Foraging for a Future

New ways of being with spontaneous plants

Tamara Griffiths

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The open access publication of this book is made possible due to generous support from the University of Highlands and Islands.

First published in 2025 by
Sean Kingston Publishing
www.seankingston.co.uk
Canon Pyon

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

Cover image: *The Forager*, 2023, an oil painting by the author.

Ebook ISBN 978-1-912385-72-0
DOI 10.26581/B.GRIF01

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Initiations

On a misty winter day in 2019 we gathered in the kitchen of an ancient palazzo, atop of a small hill-town facing the Apennine Mountains, learning how to cook foraged plants within an experience offered by the Case delle Erbe. All at once the workshop leader, Maria-Sonia, alters her voice making it loud, echoing and resonating beneath the vaulted ceiling, so forceful as to sound angered:

> The figure of the (female forager) is to honour nature, not to use it! The figure of the *raccoglitrice* means to honour, not to profit! The figure of the *raccoglitrice* honours hour after hour!

There is a pause as no one speaks; presumably everyone in the group is surprised.

> Every second is an appointment of love. I'm in transit on this planet. All I have are the hours, the seconds of appointments with love until my last appointment.'

In a sense the following pages represent a journey to understand these words, or rather to embody them as a precursor to a transformative discovery of Being in a Heideggerian context.

From the outset, intense synergies between Heidegger's realization of living as a journey towards death disclosing an ultimate realization of Being, and Maria-Sonia's approach to teaching foraging as a way to learn how to live and how to die, became apparent to me. These form the themes of this book. Indeed, Maria-Sonia's 'appointments with love' and her daily developing of the ability to part with one's body are physical embodiments of Heidegger's philosophy in the quotidian, as we shall explore. For Heidegger the specific

positionality of 'Being-towards-death' places *Dasein* 'face to face with the possibility of being itself,' (Heidegger 1962:311); likewise, with Maria-Sonia and generally within the study area's Case delle Erbe, foraging evokes experiences of Being. Given the intensity of Heidegger's focus on explicating Being and experience in relation to other contemporary and historic theorists, he provides the most appropriate underpinning for the journey the book represents. Heideggerian thought is also the base of the weak ontology which emerges as culmination of the book's experiences; a style of ontology branching out specifically from Heideggerian phenomenology (White 1997:504; 2009). Presently, we will analyse embeddedness and interwoven synergies between Heidegger and the Case delle Erbe and these themes are further detailed in Chapter 4, including the shared theme of care. Why other contemporary theorists are not given central stage is explained in Chapters 5 and 7.

Foraging for a Future offers a timely investigation into foraging, a practice that has become fashionable and is sweeping across Europe and North America (Ballerini 2012; De Jong and Varley 2018; Fortini *et al*. 2016; Guarrera and Savo 2016; Landor-Yamagata, Kowarik and Fischer 2018; Pieroni *et al* 2007; Smith and Jehlicka 2013; Tuttolomondo *et al.* 2014). Guided by phenomenological anthropology, we delve into an international foraging movement whose relationship with non-domesticated plants is creating an experience economy.[1] This social movement, called the Case delle Erbe, revolves around spontaneous[2] plants and has 130 houses, or centres, across Italy, along with others located in Chile, Romania, Canary Islands etc. This movement focuses on experiences with spontaneous plants, offering people new ways of Being. It has no intention to replace agriculture, nor to present new models for food production. Experiences and Being are the core of the Case delle Erbe. This book does not describe all of the Case delle Erbe in Italy (and beyond), but instead, after many years of participation, develops an understanding of a group of Case delle Erbe located in the Central Apennines, largely within a mountainous national park.

Subsequent chapters will make evident the importance of the location for my research, and the choice of the study area is further emphasized by the

1 Pine and Gilmore (1999) brought the concept of the 'experience economy' into contemporary discussions, where it continues to evolve (Richards and Munster 2010:23; Tsai 2016). In more recent considerations, 'experience' has merged with a search for existential self-realization (Kirillova, Lehto and Cai 2016:13). See also p. 35.

2 The term 'spontaneous plants' is used since this is the name used in Italian to signify non-domestic plants. This term has implications, discussed in following chapters.

main protagonist of the Case delle Erbe movement having chosen to move to here. As will become obvious, the author is neither visiting for research nor studying subjects, but instead has been living in the study area for more than a decade, taking part in the community with friends. This has resulted in a multifaceted positionality with an abundance of elements vying to be written about. During my time there, we endured a national disaster, the devasting earthquakes of 2016–17, which might have provided the material for a different type of book. However, being the only English-speaking person involved in the Case delle Erbe in the study area, and having an opportunity to communicate to a wider readership, sparked an impulse to explore and impart my findings in two areas.

Firstly, though many studies focus on spontaneous plants as resources, and the scientific validations of, and the locally held beliefs regarding, the health benefits of the culinary practices involving spontaneous plants are well documented (Agradi *et al.* 2006; Bandini 1961; Bellomaria and Della Mora 1985; Cappelletti, Cirio and Mutti 1979; De Feo and Senatore 1993; Fortini *et al.* 2016; Guarrera 2003; Pieroni *et al.* 2002, 2007), there appears to be no detailed research in Europe regarding foragers' beliefs pertaining to a relationship between spontaneous plants and Being, as is explored in this book. Indeed, the Case delle Erbe propose and envisage a new culture and a new way of Being. Understanding these themes became a key focus.

Secondly, while the experience economy (Kirillova, Lehto and Cai 2017), slow tourism (Fullager, Markwell and Wilson 2012) and slow adventures (Varley and Semple 2015) are all well understood, there is little if any research on a post-growth evolution of the experience economy. The experience economy is beginning to mature beyond its neoliberal roots and the Case delle Erbe offer an example of this emergence. *Foraging for a Future* explores the details of how a post-growth experience economy functions in a mature capitalistic setting, investigating its impacts on experiences in nature.

Addressing these two lacunae, with attention upon experiences and Being, rendered Heideggerian thought an apt theoretical perspective. Additionally, there is no need to underline the relevance of phenomenological philosophers within phenomenological anthropology; the methodology itself does that for us (Ram and Houston 2015). Yet this integration has one consequence deserving mention within this initial conceptual sketch. A stimulus for interpreting the Case delle Erbe within a Heideggerian theoretical framework was partly in order to have a touchstone for what might otherwise have been overly nebulous and large themes, the very themes Heidegger devoted his life's efforts to illuminating (Being, death, care, dwelling etc.). Simultaneously, my aim was to enrich discussion by opening another dimension regarding the Case delle Erbe as experienced from a Heideggerian perspective. These

stimuli proved valuable in themselves, yet also transformed with time. The methodological impulse shapeshifted into an experience whereby the Case delle Erbe gave me a different understanding of Heidegger. Hence, rather than 'using' Heideggerian philosophy for interpreting the Case delle Erbe, instead the Case delle Erbe made apparent a new interpretation of Heidegger. This interactional postulation of Heideggerian thought became what Desjarlais and Throop (2011:92) refer to as 'fieldwork in philosophy'. As but one example, I will explore in Chapter 6 how experiences in the Case delle Erbe contest the perceived value of Heidegger as a favoured environmental philosopher (Zimmerman 2006). Consequently, it is important to recognize *Foraging for a Future* is an analysis and exploration of both Heideggerian thought and of the Case delle Erbe, without any hierarchical predominance given to the famous thinker. Heidegger is awarded no privileged authority; participants' interpretations and lived experience in the Case delle Erbe are valued on a par and celebrated as embodied phenomenology. Thus, various branches of thought combine and inform our understanding of each within an egalitarian and symbiotic rapprochement, with unexpected consequences; where and how divergences occur form pertinent points of illumination for comprehending both Heidegger and the Case delle Erbe.

The cultivation of knowledge requires time and *Foraging for a Future* evolved from years of participation in the Case delle Erbe, beginning before 2016 and continuing to this date and beyond. Given my experiences in the Case delle Erbe, it appeared significant to communicate my learning about approaching Being via foraging and relationships to nature. Initially, this also included exploring personal-identity projects (Vepestad and Lindberg 2011) or self-transformation, as these represent predominant motivations for seeking experiences in nature (Beams, Mackie and Atencio 2019:165), and therefore reflections on an 'identity' dimension in the relationship to foraging has been included in this work. It was fascinating to discover how the Case delle Erbe in the study area engage in a post-growth experience economy, promoting decommodification and the civil economy (Bruni and Zamagni 2007) and slowly the details of this new expression of the experience economy became clear to me. Consequently, the following journey is transdisciplinary by necessity, as the participants' experiences and reference points traverse disciplines such as alternative economics, decommodification, philosophy, spirituality, sustainability, tourism and well-being. Although readers from a range of backgrounds will find the book engaging, it is intentionally most pertinent and stimulating for those offering experiences in nature.

Further, during my years of participation it was exciting to observe how the research for this book illuminates the cultural and biocentric richness

of mountains and uplands within the context of sustainability studies. This is in contrast to their popular role as recreational resources, where sports and human health are frequently pursued with blinkered zeal. Obviously, the current Western recreational approach to mountains comes belatedly, compared to tens of thousands of years of other more integrated styles of human interaction. Possibly this book is a 'traditovation' (Cannarella and Piccioni 2011), thereby an innovation of traditions, for the richness of experience displayed in *Foraging for a Future* presents a timely contrast to the global consumerization of mountains and rural landscapes as sport and hedonic well-being centres (Oriade and Robinson 2017).

Within the context of sustainability *Foraging for a Future* proffers a discovery: namely, how a life integrated with spontaneous plants – not controlling them, but rather interacting with them – appears to engender a 'social fabric', as a participant calls it. Upon first hearing the term 'social fabric' I understood it as a notion with a sentiment. Only years later did it become clear that this is a visceral, physical force. In the Case delle Erbe in the study area, through a close interconnection with the world of spontaneous plants, people learn a corporeal attachment to the whole environment and a recognition of humanity that is more collective, interwoven with impersonal cycles of time and seasons. In turn, this stimulates shared socio-economic values based on decommodification and exchange. Although Case delle Erbe participants are extremely diverse, their specific relationship to spontaneous plants appears to generate a trust and inclination for a sharing economy of decommodification and non-control. In Italian non-domestic plants are called '*piante spontanee*' (in English, 'spontaneous plants') and this correlates with the Case delle Erbe commitment to destabilizing control (which agriculture requires), while stimulating spontaneity. Italians do not use the word 'wild' in relation to spontaneous plants; this large topic, which may represent a psychological propensity towards narrowing the nature-culture dichotomy and certainly does stimulate sustainability, is discussed in Chapter 2. The entire national movement grows 'spontaneously' and commenting on this Maria-Sonia says:

> I do not try to control it (the Case delle Erbe). It happens of its own, spontaneously. Almost by contamination. When I am no longer here, it will keep changing. Nothing is fixed.
>
> (Maria-Sonia 2019)

Chapters 5 and 7 elaborate on how this social fabric created by spontaneous plants inspires a rejection of control, creates a new economy and a more collective society, while challenging processes of neoliberalism.

Vitally, it is tempting to understand this type of interconnection between the world of spontaneous plants and an attachment to the whole environment with recognition of humans in a collective interwoven impersonal sense, bound by cycles of time and seasons, as a cosmological grounding in place. The reality of this intuitive experience equates to a cosmology for some participants. However, others have little or no connection to religion or myths offering a universal organic conception. For these participants there is no 'stable cosmic order to which things conform, which governs us' (Eco 1986:88), yet their lived world is one which interconnects all things in position with respect to one another (ibid.). To a degree, many experiences in the Case Delle Erbe are well represented by Heidegger's fourfold, born from his theory of dwelling, and as expanded upon within this book. Yet, the beauty of engaging with spontaneous plants is how they open a sensitivity to a cosmological proclivity without any specific narrative. Unusually, the reality of the experience is shared; the beliefs or the narratives used to create the reality, or to 'arrive there', are left to the individual as detailed in Chapter 5. There is no understating the importance of this conceptual openness, with its potential for understanding environmentalism, sustainability, the popularity of spiritualism without religiosity (Chastain 2017) or the longing for a sense of place and 'oneness' theory in pro-environmental behaviour research (Wamsler *et al.* 2018:143).

With time and learning, rather than framing this worldhood as a cosmology, I root it in a fascinating embodiment of Heidegger's fourfold, enriched by Umberto Eco's (1986) study of the Middle Ages, as a type of '*integritas*' that was 'dissolved by nominalism' (Eco 1986:89), a topic explored in detail in Chapter 7. To render this more commensurable with a nomenclature, *Foraging for a Future* frames this integration of the fourfold with *integritas* as a 'territory of grace and thanks'. It may be interesting to consider there is no current landscape designation reflecting such a territory, and for the most part this is because a territory of grace and thanks is principally a non-productive landscape, wherein the importance rests on spontaneous plants: not upon agricultural labour, nor upon the other side of agriculture's coin, conservation. In a territory of grace and thanks people's lives are deeply integrated with an embodied realization similar to Heidegger's fourfold, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Leaving behind the book's 'discoveries', some setting of the scene is required for basic context. The study area in Central Italy reflects the Mediterranean's diverse micro-niches (Horden and Purcell 2000), woven

together within matrixes of flowing interconnectivity between biodiversity and human activity, intensifying and abating with various altitudinal and gradient ranges, with north/south facing slopes, deep glacial valleys and sub-Artic summits. Additionally, rich river beds clad in dense deciduous woods, lakes, and vast high-altitude grasslands create a cornucopia of 'extraordinary richness of species' (Fortini *et al.* 2016:208), including many endemic 'European Community interest' flora and fauna. The study area proffers multifaceted opportunities for human engagement and forms a valuable part of 'Europe's ecological backbone' (EEA 2010:1). As the historian Pagnani writes, 'The relative ease of access, vast pastures, prodigious richness of vegetation, animals and water made it a place that attracted pastoral people from the most remote ancient times.' (1987:132).

Within ethnobiology a correlation between abundant biodiversity and cultural richness is being explored (Nabhan 2016). In Italy the fecundity of foraging as a custom and as a present-day practice is influenced by the diversity of the geography, in turn stimulating a range of biodiversity and cultural differences between neighbouring villages. Population density is higher around the coast, but in the study area it is on average 30 people per square kilometre, though it varies greatly depending on the location (pers. comm. Ufficio dell'anagrafo 2021) and population continually reduces as one ascends the mountains. Modest levels of commercial or industrial development are also factors important for foraging behaviours in the Case delle Erbe.

Furthermore, it cannot be reiterated too strongly that this book does not capture the Case delle Erbe movement in all its diverse locations throughout Italy and internationally, as there are Case delle Erbe in Romania, Canary Islands and Chile, and one opening in Tunisia, while pre-Covid there was interest in California. Why northern countries have yet to engage is discussed in Chapters 2 and Chapter 7. Readers will learn the essence of the Case delle Erbe is its lack of homogeneity and any notion that this book is representative of all instances should prompt extreme caution. Equally of note, this research covers the study area between roughly 2016 and 2020 and captures no more than a transient phase, as the movement evolves, altering rapidly and continuously. While additional scope and focus is given to the main protagonist of the movement, Maria-Sonia, who lives in the study area, she has her own approach and is completely different in her style from other participants. As we shall see, there are very defined differences between the Case delle Erbe and the movement is celebrated for its heterogeneity.

Today each of the 130 Case delle Erbe in Italy is actually unique, though they share similar beliefs. The foundation of Case delle Erbe is education and experiences, more specifically learning about the values of local spontaneous plants and often earth honouring. Some Case delle Erbe interact as a kind of

co-operative, creating a network of suppliers who exchange with each other, or with health-food businesses, restaurants, cosmetic companies etc. Different regions in Italy have a more developed presence and generally, but not always, they represent people who have opened their homes to the public. A key point in the movement is that one does not need to own land, nor invest in machinery, nor agricultural practices – one simply needs to be able to walk to where one can forage. For the most part, the inspirational figure providing a sense of unification within this myriad of diversity, is St Hildegard of Bingen. A deep enthusiasm, reverence and knowledge of the works of Hildegard make this (alternative) saint something approaching a figurehead for the movement.

Finally, to prepare for the '*passaggio*'[3] this book represents, it is worth sketching out some aspects of positionality. In terms of 'pre-textual engagement' (Rakowski and Patzer 2018:5), I adhered to no preconceived anthropological concepts when starting. Instead, my participation in the Case delle Erbe was due to happenstance, my desire to learn and personal development. Typically, like most people, I was interested in plants primarily as regards 'using' them with a utilitarian productive mentality; through the Case delle Erbe I learnt to have an altogether different and profoundly rich relationship with spontaneous plants. As I learnt from the Case delle Erbe, I began to see the importance of communicating these experiences and this resulted in formalizing an approach. In preparation for writing, a phenomenological anthropological perspective clearly became the most appropriate methodology. Although considerable care is required to address positionality, here it may suffice to communicate an abridged explanation. It is worth reiterating that I had no plans to study Case delle Erbe. This is noteworthy because with time I discovered my personal motivations of wanting to learn about spontaneous plants, biodiversity and health, are the typical initial motivations of most participants drawn to the Case delle Erbe. Hence, including my own experience in the Case delle Erbe has relevance as a common denominator of the popular desire to participate. In anthropological terms there is an indivisible auto-ethnographic aspect in 'homework', in contrast to classical foreign 'fieldwork', in anthropology. Within 'homework' the methodology represents one's life, immersed in the daily reality and politics of research (Aggarwal 2000).

In this vein, the 'theory of the approach' cannot be described as rationally deduced initially. Focusing further on my positionality within homework, even the basic term 'active participant observation' sits awkwardly with my

3 If thematically coding conversations in the Case delle Erbe in the study area, the word *passaggio* would represent one of the main repeating themes. In Italian it is used to signify steps or transformations and my own interpretation, which is perhaps not prevalent, is that of a passage in the sense of a voyage.

experience. Rather than signifying how I participated, perhaps this term represents shades of the past that we are transitioning away from. As Okely mentions, regarding anthropology's sordid history,

> Observation has sometimes, even in social anthropology, been emphasised at the expense of participation. The material for this study did not come from 'feeding' tobacco to a handful of informants…
>
> (Okely 1983:44)

The way in which feminist anthropology offers a direct contrast to the mentality of participating with 'informants' is instructive, becasue one works with intimacy in one's own culture, frequently within one's community of interest (Whitaker 2011). Despite such advancements, within today's anthropological discussion of implicating the body as the horizon of experience (Dalidowicz 2015:91) there remains a sense of the anthropologist physically applying themselves to a group, with the purpose of observing or studying. This application is done with the goal of representing the group in writing, film etc. Between such an intent and my experience lurks a difference that raises the longstanding discussion regarding 'the tension that exists between subjectivity and objectivity in post-phenomenological enquiry' (Payne 2003:186). When one participates for the same reasons that others in the group participate, one is simply another participant who wants to understand the experience. Though my participation was informed by knowledge of academic literature, other participants were also academically informed. Instead of taking a stance of active participant observation, I choose to participate in the experience in its own right and was enmeshed in deep intersubjectivity. I was not applying myself to document. In this positionality one is immersed in involvements with the primary motivation being to experience. A secondary, later motivation, was to discover if one can document the learning and intersubjectivity in a manner that is meaningful to the Case delle Erbe and within a larger theoretical context as a body of thought.

This kind of participation is of a lived nature, spontaneous, shaped by happenstance and emotion. The intersubjectivity existing in this type of relationship cannot be orchestrated; categories of objective/subjective become obscure. Yet, sharing physical and emotional experiences through a lengthy continuity together does not necessarily mean one is the same as other participants. In the study area I represent the only non-Italian participant. I am warmly regarded for a book I wrote about the mountains; and hence always considered both a foreigner and yet also at home. My first interaction with Maria-Sonia, the main figure in the Case delle Erbe, was when I brought

a group of visiting undergraduates from an American university to experience a didactic session with Maria-Sonia at a Case delle Erbe in the mountains in 2015 (this structure is now closed due to earthquakes). Later, when Maria-Sonia moved into the study area in 2016,[4] I went to say hello and over time began to participate at her Case delle Erbe. During this phase I occasionally worked as a journalist, published a few articles about the Case delle Erbe and represented the Case delle Erbe at a conference on mountain sustainability. Although I had not planned a role, my being a person who documents the Case delle Erbe was received with enthusiasm and with time solidified in the eyes of participants.

This was significant for the book, as people who open their homes as Case delle Erbe would not have given their time so generously had they not read my work and known about me within a local context for a number of years before I arrived on their doorstep. As well as experiencing the Case delle Erbe in the study area, I also attended festivals where the Case delle Erbe was represented. The Case delle Erbe in the study area were involved in a government-funded project and I attended six workshops as part of the project during 2018–19. At these workshops and at the Case delle Erbe houses, I interacted with and alongside other participants and learnt about participants' interests and involvements. In 2017 the Case delle Erbe opened a higher education centre in the study area focused on Hildegard of Bingen and I did some translation for this school and attended lectures. Simultaneously, I had been taking part in other foraging groups and events and increasingly talked with high-altitude mountain residents to understand their (different) relationship to foraging.

Perhaps of interest for others embarking on homework in anthropology, an unplanned and in-depth immersion in a northern European culture for part of the year altered my perception of the study area radically. The culture one has left behind is literally seen with new eyes, attuned to the unfamiliar when returning home. A central aspect of classical anthropology, which is 'predicated on the revelatory potential of the unfamiliar' and 'transporting alien selfhood into the field' (Herzfeld 2001:45), may thus be resolved within homework by becoming what could be termed as a slightly ill at ease 'visitor at home'. The methodology of *Foraging for a Future* highlights the benefits of homework, participating with people who have a similar level of education, within a similar European culture and with shared interests. This positionality may represent the highest level of engagement. Being on the same intellectual (and compassionate) level also offers a solution to a problem Houston (2015) describes as

4 Since 2016 I have been involved in the Case Delle Erbe in the study area, using the practices learnt therein in my daily life.

> Phenomenology as anthropological inquiry generates a further paradox in its epistemological critique of the theoretical knowledge of intellectuals in the name of ordinary humans' practical knowledge and involvements.
>
> (Houston 2015:282)

As will become apparent, one participant has a degree in phenomenological philosophy and is a published author whose books are cited in the next chapter. This participant encouraged me in taking a Heideggerian perspective, considering it an excellent approach for writing about the Case delle Erbe. All the main Case delle Erbe people who opened their homes to me in the study area brought writers and academic material to my attention, influencing this book's arguments. As well as sharing an intellectual curiosity, we also share 'practical knowledge and involvements' as regards the quote above, in terms of foraging and knowing the territory. Intense intersubjectivity involves 'shape-shifting' (Houston 2015:282) and readers will observe how I shifted, and further how shape-shifting was responsible for positing intersubjectivity between people and spontaneous plants. As we will see, I incorporate the perspective of the so-called ontological turn, by interacting with 'participants' who are spontaneous plants, as explored in Chapter 5. Engagement in homework with its intersubjectivities is a stimulus encouraging

> … a growing number of thinkers to argue for the merits of approaching intersubjectivity as a core foundational theoretical construct for anthropology and the human sciences more broadly defined.
>
> (Desjarlais and Throop 2011:91)

To reaffirm, the book endeavours to forge two paths, ultimately leading to one proximally shared destination:

1. an investigation of foraging for Being in the Heideggerian sense, discovered through a relationship with spontaneous plants;
2. an investigation of how the Case delle Erbe may represent a new post-growth phase of the experience economy and its significance for slow adventures and tourism, and experiences in nature.

Additionally, as previously mentioned, nothing is static in the Case delle Erbe and the embodiment examined here dates specifically from 2016–20.

The reader can expect Chapter 2 to advance vital contextual background. Chapter 3 makes an initial description of the Case delle Erbe, with preliminary details of how this movement functions. Chapter 4 applies aspects of Heideggerian thought to the Case delle Erbe of the study area. Chapter 5 dives into experiences in the Case delle Erbe and analyses Being within Heideggerian and the Case delle Erbe contexts. Subsequently, Chapter

6 considers Heidegger's shortcomings in relation to the Case delle Erbe. Chapter 7 brings the themes together, while and Chapter 8 offers a 'takeaway' summarizing the conclusions.

In as much as various participants in the Case delle Erbe in this study area share a reality, it is a reality I share, yet they are also deeply shaped by social context and history. This is not a world I have been born into, although I share their fascination for it, and it is to context and history we now turn, as they provide the necessary background to comprehension.

2

Representations

Beginning to understand the Case delle Erbe

'The character of "having been" arises, in a certain way, from the future.' (Heidegger 1962:373) and interpretation of behaviours from the past forms our future. From the outset, distinctions between farming and foraging appeared central to the practice of the main figure in the Case delle Erbe, Maria-Sonia. Between 2017 to 2020, when teaching, she made a contrast between contemporary farming and contemporary foraging practices, and this thought was expressed in diverse manners.

> The magic of the figure of the forager (*raccoglitrice*) is that she doesn't own land, she doesn't seed, she doesn't use machines, she puts herself at the service of the plants. They don't wait for you.
>
> (pers. comm. Maria-Sonia 2019)

This statement reflects core values of the Case delle Erbe, namely that one does not seek control or dominate plants or nature, nor does one have to participate in owning land and the genealogies of hereditary rights. Additionally, the statement spells adventure: the experience of being outside of a controlled context. One is 'at the service of plants', experiencing a different reality.

Stimulating the discussion of perceived values embedded in farming or foraging realities, a key participant in the Case delle Erbe in the study area is a strong advocate of nature-first, 'traditional' farming practices. Alberto's perception of the forager is as being in harmony with the agriculturalist and his experiences, and frequent comparisons of foragers and farmers added to the discussion. As a result, historical differences and current interpretations

of foraging and farming have been taken up as a theme within this book.[1] We begin this chapter with a glimpse of some archaeological background to create context for this conceptual trajectory, expanded upon throughout the book. The aim is not to present a single reality, nor analyse interpretations of the past. Instead, historic themes are visited and interpreted in light of what they show us about the Case delle Erbe's distinctiveness today. Rather than presenting this historical information as a single or authentic vision, the information in this section is included to give context and create the background for a stimulating discussion of contemporary and future values in the Case delle Erbe.

This chapter has four main parts. The opening section begins with prehistoric foraging in the Apennines. Comprehension of how foraging has been represented in Italy, both historically and also in the present, is crucial and it is to this that we subsequently turn. The Case delle Erbe is contextualized briefly within the experience economy, economic models for 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson 2017) and the civil economy, as a preliminary knowledge of these frameworks is required to comprehend the significance of the Case delle Erbe. Here, only bare bones are offered, in order to move quickly on to the Case delle Erbe itself and its experiences. As we will see, each Case delle Erbe aligns itself with a different type of focus, using different approaches. In order to fully appreciate and be comfortable with this heterogeneity, understanding some context and theoretical background is helpful for framing the Case delle Erbe in all its diversity. It also stimulates the fullness of vision required to enter into the experiences.

Themes: early peoples, foraging and farming

Archaeological research aided by increasing technological development has substantial altered our perceptions of the past. More than ever the, past is changing as rapidly as the future (Lowenthal 2015). In this section themes are introduced that highlight aspects of the Case delle Erbe's discourse and frame the weak ontology of Chapter 7.

The study area offers a particularly rich documentation of pre-agricultural peoples, commencing with the Pleistocene (corresponding to the Palaeolithic period), partly because, as Manzi, Magri and Palombo state, 'The Italian

1 The author had been sensitised to the theme of non-agricultural groups by researching and writing a book about high-altitude mountain communities in the study area (Griffiths 2014), in the process of which she discovered that parts of the Apennines had a distinctive culture largely due to being outside of the feudal *mezzadria* agricultural system that operated in most of central Italy at lower altitudes.

territory is especially suitable for palaeoecological studies, because of its strategic position between Africa and continental Europe.' (2011:1420). Indeed, they make significant contributions to new debates about our origins, describing additional species considered to have evolved into *Homo sapiens*.[2]

A Middle Pleistocene site in the central Apennines, located slightly south of the study area, reveals an abundance of lakes and waterways in valleys with skeletal findings of animals that capture public imagination. such as the *Mammuthus* sp., or mammoth; *Hippopotamus antiquus Desmarest*, a European hippopotamus; *Elephas* (*Palaeoloxodon*) sp., a straight-tusked elephant; and two types of 'giant' deer (Palombo *et al.* 2010:174). There are signs of humans work upon the animal bones, offering 'evidence of the human peopling of intermontane basins of the Apennine chain since the early Middle Pleistocene' (ibid.:170).

Epigravanette, or Upper Palaeolithic, findings from 20,000 to 10,000 BP are in richer abundance, particularly around the intermontane Bacino Fucino. Archaeologists demonstrate the Fucino had a vast variety of habits and biodiversity, from high-altitude summits to swamps on the edge of what was formerly the largest lake in central Italy. We might view the Fucino basin as a microcosmic representation of societal and land-use changes. Throughout prehistoric times and into the Middle Ages these diverse wetlands/lake habitats were the focus of a rich social culture and were prized as a free and shared source for food as well as other useful products (Horden and Purcell 2000:187). In the 1800s this vast lake was drained to create an agricultural plain of 200 km^2 by Duke Torlonia (Agostini *et al.* 2008:102), exemplifying Braudel's 'battle' for man to dominate peripheral landscapes (Horden and Purcell 2000:249). The draining of the lake was motivated by desire for productivity and power via agriculture. More recently, as agriculture became less profitable, this land was transformed once more into sprawling light industry interspersed with fields (Agostini *et al.* 2008:102).

Today, there remain over fourteen prehistoric sites, mostly caves around the Fucino Basin, studied since the 1950s to the present day (Agostini *et al.* 2008:103; Grifoni Cremonesi 1998, 2003; Grifoni Cremonesi and Radmilli 2001; Mussi, Melis and Mazzella 2003). Decades of excavations have revealed information regarding food consumption, artistic activities and funeral rites. To weave our way through a superabundance of information that merits a book in its own right, we initially focus on an identified group of Upper Paleolithic mountain 'foragers' (Grifoni Cremonesi *et al.* 1995:228) called the 'bertoniane', thus named after the first location in which they were identified (ibid.). This

2 The richness of their findings render them impossible to do justice to in the space available, and readers are encouraged to read their work (2011).

group of semi-nomadic, Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers moved with the seasons and inhabited the approximate area of the National Park of Abruzzo (Grifoni Cremonesi *et al.* 1995). The Grotta Continenza, where the 'bertoniane' dwelt, is a fascinating cave in the Bacino Fucino that displays almost continuous inhabitation from the Late Upper Palaeolithic to the neolithic, or from 15,000 to 7,000 BP (Boschian *et al.* 2017). For our immediate purposes, particular attention is given to the transformation from foraging to agriculture, as a discussion of possible tensions and imperatives within society during this time enhances comprehension of the Case delle Erbe today. We commence with the 'bertoniane' in the Grotta Continenza, then enlarge the focus to sketch an initial image of issues possibly encountered within foraging to farming transformations. Agostini *et al.* (2008) used Geographic Information Systems to create an 'integrated computerized system for archaeology' showing the geomorphic evolution of the Fucino area from 20,000 years ago, thereby presenting a suggestion of the environments at the time, some of which were inhabited. Inputting figures for glacial presence in the Apennines during Würm III and factoring in the mitigating effect of the Fucino lake, calculations show that the permanent snow during the years 20,000 to 18,000 BP was around 1,700 to 1,800 metres altitude, with tongues of ice extending down the valleys to the altitude of 1,400 to 1,500 metres (Agostini *et al.* 2008:104). After this phase there was a period of interglacial change with cold humid and cold arid years in which large mammals are believed to have lived at the higher altitudes. These would have included the horse, *Equus hydruntinu*s, and the famous 'camoscio appenninico', the *Rupicapra pyrenaica ornate*, which the national park in the study area has brought back from the verge of extinction in the 1990s (Ragni 1995). In the more temperate forests at a lower altitude there were deer, wild boar, birds and fish in the rivers. From 20,000–15,000 BP the depth of the lake decreased, providing more land and marsh for foraging and hunting and greater access to caves (Agostini *et al.* 2008:109). The authors' findings suggest there was an increase in human presence in 18,000 BP when some of the sites, such as the Grotta Tronci and the Riparo Maurizio first become used (Radmilli 1997:109).

The Grotta Continenza has led scholars to conclude that the transition from 'subsistence to production economy' (Boschian *et al.* 2017:2), along with behavioural changes within the hunting-gathering lifestyle, was relatively abrupt in this part of Italy, although not synchronous. Anthropic evidence including domestic waste, hearths and 'pebble pavements' (ibid.:3) characterize the Palaeolithic periods. The cave was a site of burial and simultaneously a habitation, which with secondary disposal was common in Europe (Schroeder 2001:79). By the Mesolithic, the assemblages contain the remains of nine bodies and demonstrate how domestic life moved further towards the outer

cave (Boschian *et al*. 2017:3). During the neolithic the living space was further reduced to the very outer part of the cave, and the inner cave was only reached by crawling through a tunnel. In the neolithic the cave came to be used solely for: 'funerary practices, with a minimum number of individuals (mostly unarticulated) estimated to at least 45, many of which were infants' (ibid.:3). The predominance of infants may be described as the 'neolithic paradox', namely how the transition to agriculture brought higher mortality rates, particularly for children (Page *et al.* 2016), a conceptual dilemma we will shortly turn to.

From debris in Grotta Continenza archaeologists ascertained that wild boar, deer, chamois and trout were eaten by the Upper Paleolithic 'bertoniane' group (Grifoni Cremonesi *et al.* 1995:228).

> Considering also the analogies in the stone tool assemblage and economy, it is likely that the same groups of foragers continued frequenting Grotta Continenza through time, progressively adapting their behaviour to the Holocene climate change. Fishes – mostly *Salmo trutta* – from the nearby Fucino lake had been a major food source in all the preceding periods.
>
> (Boschian *et al.* 2017:21)

Studies suggest there was seasonal movement for the 'bertoniane' and other groups from most of caves in the Fucino basin, often to obtain raw materials to make tools, with summer residency in the high-altitude locations like Fonte Chiarano (1600 m), where an abundance of artefacts and charcoal were found (Lubell *et al.* 1999:465). In Grotta Continenza the funerary and artistic objects, including painted stones and decorated bones and shells (Astuti 2012; Astuti, Chiarenza and Grifoni Cremonesi 2005), give a rare glimpse of a seemingly rich Upper Paleolithic 'bertoniane' culture. A vast number of *Columbella rustica*, a spiral shell that would have been found in abundance in the Fucino lake, appear to have been worn as necklaces. Additionally, there were numerous, densely decorated animal teeth and bones as well as impressive, large pieces of crystal quartz (Astuti *et al.* 2005).

Currently there is scholarship – the 'social brain hypothesis' suggesting 'cognitive competences underpinning complex behaviour' (Gamble, Gowlett and Dunbar 2011:116) – supporting the view of Palaeolithic society as highly socially integrated and functioning collectively, at scales fluctuating between larger and smaller groupings (not necessarily based on the nuclear family). While it is impossible to suggest a detailed representation of Palaeolithic people in the central Apennines, it seems that the environment or the natural world was the core of life. The Director of Archaeology for the region of Abruzzo, Dr Agostini, who is supervising the Palaeolithic archaeology in the Fucino basin,

explained how he understands Palaeolithic life as ideologically and culturally complex, with an understanding of the cycles of nature in relation to their daily lives (S. Agostini, pers. comm. 31 July 2017). He suggests that Palaeolithic people in the Fucino were not necessarily trying to understand, nor analyse/direct nature, although they were fearful of it and their collective livelihood was bound to it. Dr Agostini believes they were probably 'concerned with discussing views to solve problems to understand daily life and its issues, more than trying to understand nature' (S. Agostini, pers. comm. 31 July 2017).

In addition to decorative and cultural objects in the cave, a renowned discovery was one skeleton in an unusual position with the head removed, in the levels between the Upper Palaeolithic and neolithic (Grifoni Cremonesi *et al.* 1995). The body, dating from 10,200 BP (ibid.:234), is described as of special interest because it was truncated, in a kneeling position and surrounded by a precise circle of painted stones (Grifoni Cremonesi 1998:401). It is identified as a mature male, of low height and robust stature. The head appears to have been severed as a human act. Further, where the head was removed a stone 'pillow', a rectangle stone, was left in its place. This practice was also discovered at the nearby Grotta Maritza, where a young person's head was truncated and a stone put in its place during the same period (Grifoni Cremonesi *et al.* 1995:234). Schroeder (2001) studies disarticulation cross-culturally and finds it in sixty-six per cent of European burial practices, with an overwhelmingly high percentage in 'rotating settlements of hunter-gatherers' (ibid.:88) such as the 'bertoniane'.

In archaeological terms interpreting the removal of heads with these associations could prompt caution. A similar example was found in a mountainous cave in Spain, where a person described as Upper Palaeolithic is believed to be a 'middle-aged, robust female individual of ca. 160 cm in height and weighing ca. 60 kg, with good health status' (Strauss *et al.* 2015:10). As in Grotta Continenza, this individual was entombed with the head removed and given ritual importance, due to the amount of red ochre on the body (ibid.:12) although no painted stones are recorded. The thigh bones were also removed, which was a common practice and may foreshadow the image of the skull and cross bones with which we are still familiar today (Armit 2016). These practices in the cave in Spain predate Grotta Continenza by many thousands of years, reducing a correlation between these practices and the neolithic transition to farming. However, Koutsadelis (2007), explores how 'the profound changes brought about by the advent of agriculture are reflected in mortuary practice'. There was also consistent skull detachment across the whole of the Levant leading up to the neolithic transition. One may conclude, the new practice of removing the skull indicated that the head was distinct in some manner from the rest of the body. Due to the ritualized objects and the significance of the

position of the body therein, we can interpret the practice of removing heads in the central Apennines as an extremely powerful expression, intended to underline deep meanings symbolizing some separation/distinction between head and body.

Changes of values and lifestyles are assumed in the transition from foraging to farming, be they gradual or abrupt, as was in the case of the Upper Paleolithic 'bertoniane' culture (Boschian *et al.* 2017:20. One example of such change is represented by the 'neolithic paradox', which Page *et al.* (2016) studied in the context of present-day peoples, focusing on

> foragers in the Philippines (henceforth referred to as "Agta"), a diverse group varying in mobility, foraging, wealth accumulation, and camp permanence, all traits attributed to the Neolithic revolution.
>
> (Page *et al.* 2016:4694)

Avoiding a search for so-called 'pure' hunter-gatherers, were they ever to exist, Page *et al.* instead sought a parallel to the neolithic transition as a means to exploring how the quality of life for hunter-gatherers diminished with agriculture. The 'paradox' element is the acknowledgement that with agriculture the population increased, yet mortality rates were much higher. They tested how

> the spread of agriculture involved a life history quality-quantity trade-off whereby mothers traded offspring survival for increased fertility, achieving greater reproductive success despite deteriorating health.
>
> (ibid.:4694)

Searching for an 'adaptive mechanism' to explain the paradox, the authors described how hunter-gatherer mothers gave up 'quality for quantity' (ibid.) in the agricultural lifestyle change. In hunter-gatherer groups fewer children were born and they apparently received more time and parental investment, outliving their parents, meaning the emotional bond between mother and child was long. In the Page *et al*. study the hunter-gatherer children were healthier and experienced more abundant resource provision, as they were fewer in number. Hence children of hunter-gatherer mothers, are 'higher quality offspring' (ibid.). Oddly, the authors did not ask the foragers they were studying, nor ask themselves, if and why women wanted to become more fertile? Producing more babies with increased physical strain of repeatedly giving birth, without resources or time to sufficiently care for the children, who in turn experienced a high level of mortality, would conceivably impact family well-being.

Simultaneously, the so-called 'neolithic revolution' in parts of Italy involved the domestication of animals for production of meat, wool and milk, which was previously proposed by Sherratt (1983:91–3) to commence from *c.*4000 BC. Given radiocarbon dating, domestication is now perceived as occurring earlier and we learn that 'pioneering groups of agro-pastorialists moved upward from the south of Italy in 5900/5800 and 5600/5400 BCE' (Battentier *et al.* 2017:3), eventually interacting with hunter-gatherers in the uplands. There might be a correlating narrative whereby the new productive mentality of domesticating animals also defined how women were encouraged to behave by increasing their productivity. Indeed, mirroring societal shifts, Grotta Continenza went from being an apparently sacred and important location, to functioning as a stall for domesticated animals in its latest neolithic period (Boschian *et al.* 2017:13), presumably for sheep or goats. Within the Palaeolithic to neolithic transition to agriculture, farming practices connected people to a precise piece of land, leading to the development of a new 'tenurial relation to land, while the creation of genealogies which extended back through the generations' (Thomas 2000:657) imbued a perceived permanence to land claims and emphasized the importance of the nuclear family structure.

In the study area a neolithic settlement, periodically abandoned and inhabited until Roman times, revealed 'a local economy that was primarily based on animal breeding, cereal cultivation, fishing and deforestation' (Farabollini, Aringoli and Materazzi 2009:1800). We return to discuss deforestation in a Heideggerian context in Chapter 6. Four 'monumental graves' of prestigious persons from the Piceni tribe were discovered, containing objects and ornaments that suggest contact with other communities and a pronounced social hierarchy (ibid.:1804). From 6000 to 5000 BCE it is believed the community farmed sheep and pigs, while still hunting, within a landscape retaining only some 'presence of a woody cover with open spaces' (ibid.:1804).

In the Mediterranean, and hence the study area, caution is required before interpreting various 'revolutions' as having had comprehensive impact. Like the agricultural 'revolution', that of metallurgy is best understood as non-uniform. The 'mining, smelting and production of large implements' became widespread in central Italy during the early Copper Age, although these objects already appeared in the late neolithic (Dolfini 2010:708). Large metal tools could represent a completely different relationship with the vegetative environment, a life-altering technology that could grant a sense of increased power over nature. In the study area the expansion of metallurgy is understood to have occurred as the agricultural tradition of the neolithic was increasingly solidified.

Comparable with other 'revolutions', the transition to farming may not have always represented a disruption to people, as '[c]ultural continuity is

shown by the fact that the same places were used' and within them local people had different types of contact with 'Neolithic innovations' (Ruiz 2005:473). Ruiz relates that 'while old economic traditions were combined with new productive modes (i.e., when farming and cattle herding activities are first introduced but foraging remains the main subsistence source), a polymorphic settlement pattern flourished.' (ibid.:475).

> During the Mesolithic and earlier Neolithic, a collective distribution of goods would have been the norm: small groups returning from hunting and gathering loci distributed the products they obtained among all members of the social group. Settlement would have been dispersed, with a network of egalitarian communities (self-sufficient in food and technology) but linked by social interactions in order to regulate intra-group conflicts and to provide access to materials, lithic raw materials, and subsistence resources. Within this framework, territories are organized through mobility.
>
> (ibid.:477)

'Once food production gained ground relative to foraging' family genealogies became more significant. Family groups become independent and are understood to have left the communal structure (ibid.:478) and:

> attitudes to subsistence and surplus – and in particular the tension between incentives to hoard and imperatives to share – rendered Early Neolithic communities fragile, with tendencies to fission.
>
> (Leppard 2014:484)

The theme of sharing, contrasting with hoarding and production, is key to understanding the challenge the Case delle Erbe pose to society today as Chapter 7 explores in detail. Generally, we interpret agriculture as creating a need for storage and 'thereby of non-obligatory redistribution which, in turn, creates recursive social obligations,' (Leppard 2014:491). In sum, the neolithic transitions to farming suggest frequent but not unilateral cultural differences between foragers and farmers (Battentier *et al.* 2017) and economic tension between hoarding and sharing imperatives (Leppard 2014:484). These themes have been explored because they prompt comparison within the Case delle Erbe today, as following pages will illustrate, and furthermore to encourage an acknowledgement that discourses surrounding foraging and farming are derived in part from archaeology and orientate how the movement is conceptualized today.

Within the scope of this chapter it is not possible to do justice to the wealth of research pertaining to the Copper, Bronze and Iron Ages. Having

concentrated on distinctions between foragers and farmers as particularly relevant to the Case delle Erbe, the remaining aim is to portray glimpses of the past, woven into these themes, in close geographic proximity with the study area. Mensing *et al.* (2015) provide fascinating research on over 2,700 years in an intermontane depression and their study represents the most contemporary scientific analysis of this part of the central Apennines using 'high resolutions synthesis studies' from lake sediment drilling. Added significance is derived by cross-referencing the scientific findings with archival information, assisted by a particularly important and ancient abbey located nearby.

In the 'Pre-Roman period' of 700–300 BCE, Mensing *et al.* discuss the Sabines as an 'advanced culture' (2015:86). The Sabines retained earth-worshipping practices that continued even after they were conquered by the Romans (Cordella and Criniti 2008) and they represented one of several prehistoric peoples who co-habited in the study area. In the 'Pre-Roman period' small settlements were scattered around the 'marshy environment' (ibid.:86) of the lake. It is significant to note how the Sabine style of pastoralism had little impact on forests, therefore in this period environmental change was a 'response to climate rather than human activity' (ibid.:85). Presumably as a result of their earth-worshipping culture, whereby they had deities representing the woods and water (Cordella and Criniti 2008), the Sabines had a cultural context orientated toward environmental conservation.

A well-developed floodplain forest around the lake-shore offered sediment which revealed extensive and detailed accounts of which species (arboreal and vegetative) grew at various altitudes. It appears the lake receded naturally from 850 BCE, changing the carbon content of the water. During the 'Early Roman period' in 270 BCE the Romans, famed for their love of controlling water and dominating landscape (Schama 1996), dug a drainage canal. Flooding around the lake ceased, causing reduction of wetlands in the valley, representing a loss of a rich habitat for foragers (Mensing *et al.* 2015:86). During the Sabine period Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia* 3:109) described this basin as covered by dense forest. 'Beyond the reduction of *Alnus*, there is no evidence for forest degradation.' (Mensing *et al.* 2015:87). *Alnus* is a tree requiring water-saturated soil to grow. Deforestation only occurred later at this site, after the Sabine culture ceased to exist. Here it is worth highlighting that, contrary to popular belief, forest clearance did not always correspond with population growth (Mensing *et al.* 2015), which is relevant for concluding discussions regarding the impact of the 'clearing' in Chapter 6.

Ragni[3] (1995) offers a detailed ecological history of the study area within a similar time frame as the study above. He describes the prevalence of mixed forest covering the whole area with small pastures, created by humans or by natural disasters (ibid.:16). Subsequently, the Bronze Age saw extensive development of agriculture and domesticated animals. By the Bronze Age the forest was already greatly reduced, 'fragmented and substituted with pasture and cultivation,' (ibid.). Iconic animals were at this point driven to the extremity of the summits; the wild boar (*Sus scrofia*), the stag (*Cervus elaphus*), the deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) and the legendary, most ancient animal, the camoscio appenninico (*Rupicapra pyrenaica ornate*) whom the 'bertoniane' consumed in the Grotta Continenza during the Palaeolithic. The bear and the lynx are believed to have existed still, yet they were 'in competition for food and refuge' with the wolf (ibid.).

From the Bronze Age, through the Iron Age and into the expansion of Roman civilization in the study area, Ragni describes dramatic 'environmental destruction', plus 'direct destruction' due to hunting of animals. This direct destruction was justified by the need to defend cultivation (ibid.:17). The 'destruction, degradation and fragmentation' of the forests provoked further extinctions as well as a reduction in the stag, deer and boar populations, while the 'vulnerable camoscio appenninico' was obliged to cohabit with sheep and goats on the mountain summits. The porcupine, believed to have survived the glacial period, relocated again and adapted to living at a high altitude (ibid.:19). It is poignant to observe how the mountains in the study area in this early period were already the last bastions of salvation for biodiversity, a theme with evermore urgency today (Parish 2001; EEA 2010).

Roman conquest and colonization of the high-altitude settlements in the central Apennines typically involved brutal retaliation against the pre-Roman peoples who attempted to retain their liberty. While 'a majority of pre-conquest rural sites seem to have continued in occupation, a pattern common to many areas of the Apennines' (Bradley, Fossataro and Menozzi 2008:23), continuity did not always signify stability. The population frequently experienced extreme change, when for example 'A Roman garrison placed in Cluviae was overcome (by local peoples) in 311 BCE, but the Roman consul recaptured the town and massacred the adult male population (Liv. 9, 31.2-3).' (ibid.:22).

The Roman conquest represented further consolidation of organized productive mechanisms, promoting intensive agriculture and commerce.

3 Professor Ragni died as I was researching in 2018. A professor at the University of Perugia, he was closely associated with the foundation of the national park and played a central role in conservation policies.

The Roman occupation of central Italy saw the construction of large-scale sanctuaries for religious practices and rituals. A prominent mountain sanctuary is testimony to the complexity of social changes conforming to, yet dissenting domination during the Roman empire. The 'sanctuary complex – the so-called "Sanctuary of the Dolphins" – that once existed in phase 2 (125–30 BCE)' includes 'architectural terracotta revetments of very high quality, some of the finest found to date' (Kane 2008:147). The site was a potent symbol, one 'befitting to the aspirations of the cosmopolitan Samnite patrons' (ibid.). The Samnites were conquered, pre-Roman peoples, like the Sabines and others. Heavily influenced by Roman domination, they commissioned the sanctuary to demonstrate their status within Roman society by connecting to the fashions of Rome (ibid.:150). Yet the designs of dolphins adorning the building may represent a longing for a lost way of life and their resistance to 'Romanization' (ibid.).

> The second century BCE in Samnium was also a time when nostalgia flourished and local traditions were revived. Could the "Sanctuary of the Dolphins" reflect the area's wish to recall a former Lucanian connection? The iconography of the dolphin plaques is linked most closely with Magna Graecia and southern Italy, the land of the Lucanians.
>
> (Kane 2008:150)

The Lucanians were a predominantly pastoralist culture, without heavy emphasis on agriculture or productivism. At the 'Sanctuary of the Dolphins' rituals involved the use of spontaneous plants integrated with sacrifices of domestic animals, immature quinces and other cultivated fruits as offerings to gods (ibid.:147). Here we observe one of the last vestiges of the spontaneous being granted sufficient prestige for sacrifice, alongside domestic products, in a temple possibly idealizing a less-domesticated past.

In the study area, the second biggest modification due to anthropocentric forces occurred from 1600 to the 1700s (Ragni 1995). The discovery of America brought grains, new legumes, corn, other crops and more extensive feudalism and technologies, reaching even the 'remote Appennino dei Papi' (1995:19). The human population 'waged war against the natural landscape' (Ragni 1995:19) with intensive expansion of cultivation, regimental control of water, increasing number of villages and roads, and a vigorous and permanent increase of population. Trees in general were at their 'greatest state of degradation' (ibid. 1995:19). The prehistoric camoscio appenninico, previously referred to as driven to the mountain summits, disappeared in 1700s. The last stag was killed on 15 November 1825. The wild boar became extinct and the lynx was 'already gone' (ibid.:20). There is a public record of the last bear

killing in 1563. The otter and the European martin lost their habitat becoming extinct at this time and all large birds except the golden eagle 'had been shot' (ibid.).

Ironically, industrialization in the 1950s indirectly saved the study area, as the first wave of modernization and factory jobs available after the war provoked a 'vast out-migration' (ibid.:21). During this time agriculture was abandoned and between 1970 and 1975 transhumance was at a historic low point. 'Weed vegetation grows more' as agriculture disappears (ibid.). The forest is considered to have 'rested during the 1960s and 1970s and then was rediscovered in the 1980s and 1990s' (ibid.:21) as society became interested in conservation, ecology and landscape. Today the national park's conservation policies have assisted most of the primary animal species to return to what is visually a re-naturalized environment. Yet as Mensing *et al.* (2015) describe:

> The slopes remained forested but contained much less biodiversity than the original landscape, even though pollen percentages suggest that total forest cover is not significantly less now than during the pre-Roman period.
>
> (Mensing *et al.* 2015:91)

Paradoxically, the growth of industrialization, spawning outmigration from the mountains toward urban centres, was the turning point sparing the natural resources of the study area (Ragni 1995:21) from continued depletion caused by agriculture, hunting and population growth. The relationship between phases of capitalism and predominance of foraging develops throughout the book, forming a cornerstone of the conclusions.

Representations of foraging

A frequent misconception is that foraging is an adaptive response to disaster or scarcity (Horden and Purcell 2000). The history of food crises in the Mediterranean was rarely 'caused by demographic growth outstripping carrying capacity' (ibid.:267). Famines were frequently created by speculation and hoarding (Camporesi 1980), perhaps a shadow of the legacy of neolithic transitions to farming, which is understood by scholars as having bred both social inequality and economic growth (Armit 2016; Leppard 2014; Ruiz 2005). Mediterranean food failures were frequently due to social injustice, hoarding and war, and foraging is depicted as a skill people relied upon in these times of hardship (Horden and Purcell 2000:181). As Horden and Purcell (2000) comment, foraging has clearly been a survival skill, and for example increased in rural Tuscany under fascism (Counihan 2004). Yet it is also a demonstration of a free, shared resource that can inspire a presumptive stance

of generosity and care. Beyond the need to survive, many other motivations exert a comparable or greater influence, both historically and in the present.

Firstly, historically, people of every social class in Italy have foraged. Frayn describes foraging as a valued activity practised by everyone in Roman society, from affluent to impoverished, as a way to 'enhance the attractions of an already well supplied table' (1975:39), or for health purposes or as a component of innovative cultivation practices. Drawing on texts by Cato, Columella, Palladius, Pliny, Seneca, Varro and Virgil,[4] She shows how it was usual to collect spontaneous or semi-domestic greens and how spontaneous plants were categorized into three types (1975:35). Columella writes instructions on how to transplant spontaneous plants nearer to the home (ibid.:34) and more controversially, in terms of contemporary discussions, Palladius instructs how to cultivate spontaneous plants (ibid.:36). This history of people engaged in and enthusiastically consuming spontaneous plants continues to this day. Guarrera and Savo comment that 'Many plants currently used as food, were already known by ancient Romans.' (2016:204) and they link the past with the present:

> For example, the Pythagorean Greeks considered mallow (*Malva sylvestris L.*) a perfect food to eliminate hunger and thirst … and it was described as a plant that can cure all illnesses (omnimorbia). Still now, small leaves and shoots of mallow are consumed in plant mixtures and after 2000 years in the Italian countryside people still say 'la malva ogni male salva' ('mallow saves us from all illnesses').
>
> (ibid.)

The origins of medicine are of course entwined around knowledge and use of domestic and spontaneous plants. For example, Hippocrates (*c.*460 BCE) 'used and wrote about a great number of plant medicines' (Davis 1988:157) and later Galen and particularly Dioscordes – who authored five volumes of information on plants and their uses in 78 CE (ibid.:4) – expanded this tradition. These works were translated into Persian. Here, for brevity's sake only a few Italian examples of the long tradition of working with spontaneous plants are highlighted. Costanzo Felice has received attention (possibly only in Italy) for what are occasionally called the 'Lettuce Letters'. A doctor and botanist, he lived in the study area in the mid-1500s and wrote about flora and fauna of central Italy. His *'Lettere sulle insalata e piante che in qualunque mode vengono per cibo de l'homo'* (Ferretti 2014) were written in an upper-middle

4 Curiously Frayn does not include the first cook book by Apicus (200 BC), *De Re Coquinaria*, which gives instructions on how to prepare nettles (Ferretti 2014:19).

class context, and comprise an extremely extensive list of spontaneous plants, to be consumed cooked and raw, with suggested frequent use, and sometimes mixed with cultivated greens (ibid.:20); a point we return to.

In the 1600s a historian/doctor/writer, Salvatore Massonio, wrote '*Archidipno overo dell'insalata e dell' uso di essa*' which describes, in intense detail, how to prepare spontaneous greens for salads, over 427 pages. Contemporaneously, Castelvetro from Emilia-Romagna, an aristocrat, 'an enthusiastic amateur' (ibid.:39) and a plagiarist (Lederman 2017:264) popularized the ideas of Felice in England in the 1600s. Subsequently, the naturalist, Antonio Cocchi (1695–1738), published '*Del vitto pitagorico per uso della medicina*', in which he describes vegetables/greens as the universal medicine of mankind, and includes spontaneous greens alongside cultivated ones.

Parallel to this male, written tradition is a less documented but ancient tradition of women foraging for medicinal remedies, food, cosmetics and alchemy. A comprehensive study in Italian by Maderna, *Medichesse, La vocazione femminile alla cura* (2012) traces the origins of female foraging as originating in ancient Egypt in schools for women to study medicine (ibid.:40). A self-taught herbalist, Agnodice or Agnodike, was the first female doctor in Ancient Greece and specialized in the use of plants. She had to pose as a man to attend the Athenian school of medicine, where she was described as a good student, but later when practising as a doctor her biological sex was discovered and she was brought to trial for 'violence against the laws of the state' (ibid.:43–4). Early foraging female role models were often outside of conventional roles (ibid. 2012).

