

Stories of Change:
Alternative Food Networks in the Urban Setting of Zurich



Photo of the CSA Pura Verdura. Taken by Rahel Fuchs (permission to use given to author)

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Abstract:

Food is political: from seed over production to distribution and consumption. Large scale agriculture infused multi-layered social, ecological, and economic issues. The need to change the dominant food system approach is widely recognised. Alternatives in food production and distribution emerged and persisted over time. This thesis shows that narrative research in Alternative Food Networks provides important insights into practices that aspire to be ecological and socially just, and further illuminates and increases knowledge production on the ecosystem that, in turn, forms a vital part in transforming the food system. Using a narrative approach, this thesis engages in the praxis of seven Alternative Food Networks in the urban area of Zurich: three Community Supported Agriculture farms; a food cooperative; a community garden; a food council, and a food bank. The thesis investigates how the alternative practices are enacted, engaged, created and defined. Employing a decolonial framework, the research starts with the interlocutors' praxis and only then connects it with theory. Entanglements and breakouts of local and global structures form part of the analysis and interweave with concepts from Feminist Political Ecology. Breaking out of structures is complex and such an analysis deserves time and space. The narrative approach gives space to personal relations and the projects' emergence, struggles, blooming, and opportunities. The narratives include a discussion on the alienation from nature and from farmers, and how the alternative practices aspire to reconnect them. The research shows the interlocutors' understanding of the world as relational and process-based. As such, the research illuminates the acuteness to conceive agriculture as care work. While the studied Alternative Food Networks received support from the government, organisations, and individuals, local obstacles include access to land and infrastructure and an appropriate legal representation of their structures. This paper calls for recognition and support of a plurality of alternatives that can coevolve and coexist. More such stories of alternative practices enhance their presence as everyday realities.

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Preface

This thesis is political, written from an engaged and activist standpoint. It is multi-faceted and touches on larger, structural levels as well as local circumstances. In this way, it is just like food: complex, intertwined, political. Food is a basic necessity to live and survive. Power structures decide what we have on our plate and what we do not, and many times we fail to recognise that. The necessity to change the dominant agricultural and food system receives global recognition. Even though there is less and less fertile soil, clean water and seed diversity, little change is enacted. Many peoples around the world have taken the matter into their own hands and created or persisted with other ways of relating to food. This paper recounts some of their stories and shows how they are intertwined with local and global complexities. Their experienced realities are explored and compared with a range of critical concepts and theories. I am humbled by their narratives as well as the offered theories and concepts. I hope this discussion raises more questions and sparks some engagement with Alternative Food Networks across citizens, scientists, farmers and activists.

This paper desires to be accessible to all. Bear with me when you look for the conventional structure of a thesis and when I indulge in critical theory intertwined with the stories of the people who create alternatives on a daily basis. Yes, the food system is complex, but society and politics should not shy away because of that. The connectedness of structures and locality, nature and culture, politics, and the everyday should rather be seen as something beautiful: we have the chance to create and enact every day. Such actions create ripples and touch multiple levels. I invite you to keep your mind open, recognise the beauty of complexity, unlearn and relearn, and indulge in thoughts of how you can nurture your body and your surroundings more. I hope it will be an inspiration for you in your everyday life.

I will not dance to your beat
If you call plantations forests
I will not sing with you
If you privatize my water
I will confront you with my fists
If climate change means death to me but business to you
I will expose your evil greed
If you don't leave crude oil in the soil
Coal in the hole and tar sands in the land
I will confront and denounce you
If you insist on carbon offsetting and other do-nothing false
solutions
I will make you see red
If you keep talking of REDD and push forest communities away from their land
I will drag you to the Climate Tribunal
If you pile up ecological debt
& refuse to pay your climate debt
I will make you drink your own medicine
If you endorse genetically modified crops
And throw dust into the skies to mask the sun
I will not dance to your beat
Unless we walk the sustainable path
And accept real solutions & respect Mother Earth
Unless you do
I will not &
We will not dance to your beat

_ Nnimmo Bassey (2010)

List of Abbreviations

CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

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1. The Seed

1.1. Introduction

An estimated 7,000 different plant species form part of human nutrition, but most of the consumed food comes from just 12 plant species (EDA, 2021). The diversity of agricultural plant species and variety declined sharply over the last century (ibid.). The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO, 2019) estimates that three quarters of the plant diversity that once contributed to the human diet have already gone extinct. These numbers haunt me as I am about to explore places where people rethink the system and stand up for enhanced diversity and ecological and social justice in agriculture. It is one of the first warm spring days when I visit the Rotenbirben farm. From where I live in the city of Zurich, I commute for only 7 kilometres to the farm. The landscape transforms to open fields and farmlands. I get off the bus and cross the road. From here, I can see an orchard with old and hardy varieties of apples and pears. One of such is the Klingar variety, discovered in this area.

The carefully handcrafted letterings and small decorations make me feel instantly welcome whilst I walk towards the farmland. Five people in my age stir around a table on a patio and wave at me. "Are you Patricia? Join us for lunch! We eat beetroot and potatoes every day, because that is what we have at this time of the year." They laugh. We share a deliciously fresh beetroot pasta and crisp lettuce with rucola as I receive a glimpse into their lives. Later on, Ilona and I sit in the shade of a tree overlooking the farm activities as she shares her story within this collective farm. One guy carried on through the lunch break and is now squatting in a field; his hands mellow the soil. Reinvigorated helping hands come for support. Six primary school children tend to their allotment while they receive explanations from one of the farmers. Their delighted chatter contributes to the lively environment that I am grateful to be part of for this afternoon. Ilona is one of seven people that I have an in-depth conversation with for this thesis. The conversations engage within peoples' involvement in alternative practices in Zurich, their perception of food, and related problematics and solutions. Such alternative practices are conceptualised under the term Alternative Food Networks (Goodman et al., 2012). This approach counters the dominant narrative of success through material growth and scale. There are other stories that need to be told too. This thesis sheds light on stories that are based on the knowledge that resources are limited and that there is no endless material growth.

When I started looking into thesis topics last autumn, I reached out to Ernährungsforum Zurich, a food council established to foster the dialogue and initiatives for food transformation in and around Zurich. I aimed to find current needs and challenges of Alternative Food Networks that I could offer to investigate with the thesis. The forum connected me with various actors, and I started a dialogue with them. Through this initial interaction, I learned about their needs, their challenges, and groups that they are able to reach. The complexities of access to land, plodding through regulatory structures, finding a fair price for both producers and consumers, and many other issues on the path to a social and ecological just practice came up already in this initial stage. I felt both drawn to this messy entanglement and overwhelmed by it. I decided to stay with the trouble and situate my thesis in this mess that is our reality. Donna Haraway (2016:2) states that staying with the trouble is both serious and lively, and

requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly. Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little [...].

I dedicated my time to explore the stories and entanglements of such alternatives which reach across many fields of expertise and experiences. I do not intend to find a golden solution to current food production complexities, but to write about the many ways in which alternatives are created. Research in alternative activities aspires to make them more viable as objects of policy and activism, and more present as everyday realities (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

In a later article, Haraway (2019:565) elaborates on telling stories as “compost writing that is writing-with in layered composing and decomposing in order to write at all, living-and-dying-with to be at all, as mortal earthlings”. My research does not quantify the findings to show what works and what does not, or how it can be scaled; instead, it shows the interconnectedness of things that cannot be quantified. The narratives are put into context with both the larger, structural conditions and their local counterparts. I employ concepts and theories from Feminist Political Ecology and combine primary material of the narratives with secondary data from governmental reports for the local context. Thus, this research conceptualises as an interdisciplinary design to query different ways of knowing the world and their implications for what we can know (Nightingale, 2016). Such research is presented as a

kaleidoscope: when turned, a new pattern can emerge, and, with acknowledging the partiality and situatedness of each pattern, their comparison gains new insights (ibid.).

1.2. Standpoint

I am a white, female 30-year-old human being who grew up in Switzerland in a privileged environment. After spending many years studying and working in various areas, both abroad and in Switzerland, I decided on yet another area—or, one that brings everything together—with this master's degree in Human Ecology. In this research, I engage in a decolonial and standpoint epistemology embedded in feminist political ecology with the ontology of critical realism that includes a soft social constructivism. In other words: research is always informed by the researcher and this research is informed by my standpoint. I chose this topic to raise awareness on the importance of changing the dominant approach to food and its industry. I acknowledge that there is a reality that researchers try to understand, measure and interpret, but underneath are mechanisms in place that cannot be seen on the surface. The material and non-material, human and more than human world is entangled and constitutes the ecosystem within which all beings interact. I am most inspired by Nancy Tuana's (2009) interactionism that has embodiment at its heart to overcome the mentioned dualisms. Everything is always in flux, the human, more than human, material and discursive are interacting in a complex mix (ibid.). With this understanding, I utilise a narrative approach to shine light on various mechanisms and entanglements and to connect practice with theory.

I acknowledge the partiality of my perspective as a researcher with my background, and the effects of power relations between me as a researcher and the people I have researched. There is no innocent position (Haraway, 1991:121), and, therefore, I explain my personal connection and interest in the thematic. My positioning is practiced in terms of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991). All forms of knowledge reflect the particular conditions under which they are produced as well as their social identity and location (ibid.). I embrace new and perhaps unexpected forms of knowledge production. I write as a thinker and a listener (Tsing, 2015) and acknowledge that I bring in my own understandings and interpretations as I retell the researched stories. I employ an open, concerned, and connected stance, with which I explore rather than judge (Gibson-Graham, 2008). These reflections accompany the entire process of engaging, observing, analysing, and producing knowledge (Longhurst, 2009).

This thesis consists of seven parts. **The first part is the seed**, a requisite for any growth. It acts as the point of departure but recognises that much has happened already so that the seed can exist. It explores where the thesis is embedded: where we find ourselves right now. **Second follows the germination**, where the plant begins to grow roots and a stem. Here, the aim and research questions develop. **Third, with growing** and building leaves through photosynthesis, the interconnectedness of larger influences is acknowledged and discussed. Power structures and understandings of the world play a role here. **Fourth, the plant builds resistance**. The methodological framework embedded in a decolonial, feminist approach is illustrated. **Fifth, bloom and pollination**. We reach what we have anticipated. With many interspecies relations, the flowers produce more seeds and bear fruits. Conversations with the local alternatives are discussed here together with relevant concepts. **Sixth, reproduction**. The fruits bear seeds. Here, I revisit the research questions and summarise the discussion. **Seventh, dispersal**. I reflect on all parts, my experience and learnings. It is both the end and opens up new beginnings. All intertwine and create a necessity for one another; even more could be discussed but would exhaust the temporal and spatial scope of this thesis.

