

Redefining Wilderness

*An autoethnography analyzing more-than-human relationships
between forester of an intentional community and an
ecologically restored forest*

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Lund University Centre for
Sustainability Studies



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Submitted May 2024

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Abstract:

Anthropocentrism as an ideology places humanity above nature and has long served as an excuse for its exploitation and destruction. Only by redefining nature and wilderness as intrinsic parts of ourselves and seeing other species as our extended family can we start to develop sustainable relationships with the more-than-human world. During my fieldwork in the intentional community of Auroville, I interviewed, lived, and worked amongst forest stewards in the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF); an ecosystem brought back to life in the past 55 years. This autoethnographic study analyzes how the forest stewards have formed deep symbiotic relationships with their surrounding ecosystems, by viewing nature as part of their community and an extension of themselves. Through the lens of kincentric ecology and environmental subjects, this study aims to redefine wilderness as a space where humanity and nature can strive as one.

Keywords: Auroville, kincentric ecology, TDEF, forester, more-than-human relationships, wilderness

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1 Introduction

1.1 The aim of this thesis

In discourses about environmental concerns, the concept of the Anthropocene frequently emerges as a pivotal theme, denoting an epoch characterized by the pervasive influence of human activities on the Earth's climate and ecological equilibrium (Schmitt, 2023). Central to this narrative is the assertion that *Homo sapiens*, a singular species, now wield unprecedented control over our planetary systems, from the carbon and water cycles to overall climatic patterns and biodiversity (Spoor & Khanna, 2023; Hverven, 2022). Complementing this perspective is an ideological framework defining the Anthropocene as a consequence of human-centric prioritization, where other forms of life are disregarded and exploited based on assertions of human superiority (Schmitt, 2023). My academic research has consistently aimed to understand the root cause of this phenomenon. Within scholarly discourse, the prevailing explanation revolves around the concept of "alienation from nature." Instead of cultivating a meaningful relationship with the natural world, humans have estranged themselves from it, socially constructing it as an external entity to be exploited for utilitarian ends (Vogel, 1988). The Industrial Revolution and the subsequent establishment of our capitalist systems are believed to be the catalysts of this alienation (Hailwood, 2015). Throughout this thesis, the term "more-than-human" will denote "all components of a broader ecological milieu, encompassing human individuals and cultures, as interconnected and mutually influential constituents within a larger biophysical network" (Schmitt, 2023, p. 604).

There is an academic tendency (one I am myself guilty of) to categorize our disconnection from nature as unconditionally bad and romanticize more-than-human relationships as unconditionally good (Hverven, 2015). My thesis does not argue that more-than-human relationships are inherently superior but rather contends that our alienation from nature is an imaginary conception. We have constructed a distorted social reality where we deny being part of the co-evolutionary process with our planet, seeing ourselves more as detached gods able to exploit earthly systems without facing consequences (Abram, 2017). While I may be young, spirited, and hasty, I am not naive; I do not believe that redefining nature and reconnecting with it will magically resolve our climate crisis. However, much like Judith Butler (2006) reshaped our understanding of gender and feminist theory by conceptualizing gender as a social

construct, I believe that reconceptualizing Western alienation from nature as a social construct constitutes a vital component for understanding and providing solutions to our climate crisis.

In alignment with Arne Naess's (2005) work on deep ecology, this thesis redefines wilderness by reconciling the self as an ecological being. Using environmental subjects and kincentric ecology as theoretical frameworks this thesis reconstructs our perception of nature as; a) an extended part of our family with which we share ancestry and origins (Salmon, 2000), b) an extended part of ourselves, for we are as much in the forest as it is inside us (Naess, 2005; Singh, 2013). Furthermore, this thesis aims to go beyond academia by acting as a bridge marker "weaving relations that turn a divide into a living contrast, one whose power is to affect, to produce thinking and feeling" (Stengers, 2012, p 1). Taking inspiration from sustainability science, this thesis moves past the limitations of disciplinary studies and approaches our climate crisis through an interdisciplinary lens, recognizing the importance of making space for various epistemologies and ontologies (Jerneck et al., 2011).

1.2 How it all started

My mother grew up in Tamil Nadu Indian in an intentional township called Auroville; it was her home and soon became one of mine as well. Throughout my life, Auroville was constantly present, a place of adventure, freedom and experimentation. I spent a decent amount of my childhood there, exploring the lush green forest, catching scorpions with my uncle, and chasing cows off my friends' backyard. I always experienced a strong connection with nature when spending time there, one which I lacked and missed in Europe. Two years ago, I sat down with my mother in our garden and asked her about a Facebook post she had made which had surprised me. In it, she had written that her greatest accomplishment, what she was the proudest of in her life, had been partaking in the planting of trees in Auroville. My mother, with a Ph.D. and years of experience as a professor shaping the minds of her students and teaching sustainable development, was proudest of a few seeds she had planted 45 years ago. I couldn't understand how that could be, but I made it my mission to one day answer that question.

I arrived in Auroville on the 22nd of February 2023, with a broad research question in mind: What is the relationship between the forest and the Aurovillian community? I knew given my short time frame, that I would need to use the informants and relationships that I had already established for my research. Thus,

I naturally turned to the Auroville youth (ages 20 - 35) for answers. I was especially interested in how growing up with this man-made forest, which is relatively young (55 years), had impacted the way they saw and related to nature. However, I soon came to discover that a) to answer that question I would have to understand the history of the forest and how it came to be, and b) to understand the forest I would have to understand the life of the foresters who gave it life or healed the land. My main research question thus changed and became: What sort of more-than-human relationship exists between the Aurovillian foresters and their forests? How did these relationships form? And what concrete lessons can I take back to Europe with me?

2. Background

The upcoming section of this thesis will delve into the historical context of Auroville's forests and explore the perspectives of the foresters regarding their stewardship methods and ecological outlooks. To maintain the reality of their lived experiences, this section will draw extensively from reports, articles, and a community-authored book. The focus here is on providing a thorough background that mirrors the narratives shared by the individuals I've engaged with, not necessarily based on academic accuracy. Thus, the academic status of the knowledge presented in this section is inconsequential; its primary aim is to offer the audience a comprehensive understanding of the life stories of the informants I talked to.

2.1 Understanding Auroville

Auroville is a hard place to describe, some people may call it a utopia (although many Aurovillians reject that label) (Kapur, 2021), while others refer to it as an ecovillage (Ratka, 2019). Based on my experience the commonly accepted label used is the one of an intentional community or experimental townships.

Before Auroville's establishment in 1968, two spiritual activists Sri Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa (the mother), had begun revolutionizing yogic traditions (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022). Sri Aurobindo's new yogic system called integral yoga, can be best understood as a complex, bold reworking of ancient Indian thought, and came to be the philosophical basis of Auroville (Kapur, 2021), spiritualizing society as well as the self (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022). Auroville was founded in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu as an "experimental township dedicated to this spiritually transformative endeavor" (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022, p 1174). At its start, Auroville attracted young Westerners often from the hippy

movement seeking alternative ways of life (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022; Kapur, 2021), the spiritualism of the East offering an escape from the materialist and consumeristic tendencies of the West (Kapur, 2021). Fifty-five years later, Auroville stands out with its 3000 permanent residents of over 58 nationalities, the most diverse and long-standing project of its kind, a bulging site of social innovation, and sustainable practices (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022).

2.2 The History of the Aurovillian Forest

Auroville was first established on a plateau of barren fields and eroded canyons, a landscape stripped of life but full of possibilities (Baldwin, 2022; Kapur, 2021). One of my interviewees described this period of tabula rasa as a place where one could: *“project everything that is ideal and perfect into this empty canvas and so that creates a lot of space for imagination and enthusiasm (Interview with Ray)”*.