In Rome aristocratic women, such as the daughter of Marco Antonio and both wife and sister of emperor Augustus, studied plant-based cures (Maderna 2012:47). Around 100 BC the cult of Iside (Isis) gained popularity, leaving a legacy in the study area. Isis was famed as a healer and protector of medical knowledge, related to Potnia the goddess of vegetation (ibid.:17). The figure of the Cybele was the key priestess symbol for the Isis cult (Menichelli 2017), although Cybele predated Isis as an earth-worshipping tradition in the study area from approximately 2000 BC (Francesconi 1982). Under Emperor Tiberius in 19 CE the priestesses of Isis were crucified and their temples and statues destroyed.

Ridgway provides a worthwhile reminder of how people have long sought to revitalize old traditions connecting women to plants. He investigates the use of cheese graters found in aristocratic tombs, primarily in 'Etrusco-Italic areas' (1997:331), including the study area. Etruscans were apparently enacting or reinventing a tradition/ritual derived from *The Iliad* in which Hecamede prepares a drink 'for Nestor and for Machaon (which) seems to have the

characteristics of an effective pain-killer' (ibid.:327). Ridgway analyses the recipe, which required a developed knowledge of plants, casting Hecamede as a typical '*Medichessa*' (Maderna 2012). The preparation of this drink involved the use of the cheese grater, which are mostly found in seventh-century BC graves central Italy. The study area has an ancient history of re-enacting old traditions/ritual or beliefs, connecting women with healing and plants.

In the Middle Ages the medical school of Salerno had one female doctor, Trotula de Ruggiero, a devout herbalist who wrote *'Libro sulle malattie delle donne*' (Maderna 2012:56). In this period the study area was particularly famed for the amount alchemy practised there (Santarelli 1974), and more generally the transformation of the 'healing woman' into the 'witch' was occurring (Maderna 2012). Even after printing became widespread, this knowledge still relied upon oral communication and was primarily dependent on women (Cavello 2006:175). The strong tradition of using plants medicinally and dietarily as part of daily family life in the mountains remained (Guarrera and Leporatti 2007). A study by Buonincontri *et al.* (2014), using plant macrofossil (carpological) and morphometric analyses in central Italy, provides detailed understanding of a rural settlement during the middle of the eighth to the first quarter of the eleventh century AD. Throughout this study the integration of 'wild' and 'cultivated' is striking. For instance, spontaneous plants are consumed throughout the periods:

> Thirteen wild plant taxa were identified (ESM 1). Caryopses of Poaceae were found in the village phase, while in the manor and castle phases, 11 and 13 taxa were found, respectively. The identified taxa belonged mainly to ruderals and weeds of cultivated fields and among cereals.
>
> (ibid.:783)

'Weeds of cultivated fields' mixed with cereals explains the Italian nomenclature '*erbe dei campi*'; literally spontaneous plants from the fields. Interestingly, Buonincontri *et al.* show how some 'semi-wild' plant seeds were planted in ditches and on the 'trampled borders of the fields' (ibid.:785). Furthering the theme of integration, the authors cite two 'wild' pulses '*L. sativus and L. cicera* can be interpreted as cultivated because they were found in large amounts in the storehouse' (ibid.:784). Hence, we stand in a culture where spontaneous, semi-domestic and domesticated plants are shifting roles and transforming. Consider how in Italian there is no word for 'foraging'. Foraging is called harvesting '*erbe dei campi*,' plants from fields, or

erbe spontane, intending spontaneous plants. *Erbe dei campi* refers to plants (spontaneous) from fields, not plants from 'wilderness.'[5]

Ragni (1995:19) cites the second biggest modification in the mountains of the study area as occurring during the 1500s and 1600s, and lasting until today. As previously described, the human population 'waged war against the natural landscape' (ibid.) with intensive expansion of cultivation and regimental control of water, and forests were at their 'greatest state of degradation' (ibid.). Interestingly, vegetation expanded to the sides and the tops of the mountains:

> cultivated vegetation, including weeds and bushes in the Umbro-Marchigiano Apennines, at the end of this period (up to WWI) reached the maximum expansion in area and altitude.
>
> (ibid.)

Hence, a surge in 'weeds' arose in correlation with the expansion of intensive farming. Clearly today the integration of spontaneous plants with agriculture is only possible where chemicals are not used.

Typically, the Mediterranean environment represents 'a coexistence between "normal" and "alternative" agriculture that is an essential distinction between the Mediterranean and north-western Europe' (Horden and Purcell 2000:179). This 'essential distinction' is evident in the study area where 'pastoral' and 'arable' land blend (2000:200), and where the interconnectivity between 'forest' and 'field' endures today (2000:182). This historic aptitude for interconnecting 'wild' and 'domestic' frequently represents an approach towards narrowing the nature and culture divide. Notably, it explains how spontaneous plants, historically and currently, are freely mixed with farmed food. This offers an important clue as to how Italians retained sustainable harvesting practices for spontaneous plants over millennia.

Within the study area there is a propensity for awareness of history and culture which translates into the land(scape). The local national park presents itself as a place with undisturbed nature and conservation, but equally as a cultural landscape, a theme similar to most national parks in Europe, as well being key to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN 2015) and UNESCO (UNESCO 2012). UNESCO define cultural landscapes as 'Combined works of nature and humankind, they express a long and intimate

5 Driving foraging into a 'wilderness' imaginary is common in the UK and North America partly because of the predominance of industrial agriculture, sparing few locations, yet it also belies a psychological division between nature and culture divide.

relationship between peoples and their natural environment.'[6] It is recognized that 'nature' is almost always a cultural landscape and, furthermore, that the framework of wilderness leads to the erasure of previous inhabitants and their own understandings of themselves and their environment (Bard, Hutson and Plummer 2020). Conversely, comprehending a landscape as cultural inclines people to feel integrated with it, responsible for it and to interact more sustainably. A recent study by Wall-Reinius, Prince and Dahlberg (2019) discusses the significance of the perception of so-called 'wild' land in northern Sweden, arguing that redefining the area as a cultural landscape is more representative, and can assist in 'reconciling perceptions of the nature and culture divide in practice' (2019:6). Studies in biocultural heritage present in-depth correlations between understanding landscape as cultural and sustainability (Pool 2018; Welstead 2015). Contrastingly the concept of wilderness is frequently a marketing tool promoting nature as an expensive escape from daily reality, usually purchased by urbanites (Varley, Farkic and Carnicelli 2018). Exotic escape experiences in 'pure nature' are deliberately unintegrated with daily cultural life, thereby alienating people from a sense of quotidian responsibility as well as from a relationship that might be less commodified. We will see how foraging at home, as part of daily life, is a key aspect of the Case delle Erbe. Healing through interacting with spontaneous plants helps people care for others and become custodians of where they live (pers. comm. Maria-Sonia Oct 2020).

Hence, interacting with spontaneous plants as part of daily life puts nature and culture in one hand. Consider again the integration between 'pastoral' and 'arable' (Horden and Purcell 2000:200) or interconnectivity between 'forest' and 'field' (ibid.:182). This landscape is a product of people's propensity for combining nature and culture, as was demonstrated in a study by Pieroni *et al.* (2007) of foraged-plant consumption in twenty-one local authorities in Italy. The authors highlight foraging as an active part of people's daily diets, without delineating between integrating spontaneous with semi-domesticated plants.

> Informants were asked to name wild and semi-domesticated food plants they knew and used, and to precisely describe their culinary processing. We expressly decided not to focus on 'traditional uses' alone, since we were interested in gathering information on the *actual use* of wild food plants…
>
> (ibid.:3)

Note how the researchers do not question the public's ability to interact with spontaneous plants or, even more complex, recognize 'semi-domesticated

6 whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/#5 (accessed 10 April 2023).

food plants'. Likewise, in recent literature, Guarrera and Savo write that 'In Italy, many traditional dishes are still prepared mixing wild plants with cultivated vegetables and other ingredients.' (2016:202), highlighting an integrated quotidian knowledge. A detailed contemporary study in central Italy (Guarrera, Savo and Caneva 2015) demonstrates how spontaneous plants are gathered while working outdoors and used for medicinal, dietary and veterinary purposes. Their forty-five interviews with rural outdoor workers evidence quotidian knowledge of 102 plant species in 2015 (ibid.:119).

In this manner, an aptitude for integrating spontaneous plants (nature) with daily life (culture) accounts for sustainable foraging. By having an ordinary life relationship (rather than a purchased escape experience) with spontaneous plants, one learns about those on one's doorstep, including when and how to harvest them, and one becomes a custodian for their environment, observing and interacting with them over a long time span. With this mentality or relationship, there is nothing to be gained by binge harvesting; instead, one concernedly cares for the plants and their habitat. Further, the wider the variety of plants one understands, including semi-domestics, the less heavily each species is harvested. These are key factors determining sustainability.

Foraging-as-daily-life represents an integration of the domestic person with the spontaneous plant world and creates a common practice that appears to stimulate shared values, as explored in Chapters 5 and 7. Sharing knowledge of spontaneous plants with other people, makes that knowledge widespread; and is frequently done so without monetization, partly due to its commonplace nature. The linguistic history of understanding these plants as spontaneous and from the fields, rather from outside of society or the 'wild', has ethical importance. The perception of a pure wilderness is frequently associated with a colonial mentality and must come 'with acknowledgment that nature and wilderness are contested cultural constructs … with associated violent histories of colonization of Indigenous people,' (Baird, Hutson and Plummer 2020:369). In Canada for example, Indigenous peoples had intense cultural relationships with their land prior to their colonization and expunction (Graeber and Wengrow 2021:53,) but as their cultures were considered invalid, white colonial settlers could call the land a pure wilderness.

Beyond the cultural propensity for engaging with spontaneous plants in Italy, historically, there was also an intensely utilitarian aspect to women foraging. While aristocrats could hire doctors, other social classes (Maderna 2012) and particularly those in the mountains (Tuttolomondo *et al.* 2014) relied on family traditions of plant cures as their only option. In the 1800s a hospital opened in the study area, but it was too expensive for ordinary people and mountain inhabitants (Griffiths 2014). As well as knowledge of plants for medicinal and comestible purposes (Ferretti 2014; Tuttolomondo *et al.*

2014; Vitalini *et al.* 2015), women alone were also responsible for dying wool in the Apennines, with dyes made from plants (Guarrera 2006:2). Focusing on central Italy, including the study area, Guarrera (ibid.) shows that dyes were used for a range of purposes, including hair and clothing. Multifarious female tasks involved foraging and these combined to create indispensable and detailed knowledge of plants. Today, traditions of foraging are revived as part of local identity, as exemplified in a publication by the *comune* of a village in the study area:

> The knowledge of spontaneous plants and their traditional uses was lost to us with the disappearance of rural society, which was pushed aside by modernization that occurred too rapidly. In recent years the return to nature has become a fashion; there is a growing interest in the study of popular knowledge, to rediscover local traditions and our ancestors' use of spontaneous plants for culinary and therapeutic purposes.
>
> (Fioravanti 2017:14)

Mirroring Wickham's (1988) Tuscan study, the distinctive mountain culture in the study area in which spontaneous foods were integral, as part of activities entwined with seasons, resources of the mountains and, from the Middle Ages onward, connected to a religious calendar (Mazzarra- Morresi 2006). Contemporary examples of spontaneous plants forming part of a distinctive mountain culture include:

- Spontaneous plants are part of religious practices still today. On 24 June, *Hypericum perforatum*, the plant of San Giovanni, is harvested on the day of the saint, because at this date the plant is correspondingly at its apex. This begins the 'ritual' of preparing the oil of *iperico* for use in the winter in making liquors like '*vino di iperico*' (Fioravanti 2017:5). Flowers are gathered and floated in water and used to wash with on this day.
- In addition to women, mountain shepherds and hermits were renowned for their knowledge of spontaneous plants for dietary and medicinal purposes (Burke 1978; Jotischky 2011). In the study area shepherds and hermits frequently assisted each other and this may have disseminated plant knowledge (Lavini 1998). The use of spontaneous plants within shepherds' sheep cheese can be seen today in central Italy, for example through the use of the aromatic wild plants. '*Thymus vulgaris* L. and *Satureja montana* L. [Lamiaceae] put in rennet, the stomach of a lamb, and added to sheep's milk give a peculiar fragrance to cheese; sometimes even being used as a substitute for curdling,' (Guarrera and Leporatti 2007:29).

Spontaneous plants are prominent ingredients in meals eaten today. Many mountain recipes require such ingredients. For instance, '"acqua cotta",

a soup prepared from young shoots of boiled wild plants such as *Clematis vitalba, Centaurea solstitialis, Scolymus hispanicus, Nasturtium officinale* etc.'(Guarrera and Leporatti 2007:29). Snails and spontaneous spinach, harvested at over 1000 m. in specific micro-niches, are prized. The extreme longevity of foraging in the study area has been assisted by a caring approach. The practice emphasized by Maria-Sonia, a leader of the Case delle Erbe, is that of using fingers only; no knife. One selects certain leaves, leaving the plants practically unchanged and stimulating regrowth. Sustainability is crucial, given that food from spontaneous plant species is gaining popularity with the young and the middle-aged in Western countries:

> the gathering of wild botanicals is mostly done on the basis of a renewed interest in alternative cooking and the sudden trendiness of specialty local foods, which have been publicized mainly by the small-scale market chains and networks promoting 'typical products' (*prodotti tipici*). These phenomena have also gained considerable credence in the last few years through the activities of the Slow Food movement.
>
> (Pieroni *et al.* 2007:08)

Beyond rustic local practices, foraging also fulfils multi-level 'glocal' objectives. Highlighting this shift, ethnobotanical studies are now a subject of keen interest, although previously considered 'minor works' (Guarrera and Leporatti 2007:9). Foraging is perceived as having potential to connect community to government strategy, drive local economic development and 'meet Europe 2020 objectives' (Vitalini *et al.* 2015:455). The growing popularity of eating spontaneous plants is linked to 'roots' and mountains

> In some cases, this attention is mostly focused on finding healthy alternatives to commercial foods… However, we believe it could also be a way to re-discover our roots through food. Notably, the importance of food in the past, the present and the future was discussed at the EXPO 2015 in Milan (Italy). In fact, in many Italian regions, and especially in small villages and mountains areas, the local traditional uses of spontaneous plants are still vivid.
>
> (Guarrera and Savo 2016:203)

Government encourages the cultural context of foraging, which is of importance for participants in the Case delle Erbe.

> In the past decades, social and economic changes have caused the depopulation of mountain villages located in the Apennines. As a result,

> the traditional rural society and way of life is endangered. The preservation of this knowledge is reiterated in the Convention on Biological Diversity – CBD (United Nations 1992), article 8 'In-situ Conservation', point (j): 'Subject to its national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilisation of such knowledge, innovations and practices.' The same concept is also invoked by UNESCO, which signed the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" (UNESCO 2003).
>
> (Fortini *et al.* 2016:208)

Popular interest in spontaneous plants within traditional dishes across Italy (Guarrera and Savo 2013) allows public enthusiasm in foraging to bond with EU and UN objectives. Though much of the historic literature related to foraging is not widely available, that has not impacted its practice today. The demographic range of those involved in foraging (middle class, upper middle class, aristocratic, mountain and urban inhabitants classes, as well as cooks across the nation) dispels the miscomprehension that it derives from hardship. Academic writing and popular literature, as discussed at the beginning of this section, enshrine foraging as a vibrant cultural tradition, enduring through millennia. Beginning thousands of years before pastoralism, foraging remains unextinguished. Might the endurance of foraging be due to aloofness from large-scale production? We will return to this point. Additionally, the longevity of foraging relates to how it is taught and socially framed, with the flexibility to appeal to a range of interests. In Italy foraging is not perceived as hunter-gatherer culture, because foraging integrated with and developed parallel to society's evolution, fulfilling diverse needs for a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

If this section has served its purpose, the reader will have an awareness that foraging in the study area is documented from 18,000 BP (Agostini *et al.* 2008:109) and has continued throughout the millennia to today. This is not unique within the Mediterranean. Living and foraging daily in the study area gives rise to a sense of connection to a custom stretching back before the origins of Christianity and reaching forwards to the future we will live to see.

Here, a clarification is required, because foraging is not an unbroken tradition; in fact, it is neither unbroken nor a tradition. This book frames foraging as a custom. While the terms 'custom' and 'tradition' are entwined,

there are historic implications or unconscious associations distinguishing them. A custom is 'to render (a thing) customary or usual; to practice habitually; to be customary or usual' (Oxford English Dictionary 1979:1284). The word tradition is documented in English in 1292 by Godel intending 'delivery, surrender and handing down' (ibid.:225). Hence definitions of tradition include 'The action of handing over to another; delivery; transfer', including the 'surrendering' of sacred books in times of persecution. Additionally, '4. The action of transmitting or 'handing down', or the fact of being handed down, from generation to generation.' (ibid.:226). Finally, '5.b. More vaguely: A long established and generally accepted custom or method of procedure having been almost the force of law; an immemorial usage; the body (or any one) of the experiences and usages of any branch, or school of art or literature, handed down by predecessors and generally followed.' (ibid.).

In sum, tradition has connotations of 'immemorial usage' and greater formality due to association with 'methods of procedure' that were connected to law, philosophy and governance. We have seen how the history of foraging, particularly the largely undocumented female practices, remains peripheral and exists even throughout increased production and valorization of profitability within society. Foraging is personal, done in different ways with different values and beliefs. It is a 'custom' because people in the study area, including those who have no contact to the Case delle Erbe, connect foraging with the family practices of a mother or grandmother.

Representations of the experience economy

More than twenty years ago a seminal paper by Pine and Gilmore (1999) increased public awareness of the experience economy, yet only in the last decade has the topic become widespread and evolved to acquire diverse meanings. This section discusses the evolution of the experience economy, setting the scene for its emergence in a rural context, which I propose resulted from a post-productive climate in rural areas. Rural post-productivity is a pivotal motivation for the conclusions reached in this book and it is touched upon in this section in order to situate it in relation to the experience economy, which is so central for the Case delle Erbe. Thereafter, this section concludes with a few examples of degrowth/post-growth economic theories that relate to the situation of the Case delle Erbe, to comprehend some of its economic significance.

It may be suggested that the experience economy globally emerged in correlation to the growth of intangibles, as people began to live with 'capitalism without capital' (Haskel and Westlake 2018), as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. For my part I situate the birth of the rural experience economy in the post-productivism movement of the mid 1990s. This

represented a shift from 'countrysides of production, to countrysides of consumption' (Slee 2005:255), causing industrial agricultural to begin to give way to a visitor (urbanites) economy, commodifying the rural for tranquillity, health and leisure practices. Mountains and uplands in Europe were particularly influenced by post-productivism as 'the dominant policy and governance framing which developed especially in Europe from the 1980s until 2007' (Marsden and Farioli 2015:333), visible from the 1990s with the introduction of 'High Nature Value farming' (European Environment Agency 2010:138). During the early 2000s post-productivism in rural policy frameworks was absorbed into 'multifunctionality' which intends that farmers should diversify (Almstedt *et al.* 2014; Brouder, Karlsson and Lundmark 2015) by adding on related businesses such as visitor accommodation or handicrafts such as weaving, making soaps etc. In the case of small-scale landowners this diversification is almost exclusively a return to traditions (Scottish Crofting Federation 2017).

Studies in mountains reveal the market value of diversification into 'tradition'. Daugstad and Kirchengast (2013) explore how mountain farmers in Norway and Austria stage a pseudo-backstage in their agritourism activities for tourists to feel they are off the beaten track and have discovered a 'traditional', timeless experience. Given that tourism represents the principle force in upland economies and that globally its value can equal the food-production industry (Pyke *et al.* 2016:95), these conditions laid the ground for the experience economy to flourish. Pratt asked what kind of economy can preserve the touristic heritage value of landscape in Tuscany, while preventing the land from returning to 'wilderness', and also keep development at bay (2001:194) – today the experience economy offers a reply (Gibbs and Holloway 2017).

Over decades, the experience economy has developed and grown (Capitello, Agnoli and Begalli 2013) to the extent that Tsai writes 'Recently, the global economy has become experience-based.' (2016:536). While its origins may arise from rural post-productivity, clearly the experience economy in tourism is firmly rooted within the neo-liberal paradigm. Already by 2010 the idea was prominent 'that experiences are overtaking services as the major realm of competition between producers' (Richards and Munsters 2010:23), and Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept had evolved from hedonic purchasing of experiences in place of material goods, to consumers as 'co-creators' (Alexiou 2020:200) and further to experiences as intrinsic to the creation of socio-cultural communities, as highlighted by Vespestad and Lindberg (2011). Our present phase is labelled by Kirillova, Lehto and Cai as 'the third generation' experience economy, with an emphasis on 'self-actualization' and 'experiences that transform the consumer' (2016:13). In this context it is

understandable that the experience economy is in an existential phase and academics draw upon Heideggerian philosophy (ibid. 2016:14). This latter phase is in harmony with the Case delle Erbe.

Parallel to and interwoven with the experience economy is the lucrative market for well-being, estimated to be 'nearly a 2 trillion global industry' (Pyke *et al.* 2016:96) and generally linked to nature (Hjalager and Flagestad 2012). Well-being frequently relies on selling experiences and 'traditions' (ibid.:736). Expansion of the experience economy is conceivably linked to the predominance given to well-being activities (Pyke *et al.* 2016) and consumption, which provide a 'means to achieve a certain "state of being" or realize "identity projects"' (Vespestad and Lindberg 2011:572–4). Here, in this intersection of well-being, the experience economy and 'slow adventures' (described in Chapter 7), we arrive at a good base to situate the Case delle Erbe. That is, until the Case delle Erbe surprises one, as it tends to…

A final aspect, setting the stage for the experience economy is another double 'e', the eco-economy. In a rural context the eco-economy and the experience economy are frequently interchangeable. Both are dependent upon aspects of each other and are largely synonymous in a rural setting. The eco-economy was a conceptual term used before the experience economy, born from discussion regarding the multifunctional rural environment, which in turn is conceptualized as consisting of the eco-economy, the circular economy and the bio-economy (Christensen 2015; Kitchen and Marsden 2011; Kristensen, Kjeldsen and Hvarregaard Thorsøe 2016; Marsden and Farioli 2015).[7] The eco-economy is most applicable to mountains and is particularly relevant to food systems (Kristensen, Kjeldsen and Hvarregaard Thorsøe 2016). The ease with which the experience economy is positioned within the eco-economy, selling traditions and well-being in leisure landscapes (Marsden and Farioli 2015), is self-evident. The eco-economy, like the experience economy, embraces social enterprises, eco-entrepreneurs (nature-tourism providers) and artisans, thereby engaging a wider stakeholder base beyond agriculture.

In conclusion, we need to emphasize some delineations between what an experience represents in commercial terms and for anthropology. In the experience economy, it is an event or occurrence that makes an impression on a person. Contrariwise, in phenomenological anthropology experiences are determined by 'historically located or socially constituted pre-understandings' (M. Jackson 2015:294). Knowledge that we bring to experiences can never be approached as objective because it is never free from context (Mangion 2011:246), and this includes the awareness that knowledge itself is a social

7 Also ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/explore (accessed 29 April 2023).

construct (Houston 2015). Commercial experiences rarely analyse experience from these perspectives. Within phenomenological anthropology these layers and their pre-understandings determine how we interpret experience. Heidegger and Gadamer considered the role of interpretation to be that of 'challenging presuppositions in a new light' (Mangion 2011:246), and this represents a key approach to experience within phenomenological anthropological perspectives. Yet an experience may also contain aspects that are not 'pre-given' (M. Jackson 2015:294), be they explored in anthropology or left as assumed in the experience economy. Chapter 5 offers an example.

Another difference to experience in the experience economy, however, is how anthropology uses experiences to study the 'limits of consciousness itself' (Ram and Houston 2015:8) and how intersubjectivity is a challenge to fulfil when immersed in

> an intersubjective field of pre-theoretical experience and activity, and [a challenge to] do justice to the fact that abstract ideas and cultural values inform all experience, even though experience continually overflows and revises these epistemic frames
>
> (M. Jackson 2015:295)

As Jackson elaborates, reality is a constantly negotiated relationship between the objective, subjective and intersubjective. A challenge facing the phenomenological anthropologist is to document these overlaps, without placing them into ranks, or historical or cultural categories (ibid.). Heidegger assists us in this regard and also with the non pre-given, by creating context and foregrounding our being in the world as alongside other entities.

> When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always 'outside' alongside entities which it encounters.
>
> (Heidegger 1962:89)

In this book intersubjectivity was greatly enhanced by years of experience with both participants and with spontaneous plants.

Civil economy, degrowth and prosperity without growth

Degrowth is an ecological economic movement with roots in France in the 1980s, based on the idea of reducing consumption to be within the ecological parameters of the planet, and containing a strong critique of consumerism and capitalism (for a history of degrowth and post-growth movements, see D'Alisa,

Demaria and Kallis 2015; for post-growth within the British perspective, see Jackson 2017). Here, I provide a sketched outline of the civil economy and then turn to three specific models of post-growth/degrowth with direct application to the Case delle Erbe.

The civil economy is a conceptual thread running through the approaches covered in this section; and in fact, one of the Case delle Erbe in this study is devoted precisely to furthering the civil economy. Current prominent proponents in Italy are Bruni and Zamagni (2007) and, interestingly, it has been observed that the civil economy has much in common with the German Social Market Economy that arose after the Second World War (Martino 2018:15). The Italian roots spring from Antonio Genovesi (1713–69), who developed an economic theory based upon virtue ethics and happiness (Pabst 2018). One aim of the civil economy is to 'humanize the economy by giving more important roles to reciprocity and human relationships' (Martino 2018:15). In a sense, it is a cultural perspective for a 'diverse economic theory' (Bruni and Zamagni 2007:14) wherein individual happiness depends upon public happiness and the economy is orientated toward benefiting everyone although how this mutually shared benefit is understood and shared may create tensions. As an example of how society might look within the civil economy, barter and 'the exchange of equivalents and redistribution' (Martino 2018:22) would coexist with the conventional economy at an equal level of value. NGOs, or the third sector of not-for-profit, would not be marginalized and would instead represent the main structure within the economy. These values resonate with and are developed into an economic plan in Jackson's (2017) *Prosperity Without Growth*.

Nørgård's 'Happy degrowth through more amateur economy' (2013) offers a model of what is termed the 'whole economy' using a vision overlapping with the Case delle Erbe approach in some respects. After lengthy discussion of why the GDP is a flawed indicator, he points out the growing expense of leisure. Commenting upon the austerity required for degrowth, as he envisages it, he argues for austere leisure activities. Theoretically, austere leisure activities become more relevant as people work less hours in the paid economy, have more leisure time and possibly less to spend (ibid.). As an example, Nørgård describes making a chair in the amateur economy: if a person is interested in woodwork as a hobby, they derive benefits from making a chair. An aspect of Nørgård's argument considers the environmental impact of a person deriving 50 hours of eudemonic happiness in their leisure time in making a chair.

> The environmental footprint per chair might be the same as if you were making the chair in a factory, but the long happy leisure time you have chosen to spend on making it, instead of working in a factory – that is, the

> low labor productivity keeps your labor from being highly productive at a factory, making the equivalent to maybe twenty chairs during the same time. This might not conserve resources per chair, but it does per hour, and furthermore gives more 'units of happiness' per unit of resources consumed.
>
> (ibid.:68)

This understanding mirrors that of the Case delle Erbe, for as we will see, foraging is not framed in terms of productivity, nor is commercial value related to time. Rather, the aim is eudemonic well-being (or actual joy) for community, environment and ultimately the planet. The desirability of low(er) productivity is investigated in more detail in Chapter 7. But in essence, because only one hobby chair is produced at home, with less mechanization and greater happiness, both people and planet prosper. (Oddly, Nørgård does not mention barter, which the Case delle Erbe, for political reasons, term as exchange.) Artisan activities are connected to spontaneous plants in the Case delle Erbe: making dyes from plants, making soaps, or artwork (pers. comm. Maria-Sonia 2019), and these activities are approached in a eudemonic perspective and the products used in exchange. Yet, beyond a return to artisanship, the Case delle Erbe aim to incite a social transformation.

In *Prosperity Without Growth* (2017), Jackson's 'Cinderella economy' avoids austerity (Jackson 2017:219, 2018). His thinking echoes that of the Case delle Erbe closely, as a main 'imperative' of his work comes from analysis 'of the pursuit of increased labour productivity by the owners of capital' (Jackson 2017:224). His principal conclusion is that 'we must transform the damaging social logic of consumerism', which is distorting our 'social logic' (ibid.:227).

For Jackson productivity would be 'substantially reduced in the Cinderella economy, precisely because of the nature of its economic activities resists labour productivity growth' (ibid.:224). In a similar way to the civil economy placing human relationships and reciprocity at its core, Jackson envisages increased leisure time spent in social modes, such as farmers' markets, craft classes or 'community centred enterprise'. Through a socially minded framework of leisure, community members engage in offering civic and environmental benefits, be it delivering local services in community-care programmes, or partaking in craft, education, maintenance and repair or recycling initiatives. As with Nørgård's 'whole economy' (2013), the aim of these type of low-carbon endeavours is not to produce more and faster, nor to increase effectiveness. Instead, the aim is to contribute to the community or the common good in a way that provides 'meaningful work' (Jackson 2017:220) and helps the community flourish.

Reduced employment may mean job sharing, hence working fewer hours and receiving less income; but rather than being impoverished Jackson

argues that people's investment of time in their community would lead to the flourishing of marginalized sectors, and that the economy would continue to produce services and incorporate new measures of prosperity that enriched society and the environment. In his vision the sectors projected to expand include the care industry, education and craft/artisan workshops, recycling etc. (ibid.:220). Like Nørgård (2013), Jackson advocates a 'shift away from the pursuit of labour productivity' (2017:167). In the historic overview of foraging in Italy, we saw how it was historically bound with non-monetized care; and the Case delle Erbe in the study area focus on de-consumerization within both education and artisan workshops, thereby positioning themselves in the centre of Jackson's (2017) 'prosperity without growth' model.

For our comprehension of the Case delle Erbe, the final economic model we need to make reference to is 'Henderson's expanded model of the economy' as discussed in 'Social enterprises and non-market capitals, a path to de-growth' by Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova (2013). Discussing non-monetized sectors, the authors describe a vision similar to that of the Case delle Erbe when they write:

> traditionally in human societies most material human needs were met via reciprocity (i.e. mutual gifting), redistribution (those who have share with those who have not) and householding (non-monetised production for own use). The market as we know it today played a marginal role.
>
> (ibid.:8)

In 'Henderson's cake' model of the economy, from Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova (2013), the cake is made from four layers. The foundational layer is entitled 'Mother Nature', wherein natural resources may be able to absorb the cost of pollution. Resting upon this bottom layer is the 'Sweat-Equity' layer, relevant for the Case Delle Erbe since it embraces exchange, caring and sharing with homemade artisan production and the importance of community. These two layers make up half of the cake and are the 'Non-Monetized ½ of the Cake'. The next layer is the 'Public Sector' with its governmental services and infrastructure, and finally the top is the 'Private Sector' intending consumption, investment, savings etc. The top two layers are clearly the 'Monetized ½ of the Cake' and one observes how the monetized layers rest upon, and only exist because, they draw from the resources in the non-monetized layers below. The so-called unprofitable and marginal economies appear vital and represent half of the whole. This model would situate the Case delle Erbe, quite aptly, within the 'social co-operative caring economy' based on nature. Of interest is the authors' description of the process of commodification as simply being the movement of needs that are satisfied in the non-monetized economy,

transferred into the 'market layer of the cake' (ibid.:11). To this end, the example of building one's own home is given, as before this became a market industry, people would build their own houses together.

The point is that commodification leads to 'the artificial creation of scarcity', which involves 'de-skilling, social exclusion, loss of cultural diversity' (ibid.:11). Therefore, from the: 'Henderson cake model, we may see the commodification process as expanding the monetized cake layer but diminishing the core (reciprocity and subsistence) layer and often contributing to a shrinking of the nature economy layer as well', generating income for some, but leaving poverty for those below (ibid.). The implications for foraging are enormous.

Historically, foraging has been an activity based upon caring and sharing with little official market economy (Guarrera 2003, 2006; Guarrera, Savo and Caneva 2015; Maderna 2012). Yet, harvesting spontaneous resources such as wild truffles (Griffiths 2017) and hunting wild animals have been highly lucrative (Ragni 1995). Interestingly, these were solely male practices and were practised far beyond sustainable levels. Hunting was generally motivated by monetary factors: selling furs and wild meat (Mensing *et al.* 2015:90) or bartering with furs represent:

> factors which, since the Neolithic, have exercised the greatest regressive effect upon the wild animals considered within the Umbro-Marchigiano Apennines, the greatest part in principle is the direct destruction of species through hunting-fishing and poaching.
>
> (Ragni 1995:21)

Foraging for spontaneous plants was sustainable and evolving with early agriculture. It is possible that abundance and communality rendered spontaneous plants a non-commodity. In Henderson's cake foraging is represented by 'mother nature' with 'resources not exceeded', and foraging is perfectly profiled in the description of 'community structures' resting upon this. The fact that daily foraging is remembered as primarily female behaviour and that there is a lengthy tradition of rural Italian women being separate from monetary economy (Counihan 2004) are surely also factors influencing lack of monetization. Yet, in the Case delle Erbe this is not a discourse of oppression. At the time of writing the main focus is on exchange, and if money does exchange hands it is such a small amount that it remains well below taxation thresholds. Further, the complexity of some Italian laws obliges some activities to be undeclared (though members would like their sales to be official), and this has an exclusionary effect. Nonetheless, this heightened awareness that although the Case delle Erbe in the study area is stimulating the market economy, for example by training restaurateurs how to forage and

cook spontaneous greens, it is lodged in an exchange economy of sharing. It was explained to me that a choice has been made not to create a 'green economy' but instead to form a 'new' culture and society. As culture is the base, and thereby a reflection of, the economy, to change the economy one must begin by changing the culture. Current green strategies are restricted and have limited effect because they are not rooted in the prevailing culture

The Case delle Erbe mirrors Italian foraging's persistent, ageless engagement in decommodification, at cross-purposes with the production and commodification economy. Decommodification is achieved by 'moving goods and services from the market sphere to the community sphere' (Wearing, Wearing and McDonald 2012:40). By choosing to retain the historic position of foraging in Italy as outside of production-driven markets, the Case delle Erbe makes a step toward post-growth prosperity and the civil economy. 'Lending' and 'barter' are described as tools for decommodification consumption practices (Boulanger 2010). Crucially, we must realize that the Case delle Erbe, within the study area and up until 2020, represents individuals actively going against the grain of commodification, reversing the process whereby free aspects of life acquire market value, enriching the 'social co-operative, caring society' and reducing 'the artificial creation of scarcity' (Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova 2013:9–11). Money does indeed change hands in the Case delle Erbe in the study area, but modestly, in the form of the Cinderella economy or the civil economy, where exchange coexists with the conventional economy (Martino 2018:22) at a similar and higher level of value. We will see examples in what follows.

3

Entering the Case delle Erbe

This chapter focuses on three Case delle Erbe, including that of the main proponent of the national movement. The description of each of the three Case delle Erbe concludes with a discussion of some of the values each participant considers most significant for their Casa. Further, attendant upon our understanding the Case delle Erbe within the study area, is a discussion of the motivations of other less involved or perhaps future participants. In conclusion, there is a preliminary exploration of motivations for participating in the Case delle Erbe, although this is a topic that develops throughout the entire book.

Engaging with the 'process' versus 'product' debate, positionality theory in this case is intended to entail an attentiveness to self-analysis that is personal, and situated within the complex realities of the historical evolutions shaping our social constructs, whereby an attentiveness opens the researcher to look beyond our previously known worlds (Van Dooren 2019:9). Hence, what follows is my journey of understanding, undertaken with the positionality of an insider yet also a foreigner, and both shifting and changing with time. Likewise, as readers will discover, the Case delle Erbe is 'shape-shifting' (Houston 2015:281), as many Case delle Erbe are constantly changing their forms. Each Case delle Erbe experiences its own kind of change, therefore caution would be prompted were the study area taken as a replica of the whole movement. In general, my explorative description of these Case delle Erbe eschews 'product', in that there are few uniform or static facts when considering them, whether locally or nationally. I aspire to a representational process similar to a painting. Discussing Heidegger's fascination with the Van Gogh (Steiner 1978:126), van Heekeren writes:

> following the philosophers who considered artists and poets to be exemplary proponents of the phenomenological method, I suggest that we need to

> reframe our concern; to begin to see the possibilities that are opened up when we give attention to the everyday – for its own sake. Both Van Gogh and Cezanne painted intimate places, objects and personal acquaintances. Anthropology might attend to the ordinariness of people's cultural lives to better understand their experience of the more-than-ordinary.
>
> (2015:251)

Indeed, the canvas is prepared for the tonality of the everyday in intimate places (homes), as well as the more-than-ordinary and the extraordinary within these Case delle Erbe. Taking a semi-narrative approach such as Wynn (2015) recommends for phenomenological anthropology, I draw upon fictional writing techniques (ibid.:244) with the hope the reader may begin to feel Case delle Erbe experiences. This chapter starts with an overview of the Case delle Erbe movement and subsequently concentrates on three Case delle Erbe.

Introduction to Case delle Erbe

Maria-Sonia is the principal proponent of the social movement called Case delle Erbe, which offers an approach to sustainable living with the underlying aim of creating a transition toward a society based on relationships stimulated through a culture of spontaneous plants, learning and exchange, with a 'slow',[1] simple and pleasurable lifestyle (Zia, pers. comm. 2019). The idea for the movement began in the 1990s in an undeveloped mountain village located at 1,400 metres altitude in Central Italy. This village became a centre for sustainable practices galvanized by the charismatic Antonio D'Andrea, who is recognized at a national level for experimenting with alternative, sustainable lifestyles. Having lived more than a decade in this village, much of Maria-Sonia's thinking is derived from D'Andrea and the work he instigated.

Typically, for many high-altitude settlements in the Central Apennines, the village had no active economy, no tourism and each year the local school was threatened with closure as people out-migrated to lowland urban centres. Maria-Sonia describes how they decided to study the historic uses of spontaneous plants and then learnt how to harvest them. D'Andrea made

1 'Slow' intends the Italian Slow movement encompassing the origins of Slow Food and lifestyle values regarding work and pleasure: namely, a refusal to rationalize and to privilege work over other aspects of life, and including the belief that simple pleasures can be available for all people, regardless of achievement and wealth (Parkins and Craig 2006).

contact with a health-product manufacturer in Milan creating a market for their foraging. From this base the idea for Case delle Erbe grew.

Each of the 130 Case delle Erbe in Italy today is unique, though sharing similar lifestyle and values. The foundation of Case delle Erbe is in education, including learning the value of local spontaneous plants, and frequently in earth-honouring traditions. Some Case delle Erbe work as a kind of co-operative, creating a network of suppliers who may sell or exchange with each other, or with health food business, restaurants, cosmetic companies etc. Different regions in Italy have a more developed presence. For example, Calabria has a particularly mature network of support and collaboration between Case delle Erbe. Case delle Erbe make their own spontaneous plant products for their own use, for exchange or for demonstrations. 'There is always more demand than can be supplied,' Maria-Sonia explains (pers. comm. 2017).

Central to the Case delle Erbe is a differentiation from agriculture, a point Maria-Sonia has emphasized almost every time she teaches, over many years. This key distinction gave rise to the theme, introduced in Chapter Two, regarding interpretations of differences between agricultural and non-agricultural social structures. Maria-Sonia explains how people do not need to own or rent land, invest in (expensive) machinery, maintain fences or outbuildings, or buy seeds, fertilizers or chemicals to participate in the Case delle Erbe. The way foraging is taught, one does not even need a knife or a basket. This is a radical, inclusive, free movement for all people. Maria-Sonia also teaches foraging in deprived Italian urban areas as part of EU rejuvenation projects, and members of one of the Case delle Erbe taught foraging to migrant people who were detained in camps around Rome (Maria-Sonia pers. comms 2018, 2019).

As well as learning to recognize spontaneous plants, additional pursuits at the Case delle Erbe include cooking with the foraged plants, homeopathy, art therapy, eco-therapy, Reiki, music and dance. Case delle Erbe members often teach in partnership with schools or with local authorities in community projects, care homes, religious centres, universities, visitor associations, environmental groups etc. In addition, 2017 saw the opening of an accredited higher-education centre in 'Montedoro'[2] called 'Scuola di Hildegarda, consulenza e natura' (School of Hildegard, counselling and nature). In 2019 the school was obliged to move to Rome to increase enrolment.

In 2018 the first government-funded project connected to the Case delle Erbe in the study area began. This two-year funded project had two main aims. Firstly, ninety-five small tourist-related businesses were invited

2 The names of local locations have been changed.

to participate to learn how to forage sustainably. A specialist chef taught hospitality managers how to cook and prepare spontaneous plants throughout the year, as part of the culinary traditions of the region. The second prong of the project involved teaching foraging to primary school students in and beyond the mountains and approximately thirty students took part in this training. When Case delle Erbe offer experiences or courses that require technical knowledge, these subjects are taught by qualified instructors, i.e. homeopaths, agronomists or naturopaths. Maria-Sonia also partners with the University of Bologna, and the University of Salerno, and doctoral students frequently stay at her Casa delle Erbe, as do visitors from all over Italy.

The physical structure of Case delle Erbe is generally that of a private house, opened to the public; although increasingly local authorities are providing public buildings to the Case for free (Maria-Sonia, pers comm. 2019). In 2019 I met one Case delle Erbe protagonist who eschews buildings or homes and normally offers experiences outdoors. The public can visit or stay in a Case delle Erbe. Everyone cooks and eats together, as well as joining in the learning, harvesting and events celebrating earth or plant traditions. Visitors make voluntary contributions, either in money or by working while they stay. Maria-Sonia is keen to involve young people who cannot pay.

> To join this type of economy you don't have to be a landowner. All you need is to recognize what plants to harvest and be connected to the network to help you process the plants. You can harvest in woods, on roadsides, in gardens, anywhere. For local people who want to participate, we function with exchange only.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers comm. 2017)

All the Case delle Erbe members in one region pool their skills. As an example, attractive posters for a permaculture course at a Case delle Erbe outside of the study area were:

> designed by a young person for free because he wants to participate and learn in the workshops. Another person does the printing, another person brings wood. No money has changed hands setting up the Case delle Erbe and we have no sponsors. People come to us and offer the skills they have in order to join and learn. Those who learn become teachers and inspire more people to learn and teach. This is a movement which multiplies from its own energy.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers comm. 2017)

The Case delle Erbe in this study frequently attract participants who are health practitioners wanting to add foraging to their offer. Others participate to find a new way of living or to become more connected to where they live.

> I'm often surprised by who asks me where there is a Casa delle Erbe for them to stay in on their holiday. It's better than staying in an anonymous albergo. It's more interesting and you meet people, get involved in things, so people like it. Now I'm seeing people who aren't normally part of the Case delle Erbe wanting to stay in Case Dell Erbe for their holidays**.**
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

People who live near a Casa delle Erbe and who want to make it a way of life, exchange and learn for free, pooling resources and skills. Maria-Sonia moved from a nearby city to set up her Casa delle Erbe at 'Montedoro', partly due to the earthquakes in that area, as she considers the movement to be of assistance to locations in recession and disaster. The movement works best within a region with an established interest in the uses of plants and in traditions surrounding sustainability. To start a Casa delle Erbe one is advised to ascertain if a level of widespread interest in spontaneous plants already exists in the desired location. One must observe and research if there is an infrastructure of schools with teachers wanting to learn foraging, or hospitals and local authorities wanting to promote and pay for the courses. Once a basic interest is recognized in a region, the Case delle Erbe movement can take root. Maria-Sonia advises starting by offering a few free events in order to meet the kind of people who want to participate, and thereby learn what interests them. Ideally the location is 'where you can walk outside and gather. Not a half-hour drive away. A place where having a relationship with plants is part of daily life.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019).

Each of Italy's twenty administrative regions have a highly informal, self-coordinating network of Case delle Erbe within them. Therefore when one house when one house holds a festival, another could be employed to do the catering; each thus sustains the other. Beyond the immediate Case delle Erbe community, a larger circle of people gravitates around the houses and shares resources, if only occasionally. For example, I have met people from other alternative centres in Central Italy, including a prominent outdoor music-festival organizer, at Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe. Brommel and Spicer (2011), describing social movements in relation to the slow movement, examine this method of extension and partial amalgamation with other movements through the creation of 'floating signifiers'.

Floating signifiers, intended as shared concepts, may unite disparate social movements, each of whom designate a different and specific interpretation to the shared concept/ floating signifier (ibid.).

> They (social movements) mobilize by building alliances with a range of diverse actors, often with quite different sets of interests. At the same time, they build a collective identity for these groups by broadening the range of floating signifiers they appeal to and by creating increasingly ambiguous nodal points able to appeal to a range of different constituents. These two processes broaden our awareness of how social movements are able not only to create and extend networks but also to foster identification among diverse actors.
>
> (Brommel and Spicer 2011:1719)

It is fascinating to observe this very effective strategy in action, occurring without any orchestration. In this manner people meet and find they have points of shared interest, although their values may be different, and each group does publicity with the other group's members, making diverse groups loosely affiliated with the Case delle Erbe, and vice versa, extending influence.

The Case delle Erbe is markedly different from most national groups in that it neither has a logo nor a recognized font for writing the name (signs are usually made by hand); there is no branding, newsletter, conferences, enforced standards, membership procedure or regulations. The Case delle Erbe is a genuine popular movement. It is not a marketing project nor an NGO. Apparently, in addition to the 130 Case delle Erbe in Italy there are twenty in formation (Maria-Sonia, pers comm. 2019). Maria-Sonia visits all of the new Case delle Erbe, sometimes several times in a year, so in this sense there is 'quality control', yet differences are celebrated, as we will see. A Case delle Erbe member commented there is a certain type of person who gets involved.

> There's something about them that makes you certain right away that they are a Case delle Erbe kind of person. It's as if you can tell they are one by the nose.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

Themes in this initial introduction are elaborated at length in subsequent chapters, but it may suffice to describe there is no attempt to control the movement and Maria-Sonia trusts in its natural processes. For example, a profound commitment to spontaneous plants ensures a 'soft' homogeneity and Maria-Sonia notes people follow a path of development spontaneously.

> First I used to think my role was to teach about plants and trees. Now my work is to create a richness in as many people as possible.
>
> When there is continuity in a person, when they do it [working within a Case delle Erbe with spontaneous plants] in continuation, then it's normal to want to bring richness into people. It's a change that happens on its own naturally.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

On one level the Case delle Erbe is dependent on the personality and activity of Maria-Sonia, who stresses how in the early days she would not have had nearly as many participants if she had not 'got out' of the area, joining in festivals, conferences, teaching etc. Currently, the Case delle Erbe benefits from a Zeitgeist for well-being and foraging. In practical terms, to open a Casa delle Erbe one would generally spend two years visiting and living in a range of Case delle Erbe, as well as having personal guidance from Maria-Sonia. Roughly half of those who stay over at Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe are either starting their own or already run one. In 2018 she went to Chile to support a person she had been mentoring in Italy, who then returned to her homeland to start the first Casa delle Erbe in South America. After an initial phase of exploration this person discovered there were no requests for teaching foraging, as people in Chile were already skilled, so the mentee decided to focus on an underdeveloped niche, that of making and using plant dyes, and for this she returned to Italy for further training (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). There are established Case delle Erbe in the Canary Islands, Romania and Tunisia as well as ones starting in Israel.

> One must never feel alone or be alone in this work. We all help each other because there can be many hurdles to overcome.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2017).

By January 2019 the situation had shifted compared to that of a few years earlier. Maria-Sonia expressed a feeling that the movement was growing rapidly, increasingly without her having to invest long hours or work hard to gather groups together. In effect the movement is spreading partly due to the Zeitgeist, but also because it is more established and former students are teaching others. Maria-Sonia evolved her own relationship to the Case delle Erbe to reflect more awareness of her own health and well-being.

> I won't explain anything on the phone [anymore]. If you want to come here, I will give you a place to sleep and some food as a guest and I will show you how it functions. But on phone I will not speak. I will not dedicate time to

> explaining the Case delle Erbe like I used to. If this doesn't suit you so be it. I hang up the phone and go to the waters [thermal spring]. I earn that time for myself. But this depends on me, Tamara, before I wasn't like this. I wasn't secure the way I am secure now.
>
> (Maria-Sonia., pers. comm. 2019).

She only teaches for longer periods, because she wants to attract participants who have enough commitment to take time away from work or other activities and make an investment of concentration. Over the course of a year, Maria-Sonia's teaching involves travel from the most southern tip of Italy to the Alps, back and forth at least three times. She leads workshops at Case delle Erbe for local authorities and at many festivals across Italy.

> People always say to me "Why don't you write a book about what you are doing?" I don't want to. There are enough books already. We need to live what we learn. We learn when it is a part of our lives, not by reading about it.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2017)

And she frequently says 'Once you work with your body, you learn more than you do by reading.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). This sentiment echoes a discussion Maria-Sonia and I have had over the years about my writing. Maria-Sonia would rather I opened a Casa delle Erbe. She senses that we live in a culture of documentation whereby we constantly document things, including ourselves (for example through social media), and she believes at least sixty per cent of one's time should be spent doing/making things, and 'giving them body', instead of documenting them.

Just as people have forgotten how to forage for plants, freely available and generously offering health and sustainability, we may have also forgotten how life can be more pleasurable and freer.

A description of three Case delle Erbe in the study area

Casa delle Erbe – Maria-Sonia

Before going to see Maria-Sonia in her Casa delle Erbe, I decided to take a walk nearby. Returning to the Central Apennines after an absence granted me a new vision, a fresh perspective on the familiar land around this Case delle Erbe and as I ascended the dramatic shapes of the mountains appeared bizarre or unusual. Looming upward above the oaks, rock formations full of caves point out of the earth like fingers of stone; over millennia these have been home to hermits, saints, alchemists, *pastore* (shepherds and their culture),

Figure 3.1 Chairs in the garden of the Casa delle Erbe. Griffiths, 2019.

the Pelasgi and other peoples. How bountifully abundant the flora and fauna seem compared to where I have been. How dense the oak forests are. Can there really be so many oaks in the world? All things previously normal, after an absence, present themselves as amazing. This mosaic landscape, with small openings of pasture or bare rocks interrupting the deciduous sea, stretches up to the treeline, where vaulted high-altitude grasslands begin. Two cyclists and one car pass me during the two-hour walk. Silence is occupied by a multitude of birds calls and deep rumbling from the river in cavernous rocks below. Although I have been in a mountain environment while I was away, only here do I sense a verdant pulsing, teeming with a luxuriant energy. The mind is wiped clean and all ideas melt.

At a lower altitude, one can look up from a bridge to see Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe, a non-descript, two-storey house making a white mark in the green. I notice two fields, where there had been attempts to farm, are no longer cultivated and have become a forest of flowers, thistles and other spontaneous vegetation, reminding me of a Case delle Erbe participant saying 'An abandoned field represents an opportunity.' On the small tree-covered, curving road there is an entrance, with a steep descent, marked by a handwritten wooden sign for 'Casa delle Erbe'.

Maria-Sonia lives on the ground floor, with a partial view of some of the mountains, surrounded by forest, river and fields – mostly un-farmed, with a few former farmhouses nearby. The first floor is inhabited by a family who have their own entrance and complain that Maria-Sonia doesn't cut the grass.

She once told me that if people spent as much time picking up litter as they do cutting grass, the world would look better. She came out and we kissed. I warned her not to walk behind the car in case it rolls, and she immediately walked behind the car as if she hadn't heard.

Inside, every space is ornamented with plants or books, or plant products, other printed matter and pictures. A large open fireplace is in one corner of the main room, where there is a collection of wood of all sizes – uncut branches. Although one doesn't notice at first, there is a mirror on the floor surrounded by books about a historic goddess figure of the region, flanked by two old glass bottles containing a high-altitude flower called Asfodelo montano (*Asphodelus macrocarpus Parl.*), which shepherds used to carry as symbolic torches. Right away, she leads me past the long wooden table covered in plants and books to the bedrooms, where the beds are used for drying plants she has harvested. We discuss different aspects of harvesting and storage and how I made an error by storing my dried *Achillea millefolium* in a glass container. The plants must always remain in paper bags to avoid moisture and to breathe.

Later we sit at the table on hand-embroidered cushions stuffed with laurel leaves – made to cure back pains. She is very pleased today, as an article will be published in an Italian magazine about a practice she hopes that all of the Case delle Erbe will start to use: creating a mandala made of plants. This is the first unifying image for the Case delle Erbe and later we discuss various complexities. The mandala is significant because:

> 'All Case delle Erbes have no waste, ever. There is none. The parts of the plants that are not used, form part of a ceremony of gratitude. When I intake a plant…'
>
> 'Intake?'
>
> 'Yes, we are made of them, of the same material. Take the poppies now, when I see them I am reminded of the red berries I put on the wreaths I made to protect the house in the winter.'

Seemingly unconsciously she puts her hand on her stomach.

> 'The colour is the colour of passion and the solar plexus. When I eat the poppy petals in a salad I think of ancient people and what it meant to them. These colours have meanings and this is what the Case delle Erbe do, connect the present to gratitude and honouring.'

She explains further by showing how the Case delle Erbe mandala is formed out of the remains of plants and what the colours symbolize.

Maria-Sonia's daily routine begins with going to the nuns in the convent – now out of town due to earthquakes, on a hilltop overlooked by the mountains. Afters mass, they exchange plant information and sometimes seeds. Then she goes to the sulphur springs near a particularly ancient monastery. This is a location which is seldom visited, and the river and spring are reached via an overgrown path leading through nettles and trees. Every day she gathers some fallen wood, usually with participants, as a means of collecting one's thoughts after a learning experience – gathering and reflecting (see discussion, p. 150).

Roughly speaking, Maria-Sonia spends half of the year at home (Casa delle Erbe) and the other half teaching throughout Italy and visiting family. When she is at home there are almost always people staying and frequently people stay while she is away. About 240 people stay at her house each year and approximately 120 of them stay for several days or a week. At the Case delle Erbe days consist of continual activity, with hardly any time for repose. In addition to teaching, offering workshops for her guests and preparing for festivals, each day has designated activities in relation to the seasons, religious celebrations/dates and traditional knowledge. As but one example, the first Tuesday after Easter is the historic date to tend to the *fonte* of 'Montedoro'. This involves taking water (in a glass bottle, never touching plastic) from the sacred high-altitude mountain *fonte* of S. Maria Magdalene[3] and bringing it to the four principle *fonte* of 'Montedoro'. This is done facing in the four directions, as in this case a river flows in each of these directions. Algae is cleaned out and vegetation cut back if required.

Harvesting spontaneous plants must be done at the correct time if they are to be dried, and plants reach their apex of fecundity at certain times during the year. This involves intense periods of activity. Sometimes, due to weather conditions, one only has a few days within an entire year to harvest a plant, such as *Hypericum perforatum*, which is connected to a saint's day and the flowers of which are harvested for a ritual called *L'infiorata e la processione*[4] still practiced in a mountain village as of June 2019.

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3 Mary Magdalene is a recurring theme and has an important history that shapes Maria-Sonia actions. A prominent regional author, Tassetti, a friend of Maria-Sonia, discovered a link between the Magdalene and the Sibilla region and he explains this as a movement connected to a repressed female version of Christianity. In his fiction book *Il Segreto Delle Sibilla Pastora* (Tassetti 2015), he highlights the connection people in the study area had to the Magdalene.

4 Interestingly, this tradition is one of the very few that is unpublicized, so there are no visitors and only people who live nearby witness it. Every other local tradition is publicized, with the aim of stimulating the economy and promoting tourism –

> Every time I go away or the plants' season ends, I suffer. When it is the end of the sambuca, the end of the acacia… This helps me dedicate all of my attention to the present. When I leave the house for teaching, and then come back – more with plants, than with people, I know I will find something else.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Plants need to be turned once a day during their drying period, over the course of at least three days, and while each interaction is peaceful and probably represents eco-therapy, overall there is an abundance of things needing to be done, all the more so if one makes soaps or harvests for a group for each meal. There are no agricultural practices at this Casa delle Erbe, nor any domestic animals or pets (for the significance of this see p. 181, Cristiano). Firewood for heating is collected by Maria-Sonia daily when she goes to the sulphur springs, and guests help forage for wood. As mentioned, this is understood as time to reflect.

Maria-Sonia harvests a vast range of plants throughout the year, although normally in small quantities, because they are primarily for the people who visit her, often for teaching, or for participants in festivals she is involved in. The plants are also used in exchange, as she has a friend who produces organic products and exchanges heritage grains and pasta for her foraged plants. Spontaneous plants are also used for making cosmetics.

