

## ECOVILLAGE MOVEMENT. NEW WAYS TO EXPERIENCE NATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Ecovillages have become a phenomenon as communities focused on shared goals of sustainable living and ecological engagement grew worldwide. Within ecovillages sustainability is not meant just in material terms, but also as a specific way of interacting with nature, involving an ethics of closeness and care. Natural environment is considered an active agent generator of intimate emotions. On this basis, the paper focuses on the connection between multispecies ethnography and the human/nonhuman encounter that takes place within these communities, pointing out how it contributes to the production of new relational subjectivities.

### KEYWORDS

Ecovillages, multispecies ethnography, relational subjectivities, social movements, nature/culture debate.

### PREMISES

Ecovillages have become a global phenomenon as communities focused on shared goals of sustainable living and ecological engagement that have been growing worldwide. The renewed focus on environmental conservation, agroecology, and small scale organic farming is framed by broader concerns for living in a context whereby the impact of human activities have wrought dramatic shifts in physical environments, earth climate, and overall resource depletion (Chen, 2017:144). The rise of ecovillages around the world can be located across diverse settings from Amazonian rainforests, Peruvian highlands, Indian villages, and Central American coastal treehouses; even, in the densely urban environment of Los Angeles (Chen, 2017:144).

The utopian rural communities and the 'ecological agrarian movement' (Berry, 1996) that developed in the United States between the mid-sixties and the early seventies are

considered the historical antecedents of ecovillages. Their main goal was the creation of sustainable settlements based on self-management and self-sufficiency, with low environmental impact. These principles have later been embraced by other movements like 'Bioregionalism', 'Deep Ecology' and 'Back to the Land movement' that inspired ecovillages starting from the idea of spiritual awareness and the commitment to overcome an anthropocentric paradigm of social action, including a renewed interest for alternative forms of ecological communications and community building processes based on the consensus method. In the 1960s several spiritually based projects were initiated in different parts of the globe: Findhorn in Scotland, The Farm in Tennessee, USA, Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, the 'NAAM movement' in Bukino Faso and Auroville in India. The increasing number of intentional, ecological experiments of communal living led to the creation of a huge network, the Global Ecovillage Network, established in 1995, made up of approximately 10.000 communities and related projects<sup>1</sup>. Recent studies (Litfin 2014) define ecovillages as a form of ecological activism and as a branch of the environmental movement characterized by a systemic approach and a holistic ontology based on two main elements: 'permaculture' and Gaia Theory. Even if not all ecovillages are committed to achieving food self-sufficiency, most of these communities are inspired by the principles of 'permaculture'. This is a practice of sustainable agriculture, yet also a set of guiding values built upon the idea that living beings and their different environments exist depending on a logic of systemic homeostasis. This approach is related to the second element mentioned above: the idea of a 'Living Earth', Gaia's vision of our planet as a harmonious whole. Gaia Education, an international NGO offshoot of the Global Ecovillage Network, has 13-year track record in education for sustainable development based on these principles. Despite different approaches to technology, ecovillages promote self-production of alternative energy, recycling of household and agricultural waste and a reduction in consumption starting from the redefinition of human basic needs. These practices are supported by locally-based networks like the Italian Ecovillage Network (RIVE) and the Council of Latin American Sustainable Settlements of Mexico (CASA)<sup>2</sup>. These networks are also useful to volunteers

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<sup>1</sup> The first international ecovillage conference was held at Findhorn in Scotland in 1995. On that occasion, the Global Ecovillage Network was established along with its three regional centers: GEN Europe and Africa, The Ecovillage Network of the Americas and GEN Oceania and Asia.

<sup>2</sup> The Italian Ecovillage Network (RIVE) established in 1995, is made up of more than 40 communities located mainly in rural settings but the number is in constant growth. In Italy ecovillages are placed in the central part of the state and their dimensions are finite, often consisting of around 20–25 people. The CASA Mexico network

who offer their labor for short periods of time, in exchange for the ability to learn more about self-managed communities and sustainable agriculture. This is the way in which I first approached my case studies, living for several weeks with them and sharing all social/work activities. A common purpose of ecovillages is to shift the focus on sustainability to a local level. Consequently, there is an emphasis on increasing local economic diversity and self-reliance. Many communities are committed to the collectivization of economic resources and to the establishment of relationships of reciprocity with the land and surrounding environment. These aspirations are not limited to self-sufficiency, they entail the development of local markets, local production and cooperation among local economic entities. For this reason, ecovillages promote the connection of related networks such as joint purchasing groups and local producers. These relationships serve to sustain the logic of short chain food production and the recovery of native food species. For the ecovillages I visited, wildlife preservation is a central part of everyday life. Biodiversity conservation is another shared goal made possible primarily by planting native species, contributing to forest restoration. For centuries people have come together in small groups to live with each other and the natural environment in a balanced way. Ecovillages share these social and ecological concerns; this communitarian impulse has coalesced globally in the form of experiments of sustainable living (Litfin, 2014:11). However, there is not a unifying definition encompassing the variety of experiences that compose the ecovillage movement. Many communities are documented but many more are not, part of them are at the cutting edge of implementing green technology, others are located in remote places embracing voluntary simplicity and frugal lifestyles; some of them share spiritual paths of personal growth and collective awareness, others are agricultural projects committed to self-sufficiency, resilience and self-management<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, people who embrace this

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was founded in 2012 by the ecovillage Huehucoyotl, a pioneering ecological community of Mexico. According to my study, in Mexico there exist up to 15–20 communities that can be defined as experiments of ecological living (not counting those that are indigenous and/or agroecological). However, considering the lack of studies on this social phenomenon, it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of ecovillages in this area.