Figure 1: "Cycling between Aspiration and Utilite," 1968, (Auroville Archives, n.d)

However, the journey to restore the land was far from easy. The soil was as compacted as metal, and summer temperatures could soar above 40°C. Dusty storms frequently swept through the landscape, adding to the challenges (Baldwin, 2022). Moreover, precipitation was scarce, except during the North-East monsoon season, whose heavy rains worsened soil degradation by washing away the topsoil crucial for planting (Baldwin, 2022; Kapur, 2021). To transform this harsh terrain into a habitable environment, the initial focus was on water and soil conservation. To tackle this issue, extensive measures were taken, including: the establishment of kilometers of hand-made contour bonding, the installation of gully plugs, checks, and granite dams in canyons and ravines (Baldwin, 2022). This era in Auroville's history when healing the soil was a priority had a huge impact not only in Auroville but in the entire bioregion as described here:

"The first thing was healing the soil, so there was some real common-sense (...) Oh the beach is getting red every year mmm let's start with the bonding and Malia I have to tell you the one thing that Auroville did that everybody picked up on their own (...) was the bonding because they saw for themselves; oh I don't have to put as much compost because all the topsoil is not being washed off. And so even Auroville was doing extensive bonding work not only on its land but wherever you know they could" (Interview with Ray)

Once the water and topsoil quality were adequate, the community could plant trees. The first foresters were accidental ecologists, they planted trees out of necessity and survival (Ever Slow Green, 2021). As one of my interviewees explains:

"We got into tree planting because we needed an environment where one could survive. You planted trees because you needed some shade and protection. You know, it was a basic necessity. There was nothing" (Intergenerational Interview, Jai)

During this time there were no textbooks on how to reforest barren land in Tamil Nadu, the foresters had to rely on common sense and experimentation rather than scientific knowledge (Ever Slow Green, 2021; Kapur, 2021). When it came to flora and fauna, Aurovillians planted everything they could get their hands on (Ever Slow Green, 2021), this included seeds from the Botanical Garden of Pondicherry, local plantations, roadsides, and even seeds the community members had collected during their travels (Baldwin, 2022). These seeds were then germinated in nurseries and when ready the saplings were planted in large cubic meter holes, with a large amount of compost, and the summers were spent bucket watering the saplings and protecting them from goats and cows (Baldwin, 2022; Ever slow green, 2021).

As the years progressed the plantation of trees continued, now taking place primarily during the monsoon when the earth is softer and the water abundant (Baldwin, 2022). Different species of trees had various success rates, with a lot of trial and failure taking place (Baldwin, 2022). One of my interviewees recounts this frustrating period:

“I remember when nothing would grow (..), it was just like this relentless effort of you know seedlings, planting, watering, and dying, and again and again and again. And then at one point (...) things started to grow and it was just like such a victory (..) not a victory in domination but a victory in cooperation, (...) so that's really precious to me to have seen like this trial and failure” (Interview with Ray)

Certain species, such as the work tree (*Acacia auriculiformis*), an exotic tree native to Australia, flourished in the degraded landscape. This species possessed significant nitrogen-fixing capabilities and had a relatively short life span of 25-35 years, making it a valuable timber source upon reaching the end of its natural life cycle (Baldwin, 2022). By the mid to late 1980s, Auroville had succeeded in establishing a pioneer canopy, a forest that still lacked biodiversity and primarily consisted of a mix of exotic and native species (Baldwin, 2022).

With the growth of the Aurovillian community came an influx of individuals, including some with backgrounds in ecology (Ever Slow Green, 2021). Consequently, the next natural progression for the foresters and their forests was to begin reintroducing native species. It wasn't until the mid to late 1990s that foresters began actively prioritizing the restoration of the tropical indigenous vegetation that had historically thrived on the land under their stewardship (Baldwin, 2022). The following excerpt from one of my interviews provides insight into this pivotal period and the process of acquiring indigenous seeds:

“The French Institute. They had (...) done a study and had determined where this stuff (native forests) was growing. And so it's mainly through them that we got familiar with the TDEF (Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest) and then we spent the next 15 years travelling the whole coastal belt of Tamil Nadu and even north of Chennai to find the little bits and pieces that were left over from this vegetation (...) A lot of them were little temple groves, sometimes just one or two acres, and the biggest were government-reserved forests, usually in very bad shape and severely hacked. The quality of the places differed tremendously. Some of them were really well-preserved and incredibly dense forests, and others, there were just a couple of trees left. And so we started learning our species, collecting planting material, and seeds, and started a nursery and started propagating all these species and reintroducing them here into the area. And so that's basically been the focus ever since then.” (Intergenerational Interview, Jai)



Figure 2: Picture of the Aurovillian forest taken near the Forest community I lived in. April 2023. (Picture taken by the author).

Today, reforesting Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF) species has emerged as a primary focus for Aurovillian foresters, with more than half a million trees representing over 200 species successfully established and exhibiting high rates of maturity and regeneration (Baldwin, 2022). What ecologists

refer to as TDEF is a very specific type of forest: *“found only in the Indian Coromandel Coast on the planet, it's only found in that stretch (500 km, 50-100 km wide) (...), so it's actually a really tight area where it's found, and because it's been completely chopped for many reasons over the years (...) it's like among the most endangered forest types in the world”* (Youth Interview, Kiki).

The foresters of Auroville are more than foresters, they are ecological restorationists, caring for and bringing back to life an endangered ecosystem. They serve the environmental movement as a point of inspiration - bringing back a seed of hope for our planet.

2.3 A man-made forest

It is important to remember that there are approximately 44 forests in Auroville, each forester has a different approach to stewarding their forest, thus producing a complex variety of forest philosophies and knowledge. This diversity in forestry practices results in an incredibly unique landscape with a diversity of forest types.

Based on my fieldwork there are two main schools of thought dividing foresters in Auroville. I find this divide fascinating; however, it falls outside this paper's scope and further research would be needed to do it justice. However, I could not continue using the TDEF label without also being transparent about other schools of thought who denounced it. On one hand, you will find foresters *“pushing the tropical dry evergreen forest type and focusing on that kind of language (..) it's also a good marketing strategy. We're preserving this unique ecosystem “* (interview with Nikki). On the other hand, you have foresters who frame the forest in terms of succession, explaining that *“there are different species which come at different times and play their role. (...) So to understand which species plays a role at which time in the development of the forest. And with that, fully embracing what are so-called invasive species”* (interview with Nikki). The main critique of the TDEF is that it is too rigid of a label and defines plants as “good or native” or “bad or exotic”, and thus excludes the important role that exotic species have played in establishing a pioneer canopy, enabling the growth of indigenous species (many of which require shade to grow). I should also add that many foresters fall somewhere in the middle of these perspectives and use both simultaneously in their stewardship. When asked what one of my interviewees thought about the TDEF label I was told:

"I love the label because it's really good for marketing. So if you're trying to create relationships, if you're trying to explain to people who don't have much knowledge, it's a great label. Tropical, Dry, Evergreen Forest. It's very expressive and explains what it is. It's easy to remember. It's perfect. (...) The political politicization of that word or that name, I'm very sad about, the fact that now TDEF is politicized and it's oh, you shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that because it's TDEF" (Interview with Phenix)

Hence, the Auroville forest(s) stand out as a group of experimental forests—a space where stewards can concentrate, listen, learn, and explore diverse ontologies and epistemologies. Despite their varying perspectives on nature and adherence to different philosophies, it became evident during my research that the Aurovillians forester's connection to the more-than-human world is remarkably intricate and evolved.

