</sup> each. According to the activists we met, these are the first collective urban gardens built within the Ring Road of the city, and their history began in the 1990s. In 1996, activists and inhabitants of the neighborhood began "a battle that was fought collecting signatures, organizing initiatives and occupations of the Colombo" (Interview with Lucia, 3 November 2014, Rome). Since the beginning of 2000 various temporary initiatives were organized (festivals, tree planting). In 2008 then, following the change of administration, after having noticed the scarce propensity of the new administration to cooperate for the protection of the area, activists decided to employ the land in a way that could show their continuous presence on that territory, given that the initiatives carried out up to that point had not had sufficient impact. So, in 2008, when the land had become "a desert, one of the most neglected places in Rome, a semi-landfill" (Interview with Giulia, one of the founders of the Vegetable Gardens of Garbatella, 12 November 2014, Rome) the idea was born to create a collective vegetable garden. From 2010 onwards the project of self-managed urban gardens (which were formed in association) started, with the help of a very small fund obtained through the awarding of a tender promoted by the Province of Rome. In 2011, the Municipality of Rome implemented an agreement to confer the management of the area on the association Orti Urbani Garbatella. The idea behind the claims of the inhabitants involved was to "raise awareness in the administration on the need to maintain the green area" (Interview with Francesco, one of the founders of the garden, November 3, 2014, Rome),

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<sup>34</sup> This is a very large, long, and congested Roman street that connects the city centre with the municipality of Ostia.

and preserve it as a common good in order to contain the speculation on buildings that has affected neighbouring areas for decades. The current gardens lie in fact on an area particularly sensitive to these risks, since it is subject to hybrid forms of use - having been used first as a parking lot and later as an illegal dump: "It did not have a precise destination, but at the same time it risked being an easy prey to different economic interests "(Interview with Giulia, one of the founders of the gardens, 12 November 2014, Rome). Despite the substantial abandonment by the institutions, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood continued to implement collective actions aimed at protecting the area, planting trees and counteracting neglect. The space then began to come alive, especially when many nearby residents, including many retired people, approached the area's recovery experience and began participating in the initiatives. The actions undertaken by this group of neighbourhood activists make it explicit that these gardens constitute a strong symbol of active citizenship, based on a principle of decision-making autonomy of the inhabitants in the evaluation of the activities through which shaping their own neighborhood, starting from a decisive refusal of forms of building speculation. This view has been repeatedly confirmed also in conversations with some local activists. The following step in recovering the area was the creation of an educational area in the garden. Relationships of collaboration were thus created with schools in the neighborhood, adding an educational dimension to the experience. In this sense, for the Garbatella community of gardeners, collective activities - fundamental for increasing and maintaining the principles of sharing - are central. The people involved in the experience are also involved, for example, in the care of fences or common areas and, in general, participate actively in the management of the space itself. They also work to organize social gatherings, such as dinners and collective lunches in order to strengthen the group's cooperation and social cohesion,

and to make all the inhabitants of the neighbourhood aware of environmental issues. Despite this, at the initial stage of the works, the gardens were not appreciated by some of the residents of the neighbouring areas. To water, the gardeners take water from the public fountain next to the garden entrance. This practice was initially criticized by some inhabitants of the area, who then frequently contacted the police to check the regularity of the activities. As in many other associative dynamics, in the gardens those who are at the origin of the initiatives and some of those who subsequently approached are also often the most present people, organizing events and common works, trying to encourage other members to participate in a broader range of activities than just taking care of their own piece of land. This dimension creates sometimes conflicting dynamics between groups with different visions within the initiative. The diversity of points of view arises both in the general organization of the association and in the methods necessary to encourage participation. Thus tensions and debates arise which, on the one hand, are a sign of vitality within organizations, but on the other hand can also slow down the processes of decision-making and, consequently, of action. Garbatella Urban Garden is also a part of the commons coalition.

#### *Urban Garden of the Consolata*

The Urban Garden of the Consolata is located in the South-western periphery of Rome, between the areas of Pisana (urban area 16C) and Buon Pastore (16B), in the XII Municipality of Rome, with a house property rate between 63% and 74% and an average income between 25000 and 30000 euros per year (data aggregated from the XII Municipality<sup>35</sup>). The garden was created by the Roman municipality in 2010 and it is located in

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<sup>35</sup> This is a very heterogeneous municipality, which includes upper-middle class, lower-middle class and working class neighbourhoods.

an area of 40000 m<sup>2</sup>, divided in 21 plots. The area was previously cultivated in illegal plots, in the 80s, by a group of citizens united in the association “Fosso di Bravetta”. After the creation of the municipality project, which costed a total expense of 300000 euros, the area was assigned to the same association through a direct permission, and the permission is renewed every year. A gate now surrounds the area, and the association is in charge of opening and closing it every morning and evening. The association also manages a nearby area (on the other side of via della Consolata), which is still cultivated in illegal plots.

#### *Urban Gardens of Tor Sapienza*

The Urban Gardens of Tor Sapienza” are located in the Eastern periphery of the city, in the Tor Sapienza urban area (7C), in the V Municipality of Rome, municipality with a house property rate of 60% and an average income up to 20000 euros (the lowest in the city). The garden was created by the V Municipality in 2017 inside the Tor Sapienza Park. It is divided in 21 plots of 40m<sup>2</sup> each, individually assigned to local citizens through a public list.

#### *Urban Garden of the Ex-Snia*

The urban garden of *Snia* is located in the Ex-Snia<sup>36</sup>, a social centre<sup>37</sup>, and thus in a space that was occupied before the garden project started in

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<sup>36</sup> ‘*Centro Sociale*’ Ex- SNIA, which was born in 1995 as an occupation of the ex-factory CISA-SNIA Viscosa.

<sup>37</sup> Social centers in Italy were born in the mid-1970s and “saw their apogee in the beginning of the 1990s” (Piazza 2011: 13). It is difficult to give a unique definition as each experience has its own characteristics but a series of common features can be distinguished: illegal occupation, self-management, social aggregation and self-financing (Piazza 2011).

2011. It was donated by the artist Fritz Haeg<sup>38</sup> who decided to offer the rooftop garden that he had created at the American Academy. The material he gave was part of his project 'Edible Estates'. The garden is situated in the Eastern neighbourhood of Pigneto, in an area that is characterised by a scarcity of parks and green public spaces. This is a sensitive area, and after the factory closed in 1954, many actors elaborated different plans for it (including the municipality, private owners and citizens). When the garden project was born, a group, which continuously changes its composition over time, was formed. Today, the collective dimension of the garden is weakened as since 2015 it has been maintained mainly by a retired local woman.



Image 4 Urban Garden in SNIA<sup>39</sup>.

### *Retake*

Retake is a nationally active association that also has a Roman branch. As stated on their website “Retake Rome is a spontaneous, non-profit and non-party based movement of citizens, engaged in a battle against decay, in the enhancement of public assets and in the diffusion of civic sense in the

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<sup>38</sup> An artist whose work is strongly interdisciplinary (gardens, dance, design and architecture). In 2005, he started a project called Edible Estates; part of it has been moved to the eXSnia Social Centre.

<sup>39</sup> Source: picture made by the author in June 2016.

territory. We promote urban decorum, civic pride, volunteering, education and legal art<sup>40</sup>". Among the "pillars" of the group we can read "Improving the quality of life through actions aimed at reducing decay" and "supporting legitimate artistic expression in the form of Street Art (...) subject to authorization". Quite clear, therefore, is the law abiding and hygienist vision of the organization, which aims to include every urban artistic expression within the framework of legality, and which tends to limit the boundaries of the "quality of life" in the city within the notion of "urban decorum". As Ferreri (2018: 122) states in her ethnography on the Pigneto neighbourhood, "Retakers, promoting indistinct cleaning actions, keep a distance and show insensitivity to social problems such as poverty (beggars, homeless people, street vendors), move away from subcultures (writers, tags, and self-produced posters) and political activism, denying occupations and illegal billposting". In this vision, citizens completely replace institutions in the management of urban space, with the aim of creating aseptic spaces, in the name of decorum, where the possible presence of flora and fauna is totally subjected to an aesthetics that always places wealthy and able humans at the centre.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.retakeroma.org>

## **4. The case study: Urban Garden Tre Fontane**

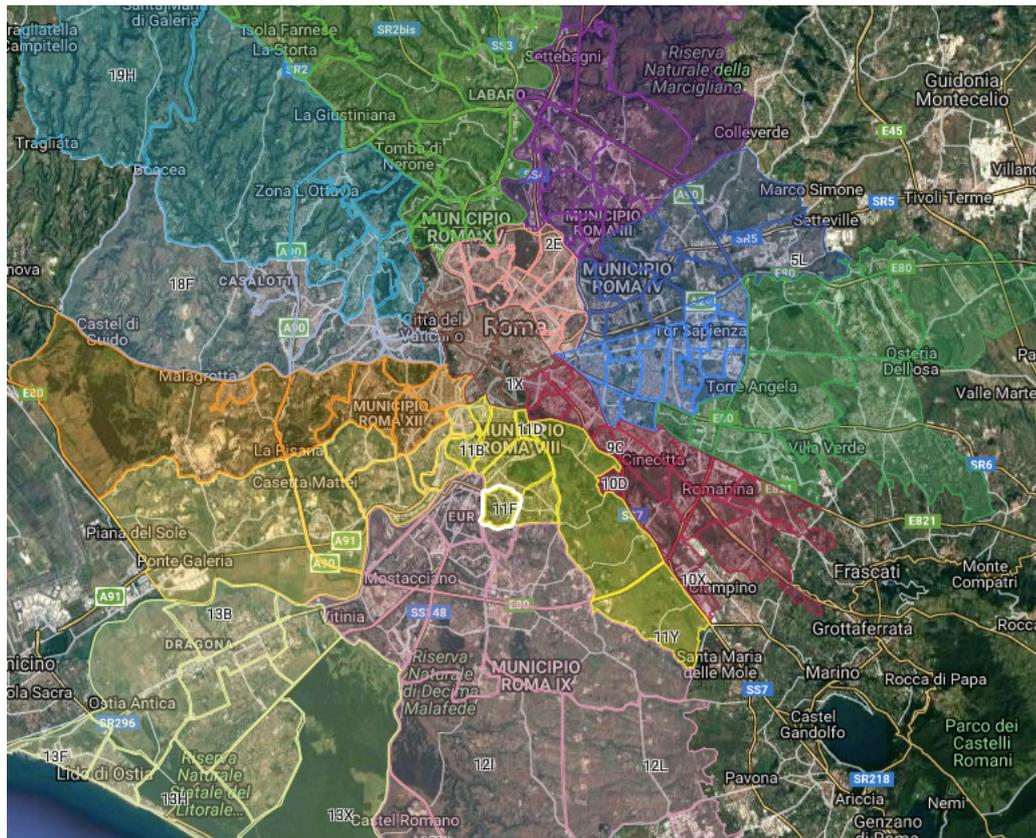
This chapter will be dedicated to the presentation of the case study on which this ethnography is mainly focused. I will start by outlining the urban history and the social composition of the area where the Tre Fontane Garden is located, tracing back the events that led to the formation of the districts that host it up until the present time. I will then move on to describe some forms of environmentalist citizenship and local activism operating in the area of the VIII Municipality, where the garden is located, focusing on the presence of self-managed shared gardens and on some specific environmental disputes taking place near the Tre Fontane Garden, and somehow connected to it. I will then describe the path that led to the creation of the Tre Fontane Garden in 2013, the social composition of its activists and participants and the main activities performed in the garden.

### **4.1 Location, history, and composition of the area**

In this paragraph I will outline the history of the urban tissue of the area where the Garden Tre Fontane is located (that is, urban areas 11E and 11F<sup>41</sup>). In the second part of the paragraph, I will report some recent statistical data about housing, green spaces and population composition of both the municipality and the area delimited by the garden.

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<sup>41</sup> As specified in the Statistics Office website of the Roman municipality, urban planning zones were established in July 1977 on the basis of urban unitary criteria in order to create a basic reference for all planning and urban management activities.



Map 2 The city divided in urban areas<sup>42</sup>.

#### 4.1.1 The local urban tissue

The Tre Fontane Garden is located on the edge of the Tre Fontane Park, within the consolidated southern suburbs of the city of Rome, straddling the urban areas 11F (Tre Fontane urban area) and 11E (Tormarancia urban area). The garden is located in the VIII Municipality, on the border between EUR, Grotta Perfetta (urban area 11G) and Tormarancia (urban area 11E) districts, in the Ardeatino neighbourhood. The EUR district (XI Municipality) was designed in the 1930s, at the height of the Fascist era, and was characterized by a rationalist architectural style and "quality construction" (Vidotto 2006: 204), which later turned into the 1960s

<sup>42</sup> The yellow section is the VIII Municipality, and the bold yellow border identifies the 11F urban area, where the Garden Tre Fontane is located. Source: mapparoma.blogspot.com.

"business center and residential district" (2006: 290). The building nucleus of Tormarancia (VIII Municipality) was also built in the Fascist era, created as one of the official townships (borgata) in the area between Via Ostiense and Via Ardeatina. It was the result of the "demolition" policies and forced transfer of population put into action by the fascist government, that moved lower strata of population from the historic center to the new suburbs (Rossi 1984: 91), that were "radially placed around the periphery" (Vidotto 2006: 199). In 1948 the area was so unhealthy that it had to be demolished and rebuilt, through the creation of public housing structures. At present, still more than half of the houses in this area are owned by Ater (Azienda Territoriale per l'Edilizia Residenziale Pubblica del Comune di Roma, Territorial Agency for Public Residential Housing of the Roman Municipality). In 2014, the Roman municipality co-funded a street art project that was meant to regenerate the neighbourhood, which is still affected by high rates of school dropout and unemployment (<https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/2015/04/10/roma-tormarancia-murales-street-art>). These kinds of initiatives can be controversial, as they could potentially engender gentrification processes (Semi 2015). Still, in Tormarancia most of the houses are public housing structures and even if the area is currently facing heavy changes (the area is also very close to Garbatella, a former lower-class neighbourhood, now highly modified by regeneration processes), this could contain more dramatic private-lead transformations.



Map 3 The area of the Tre Fontane Park<sup>43</sup>

A first nucleus of the district of Grotta Perfetta (Municipio VIII) was already present by 1920, as a “borgata”, even though the density of buildings remained very low till the end of Second World War (Rivolta 2015). The area was consolidated, instead, through “settled subdivisions” as a planned suburb inserted in the 1962 town planning scheme (Piano regolatore), within the framework of one of the zone plans for economic and popular building (PEEP) (Rossi 1984: 242). These areas of the Southern suburbs are today part of the consolidated expansion of the city (Lelo 2016).

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<sup>43</sup> At the intersection between EUR, Tormarancia and Grotta Perfetta areas, source [googlemaps.it](https://www.google.com/maps).

#### 4.1.2 Some statistical data <sup>44</sup>

I will now proceed to outline some statistical data about population and housing property of the areas surrounding the Garden Tre Fontane. I will focus on areas 11E (Tormarancia), 11F (Tre Fontane) and 11G (Grotta Perfetta), in the Areatino neighbourhood, VIII Local Municipality, overlooking EUR district as, even though it geographically surrounds the garden, the number of people who live there and spend time in the garden is residual. This is probably also due to the fact that EUR is separated from Tre Fontane Park by Via Laurentina (indicated as SP95b in the map above), a main road that spatially divides the two areas.

	<b>Tot. population</b>	<b>Middle income<sup>45</sup></b>	<b>Ageing index</b>
Rome	2.617.715	25.833,83 euros	163,8%
VIII Municipality	131.180	28.007,85 euros	206,3%
Tormarancia (11E)	31.360		
Tre Fontane (11F)	11.595		
Grottaperfetta (11G)	15.983		

According to the Roman Municipality Statistics Office (2016), the VIII Municipality is the less populated and has one of the highest rates of elderly population in the city.

	<b>Social housing rate</b>	<b>Housing property rate</b>	<b>Housing deprivation index</b>	<b>Social deprivation index</b>

<sup>44</sup> The data included in this section come from Roman Statistics Office and from the website mapparoma.blogspot.com, which elaborated on data coming from ISTAT and Roman Statistics Office.

<sup>45</sup> Range: 40.656 euros (II Municipality) – 17.069 euros (VI Municipality). Data updated to the last national survey (2016).

Rome	5,7%	69,3	0,75	-4,42
VIII Municipality	7,5%		0,36	- 6,14
Tormarancia (11E)		69,6	0,50	-2,05
Tre Fontane (11F)		80,8	0,00	-5,02
Grottaperfetta (11G)		86	0,54	- 4,31

The Grottaperfetta area is characterised for having the highest housing property rate in the city.

#### 4.2 Environmental Activism in the VIII Municipality

The VIII Municipality has a percentage of green spaces m2 per human percentage (14.9%) slightly superior than the rest of the city (14.4%). As mentioned in the previous chapter, this municipality is characterised by the presence of a high number of environmental citizen-based groups and associations. For instance, the Giovannipoli committee is located in this area and the RomasInalbera group is particularly active in this Municipality (see chapter 3). Three of the most popular and politically active shared urban gardens within the city are placed in the VIII Municipality, that is Garbatella Urban Gardens (the first ever shared urban garden in the city, born in 2009), Tre Fontane Urban Garden and the Hortus Urbis garden (which is located in the Caffarella Park, a huge park that includes farmland in the Southern part of the city) led by a group of architects who were the first to create a non-institutional mapping of Roman urban gardens (Zappata Romana map, cited in chapter 3 of this text). I will now provide an overview of urban gardening initiatives present

in the VIII Municipality. I will then focus my description on the network of local actors (committees, associations, and informal groups) that periodically gather, clean up and maintain Tre Fontane Park (the park where the urban garden on which the main part of this thesis is focused is located). I will finally move to describe a specific environmentalist controversy regarding the construction of a new neighbourhood inside this municipality that has been authorized by the municipality but is contested by a group of local citizens (that is the so called “I60 Project”).

#### *VIII Municipality collective urban gardens*

In this municipality there are seven shared urban gardens in total. Out of all, only two still do not have an official authorization to carry out gardening activities in the areas where they are located (that is Garbatella, and Ortolino urban gardens). Negotiations are still ongoing, but in the past months representatives of the local municipality have explicitly mentioned their will of regularising the positions of these three gardening initiatives. It is particularly relevant to mention that out of seven gardens, only Tre Fontane Garden is still without a fence or gate around its borders. According to international literature on urban gardening (Certomà 2016a, b; Tornaghi, Certomà 2015), one of the key features that could allow to identify an initiative of urban gardening as a collective shared urban garden is that the latter is located on a public space and it is open (not surrounded by fences). As to the public owning of the areas, all the gardens mentioned here respond to this definition of shared urban gardens; their being fenced, however, makes their identification as shared urban gardens quite problematic. The case of Garbatella is a mixed example, as this garden is enclosed but the entrance gate is open the whole day and only shut during night-time. As this issue is crucial in my thesis, I will provide an in-depth

critical exploration of each one of its aspects in the next chapter, which will be dedicated to analytical concerns.

<b>Urban Gardens in the VIII Municipality</b>					
<b>Name and date of beginning</b>	<b>Surface</b>	<b>Plots</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Fences or gates</b>	<b>Assigned area</b>
Orti Garbatella (2009)	2.200	25	100	yes	no
Hortus Urbis (2012)	1.500	Garden for environmental activities with children		yes	yes
Orti Guglielmotti (2014)	600	10	42	yes	yes
Ortolino (2015)	8.150	123	500	yes	no
Orti Tre Fontane (2013)	28.000	120	240	no	yes
Orti Tor Carbone (2015)	1.800	70	120	yes	yes
Orti Teodorico (2017)				yes	yes

#### *Stop I60 Committee and the Tre Fontane Park*

Close to the Southern area of Tre Fontane Park, between Via Ballarin and Via di Grotta Perfetta, in 2013 the construction of a new neighbourhood, called I60 was started. The project was largely opposed by groups of locals, who gathered in the "stop I-60" coordination. The I-60 building complex was included in the Rome City Plan of 1965, a document

that envisaged the construction of 180 thousand cubic meters of residential buildings. The project was initially located in the area of the current Tor Marancia estate, nowadays comprised in the Park of the Appia Antica. Following the long opposition of groups of local citizens the project was blocked. Among the figures who led the protests Antonio Cederna should be mentioned, an environmentalist and politician of the “independent left”, a political formation of the radical left (Caldaretti 2014).



Image 5 Demonstration against the project I-60<sup>46</sup>

The builders obtained from the City a prize of cubage (so-called compensations, approved by a resolution of the Municipal Council of Rome in 2003). These compensations gave the builders the opportunity to construct the new neighbourhoods (Rivolta 2015) throughout Rome, doubling the initial unrealized cubic meters in the Tormarancia estate area. The compensation was included in the new city plan of 2003, with a

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<sup>46</sup> Source: [romatoday.it](http://romatoday.it), 14 May 2014

volume of 400000 cubic meters (280000 residential and 120000 non-residential) (Caldaretti 2014).

The new project located in the Grotta Perfetta area was immediately opposed by local citizens who gathered in the Stop I-60 committee. They organized demonstrations and pressure initiatives on public institutions (local municipality, city municipality) to demand that the construction works stop. One of the main objections to the building project is that its realization will lead to the disappearance of the last piece of Agro Romano (city farmland) still present in the area. The works, started in 2013, were partially blocked in February 2014 by the VIII Municipality following the damage of the Fosso delle Tre Fontane, a ditch flowing in the Tre Fontane Park, (it can be located in maps of the area dating back to XVII century) which is protected by environmental constraints because of the particular habitat that creates for the local flora and fauna. From an ongoing investigation started in mid-2014 by the Department of Justice, it resulted that the builders have partially buried the ditch to build roads and parking lots, irreparably damaging the local flora (Rivolta 2015).

#### *Tre Fontane Park*

During my fieldwork period I noticed that in the Tre Fontane Park periodical actions of cleaning are carried out by local citizens groups. As described in the previous chapter, public institutions responsible for the care and maintenance of public green areas face difficulties in carrying out works of green management in a systematic and programmed manner due to the lack of funds and staff shortage. In this context, various organizations active in the Tre Fontane area organize working days within the park about four to five times a year. Several groups are part of this informal network of local realities, including Retake (the association,

described in the previous chapter, that declares itself apolitical and against "decay"), the Montagnola Neighbourhood Committee, the environmental association Legambiente (organizations leaning towards the traditional left sphere), the previously mentioned stop-I60 committee (whose spokesperson was running for the 2016 municipal elections in a civic list in support of the center-left coalition), and the Ortolino urban garden. These activities of cleaning, weeds mowing, repairing broken benches, removing graffiti are carried out by politically heterogeneous groups that meet for the common purpose of "regenerating the area against decay". An example of this can be found the a leaflet from May 2019 reported here below, which advertised an activity promoted by the Municipality of Rome in collaboration with the organizations mentioned above activity that was also joined by the Tre Fontane Urban Garden. These organizations meet to implement material actions described as politically neuter, without referring to a shared value system or general policies. And yet, as I will argue in Chapter 6, actions carried out under the categories of regeneration, decorum and decay are not politically neutral, and invariably generate processes that welcome or exclude human and nohuman subjectivities within the city space.



Image 6 Flyer promoting a cleaning day in the Tre Fontane Park<sup>47</sup>

## 4.3 The Garden Tre Fontane

In this section I will provide some historical information regarding the area where the Garden Tre Fontane is located. In the second part of the section I will, then, move to describe the process that led to the creation of the Shared Garden Tre Fontane in 2013.

### 4.3.1 Historical roots of the Garden Tre Fontane<sup>48</sup>

The Garden Tre Fontane is located on a territory of around 500 hectares of urban farmland (Agro Romano). In this area it is also located the Tre Fontane Monastery, a structure with a strong agricultural vocation whose

<sup>47</sup> Source: mailing list Tre Fontane Garden, May 2019.

<sup>48</sup> The source of the historical information reported in this section is the book “La Tenuta delle Tre Fontane” (Rivolta 2015).

presence is attested since 600 A.D. The use of the name “Tre Fontane” for this stream of land was already testified in XVI century maps of the city even though the extension of the area was not specified yet. The area is rich in water sources and swamps and for this reason it was also known under the Latin name “Acque Salvie” (pure waters). According to cartographies, diaries and reports collected by Rivolta (2015), in the XIX century the area was still vastly sprinkled with vegetable plots, vineyards, small rivers and cane plots. The area remained thinly urbanised till the end of World War II. After two urban development plans (1962, 2004) this territory was almost completely edified and the farmland surface was dramatically reduced (Rivolta 2015).