Guests also arrive with food. In May 2019 Maria-Sonia commented on a tendency for less exchange of practical goods and more exchange of well-being experiences. This is substantiated by others who have Case delle Erbe in the study area. At this Casa delle Erbe some income is derived from teaching and from paying guests (an amount of their choice for their accommodation). This falls below the taxation threshold and Maria-Sonia also depends on a modest pension. The next chapter explores the experiences of honouring nature and plants that she offers.

In concluding my introduction to this highly active Casa delle Erbe, Maria Sonia's teachings, and thoughts and values demonstrated to me multiple times, are presented. It really cannot be emphasized enough how much Maria-Sonia changes her teaching approaches and sometimes alters her themes, as do each of the Case delle Erbe individually. A cut-off date 2019 was chosen, because at this point I had observed patterns and consolidations of themes that had been developing from 2016, when I began participating. From 2020, with the development of Covid, there were changes in approach and while

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both of which have suffered since the earthquakes. Even at its best, the level of tourism was modest compared to Umbria or Tuscany.

these alterations are captured to an extent in what follows, *Foraging for a Future* mainly focuses on the Case delle Erbe in the study area prior to Covid.

> The saints are our shamans. You don't need to go to Brazil or India. We have our own shamans here.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

The first time shamans were mentioned, I was foraging with Maria-Sonia in a semi-abandoned ecclesiastical site. It was the only time I was lucky enough to have a one-to-one foraging lesson. She is profoundly Roman Catholic and was expressing a Roman Catholic thought while explaining foraging. When I showed hesitancy regarding this context, she replied, 'If I told you the same information and said it was a tale from an ancient forest nymph you would accept it, wouldn't you?', and reluctantly I agreed. She then explained how she was tired of people going to the Far East or Global South to search for shaman and gurus. This topic arises frequently when she is with a group, because Maria-Sonia connects plants to local culture and all aspects of quotidian life at home, rather than searching for the exotic in the foreign. This approach necessitates a detailed knowledge of the territory and in Italy this is easily connected to the church. Maria-Sonia always takes trainee Casa delle Erbe owners to visit important *fonte* or monasteries, intending that when they have visitors they should do similarly in their region. I have observed how a regional and Roman Catholic focus seems to grant additional social acceptability to Maria-Sonia as a cultural interpreter, beyond 'simply' foraging.

Although she is not aware of arguments around cultural appropriation, this approach aligns well with politically conscious thinking. Young people in the study area appear receptive to her relatively intense Catholic religiosity and constant references to saints. A participant, training to open a Casa delle Erbe who accompanied Maria-Sonia during three weeks of her teaching nationally, commented

> Young people don't mind the spirituality because they yearn for ritual/ceremonies and traditions. Therefore, they accept Roman Catholic religion as part of their culture.

An example of the kind of saint Maria-Sonia has in mind is Hildegard von Bingen, an extraordinary person by any account and a central point of reference in Maria-Sonia's life, as well as nationally for the Case delle Erbe. Due to her radical nature it took the church many centuries to recognize Hildegard von Bingen, who died in 1179 and was canonized in 2012.

Although Maria-Sonia doesn't talk about creating experiences, she can be a consummate artist when doing so, and it is something she has given time, thought and practice to. Sitting in front of her open hearth one cold January morning, she passed me a herbal tea (lime blossom, which she had harvested on exactly the day the plant was at its optimum) and told me about a group of pilgrims, in order to emphasize her key theme of exchange. In this case the exchange was not solely barter, it was also energy. The pilgrims don't simply arrive at their stopover to sleep and eat but,

> they bring spontaneous plants with them, ready to cook. Or they collect wood, or they do work. So they circulate energy. So, the thing they learn is that gratuity doesn't activate – but on the other hand, the exchange between participant and host activates, exchange activates.

We talk about circulating emotional energy. Gratuity doesn't activate this type of energy exchange. Nor does monetary payment. A feeling of mutual empowerment by learning and sharing, the sharing of skills, is the energy that creates a memorable experience. She describes an experience that is part of a small summer festival which I attended one year:

> For me this is the most complete example of a good experience. First, there is a half day when you arrive to focus and prepare yourself. Then two full days of experience. Then one day when you replicate the experience. Before going away, you need to replicate what you have experienced. There is the paper-making workshop, the dances, the cosmetic-making workshops, essential oils, the food, the teas – we decided that not everyone wants to do the same experiences. Maybe there is one person who loves to make dyes from plants, another who is in love with cooking with plants. Before they go, they have to do the experiences themselves, so they can take them back home with them to do for others.
>
> So, are you saying the main thing is to replicate before you go and to take back something you can do at home? As well as making the energy circulate? It's not just taking the experience but physically giving back too…
>
> Yes. Giving money doesn't make a full experience. For me these are the most essential points, I believe. I think you are able to understand me particularly well because before you met me you dedicated yourself to the figure of the forager, instead of the farmer. I think you are able to understand me so well because you have this faculty.
>
> (Maria Sonia interview, 2019)

It should be noted the theme of foraging in contrast to farming is not predominantly understood within an historical framework. In Chapter 2 I have interpreted this theme within some historic context because this has consequences for Chapters 6 and 7; yet Maria-Sonia's focus is on the present. She repeatedly explains as she teaches, how foraging today is distinct from farming.

> Being a farmer has represented austerity or poverty, hardships and suffering, and work that never ends. Today people don't want that. People say they love nature. I say take a hoe and work for one week in a field[5] and then tell me how you feel. Harvesting spontaneous plants is the direction of the future, the experiences give people a richness of knowledge and health – to live in harmony with the countryside.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Here, and elsewhere, there is no or little narrative of loss regarding the past from Maria-Sonia. In effect, she describes the experience economy in a post-productive rural environment. As we will see, in each Casa delle Erbe 'production' is not about quantity nor the sale of plants, instead what is valued is the quality of experience offered for participants. Some Case delle Erbe don't produce any physical products for sale. Within this style of experience economy, if a Case delle Erbe offers a product it acts as a souvenir of the experience, a memory-maker, a tangible placeholder representing a rich intangible experience.

A key theme in this book is the process of decommodification that the Case delle Erbe in the study area are energetically engaged with.

> You [one] would take the day off work to drive all the way to Perugia, to buy a remedy from a special herbalist store. But that person will say they can't take a day off work to spend time in a field gathering the plant, the same cure, themselves! People have to learn to give value to what they don't pay for! We have to give the greatest value to things that are free.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

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5 For a non-Italian reader, it should be clarified that Maria-Sonia is not suggesting something exaggerated nor summoning up an idea from the past, because the hoe is used on a large scale in the Central Apennines since it is required for truffle plantations. It is locally known to be hard work and the author herself damaged her back working 1.5 hectares with a hoe. There are older people in the study area who still farm with little mechanization.

Henderson's (1999) model of the economy in the degrowth section of Chapter 2 is evoked by Maria-Sonia here, as she describes her understanding of 'the artificial creation of scarcity' involving 'de-skilling, social exclusion, loss of cultural diversity' (Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova 2013:11) functions. Her interpretation adds another aspect to the argument. Such scarcity is not simply imposed upon us by the greed of the market system. We consumers actively extend it because we feel uncomfortable valuing aspects of life outside of productive structures. Fundamentally, the consumer does not accept the 'lower part' of Henderson's cake. Of course, intellectually we value or love nature and 'free resources', but this mental value does not translate into quotidian behaviour. Essentially, there is a gap between knowledge and action (cf. Fischer *et al.* 2017:545), a problem that hinders the uptake of pro-environmental behaviours (PEB). Generally, discussion in PEB research is framed within the context of our relationship with nature (e.g. Bissing-Olson *et al.* 2013; Geiger, Otto and Schrader 2018), yet perhaps the value we are conditioned to express toward labour (work) and productivity needs to add to this equation. To value a spontaneous plant, existing of its own accord without us, requires departing from the capitalist work ethic and from a perspective that has humans at the centre of the stage. As Maria-Sonia says, we must learn to give the greatest value to things in life that are free. For Maria-Sonia, as we will observe in the next chapter, experiences are created to enable people's growth and thereby change society.

A final theme of Maria-Sonia's preoccupied me from the beginning, and has led me to engage on a deeper level with Heideggerian thought and consider its synergies with the Case delle Erbe.

> The role of the Case delle Erbe is to make each moment an appointment with love, until the last moment. This is very important. If you consume solarized [plant] liquids regularly it makes it easier for you to leave your body [die]. Each time I do a mandala I learn to separate myself, to arrive at the last appointment with love.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

The physical actions that accompany an expression of this type will be described in the next chapter. On engaging with this theme on numerous occasions, it became evident that Maria-Sonia's interactions with plants have helped her to learn how to die and embrace death. By understanding death one can learn how to live. She once said 'The act that is the most noble is the passage.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019) and we will return to the significance of 'the passage' later. By making mandalas with the plants' remains, she learns to separate herself from her body and life as the plants do; in a sense she

envisages her life and death within the plants' cycle. Each time she puts the plants back to the earth, she is preparing to die. This is also experienced when she spreads the ashes of plants she has burnt, and other rituals. As is explored in Chapter 4**,** Maria-Sonia' ideas have much in common with Heidegger's, though she expresses herself in a more poetic and experiential manner.

Understanding how Heidegger considers death to be a means of entering our essence of Being, suggests that the purpose of life may be to understand death, before we die (Heidegger 1962:295).[6] Only when we understand dying will we discover the type of life (lifestyle) we need to lead. Although we try to ignore death and fear it, in *Being and Time* (ibid.) Heidegger reminds us of our commitment to death, while Maria-Sonia says there is only one thing in life of which we can be certain. She links this commitment to love, to understanding the beauty and joy of life in the present – a connection Heidegger did not make. Maria-Sonia is learning, and offers the opportunity for others to learn, this crucial aspect of humanity in an experiential, hands-on way. In essence, she is teaching how to die and therefore how to live.

Casa delle Erbe – Alberto

How one arrives at a place, the baggage one carries, the experiences gathered en route, set the stage for perception. I felt conflicting forces as well as some underlying prejudices regarding the location of this Casa delle Erbe in the 'interior' area, in a valley created by a mountain river.

This significant river was apparently named after a famous Pelasgi leader (Vittori 1938:13) and these early people are particularly important for the history of the study area from circa 1,600 BC. They are described as earth worshippers who were attracted to particularly high mountain summits as places for their worship. In 1983 this river was diverted with a dam to form a lake holding 14 million cubic metres of water, thereby flooding an upland village in which people had lived. I came to know a member of one the families that was forcibly re-housed to an electric mill, where the main space was devoted to the production of flour and the family of five inhabited one small room with no real bathroom. In neighbouring hill-towns in the study area people speak of problems resulting from the humidity of the artificial lake. This endeavour was directed towards the future of farming in the interior valley, where water is often lacking.

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6 Heidegger's understanding of death is discussed in relation to the Case delle Erbe in Chapter 4. Being-towards-the-end is not an attitude but rather the essence of Dasein, as is also care. Most of us are 'falling' so we flee from realizing our Being-towards-the-end. 'With death, Dasein stands before itself in its own most potentiality-for-Being.' (Heidegger 1962:295).

While it is only talk, one hears of families in this valley with illness, including cancer, attributed to intensive chemical usage in their industrial farming culture. For instance, a restaurateur I interviewed in 2013 immediately assured me she that never bought vegetables from the valley, as if it were a given (Griffiths 2014:145). Whether this is local knowledge or local prejudice, it is not reassuring to drive past professionally printed signs displaying a skull and crossbones, as were dangling off each fruit tree in a large farm I passed on the way to the Casa delle Erbe. This valley has higher temperatures than the foothills and is home to a significant amount of light industry as well as farms. Much of the road, lined with industrial farms, follows the river, which occasionally flickers into sight like a chimera in the heat.

In a field on my left, a tractor was being set up with spray tanks. I was surprised and pleased to see the operator was wearing a white respiratory mask. It looked new; very white, with black trim on the eye covers and on the two snouts. The field, of course, has a slope leading to the river we have discussed, feeding into the sea. One wonders how we can grow 'food' with poison and for this glorious purpose deem fit to divert high-quality mountain water, with repercussions for biodiversity and the mountain environment. Finally, a kilometre before the turn off for the Case delle Erbe, is a factory describing itself as a chemical manufacturer.

Despite all this, crowning the hill ahead, a beautiful historic hill-town captures the attention of visitors more than my environmental concerns would. We see what we are sensitized to and lest I portray a negative perspective, this town is renowned not only for its appearance and history, but also for having a particularly rich and active culture. On one of my times there I learnt about the 'International Dinner' the town has every year in the main square, where inhabitants represent 29 different countries and each person brings a national dish to share. The cultural life and attractive architecture have apparently inspired many second homeowners and retirees to invest. Additionally, an agronomy agency operated by the region is located here, and occupies itself with promoting agricultural biodiversity, studying autochthonous species and the threat level for extinctions, exemplifying a progressive aspect of agriculture in this location.

Parking under some fruit trees at the Casa delle Erbe, I observe the earth is bare in many places and cracking with desiccation, even though it is very early summer. Here the altitude is 350 metres, much lower than the other Case delle Erbe in this study and being further from the mountains this area does not benefit from orographic forcing. We go immediately to look at Alberto's lavender field. Heat radiates off the white gravel track while the sun beats on us from above as we walk up a gradient. The field is beautiful and between the rows of lavender the grass has been trimmed, leaving a straw-like stubble.

'Agriculture really is an incredible amount of work, isn't it?' I comment, studying the labour-intensive field, also aware of how visitors might only see a delightful purple-azure haze.

'Yes, I have to say… with age and various difficulties from working in fields, I now have someone to help me,' Alberto explains.

We commiserate, as I have ruined (or 'sacrificed', as locals say) my back in my truffle field. Then we move to his adjacent vineyard, where the vines have a gothic, gnarled, serpentine quality – their dark forms, coiling and twisting beneath a little garnish of yellow-green tender leaves. It appears a substantial enterprise, beyond what a Case delle Erbe might use, and I ask if he sells any. He tries not to treat the vines, so some years the level of production is low, therefore it doesn't actually produce much. Without chemicals it is impossible to have a consistently high yield. Our conversation is cut short by Tiger, a tabby cat with an unusually attractive zebra pattern on its fur; or what is left of the fur as it is shorn in parts and has stitches.

> He has been shot three times by criminals, delinquents… He almost died each time. I just brought him home from the vet's yesterday. Now I try to keep the cat with us at all times and in my bedroom at night.

I assimilate this as indicative of the higher population density in the interior, and of it being a place inhabited by hunters with thwarted ambitions.

Despite the above, even a person with my prejudices was able to succumb completely to the peace and restorative atmosphere of this Casa delle Erbe. No other houses are visible there, the hill-town looms above like a terracotta crown in the distance, a walnut plantation borders one side of the grounds in addition to fields of vines and lavender. One stands within an oasis of inspiration and contemplation. Frequently in the Case delle Erbe movement, the Casa – although more than an add-on – is an addition to an existing pursuit, and Alberto runs a project with a B&B type of structure. In 2005, a few years before his retirement, Alberto met Libereso Guglielmi, a legendary figure in Italy. Born in 1925, Libereso worked in an experimental centre under the direction of Mario Calvino, father of the famous author Italo Calvino and an internationally known agronomist. Libereso was one of the first in Italy to popularize the importance of biodiversity, one of the early vegetarians, and famed for his knowledge of plants and artistic ability in drawing plants and insects.

Alberto had a long career as a psychologist employed in the hospital of a large town on the coast. At that time he was devoid of interest in plants, nor did he enjoy eating vegetables. Becoming friends with Libereso (who died in

2016) was life-changing for Alberto: 'I always liked nature, but I returned to it and to farming, in my own way, after meeting Libereso.'

Alberto grew up within a farming family in another region, and left it behind when he became a psychologist. Libereso inspired him to farm in '*modo mio*' and learn about spontaneous plants (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019). Libereso's influence meant that Alberto could no longer simply walk through a field. Now he carefully looks where he steps and recognizes each plant, knowing its history, folklore and botanical name. Upon retiring from his work at the hospital, he wrote three books about the history of spontaneous plants within the local farming tradition. All his books are dedicated to Libereso and one is illustrated by him. He became a 'dear friend' whom Alberto described as a genius and an anarchist (Alberto pers. comm. 2019).

Thereafter, Alberto began to teach the history of the farmers' kitchen at the Accademia Delle Erbe Spontanee, near Ancona. About seven years ago, while he was teaching at the academy, he met Maria-Sonia, who was taking one of his courses; in this manner he learnt about the Case delle Erbe and then joined the movement in 2016. His Casa delle Erbe consists of a professionally renovated stone farmhouse with various converted stone outbuildings. One of these has become a self-contained flat for Alberto. Visitors stay in the main house with a very large dining room and kitchen area, in what was originally a *cantina* (cellar). The large double doors to this room are engraved with a commemoration to Libereso, outside a stone wall encircles rosemary bushes as a meeting point and there are recliners for sunbathing.

Alberto mentioned that a swimming pool and umbrellas would not be in keeping with the place. A mulberry tree, formerly introduced to stimulate the silk industry in this area, creates a shady haven for a long outdoor table and recliners.

The differences in the Case delle Erbe will perhaps surprise readers, yet repeatedly Maria-Sonia describes this as characteristic, a strength and a 'beautiful' aspect of the movement. Firstly, it is significant that Alberto relegates 'the honouring side of the Case delle Erbe to Maria-Sonia' (pers. comm. 2019). He has no inclination toward honouring actions or ceremonies. His focus is on the integration of spontaneous plants with traditional farming, biocultural history and academic literature. His pedagogic approach is evident in the layout of the Casa delle Erbe: there is a garden of spontaneous plants transplanted as exemplars. Each plant has placed in front of it an attractive and handmade ceramic sign with its name. Since the plants are a metre or so from each other, separated by relatively bare earth, presumably due to the heat and without other plants of their community next to them, they present themselves rather like specimens, and this is clearly an effective learning tool. On the way to the kitchen, I help myself to some (non-treated) cherries of the

Figure 3.2 A mulberry tree offers welcomed shade for an outdoor dining table, etc. Griffiths 2019.

cultivated type, therefore larger than the spontaneous ones I normally eat. Due to the heat some cherries are cooking on the tree, encircled by wasps, and one smells the rotting fruit; a theme of fecundity we will return to.

Alberto is part of the Case delle Erbe because it celebrates his values and lifestyle; additionally, he makes a connection between the Case delle Erbe and the Mediterranean diet – the latter being one of his main foci. His Casa delle Erbe is also unique for attracting mostly international visitors and participants. This has evolved due to an innovative project Alberto invented called 'Inside Rural Italy'.[7] Alberto lives in relation to several key values and each of these interfaces with the others; his Inside Rural Italy project is an example of this entwining.

> I have invented a name for the type of tourism I offer. It's called relational tourism. This is about a lifestyle which creates a tight connection between the individual and the community. It's travelling to create a bond with other people. I learn from them and share with them, and they do the same for me.
>
> So how does money enter into it?

7 This is not the actual name of the project, which has been changed to ensure anonymity.

> They pay for the basic accommodation. The rest, the experiences and other things are part of friendship.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

With this approach Alberto cooks together with his guests if they wish and he takes them to meet his friends (he has an active social life). Guests join in his life, in terms of the cultural events he takes part in and the festivals he is organizing. He frequently organizes day-long experiences for them, for free, involving meeting other friends of his, for his own pleasure and for theirs. This has an impact on visitors and they usually return. Over time they become friends and also learn about this Inside Rural Italy project. It is significant to note that Alberto does not suggest, but rather waits for them to ask to be part of the project. They then host him at their house and print some flyers inviting local people, or their friends, to come to hear Alberto give a lecture on the history of food; he also cooks a dinner with heritage foods that he brings from his region (foods people in other countries have not tasted). During this event he also advertises his B&B, although his aim is to promote the region. Those who attend the evening pay for the dinner. Through word of mouth others hear about Alberto's activities and he has an attractive website where people can inform themselves. He uses barter or exchange to pay for his airfare, by offering his B&B accommodation for free off-season. In this manner he has been all over the world, having a holiday (cooking and eating, which he loves) and he no longer needs to advertise. He enjoys avoiding standard marketing practices.

This project is deceptively simple, yet summons up radical values and is effective from both business and well-being perspectives.

> My tourism decommodifies. I eat with my guests, we learn to cook from each other, I guide them for free. I introduce them to my friends and my life.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

Decommodification is at the fore in Alberto's mind and this is an aspect that distinguishes his 'relational tourism' from slow tourism. Markedly different from the well-known WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) scheme, Alberto's guests do not do any work. If they so choose, they may invite Alberto to their home and host a dinner lecture, as an exchange with Alberto. But to reiterate, Alberto does not suggest this exchange; reciprocation is left to guests' own discretion. Importantly for Alberto, his approach interfaces with his strong commitment to the Mediterranean diet, which he teaches is not a 'diet' but a lifestyle upheld by specific values. This in turn links to his passion for the civil economy (see discussion in Chapter 2). The success of

his relational tourism means this Casa delle Erbe has guests from all over the world.

> Generally, they come because of a shared passion, a fascination for this type of lifestyle. Some of them have expectations. An ideal in mind. Others want to discover. Everyone finds hope here. They fulfil it through the human relations and meeting with nature. The equilibrium between both is the most important.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

Visitors' interactions with this Casa delle Erbe foreground the concept of identity.

> The Case delle Erbe [national movement] catches a primary need in people. The need to recognize and be recognized. This is how humans become human. Identity is not a fixed thing. Nor does one have one identity one's whole life long. It's like a spiral, it grows every second and takes in, integrates the new material. Transforms. I think you develop identity through cooking, and through the Mediterranean diet. A tight connection to the community, a solidarity, a civil economy. Not a private accumulation. In this situation we don't use categories, we don't have categories of people. Here that breaks down.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

For him,

> There is no identity without nature. You can't have one without the other.

The concept of the spiral, Alberto mentions, is coincidentally the image chosen for slow travel.

> In contrast to our western preoccupation with speed, efficiency and productivity, the image of a spiral is intended to suggest an inward attentiveness and a groundedness in place.
>
> (Germann Molz 2010:279)

'The Slow Travel Movement encourages tourists to travel in "concentric circles", a spatial itinerary that reflects the image of the spiral.' (Germann Molz 2010:279). This may encourage sustainability in its reduction of distances travelled and also a deeper level of engagement with self and place. Clearly synergies exist between the Case delle Erbe and slow tourism.

Alberto has fewer guests during the summer, as increasingly it is not a good time to forage: 'It's the time you go to the sea.' (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019).[8] This occurred emphatically in the summer of 2018, as the temperatures in August desiccated plants so badly there was little to forage except at a high altitude.[9] Most guests arrive in the spring and autumn, and a smaller number in the winter. Alberto's principal focus and the foundation of his books and lectures, is the integration of spontaneous plants with nature-first farming, so the experiences he offers revolve around guests learning to forage and learning about heritage seeds and traditional agricultural practices.

As an active participant in the slow movement, Alberto reads everything written by Petrini, founding member and President of Slow Food International. Alberto has personally met Massimo Montanari, the famous food historian who collaborates with Petrini: 'I take Petrini's philosophy one hundred per cent.' (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019). For Alberto, slow food concepts are perceived as originating in, or simply overlapping with, the Mediterranean diet which represents his main focus or passion. When staying at a Casa delle Erbe in northern Italy, Alberto learnt a culinary experience termed '*che ho che l'ho*' or 'that which I have' at a northern Casa delle Erbe. Instead of 'pot luck', 'that which I have' involves each person bringing some ingredients. The challenge and the entertainment of the evening is to create a delicious meal from whatever ingredients happen to be brought. This is a group endeavour, involving a lot of conversation (negotiation) as recipes are invented and everyone makes the food together. Alberto is particularly enthusiastic about this Case delle Erbe invention. As well as being very good fun in the kitchen, 'that which I have' enables people to learn from each other and participate in what Alberto calls relational tourism, and often facilitates exchange of knowledge from different cultures. It makes a very low-cost social gathering and memorable meals have been created this way.

Notably, the Case delle Erbe do not publicize 'that which I have', nor any of their other innovations. Individuals are left to search out, via word of mouth, what interests them independently. Partly for this reason, Case delle Erbe

8 Despite recessions and earthquakes, many people in the study area manage to spend a month, and most spend at least a few weeks, on the beach during the summer. This suggests that when pleasure is part of a social tradition one finds a way to make space for it, unlike those who were not born into these values.

9 For various reasons summers are increasingly a challenging time for foraging. Maria-Sonia likes to forage in historic and religious places, and during summer 2018,she claimed to have found the only place in the region with green plants: a ruined monastery, perhaps with an underground spring. Climate change suggests the summer may become what winter used to be a few decades ago; a time when extensive foraging is restricted.

participants are keen to visit other Case delle Erbe to learn and experience what each does. Alberto comments that the origins of the Mediterranean diet, wherein all food preparation, including shopping, farming, foraging, cooking and cleaning, were shared within the group, is in harmony with Case delle Erbe and the slow food movement. This approach to the Mediterranean diet is being disseminated through the teaching of Prof. Lluis Serra-Majem at the Università di Las Palmas di Gran Canaria. Alberto considers this university to be the leading centre for the diet and reads all their publications.

As regards nostalgia, historicity and the discussion in Chapter 2, where foraging is presented as an ever transforming and fluid custom rather than a tradition, given Alberto's intense sensitivity to biocultural heritage, his engagement with the past is perhaps best framed within contemporary discussions of inheritance. In this context, inheritance equates with complex patterns of negotiation, particularly as aspects of the future we seek to protect are born from our interpretations of the past, as Heidegger pointed out; 'The character of "having been" arises, in a certain way, from the future.' (Heidegger 1962:373). Alberto does not evoke the past as heritage but aims to invigorate it to offer more possibilities in the present, since 'All the rich cultural and biological inheritances that constitute our world are at stake, to a greater or lesser extent, in the histories that we weave' (van Dooren 2019:86). Alberto revitalizes traditions, such as gathering friends to help with a harvest and then eating together, or pressing grapes barefoot in a barrel. These actions are not presented as an evocation of an authentic past, and take place in the spirit of exchange or barter. Hence, Alberto's crops are often harvested without him having to pay for workers. In exchange, his friends receive gifts of wine, a fun experience and a wonderful meal representing a desired social occasion. In correspondence with Maria-Sonia's approach, Alberto engages in contemporary practices that become customs, such as the 'that which I have' meals.[10]

From a financial perspective Alberto's income from the Casa delle Erbe and B&B is supplemented by his pension. He considers the Case delle Erbe a good model for young people starting up, but suggests at least one additional and related employment is required. Diversification of rural income sources within one family (or cohabiting group) has historically been understood as a pluri-activities approach in mountains (Parish 2001), yet now with increasing

10 Alberto mentioned notable meals have been created with the 'that which I have' custom and I was tempted to suggest he make a book of it, as he writes about food. Yet, obviously writing a recipe would go against the grain of the concept, which is about spontaneity. This underlines the importance of happenstance and lack of control for the Case delle Erbe.

economic instability, or the Covid-19 virus, a diversified income is relevant in the lowlands also. The only product Alberto sells – to guests as a souvenir – is lavender oil from his field. A good deal of his time is spent traveling with his Inside Rural Italy project and he helps organize two local festivals annually.

In broad brush-strokes, Alberto's values rest upon three foundational concepts. Analogous to Maria-Sonia, his life is an expression of his values and he also communicates these in his published works.

> Spontaneous plants are totally integrated. They are the history of our culture, the history of agriculture. Spontaneous plants are in synergy with agriculture [organic agriculture].
>
> (Alberto. pers. comm. 2019)

This theme, conducing the integration of cultivated and non-cultivated, is a centrepiece of Alberto's books, all his teaching at the Accademia Delle Erbe Spontanee and his experiences at his Case delle Erbe. His perception exemplifies the discussion in Chapter 2, that removing the dichotomy between nature and culture creates a psychological propensity towards sustainability (UNESCO 2012). Alberto finds expression of these values embodied within his understanding of the Mediterranean diet.

> The slow food movement became too economically orientated, but we must understand our history from the seed to the plate and that this is a relationship of knowledge – experiential knowledge – respect, and moderation. There is a lack of understanding of the Mediterranean diet. It's a lifestyle with values, not a diet for weight loss. It creates a tight connection between the individual and the community. The principles of the Case delle Erbe are connected to the community and to the Mediterranean diet.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

The connection between the individual and the community is a means of also integrating nature and culture within the Mediterranean diet. This links to a cornerstone of Alberto's values; the civil economy. When I first met Alberto immediately after the earthquakes of 2017 at a spontaneous plant event, his dynamic left-wing evaluation of the situation remained memorable. The experience consisted of a hike in the national park lead by a guide (identification of plants only, as foraging is prohibited there), followed by a lunch in a mountain refuge where we were served spontaneous plants that were foraged outside of the park.

> This [event] is part of innumerable experiences that produce and increase interpersonal relations and improve human health. Now that the economy has fallen, we can profit by creating a 'civil economy' that is orientated towards the good of the whole community, not giving advantage to only a few people, like capitalism and the free market economy do.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2017)

Later, knowing him better, I began to comprehend how the Mediterranean diet forms a dimension within the civil economy.

> The civil economy is a term from Adriano Olivetti for the economy of well-being he wanted to create. In the civil economy profit is re-spent in a practical way, it is redistributed in the community. The civil economy is my inspiration. This is what I want to communicate to all the people who come here. International people who come here may not identify with Italian farmers, but they can understand the lifestyle of the Mediterranean diet, which involves close connection to community, and the community acting together is a form of solidarity. This is again the civil economy. It's not about accumulating privilege.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

His Casa delle Erbe embodies these two concepts – the Mediterranean diet and the civil economy – in the quotidian. It offers a mode of engagement that allows him to put theory into practice, living these values corporeally, emotionally, intellectually. It is interesting to consider linkages with post-growth as described in Chapter 2. As Maria-Sonia would argue, part of decommodification is the ability to give the highest value to things that are free. Referring again to Henderson's cake model (1999:11), the free things in life represent half of the entire cake. This is not a small sliver of the cake, in the hands of an obscure or impoverished counter-culture, as capitalism might condition us to believe. The free half of the cake rests upon so-called Mother Nature and the co-operative society of exchange (Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova 2013:11). Through his passion for the civil economy, Alberto promotes a sustainable and integrated way of life with nature and culture conjoined within a civil economy. Alberto's reference point, Olivetti, he tells me, was a key figure in The Club of Rome and thereby involved in the famous, *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.* 1972), often cited as the first document demonstrating a global awareness of sustainability. In sum, via the civil economy, Alberto approaches decommodification in a manner similar to Maria-Sonia, but with different points of reference and different language.

During the summer, when there are fewer guests, Alberto has time to visit other Case delle Erbe and to travel internationally with his Inside Rural Italy project. He shares Maria-Sonia's value of 'getting out' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019) to make contact with people physically, on a national and international scale. This is partly how Maria-Sonia and Alberto gain pleasure in life and might reflect their being from a pre-internet generation. Yet there is anecdotal evidence that physically meeting people remains the main mode for making significant bonds for those in their thirties and younger also (Mackinnon, pers. comm. 2018). Alberto has also constructed a radical, gentle and special lifestyle, enhanced by his Inside Rural Italy project, that allows him much time for travel. Flexible mobility is assisted by the Case delle Erbe organizing picking up or dropping off visitors, carpooling; if one has time to wait, one can frequently get a lift to the general area one aims to reach.

Casa delle Erbe – Lena

As before, my perception of this Case delle Erbe at the northern end of the national park was impacted by the environment it is embedded in. In this environment, a phenomenological anthropological approach entailing a detailed description of attunement and a sensory receptivity to the place, its sounds, tastes and visual impacts (Houston 2015:282) arises intuitively. Although familiar with this land, the drama of the landscape, the Tolkienesque peaks, crumbling clifftop castles, lakes and olive groves at high altitude, stimulated my receptivity to new experiences. In these mountains I expect inspiration. Perhaps then it is no surprise that I found some.

In this upland environment the earthquakes equate to a deeply shared significance, and for the first time, in 2019, one was able to drive through several ancient villages that had previously been closed for two years. As the road to this Case delle Erbe passes the house of an aging Contessa, whom I had once been introduced to, and I decided to stop in. Her villa is located in a *borgo* beneath the family castle. The extraordinary structure of this ancient fortification remains unchanged, yet drawing nearer, the *borgo* appeared abandoned and closed off. On foot I ventured into the beautiful architecture, all overgrown, cloaked with vines. Spontaneous plants were growing out of the ancient stone window frames, a theme we will return to. From a distance the castle endures, while the homes represent an abandoned society, succumbing to the vegetative world.

Descending through waist-high grass with an armful of wild fennel, past collapsed stone buildings, an old couple on the road below watched me; the man in a red trunks, due to the heat. Having learnt that local people like to know who one is, what one is doing, and where one lives, I immediately offered all this information and they warmly welcomed me into

the government container where they live, a few metres from their damaged home. We lamented together about the earthquakes. The man kept repeating 'it's massacred us' and 'massacred' the nearest town, which is famous and houses the second oldest university in Italy (and founded by the Contessa's family) amongst much else. He insisted I never visit the town again, for it remains completely closed and the sight of it would 'massacre' me. The woman says she will be dead before she can move back to her home. We hug, kiss and I continue.

The turn off to this Casa delle Erbe leads through a particularly devastated group of historic stone houses and past a chapel. Then one proceeds on a dirt road, like a trail, ascending through forest. Though told this Casa delle Erbe is very 'cut off', in a huge forest, it is nonetheless surprising how mature the deciduous forest is, and how the forest continues for so long without clearings or houses. Where the road ends there are two homes. I have to wait outside because of an unexpected arrival of a person with a serious back problem, whom Lena is treating.

The wait is useful because this is a Casa delle Erbe I am unfamiliar with. Walking around I'm amazed by the dimension of the oaks. The altitude is high, 750 metres, and there is a cool breeze. Sitting outside, I observe how the forest integrates with the land around the house in a sensitive way, making a peaceful atmosphere. Instead of land maintained in an ordered fashion, around Lena's Casa delle Erbe the forest opens slightly and fruit trees take the place of oaks. Harvestable spontaneous plants abound in the green lushness, with no fences. The location feels special, enhanced by the perfume of ripe figs and a view of mountains where the land drops off below the houses. Here there is no sense of time, except for the forest in its relation to light; no calendar, no world below, just bird song.

Lena greets me and takes me to a shady terrace, where she brings a basin containing the water infused with the flowers of St John the Baptist for me to wash with. The perfume is intense and together we wash our faces, our hands and arms to remove sweat. Neither of us speak.[11] There is only the sound of birds and a slight movement of leaves. Once we have dried ourselves, Lena describes what she does:

> Our brain is the so-called most rational brain, but we also have a corporeal brain with centres in different parts of the body, in the stomach, the heart, the solar plexus. A brain processes information and memory. Our corporeal brain does this also. All my work is around this aspect.
>
> (pers. comm. 2019)

11 On this rural tradition, see p. 32.

She turns to go to the house to change out of her white, massage therapist (Shiatsu) clothing. I ask, 'What's the plan for today?' I want a time frame and perhaps, unknowingly, boundaries that are predetermined. 'I prefer not to organize. I like to follow the flow…'

Feeling a need for fortification after the drive, I take advantage of the cherry tree nearby. It is a cultivated cherry with huge fruit, and being cooler at this altitude none of the cherries are rotting. While munching, I consider how following 'the flow' and not organizing connects to other Case delle Erbe participants. One I spoke with recently said the Case delle Erbe taught her that we don't need to organize (Nel, pers. comm. 2019). We tend to organize people with diverse values and motivations into a structure with a goal that unites them yet, as discussed at the end of this chapter, the Case delle Erbe does the opposite.

Lena's Casa delle Erbe is different from others in that it has an eco-therapy approach, because she is a health practitioner trained in Chinese medicine, working as a therapist offering Shiatsu and Qi Gong. She has formed an association with another person in a large town some distance away, where she offers classes and treatments. Small groups or individuals come to her Casa delle Erbe for experiences in nature. Her clients are all kinds of local people: pensioners, students, factory workers etc. Since the earthquakes, for three years the small groups stopped coming to the Casa delle Erbe. She and her family moved from northern Italy to this spot twenty years ago, and she had previously worked as a primary-school teacher.

During the first lunch with her husband (an artist) and son (a university student), they expressed interest in Mediterranean studies, prompting the husband to discuss the Mediterranean as a 'superior' culture that has made the grave error of pandering to northern values, meaning 'all is lost now'. Discussing Mediterranean culture, the topic of exchange and barter soon arose, and Lena explained:

> We are as far from capitalism as we can be, and here exchange is the essence of life. It is how rural people live, helping each other.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

The whole family is committed to the importance of living in a system based upon exchange. Lena comments that if people don't have anything to exchange, she treats them for free. Most frequently, people come to her with back problems and her massage treatments are sought after. Clients may bring things like 'rabbits and pigeons'. At the association in the town, people pay, which is necessary as this is a business. The local people who come to the Casa delle Erbe, however, use exchange.

Figure 3.3 A view from one of the doorways of the Casa delle Erbe. Griffiths 2019.

Lena and her family did run an *agriturismo,*[12] but they prefer the model of a Case delle Erbe, as well as enjoying the summer, the most beautiful time of the year, with more peace. In the winter the road and weather conditions are too harsh for conventional visitors. Also, they were not pleased with the visitors they were attracting via their former commercial structure. They describe their former *agriturismo* visitors as banal urbanites with no environmental awareness, and no manual dexterity. Within this Casa delle Erbe small groups arrive for nature experiences and people have the opportunity to stay on. Lena offers some experiences at night in the forest, and for these also people may choose to overnight.

> We charge the absolute minimum for accommodation and breakfast. Between 15 and 20 Euro.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

12 Agritourism is a popular concept in rural Italy, and allows paying visitors to stay on farms and enjoy or learn about rural life. In its pure form an agriturismo is intended to produce all of the food it offers guests and to create an access point for small-scale farmers to sell their produce. Due to the proliferation of agritourism, there are many types today and some are like small hotels with swimming pools and large restaurants.

They do not sell any products made from spontaneous plants. This lack of production may signify a respectful co-habitation with spontaneous plants, rather than perceiving them as a source of renumeration. While she easily could, Maria-Sonia does not sell any plant-related products. Lena's Case delle Erbe makes a small amount of essential oils for family use (as does Alberto with his lavender) and specifically for exchanging with local people. Although not offering products for sale, which normally would represent soaps and teas for example, may seem like a detail, it denotes a mentality opposed to controlling plants which Lena later discusses, and is in contrast to the 'Capitalocene' (Haraway 2015) resource-extraction approach. They have no website and they do no marketing. Just as with Maria-Sonia, this Casa delle Erbe has no form of promotion, and relies entirely upon word of mouth (Alberto has a website). Motivation for joining the Case delle Erbe was based on 'lifestyle'. Lena has known Maria-Sonia for more than eight years and spent three years in training with Maria-Sonia, preparing to run her Casa delle Erbe. This learning process was also to enrich her own personal development. When they first left their home in a large city in northern Italy, they were impressed by the slowness of life here.

> At first, we were perplexed. Then as we slowed down, I think we have become slower than the locals. Living where we do, slowing down is worth it (to appreciate the beauty of the location). The work one does is slow and that brings you to understand the value of slowness. Living here we follow our interior rhythms, along with the seasons, and the plants. We are privileged to have this and to share it with our children.
>
> (Lena, pers. com 2019)

Lena's strong sense of allegiance to the Case delle Erbe is based on the idea of a shared lifestyle with shared values.

> People who share in this project [Case delle Erbe] believe in reciprocal help, in a simple life, in the union of people with nature. This excludes bureaucracy. We are free. Bureaucracy is something you might not see, but it controls you. We share an approach that is positive and based on respect for plants, and life, and water. What does that mean? Without this respect people have a restricted way of living.
>
> (Lena, pers. com 2019)

People come to this Casa delle Erbe 'because they are searching for something' (Lena, pers. com 2019), but this is not necessarily an identity project. Lena's clients generally don't think very specifically. When she starts

to speak with them about life and nature, she observes a change in their faces, as they become curious and start to think. There is a reliance on the specialness of the Casa delle Erbe's location, for, as she says 'If people come here, they feel good.' (Lena, pers. com 2019). In comparison with other places in the region, the atmosphere is unique. Lena doesn't offer ceremonies for honouring plants at the moment, due to her lack of preparation for leading a group in this aspect of the Case delle Erbe.

> It's a very important part of the Case delle Erbe. It's part of the history of humanity – that we've lost. Ritual is important to help us honour the moments in life both privately and collectively.
>
> (Lena, pers. com 2019)

Lena provides nature-related therapy combined with foraging. Foraging represents the preparation for every meal. She tells me about a simple experience that was popular before the earthquakes with small groups, in which she began by explaining Yin and Yang, the earth and sky and what this energy means. Then she would ask participants to lie on the ground, face down; offer a guided meditation; and they turn over and face the sky for the second part of the meditation. After this they would begin to forage and observe plants. This procedure connects bodily experience with thought and has had some very positive feedback.

The majority of her experiences are based on 'energy exchange', often accessed via Qi Gong, which she says opens awareness to the energy of plants and leads to attunement with spontaneous plants. Predominantly she focuses on trees and the human-nature relationships that can occur in symbiosis, as explored in the next chapter. Of the treatments she offers, Shiatsu is the most requested, for which she charges Euro 30 per session in the urban location. Qi Gong is not yet well known in rural Italy, but she expects this will change. In contrast to the other Case delle Erbe, Lena's belief system and faith are based on her study and training in Chinese medicine and philosophy,[13] combined with an interest in quantum physics. Foraging creates an intermeshing of relationships with nature and seasons, forming key energies to be directed towards eco-therapy, which is in turn shaped by Lena's deep belief in traditional Chinese medicine.

On one of my drives up the forested lane I noticed a small and worn sign for a villa in the woods. Upon enquiring, Lena explained that this is an art-nouveau palace owned by a count that has been devastated by the

13 Chinese and Eastern philosophy generally was a strong influence in Heidegger's work (May 1996).

earthquakes. All valuables have been removed and the palace has been abandoned, enmeshed in vernal gloom as plants creep through the cracks and trees seed themselves on the collapsed roof; the forest is closing in. Previously, I had felt something eluded me, sensing I had not comprehended the essence of this place. Now I understood the noteworthy dimensions of the forest and the lack of development. Even by Apennine standards this location has a particularly sparse population, due to it being a private estate. It is ironic that Lena, so opposed to capitalism, structures of hierarchy and control, benefits enormously from being located in a forgotten wealthy landowner's estate[14]. Essentially, this was a place where hunting historically had complete priority over farming or commercial developments.

To conclude in setting the scene of this restorative and profoundly peaceful Case delle Erbe, Lena's life and her values stem from the union of mind and body and in reconnecting with what I have termed our less rational brains, or what she refers to as our 'corporeal brains' or our bodily brains. 'All my work is around this aspect.' (Lena, pers. comm. 2019). Over time, reflecting upon experiences of being as they are approached in the next chapter, I became aware of the importance of connecting to our embodied brains as a way to interact with spontaneous plants. 'Energy exchange' with plants is key for Lena – with a focus on trees.

> Domestic animals are distorted. We can't share energy with them because we have distorted them. Spontaneous plants don't move and they are easier for us to open our instinct, our love of life, with. Trees particularly. They are more similar to us, perhaps for cultural reasons too. Their vertical form, reaching for the sun, mirrors us, and they mirror our energy channels in terms of Chinese medicine. In all cultures trees are venerated. They have a subtler [*sottile*] energy,[15] especially compared to wild mammals. This energy [of trees] is more similar to us. My closest relationships are with trees. I clearly see a difference between my vegetables and spontaneous plants. My vegetables are less resistant, they are less spontaneous. They are dependent and distorted. Spontaneous plants have a pure energy that is not made fragile.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

14 And perhaps the Contessa had not been as isolated as she appeared, in the same way anthropologists know nothing is 'remote'. Despite her relations and children being dead, she may have had friends submerged in the foliage, and historically aligned around the former power of her family.

15 Very interesting linkage with Nel who uses the same word '*sottile*' and describes a very similar perception, suggesting this point of view is not unique.

Of note for the discussion concluding this chapter, is that Lena has a clear and developed understanding of distinctions between spontaneous and non-spontaneous plants.

At a later date in my experiences, when Lena's generous instruction was not working for me, she suggested that I might not be learning because of being depleted or too tired. She taught me a Chinese gesture to encourage deep breathing and restore health. The importance of gestures regarding thought patterns is left for discussion in Chapter 5; it is raised here to simply illustrate a physical sensation, representative of Lena's themes. Putting one's fingernails into the skin around one's belly-button, with arms relaxed and fingers bent, one breathes so that the exhaled breath is projected mentally into the belly-button. Inhaling, one pulls the same air from the belly-button upward. With time this results in a disorientation, at least for myself, whereby the exhaled breath begins to feel like an inhaled breath, as it is projected inward. This gesture acts as an embodied reminder of the intermeshed circularity of Lena's thinking and sets the background for her ideas regarding life and death as not being opposite, any more than exhaling and inhaling are, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. Through her reciprocity of energy exchange with non-fragile spontaneous plants, Lena accesses the energy of living outside of 'a box'. A box is an image she frequently uses to describe the so-called normal way of thinking and living, whereas her life is a cyclical way.

> If we are inserted into a cyclical way of perceiving our life connected to nature, then there is less pain living, less pain dying.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

As subsequent chapters illustrate, Lena has a cyclical, heightened and integrated experience of life and what may be beyond, via spontaneous plants. Indeed, living with a relationship to one's embodied brain, the seasons and spontaneous plants in a grounded manner, is an experiential illustration of Heidegger's dwelling, encompassing much of his understanding of Being and the fourfold. Chapter 4 investigates these synergies, but here, however, is one example of Heidegger's Being

> man occurs essentially in such a way that he is the 'there' [das 'Da'], that is, the clearing of Being. The 'Being' of the *Da*, and only it, has the fundamental character of ek-sistence, that is of an ecstatic inherence in the truth of Being. The ecstatic essence of man consists in ek-sistence, which is different from the metaphysically conceived *existential.*
>
> (Heidegger 1978:156)

For Heidegger, as evinced by Lena's life, 'ek-sistence' is in ecstatic contrast to *existentia* and entails 'dwelling in the nearness of Being. It is the guardianship, that is, the care for Being.' (Heidegger 1978:167). Lena's life has a noteworthy propensity for experiencing being within the quotidian and caring in her assistance of others, as well as of the more-than-human. As Heidegger comments, there is 'something simple to be thought in this thinking' (Heidegger ibid.), although it is difficult for us to apprehend due to our understanding of humanism, metaphysics and our misguided history of philosophy (Heidegger 1978:149–54). Lena says she is free to apprehend more directly and flexibly because of being rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and medicine. Ultimately, freedom is at the core of Lena's space for life and work. Aversion to control threads its way through all of her values. As she says 'I am an anarchist.' Control is understood as a negative, including the unseen control of bureaucracy.

> Permaculture could give this region a self-cultivating harvest which we could all share, and this would be the ideal. Controlling plants is connected to the market, to selling. People can't harvest wild thyme like you describe in the mountains, so they buy it. They work to pay, to exert control, for ease. The basis of our culture needs to change. People need to learn that they may not need to go to a pharmacy. Control is also a question of scale. The size of production, the size of the population unavailable to collect wild thyme in the mountains. We should all work four hours per day and then society would change. There is no time to think. Everything is monetized – our relationships, our relationship with nature.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

Lena's discourse reveals a conflict between slow living and the work imperative. If, for example, slow tourism were to contest work and control, visitors would need to engage in exchange and in Alberto's relational tourism. The Case delle Erbe would say this is the path of the future. Currently, most people have no possibility of challenging control nor of choosing a life of communicating with plants.

Through Lena, I learned it is not by chance that the Case delle Erbe movement is without a defined structure. The point is precisely that the Case delle Erbe chooses not to have a logo, a font, membership (nor membership fees), a newsletter, conferences, advertising or sponsors. There are no forms, nor set procedures for joining the Case delle Erbe.[16] Lack of control was also

16 The limited and out-of-date website instructs one merely to speak to Maria-Sonia if interested in opening a Casa delle Erbe. Her decisions are based on the person's

identified as important by a participant, 'Afterwards I thought, you don't need to be organized.' (Nel, pers. comm. 2019). Lena's attachment to freedom (lack of control) is emphasized by the Case delle Erbe structure.

One of the profound learning experiences derived from time spent with the Case delle Erbe and from foraging, is comprehending how interacting with spontaneous plants in a non-controlling manner, as a central focus of one's life, over a long period, may reduce or obliterate the need to control, as I elaborate below. With reference to Chapter 2, we can consider agriculture as predicated upon control and one can observe how this controlling mentality has extended into our social structures. Lena's attachment to being outside of bureaucracy, separate from a work imperative, as well her understanding of domesticated plants and animals as 'distorted', render the Case delle Erbe an ideal network for her to collaborate within.

Taken together, these three Case delle Erbe mirror the areas they are based in. Lena lived for a decade in a deep forest before she developed a special relationship with trees. Alberto choose an agricultural landscape because it reflects his childhood and his values, while living in an agricultural setting gives him quotidian contacts reinforcing agriculture in his Case delle Erbe. Maria-Sonia lives on the outskirts of a small village in mountain foothills and focuses on local history and spontaneous plants on her doorstep. As she told a participant,

> This is not trekking. What I want to show you today instead, is what an abundance of spontaneous plants there are right here, without going anywhere.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Becoming a Casa delle Erbe

In 2018 some members of the Case delle Erbe in the study area became involved in a foraging project that was funded by the government as part of an effort to stimulate social capital and valorization of place after the earthquakes. A grant was awarded to teach people how to forage sustainably and create new ways of eating, while reconnecting with custodianship of the natural environment. When I asked what the motivating objective of the project was, one of the key organizers, who is a member of the Case delle Erbe, explained 'Identity. The project is designed to help people rediscover a shared identity with roots connecting to culture, the history of mountains, and uses of

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situation without any forms, registrations or set procedure.

spontaneous plants.' (Francesca, pers. comm. 2018). I will return to the theme of 'a shared identity'.

The project had two branches: ninety-five small-scale tourism-related businesses were invited to participate in learning how to forage sustainably and cook with spontaneous plants. A specialist chef was brought in to teach the hospitality managers how to prepare dishes with spontaneous plants; these often formed part of the culinary tradition of the region. Each class involved hands-on plant identification lead by Maria-Sonia and a session in the kitchen. The second aspect of the project involved teaching foraging to primary school students in the foothills of the Apennines. As a key organizer explained, teaching in schools is not only passing on the knowledge of spontaneous plants for potential future use, but also,

> It creates a kind of cohesion, a knowledge that links people to each other, their culture and the biodiversity around them. It is a social fabric, one which joins people and nature.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2018)

This last sentence finds an echo in the conclusions of this book.

Two adult participants in the project were interested in joining the Case delle Erbe, but had reservations. I met them both within the funded foraging project when I was a student taking part in many of the training sessions. Nel regularly attended the training and I spoke with her when the project was finished. She appears to be the type of person who would be committed to the Case delle Erbe. Although she enjoyed the training she did not learn anything new about spontaneous plants because she has been eating and cooking what is available in the region for years – though one of the recipes was a novelty for her. She has an evolved relationship with plants.

> Every plant has its alchemy that exists only in itself. It has a soul and power, the power to transmit. I believe this and I see it in them. This is when you look, only look. They give us – not only food – something more subtle (sottile) – we don't touch it – it arrives in the mind and the whole body. Spiritual is not a word that I use…
>
> Why not?
>
> It's overused. Everything has a spirit. Everyone and everything has a soul. In plants it is more '*sottile*', it is more subtle; their soul is more subtle. When I was younger, I did honour nature and plants with actions. Now I read

> books. There is a book called the *Florario* and it describes plants in relation to the planets and describes flowers and legends and trees.
>
> (Nel, pers. comm. 2019)

Although Nel and Lena never met, they use the same word '*sottile*' to describe the energy of plants and they share a similar attunement to the energy of plants. Another key factor is Nel's commitment to exchange or *scambio*.

> I do lots of exchange with friends and with everyone. I exchange with a homeopath who lives in a city in the north. If I have money, I will give it to him but otherwise if I bring him some of our food, for him that is very special. I do lots of exchange for my yoga students – if they don't have money. I get all my clothes from *scambio*. We have a group and we gather clothes together and then we meet and exchange. I don't buy clothing anymore.
>
> (Nel, pers. comm. 2019)

Having seen the Case delle Erbe festival in 2018 that Nel discussed, I could sympathize with her comments in context.

> Everything she [Maria-Sonia] does is based on exchange. Like the *festa* they organized here. At the start when I arrived to do my yoga it was really disorganized. I thought what is going on here! But in the end, everyone arranges themselves in relation to each other. It's not disorganized. Everyone brings their own contribution and works it out. Afterwards I thought, you don't need to be organized…
>
> (Nel, pers. comm. 2019)

On that occasion, Maria-Sonia was present at the two-day event from dawn to dusk and could have easily taken charge of organizing, particularly as she is a strong and often outspoken person. But she did not; instead it evolved, and was slow and disorganized at times. This is a central point for the Case delle Erbe and is considered its organic strength, enabling it to grow in the future without a 'leader' figure. The lack of control also acts as a decisive aspect for new participants, by obscuring or hindering clear economic benefits it renders the Case delle Erbe less attractive for those with strong monetary aims. It was likely a factor, for instance, in the local business association choosing not to ask the Case delle Erbe to join events in 2019 (Zia, pers. comm. 2019).

Nel runs an *agriturismo* at 600 metres altitude in the foothills, and her family is almost self-sufficient, producing virtually all of their own food

with the highest organic standards, as well as planting trees each year. She is indecisive about joining, as they don't lack guests.

> I was thinking of becoming a Casa delle Erbe. I already do experiences that bring people closer to nature and I think that is important. I make my own soap, my own 'mother' for yeast, and these things interest me. It's a choice of lifestyle. We moved here from the north of Italy for these values, to be involved in these things. I will think about it [becoming a Casa delle Erbe]. Right now, I have enough bookings, with mostly very good guests. The Case delle Erbe could be a term to put on the website as it is what we already do, and it could attract more of the kind of visitors we want. Personally, I changed very little [due to the project]. I am already doing it, and I've been foraging with Maria-Sonia several times before. For me the importance was social. It was really beautiful, being in that atmosphere with people who realize the importance of health for the world.
>
> (Nel, pers. comm. 2019)

Another perspective is suggested by Anna, who is at a different phase, having just begun to learn foraging from participating in the training project. Participants over the years comment on how Maria-Sonia's teaching includes personal development, as Anna also expressed.

> I learned so much more about what is here. It made me so much more knowledgeable about this area. This kind of knowledge wasn't really considered, valued, very much before. It gave me a new awareness and a new potential.
>
> (Anna, pers. comm. 2019)

Anna grew up in the mountains, where her family restaurant is located (now closed due to earthquakes) at 750 metres altitude, and her mother always foraged. She recognizes a special energy in spontaneous plants.

> Before the course I already felt that. I learnt that not only from Maria-Sonia. I love the wild orchids we have. I try to see how many I can find, and I photograph them, in May. To observe them gives me a great sensation of peace and calm. Once I had some botanic specialists staying at our place to study the wild orchids. I would like to learn and dedicate myself to wild flowers. After the course I felt this even more. Now I look at plants, all spontaneous plants in all phases of the seasons. Like the *Achillea*

> *millefolium*, I always looked at it without knowing anything. Now I give more attention to them. They give me a special energy.
>
> (Anna, pers. comm. 2019)

Although new to foraging, she feels able to participate in honouring plants:

> Honouring is very important. I understood the concept because of how she [Maria-Sonia] explained it. It's right to give back to the land with no waste. I'm comfortable with it.
>
> (Anna, pers. comm. 2019)

Anna hosted a two-day event with Maria-Sonia in her home. On the first day, when I was present, there were four paying participants (three under thirty years old) and three who were already connected to Case delle Erbe and therefore did not pay. During the workshop, Anna was taking photographs and writing blog posts as the event progressed. The response on social media was, however, not significant. Anna decided the experience needs to be a regular feature and has discussed hosting Maria-Sonia again.

> I was happy to meet others who are especially sensitive, I think. They have greater attention and more sensitivity to nature than most people. It was really nice to be able to share that at my place. I felt regenerated by it. That's really important now, not to feel depressed [because of the earthquakes]. We have already thought of doing it again in September.
>
> (Anna, pers. comm. 2019)

Anna perceives herself as working in a business created by a large investment from her whole family.