2. Germination

2.1. Aim

The aims of this thesis are multi-layered. For one, it aspires to challenge the dominant scientific gaze and therein the separation of humans and nature and categorical interpretation. For another, it seeks to highlight the important role of narratives both in everyday life and in knowledge production and interpretation. The aim of using narrative inquiry is to reveal the rich and diverse ways these alternatives are constituted. As such, the study aims to highlight, on one hand, the contextuality of local initiatives, being specific cases in a particular context; and, on the other hand, elucidate the influence of wider structural conditions. Local circumstances stand in relation to larger conditions in the food chain. Even though such alternatives have been existing in urban spaces in Switzerland and throughout the world for decades, there exists little empirical study involving critical theories. Thus, this paper wishes to stimulate the discussion on food alternatives using critical theories.

I explicitly chose to research alternatives that work on building just livelihoods, rather than broadening green desires of the consumer market. As Harcourt and Nelson (2015:12) point out,

Going beyond the green economy means that we have to start from the level of everyday life, social reproduction and ongoing people's struggles for gender-aware ecological and social justice. This means engaging our bodies, emotions, everyday practices, and relationships. For example, instead of 'greening' the economy we need to be 'sustaining livelihoods' to ensure nutrition, ecological balance, clean water, secure housing, gender equality, meaningful and diverse approaches to labour.

Thus, this thesis centres the everyday life of individuals that shapes and is shaped by the alternatives, the surroundings, and the existing structures and power dynamics. The alternative practices exist within entanglements and create new ones.

Following through with the critique on a singular valid knowledge production of the scientific gaze, I aim to decolonise the approach of the thesis. Inspired by Mignolo and Walsh (2018:18), I focus on praxistal questions (ibid.) of *who*, *how*, *with whom* and *what for*, and continue with *what* and *why* to reflect and analyse. As Mignolo and Walsh (ibid.) discuss, the notion that theory and conceptual frameworks must precede praxis and the idea that meaning is only conceptually derived, is disturbed with this approach. In their words (ibid.:18), "[t]o begin with praxis and the praxistal activity of thinking-doing, is to turn academia and Western modern

thought upside down". Accordingly, this thesis investigates the praxis, what is being done, experienced, and known. The research questions developed out of this approach.

2.2. Research Questions

I aim to keep my research questions open in order to let themes emerge during the process.

They evolve around the following two main questions:

1. How is the praxis within the selected Alternative Food Networks in Zurich enacted, engaged, created, and defined?
2. How are the alternative practices embedded in and breaking out of structural conditions and local complexities?

The following sub-questions guide the research:

- How do the interlocutors perceive the interrelations between humans, food, nature, and surroundings?
- How are the selected Alternative Food Networks shaped by the people initiating them?
- In what way(s) do the selected Alternative Food Networks contribute to environmental and social justice?
- What are (some of) the obstacles of the selected Alternative Food Networks?

3. Photosynthesis

Here I elaborate on three interrelated background foundations that influence the understanding of the world, food production, and alternatives. First, we quickly loop to philosophy and how it shaped science and dominant food production. An overview of Feminist Political Ecology and Alternative Food Networks follows.

3.1. From Western philosophy to industrial agriculture

It all begins with philosophy. Yes, that's where we have to begin, because it is the foundation of how we understand the world and interact within it, both consciously and unconsciously. Western philosophers discussed nature as grand and universal, but also passive and mechanical. Nature was a backdrop and a resource for Man to tame and master, and this understanding led to the separation of Man and Nature. Through colonialism, relations of power emerged and persist in contemporary society. Coloniality asserts that some people and other beings are superior, and others are inferior. Under colonialism, land existed to be conquered, non-white people were considered inferior to white Europeans, and women were seen to be inferior to men. Subsequently, extractive capitalist thinking permitted the exploitation and degradation of land, water, and people, and continued to estrange people from nature (Tsing, 2012). Decolonising this understanding means to recognise that multiple ways of thinking, being, and knowing are valid, and that no separation, superiority, or inferiority exists where we have been taught to see it (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Stories of human mastery are also inherent in science (Tsing, 2012:144). These stories fuel the belief of human autonomy and pursue the approach of human control over nature and human impact on nature, instead of species interdependence (ibid.). The idea of *human nature* led to assumptions of human constancy and autonomy with autocratic and militaristic ideologies. Imagine instead a human nature that historically shifted together with varied webs of interspecies dependence. Today, a scientific analysis of such interdependence constitutes literature on human diseases and parasites—because they can be found in the physical human body, the relation of co-habitation and dependency can be studied. In decolonising this approach, other species that form part of the *environment with* humans can be studied not as a discourse of management and control, but as an interspecies relationship (Tsing, 2012).

Tsing (ibid.:145) exemplifies cereal agriculture in the Near East some ten thousand years ago that spread over Eurasia as the beginning of intensive agriculture and monocultural practices. Hierarchical social arrangements emerged: the states encouraged sedentary, stable farms as well as family-based households and guaranteed family properties and inheritance. The family father was the state's representative at the level of the working household and both women and grain were confined and managed to maximise fertility (ibid.). On colonised lands, large plantations to grow sugar, cotton and tobacco replaced a diverse agriculture (Bassey, 2018). The coordinated harvest quiets multiple rhythms of mingled cultivation. At this point, it stands no reason that Alternative Food Networks want to go back in time. The times of stories of Man over Nature have passed.

The rapid growth in agricultural productivity since the 1960s underpins the development of the current global food system that is both a major driver of climate change, and increasingly vulnerable to it (IPCC, 2019). Farmers were pressured into standardisation to market their crops. Standardisation makes plants vulnerable to all kinds of disease, which quickly gained a reputation as the enemy of civilisation and progress (Tsing, 2012:147). To fight this enemy, gene modifications and pesticides were employed. In 1962, Rachel Carson published the book *Silent Spring* which documented the adverse environmental and health effects caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides, calling them "biocides". She predicted increased consequences for the future and called for a biotic approach instead. Her work had a powerful impact on environmental movements globally. The subsequent report *Limits to Growth*, authored by 17 researchers and commissioned by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972) influenced international gatherings in Moscow and Rio de Janeiro in 1971. A computer simulation of population, food production, industrialisation, pollution, and consumption of nonrenewable natural resources predicted that unchanged resource consumption would dramatically worsen ecological, economic, and social conditions (ibid.).

Within time, more reports followed. To this day, researchers identify the main problems of industrial agriculture as long food chains, the depletion of soil and water, the dominance of large corporations within the whole chain and the dispossession of small-scale farmers, the alienation of the producer and consumer relationship, the dependence on imported foods in many countries and regions, the capitalist mantra that food should be cheap and, last but not least, the large amount of food waste (Bacon et al., 2012; IPCC, 2019). The Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] estimates the soil erosion rate through conventional tillage is 100 times higher than its formation rate (IPCC, 2019:3). Industrial agriculture is responsible for 23% of greenhouse gas emissions (ibid.). On top of the severe impacts of production itself, a third of global produced food is thrown away, partly because of the products not applying to industry standards or because of an overproduction to guarantee a certain yield (IPCC, 2019; Stadt Zürich, 2019). Water scarcity remains a major challenge around the world and agriculture is responsible for 70% of all human water withdrawals (IPCC, 2019). As previously mentioned, three quarters of plant diversity that once contributed to the human diet are now extinct (FAO, 2018). The FAO has concluded that the problems of the predominant food and agricultural systems show that natural, social, and economic issues are inseparable and, thus, affect each other. I invite you to go on any governmental, UN or FAO website and have a scroll through. It quickly becomes clear that the message is the same: the way we predominantly feed ourselves must change.

The understanding of “modern industrialised society” assumes that scientific rationality, technological innovations, and economic efficiency will fix these negative impacts eventually. This human/nature dualism ignores human’s embeddedness in and dependency on the natural environment. A continued exploitation of nature through industrial agriculture leads to increased environmental, and thus human and entangled species degradation. Conventional approaches to *tackling* climate change, food insecurity, and other food related challenges still tell a story of unlimited resources to draw from and master; that they only need to be optimised and that further growth will get us there (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). Important to note is that the IPCC received criticism for failing to incorporate epistemic diversity in its assessments (e.g., Ford et al., 2016; Carey et al., 2014). The following section introduces Feminist Political Ecology, which counters the outlined comprehension.

3.2. The interplay of Feminist Political Ecology, Decoloniality and Narratives

Life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings. Humans cannot survive by stomping on all others; interspecies entanglements need to be recognised and valued (Tsing, 2015). This recognition is embedded in Feminist Political Ecology. Political Ecology is committed to drawing on critical theories that take social relations of power, inequalities, and different understandings of the world into account. It employs a political commitment to social justice

and structural political change (Robbins, 2020). As such, Political Ecology moves beyond a critique and asks, “*What do we want?*”

Yet, who is this *we*? Feminist Political Ecology investigates that *we*—who forms part of it, who is left out, and why—and articulates alternative forms of living and governing and how to sustain livelihoods (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). Investigating the *we* is vital. Structural forms of power define inequality and uneven access to and control over resources, depending on, for example, gender, class, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, and nation and their intersections (ibid.). Nightingale (2011) defines the environment as an extension of and into the body as a site of material reproduction and ecological impact. Feminist Political Ecology draws on the experiences and knowledges rising from the struggles for justice in the daily lives of local communities. This includes spatial scales between global and local priorities, timescales of long-term and short-term agendas, and social differences of diverse positions and values. Feminist Political Ecology emphasises research and practice that empower and promote just social and ecological transformation (Elmhirst, 2018).

De Sousa Santos et al. (2007) call for a recognition of the diversity of knowledge systems that underlie the practices of different social groups. Global social justice requires global cognitive justice. An ecology of knowledges replaces the knowledge monoculture (ibid.). They invite researchers to identify a common ground in alternatives without erasing the autonomy and difference of each of them. Research in this area tends to focus on the Global South, where many ways of being and knowing have been oppressed and silenced. I follow this approach in an urban setting of the Global North. The separations of man—woman, culture—nature, mind—body and reason—emotion places people outside the ecosystem and reinforces a land ethic of control and ownership instead of partnership and interrelationship. Radical pluralism honours and nurtures cultural diversity by enabling many paths to the realisation of self-defined aspirations and definitions of the good life (ibid.; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This pluralism is vital to recognise in the Global North and lies at the core of my thesis.