Map 4 Area of the Tre Fontane Park, 1660, Alessandrino land register<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Source: Rivolta 2015.

#### 4.3.2 Contemporaneity of the Tre Fontane Shared Garden

The events that led to the creation of the Tre Fontane Shared Garden in a strip of land left unused in the Tre Fontane area date back to 2013, when 5 local residents decided to leaflet in the area surrounding the current shared garden. According to one of the people who started this first leafleting, the group was interested in taking a shared path "for the creation of an environmental project in the neighbourhood. Through the leafleting a first public assembly was announced" (Interview with Marco, February 2019). At the time of the first leafleting, the group had already identified as a possible place where to locate the environmental project a portion of land within the Tre Fontane Park because it was a "portion of territory in substantial abandonment<sup>50</sup>, widely used as illegal damp and covered by dense uncultivated vegetation" (Interview with Mattia, one of the founders of the project, October 2014, Rome).

This group of citizens called for a first public meeting, aimed at the re-appropriation and renewal of this designated area. The area is owned by the municipality of Rome (divided into six different cadastral parcels) and it was precisely for this reason that it was identified by the group as a possible area to start a collective project, since it would have been easier to start a negotiation with the public institutions for the usage of public land. It is noteworthy that, despite the fact that, as mentioned, the ownership of the area is public, it was still in the possession<sup>51</sup> of a construction consortium, which had built edifices in the neighbouring areas at the end of the 1900s and then gone bankrupt in the early 2000s. This construction consortium should have provided for the establishment of services and infrastructures in the area as a compensation policy after the construction

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<sup>50</sup> I will return to the concept of abandoned and uncultivated spaces in the next chapter.

<sup>51</sup> Difference in the Italian legislation that distinguishes between the subject that is the owner of a good or land, and the subject that actually has the availability of it.

of the new buildings in that territory. This never happened, following the bankruptcy of the construction consortium.

According to the organizers of the gardening project, the first meeting took place with great success in terms of participation (around 60 people). Following the meeting, participants removed the accumulated waste from the ground and proceeded to thin out and prune the weeds present in the area. Starting from this first initiative, a group of about 60 local citizens decided to deal with the area regularly, with the aim of “transforming this space into a landmark for the neighbourhood. Every Sunday, for several weeks, the group asked the municipality for permission to access the area in order to clean it. After clearing the land, the group decided to make it accessible to the local population, through the creation of urban gardens managed collectively” (Interview with Lucia, October 2018). Around the surface divided into vegetable gardens, there is also a large area that can be crossed and used by citizens, also due to the total absence of fences. The previous agricultural vocation of the area is still testified today by the presence of some centuries-old fruit trees, some vines and a cane field.



**Image 7 One of the entrances of the Tre Fontane garden, July 2018**

The association of citizens of the neighborhood that currently manages the garden was officially established in January 2013, has an elective board of directors and today counts (June 2019) 240 members, but counting all the members and supporters, the area is frequented by many more people.

The group of residents who initiated the initiative promoted since November 2012 a process of dialogue and negotiation with local institutions, first and foremost with the representatives of Municipality VIII. At the end of October 2014, this negotiation process led to the assignment of the area by the Municipality to the association of the Tre Fontane Gardens, through an annual renewable assignment. "Even in the phase prior to the formal regularization by the Municipality, the garden's activists reported that they had always perceived a substantial recognition, obtained thanks to the support shown by the residents of the neighbourhood" (Field notes, December 2014). In the end of 2017, after a

long period of negotiation with the Municipality of Rome, the Urban Gardens Tre Fontane Association received a direct allocation of the area for four years, renewable for another four by the Municipality.

The garden activists created a self-regulation, which sets out the methods of cultivation and management of the areas. In order to cultivate a plot of land within the green area it is necessary to become an associate and to request the management committee to have it assigned. The enrolment to the association must be renewed every year on a voluntary base, through a payment of 10 euros, which also covers the insurance for working in the gardening area. Once becoming a member of the garden, one has to follow a regulation that defines the commitments, rights and duration of the assignment. There is a tendency to encourage participation in the management of common spaces and an approach to community work through the organization of mandatory collective working days. The organizational structure of the gardens is accurately defined in the regulation. The committee in charge of the project performs the function of coordination, verifying that the issues emerged in the management assembly are applied. For what concerns the allocation of the plots, it appears to be partly top-down. Those who are assignees can, in fact, have the allocation of a parcel of land revoked if the committee decides that they are no longer fit to take part in the experience, if they have never or almost never taken part in community work or have left uncultivated for more than two months the land allocated to them. To obtain a plot to be cultivated it is necessary to become a member of the association and show a particular interest in the management of common spaces dedicated to conviviality. The activities carried out in the gardens are not managed by a single person, but divided into operational groups. To encourage active participation, as I will better outline below, in January 2019 new working

groups and laboratories were created where members are invited to register to participate in the co-management of the area.

#### **4.4 Main activities**

The shared garden, located in the heart of a highly urbanized metropolitan fabric, extended in 2014 for around 6,000 m<sup>2</sup> divided into 60 lots of 50 m<sup>2</sup> each, within a green area surrounded by buildings. The area, managed by the association since September 2017, has expanded, and nowadays (2019) the garden covers an area of 15,000 square meters, divided into 120 shared gardens. The association that manages the area counts at present 240 members who live in the VIII Municipality. Out of them, 140 are employed, 3 are unemployed and 97 are retired people. All the activities have been and are carried out exclusively through the work of volunteers. The cultivated plots are managed in groups of 2 to 5 people to facilitate the sharing of spaces and avoid a private and individual approach.

As specified above, the association has a management committee, which is constituted of 13 people, with a president, a vice-president and a treasurer. All these positions are elective ones, and are renewed every three years. The management committee convenes four times a year a general assembly of all the members of the association, where decisions are taken by vote and where the association regulation can be modified. The management committee has the only role of facilitating the application of decisions taken during the general assemblies and of creating the annual financial budget, which needs to be subsequently approved by the general assembly.

Daily works in the garden are carried out by working groups into which the associates are divided. This division is made on a voluntary basis.

Every new associate can choose in which group they would like to be registered when they enrol in the association. Every working group and laboratory has a coordinator, also chosen on a voluntary basis. She has the role of circulating information to the rest of the garden's activists about the work done and of facilitating the group. Decisions should be taken collectively. Also, around once a month collective works for the ordinary management and cleaning of the common areas are called sending an email to every associate. These works are usually carried out on Saturday or Sunday morning.

I will now describe the main activities carried out in the garden by local activists. I will just give an overview of these actions, reserving a critical analysis of them for the next chapter.

<b>Working groups and laboratories</b>	
<b>Working groups</b>	
Greenhouse group	Cleaning up and restoration of the greenhouse
Didactic garden group	Management of the didactic garden
Weeds pruning group	Pruning of weeds in the common areas
Compost group	Group that facilitates and checks the functioning of composting boxes
Flower power group	Group that organises logistics of social and public events
<b>Laboratories</b>	

Ronza Continua	Beekeeping group
Nests group	Group that creates nests for birds during nesting period
Creativity and handmade group	Group that creates handmade products using vegetables and flowers produced in the garden
Semi Ribelli	Group that preserves and spreads seeds of local reproducible seeds



Image 8 Beekeeping area

### *Beekeeping areas*<sup>52</sup>

In 2014, one member of the garden proposed placing three hives, which became six the following year. As explained to me by Marcello, who coordinates the project: "initially, many gardeners had disliked the idea of implanting hives. However, the project is currently very well-liked in the garden, and the prejudice against bees has been overcome, also due to an apparent increase in horticultural and fruit production "(Interview with Marcello, October 2017). In 2018, six more hives were placed in the garden (so there are currently 12 in the whole garden, divided into two areas). The six new beehives (in the picture above) are taken care of by two young women residing in the VIII Municipality.

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<sup>52</sup> One of the two beekeeping areas (the first to be born) is named "Ronza Continua", which is a pun with the name "Lotta Continua", an Italian extreme left extra-parliamentary movement active in the seventies.



**Image 9 Winter garden**

### *Winter garden*

In March 2018 a common space named “winter garden” was created by a group of activists in an area located in the Western border of the garden. This area, which is located below the new beekeeping area, has been used during the whole summer 2018 for weekly social dinners with live music and poetry readings.



**Image 10** Tomato seeds and plants

### *Tomato project*

In 2017 a collaboration with Tuscia University (Lazio countryside) was established for a project on conservation and implementation of Italian reproducible varieties of tomatoes. Seeds of 15 varieties of tomatoes were given to the gardeners, who grew them under the guidance of a young intern from the university. The intern followed the whole process, from the seeding to the harvest. The new seeds collected from the fruits were partially sent back to the university seed bank and partially kept by the gardeners for future cultivations. The project was repeated again in 2018 with a different bunch of tomato reproducible seeds.



*Semi Ribelli* Semi ribelli (rebel seeds) is a laboratory born in March 2018 under the proposal of the author of this thesis. The laboratory is responsible for collecting, disseminating and preserving reproducible seed varieties and creating awareness to encourage the preservation of horticultural seeds under extinction.

**Image 11** Seeds rebels



**Image 12** The common area in the Tre Fontane garden

*Social events in the common areas*

At the centre of the spaces allotted for cultivation plots there is a huge area dedicated to social events. In this area there are benches and tables created by the activists, which are also commonly used by the people who across the park (students, adults with children, groups of people who throw parties and organize lunches/dinners).



**Image 13** The greenhouse on the Tre Fontane garden

*The greenhouse and the compost area*

Created in 2014, the greenhouse is used by gardeners to plant seeds. It is periodically cleaned up and maintained by a working group of 12 people. In the space next to the greenhouse a big compostmaking is located. It is made of organic waste resulting from cultivation in the plots which is re-used to fertilize the soil.



**Image 14** Didactic garden

### *The didactic garden*

A specific area, named didactic garden, has been designated for the cultivation of botanical species and hosts aromatic and officinal plants destined to the training of occasional visitors. The didactic part is completed by the central area dedicated to the recognition of spontaneous plants, and by a specific part dedicated to illustrate seasonal cultivation, a sort of exhibition of the most common cultivated species, divided in families. In this space there is also a small experimental synergic garden and a wormcompost. Since 2017, this area is also used once a week to train children coming from the schools located in the neighbourhood, in the framework of an environmental education programme carried out by five garden's activists.

## **4.5 Conclusions**

In this chapter I provided an overview of the urban tissue where the Tre Fontane Shared Garden is located, starting with a historical reconstruction of the area, characterized till the XX century by a very large presence of cultivated lands and small woods, that now have almost disappeared due to urbanization processes implemented after World War II. In the last part of the chapter I focused on the events that led to the creation of the shared garden in 2013 and on the activities that are implemented in it. I have chosen to report the activities in a descriptive manner, postponing the critical analysis to the next chapter, which will be totally dedicated to the analysis of the daily actions that create and transform the space of the Tre Fontane Garden. I also considered essential to report the presence of citizen-based actions carried out in the area of the Tre Fontane Park, (within which the shared garden is located) because these activities are presented by the activists themselves as environmentalist ones, and are carried forward by heterogeneous realities, which gather to implement

local, circumscribed and episodic actions with the aim to create material transformations within their territory. The action of this informal network is largely structured around the concept of decorum, presented as a neutral category. As mentioned above, I state that this vision and consequent actions are at risk of reinforcing a model of the city which is designed exclusively for healthy and wealthy humans, thus marginalizing, criminalizing and excluding all other human and nonhuman actors. In chapter 6, I will therefore concentrate on these concerns.

## 5. From the militancy to the neighbourhood's activism. Reading the garden through alliances, conflicts and new arrangements

In this chapter I will turn to analyse how the Tre Fontane garden emerges through continuous negotiations, material and spatial, between human and nonhuman actors. In the first part I will focus on how space is created through the material action carried out by human actors. In the second part I will move to investigate what kind of relationships between human and nonhuman actors take place within the garden, and how, on one hand the perception that human actors have of nonhuman living beings (plants, insects) influences their action while, on the other hand, mutual interactions modify the conception that humans have of human actors present in the garden. I will, then, turn to analyse how the garden initiative can be configured as a political mobilization. Throughout the chapter my analysis will always keep in mind the presence of power relations in the co-construction of urban space.

### 5.1 The creation of a space in becoming through the daily practice

*Field notes, March 2018*

It rained a lot in the past few days. Today the sun is back and collective works are planned in order to shape the area at the edge of the new gardens<sup>53</sup>. I am already out and arrive at the garden a little earlier, at 9.45 am. On my way from the bus stop to the park I still feel a little cold. Today I am in a good mood and I listen to music along the way. In the middle of the path, among the old gardens I meet Francesco, already working on his plot.

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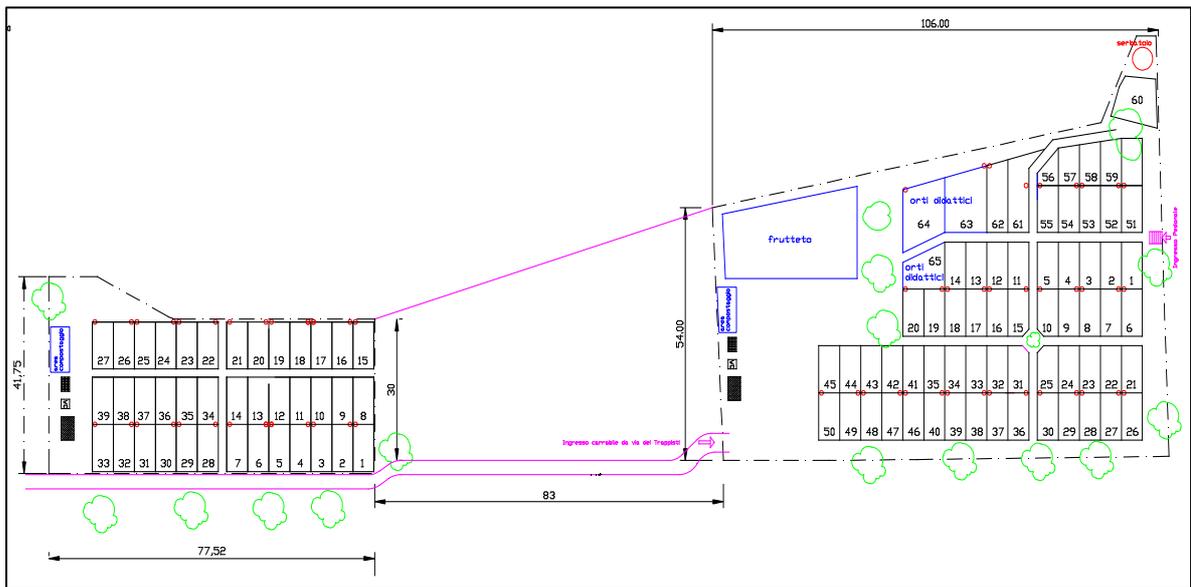
<sup>53</sup> As explained in the previous chapter, urban gardens Tre Fontane are constituted of two areas cultivated in vegetable plots. One area was firstly created in 2013 (the one that is indicated by gardeners as “the old gardens”) and a second one was created in 2015 (and is indicated as “the new gardens”).

He seems to me particularly sociable today, and follows me to the common area, where it is now very sunny. While walking, I notice that, despite the high and warm sun, plants are still a little wet, as is the soil. I arrive in the area of the winter garden<sup>54</sup>. Simone greets me and proposes to remove weeds around the flowerbeds using a hoe - they must not remain around the trees. I notice that, they have also pruned the avocado, whose top is now very small. A group of three people is intent on collecting avocados by moving the fallen branches to the ground. After this work, I start removing weeds with Costanza and Arianna, around the trunks that they placed in the right margin to create a flowerbed. I ask them if they have already had cultivation experiences and they answer that no, they are learning here. We will have to cut and tear the roots with the hoe, then transport the plants in the flat area of the garden with the rakes, load them on a wheelbarrow, and finally collect them on the other side of the street, where a new compost area will be created.

I head towards the slope that Simone pointed out to me, and I begin to raise and lower the hoe, severing the first thistles, repeating the movements he showed me. In moving the plants and the soil, I realize how many life forms there are: my hoeing brings to light an anthill, previously hidden under the thick leaves. I try not to go over it further and consider how sometimes human action risks being devastating for other entities. As I dig, I start feeling very hot, so I take off my sweatshirt and take it to the gazebo. I look around, and notice that even the others are half-sleeved, sweaty. The sun is now high and scorching hot. I get back to work, now I exchange the hoe with a rake and start accumulating what I cut, dragging it down.

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<sup>54</sup> The winter garden is an area created in 2018 at the extreme edge of the new gardens by a group of activists of the Tre Fontane association.



Map 5 Map of the Tre Fontane garden<sup>55</sup>

In doing so I take away with me many tiles, pens, pieces of plastic, even a blanket. The area was previously an illegal landfill. As the work progresses, the green just about to prevail is replaced by the brown of the plowed land, that widens more and more. After an hour of work I get a blister on my right palm, I have to stop, it is very painful.

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The description above shows one of the many moments of collective work of management of the area where the Tre Fontane gardens are located, which I took part in over the last two years. As mentioned in the previous chapter, at least once a month the association that manages the area promotes common works for settling the space, to which all the persons registered in the association are required to participate, in especially those who have a vegetable garden in assignment. Participation to these initiatives is theoretically mandatory according to the association's membership regulations. If you miss more than five

<sup>55</sup> Map made by some of the Tre Fontane gardeners.

appointments a year without giving specific communications, the steering committee may consider revoking the assignment of your plot. Actually, at least in the two years during which I attended the garden assiduously, it never happened that the assignment was revoked to anyone, despite repeated absence during the common works. But what is meant by collective work? With the description above I intended to sketch a first impression, because it is precisely from the combination of "collective works", daily modifications of the area and actions implemented on individual plots, through the interaction between human and nonhuman action that the space co-builds and changes continuously. During collective works, which are usually attended by about forty- fifty people, mainly grown grass is cut, so-called weeds are eradicated, flowers are planted, and any waste left inside the area is removed. Particular attention is paid to the cleaning and tillage of the soil in those parts of the garden that are still less experienced by the members of the association. This is the so-called "middle ground", a strip of land that connects the "old gardens" with the "new gardens", located in the center between the two areas, as shown on the map above. This strip of land is right next to the common area, where there are five tables, a gazebo with three more large tables, a small house with a kitchen, a chemical toilet, a fountain with non-drinking water, and a grill for cooking outdoors. I will return later to the management and controversies related to the use of these spaces between the various human actors.

Next to the middle area there is also a large bamboo grove and some ancient fruit trees (medlars, plums, cherries) legacy of the previous agricultural vocation of this territory. Another area in which some of the collective works were concentrated over the last year (2018) is the so called "winter garden", located precisely at the left margin of the "new

gardens". As explained briefly in the field notes above, in cleaning the area (that is, digging the land in those areas not yet established as plots), rubble, rubbish and even blankets were often found. In the reconstruction of the events that led to the foundation of the Tre Fontane gardens, a prevalent narration emerged: gardeners always emphasized the previous condition of "abandonment" and the presence of an illegal dump in this marginal area. As I will argue in the next chapter, however, space is never abandoned, but always negotiated between different actors, human and nonhuman. Moreover, the conduction of shared cleaning jobs and the daily maintenance of the areas also generates latent conflicts among human actors, even if these conflicts are almost never collectivized in a discursive manner. I will come back to this shortly for further analysis, because I believe this to be a particularly interesting element.

### **5.1.1 Gardeners' profiles**

In the following table I will describe some characteristics of a few gardeners who are part of the association that manages the area, as an example. This is not an exhaustive list, it is only meant to give an overview of the very composite conformation of the people who take part in the initiative. The information provided come from interviews and conversations I held during my fieldwork. As it is possible to see from the table, in the garden there is a presence of people who self-define themselves either as closer to left or to right traditional parties or ideologies (under the column named "political orientation"). An interesting thing is that most of the people recognising themselves as closer to leftist ideologies were already inserted in previous activist/volunteering experiences before starting the shared gardening project (local social movements, scout groups, volunteering with migrants or children).

In the last column I recorded if the identified member is a simple gardener, an active or a very active member. With these definitions I meant:

- Simple gardener: a gardener who is enrolled in the association and mainly only works on his/her plot. Occasionally takes part to public events in the garden.
- Active member: a gardener who cultivates his/her plot, actively participates in the management of the area, and works in some of the working groups.
- Very active member: a gardener who cultivates his/her plot, actively participates in the management of the area and works in some of the working groups. This is a type of gardener who comes to the garden at least twice/three times a week.

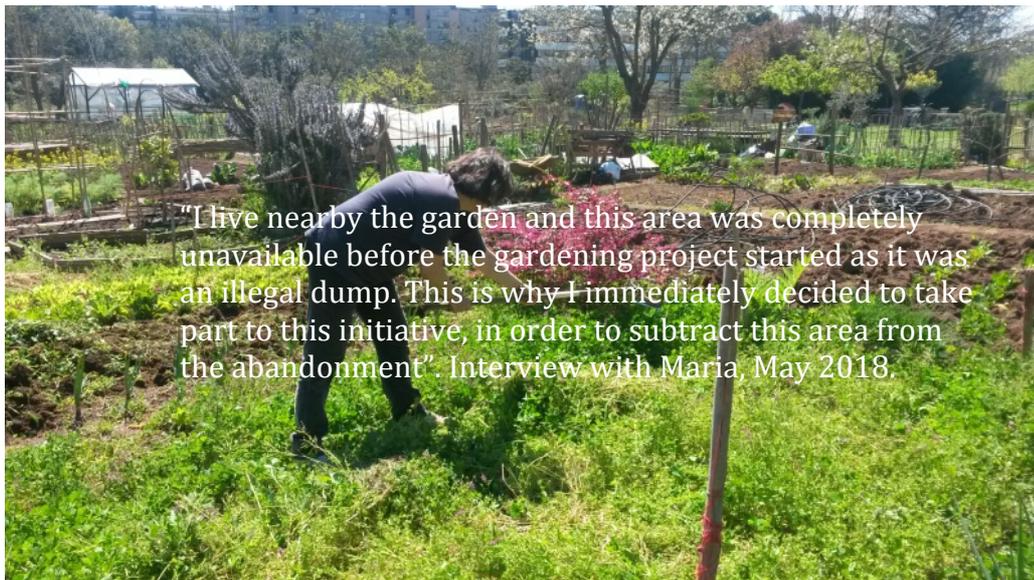
As for the degree of involvement in the management of the area, it is possible to see that both people referring to traditional leftist or rightists' ideologies can be very active members. I will return to this element soon.