<sup>3</sup> For a further description of the history of utopian ecological communities and ecovillages see:

Berry, W. 1996. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. New York: Avon.

Litfin, T. K. 2014. *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Peterson A. 2005. *Seeds of the Kingdom: Utopian Communities in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

particular way of living come from different backgrounds, different social classes and different forms of ecological activism (Brombin, 2017, 2015; Litfin, 2011).

Despite its heterogeneity, the ecovillage movement is usually presented in literature as a neo-rural counter-migratory social phenomenon challenging the actual economic model through the implementation of local based agricultural systems of subsistence and supporting alternative informal economies. It is on these terms that the ecovillage movement is identified as a material, practical response to the global ecological crisis (Litfin, 2009, 2014; Lockyer, 2009, 2010; Miller, 1992). However, very little attention is paid to the specific way of interacting with the natural environment taking place within ecovillages. This paper aims to reduce this lack of studies analyzing the experiences of these ecological communities by using the lens of Multispecies Ethnography. This field of study promotes a new mode of anthropological research not just limited to the human but instead focuses on the effects of our interactions with a multiplicity of other living entities. This new paradigm binds together the contemporary debate about the human and the history of anthropologies of animals, plants and other organisms, providing unconventional insights with respect to conceptual questions about the definition of 'culture' and 'species' (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010: 546). Multispecies ethnography encourages us to think of what we are ceasing to be and also what we are in the process of becoming, emphasizing the multitude of creative and unpredictable ways in which the human is currently being recomposed.

By adopting the approach of multispecies ethnography, ecovillages are presented here as new possibilities for ecological worlding that promote new spaces and places focused on the improvement of an empathic relation with nature. Within these communities plants, animal and other living beings are reincorporated in the social sphere, recognizing their own history, agency and their intrinsic value. As a consequence, the idea of simplicity and self-sufficiency is not limited to material concerns. These concepts change their epistemological status referring to abundance, not meant as accumulation of goods, but in terms of increased complexity pointing to the experience of fulfillment coming from the interaction with the natural world (Brombin, 2017). Through daily contact with nature mediated by senses and body experiences, the idea of relational subjectivity is framed, transforming the theoretical assumptions of multispecies

ethnography into a concrete lifestyle<sup>4</sup>. The concept of subjectivity is not restricted to bound individuals, but is rather meant as ‘a co-operative trans-species effort that takes place transversally, in-between nature/technology; male/female; black/ white; local/global; present/past – in assemblages that flow across and displace the binaries.’ (Braidotti, 2018:3).

### **Considerations about nature**

The point of view traditionally embraced by social sciences regarding the relations between nature and society shows that the most fundamental feature of modernity ‘is the creation of a ‘world picture’ within which nature is inevitably en-framed, that is, ordered as resource for us to use as we wish’ (Escobar, 1999:6). As Riley Dunlap and William Catton (1978) – who helped bring together the field of ‘environmental sociology’- pointed out, for a long time social sciences have been adopting a single approach known as ‘human exemptionalism paradigm’ based on the dualistic separation of nature and society, to analyze the relationships between humans and the environment. According to this vision, nature has been theorized in externalized and mechanistic terms and thereby abstracted from the social domain (Goodman: 1999:17). This modernist ontology supports the objectification of nature and its de-politicization, ‘treating it as a discrete and external object of study, one that can be known through the application of an objective, dispassionate science’ (Goldman, 2000: 564). Stating from these premises, various attempts have been made to link nature and society more closely together in an effort to overcome this anthropocentric approach and to make a shift away from the nature/society divide. Particularly, bringing together the reflections of environmental feminism, new political ecology, and sociology of knowledge and science, a deep re-theorization of the nature/culture dualism has been provided.

Adopting a co-constructionist approach that seeks to identify how relations and entities come into being together, locality-based studies of people interacting with their

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of relational subjectivity is presented by Rosi Braidotti as one of her main contributions to the ‘posthuman’ debate. As the author points out, in the current era of Anthropocene ‘the subjects compose a relational community, defined as a nomadic, transversal ‘assemblage’ that involves non-human actors and technological media. Material, mediated posthuman subjects constitute a materially embodied and embedded community, a ‘people’, bonded by affirmative ethics. As such, they express grounded complex singularities, not universal claims.’ (Braidotti 2018:3).

environments are emphasized, showing that what we consider to be natural is constitutive of the social, and vice versa.

