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THE WILD IN THE CITY: DIFFERENT CONCEPTS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN COMMUNITY GARDENS OF GOUTTE D'OR DISTRICT OF PARIS

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TÍTULO

LO SALVAJE EN LA CIUDAD: DIFERENTES CONCEPTOS Y SU PAPEL EN LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LOS HUERTOS URBANOS COMUNITARIOS DEL BARRIO PARISINO GOUTTE D'OR

Abstract

In this article, I explore how different conceptions of the relationship between humans and non-human living beings shape the practices involved in the construction of two community gardens in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood of Paris. I draw on concepts from the research field — such as *wild* and *laissez-faire nature* — to discuss contrasting understandings of urban nature. In these gardens, conceptions grounded in a human–nature divide seem to prevail, resulting in a conservationist approach to their development. The practices stemming from this perspective appear to be in constant tension with some of the gardens' goals, such as increasing urban biodiversity and providing spaces for human socialization. Reflecting on how perspectives on the human–nature relationship influences the constitution of community gardens in the city looks to be essential when discussing them as a form of public policy.

Palabras clave:

Urban nature; Wilderness; Urban biodiversity; Nature's Rights

Resumen

En este artículo exploro cómo las distintas concepciones sobre la relación entre los seres humanos y los seres vivos no-humanos definen las prácticas de construcción de dos huertos comunitarios en el barrio de la Goutte d'Or, en la ciudad de París. Me baso en conceptos procedentes del campo de investigación —como *lo salvaje* y *laissez-faire nature*— para discutir diferentes concepciones en torno a la naturaleza urbana. En estos espacios, parecen prevalecer concepciones fundamentadas en una separación entre lo humano y la naturaleza, lo que da lugar a un enfoque conservacionista en la creación de los huertos. Las prácticas resultantes de esta perspectiva entran en conflicto constante con algunos de los objetivos de estos espacios, como el aumento de la biodiversidad urbana y la necesidad de que el huerto funcione también como lugar de socialización humana. Reflexionar sobre la importancia de las perspectivas sobre la relación humano-naturaleza en la constitución de los huertos comunitarios en la ciudad parece fundamental para pensar en ellos como una política pública.

Palabras Clave:

Naturaleza urbana; Wilderness; Biodiversidad urbana; Derechos de la naturaleza

INTRODUCTION

This article presents some of the reflections developed in my master's thesis. The ethnographic research was conducted in two *jardins partagés* — referred to here as community gardens — located in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood of Paris. In this article, I explore the different uses of the term *wild* to investigate the ideas of *urban nature* that emerge in these gardens and how they contribute to shaping the gardens and the neighborhood's landscape.

Jardin des Tulipes and *Jardin Saint Julien*, both subjects of this paper, are located inside the Goutte d'Or neighborhood, which is undergoing a process of gentrification. The neighborhood is located along the edge of Gare du Nord, a central station known for receiving foreigners from various parts of the world, especially after World War II. It thus developed as an immigrant hub in the 1960s, home to a large working-class population (Bacqué & Fijalkow, 2006).

The process of gentrification in the Goutte d'Or, as in many other cases, begins with discourses of urban decline. The area, once framed as degraded, becomes the target of narratives centered around the recovery and requalification of the space. Starting in the 1980s, a series of public policies were introduced in the neighborhood, addressing various aspects of its urban fabric — including real estate (Bacqué & Fijalkow, 2006), public safety (Milliot, 2015), and the governance of shared spaces.

While the neighborhood is viewed as having undergone gentrification, the process unfolded in an incomplete and fragmented way. While housing has been largely changed, public spaces have had less impact, which Bacqué and Fijalkow (2006) describe as an incomplete gentrification process. As a result, public spaces continue to serve as key sites for coexistence, conflicts, and negotiations between different social groups (Milliot, 2013; 2015).

Community gardens can be interpreted as part of broader gentrifying policies and structures. Mestdagh (2013) divides community gardens into two categories: one focused on food production — tied to the notion of *jardin potager* — and another centered on socially oriented and interactive activities. According to the author, due to its characteristics, the latter tends to encourage greater engagement from higher social classes in the management and the activities of the gardens. The gardens studied here fall mainly into this second category: the productive dimension is largely neglected compared to the social significance of these spaces. Two interpretations seem to coexist. The first sees convivial community gardens as valuable spaces for exchange and the creation of social ties. The second views them as sites of public space gentrification, whose benefits are primarily enjoyed by only a segment of the population (Mestdagh, 2013).

