

# Multispecies community gardening: Inquiring material-discursive anthropocentrism through a Roman gardening experience

10 December 2021.

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PREO

# Multispecies community gardening: Inquiring material-discursive anthropocentrism through a Roman gardening experience

## **Textes et contextes**

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**Réenchanter le sauvage urbain (II)**

**Beatrice del Monte**

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## 1. Introduction

I struggle to open the gate, which has a slightly rusty lock. In this parcel 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, just some tiny mint is seedling. I take a pair of shears out of my pocket and head for the chilli plant. It is the first time that I prune a plant alone, without being guided by other gardeners. I am a bit scared, I am afraid I might cut the branches excessively. Now I understand the feeling that Claudio and Laura described a few weeks ago, of being afraid of hurting plants. Still, I also realize that this is somehow a tendency to anthropomorphize. I start cutting the twigs. They are dry and break easily. I reduce the height of the plant sensibly, until I begin to see some green in the centre of the small logs. At this point, I stop. I gather the twigs that I cut on a small wooden table in the centre of the plot and move towards the strawberries and thyme (Field notes, February 2018).

- 1 The field notes above are the result of a multispecies ethnography that I conducted in an urban garden in Rome between 2017 and 2019. This multispecies ethnography allowed me to experiment how much this garden emerges from shared human and nonhuman agencies. It allowed me to learn how to be amazed by the encounter with the nonhuman and to read the continuous entanglement of material and discursive dimensions that can modify anthropocentric hierarchies in the world. In this article I will therefore offer a picture of some material-semiotic dimensions and shared agencies that are condensed in a collective gardening initiative in the city of Rome. I will focus on some multispecies assemblages with which I entered in interaction during the ethnographic terrain. The garden constitutes a clearly multispecies space in which the more-than-human (vegetal and animal) shared agency is in action in everyday life. For this reason, it is a field of investigation that allows to fruitfully reflect on the entanglement between material and semiotic dimensions taking place in the relationship between humans and nonhumans, in its material and concrete unfolding. In particular, I will question the intertwining of different categorizations of the nonhuman, hierarchies in flux and situated interactions between human and nonhuman actors that gather in multispecies hybrid assemblages.
- 2 The article will emerge as a continuous dialogue between ethnographic fieldnotes, theory, extracts from interviews. I will begin by presenting the terrain in which I conducted a multispecies ethnography, a self-managed urban garden on the southern periphery of

the city. I will then proceed to outline some theoretical and methodological elements. I will thus turn to analyse in detail some of the multispecies relationships that co-build and cross the garden, focusing on the intertwining of material and discursive dimensions. I will report some examples of how this shared relationality is implemented and elaborated by the citizens who take part in it, generating hierarchies that diverge from a fully modern (Latour 1993) approach. While maintaining some degree of anthropocentrism, still they open up to imaginative spaces that can inspire further alternatives towards multispecies justice. The aim of this article is to investigate and acknowledge the continuous material and discursive co-participation of human and nonhuman actors in practice, as a contribution to re-enchant (Bennett 2001, 2010, Iovino, Oppermann 2012) and create more just multispecies worlds.

## 1.1 Multispecies gardening

- 3 In the city of Rome, the anthropocentric device is evidently questioned by the concrete and material display of everyday life. Plants and animals crowd the stories of the local media, they continuously pop up in the streets. They are intertwined in the daily activities of human life and in the urban management practices implemented by public institutions and local citizens' groups. Yet this continuous interaction does not necessarily reach a horizon aiming at multispecies justice. Since the beginning of the global pandemic due to the spread of the Covid19 virus that we are still going through, images of nonhuman animals that pop up into cities with increasing frequency, and of plants that grow lush on sidewalks, have begun to spread in newspapers around the world. Even if some of these reports were false, they allow reflection on interesting data. First of all, these are phenomena that are not so impromptu. To an attentive eye, they can often be found in urban environments. However, these descriptions seem to suggest an idea of pure "nature" as a sphere separated from the human, which when the human withdraws powerfully re-explodes. This conception of nature has been widely criticized and deconstructed by human and social sciences as non-universal, historically and politically situated (Haraway 1991; Kull 2008; Oppermann, 2017; Descola, 2013; De Castro 2003). Instead, positioning my investigation within feminist posthumanist studies (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Bennett