Historian William Cronon (1992) explains that narratives play an important role in research, as interactions and experiences are written down from the researcher’s perspective. The stories we tell change the way we interact with the world (ibid.). While it is recognised as a challenge, narratives remain essential to our understanding of history and the human place in

nature (ibid:1350). Gibson-Graham (2008) and Tsing (2015), among other scholars, call for new ways to tell stories beyond the rational, linear growth and development arrow pointing forward. Without the existence and separation of Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life, and women, men, and other beings can express themselves freely. The stories of alternatives open up new possibilities other than linear progress stories and appreciate the entangled ways of life across many kinds of temporal rhythms (ibid).

3.3. Alternative Food Networks

Recent research discusses alternatives in agriculture under the umbrella of Alternative Food Networks (Goodman et al., 2012). Alternative Food Networks emerged as a response to the unsustainable industrial food system and global supply chain (ibid.). Although the magnitude of these global challenges can seem overwhelming, the alternatives map different ways forward by creating new economic and cultural spaces for trading, production, and consumption of food. *Alternative* thus means to show and enact other ways of doing that are possible. They form not a classic way of protest such as demonstrations, campaigns, and lobby work (Nicholls, 2007), but rather come into existence not only out of a critique of the dominant discourse, but also from one of the daily and familiar routine that relates to personal experiences and practices (Goodman et al., 2012). They build on imaginaries and material practices infused with different values and rationalities that challenge instrumental capitalist logics and mainstream worldviews. As such, they act as templates for the reconfiguration of extractivist practices along ecologically sustainable and socially just lines (ibid.). The discursive and material development of such spaces of possibilities over the past 40 years demonstrates that alternative forms of social organization with their own operational rationalities can coexist, and even coevolve, with contemporary capitalist society (Goodman et al., 2012; Gibson- Graham, 2006). Politics as alternative food system-making must be seen as *process*: it is an understanding of the world as relational and process-based rather than perfectionist. This relational worldview admits that its vision is never perfect and can always be improved by working in relationship with other beings. *Improvement*, thus, is not fixed and static, but an open, contested and reflexive process (Goodman et al., 2012).

Two common forms of Alternative Food Networks are Community Supported Agriculture and food cooperatives. Community Supported Agriculture [CSA] draws on direct cooperation between producers and consumers. It desires self-determination in food production and

sustainable agriculture. Members pay operating contributions, which enables risk sharing, relieves producers from price pressure, and secures their income. The annual membership overrides marketing and the food reaches the consumer fresh and without losses. Members participate in planning and decision making. Hands-on farm involvement and personal experiences foster an appreciation for farm labour and food (Solawi, 2021). As a food cooperative, a number of consumers cooperate in order to buy food and other commonly used goods straight from producers at a fair price. People and the environment come before profit. Members give the cooperative the security to purchase the products through them, this in turn provides security to farmers. Members participate in decision-making and buy goods at a lower or at purchasing price (Grassrooted, 2021).

Alternatives to major food suppliers and distributors have been flourishing in recent years in Switzerland (Stadt Zürich, 2019). They consist of farms in urban areas changing to Community Supported Agriculture, local and community-owned organic stores, small food cooperatives, shared gardening spaces and food councils. Their doings have caught the attention of the Zurich government and influences their operation through this bottom-up approach (ibid.).

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach to explore the doings and knowings of people within Alternative Food Networks.

4. Resistance

4.1. A decolonial and feminist framework

As introduced earlier, decoloniality seeks to render visible, open up and advance multiple ways of doing and knowing. Illuminating pluriversal paths disturbs the totality from which the global is often perceived. It encourages a relational way of seeing. As such, it allows to think with—instead of simply about—the peoples, subjects, struggles, and knowledges (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Following decoloniality, I utilise qualitative methods of conducting interviews with local actors that are creating alternatives to the dominant food production and distribution. It is an inductive approach, where theory arises during data collection, for example during qualitative observation and interviews (Riessman, 2008). Theories and concepts belonging to Feminist Political Ecology are embedded in subsequent discussions of the conversations. Hence, I follow through with the approach to begin with praxis and only then combine it with theories.

This thesis finds its orientation through feminist principles and in particular Goodman et al.'s approach (2012) in seeing the alternative food system-making as a process of rethinking our social world, what it is, and how we know it. It does not seek to change the world by embracing a perfect vision of an alternative world based on a fixed, static set of values, but to rearticulate the understanding of the world as relational and process-based. As such, this vision partakes in a continuous work on relationships through reflective practice (ibid.). This approach promotes a diversity of voices in the process of building alternatives. A narrative approach embraces a multitude of being and knowing. Countering the dominant understanding of validating assumptions through time-efficient measurements, this study takes a slow approach to get to know the stories of individuals and to understand the complexity of building and engaging in alternatives.

The qualitative approach of narratives is inspired by scholars such as Donna Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Wendy Harcourt; it is also oriented on literature of narratives in social movements. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015:37), Tsing accentuates on “listening to and telling a rush of stories”. The arts of noticing must be revitalised within ethnography and natural history (ibid.). She elaborates that a rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up, as attention is drawn to interrupting geographies and tempos which elicit more

stories (ibid.). It is, thus, not about scaling up, but about the recognition of diversity as well as entanglements within.

4.2. Narrative research

Narrative research collects stories from individuals through conversations about their lived and told experiences (Creswell, 2014). Such narratives are an oral history of personal reflections of events and their causes and effects (Plummer, 2001). In particular, I employ the approach of participant narratives as described by Robert Benford (2002:53). Participant narratives are about the stories that individuals tell about their movement-oriented experience (ibid.); in this case, about their experience within the Alternative Food Networks. Even though the interlocutors in this case do not form part of a social movement in the classic sense, they engage in the radical practice of creating alternatives. Thus, the utilisation of participant narratives fits this thesis' approach of narrative analysis to combine personal reflection with the initiatives. In this way, narratives illuminate the interplay of agency and social structure (Davis, 2002:27).

Narrative interviewing generates a detailed account rather than brief answers or general statements (Riessman, 2008). The narrative is formed as an open story that touches on the interdisciplinary perspectives of economical, sociological, geographical, anthropological, and environmental dimensions (ibid.). As conventional food practices influence all these areas, so do the alternatives. The activities have an economic function of exchange; they are deeply rooted in social relationships; they are connected in spatial and cultural distance between producers and consumers; and they have an influence on and are influenced by the environment (Davis, 2002). In narratives, global food problematics meet local histories. Stories, actors, ideas, and activities are given importance and challenge the boundaries between science and society and within disciplines (Tsing, 2015). With this interdisciplinarity, I situate myself as a researcher in the field and listen to the actors, their stories, and their concerns. Science is no longer the authoritarian educator of the people but collaborates with local actors on matters that are of concern to all of us (ibid.).

4.3. In praxis

Growing up close to Zurich and having lived within the city for several years, I stumbled upon Alternative Food Networks every now and then. Through personal contacts and preliminary research, I inquired into existing alternatives and sought to incorporate a range of differing approaches. I reached out through either established contacts or to their published email address and explained my research objectives. The potential participants showed interest in this approach and agreed to a personal meeting to conduct the narrative inquiry. In total, I conducted seven interviews with initiators of three community-supported agriculture farms, one food cooperative, one community-culture garden, one food project for people in need and one food council.

The 60 to 90 minutes long, in-depth and semi-structured interviews (see appendix A) were, upon agreement, recorded by phone. The interviews started with a personal account, moved to a discussion of the projects, and ended with the interviewee's overall view of the food system and its transition. The flow of the conversation should not be cut by taking notes or through other reminders of a set interview. For the same reason, most of the interviews occurred outdoors, whilst taking a walk or sitting on a bench in a park. Others happened at the farm or other workplace. With this informal setting, I anticipated that the interlocutors would feel free to express themselves and feel at ease to tell their story to a stranger. Power relations are of paramount importance in narrative inquiry, and the atmosphere during the interaction should be empowering (Riessman, 2008). The interviews were conducted in either Swiss German or German, as per the interlocutors' preference for comfortability and ease of expression.

4.4. Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis, in which the researcher focuses on the themes told by the participants, instead of the way of telling or performance (Creswell, 2014). I listened to the audiotapes to retell the stories. With this, I followed the decoloniality approach and gave space to what was said and experienced and tried not to cut out what would not fit into themes that I as a researcher would find relevant in relation to existing theory. The used material was then transcribed and translated into English. There are interpretive decisions to consider in translating (Riessman, 2008). As Swiss German is my native tongue, I am confident that the different languages of the spoken and written word do not interfere with the context.

Much of the content of the narratives lies within expressions that cannot be captured in the two-dimensional way of transcribing (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, I analysed the oral narratives predominantly through the interaction and tapes, and not the written transcription. The experiences that lie at the core of this thesis are intertwined with each other, as well as with local and larger structures. They have no beginning and no ending; they exist in continuous flux and both shape and are shaped by conceptions and circumstances. Thus, the analysis is equally intertwined and moves from narratives through concepts to circumstances and back. They relate to each other, mix, contrast, and compare in their retelling.

4.5. Ethical considerations

Keeping ethical considerations in mind are vital throughout the research process, especially as I engage in personal accounts. Thus, this research followed the protocol of Lund University. Consent for recording the interviews was asked for when I introduced the research to interlocutors via email. I again asked for permission right before I started the recording. The recording was suspended when the participants voiced their request for as much. For ethical reasons, it is desirable to take the interview's subsequent analysis back to the individuals for appraisal (Riessman, 2008:281). The participants can check their narrative segments and the researcher can ask for informed consent for a second time (ibid.). This step is critical as I display interlocutor names and attribute their personal statements. With this in mind, I sent the compiled parts of the discussion to the individuals, asked for their consent, and offered to disguise their identity if wished. The interpretation of their telling and compilation with critical concepts is my doing and responsibility. It may differ from some of their assumptions. Further, I took photographs after receiving their consent and included them in this thesis upon agreement. Some participants also sent me photographs to include as illustrations in this thesis.

4.6. Limitations

There are, of course, limits to this approach. I understand that the interviews give only a glimpse into the lives, understandings, and struggles of the individuals and their initiatives, and that they might have responded differently at other points in time and experience. Yet, this demonstrates that we are complex beings, interrelated with everything around us. In this context, I value Harcourt and Nelson's (2015:15) articulation:

All knowledge comes from somewhere, but we should not assume that we can see all that is to be known from within that somewhere. It is through conversation and articulation and staying with the troubles that multiple positionalities help generate richer, more complex theories and understandings beyond a simplistic and hierarchical God's-eye view and 'ground-up' view.