3 Methods

3.1 Research design

This thesis adopts ethnography as its methodology. While ethnography can take various forms, it generally involves the integration of firsthand field-based data collection methods (interviews, participant observation, and journaling) along with theoretical frameworks, enabling the researcher a deep understanding of particular social structures and cultures (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Several reasons underpin this methodological choice:

a) my previous experience in sociocultural-anthropological studies gave me confidence in my ability to carry out this fieldwork. I felt that out of all the other possible methodological approaches, ethnography was the one I had the firmest grasp on and would allow me to generate the best quality of knowledge.

b) my interest was primarily in understanding the complex more-than-human relationships developed between foresters and forests in the context of Auroville. Since this is inherently a constructivist question recognizing that reality is differently interpreted by each individual (Kirner & Mills, 2020), ethnography offers a methodological framework where diversity in relationships and stories could be processed simultaneously.

c) This thesis aims to move past the static knowledge produced in academia and encourage its audience to connect with the stories of the forest and the people who care for it. As explained in Kingsnorth and Hine's (2009) *The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, the role of stories goes far beyond our amusement; they weave our realities. Thus, using ethnography as a tool for collecting and sharing stories I hope to redefine wilderness for my audience. Or at least encourage them to critically reflect on the anthropocentric imaginary they live in.

It is important to note that this thesis used induction to develop knowledge, meaning that I started collecting data using broad research questions and then chose relevant theory to analyze said data (Kirner & Mills, 2020). Thus, the research designed before starting the fieldwork was focused on: methodological understanding, reaching out to possible interviewees/informants, and preparing interview guides. Given the diverse approaches within ethnographic studies, which can sometimes present contradictory perspectives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), this research predominantly relied on O'Reilly's (2011) *Ethnographic Methods* as a guiding framework.

3.2 Fieldwork methods

3.2.1 Participant observation

O'Reilly (2011), describes participant observation as:

“Learning from them (your informants) by observing them, participating in their lives, and asking questions that relate to the daily life experience as we have seen and experienced it. It involves doing this over time, taking mental and actual notes as we go along, and collecting other relevant data through interviews (or talks) and the collection of artefacts, statistics, and whatever else may be relevant.” (p86)

Finding the balance between being a participant and an observant was incredibly difficult for me. O'Reilly (2011) explains that on one side participation involves immersing yourself in being present in the actions taking place, whilst, on the other side, observation means taking some distance and critically analyzing actions from the outside. It is the researcher's responsibility to take part in this complex dance and navigate dichotomies of strangeness and familiarity or insider and outsider. I found myself naturally being an observer, yet always fighting it, desperately wanting to become a participant. For example, feeling ashamed of my Western ways when being told to use water more scarcely, or following a forester barefoot on a walk in the forest, wanting to prove that I could also walk on thorns. Despite the challenges inherent

in navigating participant observation, they hold significant value as they provide a unique way of understanding the world—a perspective that cannot be replicated by any other methodological approach (O'Reilly, 2011).

Fieldwork in general and participant observation especially is a learning curve. O'Reilly (2011), explains that once you start acclimating to your environment you stop noticing the little things, whilst when you are first on-site you observe and pay attention to every detail. This phenomenon is apparent in my journal where the first entries analyze all potential human-natural interactions —from the extrinsic flower arrangements at a performance to the tree growing in a restaurant (between tables), and the ants eating a grasshopper in my living room. Whereas, later in my research, I get better at weeding out the small details and marking down the most relevant events. This generates a particular form of data, which inherently tells the story of my adaptation to a new environment. An important reason why this fieldwork took the shape of autoethnography.

Finally, it's crucial to discuss the relationships that form during participant observation. O'Reilly (2011) highlights that what distinguishes ethnography from other research methods is the enduring connections between researchers and participants. This was the case in my research as I built many friendships during my time in Auroville, many with whom I am still in contact today. Initially, I questioned whether my actions were appropriate or ethical, seeking guidance from my advisor. Rather than discouraging my growing connections, he encouraged them, explaining that such bonds are inherent to ethnographic work. While this viewpoint may spark debate, I firmly believe that it is impossible to understand another without building a connection with them. For me, ethnographic research was more than an academic endeavor, it was a deeply social and human experience where trust, comprehension, and mutual sharing naturally unfolded.

3.2.2 Interviews

This research involved various types of interviews conducted in different social contexts. Five interviews were formally recorded and semi-structured. Among these, four were with forest stewards, and one was with a youth from Auroville. Additionally, two formal interviews were conducted in group settings: one involved five Auroville youths under the age of 35 (including one forester), and the other was an intergenerational interview with a grandparent, their child, and grandchild (again, with one of them being

a forester). Lastly, several informal conversational interviews occurred, with two stewards particularly standing out due to the frequency of our discussions throughout my fieldwork (See Table 1).

Table 1: Table listing interviews, types of interviews, number of participants, and category. (Data derived from the author's fieldwork)

Interviews Title	Type of interview	Number of participants	Category
Interview with Dhalia	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	1	Auroville youth
Interview with Nikki	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	1	Forester
Interview with Ray	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	1	Forester
Interview with Phenix	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	1	Forester
Interview with Joan	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	1	Forester
Youth Interview	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	5	Mixed
Intergenerational Interview	Formal,recorded, semi-structured	3	Mixed
Other	Conversational/passive	n/a	Mixed

These conversational or passive interviews as O'Reilly (2011) puts it were opportunistic and arose through participant observation. They were also recurring as I built relationships with these informants and were never recorded but instead written down in the form of field notes. The primary reason behind my decision not to record these events or request formal interviews from these informants is tied to the growing friendships we shared. I believed that using a recorder or conducting formal interviews might alter our dynamic and introduce an unwanted power imbalance. Additionally, it's crucial to acknowledge that I was living in close contact with these informants and wanted them to perceive me as a peer rather than a researcher analyzing their actions.

Concerning the formal semi-structured interviews, they were heavily based on Josselson's (2013) work and were geared towards comprehensively understanding each individual's life story in connection with

their experiences in the forest. To prepare for the interviews three guides, for each generation of Aurovillians (Appendix 1.1, 1.2 & 1.3) were created with a big Q, a little Q, and auxiliary questions. The big Q is the core of my thesis, what I am trying to understand, whilst the little Q serves as a launching point orienting my interview (Josselson, 2013). As more interviews were conducted the questions I asked changed spontaneously, regularly building on previous conversations. For example, I would often refer to previous points interviewees had made and ask if that was something my current interviewee could relate to. Additionally, whilst my research question changed so did the interview guides. I often sat down before each interview and prepared new interview guides, tailored to the interviewee. The guides present in the appendix serve as a starting point, the foundational tool for my interviews.

The formal interviews were chosen opportunistically, due to time constraints. Meaning that the sampling itself was opportunistic. Potential interviewees were often recommended by previous interviewees, family members, friends, or colleagues. At times, interviewees were encountered randomly at community events, leading to a limited pool of participants who frequently moved in similar social circles. It's important to mention that the community of foresters, my primary focus for interviews, is relatively small.

3.2.3 Positionality

There are various degrees of positionality, the most important ones at play in my research were my position as an insider/outsider as well as my position as a woman of color.

The insider versus outsider positionality can be understood as the extent of common ground and differences between the researcher and the communities being studied (Ademolu, 2023). It's a delicate balancing act of making what is strange familiar and what is familiar strange (O'Reilly, 2011). Navigating this duality requires continuous reflexivity, as the researcher must grasp their own identity and how others perceive them (Ademolu, 2023). In my case, I positioned myself neither entirely as an outsider nor entirely as an insider, but rather as a friend of Auroville. With family ties there, including a mother who grew up in the community, and having spent significant periods of my life living there, I was often regarded as a friend, daughter, or granddaughter. People frequently referenced my friends and family in our interactions, and I was often introduced to others through my familial connections. This positioning proved advantageous when reaching out to interviewees, as I could introduce myself through my relatives. However, it also influenced how I was viewed as a researcher. I observed that my interviewees

often perceived me primarily through my familial relationships and secondarily as a researcher. I found this position quite comfortable, as it encouraged people to speak more freely, and in return, I never viewed my informants as mere subjects of study, but rather as friends and mentors who generously shared their knowledge and welcomed me into their lives.