<b>Urban Garden Tre Fontane: Gardeners' profiles</b>					
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Activism experiences</b>	<b>Political orientation</b>	<b>Starting activities in the garden</b>	<b>Gardener typology</b>
Claudio	Over 65	Yes	Left	2013	Very active
Salvatore	Over 65	No	Right	2015	Active
Francesco	40-55	Yes	Left	2013	Very

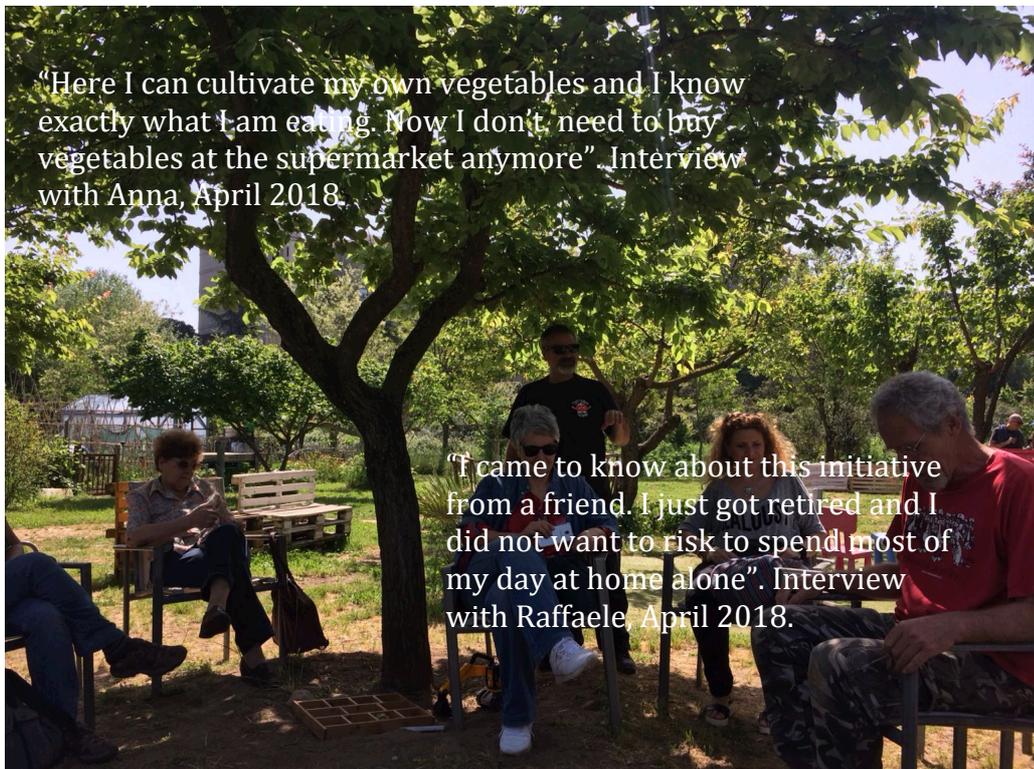
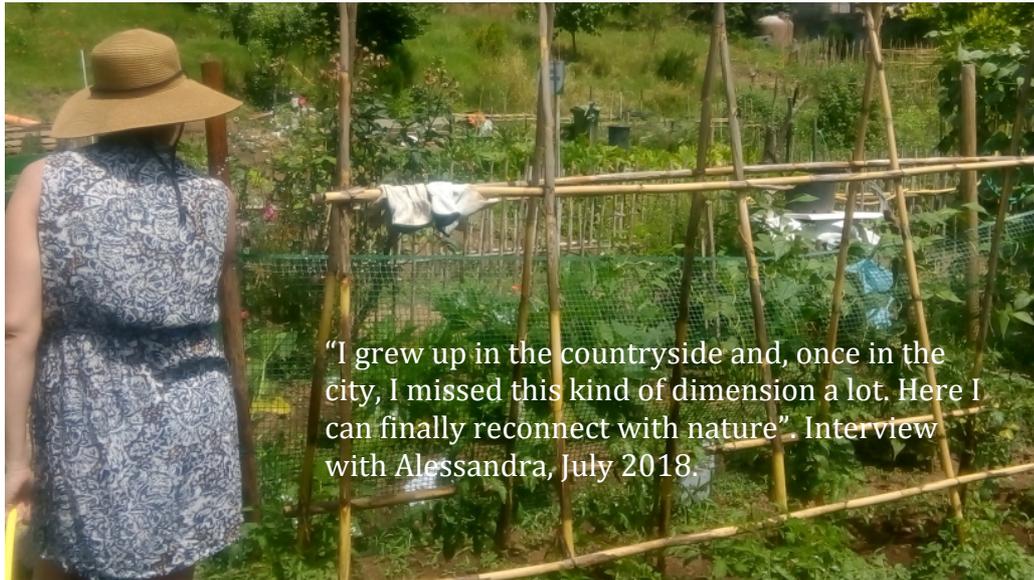
					active
Laura	40-55	Yes	Left	2013	Active
Antonella	Over 65	Yes	Left	2014	Active
Francesca	56-64	Yes	Left	2014	Very active
Alessandro	Over 65	No	Left	2015	Simple gardener
Danilo	30-39	Yes	Left	2015	Simple gardener
Salvatore	56-64	Yes	Left	2016	Active
Guido	Over 65	No	Right	2016	Simple gardener
Sebastiano	Over 65	No	Right	2015	Very active
Anna	56-64	Yes	Left	2017	Active
Anna	40-55	No	Right	2018	Simple gardener
Fausto	56-65	No	Right	2017	Very active
Luisa	Over 65	No	Left	2016	Active
Adriano	40-55	Yes	Left	2013	Very active

Also, a very differentiated set of motivations is given as to the reasons for taking part in the initiatives. For instance, according to interviews and conversations carried out during my fieldwork, this is a list of the main motivations given by gardeners:

- Will to stay in contact with “nature”;
- Will of eating healthier food;
- Will to reconnect with famers’ roots of parents and grandparents (this was a common motivation given especially by people originating from Italian southern regions or Sardinia);
- Will of subtracting a green area from “decay”;
- Will of socialising with other people and not being isolated;
- Will of becoming active in the neighbourhood in order to create public spaces for conviviality;
- Will to create a space for children education.



**Image 15** A gardener working in her parcel



**Image 16 A public initiative on 25 April in the garden**

The first three orders of motivations have been given both by active and very active gardeners as well as by gardeners who just come to the garden to cultivate their own plot. When it comes to the last four motivations, they

have been given by active and very active members. However, each of these motivations correspond to very different ways of interacting and co-constructing the area, whether the space is intended as an open space completely accessible to external people who are not enrolled in the association, or as a space for conviviality for people of the association only, occasionally open to people from outside. Most of the conflicts arising in the area come from this ambivalence. I will now therefore proceed to give some specific examples in order to make this dimension clearer.

### **5.1.2 Taking action in the common area**

*Field notes, January 2018*

Francesco wrote me yesterday evening to inform me that the association committee has decided to have a social lunch at the garden today. I have an appointment with two friends, Carlotta and Ludovica at Trastevere station to go together by bus. It is finally a beautiful day, very sunny. I am a little late because I wanted to bake a mushroom pie for lunch. I am writing to Francesco to let him know that we will be a little late. For once, there is no traffic and we arrive quite quickly. We are at the garden at 13.30. We cross the park and the part of the old gardens and finally reach the back of the common area. Thanks to the rain of the past days, the plants of the vegetable gardens look very luxuriant today. Illuminated by the bright sunlight, they give an amazing impression, a piece of countryside hidden among the buildings. Carlotta and Ludovica are very impressed. We cross the open space with the benches of the common area, there is a small group of people I have never seen before. We are inundated with an acrid smell of smoke as we pass. We move to the back of the common area beyond the storage house. Everyone is already sitting around the tables (they have joined five long wooden tables). They are very noisy, and welcome us joyfully, screaming. From the euphoria and the amount of bottles on the table I understand that they are a little tipsy. I immediately

notice that almost all of them are men (there are only two women) and all are over 50 years old. There are no young people today, probably because for most of them this is a working day. Brown, in all its shades (wooden tables, tree trunks, pine needles), is the predominant color in the dining area and it contrasts the greens that dominate the rest of the area. Somehow, this creates a chromatic and spatial fracture between the old and the new gardens. Francesco and Claudio come to meet and greet us.

I introduce all of my friends to the people around the table. They are all immediately extremely welcoming and make room for us to sit in the central part of the table. They pass us glasses and dishes, and immediately start filling them with food. They explain us that they started eating and drinking at 11 am, which is why they are almost done. The pasta, which is on a wooden pot mat at the edge of the table in a huge metal pot, is almost finished. A lot of meat is consumed as well (which I don't eat). I can't avoid noticing that, despite the place's environmental commitment, plates, cutlery, and glasses are made of plastic. They continue to fill my friends' plates and glasses with food and beverages. Then, they begin to pass around the table some all self-produced desserts (pies and two types of tiramisu).

I turn to talk to Carlotta and Ludovica. They tell me they were expecting to find a very different situation, the typical bobo garden, with young parents of the intellectual class. Ludovica above all was very skeptical before coming, since she had in mind the model of the US community gardens, which are fenced, closed and populated by upper-middle class people attentive to food and educated. Having lunch here, instead, makes them feel catapulted into a situation that reminds them of country lunches with their grandparents (North of Rome for Carlotta, in Sardinia for

Ludovica). For months I had exactly the same feeling. After lunch, everyone still sits and converses, and bottles of self-produced liquors appear: two versions of myrtle (one made by Salvatore, who is Sardinian, another by a roman gentleman who has friends in Sardinia. He explains us that they gave him the recipe: in Rome it is not easy to find juniper berries, so he brought them from a trip to Sardinia). Then, someone pulls out a bottle of chocolate liquor, a recipe from friends from Piedmont. Francesco gets up and walks to the wooden shack at the end of the common area in order to make coffee. Ludovica asks: "but can gardeners take vegetables from neighbouring gardens? Because it seems that in some way everyone is cultivating different things ". F. answers "Yes, there is a sort of tacit exchange agreement. If something does not grow, you can take it from someone else's plot. And then, there is a kind of unconscious mechanism that goes on. If I see that my neighbour plants broccoli I will plant spinach and so on, because somehow I know I will have broccoli near me. And viceversa". We finish having our coffee and say goodbye. The others are still there, some of them have started playing cards. We are going to take the bus, it is half past three. The weather is hot and the sun is still high.

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Convivial events like the one described above take place weekly in the common area at the centre of the gardens. Every Thursday a lunch is organized in which between ten and twenty people participate. These lunches are organized by a group of men, almost all retired, aged from fifty-five upwards. In these lunches almost exclusively men participate. No emails or formal communications are sent to let people know about these lunches, the news is spread only through word of mouth. Women who attend the garden literally never participate, and when I asked the reason to some of them, I was told that they perceive an exclusionary atmosphere

which, albeit not explicitly, does not make them feel welcomed in these convivial moments, which take shape as moments for men. In March 2019, during a cleaning up day, Elisabetta, one of the ladies who are in charge of the didactic garden told me: “I am really frustrated. They [the group of elderly men] do not recognise our work at all. In fact, they think our activities – planting flowers and aromatic species, and organizing initiatives with the children of the neighbourhood – do not add any value to the garden. I tried a few times to go to Thursday lunches, but I always felt out of place, hence I decided not to attend these lunches anymore” (Interview with Elisabetta, March 2019). I, too, in the lunches I took part in, I had the same perception, because of the occasional sexist language and the body language assumed by the lunch guests, The same discomfort was shared by other friends of mine who also felt occasionally out of place when they attended these events with me. The group of elderly men who organize these lunches is the same one that works hard to manage the central area called the common area, and that pushes through assemblies, meetings, and material management of space towards trying to make the garden less accessible for those people who are not part of the association. I will proceed with some more precise examples on the material and spatial management of the garden here below.

*Field notes, December 2017*

I reach the garden at 10.20 as agreed with Claudio. I find him with his bike next to our plot, which we will start sharing from today. He is busy conversing with Franco, Salvo, and two other men I don't know. They are discussing about last Thursday's assembly. Everyone seems a little disturbed by the interventions of two gardeners who kept talking for almost the entire duration of the assembly with their interventions, shouting and trying to prevail over others with aggressive modalities. They

come to the conclusion that the best solution is to stick to practical things and smooth out the disagreements through daily action. They are also very happy that a group of 15 people has spontaneously come together and will volunteer to take regular care of the common areas and lead the maintenance work on the area. I am quite convinced that the disagreements stem from the fact that the town hall requires associations to which a specific area is allocated to maintain and clean it up themselves.. Ideally the association could delegate the work to a company and purchase specific maintenance protection materials. This has very high costs and therefore some may try to mediate by ensuring that some jobs continue to be implemented by the gardeners themselves.

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The group of fifteen people mentioned in the short note above is made up almost entirely of men who spend much of their week in the common garden area and who organize Thursday lunches. It is clear that many of the disagreements are due to the management of common areas. Although it is positive that a group of elderly people who would hardly find spaces for social gatherings in the city meet in an open place to share convivial moments, from lunch to cooking together, to playing cards, I find that an area of public property is at risk, in some of its spatial areas and certain spans of time, of becoming an informally privatized area due to the specificity of the material and bodily presences that cross it. (i.e. it is used mainly by a group of people, in this case retired elderly men). This same area, however, is used more freely in other moments, for example during periodic initiatives open to the whole and advertised through posts on social networks, mailing lists, and leaflets (May 1st, April 25th, music festivals, training initiatives on the role of bees, local seeds...) or just reserved to members of the association, who are notified by e-mail communication, in case of social dinners during the summer (about once

every two months in the period from May to September). Moreover, during my research, almost every day I saw groups of young boys sitting at the tables of the common area to study, read, rest, chat, drink, and smoke together, as well as families that dine and children who play, groups of friends of different ages organizing lunches, dinners or parties. Yet, this kind of activities carried out by people who are not part of the association create a certain tension between its members. In particular, the tension arises from the fact that the association is the assignee of the area through assignment given by the municipality, and is therefore responsible for its cleanliness and the safety of the people who pass through it. The members of the association, when they register, make a payment of ten euros a year which also guarantees members insurance coverage on the garden area. In case of non-registered people, however, there is no insurance coverage and the responsibility in case of accidents is formally of the Tre Fontane association. Those who wish to adopt a more controlling approach on the area (on the people who pass through and on the activities carried out) mostly mention these reasons to justify their dissatisfaction with the presence in the area of people not registered to the association. It is mainly the group of men who manage the cleaning of the common area and take part in the lunches described above who pursues this very strict approach. For example, in June 2019 I happened to be present during a party organized by some teachers of a school in the neighbourhood to celebrate the end of the school year with the children of one of their classes. Some of the elderly men were very angry about their presence and scolded the teachers because these had not asked for the association's authorization before organizing the party, since, in order to take advantage of the table space in the common area, an authorization by the association is required, as well as the presence in the space of at least one member of the association. Although I understand that being responsible for the safety of

the area, the association wants to be informed about possible initiatives, this procedural way of using the space makes it quite controversial to continue to explicitly define and conceive it as a public space.

### **5.1.3 Self-management and spatial control**

This kind of tension arises periodically in the spatial management. The central element of discussion is the willingness of this same group of elderly men to fence off the entire garden area with a gate, in order to control access to it. Despite this debate going on almost since the beginning of the garden project, to this day those who consider essential to guarantee the public vocation of the space (including the president and treasurer of the association and some of its most active members) have prevailed and the gate has not yet been built. Towards the end of 2018 the group of men who manages the common area had started asking for daily shifts, a sort of patrols, to control who is entering the area. In September 2018, while I was sitting under a tree chatting with Claudio, one of the most active members and supporter of the garden's public vocation, Salvatore approached and angrily told us:

"You can not continue like this, okay you did not want to put the gate but you have to organize a systematic control of the area with fixed hours and days, it cannot continue this way anymore, dogs piss everywhere, waste on the ground, stolen vegetables, it's disgusting and you have to take the responsibility to control who comes in. "

Claudio tries to calm him, and explains him that his role is not to be a controller, Salvatore leaves puffing. This kind of conflict has recurred often in recent months, but on the part of the group that is more willing to preserve the collective usability of the area there is the will not to break up and not to escalate the conflict with those who have a different vision,

continuing to negotiate space creation, making different practices coexist. This is precisely one of the characteristics of the neomaterialist political mobilizations described in the second chapter (Certomà 2016b; Marres 2012; Schlosberg, Cole, 2015).

Last week (July 2019) I went back to the garden for a walk and found a sign saying " area under video surveillance" attached to the tables of the common area, which was not present until the last month. I have not been able to verify if a camera has actually been installed, but the presence of the sign indicates that the securitarian and exclusionary tendency, aimed at discouraging the presence of undesirable people in the area, configuring it more as a privatized space than public one, has at least temporarily gained the upper hand.

It is interesting to note that the people who are mainly active in the management of the garden, but concentrate more on creating initiatives open to the neighbourhood and schools, who try to manage the area by not allowing the installation of a gate and who want to make it as much as possible a usable space even for those who are not members of the association, identify themselves as belonging to a generically leftist area and have behind them experiences of activism, militancy in political parties or groups, volunteering (from voluntary work in the Catholic sphere, to social or environmental associations). Those who instead have a more privatistic view of space refer to themselves, as reported in the interviews or conversations carried out during my fieldwork, as not interested in politics, or belonging to the centre-right sphere and had no previous experience of volunteering behind them.

Many of the conflicts (or controversies according to the terms mobilised by neomaterialist politics, semantic also used in interviews and speeches by garden activists, who never or almost never openly speak of conflicts, but always of differences, difficulties, complexity, disagreements) revolve around management and the presence of nonhuman or more than human<sup>56</sup> actors that co-build the garden. I will now report some examples.

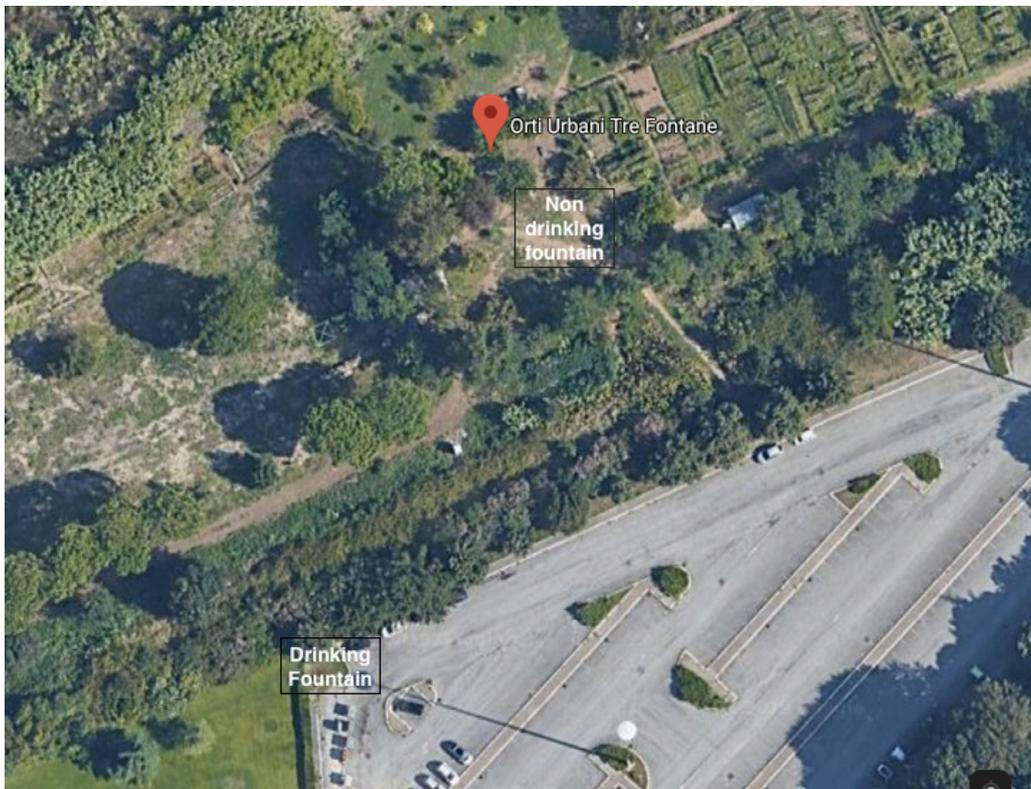
A particularly interesting case concerns the water supply of the garden. The garden is equipped with water (not drinkable, but useful for watering) almost from the beginning of the gardening project (2014). The association received authorization from the city gardening service (*servizio giardini*) to use the water from the source of water located in the adjacent park. The authorization to access the water source is therefore legal, even if the connection that leads the water from the park to the shared garden was set up in an informal way and tolerated by the administration, which has never investigated how the water is brought effectively to the vegetable gardens (interview with Marco, February 2018). The association, then, stipulated a contract with ACEA (the company that supplies water in the municipality of Rome) and regularly pays for water consumption using the money collected through the subscription of annual memberships.. At the centre of the common area there is also a fountain, built by the association's gardeners, used to wash hands and for small chores, with non-drinkable water (the same used for watering). At the edge of the square near one of the entrances of the garden, which overlooks the common area, there is a public fountain with drinking water. At the beginning of 2019, the association requested the town hall to move the drinking fountain to the center of the common garden area. Negotiations

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<sup>56</sup> According to non-representational geography the term nonhuman is used to indicate all nonhuman actors (such as water, plants, animals, microbes...) and the term more-than-human indicates technologies and infrastructures (Lorimer 2010).

are going on and the local town hall at the moment pronounced itself in favour of the displacement. The request was motivated by the fact that the garden is widely attended by elderly people, as well as by children, especially during the annual activities with the schools in the neighbourhood, and these are subjects that need easily accessible drinking water.

In the map below (downloaded from google maps) I reported both the non-drinkable water fountain inside the garden, and the drinkable water fountain, located in the left margin of the parking in Largo Virgilio Maroso.



Map 6 Tre Fontane garden<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Source: Googlemaps.it, modified by the author.

*Field notes, May 2018*

I reach the parking lot in Virgilio Maroso Square around 9.30am on Saturday. It is very hot. I have an appointment with Giovanni to take a tour of the garden and check the state of the tomato plants that we have transplanted in the last weeks, which are already beginning to flourish. On the right side of the car parking, still quite empty today, at the edge of the park lawns, where the water fountain is, there is a family of Roma people, a man, a woman, and a girl. They are washing themselves with water from the fountain and doing laundry. I remember that Giovanni told me about them, he often sees them over the weekend when he comes early to the gardens to help Flavia fix up the beehives. According to what he told me, they no longer live on the edge of the garden and moved not long ago to another area, while still coming to the "abandoned" space at the edge of the new gardens to deposit some objects (they use the area as a warehouse) so he sometimes sees them over the weekend when they come to wash themselves at the parking lot fountain. I remember that a few weeks ago I also happened to see Jonathan wet and sitting near the fountain. He is a homeless person who lives in the garden area. He does not speak Italian very well. As Marco repeatedly confirmed to me, in some moments he screams and speaks alone, and has never had any issues with the Tre Fontane garden association. I walk away without bothering them in the parking area and head towards the gardens, I see Giovanni greeting me in the distance.

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As shown in the field notes above, the fountain is used by people who are not part of the group that manages the shared garden, to wash, freshen up, and wash their clothes, probably because they would not easily find other isolated spaces where they could do. This is a practice that is not

totally unknown to the most active people in the management of the gardening project. In fact, in January 2019, during a meeting in which there was also a discussion about the displacement of the fountain, I perfectly remember that Franco, one of the elderly men who deal with the management of the common area, opposed to this way of using the fountain because he feared that "Roma people could come to wash themselves and create a mess right in the middle of the garden". My suspect is exactly the opposite, namely that, by moving the fountain to the centre of the garden, that is from a marginal spatial location to one that is visible and controllable by many people, those who use it to wash themselves will be inhibited by the new location and will be forced, albeit through a material management of space and not discursively, to move to another area in order to manage their daily lives. This case shows very clearly how spatial changes are at risk of generating spatial injustice effects, even when they are not deliberately considered and problematized by those who, being in a position of power (for example because they have a good negotiating power with the institutions) activate them.

Another very interesting case concerns the management of the reed that skirts the vegetable garden, and of the ancient fruit trees (medlar, plum and cherry trees) that were all present in the area before the starting of the shared vegetable garden project, a remnant of the previous agricultural vocation of the area. Bamboo canes currently border one of the sides of the new vegetable gardens and the common area, mainly to cover a small illegal sheet-metal structure (whose construction was never authorized by the technical department of the town hall, given that the area is subject to landscape regulation) that contains the kitchen, a fridge, and some tools. I have witnessed countless complaints from members of the association about the presence, especially very early in the morning, of people

identified as Chinese, who were intent on cutting branches of the bamboo reed, probably to eat it, given that bamboo is considered an edible plant in Chinese cuisine. The people of the garden that I heard complaining, accused those who were intent on cutting the reeds of changing the conformation of the area for personal purposes. Although I have never personally been able to witness all this, it is apparent that obviously subjective categories, culturally located and guided by a specific vision of the usage and management of the area affect this mode of action (even if only acting on rumors and maybe implementing their action in very few cases). Furthermore, I am aware that parts of the bamboo grove were cut to manage the space and widen the passage from the old to the new gardens. Finally, the same care for not cutting plants is almost never shown for the cutting of what is categorized as "invasive weeds or herbs", confirming the clearly culturally situated character of this perspective.

Similarly, in the case of fruit trees, I have repeatedly witnessed people being scolded because they were harvesting lots of cherries or plums, perhaps making children climb trees. The reason given by the gardeners is that if someone comes and takes all the fruit from the trees, there will be nothing left for the others. I fully understand this point of view, especially if brought forward by people who took responsibility for the care of trees in the area during the year. On the other hand, however, if we are dealing with a fully public space, ideally, there should not be any individual or group that has more power in deciding how to use the space. Obviously, this never happens in reality, and in this case the boundary between public use and use for specific groups becomes very blurred.