This articulation brings us back to situated knowledge and telling stories as multi-layered compost writing. Reflecting on who owns the stories, who has access to them, and who is safe enough to tell them is vital (Haraway, 2019). Due to a limited time frame, the process of reproducing interlocutors' rich experiences was not a participatory one. The thesis is further limited to a few voices that I selected to match the Alternative Food Networks criteria and their proximity to the city of Zurich. Countless alternatives mushroom in and around Zurich and each one is worth considering, but including every account goes beyond the scope of this research. This is another reminder that increased quantity is not a given for a richer result: just as with vegetables, it is the quality—how you tend and interact—that matters. Diverse approaches address the interrelated food circumstances, and ways to conduct research in this area are manifold. This research does not explore the council's opinion, regulations, and traditional producers and suppliers as much. Their positionality is likewise important to consider and research in those areas is encouraged. Tending to a variety of approaches with honour, care, and reflective practice is embraced.

5. Bloom and pollination

5.1. Overview of the interlocutors

A. Dominik (23 years old), food cooperative Grassrooted and Rampe21

Dominik's journey with Alternative Food Networks is rooted in food waste. He visited local farms and learned about the abundance of food that ends up as biogas because of unconformity with industry standards. He 'rescued' 28 tons of tomatoes and distributed it. More and more farmers began to offer their crooked food, and the redistribution organisation Grassrooted was born. With more engagement in the field, Dominik came to understand this waste as a result of larger structural issues. Half a year before our conversation, he founded the food cooperative Rampe21. Here, producers and consumers can interact and become active citizens in shaping what to eat. The food cooperative offers vegetables from local organic and Demeter¹ farms and additional organic goods, including those from neighbouring countries. Members participate in the choice of goods, receive a discount, and are invited to discuss how the food system can and should transform. Dominik trains part-time as a biodynamic agriculturist and is an activist for the Global Climate Strike, a number of popular initiatives, a platform for farmer and consumer exchange, and much more.

B. Tina (36 years old), CSA Ortoloco and Fondlihof

While pursuing her Environmental Engineering degree, Tina joined the planning group of the food cooperative Ortoloco. The group formed out of the interest to probe a different economic system. For over 10 years, Ortoloco has been growing vegetables on 1.5ha for 500 subscribers on the farmland of Fondlihof. Fondlihof is located in the outskirts of Zurich with many CSA members living in the city. Three years ago, Tina and her partner Finn took over the farm. Since the beginning of this year, Fondlihof and Ortoloco merged, and the whole farmland of 20 ha has been cultivated through CSA and financed with member shares and private loans. Members can choose from three types of memberships. Full membership includes grains (wheat, spelt), millet, fruit, sunflower oil, flaxseed, beef, and vegetables; another excludes meat, and the third is without vegetables. Tofu, eggs, and bread are an addition to each. Members commit to at least 14 field days a year. Only a few other Swiss

¹ Demeter is a quality label for biodynamic agriculture based on seeing the farm as a living holistic organism. See for example <https://demeter.ch> for more information.

farms apply the CSA model across the whole farm. Tina spends most of her time at the farm, be it occupied with organisational matters or tending to the animals.

C. Ilona (30 years old), CSA Rotenbirben farm

Since the beginning of 2016, a group of 25-35 year olds tends to the land of the Rotenbirben trust. When Ilona was looking for a place to teach the Gartenkind² course and the Board of Trustee was looking for people to revitalise and tend to the Rotenbirben land, they found each other. The group plants hedges, maintains and harvest the orchard, and holds cultural and educational events. When physical gatherings are allowed, monthly concerts take place at the barn. Their gardening course offers a group of children to tend to an allotment on a free Wednesday afternoon. Another field forms part of the Swiss GemüseAckerdemie, a project which facilitates school classes with tools and knowledge. The collective established a small shop in the town, which sells their and surrounding farms' products. Starting this season, around 40 households can obtain a membership with weekly vegetables. Ilona recently finished her second degree in Environmental Engineering and works part-time both at the wildlife park Zurich and at the local church for intergenerational projects. She is now looking forward to spending much of her time at the farm.

D. Rahel (35 years old), CSA Pura Verdura

Rahel first studied ethnology and then social work before becoming a trained vegetable gardener. Within her first degrees, she engaged in social issues such as access to housing and found herself in the frustration of complexities. Through her previous boyfriend who initiated a CSA, and trying a CSA membership in her shared flat, the importance of food crawled upon her. For a year, she worked one day per week at her boyfriend's CSA and before finally thinking, "Why am I not doing this full time?" She entertained the thought of farming for a while but did not dare to engage in it as her main occupation. She followed through with a third education. Since 2019, she has been employed at Pura Verdura and was previously involved in setting up and running other CSAs in and around Zurich. Pura Verdura cultivates 1 ha of vegetables with 130 members. The CSA is located right in the city—accessing such land was a two-year process. Right after sowing the first plot together with members, thistles

² Gartenkind [garden child] is a project of Bioterra, a Swiss NGO for organic cultivation and wildlife gardens. There are around 60 cooperating farms and individuals with allotments for primary school children's use and who guide them through the season. See more at <https://www.bioterra.ch/angebote-engagement/gartenkind>

started to show up in the field. Working through such obstacles with supporting members shows the strengths of this model and how potential risks and the resulting extra work are shared. This year, the members agreed to pay more for the membership so that a second gardener could be employed.

E. Amine (23 years old), Food Bank Essen für Alle

Amine initiated a food bank in Zurich in March 2020 when the restrictions due to the pandemic prevented Sans Papiers³ and other people in need from accessing food and employment. A number of food banks in Zurich had to close indefinitely. Thus, Essen für Alle [meaning food for all] was born out of necessity and supports people who have few material resources in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the journey from Guinea to Switzerland seven years ago, Amine experienced extreme hunger. He could not bear for others to go through the same in a city where there should be enough food for everyone. The activity was risky for Amine as he was a Sans Papier himself—he received his residence permit only recently. The project started small one day with a food trader’s leftovers, and the next day people lined up for more. Amine quickly gained the support of volunteers, donors, and food companies. Currently, they distribute food packages and hygienic products for more than one thousand people in need every Saturday. His wish is that no human being suffers from hunger.

F. Fabienne (33 years old), Food Council Ernährungsforum Zürich

Fabienne took part in initiating Ernährungsforum Zürich in 2018, the first food council in Switzerland, and has managed it since. It is an association of various actors who want to contribute to a sustainable food system in Zurich. It intends to create synergies by facilitating exchange between Alternative Food Networks, organisations, activists, researchers, citizens, and anyone interested in discussing and shaping the future of food. Further, events stimulate discussions about food justice, sustainability, and related topics. Through these connections, food should become more sustainable at all stages of the value chain. Good food forms an important part in Fabienne’s life and an initial engagement with Slow Food Youth helped her to establish relationships and connections to initiatives in and beyond Zurich.

³ Migrants without a legal residence status. An estimated 190,000 Sans Papiers live in the canton of Zurich (sans-papier.ch, 2021)

G. Wanda (42 years old), Community Gardens

Wanda combines her two interests of gardening and bringing people from various lifeways together. She initially shifted her studies from ethnography to social work, and later studied plant usage. She has been able to combine the two well: she established the first intercultural community garden in the city of Zurich on fallow land as a two-year interim project. A second community garden followed on another piece of land, and thus offered the chance for gardening to various people, along with projects for the elderly and for people with intellectual disabilities. Around 50 people participated in both of the gardens. Now, Wanda works for the Gartenkind project and educates children in school gardens on how potatoes grow; she also gives presentations, writes columns, and works for a city community centre.

5.2. Location of the Alternative Food Networks

The following map of Zurich shows the location of the selected Alternative Food Networks. The location of Wanda's community garden relates to the first project; the location of the second one was closer to the centre. The school projects that Wanda carries out nowadays are in schools all over Zurich. The displayed location of the Ernährungsforum is their office. Their outreach, events, and collaboration happen in and around Zurich.

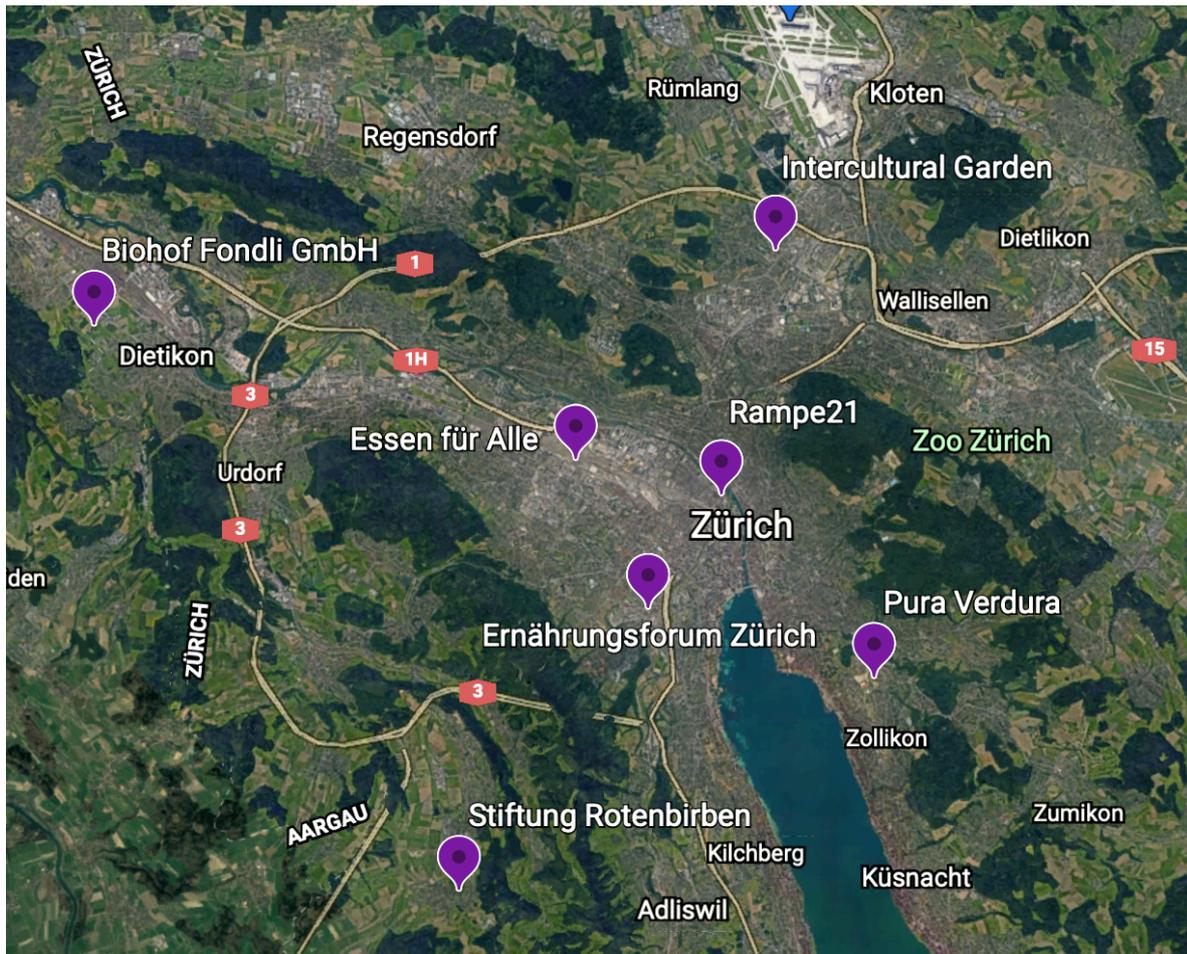


Figure 1: Map of Zurich with location of projects. 1:26km. Source: Google Earth

5.3. Discussion of narratives

Here I bridge the conversations with concepts from Feminist Political Ecology. The discussion is divided into 15 parts. Each section represents an inductive theme that appeared through the conversations. The discussion moves through their articulations, integrates concepts they touched on, broadens onto global structures, and zooms in on local entanglements.