My identity as a woman of color also plays a significant role here, allowing me to blend into my social context to a greater degree. As O'Reilly (2011) highlights that factors such as color, age, and gender can profoundly affect how you are perceived and which spaces you can access. Throughout my time in Auroville, I was frequently mistaken for being of Northern Indian descent, with one informant even suggesting that I could easily "pass" as being from the North. However, it's worth noting that Auroville has a large white population. Regardless, I can only speculate that my skin color influenced others' perceptions of me, possibly allowing me to blend into various environments without attracting undue attention. However, my ambiguous nationality would often be revealed by my attire, manner of speech, and lack of practical skills. Many examples would fit here, such as forgetting to wear a hat/cover my head when volunteering at the water mela (water festival), not knowing how to start a fire to cook or refraining from asking for word definitions out of fear of appearing ignorant, only to seek clarification later from Google or a friend.

Regarding gender, it's difficult to say whether certain occurrences unfolded due to my gender or my status as a foreigner. While volunteering at the Water Mela, I noticed that men would often offer me their assistance when carrying heavy loads or expressed concern when I climbed ladders. Whether these actions stemmed from cultural norms, my gender, or my outsider status is hard to determine, likely a combination of all three factors.

3.2.4 Autoethnography

This research grew organically into autoethnography, and as I reflect on my time in the field, two main factors are responsible for causing my work to take this direction.

Firstly, it's essential to recognize there are no clear boundaries between ethnography and personal narratives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Consequently, distinguishing my research from the unfolding of my own story became increasingly difficult. As O'Reilly (2011) points out, field notes often begin with

initial impressions and are infused with the writer's emotional reflections. I noticed this blurring early on in my field notes, which often resembled personal journal entries. This tendency can be attributed partly to my history of journaling; it has long been a tool to process my emotions and experiences. However, the primary reason lies in the nature of my research, which is deeply rooted in my subjective experiences in Auroville, including my interpretations of sensory stimuli such as smells, touch, colors, and interactions with wilderness. Thus, framing my work as an autoethnography felt more ethical and transparent, allowing me to authentically convey the complexity of my personal experiences with my scholarly work.

Secondly, autoethnography can be defined as a researcher's "study of his or her own life and its context" (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2019, p1). The first month in the field was confusing, and at times discouraging. How could I ever understand the connections foresters had with their forest when my own connection with this ecosystem was limited? It wasn't until I was invited to move into a forest community sharing my home with forest stewards and the ecosystem, they cared for that my relationship with wilderness changed. One day I was living in a house with concrete walls, the next I was in a tree sharing my home with a myriad of species. The tree became my friend, my protector. I felt grateful for its shelter, and the animals living there became my friends, neighbors, and roommates. From Edith the bat who lived under me, to Liz the lizard who slept near the shelf I kept my toothbrush on (Figure 4), or Freja the bird who passed by every day carrying a piece of white fluff (maybe fur?) for her nest. I had never had so many flatmates in my life, let alone from so many different species. My relationship with nature changed suddenly and drastically in the span of a few weeks. As I reflected on my newfound relationship with nature it became apparent that this would be the point of great impact in my thesis. My audience may never be able to relate to the foresters who came when this land was barren, but they may relate to a fellow academic and how her life changed during her fieldwork. The best and most authentic way to get you to redefine wilderness and reflect on your relationship with nature is by bringing you along in this story.



Figure 3: Picture of Liz the Lizard, hanging on a branch near my treehouse. April, 2023. (Picture taken by the author)

3.3 Ethical consideration

This research followed the 7 Statement of Ethics set forth by the American Anthropological Association (n.d), which are as follows: 1) Do no harm, 2) Be open and honest regarding your work, 3) Obtain Informed consent and Necessary Permission, 4) Weigh competing ethical obligations due collaborators and affected parties 5) make your results accessible, 6) Protect and preserve your records, 7) Maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships.

Given the ongoing developmental projects in Auroville, which have significantly impacted the forest, ensuring the safety and comfort of all interviewees and informants was crucial. To achieve this, formal

interviewees received informed consent forms (refer to Appendix 2) to review and sign, while informants and passive interviewees provided oral informed consent. Given the tight-knit nature of the community, gender-neutral code names replaced all names, and any identifying information or locations were anonymized in interview transcripts. Additionally, all interviewees in this thesis are referred to using gender-neutral language to further safeguard their identities, particularly given the small community of Auroville foresters.

3.4 Reflexivity in Research

At its core, reflexivity is the researcher's ability to understand and reflect on how they are part of the social context they study and should be practiced in all aspects of an ethnographic study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). For example, positionality is a reflexive exercise that necessitates that the researcher grasps how their position within the space they study affects their work (Ademolu, 2023). Participant observation is a reflexivity activity, as it requires the researcher to immerse themselves in social settings while also reflecting on the impact of their presence (O'Reilly, 2011). Within interviews, reflexivity requires acknowledging our own biases in question formulation, research framing, and interpretation (Josselson, 2013). Ultimately, reflexivity serves to humanize ethnography and recognize the researcher's influence on the data being generated (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

In fact, the methodological sections above are colored by my reflexivity. For instance, my position as a woman of color, my feelings of shame regarding my Western background, or even openly acknowledging my opportunistic choice in interviewees. Additionally, another way in which I engaged in reflexivity during my fieldwork was by utilizing my field notes to reflect on my research process. Given that this was my first experience conducting ethnographic research of this magnitude, I felt it was crucial to honestly address the frustrations, feelings of hopelessness, and anxiety that accompanied it. For example:

Wow, what a roller coaster of emotions, everyone said it would be but I wasn't prepared for it. Every day something changes, some days I am totally confused others I am lost and discouraged. Then poof a small breakthrough followed by hope. Or wow a small connection I hadn't made before and then back to the confusion again. Sometimes these feelings all happen on the same day, sometimes at the same hour and other times, they are dispersed throughout the week. The time pressure is also killing me. Am I doing enough? Are my notes good enough? Will I have enough data? Do I know what I am doing? (Journal entry, 4th of March, 2023)

3.5 Data limitations

Because the quality of ethnographic research is based on the richness of the data (Sahoo et al., 2023), I dedicated a significant amount of time to writing field notes. Since these notes were handwritten, they consumed considerable time; I often had to take days off solely to catch up on them. Additionally, balancing participant observation, interviews, and field note writing proved challenging. Some days were spent entirely engaging with people, leaving minimal time for note-taking. During such instances, I resorted to using voice memos and bullet points to outline key events.

Pre-existing relationships with interviewees can color the quality of an interview and change its dynamic (Josselson, 2013). This aspect poses a notable limitation in my research, as I included friends as interviewees and informants. However, my decision stemmed from the limited time frame I had, which is another inherent limitation. It's important to note that no formal interviews were conducted with members of my family; no data from them was gathered through casual conversation. Moreover, close friends were only involved in informal conversations and group interviews—a setting where the power dynamics between interviewees and the interviewer are less pronounced (O'Reilly, 2013). Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my interview data might have differed significantly if all interviewees had been strangers.

Ethnography is an interpretative methodology that is inherently shaped by subjectivities, ambiguities, and contradictions (O'Reilly, 2013), which inevitably entails limitations. Two specific challenges proved particularly difficult to navigate:

Firstly, interpretative data presents challenges as it's impossible to know whether other researchers would arrive at the same conclusions or entirely different ones. For example, I encountered numerous contradictions, both among interviewees and between my observations and the information conveyed to me. While speaking with "city" Aurovilians (those not involved in forest work or residing in forested areas), I was advised to engage with foresters instead because they reportedly lacked a connection with the forest. However, my observations revealed that although less pronounced compared to foresters, many Aurovilians still harbored a profound love and appreciation for nature, especially when contrasted with my experiences in Europe. However, it is possible that another researcher (especially one from a non-Western background) could have interpreted these contradictions differently and arrived at a different

conclusion. Additionally, investigating such an emotionally charged question highlighted variations in how different foresters described their relationship with the forest. Thus, I relied on my common sense and interpretative instincts to discern patterns and draw comparisons.