Even if the separation of nature and society has been considered one of the basic features of modern societies, many scholars point out that the divide only makes possible the proliferation of hybrids of nature and culture, linked together in a multiplicity of networks (Escobar, 1999; Latour, 1993; Haraway, 1999; Ingold, 2002). According to the idea that 'the crisis of nature is also a crisis of nature's identity' (Escobar, 1999:1), this article is based on the assumption that we are in front of 'the final decline of the modern ideology of naturalism, that is the belief in the existence of pure nature outside of history and human context' (Escobar, 1999:1). Naturalism is the term used by Philippe Descola (2005) to describe the ontology of the Western world - also called 'mononaturalism' (Viveiros de Castro, 2010)- characterized by the dualistic strategy of dividing and separating<sup>5</sup>. This 'mode of identification' (Descola, 2005) implies the idea of an internal and an external subject and many other dualisms such as mind/body, individual/society, nature/culture, in which the epistemology of western societies and the discourse of science and technology are rooted. In this ontology, that becomes the unit of measurement against which to calculate the other's 'otherness' (Zuppi, 2017:130), is grounded in the civilizing process of Modern Humanism (De la Cadena, 2015). Therefore, nature should not be thought as an essential principle or as an independent domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity. On these bases, nature is considered to be a hybridized concept permanently undergoing changes, a social fact simultaneously collective and discursive (Escobar, 1999; Haraway, 1999; Viveiros de Castro, 2010).

In this regard, the concept of 'natureculture' (Latour, 1993; Haraway, 2003) problematizes the presumed ontological distinction between human and nonhuman<sup>6</sup> as well as a strict delimitation of the world of nature and the world of culture (Hamilton and Placas, 2011). According to the thought of Donna Haraway (1999), we are pitifully

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<sup>5</sup>In the book *Beyond Nature and Culture* Philippe Descola(2005) defines 'naturalism' as one out of four ontologies (or 'modes of identification'), the other three being animism, totemism and analogism. Each of these is the expression of a peculiar, cognitively determined, way of classifying the things that exist in the world.

<sup>6</sup> 'Nonhumans' is an analytical category proposed by Bruno Latour (1993) to move the ethnographic study of science-making practices beyond social constructivist frameworks in which humans are the only actors. However, as Eduardo Kohn (2007) points out, the distinction Latour makes between humans and nonhumans fails to recognize that some nonhumans are selves. As such, they are not just represented but they also represent. And they can do so without having to 'speak' (Kohn, 2007:5).

aware that in the history of colonialism, racism, sexism and class domination, nature has been discursively constructed as 'the other'. However, 'this fickle, problematic, ethnospecific concept represents something we are not able to abandon but we can't really keep neither' (Haraway, 1999: 122). For this reason, we have to face the urgency of creating another kind of relationship with nature, different from reification and possession.

The ethical implications underlying this assumption, as well as and feminist perspective itself, are at the core of the theoretical approach presented in this paper. In fact, 'What is anthropos becoming?' is the key question orientating Multispecies Ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010). The same concern lies at the heart of the experiences of communal living proposed by ecovillages. This implies to move away from the idea of human exceptionalism that opposes men to other living beings – assuming that humans are unique, distinctive selves that ought to be assigned a fundamental moral value in accordance with that distinctiveness – and rather embrace a perspective that brings humans and other species back into anthropology, considering them equally as part of ever-evolving collectives.

Multispecies ethnography 'takes seriously how other beings are good to live with' (Hamilton and Placas, 2010: 253). In this sense it is focused on contact zones, or nature/cultural zones where this multispecies encounter is made possible. Ethnographic attention to the nonhuman is not new to anthropology, however the multispecies approach does not consider the nonhuman just as a symbolic realm suitable for legitimating human logic and cultural determination; instead, rather it focuses on the materiality of the everyday experience and engagement with a plurality of others, following a logic of co-construction and interdependence.

The context of the multispecies debate is placed in the era of the 'Anthropocene', a term used to represent the current historical time in which the ecological equilibrium of the earth is directly affected and regulated by humanity (Descola, 2017; Haraway, 1999). In consequence, we have to face the epistemological, ethical and political crises that cross different fields of social life and the production of knowledge, including human sciences that are called upon to question the effectiveness of their own analytical bases (Latour, 2014). Multispecies ethnography focuses on the decline of anthropocentrism, meant as a distinctive feature of contemporary industrialized societies, emphasizing 'the situated connectivities that bind humans into multispecies communities' (Rose Bird, 2009:87).

As a result, the vigorous revitalization of the human-nonhuman relationship and the affirmation of a geocentric planetary perspective are underlined (Braidotti, 2014). According to these premises, in this article ecovillages are presented as an empirical reaction to the collapse of so-called 'Eurocentric Humanism' and consequently, to the crisis of the political, economic and social system defined as globalized capitalism built on the idea of 'the rational man'.

In particular, on the basis of ethnographic data on ecovillages<sup>7</sup>, I believe that the elements which compose the concept of anthropocentrism are overturned. In fact, the man who reasons, objectifies and separates the real, who breaks it up into parts which can be analyzed and understood only through the hyper-specialized knowledge of science, is replaced by the 'sensitive man'. The man or woman who feels and perceives, who rediscovers his/her sensory experiences, is the man who mixes himself with the things, according to a vitalistic logic. In this way, a nature-culture continuum becomes evident in terms of participation to life that bonds together man with other species, whether animals or plants. The vitality of this bond is rooted in the possibility of sharing the planet and the environment in a non-hierarchical way (Braidotti 2014).