As these studies show, the creation of these gardens is strongly rooted in both political and social motivations from public authorities as well as part of

the population. What place is given to other living beings in this garden, whose primary purpose is to foster social interaction and the development of social ties? What can the relationship between humans and non-humans reveal to us in this context?

Jardin des Tulipes and *Jardin Saint Julien* are part of the *Charte Main Verte*[1], a program by the City of Paris that oversees green spaces managed by associations. In the case of the gardens studied, both are managed by inhabitants associations. The document specifies that the participatory approach seems to refer to the management of the garden itself: the involvement of residents in the garden's life is the principle being advocated (Demailly, 2014). Beyond the garden's social importance, the documents governing the operation of the program *Charte Main Verte* (Mairie de Paris, 2003; Teycheney & Engel, 2012; Ville de Paris, 2022a; Ville de Paris, 2022b) address the physical management of the gardens. They highlight the need to keep the garden in good condition and to promote environmentally respectful management, as shown in the excerpt below:

> "A shared garden is a space for experimenting with environmentally respectful practices. It contributes to maintaining biodiversity in urban areas and to increasing the presence of vegetation in the city, in line with the sustainable development approach initiated by the municipality (Teycheney & Engel, 2012, p. 2).

The document emphasizes the importance of vegetation, ensuring that gardens function as green spaces and advocating for sustainable practices to preserve biodiversity. However, these guidelines often leave the specific management strategies open to interpretation. As a result, the responsibility for making decisions about the physical management of these gardens typically falls to the residents' association, which is the case analyzed here.

The factors influencing the constitution of these gardens' landscapes are diverse, ranging from pre-existing soil compaction to the local presence of an animal deemed a pest. Yet the latitude afforded by the documents, allowing the managing associations to determine the direction of each garden's landscape, appears to assign decisive importance to the choices made by the people involved in this management and their employees. I was particularly struck by how differing conceptions of the relationship with non-human living beings shape each garden. These conceptions seem to guide the very course of what urban nature comes to be within the collective gardens of the Goutte d'Or.

Mestdagh (2013) offers a critique of the gentrifying potential of these gardens, highlighting the positive aspects of this public policy while emphasizing the need to rethink it. The author draws attention to the activities carried out

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1. Green Hand Charter, in literal translation. Main Verte is an expression that equals green thumb in English.

in these spaces, primarily cultural and educational, which tend to be enjoyed predominantly by individuals from higher social classes. Throughout this article, I discuss the impact of different perspectives on human relationships with other living beings on the practices developed within the gardens. Can reflecting on these practices through other forms of human–non-human relationships help us rethink these gardens as a form of public policy?

In this document, I take as a starting point the uses of the word *wild* - and similar notions - to explore the relationships established between humans and non-human beings in this context and how these relationships shape the landscape of the gardens. I draw on the concept of landscape developed by Marimoutou (2017), who, similarly to Ingold (1993), challenges the view of landscape as a merely figurative element. He understands gardens as landscapes, that is, as visible expressions of material practices that transform reality. Therefore, when I propose to examine how these relationships shape the gardens' landscape, I aim to understand how they alter the practice of collective gardening within the specific context in which I was embedded.

To address the research question posed in this study, I primarily engage with members of the associations that manage the two gardens under investigation. These individuals, who refer to themselves as "gardeners," are actively involved in the daily development and maintenance of these spaces. My analysis focuses on those I interacted with most frequently and who played significant roles in the decision-making processes within the gardens. All of these individuals are residents of the neighborhood or nearby areas, able to walk to the gardens from their homes—some live just a few meters away. Additionally, there is a neighborhood resident who, while not a member of the association, serves as a central interlocutor in this study. This individual is the gardener of Jardin des Tulipes and is the only person employed by the association.

In the following section, I delve into how the relationship between the urban environment and nature has developed in Western Europe. What is the place of nature within the city? Can we speak of an urban nature? This section also marks the beginning of a dialogue between my fieldwork and the literature through an initial exploration of the concept of *wild*. In the subsequent sections, I draw on field data to reflect on the forms that the relationship between humans and non-human living beings takes within the garden's spaces studied, and how this contributes to our understanding of the construction of this landscape. There are four sections dedicated to these discussions, leading to the conclusion.