#### **5.1.4 Critical remarks**

I will close this section with an example concerning the circulation of vegetables grown in the plots, which can be reconnected to the field notes

reported at page 13, when Ludovica asked Francesco how the cultivated vegetables were divided. Marcello explained how there exists a "tacit agreement" whereby if over a period of time someone produces lots of broccoli, but not spinach and vice versa, people tend to exchange vegetables to support each other. This is a very interesting dimension, which seems somehow to contrast a totally privatistic view of cultivated parcels. As for people from the outside though, my opinion is that things go in a very different way. I have often heard people complaining about small thefts of vegetables, not only in Tre Fontane, but in many roman gardens. For example, in July 2018, in one of the whatsapp chats of the garden which i joined, a message arrived from a person who reported having seen an elderly lady gathering wild chicory at the edge of the small fence surrounding the gardens, as well as a pumpkin and some flowers. The person who sent the message gave the lady some salad, explaining, at the same time, that she should not take anything without asking, as she could meet some other gardener who could get angry about her behaviour. Even in this case, although it is clear that after working for months to grow vegetables it can be annoying that others take them without asking, this tendency contrasts with the presumed fully public vocation of the area. A similar problem had been reported to me in the gardens of Garbatella in 2015, where during an interview with one of the gardeners I was told: "several thefts of tomatoes happened and we started talking about setting up a gate that should be closed at night. But I am against it, this is a space that must always remain open to everyone, and if someone needs to come overnight and pick some tomatoes because they are facing hardships, then it's all fine. "(Interview with Ettore, urban gardens Garbatella 2015). However, the decision of not locking the fence overnight has changed over time, and today the garden is closed in the evening and reopened the next morning (2019). The issue of small thefts of vegetables in roman urban

gardens is relevant for those who growth shared urban gardens. This was also confirmed during a course for people active in roman urban gardens which I attended in early July 2019 and where I discovered that vegetable theft was among the topics covered. One of the organizers brought the case of Tre Fontane as a positive example of non-violent resolution of the conflict in the use of space, where a "garden of thieves" had been at the entrance to the garden, dedicated to those who wanted to take vegetables without being part of the association. In addition to being struck by the semantic violence inherent, in my opinion, in the definition "garden of thieves", I was very surprised, because over many months of research not only I had never seen the garden, but I was not even aware of its existence. I then asked for clarification to the president of the Tre Fontane association who denied the presence of this specific plot in the garden. However, this case shows that, despite the desire to de-escalate conflict at a discursive level or by devising microactions, which are only apparently non-conflictual (as in the case of the example provided during my training, even if the solution was never really implemented), a typical tendency, this, of neomaterialist political practices, conflict persists. Its existence is, however, invisibilised through the rhetoric of inclusion pursued in unidirectional ways, which tends to exclude, through material actions, unwanted actors who might potentially cross the space.

## **5.2 Interactions between human and nonhuman living beings in the co-construction of the garden. Materiality and language**

In this section I will focus on the interaction between living human and nonhuman actors (plants, insects, fungi) in the co-construction of the garden, and on the perception that human actors have of the presence of nonhuman actors in space, keeping in consideration the mingling of material and discursive (semiotic) dimensions. As explained in the second

chapter, I will refer to the neomaterialist theoretical framework, focusing on the role of nonhuman actors in co-building space, even beyond human intentionality, and on the perception that humans have of nonhuman actors with whom they interact. For this reason, I will proceed further to expose some descriptions and analyses of these interactions.

*Field notes, December 2017*

I reach the garden around 10.30. It is quite sunny and the temperature is mild. Upon my arrival, I find a group of men sitting in the common area. Francesco greets me first. They are all very cheerful. Four of them, sitting around a wooden table, are playing cards and drinking wine. They ask me if I want to drink too. They are all retired (apart from Francesco). Francesco asks for the purpose of my visit. I explain him that I have an appointment with Claudio to work with the bees. After a while, Claudio arrives and greets everyone. Francesco asks him "are you going to see the girls?" (The bees). We spend a few more minutes chatting with the group and wish each other merry Christmas. After about 15 minutes and two cigarettes smoked (me, Francesco and Claudio) Claudio and I move towards the hives. The area of the beehives is placed on a rise at the edge of the old gardens and is marked by a sign with the words "continuous buzz". The hives are in wood and laminated metal, they are eight, painted in alternating blue and yellow. We lean on a large wooden bench at the foot of the hill and Claudio hands me protective clothing. Then he explains me step by step what kind of work we are going to do.. He explains that the bees present here belong to the most common species in Italy, the honey bee. which at the moment, is one of the species of nonhuman animals at highest risk of extinction. This is due to environmental transformations for which human beings are mainly responsible. In the Italian context, the bee mellifera ligustre, the most widespread in the peninsula, is currently at risk

of extinction, due to the erosion of its habitat and to the spread of a parasite, named *varroa destructor*, which started to circulate in Italy from the 1980s, decimating in a few years the population of wild bees. This parasite is endemic in Asia, where local bees (*apis cerana*) have developed over time a relationship of equilibrium with their host parasite. However, in the 20th century the parasite came into contact with the European honeybee, following its worldwide marketing for honey production, causing its rapid decimation. In fact, the European bee had no time to adapt to the parasite. While Claudio is describing this historical process, I reflect upon how it clearly shows the environmental violence of capitalist human action. Being aware of the increasingly precarious situation of Italian bees, Claudio proposed starting a beekeeping area in the garden, taking responsibility for a species that has historically been highly endangered by capitalist human beings' action. He explains that some beekeepers treat bees with chemicals to preserve them from the parasites. He is against it, and besides, the use of chemicals in the garden is forbidden. Instead, he treats bees with a mixture of water and thymol which he sprinkles on them inside the hives. Then the bees, rubbing on each other spread the mixture to the whole hive.

After wearing the upper part of the protection, made of heavy and rough cloth, white, and surmounted by a hood with a metal net at the eye level, we head uphill towards the hives, through an earthy path that crosses a hill covered with "spontaneous" herbs. We carry with us a sack containing the solution, a syringe, and a metal tool with a spout, similar to a watering can. At the top, next to the hives, we climb over the wooden fence that borders the area and wear the hood, with the protective grid that falls before my eyes and blurs my view. Claudio pulls the tool with the spout out of the sack, takes a piece of paper, burns it and places it inside the tool, where it

begins to produce smoke. He tells me that the smoke will lead the bees to believe that there is a fire nearby and concentrate on protecting the hive, thus becoming less aggressive towards us. The hives are numbered from 1 to 8. Claudio opens the first apiary. At first glance it seems that around the hives everything is still. Then I try to calm down and begin to notice that there are many bees that fly around the hives buzzing, concentrating mainly at the front. The lid of the first beehive that Claudio tries to lift is glued, and he needs a small knife to unstick it. He clarifies to me that this is a good sign because it means that the bees have already started working again. When the hive is open, we can see some bees in the upper part but they do not stir much. The whiff of cold air at the opening could be perceived by them as a danger so Claudio spreads a bit of smoke which makes them more concentrated on the hive and less aggressive. Then, using a syringe, he drops some solution on the bees. The bees move slowly but incessantly on the wax structure they created in the upper part of the hive. They rub each other, unknowingly passing the solution. Claudio continues with the following hives. In all the beehives the bees are not aggressive, they buzz slightly when he opens the lids, continuing to stick to the wax, without flying or attacking us. Then, he takes some frames out of the hives and notices that the production of honey is already quite conspicuous. He says that every community of bees has its own collective personality, which is usually very much influenced by the personality of the queen bee. When opening the sixth hive, the buzz that we hear is much more intense, the bees seem nervous. In opening the lid, Claudio accidentally drops it over the hive. The bees get frightened and nervous and begin to whirl around. A bee stings me on the leg. I feel an intense pain and start panicking. I try to get away, climb over the gate but the bees continue to follow me around. I try to stand still and the bees finally move away. I check my leg, the sting is swollen but there is no stinger. After a few

minutes, just the time to compose myself, we get back to the hives to complete the treatment of the bees in the three remaining beehives. At this point I am pretty scared, as I have never been stung by a bee and the contact has shaken me a lot. Claudio, while he keeps working, explains that after biting me the bee has died, and that he had already realized that I would be stung, a few seconds before it happened because he had already noticed that the bee had its stomach protruding and therefore was going to attack and die. I was aware of the fact that bee die after stinging and I had somehow taken this possibility into account while Claudio had stated that this was a really rare occurrence as long as we try to interact with the bees with the highest possible degree of respect, humility and relaxation, elements that are all fundamental not to frighten the bees and alarm them. In the seventh hive the bees running in the upper part are few. They are very quiet and not particularly noisy. Claudio opens a frame and notes that they have already produced a lot of honey. Once we are done with the last two hives, we collect the tools, climb over the wooden gate, and go down the slope to reach back the wooden bench in the collective flat space. We take off our protective jackets and sit in the sun chatting a little. Claudio tells me "it's my fault if they got upset, usually they are not at all aggressive, but having dropped the lid I scared them. You have seen, perhaps they recognize me, between the two of us they have bitten the new one".



Image 17 Beehives in the Tre Fontane garden

*Field notes, January 2018*

Claudio and I approach the bees. He wants to check if there are residues in the edges at the bottom of the beehives. We have no protections and I prefer to stay on this side of the wooden gate. We first stop to look sideways at the front of the hives and Claudio points out to me that there are many more bees entering and leaving the hives. The activities are fully restarted, the brood cycle is over. He points out that the bees fly in a perpendicular position when moving from the beehive to collect pollen, while fly horizontally when returning to the beehive. The bees have increased in number from the last time, it means that the treatment was done at the right time.

In the first two hives there are not so many residues and there is no trace of varroa. The residues come from the chewing of bees, what is not transformed falls down in the form of residues, which appear as a yellow-brown granular powder. Claudio stirs the dust using his fingertips, to sift it and check carefully that there is no varroa. I notice that his hands are full of little cuts and dirt. Then he goes to hive number 6. It is the hive from which the bee that had stung me last time had come out, and which had very

agitated bees. There are many residues scattered across the entire surface of the foil, which means that the bees are moving throughout the hive. Claudio suspects this hive to be orphan, which means, that its queen bee is dead. He deduces this from the fact that, once again, these bees are way more aggressive than the others, and that in the front part of the hive, from which the bees come out, there are more bees in activity, than in front of the others. Of course, he tells me, every community has its own personality, and therefore it could also be the peculiarity of this hive, but it is rare for bees to be so aggressive without a real danger, and it is for this reason that he thinks that their behaviour might be caused by their having been left without a queen. Meanwhile, a bee moves from the front and comes to the back of the hive, to see what Claudio is doing and to assess a possible danger.

In the other hives there are residues too, with several varroa parasites. It is the first time I see them, they are small, dark red, shiny spheres, which indicate that the treatment has been effective. Claudio says that anyway, there are very few of them, and that, if there was an ongoing invasion we would have found them in all the hives. Bees will get through the season well. Then in the summer we will treat them again, this time with thymol (derived from thyme). In hive number 3 there are many residues of the consistency and color of crystal. I ask what it is. Claudio explains me that sometimes bees also collect pieces of paper and plastic, and from chewing them these scraps similar to crystals come out. In hive number 4 we find a dead bee. There is no trace of varroa on its back, but it has a white spot on its face, between the eyes. Claudio tells me that the bee sucked a drop of the not-yet-dried treatment, and this killed it. He tells me that it certainly saddens him but it can happen, and the treatment has still saved the bee family. In hive number 5 there is a dead wasp instead. Claudio explains that

the bees recognized it as an intruder and killed it. Near the wooden fence there is a black electricity cable. It is full of shaking ants. Claudio lowers down to check "what is all this excitement about? Is there a corpse? No, it doesn't seem so... so they are just looking for a warm place ". We go back down, we both light a cigarette, sitting on the wooden table near the path of the gardens. Meanwhile a girl runs in the park.

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In the field notes above, centered around the relationship between Claudio, the main person responsible for the beekeeping project of the garden, the parasite varroa destructor and the bees, it emerges how the bees are recognized as subjects, and actions are taken to facilitate and encourage their presence in the garden space. This emerges from the type of language used to refer to them (for example Francesco tells me "are you going to meet the girls?" - in Italian the term bee is feminine). Moreover, Claudio in guiding my actions in the presence of bees, uses a series of terms that are usually employed to characterize humanity (for example in the description above he talks about bees' personalities, the risk of scaring them or making them nervous, and advises to interact with them with humility and respect). I report another brief passage that completes what has just been written, also describing the behaviour of other people who manage the garden or are part of it.

*Field notes, March 2018*

Claudio joins me, approaching the gate with his bicycle. He comes in and points out at the area of broccoli, now completely in bloom and no longer edible. They appear as an extension of yellow flowers, vigorous and vital. Claudio explains me that, even if they are no longer edible for us humans, they are very much appreciated by bees. That is why he left them until they

fade away. Calming my eyes, I begin to look closely, bowing. A fervent activity unfolds under my eyes. There are plenty of bees resting on the flowers, or flying low. Then, I look up at the hives: looking carefully one can clearly see a very large gathering of bees in the front of the hives, ready to depart or to return. Claudio calls my attention to a bee resting on a flower. He points out that on the sides of the body it has two little bags, which are filled with pollen, and which gradually swell, turning yellow. I can see them. It is impressive, it is the first time I've noticed it. I start checking other bees. They all have them. Claudio informs me that they can fill their bags about three times their weight before flying back to the hive. I see a bee with huge pockets, a side bag of pollen falls to the ground. The bee moves to a new flower and starts again.<sup>58</sup>



**Image 18 Bee on broccoli flower**

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<sup>58</sup> This short fieldnotes of March 2018 have also been used in an article published in 2018 (Del Monte, Sachsé 2018).

This last brief excerpt shows how the presence of bees is encouraged by many of the gardeners, who decide to leave flowering broccoli plants no longer edible for humans on areas that they could instead use to recultivate edible products. This shows how, they do not always implement in the management of the space behaviours that are human-centered. It is true that, as I have been told many times by several gardeners, they recognize the indispensable value of pollination done by bees, whom they know being at risk of extinction and that have contributed greatly to the garden space improving the quality of vegetable products through pollination. However, while building this alliance, the gardeners enter in conflict with the varroa parasite. I propose that, due to the close, perhaps inextricable, connection between humans-plants-bees' lives, this relation can be read as a capitalism-varroa-humans-plants-bees multispecies assemblage. In fact, reading the environmental history that led to the spread of varroa, it is clear how much the capitalist model of exploitation of other species has acted, threatening not only the life of bees but also those of the human species itself. In fact, assemblages cannot hide from capitalism, but could become "interesting sites for watching how political economy works" not only for humans (Tsing 2015: 23). Nowadays, according to the perspective of the group that manages the hives of Tre Fontane garden (but also of people from other groups that deal with beekeeping in the city ,which I have met in the past months) bees could no longer survive without human action to remove the varroa parasite. Similarly, humans cannot potentially survive without the collateral pollination carried out by bees. That is, survival always involves others (Tsing 2015). So then, an assemblage emerges through the interaction of different actors, human and nonhuman, that are strictly entangled and interact by continuously creating and re-creating the space they cross in an

indissoluble hybrid that comes to life beyond the canons of human intentionality.

However, different modalities of interaction occur towards other species of pollinators that live in the garden or cross it. In the case of hornets and wasps, human behavior is very different. In fact, wasps and hornets are killed at any chance and therefore expelled from space, because they are perceived as a danger to humans and bees. In fact, the gardeners have established a sort of alliance with the bees, with which wasps and hornets, according to them, enter into competition. In May 2018, during a day of collective training on the role of bees that took place in the gardens, in which I participated, a hornet's nest was found on the edge of the new vegetable gardens. People from the association immediately took action to kill the entire nest as it was categorised as a danger. Very interesting is also a flyer that was sent in June 2019 by a gardener on a whatsapp group of the garden, where a bee and a wasp were compared, inviting people not to kill bees. Anthropomorphizing the bee, the leaflet made it talk and ask people not to be killed because it was docile, not dangerous for the human, and fundamental for the ecosystem, unlike the wasp, prone to violent behaviour, and therefore to stinging. In the flyer, the wasp is defined as a "whore", also highlighting an interesting parallelism that is created between inter- and intra-species hierarchization mechanisms (I will briefly examine the connection between speciesism and sexism in the conclusions of this paragraph).

*Field notes, December 2017*

Claudio describes to me how his plot is organized. He placed an absinthe bush near the entrance and scattered plants near the spinach. Absinthe drives away snails and other insects that eat plants from the garden. He

explains that it seems to have worked very well. Since he planted it, there are very few snails despite the rain and despite the fact that they are present in the neighboring gardens, so, the cultivated leaves have not been eaten by insects or parasites. He confirms that once we have collected everything in the next few weeks, from the next sowing he will let me manage half of the garden alone so that I can independently experience what it means to take care of a vegetable garden. He makes me take a first tour to explain the subdivision. In the centre there is a grass-covered walkway, he initially wanted to create a green mantle, then gave up and let the plants grow there freely. At this stage, what he sowed has been harvested, and in a few weeks he will sow again. He sowed everything in October. We start by picking up the black cabbage. There are four plants. One of the braches broke and began to rot in the driveway nearby. The plants are almost two meters high, each supported by a bamboo cane stick. Before starting the harvest, he also shows me that there is a corner area where he has planted strawberry plants several months ago, but they are not growing. We will have to rearrange this area by pulling them out and replanting them. I hear the chirping of green parrots, very common in Rome, some magpie verse, occasionally the distant roar of a car. Three magpies fly away together, first to our right, then to our left, heading towards the pines of the park.

Claudio shows me a black case where he keeps his tools, at the edge opposite to the fence's entrance. He opens it. Inside there are a shovel, a bag of soil, one of compost made from earthworms, one of manure, gloves, and shears, an iron hammer with a wooden handle. Then, outside the box he has a spade, a rake, and a tool that tells me to be very useful to remove weeds from the ground. We take a pair of shears each and start cutting two tops of black cabbage. Claudio cuts off one, and leaves a part of the stem

(which looks like a small yellow trunk). It should grow back again. I find it very difficult to cut the cabbage by cutting the stem with the shears and in the end we decide to uproot it. Cabbages have become very high because over time he always takes the leaves around the stem without cutting it, and the stem keeps growing in height. Then, when the plant started to become too tall Claudio tied a bamboo stick with wire to support its growth. Initially, he was afraid that by continuing to grow the trunk could be choked, but this was not the case. According to him this type of plant behaves like this because it has been transformed over time by the interaction with human beings. He does not know if it exists in the wild and if it behaves in a similar manner. According to him, it challenges gravity, because a plant should grow in height only if it is a creeper. In this case though, it happens because a human supports it with a stick. Claudio decides to leave one of the four plants intact, removing only a few ruined leaves, so that it can stand there as "a sort of totem for his garden".



**Image 19** Black cabbage in Carlo's plot

Laura collects two salads and three cabbages and starts filling two bags, one for herself and one for me. She tells me about her initial feelings when she first started cultivating. She initially had a lot of hesitation in pruning the plants because, after planting them and seeing how well and quickly they had grown, one really realizes that they are living beings. And therefore she felt guilty, she was afraid of hurting them, and perceived it as a mutilation of living beings. But then, seeing how well they grew after being pruned, she realized that actually for them human contribution becomes a support to live better. Being vegetable varieties, she tells me, she is sure that they could not survive on their own; they probably need a contribution from the human being. The first time, she continues, even removing them to eat them after seeing them growing made her feel guilty. The first few times she cultivated, she thought that the soil would become almost sand because the plants would suck all the substances, but since then she has changed her mind. The land "reciprocates" and remains very fertile. While Claudio moves a mound of soil to the compost area we see a very large earthworm. Laura tells him "Throw it back in the garden, don't let it travel for miles or you'll risk hurting it". And Claudio answers "yes, yes sure". Laura: " take it to the cabbage so that it can go wherever it wants".

*Field notes, January 2018*

Plants have grown tremendously since the last time. There is plenty of roman cabbage, Sicilian cauliflower and broccoli, which will have to be collected quickly. Claudio shows me one more time the aromatic plants that he planted along the main edge. There is thyme, lemon-thyme, two roses, lavender, marjoram. He is trying to make them all grow in height, because as bush plants they would die after three or four years of cycle. These plants have been here for three years and hopefully will still resist.

He tells me he should have pruned roses way more, but he could not. He feels too guilty, as if he was mutilating a living being.. And so he prunes them, but just a little, without following the rules of pruning which prescribe that branches are sensibly reduced every time they are pruned. Then, he shows me the line of pat choi. He tells me "these plants, I planted them all together. Yet you see, same size when I planted them, same soil, they are planted next to each other, yet they have all grown differently. The first has yellowed leaves, the second turned out to be a different plant once grown, the last did not grow at all. It is really true that we are all unique and unrepeatable individuals ”.



**Image 20 Pak choi in Carlo's plot**

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From the modalities of interaction that Claudio uses in his garden, two things emerge: the creation of alliances with some plants (for example with the absinthe, which he plants to discourage the presence of insects and

snails, unwanted actors in the garden because they would ruin the crops) and a certain tendency to attribute subjectivity to plants and insects with which he enters more closely in contact. Again, at a discursive level, as in the case of bees, he attributes to plants the ability to feel pain, since he feels guilty about pruning. Furthermore, he discursively highlights a close connection between human action and plants for the survival of horticultural plants, modified over the centuries by interactions with the human (as in the case of cabbage, which manages to grow in height even though it is not a tree or a creeper, because of the support placed in the ground). Laura shares a similar vision, which emerges in the example given when she talks about the plants she has to cut. Finally, as in the field notes at the beginning of the chapter, Claudio and Laura also attribute subjectivity to the earthworm, which they readily remove from the compost area so as not to risk killing it. Even in the following extract from my notes, Claudio reaffirms his desire to prune roses as little as possible, because in doing so, he feels he is "mutilating a living being". Finally, when referring to the pat choi plants that he showed me, he recognizes them as many differentiated individuals, rather than as an indistinct set of objects.

*Field notes, January 2018*

I follow Michela in the plot she cultivates. She tells me that this year she started sowing very late, in November. And in fact, the plants are much smaller than those of Claudio and Laura, at the moment there is almost nothing to collect. Even in her parcel the land is rather wet. I am immediately struck by a tall rectangular structure made up of reeds in the center of the plot. Michela probably catches a glimpse of my perplexed face and explains that she has built it to be able to plant creepers that need to climb, or that grow better with support. At the moment the structure is bare, there are only two large porous courgettes, now completely dry and

yellowed. She shows me the species she is cultivating: she has planted many fennels, whose upper parts, thick and foamy, already appear of an intense green. Then, there are two long rows of garlic and red onions. Long green threads emerge from the ground, now about ten centimeters high. There are some salad plants, still very small. Then, a bush of black cabbage and a plant similar to broccoli, whose name she does not remember. The bush is more than a meter high. The plants are about two years old, and like Claudio, Michela does not replace them every year, but only removes the ready leaves, letting the plant continue to grow in height. She also planted many aromatic plants, which grow directly in the bush soil: oregano, sage, mint, thyme, parsley. She shows me a big bush, apparently completely desiccated. She asks me if I recognize it. I do, despite the altered features that make it look different from the fresh plant. It is thyme. Laura rubs her hands on the leaves and invites me to do the same to feel the aroma. The smell of thyme is very strong. She shows me the base of the plant: there are some new, bright green leaves: the plant will probably survive. He tells me that if I feel like it, I can come back tomorrow and try to prune it to see if its condition can improve. I accept.

*Field notes, January 2018*

At one of the edges of the parcel there is an area of land where nothing of what Franco has sown has come out yet. However, he recognizes two tiny plants that have just popped up. They are parsley and mint. He tells me: "these are invasive plants. I didn't plant them, they grew up on their own. They spread from the plants I planted a little further away. If you look closer, lots of mint leaves are popping up around here, even outside the parcel. They tend to multiply, no matter where you plant them. These two must then be removed, otherwise they will suffocate the plants I have sown. But I don't kill them, I love them, sometimes I talk to plants. I pick

these and take them home, then plant them on my terrace ". We continue the tour. In the central part of the garden there is a small table of light wood, rough to the touch, with a chair. Behind it, I see a tall wooden box from which tools sprout.



**Image 21 Tools in the garden Tre Fontane**

A large rectangular plastic jar is placed beside the wooden shelf. Inside it there is an almost dry, branchy plant, which I do not recognize. It is chilli. In fact, at a closer look, I can see two small dried peppers still attached to the branches. He tells me that the life cycle of the chilli plant is usually a year, but if I want, I can try to prune this too and see if it will recover. There are still green twigs near the base. I accept, but I ask for more information

because I do not know how to prune it. He explains me that I have to cut the dry twigs that sprout from the main trunks, also shortening the main trunks until I see some greenery appear. At this point, I ask how he learned to prune the plants correctly and if he had already had gardening or cultivation experiences. He clarifies that outside Rome he owns a small house in the countryside, where his son now lives and where he planted some tomatoes few years ago, but he had never had any other experiences. Actually, he collected this information on Internet. We move to the other side of the wooden structure. Next to more thyme plants, he points to a vase from which a few leaves and very long, dry blades of grass sprout. They are strawberries. He proposes me to prune those too, if I have time, because they might recover in spring. I touch the earth in the vase. It is moist and partly covered with velvety green moss.