5.3.1. What *is* agriculture?

Agriculture is care work; it's not like producing something with a machine where you can turn it up when you realise that you need more, and turn it down when you need less, or leave it running overnight when electricity is cheaper—the whole farm is a living organism that you need to nurse, and only when you are nursing it well, you will receive a yield to make food from over the years and decades and centuries.

Tina and I sit at the wooden dinner table in their house situated in the middle of Fondlihof. Two other couples live here, but only Tina and her partner are responsible for the farming. A housemate peeks in the kitchen and grabs a few nuts from a glass jar. Tina sips from her coffee and sets forth that she sees the lack of discussing what food production *really* is as one of the main issues in the contemporary food system and that it does not fit with our economic growth system. Tsing (2014:62) raises the same issue and elaborates that even in industrial farms, farmers depend on life processes outside their control, such as photosynthesis and animal digestion. Within systematic capital accumulation, living things within ecological processes are co-opted for the concentration of wealth (ibid). Tina clarifies that within a growth economy, there is always the tendency to rationalise and optimise, but a living organism will suffer from that; be it the soil, the animals, the environment, or the people working within.



Figure 2: A part of the farmland of Fondlihof. Photo taken by the author, 2021

With this apprehension, the group ventured on their CSA journey. During the financial crisis in 2008, Tina and a few others ruminated on how an economy could be designed without banks that are too big to fail and people who are not too big to fail but can be exploited: “Animals, the soil and plants can be exploited, and nothing happens in the way that the economy should serve the people and not the other way around”. The group wondered how they could try out such an alternative economic system within a concrete setting. During this time, Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in Economics—the first woman to do so. Elinor Ostrom, a political economist, contributed vital empirical research on solidarity economy and the commons, demonstrating that communities are capable of creating rules and institutions that allow for the sustainable and equitable management of shared resources (Ostrom, 1990). An article about the pioneer CSA Le Jardin Cocagne in Geneva caught the group’s interest, and “that was kind of the point where we said, let’s try this solidarity economy and do it with food, something that is really necessary for everyone, where everyone can be a part of the process, where logistics and production are not so complex that you can’t see behind it as a layman, and where participation is relative simple”.

Gibson-Graham (2006) discuss that the development of such spaces of possibilities over the last 50 years demonstrates that alternative forms of social organisation with their own operational rationalities can coexist and coevolve with contemporary capitalist society. While they cannot operate completely outside of ingrained structures, they do it within the possibilities and, in that way, create change from within. The notion of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008) allows to see economic activities as a network of diverse practices, spaces, and relationships that may partly be controlled by market economy, but are rooted in trust, collaborative ownership, and solidarity (Goodman et al., 2012:9). Taking Dominik’s food cooperative Rampe21 as an example, capitalist structures are reproduced through reselling goods at a higher price. Examples of alternative practices are the security that members provide to the cooperative and the farmers with buying their goods; paying only the purchasing price with a membership; direct trade and contact with farmers; and members partaking in decision making. Their approaches towards production practices, social organization, and consumption routines challenge those established by commodity agriculture and corporate food processors and retailers (Goodman et al., 2012:9).

5.3.2. Alienation from nature

The city is buzzing when I meet up with Dominik. Children zip around, parents shout, elderly stroll, and what feels like the whole city promenades by the river Sihl. The turmoil cannot put Dominik off his stride; he remains calm and focused. As we wander along the river, he reflects on his growing connection to food and agriculture the more he engages with it. Through this engagement, Dominik has come to understand that one of the main reasons that humans in Western society are at the point of this extreme extractivism, where we pollute the ground and the water, the sources that we are dependent on for our existence, is the perceived duality between humans and nature. What we pollute and damage in the environment, we do within ourselves too. He continues to say that we cannot just hope for a technological fix that ensures that we can carry on as usual. A different relation to food is needed instead of seeing it merely as a commodity.

This duality of humans and nature places the environment outside of society and solely sees it as a resource to draw from. As Dominik and Tina described, it implies a worldview that sees human activities independent from the ecosystem. An instrumental attitude is adopted with classifying, measuring, explaining, and using nature for humans' own purposes (Benton et al., 2001). This is demonstrated in the understanding of *managing* the environment with technological fixes. The understanding of sustainable development through green growth is in that sense ideological and serves the interest of a particular class, blind to a wider reality and historical context (Benton et al., 2001:111).

Another rift occurred between producers and consumers with the concentration of only a small part of the population in direct contact with agriculture. Approximately three quarters of Switzerland's population of 8.5 million lives in metropolitan areas (BFS, 2021). There are more than 430,000 people living in the city of Zurich (Stadt Zürich, 2020) who all rely on food daily, and, seemingly magically get the necessary foods supplied to them on the supermarket shelves of Migros and Coop. But where does this food come from? And in which other forms do they come in? The shelf is always stacked with identical products. The cleaned and trimmed vegetables reveal no history. Rahel sees this as the biggest problem around food:

the constant supply of everything, all the time. So you can really always buy everything. That is what makes us completely blind—to see what the correlations are. During the whole year, you can get everything—yeah, then you really need to find out yourself what is in season at the moment.

Coming to grips with the diversity of vegetables was a key moment for Ilona. At the time, she helped out at farms in Italy and Ireland. One defining moment was, “for example, when peppers grow, they are super diverse—none of them are just yellow or red. It is totally different to what we get at a supermarket”. The range that consumers see at supermarkets is limited to standardised varieties. The uniformity within the varieties is responsible for a large amount of food waste before they even reach the selling hands. Vegetables that grew different to the standard shape and size are sorted out. The following section digs into this unconformity.

5.3.3. Entanglements in food waste

Dominik’s journey with Grassrooted started with his inquiries regarding food waste in the dominant food system. Many large food saving actions were thus carried out and today, Grassrooted distribute the saved food as a biweekly vegetable membership.

An in-depth study of the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (Bafu, 2021) shows that around one third of the produced, edible food is lost or wasted along the food chain in Switzerland. This food waste accounts for 25 percent of the environmental impact of Switzerland's diet and amounts to a total of 2,8 million tons of food per year. 20 percent of the overall waste is generated in production; 35 percent in food processing (transport, storage, and sorting); 10 percent in wholesale and retail; 7 percent in gastronomy; and 27 percent in households (Bafu, 2021). As an interesting side note, the federal office published the study with a graph indicating the percentage in terms of “environmental impact points” instead of volume, and concluded that most food waste occurs in households; thus focusing efforts against food waste on consumers alone. The waste occurring on the levels of production and food processing both include sorting non-conforming vegetables and overproduction and amounts to 55 percent of total waste. Food waste concerns not only consumers and requires attention across all stages of the food chain. Calculated in terms of available land, the land consumption of overall food waste is almost two-thirds of Switzerland's arable land and just under half of its pastureland (Bafu, 2021).

Through increased engagement in the food chain, Grassrooted realised that food waste is only a symptom of the dominant food production structures. Dominik acknowledges that the vegetable membership does not change these structures, but the food used by the organisation does not go to waste and creates awareness of the issue. The aforementioned

alienation of nature is counteracted in this way. Citizens may relate to farmers and food production and see themselves as a part of the food chain again. The food cooperative Rampe21 rethinks these structures and facilitates the relating between producers and consumers. Dominik does not aim to scale the cooperative—that would be reflective of the problematic in his eyes—but to craft a model that can be reproduced elsewhere and enables a democratic creation of smaller, subversive structures vis-à-vis the overarching productivity-oriented paradigm.



Figure 3: The food cooperative Rampe21 from the inside. Photo taken by author, 2021

5.3.4. Alienation from farmers

Ilona reflects on how working within a farm has shown her how unfair it is to blame solely farmers for all problems of agriculture. The working conditions for farmers are tough. There is no clocking out at 5pm; many tasks cannot be shifted to the next day. Along with long working hours comes a low income, which puts physical and psychological pressure on farmers. They have to deliver a certain yield to traders, who also decide on the price. The two largest retailers in Switzerland, Migros and Coop, significantly influence this pressure with a market share of 70% (EDA, 2017a). Small- and medium-sized farms are dependent on world market prices and are forced to compete with large agro-industries. Ilona highlights that farmers should not be opponents, but rather allies in transforming the food system. Frustration and misunderstandings prevail on the sides of both producers and consumers. The trend towards less and bigger farms with fewer people working in the sector leads to the

displacement of small-scale farms, and agriculture thus becomes more remote from people's lives. In Switzerland, some 155,184 people are employed in this sector, which is 14% fewer than in 2005 (EDA, 2017b). Between 2005 and 2015, the number of agricultural businesses fell from 64,000 to 53,000 (ibid.). The average farming area is 19.5 hectares, and three quarters of the farms are specialised in animal production (ibid.). Ilona connects the dots of these issues:

The trend of less farmers and people working in agriculture is on one hand because of replacing people with machines, which is in itself also problematic, but also leads to alienation. With this alienation comes that there is generally little time to get food and process it, cook it.

5.3.5. Away from wilderness, towards agency

When Rahel shared what the ground means to her, she thought of various ways to look at it, how it can be analysed, that many unexpected things happen on and within it, and that it is something mighty. We sit on a bench between Pura Verdura's greenhouse and storage shed. As she gathers her thoughts, she moves her head towards the opening of a forest next to us and glances around, as if the answer lies there. Then, she smiles, nods at the forest and says "in the end, everything is kind of cultivated. Over there, that's also not untouched forest ground. So, we really have to look out now that we don't completely destroy it."