1. URBAN NATURE

Western Europe's cities have a long history of separating spaces, between the natural and the urban. Traditionally, cities were built on the idea of detachment from nature, defining humans in contrast to all other living beings. However, this perspective began to be challenged in 19th-century

Europe, even more so by the late 20th century (Calenge, 1997). Where does the natural end and the human begin? What is the boundary between nature and the city?

In this process, elements understood as part of nature have become part of humankind's imagined origin and destiny (Querrien & Lassave, 1997). Living beings other than humans, along with non-living elements such as sunlight, wind, and hills, began to be conceived as part of the same whole, reshaping the very notion of "nature." Once defined in opposition to a nature devoid of human presence, the city has become a "place where the naturalness of the world and people is lost" (Calenge, 1997, p. 13). In other words, an environment that, by definition, excludes nature ultimately also excludes humans, who are now understood as part of it.

This evolving relationship with nature required a shift in how urban space was conceived, moving beyond the idea of an antithesis to the "natural". Urban planning began to recognize the importance of "bringing nature back into consideration" (Berque, 2010). In other words, once seen as separate and excluded from the city, nature is now being reimagined as a key element in reshaping the urban landscape and revitalizing public spaces (Calenge, 1997).

It is important to highlight that non-human living beings and non-living natural elements have always been part of the urban environment. The idea of the city as a purely human creation has never fully prevailed — urban inhabitants and planners have always had to navigate the presence of other living beings in the design and experience of urban spaces. However, until then, these beings were seen as having no social function within the space designed by humans for humans (Raymond & Simon, 2012).

At this point, elements of biodiversity began to be reintegrated into urban planning. This shift was accompanied by a discourse centered around terms like "sustainable city," "green city," and "urban ecological infrastructure" (Calenge, 1997). But what sets this new green, sustainable, and ecological city apart from the one that came before? The incorporation of 'nature' into urban design has given rise to a reimagined vision of the city itself.

The definition of urban nature raises a series of complex questions. As previously mentioned, the very concept of nature is often constructed in opposition to its counterpart — in this case, the modern city (Berque, 2010). From this perspective, urban nature could be understood as the 'nature of human beings'. Bonnin and Clavel (2010) argue that "urban nature" consists of "natural" elements that "(...) adapt to a densely built, mineral, noisy, polluted, and artificially illuminated environment". The city shapes these elements just as they shape the city. As a result, nature is no longer simply defined by where it ends and the city begins; instead, concrete itself must also encounter limits when it meets the natural (ibid.), forming a shared space or landscape.

Querrien and Lassave (1997) argue that nature manifests in multiple ways within the urban environment, and all these forms must be considered when shaping the concept of urban nature (Calenge, 1997). Community gardens are one such space where nature takes form, providing a refuge for biodiversity within urban centers, both physically and in discourse (Friedberg, 2014). In this sense, community gardens serve as spaces where reflecting on, naming, and redefining elements of nature become part of everyday life. They become spaces of great potential for reflecting on the city and, especially, on constructing urban nature as both material and imaginary reality. How is the idea of urban nature constructed for city inhabitants? Which concepts is it thought from?

Jardin des Tulipes and *Jardin Saint Julien* seem to be particularly interesting spaces to seek answers to these questions. In the process of creating collective green areas in cities — where interaction with non-human living beings, such as plants and animals, is constantly challenged — ideas surrounding urban nature are constantly revisited.

"They showed us beautiful, colorful flowers they had won and told us we could plant them. (...) We asked them to tell us where [to plant]. They started pointing out spaces in the inner orchard of the garden, the only part dedicated exclusively to gardening. Having decided it would be in this space, we began discussing where exactly to plant the seedlings. Julie raised a point: she didn't think it was right to plant flowers near *wild* plants. She quickly rephrased by saying that they weren't *wild* plants since they had been put there by humans, but they had *wild* traits, which the flowers had not" (Extract from field notebook. May 17, 2022).

Julie is a retired university teacher from the Parisian region, who was head of management of *Jardin des Tulipes*. Living some blocks away from the garden entrance and having a lot of involvement in the project, she was always present in the garden and available to interchange with me. As she did in this conversation, the gardeners often use the concept of *wild* - here translated from *sauvage* - as a way to characterize a plant, a garden, or a landscape. Berque (2010) discusses the definition of the concept of *wild* as the opposite of cultivated. Anything considered *wild* has not been introduced into its environment through human intention and intervention. Although widely used, is this definition appropriate for understanding its use in different contexts? What's more, is it possible to consider this definition of *wild* in an urban context? And for what is it used?