We pass the entrance of the plot. At the corner there is a very thick huge bush, of a pale green. It is a large borage plant. Then all around I can see several specimens of thistle. They are a highly present species in Rome, which spread spontaneously (they are not usually cultivated). They tend to grow easily and multiply quickly. Franco tells me that he collected them in the area on the hill near the reeds, at the edge of the new gardens. Although they are usually not very popular, he explains that they are very good when cooked. However, there are way more plants than those he initially planted, as they tend to multiply. Several of them have already grown outside the fence, at the edge of the path. He fears that they might suffocate other plants, absorbing all the nutrition from the earth. The large corner plant has increased considerably in volume (it is indeed very impressive) and according to Franco there is a risk that if it keeps growing, it may disrupt the gate of his parcel. For this reason, in the coming weeks he will evaluate whether to prune it and, if necessary, even to uproot some

thistles. We move again, he wants to take me to see the area from where he collected the thistle and the borage that he transplanted here. As he closes the gate, I realize I have a bitter taste of earth in my mouth. It is becoming a habitual flavor since I came here, even when I hardly touch the soil.



**Image 22** Thistle in Franco's plot

We cross the area of the new gardens to reach the area that Franco wants to show me. In crossing the area of the new gardens, I have the impression that the plants are more "unkempt". In many plots an aesthetic attention stands out (there are flowers, small wrought iron structures, pinwheels) but overall I have the impression that plants here are left to grow more freely than in the area of the old gardens, where the parcels are

very regular and there are almost no plants that are not edible or ornamental. This may be due to the fact that the area of the old gardens is directly visible from the common area, it is the most frequented by those who are not gardeners (people who cross the park to take dogs for a walk, to run or walk, to listen to music) and more visible from the buildings that surround it. Instead, the new vegetable gardens end where a vast area with reeds begins where some homeless people stop to eat and spend the night. It is, therefore, possible that those who have a plot on this side will feel less "controlled". It happened to me several times to listen to speeches where the absence of a certain type of order and regular decay are discussed (mainly by Guido, Simone, and Luigi).

We arrive at the final margin of the new gardens. There is a small flat area, then a hilly part begins, both covered with thick grasses, which Franco defines as "infesting". They are mainly mallow, borage, many thistles with huge leaves, nettle, lots of mint and tall grass. I notice some scattered yellow flowers. After a few meters the reed bed starts. Franco tells me that, before they drained the area, the reeds also covered the area where we are now standing. He tells me that it is exactly there, on the edge of the reed and knoll, that he took the thistles and the borage that he later transplanted.

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Like Claudio, Michela and Franco, tied a very close relationship with the plants that grow in the plot they cultivate. Like Claudio, again, they try to prolong the life cycle of plants as much as possible, without changing them every year, as intensive agriculture would require. Even this desire to extend the life of the plants they grow can be read as an attribution of subjectivity to the plants with which they enter in a close relationship, as is

their transplanting and not eradicating some of the plants that grow out of their control. Walking through the new gardens with Franco I also noticed that there is a correspondence between the increased focus on cultivation methods that correspond to the canons of beauty and order centered on the human, and the greater presence of social control. In the case of the old gardens, in fact, where there is a large passage of people and visibility from the neighboring buildings, the parcels are cultivated in very similar ways to each other and very regularly. This is not the case in the new vegetable gardens, less exposed to control, where the plants appear much more irregular and uncontrolled.

*Field notes, February 2018*

I struggle to open the gate, which has a slightly rusty lock. In this parcel too, the soil is mainly humid, with the exception of a long narrow area, of a lighter and drier brown which appears sandy, where, at the moment, only a few tiny mint seedling grow (growing slightly more than a centimeter). I take a pair of shears out of my pocket and head for the chilli plant. It is the first time that I plant a plant alone, without being guided. I am a bit scared, I am afraid I might cut the branches excessively. Now I understand the feeling that Claudio and Laura had described a few weeks ago, of being afraid of hurting the plant. Still, I also realize that this is probably a tendency at anthropomorphizing the plant. I start cutting the twigs, which break easily, dried. I reduce the height of the plant sensibly, until I begin to see green in the center of the small logs. At this point, I stop. I gather the twigs that I cut on a small wooden table in the center of the parcel and move towards the strawberries and thyme. At this point, I see Gianni joining me. He starts talking and asks me "What are you doing here?" I explain him that Michela asked me, when I had time, to help her tidying up her plot. I see Gianni uprooting plants with his foot, rubbing it on the

ground back and forth. I tell him "Hey, what are you doing?" He replies that they are "weeds". He says "these must be removed, otherwise they will suffocate the other cultivated plants and dry up the soil". Although I can understand the thought behind this gesture, justified by his words, the bodily modality used to eradicate them appears to me violent and disrespectful. I ask him "but didn't you tell me that you had learned from your grandmother to respect plants, the little entities as she called them?" He replies that it is not so much a lack of respect but a choice, because when you choose to plant on a surface plants that would not have grown otherwise, that are there because you brought them there, then you have a responsibility towards them and you have to take care of them. And this does not mean just watering or pruning them, it also means eradicating and killing other plants that would otherwise suffocate them and dry the earth within a short time. I collect the dry twigs and deposit them next to the gate, inside the parcel. They will enrich the soil decomposing.

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In Gianni's words and action a strong hierarchy emerges between cultivated plants and invasive, infesting spontaneous plants. The former are, in fact, cured and cared for, the latter are pulled out. Gianni, in his own words, justifies this distinction, which, in turn, informs his practice, with the need to take responsibility for horticultural plants that have been planted, that would not have grown by themselves in that area, and that without human action human would die from other invasive plants. This mode of cultivation is also very common in the vegetable garden, and is visually noted in the parcels where the land is almost completely bare, with the exception of single horticultural plants planted by gardeners. This is the case of Salvo's vegetable plot, alongside that of Claudio. His vegetable

garden is extremely regular, with rows of distanced horticultural plants, and the soil completely clean from the presence of spontaneous plants.

*Field notes, April 2018*

I begin to help Loredana fixing the aloe plants inside the teaching garden. She shows me an aloe plant that has been planted by a very experienced person, at the right time and has been attentively cared for, but which nevertheless has adapted very badly and remains small and partially dry. On the other hand, other aloes, although planted "by chance", thrived. In her opinion this is a confirmation of the fact that every plant is an individual in its own right and that, despite following the codified rules, each individual then responds to the interaction with other individuals who find themselves occupying the same space in a different way. She tells me that she has noticed that some plants tend to come closer and others repel each other, regardless of the position of the sun. Loredana, Rossella, and Clelia add that they often talk to plants, and that they are fairly certain that this positively affects their growth. Laura also says that sometimes when it is hot she blows on the leaves, believing that this gives relief to the plant.



**Image 23 Didactic garden**

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As I will discover later, this is a fairly common practice in the vegetable garden. Most of the people who take part in the working group for reproduction of varieties of ancient tomatoes go almost every day to see the plants in the greenhouse (even when they are still in the seed phase) and in watering them they talk to them, and regularly share this practice in the whatsapp chat.

The relationship with plants that are not found in single cultivated parcels is, instead, very different. Especially in the common area, gardeners tend to cut the grass as much as possible and weed out spontaneous plants. Indeed, as I have already noted, many of the conflicts in the garden derive precisely from the management of this space, which according to several people, mainly belonging to the informal group that takes care of the

cleaning of the area and organizes Thursday lunches, is never sufficiently clean. Furthermore, these people often complain that, during common work days, a large group of people dedicate themselves to managing the didactic garden and arranging the flowers in the flower beds, instead of systematically mowing the grass of the common area. And yet, this way of managing the common area, all centered on human aesthetic and standards of pleasantness (and largely driven by the decorum / decay dichotomy, as I will explain in the next chapter), makes it inhospitable for other nonhuman actors. In the period between February and March 2018 some meetings were held in the garden with a group of young permaculture experts who were supposed to build for free a dry oven in the center of the common area. The project was not successful because several of the most active people in the garden perceived the presence of an external group as an intrusion in the management of the association, so the meetings were interrupted and the oven was never built. However, I report an excerpt of field notes from a specific meeting, because it introduces some elements about the interaction between human and nonhuman actors in the construction and management of the garden.

*Field notes, March 2018*

We sit in a circle outdoors on the newly built wooden benches in the center of the common area, and begin the session. The girl who is in charge today of leading the group proposes an exercise. Each of us will have to identify with a different entity than we usually do when working at the vegetable garden, take a 10-minute tour of the garden, and then report to the group how we perceived the vegetable garden with a different body. The chosen entities are: a teacher, water, fire, wind, a disabled boy, an ant, a cat, a bird, a bee. The human who identified with a sparrow reports how in flying above the garden, he had a hard time finding puddles of water

because the soil is made up in such a way that there is no water gathering up anywhere.. He also found it difficult to locate shady areas where he could hide and, perhaps, hunt small reptiles. He, then, suggests extending to the edges of the garden the sections dedicated to small bushes, so that small animals can find refuge more easily.

This intervention highlights how the garden is largely anthropocentric (for example, the bushes are limited to the bare minimum because they respond to a shared category of "decay"). Furthermore, in the case of the management of the common area, the dichotomy between plants that need to be treated and plants that must be eradicated returns.

This mode of interaction, and its underlying anthropocentric vision, is not shared by every the gardener. A few weeks ago (May 2019), returning by car with Pietro, a 35-year-old man who cultivates a parcel together with his girlfriend, I exchanged some thoughts with him about the managing of the common area. He told me "I am happy that finally a group has been set up that deals with building nests to encourage the presence of birds. Of course, however, if we continue to remove all the brambles, the bushes, and the grass they will have nothing to eat ... I do not agree very much with such an invasive modality of handling the garden, because, then, this will become just another area in the city for our pleasure, but but not one wherewe welcome other living beings ". Unfortunately, in the meetings I have never heard him expressing this position in public.

Maura also brought me a similar perspective:

"By interacting with plants, I transformed the way I relate to them. Now I am aware that I need to spare plants that I used to consider as weeds. I

developed the awareness that insects I used to be scared of are simply part of a reality that I didn't consider before. For example, my relationship with ants has changed. Before I considered them enemies, now I see them as entities that crossed this space before me, and therefore have the right to be part of it "(interview with Maura, May 2018).

### **5.2.2 Critical remarks on humans-nonhumans interactions in the garden**

As we have seen so far, the garden is built through the continuous relationship between human and nonhuman actors. The analysis of the material dimension, of the practices, and of the directly related discursive dimension, shows that human action does not interact with the living nonhuman as an undifferentiated set of objects. The reports above clearly show a hierarchization of the nonhuman living, which, despite deviating from a fully anthropocentric perspective and mode of action, remains hierarchical. There are nonhuman actors to whom gardeners relate in ways that seem to suggest the attribution of subjectivity, the search for an alliance, the attribution of feelings to nonhumans (pleasure, suffering), a personality, and states of mind (positives or negatives). This happens specifically in the relationship that some gardeners have with bees, ants, black cabbage, pak choi, and horticultural plants sown in vegetable gardens or in the greenhouse. To some plants, as already shown, an individuality is recognized, specifying that "each plant is an individual in itself and, that, despite following the codified rules, each individual, then, responds to the interaction with other individuals, who find themselves occupying the same space, in a different way "(field notes April 2018). A very widespread practice is to talk to the plants that are cultivated, a symptom of the logocentrism of the gardeners' approach, but also of the recognition of a certain subjectivity to the nonhuman otherness with which they interact. Especially in favour of bees, with which the relationship has been

consolidated over the last two years, many gardeners renounce to a totally anthropocentric approach in the transformation of space, leaving broccoli in bloom because they believe these are particularly appreciated by the bees.

Other nonhuman actors are strongly inferiorized, as is the case of wasps and hornets, thistles, borage, bindweed, and all those plants that are categorized as weeds or invasive species and systematically eradicated by many gardeners (only a few of them, or at least those who are less determinant in driving the collective human action, have expressed, in interviews and conversations, the desire to imagine the garden as a more welcoming environment even to nonhuman actors that were anyway assigned to this second category by the majority of humans crossing the garden). For some gardeners, therefore, nonhuman presence is still interpreted in an instrumental way, completely centred on human aesthetic, and taste pleasures (Rudolf and Taverne 2012). In many cases, gardeners engage in tangible material conflicts, as nonhuman presence is seen as a constraint for human action. A similar trend was highlighted by Pitt (2018) in her research on urban shared gardens in the Anglo-Saxon context. Also in this case, "power dynamics" and "relations driven by human priorities" emerged from the relationships of care and from the daily interactions with the nonhuman (Pitt 2018: 24).

In this perspective, a specific analysis is required of the sematic choices made by gardeners when referring to bees and wasps. As written above, in fact, while bees are considered an allied species, wasps are strongly opposed and discouraged from crossing the garden through material action, and, in an image sent by one of the gardeners, even defined as "whores". Both are anthropomorphized and feminized (since both the

words for designating them are feminine in Italian). The connection between the specist mechanism and the sexist mechanism as hierarchical devices appears evident here. By speciesism it is meant that mechanism of power aimed at drawing a line of insurmountable separation between the human being (or better, the Man (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Braidotti 2016)) as *Homo sapiens*, and all the other animal species, according, moreover, to the human species a privileged moral state justified through the biological datum (Filippi, Trasatti 2013). It is, above all, on this theoretical basis that anthropocentrism is founded. As Adams (1990) shows us, in the inferiorization of feminized and animalized subjects, comparable hierarchical mechanisms come into play on a discursive level. Through a mechanism that she defines as the mechanism of the "absent referent", from time to time reference is made to experiences that sanction female exploitation or that of the animalized subject, ascribing to the animalized subject concepts typical of the experience of inferiorization acted on female bodies and vice versa. This is exactly what happens when reference is made to discredit the wasp employing the category of "whore", commonly used to inferiorise feminized human subjects. In this case the female human subject disappears (the factually absent referent) but its mobilization at a semantic level becomes an instrument of material submission with respect to the nonhuman animal to which it is referred.

Ciao! Io (quella di sinistra) sono un'ape spesso vengo confusa con quella mignotta che sta alla mia destra che si chiama vespa, la differenza con lei è che io non pungo perché muoio (mi si stacca l'intestino) quindi non vedo perché dovrei morire per fare uno scherzo a te, quella di fianco invece purtroppo non morirà mai nemmeno dopo una puntura e quindi aggredisce volutamente (motivo per cui la chiamo "mignotta")! Salva la fotografia e impara a riconoscermi, puoi salvare la vita a me e a te perché un domani che io sarò completamente estinta, tempo qualche anno non esisterà più nemmeno la razza umana! Anche se sotto certi aspetti non sarebbe nemmeno un male.

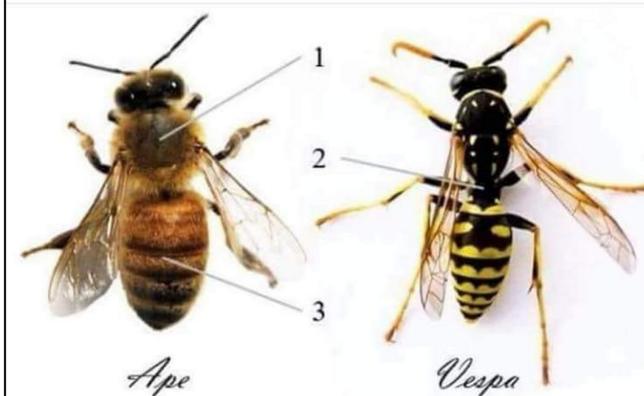


Image 24 Flyer that compares bees and wasps

This was sent by one gardener on Whatsapp in July 2019. On the other hand, however, there are those who, in case of actors with whom they are closely related, seem to deconstruct the concept of nonhuman and species as an undifferentiated whole, referring to plants with which they have tied close relationships as a multitude of many different individuals. Furthermore, Claudio, during a seminar held at the Tre Fontane gardens in June 2018 on the role of bees, explicitly stated that "each individual is different, even if classified within the concept of species. After the long experience I have had in dealing with bees, I strongly questioned scientific taxonomy as a classification system for the living" (Claudio, June 2018).

As shown, the hierarchization mechanisms that emerge from the relationships tend to anthropomorphize the nonhuman that crosses the garden, attributing a superior status to and generating alliances with some nonhuman actors, to which, as a consequence, positive anthropomorphic characteristics are attributed at a discursive level. As Braidotti warns us (2013: 79):

Anthropomorphizing them (...) may be a noble gesture, but it is inherently flawed, on two scores. Firstly, it confirms the binary distinction human/animal by benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others. Secondly, it denies the specificity of animals [but also of other nonhumans I would add] altogether, because it uniformly takes them as emblems of the transspecies, universal ethical value of empathy.

While I would agree on an ethical ground with this statement, I also argue that it is nevertheless extremely interesting to highlight a withdrawal from this trend with respect to the Eurocentric system of thought and scientific classification that categorize the nonhuman as intrinsically different, and therefore justify its inferiorization on a political and practical level. As Bennett (2010) reminds us, in fact, a certain degree of anthropomorphization of the nonhuman can be considered as a questioning of anthropocentrism and of the insurmountable division between the sphere of nature and the sphere of cultural/social (Descola 2013), bringing to an hybridization of the naturalistic ontology with different ways of being in an entangled world.

*Field notes, April 2018*

I start watering and I realize how I fell back again in logocentrism. I still feel restless. After several minutes, the only human in the garden, I begin to

relax. Finally, the nonhuman presences that cohabit and build this place are opened to my gaze, to my touch, to my hearing, to my nose. In watering, my skirt gets wet, my hands get dirty with soil, which sticks to my wet skin, giving a feeling that my body perceives as anything but pleasant. But that reveals my contact with otherness. Plants have grown tremendously since the last time I saw them. The parcel is teeming with plant life, it is almost impossible to see the soil. It is a whole tangle of plants, some planted by us, others (perhaps most of them, in fact) grown by themselves. Watering, I make my way through the chickpea plants. Many green buds have begun to form on the ends of their stems. In the ground, which is now muddy from the water I poured, thousands of ants move swiftly, creeping up my leg, pricking me. Still wet, I scratch my hands. As always, I perceive on the skin the physical layer that I am used to considering as the physical boundary between my body and the rest of the world, and consider how the interaction with nonhumans, like any relationship with humans, needs time, attention and knowledge, and how annoying it can be.

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Obviously, the relationship with the nonhuman is not always peaceful. As Tsing (2015) reminds us, encounters are not always harmonious, but the relationship with otherness can allow us to establish a confrontation with other nonhuman actors with whom we co-inhabit the world, starting from the use of smell ("smell is the sign of the presence of another ", Tsing 2015: 46) and by paying attention to the sensations we feel through body materiality.

In the management of space and in the relationship between humans and nonhumans, gardeners do not act as a single collective actor, but some voices and some bodies are stronger, reproducing a normalizing and controlling action. Analyzing the descriptions reported above, it clearly

emerged that there are nonhuman actors explicitly encouraged to enter the garden-assemblage (such as bees) while other actors are strongly discouraged from doing so (wasps, plants categorized as weeds).

### **5.3 Environmentalism of everyday life and newmaterialist politics**

As described so far, the mobilizations carried out by Roman gardeners are different from the socio-ecological mobilizations typical of the 1970s and 1990s (Della Porta 2014, Melucci 1989). They represent an alternative way of doing politics, which starts from a material action, implemented starting from a specific shared dispute and objective (Marres 2012) and which, being implemented at a material level and in a concrete space, is constantly built through more or less intentional (from a human perspective) negotiations and interactions, with the nonhuman (Certomà 2016b). Unlike the ecological movements of the previous phase, many human actors who take part in the action, do not recognize an explicit shared political ideology in guiding their action. Yet, their action can be interpreted as politics (Schlosberg, Cole, 2015), because through daily practice and continuous negotiation with human actors, public institutions and nonhuman actors, they continually modify a specific urban space (Tornaghi, Certomà 2015). As I will explain more precisely shortly, the activity carried out in the garden moves from a negative political approach, based on conflict, to an affirmative, constructivist, performative approach, which, in the words of the gardeners, tries to avoid any form of conflict through a synthesis between different visions and ways of existence. It is an approach to action that embodies the theories of what have been defined in the theoretical chapter of this text as neomaterialist political activations (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Braidotti 2016, Certomà 2016b, Marres 2012). An analysis that takes into account power relations, as I did, is

therefore fundamental in the critical reading of these activations, to understand how, beyond the discursive dimension emerged from speeches, interviews, assemblies, flyers, and digital materials distributed by gardeners who pursue the initiative, - all of which always define the action as negotiated, shared, inclusive, and non-conflicting- actually, as we have seen, different actors continuously associate and / or enter into conflicts.

### **5.3.1 Environmental politics in the VIII Municipality**

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the VIII Municipality, where the Tre Fontane urban gardens are located, is characterized by a high presence of environmental initiatives (shared vegetable gardens and parks, environmental associations, with which the Tre Fontane urban garden has a close network relationship) and by an attention to environmental issues implemented by public institutions at a local level. This attention is also testified by the fact that, at the last town hall elections, which were held in June 2018, several candidates were more or less actively involved in urban gardens on the territory. Specifically:

- The person who ran for the presidency of the town hall for the 5Stars Movement Group is an activist of the Garbatella urban garden;
- The person who ran for the presidency of the town hall for the center-right coalition is a member of the Tre Fontane garden;
- Three people who ran for election in support to the center-left coalition are very active activists, two in the Tre Fontane garden and one in the Garbatella urban garden.

In May 2018, a debate was held between the three coalition candidates in the Tre Fontane garden, specifically dedicated to environmental issues, and I was the moderator. In the next chapter I will return to some points addressed during the debate, focusing my attention on the decorum / decay dichotomy, which, among other things, emerged within the discussion.

The presence of activists of shared gardens of the VIII Municipality territory in the three main political lists that ran for representation is a strong demonstration of the post-ideological nature of collective activations that give life to these shared urban gardens. This shows the dismissal of ways of self-managing urban spaces centered on strong political ideologies and normative visions (Certomà 2016). Instead, the focus is on material action aimed at responding to specific locally situated issues, rather than creating larger long-term imagery.

### **5.3.2 From militancy to local activism**

The Urban garden Tre Fontane, as described so far, can therefore be read as a citizens' based initiative that moves from negative, conflictual, militant political actions carried out by "antagonistic subjectivities" (Roggero 2016: 96), to a kind of activism of everyday life, a volunteering practice carried out to modify the territory in which gardeners live (Marres 2012), conceptualized by them, at a discursive level, as an affirmative practice (Braidotti 2013).

Here below, I report some short quotes of my field notes and interviews to make more explicit what I am referring to:

I have been a member of the Communist Party for many years, I worked in the section, I have always been socially oriented. This is

why I found myself at ease here [in the garden], because there is no gate here, we try to keep the space open, which for me is very important. (...) Rather than activism, I have a long history of militancy behind me, I've done a lot of it, I believed in it... now a little less. You know, I discovered that here we are, leftists or non-leftists, this is not important, but there are those who come from the scout experience, those who come from the experience of political militancy like me, in the PCI (Italian Communist Party), or from other kinds on militancy. Now, there is nothing left in my opinion, and it is hard to have a kind of open militancy. It's a different phase (Interview with Antonella, July 2018).

*Field notes, December 2017*

Without me asking questions, Claudio begins to talk about his past. At this point, I notice his outfit, which, as usual, appears to be movementist. He is wearing a pair of wide military trousers, a hooded sweatshirt, an orange T-shirt with a Sylvester cat with the words "communist cat", and a pair of round golden glasses. He tells me that when he was about twenty years old, after graduating from high school, he left home and moved to Venice. There, he became part of an anarchist group that taught him a lot. Then, he was drafted into military service and, in order to avoid it, enrolled in college to study biology t. He gave a few exams, and began his training on relationships with plants and animals. He never finished college, but his interest in animals and plants behaviour stayed, and he continued reading texts, and puts them into practice in the garden. Then, once in Rome, he became very active in the movement for the right to houses (lotta per la casa). Referring to his current commitment in the vegetable garden Tre Fontane he tells me:

There is no longer an avant-garde that pushes forward, but I try to slowly shift the balance through non-ideological relationships.