> I'm still not really clear what the Case delle Erbe is. Maria-Sonia gave me a lot of things to read, but I don't really understand what it involves exactly. I know at her house people stay mostly without paying and it is a base for her to teach but… We are a restaurant. We are not going to move away from that. No. I would like to offer experiences and share them with friends, but not much more.
>
> (Anna, pers. comm. 2019)

This perception, along with the confusion and also the financial pressure, is very understandable. In fact, the next day Maria-Sonia took pleasure in telling me,

> You think you are starting to understand the Case delle Erbe but the more you learn the more you realize you don't understand. You can try to understand, but it will always confound you. It will keep on confounding you.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Maria-Sonia went on to discuss various networks of friendships and contacts through whom, for example, a location which is not normally a Casa delle Erbe becomes one every year for the workshop or festival they host annually, or a private estate in Umbria opens its grounds (with support from members of the Case delle Erbe) as if it were a Casa delle Erbe for a few dates during the year.

Differences between Anna and Nel could be attributed to one only beginning to forage and one having decades of experience, because as a relationship with plants evolves people's perception frequently shifts. Typically, I observed this occurs through shared experiences involving people passing through similar stages of interest. Making soaps is an initial interest, followed by making teas and then essential oils or dyes. This brings the person in contact with others who are more experienced and involved in communities of interest based around spontaneous plants. With time, a larger alteration in perception transpires (see Chapter 5).

Yet, practical factors often intervene and render this interest as a hobby. Other people in the mountains who run small tourism businesses, possessing years of foraging skills, also expressed hesitancy joining the Case delle Erbe, because the cost of of carrying a mortgage and paying a range of taxes obliges owners to earn a set amount per person.

There are not many Case delle Erbe at high altitudes in the study area, for various reasons, including the closure of structures and homes in the mountains due to earthquakes. There are, however, multifaceted reasons the Case delle Erbe in the study region largely attract urban people from developed centres.

> Now, funding for the earthquakes is running out, and it's not a bad thing because they are all second homes anyhow.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

In the study area, Anna is the only higher-altitude local person participating. There were two nearby Case delle Erbe in the mountains, but both are now closed due to the earthquakes. They were in fact second homes, run by people (both intellectuals) who were born and lived much of their lives outside of mountains; which does not lessen their love nor knowledge

of mountains. In the study area there are no Case delle Erbe interacting with the longstanding mountain families, some of whom have lived in the same village for several hundred years.[17] Partly this is because high-altitude families do not make foraging into an 'experience'. They inherit profound networks of exchange with those whom they have known their whole lives, and these networks are relatively closed. Other values also condition how the Case delle Erbe is viewed. For example, earthquakes oblige one to have the land registration of the property up to date, and as one high-altitude woman proudly explained, her husband always paid for every change they made to their property (for example, in window size) and each change is very expensive. By law it is required, and it is 'only right that people pay taxes', which they also paid 'Because we want to leave what we have, to our children, with nothing outstanding to pay,' (Serena, pers. comm. 2019). This family claims to have lived in this mountain hamlet before Roman times (Griffiths 2014:36), whether that is true or not, they represent a resourceful family rooted in place, preparing for its future while the settlement is literally in ruins. On the other hand, one high-altitude forager described the Case delle Erbe movement as encompassing 1960s values, as comprised of people without many responsibilities, who are free to move about and don't pay taxes. There is clearly a contrast between more 'traditional' and rooted mountain families and ex-urbanite intellectuals interested in demonetization, based on their experience with economic centres.

Except for two people, those in the Case delle Erbe in the study area do not explore mountains on foot nor do they walk long distances. This is significant, because the Case delle Erbe emphasis is on 'plants that are all around us', not trekking. It is important to recognize the Case delle Erbe represents experiences of the everyday, rather than an escape into a consumerization of 'wilderness'. Integration of the spontaneous with the everyday appears to encourage sustainability, as discussed from a UN perspective in Chapter 2. Nationally, the Case delle Erbe aims to connect people to spontaneous plants on their doorstep and reduce the need to travel distances to find 'natural' locations. This stance reduces the pressure on fragile natural environments, already strained by climate change. Additionally, foraging inside the national park is illegal. One way in which the Case delle Erbe represent a process

17 When writing *Walking in the Sibillini* (Griffiths 2014) I met some of the last permanent residents, the 'anziani', their children and grandchildren in these settlements. It is worth mentioning I met these people by walking, not by driving, nor by attending workshops, but by walking alone when I came across them at work in the mountains. People would stop, surprised to see a person and then begin to talk.

of decommodification is by teaching participants to be able to replicate their experiences on their own at home, rather than aiming to sell more experiences. The goal of the Case delle Erbe is to empower people to take action in their own daily lives. As Maria-Sonia frequently explains, throughout the learning process there are four stages recognized by the psychologists she has worked with:

> The first is I pick and show you. Then you pick and show me. Then you pick one that is similar but different and we discuss it in a group. Then you teach someone. People have to be independent.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

On one occasion, when Maria-Sonia was teaching this concept to a group, she explained how people need to teach others themselves. She then discussed the importance of gestures and concluded by saying 'we only use our hands' (pers. comm. 2019). As she demonstrated the first of the four steps, I noted how her hand gracefully encircled the plant twice, probably unconsciously, before she settled on a leaf to pluck. When the participants were asked to pick, the man beside me startled me by doing what he thought was the same action. He made a beeline, diving onto a plant, directly seizing the leaves in a fist, pulling straight upwards. What an incredible difference! Making participants independent and competent to teach can be a long process, requiring more than a few foraging experiences and a plant-identification app on a telephone.

While it is obvious for people who forage, it may be worth mentioning this style of foraging, done with fingers only, is practised in order to respect the plant. Rather than taking all the leaves, only a few leaves of each plant are harvested, in order to have less impact on its growth and interactions with ecological processes within the more-than-human world. The plant is not harvested; it is lightly grazed. With this approach, although some leaves are taken, the lifecycle and habitat of the plant are respected, in contrast to approaches intended to maximize profit. How we eat plants 'entails much more than a biological process; it is also and above all, a cultural practice enveloped in a set of generally unquestioned attitudes' (Marder 2013:32). This style of foraging also important from an aesthetic perspective as the environment largely appears unchanged.

In conclusion, although the Case delle Erbe has limited relevance for the few 'traditional' mountain residents in the study area, it does have a larger-scale European significance. Rural inhabitants account for a quarter of the EU population and in Italy the rural population is predicted to grow ten per cent before 2030, particularly in the north (Perpiña-Castillo *et al.* 2018:9). Foraging on one's doorstep is not about pandering to a privileged enclave. In addition,

urban foraging is gaining strength. In a study of urban foraging, Landor-Yamagata, Kowarik and Fischer (2018) echo many of Maria-Sonia's comments, describing how foraging has entered popular culture, with restaurants offering foraged foods and authors highlighingt the 'everyday'.

> Cumulatively, the results confirm that urban foraging is an 'everyday' (i.e., regular or normal) and surprisingly common practice, both in the Global North and South.
>
> (Landor-Yamagata, Kowarik and Fischer 2018:2)

Research in the USA illustrates what Maria-Sonia frequently discusses as 'the democracy' of spontaneous plants. 'An analysis of five US-based studies showed that the demographics of urban foragers cut across common categories, such as ethnicity, sex and income level' (ibid.) and the authors also confirm studies illustrating the importance of foraging in large European cities.

So why do people join the Case delle Erbe? Primarily, they take a lifestyle and value choice to interact with spontaneous plants as a central focus of daily life. Joining grants a sense of belonging to a type of network, while being unconstrained by any obligatory structures; being uncontrolled. All participants speak of a deeply enriched experience of life. Some, but not all, who have opened a Case delle Erbe have had many years of training with Maria-Sonia, and they perceive this as very valuable learning and personal development. Prior experience in the Case delle Erbe suggested decommodification could be a theme, yet it was surprising to find people so highly active as regards this political choice from 2017–21. For Maria-Sonia, decommodification is part of what she 'fights' for, to make people understand the value of 'free' plants (pers. comm. 2019); and Alberto's life is fused with the civil economy. Lena treats people for free if they have nothing to exchange.

My description of the walk before visiting Maria-Sonia's Case delle Erbe presents a visitor's view from outside the Case delle Erbe. In this scenario, the experience is an eco-therapy walk. The person would probably enjoy learning the names of different plants and paying to taste local dishes made with foraged greens. For them, the walk plus a short didactic foraging session and an exercise in gastronomy would create a satisfying, purchased experience. Yet through involvement with the Case delle Erbe, this comes to represent a superficial level of engagement. While enjoyable and therapeutic it is a precursory level. There can be giving and transformation, rather than only consuming, in our relationship with spontaneous plants. The Case delle Erbe offers resonant levels of such experiences, as will be explicated in Chapter 5.

4

Interpretations, Heidegger

> *If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life – and only then will I be free to become myself*
> *(Heidegger 1978:ix)*

As touched upon at the very beginning of this book, the choice of Heideggerian phenomenology as a philosophical framework has an intimate and entwined relationship with the Case delle Erbe. Throughout my time with Case delle Erbe's attendees and protagonists, direct references to identity, being, care and death made clear links to the work Heidegger devoted his life to, and effectively take his philosophy from book to field, so to speak. Yet the Case delle Erbe is not 'reducible' (M. Jackson 2015:294) to Heidegger in that

> What is critical about experience is that it is at once determined by historically located or socially constituted pre-understandings and at the same time never entirely reducible to such pre-givens.
>
> (ibid.)

Like an armature for a vine, Heidegger initially offers a very useful structure, but upon further exploration he proves to have shortcomings in areas the Case delle Erbe expands and flourishes upon; and Chapter 6 is devoted to these divergences. As described in the first chapter, as much as Heidegger offers an insightful interpretation of the Case delle Erbe, in turn the Case delle Erbe helps us understand Heidegger in an experiential manner. For me this represents the essence of 'fieldwork in philosophy' (Desjarlais and Throop 2011:92) and this cross-pollination opens new and richer understandings of both Heidegger and the Case delle Erbe. This type of 'multifaceted holism' (Okely 2012:19) allows theory and practice to mutually

inform each other through a constant touching and withdrawing of contact within an equilibrium, like a dance.

Hence, this chapter begins with a brief overview of aspects of Heideggerian thought with proximity to foraging. It is nowhere within the scope of this chapter, nor would it do justice to Heidegger, to proffer a condensed description of all Heidegger's writing. Instead, I present an overview and then focus on two central aspects of Heidegger's thought (dwelling and death) that intermesh with the Case delle Erbe in the study area.

To begin an overview or prelude, let me sketch some synergies between the approach Heidegger takes towards Being[1] and the Case delle Erbe approach to foraging. Returning to the source, so to speak, the Greek word for nature, *physis*, may be translated as the 'self-unfolding emergence' in which things arise out of obscurity and disappear again, in a dance with the observer. Heidegger describes how *physis* became *natura* in Latin, which translates much as we understand the word today, into a fixed concept rather than a living relationship (Clark 2002:32). This change allowed nature to be understood as a static resource to be used and exploited. Discussing the 'appropriation of Greek words by Roman-Latin thought', Heidegger writes

> However, this translation of Greek names into Latin is in no way the innocent process it is considered to this day. Beneath the seemingly literal and thus faithful translation there is concealed, rather, a translation of Greek experience into a different way of thinking. Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding, equally original experience of what they say, without the Greek word. The rootlessness of Western thought begins with this translation.
> (Heidegger 1978:93)

Physis is 'also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth' and 'what presences by means of *physis* has the irruption belonging to bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom, in itself' (ibid.:221).

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1 Being is capitalized when paraphrasing or quoting Heidegger, respecting his usage of it to signify distinction between the Being of man and all other beings, written in a lower case to signify lesserness. Only Dasein can have a relationship with Being and 'Dasein in itself has a relationship towards that Being – a relationship which itself is one of Being' (Heidegger 1962:32). 'Life, in its own right, is a kind of Being; but essentially it is only accessible in Dasein,' (ibid.:75). I do not share this perspective, nor does it reflect the Case delle Erbe in the study area, and therefore I write the word with the lower case when expressing myself or the Case delle Erbe.

Similarly, the Greek word for thinking, *legein*, was translated into the Latin as *ratio* (Robbins 2003:17). The striking change in this word is similar to the transition in 'nature', where the meaning was greatly altered or actually lost. Heidegger shows two aspects of thinking lost in the translation: 'a) thinking as speaking and b) thinking as gathering' (ibid.). Yet Heidegger takes us further in *The principle of ground* (1974) as discussed by Robbins:

> In the Roman, ratio, there is no obvious connection between thinking and Being. Yet, when ratio is traced back to legein, from which Logos is derived, Heidegger (1974) finds that it means 'to collect together,' 'to lay one thing beside another,' 'to arrange one thing after another' (p. 178). Thus, we find the second meaning of legein as a gathering. 'Legein and logos are the letting lie forward of a thing which comes to presence in its presence,' writes Heidegger (1974:179). What for the Greeks is that-which-comes-to-presence-in-its-presence? It is being in its Being.
>
> (Robbins 2003:15)

'Thinking is gathering' (ibid.) and Robbins writes: 'thinking is called a gathering for it gathers what is called to be gathered. What calls to be gathered?' (ibid.). A Case delle Erbe participant replies to this question, expressing a sensation, echoed by other foragers.

> in the fields - just collecting a few, I remain vibrating in '*meraviglia*' [vibrating with wonder]. Ecstatic. If I don't have time to forage, I can feel the plants *calling* me.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2017, emphasis added)

Could foraging be a particularly pertinent means of reaching proximity with Being?[2] When one learns to forage, one collects and arranges, lying one plant next to the other, as part of a learning process for distinguishing plants, as the author has observed countless times. The careful gathering with one's

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2 Being in this context is interpreted in a Heideggerian sense, as laid out in *Being and Time* (1962). One way he proposes to comprehend Being is to begin with 'Dasein' (ibid.:27) or 'Being there', grounded in place with what is to hand. He argues that people neglect the possibility of understanding Being, and 'for the most part Dasein is not itself but is lost in the theyself' (ibid.:365) and to an extent one may choose to engage with Being.

> Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence – in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already. Only

fingers, the collecting, the arranging of the plants – which have a tangible presence emanating from them, as well as power for dietary and medicinal purposes.

> Thinking is gathering…

The focus in this sentence is not individual originality of thought, but recognizing and acknowledging, sensing that thinking may be bundling diversity together. I was open to this synergy disclosing itself due to daily experience, in a way that mirrors Okely (2012), who writes of physical, everyday work engendering an understanding through the body. Many rural people in the study area collect fallen branches and twigs for kindling after storms, or when trees are pruned. It is a painstaking and never-ending job, gathering twigs from the grass and collecting them into piles that are of similar length. Then the bundles are tied with string and arranged on a wood pile. At one point I spent day after day doing nothing but gathering fallen twigs, sorting them, arranging them; I felt like a child or a person from the Middle Ages, when time had a different value. A visiting North American asked me what I was doing spending entire days bundling twigs together. 'Doesn't life have more meaning?' he asked. I didn't know what to reply at that time, but I do now: bodily experience, perhaps meditative, repeated, seemingly without emotion, creates an interface between cognition and gestures and research thereby leads us to new understandings of ontology (Malafouris 2013:40). Repeated physical action with hand gestures has been proven in Material Engagement Theory (MET) to stimulate the brain's thought patterns (Malafouris 2013). Over time, with repetition, this gathering of fallen wood could hypothetically link me to earlier people who lived in the research study area and certainly sensitized me to apprehend the gathering of Being, as discovered later in foraging.

> the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting.
>
> (ibid.:33)

Likewise, as we shall soon appreciate, one can forage without an awearness of Being. One can even dwell in the Heideggerian sense without encountering Being. Heidegger describes an ordinary understanding of Being is 'presence-at-hand', as if self evident (ibid.:441), yet this understanding is a 'falling' (ibid.:339), a way of avoiding primordial truth and excludes 'anticipatory resoluteness' (ibid.:370) which is essential for care. In the context of the Case Delle Erbe, as the following pages expound, being may be understood as having a space to let itself be within the fourfold (Heidegger 1978:248) in a grounded position of care, interconnected with life and death, interacting with what is to hand, in our hands.

Several years after my conversation with this North American, I learnt how gathering fallen wood is one of the most significant practices the main figure of the Case delle Erbe, Maria-Sonia, does with participants. It is used as a time of reflection, for thinking, precisely as Heidegger would intend.

> 'Yes, at Epiphany there were two students who are doing their doctoral degrees in research from South America, contemplating twelve different *attegiamenti* [poses/attitudes]: boldness, listening, the tradition of gestures, everything you can think of and we combined this with plants.'
> 'How did you make that combination?'
> 'The connection was made by studying the energy of the laurel and that together with the epiphany, also. Every morning we went to mass, we joined the waters and gathered wood. While gathering wood we were thinking, thinking of twelve plants that would connect to the twelve modes of behaviour, and plants that we had seen and had studied that night.'
> 'Was the collecting of wood a time to think?'
> 'Yes, and it was simple because the seven plants they are contemplating in South America – they are the same plants that we have here – achillea, sunflower, violet, rose, dog rose, chicory, the dandelion and the nettle… so… we united five others. We were thinking as we did it. Then, after we had collected the wood we went home and wrote done the combinations we had each thought of. To see what each person thought [whether they were similar].'
> 'How were you thinking and collecting? Small pieces of wood?'
> 'At the beginning we were collecting small pieces in silence, but then later when I stopped in front of the mountain and I was giving thanks for having these young people here… Then they found a big piece that flattened the bushes as they dragged it back to the house. Sergio promised he would come with a chainsaw to cut it up. So, they took it and dragged it. This was something really, really nice.'
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Gathering fallen wood and using its ash after burning it are further explored in Chapter 5. During the Covid crisis of 2020, Maria-Sonia spent her time at home and found the lockdown highly restorative. When I asked what she did daily, Maria-Sonia replied that she spent her time gathering wood. Simultaneously, she was also studying plants and observing them, but harvesting them less. Her focus was on gathering wood and thinking. Through this practice she emerged from the first lockdown with a different pedagogic approach to foraging. The fact that the wood is fallen is significant for my discussion of Heidegger's 'clearing' (Chapter 6). Regarding Covid in 2020, she said:

> In the first moment it was a time to throw seeds and excite curiosity. Now there are more people interested in living in the countryside and they are much more motivated to learn. They come to me. If we were to live in the countryside the way we used to live, after a few months we would want to leave. Now people have to learn that spontaneous plants are the regal queen of the table. They have to learn to make that value and to think that we are in a passage on this planet to do something precious. If you live, every hour, the message that you carry, the world changes.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020)

On the first day of a typical workshop, she continues, as she did in the past, to demonstrate and explain plants to people, walking in a circle around the centre-house-dwelling. The new pedagogic addition is that on the second day she asks people to 'find five plants that you want to be part of your life' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020). Participants may not know the plants, but they choose ones they are attracted to, and apparently this active choice enables them to learn more effectively. Finally, she asks them to spend eight days using the skills they have developed vis-á-vis plants to think about people. This directly connects to an expression in the Case delle Erbe in the study area, regarding the integration of plants and people, sometimes expressed as the similarity in structure between haemoglobin and chlorophyll; this is equated with the frequently mentioned belief that people and plants share many characteristics.

> Put yourself aside and recognize people the same way you have plants. See their particular richness and their talents. In the same way that, existence – I could say God, but I can't always talk about God, so I say existence; in the way that existence is so rich and nature so generous to us, when you recognize the richness in people a door opens and it helps the individual develop.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020)

In this manner foraging actions that could be simply directed at consumption, become part of thought processes leading to foraging for thinking and Being, as the next chapter elucidates.

Turning more directly to Heidegger, a comment regarding interpreting his style of writing may be helpful. With a profound interest in etymology, Heidegger traces the evolution of words and working with the German language. This can entail a compounding process through which he interprets and paraphrases himself, thereby developing and reinventing his own dictionary. Over time, words sometimes evolve into codes for larger ideas;

and throughout his life, but particularly at the end of his career, the codes/words are often reorganized to become other thoughts in relation to (and still signifying) the first thoughts. Given the contemporary predilection for clear and succinct writing, the way Heidegger demands time and effort could be considered refreshing, for he uses his self-interpretation as much as a means of concealment as for clarification. Should we spell out everything explicitly in as few words a possible (reducing multidimensionality)? Or should the reader be encouraged to develop a relationship with the text over time? On one hand, Heidegger's lack of clarity and concealment is described in Reinhard May's ground-breaking study (1998:1) as drawing upon Eastern and mystical influences, as is also discussed by other scholars (Caputo 2006; Guignon 2006; Steiner 1978). On the other hand, my understanding of Heidegger's style of writing is that it reflects his thinking processes. As we evolve through our own life experiences, the same text may allow us to find different meanings arising, disclosing or submerging, and, as in one of Heidegger's famous circles of thought, can turn in a spiral.[3]

Our overview complete, let us consider the first of our two main Heideggerian concepts: 'dwelling.' By far the most commonly discussed aspect of Heidegger's thought, 'dwelling' is often misconstrued though it interweaves on various levels with the Case delle Erbe. The following paragraphs offer a glimpse of some aspects of Heideggerian dwelling and then explore the Case delle Erbe's useful complementary narrative to it. The discussion will lead us also into the 'fourfold.'

Colloquially, dwelling is frequently used to signify living in a place for a few years, knowing the landscape, history and feeling rooted. Obviously, this is not what Heidegger intended. In Heideggerian thinking, Being is the potential-for-Being and may be understood as a life (and death) process, shaped by thrownness, falling, anxiety, death and care. What I learnt through the Case delle Erbe is that dwelling does not make the realization of Being an end goal. The two do not necessarily equate. Dwelling may offer a context, or a path towards Being, but no more. The Case delle Erbe taught me this and one might not reach this interpretation by reading academic literature without embodiment. Yet, once attuned to the perception of dwelling as purely the context for possibly apprehending Being, it is more than apparent in Heidegger's writing as explored in Chapter 5.

Heideggerian dwelling might be described as the place where one stands deep inside oneself, almost entrenched (with one foot in the grave, so to speak), because the person is actually created by this place and by no

3 In Chapter 3 we saw the spiral image used by Alberto and also as the image representing slow tourism.

other. The person may be made by generations of family in this very place as well as bonding with the history of a culture. In this context the person might begin the process of moving toward Being. But not necessarily. In the same way foraging does not necessarily lead to being, nor to 'authenticity' in Heidegger's sense, dwelling can also be done in an embodied yet perfunctory manner. Frequently in contemporary scholarship dwelling has been softened to fit our international and postmodern world, with 'being in the world as an embodied engagement with the environment' in which our quotidian tasks or practices are how we shape that world (Farkic 2021:232). While this interpretation of dwelling is easier to assimilate and vastly more inclusive, this type of explanation fundamentally lessens the focus of Heidegger's writing. Heidegger intends we enter the truth of Being, 'the essence of man is to dwell in the truth of Being' (Heidegger 1978:177). 'This dwelling is the essence of "being-in-the-world"' (ibid.) and Heidegger points out '"being-in" in "dwelling" is no etymological game' (ibid). Our apprehension of Being is largely attached to Dasein's own finitude, therein creating our sense of time and leading us to embrace death. Being is not essentially located in dwelling, for Being also springs from anxiety, which is rarely mentioned in connection with dwelling and may be summed up as:

> anxiousness as a state of mind is a way of Being-in-the-world; that in the face of which we have anxiety is thrown Being-in-the world; that which we have anxiety about is our potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world.
>
> (Heidegger 1962:235)

Although Being is associated with dwelling, the aforementioned assertion that dwelling may simply offer a context for it is because Being is most rooted within care. As dwelling with Being is the topic of our deliberation, the following considerations are offered to comprehend the placement of Being. My understanding of dwelling necessitates touching upon care, even if only provisionally, and all the more so because the foundations of dwelling are actually forms of care (i.e. 'sparing' and 'safeguarding'). Care creates a privileged space for our contestation of Being and is also central to the Case delle Erbe; 'Because Being-in-the-world is essentially care' (Heidegger 1962:237) and care creates our Being (Heidegger ibid.:242).

Care is a priori, for it is 'a primordial structural totality' (ibid.:238). Care is how we realize our 'ownmost possibilities (projection) as well as how we are surrendered to the world of its concern (thrownness)' (ibid.:237). Indeed, for Heidegger care is the underlying totality for his articulation of Dasein and Being. This is reflected in the Case delle Erbe in the study area. As a brief example, as well as caring physically for the plants, their habitats and the local

fonte or rivers near a foraging place, regular participants in the Case delle Erbe find it impossible to throw out stalks or unused parts of the spontaneous plants. Every part of the plant must be respected and cared for; hence the creation of the mandala to return the plants to the earth with honour. Others make teas or foot baths from the remains and then return them to the earth. I am aware of only one person in the study area that put the spontaneous plant remains into a plastic rubbish bag. After several years of participating in the Case delle Erbe, this apparently normal action appeared shocking.

'Being is constituted as care' (ibid.:363). 'We made it plain at the same time that in the call of conscience, care summons Dasein towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being.' (ibid.:365). Within the multifaceted understandings of care that Heidegger posits, it is worth recognizing not all care equates with Being. Likewise, not all caring foraging gives rise to Being. When Dasein is 'falling', it flees into the 'they' and becomes a Self that is actually 'the they-self' (ibid.:368). This non-authentic self is absorbed in the everyday in 'multiplicity and rapid succession [*Sich-jagen*] of that with which one is concerned, the Self of the self-forgetful "I am concerned"' (ibid.). Care in the 'they' world is 'constantly selfsame but indefinite and empty' (ibid.). Essentially, one dwells when one is within a care that creates awareness of mortality and being. 'Care is Being-towards-death' (ibid.:378).-

In Chapter 2 we saw how care and sharing are interpreted as descriptive of foraging historically. Latterly, this was understood in the context of women foraging to care and share and possibly pre-agricultural societies foraging communities also had a culture of sharing. As we saw in an exemplar earlier in this chapter, Maria-Sonia uses foraging to inspire people to heal themselves and care for others. We will learn how care is a defining engagement functioning on three (or more) levels in the Case delle Erbe. The primary level is caring for spontaneous plants (recognizing them) and their habitats. Thereafter, a second, more profound level of caring emerges through forming a relationship with a plant as a sentient being, and healing and caring for other people and other plants also. Thirdly, through honouring, or 'appointments of love', another level of care emerges: caring for our world makes us feel our mortality and enter the fourfold. In this respect Maria-Sonia's teaching mirrors Heidegger very closely indeed.

Let us consider how very much can be understood by these five words from Heidegger: 'Care is Being-towards-death.' (Heidegger 1962:378).

In essence, dwelling goes beyond the boundaries of one person's generation in one place and Heidegger elaborates upon the relevance of historicity for Dasein, as the 'ownmost meaning of Being' (Heidegger 1962:42). Historicity is important for Being to understand itself and this is partly done by enquiring ontologically into its own history, revealed through historical inquiry into

understanding how society has buried Being (Heidegger 1962:42). 'In its factual Being, Dasein always is as and "what" it already was. Whether explicitly or not, it is its past,' (Heidegger 1978:23). Heidegger does not see the past as passively steering us. Instead, the past coagulates with the future and our unrealised potential. Heidegger would like us to appropriate the past so we can take hold of its possibilities and largely this is done by dwelling; the Da of the sein. In Heidegger's perception we are enquiring beyond local knowledge, or nationalism and entering the origins of European culture which he traces to early Ancient Greek thought/being. Hence, dwelling is building upon one's past beyond the personal, in a profound sense and then entering the theme of the 'fourfold', to be discussed.

Additionally, in later Heidegger dwelling is the act of sparing. 'The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing.' (Heidegger 1978:246). This sparing is a practice creating a form of care. By this Heidegger intends:

> Let us listen once more to what language says to us. The Old Saxon *wuon,* the Gothic *wunian*, like the old word *bauen*, mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic wunian says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede,* means the free, *das Frye*; and *fry* means preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. To free actually means to spare. The sparing consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing is something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own essence, when we return it specifically to its essential being, when we 'free' it in the proper sense of the word into a preserve of peace.
>
> (ibid.)

The next chapter demonstrates how the Case delle Erbe, and particularly its figurehead, Maria-Sonia, is devoted to the positive sparing and freeing of spontaneous plants to return to their essential being.

Sidestepping how dwelling is also intensely interconnected with people and how in Heidegger's world this is work related (Heidegger 1962:163), let us move directly to mortality. To start to engage with Being within the context of dwelling we need to live in such a manner as to understand 'being capable of death as death – into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death' (Heidegger 1978:247). To dwell does not make death a goal nor something we strive for (ibid.), yet it is the essence of dwelling, as it is of Being. We will return to this shortly. For Heidegger, embracing our mortality as part of dwelling and as part of our interconnectedness with the environment, leads to the fourfold – 'a place where man dies' (ibid.). 'Dwelling is the manner in

which mortals are on the earth.' (ibid.:245) and '"on the earth" already means "under the sky"' (ibid.:246).

> Both of these also mean 'remaining before the divinities' and include a 'belonging to men's being with one and other.' By a primal oneness the four – earth and sky, divinities and mortals – belong together in one.
>
> (ibid.)

Hence, 'This simple oneness of the four we call the fourfold.' (ibid.:247). Dwelling is always a 'staying with things' and a concerned preserving of one place, therein sparing and safeguarding. We are caring for the unity of the fourfold.

> But the basic character of dwelling is safeguarding. Mortals dwell in a way that they safeguard the fourfold in its essential unfolding. Accordingly, the safeguarding that dwells is the fourfold.
>
> (ibid.)

Notice how dwelling is not simplified to safeguarding the fourfold, but rather 'the safeguarding that dwells is the fourfold.' Coupled with sparing, safeguarding is another form of care. Chapter 5 explores the synergy between Case delle Erbe experiences and the fourfold. A final word on dwelling in the fourfold:

> Dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the essence of the fourfold into things. But things themselves secure the fourfold *only when* they themselves *as* things are let be in their essence. How does this happen? In this way, that mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow…
>
> (ibid.:248, orig. emphases)

Mortals who 'nurse and nurture' are those who care. Care is the being-toward-death. To fully analyse this paragraph as regards the Case delle Erbe in the study area would be a significant task; however, one comment in passing: Maria Sonia does not only teach plant identification, for her focus is on the essence of plants and their emanations. We have heard participants' sentiments regarding plants' 'souls' and how 'every plant has its alchemy that exists only in itself' (Nel, pers. comm. 2019), demonstrating sensitivity for bringing the essence of plants into daily life. We will see Lena's relationship with plants and trees is a relationship of letting be in their essence. The trees she collaborates with are not planted by her, nor pruned, nor managed, nor commodified. This type of dwelling and letting something be, in its essence,

while sparing, is clearly diametrically opposed to making a plant a consumer product. Things cannot be in their essence with the freedom and space of sparing if they are framed within a monetary transaction as a product. 'Sparing' and allowing the essence of things to enter into a relationship with our Being, may explain why the Case delle Erbe in the study area are active in decommodification and the civil economy.[4]

For the Case delle Erbe, holding spontaneous plants as the centre of one's life, living for them and with them (not controlling them), creates the path and context for dwelling in a Heideggerian sense. However, the Case delle Erbe's approach to dwelling differs from Heidegger's in that it is not based on genealogies, nor work- or labour-related identities. Nor is it based on a specific location. The specific place is the habitat in which the plant grows, and in which many plants grow all over the world. Therefore, the place one dwells is dispersed yet interconnected and united by the spontaneous plants themselves. 'I recognize you, plant with a name used for consumption' becomes 'I recognize you, plant' on a deeper level, as elucidated in the next chapter. Thereafter, recognition of the deeper level of plants' being, allows one to re-connect with humans and more-than-humans. We have heard Maria-Sonia saying recognize people as you do plants.

> The need to recognize and be recognized. This is how humans become human. Identity is not a fixed thing.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

One participant described the Case delle Erbe 'discourse' as follows: 'I know you and I know the plants. I give value to nettles and I also know you.' (Zia, pers. comm. 2019). The visceral force of a social fabric of spontaneous plants integrated with humans is a theme running throughout this book. Therefore, we need to apprehend how the Case delle Erbe offers a mode of dwelling and approaching being and the fourfold that is not based on a specific place, nor genealogies, nor work-related identities. Holding spontaneous plants as central may create a more accessible perspective for dwelling and being, without discarding Heidegger's profound and less popular concepts (i.e. anxiety, death).

Within dwelling, the interlinkage of Being and death is key for both Heidegger and Maria-Sonia. Maria-Sonia's approach to death is poetic and experiential. Her 'appointments of love' are moments of intense care in which death is implicated. Maria-Sonia underlines this by talking of 'the

4 The Case delle Erbe is always changing, but the strong focus on decommodification and the civil economy has been noted up until 2020 and likely will continue.

last appointment', when she will die with love. Maria-Sonia has her style of approaching death: a gentle and poetic portrayal of what is a phenomenological project. The 'appointments of love' are a gateway to the honouring experience. Importantly, as described in the first chapter, there is no prescriptive path; the action and intent of honouring varies depending on the individual, ranging from creating a mandala, going slow by crawling on hands and knees to spend time with plants, or a ceremony of spreading ash etc. The ceremonies are frequently done in order to learn how to 'separate from your body' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020), as:

> If you can't put the plants back to the earth to decompose and recycle, how will you prepare to leave your body? If you can't burn the wreath that you wove in the fire and spread the ash, how will you learn to separate from your body?
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020)

When one regularly puts the plant remains back to the earth as if participating in one's own death, or as if spreading one's own ashes, the impact is profound. Partly this arises from embodiment, but ultimately it emerges from being integrated with spontaneous plants within a cycle of mortality and rebirth, echoed in the changing seasons and the fourfold. These actions go 'directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality' (Schama 1996:15).

A brief comment on the Heideggerian interpretation of death is valuable context for the discussion of the Case delle Erbe. Heidegger gives focus to what could otherwise entail numerous and or vague understandings. He asks if Dasein 'can ever become accessible in its Being-a-whole?'(Heidegger 1962:279). Although he does not directly reply, his argument convinces us death facilitates this. For those of us embedded in the 'they' world, only in the moment of death does there arrive the first and last reckoning of Dasein's Being. Angst surrounding death functions on many levels and interpretations. To be loyal to Heidegger's thoughts – 'Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety' (ibid.:301) – a condensed explication of anxiety, uncanniness, thrownness, authenticity and the they-world are required.

'With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being' (ibid.:294). At this point there is no fleeing, nor turning away, as 'even everyday Dasein already is towards its end – that is to say is constantly coming to grips with its death, though in a fugitive manner' (ibid.:303). There is conceivably some fruition in reaching the certainty or 'conviction' (ibid.:300) to face death. The ability to face the certainty, despite the uncanniness and anxiety of being thrown, leads to a consciousness that enables one to reply to

the call, resulting in culmination or resolution in a cathartic sense. Anxiety does not dissolve, rather it becomes a bittersweet positive force bringing Dasein to fruition. In Being-towards-death, Dasein 'is face to face with the possibility of being itself' and exists in 'an impassioned freedom toward death – a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the "they", and which is factical, certain of itself, and anxious' (ibid.:311). In this freedom Dasein is fully 'assigned' and 'all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one' (ibid.:294). Living this awareness one literally inhabits oneself and is one's Being, facing impending death, completely alone as one's own possibility, 'which is non-relational and not to be outstripped' (ibid.:294). The enormous courage and certainty of Being one's own Dasein, standing alone inside oneself, is perhaps the greatest fulfilment of living.

Through my fieldwork, I have come to interpret Heidegger not as simply urging us to realize death in life, but instead life becomes a journey towards-death as an ultimate realization. This sensitized me to Maria-Sonia's approach of teaching foraging as a way to learn how to live, in order to learn how to die.

Is there anything more important to learn?

5

Experiences

This chapter further explores experiences in the same three Case delle Erbe as in Chapter 3, with the same respective owners, namely: Maria-Sonia, a national figure and the main person responsible for the movement; Alberto, who has a Casa delle Erbe in the interior, with various 'relational tourism' projects; and Lena, at the highest altitude, who has a background in traditional Chinese medicine and focuses on human relationships with trees. The style of description used here is semi-narrative (Wynn 2015:244). As previously discussed, I pursue two paths of analysis: understanding foraging's connections with 'being' in the Heideggerian sense, as discovered through a relationship with, and honouring of, spontaneous plants; and understanding the Case delle Erbe's post-growth experience economy, with its implications for slow adventures, slow tourism and experiences in nature.

Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe

Almost all of Maria-Sonia's experiences include instruction in plant recognition (knowing what a plant is used for, its name etc.), although her experiences encompass and intend a great deal more than this basic level. As Maria-Sonia commented, foraging is becoming 'banal' and Italians have foraging information in magazines (Vivere Meglio, Riganelli 2017:71) and on television. In summer 2019 films of Maria-Sonia foraging were being shown in commercial shopping centres throughout Italy, appealing to well-being interests (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Yet the experiences Maria-Sonia offer have striking richness:

> If I see a road that is closed, I have to drive down it. I'm that kind of person. I want to see why it is closed. We want to change the world. Do you find that amusing?
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

In most of her experiences, as she encounters the plant, she makes a connection to past traditions and then to contemporary uses. 'I am a bridge between our ancestors and the present.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Frequently she highlights a traditional custom regarding a plant, which she then interprets in a way that gives meaning to people's behaviour today. Often, she connects the plant with a saint, taking us back into history and then again connecting this discussion with a contemporary life-value, thought or ethic. This continual movement between past and the present, plant and culture, encompasses a huge range of themes for participants. Except for when teaching the most advanced foragers, the experiences involve participants creating a sample card showing all the plants that have been introduced. Together, they put the plants into categories of 'eat raw', 'eat cooked', 'medicinal uses' and 'don't eat'; in effect formalizing the teaching of plant recognition.

During this process Maria-Sonia tells the group the name of the plant and they write it beneath the plant, which they stick on the card with tape. Doubtless, Maria-Sonia has done endless 'sample' cards over the years, yet she approaches it with great care and attention to detail, while letting the participants lead. People have many additional questions and Maria-Sonia elaborates. At the end, participants photograph the cards so as to have a resource for refreshing their knowledge. Over the years, I have probably participated in this experience twenty or more times, and there is always more to learn. In the Case delle Erbe nationally, there is discussion as to how much information to offer without creating an overload. Maria-Sonia believes people should learn one plant a day, otherwise they won't remember, but participants are very hungry for knowledge pertaining to human well-being and health, asking endless questions on this theme. Participants in the study area rarely raise environmental concerns.[1] Nonetheless, Maria-Sonia offers environmental information while foraging.

The 'mandala' has become a ceremony, at least at Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe.[2] When the sample cards are finished, the leftover stalks or unattached bits of plants are returned to the earth, as will be shortly described. 'There is no waste, there is never any waste.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comms 2017, 2018, 2019). No part of the plant is discarded.

The primary experiences offered by Maria-Sonia that encourage the honouring of nature are as follows:

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1 Once though, in summer 2019, I did overhear pro-environmental information being exchanged by two participants, and this stands out as memorable.

2 At the time of writing, the other Case della Erbe in the study area were not doing mandalas.

1. The mandala; a donation of gratitude and recognition of learning, using the remains of plants. 'We are the same as plants.' (Maria-Sonia, pers comms 2017, 2018, 2019). This practice was created in Maria-Sonia's own style in 2019 and blends a range of cultures (Eastern) and interpretations.
2. Making bread with heritage grains and spontaneous plants. As well as cooking spontaneous plants within the bread dough, a herbal water is also brewed in order to mix the dough. Plants are also dried and used to light the fire for the wood oven. This procedure is approached as a ritual, with attention to gestures, and is done to augment responsiveness to the Case delle Erbe and spontaneous plants, generally. 'It does not happen quickly, but with time it always works when we do this.' Connecting with bread acts as a form of honouring (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). This is a practice linked to traditional knowledge from different parts of Italy and even the biblical history of bread, all brought together in Maria-Sonia's own style.
3. The ceremony of water. Reverence for water is considered to be part of the earth-worshiping cultures of early peoples. This practice was created in 2012.
4. The ceremony of the ash. At different times (26 December, New Year and Epiphany, for example), various spontaneous plants are burnt in the hearth, to heighten intuition. Replacing the ashes back in nature completes a cycle. They are spread in the four directions with a particular gesture. Each person does this freely and individually, it is not orchestrated. This is for personal orientation and protection, and environmental health for the location it is performed in. This is a practice that Maria-Sonia has adapted from the Iguvine Tablets.[3] Although she claims all people spread the ash from the Christmas log on New Year's, apparently the 'Tavole' (Iguvine Tablets) describe the spreading ash on the first full moon in January, in the four directions with the rising sun.

> This they do in the Tavole. In the Tavole the ceremonies were only and exclusively for the protection of the territory. While the ceremony that I choose to do is for personal development, a personal path because everyone of us brings energy into the territory. So,

3 The Iguvine Tablets (*Tavole Iguvine*) are seven bronze panels in rectangular form, covered in an ancient script (umbro-safino) attributed to early Umbrian people. The tablets were found in 1444 by a farmer in Umbria and have been owned and displayed by the local authority of Gubbio since then. Scholars consider the tablets to be one of the most important texts from classical antiquity: www.unicaumbria.it/storia-e-storie/tavole-eugubine-gubbio-umbria (accessed 16 December 2023).

> the full moon illuminates a project and the new moon removes the obstacles.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

5. The making of Bach Remedies. The solarization of plants is an elaborate process as developed by Edward Bach.[4] He thought of plants as integrated with humans, and believed the power of interactive relationships between plants and people is essential for well-being. This holistic (well-being) aspect of relationships with plants, rather than simply considering them products to use, is central to Bach's importance for the Case delle Erbe.
6. Many ceremonies regarding *fonte* (springs/fountains), for example on the first Tuesday after Easter. Another prominent example is the 'ritual' of San Giovanni Baptista, widely practised here both in the Case delle Erbe and in homes all over the mountains. As well as harvesting plants in order to make the flowered water on this day, Maria-Sonia takes this a step further by moving water from one religious site to another, or from one *fonte* to another, mixing the waters. Maria-Sonia teaches this in relation to traditions of the Catholic church.

Maria-Sonia offers numerous other experiences that are less bio-centric and focus on individuals' well-being and the acquisition of self-knowledge, such as the 'weaving of colours', where one's choice of coloured wools enables Maria-Sonia to give an analysis of personality strengths, weaknesses and challenges to be faced. These types of experiences may be categorized as part of the 'new New Age' (pers. comm., Azaro 2020), defined as focusing on personal development within environmentally responsible contexts or with social-justice aims. Having participated in the experience with the coloured wools, it can be described as simultaneously calming and thought provoking. These and many other experiences, including making laurel oil or protective wreaths for the house, are not discussed here, as their focus is primarily on well-being rather than more direct interaction with nature.

De Jong and Varley discuss how foraging is taught in the UK, and found that 'The narratives of nostalgia evoked by course leaders are romanticized and idyllic.' (2018:694). While nostalgia may be a motivational factor for participants who partake of an experience at a Case delle Erbe, there is sparse nostalgia in Maria-Sonia's teaching (although it features at Alberto's Casa delle Erbe). Maria-Sonia generally teaches in five-hour sessions, or over the course of two or more days. Thematically coding Maria-Sonia speaking over several

4 Best known for developing the Bach flower remedies, a form of alternative medicine, Edward Bach was a prominent homeopath who died in 1936.

days would doubtless reveal a level of nostalgia, yet this is not the sensation one has as a participant. She has a cyclical style, balancing future, present and past in constantly shifting and linking comparisons, without a narrative of loss and distinctly without portraying the past as precious (for example, when she describes traditional farming as 'suffering' and considers this a past to put aside). Her energy is focused on the present, as the ideal time to live in (see Chapter 7 for discussion). Importantly, her experiences are fundamentally not offered as evocations of the past. In what follows we will see Maria-Sonia telling participants the water ceremony was 'invented' in 2012. Participants I spoke with did not seem interested in distinctions between the invented and what might be construed as historically accurate, instead the appeal converges around feelings of connection to nature (see Chapter 7).

By letting the past and the future blur within the present, Maria-Sonia's teaching closely represents the understanding famously expounded by Lowenthal in his work for the UN and his book *The Past is a Foreign Country Revisited* (2015). In these he demonstrates how we choose aspects of the past to suit our purposes, altering it to become part of ourselves and ourselves a part of it. Hence, past and future change each other equally, and consequently are fluid and interconnected. No hard line exists as to when the past becomes past, and Lowenthal (ibid.) explains that given that traditions are created, and are being recreated, in both the past and present, it is best to perceive time as interconnected currents of flux, rather than with static linear concepts. Lowenthal's arguments are in fact well realized in Maria-Sonia's approach, and her style of teaching as well as the content she draws upon is constantly changing and evolving..

An additional factor reducing any reliance on nostalgia is Maria-Sonia's personal charisma when leading an experience (which she feels is her role on the planet). This dynamic energy places participants within the process of creating a new society, or beginning to realize they could change the world – which represents Maria-Sonia's underlying motivation. Maria-Sonia makes reference to many religions in a 'New New Age' style, but she is heavily centred upon the spirituality of Roman Catholicism. Referring to a saint in this part of Italy does not summon nostalgia, as most people participate in multiple religious practices connected to the church; every day is a saint's day and the saints are recognized within the quotidian.[5] Not all participants are active

5 Some saints are popular with those under thirty years old; for example, St Lorenzo, who is associated with falling stars, whose day is 10 August. Young people take this as an occasion/tradition to sleep out under the stars in the mountains and have a barbecue with lots of drink. In this instance, as in many others throughout the saints' calendar, young people interpret the tradition as an occasion for a party.

Roman Catholics, but as Lena says, 'I'm not Catholic but my culture is. I use things from the Bible because they are part of my culture.' (Lena, pers. comm. 2019). Lena does not attend church. Occasionally Maria-Sonia's religiosity sparks objections, as one participant commented, 'I'm absolutely fascinated by Maria-Sonia, walking with her, she is incredible. But the religion – that's where we part.' (anon, pers. comm. 2019).

To clarify, Maria-Sonia does not equate love of nature with Catholicism, instead her aim is as described in Chapter 3: to show there is no need to go an exotic country to meet a shaman to find oneself or have a spiritual experience with nature, as the saints are our shamans (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). This reflects her belief that honouring nature is part of the everyday in Italy. Yet this approach also demonstrates how both Maria-Sonia and the Case delle Erbe nationally are fascinated and influenced by Hildegard von Bingen – as described in Chapter 1 and explored in depth in Chapter 7. Born in Germany 1098, Hildegard was a mystic and abbess, artist, author, composer, pharmacist, poet and theologian, who was particularly radical in her holistic understanding of humans and plants; for this reason and others the Vatican was only able to accept her canonization in 2012. She is sometimes referred to as the Sybil of the Rhine, and for Maria-Sonia and others she is the apex of sainthood (De Giovanni 2013; Della Croce 2002).

Frequent discussions take place in the Case delle Erbe about how much information to offer, how much detail and so forth. Maria-Sonia begins by asking people what they know and gauges the experience accordingly. The description below begins in the afternoon of what was an entire day of experiences, including foraging, cooking, eating, making teas and visiting other *fonte*.

The ceremony of the water

We go to a previously renowned *fonte*, now abandoned. A local club have permission to fish on the river where the *fonte* is, so they have cleared a trail; otherwise it would be very overgrown. Today, in the heat of the afternoon, the green glowing gloom of the forest is very welcome. I walk beside a participant who came from the north of the region to stay a few days with Maria-Sonia. She has also studied a year at the School of Hildegard, which was founded in collaboration with Maria-Sonia in 'Montedoro', and we talk about how it had to move to Rome. Interestingly, she is not motivated by the accreditation offered, nor is she career or work orientated. The learning she is accumulating is for her personal interest, with no 'pay off' as a future objective.

Did you choose to visit Maria-Sonia on these days for a special reason?

> I lost my family house in P (in the mountains), so staying with Maria-Sonia is my way of keeping contact to this area. I miss it too much otherwise, and…

She breaks off. I don't want to talk about the earthquakes as I find it too intense. 'Do you want me to carry the water?' I ask instead. She is carrying a large glass container of water that she and Maria-Sonia have taken from the high-altitude chapel of the Mary Magdalena to mix with this *fonte*.[6] As we walk, Maria-Sonia talks about the plants we pass. The small group consists of this studious woman from the north, a young couple from Tuscany who are opening a Casa delle Erbe soon, myself and Maria-Sonia. Maria-Sonia demonstrates how the potentilla is the upside-down version of the strawberry; also how there are two types of elderflower – the one with blossoms facing up is relatively toxic, whereas the one with drooping downward-facing blossom is safe to use.

I notice wild strawberries and we all stop to eat some. Everyone is bent over in the long grass. Maria-Sonia suggests we gather different-coloured plants for the mandala we will make, and I make a comment about picking plants to which she replies

> They want to be picked.

> I think they are striving for life and they don't want to be picked.

> They do. When two of them are together and we take one the other one says 'Why didn't you take me too?' Plants are like people. They want to interact with things, with things that honour them. And they will finish their life cycle shortly anyhow. There is a desire – the plants' desire to interact.

We arrive at the clearing, which is both impressive and slightly odd. In a side of the rock cliff there are doors and windows, up to three storeys high, but not ancient stone ones such as found elsewhere. It looks like a rusting endeavour from the 1940s. Below, at various heights, eight short pipes protrude from the moss-covered rock, all gushing water that accumulates in a large mossy basin below. I remember being told that this is convergence of many different springs, so I wonder if each pipe represents a different water source. The site overall is known for the level of calcium present in the water. Opposite the rock face is the river, nicely overgrown.

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6 See below, for more on Mary Magdelena.

Maria-Sonia brought a bag to collect litter, but there is none. She is pleased by this and smiles a lot throughout. Now she calls us to the river edge. She suggests that we study how spontaneous plants are overgrowing an abandoned bench, and speaks of the beauty of the way they grow through the gaps, 'taking over'. The perdurance of plants also simulates a sense of mortality, for we see our vulnerability and the enduring celebration of life in plants – 'the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality' (Schama 1996:15).

I was sensitized to the perdurance of nature due to visiting a hermitage, long abandoned, built in a dramatic gorge in the mountains, generally only accessible with a machete, supposedly around the year 1000 AD (Lavini 1998). Poignantly, the builder undertook the construction of vaulted arches and this careful workmanship is cracked and has shifted shape because tree boughs are growing right through the stones. Parts of the ruin are enveloped by beech trunks like giant boa constrictors. This unnerving image remained with me, sensitizing me to the perdurance of nature.

Although humans control nature in the short term, in the study area one feels that we are precarious and temporary dominators. Flora and fauna are subjected to human aims (agriculture, aqueducts, construction etc.), yet they still embody a will to live, an eternal energy cycle, seemingly unweakened in the study area. We as dominators are intensely timebound by comparison; as Heidegger writes, the only sure commitment we have is with death (Hoffman 2006) and through death we encounter being; yet generally people try to avoid this knowledge. Plants threaten us and inspire us, due to their eternal cyclical celebration of life; which we lack; a theme to be revisited.

Maria-Sonia comments on how 'wonderfully the plants take over the area' and organize themselves in terms of where they grow; the ones most used for Bach remedies often grow together in a group, whereas the others that we eat will situate themselves together in one place. 'It's amazing,' she observes.

When Maria-Sonia explains or teaches she adopts a humble posture; perhaps by tucking her chin down slightly before speaking. She clasps her hands at her wrists and pulls her back up to be straighter. This may be because she is developing a slight hunch, or more likely she feels she is delivering something of importance and aligns herself accordingly. She smiles broadly.

The Tuscan couple have done three *fonti* already today with Maria-Sonia, so although they have only recently learnt this ceremony, they are well versed. We stand in a line along the river, I at the end, beside the Tuscan fellow, who begins. He bows to the river.

> I join the water in my body, in all my cells and running through my veins, with this river… to honour and care for water.

He tosses a flower into the river with a particular gesture.

> The water of the earth, in the veins of all the rivers, I honour, respect and care for…

Then he bows. Each person says and does the same, then Maria-Sonia asks me to do it. I've already forgot the words.

> There is nothing written down.

She says this with a smile, knowing I like things to be written.

> It's only experience now. Say your own words, in your own language. It should be in your own language.

I do so, but realize I forgot to mention the vein aspect, which I was most attracted to. Now the woman carrying the glass container brings it forth. She and Maria-Sonia pour the water into another glass bottle, the size of a wine bottle. The man makes the same large gesture thereby pouring some water into the river and then passes it to me. I do likewise and pass it to the Tuscan woman, who doesn't do it well. Everyone comments that she needs to do it again. 'Do it like you are sowing seeds,' the Tuscan fellow says.

She does it with a much wider arch and some grace. Everyone agrees this time is good, and she looks pleased. Before we leave the river, Maria-Sonia explains this is a newly invented ceremony.

> Therefore, you don't have to worry about the date when you do it, if there is a full moon, or anything else. You can also do it alone. We started it in 2012 and it was so popular people carried on doing it – so we said we will do it until 2022. The more you do it the better you feel, that's why people like it.

Meanwhile, I notice a small old man filling up his last glass bottle from the *fonte* and then carrying a crate of bottles up the green pathway. I think he arrived while we were talking. It might have looked like an odd practice to him, in an area where people have a history of being sensitive to 'witchcraft'. Probably we looked like a group of visitors. Maria-Sonia's odd shoes would not have been visible. Before we entered the forest, Maria-Sonia changed into her 'shoes for ceremonies'. They are extremely worn, black, trainer-type shoes that are used by the nuns of the convent where Hildegard von Bingen is buried in Germany. Maria-Sonia is proud to have bought these shoes in Bingen, which visits annually with others from the Case delle Erbe.

> All the nuns wear them since they are so comfortable and good for walking.
>
> But you don't always wear them…
>
> They are for ceremonies. These shoes make me feel closer to her [Hildegard].

It is difficult to describe how profound Maria-Sonia's love, connection and respect for St Hildegard is and while this is a seemingly small example, the everyday of Maria-Sonia's life is brimming with these testimonies. St Hildegard is her central point of reference.

We sit in the knee-high grass in a circle and begin to make the mandala. Maria-Sonia explains that all the Case delle Erbe do this now. Though the practice is more elaborate, in the interest of concision I summarize. The form is a green frame, a 'cornice' made with greenery, and everyone adds something, shaping the circle. There follows a specific sequence of colours. Mandala is a Sanskrit word signifying a sacred centre, and mandalas are generally used for meditation. In the Case delle Erbe they are a way to experience contact with nature 'without a precise rule to follow' (Ciaghi 2019:2). The positions of the colours represent the chakras, and the mandala is intended to show gratitude and honour towards the plants. Normally, they are made after a harvest, be it a daily harvest for food or a harvest taking samples of plants for training in plant recognition. Following the 'no waste' value, the leftover parts of the plants are what normally form the mandala. As Maria-Sonia says:

> Particularly after doing a Bach solarization experience, when I take Bach's practices into my being and with this level of care and concentration… It doesn't feel that it is suitable afterward to throw the remains into the field. It doesn't feel right to compost them. That's how I invented this. The mandala is the best way to show gratitude.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

For Maria-Sonia it is imperative that the mandala is left on the ground to decompose back into the earth.

The colour sequence begins with white, representing pure thought and the mind. This has a special significance for Maria-Sonia. Although she did not explain it on that occasion, she attended an anthropological conference south of the study area in 2018 where a teacher from Venezuela presented a paper on the immaculate conception, explaining it as a conscious act Mary undertook, making her the author of the whole of Christ's life and death: in effect, Mary as the author of Christianity. Maria-Sonia describes this thought process as a

person having one pure and immaculate thought which is constant and does not include change. 'You put your life like leaves on one plant stalk, or like stars in a constellation.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019) and in this way, by having a pure thought, one experiences a 'benediction' and this creates a type of personal energy which will attract positive events. The colour white in the mandala is symbolic of this process for her.

The colour sequence continues: white (mind), purple (perception), blue (communication), red and green (sentiments and life), yellow (energy), orange (creativity) and red (passion). Each colour represents an aspect of being alive and is often a part of the body, therefore, red and green are at the centre in the stomach or solar plexus. As we form the mandala, Maria-Sonia does a shorter version of her colour analysis, connecting the colours with their representation to historic figures, and to aspects of the participants' lives, creating an emotional investment, or a more personal engagement in these plants.

> The white represents when one is pure, pure in one's intent, like you – one fears no one's judgement.

I agree, as I don't consider judgement, or at least at that time I did not.

As regards De Jong and Varley's (2018) apt observation that most foraging teachers evoke narratives of romanticized nostalgia, which I have also experienced, it is noteworthy how Maria-Sonia experiences the personal freedom to build her own rituals in a typical New Age style, blending Eastern traditions of colours, represented in the chakra and localizing them with Italian plants, entwined with regional Italian figures. As she explains to participants, making this mandala is a 'custom' that started in 2019.