Cronon (1996) illuminated with *The Trouble with Wilderness* that there is no wilderness as such. He explained that wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside of the natural. Consequently, we leave little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, and honourable human place in nature might look like (ibid.:17). Cronon sees humans entangled with the ecosystem, and at the same time stresses the need to recognise and honour the nonhuman nature as a world we as humans did not create, and that has independent, nonhuman reasons for being as it is (ibid.:22). This entanglement has been coined *natureculture* by Donna Haraway (1999). The term describes entangled multispecies histories, meaning that nature and culture cannot be fully separated (ibid.). Biophysical properties of resources can resist, assist, or redirect political economic prerogatives (Swyngedouw, 1999). For example, the thistles that were in the way of Rahel's plan to grow vegetables resisted her intention to grow something else in their spot. Another example is the unique soil structure in every piece of land that can hinder or enhance plant growth. This ties into Latour's (2005) stance that nonhumans have agency, meaning to have the power to act.

Pickering (2010:7) characterises this human–non-human interaction as a dance of agency. Thus, we humans have to see ourselves as part of and not mastering the ecosystem, and, as Cronon (1996:24) puts it,

we need to discover a common ground in which all of these things, from city to wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word ‘home’. Home, after all, is the place where finally we make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children.

5.3.6. The meaning and perception of food

Tina, Rahel, and Ilona from CSA farms all articulate that their perception of food has changed over time with their involvement in food production. Being both producer and consumer revealed intertwined complexities. Ilona articulates that

Food means community and care to me, I’ve been living in large, shared places for a while and sharing food has always been essential. Cooking for one another means caring for one another. Good food also means good produced food: where you know the story and know that, with buying and eating it, you’re also doing something good. I love seasonal food and just eat what grows at that time: now we eat beetroot and potatoes, because it is their time now.

Tina calls food an incredible big world that opens up when you start producing it yourself. Rahel has embedded in her approach a deep care about where food comes from. The many stories behind the vegetables are invisible when bought from the supermarket shelf. One such story influenced Rahel’s decision making. During her degree, she visited a food processing and packing center. There, she saw mostly migrant workers standing in a cold room all day and preparing foodstuff for the supermarkets. They sorted through and cut leek after leek. Knowing about these multi-layered problematics in the food chain, she actively investigates the background of the products she gets. There are three CSA memberships amongst her shared flat, and they all buy basic goods from a food cooperative. What they eat, where it comes from, and who they support is crucial in her household’s approach. Rahel hopes that her CSA members experience this shift in attitude too:

I think the members can change their attitude as consumers. So maybe in the supermarket they will think how the peppers got there, under what kind of conditions. That’s my hope at least. So they might think – what would Pura Verdura give us at this time? Probably kohlrabi, beetroot, carrots, potatoes... that’s at least how I started to connect the dots, when I had that first membership. Going to the supermarket was annoying with choosing what kind of vegetables that I can really buy with good conscience. So that is something; they can learn about it and partake in decisions.



Figure 4: A part of Pura Verdura's farmland (left; photo taken by author, 2021) and an assortment of vegetables that members receive weekly (right; photo taken by Rahel Fuchs)

Food means life to Amine. He did not expect to find himself fighting for food as a basic human right when he came to Switzerland, but he could not bear people to be hungry in a city that could feed everyone. The following part explores Amine's project and how it ties into the food sovereignty movement.

5.3.7. Food security and food sovereignty

At heart of Amine's project is the immediate relief for people who, on paper, do not exist in society. I visit him in the large canteen of a corporation, a place which he uses for the weekly food distribution. A floor below, he stores the sponsored and bought food. Myriad cartons are stacked on top of each other in five different rooms. Beverages are heaped on the floor between the rooms; there is also chocolate, grains, rice, oil, vegetables. The amount of foodstuffs does not seem to come to an end, just as the line of people waiting patiently for hours every Saturday to get their share. Amine came to Switzerland with aspirations to go to school, but he found he was not welcome here. His residence request was denied, and he was a Sans Papier for three years. Subsequently, he engaged in rights advocacy for Sans Papiers, and when people stormed the supermarkets in March 2020, he asked himself what all the people without means do now. He knows hunger too well from his journey:

You fall asleep hungry, you wake up hungry, maybe you can't even sleep at all. [...] In Morocco, you have to cross the Mediterranean. I had to wait for three months, and there I really was hungry like never before in my entire life. So if now someone comes to me and needs help, I'm here—no matter how and when. Sometimes I come here at 11 at night to give food to people.

Amine pushed through the disbeliefs of his endeavour, kept asking around, and finally found a food supplier who had to get rid of food intended for a closed care centre. The first 500 meal packs were gone within an hour. He brought 1,000 more the same night, and 3,500 packs more the next day. Support for his project continued to grow on all sides, and now Essen für Alle is well-established, with over 500 volunteers helping on various ends.

Amine grew up in a small village in Guinea located next to a river. All their vegetables, grains and oil were cultivated and processed in the village—except for a few Nestlé products, he remembers, like bouillon and milk products. As such, Amine had food sovereignty within his village, and is now fighting for a minimum amount of food security for financially disadvantaged people in Zurich. These entanglements deserve a thorough analysis of their own that I cannot do justice here—but they are important to be reminded of, as the local and global continuously affect one another.

Food security focuses on adequate nutrition for all, enabled through efficiency and enhanced productivity. The food sovereignty movement emerged as a response to the dominant discourse on food security and quickly gained international support and recognition. With food sovereignty, both farmers and consumers demand for control over the food system to remain in the hands of farmers. It is rooted in the complex realities of producing, buying, selling, and eating food, and not based on abstract theories of profit and growth. Food sovereignty is a process in action, an invitation to self-organisation to improve conditions and societies together. It is a proposal for humanity to rethink how food and agricultural production is organised, how distribution and trade works, how land and aquatic resources are being used, and how the interaction, exchange, and organisation with one another works (Via Campesina, 2018).

During our walk along the river, Dominik affirms that food is a basic need and should really be treated as such so that everyone has access to healthy and reasonable produced food. It should not be a question of what works on the market. On the global level, he elaborates that

When a lot of people started to produce food not for themselves but for an export market that makes them dependent on those who buy it, but they cannot assure that they can feed themselves anymore. And they only reach the opposite—even though they are exporting, they have to import more to be able to sustain themselves; it shows that it doesn't add up when we only think on this global level. That means we need to have a certain localisation of the production chains, so that it can be more direct again and the people who are really working for it, who produce the food, that they also have something out of it and can live

off it. A lot—really a lot—has to change in this aspect. In the end, it is about the society having the collective responsibility over food, that they can decide together what kind of food they want to have, and it shouldn't be in the power of others.

Tina proposes food sovereignty in Switzerland as an important political instrument for citizens and farmers to decide what should be produced where, when, and how. She proceeds that if food sovereignty were introduced on an institutional level and citizens carried out the duty to engage in the transformation of food production, “then you would come to grasp that you actually don't want the factory farming, intensive animal husbandry, not use poisonous pesticides, no exploitation of farm workers and all that. No one really wants that.” How such a system could look is explored in the next section with democratic local food politics.

5.3.8. Democratic local food politics

Direct contact with farmers, shorter supply chains, knowing one another, and building a community leads to a certain kind of locality of trust, care, and embeddedness (Goodman et al., 2012). Ostrom (1990) encourages the collective organising of people as organisations to find local, original solutions. Tina expresses the importance of making food production more democratic: all citizens should be able to determine what gets produced and under which conditions, where, and in what quantities. Despite his young years, Amine has experienced more by way of engagement with food politics than many citizens of Zurich ever will. He is looking for an apprenticeship now and already manages a large food bank. He intended to study here in Zurich; now basic human rights occupy his time and attention. His experiences and aspirations are vital to include in discussions on the future of food production and distribution, just as many other voices.

Discussing the local opens up another set of questions. What is local and who defines it? The definition intrinsically brings inclusion and exclusion of people, places, and ways of life. The aspect of locality came up during many of the talks and showed the significance of critically reflecting on one's positionality. Clearly distancing oneself and one's farming activities from a Eurocentric localism was important to all three CSA farms.

Goodman et al. (2012) discuss that local food system members are mainly white, middle class professionals, and warn that the movement is socially homogenized and exclusionary. The investigated projects show a reflective practice with a focus on including all peoples. Having a CSA membership and choosing to buy from a food cooperative involves the privilege of money

and time: being able to afford it and to devote time. The projects experimented with ways to address such obstacles. CSAs offer cheaper memberships through donations, a solidarity fund, or cross-financing; membership costs at Rampe21 are income-based. The privilege has certainly been discussed within these initiatives.

A food council is a community-based coalition and provides space to explore and shape Alternative Food Networks. Fabienne nods when I ask her if there is a reason for the name Ernährungsforum [food forum] and explains that it was formed out of a participatory aspect. The word “council” reminded her of the federal and national council, which sounds like a few men who consult with each other. In contrast, a “forum” represents an open space where multiple people can put their heads together, collaborate, and probe ways forward. For her, inclusiveness incorporates but is not limited to big players in the current system who express willingness to change. Nevertheless, she sees room for improvement in acting more inclusionary. It shows again that building alternatives is an iterative process with continuous reflection.

Following Goodman et al.’s (2012) notion of reflexive localism, democratic local food politics is processual, open-ended, and altogether messy. It includes experimentation, negotiation, and openness to other worldviews—but without romanticism. The local is not idealised as a space insulated from power relations and global capitalism. As such, it is acknowledged as a contested site of political-economic struggle, exploitation, and accumulation (ibid.).

When gardening together, people from the district share stories of the land with Rahel—for example that the orchard next to them has been cultivated organically for a long time. Rahel, coming from the outside, learns about the history of the land through them. When she hears these stories, she craves for a participatory process where locals can bring in their opinions on the cultivation of the land and on the fostering of biodiversity. Such participatory landscape design engages local knowledge and shows valuation of their opinion. As a result, citizens may commune as an integrated part of the ecosystem. In terms of her own CSA activities, Rahel explains that incorporating voices of 130 members can get complicated, but she desires to shape a few things more collaboratively. CSAs have member-led working groups that take responsibility over their chosen field. Listening to stories and engaging in the myriad entanglements *is* messy and complex, but that is again not why we should shy away from it.