The term wilderness can also revisit the concept of the *wild*. As well as Berque (2010) did about the *wild*, Stankey (1989) argues that wilderness was only able to appear as a concept in the context of the cultural separation between nature and civilization. Mainly, wilderness refers to the idea of an untouched nature. The author shows the evolution of this concept throughout human history, assigning to this separation a Judeo-Christian origin. It evolved

into a duality: wilderness as paradise or as desolation. Stankey (1989) shows that this historical ambivalence remains to this day, reinforced by Arts *et al*. (2011) years later.

As I have explored so far, the separation between humans and nature shapes the very idea of urban nature in Western Europe. This divide plays a central role in how green spaces are understood and constituted within the city, especially when it comes to collectively created spaces, where different representations of nature may coexist. Considering the historical and cultural importance of wilderness, Arts *et al*. (2011) argue that it is important for biodiversity conservation projects to take this separation into account so that they do not arrive at simplistic solutions.

Based on this idea, it seemed meaningful to use the *wild* concept as a starting point to look at the studied community gardens in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood in Paris. In this research field, *wild* appears as a concept that changes according to different factors in the context of the urban community garden's daily activities. How do those different concepts work in shaping the landscape in this context? Is it significant to consider this ambivalence when analyzing them as a public policy?

2. *WILD* TRAITS: BUILDING A *WILD*-LIKE LANDSCAPE

The *Jardin des Tulipes* is connected to another green space in the city, which is managed by the local government. To access the garden, one must pass through this area, which primarily consists of a children's playground. Surrounding the playground are dark green wooden benches—the signature color used by the City of Paris for urban furniture. While children play in the center of this space, their caregivers watch over them, engage in conversation, and interact. In addition to this organization around the children, many men occupy the space, usually sitting on a more distant bench, separate from the rest of the activity. This is a privileged spot in Paris, set slightly apart from the street, with access to a public restroom and a drinking fountain.

The garden is located behind the playground and has two entrances: one directly in front of the playground's entrance and another to the right. The first is the main entrance, which remains open during specific hours, when members involved in the park's management are present—whether association members or the gardener hired by the association—, as stipulated by the *Charte Main Verte*. These designated opening periods, known as *permanence*, occur only during specific times, either in the afternoon or evening.

This garden is divided into different areas, each serving a specific purpose. One section is enclosed by large fences, preventing human access. The goal of this space is to allow plants to grow freely, without human intervention—neither through planting nor by physical presence. The only ones allowed in this Biodiversity Zone are the chickens, who spend most of their time in a coop

but occasionally roam in this protected area. Next to the chicken coop is the orchard, a space dedicated to planting, featuring fruit trees, ornamental plants, flowers, shrubs, and stones. Adjacent to the orchard, a canopy has been built, providing shelter for a communal area equipped with a library, benches, and a central table.

The garden attracts a diverse range of visitors. On weekends, the number of people in the space increases, while during the week, it tends to be quieter, with little to no visitors present. Many children visit the garden with their caregivers—some simply stroll through, observing and minimally interacting with the space. The main attractions are the chickens and the plants, particularly those in the orchard.

Next to the chicken coop, the orchard is where most direct human interventions with other living beings occur. It was during one of these interventions that one of my interlocutors, Julie, mentioned the aforementioned plants with what she called "*wild* traits", affirming that flowers should not be planted next to them. Julie began the discussion by saying she didn't think it was right to plant flowers next to *wild* plants. At first, she seemed to be using the conservationist definition mobilized by Berque's (2010): *wild* is that which humans have not planted. However, she quickly revised her statement, realizing that the plants she was referring to as *wild* had also been placed there by human hands. In doing so, she introduced the idea of "*wild* traits": a plant doesn't necessarily need to be *wild*, according to the definition discussed by Berque (2010), to look *wild*. What was so different about the new flowers that Julie prefers to plant separately? The flowers were purple, with soft, green fuzzy leaves and a small, delicate size. In contrast, the wild-like plant appeared like a weed — small shrubs with long, dark green leaves leaning toward brown, with no shine or significant variation in tone. They have a "*wild* look". If the uses of *wild* refer here to something untouched by human hands, then could something that *looks wild* be understood as something that seems not to have been shaped by humans? So it's an aesthetic aspect: even if all the plants we've been talking about have been introduced into the environment by human action, there is an aesthetic difference between them that is marked by the participants in their discourse.