The research questions arising from these assumptions are the following: How do ecovillages contribute to the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the supposedly universal measure of all things? and, how do they create, in practice, models of social interaction alternative to the paradigms of species hierarchy and human exceptionalism?

Multispecies Ethnography helps to answer these questions, supporting my hypothesis. This perspective of analysis shows the different forms in which the vitalistic interconnection takes place, pointing out how it contributes to a qualitative change in the human-nonhuman relationship, moving away from speciesism and enhancing what bodies (humans, animals and plants) are capable of doing in response to the commodification of life in all its forms, challenging the opportunistic logic of global capitalism (Povinelli, 2016; Stengers, 2010).

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<sup>7</sup>This paper is based on an ethnographic multisite research conducted among Italian and Mexican ecovillages. The study adopts a qualitative methodology mainly based on participant observation and my experience of living in several communities chosen as study cases, sharing with them all the working and communal activities, for a total of 101 days of fieldwork in the Italian ecovillages and 45 days in the Mexican ones. In particular, the interviews' excerpts selected for this paper have been collected in the Commune of Bagnaiia located in Tuscany, Italy and in the agroecological project called Suelo Feliz, located in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. These are farming communities adopting organic agricultural techniques and sustainable farming practices.

Accordingly, ecovillages can be taken as examples of a relational way of interacting with the non-human world, a notion that has as its main implication the need to rethink and redefine the concept of subjectivity.

The idea of a 'nomadic subject'<sup>8</sup> (Braidotti, 2014:100) responds to this need, combining the idea of a non-unitary subjectivity with that of ethical responsibility, stressing the ontological role of relationality. The anthropology of becoming, theorized by multispecies ethnography, points out that the 'not-one' represents the deep structure of our subjectivity, that is intimately linked to the bonds that entangle us with many others in networks of complex relationships (Smith, 2012; Strathern, 1988). Furthermore, it is from the realm of the emotions that this theory of subjectivity can be constructed, identifying our emotional sensations rather than reason, as the cornerstone of consciousness (Rapport, 1997). Conceiving subjectivity as something that incorporates multiplicity and therefore non-human agents, implies that this concept cannot be considered an exclusive prerogative of 'anthropos' since it is based on a variety of relationships with different others. According to the multispecies approach, the challenge for a critical anthropological theory is to imagine the subject as a polymorphic entity that includes human beings, animals and the earth as a whole, referring to the need of rediscovering the bond between subjectivity and community. The lifestyle proposed by ecovillages responds to these theoretical claims. In fact, the way in which ecovillages structure the experience of nature is grounded in the relational drive that leads the subject towards other subjects, humans and nonhumans, in recognition of the continuity at the basis of all forms of interaction<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This concept comes from ecofeminist studies and it is particularly related to the post-humanist critique. This current of thought defends the idea of nature-culture continuum, proposing an holistic approach to life. The goal of ecofeminist ethics is to overcome the dichotomous logic opposing nature and culture, spirit and body, in order to give value to the differences and the interconnections between all forms of life. Furthermore, ecofeminist activists bring our attention back to the fact that one of the consequences of the global ecological crisis is the denial of the body's dependence of the sphere of nature. Rosi Braidotti is one of the European ecofeminist scholars who has most contributed to the theoretical reflection on the posthuman, emphasizing the cultural aspect of this critical theory and at the same time, questioning its classical approach going back to the Studies on Science and Technology.

<sup>9</sup> This paper is considered an opportunity to use the Multispecies approach expanding its classical standpoint that is tied up in social movements and environmental activism on one side, and on the other to science and technology studies. The idea here is to use this theoretical and methodological perspective for the analysis of lifestyles and particularly to respond, as many authors point out, to the need of producing a new theory of subjectivity focused on the ontological value of relationality and on the idea of nomadic subjects (Braidotti, 2011; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Descola, 2005).

Based on my fieldwork in both Italian and Mexican ecovillages, the paragraph below provides empirical insight in an attempt to clarify their specific form of interaction with the natural environment, thus putting it into dialogue with a multispecies approach.

**Multispecies lifestyle? From theory to practice.**

*'If we take otherness to be the privileged vantage from which we defamiliarize our 'nature', we risk making our forays into the nonhuman as a search for ever-stranger positions from which to carry out this project. Nature begins to function like an 'exotic' culture. The goal in multispecies ethnography should not just be to give voice, agency or subjectivity to the nonhuman- to recognize them as others, visible in their difference- but to force us to radically rethink these categories of our analysis as they pertain to all beings.'*

(Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010: 562 - 563)

In this section I am going to analyze the distinctive ecovillages' attitude of considering non-human beings as active subjects in daily interactions. I will take the idea of 'anthropology of life' (Kohn, 2007) proposed by Multispecies Ethnography as an analytical tool useful to better understand this specific trait. This approach focuses on the interactions and the effects of the interactions between human and other kinds of living beings, both considered creative, active agents (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Kohn, 2013). It aims to overcome the nature/culture binary that positions humans outside of nature and thus implicitly posits that we are free to control our own destiny within a broader 'natural' world that is devoid of meaning, values, and ethics (Rose Bird, 2012).