Sometimes we need to withdraw from a militant point of view. To be honest, most of the times, I don't have anything to do with half of the people in here. But after all, the ultimate goal is to create a reality that is as much as possible inclusive, even among people who have different worldviews. And this is a way to try to stem the conflicts, which are increasingly characterizing our society (Interview with Claudio, September 2018).

Guido's career is also very interesting. I had many conversations with him in the past months, but he preferred not to be interviewed at the recorder. Strongly involved in movements of the extra-parliamentary radical left of the 1970s, after a few years in prison, he moved away from politics and created a social cooperative. He explained me several times how in the initiative of the vegetable garden he sees the possibility of creating a project at the local level which could involve people with extremely different ideological vision who, nevertheless, decide to collaborate to build a delimited and specific initiative.

## **5.4 Conclusions**

From these descriptions it appears evident the shift of the subjects interviewed from a political activation based on conflict (negative) to a perspective that tries to focus on affirmativity, on construction and inclusion; from a militancy inspired by the twentieth century oppositional, dualistic political action - militancy parties, radical social movements- (Certomà 2016b) to a form of volunteering that starts from the construction of practices in everyday life (Marres 2012).

And yet, beyond the discursive level, as we have seen, conflicts continually emerge in the material relationships, although they are almost never explicitly explained in a discursive manner. As in this case, the

creation of a shared green space to replace a so called-"abandoned" area, makes conflicts arise, even if these conflicts are not debated or problematized. Furthermore, garden activists, in transforming a specific urban space of their neighbourhood, somehow work for free in the management of urban space, a job which was previously a prerogative of public institutions (Ernwein, Tollis 2017).

*Field notes, December 2017*

There is a strong desire to do something, an energy that is perceived, but that seems to be driven more by a will of making one's own presence explicit in the garden, rather than by the desire to create together. This situation seems to be linked to the problems of interaction with the administration, which has not yet approved a resolution for the regulation of the roman gardens, leaving the gardeners in a situation of partial illegality (in November they have been issued an allocation by the local municipality, but they cannot install facilities to store tools or other common materials, nor gather or perform social activities indoors). Then, the situation has been worsened by the regulation of volunteering in green areas approved in July 2017, which deems associations legally responsible and charges them for the costs. . For this reason, the members of the association's board, and, most of all. The president of the association, are very focused on these issues, as they feel the weight of responsibility entirely on them. Other gardeners perceive the situation as an act of submission to the institutions, a lack of autonomy that blocks the creative energies and the possibility of action in the gardens. This is probably the reason why the group of elderly men is building tables and making changes to the common area, to reaffirm their presence on a physical and material level.

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Setting itself up as an excellent example of neomaterialist politics, the action carried out in the garden Tre Fontane claims to be a type of activation that overcomes the ideological divisions that guided twentieth-century political practices (Braidotti 2013). Many of the gardeners with whom I interacted in several occasions, during interviews, conversations, and public meetings, especially those having a leftist political orientation, expressed the will of overcoming conflictual dynamics, while practicing a daily interaction based on confrontation and inclusion of diverging perspectives as well as commitment in the material management of the garden. This is a characteristic of newmaterialist affirmative politics, which dismiss the concept of conflict in favour of negotiations and nonconflictual, antinormative conversations (Latour 2017; Pellizzoni 2015; Rebughini 2018). Still, conflicts do not disappear just because they are elicited from the discursive dimension. Indeed, as exposed, conflicts actually continually materialize, between humans and between humans and nonhumans, risking to be dangerously invisibilised (Pellizzoni 2015). As it appears from the field notes above, the responsibility of the management of the territory, that falls on volunteers, generates tensions and conflicts. On the other hand, this management has been implemented by some gardeners by discouraging the presence of unwanted human actors (as in the case of the fountain and fruit trees described in the second paragraph of this chapter). Indeed, space is always a product of interactions generated by relational modalities (Harvey 1996; 2008) and is built and modified over time due to unbalanced power relations. The impossibility to freely experiment with urban spaces is strictly related to the location in a subaltern place in the social system (Signorelli 1999). For this reason, material action, although described as affirmative and non-conflictual in the speeches of the gardeners, can generate phenomena of spatial injustice, towards other

actors, human and nonhuman, who cross the garden (Angelo, Wachsmuth 2015; Farias, Bender 2010; Heynen et al., 2006). This is even more relevant because of the greater negotiating power of the gardeners towards public institutions. In short, at the very basis of the conflicts that arise in the garden lies the understanding of the care and management of the area which can be intended either as an open-ended initiative, based on shared responsibility and mutual relationships, or as a process that allows to control, normatively regulate, and appropriate the area.

As seen in many cases, even the relationship with the nonhuman, described at a dialogic level as an harmonic and peaceful connection, turns out to be conflictual. And yet, the possibility of collectively interacting within an urban space in which the action of public institutions has become increasingly sporadic over the years, also allows some gardeners, as illustrated in this chapter, to experiment with ways of interaction that seem to depart from the anthropocentric hierarchical paradigm of naturalistic ontology (Descola 2013). From the field observation it emerged that some plant species and insects, with which the gardeners come into close relationships of care and alliance, are anthropomorphized. They are thought to have sensations and personalities which are usually attributed to humans (such as fear, pain, nervousness). Many of the gardeners talk to the plants that anthropomorphize. If on one hand, this behaviour reconfirms their logocentrism, on the other hand it also acknowledges subjectivity to these nonhuman actors. Anthropomorphized actors are encouraged to be part of the garden, cared for, not eradicated. Anthropomorphization can be a step towards decentralizing the human subject and questioning the insurmountable separation between nature and culture as well as the separation between human and nonhuman on which the Western modern way of being in the world is based (Bennett

2010). As we have seen, anthropomorphized actors in the garden are given a superior status. Still, this status takes the form of an extension of privilege given to some specific actors, through the extension of human characteristics (Braidotti 2016) to nonhuman actors. This attitude does not question human privileges, nor displaces the human subject from its centrality in controlling the area. Moreover, nonhuman actors with which gardeners enter in relationships of closer care and alliance are often those who provide free labor (bees, pollinating and making honey) and food (the edible plants found in the cultivated parcels). Conversely, wasps are highly discouraged from crossing the space, and in the flyer shared by one gardener in a Whatsapp group (the flyer I reported in this chapter) wasps are defined as “whores”. The term “whore” is, indeed, widely used as a category applied to the human, to stigmatize women who subvert the power of control exercised over their bodies by fathers, husbands, or parental groups (Tabet 2004). Since a “whore” is a woman who escapes male control, then the wasp is defined a “whore” because it does not submit to the control of human agency, nor provides the human with free labour that is visibilised (as it happens, on the contrary, in the case of bees, whose pollination work and honey production are widely recognized by gardeners).

Moreover, the nonhuman, if one learns to read it, clearly expresses its capacity for action: bees and wasps act by transforming space through their action, as well as the so-called weed species do. These, despite the constant pruning, manage to propagate with their spores and seeds, continuously transforming the garden as a hybrid assemblage of human and nonhuman actors, coming into conflict with the action of humans who try to discourage their presence, and demonstrating their agency by re-emerging in a continuous transformative flow, whose temporality deviates

from the temporality of the gardeners. The garden, therefore, emerges as an ever-transforming social space (Latour 1993) through the interaction between different actors. In the next chapter, I will move to the analysis of power imbalances in the management of Tre Fontane garden, and, more in general, in the management of green spaces in the city of Rome, particularly focusing on those actors that are commonly identified in media and institutional discourses as “decay”.

## 6. Vegetal politics between decorum and decay

"Nature is entering the city, and it is starting to be scary. And we are not only talking about animals, wild boars, seagulls, foxes, wolves that cross the city boundaries: the metropolis is also invaded by vegetation now without rules. (...) There are trees that grow luxuriant, beautiful to see, as long as they are in their place, but then, it happens that - after years of lack of pruning - in Donna Olimpia road a family ends up with the branches of an elm tree in their house "(Il Messaggero, Italian newspaper, "A Tree broke into our House ". Rome as in a Horror Movie", 8 July 2019).



Image 25 Roman trees in a local newspaper<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Source: Image taken from the newspaper "Il Messaggero"

The few lines here above are taken from the Roman newspaper "Il Messaggero", a newspaper that covers with particular attention the growing presence of nonhuman, vegetable, and animal actors, once sporadically present in the city, or however strongly limited and shaped by human action, an action primarily carried out by the relevant public institutions (environmental department, gardening service). From the quote above, we read that trees "are beautiful... as long as they are in their place". And being at one's place means subjecting oneself to anthropocentric canons of beauty, which over time have built up urban space as an easily traversable and usable space for certain humans only. As described in chapter three of this text, in the last decade funds invested by the public administration in the management of the Roman green care have dramatically decreased, as has the number of personnel responsible for these maintenance activities. For this reason, the range of action of the nonhumans living in the city has become increasingly materially explicit, as can be read in the excerpt from the article reported above, one of the many articles available on the internet that describe similar scenes of daily interaction between humans and nonhumans in the city, where the nonhumans clearly exceeds with their own corporeity the limits previously imposed on them by human actors. In many of these newspaper articles, the presence and non-compliance of nonhuman actors which break into urban space is taken as a clear proof of the lack of decorum and of the consequent state of decay in which the city of Rome has fallen. Similarly, as already mentioned in the previous chapters, the category of decay is often associated with the presence of informal settlements (see page 33, chapter 3 of this text, for the analysis of the images on the Facebook profile of the current president of the Environment Commission of the Municipality of Rome, which describe as decay, as an obstacle to urban decorum, the presence of informal camps and sheds of homeless people). It has emerged

very frequently in the interviews and conversations I had during my fieldwork period – also in the Urban Gardens Tre Fontane – that the issue of the "decay" of the city is particularly relevant and frequently associated with the lack of management of urban green spaces. Furthermore, as reported in chapter 3, the current Capitoline Council has established a specific office, under the direct control of the Mayor, for the preservation of urban decorum. For this reason, in this chapter I will proceed to describe how the categories of decorum and decay and the management of public green areas are intertwined. I will focus on the interactions between humans and between human and nonhuman living beings, and on how the lens provided by the two categories of decorum and decay often guides the action of many active citizens reproducing hierarchies between different actors (human and nonhuman). I will begin by providing some semantic context on the possible meaning of the two terms, then I will contextualize them in the lexicon used by the Capitoline institution and in questionnaires submitted to activists of the Gardens Tre Fontane during my research. In the second part of the chapter I will analyze how the management of the Tre Fontane Garden area and the perspective of gardeners are often informed by the application of these two conceptual categories. I will therefore concentrate on the kind of hierarchical practices and power relations that are reproduced in the creation of space. I called this chapter "vegetal politics" because, in my analysis, I will focus not only on citizen-based policies, public policies, and politics "on" plants, but also on the role that the vegetal assumes as a political actor capable of modifying urban space, as well as on the similarities between marginalized human and plant actors in the city. In order to do so, I will combine, as I did in the previous chapter, the approach of urban political ecology, which is particularly attentive to how spatial and environmental inequalities and injustice are reproduced in and reproduce urban spaces, with a posthumanist

orientation, which is aware of the role of the nonhuman living beings in the co-construction of reality. In doing so, I will try to be in a constant dialogue with theoretical elements of the two approaches.

## 6.1 Decorum, decay, and environmental politics in the city

According to the Treccani Encyclopedia (in "Parlare Civile", 2013), the term decay mainly means:

"Dishonor, debase, make morally abject". In general, it means "deteriorating, damaging, reducing to a bad state; (...) Degrading means" transforming oneself from a superior condition to a lower one, undergoing a regression (even in a biological sense), or, referring to natural environments, complex architectural, institutional, social bodies or communities, political or economic situations, and similar, deteriorate, undergo a gradual decline.

In the use of language, there is a growing tendency in public institutions and media to use the term decay to refer to the presence of homeless and jobless people. Their presence would undermine the possible redevelopment of urban spaces and the "decorum" of cities. See the link: <http://www.parlarecivile.it/argomenti/povertà-ed-emarginazione/degrado.aspx>, for a selection a selection of Italian newspaper articles, using the term "decay" to refer to informal settlements of homeless or undocumented people, and defining the consequent evictions carried out by public institutions (police or urban police) as "anti-decay actions". Indeed, an online Roman newspaper has dedicated a specific section to the topic "decay", with articles published on the subject at least weekly.

As the term decay is increasingly used in the language of institutions, journals, and citizen-based groups active in the Roman context (first of all in the group named Retake Rome, as saw in chapter 3), it is often coupled with the term decorum. In resolution 222 of the City Council of December 4, 2018, called "Planning Activities for the Coordination of Urban Decorum", urban decorum is defined as:

The beauty and dignity of urban space, especially in those parts deputed to collective use, which require a multidisciplinary and superordinate approach and the activity of coordination of several subjects and multiple skills, in order to guarantee, in a given territory and / or in one part of the city, the realization of interventions whose effects are interpreted by citizens in the context of a unitary idea of harmony and decorum of the city, through the removal of degrading situations in the city and the pursuit of uplifting conditions of beauty and harmony.

The contrast between urban decorum and decay is therefore formally explained in this definition which, despite being rather generic, testifies the importance assumed by the theme in the agenda of the central Capitoline institution. To better understand what types of action are undertaken and advertised in the framework of the attention to urban decorum of Roman institutions, I consulted the official Facebook pages of both the Chairman of the Environment Commission and of the resigning Councillor of the Department for Environmental Sustainability of Rome. Below are some examples, with photos and texts of the online posts:



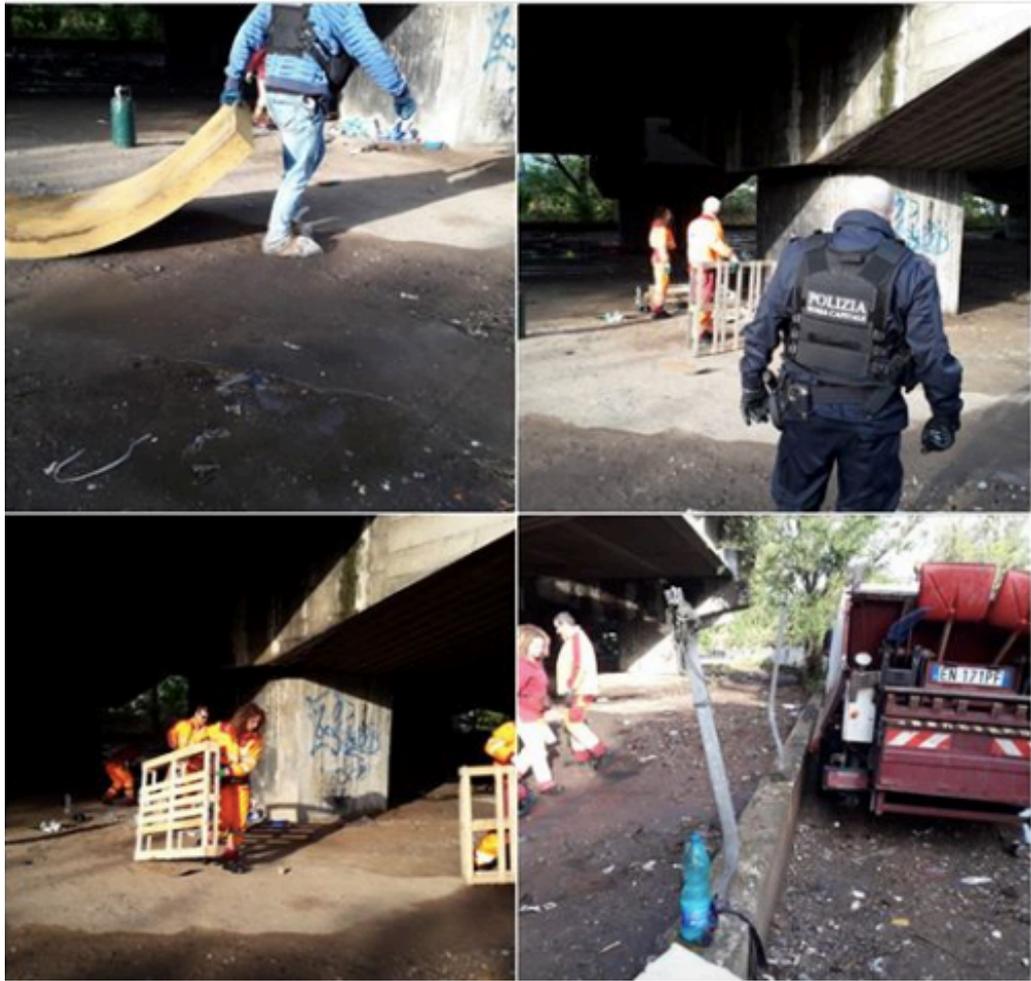
**Image 26 Eviction of wild plants**

8 March 2019: "Starting from this morning in via di Grotta Perfetta, in the VIII Municipality, a crew of "AMA Decoro" has conducted a vast operation of mowing and decontamination of the urban greenery. The commitment of the Environment Commission and of the Environmental Protection Department for a #Romapulita persists".



**Image 27 Eviction of informal settlements**

3 March 2019: “Yesterday morning an impressive operation of decontamination took place under the Magliana flyover in the 11th Municipality, where illegal camps had long stood: a veritable repository of decay, dirt, and petty crimes. In a joint operation, the PICS Unit of the Local Police, Ama Decoro, the XI Municipality, and the Garden Service, cleaned up the area with a bobcat and returned it to the citizenship with a new look. The Environment Commission and the Environmental Protection Department would like to thank the operators for the valuable work they have performed to protect the citizens of Rome and the urban decorum. #Romapulita”.



**Image 28 Eviction of informal settlements**

May 23, 2019: “In the morning, under the Magliana flyover in the 11th Municipality, a joint intervention of control of the territory of Ama Decoro and the Local Police PICS Unit took place. In an area that had just recently been restored, some Roma people had reinstalled a small settlement. Two different garbage bins were dumped into the landfill. The commitment of the Environment Commission together with Mario Torelli continues for a #Romapulita ”.



**Image 29** Eviction of informal settlements

2 July 2019: “Yesterday morning the Tuscolano Group of the Local Police intervened to clear a slum with an attached landfill in a green area partly owned by the Municipality of Frascati, but included in the territory of the VII Municipality of the Roman city. (...) At the time of the demolition of the fifteen barracks that made up the settlement there were no occupants”.



**Image 30 Eviction of informal settlements**

23 July 2019: "Clearing of recovered land, Ama works hard in order to improve quality of life and public health in Rome. The facts bear witness to it. As shown in the images, the municipal company is proceeding with the disposal of as much as 50 tons of waste in via Alagno, at the crossroad with via Portuense, after the Marconi Group of the Local Police carried out the eviction of an illegal settlement. Law, decorum, and cleanliness are the key words that guide the work of Roma Capitale in its daily activity".



**Image 31 Eviction of informal settlements**

26 July 2019: "The Local Police raided Colle del Sole District in the 11th Municipality. In via Alagno, at the intersection with Via Portuense, officers of the Marconi group removed 4 barracks built with makeshift materials, in the vicinity of a communal area in via delle Vigne, at the intersection with via Lanfranco Maroi. About 15 tons of waste that Ama will have to dispose of in the next days have been found. At the time of the intervention no illegal occupants were present".



**Image 32 Removal of weeds**

2 February 2019: "The clearance of vegetation has begun in the green area of the Canneto in via Mattia Battistini street, in the northern part of the city. The intervention, made possible thanks to the awarding of a 4 million euro contract for the maintenance of horizontal greenery, consists in the elimination of weed vegetation and the removal of the resulting material. (...) So, our work continues to restore the decorum and safety of the green areas of our city".

In the posts listed, the intervention carried out by the Environment Department of the Municipality against decay and for the restoration of urban decorum focuses on the removal of "infesting" vegetation, weeds, "illegal settlements", "shacks", and "makeshift houses". Plants and human actors dislodged by institutional action are guilty of having appeared with their corporeality, and having modified urban space outside the spatial, symbolic, and institutionally protected boundaries established by the formal city. . The vegetation defined as infesting becomes an obstacle to the "decorum and safety of green areas". Likewise, the presence of informal settlements is described as a "receptacle of decay and dirt". The human actors who gave birth to the evicted camps are completely dehumanized,

inferiorized, until they disappear. In the descriptions there is never any mention of the life paths and future destinations of the displaced people, who are described as a mere obstacle for the "citizens" (a category that is first of all political as well as normative, from which these subjects are thus implicitly excluded). The belongings of the evicted people, removed during the "cleaning" actions, are often categorized in the posts as "waste" and promptly removed by the action of the Municipal Company for Waste Disposal (AMA). The semantics used in the hashtag present in the posts, #Romapulita, is particularly violent, praising evictions of human beings and the removal of "infesting" plants, both, thus, even more explicitly associated to that of garbage.

The categories of decorum and decay (as well as those of beauty and harmony, present in the definition given in the Capitoline resolution reported above) are not neutral categories at all, but historically and politically located ones, negotiated between the various actors, human or nonhuman, that cross and inhabit public space. I will examine this topic more in depth in the second part of the chapter. However, a constant attention to the theme of urban decorum is not an exclusive ambition of the current administration, but it is part of a much broader process that goes on a national and international scale (Bukowsky 2019) and that, as we saw in chapter 3, is in continuity with practices and discourses carried out in the last two decades in the urban context.

It is interesting to note that, in the Capitoline resolution of 4 December 2018 mentioned above, and in the internet page of the Municipality of Rome dedicated to the newly created Urban Decorum Coordination Office explicit reference is made to the importance of dialogue with associations and groups of citizenship active in the Roman territory. In fact, in June

2019, the Capitoline administration presented a project for a participatory budget of 20 million euros, named "Rome Decides". The project was aimed at collecting proposals to protect the decorum of urban spaces and green areas. Residents or domiciled in the city of Rome, – students or workers –, could present projects. The proposals were voted online, and the administration will choose later, in a second phase, which project to implement among the most voted ones. The connection between management of green areas, urban decorum, and active citizenship in the city emerges here very clearly. I will investigate this connection thoroughly in the next paragraphs, highlighting how it is not neutral, but rather strongly guided and structured by power relations; I will move on, then, to analyse the specific case study of Tre Fontane.

## **6.2 Decorum and decay in the Garden Tre Fontane**

Among the projects presented for the participatory budget of the municipality of Rome 2019, a project was also presented for the area of the Tre Fontane Park, within which the Shared Gardens of the Tre Fontane are located. The project was presented by the local Retake Group, the association I mentioned in chapter 3, which aims, as stated on their website under the heading "who we are", to "improve the quality of life through actions aimed at reducing decay". Since the project presented involves the park where the gardens on which I focused my ethnographic investigation are located, I asked Claudio, one of the most active and involved people, in the association that manages the gardens (also at the administrative level), if the association was involved in the project. He replied negatively. In the months of June and July 2019, however, I saw several online posts made by the local Retake Group to invite people to vote for the project presented in the Park Area of the Tre Fontane. In the posts, which also appeared on the Facebook page of the Tre Fontane

Gardens, it was specified that the project was presented in collaboration with the Association Tre Fontane and with the neighborhood committee of the area. This discrepancy between what I was told by Claudio and what was reported instead on the online page of the gardens, probably shows a latent, implicit conflict, between people of the association, with respect to the vision on the management of the area (issues of experimentation, "urban decorum", and practices of inclusion that are both discursive and material at the same time). Another heated debate exists around alliances to be implemented (for example in the case of Retake, an association which is particularly connoted at the city level as forcibly depoliticized, and whose action is all centered on the theme of decorum, cleanliness, normalization of urban spaces). In the project presented for the participatory budget, among the various actions to "make the area more decent, and therefore usable", the "removal of existing illegal settlements" was explicitly mentioned. Actually, at the moment, the presence of informal residential settlements is almost non-existent. Over the years most of the people have been displaced, or have moved away due to the massive attention of active citizenship groups and local newspapers in the area of the Tre Fontane Park. Some parts of the park contain material residues of occasional human presence, such as cooking pans, remnants of small fires, and clothes. This attention is demonstrated by titles of local newspapers and online pages such as "Degradation and Free Dogs in the "Park of the Frogs", or by the many articles on this subject of the online newspaper Romatoday. It is apparent that the presence of people who live in informal camps is described as a problem of lack of decorum, order, and harmony of public space, a space which is, instead, designed to meet the needs of pleasure and leisure of a certain type of human (wealthy, in possession of documents, a house, a stable residence).