To recite Elinor Ostrom in her acceptance speech (Nobel Prize, 2009): “Complexity is not the same as chaos. [...] We must learn to deal with complexities rather than rejecting it.”

Justice incorporates the same reflexive practice. There is no universal understanding of what is just and what is “the good life”, as there are epistemological differences of standpoints resulting from histories of oppression and exclusion (Escobar, 2017). A single, universal idea of the good life is authoritarian, as it does not recognize the diversity of viewpoints. Thus, reflexive justice brings activism back to the imperfect politics of process and away from the privileged and perfect politics of standard-setting. Rather than creating an alternative economy for the homogenous few, reflexive localism works across differences, and thereby aspires to make a difference for everyone (Goodman et al., 2012:32). This plurality of understandings forms the notion of the pluriverse (Escobar, 2017).

5.3.9. A Plurality of Alternatives

Tina perceives Fondlihof as a model to create visually tangible alternatives to both conventional food practices and the current economic system. It visualises the implementation and functionality of such an alternative in reality. This does not mean to only have CSA farms in the future; shifting the dominant paradigm needs a plurality of approaches. Wichterich (in Harcourt & Nelson, 2015:83) calls it the TAMA principle: There Are Many Alternatives. It reveals that there is neither a one-size-fits-all recipe nor a lever which makes it all happen automatically. The notion of the pluriverse (Escobar, 2017) acknowledges the coexisting epistemologies and practices of the different worlds and problems we inhabit and encounter. There are various and multipolar entry points, opportunity spaces and transition strategies in search for good living, secured livelihoods, and sustainable living in ecosystems (ibid.). The commons (Ostrom, 1990) is one such entry point. An alternative to development in Latin America is the apprehension of Buen Vivir, which grew out of indigenous articulations. It forms an opportunity for the collective construction of new ways of living (Escobar, 2017:148). Wanda’s first community garden represents a pluriverse where multiple understandings of the good life exist next to each other. Various people create their space on a piece of plot and grow food within their own way of knowing and being. The recognition of diverse ways of being moulds into the understanding of food sovereignty and follows the call of De Sousa Santos et al. (2007) for an ecology of knowledge practices. Ilona elaborates that

[F]ood sovereignty is at our core. And also world-wide solidarity, with farms in other parts of the world, also with Buen Vivir, living with and from the land. Bringing together acting local and thinking global.

In the process of merging Ortoloco with the whole farm, the Fondlihof team visited a similar farm in Germany. In the end, they did not co-opt a lot—to find out what does not apply to your own concept can also be an inspiration. Each CSA farm is unique and has its own character, Rahel explains to me. She takes a moment to think and adds that Swiss CSA farms could enhance their exchange, but in the end, each one has their own requirements and needs that shape around the land and members.

I draw parallels from the common ground that Cronon articulated in his thought-provoking paper to the understanding of the pluriverse. The Other within, the Other next door, and the Other far away need to be honoured (Cronon, 1996:24) without creating “otherness” as such; just like nature needs to be honoured without creating wilderness.

5.3.10. Creation through Resistance

“It is not a fight against something [...], it is a creation” answered Tina when I asked if she was resisting something. Dominik shares her position:

Through creating something else and showing new paths, the existing can become superfluous. The current system is completely wrong, so of course there needs to be resistance so that it doesn't get worse. So that people have better access to healthy food, so that people can partake in decisions, so that farmers have more rights again, so that agricultural workers have better working conditions and more appreciation—that is, of course, resistance.

Tina explains that CSA works on various levels of engaging with and understanding food: Through CSA, you support the production and not the product itself. It creates a distribution of risks: if there is a crop failure, or plenty of one vegetable and less of another, the risks, losses, and gains are carried on all shoulders. People participate as it is their farm too and see it as their duty instead of something that can be obtained as a service. Producers and consumers can come into a relationship with each other and exchange their needs.

Wanda suggests that the dominant discourse is changing towards an interdisciplinary understanding. When she studied social work with the intention to combine it with gardening, people shook their head and responded that the two fields have nothing to do with another. Today, people respond that it is an interesting combination. She paints a picture of these entanglements in various ways:

In Seebach, I knew that there are a lot of people with a lower socio-economic status and I was lucky enough to reach them. There it was really about enabling people to grow their own food, you know, having a part of their home. So a person from Cambodia grew chrysanthemum, a person from Albania went over there to get the seedlings, and stories like that. At Kronenwiese [the second gardening location], which is in a different district, my incentive was to show [...] the work behind; what needs to be done so that you can have a radish on your plate. [...] And in terms of the work with the children, it was about showing that potatoes don't grow on a tree in a plastic bag. [...] With the elderly, it was clearly about moving, being outside, seeing them as elderly who lived their life and have knowledge about gardening, right, and with the mentally ill it was more about having the courage to go outside on a field where there are a lot of others too, you know.

This feeling of togetherness is what Wanda still experiences today when she thinks back to the community garden projects. At times, she meets people on the street from back then, and there is a smile and a sparkle, a sentiment of the shared experiences. I can see the sparkle as she shares that it means a lot to her personally. She laughs and says, "it is like soul food." She finds it beautiful how people can find something beneficial for themselves through simple tools. For her, it acts as a hidden activism as she passes on and enables new knowledges and ideas through doing.

Maria Lugones (2010) writes that resistance comes from within a shared understanding of the world and living in it, which provides recognition. Communities—rather than the individual—enable resistance. The production of the everyday produces one's self as it provides particular and meaningful clothing, food, economies and ecologies, gestures, rhythms, habitats, and senses of space and time (ibid.). Ways of resistance include affirmation of life over profit, communalism over individualism, "estar" over enterprise, and beings in relation rather than split in hierarchies (ibid.). It reminds me of Dominik's words:

Through building alternative structures people can understand that something else is possible. Of course you can talk at length about how difficult and bad it is, that there are a lot of problems and that it isn't ecological and so on—we won't get to the point of everyone working in agriculture two days a week and gaining the comprehension of it from one day to the other, that's a beautiful imagination, but it's not like that. So we have to find different paths of how awareness can be created and how the everyday can support this change. I don't want to come to an individualistic point to say that it's about individuals to change it, not at all, but if we as collective citizens of Zurich build alternative structures—and that only works if we are a few, so it's a collective approach—then we can change the problematic structures that we are reproducing daily. With that, we take responsibility for being part of the whole system.

In the first few paragraphs of this chapter, I discussed the complexities in which consumers and producers find themselves, and how alienation has led to misunderstandings. The responsibility to dismantle this alienation concerns all. Throughout our conversation, Wanda

highlighted the aspect of the responsibility of all involved parties. A consumer can actively choose what to buy and who to support with it. The supermarkets can change their range of offers and educate people at the same time with a justification. Wanda continues that supermarkets defend themselves and blame the consumers' choice—"but people will forget over time that they used to buy strawberries in January". Equally, farmers carry their share of responsibility intertwined in the complexities. She sees room for innovation there. From her observation, many orient their doing towards governmental payments—that is, they follow the incentive of what one receives for which activity—instead of trying out other ways. Thus, it is an active steering on all sides, that, at best, is done collaboratively; just as the researched alternatives are doing today.

These entanglements show again that change is a process, not happening from one day to another and not aiming for a universal, perfect condition. As Wanda put it at the end of our conversation,

When I was young, I thought I needed to fully change the world. But now, I know that I can't do that (laughs). I have a scope of action and I can pass on the things that I find important, and do it on a small scale really, knowing that a lot of people around the world do the same thing—that adds up.

With this notion, we come back to a few local entanglements that the projects find themselves in.

5.3.11. Local entanglements

The initial project phases presented obstacles in the forms of access to land and adequate infrastructure. Pura Verdura faced an initial challenge in the uncertainty of whether or not they would receive the land. Infrastructure such as that for packing, nursing seedlings, tools, and storage is vital for CSA farms to even begin farming, but is also overwhelmingly hard to access. Pura Verdura were lucky to take over a greenhouse and a shack from their neighbours who were just about to throw it out. Rotenbirben could afford one through crowdfunding, and the sum that came together within only a few days approved them in their activity. Apart from such difficulties, finding supporters and members has not been an issue for all projects. Their engagement was generally appreciated, and supporters and helping hands were found quickly.

Having initial funds for running the projects is also a known issue to Fabienne at Ernährungsforum, who is in touch with various initiators:

You see a lot of creative people who maybe want to do a small garden somewhere, and it wouldn't even need a lot, but it is already dismissed if the only way to get finances is a complicated request for foundation funds. You nip it in the bud already like that. Solutions are needed for this here.

The legal form of CSAs presents another obstacle. There is a legal gap in the structuring of a CSA regarding who bears the risks and the ability to receive governmental payments. Pura Verdura, for example, leases their land and legally organises as a cooperative. Even though they are cultivating land like other farms, their structure prevents them from accessing such governmental payments. Fondlihof's transition to a full CSA farm required lengthy legal advice and they decided for a GmbH (limited liability company) structure. The same structural workarounds are of concern to Ilona. At the moment, they consist of various entities: the foundation as the owner; the farm collective as the management group; and an association as a vessel for volunteers. A cooperative would best reflect their community structure, but this prevents direct payments, which are an important source of revenue. How it can be organized so that it is both legally in order and reflects the community structure is an ongoing discussion.

The following section dives deeper into the discussion of access to land.

5.3.12. Access to land

Agricultural land occupies around 9%—or 810 hectares—of the total urban area of Zurich. Over 60% is owned by the city of Zurich. Eight tenant farms, one municipal estate farm, and 18 private farms cultivate the land. In addition, around 155 hectares of green spaces facilitate small, community or estate gardens (Stadt Zürich, 2019). The city voices its support of gardening projects, and that is also the experience of Wanda. She wrote her academic thesis in gardening therapy and sought to combine gardening and social aspects through community gardens. Wanda pitched her idea at a local community event and was referred to a contact from the city council who was looking for an intermediate use of a plot. She remembers how she called the guy and explained her idea, “feeling naïve but still convinced of it, and I will never forget how he was like, that's a great idea, how much land do you need?”

For farms, the situation is a bit trickier. What all CSAs mentioned is the hindrance in accessing land, even when the legal requirements are fulfilled. On a regulatory level, farmland can only

be acquired by the person who cultivates it and has an agricultural education. This prevents cases of land grabbing, yet also enhances the difficulty for CSAs to access land and receive the same governmental support as conventional farms. Both Ilona and Tina were lucky to access farmland from people with similar worldviews, and Rahel worked for over two years to access the land they have now. Ilona elaborates on how the farming rights are not aligned to their way of farming:

Normally it would be big land, machines, one person behind it. Registering this farm of 2.5 hectares with eight people is not within the scope of traditional farming. So, it is hard to find out how we as a collective can register in the same way and receive the same benefits. There are also not many similar cases to compare to. This has been quite a big challenge.