Secondly, due to the emotional nature of the study, certain participants, typically men, struggled to articulate their relationship with the forest or their emotions. Once during a conversation, an informant told me that her parent (who was present) was not *“big talking about this kind of stuff”* but explained, *“Just because you're not able to articulate that. Doesn't mean it's not there on some level”*. Another time an informant approached me explaining that they had struggled in our previous conversation because they weren't used to sharing their emotions. Consequently, I often had to analyze stories and infer emotions based on my interpretations rather than relying explicitly on expressions from participants.

4. Theory

One of the problems with using inductive reasoning with ethnographic methodologies is that it becomes difficult to find one theoretical framework which encompasses the complex realities observed and experienced in the field. To this extent, I found myself using multiple theoretical frameworks simultaneously to produce the most accurate knowledge. An additional hurdle whilst looking for the best-fitting theoretical frameworks was dealing with my own biases. It became evident that through my questions, interactions, and experiences, I generated data which was colored by my worldviews. This is most evident in my criticism of Western-based theory, which despite offering interesting analytical lenses are still extensions of Westernism, and thus often reenact anthropocentric values, re-creating a nature vs human dichotomy. This is also visible in my use of indigenous theory, reflecting how I have often admired and turned to such worldviews throughout my academic career. However, my use of indigenous theory also acts as a decolonial analytical agent. Given the colonial past of India and specifically Tamil Nadu, as well as the socio-geographical context this study takes place in, it was important for me to make space for non-western ontologies to further develop the more-than-human relationships explored in the field.

4.1 Environmental subjects

Agrawal's (2005) work in Kumaon India and Singh's (2013) rethinking of environmentalism through forest conservation in Odisha India, are both influential in their use of “environmental subjects” as theoretical

frameworks. I felt quite drawn to their work when analyzing my own, as it took concepts which I deem to be inherently constructionist and built upon them in an environmental context.

Agrawal (2005) can be seen as the pioneer of environmental subjects, a framework taking inspiration from Foucault's work on governmentality (Singh, 2013). In his work, Agrawal (2005) defines environmental subjects as people who share a deep love and care for the environment. For these people, "The environment is a conceptual category that organizes some of their thinking and a domain in conscious relation to which they perform some of their actions" (p 162). Agrawal's (2005) work can sometimes be difficult to interpret. My interpretation of the above quote when unpacked, is that foresters (in this case) see their environment as a category they have conceptualized, and thus their categorization of the environment (however it may look) impacts their way of thinking and acting towards it. This position is interesting as it further explains why anthropocentrism (a way of classifying nature as inferior or other), affects the ways we think of nature and act towards it. This interpretation of Agrawal's (2005) words is inspired by constructionism, the idea that we perceive and construct nature through our interactions and experiences with it and others (Burningham & Cooper, 1999). For instance, during my interview with Ray, they emphasized that the primary task was "*healing the earth*," indicating that the concept of the earth needing care and love was already ingrained. Essentially, the early Aurovilians had already constructed the land as a space requiring healing, and their subsequent actions, such as bonding and improving soil enhancement, were directly linked to this initial conceptualization of nature.

On the other hand, Agrawal (2005) also refers to "how actions affect ways of thinking about the world and produce new subjects" (p166). Thus, environmental subjects are also created through their actions. Following this thought, environmental subjects are both created through their conceptualization of nature which impacts their actions, as well as through their actions, which in turn impact their way of conceptualizing nature. Framing environmental subjects in this constant cycle is more realistic as it reflects a dynamic, ever-changing relationship. One where foresters reflect and act towards nature depending on how they conceptualize it whilst constantly reconceptualizing it based on their interactions with it. This circular framework (which is based on my interpretation and adaptation of Agrawal's work), will later be referred to as an environmental subject's interactive cycle. I argue that Auroville and its foresters have continuously reconceptualized nature through their work with it. The TDEF and succession of the forest are good examples of this. What was once conceptualized as a barren land in need of care has now been

reconceptualized as a rare forest type in need of protection, or a forest expanding its potential through stages of succession (see background).

It is, however, important to understand that Agrawal (2005) writes about expanding and transforming practices of conservation, by commenting on issues of power relations specifically between communities and institutional systems such as governments (Shantz, 2008; Singh, 2013), which isn't relevant to this thesis. In contrast, in her fieldwork in Odisha, Singh (2013) explains that people come to care for their environment through daily caring activities and engagements with it, and as these ties are strengthened nature moves from being outside the self and instead becomes part of oneself. Here she relies on Ingold's (2000) work on the perception of the environment to explain how one should not distinguish mind and body but rather see ourselves as part of an environmental whole. Thus, environmental subjects are shaped by engaging in their entirety with the more-than-human world, not just in their social context (Ingold, 2000; Singh, 2013). This school of thought aligns with Naess (2005), who uses deep ecology to explain that nature is as much outside as it is inside of ourselves. While blurring the boundary between the self and the natural world by defining the self as an interactive organism inseparable from its environment, the emphasis on environmental subjects still places humans prominently at the center, thereby perpetuating an inherently anthropocentric ideology. Continuously, the term subject used in Agrawal's (2005) work is rooted in Foucaultian thought of subjectivity and governmentality, which involves the view of a subject under a disciplinary structure (Lemke, 2001; Singh, 2013). Thus, the framework of an environmental subject holds connotations of being under something's control and jurisdiction. This could be interpreted as nature being a force of power to which we are subject. However, this interpretation is problematic as it merely extends Western thought, viewing environmental subjects through imperialist lenses of power and control. While the creation of environmental subjects is vital for comprehending the cyclical interactions among foresters, their actions, and the way they perceive and categorize nature, it is not sufficient on its own.

4.2 Kincentric Ecology

I must acknowledge that disciplines such as anthropology and sociology are inherently anthropocentric, focusing on the study of humanity and its cultural societies in relation to the world. Indeed, this thesis

delves into human relationships with the more-than-human worlds, which inadvertently reinforces the same dichotomy it critiques. To mitigate this, I turn to kincentric ecology, which conceptualizes nature as an extended family (Salmon, 2000), providing a more suitable framework for describing the collaborative practices between the forest and the forester and how they mutually influence each other.

Indigenous people have long been aware that life on this planet is only viable when humans view their environment as kin and share a sense of direct responsibility and relationship with it (Salmon, 2000; Salmon, 2016). Salmon (2000) coined the term kincentric ecology to refer to the kindred relationship between indigenous people and the more-than-human world. Explaining that by forming these complex, interdependent, intertwined ways of interacting and forming relationships with nature, indigenous people can better preserve and care for ecosystems (Bhattacharyya & Slocombe, 2017; Salmon, 2016; Salmon, 2000). While Auroville's foresters generally do not characterize their forest as direct kin (e.g., mother, father, sisters), they often view their forest in terms of extended kinship (e.g., friends, neighbors, teachers, and guides). I will therefore use kincentric ecology in broader terms which include such extended communal relationships.

Bhattacharyya and Slocombe (2017) use Kincentric ecology to explore how the Xeni Gwet'in, First Nation in British Columbia, give animals (specifically horses) agency as they view them as non-human beings who have decision-making abilities. They explain that giving animals this form of agency (or in our case giving a forest agency) achieves three specific outcomes. Firstly, management is no longer centered around the human (anthropocentric) as their rights are instead reframed in terms of the integral responsibility and rights of all beings (ecocentrism). Secondly, by recognizing more-than-human beings as having agency, we are more adequately able to fully capture the complex socio-ecological relationships which exist, whilst simultaneously moving further away from utilitarian approaches of wildlife management. Lastly, if we recognize the more-than-human world as having agency and decision-making abilities, we simultaneously come to understand that humans are not in control of said relationships.