2010; Braidotti 2013; 2016; Breda 2015; Coole, Frost 2010; Ferrando 2016; Haraway 2008; Oppermann 2016; Tsing 2015), that reveal how reality is a multispecies hybrid, I will focus on the incessant interactions of more-than-human life. I will detail the mingling within a self-managed urban garden of the city of Rome, to bring out the symbolic, cultural and discursive materiality and representations in flux. The creation of spaces rarely mediated by institutional public actions in which to weave continuous relationships with the nonhuman can make it possible to establish multispecies political micro-experimentations. Yet, in order to begin to imagine cities based on multispecies justice it is necessary to look at the material-semiotic hierarchies on which the humanist city as an anthropocentric space is based on.

- 4 The garden in which I carried out my ethnographic terrain is a self-managed urban garden located in the consolidated southern periphery of Rome. The city has been experiencing at least since the nineties<sup>1</sup> a 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 has become increasingly structural in the last decade. In this context, starting from 2009 (Attili 2013), experiences of self-management of parks, flower beds and green spaces carried out by groups of citizens and associations have multiplied. The community garden where I carried out the multispecies ethnography is one of the most active in the city. It started as a self-managed project, carried out by a group of citizens of the neighbourhood, who in 2012 decided to occupy a green area on which a landfill was placed. They decided to clean up the area and to start taking care of it collectively. Born as a shared gardening project put into place after reclamation of an area where an illegal landfill once stood, it contains some elements that allow us to glimpse a re-enchantment of urban space from a multispecies perspective. An association that has more than 200 members currently manages the garden. It is divided into about 150 cultivated plots, a large common area where parties and initiatives open to the neighbourhood are held, and two areas with beekeeping.

## 2. Theoretical framework and methodology

- 5 The city has been historically conceived by the modern western system of thought as the triumph of the human (at best represented by the white, middle class man), as a space purified from nature (Rudolf, Taverne 2012). However, it has actually always been a more-than-human space (Franklin 2017), and this is currently evident even more than ever. With their bodies and agencies (Hinchcliffe, Whatmore 2006), plants and animals are underlying the urgent need, but also the potentials, of re-thinking new ways of co-inhabiting the city. Placing my analysis at the intersection between feminist STS and posthumanist studies (Alaimo, Hekman 2008; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; 2016; Breda 2015; Coole, Frost 2010; Ferrando 2016; Haraway 2008; Oppermann 2016; Tsing 2015) I analyse more-than-human material-discursive assemblages that gather in a Roman urban garden. I focus on anthropocentric devices at play and on the possible intersections between sexism and specism, both on the discursive and material levels. Moreover, using a posthumanist feminist approach, I trace possible situated practices of multispecies affections at work. In particular, I look at the garden as a place of inspirational transformation and enchantment towards unexpected hybrid affections, narratives and encounters (Bennett 2001, 2010; Certomà 2017).

### 2.1 Multispecies ethnography

- 6 In my investigation I performed 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 material-discursive continuous (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010; Haraway 1991; 2008). Positioning myself in the framework of feminist knowledge-practice, as a feminist researcher and activist, I reject the objectivizing authority and the reductionist universality, in favour of the production of a partial and situated knowledge (Haraway 1991). Performing multispecies ethnography, I pay particular attention to bodies and everyday practices, to citizens' perceptions, to

possible conflicts, co-existences, co-emerging affections and affectivities.

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

- 7 In this section I will detail the interactions between some human and nonhuman (that is, plants and insects) actors in the co-construction of the garden, keeping in consideration the mingling of material and discursive (semiotic) dimensions. Referring to a new materialist theoretical framework, I analyse the role of nonhuman actors in co-building the space, even beyond human intentionality, and the perception that humans have of nonhuman actors with whom they interact.