### 6.2.1 Decay: a pertinent category?

To understand how the conceptual category of decay, and its semantic opposite, decorum, were relevant in the systems of values of the gardeners' of the Tre Fontane Shared Gardens, I submitted to 30 of them a questionnaire with some questions on the subject. I chose to submit the questionnaire anonymously rather than recording interviews, because, in my opinion, with the first method the possibility to obtain truthful answers was higher. I submitted the questionnaire at the end of my fieldwork period, so that the answers given would not risk guiding the direction of my investigation. It is a term, decay, which has been very often used in the conversations I heard, in the assemblies and meetings I attended, in the semi-structured interviews I conducted in the months of research in Tre Fontane Gardens. It is also, as already discussed above, an extremely recurrent term in the language of local institutions –even in formal documents– in local newspapers, and in the language of territorial associations such as Retake.

Before analyzing the answers given by the gardeners to the questionnaire, I will report below a graph on the distribution by age of the people who answered. Then, I will proceed to analyse the results. In the next section I will combine what is presented here with what emerged from my ethnographic work, analysing it in the light of the theoretical framework of reference.



The answers given can be divided into different types: answers that emphasize material lacking: lack of cleanliness, dirt, lack of management of spaces and urban facilities; answers that emphasize the lack of sense of community: sharing, cooperation, social exclusion (racism, cultural brutality, loneliness). In the first group of answers the most common term is dirt (reported in five answers, plus three other variations of the concept), followed by abandonment (a term which, as we shall see in the next paragraph, is also often used to describe the state of the area of the park before the start of the shared garden project) and by no rules. This type of response therefore confirms a conception of decay understood as an obstacle to a hygienic (in contrast to dirt, garbage) and normative (in contrast to absence of rules and order) vision of the city. I connected the "Retake" answer (given by one of the gardeners) to this conceptual area. As expressed in the previous pages, this is the name of a national association, branched at the local level, very present in Rome and also in the VIII Municipality. It focuses its action on fighting degradation through actions of clean-up, accommodation of urban furnishings, and removal of writings from the walls, all activities in line with the answers that could be found in the subdivision based on the material dimension.

Here below is a table with the complete list of answers:

<b>Answers with a material dimension</b>	<b>Answers with a value-based dimension</b>
State Absence of the State	Loss of community values
<b>Abandonment (3)</b>	Alteration of human relations,
Lack of cleanliness and order	Lack of sharing
<b>Dirtiness (5)</b>	Racism
Lack of management of urban solid waste	Cultural brutality, Asociality
Poor management of green areas and roads, poor park maintenance, neglect	Loneliness
Dirt on the streets from abandoned garbage dog faeces	Poor civil and environmental awareness
Absence of rules	Lack of respect for others
Disregard for rules	Lack of belonging
Illegal dumps, areas of non-maintained human settlements	Corruption
Retake	
Dirty streets	

I then asked which terms they considered opposed to the concept of decay. Here below a world cloud of answers:



Also, in this case, I arranged the answers in a different order. The answers with a value-based dimension gave importance to: participation (answer given seven times, plus one declined as "active participation"), to the concept of care (given five times), belonging, sharing and collaboration, territorial rooting. The material-based answers were, instead, focused on the concept of: cleaning (used in five responses plus three declined as cleaning, keeping existing facilities clean, and garbage collection),

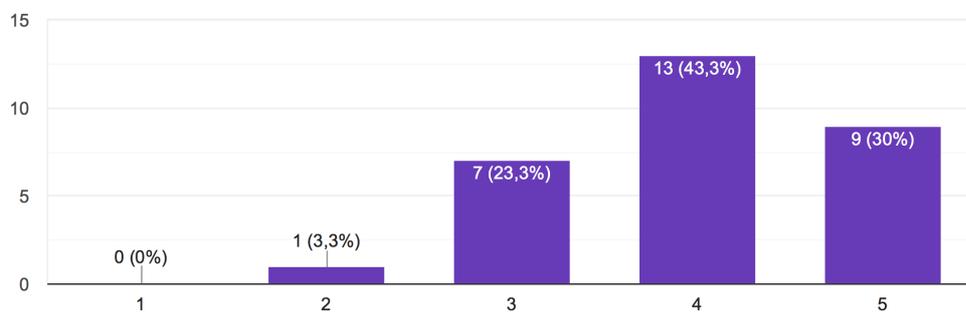
maintenance, order, normality, decorum. For these answers the contrast to degradation seems to be mainly focused on an aesthetic plan based on the management of the material space devoted to maintaining order, street furniture (creating flower beds) and cleanliness: all elements typical of the anthropocentric vision and city regulations described in chapter 3 and in the first part of this chapter.

Below are enlisted the complete answers, divided into the two categories I created:

<b>Answers with a value-based dimension</b>	<b>Answers with a material dimension</b>
<b>Participation (7)</b>	Presence in the territory, cleaning
Association, involvement, being together, Common initiatives	<b>Cleanliness (5)</b>
Attention to collective things	Collect the garbage we produce,
Possibility for everyone to use public facilities without dangers	Keep existing facilities clean
Environment, sustainability	Decorum
<b>Care (4)</b>	Maintenance
Action	Creation of more flower beds
Greater collaborative spirit	Normality, civilization
Openness, sharing projects, Attention and respect for others and for the commons	Order
Civic culture, active participation,	
Local government	
Belonging, socializing, recreating connections with the territory	

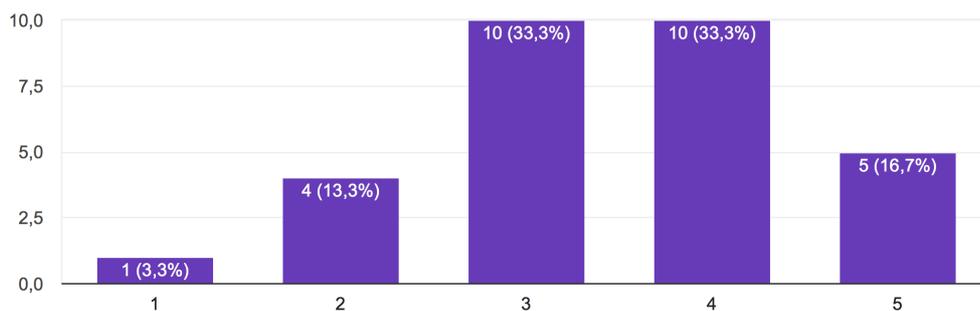
Finally, I will report some graphs on the perception of decay according to the people interviewed, respectively, in the city of Rome, in the VIII Municipality (in which the Gardens Tre Fontane are located), and in the Tre Fontane Park. For each question people were asked to provide an answer assigning a value from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

In your opinion, how much the concept of decay is associated with the city of Rome:



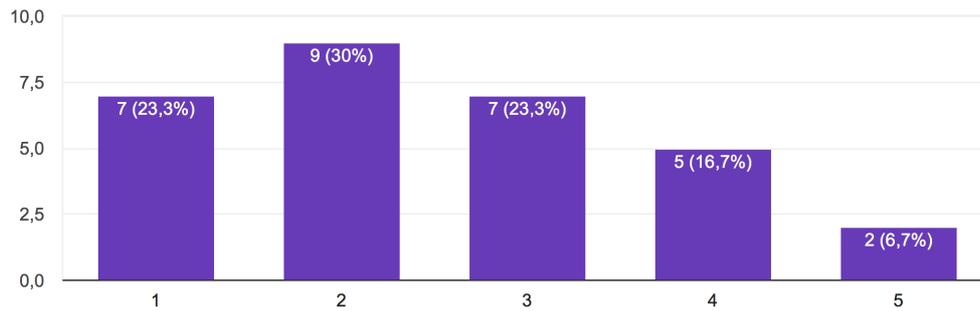
Graph 9 Decay and the city of Rome

In your opinion how much the concept of decay can be associated with the VIII Municipality (where the Tre Fontane Gardens are located):



Graph 10 Decay and the VIII Municipality

In your opinion, how much the concept of decay could be associated with the Tre Fontane Park:



**Graph 11 Decay and the Tre Fontane Park**

The first two answers were given a fairly high value, confirming the perception that the urban space of the city and the municipality are quite degraded. The value attributed to the perception of degradation was much lower, then, in the Tre Fontane Park, probably a sign that the presence of the shared gardens is considered as a way to contrast the decay - whether one assumes it in the declination connected to the lack of management of urban facilities, or in its value-based version. Only two people out of thirty have, in fact, attributed a maximum value to this last question. As we will see in the next section, most of the people interviewed considered the area degraded and abandoned before the project of the gardens began, a tendency confirmed also by the many conversations I had during the field period. In the next section, after giving an overview of how the garden area was perceived before the birth of the shared gardens project, I will proceed to question the management of space and the interaction between humans and nonhumans within the gardens in the light of the two conceptual categories of decorum and decay described so far.

## 6.3 Vegetal politics

*Field notes, April 2018*

I arrive in the garden a bit late for the collective works. The works are set for half past nine, I reach the garden just after ten in the morning. The sun is already high, it is hot, and as usual over the weekend in this period, I find many people intent in working on their plots. Walking along the path I notice that this morning many of the plants that had almost covered it have been eradicated. Only the orange flowers on the margins of the didactic garden have been spared, a sign that not all plants are treated in the same way, meaning that probably, despite the narrative, in practice human action is guided by hierarchies. While crossing the new gardens I am not able to see anyone in the distance, nor can I hear any noise. So I begin to wonder if nobody has come. Actually, when I arrive, I find Francesco, already busy hoeing, Cecilia, Loredana, and Gianni who are busy talking, and Laura, who is removing some herbs. Today's working day will also be dedicated to eradicating wild plants ("weeds" or "invasive plants" as defined by some of the gardeners) and to removing waste from the area. After the work carried out in the last few weeks, in the area where the winter garden will rise, the presence of wild plants is strongly diminished. They have been replaced by the gardeners with colorful flowers and a few trees. I approach Laura, and ask her why she removes plants growing in the area to replace them with flowers. She replies that she does this mainly to clean up the area, which was previously heavily degraded. She tells me that in cleaning up, a lot of residual material comes out that pollutes the soil and consequently the plants themselves. She does it also to improve the variety of species with which bees come in contact. In fact, the winter garden is located just below the new eight garden hives. "I do it mainly for the poor bees". I remember that Claudio recently told me that bees can fly

up to ten kilometers to find flowers, so maybe it is not so necessary for them to have flowers so close to the beehives? I stop under the gazebo in the middle of a flat area, and place my things on the wooden table below. Gianni approaches me smiling. I ask him how the work is proceeding. He replies that it is going well, that for several weeks now people have been taking part in cleaning the area and that in a short time it will be usable for collective dinners and initiatives open to the neighborhood. He updates me on the fact that in the preceding weeks, many wheelbarrows of weeds and of various kinds of waste were removed. In digging up the soil they found lots of rubble, bricks, tiles, edil materials of various types, plastic. Meanwhile, Cecilia and Loredana are also approaching, and join the conversation. "The discovery of all this construction waste is a clear indication that this space was once completely abandoned and was used as an illegal dump," Cecilia says. And Loredana adds "here people came to burn objects to make copper for resale. I live nearby, and the smell of the fumes reached the buildings. Since the time shared gardens were started, they have not come anymore".

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In the recounts of the history of the area where the shared gardens are located today, it was almost always reported to me that the area was once used as a landfill, it was particularly degraded, abandoned, and needed to be cleared. The discovery – that I have repeatedly witnessed – of various construction materials and waste during the work of resoration of the space, materially shows that the area was, at least in part, used precisely as a landfill. Also, the plants categorized as invasive grass or weeds concur, in this vision, to the decay of the area (which was therefore in need to be "cleared", as indicated in Laura's words). During the interviews on the theme of decorum/decay, as a last question I asked what was there in the

area of the shared gardens before the project began. The question was an open-ended one. This below is the word cloud of the answers:



In this case, the answers were very uniform. Out of all the answers, the answer "a dump" (12 replies) prevailed, followed by "abandoned area" (8 replies, plus 2 similar ones- partially abandoned, underused), and "degraded area" (5 replies). Another quite common response was the presence of "illegal settlements" (3 answers, plus "area attended by squatters, and Roma people occupation"). These were extremely recurrent words uttered in the conversations I witnessed during the months of my fieldwork to explain the condition of the area before the vegetable gardens

began, and the same words were confirmed in some of the semi-structured interviews that I conducted (as well as in the 30 structured questionnaires analysed in the word cloud above).

Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, in June 2018 I was asked by the Tre Fontane Association to moderate a debate between the three candidates for the presidency of the VIII Municipality for the municipal elections of June 2018. The debate, which took place in the Tre Fontane Gardens, focused on the environmental vision of the three candidates and their programs. Among the questions, I asked about their vision of urban regeneration / redevelopment, in particular in connection with the management of the green areas and the participation of citizens in the management of public spaces. In response, one of the three candidates (running for the center-right coalition) stated very explicitly that:

The first commitment of the institutions must be to make the green areas safer. Today we face a big challenge: if green areas are not experienced daily by citizens, their decay will be unavoidable. (...). Unfortunately, today we have so many green areas that because of tall grass and security problems are left in a state of decay and become places of bivouac. (...) It is a shame that the parks situated along via C. Colombo (a large road that runs through the VIII Municipality) cannot be enjoyed by families, by mothers, because there are gatherings of such people (...), and illegal camps (June 2018).

The position of the two other candidates is different, in particular that of the center-left coalition candidate, who replied that, in order to deal with the presence of informal settlements one should work on more inclusive housing policies, also in close synergy with the Department of Social Policy of the Municipality.

However, the president of the VIII Municipality in office until 2016 (center-left coalition) had expressed a different position, as reported by the newspaper Romatoday: "That area was abandoned and experienced a state of profound degradation. Because of the landfills and illegal settlements that were repeatedly formed there, the area was indeed in distress. And it was also a big problem for the resources of the administration. Eliminating persistent degraded areas, in fact, requires interventions that do not come at a cheap price. I can demonstrate how, during the two years before the experience of the gardens started, 5 or 6 interventions were carried out, which cost between 30 thousand and 70 thousand euros each. In addition to AMA, which carried out the clearing operations, police and, sometimes, social workers had to intervene".

These statements, uttered with a gap of three years from each other, show a certain transversality in the tendency of the city's institutional policy to associate the term decay with unkempt green areas, the presence of "illegal" settlements, and garbage. Instead, active citizenship organizations (for example, the Tre Fontane Gardens initiative which was mentioned in the article I quoted above) are seen by the institutions as a possibility to cut on their budget and as a contribution to the removal and eviction of those actors (human and otherwise) who are categorized as decay.

### **6.3.1 Vegetal politics and environmental justice: a posthuman political ecology**

Humans-plants relationships have been highly disregarded among social sciences till very recent times. In the last decade though, humans-plants assemblages started to be investigated, in particular by newmaterialist (Breda 2018; Mayers 2015), multispecies (Hartigan 2015;

Scapino 2015), and more-than-human (Barua 2014; Hinchliffe, Whatmore 2005; 2006; Pellegrini, Boudry 2014) accounts. Political ecology is also doing this, paying great attention to the role of power relations between the various actors, while remaining primarily focused on the issue of spatial justice from an anthropocentric perspective. As done so far, through the combination of the two approaches, I will proceed to the analysis of the co-creation of the garden area in terms of spatial justice (Rose, Wilson 2019) and plant politics (Head et al. 2014). If, on the one hand, institutional policies and politics pursued by active citizenship groups "on" the vegetal, ie the transformation and management of green areas, can implement mechanisms of spatial injustice, on the other hand the analysis of interactions between humans and vegetal actors is demonstrating the capacity for action and transformation of the latter, well outside the boundaries established by human intentionality. I therefore intend here for vegetal politics the assemblage, in continuous transformation, that is created between plants, institutional, and participative policies that are built around the management of the green in the city. The interactions that emerge can be of alliance, indifference or conflict, but they necessarily question the exceptionalism of the human subject (Head et al. 2014).

The materiality of the action that revolves around the term decay is markedly a form of vegetal politics. Decay speeches, in fact, legitimize and mobilize, at various levels, actions of spatial transformation, on the plants and towards other human actors that are assembled within the green areas. On the discursive level, it legitimizes the inferiorization, and therefore the material removal (through eradication in the case of plants, through evictions or the creation of material spaces from which unwanted bodies are pushed out, in the case of humans). This process is implemented from time to time by the institutions, or is anyway supported and favored

by them (especially in this phase, where, as we have seen, due to the decrease in funds and personnel, public institutions retreat from management of urban space), or by the gardeners. This dynamics is not necessarily intentional, but still, due to the position of power that the different actors embody, has concrete and material consequences in the transformation of space and in the exclusion of those who are hierarchically constructed as not suitable for that space, out of place, in need of removal, because they are catalyzed around the "decay" pole.

#### *Vegetal politics in the Gardens Tre Fontane*

The Tre Fontane Shared Garden was born, as explained in the previous chapter, from the gathering of some people residing in the neighbouring areas who decided to start a self-management project of a green space in their neighborhood. As seen so far, the area was perceived by many of them as degraded, and by almost all the people I met during my field research, as abandoned by institutions, empty, a landfill. The presence of some kind of landfill is certainly materially confirmed by the large number of construction material, plastic, and rubbish of various types which kept emerging during the works of management of the space, works in which I took part during my ethnographic period. Also, the presence of informal settlements, mentioned first of all in the anonymous questionnaires, and indicated by many as an example of decay, is confirmed by articles available on the internet, which report evictions occurred over the years, implemented by the institutions. Below is a photo of the area taken from an article in a local newspaper, which documented the state of "decay" of the Tre Fontane area in April 2017, a few months before I began my field research work. In the picture you can see clothes hanging out to dry, a sign of the presence of unsheltered people.



Graph 12 Tre Fontane Park<sup>61</sup>

A presence, now sporadic and temporally limited, of people creating temporary settlements in the area is also testified by the items of clothing and blankets that I have repeatedly noticed in the bushes on the edge of the gardens. The presence of the bodies of unsheltered people and the traces of their passage is also documented in other studies and interpreted as "out of place" within parks (Rose, Wilson 2019). Similarly, as described so far, the presence of vegetal actors categorized as spontaneous (weeds, invasive plants) are perceived by gardeners as obstacles to the full enjoyment of the area, and therefore systematically removed. Thus, a boundary is created between welcome actors that are encouraged to enter the area (for example bees, as described in chapter 5), actors that are cared for and protected (as in the case of the plants that make up the bamboo grove, or fruit trees, also analyzed in chapter 5), and actors that are strongly discouraged from staying, as they are labelled together under the category of decay. In this perspective "the ecological others", humans, plants,

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<sup>61</sup> Source: Romatoday (local newspaper) Online article "Tre Fontane Park: with the arrival of Spring illegal settlements flourish", 28 April 2017.

animals, are at risk of being "doubly victimized; not only do their bodies (...) often bear the costs of environmental exploitation, but they are perceived as a danger"(Ray 2013, in Oppermann 2015). However, if it is precisely on bodies that procedures of exclusion act, it is through the bodily presence in the public space (Butler 2017) that these actors, plants, animals, and humans, formally excluded from the processes of co-creation of reality (Bennett 2010; Descola 2013; Latour 1993), continue to show their capacity of action.

To summarize then, it is clear that for different human actors politically active at a material level on that territory (among gardeners), and for institutional actors, waste, plants categorized as invasive, and unsheltered homeless people fall in the category of decay. This categorization is an evident expression of the power relationships that guide the transformation of the garden space. A representative example of this is the fact that the hut and the gazebo built by the gardeners themselves are not perceived as degrading elements despite being structures built illegally (with no authorization from the institutions) using makeshift materials (wood, metals, recycled materials). They are not, however, perceived as degrading in the structuring of space because those who use them have greater power over that area and greater power in the negotiation with local institutions (which despite not legally recognizing the presence of the two structures, do not hinder their permanence). As expressed by Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003):

It is this nexus of power and the social actors carrying it that ultimately decide who will have access to or control over and who will be excluded from access to or control over resources or other components of the environment. In turn, these power geometries

shape the social and political configurations and the urban environments in which we live.

As I will describe with a fieldwork example in the next paragraph, however, precisely because the co-creation of space is determined by power relations and does not emerge from a single isolated source, unexpected actors can emerge and remain in space, overcoming the semantic-conceptual hierarchization that would bind their elimination.

### **6.3.2 The agential and symbolic power of vegetal life**

As we have seen, plants categorized as invasive, bad grasses or weeds, are systematically eradicated from their parcels by most gardeners (with some exceptions, as described in chapter 5) and even more so, are removed in the non-cultivated areas of the garden. Gardeners justify their action stating that the presence of these plants corrupts the state of the area, leading to a condition of degradation, abandonment, and disarray. Precisely for this reason, non-ornamental, non-horticultural plants, or in anyway plants that are not regulated by human action, are often perceived as a danger, even more so if they appear in urban spaces (Menozzi 2007), which have historically been consolidated, in the eurocentric paradigm, as a space purified from the nonhuman (Franklin 2017).

Metaphors used to describe the presence of plants categorized as infesting are quite eloquent. As very well described in the essay of the two social scientists Tassin and Kull (2012) "*Pour une autre représentation métaphorique des invasions biologiques*", the metaphors referring to plants that exceed the order imposed by the human, metaphors used not only by public and vehicular institutions (as expressed in the ethnographic observation previously reported in the document), but also frequently in the botanical language, are of "militarist", "nationalist", "xenophobic" and

clearly anthropocentric types. This is the case of terms like "invasive" and "infesting", to be eradicated, to be evicted. This emerges even more, in the use of the term decay, which means precisely to reduce to a bad state, to damage, and, in its moral sense, morally deplorable. And this is also true in the case of the term "weeds", that is, bad herbs, which gives an immoral status to the plants labelled under this category (Tassin, Kull 2012). Among other things, these same metaphors are often mobilized in referring to human actors hierarchically inferiorized, as in the case of homeless people, associated with the term decay. It is a categorization that conceives the nonhuman and nature as in a static condition, in equilibrium, a categorization now clearly challenged by the postmodern ecology that has instead shown how the ecosystem is unstable, in chaotic transformation, made up of actors in flow (Tassin, Kull 2012). Plants are never out of place. They emerge where they find favorable conditions, if they manage to be born and survive, it means that they fit the environment (Head et al. 2014).

Among the plants that the scientific system categorizes as invasive, and among those present in the garden, the occurrence of *Ailanthus altissima* is very interesting. It is a species native to China, naturalized in Italy, in many other European countries, and in the United States. It survives very well in areas where there is pollution, garbage, and "in urban areas globally [it] continues to symbolize blight and decay", as described very well by Patrick (2014) in an article on green gentrification and urban queer ecology in the City of New York. I discovered that the *Ailanthus* is categorized as invasive only in July 2019. In fact, I attended a course for garden organizers in the city of Rome, and one of the lessons was held in the Tre Fontane Gardens. During the lesson we were asked to walk around and collect ideas to improve the state of the garden. After an hour of work divided into groups, we gathered under a large tree in the common area, as decided by the

person of the Tre Fontane Association who was facilitating the lesson that day. Once there, we shared impressions about possible improvements to be made. I was struck by the suggestion of a young man and a young woman, a botanist and a landscape architect, who proposed to work to greatly reduce the presence of *Ailanthus Altissima*, precisely because of its infesting "essence".



**Graph 13** A conversation around the Symposium Tree

I thus discovered that the large tree around which we were gathered, called by the Tre Fontane gardeners the "symposium tree" (precisely because, several months ago, they took the habit of gathering around this tree for meetings, assemblies or during public initiatives), is categorized by the scientific paradigm as "pest" and "invasive". Instead, it is considered by gardeners as an actor who is part of the garden, so much so that, in fact, when the two attendees addressed the suggestion of eliminating the *Ailanthus* to Francesco (the person of the association who was facilitating

the lesson) he was visibly annoyed, and did not accept the recommendation. This shows how these categories are not neutral, immutable essences of the actors to which they refer, but a political product, a hybrid of the interaction between culture, matter, and power (Dalla Bernardina 2000, 2004; Tassin, Kull 2012). Material and discursive dimensions intertwine continuously, since ways of knowing the world are inseparable from ways of being in it. Therefore, categorizing differently also leads to interacting differently.

## 6.4 Conclusions

Within the Tre Fontane Garden, and more generally in the institutional, associative, and active citizenship policies (and in the representation given by different local media) discursive and material mechanisms, act to exclude vegetal and human actors categorized as decay. These mechanisms are based on a vision of city and urban spaces based on criteria of order, decorum, and harmony. These are criteria that, while presented as objective, are instead markedly political, and design and reproduce (Harvey 1996; Patrick 2014; Rose, Wilson 2019; Swyngedouw, Heynen 2003) urban space as usable, traversable and welcoming only for a certain type of human: resident, with a home, with a power of negotiation with public institutions. As well highlighted by posthuman accounts, these are inferiorization practices that govern the establishment of a human subject (the Man) as a universalized and falsely neutral subject, inferiorizing all the other bodies, animals, humans, and plants conceptualized as racialized, culpably poor, prone to deviance, naturalized, reduced to being less human than the unmarked individual of reference (Braidotti 2013: 15; Coole, Frost 2010).