Tina notes how quickly neighbouring land was taken when the farmer suddenly died. From her experience, it is especially difficult for small-scale and unconventional producers to access more land. She identifies the personal property of the land where food is grown instead of it being tied into the democratic system as a structural problem.



Figure 5: The entry (left) and parts of the farmland and orchard of Rotenbirben (right). Photos taken by author, 2021

5.3.13. Promising Prospects

The city of Zurich put together a comprehensive food strategy with aims to reach by 2030 (Stadt Zürich, 2019). The strategy reads: “Numerous already ongoing municipal activities are to be strengthened in their effect through improved coordination. The city of Zurich cannot and does not want to bring about this sustainable development alone. Cooperation with organizations and actors from society, business and science in planning and implementation

must be strengthened.” (ibid.:7, own translation). It continues that new forms of collaborations between producers and consumers such as CSAs should be increasingly applied and strengthened (ibid.:22). Thus, the will for change is soaring at the city level. Fostering such collaborations could be an interesting participatory follow-up approach to this thesis.

Dominik shares the city’s aspirations for cooperation. The separate agrarian, ecological, and health policies are not collectively thought through and implemented. He calls for different structures that enable insights from and interdependencies in all areas as a foundation, where a framework for production can be oriented. What is one possibility of such a concept in Zurich? Rahel connects the concrete with the utopian thought:

So, in a city context, those 12 [dairy] farms could be responsible to generate fertile products out of their farms to nurture the population. So those are 12 larger farms, and then there’s a lot of small projects who have their gardens who share their land, labour and harvest. So that would be like sustenance in the districts and exchange within the districts. And a lot of places where you could just harvest—like here, this orchard [in front of us] the apples here just fall down the trees in autumn as they cannot follow with harvesting. Some people actually come with bags and take some apples, which is great—so you could just say it’s the season to pick apples and everyone could come to get them. So lots of small and big areas where the bigger ones work professionally to have good products, and the smaller ones, where everyone can participate and can have their own plots, and work collaboratively. That would be cool.

It is still a journey to embark on. Talking about the present, all interlocutors mentioned material matters that they are figuring out. Amine is in search of a new space to continue running his project as the current agreement comes to an end. Rahel recounts that after quenching fires here and there, they want to dedicate some time to engage with future plans. Tina is occupied with paperwork for the merging process such as figuring out leasehold insurance. While Tina’s bigger vision of community neighbourhoods connects to what Rachel outlined, her ambition for the immediate future is for the CSA to keep existing, to have good working conditions, to further engage in ecological agriculture and the reduced use of diesel, to have a healthy humus formation and a diverse system. Fabienne voices that the Ernährungsforum established a network of competence around the themes of food and sustainability. Yet, there are still many citizens that do not know much about it. She would like to get a step closer to citizens and enhance the exchange with food councils from other cities. Ilona and her collective set up a five-year plan with different foci each year and they sketched a financial plan. The creation of alternative everydays is at its work.

5.3.14. Reflections on the ground

As a last question of the conversation, I asked about interlocutors' perception and signification of the ground. With this open question, I could establish a sense of seeing through their eyes. All interlocutors reacted very passionately to this point—even if it came after over an hour of conversing. Their replies entailed being in awe, seeing the ground as a mystery, and sometimes also applying a personal pronoun, never able to fully understand it with scientific tools, a living organism you have to get to know, and the most important thing we have. Amine articulates the ground as fundamental to live, apart from clean air and water. According to Tina,

It is a mystery, an organism that you cannot simply put into a pattern to understand it, you really need to get to know him. He's always good for surprises. Yes, it's an organism, the most important thing we have. What I find really important there, it's not out of a protectionist, Eurocentric standpoint, but more like to comprehend it as a part of the ecosystem that we are also part of.

Dominik's reflection brings the discussed notions of agency, natureculture, knowledges, and the pluriverse together:

It is the basis for everything. If we don't have a healthy, fertile ground, we cannot sustain for long. It is a question of existence. The ground is a reflection of what we do—how we live and function. If we take too much out of it, the ground becomes exhausted and destroyed on a level where it takes a long time to regenerate. We have to take care of the ground. That can be looked at on a purely rational, technical level, but also on an emotional level—on all levels you can come to the same conclusion. So everyone needs to approach it from their own understanding, so it's not like you see it in one way and therefore everyone else should see it like that too. [...] Only then you can have the appreciation again.

5.3.15. Learning new stories

A sheep shearer arrived by the time Ilona and I finished our conversation. The school children and one of the farmers in a later stage of her pregnancy herd the sheep towards a barn. One kid skips with excitement. The sheep nervously bleat and stop for every chance to munch on the grass before they are rushed on. Ilona and I join the group that formed around the yard where the shearing takes place. The children closely observe as the wool drops on the floor. They take a bit of wool into their hands and rub their fingers, startled by the oily residues. We laugh, and Ilona turns to me and says, in a hopeful yet assertive tone, "There need to be more stories of change. Real ones and fictional: not only about technological utopias, but also related to the future of agriculture and food. With that, the overall narrative can be changed too." Let us create those stories, both petite and grand.

6. Reproduction

The focus on narratives in this thesis showed how the praxis within the selected Alternative Food Networks is enacted, engaged, created, and defined, and how the alternatives are embedded in and breaking out of structural conditions and local complexities. The narrative approach illuminated how global food problematics meet local histories. The seven interlocutors create an alternative everyday within their projects and open up spaces for others to become part of the creation of alternatives. Through the narratives it became evident that this creational aspect is at the heart of all initiatives, not only for their personal need, but also to showcase that other ways of seeing and interacting in the world are possible—especially in terms of food, a basic necessity in life. Their approach demystifies the relation to nature and the producer and consumer relationships.

The initiatives show that agriculture is possible beyond the constraints of market economy. Agriculture is seen as care work with the needs of people, animals, and plants at the centre. They are not regarded as mere resources in the competition for profit. The alternatives conceptualise around local and seasonal food, fair working conditions, and ecological agriculture. This is approached through solidarity practices. Fondlihof, Pura Verdura and Rotenbirben share the harvest, the culture, the work, the costs, and the responsibility of running the farm with their members. Rampe21 enables the members of the food cooperative to get in touch with producers and engage in where their daily food comes from. Essen für Alle provides access to nutrition and illuminates forgotten citizens in the midst of food waste. The food council brings about open debates about food entanglements. These initiatives employ a continuous reflexive praxis. The definitions of the local, ecological and socially just practices are reflected upon and incorporated in their processes.

The stories of the individuals I visited showed that changing their everyday was enabled through collaborative action: first as a group, then as a community. The examined local food systems are understood as the outcome of mutually constitutive, imperfect, political processes in which the local and the global make each other on an everyday basis. In these open-ended stories, actors are allowed to be reflexive about both their own norms and about the structural economic logics of production. Obstacles include access to infrastructure and land as well as regulations and laws that are not aligned with their structures.

These projects are created through resistance. They emerge from the idea to work revolutionary and show what else is possible—in resistance to popular ways of doing and thinking. The vision of the interviewees is similar: more care, more connectedness, more active participation. They envision neighbourhoods and districts organised with food cooperatives and Community Supported Agriculture, amongst other collective organised practices. Citizens would see themselves as part of the ecosystem and integrate themselves in that way.

Projects such as the ones of Amine, Dominik, Fabienne, Ilona, Rahel, Tina, and Wanda are met with approval by citizens and the city council. The support on various levels helped them to come into existence and ensures that they can keep running. Working through the difficulties and staying with the trouble in the complexities of entanglements takes time and continuous engagement. This can be eased by the support of involved actors. The city of Zurich has voiced its intent to foster collaborations between all actors. The floor is open for more of such stories of change. Let us make them happen.

7. Dispersal

What does it mean to write an academic thesis? Many expect a paper that is hard to understand if you are not from the field. I wanted to break the conception that a paper must consist of language inaccessible to many. Researching and writing this thesis has been a constant journey of unlearning and relearning. Accessible yet academic, entangled yet rigorous, engaging yet impartial—it was a ride of constantly checking my standpoint and the assertions I wanted to make. I found myself getting nervous about the results, wanting to quantify and provide key insights, and telling myself again and again that it is not about that. From the beginning, my research was about the plural, radical approaches to change, so why did I itch to push them back into boxes? Decolonising the mind includes moving away from the fact- and number-greedy mind that I was not even aware I cultivated. Afraid that my research would not be accepted in the same way as a quantified, difficult-to-understand approach kept me unsure of my doing. But the realness of the alternatives, their embeddedness in critical approaches, and the warm hearts and minds of the people I met kept me on the track. I chose not to engage with utopian literature as the alternatives are not a utopia. They are real; they are part of the everyday life of many people directly or indirectly involved and do not configure “an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect”. They are raw, imperfect, and choose to unlearn and relearn, experiment, exchange, and improve—in terms of justice and, decidedly, not profit. The experience and the journey are vital, and not just the result. As growing food is cyclic, there is no end result. It starts over and over, without an actual starting point. These are some of the things I am grateful to have learned throughout this journey. There is much more depth and richness within the world to respect, honour, and integrate. Accounting for their richness through retelling stories was challenging. Countless more stories move in multiple rhythms beyond these illustrated snapshots.

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Appendix A. Guide for semi-structured interviews

General setting, introducing person

- What is your favourite meal? What kind of memories or pictures do you see in your mind thinking of that meal?
- Tell me a bit about yourself: where did you grow up, what shaped you into the person that you are now?
- What does food mean to you?
- Has your relation to food changed over time?

Food project/activism related

- Tell me about the time right before you started with xxx. What was going on around you? Inside you?
- You decided to start this project. How did you do that? Has something inspired you?
- Who / what was helping you?
- What was hindering you? Where did you face difficulties and what kind? And now?
- Where do you stand now?
- Where do you want to go from here?

Personal aspects

- Do you see what you do as your work, activism, something you just have to do, or as something else...?
- What does your 'action' mean to you personally?
- Are you trying to reach, influence, affect,... somebody? Who?
- Are you resisting something/someone? What/who?

General perception

- Where do you see the current biggest problem(s) in relation to food?
- If you could do anything, how would you solve the outlined problem(s)?
- Do you conceptualise your ideas around food sovereignty, food justice or related concepts?
- Has your perception of consumers and producers changed? How?
- How do you see other people becoming active citizens (instead of just consumers)?