The idea of 'becoming' is the central concept of this theory based on the assumption that 'humans are participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled in rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to 'become with' others in a more than human world'. (Rose Bird, 2012: 3-5). As mentioned before, Multispecies ethnographies are focused on the concept of ethics, and the whole world, at all levels, is considered a 'contact zone' where the separation between nature and culture breaks down (Haraway, 2008). Furthermore, the multispecies approach stresses the centrality of body and of sensory experiences as

privileged tools to understand and articulate the interaction between humans and nonhumans.

My hypothesis in this regard is that within ecovillages the conceptual corpus described above results in concrete everyday practices in which the interaction between humans and other actors, such as plants for example, is a hallmark of the lifestyle adopted by these communities.

In this regard, the following interview extract offers an example and a dense description of the multiple dimensions which compose the relation between humans and natural beings, showing a sensorial and experiential complexity that fits with the multispecies approach.

Kate, my respondent who was born and grew up in Milan, one of the most urbanized cities in northern Italy, graduated in advertising design and worked sporadically in various commercial contexts as a phone operator and store clerk. Tired of the confusion and accelerated rhythms of city life, she became interested in communitarian experiences in rural settings. She found information about the commune of Bagnaia<sup>10</sup> on the Italian Ecovillage Network (RIVE) website. At the time of the interview she had been living in the ecovillage as a community member for two years. The garden and the vineyard are the main 'actors' which Kate chooses to interact with.

*I was very focused on the garden. I worked there for about two years. I chose the garden just to get in contact with plants. My curiosity was to observe the whole process, from birth to growth, and then pick the fruits. Then, I was even curious about the vegetables, to look at them, to know the names of wild plants, to work the land, to feel it, to touch it, to hoe it. (...) Now, I prefer working in the vineyard, I like so much to just stay in the vineyard. Because somehow it adds something to my everyday life... I'm in contact with a plant, and I like to take care of her. And then, I realized that it is an extremely delicate plant, and I also had to face the problems it has, such as parasitical mushrooms, or the fact that perhaps it is not very suitable for this*

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<sup>10</sup> The Commune of Bagnaia located in Tuscany is a farming community that reached a high level of self-sufficiency both in food and energy. It was founded in 1979 and is considered a pioneer community in Italy for its contribution in the creation of the Italian Ecovillage Network (RIVE) in 1995. Bagnaia doesn't follow specific religious beliefs and people do not have to adhere to spiritual doctrines in order to be part of the community. At the time of my fieldwork 22 people were living there, 7 of them were founders. The community's internal economy is completely shared and decision making processes are based on the consensus method. I had been living in Bagnaia for 30 days as volunteer, participating in working and communal activities. I interviewed almost all of the community members and other guests I met during my stay.

*particular environment. And then, there's so much work, there is so much to discover in the vineyard. It is as if it is hiding a mystery that is waiting to be discovered. And then, because I love wine. And, it is so nice to work a plant which then gives you its fruits<sup>11</sup>.*

(Kate, 28 years old,

Commune of Bagnaia)

This quote contains a very dense ensemble of meanings characteristic of a multispecies approach, and in particular to the idea of 'becoming' described above. The first relevant aspect is that Kate's work in the garden and in the vineyard is not a task that has been passively assigned, but rather is the result of a voluntary choice, motivated by the desire to establish a particular type of relationship with plants, 'come into contact' with them, in order to create a specific dimension that ultimately becomes a source of wellbeing. Kate's words accurately describe the complexity of this interaction.

The relationship with the vineyard is primarily based on observation and knowledge of plant life-cycles, and on developing a familiarity with its living context populated by a variety of agents conditioning the history of the plant. Kate explicates the need to be aware of these biological factors, such as mold or fungi that could damage the vineyard, influence its growth, that otherwise affect the development of its fruits and consequently the taste of the wine. Kate actively intervenes in the history of the plant through a daily interaction that emerges primarily as an action of care and knowledge as an ongoing process.

What transforms the interaction into a relationship is the curiosity and the fascination that the vineyard exerts on Kate and pushes her to approach the plant with the desire to know and discover its features. On this basis, the relationship of care that is established is not simply related to material needs or material purposes, as the production of wine, but it satisfies an ethic-aesthetics demand. 'Taking care of the vineyard' is beautiful, a source of pleasure, and an action that adds meaning and value to Kate's life.

This dynamic joins in the circular dimension of gift; the reciprocity of the relationship materializes in the fruits of the plant that represent the result of the interaction between humans and nature. The plant's fruit (meant as outcome) qualifies and supports human presence and human action expressed in the gesture of care. The transformative and trial aspect of this relationship is revealed in reference to the destiny of the vineyard's

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<sup>11</sup> I translated this interview's extract in English. The original version is in Italian.

'gifts', passing in the human body in the form of food, to give then rise to other transformations. Following the thought of Tim Ingold (2011), it seems pretty evident that Kate ascribes to the vineyard its own agency, not so much for its ability to generate a concrete action (producing fruit), but for the simple fact that it is a living being interacting with her.