Here beside the *fonte* and the river, the temperature is perfect, without humidity and for the first time in this hot summer one feels comfortable, as is commented upon by the group, brought together in tranquil unification since the water ceremony. Each person adds to the colours, with small discussions or questions ensuing. A little *venticello*, or breeze, ruffles some tall wildflowers in the grass beside us, their minuscule pink heads bobbing in the emerald light. As ever, the variety of bird song astounds, now softened by the symphony of water, both pouring at different speeds, erratically surging and also dropping from various heights into the full basin. In this peaceful setting the group put the colours in their order and increasingly people fall silent.

We drink from the *fonte*, each person choosing a different outpouring. I touch the water to the nape of my neck, a symbolic gesture I normally only make at mountain springs, and we head up the deep green corridor towards

the road. This time we stop to identify and discuss trees, going slowly as before.

> What we are doing are things you have to experience. If I tell you to lie on the ground to feel the earth – it's good for your spine – or press your body against a hay bale, you won't do it. You think, it's free. It's there whenever. I don't have time now. But if you experience it and feel what it does, you start to do it at every opportunity.

Maria-Sonia elaborates on her frequent theme of working to make people value what is free, outside of the market economy. As we are leaving the woods Maria-Sonia reminds everyone of another point she frequently makes.

> Remember, if you are curing yourself with a plant, ingest it every day in all forms; the essential oil on your skin, the tea, as a food, and so on.
>
> How long for? [The Tuscan woman asks.]
>
> Consume it for seven days like an antibiotic. With the same veneration [as we give medicine].
>
> Not veneration, no. [The other woman protests.]
>
> Yes. It is veneration. We carefully put them [antibiotics] on a little shelf. We count the days. We pay whatever it costs. We believe in them – but this is free, therefore it has no value to people…

Maria-Sonia is consciously committed to the 'fight' for decommodification (of spontaneous plants), a theme explored at the end of this chapter.

The Bach remedy experience

This experience encompassed two days of foraging, plant recognition and Bach flower solarizations. Each day participants varied and the group was less than ten. The location was a partially closed (due to earthquakes) agri-tourism business that has a small traditional stone building open to the public, intended as a holiday rental home. It is located on the lower part of the mountains, at about 750 metres altitude, on a tiny road used by few cars, with stunning mountain views and a panorama facing down over the hill-towns and fields toward the sea.

The owner of the agri-tourism business talked about the earthquake, as we sit in the shade of the closed-up house, on wooden benches. Young

donkeys are grazing nearby and roses are everywhere. Maria-Sonia unpacks about fifteen paper bags with dried plants in them and the names written on. I have seen this done many times, yet it is still very engaging and also varies because the plants do differ. Each participant smells and touches the dried plant, and discussion begins regarding their medicinal use, how to make a tea with it, how to harvest it and process it etc. Maria-Sonia explains teas can be kept for more than a year but:

> It's better to please the plants and harvest each year. They are happy to be harvested. Then it is fresh. Don't throw anything away – the old tea can be a foot bath or burnt in the fire. This [burning] is important especially at the summer solstice and the winter equinox for the ash.

Later she comments that the plants need to rest for three days and three nights, being turned as they dry. She does this on her guest beds. She reiterates a very important aspect of the Case delle Erbe and foraging:

> You don't have to own land, you don't have to plant any seeds, you don't have to prepare the land or treat it – all you have to do is harvest. But you have to be very attentive to the moment of harvesting.

The group choose a mixture of plants for the tea at lunchtime. Maria-Sonia asks for bowls for the solarization process. The agri-tourism owner brings plastic bowls, but Maria-Sonia says they must be glass. Additionally, the water (which Maria-Sonia has brought with her) cannot come from a tap but only from a *fonte*. She rinses the glass bowls three times with water from the *fonte* and comments:

> I fight to teach people to value what they learn outside, in a field. Learning outside people think has no value. But here, what we are doing are '*passaggi*' [steps]. These are gestures or passages. It has to be done this way. We have a memory of the past and we must connect to it but in a rigorous way. This learning I'm offering today is so that Edward Bach does not turn over in his grave. I'm giving him some peace today.

Bach died in 1936. Maria-Sonia elaborates on the consequences of this, that the Bach Remedies are very commercialized today and we do not know if large-scale producers give sufficient attention to Bach's values. If he were alive, he would be horrified by the absurdity of Bach experiences involving people being shown PowerPoints of flowers and being expected to feel something. Maria-Sonia focuses on physicality and experience.

> The relationship with plants is the first step. The knowing by doing. The relationship with plants is the beginning.

As we go to harvest the first plant we are going to solarize, she says:

> Now your body must be free – leave your notebooks and pens. Now we will experience.

Solarization practices are particularly detailed, but in brief: after the flower is harvested without touching the blossom, it sits for at least four hours in strong sunlight in the water in the bowls (with certain proportions of each). Following this is an elaborate decanting process and a preservation of the liquid, which will become in effect a 'mother', in the way of a vinegar or yeast mother. While the plants are solarizing we forage and again I marvel at Maria-Sonia's compelling style.

The experience she offers presents her understanding of the world far beyond plant recognition. (If the Case delle Erbe simply taught how to 'use' plants or produce plant products, it would be nothing more than an entry level experience.) Maria-Sonia entwines plants with less known regional historic figures, such as Christine, Queen of Sweden, who abdicated to live in Rome, but whose villa was an important meeting point for alchemists. Alchemy was particularly developed in this region historically (Santarelli 1974) and Maria-Sonia says it is also of increasing importance today.[7] These historical references are interspersed with those to present-day figures, such as Italy's most celebrated plant-dye maker, who lives in the region; along with discussions of what plants he uses and why; which in turn connects to a discourse on local economic development and new approaches to the countryside.

Her teaching weaves foraging with a range of locations, identities and practices, including some folkloric information, such as how wild-oat grasses that sway in the wind were used for people to perceive their path in life. Between the end of April and the end of May, people would braid three long stems of wild-oat grass together and put them with a small piece of gold (a ring), and one coin, behind the door to 'help people find their way'. The *pastori*, the high-altitude shepherds in these mountains, tied *artemisia* around their waists because it is a plant that protects travellers, and this was so engrained that the first automobile in Italy had the image of artemisia on it. Discussing a type of wild plum, she says it is now being used as a cancer treatment.

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7 This awareness is comes from a number of sources, including Maria-Sonia interactions with a young priest, who she describes as extremely gifted, practising an advanced level of alchemy and trying to turn his body into light.

> The whole of Molise is full of them – but now they are planting them in rows instead of going about gathering them, which is easily done.

> It's a difference of control. In lines they are controlled like agriculture. Spontaneous plants are not controlled and that makes for a different relationship. [I add.]

> Exactly. Exactly. It is about control.

Later, inside, Maria-Sonia asks for all plastic to be removed from the table and sits at its head, with several cushions stuffed with laurel leaves. Possibly she has back problems, or the laurel cushions give her a special sense of what she is imparting, because they are a re-invention of a practice, popularized by D'Andrea, who founded the first centre out of which the Case delle Erbe movement began. As I'm breaking up flower blossoms for the salad, she comments:

> I've observed a change of gestures. Thirty years ago, it was interesting to discover that one can eat violets in a salad in a restaurant. But everyone pushed it away with their fork. Now the flowers on salads in restaurants are the first thing people eat because at 7:00 am they see a programme on TV about these plants being good for your health. Now restaurants can't get enough.

Conversation turns to the plants still outside, solarizing in the water and sun.

> Consuming solarized liquids regularly makes it easier for you to leave your body. The aim of the Case delle Erbe is to make each moment an appointment of love, until the last moment.

Then she shows us how the salad is made, 'with hands'. She breaks up lettuce in the bowl and adds oil and vinegar, commenting on what types are most suitable. She mixes it with her hands, crushing the leaves a bit. Then she asks me to pour the plate of separated petals that we have collected onto the lettuce.

> See how my hands are…

Her hands are covered in oil and tanned by the sun. She massages the flower petals, rubbing and rubbing them together. It is sensual.

This is an appointment with love…

Suddenly I feel very moved.

Each time I do a mandala, I learn to separate myself to arrive at the last appointment with love.

Full of emotion, I'm not sure what to think; does she honour her life and death symbolically through that of the plants? Or is the honouring, the putting back to the earth, actually her preparation for dying? Does interacting with plants help one to understand death, and thereby how to live? *Dasein*'s 'attitude to or "being towards" its own death, pervades and shapes it's whole life' (Inwood 1997:61).

Meanwhile the tea is poured into glasses and we raise them in a toast, done before one eats in all of the Case delle Erbe.

Al cielo, alla madre terra, al centro dell'universo, ai nostri cuori.

To the sky, to mother earth, to the centre of the universe, to our hearts.

The glasses lift up to the sky, go downward for the earth, reach over the plates, and finally come into the chest. The tea is excellent, slightly sweet and distinctive. Discussion is cheerful and turns to the Luna Rosa, the first moon after the summer solstice, which is the 'harvest moon' and often 'pink', and this comingles with the blue of the borage flower family being discussed, as we are eating a blue relative, the *buglossa* (*Echium vulgare*).

This is a small slice of one rich day. The action of massaging the broken flowers, and the words spoken, created one of these openings (*Eröffnung)* for me, like a spark of life, not conforming to modes of consciousness, creating confusion or mystery. Although I had reckoned with the words 'appointments with love' many months before, it was only at this point that I felt it. On another occasion, I asked her:

Do people realize what you are teaching?

Not during the course of one day, but over three days people realize…

What do they realize?

> You have to make a passage to give value to your life independently and realize that life is not about *dovere* [having to do]. Plants are a door of access.
>
> Could there be other doors?
>
> Yes, the music of Hildegard… singing… Music often is.
> Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

At this stage I saw the opening of a Heideggerian type of clearing for Being, from a distance, but without entering in…

Alberto's Casa delle Erbe

All of the experiences Alberto provides revolve around food, the Mediterranean diet and the civil economy (in connection with the experience economy), and take place with foreign participants whom Alberto considers 'dear friends', not guests. This international aspect and his close relationships were described in the previous chapter as 'relational tourism', and as the result of Alberto's simple but radical project 'Inside Rural Italy'.

If I describe an indicative experience of 2019, it will show the typical pleasures Alberto enjoys in his Casa delle Erbe. Alberto had French visitors who had planned an evening of *chanson Français* because they love to perform music from their homeland, and around thirty people were invited. Zia and I arrived early to talk and help in the kitchen. Alberto greeted us before we went to the kitchen: a long rectangular room in the *cantina* or cellar area of the main stone house, without windows, though the walls are a deep burgundy colour, making it welcoming. Warm and golden light illuminated the shelves along the walls full of books, artwork and bottles of different liqueurs and wines. In the centre was a table eight metres long and used to full capacity.

> Shall I make some lavender biscuits? [Alberto ponders aloud.]
>
> Yes. What was the harvest like?
>
> It was very good this year, with this heat – very good…

Zia, an old friend of Alberto's, last visited this Casa delle Erbe to harvest lavender with others and then enjoy a communal dinner. Alberto organized this in the style of the old rural harvests, in which people gather to help with the work and enjoy communal eating afterwards. It was not presented to re-evoke the past, but rather as a fun dinner activity; while, for example,

guests would not be invited to labour in the harvesting of potatoes,[8] working in the lavender field is seen as offering an attractive experience. Alberto makes lavender biscuits with the recently harvested plants and the perfume fills the kitchen. He puts in two tablespoons of crushed lavender and there is a bit left over. He says two is right for the amount of dough and he will use the rest in something else.

His gestures, the pouring the flour and other ingredients, are completely '*ad occhio*' (done by sight alone), as is the style of cooking in the study area. He shakes his wrist loosely, letting the ingredients spill out, as he looks towards a sauce simmering on the large, stainless steel hob some distance away. While talking, almost punctuating the conversation, other ingredients are added. To put his cooking style in historical context, since Apicius' Roman description of foods in *De re coquinaria* (considered the first cookbook), no recipe books were used in kitchens until 'Respectable Pleasure and Good Health' was written for the upper classes by Platina/Martino di Rossi in 1470 (Dickie 2008). Even today, rural people in the study area do not use written recipes. Upon arriving in Italy more than a decade ago I took a cooking class offered by the local authority (to learn Italian) and we were taught basic foundations of cooking like chemistry, in terms of how substances react. Thereafter, one is expected to adapt to seasons and situations without recipes, from understanding the principles of cooking. The Anglo-Saxon desire to follow a recipe, closely reading it and measuring, is too controlled for the Case delle Erbe. In a rural context, only a person unfamiliar with cooking looks for a recipe.

Discussing whether spontaneous plants have a spiritual significance, Alberto told a story by Pirandello that echoes his own feelings:

> The plot revolves around a young priest, Tommaso, who is in a seminary and becomes disillusioned. He finally leaves the seminary and returns to his family in Sicily. Here he withdraws into himself. Outside of the family he has no important contact with anyone, except that he is known for singing the words of the priest, while the priest is doing mass. He walks a lot and one day he finds a spontaneous plant. He sees enormous beauty in it. Perhaps he sees all the work of God. He starts to care for it like a son. He protects it from goats and from storms. This plant gives him the significance in his life he never had before… A young girl, who is a bit strange, is one day in the place where the plant grows and waving her hands about, she destroys the plant. Tommaso is devastated and speaks harshly to her. She tells her fiancé, who is in the military. He takes offense and challenges Tommaso to a duel.

8 Alberto does not grow any vegetable, grains or legumes. He has a vineyard, a lavender field and a small walnut-tree grove.

> Of course, Tommaso has no experience and the other man is a professional. Yet he agrees to the duel and is severely wounded. He dies in hospital. As he is dying, his family ask him why he agreed to the duel. He says: I did it for a piece of grass [*filo d'erba*]. The family think he is delirious with fever. For me, also, spontaneous plants are more spiritual. They are an expression of god. I'm agnostic but domestic plants are an expression of man, of society.

Zia nodded enthusiastically, smiling without looking up, continuing her chopping. As we cooked, Alberto described how the farmer cares for the environment, making forests better by reducing the number of trees; and how the abandonment of the mountains, particularly now after the earthquakes, represents a tragic setback because: 'no one cares for them anymore'. This opinion is often expressed along with a sadness for better times lost. In the study area, humans are a profound part of this cultural landscape, and indeed this integration supports sustainability theory as described in Chapter 2. Yet the nostalgia of this vision may glorify more than it ought.

Apart from Professor Ragni, a zoologist at the University of Perugia, closely associated with the foundation of the national park and its conservation policies, few people choose to remember that between the 1500s and the First World War, in the mountains and uplands of the study area. The inhabitants 'waged war against the natural landscape' with a wave of 'mass extinctions of animals' and with 'the forests historically in their greatest state of degradation', with intensive expansion of agriculture, 'regimental' control of water and increasing numbers of villages (Ragni 1995:18). This could be perceived as a successful agricultural landscape, with nature fully subservient to human ends. The more one hoped to produce – as population increased during those centuries – the more control was required and anthropocentric values were proliferated. The intensity of the farming in the mountains was only challenged in the late 1980's and 1990's (Marsden and Farioli 2015:333) by introducing post-productive policies and the concepts of 'areas of natural constraint' and 'high nature-value farming' (EEA 2010:138). In the 1980s the concept of equilibrium between man and environment began to be considered in the mountains of the study area, yet it seems no one is nostalgic about this phase.

Meanwhile, Zia and Alberto worked like professional chefs, and I asked whether I was cutting the tomatoes the correct size. The tomatoes and onions were home-grown produce. I had never seen a supermarket tomato in a Case delle Erbe – but not because Case delle Erbe grow their own. Alberto does not even have a vegetable plot. Generally in the Case delle Erbe, particularly at Maria-Sonia's, food arrives because of exchanges with friends. Already the long table was almost fully used, as we were making a range of different dishes,

including antipasti, main courses and various desserts. Frequently Alberto hurried outside to forage for a part of his recipe. For example, he went to harvest a spontaneous plant, *Portulaca oleracea L.,* as a raw ingredient.

Alberto's phone almost constantly receives messages and calls, underlining his social connectivity. Most of the time he can't respond. When the French people arrive in the kitchen, I am told they are retired teachers from Lyon. Perhaps as a political statement they do not speak English and only two of them speak Italian – one of these was the singer and she immediately left the kitchen to prepare. Although I understand French, I do not speak it anymore and I had a very primitive conversation with one fellow. Soon they went to set up their instruments in the performing space, which is a two storey covered veranda at the main stone house.

A stream of other people started arriving, each bearing food. At least half of them immediately fell in to work or were assigned tasks in the kitchen. One decided to take over the pasta sauce so that Alberto could see to other things. Another made an impromptu decision to create a sauce from the onions remaining on the table. At this point there were nine people cooking in the kitchen with several others simply chatting and snacking around the table. They were all local people, good friends of Alberto who knew their way about the kitchen, and were able to find what they were looking for easily. Two people took the initiative to start setting up a buffet table in the performance space. Alberto neither lead nor instructed.

One person who owned a tourist structure brought her guests, a Dutch couple, in the same way that Alberto would bring his guests to her home. A retired English couple who live locally also arrived; they didn't speak much Italian, but one of Alberto's friends teaches English and French at the local secondary school and was delighted by the opportunity to use her English. An unknown couple arrive and introduce themselves to Alberto; a man whose white bush of hair contrasts with his formal black suit. His companion is an extremely thin, ageless woman, wearing sunglasses although she is in the windowless kitchen and it is dark outside. By conventional Italian characterizations this suggests she is from Milan. Later I learn that he is a well-known classical guitarist and they are indeed from the north. Alberto was enthusiastic to meet the new people and the couple stared at the large kitchen and scene of activity.

This is a room dedicated to Libereso Guglielmi.

I'm sorry – I suppose I should know who he is?

He is my inspiration in life.

As Alberto spoke he showed them the large double, metal doors of the kitchen entrance, where Libereso's name is embossed, and began explaining Libereso's history, leading them outside to show them around. Although no one is in charge, everyone works well together, assisted by the fact they have participated in this type of experience before. Upstairs in the performance area a participant kindly wiped down the garden chairs, passing me one, while the musicians tuned their instruments. People helped themselves to wine and snacks from the buffet table.

At this point a fellow who was almost always helping with outdoor work at the Casa delle Erbe arrived at the concert and warmly greeted me. I had observed he was always alone and was a constant presence at this Casa delle Erbe throughout the year, while other friends/guests come and go. The high level of unemployment in the region may have enabled his presence. Yet he told me he had some paid work (unspecified) occasionally. When I first met Alberto in 2017 he said:

> This [event] is part of innumerable experiences that produce and increase interpersonal relations and improve human health. Now that the economy has fallen, we can profit by creating a 'civil economy' that is orientated towards the good of the whole community, not giving advantage to only a few people, like capitalism, and the free market economy do.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2017)

The 'economy has fallen' may seem exaggerated to readers, yet although Alberto's area was not impacted by earthquakes, life changed dramatically, entering recession even before the global downturn of 2009. Alberto supports Maria-Sonia's idea that the Case delle Erbe can thrive where the conventional economy fails.

An eminent historian in the study area, Anselmi, writes that the structure of the Mezzadria, the share-cropping system so prominent in Alberto's area, shaped the future of the region's economy (1980). Some of the family-based agricultural workforce remained in the countryside after they were granted 'freedom' in the 1950s and 60s, and they applied the same zealous work ethic to family businesses making leather goods, or processes within shoe manufacturing, which the region became famous for. National investors were attracted to this model because it offered the lowest price in Italy for high-quality work, often in very poor conditions (Anselmi 1980); a predictable legacy of Mezzadria. In this way agriculture was the foundation for an economy of leather goods. As previously mentioned, the industrial boom 'with the first wave of modernization and factory jobs available after the war' created a 'vast outmigration' (Ragni 1995:21) and at this point the enduring tradition

of foraging fell out of favour. Ironically, the industrial boom and leather-goods industry allowed the natural world in the study area to 'convalesce' (ibid.). Subsequently, the leather economy was obliterated by the rapid emergence of China's industry and international competition.

Today, mature capitalism is exploiting the profitability of intangibles (Haskel and Westlake 2018), yet the area where Alberto is located remains largely committed to objects (agricultural products) with diminishing profits. Alberto stands out for having transitioned into the experience economy with his 'relational tourism'. His success derives from his flexibility and foresight regarding the intangible economy, and in developing a model for decommodifying the experience economy that is both financially viable and enjoyable. In this vein, Alberto does not farm a product to make money from it; instead, he uses instead uses the process as an experience. Therefore, during the wine harvests of 2019 and 2020, Alberto invited friends to come to his Casa delle Erbe to experience pressing grapes barefoot in a wooden barrel, in a group. Although this event was presented as a recreation of the past with some degree of authenticity, it was done as fun and because without friends helping him, Alberto would have had to hire workers and machinery. We have already discussed how his comparatively large vineyard has low production, because it is not treated with chemicals. But it does function as an experience, a source of well-being and of wine for Alberto, his friends and the Casa delle Erbe.

On another occasion when six of Alberto's nearby friends came to dinner, they were asked:

1. Do you attach importance to eating spontaneous plants, compared to eating vegetables from your garden?
2. Has your experience of spontaneous plants changed your perspective of life in any way?
3. Are there times when you have had a sense of spontaneous plants having a special energy, separate from providing a resource or use?

Notably, none of them saw a difference between spontaneous plants and their farmed plants. Compare this to Lena's detailed explanation of distinctions in this regard (p. 79). They said they could not answer the questions. Almost all of them are involved in agriculture. Alberto does not feel a special energy connected to spontaneous plants, although he does prefer their taste. Yet, as we have seen in his story of Tomaso, he considers spontaneous plants to be '…an expression of god. I'm agnostic but domestic plants are an expression of man, of society.' Is it a coincidence that Alberto's local agricultural friends, with their adherence to an old-style productionist economy, are detached from foraging? We will explore the relationship between productivism, capitalism and foraging in Chapters 6 and 7. Alberto explained to me that

those six friends are neither regular, nor experienced foragers. Like them, the participant I talked to is not an accomplished forager. Several times I observed Alberto teaching this fellow to forage, with minor success. He is part of the Casa delle Erbe for emotional, anthropocentric reasons.

> This is your home…?
>
> We are family.

When we began to eat, and the concert was ready to start; people, were encouraged to dance or continue helping themselves to food and drink. Alberto had changed clothes and took the microphone to make a welcoming speech. Guests/friends add comments and jokingly heckled. Looking at Alberto, who may be in his late sixties or early seventies, beaming with happiness and health, makes it apparent that his Casa delle Erbe and 'relational tourism' offers an excellent way of ageing in place. As an older, single person, with seemingly little contact with his children, who live abroad, Alberto has a community as an extended family. He has a regional network of 'dear friends' and collaborators. Nearby, he has a group of close friends whom he sees weekly, and within this group he has a small nucleus of 'family' with whom he interacts daily. Further, this social connectivity is enhanced by international friends/guests visiting. Living fully in the present, Alberto gives little consideration to ageing. At one point, he mentioned he would like to be cremated and for his 'ashes to return to nature, to make a new beginning' (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019). As described, he is agnostic and believes his psyche will join the energy of the world and help create other life. His understanding of mortality is derived from a combination of the perspectives of Hildegard (like others in the Case delle Erbe) and Libereso.

While there may be a degree of stress in hosting thirty people, it was less challenging for Alberto as the work was shared. One of the cooks in the kitchen – a friend – commented on how Alberto always says 'yes, yes, yes'; because he is a psychologist and does not want people to feel stressed. Alberto's inner circle of friends frequently refer to this former work as a psychologist; at each meal I ate with them comments were made regarding his use of psychology as a base for creating recipes, or that the food was good because the ingredients are combined by a 'psychologist-chef'. However much this was important for the inner family group, the popularity of his Casa delle Erbe is not based on Alberto's past, but rather on his present interactions, festivals, 'Inside Rural Italy' project, teachings and publications.

From an economic perspective, the concert was not a burden. For thirty participants Alberto contributed two litres of wine, three aubergines, two

tomatoes, onions, the biscuits and a quantity of olive oil. The amount of food brought to the experience represents between four and five days of leftovers for his Casa delle Erbe family. The event was not publicized and was free for whoever cared to come – including people who didn't know Alberto. The concert began with the singer, an accordion player and a guitarist, and the lighting appeared to be of a professional standard. The warm wafting breeze, the moonlight on the rustling trees around us, the music and wine, came together to create a pleasing atmosphere. Later, others began to play informally, improvising and dancing.

Spontaneous plants were not used in a central way in the meal and were not included in the food that was brought. With the exception of one dish brought by the couple whom Alberto did not know, everything else was vegetarian. One might ask what kind of Case delle Erbe is this? Yet it illustrates Maria-Sonia' point that the diversity of the Case delle Erbe is profound.

Meeting Alberto a year later

In January 2020 I contacted Alberto to discuss the way my my book was evolving. I did not imagine large changes in his life would have occurred. However, he had a surprise, although he did not mention it before meeting. We were choosing a halfway point to meet, when I mentioned I was going to a gem of a library in a mountain village. Alberto did not know it and was keen to visit: 'I'll meet you there.' He declined the first meeting time and proposes a later one. He must negotiate his slow choice.

We settled upon a café in an old spa hotel in the main square of the village. I was ten minutes late; I couldn't find parking and felt anxious. Alberto arrived half an hour afterwards, looking rested, happy and healthy. Seeing him, I closed the newspaper I was reading, with its double-page spread, 'The end of the world – World War Three'. Looking up, by contrast. I saw a well-dressed older woman walking past with her lapdog, the sunlight illuminating a water fountain in the main square surrounded by palm trees, mixed with some local deciduous trees such as the attractive '*leccio*' (*Quercus ilex*, holm oak), and Alberto's beaming face as he cut the pistachio croissant we were to share in half. I mention the grim article in the newspaper.

> Tourism requires peace and open borders. This is what Relational Tourism extends – a cultural exchange, friendship and peace making.
>
> So your visitors are like ambassadors of peace?
>
> Yes, exactly. This is increasingly important and we exchange what we learn.

I recalled meeting Alberto in 2017 at a foraged-food walk in the national park. It was a didactic session, as foraging is not permitted in the park, and its conclusion was a forage-based lunch in a mountain *rifugio*, organized to bring the public back to this area after the earthquakes. We arrived to find a table full of wine glasses; a local white wine, with an interesting mountain history and with the herb pimpinelle (*Sanguisorba minor*) soaking in it to give it a distinctive flavour. Some of the participants were Italians from Rome having their first foraging experience with their young children. They were not comfortable with the food and told me:

> These wild greens taste very strong, and bitter. That's because I normally eat industrially grown lettuce, which has no flavour. It is very bland. My palate is accustomed to supermarket foods. That's why.

Alberto was there with two Slovakian visitor/friends. While staying with him they learned to forage and they were happy with the taste of the lunch. They described foraging as 'what our grandmothers did'. Yet, in order to learn foraging they came to Alberto's Casa delle Erbe:

> People are interested in foraging in Bratislava, but we don't do it. You have to have evolved through capitalism for this kind of thing. We started with capitalism in 1998. We haven't advanced out of it yet. But when we do I'm sure foraging will be popular in Slovakia.

This relationship between phases of capitalism and popularity of foraging forms part of the conclusions to this book.

The level of internationalism in Alberto's Casa delle Erbe is increasing. His news is that he won the 'Culinary Heritage Food and Gastronomy Tourism' award from the European Cultural Tourism Network in October 2019! This award gave Alberto increased recognition from institutions; a development he was furthering by starting partnerships with universities and with the regional tourism board.

> They have more acceptance for what I'm doing now. What I am doing will not replace mainstream tourism, but sustainable gastronomic tourism based on exchange is becoming popular. It is recognized that there is a role for it and people are interested.

Societal change can emerge from pleasure. When we discuss this book, I mention Heidegger.

> That sounds excellent. Excellent. I did my thesis on phenomenology. Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

We start to talk about phenomenology. Alberto is the only participant who reads in English; he might read drafts of the book for me except that he is working on several books himself.

> 'Phenomenology is a good approach for this subject. What I am working on now…'

I presented Alberto to the librarian with due formality. Alberto had brought a signed copy of one of his books to give to the library and began to discuss his references with the librarian, who was familiar with the authors and seemed delighted. During their discussion, I decided that I should bring my book about the history of the mountains to this library, because it was greatly assisted by the former librarian; a young woman with young children who died of a heart attack shortly after the earthquakes. Due to being with Alberto that day, I later asked my local publisher to post a copy of the book to the library, with a dedication to the deceased librarian. Several months later, someone returned some borrowed items for me, and happened to arrive just as my book arrived in the post and was opened. The surprised librarian conveyed her warm thoughts about the dedication to her deceased colleague. When I related this to the publisher as an 'odd coincidence', the reply was that it was in fact not a coincidence, but that the deceased person had 'piloted' the whole series of exchanges.

In the study area, there is a propensity for spiritual imagination. In all likelihood, if a Catholic researcher had done my fieldwork, they would state Catholicism as an essential ingredient in the argument I put forward for a territory of grace or thanks (see p. 158). This would be against my politics, yet its resonance is comprehensible, and I experience an ongoing tension caused by my criticisms of Catholicism, and the ideal that fieldwork should challenge personal politics.

While the librarian located a book for Alberto, I sat researching the Inquisition in the study area, and Alberto passed me, going to admire the views. Half his body was submerged in darkness, half silhouetted against brilliant blue and snow, with swallows cavorting in circular swoops. Although he had not been here before, he was embedded in place by being part of the culture. He turns back towards me, smiling with appreciation. I recalled his next appointment was on the coast and it was already noon. He left with a book, ostensibly glad to have cause to return. I worked on in the shadowy silence.

Figure 5.1 Hot and cloudy day. Griffiths 2019.

The familiar themes of beauty, death and time run like veins through many experiences. Perhaps our life blood is in appreciation, slowness and finitude.

Lena's Casa delle Erbe

Horden and Purcell's view was that in the Mediterranean, 'The peripheral environment of marsh, mountain, forest or sea was long undervalued by historians influenced by the cultural prejudice that privileges, as being more civilized, tilling the soil over other productive activities.' (2000:181). This section begins with a description of the Apennines, which I cross over en route to participating at Lena's Casa delle Erbe. Assuming readers do not share my interest in small changes of maintenance in high-altitude grasslands, the size of flocks and the proliferation of biodiversity, it may suffice to write that the sculptural forms of the mountains and enormous contrasts of colour open one's heart with an expansive sensation.

Hence, I was possibly over excited by the time I arrived at the shepherds' chapel (*casale*) of St Maria Magdalena (1,500 m), where Maria-Sonia comes to gather water. A shepherd used to sell his cheese from this chapel, but since the recent celebrations of the flowers of St Giovanni there had been an effort to make it more church like, resulting in his removal. When I arrived the stone building was closed. Looking in the miniscule windows, one with broken glass, all was dark. This site, particularly sacred for shepherds, has born testimony to over a thousand years to the cohabitation of shepherds and hermits (Bittarelli 1985; Pagnani 1987). Within the layers of stone one observes the earliest

building and the building's evolution, leading to the blotches of cement that represent our contemporary phase.

I started to leave, but suddenly turned back and for some reason went on one knee in front of the main entrance, beside a *gorbini* (wild spinach) plant, as gesture of thanks for the richness of culture the site makes evident. I ate a leaf of the plant, which tasted wonderful, better than from harvests at other *casale/* shepherd's huts. Heidegger devoted much thought to elucidating the temple, and although he had a Greek model in mind, the shepherds' independent traditions and the Magdalena's non-conformist traditions co-present at this site generate a similar correspondence.

> The temple is not a totalizing paradigm that makes everything clear and promises to bring it under control. The temple not only shows people what they stand for, but shows them that there is an earthy aspect of things that withdraws and that can never be articulated and dominated.
>
> (Dryfus 2006:358)

This site remains relatively uncontrolled, or un-dominated, protected by its altitude. Dryfus, a renowned Heideggerian scholar, maintains that 'what does not fit in our current paradigm – that is, that which is not yet at our disposal to use efficiently (e.g., the wilderness, friendship and stars) – will finally be brought under our control and turned into a resource' (ibid.). At this building strands of the Case delle Erbe combine; physically as Maria-Sonia comes here to gather the water which is most sacred; as a site of non-conformist traditions; a location where I clearly found myself for a second displaced from my paradigm and politics; and a site where nature is not utterly controlled nor efficient.

I walked away self-consciously, with dark earth on one knee, wondering about the meaning of what I'd spontaneously done and worrying about Roman Catholicism. Many other things happened, but in brief, I decided to hike to the Fonte of the Eagles and then descend to a favourite high-altitude settlement, one with hand-carved stones fit for the Medici – only to find it decimated by the earthquakes. This was dramatic, to say the least. In the car, approaching the Casa delle Erbe in ascent through the forest, a huge storm began. Trees were lashing and whirling wildly, branches flaying and flying. The trunks of some of the oaks were much more than a metre wide and in the tempest they appeared like monsters. The windscreen was awash, with water pouring much heavier than the wipers could manage. I could not see through the glass, but nor did I feel I could pause because of the falling branches. From the side window I observe the entrance to the count's abandoned palace. Rain turned to hail the size of plums, granting sight, yet I feared the old car would be

crushed. A classic nightmare in the woods. The challenging road and extreme weather are part of the daily life in this Casa delle Erbe.

My aim was to get advice from Lena. As the earthquakes had brought an end to the groups of people coming to her Casa delle Erbe (although there were signs of this recommencing), Lena offered me individual experiences connecting to the energy of trees, and gave me exercises to do at home, developing them. I devoted a half day twice a week to these practices over the course of two months, and experimented with my own experiences under her guidance.

'We have to learn how to connect to our potential. We can only live with joy when we are in contact with our potential. And have the ability to express it,' Lena told me as she took me inside her house.

By studying Chinese medicine, shiatsu and qigong she acquired a special relationship with energy currents and the way people interact with plants' energy. The experiences described below represent moments in my own trajectory of learning to become attuned to the energy of plants.

The public area of her Casa delle Erbe is a large open space with old ceramic tiles and exposed beams. There is an open-plan kitchen for demonstrations, ample seating, worktables, and foraged plants on drying racks. She opens a small, panelled, wooden door which is termite eaten and worn. The room inside is dimly lit and the floor, made of handmade tiles, is almost completely covered with a padded mat used for shiatsu. On the walls are her certificates and a few framed paintings. The room is windowless and the temperature is finally cool. I sit on a wooden chair and she kneels in the centre of the mat facing me. She gives me a kind of guided meditation in which I learn arm movements and breathing as part of a qigong exercise. Generally, I am susceptible to suggestion, and I am dismayed I do not feel energy between my hands, as is the object of one of the exercises.

> As you do the exercise more often it might happen any time. It can take weeks or months. Then once you have reached that sensation you can start to do the same with small plants.

Another time, we discuss differences in our personalities and I say, as an example, that if someone tells me there is a ghost in a location, left on my own, it is possible I might have an experience of it once the idea is in my mind. Lena explained that she is the opposite. She understands herself as a highly sceptical, critical, rational person, and in her former life in northern Italy, she says she was too rational, and lived entirely in her mind. She reads scientific literature and perceives her practices as validated in science, with a strong emphasis on quantum physics. Her other theoretical framework is Chinese

medicine (see Chapter 3), and she explains how conventional Western medicine is slowly moving closer to aspects of this ancient knowledge and the profound well-being it offers.

Lena suggests it is easier to sense the energy of small plants than that of trees or bushes. The hands move, in a circular movement a few centimetres from the plant, without touching it, encompassing its form. Afterwards we go to her favourite elm tree, one noted for its spiritual associations. We approach cautiously, with '*calma*', and make sure it is aware of us before we touch it. She instructs me to press my body and the side of my face into the bark of the trunk. The first sensation I have is that of being a child. I stay in this posture for 25 minutes and Lena moves away. At times she talks, providing a guided meditation, suggesting awareness of different aspects of the tree. I'm surprised that my arms don't hurt, although I'm holding them at shoulder height. I feel relaxed in the environment of her Casa delle Erbe. All is silent but for wind and bird song; sunlight makes patterns through the leaves and the temperature is lovely.

At the end we thank the tree and I put my palms on it. Lena says she often embraces a tree instead of taking a siesta. I feel rested, relaxed, and my spine feels good. This sensation of defined well-being remains even after the long drive back in my uncomfortable car. In the evening I'm particularly moved by the normal beauty of the surroundings with golden light rolling, unfolding over the foothills like a slow wave.

On another occasion she teaches how to look at trees and choose one to form a relationship with. When walking in an area, regularly studying trees, one is attracted to particular trees. We walk around a tree, sensing it.

> Every tree has a *porta*, a place where you can enter it. That is the place where you embrace it.

It is important to always thank the trees, to show respect and honouring, and this is the reciprocal aspect of the relationship that overtime forms into a connection with particular trees. Thereafter, I began to do the exercise in the morning and to try to sense the energy of plants and to choose a tree. What follows is a brief depiction of moments from out of many weeks.

At the start, after experiences with Lena, I practised the exercises she taught, trying to sense the energy of a range of spontaneous plants near my home, both in the national park and in out of the way locations. Further, I did 'placebo' type tests to gauge sensations. Generally, I only clearly felt energy from nettles, although this altered with time. As for trees, things did not progress well. Around my home I realized all the trees had been pruned and were 'distorted' (Lena, pers. comm. 2019); some were pruned to fit my

schedule and rather than the tree's. Others had illnesses, or had been cut down and grown back. Far from honouring, I realized I was treating trees appallingly. Unfortunately, there is no clear solution, such as simply pruning differently; pruning is not like cutting hair. Wohlleben, in *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016), drawing upon studies by the University of British Columbia and the Max Planck Society, coupled with his own experience working in forestry, writes that for most deciduous trees pruning is traumatic even when done professionally, and that:

> A severely pruned crown is a severe blow for the roots which grow to a size optimally suited to serve the above ground parts of the tree. If a large percentage of the branches is removed and the level of photosynthesis drops, then just as large a percentage of the underground part of the tree starves. Fungi now penetrate the dead ends where branches have been removed…
>
> (2016:173)

He describes how wood is filled with air pockets, due to trees' rapid growth in early years, and that fungi colonize these. Further, he describes a range of diseases that follow, creating inner rot that becomes visible over many years, making the tree die in a few decades, which we are reminded is 'incredibly fast for a tree' (ibid.:174).

Turning to the mountains, for a tree that had not been heavily anthropocentrically impacted, embracing it gave me a sensation of transgression. Perhaps this would be a stimulation for some people, but pressing my body on a tree felt like an imposition upon a living thing that is not in a position to express consent. An animal could at least move away from a person. What if trees do not like humans? How can I assume the tree wants to share its life energy with me, or as Lena says, that the tree will take some of my energy? I became depressed and anxious, seeing suffering trees everywhere.

Lena, who senses the energy of spontaneous plants, has taken a large step beyond a foraging relationship of consumption, to an energy exchange with nature. The transcendence of moving from 'using' plants to a mutual exchange is inspirational. Her work around stimulating the other 'brains' in the body and unifying the mind and body split, represents another approach to foraging for being, and involves a process of awakening people's bodily awareness. In January 2020 she offered a workshop on reconnecting to one's solar plexus, which Maria-Sonia attended (too advanced for me).

The day of the storm in the forest, I asked Lena what to do about my blockage and depression. She said I am likely trying to force a sensation, rather

than letting a relationship with nature unfold, or disclose, appearing and disappearing (Steiner 1978). We must 'let Being be, let it lie forth (*legein*) and emerge of itself (*physis*)' (Robbins 2003:16). Instead I approached the exercises with wilfulness. Nonetheless, Lena was surprised I did not feel any energy around my body, as people usually feel this before they sense the energy of nettles, and she suggests that I am very tired, which was true. Probably I was thinking Being more than being.

Trees have had a huge influence on her life and work. 'Working with trees is working at the fountain of wisdom,' (Lena, pers. comm. 2019). Before moving to the forest, she 'lived in her head', with the associated limitations. But she was always looking for something else, and felt that 'some links in the chain of my life were missing'. Studying shiatsu and qigong started her on her path.

> In 3000 BC the Chinese realized that life and all things in the earth, share an energy or power which they call chi. As I read more physics, I see that our society is beginning to understand this in different terms, but a similar realization.

Over the last seven or eight years the decisive factor has been working with plants to understand her 'place in life'. Plants, and trees particularly, have been a 'huge influence' during this phase. Consider how Lena's 'place in life' with plants is a clear example of 'dwelling'. Only by living in this location for almost twenty years did she begin to combine her holistic Chinese knowledge with a desire to collaborate with trees. Being, for Lena, arises from sharing the energy of plants and connecting to the seasons.

> Linear time leaves a person in a desert. Quantum physics shows us that what we think of as time might not even exist.
>
> Energy or vibrations or 'chi' is in everything, from rocks to people.
>
> If a person is aware of the vibrations then we are inserted into the cosmos which is sacred and integrated. Otherwise, a person feels alone and fearful. We feel fear because we are not integrated. If one understands life one is not frightened of dying. Or it's less. If we are inserted into a cyclical way of perceiving, then there is less pain.
>
> And plants are how we enter the cyclical perception?

> Yes. In this world we are profoundly alone, that's why we need to feel part of a cycle.

Although the structural framework is different from Maria-Sonia, the agents – the plants – and the outcomes are similar. Attuned to the letting be of spontaneous plants, Lena speaks of not being attached to what we love, of learning to love with a distance, not trying to possess or control and influence. Lena makes a critical reference to an image of a closed box numerous times. Then at one point she explained the thought was expressed:

> …by a professor, to a group of academics, when he criticized the group by saying we are thinking in a closed box but instead we are an aperture to infinity. Everyone has a little bit of the opening to infinity in them. This is what I mean by being part of a bigger whole. In my sense, this is life.

The opening to infinity is reached by interacting with plants and being part of the cyclical whole.

Driving down from their forest home the last time was like descending a mountain, knowing the exceptional is left behind and ahead lies daily existence. Especially for North Americans, the life this family leads would be a dream. Yet they too have problems; unexpected expenses, the road is difficult in the winter, my 'nightmare in the woods' scenario is frequent, the cost of the children's accommodation for their university education is a hardship.

Later I found an adaption of the experience with trees. Having had a range of issues with my back since childhood, I frequently envisage my spine as a plant stretching to the sun, to improve posture. Leaning my spine against a tree seemed an appropriate level of intimacy. Looking over my fieldnotes, there is a parallel with the first time I said goodbye to Lena. She told me not to bend over (as I am tall) to embrace others, who are shorter. Instead she instructed I should 'pull people to my chest like the mother of everyone'. No doubt I will be criticized for not engaging bodily, but for all we know the tree might be relieved that I like to keep a distance. Is it more respectful? In the Case delle Erbe they say respect happens not through guarded distance, but by acknowledging and physically engaging.

Honouring and identity as aspects of the experiences

We can see there are many similarities between the experiential ontology of the Case delle Erbe in the study area and Heidegger's paths, as we will now consider. The striking consequences of how Heidegger devoted his life to contemplation, seemingly without experimenting corporeally, is left to the next chapter for deliberation.

These paths to understanding were like many in the mountains here – old sheep trails created during the transhumance, hiking trails so overgrown they disappear or trails made by wild animals, but appearing as defined as human trails. Otherwise, one goes without a path.[9] At least fifty times in my mind I've been up and down this mental gradient, trying to find my way. Frequently it was hard believe, in this historic and prehistoric landscape, that there could be no trail – only to look down – and spy a faint path existed all the while below. Many Case delle Erbe experiences highlight how learning about and interacting with plants and seasons help one become attuned to an experience of being. How does this function? In what follows practice and theory are entwined like a vine around a branch.

There are stages of involvement as Maria-Sonia describes:

> Firstly, you have to know and recognize the plants dry and fresh, with and without flowers, in all seasons. The second level is to interact daily with these plants independent of celebrations. You give the plant to your body in all ways. You read what Hildegard wrote about the plant when you are harvesting it, you eat it, you drink it, you use the oils, you make a footbath from it. The third level is your intent.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm.2019)

Within the third level, it is not so much the actions, but the honouring.

> Honouring is the key.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

There could be many interpretations regarding the 'intent' required for honouring. Each Case delle Erbe has a different style of honouring. Maria-Sonia is attracted to honouring in a spiritual context, whereas Lena honours via qigong and living within a forest. Alberto honours via the importance he gives to Libereso, which dictates the layout of his Casa delle Erbe around a didactic experience, celebrating the richness of farming traditions interconnections with the seasons.

Ole, a Case delle Erbe owner visiting from northern Italy, feels simply that teaching people about spontaneous plants is honouring them, because as he recounts, afterwards participants tell him they have stopped using herbicide. Before participating in the experiences Ole offers, people say the plants are

9 Each of these paths (*Wege*) represent different types of thinking approached from an animal's perspective, a person's (visitor or ancient transhumance) perspective, or forging into the unknown.

weeds; afterwards they are recognized as having properties beneficial for humans. He equates 'slow' with this respect – 'slow is my life' (Ole, pers. comm. 2019). By this he intends having time to learn, to care, to make food from foraged plants; all this requires patience and time and equates to honouring. Often, Ole will crawl on hands and knees so as to properly study plants. He explains it is required in order to appreciate them.

Yet the experiences of the Case delle Erbe suggest something more. At one point I asked Maria-Sonia how I can find a way of honouring with a workable intent. She advised me to choose a plant and approach it as follows:

> I see you [plant] like a star constellation. I recognize you [plant]… I use you to heal others, not only myself.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

As before, she advised I take some of the plant, draw it in miniature, make a tea from it, eat it, use an essential oil of the same plant, read about it and dwell on this plant for one day, as described. Maria-Sonia serendipitously used the same expression as Alberto for describing the strength of the Case delle Erbe:

> The Case delle Erbe [national movement] catches a primary need in people. The need to recognize and be recognized. This is how humans become human. Identity is not a fixed thing. Nor does one have one identity one's whole life long.
>
> (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019)

Beginning with 'I see you', Maria-Sonia addresses a plant as a being, a who not a what. This is the antithesis of the typical forager's question, 'What plant is this?' Instead we ask, 'Who is this?' This key distinction is recognized only in part by Heidegger:

> Dasein is a 'who' not a 'what'. The formal structures laid out in the phenomenological account of it are 'existentialia' (a term coined by Heidegger), and not 'categories'.
>
> (Dostal 2006:140)

Here we encounter a fundamental distinction between Heideggerian thinking and that of the Case delle Erbe. Heidegger considers all 'presence-at-hand', including plants, to be within the what group, existing to be categorized. Heidegger (1978:155–6) believed there was a vast difference separating man from other sentients. The idea that only man could have true Being because

'language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself' (ibid.:156), is discussed in further detail in Chapter 6. On the other hand, in the Case delle Erbe one frequently hears the expression 'We are the same as plants.'

When Maria-Sonia refers to 'healing' with plants, she means improving environmental and human health; and this explains Maria-Sonia's path to harvesting plants with a clear conscience (though it is not my path). For her, recognizing the plant as a being, rather than a resource to be categorized, means harvesting a plant is not like a farmer driving a harvesting tractor. Instead it is an interaction between two beings – another justification for her adamant use of fingers only (no blades) – and this relationship is greatly heightened by respectful practices she uses when interacting with plants. The ritual aspects, like the mandala, justify taking parts of the plant, which she considers as an interaction wherein the plants call out to be recognized and participate. 'They want to be picked. When two are together and we take one the other one says, "why don't I get picked also?"' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). If there is validity in Durkheim's conception that the origins of words correspond to actions not objects (1915:76), then manners of acting or gestures are fundamental, as we will soon discuss. In Maria-Sonia's case, the value she gives to gestures arises largely from the Iguvine Tablets of Central Italy, through which she studies gestures from the Bronze Age or earlier.

Once home, I go to a plant of spontaneous uncultivated oregano, which I have a connection to, partly due to eating large quantities, but also from a powerful oil I made from this plant in the past. I take care to consider the time of harvest. I acknowledge the plant as sentient and sense the energy around it with my hands, as Lena taught. I say its name; *Origanum vulgare*. But this name seems wrong, part of Heidegger's accepted categories, like an anthropocentric appellation for a living thing that may conceive/feel itself differently. Encountering this stumbling block, the Heideggerian importance of 'historicality' suggested a way forward. For Heidegger, human Being is unique because it is deeply interwoven with 'historicality': 'In its factical Being any Dasein is as it already was and it is "what" it already was. It is its past, whether explicitly or not.' (Heidegger 1962:41). Other entities or beings are positioned as lesser because they are without man's inquiring goal of reaching Being, which represents the highest aim in Heidegger's project. For man, the 'ownmost meaning of Being' (ibid.:42) is in no small part derived from understanding the history of Being in our society: how it has been presupposed or buried and how through historical inquiry of Being man can discover and create a place for Dasein today (ibid.). Inspired, I remembered Maria Sonia's instruction to read about the plant I am harvesting; so I turned to books and history for assistance. Supposedly, oregano is a plant the Greeks believed was cultivated by Aphrodite and this seems a more appropriate framing than the

botanical name. Dostal (2006) writes that Heidegger states we can encounter nature by placing it within our Dasein's sense of time, encountering it within our historical world. In this instance 'plant of Aphrodite' acted as a pathway for understanding when this hurdle was encountered.

In order to produce a type of 'essential' oil made by women in the mountains, I put the crushed plant in a glass jar and poured warm oil onto it. The plant emitted a loud gasping sound, as the oil covered it. Probably it was the moisture in the plant, cooking. This had a highly negative impact on me: instead of learning from them, am I torturing the plants! My thoughts around 'using' plants is informed by the writings of Professor Mancuso, whom Lena directed me to read. Head of the world leading International Laboratory for Plants and Neurobiology (LINV), Mancuso leads a global research team at the University of Florence. He writes:

> Plants are capable of refined self, and non-self-recognition, exhibit territorial behaviours and have complex communications skills. Plants have a very well-organized sensing system, which allows them to explore efficiently the environment and to react rapidly to potentially dangerous circumstances. Below and above ground, plants are aware of the space surrounding them. Plants have memory, are able to learn, to solve problems and to make decisions. We firmly think that all the behaviours observed in plants, which look very much like learning, memory, decision-making, and intelligence observed in animals, deserve to be called by those same terms. In short: 1) plant are intelligent 2) intelligence is a quality of life and 3) the brain is not the prerequisite for intelligence. Plants are as sophisticated in behaviour as animals but their potential has been masked because it operates on time scales many orders of magnitude less than that operating in animals.
>
> (Mancuso 2019:4, 9)

Note point 3, which represents the foundation of Lena's work. This knowledge was popularized in *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Wohlleben 2016) and considering the plants' experience of life had already created issues for me in interacting with trees. Case delle Erbe members have various justifications for harming plants: a central one being the way plants grow back: 'When I cut or harvest, the plants regenerate better and grow back stronger.' (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019).

While this is visibly the case, more likely we are witnessing an ecosystem out of balance. When the equilibrium of an ecosystem is disturbed, the rate of decay no longer equals the rate of 'bioproduction', intended growth or energy use (Boyden 1987). Many people, including myself, harvest nettles regularly to keep them young and green, yet this destroys the plants' natural

cycle in relation to the seasons and suspends them in a state of high-energy expenditure. In effect, these spontaneous nettles become semi-domesticized by human interaction.

Lena explains:

> I see my vegetables are less resistant, they are less spontaneous. We can't share our energy with domestic plants and animals because we have domesticated them, and they are distorted. And we can't approach wild animals. Spontaneous plants don't move, so they are easier to interact with. They open our instinct, and our love of life… Although trees and spontaneous animals are the same, trees are more similar to us, perhaps for cultural reasons too. Vertical forms reaching for the sun, mirror our own energy channels. The molecules of chlorophyll are the same as in the molecules of blood. There is an affinity between plants and people. Plants don't feel happy when we cut them – but they grow back. We can eat them with respect and causing the least pain.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

Comparisons of haemoglobin and chlorophyll in the study area are frequently mentioned in the positioning of people as being similar to spontaneous plants. The Case delle Erbe, for a range of reasons, do not generally enter into the debate about eating plants. The difficult discussion around consuming living entities is ameliorated by taking only some parts of plants, as if pruning or grazing. It is not for me to judge if this is a strong ethical case. The Case delle Erbe approach in the study area offers a practical example of an argument developed by Marder, invoking to Aristotle and the 'plant within us', in which we eat 'thanks to plants' and by 'pursuing radical self-knowledge we discover the uncanny plant within us' (Marder 2013:32); the 'uncanny' here is a direct reference to Heidegger's understanding of Being. Further, a perceived energy-exchange relationship with the plant, as well as harvesting lightly, leaving the plant visibly unchanged, is understood in the Case delle Erbe to be the most respectful and supportive interaction, within a relationship fraught with potential acts of violence to sentient beings.[10]

The underlying ethos of the Case delle Erbe in the study area is an integrated yet fundamentally anthropocentric one. As stated at the outset, the Case delle Erbe are engaged in experiences and being. This includes enriching

10 I began leaving foraged plants to sit for half a day before preparing them to be eaten, sensing that space and time is respectful, to allow for the separation of the plants' 'energy' from their bodies. As of 2023/4 I became able to clearly sense the energy of plants, thanks to Lena's teaching.

our being – corporeally, spiritually and intellectually – by interaction with plants. In the study area there is the belief that we share the same substances as spontaneous plants and our interconnectivity with them increases by eating them ('assuming' or 'intaking' them as Maria-Sonia says) daily. I did not encounter any person who cared for spontaneous plants so greatly that they were unable to eat them. Instead of anxiety around these issues, in the study area experiences are predicated upon pleasure – of interacting with spontaneous plants and their habitats, of studying, of learning – culminating in eating as an act of honouring. As before (p. 137), the Case delle Erbe argue respect is shown not by distance, but by engaging, albeit in this case with an anthropocentric foundation. Two experiences assisted me to move closer toward foraging with a conscience.

In the case of *Origanum vulgare*, rather than give up in despair when the plant gasped, I followed Maria-Sonia's instructions. The tea made from this plant was fantastic and lifted my sprits sufficiently to return to studying its history. I read its 'local name' is 'Joy of the Mountains' (Grigson 1996:320) in both Italian and English. The perfect plant for my interests. Returning to Aphrodite, the 'appointments with love' became more understandable.

The 'appointments with love' are a base of intent, opening the way to honouring. The intent is not bound by discourses and interpretations, nor primarily by the intellect, being based in emotion. As such, I returned to this species of oregano I have interacted with over years and approached it with a warmth of feeling and love of mountains, its autochthonous home. Moving hands around the plant, sensing the energy now seemed a way of honouring it, in that I was recognizing it, feeling emotion for it, and not solely using it. Perhaps due to having drunk a lot of the tea, I felt I was learning from the plant; albeit with a minor exchange compared to those of Lena. For those who prefer science, this exchange may be construed in terms of the plant's requirement for carbon dioxide:

> Carbon dioxide is present at only one part in 3000 which makes it a very rare gas in the atmosphere… There is 4 percent CO_2 in the air we exhale, which is over a thousand times as much as there is in the air. That may help plants to grow. But there is also the question of the vibrations transmitted in speech. Plants respond to many mechanical stimuli (touching, stroking, wounding).
>
> (Ford 1999:233)

Afterwards, walking through this environment, I had the perception of moving through a space filled with 'appointments of love', represented by each plant, clearly beings rather than a 'what'. On a roundabout path of my own, I

had come to an understanding that people in the Case delle Erbe seem to have reached more directly. A more profound understanding emerged later, from a focus on the plant *Hyssopus officinalis*, another native to the Mediterranean. This time, before encountering the plant I read about it as Maria-Sonia instructed, and found it mentioned by early medical writers as having popular uses during the Renaissance. Apparently, 'Hyssop was regarded by both the Greeks and the Hebrews as a sacred herb, and it is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. It was used to clean out temples and sacred places…' (Davis 1988:168) and is considered an '*erba sacra*' or sacred plant (Baldoni 2014:249). To purify sin and cleanse the soul, hyssop may have been collected and bundled into a wand form, to be waved after being dipped in purified water or vinegar. Coupling this bundling action with the collecting and bundling twigs (pp. 95, 185) brought Heideggerian synergies to the process of foraging: the 'wand' gesture with hyssop had appeal.

A conversation with Zia while driving to Alberto's Casa delle Erbe also influenced my experience. Zia was interested in neuroscience literature that described connections between how people use their hands and their brain patterns. Some manual actions stimulate neural connections, she explained. The networks between the neurons are synapses, which have a plasticity that can be enhanced or weakened. At first I considered Peng and Braun (2015), who find a correlation within interaction between creativity and hand movements in complexity and range.