Questions regarding foresters and their relationship with nature were recurring themes in my reflections. If the Aurovillian forest is man-made, then humans must have exerted significant control over it. Even in everyday forestry tasks, foresters make decisions about what and when to plant, where paths are established, and which trees to harvest. It wasn't until a passive interview with a forester that I gained

insight into how one can exercise control or guidance without necessarily asserting dominance. As they explained

“I too control trees or guide them according to what I know. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but underlying it all is the feeling somewhere within that I haven’t the slightest clue about trees, and I hope to observe it too and learn from its process” (passive interview with Sonny).

From this quote, we can see that the forest possesses agency, and the forester serves as a guiding hand, seeking to understand and respond to the needs of the forest. The forest, in turn, responds, and the forester observes and learns from this interaction. This conversational and collaborative process mirrors the approach to land management among the Rarámuri, which embodies a tradition of *“conservation that relies on a reciprocal relationship with nature”* (Salmon, 2000, p 1330)

Although kincentric ecology offers an interesting theoretical framework to analyze the complexity of the more-than-human relationships taking place in Auroville forests, there are a few aspects of indigenous cultural, linguistic, and spiritual practices that are not applicable in Auroville. Firstly, it is important to understand that Kincentricity for a lot of indigenous people is also tied to a deep ancestral relationship with the land (Salmon, 2000). This was brought up by one of my interviewees who explained: *“ I think (...) I have this very limited relationship to it (the forest) in a way you know (...) not this ancestral relationship” (Interview with Dahlia)*. Due to Auroville's relatively recent establishment and the predominantly non-native population, its inhabitants cannot connect with nature based on historical and ancestral ties. Secondly, Salmon (2000) explains that kincentricity is also encoded in his language (Salmon, 2000; Salmon 2016) as the Rarámuri do not have a word for wilderness and can thus not express that concept, a recurring phenomenon in many indigenous languages (Center for Humans and Nature, 2017). As an international township with inhabitants of over 58 nationalities (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022), Aurovillians do not share one common language in the same way. And thus cannot connect to nature in the same linguistical sense.

5. Applied Theory

Applying theory to my lived experience and conversations in the field revealed that the complexity of human-forest interactions varied depending on the individuals I spoke to and their interaction with the forest. Initially, I aimed to explore intergenerational knowledge and how different generations within the community were impacted by the forest. However, I soon realized that my focus had to shift to the

foresters, as they were the ones directly engaging with the forest and thus held the primary connection to the more-than-human world. If I ever wanted to grasp the meaningful relationship that the rest of the community had developed with the forest, I needed to first understand the relationships that enabled the forest to exist in the first place. Although I had discussions and interviews with various community members (especially youth), my research inherently focuses on the foresters.

5.1 Interactive cycle of an environmental subject

In section 4 (Theory) I built on Agrawal's (2005) use of environmental subjects to explain what I call an interactive cycle, where environmental subjects are both created through their construction of nature which impacts their action towards it, as well as through their actions which impacts their way of constructing and understanding nature. Thus, nature is in constant reconstruction. A good example of this is when Ray explains *"I say that I look after the forest but actually the forest looks after me"*. An interpretation of this quote could be that land that was once constructed as barren and in need of care, came to grow and produce shade, water security, diversity, livelihoods etc... In essence, their acts of care transformed the land and reshaped their experience of it, leading to a redefinition of nature as an entity that reciprocates their care.

The fluidity by which nature is in constant reconstruction is apparent in the diversity of the Aurovillian forests. During my fieldwork, I often observed how various forests felt differently as if a part of the forester was in the forest itself. This topic came up in my intergenerational interview where Jai (a pioneer forester) explained; *"The different forests in Auroville have somehow a different atmosphere. I definitely see that. I guess part of the personality of the people who created it is there in that forest"*. An environmental subjectivist wouldn't necessarily see a person's personality in the forest but rather see a forester's constant reconstruction of nature as the reason why forests look differently depending on the foresters who steward them. This form of reasoning aligns well with Mimo, who during our intergenerational interview pointed out that:

"I don't know of human traits. I don't think I can identify human traits of the people who give it, but you can definitely see that it's different and part of who is helping it. For example, some are wilder, some are more cleared. Some people leave the woods to be there, some people harvest the wood. Some actions create physical differences".

A less anthropocentric interpretation of this phenomenon would suggest that the environmental subject is not merely reconstructing nature through its actions toward it, but rather through nature's responses to those actions. This results in a diversity of forests, as nature may be responding differently based on its geological conditions and the foresters may be interpreting said response differently.

Singh (2013) and Ingold's (2000) offer a nuanced perspective on environmental subjects, highlighting how our interactions with nature reshape our relational ties with the more-than-human world, integrating it into our sense of self. My observations on the reciprocal reflection between the forester and the forest indicate that this relationship is reflective. In other words, we perceive nature as part of us, but we also become part of nature. In my field notes, I noted that the Aurovillian forest is a product of experimental reforestation knowledge, evolving alongside the Aurovillian community. It tells Auroville's story as much as Auroville tells its story. This reciprocal relationship blurs the dichotomy between nature and humanity and is best understood through the lens of Kincentric ecology.

5.2 Applying Kincentric Ecology

During my fieldwork, I frequently encountered a profound connection with nature that transcended the constraints of Western theory and closely aligned with indigenous ontologies. Initially, I questioned whether my romanticization and admiration of indigenous knowledge influenced my perception. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find recurring discussions about indigeneity throughout my fieldwork. One day, while I was talking to a pioneer forester I asked if indigenous people had been a source of inspiration and was told casually ; "well they are the archetype". I wanted this thesis to go beyond the constricting boundaries of academic knowledge and make space for other forms of knowledge. This makes sense as the Aurovillian forest is a product of experimental knowledge. Most Auroville foresters do not have ecological degrees, what they have achieved is a product of cooperation with nature, which resembles Raramuri's conservationist approach (Salmon, 2000). Based on my fieldwork I have categorized 3 distinct kincentric relations between foresters and their forest, which I will discuss. What I aim to show with these 3 distinct relations is the diversity of kincentricity ecology which takes form in Auroville.

5.2.1 Friendship

The most common form of kincentricity between foresters and their forest was friendship. Whether it was through stories like recognizing a tree in another country and feeling a sense of familiarity (interview with Dhalia), hugging trees, and saying goodbye to them before a cyclone (interview with Ray), or perceiving them as characters with personalities (intergenerational interview, Mika), friendships with the forest manifested in diverse ways. However, beneath each quote lay a sense of familiarity and kinship. One quote resonated with me, perhaps because it evoked memories of my childhood in Auroville and resembled the friendships I cherish. It explained:

“I remember growing up when I would be sad or not only pain, but also other kind of emotions that would be a place that I could kind of be in. And so I think in many ways they'd be a friend, especially specific trees that I'd go to often and they'd be like a confidant or a friend or like this kind of family or like a mini home, like a safe space I guess (...) I think growing up with the forest around me, I think that was just a familiar, not a face, but a familiar kind of being and a safe place. A lot of love, especially with specific ones.” (Intergenerational interview, Mimo).

As I reflected on my friendship with trees and other plants, I realized the challenge of articulating these feelings into words. A forest friendship isn't directly comparable to human companionship, yet it offers a similar sense of familiarity and safety found in human friendships. Furthermore, I realized that these friendships exist on multiple levels; while most interviews discussed friendships with individual trees, some also spoke of their bond with entire species. Thus, kincentricity can be experienced across different scales. This was highlighted in one interview when a pioneering forester mentioned:

“It's whether it's the individual tree, whether it's the species of that tree, or whether it's the forest. It's like you can have a relationship on each level. So for example, some of the trees here I know exactly where I collected the seed 30 years ago. So I have a string of narrative back to that tree. I have trees in the forest that are like old friends. If I see like a species in a completely new space where I've never been before that I know, it's like greeting an old friend. So whether it's the individual tree that I know that I've nurtured since the beginning of its life, or whether it's a tree in the forest where I collected the seed, or whether it's a tree in a different place. So all of those are relational. They're all relationships. And the forest is also a relationship. When you walk into forest, you have that sense of becoming.” (Interview with Phenix)

My interview with Phenix took place towards the end of my thesis. However, if given more time and a larger word count, it would have been interesting to build upon this and analyze the various levels of our more-than-human relationships in more depth.