#### **3.1 Interactions with the nonhuman in cultivated plots**

Claudio starts to describe how his plot is organized. He placed an absinthe bush near the entrance and scattered plants near the spinach. Absinthe drives away from the garden snails and other insects that eat plants. He explains that it seems to have worked very well. Since he planted it, very few snails appeared, despite the rain and despite the fact that they are present in the neighbouring gardens. Hence, the cultivated leaves have not been eaten by insects or parasites. Laura collects two salads and three cabbages and starts filling two bags, one for her 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 flourish. 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 him back in the garden, don't let him travel for miles or you'll risk hurting him". And Claudio answers "yes, yes sure". Laura: "take him to the cabbage so that he can go wherever he wants" (Field notes, December 2017).

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 much more, but he could not. He feels too guilty, as if he were mutilating a living being. And so he prunes them, but just a little, without following the rules of pruning, which prescribe that branches should be sensibly reduced every time they are cut. 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, but 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" (Field notes, January 2018).

- 8 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. Also, Claudio and Laura attribute subjectivity to the earthworm, which they readily remove from the compost area so as not to risk killing it. 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.

## 3.2 Humans-bees entanglements

I reach the garden around 10:30. It is quite sunny and the temperature is mild. Upon my arrival, I find a group of people 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. Francesco asks what the purpose of my visit is. I explain to him that I am meeting with Claudio to treat the bees<sup>2</sup>. 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, then Claudio and I move towards the hives. The hives are located on a hill in the garden. There are eight. Claudio begins to open the hives to carry out the treatment. 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. 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. He says that every community of bees has its own collective personality. 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. 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. Once we are done with the last two hives, we collect the tools, climb over the wooden gate, and go down the slope back to the wooden bench in the col-

lective 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 see, perhaps they recognize me, between the two of us they bit the new one" (Field notes, December 2017).

- 9 In the field notes above, centred on the relationship between Claudio, the main person responsible for the beekeeping project of the garden, the parasite called varroa destructor and the bees, what emerges is that 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). Moreover, the presence of bees is encouraged by many of the gardeners. They know bees are at risk of extinction and also recognise they have contributed greatly to the garden space, improving the quality of vegetable products through pollination.
- 10 However, different modalities of interaction and words occur towards other species of pollinators that live in the garden or cross it. In the case of hornets and wasps, human behaviour is very different. In fact, wasps and hornets are killed at any chance and therefore expelled from the garden space, because they are perceived as a danger to humans and bees.
- 11 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 gardening 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. Besides, 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 shortly.

### 3.3 Material and discursive representations of the nonhuman in the garden

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 centre 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 centimetres 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 metre high. The plants are about two years old, and Michela does not replace them every year, but only removes the ready leaves, letting the plant continue to grow in height (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 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, other-

wise 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 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 feeling 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 feeling 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 feel less "controlled". On several occasions I did hear them discuss the absence of a certain type of order. 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 (Field notes, January 2018).

- 12 Claudio, Michela and Franco developed a very close relationship with the plants that grow in the plot they cultivate. 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 centred on the human, and the greater presence

of social control. In the case of the old gardens, in fact, where there is an important flow of people and visibility from the neighbouring buildings, the parcels are cultivated in very similar ways to each other and very regularly. It is not the case in the new vegetable gardens, where the plants appear much more irregular.

I begin to help Loredana treat the aloe plants inside the school garden. She shows me an aloe planted by a very experienced person, at the right time and which 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 (Field notes, April 2018).

### 3.4 Trying to decentralise the anthropocentric gaze

- 13 As I will discover later, this is a fairly common practice in this garden. Most of the people who take part in a working group dedicated to the reproduction of varieties of ancient tomatoes in the garden, 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 a whatsapp chat. The relationship with plants that are not located in 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, many of the conflicts in the garden derive precisely from the management of this area, which, according to several gardeners, is never sufficiently clean. And yet, this way of managing the common area, all centred on human aesthetic and standards of pleasantness 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 centre 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.

We sit in a circle outdoors on the newly built wooden benches in the centre 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 an entity different from the one 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, 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 (Field notes, March 2018).

- 14 This is a very stimulating exercise. In fact, when a body is in a privileged position, it can be more powerful to try to decentre your gaze rather than start from yourself, as an exercise to fracture the oppression lines at the origin of spatial hierarchies. The intervention made during the exercise I reported, highlights how the garden is still 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 gardener. In 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 not one where we welcome other living beings (Interview with Pietro, May 2019).