> In our data we found a significant and reproducible correlation between the information-theoretic complexity measures of subjects' motion trajectories and the subjective creativity judgment of independent jurors.
>
> (Peng and Braun 2015:10)

While there are a range of similar studies evidencing a link between thoughts and hand movements (Bruhn 2013; Cho and So 2018), Malafouris' (2013) 'material engagement theory' challenges the foundations of our thinking in a manner which emphasizes Case delle Erbe perspectives meaningfully. With a background in cognitive archaeology, Malafouris rejects the idea of the brain as a computational processing device sealed within the body. He expounds a theory of thinking taking place as part of engagements in the world outside of the body and in synergy with the body. 'Material engagement theory' (MET) has 'explicit emphasis on the cognitive life of things and the nature of the relationship between cognition and material culture' (ibid.:33). In *How Things Shape the Mind* (2013), which erases the mind body divide as well as other cornerstones of Western thought, MET gives agency to the things we

interact with, including plants. Malafouris creates an ontology whereby the human is not sole creator.

> The aim of MET is to restate the problem of the interaction between cognition and material culture in a more productive manner by placing it upon a new relational ontological foundation.
>
> (ibid.:40)

Malafouris (2013) underlines Zia's contention that neuroscience makes a connection between hand movements and thought patterns. For Zia, the importance of this is clear in the way people are losing dexterity, being reduced to using their index finger to 'swipe', without practising using their hands to milk a goat, or forage, or sew. Zia explained that neuroscience suggests various connections in our brains will also become less used. If one considers Peng and Braun (2015), this would also suggest a corresponding decline in creativity. Malafouris takes this further, agreeing that 'the hallmark of human cognitive evolution is metaplasticity – that is, ever-increasing extra-neural projective flexibility, interacting with the environment' (2013:241). As Zia proposed, Malafouris elaborates:

> I believe that it is the burden of those who are dealing with material culture per se to investigate the kind of life it leads. For many years now, archaeologists have emphasized the active nature of material culture and have recognized that things, like persons, have social lives (Appadurai 1986).The Extended Mind Hypothesis, I want to suggest, opens the way to discovering the cognitive life of things. I believe that Material Engagement Theory, by focusing on the dense reciprocal causation and on the inseparable affective linkages that characterize the ontological compound of cognition and material culture, may offer the optimal point from which to perceive what for many years remained blurred or invisible: the image of a mind not limited by the skin (Bateson 1973).
>
> (Malafouris 2013:208)

Consequently, beyond hand gestures connecting to thought patterns, Malafouris (2013) offers a less anthropocentric vision of life, since human and thing (in our case spontaneous plants) create the human brain together. In this sense it is highly significant what things one interacts with and how (gestures) one physically touches them. Things '…impose their own dynamics, consciousness, and temporality on our bio-cultural evolutionary continuum. Things affect the flow of time, our emotions, and the boundaries of our cognitive systems,' (Malafouris 2013:246).

The significance Maria-Sonia places on '*gesti*' or gestures, which are predominantly hand movements, is conferential. Now, further, we see the specific nature of the location stimulates behaviour, requiring hand gestures like milking sheep with one's fingers, which at the very least connects neurons in our brains with a propensity for thought and experiences – that an urban index finger-swiper might eventually lose the capacity for. Added to the importance of place and gestures, Mancuso's (Mancuso 2019) research regarding the sentience of plants, brought to my attention by Lena, urges us to consider how plants, like people, have no recent 'memory' of being honoured, just as I have no memory of how to honour plants. One may interpret how performing gestures with one's hands, which I observe is so crucial to Maria-Sonia in terms of honouring, may be a process to stimulate a lost memory in the plant and awaken thought patterns in our brains, in synergy.

There was no doubt in my mind about the vigour of *Hyssopus* as it grows in its autochthonous Mediterranean home. A generous sized shrub, the woody stalks are firm enough to be waved in the air, and the branches naturally entangle, adhering to each other. I had purified water, not from any religious source, but from a favourite mountain spring, where a local fellow had climbed up the side of a cliff and secured a broken-eaves trough and pipes to funnel a little of the water that emerges straight out of the rock, down the gradient and into an old bathtub, overgrown by trees. Locals claim this water bestows energy, which the local fellow describes mechanistically as 'It is like drinking petrol!' Regardless of the water's attributes, it is special to me, as I once scrambled up the cliff with him to visit a cave near the water source, which was possibly inhabited by hermits 'sometime after the fall of Rome'.[11]

I wrapped one of the plant stalks around the others, to secure the wand form. The length is ideal, and the *Hyssopus* well suited: when I dipped it in the water, poured into a metal container, the flowers and seed heads at the tip of the plant become heavier and droop, providing the perfect flicking effect. I made a wide, expansive gesture with it, similar to the water-ceremony gesture and water dripped onto my heart and forehead. I 'purified' the plant itself and an area around the building. Could this be a reciprocal exchange of energy encompassing lost memories between plant and I? Like gathering the twigs, what mental pathways might these gestures open with time?

The plant I had previously simply considered tasty, is different now. The 'wand' grants a ceremonial aspect and the expansive arm gesture feels like making a 'clearing'. Initially, this could be a clearing or opening to nothing.

11 In this part of the Apennines most mountains, valleys, rock formations have attached to them a history of early pre-Roman peoples or hermits, legends, miracles etc.

A '*nichtige Nichts*' (May 1996:24), and for some people it could be an empty nothing. In Heideggerian terms it only becomes a '*Nichts nichtiges*', a concealing or revealing nothing, through practice, perhaps similar to learning meditation.

Thought patterns in the brain are unlikely to alter by embodying an action a few times. I spent years gathering and bundling fallen wood, before slipping into its representation as a physical process for thinking. Beware, experience providers, this is not a 'quick fix'. One needs to forage with bare fingers, daily, for years, developing a holistic relationship to stimulate the brain's plasticity to interact with memory and new mental pathways associated with hand movements.

Unlike a religion or a political party, many of the Case delle Erbe journeys are pathless. Individuals find their own manner of having an energy exchange with plants. The significance is that a shared experience exists, while the beliefs or the narratives used to enter into the experience, or to reach the awareness, are left to the individual to find or make. As previously highlighted, this is an utterly open, non-prescriptive relational context. Within the diversity of the Case delle Erbe, to some extent, a series of shared steps or processes may be perceived. In order to exchange energy with plants and forage for being, the following may be summarized:

- plants are a portal – the access point for experience;
- this portal is entered through intent, based on recognizing the plant as sentient, in any manner the person chooses;
- honouring (which can be secular) opens an energy exchange with the plant;
- this honouring can be an emotional 'appointment with love';
- through this experience a person accesses an awareness of being – more or less profoundly;
- it is a cumulative process;
- 'the sacred is everyday' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019);
- eventually one may move through a landscape in which each plant acts a '*fonte*' of awareness, love and knowledge for the person, and perhaps there may be reciprocity in this with the plant also.

In this 'fieldwork in philosophy' (Desjarlais and Throop 2011:92) the experience of these openings, like Heidegger's clearings (Gadamer 1994) is that of being fully embedded in time, rooted in the present and within a cultural history, but in an impersonal sense. Acute awareness of beauty and a sensation of love quells any impulse to dwell on personal characteristics or choices in life. Individualistic thoughts are among the first dissolving into meaninglessness.

We complete this section with one more experience.

Casa delle Erbe workshop experience

In 2019 Maria-Sonia held a number of workshops for women based on learning about spontaneous plants and the recognition of a historic figure who is locally famous in the study area in the mountains of central Italy. This week-long experience deserves mention since it has a different structure. For Anglo-Saxons, highlighting a local legendary figure may seem esoteric or 'new age' (which Maria-Sonia is to an extent); yet this historic figure is also heavily used for commercial businesses' advertising and for regional branding. Additionally, in Italy, history is not remote from daily life. As described in Chapter 3, Case delle Erbe nationally are directed to inform themselves and educate others regarding the history of the province where they are located. It is well known that the Mediterranean and Italy had a plethora of deities and goddesses before Christianity, and in Chapter 2 local reverence for the goddesses Iside and Potnia was cited, both in connection with plants. These are but two examples of numerous goddess figures in the study area.

Due to this being a week-long, highly intense learning experience, beginning at seven in the morning and finishing near midnight on most occasions, this workshop will be summarized, rather than described in a narrative style. An exception is made for a short description of the last lunch. The aim of the workshop, held at Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe, was to connect women to archetypes and uses of spontaneous plants. There were eleven participants, of diverse ages and nationalities, including a woman from Quebec, one from Romania and from Israel, as well as people from the north and south of Italy. My impression was that all were under the age of forty, with most being in their late twenties or mid-thirties. They stayed at the Casa delle Erbe for the week.

Each of the five days focuses on earth-honouring customs, as well as practical knowledge regarding harvesting, drying and preparing plants for consumption. 'This is information you don't find on the internet. It is knowledge you learn by doing.' (Maria Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Every day begins exactly as it does in Maria Sonia's daily life, once again reaffirming how Case delle Erbe experiences are based upon sharing one's personal life in one's home. Each morning Maria Sonia visits the nuns for mass,[12] in the hills facing the mountains, where they have been rehoused due to earthquakes. Afterwards, the group stay and talk with the nuns, who share a simple homemade snack with them. The nuns, who have themselves been taught foraging by Maria Sonia, now forage daily after mass; and each day the

12 For personal reasons, relating to my understanding of the history of the Roman Catholic church, I have avoided participating in mass which causes minor, but ongoing, disappointment to Maria-Sonia, who wants to convince me to attend.

group forages together with the nuns. Thereafter, an exchange of spontaneous plant seeds or recipes follows, such as used to be an important part of life in mountain communities.

Next, still following Maria Sonia's daily pattern, they go to the sulphuric springs and river every morning. There are no facilities, as this is not a recognized spot for the public; rather it is simply the river and spring that inspired people to build one of the older monasteries of the province.

With warm weather, chairs are put in the river and we sit as a group in the middle of it, with shoes removed. This is a sunny, silent spot immersed in greenery and birdsong, where the rushing sound of water is loud. It is slightly disorientating remaining still for some time, with the water rushing around one's lower calves. In all likelihood it does have an impact upon how one thinks, which is why Maria-Sonia chooses this practice. On one occasion, a builder's van with some young men drove past on the gravel laneway, which is passable when the river is low, as shortcut. They were clearly amazed to see a group of young women sitting in the river and gawked. Mostly however, it is silent and unvisited; though the mud is claimed to be a cure for rheumatism and attracts a few local people. One Case delle Erbe participant related:

> It [nature] does therapy. For example, I go to use the mud at the sulphuric springs, which is not a commercial place nor a designated spot, in that there is no place to park, there are no signs, and no one maintains the path. I go to the historic place. I add essential oils, my own [home-made] essential oils into the mud. One time I met some visitors and I explained what I was doing and I performed the 'ceremony of the water' and showed them how to do it. It was spontaneous and they learned something genuine. This is the way tourists connect to values. They connect to something which has been ignored, in the way that this territory too has been ignored. Now I don't want to go away. Despite the earthquakes. Yes, the services are lacking now. If you choose to remain here it is because you choose to value nature, to value the territory.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2017)

Sitting on the chairs in the water, the first exercise is to draw maps of where the spontaneous plants were found, and this leads to discussion of their growing conditions. This practice is significant because spontaneous plants are 'truly democratic', as Maria-Sonia says, growing in most countries of the world. As each micro niche has different light, temperature and soil qualities, understanding the locations favouring each plant empowers the forager to apply their knowledge in a large range of geographical locations. Currently, ethnobiologists suggest an important role for leaders in 'post-

apocalyptic dystopias' (Nabhan 2016:277–87) is the ability to learn general plant families, rather than one species at a time. One can recognize a species in the '*lamiaceae*' family and know that it is safe to eat anywhere in the world (ibid.:283).

Sometimes this part of the day concludes with using the mud for its curative properties on the body, or walking barefoot in the river, which is an established eco-therapy activity. This segment of the day is completed with the 'water ceremony', as previously described.

Then there is time to gather wood and reflect on what has been discussed or felt. This practice is done regardless of the weather, and it acts as a way of digesting the learning. Generally, it is done individually, each person moving through the forest alone and without speaking. At this semi-reflective level, it is remarkable how repeating physical gestures habitually may physically re-enforce thought/hand patterns. It is symbolic of the process of thinking: gathering together what has been foraged during the morning, immersed in understanding. Consequently, each night the wood is burnt in the hearth for the group to gather around and discuss their thoughts. The significance of hand gestures has been discussed and runs thematically throughout this book, in tandem with the relations Heidegger makes between gathering, collecting together, bundling and the process of thinking, creating an intersection of philosophy and foraging.

After gathering the wood, we return to the Casa delle Erbe to prepare lunch and then the afternoon is spent visiting a different part of the territory, to learn its history, forage there and make notes regarding the plants and their traditions. As will be evident by now, Maria-Sonia tends to choose locations where there is a spiritual history. Monasteries, for example, have a history of foraging and medicinal use of spontaneous plants. Maria-Sonia likes to forage in these settings, as she believes places where people have prayed for centuries have particularly beneficial qualities. Some of the small mountain chapels are very evocative and that day she took the group to a settlement where the road ends with a small church in a valley surrounded by alpine mountain views. The inspiring location creates an impression that also facilitates learning.

On the last day, at lunch time, we gathered in the kitchen, preparing the greens that had been foraged in the morning. One girl was expertly grating a large quantity of parmesan cheese, a task most people find tedious; yet she was radiating happiness. I commented on her skill. She said she always grates it, because no one likes doing it and therefore she has become very fast. The pasta and rice are cooked in the vegetable water from the greens. It gives a flavour to the rice that Maria-Sonia considers indispensable. Everyone helps, sometimes in crowded busyness, as is often the case at the Case delle Erbe; and soon we are seated with meals prepared.

Maria-Sonia commented on this aspect of the Case delle Erbe:

> It's different from an Ecovillage where people sit down to decide and to delegate the work, to discuss who brings food, who does the washing, who sweeps etc. We don't ever discuss this and everything is done by 'manifestations'.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020)

By 'manifestations' Maria-Sonia means the projection of a clear thought and seeing it realized. An additional way of interpreting this is that people in the Case delle Erbe share an attentive awareness and as well as having good will, they are non-passive, so each person finds a way of helping to bring the situation to fruition. By now readers will understand the lack of structured organization is a defining feature of the Case delle Erbe.

Conversation was rapid and animated at the last lunch, with people commenting on what they learnt that morning and aspects of spontaneous plants that surprised them. Maria-Sonia intervened now and then; she is meticulously detailed regarding the time and manner of harvesting each plant, and she explained to the group:

> We are walking between two worlds now. On one hand there is the world of the pharmaceutical industry and on the other the world of traditional knowledge. We have to do our work to the highest standard to maintain credibility. We can't produce vast quantities like a pharmaceutical factory. But we can be organized and start co-operatives, and build a relationship of trust based on quality.

All the participants were experienced foragers before they started the workshop. The young woman who sat next to me was from northern Italy, where she forages and cooks with spontaneous plants as a way of earning an income, without being a member of a Case delle Erbe. She was pleased with what she had learnt, as it has given her a larger vision, added to her knowledge of spontaneous plants and put her life into a larger context. As she explained:

> I was attracted to foraging because I wanted to find an alternative way of living, outside of the patriarchy, outside of society.[13] As I followed this route

13 This was the only time since 2016 that I heard the word patriarchy. Nor did I hear any terms that are similar in any other situations. To emphasize, this participant was not a member of the Case delle Erbe and was from the north, outside of the study area.

> I learned a lot. Here in this training I've learned how working with plants connects the micro to the macro. I mean, we are studying the form of a petal, and then that connects to a conversation with a global perspective.

Before the workshop, she had a more individual vision of her path and through the training she added to her awareness of foraging, in terms of assisting other people, as well as with more detailed environmental knowledge.

Looking at the faces along the table, the level of positive energy, or animated well-being leapt out. The training appeared to be concluding with very satisfied participants. The pleasure of the experience was also reemphasized by the location and by the places Maria-Sonia took the group to visit and forage. Frequently visitors, including those outside the Case delle Erbe, comment on the sensation that the study area is a unique place where nature is more intact. The (Italian) woman who lives in Canada, foraged at home and said, 'I know the plants of the Laurentians much better than the ones here.' Yet here there are many more spontaneous plants and part of the learning arose from the other women in the group, all experienced foragers, sharing insights and personal development over the five days, in this abundant environment.

> I would like to spend every day like this. Being outdoors, the health, the solidarity and learning, it's fantastic. When I see the richness of nature all around me, like it is here, I stop fearing scarcity. I feel balanced.

It is extremely noteworthy that the workshop ended with a 'ceremony of ash' from the wood that was reflectively gathered each day and then burnt in the hearth every evening. This action, the spreading of the ash, was a ceremony of the 'Four Directions' derived from the Iguvine Tablets. In addition, Maria-Sonia articulated how returning the ash back in nature completes the cycle of learning and gives back to the earth. Consider how Heidegger's understanding of thinking, *legein,* derives value from its processes of gathering and redistribution (Heidegger 1974:178–9), on several theoretical and physical levels (Heidegger 1978:220). Collecting the sticks/plants organizes thoughts and grounds the thinking in hand movements that are repeated throughout the day in different contexts, with foraging in diverse places: replicating but also diversifying. The personality types of participants were also represented through recognizing 'families of plants.' As one participant commented:

> I've learned how to identify plants and people – people's psychology. The families of plants are like groups of personality types. I feel more relaxed and more confident.

The thoughts and wood are collected together to make heat and light for the group to gather around the fire in the evening, collecting people's psychology as they share ideas. After unification, gathered around the hearth, each individual separates at the end of the workshop and spreads the ash from the hearth in the four directions as an act of self-alignment. The week's cold ash was emptied from the hearth and put in a bucket to take outside for this ceremony.

On another occasion in the workshop, speaking with Maria-Sonia about the 'Tavole' (Iguvine Tablets) she explained that they gave the inspiration for spreading of ash: apparently describing spreading the ash on the first full moon in January, in the four directions with the rising sun.

> This they do in the Tavole. In the Tavole the ceremonies were only and exclusively for the protection of the territory. While the ceremony that I choose to do is for personal development, a personal path, because everyone of us brings energy to the territory. So the full moon illuminates a project and the new moon removes the obstacles. For this year [2019] the first appointment was with the new moon on epiphany – therefore removing obstacles. And there were the four directions to give to, to think clearly of what we want. The east represents: I need to know, I need to know – it is the thought; then the south brings the thoughts to material, it brings the material relations to the thought. It gives direction to the thoughts. I need to give equal time to document myself and put things into action. And this regards every and all people. They did it in many shamanic traditions. The west represents the faith. It comes after one has operated and done all that we can, if different things emerge from what we expected, we are faithful that existence knows more than us. In the end the north is moment for moment transforming every disadvantage into an opportunity – the weaknesses into strengths.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

In this sense the spreading of the ash is derived from the Tavole but interpreted differently, with a context relevant for participants today. It is imperative to recognize the action is not presented to participants as historic, as might be expected in nostalgic foraging. The connection to the Iguvine Tablets was not explained and the experience was neither offered as a re-evocation nor as 'authentic'. As in other instances that have been described,

participants do not express interest in what may be understood as historically 'accurate'.

We took the ash outside where it is sunny and warm. The grass was tall, the atmosphere verdant and in the distance the snow-clad mountain summits merged and mingled with drifting clouds… Each person took a handful of ash. Time suspends. Some ash starts to drop through one's fingers. As we faced the four directions Maria-Sonia spoke briefly about what each direction represents symbolically: 'the north is for transforming disadvantage into action'. Some people span around, releasing the ash spontaneously. Others were focused on each direction. The ash was pale coloured in the sunlight, making clouds of dust. Afterwards, Maria-Sonia said to me of this action:

> [for those who] participate in the ceremony of the four directions when we turn to the places – it is an action of the everyday, because if you don't have clear ideas in your life, you can't see the directions. You have to know what you want. Then you are an artist not a victim.

The ash fertilized the earth as it spread, sometimes borne by a slight breeze, and Maria-Sonia interprets this to represent the personal richness of the participants giving back to the territory. We returned inside and some people make herbal teas and chat, while others prepared their things to leave, as the workshop was finished. I asked a woman who worked as a councillor in a large urban centre what she felt was the most important aspect of what she had learnt in the five days:

> This training helped me to see the archetypes in nature, which is useful for my work. Maria-Sonia has shown us how the sacred is part of daily gestures. This is an open type of spirituality that people from different religions can be part of. I often work with people who have suffered trauma from traditional religions, so this is interesting for me.

Perhaps it is noteworthy that four of the eleven participants were studying, or already had degrees in, anthropology.

All participants in the Case delle Erbe in the study area have an awareness, to various degrees, of the uniqueness of spontaneous plants and a way of honouring them – in secular terms explicated as participating in a level of energy exchange with a sentient being – embedded in the historicity, seasons and slowness of place. As Zia explains

> I love all the history of the territory, the history of the mountains and the beauty of the environment, without structured tourism. Nature is not ruined

> here. It is left uncontaminated. Without cementation. Living in this nature, the abundance, you study it and you see how plants live. I would rather forage than plant [garden]. I collect in the fields. Just collecting a few, I remain vibrating with wonder.[14] Ecstatic. If I don't have time to forage I can feel the plants calling me.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2017)

Approaching being

To reaffirm, the enquiry proceeds along two paths, and here the first theme – foraging for Being in the Heideggerian sense, as discovered through a relationship with spontaneous plants – comes into clearer focus.

Gadamer, a former student, fellow philosopher and lifelong friend of Heidegger, shares an in-depth reading of Heidegger derived from years of conversations and exchanges of manuscripts (1994). He makes a detailed distinction regarding Being and the 'clearing' experience, arising from marginal notes written by Heidegger in the manuscript of *Being and Time,* 'There, the expression "the place of the understanding of Being" is especially instructive' (ibid.:129).

> With this expression Heidegger obviously wants to mediate between the older point of departure from Dasein (in which its Being is at stake) and the new movement of thought of the 'there' [Da] in which das Sein or Being forms a clearing. In the word place [Statte] this latter emphasis comes to the fore: it is the scene of an event and not primarily the site of an activity by Dasein.
>
> (ibid.:130)

Indeed, this significantly altered my own understanding. I began with the preliminary thinking of 'Dasein (in which its Being is at stake)' (Gadamer 1994:130) in relation to its interaction in the world or place. In fact, it cannot be over emphasized how often authors take Dasein's physical interaction of dwelling and ready-to-hand making (Ingold 2000; Kirillova, Lehto and Cai 2016; Reisinger and Steiner 2006) as Being and authenticity. Led down this overtrodden path, I contemplated foraging as a way of reaching the clearing of Dasein, as described in the act of collecting and bundling. Yet, participating in the Case delle Erbe enabled me to revisit 'dwelling' and be comfortable with

14 The participant said '*mergaviglia*' which casually translates as wonder, but has strong connotations of marvel, and miracle.

Heidegger's less manageable concepts. Through participating I learnt dwelling is not a realization of Being in itself.

To explicate, Gadamer's (1994) distinction is fundamental. In one sense, considering the fieldwork, there is the foundation of an argument for foraging creating the beginning of a clearing, with plants as a portal. This is the required daily groundwork, with hand gestures stimulating awareness, representing 'dwelling'. But dwelling is not an end in itself. This is the point of general confusion. Let us take foraging as an example. Being is not necessarily found through foraging as everyday practice. Nor is it found in the use of Heidegger's example of hammering and dwelling in place, although all these things cumulatively give the required context, for 'the scene of an event' (ibid.:130). What Gadamer explicates is that to experience the clearing, the moment of being inside Being, this clearing must be 'the scene of an event and not primarily the site of an activity by Dasein' (ibid.). Note how the scene of an event differs from an activity. An activity in Heidegger's writing is frequently a type of work linked to building or agriculture.

Within my fieldwork the 'scene of an event' equates with the honouring 'appointment with love'. This is the shape it takes today in the Case delle Erbe. In the past, for Ancient Greeks and Romans, there were other ways of expressing gratitude and honouring (Coulanges 1864) and yet other rituals in the Iguvine Tablets (Menichelli 2017; Nagy 2007). The mode of honouring changes and it may also be secular. In the Case delle Erbe every participant has a different mode of honouring. This unstructured approach seems more inspirational than that of a religion that would proscribe behaviour. Performing what may have been an ancient Greek and biblical gesture with the *Hyssopa*, coupled with the expansive arm movement, was an honouring gesture that gave way to an appointment of love, and seemed to make space physically for a new relationship with the environment.

With hindsight, it must be clarified, gratitude and honouring are not enough in themselves. Their vitality arises from being a conduit for the appointments with love. This is no semantic detail. It would be easy to assume gratitude and thanks form an interchangeable part of the 'scene of an event', or that enacting them constitutes the 'scene of an event' itself. Yet over time, in this location, together with spontaneous plants, it became evident that to die peacefully with understanding, one needs appointments with love throughout each day, to feel simultaneously the love of life shown by plants, and to express this in return. The feeling and the expressing of love is not quite the same as gratitude and thanks. Consequently, we can understand dwelling in a Heideggerian sense, as setting the context which gives rise to actions of gratitude and thanks, and depending on the person's awareness, this can act as the conduit, a lightning rod, for the appointments with love.

For Heidegger 'the scene of an event' in his later writings would be the moment of truth. Truth and Being are entwined and increasingly historical. The original truth is the truth of Being as a whole (Heidegger 1978:80) and 'Truth signifies sheltering that clears [*lichtendes Bergen*] as the basic characteristic of Being' (Heidegger 1978:81).

> Because sheltering that clears belongs to it, Being appears primordially in the light of concealing withdrawal. The name of this clearing [*Lichtung*] is *aletheia*.
>
> (ibid.)

In earlier Heidegger, although not exclusively, the event would be the death of Dasein, which is relevant for us in the Case delle Erbe. Dasein is defined by 'anticipation of its death' (Gadamer 1994:128). Here formulations of Heidegger's understanding of temporality could be entered into, but limiting ourselves only to what furthers the immediate argument, Heidegger's ontological interpretation of 'Being-in-the-World' happens with care. Through care, the fragility and mortality of things express themselves. Dasein's greatest disclosure or appearance happens in experiencing mortality and understanding that our time is Dasein's own making. The theme of death occurs multifariously with Maria-Sonia, as we have seen, and also with other participants, as in an example from a Casa delle Erbe owner, Cristiano, in the study area:

> When I'm foraging with my basket, part of it is the walk, the thinking. I want to see what I will find. Where it will lead me… Even if I were to take all of the plant, I don't kill it because the roots live on. It's like death for us. Our death is partial…
>
> How's that?
>
> There are always people who take something of us. And there is what we leave behind us. There are things we leave behind that we make, or children – is an obvious one. But without blood relations, I carry with me all the people I knew. When they are no longer here there is a continuum in me. Plants are not different from us in their life cycles. In a way we also return – that's a cycle.
>
> (Cristiano, pers. comm. 2019)

Our caring world makes us feel our finitude, death. Therefore 'appointments with love' are moments when death is implicated. Maria-Sonia underlines this

by talking of 'the last appointment', when she will die with love. As has been already expressed, the theme of care manifests itself on three, if not more, levels in the Case delle Erbe in the study area: that of a primary care for plants, that of an exchange or relationship with plants as beings which generates healing, and that of honouring through 'appointments of love'. Heidegger argues that *Sorge* or 'care' (although this is not a direct translation, as *Sorge* implies anxiety also) is essential for Dasein to become aware of our death/end. From a Heideggerian perspective: 'Thus the reflection of death is called for.' (Gadamer 1994:129). Love is care bound by finitude. Love and honouring stem from the same branch as death or finitude.

If experiences in nature are to afford awareness of being, in a potent sense, this correlation needs acknowledgment. Truly engaging in being renders death salient. Maria Sonia does so via her experiential and poetic portrayal of a phenomenological project. A problem leading Heidegger to his famous 'turn' was that ontology was objectifying Being, and he returned to an ontic project, where objectification is 'contrary to the everyday relations to beings' (Heidegger in Gadamer 1994:128). This is precisely the joy of the Case delle Erbe. By putting experience first 'the everyday relations to beings', embodied by spontaneous plants, creates an ontic project towards engaging with being, largely based on bodily experience and possibly more profound for not being written.

Territory of grace and thanks

Living with seasons and responding to the seasonality of spontaneous plants is key to the Case delle Erbe. Yet how does what is, essentially, a common knowledge of slow living in connection with the seasons grant people a deep sense of being and integration with both plants and the environment in the study area? Keeping to the physicality of learning in the Case delle Erbe and 'how experience and perception are constituted through social and practical engagements' (Ram and Houston 2015:1), let us commence with a physical example.

Walking beneath the treeline I paused at a non-domesticated plum tree. Normally I eat the fallen fruits, but a plum presented itself in easy reach. The fruit seemed much too sweet for a spontaneous plant. Perhaps it was over-ripened by excessive summer temperatures. It appeared a perfect example of a non-domestic plum, just reaching maturity. Despite its beauty, or indeed precisely because of it – its overly sweet taste evokes contrasting thoughts of decomposition and then morbidity. As Simon Schama writes in *Landscape and Memory*, interacting with trees and nature 'goes directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality' (Schama 1996:15). Essentially, a pressing mortality and

Figure 5.2 Detail of contrasting sides of one mountain. Griffiths 2019.

simultaneous awe of beauty create a tension, interconnecting one's awareness of plants and seasons towards a more profound sense of being, as will now be elaborated upon. Contrasting thoughts between beauty, fresh growth and decomposition, death seemed to foment within the landscape. Lifting my head to the mountain in front of me I saw a physical representation of the culture/nature, sublime/domestic contrast and cohabitation so typical to the Mediterranean (Horden and Purcell 2000).

The tame gradient, formerly devoted to agricultural fields still vaguely visible at the base, is sliced by sheaths of rock plunging into an area that was previously considered so sublime and difficult to traverse that it inspired the Church of Rome to deem it a pilgrimage route for the worst sinners (Lavini 1998). Thereby, the sublime is situated as inspirational for spirituality. As for the dense forest: 'Thanks to Dante, woodlands as places of darkness, danger, and dubiousness' were: 'considered "features of the spiritual landscape"' (Greenberg 2015:405). Here the dense forest is punctuated with dramatic rock formations, awe-inspiring caverns and waterfalls.

In *The Corrupting Sea* (2000), Horden and Purcell describe the Mediterranean landscape as inspiring religiosity due to the nature of its karst, which erodes to create mysterious caves or dramatic waterfalls, and in which violent contrasts summon awe. The Mediterranean landscape stimulates these spiritual associations in us because, prior to Christianity, the ancient Greeks

and Romans made a direct identification between the sacred landscape and its dramatic features (Horden and Purcell 2000:431) and this lingers in the deep base of our cultural associations (Greenberg 2015) – associations to which Heidegger devoted his life.

The chapter 'Territories of grace: the sacralized economy' (Horden and Purcell 2000:404) is an apt description of the history of the Apennines, with ownership and agricultural production entwined around religious behaviours.[15] Within their well-versed arguments Horden and Purcell do not suggest religious continuity arises from this landscape imbued with religious significance. Observances emerge, abate and are re-invented constantly. Nor do they deterministically suggest landscape supposes a particular type of religion (ibid.:406–8). Their argument is that a distinctive feature of the Mediterranean is the particularly intense religious activity within rural landscape (ibid.:406). If, as we have seen, landscape and its cultural associations stimulate behaviours which in turn create thought patterns, it may be proposed the distinctive level of rural spiritual activity which Horden and Purcell describe, was and is due to people being embedded in a place with a superabundance of sacred associations with their gestural histories.

We are conscious of these associations, or influenced unconsciously. To this day, the social construct of sacredness linked to distinctive features of this landscape is a bedrock, unconsciously prompting daily activities – so that even biting into an uncultivated plum or looking up to a mountain evince sensations of creation and mortality. Partly because the landscape is stimulating sacredness, the sense of mortality is deep. (Intense beauty modestly assuages this contrast, restraining melancholy.) Tensions between heightened feelings of death and life, within an environment stimulating sacredness, inspires us to give thanks and conjoin with what appears to be the celebratory life and death cycle of spontaneous plants. As described in Chapter 4, daily returning the plants' remains back to the earth as if participating in one's own death or

15 While agriculture and the church were bound together, circa 1,500 metres altitude and above was a region famous for penitents, hermits and shepherds, and for folklore, individualism and 'visions', without being fully connected to the productive hierarchy established at lower levels. As the authors comment, it is the diversity of practices, mirroring the density of micro-regions that is salient (Horden and Purcell 2000:423). In the foothills the agriculturally productive landscape further ossifies with the progression of Christianity. As was described in Chapter Two, food was eaten as much in connection to the seasons as it was to the religious calendar. In particular, sweets (cakes/pies/biscuits) were eaten only on one specific day in a year, as determined by the season, the harvest of the ingredients and the religious significance of the day, described as ritual (Mazzara-Morresi 2006:333).

spreading one's own ashes, creates a profound cohesion with the spontaneous plants. In such a sacral, provoking site, interacting with immutable seasonal cycles brings an experience of Heidegger's fourfold to life. Seasons impress themselves upon us as access points summoning hidden or symbolic associations to spring forth.

Lena explains that as we are 'profoundly alone' it is important to learn how to be part of nature's cyclical experience, by connecting with spontaneous plants.

> We feel fear because we are not integrated. If one understands life, one is not frightened of dying. Or it's less. If we are inserted into a cyclical way of perceiving, then there is less pain.
>
> And plants are how we enter the cyclical perception?
>
> Yes.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

This mirrors Schama (1996:15) finding that an engagement with plants leads us directly to our own sense of mortality.

Toward the end of this research (if it has an ending), a family member died. Although I understood Cristiano, the Casa delle Erbe owner who had previously explained our death as 'partial', I had done so as an idea, rather than physically.

> I carry with me all the people I knew. When they are no longer here there is a continuum in me. Plants are not different from us in their life cycles. In a way we also return – that's a cycle.
>
> (Cristiano, pers. comm. 2019)

Only later did I comprehended the weight of his words, and how we erroneously imagine time to be linear (Heidegger 1962:476), though it is actually a circle we tread alongside the seasons and cycles of plants. We are replenished, 'in a way we return', as Cristiano said. At first, I understood this as a poetic phrase or an allegory, but it is a physical description. 'Plants are not different from us in their life cycles,' he told me. Ours is a life like that of spontaneous plants, as one generation replenishes the next, each 'leaping ahead', making space by giving 'authentically' (ibid.:159) for the next. This is partly why Heidegger understands the future and past to be so enmeshed and writes that the ordinary way of interpreting time covers up our primordial temporality (ibid.:476). As Lena says, 'Linear time leaves a person in a desert.'

(Lena, pers. comm. 2019). Real temporality occurs when we feel how time is created by Dasein's finitude (death) and nothing else.[16] This awareness transpires or comes to the fore with a slow life, paced with mortality and birth of plants and seasons. Significantly, it obscures a personal identity project, as the individual is instead bound to a vast cultural and natural cycle which is relatively anonymous and more-than-human.

Thus, a bland conception of seasons representing the passing of time in one culture, can become an 'opening to infinity' within ourselves (Lena, pers. comm. 2019) in the study area. In Lena's perception, interacting with spontaneous plants is how we open our cyclical connectivity. Here we observe the integrated or *integritas* (Eco 1986) experience of the Case delle Erbe in the study area meshing into Heidegger's fourfold. For a moment let's pause and reflect on Lena's statement:

> Everyone has a little bit of the opening to infinity in them. This is what I mean by being part of a bigger whole. In my sense, this is life.
>
> (Lena, pers. comm. 2019)

Through interaction with spontaneous, non-controlled plants and the seasons, within a slow life, a 'bit of the opening', a fracture, initiates a vastness that is an anonymous enormity. This is not a cosy community of practice. It is visceral knowledge of space extending beyond an individual life, encompassing death. Herein is lodged the concept I have called the 'territory of grace and thanks', a place grounding a person to stand barefoot, both belittled and empowered. Spontaneous plants root this embodiment.

Territories of grace and thanks are not measured in relation to standard productivity or the work imperative. Spiritual associations abound in them, due to historic and distinctive environmental features stimulating religious or spiritual activity within the rural landscape (Horden and Purcell 2000:406), as Heidegger describes the fourfold. More specifically, Heidegger writes of spirituality within the fourfold which unifies man/earth/sky/divinities as one,

16 As with spontaneous plants, we are 'thrown' into the world and all our 'turning away' or 'anxiety' has waited in our Being, existing before us. One section of *Being and Time* which highlights this theme is the 'Being-towards-death' discussion (Heidegger 1962:293–311) which culminates in 'freedom towards death' the most authentic aspect of Dasein (ibid.:311). This discussion is revisited throughout the whole of *Being and Time*.

> The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook upon themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it.
>
> (Heidegger 1978:107)

Within the fourfold the temple's spirituality:

> first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world…
>
> (Heidegger 1978:106)

This 'open relational context' grows out of the spontaneous plants (as previously mentioned, each individual finds their own way) with mortality and births, heightened by the associations of seasons and land influencing us, unconsciously in this context. Heidegger would relish the pre-Hellenic temple facing the mountains, several hills away from where this book is being written. The site is used in the summer for local people to hear ancient Greek being spoken or read aloud. As we have seen, the sacred is quotidian. It is not an exotic escape. 'The sacred is every day.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). The study area's rich biodiversity makes one feels this sentence corporeally beneath one's feet[17] and this sacredness can also be secular as within the rural religious context. The 'embedding' of a 'web of connectivity' blurs 'the doctrinal differences' (Horden and Purcell 2000:406) and stimulates cross-pollination beyond traditional religious perspectives to include new age and personal or secular spiritualities.

In the Case delle Erbe honouring and gratitude blur 'doctrinal differences' by offering a secular option (consider Lena or Alberto, who is agnostic). Secular spirituality, popular today, entails 'the acknowledgement of spirituality without religion' and has 'become commonplace' (Chastain 2017:633). This view proposes life as a 'gift without a giver' (Chastain 2017:638). However, in the Case delle Erbe there is a giver. The giver is spontaneous plants.

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17 'Of all the European countries, Italy has one of the largest stores of biodiversity, accounting for half the plant species and a third of the animal species occurring in Europe.' (EEA 2015), while in northern Europe, in a semi urban landscape with few spontaneous plants 'the sacred is every day' becomes abstract and one tries to reason with it as if it were a vague idea.

Recall how Maria-Sonia says, 'We have to give the greatest value to things that are free. Then the highest importance for us is to show our gratitude in return to the earth.' (pers. comm. 2019). 'Our gratitude in return to the earth' is heightened and provoked by a place that stimulates gratitude: the territory of grace and thanks. Within sustainability science 'More research that acknowledges positive emotional connections, spirituality, and mindfulness in particular is called for' (Wamsler *et al.* 2018:143).[18] A territory of grace and thanks reduces the nature–culture dichotomy, offering a level of integration by symbiotically stimulating sustainability within two epistemologies. Firstly, the larger environment of the territory of grace and thanks offers its own overarching integration of nature with cultural references and with social constructs regarding spirituality or gratitude and honouring as a context for dwelling. Secondly, embedded therein, slow lifestyles, attuned to the seasons with spontaneous plants as an 'opening to infinity' within ourselves (Lena, pers. comm. 2019) integrates nature and culture within the inner world of the person. This embodiment closely approximates Heidegger's dwelling in the fourfold.

The experience economy and Case delle Erbe

A preliminary discussion of honouring, identity and being has been offered. Now we turn to the second focus of this study: understanding the Case delle Erbe's post-growth experience economy, with its implications for slow adventures/tourism and experiences in nature.

In this section slow adventures (and therein slow tourism) are placed in relation to the Case delle Erbe as an initial point of comparative discussion. For those unfamiliar with the movement, a cursory description of 'slow adventures' and their context is provided. Thereafter, we consider nature-based lifestyle businesses in relation to the Case delle Erbe. Subsequently, a summing up of divergencies with de-growth is given. Finally, the larger picture including conceptual implications of commodification and decommodification of experiences requires interrogation, and this results in the illustration of the economic themes brought to light in the experiences.

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18 Some sustainability studies are transitioning towards the perspective of the Case delle Erbe. The 'vast majority of sustainability science has focused on the external world of ecosystem, economic markets, social structures and governance dynamics. In doing so, a critical second dimension of reality has been neglected: the inner lives of individuals. We argue here that our inner worlds, such as our emotions, thoughts, identities and beliefs, lie at the root of sustainability challenges and are fundamental to the solutions to some of the world's greatest challenges.' (Ives, Freeth, Fischer 2020:208).

A scholarly article by Varley and Semple (2015) put slow adventures on the map within the framework of outdoor tourism and adventure experiences. They have their roots in the slow movement (Honore 2004; Petrini 2001) and importantly in the traditional practice and understanding of the Nordic concept of *frilufsliv*, developing sensitivity and awareness of the 'more-than-human world' (Varley and Semple 2015:78). They base the concept of slow adventure on Ingold's (2000) perception that 'the significance of time is woven into the landscape as history, heritage, tradition and origin' (Varley and Semple 2015:82) within slow adventures. Clearly slow adventure is part of slow tourism and 'Likewise, slow travel celebrates simple, local, traditions, sensory and affective aspects of the experiences generated through movements at a slower pace and immersion in the destination and local way of life.' (Farkic and Taylor 2019:1). Within this sketch, it is important to highlight how slow adventure interprets defining characteristics regarding 'time, nature, passage and comfort' (Farkic *et al.* 2018)., which are interconnected. In sum, time may be understood to be awareness of the journey's passage, and passage encompasses both 'physical and spiritual, is the navigation through time, space and the self' (ibid.:3).[19] Comfort has a contextual meaning of being comfortable with the 'challenges of the journey' and within the connections of 'place and self' (ibid.). Foraging is generally described as a component in slow adventures (Farkic *et al.* 2018). From this sparse overview, it should be apparent that the concept of what an adventure may entail has shifted from a focus on risk and adrenalin towards so-called soft adventures involving personal development, and connection to communities of practice and to nature/place (Varley, Farkic and Carnicelli 2018).[20]

As Farkic and Taylor elaborate, 'the temporal aspect of the tourism experience and the commodification of slowness seem crucial here' (2019:3), and indeed commodification is the remit of the latter section of this chapter. Further, discussing 'highly embodied activities' they call for research that is immersive and that:

> …should investigate how people may successfully recreate familiar, comfortable spaces in which they experience longed-for feelings of reconnection, restoration, reunion, regeneration or recreation, and make a meaningful contribution to their improved wellbeing. Crucial here is to

19 This is an effective definition of the word '*passaggio*' as used, with some prominence, in the Case delle Erbe.

20 The Adventure Tourism Trade Association states that adventure tourism includes 'at least two of the three conditions: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion' (Chen, Mak and Kankhuni 2020:2).

> extend the research into temporal, psychological and social dimensions of the slow adventure concept as a commodified tourism product.
>
> (ibid.:4)

Perhaps this book makes some step towards addressing this call. Readers can doubtless comprehend how the Case delle Erbe create experiences with these 'longed-for feelings' and perceive an overlap between the Case delle Erbe and this short description of slow adventures.

However, the implications of divergences between the Case delle Erbe and slow adventures are illuminating. Foundationally, the Case delle Erbe functions in reverse compared to slow adventures. The only cohesion for Case delle Erbe on a national level derive from their values (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Contrastingly, 'Slow Adventure' is a brand, with marketing and business cohesion (Farkic *et al.* 2018) that seeks to create shared vision and values. Case delle Erbe's cohesion may amount to the description Alberto gives of how 'There is something about them that makes you certain right away that they are a Case delle Erbe kind of person. It's as if you can tell they are one by the nose.' (Alberto, pers. comm. 2019). This sensory explanation presents distinction that requires clarification. We have acknowledged that Case delle Erbe, 'Do not like to be organized. They like to do as they like themselves.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Their cohesion is neither specifically created nor designed. As will be explicated, some similarities between participants in the Case delle Erbe seem to emerge through prolonged relationships with spontaneous plants and thereby shared personal development and values. Rather than cohesion, referring to Alberto's quote above, it is more appropriate to describe a visceral or sensory consistency. Each Case delle Erbe is different, but this consistency is not vague. In the study area it has very tangible qualities: commitments to decommodification and lack of control, and strong tendency toward a culture of sharing or '*condividere*'. This consistency, underlying other shared aspects, allows the Case delle Erbe to exist without branding or control.

Today this is a radical distinction. Imagine an organization without a given structure. Can one exist? It does, and it is the Case delle Erbe. The consistency, as described, enables people to find shared solutions:

> In the end everyone arranges themselves in relation to each other. It's not disorganized. Everyone brings their own contribution and works it out. Afterwards I thought you don't need to be organized…
>
> (Nel, pers. comm. 2019).

Hence, the Case delle Erbe is a popularist movement not a business organization. Recall how the Case delle Erbe is without a logo, without a

newsletter, without conferences, without registration or memberships. As Maria-Sonia often says, the differences in how people realize their Case delle Erbe are wonderful.

Maria-Sonia, as main proponent of the Case delle Erbe, says 'it is impossible to organize the Case delle Erbe' for three interconnected reasons. Firstly, 'everything is constantly changing on all scales'. For example, one person who was important in a Case delle Erbe recently moved to Mongolia. People's lives change and they may suddenly need to move to look after their parents. Festivals that were popular suddenly stop being so. Maria-Sonia emphasized several times how festivals were important in the beginning of the movement for gaining new members and making contacts. Secondly, a high percentage of things take place in the Case delle Erbe by happenstance and this is accentuated by Case delle Erbe values being opposed to control, exemplified by Lena – 'I prefer not to organize. I like to follow the flow.' 'In this way people and events pop up or drop out all the time.' Finally, Maria-Sonia is cognizant that 'They do not like to be organized. They like to do as they like themselves.' Extending this attitude, Maria-Sonia is not in the least concerned about when she will no longer be there as a figurehead.

> I do not try to control it [the Case delle Erbe]. It happens of its own, spontaneously. Almost by contamination. When I am no longer here, it will keep changing. Nothing is fixed.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comms 2019)

Her choice of the word 'spontaneously' is significant, as in Italian non-domestic plants are called *piante spontanee* (the terminology used in this book) as discussed in Chapter 2. The entire sentiment of spontaneity correlates with the Case delle Erbe's lack of control, flexibility and attraction to happenstance. The Case delle Erbe in the study area mirror the ways in which spontaneous plants themselves prosper.

Distinctions defining the Case delle Erbe may be emphasized by comparison with normative categories of what are considered nature-based experience and adventure lifestyles (Lundberg, Fredman and Wall-Reinius 2014). Studies show these lifestyles often remain appealing even when no longer very viable economically, demonstrating a commitment to values beyond financial aims. 'In addition, making a profit is not considered important in comparison to "making a living", spending time with family, freedom and independence.' (Tervo-Kankare 2019:2). 'Far from being a main motivation monetary gain was not deemed even important…' (Lundberg and Fredman 2011:656). As elaborated upon in the last chapter, the Case delle Erbe do charge for some experiences. Members of the public, usually arriving from urban areas and

participating as visitors are charged nominal prices (e.g. twenty euro for a full day experience). People who are more involved in the Case delle Erbe, including those in training, do not pay. Some Case delle Erbe in the study area ask for an exchange in return for providing accommodation, while others will charge the most minimum fee for accommodation and provide experiences for free, as we have seen.

It is because Case delle Erbe experiences are part of personal life that they can be affordable, exchanged or free. This creates key distinctions regarding the perception of and approach to experiences. Case delle Erbe experiences depend on sharing one's personal everyday in one's home. As they do not require planned travel into 'wilderness' such experiences are frequently left unorganized, to arise serendipitously, as when Alberto's French friends wanted to make a concert, or when Maria-Sonia's arrival at a Casa delle Erbe is celebrated by the creation of an experience. Experiences are also offered for personal reasons, because those in a Case delle Erbe are doing something they wish to share. Finally, they are offered in response to requests, rather than being marketing to create a need. Thus, they are predicated on happenstance, with less control and less prescription than nature-based tourism lifestyles. As discussed, *piante spontanee* are associated with springing up where they wish, without being ordered. Consider how the opposite of spontaneous plants requires toil in order to make a controlled agricultural crop grow. In the Case delle Erbe context, co-habitation with nature, sharing synergies, can reduce work and control simultaneously.

Another overlapping context, useful as regards the Case delle Erbe in the study area, is that of amenity migration, which offers more than a decade of academic exploration of a holiday-lifestyle theme (Moss 2006). Case delle Erbe owners in the study area are almost exclusively amenity migrants: ex-urbanites who moved to a desirable natural environment for its distinctive culture, for pleasure and contact with nature, without economic motivation. Underplaying the difficulties amenity migrants often experience, amenity led migration has academically been referred to as 'the longest holiday of a life-time' (Bourdeau 2008:30). Within pre-retirement age groups, amenity migrants frequently face financial pressure in an effort to sustain the chosen lifestyle (Stockdale and MacLeod 2013:89), as was observed in the study area prior to earthquakes. For the Case delle Erbe, monetary pressure is reduced or removed because experiences are done from home and require no investment in equipment, and no ownership of land or special buildings. As Maria-Sonia frequently states, participants do not need to own land, tools, equipment or outbuildings. Essentially, one only needs the ability to walk to where one can legally forage.

To illustrate, a Casa delle Erbe owner from the north of Italy specializes in making pesto from spontaneous plants. Ole makes the pesto with a knife, not an electric mixer, and frequently offers his experiences (foraging and then making various pestos) in tents, under trees or in mountain huts. He calls himself the Casa delle Erbe 'vagabond' because he does not have a structure or house as a base. His experiences can happen anywhere. His pesto recipes are extremely popular, and when I asked if he would ever consider making a business to sell them, he said, 'No. It would not be right to sell it.' (Ole, pers. comm. 2019). To sell the pesto he would have to use a preservative, which is against his values, though mostly he thinks as it would no longer be fresh it would lose its nutrients. Importantly, it also would lose the experience of making it. Ole prepared lunch for a group of us, and apart from being tasty, including raw nettles to give it zing, the foraged pesto gains appeal by being made by an expert and, as discussed regarding marketing, it acquires further value by not being for sale. The point is that though Ole refuses to sell the product, he will give it for free, or for exchange. Therein lies the ultimate attractiveness of his product, an exemplar of the civil economy and of the Case delle Erbe economy, so different from slow food.

Thus, we can comprehend how Maria-Sonia can say that 'Even if a Casa delle Erbe is closed, it is still a Casa delle Erbe because of the people who live there, how they live, their values.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). 'Slow' has been described as 'signalling an alternative set of values or a refusal to privilege the workplace over other domains of life' (Parkins and Craig 2006:1) and this importantly includes a refusal to 'rationalize' the self (Burkitt 2004:226). Considering the experiences the Case delle Erbe offers, we can understand Melucci's belief that engaging in slow sincerely is 'where deep individual experience transforms itself into a social energy for change' (1998:180). Being motivated by values rather than a work structure also grants the Case delle Erbe particular resilience during recessions. For instance, Maria-Sonia considers the COVID situation to be the perfect awakening for the public to change their lives, and comments on how the Case delle Erbe are growing in popularity:

> You can't work to earn money anymore so you have to think about life. We are on this planet to do [make] something precious. Covid is teaching people to learn to integrate with nature. To learn to be custodians of the planet. This is what our ancestors[21] have been telling us to do. They are teaching us this.

21 Perhaps it is obvious in this exemplar that the word 'ancestors' is not intended as Maria-Sonia' progenitors, but as all of the people who came before us and are

> But why only now? Why didn't the ancestors tell us before now?
>
> Because people were not ready before. They had jobs where they could make money so they didn't think.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020)

Evaluating changing economic futures, we have discussed the role of the Case delle Erbe within the perspective of the civil economy, Norgard's (2013) 'amateur economy' and also Jackson's (2017) community-based social enterprise and voluntary non-monetized sector. Nonetheless we sidestepped a main issue. Part way through my immersion in the Case Delle Erbe, I suspected a narrative could emerge positioning it as part of the degrowth movement; how and why this proved incorrect provides a framework for distinctions that may be illuminating for non-Italian readers. The Case delle Erbe in the study area are not influenced by and actively position themselves as separate from eco-feminism and other types of feminism. Nor is the Case delle Erbe influenced by post-structuralist thought, and is void of any resonance with Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze or Manning etc. Significantly, the Case delle Erbe in the study area retains distance from all environmental and political theorists. A principle reason for this stance is explored in detail in Chapter 7. They do, however, have their own (unique) imaginaries, creating particular visions of the world and reality.

Although 'degrowth' is based predominantly in France and Spain, in Italy there is the *decresitafelice*, a 'happy degrowth' movement with a manifesto dated 2011, that is rather milder than the Spanish varsion (Martinez 2017). Happy degrowth focuses on changing Italian government spending, although the website currently also embraces social action regarding climate change, disabilities and recession.[22] How can we better understand the Case delle Erbe regarding its differentiation from degrowth?

Firstly, degrowth has a global social-justice agenda. This is not present in the Case delle Erbe in the study area. Furthermore, they purposely disregard what they view as the media's abundance of negative information and do not engage with contemporary issues and international news (unless it is optimistic). Case delle Erbe members focus only on positive local actions, and void of the discussion of social or environmental justice that characterizes the activist degrowth movement (Martinez 2017). Degrowth places social justice at the core of environmental and economic justice (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015) in a similar way to the international bestseller *This Changes Everything;*

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dead; the spirit world.

22 www.decrescitafelice.it/en/chi-siamo (4 January 2024).

Capitalism vs Climate (Klein 2014). Without doubt this stance is fully justified, yet the Case delle Erbe do not engage with it. Dovetailing experiences of home and personal aspects of being, Maria-Sonia's decommodifying statement about giving gratitude for what is free is attractive as a simple, common-denominator approach to degrowth. At first, it seemed to me that Case delle Erbe values might be framed as a gentle, inward-focused strand of degrowth. Yet greater contrasts lurk.

Although the Case delle Erbe aims to change the world, it functions on a local level, wherever that may be. In reverse, degrowth embraces the global picture, beginning with deconstructing global capitalism (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015). The Case delle Erbe makes its own infrastructure without trying to change institutions (e.g. the banking system), which are perceived to have failed. This is contrary to degrowth, where a goal is to change the infrastructure of society. The Case delle Erbe either quietly distances itself from the establishment, like Lena; or integrates with the establishment, like Alberto does by linking his Casa delle Erbe with universities, or as Maria-Sonia does when partnering with government-funded projects.

Another notable dissimilarity is that Case delle Erbe culture is self-regulating; the personal politics of individuals have no directed structure and take diverse expressions. Therefore, members of the Case delle Erbe have little homogeneity in their politics or religious beliefs or lack thereof. The commitment to spontaneous plants does however ground a consistency, one offering great openness. Over the years I have only once heard a conversation that even touched upon inequalities, racism, oppression or criticisms of politicians. This is due to an propensity for doing, and speaking about, positive actions, perceived as a stimuli for more affirmative energy. This preliminary description will shed its vagueness in a later discussion (see p. 204).

The Case delle Erbe's ability to collaborate with the establishment make it valuable to local authorities in terms of providing 'services' for the community. Speaking of the movement nationally, Maria-Sonia recounts 'Now the local authorities are coming more and more to us' (pers. comm. 2019). By way of example, two mayors in two towns in a region next to the study area actively sought partnerships with the Case delle Erbe during July 2019 (including giving free use of a 'baronial palace' to a new Case delle Erbe). In the same month, Zia was asked to give a talk in a town hall in another region of Italy, explaining how the Case delle Erbe can interface with a local authority. This harmony exists because the Case delle Erbe provide some local authority aims:

- experiential learning (intergenerational);
- well-being and health experiences;
- community cohesion;

- lean start-up and entrepreneur economy (albeit based around exchange);
- intense valorization of place.

Decommodification and a larger vision of the experience economy

A most distinctive aspect of the Case delle Erbe in the study area at the time of writing, is the commitment to the decommodification of experiences. This commitment is what distinguishes the Case delle Erbe from business people. Why is this significant and how does it function?

> Give the same honour to plants as you give importance to yoga or reflexology. Things have value because they have intrinsic value, not because you pay! Gratitude is what distinguishes a forager.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Regarding learning how to value what is for free (and show gratitude) as opposed to what we pay for, Maria-Sonia discusses the obligation some providers make that participants leave their phones behind:

> If the experience were to cost Euro 300 a minute you would never look at your phone. The only way to make a change is by changing values – people have to do it as their free choice. The objective has to be personal growth. You [one] would take the day off work to drive all the way to Perugia, to buy a remedy from a special herbalist store. But that person will say they can't take a day off work to spend time in a field gathering the plant, the same cure, themselves! People have to learn to give value to what they don't pay for! We have to give the greatest value to things that are free. Then the highest importance for us is to show our gratitude in return to the earth.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Similar expressions about teaching people to value what is free are made by all the Case delle Erbe in the study area. To understand the heightened importance of 'things that are free' and decommodification, it is crucial to consider 'intangible' markets, including those of surveillance capitalism, which is powered by the selling of 'behavioural futures markets' (Zuboff 2019:8).[23]

23 Zuboff has a page long definition of surveillance capitalism, including: 'Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data.' (2019:8).