5.2.2 Child/Parent relationship

Another form of kincentricity which came up in the field was the one of a parent and a child. Because the Auroville forest is man-made, some foresters saw the forest as a being or a collective of beings they had helped birth. In my interview with Joan, they explained:

“I'm not that attached to the product as much as I am the process because you can't be, it's like when you have kids you don't know what's going to happen you don't know if they're going to live or die you just have them because they're a beautiful addition to the earth and you've made them as good as strong as you can. So I guess when I say it's part of who I am and it's like my soul.” (Interview with Joan)

This quote unveils two intriguing themes. Firstly, it suggests that one's connection with nature isn't solely determined by interactions, but rather by active engagement, echoing ideas explored in Agrawal (2005) (see discussion on the Interactive cycle of an environmental subject). Hence, I argue that the foresters in Auroville develop kincentric relationships with nature not as a result of the forest itself, but through the ongoing process of living with it. Secondly, the quote emphasizes kincentricity by attributing agency to nature and wilderness, echoing similar findings in Bhattacharyya and Slocombe's (2017) research. This notion was further elaborated on in my interview with Phenix, where they explained:

“But still there's a lot of thought. I mean, it's regenerating itself. And so you'll get second generation plants, third-generation plants, things like that. So it will become more of a forest. More able to express itself or just be. Because it's sort of sorting itself out. We've planted things like this and now they're regenerating wherever they come up. And so then eventually you'll lose the trace of the human hand.”

The idea that nature has the ability of self-expression, that it will (like a child) grow into its own self, was a recurring theme which I touched upon later in terms of wilderness.

5.2.3 Teacher and student

A third form of kincentricity which emerged in my research took the form of teacher and student. Nature became a mentor of sorts, resulting in a collaborative relationship of experimentation and learning. It demands from the foresters a degree of humility and asks them to listen to what and how nature wants to grow. A good example of this comes from Jai and his story with the Teak tree where he recalls:

“In the beginning when I didn't know what would grow here, for instance, I planted a teak tree somewhere down in the path there and after (...) almost 35 years, it's now a shrub of about 3 meters tall. Normally teak trees by then would be something like 30 meters tall (...) That gave me a very strong indication of what does not work here in the tougher areas.” (Intergenerational interview, Jai).

Jai's story shows a certain amount of respect for the forest, a learning moment where the forester must take a step back and listen to what the land is trying to teach them. Positioning humanity as students of nature rather than masters of it. Foresters are thus not experts of ecological re-forestation but students of ecological processes who learn how to listen to nature and how it wants to grow.

6. Discussion (tangible ways to enhance more-than-human relationships)

It was crucial for me that this thesis yields practical outcomes for enhancing more-than-human relationships, rather than presenting another abstract academic analysis of these relations. To this extent, this section is entirely based on my fieldwork and highlights the predominant ways by which Auroville as a community and its foresters especially have come to redefine wilderness as a place they belong in.

6.1 Contact with Nature

Engaging with nature is central to the development of more-than-human relationships and has been shown to improve pro-environmental behavior (Lumber et al., 2017). As Dhalia points out in our interview:

“ I think living in Auroville you are like just surrounded by forest and I think that that does shape you in some way just to be (...) yeah to just love nature and want to be around it want to live

like surrounded by nature want to protect it in some way or you know care for it and respect it.” (Interview with Dhalia)

To this extent, the most obvious way to reconnect people with nature and encourage meaningful relationships with it is by providing humanity access to nature and offering engaging activities. As discussed, concerning Joan’s quote in section 5.2.2 (child/Parent relationship), Aurovillians are more likely to develop kincentric relationships with nature not as a result of the forest itself, but through the ongoing process of living with it. Based on my own experience of Auroville, the relationships I built with the forest were most meaningful when the engagement was constant without necessarily being purposeful. In other words, it is my experience that more-than-human relationships are strongest when nature is part of daily life. Whether it be going to work, grocery shopping or meeting friends, if nature is intertwined in all these mundane activities, one is more likely to develop a stronger relation to it. Exploring strategies to incorporate more wilderness and nature into urban areas could be an intriguing approach to enhancing more-than-human relationships in Western societies.

6.2 Education

During my fieldwork, I encountered various people who had gone through an Ecological Horticulture course with the Botanical Garden in Auroville. This four-month-long course combines knowledge of plant biology and ecosystems with material experience to train new generations of professionals for conservation work (Auroville Botanical Gardens, nd). It became clear to me through my conversations that individuals who had undergone this course had developed deeper relationships with the forest, akin to the connections observed among foresters and their forests. For instance, during our intergenerational interview, Mika elaborated:

“during the course (...) I think that the whole exercise of identifying and observing in a new way. Like looking closely and learning to know something. I've seen it before, but you haven't really looked. That's how it is. And then you're like, oh, that's different, that's different. And you notice all these little changes and differences, like the kind of difference in how they grow, what their seeds look like. So I don't know much. It's just like four months and there's so much to know about. But yeah, that definitely changed my relationship with the TDF species. I think also like an appreciation for things that I didn't realize were special about. Like finding things special about your trees, whether it's the shape of their thorns or the color of their fruit or that they all have certain characteristics that I haven't really appreciated before.”

If we want to solve this climate crisis, I believe we must create space where knowledge of nature, in the form of such courses, can be made accessible and available to all. We as a society must encourage people to learn and engage with wilderness. It is one of the major ways by which a *“living mechanism become less of an object and more like an actual being”* (Intergenerational interview, Mika). Just as people attend yoga classes, riding lessons, and choirs, let's promote ecological classes as a new hobby.

Additionally, language became a predominant theme in many of my conversations with foresters and people who had taken that course. As Kiki describes.

“I started learning all the botanical names for our TDF species, and that completely, it's like putting glasses on, I mean, it's changed my complete outlook on the entire forest, you know, now if I drive by, I don't see it as, like, oh, tree, no, that's this species” (Youth interview, Kiki)

In linguistic discussions with my informants, the choice of language itself was not important. Instead, the focus lay on establishing a system of identification where a forest, often perceived as a chaotic green mass of trees, could become more recognizable in terms of its remarkable diversity and interactivity. A sentiment that was often brought up was that by giving a tree a name you also gave it an identity.

6.3 Wilderness

A major theme which came up time and time again was wilderness, the facilitation of nature expressing itself freely without human dominion. Mimo explained:

“I feel like growing up in this kind of disorganized organization of nature that's what makes me feel more right. When it's two like just organized parks and all it doesn't feel the same”.

Thus, it is not enough to simply give people access to nature, to foster meaningful relationships with nature we must give humanity access to wilderness. If we give people access to tamed “natural” areas we are not allowing them to meet wilderness but rather letting them interact with a synthesized version of what we think nature should be. Thus, we must create spaces within communities where nature is allowed to be itself in all its expression.

As Nikki brilliantly points out; *“Auroville is also largely manmade, but it's wild at the same time. We're allowing for a wilderness to take shape”.* It is this respect towards nature, this recognition of kincentricity which allows the Aurovillian forests to be themselves in all their diversity and enables people to connect with them as beings with agency and equal value. I use the word wilderness as it was the word used in

most off my discussions, however, as Enrique Salmon explains “ *Wilderness is a knowledge, an idea, whereas wildness is the actual thing.(...) But it’s not separate from me, neither of them is separate from me, wilderness and wildness are me, I am it.*” (Center for Humans and Nature, 2017, 6:30). Aurovillians have helped create a forest that is wild and through this process have come to embody both wilderness and wildness.