Continuing the analysis of the interview excerpt, the concept of 'becoming' comes again into play, since the interactions with the grapevine modify Kate's perception of her everyday life, changing her sensory and emotional experiences, and finally it creates the conditions for the development of a creative action. Particularly, as Tim Ingold points out, human creative action is expressed by 'participating in the world's transformation of itself, that means that human beings produce themselves and one another by establishing through their action the conditions for their ongoing growth and development' (Ingold, 2011: 8).

Things are of such vitality and aliveness because their material presence affects the lives of the persons with whom they are interacting. So there is social vitality in things in relation to the social lives of persons, because 'the material character of the world is comprehended, appropriated and involved in human projects' (Pollard 2004 in Ingold, 2011: 31) In this sense, things have histories forged in ongoing relations with humans and non-humans, situated in a specific local context.

The interaction with the vineyard changes Kate's perception of time and enables her to create a personal and intimate temporality that does not respond only to human rationality, but rather is modulated also considering the plant life-cycle and its reaction to Kate gestures. This is part of the creative aspect of the connection established with a 'different' subject, one who is going to be discovered through a daily continuous encounter. The contact with the plant is something new and, to some extent unpredictable. The fact that the vineyard is both a living being and the context of Kate's working activity breaks the repetitiveness that characterizes agricultural work. The vineyard is perceived as a subject, a mysterious subject, and the fact that it is not completely knowable stimulates Kate's imagination. This aspect is central in terms of creative action, because the interaction with the plant always seems to be original, never equal to itself<sup>12</sup>. I believe this is an example of the possibility of interacting with natural

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<sup>12</sup> For a better understanding of this dynamic, it might be useful to mention the distinction between action as 'praxis' and action as 'poiesis'. The former responds to a logic of cause/effect in mechanistic terms, while the

beings out of an utilitarian logic of possession so fervently evoked by multispecies ethnographers (Haraway, 1999; Tsing, 2005). In fact, the relation that Kate creates with the plant is not designed according to the conventional schema that utility demands. It expresses care, curiosity, even a playful inclination that goes far beyond necessity, stressing the perceptual values inherent in the physical engagement with the environment. This form of interacting with nature converses with the thesis proposed by Thomas Berry (1988) who talks about a 'biocratic' criterion that contemplates planetary well-being as the measure of all human activity. This enables us to enact a renewed sense of community, encouraging us to reflect on how the histories of humans and of other earth's beings are deeply entangled.

Furthermore, from an emotional standpoint, the feeling generated from the contact with the vineyard is similar to the aesthetic appreciation one can experience producing art. This is precisely what many environmental philosophers describe in terms of an 'aesthetic experience' referring to the moment in which we join in a relation of undivided reciprocity with things in nature (Abram 1996). It describes the personal encounter that establishes the 'world of relation' (Berleant, 1997; Schehr, 1997). Unlike an ordinary experience, in which we objectify and manipulate things, an aesthetic experience describes 'how a person in the intimacy of relation develops a personal bond with what is ordinarily considered quite distinct and separate. The kind of things with which we can engage in this way are perhaps surprising: nature, people and ultimately art' (Berleant, 1997: 153).

Finally, another aspect stressed in the interview, which is also central in the multispecies approach, is the importance bestowed to senses and bodily experiences and how they can be considered indices of human-animal encounters. This focus may also help in understanding how the engagement between human intentionality and the agency of multiple species, ethics and knowledge production can be apprehended.

When Kate talks about the garden or the vineyard, she refers to a broad sensory spectrum; senses are crucial to interpret the relation with the plant as an experience of knowledge. First of all, she refers to the visual experience, her choice to work in the garden is largely motivated by the desire to 'see the plants'. The sense of sight here is re-

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latter implies a generative process that escapes the repetitive reproduction of the same (Haraway, 1999). Moreover, the fact that the vineyard is in part perceived as something mysterious, which makes it not completely accessible to Kate, allows to maintain that homeostatic balance between the 'conscious purpose' and the 'unconscious thought' which is presented by Gregory Bateson (1972) as an expression of the bond between human being and the environment.

framed, it does not allude to vision as privileged tool of the modern objectifying rationality, as a look that creates a divide between an active and a passive subject, or separates people from the context of their actions (Latour, 2005,1993). In this case, the act of seeing implies proximity and the concrete, material engagement of Kate with the plants, the time to follow their life process, as if it could be possible to really see them only through the direct contact in the garden. The dynamic is completely different from the one that can take place, for instance, in a supermarket where vegetables are not truly seen, because we don't know where they come from or how they were grown, here it lacks the process of knowledge which is instead produced by a concrete and tangible action in the garden. Then touch comes into play, touching the ground, working it, modifying it: physical contact is central in order to establish a relationship between humans and non-humans, since, as Tim Ingold (2011) has noted, life is (and needs to be) experienced through the body.