> Just as industrial capitalism was driven to the continuous intensification of the means of production, so surveillance capitalists and their market players are now locked into the continuous intensification of the means of behavioural modification and the gathering might of instrumentarian power.
>
> (Zuboff 2019:9)

The intangible economy is perceived as having clear growth globally (Haskel and Westlake 2018). In Chapter 2, the rural experience economy was positioned as a response to the global value of intangibles, arguing that the experience economy and eco-economy arose from moving out of a production economy into our current knowledge-based economy. The rise of intangibles highlights some salient points regarding commodification. The profitable global intangibles (Haskel and Westlake 2018:43) are commodification of information (computerized 'behavioural markets'), 'innovative property' (arts, design, pharmaceutical, entertainment, R&D) and competencies (often banking, brokering, insuring). In 2015 this change was already observed by mainstream economic academics, and was described as 'Value is increasingly being created not from physical assets but from knowledge and the virtual assets it creates.' and 'The highest proportion of high growth firms hold intellectual property and intangible assets.' (Burns 2016:5).

To understand the role of commodification, consider how we are in 'stagnation' yet corporate profits are up and many firms' profits 'have never looked better' (Haskel and Westlake 2018:94). The gap between the leading firms and the majority of business is the largest it has ever been. The leading firms are a small global group, profiting from intangibles and catching each other's 'spill overs', other opportunities for profit (ibid.:103). The intangible economy has made the richest much richer and has heavily hit the working class in developed countries, as discussed in relation to the demise of the shoe industry in the study area. Intangibles have also created 'inequalities of place' in which rural areas 'are left behind' (ibid.:123). Given that more than a quarter of Europe's population live in a rural environment (Perpiña-Castillo *et al.* 2018:8–9) adds significance to this impact. For prosperity, rural locations require landscape capital, in other words the 'mother nature' layer intact, as described by Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova (2013:11) and infrastructure to attract the experience economy, ex-urbanites, amenity migrants or the Swiss 'New Highlander entrepreneurs' (Mayer and Meilli 2016). We observed in the 'Henderson cake model' that when the commodification process expands the monetized cake layer, it is 'often contributing to a shrinking of the nature economy layer as well' (Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova 2013:11). This shrinkage is most visible and detrimental in a rural setting.

Although commodification has been an issue in tourism studies for more than decade, sometimes described as 'consumerization' (Sharpley and Stone 2010:4), and already in 1944 Karl Polanyi described the capitalist need to create 'commodity fictions' (Zuboff 2019:99), its forward progress means few aspects of life remain non-commodified. The pressing change for us, considering foraging and other non-efficient activities, is how our mode of socio-cultural consumption extends commodification's grasp wider, now encompassing small-scale, relatively private, daily practices. Selling intangibles made by commodifying a skill or ability which was previously free, represents a societal detriment, while also presenting itself as an obvious business opportunity in many rural environments. Precisely because foraging has been separate from mercantile values over millennia, it creates a particularly precious escape from consumerization. But it also transforms foraging into a perfect 'product'.

Here let us posit an understanding of what I would term cultural bankruptcy, based upon product/market life-cycle theory, which is similar to Butler's 'tourism area life cycle' (Butler 1980). The familiar market cycle is of tentative growth, then steady growth, maturity and possible decline. Let us elaborate on this from the vantage point of millennia, taking the example of the Apennine transhumance and wool industry that thrived for thousands of years (Battistella *et al.* 2000) and is now virtually non-existent. In the study area this neolithic tradition of sheep rearing was famed for creating wide-spread prosperity, offering employment for all, from children to elderly, with a wide range of skills. Women would forage for dyes for wools in the mountains, while male merchants were dealing in the urban and international wool trade.

The issue is how once something enters the product/market life cycle, it becomes time-bound due to growth, and therefore with inevitable end. After the growth phase, when product saturation is reached, it could be reinvented or regenerated by innovation, with significant social changes. Fast-paced technological development suggests that when a product reaches its critical range of capacity, it can create a 'spin off' (Haskel and Westlake 2018), an opportunity for a new product. Or it may be utterly replaced by something apparently similar, that involves different cultural and social practises. This occurred with industrialization of wool and textiles. Ultimately, in the case of the transhumance, which in the central Apennines lasted for three thousand years as a continuous tradition, plus another thousand years in a state of diffusion (Battistella *et al.* 2000) the product becomes fully redundant. The profit margin decreases and, more importantly, a substitute product takes its place (synthetic textiles, mechanized mass production etc.).

So far foraging has avoided this life cycle and redundancy by not being productive. In the Case delle Erbe this history of non-productive, non-monetized foraging continues. It has remained within the social economy,

and therefore has not entered a life cycle bound to decline. Key though, is the ability for the product to be substituted or not.[24] Optimistically, with the passing of centuries, taking the example of the *pastore,* or shepherd, there may be an argument for some commodified activities finishing their product/market trajectory and subsequently reappearing as (non-efficient) hobbies. These hobbies quietly re-enter society at the level of unpaid community structures and home-based production.

Redundancy of the transhumance means little to Europeans today. The eventual hollowness or redundancy of experiences would not be so simple to ignore. The implications for slow tourism are grave; by taking non-market capitals (foraging, caring, well-being) which were fulfilled in the non-monetized economy and placing them in the market as a commodities with a price tag, we diminish free aspects of life. This in turn reinforces the work ethic, ensuring people have to work longer, or more efficiently/faster, to be able to purchase the formerly free aspect of life. As previously discussed, humans may have reduced capacity to perform hand movements with associated loss of thought structures. Society could futuristically be that of index-finger-swiping workers, who purchase commodities within surveillance capitalism.

While some companies would profit from this economy, it is likely to accentuate what has already occurred: corporate profits vastly increase for a relatively small group of global businesses. Setting up a nature-based experience business in which slow adventures are conceived of and sold as 'products' (Farkic *et al.* 2018) may appear to be a good rural entrepreneurial endeavour. Yet slowly, behind the scenes, a process of social poverty is at work. The experience economy, as a rural reflection of the growth of intangibles, is currently based on commodification; and as more aspects of life are commodified, people have to work more and slow becomes impossible.

Is the Case delle Erbe offering a life-saving alternative? Appearances may mislead and significantly the aim of *Foraging for a Future* is not to find a model to be rolled into production. But in essence, decommodification is ready-to-hand for all of u, by offering exchange rather than payment for a product or a service. In these instances the products are removed from the market place and become a part of the social world (Boulanger 2009). The first step is learning to give highest value to things that are free. Maria-Sonia says 'we want to change the world,' and the Case delle Erbe take a pragmatic approach.

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24 While some might argue changing market forces are responsible for growth or decline, the pivotal factor is actually substitution. Since around 2009 foraging has become in danger of being substituted, as companies are now cultivating spontaneous plants in central Italy. The truffle industry in Italy is an older case of cultivating a spontaneous food product.

> The Case delle Erbe stimulates a non-normative society. Exchange, the idea of exchange is cultural. Stimulating exchange is cultural, it's not monetary. It's a way of giving value to relationships. The Case delle Erbe spreads the vision of a new lifestyle. We shouldn't have to suffer for changing society. We aim to enjoy life while being radical. Once there is a movement then it is easier for others to join in…
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2019)

The idea that radical people do not need to suffer in order to change the world is to be developed elsewhere. Here, however, note that values regarding pleasure and enjoying life may include radicalism. As before, the emphasis on exchange resonates with Alberto's 'relational tourism' and the civil economy. It is no coincidence that the action of exchange (usually called barter) is a direct means of decommodifying (Boulanger 2009).

The word 'barter' (*baratto*) is used by Maria-Sonia, but not by those born in the study area, partly because it was a word that did not exist locally, although what we understand by it was a central part of local, rural life, as two Case delle Erbe participants described to me in 2019:

> When was the word barter first used? In the 70s?
>
> No never.
>
> But Maria-Sonia uses it.
>
> If I think of barter, as it is known, as we use the word now, I think it is taken from our school books when we studied history and it was written that there was no money, but there was barter. Barter gives the attributes of a primitive society and the passage to using money is presented as a progress. So, barter has this perception that was negative.
>
> Archaic. Barter was connected with a society that has not evolved.
>
> Yes, yes. Today we trying to autonomously realign ourselves in the economy – I don't know what happened in the year 1,000 BC but the concept of barter was never nominated (articulated). Exchange was a concept always, and always in a profound manner. It is a thing that is characteristic here but also everywhere.

The Case delle Erbe 'autonomously realign' themselves, carving out a radical niche within the whole economy. However, the Case delle Erbe

perceive their current existence as a phase of evolution, towards the creation of a new culture based on spontaneous plants.

> The initial phase of development is the Case delle Erbe. We can also have money, and we can even use money without the banks being behind us. Because we make our values. The value we live is the value of plants. This is a radical transition. We are in a phase [now] that includes the combination of the economy of money and that of exchange. This is a transition [*passaggio*].
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2019)

In 2019, more exchange was taking place with health practitioners for well-being and treatments; and less for food or wood, as was previously the case (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). In this stage of transition, exchange is not spread evenly across all aspects of life. The Case delle Erbe takes the foundation of a new culture as the basis for a new economy. They perceive the monetary economy as the 'old' economy: 'It doesn't work anymore. Those times have passed.' (Zia, pers. comm. 2019). Maria-Sonia strongly supports this view, believing the harsher the recession, the more attractive the Case delle Erbe. As we have seen, she believes our phase with COVID and recession is special, as people were not able to think when they worked to earn money: 'People were not ready before. They had jobs where they could make money so they didn't think.' (pers. comm. 2020).

Mature or post-capitalism may act as a tipping point for people to reposition foraging as a focus of rural life, a theme which Alberto sensitized me to (p. 125), and one resonating with daily life in the study area. For example, during Italy's industrial boom of the 1950s, which began to impact the study area in the 1960s, people out-migrated from the mountains and foothills for factory jobs in the city. Along with change of lifestyle and diet during this vivacious phase of prosperous capitalism, foraging ceased and was scorned. A mountain dweller in her eighties expressed the common sentiment at this time: 'It was food for poor people. So no one ate that then. Now, if I see a plant around, I will eat it.' (Maria, pers. comm. 2019). She no longer faces social criticism if she forages in her mountain hamlet. This theme is further explored in Chapter 7.

Yet, care and caution are prompted, for one size does not fit all; as discussed, decommodification is not always attractive to rural people and it is frequently, although not exclusively, embraced by ex-urbanites with exposure to more information and alternative values. Revealingly, the Case delle Erbe's social and political consistency in the study area is not solely a result of participants being educated, predominantly ex-urbanites. As introduced in

the first chapter, experience in the Case delle Erbe suggests that economic consistency (shared economic values, shared modes of exchange, shared aspirations) may arise from prolonged interaction with spontaneous plants in the study area. To illustrate, let us assemble characteristics of consistency resulting from interaction with spontaneous plants, already highlighted.

- Spontaneous plant recognition forms an understanding of other people, as is illustrated in the following exemplar, and was also elaborated upon by Alberto: 'The Case delle Erbe [national movement] catches a primary need in people. The need to recognize and be recognized. This is how humans become human.' (pers. comm. 2019).
- A focus on spontaneous plants attune participants to living slow with the seasons as Lena describes, within the 'territory of grace and thanks.'
- Spontaneous plant recognition offers a means and mode of honouring: 'I see you – [plant] like a star constellation. I recognize you [plant]…' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019).

Regarding economic cohesion, 'The value we live is the value of plants' (Zia, pers. comm. 2019), while also saying money can be used without banks because we have our own values, are significant statements. A connection appears between interacting with plants and the exchange economy. Additionally, exchange itself…

> It's a recognition, an awareness – In terms of recognition and consciousness – and therefore we, within the discourse of the Case delle Erbe, we say, I know you, and I know the plants, I give value to nettles but also I know you. I say to you directly 'can I borrow this machine?' Before it was diffuse in this area, everyone would share machinery.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2019)

In the above, a relationship between valuing nettles and knowing (valuing) the person creates a culture and economy of sharing. Knowing plants in this manner generates shared values, forming the fabric of a society where one can feel secure in sharing and exchanging. We have observed how foraging in the Case delle Erbe is used:

> It creates a kind of cohesion, a knowledge that links people to each other, their culture and the biodiversity around them. It is a social fabric, one which joins people and nature.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2018)

This 'social fabric' is not a concept; it is tangible. The value given to spontaneous plants (not simply using/consuming, but valuing them in interactions) seems to attract shared socio-political values as in the 'discourse of the Case delle Erbe'. The shared value of nettles and people engenders a sharing economy. Whilst the interpretation of the history of foraging in Chapter 2 may have seemed detailed, it was offered to stimulate discussion around the collocation of Case delle Erbe values and those which some archaeologists ascribe to pre-agricultural people, whereby foragers lived 'with a network of egalitarian communities', 'linked by social interactions' (Ruiz 2005:477). The transition into farming at times emphasized deep cultural differences between foragers and farmers due to the economic 'tension between hording and sharing imperatives' (Leppard 2014:491). The past is brought to light here not as an attempt to expose a truth, instead this thought exercise considers how many of the attributes we ascribe to capitalism arise from the root and body of agriculture. Therefore, contrastingly, engaging in foraging today in the manner the Case delle Erbe do, may have far reaching socio-political implications.

Maria-Sonia has frequently commented on how people tend to follow the same series of developments, a shared sequence resulting from their participation in the Case delle Erbe. In her eyes, those who participate in the Case delle Erbe in an immersive manner over several years, progress through similar points of development by interacting with spontaneous plants and assuming them physically 'giving them body'. She says, 'Put it into practice. Speak of a thing and then do it.' (pers. comm. 2019), learn how to harvest a tea, find it, make it and drink it, in this way people arrive at 'equilibrium'. The next step is that everyone acquires a type of faith. 'Then the faith. People have increased their faith by participating. Or faith just arrives.' (pers. comm. 2019). Later, they arrive at a stage of wanting to share what they have to help others.

> At first I used to think my role was to teach about plants and trees. Now my work is to create richness in as many people as possible'
>
> When there is continuity in a person, when they do it (being in a Case Delle Erbe with spontaneous plants) in continuation, then it's normal to want to bring richness to other people. It's a change that happens on its own naturally.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Before participating, I had no awareness of a conceptual linkage between spontaneous plants and the exchange economy, nor how this interface generates a social fabric. An argument may rest within the Case delle Erbe

suggesting that interacting with spontaneous plants, a relationship that is not embedded in ownership and control, stimulates a non-productive society of recognition and exchange with a more collective social outlook based on sharing and adapting, rather than dominating the environment, moving with the seasons and frequently earth-honouring. A key message, repeated nationally in the Case delle Erbe, is how participants need not own land, nor control the plants with herbicides or fertilisers, nor plant seeds etc. Clearly, the Case delle Erbe is not motivated by labour for production nor does it depend on hierarchical genealogies granting ownership of land.

Continuing this theme, Casa delle Erbe owner Cristiano describes spontaneous plants:

> They have intelligence. The intelligence of plants is for us to learn. They have communities and communicate with their roots. They have a harmony that we don't. Imitating the vegetative world helps us because they have a superior knowledge.
>
> (Cristiano, pers. comm. 2019)

Although facing stark financial pressure, Cristiano explains he would never ask for payments–for the accommodation he offers, nor charge a fee for spontaneous plant experiences. This Casa delle Erbe owner's behaviour is opposed to production and power. Cristiano maintains that people may choose to donate money, but preferably they should offer exchange. The following excerpt elaborates on his values:

> I live a slow lifestyle in the sense that I spend more and more time doing things I care about, in the kitchen with food, and with plants.
>
> You would like to be a chef?
>
> Yes, that is my ambition. But I wouldn't do it as a business. But not in a business structure… I think my feeling for plants and nature has always been inside me. I have a simple life, like when I lived in S there was no heating, so I slept with a hundred jumpers and a hat. It seems hard but in the end I was fine. I never got ill. You realize you can live without heating. A simple life, an austere life is very good. One only needs a community.
>
> Could plants be that [community]?

> Yes, plants and animals are part of the community. I don't have any domestic animals. I don't want domestic animals. Plants and animals have to have their autonomy. They interact with us but not domestically.
>
> (Cristiano, pers. comm. 2019)

His introduction of the theme of domestication of plants and animals (therein control for productivity) is interesting in relation to early foraging values, when animals were autonomous.

In sum, living closely with spontaneous plants in a post-productive rural location inclines Case delle Erbe participants to slowly absorb some of the plants' own self-organizing qualities and to share a cyclical perception that goes beyond individual concerns. Additionally, precisely because participants move through similar transitions (wanting to know how to use plants, then moving toward a relationship with spontaneous plants, and recognizing shared values with other Case Delle Erbe participants so that one uses one's richness not solely to produce products but more as a means of helping others and the plants themselves), resulting from their interactions with spontaneous plants, control is not sought.

Conclusion

Let us gather and bundle what we have at hand. We have explored the idea that interrelating with spontaneous plants in the setting of the Case delle Erbe stimulates a more collective and non-productive society attuned to nature and a different economy.

The movement of the experience economy toward commodifying everyday experiences has been elucidated. Our culture likely runs the risk of great impoverishment and participants wanting slow experiences in nature will either have to opt out of the experience economy, or work harder to purchase slow, turning slow into an empty signifier. Visions of future economies predict more time outside of work, but rather than questioning how leisure can be made affordable or more austere, the question here is what happens when experiences reach their critical threshold of growth in the market lifecycle. At times this demise will result in a 'spinoff'; other times we might happily see former activities returning to a social economy as hobbies.[25]

Longer term, as the experience economy becomes redundant, it may be replaced by a virtual technological economy, but free time could become an empty space for de-skilled individuals without any profound physical

25 Regarding wool and the *pastore*, loom weaving and wool spinning are popular as demonstrations of historic practices and often hobby groups coalesce. Ironically, this is only beginning in the study area.

experience, eking out an existence in 'the artificial creation of scarcity' (Johanisova, Crabtree and Frankova 2013:11). Relatively insignificant experiences remain uncommodified, and because they are few, paucity creates an argument to protect them. In conclusion, a familiar theme: 'It is about control.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019).

Here Dreyfus' analysis of Heidegger assists us.

> To begin with, Heidegger holds that we must learn to appreciate marginal practices – what Heidegger calls the saving power of insignificant things – practices such as friendship, backpacking in the wilderness, and drinking the local wine with friends. All these practices remain marginal precisely because they resist efficiency. These practices can, of course, also be engaged in for the sake of health and greater efficiency. Indeed the greatest danger is that even the marginal practices will be mobilized as resources. That is why we must protect these endangered practices. But just protecting non-technical practices, even if we could succeed, would still not give us what we need, for these practices by themselves do not add up to a shared moral space of serious, meaningful options. Of course one cannot legislate a new understanding of being. But some of our practices could come together in a new cultural paradigm that held up to us a new way of doing things – a new paradigm that opened a world in which these practices and others were central, where as efficient ordering was marginal.
>
> (Dreyfus 2006:366)

Is the Case delle Erbe a new paradigm?

Dreyfus here parallels my discussion in his own terminology: resisting efficiency, resisting effective ordering and mobilizing resources. Indeed, 'we must protect these endangered practices' and 'marginal practices', which is what foraging has historically been. The 'saving power of insignificant things' perfectly describes spontaneous plants or 'weeds'. This is where the Case delle Erbe begins, yet the fieldwork shows it is but a beginning.

The Case delle Erbe offers more than resistance to efficiency and protection of marginal practices, for it offers portals to inspire other ways of being. Of course, the Case delle Erbe makes us immediately attuned to the irony of Dreyfus' comment about 'legislating' a new understanding of being (ibid.). If efficiency or production become a goal, control is required. What experiences of being exist if we commodify almost every aspect in life?

Where now? The weak ontology in Chapter 7 intones a direction.

6

Parting with Heidegger

What and how can we honour now?

Facing fallen branches after a storm and recalling how Heidegger first became entwined in this project, again I collect and gather (thoughts). When gathering branches or sticks, similar shaped pieces can be grouped together. Is this a vestigial practice (obsolete for the urban and technological populations), historically performed in a certain manner? Physically, I find laying sticks together that are very different from each other group better as a bunch. On hands and knees, I gather many diverse branches. Twigs of acacia with multiple branches splayed out in all directions are smaller, yet they mesh into the other pieces, actually holding the collection together. Substantial differences exist between the demands of the two research themes and critics might shy from bundling the economic themes of the second line of enquiry together with the context of honouring, upon a shrine. Yet that is where I posit both questions. Of course, this is exactly what the Case delle Erbe do also.

Before we arrange our offerings and discover what words are to be said, if there are any, it is here we part paths with Heidegger. He has been an experienced guide on our journey and enriched understandings, but there – with backward glances and nods of recognition – we part ways and he proceeds on his circular routes in the woods. Chapter 4 explicated Heideggerian synergies with the Case delle Erbe, but this rendering was not intended as prescriptive, it is simply one way of interpreting, and it was offered to address large topics such as being and to begin a discussion about the Case delle Erbe within a framework not frequently used. Likewise, in what follows, the interpretation offered is not intended as the only way of reading Heidegger; its value lies in it having emerged from participation in the Case delle Erbe. Hence, this chapter explicates a different understanding of Heidegger, born from several years of interaction and participation with the Case delle Erbe in the study area. We begin with a small example and directly move to the central concept.

Figure 6.1 A mountain chapel with a shrine to the future. Griffiths, 2019.

Gadamer, Heidegger's friend and student, defines Heidegger's hermeneutics as principally addressing, 'How is understanding possible?' (Hoy 2006:178). The Case delle Erbe replies: understanding being arises by interrelating with spontaneous plants. Heidegger would not agree, due to his own narrative and place in history. Perhaps Heidegger never put experience first, physically in his hands, although he advocates for it (Heidegger 1962:98). For Heidegger, language and historicity create the clearing for the advent of Being, and only via language is man able to meditate on Being (ibid.:156). Although he held that objectification is: 'contrary to the everyday relations to beings' (Gadamer 1994:128) the changes he intended to stimulate were intellectual; unlike those of the Case delle Erbe.

A simple point illustrating how lived experience may highlight shortcomings in a philosophy are illuminated by 'care' and its boundaries. Few people would wish to geographically confine their care to a single locality, nor to the house where one dwells, yet even if one were to restrict it to one's own backyard in the most myopic manner, animals and people nonetheless arrive displaced by misfortune, disaster or climate change and require care. The moral dilemma of wanting to care while having realized the limits of one's capabilities is a harsh predicament. Whether one dwells in an isolated forest, or as an international activist working for social and environmental justice,[1]

1 Rather than discussing boundaries as to what care a person can encompass, Young (2006:380) explores a contemporary idea of global care from Heidegger's

there are times when one reaches a limit of personal capacity. The moment one excludes something from care remains pitifully embossed on one's mind. In Heideggerian terms this exclusion amounts to a denial of Being and one would not do this where one dwells.

Additionally, cross-cultural limits to care compound difficulties. As a foreigner, as one who feels '*foris*', as in 'outside', when in the Middle Ages *foris* intended 'fugitives, misfits, the persecuted, the wild men' (Greenberg 2015:402), my understanding of care is not always the same as the culture I inhabit. As a simple illustration, many men in this rural area are proud of how they care for their domestic animals. To me, with different values, their care often represents bitter cruelty. It would be illegal for me to impose my style of care upon their animals. On a simpler level still, locals may look at where I dwell and think 'she doesn't know how to care for land', due to cultural values shaping land-management ideas.

For Heidegger, it would seem that limits or constrictions to expressing care never arose, partly because within a nationalistic vision of Germany there was a belief that place equates with culture; an idea discredited today (Okely 2012:27). Heidegger's ideas are primarily rooted in the farming community of Messkirch, a conservative Catholic community. Heidegger's father was a sexton in the church and in this same church, where Heidegger grew up, Heidegger later asked to be buried between his mother and father's graves (Caputo 2006:341). Heidegger only writes from the perspective of one who is rooted within his natal culture.[2] In our international and post-modern world, the physical and emotional practicalities of global interconnectivity make extending care to other people and to the more-than-human increasingly important and fraught. Heidegger's use of *Sorge* as care is not directly translated in our English usage, as *Sorge* also means anxiety or worry, and these aspects do encompass care today. Nonetheless, in our interconnected global world, where people may live in different countries within their lifetime and may be engaged in large networks of care via global NGOs or communities of interest made accessible via technology, Heidegger's intent of nurture and care rooted in one's birthplace contrasts with quotidian contemporary life.

More significant, however, is that Heidegger embodied values his writing does not directly espouse: namely he was entrenched in a strict control and production mentality with regard to nature. I propose that some of these underlying values in his thinking seep into society, reinforcing our inability

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perspective of the fourfold, without finding resolutions.

2 Despite Heidegger's original and radical thinking, later in life he is quoted as saying: '*Ich bin niemals aus der Kirche getretten*', intending that 'he had never left the Catholic church' (Sheehan 2006:72).

to engage with pro-environmental behaviours and restricting a sustainable relationship with the natural environment.

Bringing several background aspects of Heidegger's life to the foreground may help us understand. One may well wondered why Heidegger did not consider people before the ancient Greeks. Born in 1889, he might have found archaeology too speculative and he was critical of anthropology (Cykowski 2015:28), although he was influenced by and close to Max Scheler who remains the author of the 'foundational text for philosophical anthropology,' (Ifergan 2015:360). Heidegger's lifelong relationship with theology, was a central motivating influence (Caputo 2006). Intending to become a Roman Catholic priest and with a scholarship funded by the Catholic church, Heidegger was embedded in theology for many years.[3] In his thirties he began a search for the factual life experience buried within the New Testament, based on Luther's critique of Aristotle; thereafter writing his own interpretation of Aristotle, for which he became famous (Caputo 2006:328–9). Working with Protestant theologians at Marburg, many of the core concepts of *Sein und Zeit* arise from this factual investigation and in this period early Greek spirituality was equated with early Christian experience. Hence, theologians were excited by *Sein and Zeit*, finding 'they stared into their own image', for Heidegger's work represented a 'demythologized' and formalized Christian existence with the removal of cosmological myths (ibid.:330–1). If we perceive Heidegger's work as primarily secularizing fundamental biblical Christian constructs, then it is obvious pre-agricultural people would be of little interest; although this may have begun to change in his later life with his interest in the fourfold.

A probable influence is also the Pergamon Altar. Having seen this relic in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, as Heidegger would see it as of 1930 and later in his lifetime, it is hard to exaggerate what a showstopper of an attraction this was and still is. The romanticism of the ancient world was an intense theme in German culture during Heidegger's adult life, culminating in its use by the National Socialist Party, which Heidegger joined in 1933 (Steiner 1978). Even in this phase, with his preference for early Greeks over early Christians, 'it was clear to everyone but Heidegger's most fanatic disciples' that Heidegger was Hellenizing concepts of human existence from Christianity in his interpretation of early Greeks, in ways 'that were quite alien to the Greeks' and yet highly appealing for Catholic theologians (ibid.:336). Thus, for a range of reasons, we need to be cognizant that Heidegger only considered human society as an agricultural society, and that his work is rarely free from Christian constructs, even if they are hidden.

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3 Imbedded Catholic aspects within Heidegger's work may explain subtle resonances between Heidegger's thinking and the Roman Catholic study area.

The amalgam of Christianity and agriculture in Heidegger's mind is obviously a historical one, conceiving that man has god given right to use the earth for man's benefit (Carlisle and Clark 2018:217–18); and that Christianity and agriculture are tightly entwined in the productive landscape, as observed in the Mediterranean (Horden and Purcell 2000:426–7). In previous chapters, mention has been made of how the farming lifestyle and using manly tools (Clark 2002; Moraldo 2012) were dear to Heidegger's project. Agriculture is the backbone of Heidegger's thinking. In *Being and Time* (1962:112), Heidegger describes the farmer who studies the sky for rain and as Dostal writes,

> it is hard to accept the claim that Heidegger makes… Only by the circumspection with which one takes account of things in farming is the south wind discovered in its Being.
>
> (Dostal 2006:141)

Heidegger suggests that by being accomplished in farming, the farmer is able to access Being, or as Dostal writes: 'only through farming do we discover it "in its Being"' (ibid.). Apparently, in 1955, addressing the Schwartzwalder 'peasants', Heidegger typically condemned calculative thinking, rendering nature utilitarian, and complained about the television antennas on farmers' houses, signifying their being closer to the TV than to their fields (Dreyfus 2006:360). Here is the lingering shadow of romantic visions. Somehow farming is to remain separate from Heidegger's understanding of world technology, where human potential is simply ordered 'development for the sake of future growth' (Dostal 2006:362), which is a good description of agriculture both past and present. In 1953 Heidegger had written 'The question concerning technology' (Farrell Krell 1978:215), in which a central argument holds that man orders the self-revealing essence of nature into a rationalized standing-reserve which is a resource driven concept understood as existing simply for human use, and in this work, he criticizes our manipulative stance toward nature. The way in which Heidegger imagined 'peasants' farming (Dreyfus 2006:360), enabled him separate agriculture from his understanding of our contemporary manipulation of land.

While he romanticized the simple farmer, dwelling in place, working the land the old way, he did not believe plants, trees or animals have a being (Firenze 2017). Only Dasein is concerned with being. Although Heidegger riles against exploiting nature, he perceives the world in solely anthropocentric terms: the signature of those enamoured with agriculture. Hence, for Heidegger the earth exists to support the weight of man's buildings (Young 2006:374), as if it were a simply a platform for man's use, albeit, at times, a spiritual use.

> First of all we relate to things as things-there-for [our use], things there-in order-to [accomplish some objective or task]. And we are that for the sake of which they exist, at least in our initial take on them. 'The forest is a forest of timber', Heidegger writes, 'the mountain is a quarry of rock, the river is water power, the wind is wind in the sails'.
>
> (Maraldo 2012:55)

Later, in 'The question concerning technology' Heidegger (1978:239), draws a line between using nature for man's immediate needs with hands-on application, and using nature in a calculative manner to generate a standing reserve of power, stock piling and in service to 'enframing' nature, wherein man is the 'order of the standing reserve' and ultimately man falls into 'the point where he himself will have to be taken as a standing-reserve (Heidegger 1978:232) – a point Zuboff (2019) explicates today. To this end, Heidegger would not object to a watermill functioning in harmony with the flow of the water, yet he is critical of a hydroelectric dam, aiming for yield by unlocking energy (Heidegger 1978:223) with manipulative enframing.

Attractive as the idea of relying on an old watermill for energy may be, the issue at stake is the scale with which we dominate and consume other beings in order to fulfil our social ideas about consumption. Within our anthropocentric stance the essential question is one of degrees and importantly types of behaviour that can manifest sensitivities or compassion toward the more-than-human (Marder 2013:13). The extremely exalted position Heidegger awards man alone, excludes these sensitivities, albeit intellectually, due to positioning man as vastly distinct and superior to animals. This avoids a naturalistic argument of man as a more sophisticated animal with rationality and language as supplementary brain development, which Heidegger opposed. The tendencies, emotions and beliefs underlying this hard-anthropocentric posture are likely the fruit of Heidegger's attachment to theology and agriculture.

Essentially, in Heidegger's world we interact with nature for man's needs. This perception is represented in the fieldwork by Maria-Sonia describing the basic level of recognizing plants and using/consuming them. Or by my description of myself as a visitor, interacting with 'What plant is that?' and 'How can I eat it?' Heidegger is highly preoccupied with using nature, implying control and a work ethic, and framing his longstanding investigation into hand tools and equipment. Trees are cut to make timber for man to hammer to dwell, for what else is there to do with trees: 'since what things *are* (their being) is accessible only insofar as they become intelligible to us (insofar as they show up for us as relevant or as counting in some determinate way)' and fulfils our need for 'being there' (Guignon 2006:5). This represents the 'Da' in

Dasein. In Heidegger's argument, things have no worthy being outside of their use for us and they are subject to our need and control. In later Heidegger this is not entirely the case, as he writes with great sensitivity about how 'violence has long been done to the thingly element of things, and that thought has played a part in this violence' (Heidegger 1978:94). Nonetheless, his hard-anthropocentric stance never changes and 'Dasein has ontological priority over all other beings '(ibid.:38).

Generally, the sensitivity with which Heidegger engages in the natural world is via the work ethic. Man does not sit around enjoying nature and allowing it to live in peace in Heidegger's theory, as is expanded upon in *Poetry Language and Thought* (1971). As Young writes, Heidegger shows man as practical, and 'because we are given over to "toil" (ibid.:220) we are, in a broad sense of the word, "workers" (we cannot but bring about intentional changes in the world), things show up for us in "work"-suitable ways' (Young 2006:376). Man is at work, using nature and producing. Nor does Heidegger ever mention inefficient things like free time or play.

> The notion of 'play' is quite alien to traditional rationality. Traditionally, 'play' is understood as the break one takes from the serious business of life. Play in this sense is understood to be a deviation or departure from rationality, from the calculation of ordering for the sake of further ordering that has the character of utmost seriousness.
>
> (Robbins 2003:17)

Although Heidegger pitched his philosophy against instrumental rationality, man's acts are working to transform nature, cutting it into products of use.

> It is telling that the opening scene of *Being and Time* is that of the craftsman at his workbench surrounded by his tools, and not a scene in a more 'natural' setting. Tools, like the hammer or turn signals of an automobile [Heidegger's examples], are human constructs and are defined, as Heidegger points out, by a network of [human] involvements.
>
> (Dostal 2006:141)

I have not encountered literature touching upon Heidegger's attraction to the work ethic and production, yet Dostal unintentionally highlights my argument.

> Heidegger treats our encounter with things in the world as exemplified by work in a workshop. In the first place, according to the account given there,

> we experience things practically as equipment [Zeug]. The equipment of the workplace is either 'handy' … or not handy.
>
> (ibid.:140)

This vision represents agricultural, productive, organized values at work.

> Taking things as useful objects is itself a mode of seeing; it is seeing something as there for some-thing else, a circumspection Heidegger calls *Umsicht*, that is, a view to a goal in sight [*eine Sicht um zu*].
>
> (Maraldo 2012:56)

Certainly, Heidegger later describes how the breaking of a tool is the moment of recognition of the object/tool, a time to attend to the present and feel anxiety or care. Yet these moments of crisis are exceptions within the productive working day. Later this perception develops:

> With regard to things, *Gelassenheit* is a fundamental shift from the kind of seeing and apprehending that the Heidegger of *Being and Time* elucidates as our most common way of treating the things we encounter in the world. Instead of using things in expectation of reaching a goal or objective, *Gelassenheit* calls for a waiting quite different from expecting, a waiting that has no specific object already in mind, that leaves open that upon which we wait (Heidegger 1995:115–16). Instead of the looking with a view to a goal in sight [*Umsicht, eine Sicht um zu*] that is at work in our usual comportment with things, waiting is staying with whatever might open itself to us.
>
> (ibid.:62)

The 'there for some-thing else' in the second sentence represents 'work.' Regardless of how he views objects and nature, his energy drives work, goal, skill, control, without letting be, nor recognizing nature as sentient.

Toward the end of the Second World War the concept of *Gelassenheit*[4] was likely Heidegger's amelioration of his instrumental and productionist view, since *Gelassenheit* equates with Eastern philosophies, describing how a person can lose their identity and will in the perfection of a skill. It represents willing not to will. As well as its Eastern influence, *Gelassenheit* is apparently part of the vocabulary of the early Christian, Meister Eckhart (Caputo 2006:337), one of Heidegger's primary mystic influences. Nonetheless, while Heidegger's

4 Literally, 'peacefulness or 'serenity'; but what is intended is more like letting things be and being open to them.

Gelassenheit frequently arises through repeated actions (work with a tool), it does not form a central part of his philosophy, as it is a later addition, and as Moraldo explores, Heidegger rarely relinquished the self of 'goal-orientated instrumental practice' (Moraldo 2012:65). At the *Gelassenheit* point, perhaps Heidegger could be sympathetic to the Case delle Erbe. But could he understand a person who is happily unstructured, moved by the seasons and happenstance, looking for serendipity and communing with spontaneous plants – rather than hammering away to build his anthropocentric home based on agricultural production?

Recall how Heidegger considers all 'presence-at-hand', including plants, to be within the 'what' group, existing to be categorized (Dostal 2006:140) and born out of his productive mindset. Referring to the handiness of tools and objects Heidegger writes 'Readiness-to-hand is the way in which entities as they are "in themselves" are defined ontologico-categorially.' (Heidegger 1962:101).

> …language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time. Where there is no language, as in the Being of stone, plant and animal, there is also no openness of being and consequently no openness of nonbeing and of the empty.
>
> (Heidegger 1978:128)

In later Heidegger, increased emphasis is place on language as a vehicle for Being – 'Language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself.' (Heidegger 1978:156). Although Heidegger suggests that more-than-humans could have a lower type of being, it is only when man names them that they come to be, as the beings of usefulness. Hence, giving things names 'is a projection of clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the open as' (Heidegger 1978:128), implying more-than-humans only fully exist when they come into our sphere and are given credence. Analysing Heidegger's aim of presenting man as the only creature ontologically attuned toward understanding Being, Derrida (in Firenze 2017:150) comments on Heidegger remaining enmeshed in metaphysics by using man as a measure of all things. Heidegger…

> reintroduces the Cartesian-Hegelian spiritual man as the measure of all things, hence reintroducing metaphysics itself, which, rather than being overcome, would remain under the guise of post-metaphysics.
>
> (Firenze 2017:150)

Entranced by a rich interpretation of ancient Greek culture, Heidegger cast a romanticized shadow over the contemporary yet 'traditional' agricultural world of his native south Germany. As significant as his conflicting anti-metaphysical stance is, I propose Heidegger's deep bond with agriculture, linked to the *Ursprung* of his philosophy, restricted his vision by unquestioningly promoting production and the work ethic. This curtailed him from an in-depth experience with spontaneous plants and nature. As Firenze concludes regarding the animal world, Heidegger was 'oblivious' of deep bonds between 'natural life and human existence', one of the most pressing aspects of philosophical thinking today (2017:151).[5]

Ironically, Heidegger is frequently considered a philosopher for environmentalism (Zimmerman 2006:294), yet what this contradiction demonstrates is Heidegger's artfulness. As described in Chapter Four, Heidegger is shifting, concealing and opening interpretations, creating his own vocabulary, which evolves with our own understanding and mirrors societal shifts. We saw how during experiences in the Case delle Erbe spontaneous plants, including trees, can be perceived as a 'who' and not a 'what'. Further, considering how gathering fallen wood can be interpreted as part of a hand movement stimulating a thought/brain pattern, associated by Heidegger with a bedrock of thinking, we now turn to a narrative, stimulated by participating in the Case delle Erbe, for Heidegger's placement of Being in the 'clearing'.

In earlier Heidegger, in its essence Dasein creates or is its disclosedness (Heidegger 1962:171), its own clearing, which is bound to human capacity. For Dasein by 'Being-in-the-world it is cleared [gelichtet] in itself, not through any other entity, but in such a way as it *is* itself the clearing' (Heidegger 1962:171). In later Heidegger, coupled with *Galassenheit*, the clearing reveals as an interrelated space rather a than human capacity (Zimmerman 2006:311). Heidegger writes that the ancient Greeks did not think Being, nor did they question it (May 1996:31), as Being may have been integrated into life. The word *Lichtung* (clearing) suggests light, which connects with an explanation of ancient Greek etymology and Heidegger's use of nothing, as openness. In *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) Heidegger writes:

> In the midst of beings as a whole there is [west] an open place. There is a clearing. This clearing is, thought from the side of beings, more 'being'

5 While Heidegger may be excused, as a product of his time, Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) writing contemporaneously, although in America, is still considered an inspirational environmental thinker. Heidegger was born only two years later in 1889 and had the advantage of living much longer (died 1976). Leopold discusses values regarding humans in the natural world in terms that we still aspire to today.

> [*seiender*] than beings… The luminous [*lichtend*] middle itself encircles like Nothing… all that is [*alles Seiende*] (Heidegger PLT 53/41).
>
> (May 1996:31)

For Heidegger the 'self-veiled' Nothing shining in the clearing is a positive opening and not identified with rational thought (May 1996:32). May's study elucidates the influence of Eastern philosophy on Heidegger (1996). Heidegger was aware that the Eastern meaning of the clearing intended 'A multitude… of men, acting upon a forest, felling the trees.' (May 1996:33). Heidegger's clearing:

> …refers to a place that was originally covered in luxuriant vegetation, as in a thicket in a wood, but where trees have been felled so that there is now an open space, a clearing.
>
> (May 1996:32)

May explores how within Chinese script the concept of the clearing that Heidegger focused upon summoned up concepts of 'defect, want, negation' (ibid.:33) and a place '"there, where there is nothing", a place where formerly there were trees' (ibid.:32). May's aim is different from ours, for he is explicating Heidegger's concept of nothingness drawn from Eastern philosophy. Other authors (e.g. Zimmerman 2006) have added to May's work, excavating the degree to which Heidegger appropriated Eastern philosophies and exploring Heidegger's numerous interactions with prominent Eastern scholars, as well as his attempted translation of the *Laozi* with Paul Hsiao (May 1996:32).

Based on an understanding arising from participating in the Case delle Erbe in the study area, I became attuned to Heidegger's metaphoric choice of situating Being in a clearing of felled trees, as part of Heidegger's unquestioned appreciation of agriculture. Here I present an interpretation of the 'clearing' as a result of and an apology for agriculture.

Clearances of trees and woods in Europe originally took place for agriculture and intensified during Christianity. The church of Rome was aware that a passion for trees and flowers symbolized a 'death-that-is-no-death,' which came close to idolatry and the faithful were instructed to 'utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree' (Schama 1995:215). Contrastingly, in pre-Christian times, as we saw in Chapter Two, the Sabines are described in the 'Pre-Roman period' of 700–300 BC as an 'advanced culture' living in small settlements scattered around the marshy environmentof a lake (Mensing *et al.* 2015:86), close to the study area. The Sabine style of pastoralism had little impact on forests and Mensing *et*

al. (2015:85) demonstrate that the only environmental changes during these centuries were a 'response to climate rather than human activity'. The Central Apennine Sabines are understood as an earth worshipping culture with deities representing woods and water and conceivable also mountains, as a famous mountain crossing is named after one of their gods (Cordella and Criniti 2008).

Contrary to popular belief, forest clearance did not correspond with population growth (Mensing *et al.* 2015). Sabine society prospered and integrated with the environment without clearing land.[6] Pre Roman peoples in the study area are understood generally as collaborating with the environment to hand and being connected to plants and animals (Menichelli 2017). For ancient Greeks the forest was a sanctuary and frequently tree cutting was outlawed, as trees were inhabited by goddesses (Greenberg 2015:380–1) and 'men were born from oaks' (ibid.:383). With the growth of agriculture (and later Christianity), this attitude utterly changed and Heidegger is well aware that the clearing he intends is made by cutting down trees, as he writes in *The End of Philosophy*:

> To clear [*lichten*] something means; to make something light, free and open; for example, to make a place in the woods free of trees. The open space that results is the clearing [*Lihtung*].
>
> (1978:319)

One might ask if, during the destruction of nature, including controlling nature as a productive resource, we disposed of our individual relationship with honouring. The interpretation proposed here suggests as agriculture evolved alongside Christian civilization, nature become a 'what' and no longer a 'who', emphasizing the argument that humans only claimed the right to control nature when spirituality was removed from nature (Bennett 2001; Blumenberg 1983). Knowingly, or perhaps unwittingly, Heidegger correlates our realization of Being as situated in a site of deforestation and indirectly situated in 'defect, want, negation' (May 1996:33). Perhaps the 'defect, want, negation' and the 'clearing' create an accurate description of Europe's evolution.

But is it correct to suggest an apology for agriculture and/or for the clearing? Although Heidegger was aware of the original negative connotations

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6 Integration was also previously exemplified in many of the high-altitude communities of the Apennines (over 700 m) where the shepherding families sagaciously embraced both constraints and opportunities of the mountains, rather than dramatically changing (compromising) the environment to suit man's agricultural goals (Griffiths 2014).

of the 'clearing' in its Chinese source, he probably believed his reinterpretation to be positive. His language celebrates the positiveness of the clearing, and language is his skilled and principle tool. His proposal of the absence of trees is actually metaphorically indifferent for him, for it is only via his conceptual discussion of Nothing that this empty space acquires value. His philosophical project offered so much richness to man, that he would perceive it as an adequate validation for sacrificing the trees in the clearing. He would view agriculture in the same light; necessary for man as the higher creature he rightfully is, with priority over all other beings (Heidegger 1978:38). An apology is not intended for humans, as they are compensated for by receiving *Sein und Zeit* and therein a new 'way' out of our negative metaphysical jungle. Given Heidegger's anti-rationality, his strident non-instrumental stance and his Catholic (Caputo 2006:326) conscience, if there were an apology it was for cost borne by the natural world for housing man's project. Mysticism presented a means for Heidegger to distance himself from his mind's productivist values. Mysticism was the balm to conceal a gaping sore.

What Heidegger metaphorically stated, although he may not have intended it, is that consciousness as we know it in Western Europe, with our mentality of production, control, and defence, increasingly requires the destruction of the natural world. Indeed, a clearing of felled trees with metal tool in hand would give rise to just our particular type of consciousness and over time these hand movement create thought patterns. A consciousness driven by the sensation of physical dominance over a raw resource, (rather than a spiritual or sentient tree), developed into increasingly complex goal-related achievement and efficiency values. This would transpire within an anthropocentric lens. Symbolically the 'clearing' represents simultaneously our loss of a symbiotic relation to nature and our acquisition of power.[7]

To further untangle these strands, the site of the clearing is cut out of the whole and may be envisaged as a circular (semi-circular) space, similar to clearings occurring naturally without man's efforts in woods. An early understanding of the image of a circle is interpreted as a symbol for unity and an image for the self. For example, Jung describes the history of the symbol of the circle as having expressed 'the totality of the psyche in all its aspects,

7 Discussion could seem complicated here by Heidegger's attraction to the 'fall' from grace and from the Garden of Eden, which spawned his theory of the positivity of 'fallenness'. This is also evidenced in another form in 'The question concerning technology' (Heidegger 1978:235) and elsewhere. Yet the distinction is how Heidegger connects fallenness to Dasein's search for authenticity (Steiner 1978:96) and ultimately the point is a reversal into positivity. Whereas the clearing is positioned as positive and desirable from the outset to the end of his work.

including the relationship between man and the whole of nature' (1958:266). Historically, as the relationship to the whole of nature altered with farming, the development of accounting is perceived as evolving from the increased need to calculate and record larger volumes of agricultural produce; at least this is the argument based on studies in the Fertile Crescent.

> It is argued that as people transitioned from an egalitarian, mobile hunter-gathering way of life to living year-round in permanent, hierarchical farming villages, they needed clay 'tokens' in order to count and maintain a record of quantities of livestock, crops and food supplies.
>
> (Bennison-Chapman 2018:235).[8]

Calculating larger and more complex amounts of production, the circle transformed from representing fullness and self, to becoming a circle which ultimately represents zero in mathematics and commerce. The circle moved from self, to production functionality and the basis of technology. In this narrative, Heidegger's 'clearing' becomes an allegory that mimics our condition.

Heidegger's conception of nothingness as a richly revealing sensation in the 'clearing' is based on mysticism (May 1996) and his own theological background. Youthful Heidegger 'was marked from the start for Catholic priesthood' (Caputo 2006:326) and studied theology from 1909–13 within a tradition where unstructured honouring was long abandoned. He may have used mysticism, including his study of St Augustine and his fondness for Meister Eckhart (Steiner 1978:103, 125) as a means of funnelling his longing for a holistic world, at odds with his conscious mind, driven by work, control and productivity. For Heidegger a crucial mistake of Western philosophy was to think Being (May 1996:29) rather than to realize Being is understanding. Yet, despite Heidegger's ardent intent, the Platonic tradition of debasing the physical as hollow, is continued. In this case it is taken radically further. The physical is destroyed to make it hollow and the self transforms into a production unit. A blind eye is turned to this.

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8 It is important to recognize that current interpretations suggest the use of 'tokens' was not a simple transition as was supposed in the 1990s and there is scholarship suggesting sophisticated accounting began at the end of the neolithic during an agricultural period. The 'tokens' may have previously served gaming or spiritual purposes before they began to represent commodity counting, which could be symbolic of an interesting transition regarding agriculture. While dates shift, the relationship between accountancy and agriculture remains (Bennison-Chapman 2018).

Heidegger's metaphor of the 'clearing' is a bankrupt inheritance. As a metaphor, it acts as an unwitting hinderance for humans on a subliminal level. Although it is adorned with mystical tranquilization, the 'clearing' functions as a root for our capacity to turn a blind eye to ecological destruction and to our productive imperative. Today styles and aims of production are being challenged throughout Europe **(**D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015), yet in sustainability research the 'gap' between our knowledge and our action (Fischer *et al.* 2017:545) has remained a central quandary for decades. We realize over-exploitation of natural resources is one of the 'major concerns of the 21st century; awareness of the need to adopt pro-environmental behaviour for a sustainable future is now widespread' (Carfora *et al*. 2017:92). We generally turn an unseeing eye and take 'simple painless steps' that do not engender significant pro-environmental change in individuals (Crompton and Kasser 2008). In pro-environmental behaviour studies there is the beginning of an exploration of 'oneness', in other words the whole circle, as a means of overcoming the 'gap' in pro-environmental behaviours (Garfield *et al*. 2014; Wamsler *et al*. 2018).

> Now it is a long process, but society is moving back to the individual relationship with honouring.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

Participating in the Case delle Erbe in the study area (learning about less rational brains located in other parts of the body, the importance of gestures creating thoughts, the civil economy, plants as sentient etc.) sensitized awareness to how the 'clearing' metaphor is more potent than simply an image. As Blumenberg (2010) illustrates, a metaphor is a foundation of thought patterns, as it represents experience, which concepts build upon:

> metaphors in particular, have an independent status that conceptual logic cannot eliminate. Metaphors are not merely a stylistic device, not merely ornamentation, but rather, their existence enables us to understand that ideas emerge and develop within a historical context.
>
> (Ifergan 2015:372)

Heidegger is one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Situating Being in a 'clearing' based on destruction of nature, creates a foundation for us to disregard other sentients and the natural world as we attempt to realize ourselves, a realization that frequently strives to include a longed-for relationship with nature (now destroyed). We remain entranced by our power and production in the metaphysical

Platonic, Cartesian maze Heidegger attempted to free us from. Perhaps as a compensation for the bankrupt circle, post-structuralism embraces intersubjectivity, a term strongly associated with Husserl (Beyer 2018). It is fascinating how intersubjectivity is likely a part of what has been removed or at least subdued within our life experience; it may have been a quality of life when the circle as a self was embedded in the environment. Is my interest in intersubjectivity, a cyclical movement, connected to 'the totality of the psyche in all its aspects, including the relationship between man and the whole of nature' (Jung 1958:266), an integrated self, embracing the more-than-human world?[9] In the Case delle Erbe in the study area, some intersubjectivity surpasses its human-only delineation, beginning to conjoin with diverse sentients, and for all Heidegger's assistance we proceed to a place he could not imagine.

9 While subjectivity is a base for Heidegger's project, it is actually not a substantial feature, because his concern springs quickly to systems of relations and ways of involvement with capacity to be generalized to include all Daseins. Although Heidegger is mistakenly considered a champion of subjectivity, his emphasis is on his vast vision.

7

Weak ontology and anthropological context

Now we have parted ways with Heidegger, in as much as one ever does, this chapter is devoted to gathering and bundling various themes into a weak ontology and then further into an onto-narrative. In what follows, a weak ontology will firstly be defined and then placed in an anthropological context. Subsequently, the weak ontology will gather themes from this work into a unified context. This takes the structure of three loops within a hermeneutical circle, spiraling inward to where 'the word breaks off' ', as White (2009:816) describes Heidegger's style of work.[1] Finally, following Bennett (2001), who has created a subgenre of weak ontology, the 'onto-tale', an onto-narrative is offered. It acts as a means of distilling academic thought into a more accessible short text and it is offered at the end of this chapter.

For our immediate purposes, a weak ontology is a variety of ontology that emerges from Heideggerian phenomenology (White 1997:504) and represents a 'social theory that develops its political analyses in conjunction with a set of contentions' concerning 'human being and the world' (Bennett 2001:160). In the following paragraphs, further clarification of weak ontology is offered and then the Case delle Erbe's harmony with an Anglo-Saxon proponent of a weak ontology, Stephen White, is briefly discussed, offering an opportunity for

1 'Heidegger conceives of Dasein and the world as forming a circle, and he thus extends the traditional hermeneutic circle between a text and its reading down to the most primordial level of human existence.' (Hoy 2006:179). A key point is that rather than the interpretation of a text, Heidegger's hermeneutic circle is a feature of human existence, encompassing Dasein and the world and it 'characterizes all understanding' (Hoy ibid.:192) intending that 'any interpretation which is to contribute understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted' (Heidegger 1962:194). In this sense interpretation becomes itself and 'beliefs can be checked only against other beliefs' (Hoy 2006:192) so that interpretation cannot be a 'presuppositionless apprehending of some *given*' (Heidegger 1962:191).

readers to further frame the socio-political positioning of the Case delle Erbe an international context.

White writes that 'Heidegger gave ontological investigation a historical dimension' while overthrowing Western metaphysics (1997:504). The historic dimension relates to weak ontologies being a reaction to 'present historic circumstances' (ibid.:506) and a product of late modernity. Ontologies 'typically exhibit at least some of the characteristics I refer to as 'weak', whereas premodern and modern ontologies have more typically exhibited the characteristics I refer to as 'strong" (ibid.:505). White also refers to weak ontology as a 'nonfoundational ontology' (White 2009:809). In general, strong ontologies make a claim to reflect reality and a 'truth', and are heavily based on metaphysics with a direct link to a moral stance. Most of these were formulated before the Second World War. On the other hand:

> Weak ontologies are also not rooted in a crystalline conviction of ultimate cognitive Truth. Rather, their proponents acknowledge that they are interpretations of the world. They are contestable pictures with a validity claim that is two dimensional. Ontologies provide a framework of meaning for basic existential realities such as natality, language, and finitude. Although these realities are undeniable, they are also radically underdetermined in their meaning. This means that the persuasiveness of one framework as opposed to another will rest finally not only on a sense of adequacy in regard to these realities but also on a sense of adequacy in regard to some reading (itself contestable) of present historical circumstances. Accordingly, weak ontologies might be characterized as the most basic frames we use both to access and construct ourselves and the world.
>
> (White 1997:506)

For Bennett, a weak ontology may enhance the power of a theory and may stimulate 'certain dispositions' or 'affective energies' influencing both political and ethical life as well as our train of thought for specific issues (2001:161). These weak ontologies thread themselves like veins under the surface of society, bundling values and emotions, assisting people to identify in groups. In the quote above, note how constructing ourselves is included as a function of a weak 'onto'. Stephen White, a political theorist, has been chosen as the exemplar here, as his perspective and that of the Case delle Erbe in the study area have synergies, despite their different backgrounds, aims and contrasting reference points.

I do, however, have reservations about White's approach, predominantly in two respects. Firstly, he hopes to build an 'ethics and politics of affirmation'

(Corlett 2003:163), and likewise the Case delle Erbe in the study area promote an ethic of affirmation, though not a political affirmation. White believes we possess a negative concept of the self, associated with post-structuralism, which he refers to as the 'Teflon' self (1997:503). He views this negatively, and aims to remove his theory from the 'excesses of post-structuralism' (Corlett ibid.). Contrastingly, I value the enabling of inclusivity or creativity within post-structuralism. Regarding White's weak ontology, Corlett criticizes:

> It seems sadly strange to me that post-structural stances, which bring power relations into the picture at every pixel, should be presented as apolitical and morally suspect, while those which ignore the power relations of subject positioning are said to lead the way to a defensible ethics of politics of affirmation.
>
> (Corlett 2003:163)

Indeed, aspects of White's anti post-structuralism are worth doubting. Yet simultaneously, there are Case delle Erbe affinities: namely ignoring power relations of subject positioning and strong ethics of affirmation. It is crucial to note that the Case delle Erbe is entirely outside of White's political and theoretical structures, and does not aspire to designate anything 'morally suspect'. In my efforts to respect White's synergies with the Case delle Erbe in the study area and to ameliorate White's disadvantages, the weak ontology which follows also draws upon Bennett (2001), who has also faced valid criticism regarding her own weak ontology (Markell 2003). Bennett disapproves of White's traditional anthropocentric view, and writes of his weak ontology: 'How sharply ought the line between humans and nonhumans be drawn?' (2001:164). White's weak ontology revolves solely around humans, as the fulcrum of the universe, and his 'weak-ontological interpretation cannot accommodate the non-anthropocentric elements' (Meijer 2017:68).