Vegetal politics, in its variant of politics “on” the vegetal and green spaces, thus, risks reiterating mechanisms of exclusion and injustice, when it is based on a normative and hygienist vision of the city. This happens when the management of green areas and the policies on plants are based on a normative and anthropocentric vision, that is, a vision that places the Man as the neutral subject and as the maximum referent of every action in the world, justifying, in this way, the removal or physical elimination of those who (human or not) do not comply with this rule. A power exercised in the name of decorum may risk changing the space by creating injustice and forcing inferiorized humans to move.

As previously analyzed, some gardeners, in case of the Tre Fontane Garden, do not share this discourse and framework of action. Still, the choice to renounce a conflictual approach (and therefore avoid an open opposition to those who categorize some human bodies and plants as decay, comparing them to urban waste) in favour of material action around a shared goal (in this case the shared management of a green space), makes the action prevail of those who assume more violent positions in exercising a stronger transformational power on the area. This generates the exclusion of those inferiorized bodies (human, vegetable, animal) discursively labeled as decay, since they do not respond to a normative, hygienist, and "ordered" ideal of space.

And yet, hierarchies are the result of relational processes, not ontological substantial statuses (Muller 2015). In fact, as seen, many "infesting" plants, though uprooted, eliminated, and expelled, spread allopathically through seeds, or spores, and multiply again in space. In the case of the *Ailanthus*, which has become corporeally and materially imposing at the center of the common area of the Tre Fontane Garden, the

tree challenges the dichotomic categorization of the scientific system that would categorize it as a bad invasive plant, to be eliminated, and becomes instead the symbolic center of the common space for the members of the Tre Fontane Association. It is precisely the materialisation and continual modification of the space of the garden put in place by these plants, which configures them as social actors that contest an anthropocentric normative order. Their presence and ability to change the space of the garden, which exceeds human intentionality, is therefore clearly political.

## Conclusions

This study focused on the analysis of gardening practices carried out in the urban space of Rome by associations and groups of citizens within publicly owned land. These plots of land were given to the citizens by public institutions as a result of negotiation processes (in some cases after a first phase of occupation, in other cases with assignments made by the local municipality or by the urban gardens office of the municipality of Rome). These are shared urban gardening practices that have emerged and spread more and more in the city over the past decade. These initiatives are implemented by groups of citizens who gathered together to manage green spaces they perceived as abandoned, degraded, unusable, unkempt, following a withdrawal of public institutions in the management of green areas in the city, due to the increasingly structural lack of funds and personnel (as described in detail in chapter 3). In fact, over the last decade, the management of Roman public gardens and parks has seen a substantial erosion of resources. A reduction in total and unitary expenditure (per inhabitant) for green management was accompanied by a sharp decrease in specialized gardeners. Also, the amount of tree pruning carried out in the 2012-2018 period decreased dramatically. Furthermore, since 2014, as seen in chapter 3, there has been a total blockage of the calls for green maintenance, up to 2016, causing a sharp deterioration in the management of public green areas, which is now largely based on emergency measures rather than on ordinary maintenance operations. This tendency has been

established since the nineties in the city of Rome, gradually increasing over the last decade.

It appears manifest that over the years, Rome has increasingly become a more-than-human space, given that the lack of institutionalized structural management of public parks has combined with the increasing erosion of the borders between urbanity and the countryside and with other environmental issues such as the lack of an adequate waste collection system. In this context, urban space is increasingly crossed by nonhuman plant and animal species, even those that have traditionally been classified as wild and spontaneous varieties. The number of mice, gulls, foxes, and wild boars in the city, in the suburbs as well as in the center, has grown enormously, as reported by many local newspapers. I was also able to personally experience this tendency while walking in Rome during the period of my fieldwork (2017-2019). Plant species are increasingly present in the interstices of urban space, multiplying as a result of the reduced maintenance of trees, gardens, and flowerbeds by public institutions. The city is therefore experiencing unusual circumstances, which can, however, also open up to the possibility of rethinking new ways of cohabiting in the city.

At the same time, there was a strong increase in the willingness of groups of citizens to participate in the management of public green areas, as noted in the interviews and conversations I conducted, precisely to compensate for the lack of public administration management. The self-managed shared gardens that are the object of my studies are a clear example of this trend, beginning to spread in 2009 and currently reaching a hundred of experiences. It is a universe of extremely diverse actors, which respond to very different, more or less structured ideas of cities.

They range from informal groups that carry out symbolic guerrilla gardening actions, to neighborhood committees that manage flowerbeds, from small green areas or small parks, to groups like “Retake”, an association which focuses on contrasting urban "degradation" (a category that I thoroughly examined in chapter 6). As we saw in chapter 3, the relationship between active citizenship and public institutions is ambivalent. In fact, although institutions seem in part willing to recognize the role played by volunteers in the management of public green spaces, also because of the free service performed by the citizens involved, there is often an excessive regulation imposed, thus risking limiting citizens' participation. In this scenario, citizens' based groups have gained relevance in the material transformation and in the management of green areas, small parks, and gardens, benefiting from the diminished power exercised by public institutions in the management of urban spaces. After having described some of the experiences of environmental citizens'- based initiatives in the city, the study focused on the ethnographic work I carried out within the Tre Fontane self-managed urban garden, in the southern quadrant of the city, one of the first experiences of this type born in Rome, which covers an area of 2.5 hectares under management (thus becoming one of the largest self-managed green areas in Rome).

This study was, therefore, primarily devoted to the analysis of what I defined vegetal politics, that is the investigation of politics on and of the vegetal. With this definition I intend to designate:

- the study of citizens' -based and institutional public policies and of politics "on" green spaces and plants as well as of the similarities between marginalized human and plant actors in the city (politics on the vegetal);

- the study of interactions between plants and humans understood as political interactions, considering the role that the vegetal assumes as an actor capable of modifying urban space (politics of the vegetal).

As I am writing these conclusions, looking out of the window of my new home, in a neighborhood on the eastern periphery of the city, I perceive the acrid smell of garbage that rises from the bins gathered up at the sides of the road so that they partially obstruct the passage on the sidewalk, where lush bushes of wild plants are growing. Two seagulls fly over the bins in search of food, constantly reminding me of their presence because of the sound they produce flying at a very low height. This is just one of the several examples showing the ever increasing mingling and entanglement of human and nonhuman life in the city that I witnessed during my fieldwork, as described along this whole thesis. In this context, it seemed to me appropriate to the scenario to read Roman urban space as a public sphere in which human and nonhuman actors relate through practices of conflict, resistance, and balancing.

However, urban gardening initiatives that take place in the city through continuous interactions between human actors and human and nonhuman actors, investigated in my ethnographic work, are characterized by being implemented through material activations around specific issues. These initiatives are often not based on a strong ideology that drives their collective action at a discursive level. Moreover, since these are spaces co-created through daily interactions of human and nonhuman actors, they question urbanity and make the city emerge as a political space that is more-than-human and in constant transformation. Precisely for these reasons, I have chosen to address these dynamics through postanthropocentric feminist neomaterialisms, combined with political

ecology, which converge in what in Chapter 6 I defined as posthuman political ecology. Indeed, as outlined in depth in the theoretical chapter, feminist neomaterialisms, as postanthropocentric and posthumanist theorizations, diverge from the more classical sociological conceptions of agency, politics, and political action. In short, in studying collective action according to this approach:

- Nonhumans can emerge as actors in the construction of the world and are provided with agency, which is no longer the prerogative of the human subject, nor consequently necessarily linked to the intentionality of the human subject;

- Politics and political action are relational and emerge in the interaction between human and nonhuman actors, as a material-discursive continuum (they are not anthropocentric or logocentric).

- The focus of political action shifts from normative principles and ideologies to socio-material and situated practices.

- Hierarchies are not pre-existing essences of the actors, but emerge from the continuous interaction.

Though, this does not mean that historicized hierarchies based on race, class, gender, species and others does not exist or do not have an influence in shaping assemblages. Studying the world through the approach I have been using in the thesis means being open to see local entanglements, unexpected agencies and shifting hierarchies in their materialdiscursive embodied deployment, while not flattening power unbalances. The use of this theoretical lens has fruitfully allowed me to read my ethnographic

work. First of all, it gave me the possibility to read the complexity of an urban fabric, that is co-constructed through the interaction of human and nonhuman actors, which increasingly emerge within the city in a way that a classical (fully humanist) sociological approach would not have allowed me to investigate. Secondly, it allowed me to question the activities carried out by groups of citizens and environmental associations, especially in the case of the most thoroughly analysed initiative, urban gardens Tre Fontane. In fact, since these are mobilizations that, in their activation, are mainly concentrated in the management of areas of urban space at a material and contingent level-without fully exploring at a discursive level values and ideological dimensions that lead the actions of human actors involved in the initiatives- they largely converge with a neomaterialist, non-dialectical, and affirmative conception of politics. However, it was fundamental to maintain a focus on the conflicting dimension and on inequalities of power, dimensions that feminist neomaterialisms tend to mitigate in favour of theories of action based on affirmation and controversy, but which I considered essential to investigate through the contribution of political ecology.

Now, in the conclusions below, I will proceed to give a brief account of the most significant results that emerged from this study, always keeping in mind the theoretical frame of reference mobilized, that is posthuman political ecology. In focusing on a specific ethnographic case, the Tre Fontane garden, I analyzed how, having to deal with a context in which public institutions are withdrawing from the management of urban spaces, the garden emerges as a co-built space through continuous material and spatial negotiations between human and nonhuman actors. More precisely, I investigated:

- How the garden is co-created through material action conducted by human and nonhuman actors;
- Which interactions between human and nonhuman actors take place within the garden, and how the perception that human actors have of nonhuman living beings (plants, insects) influences their action;
- How reciprocal interactions between humans and nonhumans affect the conception that humans have of nonhuman actors present in the garden and their way of interacting materially with them (analyzing the material and discursive dimension);
- In what terms the garden initiative can be configured as a political mobilization (constantly questioning action in light of the presence of power relationships in the co-construction of the urban space).
- What kind of alliances, conflicts, and exclusions emerge in the garden through the interaction of human and nonhuman actors.

*The Tre Fontane garden as a more-than-human assemblage*

As emerged from the analysis, the space of the Tre Fontane garden materializes, as a multispecies assemblage in perpetual transformation co-constructed by multiple actors, humans and nonhumans, that, from time to time, forge alliances or enter in conflict, in ways that exceed the intentionality of the single human actor. There is no individual point or actor from which the action originates. Some actors, either human or nonhuman, are explicitly appreciated and welcomed in the garden by

activists. Some others are materially expelled, according to relational hierarchies that emerge from interaction. The activists of the Tre Fontane shared garden are not very vocal about the differences in the views that inform their action. Instead, they pursue a spatial management of the area based on material action that avoids the explicit problematization of conflicts. As I will outline more precisely below, this tendency can generate unintentional alliances, which in some cases can perpetuate dynamics of exclusion and spatial injustice.

As have seen in Chapter 5, the Tre Fontane shared garden management is carried out by people who have different motivations to take part in the gardening initiative, different visions about space management, and varied political ideologies of reference. They united to reach a common specific goal, that is the management of an area of the city that they perceived as degraded and abandoned by the public institutions, and to transform it together through material action. In particular, the research showed that in the garden there is a presence of people who define themselves either as closer to the traditional left or to right parties/ideologies. Most of the people who recognize themselves as closer to leftist ideologies (more or less radical, or in the catholic left) were already involved in previous experiences of activism/volunteering (local social movements, scout groups, volunteering with migrants or children).

There are different degrees of involvement in the garden activities, from very active people who are present at least 4/5 times a week, to people who are present 2/3 times a week, but are, nevertheless, very active in space management, to people who occasionally participate or who are interested in dedicating themselves exclusively to the cultivation of their own parcel. Political belonging (right-wing or left-wing tendencies) is not a

determinant factor for the level of activity. There are very different reasons for deciding to take part in the initiative. These motivations correspond to very different ways of interacting and co-constructing the area. People who took part in the project with the aim of building an open space that is completely accessible to external people and to the neighbourhood will work to ensure that the space can be crossed by groups and people who are not part of the association. This type of activists try to implement activities with young students of the neighbourhood such as, throwing parties, managing public initiatives, providing free courses in the garden area etc. They are against the creation of spatial limitations that could hinder this openness (as it has happened in the case of the opposition to the creation of a gate that could limit the access of those who are not members of the association). However, if the main motivation is the re-establishment of a regulatory control over the area -in substitution of the role of control previously held by public institutions- and if the area is mainly intended as a convivial space for the people of the association, and only occasionally open to external people, then, daily material action will be put in place for the removal of those actors perceived as not welcome in the garden space. Some gardeners, who rely on traditional leftist ideologies or on Catholic leftist values, perceive the garden as an open space, to be managed collectively through a perspective based on shared care, and on values of openness to the rest of the city. There is, instead, a group of gardeners, that is mainly a group of retired men who spend most of their days in the common area of the garden, and who lack previous experience of social activism. This group has a completely different vision about how the garden should be managed. They would like the garden to be as much controlled as possible, uncrossable, or crossable with many limitations, by those who are not members of the garden's association. They focus their action on implementing the social control previously exercised by public

institutions, in an attempt at expelling as much as possible from the area those actors, humans and nonhumans, whom they perceive as degrading, disturbing, and not responding to a framework of order, hygiene, cleanliness. As we have seen, many of the conflicts in the garden derive precisely from these different conceptions, and from the poor problematization at a discursive and conceptual level of these different visions in favor of a mode of action that puts daily material action before the creation of a truly shared vision.

Those who imagine the garden as a space of experimentation and mutual care open to the neighborhood, as emerged from the excerpts of interviews reported in the text, have abandoned a conflicting vision of politics in favor of a mode of action based on material action around a specific shared goal (which, in this case, is the management of the garden space). They do not want to enter in conflict with those who have a different vision from their own, but, instead try constantly to mediate. This is the transformation defined by Antonella (interview given in chapter 5) as the transition from militancy to activism, from a negative politics based on conflict and opposition to a politics conceptualized as inclusive, non-conflictive, and affirmative, focused on material action and on bringing together actors who respond to different ideological visions in the name of achieving a common goal. Indeed, what happens is that activists who choose a non-conflictual and affirmative approach are confronted with other gardeners (the group of elderly men who mainly manage the common area of the garden) who use, instead, a strongly normative approach, both in values and action. This is a typical modality of political collective action carried out by neomaterialist social movements (Marres 2012, Certomà 2016b). Neomaterialist politics, in fact, rejects the idea of conflict, based on the opposition of contrasting normative principles, and

consequently different "regimes of truth", in favor of the concept of "controversy among alternative compositions of reality" (Rebughini 2018: 13).

What happens, however, is that when less normative gardeners choose not to openly vocalize conflict in order to avoid confrontation with more normative gardeners, the former end up being allies of the latter in the application of a normative material action in space management aimed at controlling and systematically eradicating human and nonhuman actors categorized as degrading or unwelcome. That is, if the conflict is not explicit, and the relations of power that operate in space are not problematized, gardeners who would like to create an open and inclusive space actually form an alliance with those who operate more violent and excluding modalities. This frequently happens in the management of the common area in the center of the garden, when people who are not members of the association were reproached because they had collected fruit or cut reeds from the grove that surrounds the common area, or because they used the common area for parties without first asking permission to the Tre Fontane association. Or, as in the case of the drinking fountain, that the association has asked the local municipality to move to the center of the garden, and that, as described in chapter 5, is likely to generate further practices of spatial injustice, although not intentionally pursued by all members of the association. In the management of the common area we, then, saw that there is a widespread tendency to eradicate as much as possible plants categorized as invasive and spontaneous, following the indications of the group of elderly people who are mainly in charge of managing this space, since they spend most of their days there. This position is not shared by all the gardeners. Indeed, in a few informal conversations discomfort was expressed by some in seeing this

systematic eradication of wild plants perpetrated in the common area, a practice that also affects the well-being of insects and nonhuman animals that cross the area. Also, there are some human actors who exert more power in the garden, and those who would like to implement divergent practices remain invisible because they do not want to openly enter in conflict. The conflict, therefore, does not disappear just because it is erised at a semantic and conceptual level. Indeed, in renouncing to explicitly counteract actions and visions that reiterate spatial exclusion and control, material action of the most powerful actors is reinforced, albeit unintentionally. At the moment, those who have a securitarian vision of the garden and who interpret the action of the association as a sort of replacement of the action of spatial control on the urban space previously exerted by public institutions, seem to have become prevalent. This is, for instance, shown by the sign indicating the presence of video surveillance cameras appeared in July 2019 in the common area of the garden. Although, since the beginning of the initiative, in 2014, some gardeners wanted to install a gate around the whole garden, those who want the space to remain inclusive and open have always managed to reach a compromise, and the gate has not been installed yet. The fact, however, that such a sign appeared, indicates that the conflict between the two visions of space management is alive more than ever, even if not explicitly tackled. Also, certainly the role of this sign is introducing a disciplinary and controlling order within the space, which, from that moment on, will modify the action of human actors who cross it.

This spatial action, guided by a normalizing and controlling vision of urban space, is intertwined and finds correspondence with a conception of the city aimed at restoring and encouraging the so-called urban decorum, through the expulsion of all those actors constructed and perceived as

degrading. As I have extensively analyzed in chapter 6, this is an idea of the city strongly encouraged by public institutions that deal with the management of green and urban space, in Rome as well as in many other territories of the country. In fact, in December 2018 a specific activity plan for the coordination of urban decorum was approved by the municipal administration, and a specific office dedicated to urban decorum was reopened by the current municipal administration, which is still in charge. Even the media coverage (through their official and unofficial facebook accounts) of activities implemented by representatives of local public institutions that deal with the management of green spaces, is largely focused on the issue of opposing decay and encouraging urban decorum. This theme has also become central in the local press, which publishes many articles on the decay of the city of Rome. In fact, in the category of decay we find garbage, informal settlements, spontaneous plants and nonhuman animals that previously were rarely found in urban space (for example wild boars and gulls). In this perspective, the restoration of decorum should be achieved by materially eliminating from the urban space human and nonhuman actors. Decay are considered those actors that exceed with their own corporeity the limits imposed by a normative and anthropocentric vision of urban space (an urban space centered on a specific kind of human, that is resident, home-provided and owner).

In the garden, hierarchies are created and reproduced between different actors. These hierarchies are not inherent to the actors involved, but emerge from the interactions that are established from time to time. There are nonhuman actors explicitly welcomed and encouraged to enter the space (bees in the first place), others that are tolerated, and others that are strongly discouraged from occupying the space (hornets, wasps, thistles, borage, bindweed etc.). Then, those who are not part of the association Tre

Fontane, are sometimes less capable than activist gardeners of exercising their material action in the space, (for example, they are encouraged to keep dogs on a leash, must ask permission to throw parties, are scolded if they collect fruit or reeds in the common area of the garden). Furthermore, the space where the shared garden stands today is part of a park where homeless people and groups used to sleep and live in small informal settlements. In chapter 6, I reviewed how no urban space is ever abandoned, even if described or perceived by some human actors as such, but, rather, always negotiated and continually recreated. Even if garden activists have not implemented actions explicitly aimed at evicting people who were sleeping in informal settlements in the area, the gardening initiative has nevertheless entered into a wider process of contrasting "decay" that the Tre Fontane park is experiencing (where the action of public institutions and associations, such as Retake, are intertwined with the activity of the Tre Fontane association). Having asked the local municipality to move the drinking fountain to the center of the garden, as it has just been re-described above, will probably cause the abandonment of the area by the few homeless people who were still crossing it to wash themselves and their clothes. It would, therefore, be necessary, when implementing actions of material transformation in the urban space, to consider the presence of other actors who cross it, who could be in inferiorized and invisibilized positions, and consequently also have less negotiating power with public institutions.

To show that the positions of actors who co-construct the garden are not essences of the actors themselves, but are generated in an immanent plan through relationships, I then turned to analyzing the vegetal politics in its variant of politics of the vegetal. A very interesting example is that of the *Ailanthus Altissima*, a plant categorized as invasive by modern science and

commonly considered as the emblem of urban decay, because it thrives and spreads even in polluted environments. A large *Ailanthus* plant, which has become a tree, is located in the center of the middle area that connects the two parts of the Tre Fontane garden. It is defined by activists as the tree of the symposium, and has become a center where gardeners gather for events and assemblies. By becoming an imposing tree, it has put into discussion, with its capacity for action, the scientific categorization that would define it as an invasive species destined to be eradicated from the garden. From the research it emerged how some plant species (and also insects), with which the gardeners come into close relationship, are anthropomorphized. They are attributed with sensations, character and even feeling which are typically human (for example fear, pain, nervousness). Many of the gardeners talk to the plants that anthropomorphize, reconfirming the logocentrism, but also showing the attribution of subjectivity to these nonhuman actors. Anthropomorphized actors are encouraged to be part of the garden, cared for, not eradicated. As Bennett (2010) tells us, anthropomorphization can be a step towards decentralizing the human subject and questioning the insurmountable separation between nature and culture as well as human and nonhuman on which the Western modern way of being in the world is based. Indeed, anthropomorphized actors in the garden are given a superior status, with them seeking alliances in the construction of the space. Still, this superior status takes the shape of an extension of privilege to some specific actors, through the extension of human attributes (Braidotti 2016) to nonhuman actors, rather than of an effective decentralization of the human and an effective displacement of its privileges. Finally, the nonhuman actors with whom gardeners interact with most care and attention are often those who provide free labor (bees, pollinating and making honey) and food (the edible plants found in the cultivated parcels).

The Tre Fontane shared garden project is growing up in a context in which public institutions are withdrawing in the management of the green spaces of the city. In this context, a shared management of public space could pave the way for an unforeseen relationship with nonhuman actors in the city, free from the controlling action previously exercised by public institutions. It could allow the experimentation of actual postanthropocentric modalities of construction of the city. With this term I mean the overcoming of a model of city centered on the needs and desires of a certain type of man, owner, and resident, which results in being exclusionary for all the other, human and nonhuman subjects. In fact, the aim of this study was to investigate if interacting in an urban space less mediated and controlled by public institutions, as it is in the case of roman public green spaces, could allow local citizens to experiment transformations in the ways of existence in the daily entanglement with the nonhuman world. From the research emerged that gardeners are not actually consciously assuming a postanthropocentric approach in the co-construction of the garden. This gardening experience is operating an hybridization with respect to a fully naturalistic paradigm that conceives the nonhuman as a set of freely exploitable objects, but still, the management of Tre Fontane garden remains mainly anthropocentric. Nevertheless, I found particularly insightful to adopt a postanthropocentric length for my onto-epistemological approach (that is, in the process of being with and researching in the garden). In fact, space construction is always negotiated among human and nonhuman actors, and only a postanthropocentric analysis could make the power of nonhuman agency emerge.

The research showed the analytical and material power of vegetal politics. That is, a postanthropocentric political analysis and practice that allows to creep in the folds of reality, giving emphasis throughout the whole research and analysis process on actors who risked otherwise being invisibilised by the use of a fully humanist and anthropocentric length. With this definition (vegetal politics), I identified the always-transforming assemblage of institutional policies, activists and plants and its capacity for action, materializing in the garden. Politics and policies pursued by public institutions and by gardeners on green spaces (vegetal politics on the vegetal), in some cases reiterate or consolidate at a material level spatial injustices, particularly when a normative and controlling attitude prevails unopposed. The materiality of the action that condenses around the term decay legitimizes spatial transformations aimed at the removal of plants and human actors conceptualized as degrading. Instead, from the daily interaction with the nonhuman world, a political material relationality emerges which leads some of Tre Fontane's gardeners to recognize subjectivity to nonhuman actors with whom they enter in a closer relationship of care and alliance. The analysis of interactions between humans, plants, and nonhuman actors shows the power and the capacity for action and transformation of the latter, which arise exceeding the boundaries of human intentionality (vegetal politics of the vegetal). It is precisely when human agency is lacking or incapable of domestication that the power of action of the nonhuman is more clearly shown, as in the case of the tree *Ailanthus Altissima*, which demonstrates that agency is actually always shared and continually negotiated. Vegetal politics materialises in the garden as an assemblage that is always in flux, where plants categorized as invasive continue to re-emerge, spreading through spores and seeds, despite being eradicated and discouraged.

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