When Kate talks about wine, about the taste of the fruit of her labor, the concept of pleasure is then addressed in a holistic sense. Pleasure passes from the physical senses to a more existential level that involves wellbeing and fulfillment. The dimension of care and the opportunity to express herself creatively are an integral part of this pleasure. All the elements discussed above about Kate's perception of the non human world can be compared to Haraway's interpretation of the multispecies approach, that according to her thought refers to a specific epistemological field linked to 'simply situated knowledge and to an untraditional conceptualization of vision not meant as a passive activity, but rather as an active perceptual system, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life' (Haraway, 1988: 583). In this respect, a multispecies perspective required a specific attitude based on 'the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view, even when the other is our own machine' (Haraway, 1988: 583). This is also the position of the feminist version of objectivity: 'situated knowledge requires that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground, or a resource' (Haraway, 1988: 593). In this direction ecofeminism has particularly stressed that 'the world must be seen as an active subject and not as a resource to be mapped' (Haraway, 1988: 592-593).

This attitude of care, that is supposed to be at the basis of a multispecies perspective, is precisely the attitude that in the ecovillages is assumed in the relationship between humans, plants and animals. Kate's interview gives an example of this assertion. The

following quote of Haraway, referring to the interaction she has with her dog, is comparable with the experience that Kate has with the grape:

‘The coming into being of something unexpected, something new and free, something outside the rules of function and calculation, something not ruled by the logic of reproduction of the same is what training with each other is about. That, I believe, is one of the meanings of *natural* that the trained people and dogs I know practice.’ (Haraway, 2008: 223)

In this quote Haraway is talking about the relationship she created with her dog in the context of a specific sport-like discipline that required a mutual training of both human and animal in the case. Particularly, Haraway uses the concept of ‘contact zone’ to describe the physical and emotional space in which the interaction with her dog takes place. As the quote shows, this zone is characterized as a context in which something ‘unexpected’ is produced, something new and free. I think that it is possible to compare this specific dynamic with the relationship that my respondent creates with the grape. There is a kind of training Kate must respect in order to interact with the plant that requires observation and care; one of its main implications is the change in her subjectivity. In this respect, the Anthropology of becoming theorizes a subjectivity that is not based on structural dependence, but, rather, is part of a dynamic process wherein ‘the social field from which it emerges leaks on all sides’ (Biehl and Locke, 2010: 322). In the field, the unexpected happens every day, and new causalities come into play. So, understanding the process of becoming means ‘possibly understanding where things are going, a key to making viable for assessment and transformation the future form of life of emerging communities’ (Biehl and Locke, 2010: 337).

To conclude, I want to introduce another extract, related to my experience in the Mexican context. Despite the differences between the Italian and the Latin American ecovillage movement that can’t be discussed in this paper, I want to stress the similar approach to the natural environment, conveying a distinctive ecological sensitivity. The quote below is from Raul the founder of ‘Suelo Feliz’, an agroecological community located in the central part of Mexico<sup>13</sup>. He was talking to me about how he and his

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<sup>13</sup>Suelo Feliz is an agroecological project located in the municipality of Atotonilco el Alto in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. In 2013 the community formally turned into an agricultural cooperative, 9 families of local farmers participate in the project producing organic food. The agricultural products are mainly supplied nearby to the city of Guadalajara through the creation of a huge solidarity purchase group composed by more than 120 consumers who are accustomed to visiting the farmers’ families in order to directly learn about the production system. Suelo Feliz adheres to the Mexican network of ecovillages and sustainable settlements (CASA), part of the Latin

companions solved a problem in his garden connected to a plague affecting trees. The resolution implied the use of water as a key element of a specific ritual.

*'I told you about the water we made for the insects, following the idea that we are transmitting information to the natural system which understands the information. So, the thing was that in this area there were many ants, they were everywhere, in the field too, and they were bothering the flowers of our trees. There was a guayabo, and they almost killed it, it was getting very bad. So, what we did between Yanay me and other two guys who work here with temazcales, medicines and plants – and they know a lot of those things- we gathered together, each one put his energy, directed his energy to the tree, but also put an intention, a purpose and we said it out loud. I wanted my plant to be healthy, but I also didn't want to harm the ants, my intention was not to destroy or kill them, but I wanted to stop that. I wanted a solution good for everyone.*

*I gave this water to Juan, the guy who helps me, and I asked him to sprinkle it on the tree every day. On the third day, the tree was covered in wasps and flies and the boy came and said: «Hey, there are many flies and many wasps and they are eating the insects.» I went to check it out and yes, it was true, I heard the buzzing of the flies all around the tree. And in a few days the insect population dropped a lot and then, the ants left.*

*[...]We used normal water, from the well. Water is not important, I mean, it is important not because of its properties, but because it is a vehicle used to transmit information to heal and for many other things. So, one begins to have this kind of experiences, that even I do not believe sometimes, I wonder how it can be truly possible [...]. This has been a very important experience because it allowed me to believe more, to convince myself that many things can be done. And I have been learning a lot, but I need to experiment, to practice more, to have further experiences in order to believe more.*

*In the end, I see and I begin to understand that nature does interact with us, and we can interact with it. Since then, I am learning many lessons. In this case of the insects,*

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American branch of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). The cooperative offers courses in natural medicine, biodynamic farming techniques, bioarchitecture and sustainable practices. I visited the project to attend a five day course of biodynamic agriculture; during that time I stayed in the house of the community founder with his family.