White's (1997) affirmative impulse indirectly gives context to the Case delle Erbe:

> At this point, one might begin to suspect that my distinction between strong and weak ontology is merely a relabeling of the familiar distinction between metaphysical and anti-metaphysical or postmodern views, or between foundationalist and antifoundationalist views. This suspicion is true to a degree. But I would claim that this relabeling serves a useful philosophical purpose. My intention in developing the notion of weak ontology is to call greater attention to the kind of interpretive existential terrain that anyone who places herself in the 'anti' position must explore at some point. In short, I want to shift the intellectual burden here from a preoccupation with

> what is opposed and deconstructed to an engagement with what must be articulated, cultivated, and affirmed in its wake.
>
> (White 1997:505, 506)

Here we view his affirmative energy at work. In the Case delle Erbe participants in the study area have zero 'preoccupation with what is opposed and deconstructed'. In essence, within an intellectual context, White aims to achieve what the Case delle Erbe live in daily life, thereby reducing preoccupation with negativity; cultivating the affirmative. Hence one must stop being 'anti' and put aside the problems of the world by undertaking positive actions. Undeniably, the Case delle Erbe in the study area abound with positive actions and affirmative energy or joy. One might question if foraging in Italy has been spared the subject positioning of female oppression due to remaining aloof from productivism and also monetization. In the study area, with predominantly female participants and Maria-Sonia singling out the female forager (*raccoglitrice*) figure in her teaching, aspects of feminist thinking, for example, could have coalesced alongside a critical analysis of capitalism. Yet there is no trace of feminism, nor is it mentioned by participants. Daily foraging is remembered historically as primarily female behaviour, and currently this is celebrated as something both desirable and taken for granted – rather than as a discourse of oppression or of positive powerful feminist constructs.

I discussed the Case delle Erbe as an organization without structure, and we are faced with a further challenge of understanding a movement that does not occupy itself with many issues in contemporary Western society. For non-Italian readers, a spontaneous social movement engaging with some significant societal values (relationship to place, sense of being, understanding nature etc.) without entering into a political framework, ignoring interrelated environmental themes, including the climate change preoccupying society today, will seem odd. Some readers may deem this a weakness and others a novel strength. Although it is done for different reasons than White's argument, the Case delle Erbe exclusion of negation, focusing on joy and pleasure, does offer rich fruits. We will see how it gives rise to an '*integritas*' similar to the early Middle Ages and realizes aspects of the fourfold in the *passaggio* of suffering to pleasure (pp. 210–18). Maria-Sonia believes we live in a unique point in history, when social change is no longer created by suffering and negativity but comes through joy, and in this manner, she would say she is not ignoring the suffering of the world, but instead facilitating change.[2]

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2 As will become further apparent, it is difficult to frame the Case delle Erbe in the study area in relation to the work of contemporary theorists as they are

In sum, for this weak ontology I take an approach representing some Case delle Erbe perceptions and aspects of my own values, advancing with an attitude White states to be only 'true to a degree' (White 1997:505, 506): positioning the weak ontology as a non-foundationalist, semi-post-structuralist interpretation. Regardless of how one commences, perhaps all weak ontologies integrate in a Heideggerian style of ending, when White refers to Heidegger's famous hermeneutic circles:

> In this variant of the circle, one is engaged in a loop in which 'the word breaks off' finally as we encounter our ultimate inarticulacy. The very idea of weak ontology grows out of an interest in exploring this ontological loop of the hermeneutical circle, and how it occupies a space that cannot be comprehended adequately within either a contemporary rationalist framework or a strong-ontological one.
>
> (White 2009:816)

The anthropological approach of *Foraging for a Future* prompted engagement with weak ontology. The anthropological experiences in the study area, do not suggesta common humanity nor cultural relativism, nor that universalisms (ultimate truths) underlie all cultures and societies when it comes to being. Understanding being does not require universalism. Such understandings are not even homogeneous within the Case delle Erbe in the study area. My time in the Case delle Erbe altered me, with a corresponding change in my positionality, an example of 'recursivity' (Heywood 2017:5), when fieldwork gives birth to analytical structures.

In this research I sought to interpret and seek contexts for how the Case delle Erbe frames itself and the social relations that characterize it, as part of my effort to communicate/share the essence of the Case delle Erbe in the study area. Within this process, as it evolved, I found myself entering into the so-called ontological turn. It seems significant to note that the ontological turn was not an idea shaping the research at the outset; rather it was remote to me for I was fully consumed by physical participation in the Case delle Erbe,

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fundamentally positioned outside of narratives explicating problems, although they make observations regarding the reductive force of technology. Nonetheless, as described, there are many synergies with Heidegger. Due to what might be conceived as a dense theoretical aspect already present in this book, taken together with the Case delle Erbe's proclivity for joy, it was not appropriate to integrate other theorists' work. Hildegard and Heidegger are a very clear exceptions. Michael Marder, specializing in plant sentience, would be another, but see page 205 for the reasons his work was not a focus.

the plants and Heideggerian thought. Nonetheless, I was never inherently comfortable with cultural relativism which claims that:

> epistemologies (forms of knowing or understanding) vary, but that there is only one ontology (form of being or existing). Many worldviews, only one world. The ontological turn, instead, proposes that worlds, as well as worldviews, may vary.
>
> (Heywood 2017:2)

Indeed, the Case delle Erbe in the study area offers an experience of existing in different worlds (Candea 2010:175). I experienced this vividly. Leaving the study area after a phase full of experiences to return to a neoliberal, productivist culture, it seemed as if I had been on another planet, not simply a different part of Europe. Rather than experiencing different world-views and cultures at the Case delle Erbe, it imbued me with 'a recognition of the importance of nature and being' (Heywood 2017:4) as a distinctive reality embedded in a particular place (Territory of Grace and Thanks).

In 'Taking love seriously in human-plant relations in Mozambique', Archambault shows how human and plant relationships draw 'on debates spawned by the ontological turn, namely, the renewed interest in anthropology's commitment in taking seriously the propositions of others' (2016:246). This includes understanding more-than-human relations as being literal, rather than metaphorical; an error I made at times in the first years of my participation. For example, when I assumed Zia was speaking poetically or symbolically when she explained how plants make a social fabric. Through these experiences in the Case delle Erbe, I realized being is not necessarily bound by the individual, nor necessarily solely contained within a person's anthropocentric awareness. Likewise the discussion when Cristiano explained people's death is 'partial' like that of plants (page xxx):

> It's like death for us. Our death is partial… There are always people who take something of us. And there is what we leave behind us. There are things we leave behind that we make, or children – is an obvious one. But without blood relations, I carry with me all the people I knew. When they are no longer here there is a continuum in me. Plants are not different from us in their life cycles. In a way we also return – that's a cycle.
>
> (Cristiano, pers. comm. 2019)

At first I interpreted this as a poetic comparison with plants. Later, becoming more immersed in spontaneous plants, I learnt Cristiano's and Zia's are both physical descriptions. I live them as experiences, instead of

understanding words or phrases. Spontaneous plants have indeed acted as a conduit for 'a radical rethinking of alterity'.

During the fieldwork a key point in favour of the ontological turn arose from awareness of intersubjectivity extending beyond people to include spontaneous plants. There was a description of this in relation to encountering 'Joy of the Mountains' (see pp. 140–3). Latterly, I lament having been a slow and conventional learner. If I had started with the awareness I uncovered in the Case delle Erbe, I might have focused exclusively on engaging with plants as sentients and interacting with our less rational brains in other parts of our bodies as a way of approaching being. As mentioned previously, Lena's positionality – using the body's key centres of awareness (the solar plexus, the stomach and intestines, etc.) as alternative sources for information, communication and understanding, which she colloquially calls 'our other brains' – could offer a fruitful equilibrium in our interrelations with more-than-humans. The most applicable living theorist for the Case delle Erbe in the study area would clearly be Michael Marder, given his book on plant sentience, in which he makes a correlation between plant being and Heidegger's conclusions regarding the essence of Dasein (Marder 2013a:95), his specialization in Hildegard (Marder 2021) and phenomenology (Marder 2014). When considering recommencing the book and including experiences enriched by Marder's inspiring perspectives, it also seemed increasingly appropriate to move away from humanities and post-humanism, away from philosophy and theory, to focus on Lena's bodily approach – which would nonetheless require years of training to develop my bodily connectivity and emotional sensitivity. With time (during the writing of this book), I moved from a stance whereby I prioritized academic theory, to the Case delle Erbe's belief that emotional knowledge is the more valuable and best orientation for interacting with spontaneous plants (and much else in the world).

Significant contributions regarding collaboration with plants and the more-than-human are found in multispecies ethnography – such as authors mentioned by Archambault (2016:248), as well as scholars within the movement of 'Ethnobiology 5' (Nabhan 2016:14) – although it generally engages with balancing Western science and indigenous knowledge from an etic researcher's perspective. Likewise, feminist critiques including those of Donna Haraway (2015) have laid foundations for a flourishing discipline broadly termed as multispecies ethics.

Although *Foraging for a Future* did not aim to contribute to multispecies ethics, an apparently unexplored aspect of multispecies ethics emerged through happenstance, therefore all the more valuable from a Case delle Erbe perspective. Joy, affirmation and gratitude are essential to the Case delle Erbe

and represent an unexplored perception in applied multispecies ethics for two main reasons.

Firstly, multispecies ethics studies are frequently grounded in white-settler colonial perspectives. Consider Van Dooren (2019) as one example, who considers applied multispecies ethics in Hawaii, Australia, North America and Mariana Islands, and in addition the work of the 'Extinction Studies Working Group' (an academic group who share common interests, including both Van Dooren and Haraway) as well as another famous proponent within this theoretical framework, Deborah Bird Rose (Van Dooren and Chrulew 2022), who worked in Australia. In all these studies, a deeply entrenched correlation between the destruction of indigenous peoples and cultures, and violence towards the more-than-human emerges. In Italy there is no similar history of colonization, though the author is anecdotally aware of interest in identifying with the earlier peoples the Roman empire annihilated. Chapter 2 explains some of the historic background in the study area. Prioritizing joy and positive thinking would not be possible, appropriate or commensurate with realities in a white-settler context.

Secondly, multispecies ethics are applied to distinct locations when a crisis is perceived, such threat of extinction, or in response to climate-change impacts in a European context (Nadegger 2023). Spontaneous plants in the study area are prospering, and although impacted by climate change, to date they are abundant and luxuriant. As a participant in the week-long workshop described in Chapter 5 commented: 'When I see the richness of nature all around me, like it is here, I stop fearing scarcity. I feel balanced.'

Taken together, these factors enable the Case Delle Erbe to focus on the pleasure (joy, affirmation etc.) of interacting with spontaneous plants. It feels appropriate, rather than opportunistic, simply because spontaneous plants themselves share and express their joy of life and can inspire us to do likewise. As discussed in Chapter 5, plants teach us the nature of life is a celebration. The author is unqualified to judge if the exclusion of current socio-political theory is justified, or required, to experience the Case Delle Erbe's focus on joy, affirmation and gratitude. Yet it is noteworthy that through my participation in the Case Delle Erbe I also began to attribute less value to academic thinking. In the section on the *passaggio* (pp. 210–18), the aim is to explain this further by acknowledging the criteria used in upholding the pleasure perspective within a situated and historical framing.

Weak ontology

Beginning the weak ontology with our first ontological loop of the hermeneutical circle, we take a swift backward glance at Chapter 2. We saw scholarship supporting a view of Palaeolithic society as highly socially integrated and

functioning collectively, with 'cognitive competences underpinning complex behaviour' (Gamble, Gowlett and Dunbar 2011:116), and as fluctuating between larger and smaller groupings (though these were not necessarily based on the nuclear family and may have been based on affinity Apicella *et al*. 2012). The weak ontology beginning here positions the natural world as the core of life, around which in pre-agricultural times less individuated people interconnected, with shared imperatives (Ruiz 2005:477). It is likely Palaeolithic people in the study area had relationships with plants as sentients, as tree worshipping in the Mediterranean is one of the most ancient practices (Greenberg 2015) and earth-worshiping practices endured in the study area through the Neolithic (Cordella and Criniti 2008; Fatucchi 1976:8-9). In broad brush-strokes, while possibly anthropocentric in its core, this is a phase of life with a perspective of turning-towards-nature and frequent sharing or co-operating.

Subsequently, as we observed in Chapter 2, agriculture is interpreted to have encouraged an anthropocentric, people-centred world (Thomas 2000:657). With agricultural dominance, ancestors became prominent as a means of defining man's claim to his land and therefore family structure became key. Humans became increasingly individuated and honoured other people, including their ancestors (Armit 2016). The foundation of the turning-towards-humans phase instigated demanding power relations and productivity. Identity projects, and self and family-group-social hierarchies, were and are the central reference point, bound by ownership, production, defence, distribution and 'the hording imperative' (Leppard 2014:491). As our society developed, the relationship with plants increasingly diminished, until they were no longer perceived as sentient but simply as a resource to use.

In what follows, a weak ontology is framed by the turning-towards-nature that evolved into turning-towards-humans. Within the post-productive phase that ushers in the experience economy and intangibles, the productive engine of the turning-towards-humans phase slackens sufficiently for people to question and express interest in a relationship with nature, possibly encouraged by climate change's effects on nature.[3] This weak ontology

3 In 2018 the author gave a questionnaire to Case delle Erbe participants over one weekend at Maria Sonia's house, asking them to hypothetically choose between honouring nature, or honouring their ancestors – as an exclusive choice. Anticipating Italians would not override family values, it was surprising how eleven out of the twelve respondents choose to honour nature exclusively. All but one identified as female. Presumably, the Case delle Erbe attracts people who want to be closer to a nature-centred focus, and then the activities they engage in, heighten further movement towards that nature-centred focus.

positions our current need for experiences in nature arising within the turning-towards-humans phase, stimulated by the productive engine of society being less robust.[4] Yet when people purchase an experience in nature, it is often entered into in a misguided manner, because identity projects and personal well-being are frequently connected with experiences in nature. People hope to find a turning-towards-nature experience, yet they are in themselves fully turning-towards-humans. They view plants as inert resources to be consumed for human health. Entering a nature experience with a solely anthropocentric vision results in production and control; hence experiences in nature are frequently shallow and commodified, with the by-products we have investigated.

Contrastingly, as one approaches being with spontaneous plants as a portal (access point for experience),[5] one drops the cloak of personal preoccupations or the highly individuated self. This assists a person to shift away from a turning-towards-humans focus. This weak ontology seeks to raise people's awareness of a less personalized way of being, as opposed to, for example, the trend of promoting our personal identities on social media and reinforcing our anthropocentric obsessions. This is a slow process because, as the Case delle Erbe know, people have to be personally enriched already in order to arrive at the point of perceiving the option of changing values.

Meanwhile, within the mainstream, the personal-identity project is rapidly and routinely fed by contemporary society, underpinned by financial gain from surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). The speed with which technology is transforming society and identity suggests emotional bankruptcy via commodification, which has been dwelt upon. In this weak ontology, the

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4 'You can't work to earn money anymore so you have to think about life.' and 'Because people were not ready before. They had jobs where they could make money so they didn't think.' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comms 2020).

5 See p. 147. Within the diversity of the Case delle Erbe, to some extent, a series of shared steps or processes may be summarized:

- plants are a portal – the access point for experience;
- the portal is entered through intent, which is based on recognizing the plant as sentient, in any manner the person chooses;
- honouring (which can be secular) opens an energy exchange with the plant;
- honouring is an emotional 'appointment with love';
- through this experience a person accesses an awareness of being – sometimes more or less profoundly;
- this is a cumulative process;
- 'the sacred is everyday' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019);
- eventually one moves through a landscape where each plant acts a 'fonte' of awareness, love, and knowledge within the person.

majority of the population remain in the foundation of turning-towards-humans, ossifying with additional centuries. These are the fallen *Daseins* (Heidegger 1962:296) who may feel inauthentic or unhappy in the distracted they-world. These *Daseins* are aware of that which 'is defined as lack – when something which ought to be, and which can be is missing' (ibid.:328). In other language, Zuboff describes a 'they world':

> if industrial civilization flourished at the expense of nature and now threatens to cost us the Earth, an information civilization shaped by surveillance capitalist will thrive at the expense of human nature and threatens to cost us our humanity.
>
> (Zuboff 2019:347)

Shortly after writing this section of the weak ontology, having lunch at Maria-Sonia's Casa delle Erbe with several local participants, precisely this division in society was spontaneously discussed, in terms as are presented here. The conversation was prompted by reported comments from a local priest. Case delle Erbe people at that lunch anticipate one tier of society to be evermore emmeshed in technology and commodified experiences (the 'they' world in Heidegger's work). They consider this group will eventually lose its humanity and this may be summed up by Jackson, who writes:

> The loss of meaning and the decline in common endeavour are both an inevitable consequence of economies that feed, almost literally, on privatising our lives and commercialising our identities.
>
> (Jackson 2017:219)

Another section of society will choose to live nature-based lifestyles (Case delle Erbe, pers. comm. 2019), perhaps choosing the Case delle Erbe among the various options. These people live in a partially decommodified civil economy, where 'living simply is good' and 'we can learn from plants' (Cristiano, pers. comm. 2019).

The second ontological loop within the hermeneutical circle of this weak ontology embraces an understanding of joy, leading us into *integritas*, as described in the work of Umberto Eco who elucidates an holistic perception of life in the Middle Ages which was 'dissolved by nominalism' (Eco 1986:89, see also Chapter 1), and this is then coupled with the fourfold. In the Case delle Erbe, one acts 'importantly only with joy, only do things with joy' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2020) or not at all. For Maria-Sonia this is derived from the belief that we have been slowly evolving out of the period of Christ's suffering.

> It's all a process of development. Christ suffered, but that way of influencing things and creating change has finished. Now it's happiness and joy that moves people.
>
> (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019)

In her narrative, this change is also connected to an alteration from low to high magnetic frequencies in the atmosphere. Within the Case delle Erbe in the study area a central motivational factor is strong pleasure (happiness or joy) grounded in sharing the energy of spontaneous plants. We observed how Alberto has changed society with pure happiness, gaining European recognition for his Casa delle Erbe and altering how the regional tourism board perceives him, as well as teaching and exchanging with people around the world.

In the Case delle Erbe, the movement from suffering to happiness/joy could be explained as mindfully interpreting one's actions to shift expectations, framings and emotions. In essence this would act as a reassessment of how things are represented and constitute an internal value change. As one of countless exhibitions of this perception, in January 2020 while working on this book, I mentioned the gruelling aspect of years in front of a computer and a participant with whom I spent time in the summer 2019, gently reproached me, 'But you do it with joy, don't you?' I said I supposed so. 'Then feel the joy, or else you should stop working on the book.' (Paula, pers. comm. 2020).[6] Doing things with joy is part of the centrepiece of Maria-Sonia's daily experience and her teaching. In the Case delle Erbe in the study area, actions are motivated by abundant good humour, if not actual joy. Though this mindful approach is significant, it is the symptom and not the cause of joyfulness.

The European root of this belief in a socio-historical movement from suffering to happiness/joy is paralleled by transitions of foraging in society. Broadly speaking, foraging evolved from a life strategy, to becoming a crime (Milliken and Bridgewater 2013); and then with industrialization it became a social stigma for poor and backwards rural populations, as 'It was food for poor people. So no one ate that.' (Maria, pers. comm. 2019). As noted in the historical analysis of the study area, during the boom of the 1960s, when local people accessed factory jobs and the monetary economy was strong, foraging fell out of favour. It virtually disappeared with industrial growth, but becomes popular with industrial decline. Hence in mature capitalism, today, foraging is integrated with government policy (Fortini *et al.* 2016; Vitalini *et al.* 2015:455)

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6 Later, discussing writing this book with Maria-Sonia, I described it as my type of 'appointment with love', and she agreed, adding that the book will write itself and I need not worry about it.

and with the experience economy (De Jong and Varley 2018; Pieroni *et al*. 2007). Experiences offered at Case delle Erbe today are only possible now foraging has become enshrined both by government and popular culture, as discussed in Chapter 2.

In what follows, just a sliver of information is discussed to create context for the Case delle Erbe foraging imaginaries, as a base for a weak ontology with a joyful precedence, grounding us in the fourfold and *integritas*, which I have conjoined as a 'territory of grace and thanks'. Historically, within philosophy and ethics, joy has been called upon as a means of inspiring social justice and 'ethical generosity' (Bennett 2001:12,13), for example in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger (Robbins 2003). Apparently, Zarathustra tells us, 'And learning better to feel joy, we best unlearn how to do harm to others and contrive harm.' (Bennett 2001:13). The point to note here is that although the Case delle Erbe's positioning of joy is particular, engaging with joy for societal change is neither solely Christian, New Age nor unique. Nevertheless, as previously discussed, commitment to joy is an element driving a deep separation between the Case delle Erbe and contemporary academic theories and foci. Given that description of the full ascendancy of cultural and historic evolutions is beyond the scope of what follows, I refer to Blumenberg's seminal book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1983), a work that provides a structure for the inclusion and exclusion of material with a theological focus, and ultimately leads to the Case delle Erbe's emblemic figure, St Hildegard. Umberto Eco's (1986) erudite study of philosophy and aesthetics in the Middle Ages also colours what follows. When Case delle Erbe members in the study area mention traditional knowledge, they speak of it as part of rural life that was at times demonized by the church.[7] While it is easy to disregard – now foraging has socio-political support – there is a history of women being killed by the church for foraging and honouring.

> Initially, the orthodox medicine of medieval Europe shared its roots with the peripheral practices of folk healing and sorcery. Yet as Christian doctrine

7 In 2017 I had a foot injury I was not recovering from, despite medical treatment. Maria-Sonia kindly offered me a cure similar to faith healing. Firstly she anointed me and herself with a sacred oil from a monastery, used for prayers. Then she held my foot and repeated a Roman Catholic incantation, very rapidly, over and over, hardly able to say the words due to the speed. I recall the Virgin Mary was mentioned frequently. This process was repeated a number of times. She said I was trying 'traditional knowledge' and if it works, she said, it is not because of her, but the energy passing through her. In fact, my foot was better afterwards, though the benefit did not last. I tried other conventional treatments, which did not seem to work either. The foot righted itself with time.

> spread throughout the continent, sorcery became increasingly associated with heresy – a crime which, by the eleventh century was already punishable by death. The thirteenth century later saw the increased demonification of witchcraft and the concomitant isolation of traditional healers –most of whom were women. By the middle of that century, hostility towards traditional women healers intensified further, marking the start of 250 years of persecution…
>
> (Cotton 2002:344)

In some instances, persecution may have followed a simple act of procuring herbal remedies with small gestures of gratitude, such as distinguish the forager (as Maria Sonia explains). Small acts of honouring may have been the endeavours of a woman harvesting yarrow (*Archillea millefolium*), a white flower renowned for health properties, that myself and others harvest every year. The trial and subsequent death of Elspeth Reoch, convicted in Orkney in 1616, is described as having 'confusing evidence', but was based on her 'gathering yarrow in a ritualized manner', whereby the women seems to have plucked it between with her mid finger and thumb, on one knee, while saying prayer-like words (ibid.:162). I reference a situation outside the study area only because historical sources of the Church of Rome's persecution of women there no longer exist. 'They seem to have been destroyed.' (O. Gobbi 2020, pers comm.). Understandably, the embodiment of the Case delle Erbe belief in the socio-historical movement from suffering to happiness rests upon changes in theological history. Blumenberg (1983) describes our efforts to recast god, from the Middle Ages onwards. In this sense 'Modernity is a response to an internal failure of medieval Christianity, rather than a betrayal of its stable essence, and this is what the critics of secularism conceal.' (Bennett 2001:67). In brief, a historical task of theologians was to explain how god could be caring and also have created evil in the world. The rediscovery of Aristotle's works in the late twelfth century, left the thirteenth century embroiled in debates contrasting the total omnipotence of god and Aristotle's non-Christian beliefs that the world did not depend on god. There were additionally further debates around the restrictions of god's power, as natural effects, such as a landslide after heavy rain, could be conceived as a rule of cause and effect, therefore limiting God from being able to recreate as he so chose (ibid.).

Of note is how an enduring solution was to remove god from nature and conceive of god as so vastly powerful that humans could not begin to comprehend him, requiring unconditional faith. As Blumenberg writes 'divine spirit and human spirit, creative and cognitive principles, operate as though without taking each other into account' (ibid.:154). Simultaneously, nominalism was undoing the hinge between humans and heaven. Key figures

like the Franciscan Ockham argued that individuals exist separate from the universals; the latter representing a cosmological vision of integrated reality. 'The reality of universals, which was necessary to the concept of *integritas*, was dissolved by nominalism.' and 'All that remains [is knowledge] of existent objects whose visible proportions are analysed empirically.' (Eco 1986:89). Here one might interpret the beginning of our scientific, individualistic and more detached perspectives.

For our purposes, this was 'equivalent to nature devoid of God – and thus fair game for human mastery' (Bennett 2001:68). Therein grew an attitude of independence and self-assertion over nature and this extended to understanding possibilities for man's 'exertion of his own powers' (Blumenberg 1983:86). The spirit of nominalism gathered force in Europe between the 1300s to the 1700s. Coincidentally, or not, this occurs at the approximate date the Inquisition began. Was the Inquisition partly motivated by a need to be certain God was driven out of nature? Or as Bennett writes: 'A nominalist God unrecognizable in nature turned out to be the psychological equivalent of nature devoid of God.' (2001:68). In this setting, women who understood spirituality and gratitude to nature represented a grave threat.

In this interpretation, spontaneous plants represented a 'theology of enchantment' (ibid.) and thereby delight and well-being from plants symbolically undermined the Church's foundation. As Blumenberg writes, the 'Middle Ages came to an end when "providence" ceased to be credible to man' (1983:138). Yet the protective care of nature and gods residing therein, lived on in the hands of foragers. Is 'providence' not equivalent to being graced and feeling thankful therefore? We return to this theme, experienced today within the 'territory of grace and thanks'.

By glorifying the doctrine of the suffering of Christ, the Church could fortify its anthropocentric dominance. The affirmative power of spontaneous plants and the well-being they offered, was a stark contrast to Christ's suffering. In sum, the Roman Catholic church may have used the very human physicality of Christ's stages of his 'Passion' to retain focus on a dramatic individualistic anthropocentric discourse of pain. Simultaneously, the church was 'essentially antagonistic toward what it considered unhumanised nature', thereby uncontrolled nature (Greenberg 2015:402–3). Spontaneous plants, ever potent, and powerful spiritually were uncontrolled. Thus, it could be supposed that spontaneous plants needed to be demonized.

Recognizing that we are traversing theological territory foreign to the Case delle Erbe quotidian, my aim is to present context for the evolution of their interpretation today. To this end, I touch upon a Portuguese example, as it represents a rare and studious book, authored by a woman, documenting the lives of sixty cloistered women in a convent 'in Braga from 1629–1744'

(Bellini 2005:13). *Jardim do Ceo* was written by Maria Benta do Ceo, who interviewed these women and also did archival research in the 1700s.[8] While the book's format is inspired by the 'books of sisters' describing the lives of virtuous nuns in the Low Countries (ibid.:14), it makes a special contribution to our understandings of the history of the Mediterranean, where 'Catholic thought was not institutionally open to contributions by women' and nuns were expected to remain silent (ibid.:18).

Maria Benta do Ceo gives context to the sadomasochistic behaviours women undertook to participate in Christ's suffering and 'Passion'. Without listing each nuns' individual details, as the book does, such practices included, for example, long-term commitment to drawing blood through self-flagellation; semi starvation; rolling naked in nettles and lying on the floor in a position whereby people were obliged to walk on top of the nun, exerting their full weight etc. Unsurprisingly, this was combined with emotional outbreaks, visions and chronic ill health, for which the women were praised and upon death glorified (ibid.). Bellini comments on how:

> The period considered here saw the diffusion of the measures emanating from the Council of Trent, in which bishops were to play an important role in the control of ideas and acts contrary to orthodoxy. The supreme institutional force for repression was the Inquisition.
>
> (ibid.:29)

In the aspirational world of the Inquisition, there was no place for health and well-being. Foraging women were tortured for finding strength and happiness with nature. Contrastingly 'For the perfect nun, suffering in the world should represent the eve of an eternity of glory.' (ibid.:33) and the nuns relished their socially condoned punishments. Nonetheless, tides were turning and later, 'By the late 18th century, the appreciation of nature and particularly wild nature, had been converted into a sort of religious act.' (Mathieu 2009:347).

This discourse of joy and suffering leads us to the central figure for the Case delle Erbe nationally. Befittingly, Hildegard von Bingen died in 1179, at 81 years of age, before the temporal distinction Blumenberg (1983) makes for the end of the Middle Ages, and she clearly embodied the utter integration of human, cosmos and all living creatures within a holistic spiritual harmony (Della Croce 2002). She is an example of thriving providence and grace. Of small note, among many extraordinary details in her life, apparently Hildegard

8 There is no exact date for the book's publication, see the full study of it offered in Bellini 2005.

took the bark from a tree[9] and sewed a vest out of it, which she wore (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019), identifying with trees. Living and dying before nominalism, Saint Hildegard von Bingen's popularity in the Case delle Erbe can be understood.

Before nominalism, in the early Middle Ages 'Life appeared to them as something wholly integrated.' (Eco 1986:16). From the smallest microcosm to the music of the spheres, humans were deeply interwoven within a cosmic mesh. At times this integration was explained in terms of theories of proportions, or of musical harmony in the world, the orbits of the planets, arithmetic or symbols and allegory (ibid.). While the vehicles of thought evolved, the theological underpinning and assimilation of humans together with all dimensions and forms of life endured. Living within this context, St Hildegard was famed for a profound understanding of the spiritual in plants, conjoining within the human body, psyche and cosmos. Largely, her sense of interconnectivity with nature is what is popular today, and the rediscovery of her teaching forms the basis for many holistic alternative health practitioners working within nature.

The journey of Hildegard von Bingen, a person in diametric contrast with nominalism, mirrors the movement of the Case delle Erbe *passaggio* and positions her as the perfect figurehead for them. Christian theology, in the form of nominalism, created a lack of religious substance that impelled people to discover a secular recourse (Blumenberg 1983). Rich with a pre-nominalist celebration of the human bound to nature as bound to god, it required more than a thousand years for Hildegard's holistic beliefs to move from heresy and controversy, to sainthood. She was canonized only in 2012. The Case delle Erbe suggest this canonization occurred recently because our current era has an opening for Hildegard's type of holistic understanding, which foraging imaginaries and the Case delle Erbe represent.

As the main protagonist in the Case delle Erbe, Maria-Sonia is possibly the most demonstrative in her devotion to Hildegard von Bingen. However, the beliefs and values ascribed to Hildegard function as the closest approximation of a unifying factor in the Case delle Erbe. Nationally, Case delle Erbe meetings based upon studying and celebrating Hildegard are the most highly frequented. These keenly received gatherings generally take place in monasteries (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Health and well-being practitioners are attracted to the Case delle Erbe to learn applications of Hildegard's teachings. It is worth commenting that despite considerable differences between Alberto and Maria-Sonia, a commitment to St Hildegard is shared, as it is apparently for the Case delle Erbe nationally.

9 Hopefully the bark was not removed from a living tree.

Ultimately, by presenting and cherishing Hildegard von Bingen as the emblematic figure for a rebirth of significance given to plants and holistic understandings, the Case delle Erbe make a commitment to the historical link between foraging, spirituality and health; and their…

> approaches are the 'postmodern' blending of religious traditions and sites with forms of New Age spirituality, the sacralisation of certain cultural or natural sites.
>
> (Howard 2012:17–18)

In June 2019 I went with Maria-Sonia to attend a history-of-art lecture in an informal setting in a mountain village in the study area. The lecturer explained Botticelli's *Primavera* as a symbolic rendering of the 'hopeful new society of the Renaissance', and the prosperity of the Medicis. Afterwards, Maria-Sonia described how the lecturer did not understand and had offered an inappropriate explanation, because the significance of the painting is that it foretells the spring and rebirth of plants of today. Botticelli painted it as a symbol to show to people 'that a time such as ours today, would come; it's a painting about today' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019). Ours is the long-awaited spring time, for St. Hildegard.

Blumenberg (1983), in his philosophic understanding, reaches a similar conclusion to Maria-Sonia's optimism.

> Finally, Blumenberg's rejoinder to the charge that modernity is an ingrate and an aggressor, that is, his defence of modern self-assertion as the best and, really, the only viable response to the worldliness of our world (as what is left once we face up to the self-defeat of teleological perspective) opens the door to a story of modernity that is not founded on a fundamental loss.
>
> (Bennett 2001:74)

The 'loss' referred to here is of course the Weberian exhalation of the richness of premodern life. But what 'loss'?, the Case delle Erbe would retort. For central figures in the Case delle Erbe in the study area, life is an experience of a type of providence that has pre-nominalist richness, frequently heightened by connectivity with the work of Hildegard and engendered by being in a 'territory of grace and thanks'.

Hence, for the Case delle Erbe and for this weak ontology, the past is not a place holding our sorrowful loss of life and being, but rather it has bourn us to the privileged point of the present. The appeal of the Case delle Erbe is based on celebrating the specialness of the present (not recuperating from loss, nor excavating the past) with a sense of marvel and positive emotion,

within the enchantment of the natural world today. This makes a rich harvest and the pleasure from this overflowing cornucopia engrosses the Case delle Erbe to the point of remaining distant from contemporary perspectives of today's problematic issues. One can comprehend how the positioning of the Case delle Erbe both benefits from, and is also at the forefront of, a unique combination of histories and imaginaries. The *passaggio* from suffering to pleasure, for them, renders the significance of intense positive emotion into a socio-cultural force within an historic context. Affirmation of joy and happiness encompasses more than individual desires. It is held as crucial for continuing social and environmental evolution.

This view is a critical mirror to a simplistic hedonic understanding of happiness or joy, often connected to personal well-being. A territory of grace and thanks, as described (p. 158) offers possibilities for people attuned by spontaneous plants to feel stimulated in an unconscious manner toward gratitude and joy, giving thanks and honouring, with an energy that turns outward, beyond individual hedonic well-being, accompanied by a thought or value structure that differs from person to person. Focusing on joy in Heideggerian thought, Robbins (2003) indirectly excavates the etymology lurking within the territory of grace and thanks.

> The playful dance of thinking-thanking is the proper way to 'rejoice' in the gift of Being. 'Rejoice' is a term which derives from the Latin *gaudere* from which is derived *gaudium*, 'joy' (Ayto, 1990). A closely related term is *gracious*, which is derived from the Latin *gratus*, which meant 'pleasing' (Ayto, 1990). Its English derivatives include the words *grateful*, *gratify*, *gratuity*, as well as *grace*. What is joyful is *pleasing*, and joyful thinking-thanking is pleased with Being as it is, without why. To en-joy Being is to be *gratified*, that is, satisfied or pleased, but also *grateful*, which means both 'pleasing' and 'thankful.' Joyful thinking-thanking in being pleased with the gift of Being, acknowledges the favour of Being as *grace*. Thinking-thanking recognizes the gratuitousness of the gift of Being, given without why, unearned and without recompense, costing nothing, unwarranted, without cause or purpose. Gratified by the gratuitous grace of Being, thinking-thanking perceives the beautiful *gracefulness* of Being.
>
> (Robbins 2003:20, emphases in original)

Connecting the words grateful, gratify, gratuity and grace to being 'without recompense, costing nothing' (Robbins 2003:20) poetically and perfectly describes the Case delle Erbe. The quotation depicts something akin to the experience of being rooted in a territory of grace and thanks. The belief in pleasure as a natural right, regardless of accomplishment, separate from

Figure 7. 1 Busy local post office. Griffiths, 2019.

wealth is also part of the history of the slow movement. 'Yet pleasure … is just as natural as, if not more natural than, work (which may itself be a source of pleasure for that matter), or duty and sacrifice' (Petrini 2001:20). Returning to Robbins (2003) acknowledging 'the favour of Being as grace' (2003:20) implies the territory of grace and thanks plays a favoured role in realizing Being. One does not work toward it, nor think about giving thanks, for as previously described, the territory of grace and thanks sways the person without their being aware, priming them.

Beyond the basic entry point in foraging of 'what plant is this and how can I eat it', the more intense experiences leading to turning-towards-nature will disappear if they are not spared; these experiences cannot be work and sold. They rely on non-calculative thinking.

> When thinking-thanking attempts to seek grounds to explain the excitement of the dance of Being, the 'it gives' withdraws and wonder gives over to mere curiosity. Thinking-thanking then falls back into *ratio*.
>
> (Robbins 2003:20)

From this base, the weak ontology reaches a final, concluding ontological loop in this hermeneutical circle, with the addition of spontaneous plants.

The post office in the photograph above is located in a town of approximately 2,500 inhabitants in the study area. It is busy on a daily basis. In its rural setting, the post office is a symbol of the (local) government's presence

Figure 7. 2 Detail of post office, front paved area, in front of where the white car is parked in previous image. Griffiths, 2019.

and authority and relies on bureaucratic structures for controlled efficiency. The co-habitation of this symbol of government with 'weeds' over the course of many years is indicative of psychological propensity for integrating the nature and culture divide, explored in Chapter 2. The abundance of spontaneous plants at the post office may also symbolize a shift in values or an opening of opportunities within mature capitalistic southern economies. This was drawn to my attention in 2017, with Alberto explaining 'now the economy has fallen' it is time for the civil economy; or with discussion of 'you have to have evolved through capitalism for this kind of thing (for foraging)', as explored in Chapter 5. As previously discussed, a relationship appears to exist between interest in spontaneous plants and reduced productivity in mature capitalism. As described, foraging fell out of favour in the study area when Italy was in its industrial boom; while as the engine of production became more intangible and slacker, foraging was increasingly enshrined. Foraging constitutes 'always political and moral acts' (Nabhan 2016:19).

Contrastingly, in northern Europe where the work-hard ethic still equates with a wage for a percentage of the population, it would be unthinkable to allow 'weeds' to integrate with an authority like a post office. This may correspond with understanding degrowth as particular to the Mediterranean, for it 'refers to a diverse and heterogeneous school of interdisciplinary thought, part of what has been called a specifically Southern European and Mediterranean environmentalism' (Martinez 2017:196). A rock props open the door of the

post office. The rock is as found in mountains, as opposed to garden centres, and offers a finishing touch of integration. In cities and in some European countries more than others, glyphosate – a herbicide the EU is aiming to control usage of as it has entered the human food chain with associated health problems[10] – would be used to kill the plants.

Additionally, due to earthquakes and outmigration some hamlets and upland settlements have become overgrown by spontaneous vegetation, as described in Chapter 5. This growth was previously held back by the inhabitants. Not everyone is comfortable with relinquishment. Near me, a farmer in his seventies was obliged to leave his smallholding and earthquake-damaged home permanently, to take up residence on the coast. Believing he would not live long enough to ever return, he bulldozed his home-produce vineyard and cut down his fine fruit trees before he left, because he didn't want them to become overgrown in his absence, and for locals to comment that he had let it become messy. Overall, in the study area, this controlling mentality as represented by old farmers is fading, as a Case delle Erbe participant explained:

> We have lost 600 people, probably permanently. How many of them had fields or were farmers I can't say – hardly anyone farms. However, there is a real relationship between abandoned fields and the opportunity to forage. Knowledge is the essence. Once you know how to forage you find a way.
>
> (Zia, pers. comm. 2017)

As less people farm, more people have opportunity to forage and interact with spontaneous plants, stimulated by Case delle Erbe teaching. Simultaneously, perhaps due to lack of funds, the local authority cuts the roadsides less frequently and overall one has the sense described (pp. 73, 112) of spontaneous vegetation taking over the roads, fields, abandoned gardens and houses. On a more dramatic scale, these kinds of changes were also witnessed during the Black Plague in the Apennines when 'in 1347, and then with additional plagues and famines, did the population reduce, by more than 50% as of 1400' (Mensing *et al.* 2015:90). This was accompanied by 'rapid reforestration' (Mensing *et al.* 2015:90). When human productivity and population density relent, nature quickly takes advantage of the respite.

Ultimately a weed is only a weed in a productive society. Otherwise the nomenclature cannot exist. Precisely at the point control is diminished, we start to have a sense of a spontaneous vegetative presence outside of ourselves.

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10 www.dw.com/en/glyphosate-eu-agency-must-release-censored-study-court-says/a-47804040 (accessed 21 February 2024).

It is an actual force of energy that feels like a celebration and can also be disquieting. This is very different from going to visit a national park or private estate that controls, contains, protects or manages an area. Instead, when spontaneous plants overflow into our daily lives, this is the first quotidian step toward an awareness that opens one to becoming part of a fabric of an existence that includes them. 'Weeds' only exist in a society where there is a hierarchical ranking structure (plants and people) based on usefulness for production.

Studies have shown the unseen democracy of spontaneous plants, who offer their richness even against the odds in urban settings, cutting across social divisions in society (Landor-Yamagata, Kowarik and Fischer 2018) in the context of urban foraging. The first step is accepting spontaneous plants in daily life and in public spaces, as exemplified by the post office, without interpreting this as a fearful lack of control, or a dreaded collapse of capitalism bringing poverty. Being in the company of spontaneous plants in all kinds of situations eases public acceptance. Thereafter, as we have seen, the next step is awareness and recognition, followed by interacting with 'who' rather than 'what'.

This informs two contrasting observations, travelling out of the study area for a prolonged period of work in the north. Waiting for the train with a friend, we went to a little café on the platform of a coastal train station. It was morning and she and I were the only customers; we sat on plastic furniture so my acquaintance could smoke. Already the air was very warm and the salty breeze made the leaves of the large palm trees rustle, brushing against the brightly painted 1800s-style villas on the road, opposite us. The platform was full of pot holes or broken cement from past remedial works, and here earth had collected and spontaneous plants were growing. One or two were knee height, swaying in the wind. Spacious peacefulness resided, although it was time for commuters. A few people appeared, waiting for the train, standing alongside the plants.[11] It was enchanting. What kind of place is this, where capitalism is delipidated and has room for spontaneous life?

Contrastingly, London was more crowded than usual because it was the Friday of a holiday weekend. Walking to Euston Station, the architecture was new and shiny, towering high, proclaiming wealth and economic prowess. The enormous station was so full, hundreds of bodies had rub into each other to move. People were commenting they had never seen so much litter in the station, but it was too crowded for cleaners to clean. Everyone was eating, drinking or pushing to get to the trains. Like an overstocked battery-chicken

11 In the very centre of the platform there is a stretch of intact paving without spontaneous plants.

farm, the infrastructure seemed stretched to support an exaggerated level of consumption and production. In these situations, one man-made surface seamlessly connects with another. Domestic plants are situated in stylized, root-constraining boxes, with commercially produced 'soil' and act as rubbish bins. This is not a location to live alongside spontaneous plants with time to recognize them.

In this weak ontology, when 'business as usual' economies of Europe seek to help people engage with nature, often branded as wilderness, that is unlikely to be a full engagement, no matter how hard the experience provider works, because of a lack of cultural acceptance of spontaneous plants beyond control (which includes conservation). A requirement for moving to a turning-towards-nature focus is feeling graced and having a relationship with the energy of spontaneous plants.

Summary of the weak ontology

In the study area, one physically inhabits a different world, not a world-view (Heywood 2017:2). Walking in that world brings a particular world-view, with an intuitive propensity for thoughts and behaviours springing from it. These may include non-controlling behaviours towards spontaneous plants. This view holds society as less personalized, as conjoining with sentients and historicity, and converging with aspects of turning-towards-nature. Feeling graced with a territory bountiful, both culturally and environmentally, pleasure and joy become a part of daily life. Giving thanks, that may develop into honouring, opens a propensity for a turning-towards-nature. Then a journey within ourselves, ushered in by spontaneous plants and cycles, as Lena teaches, is where the 'word breaks off' (White 2009:816). 'Gratified by the gratuitous grace of Being' we cannot analyse further without falling into 'ratio' (Robbins 2003:20).

In parts of Europe 'weeds' in public spaces remain a sign of decline of power and of poverty (capitalistic failure) rather than being understood as an access point for sustainability. Even assuming northern capitalism matures significantly, and northern Europe learns from the innovations and adaptations which southern Europe has honed, without a territory of grace and thanks the relationship with spontaneous plants will remain utilitarian and bound in control. The standard approach of a 'business as usual' economy is to weigh up the benefits of ecosystem services and the monitoring and control of biodiversity. Perhaps these are worthy aims in theory, but this approach is critiqued for impoverishing nature by applying the same commodifying market systems used by business (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015). In the Spanish perspective, sustainability is erroneously framed within:

> substitution of manufactured capital for lost 'natural capital', valuation and payment for environmental services, dematerialization of the economy, habitat and carbon trading.
>
> (Martinez-Alier 2015)

The business approach to sustainability may help people rationalize the value of nature, but it is constricted to a limiting neoliberal productive discourse and people's 'inner worlds' are largely ignored (Ives, Freeth and Fischer 2019:208).

Within a productivist monetary mentality, people turning-towards-nature remain a threat to efficiency and power, while a weed becomes a product.

Onto-narrative

Before laying forth the onto-narrative it is poignant to observe that 'weak ontology' is also a computer term.

> In computer science, a weak ontology is an ontology that is not sufficiently rigorous to allow software to infer new facts without intervention by humans (the end users of the software system).[12]

Part way through this journey an awareness arose in me of the vast amount of love of life offered by spontaneous plants, that I missed for most of my years, and the lack of interest I manifested in understanding the personal experience of dying. We as turning-towards-humans dominators, with our hording imperatives, are fragile and timebound in comparison to the spontaneous plant world. As Heidegger (1985:316, 317) writes 'MORIBUNDUS *first* gives the SUM its sense', though many of us try to avoid it. Spontaneous plants simultaneously threaten and deeply inspire us, due to their eternal cyclical force and celebration of life; precisely what we sometimes lack.

Returning to the opening exemplar, which acted as a compass:

All at once the workshop leader, Maria-Sonia, alters her voice making it loud, echoing and resonating beneath the vaulted ceiling, so forceful as to sound angered – I've never heard anything similar before – perhaps I feel a sense of awe… I shiver the length of my spine, from the top downward.

> The figure of the *raccoglitrice* (female forager) is to honour nature, not to 'use' it! The figure of the *raccoglitrice* means to honour, not to profit! The figure of the *raccoglitrice* honours hour after hour!

12 www.semanticscholar.org/topic/Weak-ontology/1788357 (accessed 22 February 2024).

There is a pause as no one speaks; presumably everyone in the group is surprised.

> Every second is an appointment of love. I'm in transit. On this planet. All I have are the hours, the seconds of appointments with love until my last appointment.

Speaking to Maria-Sonia after this, she mentioned, not by way of explanation but in passing, that she had been awake reading about the Iguvine Tablets until two in the morning and this would have contributed to the force with which she expressed herself.

Here, the onto-narrative acts as a 'weak-onto tale' (Bennett 2001) gathering experiences into a non-academic form.

How to die and therefore how to live (in the Case delle Erbe)

I would sum up my thoughts thus:

- we need to include dying in life in a positive way;
- many people have a store of unexpressed love (for a range of individual reasons);
- we do often not enjoy living, to the point that we forget, or lose contact with, our love of life;
- dying with this unexpressed love can make people feel they have missed the point; when we die, we may realize we missed expressing (and maybe missed experiencing) our love of life, great as it is;
- spontaneous plants particularly express the love of life in a visual and dynamic manner;
- they can help us access or express the love of life we feel – this is facilitated and able to be more frequent, because the of love of life is not directed toward people;
- this follows turning-towards-nature, rather agro-anthropocentric, values;
- frequent and regular expression of the love of life, often taking the form of thanking or honouring – forgetting one's personal world and grievances – makes us beings in a way our daily lives normally curtail;
- frequent and regular expression of the love of life, enables us to die at peace having expressed the buried root of our existence;
- spontaneous plants are a particularly rich portal or 'plants are a door of access' (Maria-Sonia, pers. comm. 2019), as they stimulate a social fabric for human interactions;
- this whole experience is facilitated by being situated in a 'territory of grace and thanks' (as described).

At the end… there are no more words to intone. Instead, exhale deeply and for once do the reverse; give some pleasure from our bodies to plants.[13]

13 It is important to acknowledge that while at the outset I was not responsive to sensing the energy of plants with Lena, I continued practising and as of 2023 a change evolved. Now, distinctly, and at times very forcibly, I sense the energy of spontaneous plants and frequently have ability to distinguish a difference in energy between individual plants. I am grateful to Lena for this.

8

Conclusion

Summation

This transdisciplinary book makes six contributions of note, which represent its core conceptual trajectories, listed here thematically rather than in order of importance.

1 – Anthropology

Foraging for a Future refutes the historic anthropological trope of searching for foreign cultures in which to find people living within an understanding of the sentience of nature. Additional credence is given to anthropology at home, therein engaging with intersubjectivity beyond humans. Moving beyond oppositional thinking in terms of anthropocentric or biocentric, beyond human exceptionalism and power imbalances *Foraging for a Future* illustrates how we may flourish in porous and symbiotic relationships with the dense more-than-human ecologies around us. (The degree of equilibrium between spontaneous plants and persons within this flourishing rapport in the Case delle Erbe is a varying matter of personal experience and belief.)

2 – Identity and transformation

Participating in the Case delle Erbe made it evident that the pursuit of an identity project in nature derives from misguided motivations and represents a serious challenge for nature-based activities, unless their only aim is to provide pre-packaged products with superficial outcomes, with the societal repercussions that have been developed in terms of a *turning-toward-nature* (a less self-individuated person focusing on collaborating with the natural environment, feeling sharing imperatives towards people and more-than-humans) vs *turning-toward-humans* (a person with an identity project, prioritizing other people instead of nature, with imperatives to produce and defend) as has been discussed (see p. 207). 'Being' within the Case delle Erbe

is an awareness reached through spontaneous plants and is predominantly unindividuated, connecting to a sense of time, thereby finitude, conjoining with a collective and more anonymous lifeforce. This is presented as an alternative to people searching for an identity in increasingly commodified, technological society.

3 – Territories of grace and thanks

'Territory of grace and thanks' has been articulated with distinctive characteristics hitherto unrecognized within a specific landscape designation. Territories of grace and thanks are nodes, stimulating intrinsic pro-environmental behaviours, and require 'turning-toward-nature' research, contrasting with the prevalent non-anthropological style of pro-environmental behaviour studies (Binder and Blankenberg 2017; Bissing-Olson *et al.* 2013; Carfora *et al.* 2017; Farrow, Grolleau and Ibanez 2017). Significantly, being spared from a white settler colonial history, the people in this territory are positioned to engage with the more-than-human with an intensity of joy (and lack of trauma) that proffers profound richness. Additionally, the context of thousands of years of foraging in Italy allows participants to connect to large cultural frameworks (gestures, rituals, customs) rather than turning inward, and becoming preoccupied with personal well-being or healing. The gift of the territory of grace and thanks is how it spontaneously inspires thanks, mediates a propensity for honouring nature and is a precursor for 'appointments with love'. Within the latter, the confluence of dying and living, mutually enriching and made possible by a relationship with spontaneous plants, deeply augments our experience of existence.

4 – Life integrated with spontaneous plants

Living with spontaneous plants – not controlling them but interacting with them – appears to form the basis for a social fabric. Within the Case delle Erbe people are closely interconnected with the worlds of spontaneous plants, and through this people learn a corporeal attachment to the whole environment, encompassing a recognition of themselves as collective, less individual and interwoven with impersonal cycles of time, history and seasons, which seems to stimulate shared socio-economic values. Although Case delle Erbe participants are extremely diverse, their relationship to spontaneous plants creates the cultural homogeneity and trust required for a sharing economy. In this plant-based relation, happenstance and spontaneous behaviour is welcomed, while control (on all levels, from control of the Case delle Erbe as a movement, or control of individual Case delle Erbe, or control of the environment such as mowing, weeding, planting, fertilizing, increasing production, crop selection etc.) is neither desired nor even considered. A

theme throughout the book is how Case delle Erbe behaviour contrasts with our society's emphasis on control, including agricultural practices.

5 – Commodification and the experience economy

The implications of commodification for the experience economy and slow movement are grave; by extending market products (foraging, caring, well-being) that were previously fulfilled in the non-monetized economy and framing them as a commodities with a price tag, we diminish free aspects of life, and with a corresponding depletion of skills that increases the number of people who can only partake as consumers. As elaborated upon, this creates artificial socio-economical scarcity. Nature-based experiences selling slow practices as 'products' seem like good entrepreneurial endeavours; however, behind the scenes a process of social impoverishment is at work. As a counterpoint, we explored the Case delle Erbe's post-productive experience economy. Instead of focusing on consumerism this post-productive experience economy is motivated to empower participants for social change through connection to plants (rather than political stances).

6 – Heideggerian approaches

Foraging for a Future informs a more holistic approach to Heidegger, showing how dwelling is not the end in itself it is frequently represented as. Dwelling represents only one possible path toward encountering Being. Significantly, *Foraging for a Future* exposes Heidegger's role in a conceptual framework which, ironically, requires the destruction of nature to reposition Being. A new reading of Heideggerian philosophy linked to agriculture and productive control reveals how the metaphor of the 'clearing', initially appearing inspiring, may represent a vestigial understanding that hinders our ability to be sustainable.

It is worth discussing the extent to which conclusions in this book are controversial and have been justified by the research. Deliberating the future consequences for the economy and social behaviour in Western Europe can only speculative. *Foraging for a Future* envisions how contemporary trends in the intangible economy and the quest for personal transformation or identity could be shaped by neoliberal technological society, with sociological and psychological spin-offs. Alternatively, as the Case delle Erbe argue, a segment of a post-productive experience economy could evolve through affirmative nature-based lifestyles in mature capitalistic countries. While the conclusions drawn herein may not achieve unanimous support, the individual points

have been discussed in the scholarly literature. But this is the first time these thoughts have been situated within the synergistic framework of declining productivity and the territory of grace and thanks.

The weak ontology in Chapter 7, branching out from Heideggerian phenomenology, develops a social theory and draws together the converging findings in this journey without aiming to be an uncontested 'truth'. It represents the Case delle Erbe in the study area, which is its validation.

Key contributions listed above as points one, two and five are less likely to be contested, given their foundation upon physical practice and their contribution to existing academic discourse, whose themes are widely acknowledged. For example, the anthropological arguments in point one expand existing discourse within phenomenological anthropology and multispecies ethics.

Partially, this status could extend to point three as regards the value of the 'territory of grace and thanks', which was inspired by Horden and Purcell's (2000) seminal work *The Corrupting Sea*. Contributions of the Case delle Erbe in light of interacting with the more-than-human arise from being within a territory of grace and thanks, rather than colonial land.

As regards point four, external validity and replicability were expressly cautioned against from the outset, for the aim is not to produce a social model. Its contestability may rest upon whether the reader has a valuable experience from being immersed in the book's journey. For those who are bound to understand research purely in terms of refuting or justifying, some aspects of point four could be generalized to offer external validity. For example, the transformations and approaches to being which people experience in the Case delle Erbe are partly due to the movement being a social (spontaneous) project instead of a commercial one. Additionally, the study area offers a setting with a propensity for decommodification and the civil economy; these forces connect to a culture that still exists, albeit fragmentally. 'Here exchange is the essence of life. It is how rural people live, helping each other.' (Lena, pers. comm. 2019). Conceivably, within similar contexts in Europe some degree of replicability could be found. Studying the Case delle Erbe internationally would further this exploration.

Point six offers a new interpretation of Heidegger's work that has the particularity of being born from participation in the Case delle Erbe; this origin in itself is its merit. This interpretation does not preclude contrasting readings and contributes to a body of writing continually reanalysing Heidegger's work. Indeed, the nature of Heidegger's writing lends itself to this type of endeavour, for we develop a relationship with the text which evolves as our own understanding and as society itself change.

Finally, the onto-narrative offered in conclusion is a non-academic exercise or tool to stimulate learning and public well-being. It may be a welcomed point of discussion for experience providers as it beneficially integrates Heidegger's less discussed – yet central concept – of death.

Taken as a whole… discovery and relationships between plants and people have no end. It is a way of being and growing

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Based on more than five years participation in the Case Delle Erbe movement of the Apennine mountains of Central Italy, *Foraging for a Future* describes how spontaneous plants have become intrinsic to a social fabric involving an economy of exchange and living with greater freedom. It offers rare insights into a post-productive 'experience economy' that empowers people, and yet simultaneously decommodifies experiences – bypassing neoliberalism.

In this book, Tamara Griffiths enters into dialogue with Heideggerian thinking, which is applied to the Case Delle Erbe with surprising outcomes. The results illuminate experiences of intersubjectivity beyond humans, showing how we can re-understand ourselves in nature, to create space for reciprocal and rich relationships with more-than-human communities.

> This book is especially timely in today's uncertain and chaotic world, where politics often dominate the global spotlight. It reminds us that we must focus on people, not politics, and rethink our relationship with nature, which is frequently overshadowed by the turbulence of the political landscape. This is a must-read for teacher educators, school educators, and policymakers.
>
> ***Chenkai Chi***
> University of Windsor, Canada

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