- 15 Unfortunately, in the meetings I have never heard him expressing this position in public. Maura also formulated 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 I did, and therefore have the right to be part of it (interview with Maura, May 2019).

## 4. Critical remarks on humans-nonhumans interactions in the garden

- 16 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 gardeners do not interact with the living nonhuman as an undifferentiated set of objects. The reports above clearly illustrate a hierarchisation of the nonhuman living, which, in some cases, deviate from a fully anthropocentric perspective and mode of action. 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. This happens specifically in the relationship that some gardeners have with bees, ants, black cabbage, pat choi, and horticultural plants sown in vegetable plots or in the greenhouse. To some plants, 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. This could be read as a symptom of the logocentrism of many gardeners’ approach, but also of the recognition of a certain subjectivity to pertaining nonhuman others 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<sup>3</sup> because they believe these are particularly appreciated by the bees.

- 17 However, other nonhuman actors are strongly inferiorised by some gardeners, as is the case with wasps and hornets, thistles, borage, bindweed, and all those plants that are categorized as weeds or invasive species and systematically eradicated (only a few gardeners, 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, when 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).



## 4.1 Specism and sexism at work through the anthropocentric device

- 18 In this perspective, a specific analysis is required of the semantic choices made by gardeners when referring to bees and wasps. As written above, in fact, while bees are considered an ally species, wasps are strongly opposed and discouraged from crossing the garden through material action, and, in an image sent in a whatsapp group 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. Speciesism is 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, in the inferiorisation of feminised and animalised 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 animalised subject, ascribing to the animalised subject concepts typical of the experience of inferiorisation 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 feminised human subjects. In this case the female human subject disappears (the factually absent referent) but its mobilisation at a semantic level becomes an instrument of material submission with respect to the nonhuman animal to which it is referred. The term “whore” is, indeed, widely used as a category applied to the human, to stigmatise 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 as a “whore” because it does not submit to the control of human agency, nor provides the human with acknowledged free la-

bour (as it happens, on the contrary, in the case of bees, whose pollination work and honey production are widely recognized by gardeners).

- 19 On the other hand, however, there are those who 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 in the garden 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).
- 20 As shown, the hierarchisation mechanisms that emerge from the relationships tend to anthropomorphise 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.

- 21 While I agree on an ethical ground with this statement, I also argue that it is nevertheless extremely relevant to highlight a withdrawal from this trend with respect to the Eurocentric system of thought and scientific classification that categorise the nonhuman as intrinsically different, and therefore justify its inferiorisation on a political and practical level. As Bennett (2010: 99) reminds us, in fact:

A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in

"nature" and those in "culture," anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms.

A certain degree of anthropomorphisation of the nonhuman can be a first step to question anthropocentrism and the insurmountable division between the sphere of nature and the sphere of culture/society (Descola 2013).

## 5. Conclusions

- 22 This article aimed to bring out some of the material-semiotic interweaving that builds urban environments that we co-inhabit and co-build with our non-human companions. In a path aiming at trying to imagine future horizons of multispecies urban justice, it is essential to report and analyse material, symbolic and discursive practices of hierarchisation in place in urban spaces. Still, it is also essential to be able to be surprised by possible practices of affectivity and relationality diverging from anthropocentrism that can emerge through daily interactions.
- 23 As emerged in the article, 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 normalising and controlling action. Analysing the descriptions reported above, it clearly appeared 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 categorised as weeds). The relationship with the nonhuman, described at a dialogic level as a harmonic and peaceful connection, turns out to be sometimes 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 to experiment with ways of interaction that seem to depart from the anthropocentric hierarchical paradigm of naturalistic ontology (Descola 2013). Some plant species and insects, with which the gardeners come into closer relationships of care and alliance, are anthropomorphised. They are thought to have sensations and personalities, which are usually attributed to humans (such as fear, pain, nervous-