*I realized that we humans do not have the role of being insects' predators.*<sup>14</sup>

(Raul, 60years old, Suelo Feliz, Jalisco)

The goal here, as my informant himself points out, is not to look for specific meanings in order to give a rational explanation or sense to the ritual. The thing here is that – if we want to take seriously the suggestions of multispecies approach -we need to get rid of the restrictions of an analytical perspective that obsessively privileges interpretation and representation, and rather focus on the relational bonds that are activated and made possible through specific social practices that in this case link together, in a non-hierarchical way, the human and the nonhuman world (Berry, 1988).

As Raul's quote shows, within ecovillages nature is considered a mirror through which it is possible to learn and increase the knowledge about human behavior and human inclinations. Natural features are considered collective values, indeed, the interaction with the environment has an ethical implication. In fact, being in the world implies the ethical responsibility to dwell in it, following a communitarian project of being.

In this sense, within ecovillages nature is not meant as a theater in which human affairs are conducted, rather it is considered an active subject, that contributes to the understanding of the interdependent dimensions in which human and nonhuman beings operate. So, animals, plants and trees play a central role in the creation of the meanings given to social practices.

Nature does not represent just a thing, an object to deal with or to take advantage of. Rather, within these ecological communities, nature is meant as a 'dwelling' (Ingold, 2002) such as a home, a place to which we belong intimately both in living experience and memory. As we are used to thinking of our own home as a place that primarily involves feelings and emotions, likewise the same feelings are involved in the vision that ecovillages have of nature. At the same time, it represents a place in which the presence of individuals acquires value and meaning because of the relationships of proximity that are created in it. As in the case of our own homes, nature is not something given or preexisting, it is our personal landscape, it is something that entails a process of mutual change, growth and challenge as well (Haapala, 2005). It arises 'in the kinesthetic sense of the masses and spaces that incorporate us. In this case, incorporate is a good word,

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<sup>14</sup> I translated this interview's extract in English. The original version is in Spanish.

because it literally means to bring our bodies in' (Berleant, 1997:13). So then, the relationship with nature can be considered an embodied experience. As the quote shows, the human contribution to landscape produces knowledge not only by thinking, but by being; it provides an understanding gained through action and not contemplation (Berleant, 1997).

Moreover, considering nature as a dwelling means that the idea of familiarity is implied; in fact 'home is a place where everything is familiar' (Haapla, 2005: 46). In this sense, it becomes possible to better understand the idea of mutual co-construction between humans and the natural environment. Within ecovillages nature represents a place that has a specific character, it is not an abstract location, but 'a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and color. Together these things determine an 'environmental character' that is the essence of place. It is therefore a qualitative 'total' phenomenon' (Light and Smith, 2005:42).

As Tim Ingold ascertained, understanding the world is not a matter of interpretation, but of being in relation. It is not a matter of construction either, but rather of dwelling, it is not about producing a gaze of the world, but having a gaze within it. Knowledge is produced by the encounter between humans and nature starting from sensorial and practical experiences that shape the way of doing and perceiving (Ingold, 2002).

On the basis of food self-production and the daily contact with the land, ecovillages create a particular kind of relationship with the natural environment contributing to restore the sense of place which becomes a 'landscape of everyday life' (Berleant,1997). This process is connected to the need to re-find identity values that bind the community to its own territory often endangered by the homologation processes of globalization. The specific form the landscape assumes, that is an exterior place as much as the interior space of the self, arises from the concrete interaction between people and the surrounding environment, between humans and nonhuman beings. Then, it rises up to become an aesthetic expression and a symbol of shared ethical values.

## **Conclusions**

Ecovillages adopt a lifestyle that, through contact with nature, aspires to confer sense to the self, starting from the recovering of human environmental experiences and perceptual knowledge. This enables the shaping of a specific ethic and aesthetic in which

the interaction with environment contributes to increase the feeling of personal sustainability of the subjects.

In this respect, the way in which ecovillages experience nature represents a reaction to the process of modernization that according to several authors, involves the gradual disappearance of individuality, the concrete, history, memory and the human voice: a process whereby the experience is destroyed (Agamben, 2005; Beck, 2000; Sennett, 2008).

For ecovillages, embracing a lifestyle in close contact with nature represents the possibility of 'being able to stay' in the world in a more confident way, using the everyday experience one has of the world based primarily on the direct contact with the surrounding environment instead of a pre-established and mediated knowledge.

This interaction is meant in terms of 'becoming', as an ongoing process of change that not only affects individuals, but also changes the characteristics of the natural context in which it takes place. Consequently, the encounter between humans and nonhumans facilitate the development of a relational subjectivity understood as a process of autopoiesis determined by multiplicity. This implies an 'embedded sense of responsibility that originates from a feeling of deep communality and is made possible by relationality and community' (Braidotti, 2014: 57).

The contact with the natural world implies focusing on what one's own body communicates and the senses and bodily experiences detected through expressing and sharing emotions. This allows the ability to give new meaning to one's own presence by paying attention to the way in which humans and the environment influence and co-create each other. In these terms self-sufficiency acquires a complex meaning not limited to a materialistic or economic perspective, where nature is mainly considered as something to interact with in order to achieve material goals. Ecovillages extend this concept to a more complex spectrum of experiences, emotions and feelings, arising from the encounter with many different 'others'.

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