When the term *wild*, and its variants are used to describe a plant, a garden, or a landscape, it can refer to a set of aesthetic attributes. These, in turn, refer to the practices that eventually led to the plant's installation in the garden: did they involve human intervention or not? The wild as an important concept in the landscape definition is not only understood according to the definition presented by Berque (2010), which opposes the cultivation. Figurative aspects, which may or may not be classified as *wild* according to his definition, also define the fates of this landscape.

The importance of the figurative aspect of plants seems to sit alongside a discussion of the role of aesthetics in landscape construction. Aesthetics

participate in communication between different people and social groups (Rancière, 2000). The messages communicated by these plants about the constitution of the landscape seemed to be of great importance in the constitution of the idea of the *wild*. By contrasting the wild with the cultivated, we give great importance to the practices put in place to construct a landscape. However, once the *wild* is also defined by how plants are perceived aesthetically, communication through this aesthetic also becomes central to the constitution of the landscape.

When we look at this landscape, what practices do we imagine behind its construction? With "*wilder*" plants, we can infer that human intervention in landscape construction is low. Some plants communicate that human hands have intentionally planted them, while others do not. This communication is essential when discussing urban public space, which many people share. Here, the landscape communicates about the practices that were put in place to build this garden. So, it's not just the ethics behind the practices that are considered important in defining the landscape. What the landscape communicates about these practices is also significant in determining its own.

This aesthetic discussion around how *wild* a plant looks reinforces the idea that there is such a thing as nature untouched by humans. In the context of this research, greater value is often attributed to *wild*-like plants — a tendency that echoes the discussion developed by Stankey (1989), in which he explores this idealized nature as either paradise or perdition, through the concept of *wilderness*.

3. LIMITING HUMANS TO LAISSEZ-FAIRE NATURE

This discussion around *wild* traits also appears — though with different words — in the Jardin Saint Julien. With a particular history, this space has an aesthetic quite different from most gardens. Towering trees, as tall as buildings, provide abundant shade and shelter an impressive population of birds, a feature often highlighted by the garden's regular visitors. Amid the songs of sparrows and doves, the Jardin Saint Julien does not resemble a typical Parisian garden, where the dominant sounds are usually traffic or trains. The dense vegetation acts as both a visual and acoustic barrier. This is one of the garden's unique characteristics: it is not a tall, open-mesh fence that hides what is inside but the plants themselves. Certain garden areas are hidden from the street behind the foliage, just as the street becomes invisible from specific points inside the garden. Similarly, the farther one moves from the fence, the less visible the street becomes — and the less those outside can see in.

Unlike the Jardin des Tulipes, which was organized from the beginning as a designated green space in the city, Saint Julien emerged from a desire to preserve this abundant vegetation that had taken root during a long period of restricted human access to the site. Members of the association noted that it is quite remarkable in this garden to find plants growing directly in the soil

and have reached heights of around 10 meters — something rare even in the city's official green spaces. This is precisely what drew their attention before the site was officially converted into a garden in 2007. Previously, this vacant lot had been used as a parking area, which was later expropriated due to legal disputes. Enclosed by a wooden *palisade*, the land remained inaccessible while legal proceedings were underway.

The restriction of human presence allowed various plants to establish themselves and grow freely, some eventually reaching the size of trees. According to members of the association and others involved in similar gardens, the plants arrived "naturally", in their words — carried by birds, other animals, or non-living elements such as the wind.

This vegetation that established itself in the space is often referred to as *friche*[2]. In French, the term describes *uncultivated land* or land with an aptitude that is not being exploited. In the context of the Jardin Saint Julien, there is frequent discussion about preserving what is called the *côté friche*[3] of the garden. *Côté* means "side," but here it is used in the sense that Julie uses aspect — as an aesthetic feature. Preserving this uncultivated and somewhat visually abandoned by humans is one of the significant ongoing discussions in this garden. As we have seen with Julie, from the *Jardin des Tulipes*, the space's aesthetic — in dialogue with the idea of something not cultivated — plays an important role in decision-making.

The preservation of this *friche*-like and abundant vegetation is in constant dialogue with the idea of *laissez-faire nature*. *Laissez-faire* is a French term that refers to an attitude of minimal interference. This hands-off approach implies non-intervention and allows plants and other non-human living beings to occupy space without human interference.