“In many ways I feel like the forest is a lot like my thesis it's messy, wild without a narrative or pattern. It looks as if it was just allowed to be itself to reflect the experienced truth of its existence. I'm sure trained I will see a pattern and a narrative (...) but at this moment I really can't and there is beauty and that as well.” (Field notes). In many ways this thesis is wild, it embodies the very essence of what I am studying, and I hope it encourages you to redefine wilderness in your own life. The next time you see a tree I urge you to take a moment to see it and appreciate it for what it is, a part of your community.

7. Conclusion

My mother’s proudest achievement is not simply planting a few seeds in the soil when she was a child. No, it is having been given the chance to bring back hope to this world, having partaken in the rehabilitation of a forgotten ecosystem, and having helped create a community which transcends the barriers of species; that is what she is proudest of.

The Western world, influenced by anthropocentric ideologies, alienated itself (Vogel, 1988) from its ecological kin (Salmon, 2000), creating a distorted reality where nature is seen as exploitable and controllable without consequences (Abram, 2017). This mindset needs to shift. As bell hooks (2000) discusses in her book "All About Love; New visions", love is the “primary way to end domination and oppression” (p.76). While it may be unrealistic to expect that redefining wilderness and reconnecting with it will single-handedly solve our climate crisis, I believe it's a significant piece of the puzzle—one that has often been overlooked.

This autoethnographic research recounts the transformation of a desertified landscape into a unique ecosystem (Baldwin, 2022), achieved through the dedicated efforts of a close-knit intentional community (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022). Through the theoretical frameworks of environmental subject and

kiencentric ecology, it explores the intricate dynamics of more-than-human relationships, examining how they are constructed and how they challenge the dichotomy of 'us' (humans) versus 'them' (nature) perpetuated by the anthropocentric society of the West.

Finally, this study concretely highlights three distinct ways by which Auroville as a community, and its foresters especially, have come to redefine wilderness as a place they belong in. This thesis aims to transcend the boundaries of academia by evoking feelings and reflection in its reader. Urging all of humanity to redefine wilderness for themselves, to reconnect with its more-than-human kin, and to recognize their place within a larger ecological cosmos; it aims to inspire a profound shift in perspective and experience so that in the future:

May we raise children
who love the unloved things – the dandelion, the
worms & spiderlings.
Children who sense
the rose needs the thorn
& run into rainswept days
the same way they turn towards sun...
And when they're grown &
someone has to speak for those
who have no voice
may they draw upon that
wilder bond, those days of
tending tender things
and be the ones.

- Nicolette Sowder (n.d)

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Appendix:

1. Interview Guides

1.1 Interview guide for younger generation:

Big Q: What is the relationship between the TDEF and the Aurovillian community?

Little Q: I'd like you to tell me about the forest in Auroville, how do you feel about it? What does it mean to you?

Or

Tell me about yourself and your story with Auroville. Were you born here? Did you move here later in life?

- 1) How has Auroville shaped your relationship with the forest and the way you perceive the environment in general?
- 2) Do you think that your personal relationship with the forest is different from others in the community of different generations?
- 3) In what ways do you feel emotionally connected to your environment, especially the forest can you tell me a story between you and the forest?
- 4) Whenever you leave Auroville do you feel that others in the "outside world" have a different relationship with the forest or nature in general in comparison to you? Why do you think that is? Tell me a story of when you realized such a difference.
- 5) What can the outside world learn from Auroville and its forest?
- 6) Is there a specific part/aspect/or even a tree you feel especially linked to?

Other possible questions:

How important do you think the forest is for Auroville and what it represents?

Do you think that value can be assigned to the Aurovillians forest? And if so in what way?
What did you do during your time outside of Auroville?

1.2 Interview guide for mid-generation

Big Q: What is the relationship between the TDEF and the interviewee?

Little Q: Tell me about yourself and your story with Auroville. Were you born here? Did you move here later in life?

- Has the forest changed during your time in Auroville or between visits?

- 1) Tell me about your relationship with the forest has it changed through time? If you are confused with what I mean by relationship, I am asking you to reflect on how you see the forest. Some of your peers in previous interviews have referred to it as a friendship, others as a guide. In indigenous knowledge, nature can sometimes be a kin a part of your family, a spiritual force, or even a teacher. Some may also see nature as an extension of themselves. So how would you personally define it and has that relationship changed through time as you may have left and come back, as you grew up, asked more questions and learned more about it?
- 2) What is your relationship with the forest today do you think your particular relationship is different from others in the community?
- 3) Can you tell me a story about the forest and yourself? What draws you or motivates you to work in/with the forest?
- 4) What can the outside world learn from Auroville and its forest? As a man-made forest how is it different from other man-made forests?
- 5) Is there a specific story that the forest and its ecosystem have taught you?
- 6) , can you tell me anything about your observations and how others interact with the forest?

Extra side questions:

- What do you think the TDEF forests represent in terms of Aurovillian Identity?
- How often do you interact with the forest?
- Is your relationship with the forest in Auroville anthropocentric or more symbiotic?

1.3 Interview guide for older generation

Big Q: What is the relationship between the TDEF and the Aurovillian community?

Little Q: I'd like you to tell me about the forest in Auroville, how do you feel about it? What does it mean to you?

Or

Tell me about yourself and your story with Auroville. Were you born here? Did you move here later in life?

- 1) Tell me a little bit about yourself, how did you end up in Auroville and what did Auroville look like back then?
- 2) Tell me about your relationship with the forest has it changed through time and how?
- 3) What is your relationship with the forest today do you think your particular relationship is different from others in the community? Or differs between generations?
- 4) Is your relationship with nature now different than before your arrival in Auroville? In what way?
- 5) In what ways do you feel emotionally connected to your environment, especially the forest can you tell me a story between you and the forest?
- 6) What can the outside world learn from Auroville and its forest?
- 7) Is there a specific part/aspect/or even a tree you feel especially linked to?

Other possible questions:

- What trees did you plant?
- Was it difficult to plant trees?
- How did you plant these trees?
- Who was involved?
- What issues did you have when planting the trees?
- How did it impact your relationship with the forest?

2. Informed Consent

Thank you for accepting to participate in this study on the socio-environmental experience of Aurovillians in relation to the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF). I Malia Menard Elder, a graduate student at Lund University Sweden, will conduct this research as part of my master's thesis.

Your participation will entail an in-depth interview, which will last approximately two hours. The findings of the research will be shared solely with Lund University, as well as with the Rights Livelyhood association which has sponsored this trip. There is a possibility that this research may be published, in this case, you will be made aware of this prior to the publication.

The interview recordings and transcripts will be kept confidential and anonymous. Direct quotes from your interview may be shared with my supervisor in order to clarify and guide the research, whilst protecting your anonymity and changing any identifying details. This includes names, locations as well as gender. By signing this consent form, you give the researcher permission to audio record the interview and to use the statements you make during the interview.

By accepting the invitation to be interviewed, you may develop greater insights into your experience and relationship with the TDEF and environment. No risks are anticipated with your participation in the study.

You can terminate the interview at any time. You may also withdraw from this study either during or after your participation. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, your recording, transcription, and data will be removed from the study and erased.

All the information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The informed consent form will be kept separate from the interview data. All information identifying you will be modified in the write-up of the interview transcript to protect your identity.

If you have any questions about this study or your involvement in the research, please ask the researcher prior to signing this consent form. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Malia Menard Eder through email at malia.menard@gmail.com.

A copy of this informed consent form has been emailed/given to you. Please sign this form to indicate that you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Please keep a copy for yourself.

Name of participant (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Contact Information

Name and address of researcher

Malia Menard Elder

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