ness). Many of the gardeners talk to the plants that they anthropomorphise. If on one hand, this behaviour reconfirms logocentrism, on the other hand it also acknowledges subjectivity and agency belonging to these nonhuman actors. Anthropomorphised actors are encouraged to be part of the garden, cared for, not eradicated. Anthropomorphisation can be a step towards decentring 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, some anthropomorphised actors in the garden are given a superior status. This attitude does not always displace 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 labour (bees, pollinating and making honey) and food (the edible plants found in the cultivated parcels). Conversely, wasps are highly discouraged from crossing the space. Still, the nonhuman, if one learns to read it, clearly expresses its agency: 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 this line, even being a multispecies community, it still does not fully discard anthropocentrism. Yet, this experience can allow opening to imaginative cracks in the anthropocentric city, as the garden emerges through continuous interactions of human and nonhuman actors, through their shared agencies. Moreover, many gardeners let themselves be amazed and delighted by the presence and agency of the nonhuman, often starting from anthropomorphisation. In this way, this community garden shows us paths towards less anthropocentric experimentation. This is a fundamental step to push further a posthumanist vision, taking a cue from the possibilities of more-than-human political micro-experiments in

action. In fact, imagining differently can allow opening up to more just multispecies worlds.

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1 Report 2016, Il verde pubblico di Roma Capitale, Municipal Statistics Office.

2 We treated the bees against a parasite called varroa destructor, a parasite which can lead to the death of the entire colony.

3 When the broccoli plant is in bloom it is not edible anymore for humans.

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## English

Positioning my investigation within feminist posthumanist studies, in this article I will focus on the incessant interactions of more-than-human life that co-construct urban spaces. Exploring the activities carried out in a Roman shared urban garden, I will offer a picture of some material-semiotic dimensions and shared agencies that are condensed around vegetal life. I will investigate some multispecies assemblages with which I entered in interaction during an ethnographic terrain that I carried out between 2017 and 2019. The garden constitutes a clearly multispecies space in which the more-than-human (vegetal and animal) agency in its shared mode is in action in everyday life. The article will emerge as a continuous dialogue between ethnographic fieldnotes, theory, extracts from interviews and analyses. I will begin by presenting the terrain in which I conducted a multispecies ethnography, a self-managed urban garden in the southern periphery

of the city. I will then proceed to outline some theoretical and methodological elements. I will thus analyse some of the multispecies relationships that co-build and cross the garden, focusing on the intertwining of material and discursive dimensions. I will report some examples of how this shared relationality is implemented and elaborated by the citizens who take part in it, generating hierarchies that diverge from a fully modern approach but that still maintain degrees of anthropocentrism, while opening imaginative spaces that can inspire further transformations towards multispecies justice.

### **Français**

Positionnant mon enquête dans les études posthumanistes féministes, je ferai porter cet article sur les interactions incessantes de la vie plus qu'humaine qui co-construisent les espaces urbains. En me concentrant sur une expérience romaine de jardinage urbain partagée, je proposerai une représentation de certaines dimensions matérielles et sémiotiques et d'agencements partagés qui se condensent autour de la vie végétale. Je vais donc enquêter sur des assemblages multi-espèces avec lesquels je suis entrée en interaction lors d'un terrain ethnographique que j'ai réalisé entre 2017 et 2019. Le jardin constitue un espace clairement multi-espèces dans lequel l'agentivité plus qu'humaine (végétale et animale) est en action dans la vie quotidienne. L'article émergera comme un dialogue continu entre des notes de terrain ethnographiques, de la théorie, des extraits d'entretiens et d'analyses. Je commencerai par présenter le terrain sur lequel j'ai mené une ethnographie multi-espèces, un jardin urbain autogéré à la périphérie sud de la ville. J'esquisserai ensuite quelques éléments théoriques et méthodologiques. Je vais donc analyser en détail certaines des relations plus qu'humaines qui co-construisent et traversent le jardin, en mettant l'accent sur l'entrelacement des dimensions matérielles et discursives. Je rapporterai quelques exemples de la manière dont cette relationnalité partagée est mise en œuvre et élaborée par les citoyens qui y participent, générant des hiérarchies qui s'écartent d'une approche totalement moderne mais qui maintiennent encore des degrés d'anthropocentrisme, tout en ouvrant des espaces imaginatifs qui peuvent inspirer de nouvelles transformations vers une justice multi-espèce.

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### **Mots-clés**

jardins urbains, ethnographie multiespèces, anthropocentrisme, analyse materialdiscursive, plantes

### **Keywords**

urban gardening, multispecies ethnography, anthropocentrism, material-discursive analysis, plants

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