In the context of Jardin Saint Julien, this idea has been present since the very beginning of the human occupation of the site, as the garden was established in a previously abandoned area and, therefore, taken over by *friche*-like vegetation. The closure of this space to human access for years is precisely what made this possible: had it not prevented human access, the vegetation likely would not have developed as impressively as it did.

However, once the space was reclaimed as a garden, conflicts began to emerge around the limits of human occupation. Would human presence not threaten the very existence of this vegetation? The *Charte Main Verte* (Mairie de Paris, 2003; Teycheney & Engel, 2012; Ville de Paris, 2022a; Ville de Paris, 2022b) clearly states that it is the responsibility of garden managers to ensure that the gardens remain open to the public, following a specific set

2. Wasteland, in literal translation.

3. Non cultivated land characteristics

of guidelines. Therefore, human presence in the garden becomes irrevocable once registered under the *Charte*.

How, then, can we think about the coexistence of a *friche*-like space with the constant human presence required by the garden's public function? It seems that two different interests must coexist within this space: on the one hand, the desire to maintain an environment in which vegetation can grow with minimal human intervention; on the other, the need to ensure a certain degree of openness to the public, as required by the *Charte Main Verte*. In an attempt to reconcile these two interests, both gardens studied here have divided their territory into different areas, each serving a specific purpose — some of which are intended to allow little to no human intervention.

When I began my fieldwork with *Jardin Saint Julien*, I noticed a distinction between areas where humans could walk and those that did not serve this function. However, these spaces were not clearly marked or delineated as such. I quickly realized this was a recurring discussion within the association: not everyone who frequented the space respected the designated pathways, often encroaching on areas meant exclusively for non-human living beings.

The association decided to create a physical barrier between these spaces to address this. They installed a rope attached to small wooden stakes. In addition to the rope, they placed a sign with the following message: "Please respect the plants by not crossing the barriers". The communication of space usage boundaries was established here clearly: a physical barrier accompanied by a fixed message seems to have transformed how different people interact with the space. This delineation resolved the issue of communicating proper use and contributed to the coexistence of two distinct projects within the same garden, even though not in the same space.

At the *Jardin des Tulipes*, something similar was also done. A "Biodiversity Zone" sign was used to communicate a limit for humans: the barriers of this area must not be franchised. There were separate spaces, ones where human intervention was allowed, and others not. Even though this separation of spaces contributes to the coexistence of different projects in the same gardens, the idea of a space for biodiversity could not coexist with human intervention at the *Jardin des Tulipes*. As we saw, human intervention refers to planting and any other kind of land use, whether as a passageway or resting space. The old biodiversity zone and the new one are enclosed by a wooden fence, making it even more complicated for humans to enter the *Jardin Saint Julien*.

This restriction of the space to human interaction, leaving it primarily for contemplation, aligns with *laissez-faire* nature and connects the initiative of creating isolated zones to Berque's (2011) discussion of the concept of *wild*. If the wild is everything that has not been cultivated, everything that is non-human, then biodiversity zones can be considered *wild* spaces. This also brings them closer to the concept of wilderness as untouched nature, a conservationist

idea that is founded on the separation between human and nature. Of course, we are not talking about a space completely free from human influence, as it exists within a highly urbanized environment. However, could these practices be seen as an attempt to create a space where nature—distinct from anything human—can manifest itself in an untouched form?

4. THE BIODIVERSITY DILEMMA

The idea of *laissez-faire nature* comes into conflict with the need for human presence in the garden space and the need to increase biodiversity in the urban environment. As described above, in the *Jardin des Tulipes*, a Biodiversity Zone was established, fenced off, and restricted from human access. The link between the absence of humans and the increase in biodiversity is based on a notion similar to that which informs the *laissez-faire nature* approach: the idea that the presence of human beings prevents other living beings from fully establishing themselves in a given space. This understanding seems to stem from the belief that human impact on nature is always negative. So, what is a Biodiversity Area in the middle of a megalopolis? Could it be a space free from human impact? Is that even possible — or desirable?

Raymond and Simon (2012) point out that urban biodiversity worldwide is fairly homogeneous. Indeed, the environmental conditions of different urban spaces are very restrained and similar: compact soils, various pollutants that exclude the more sensitive species from the city, and higher temperatures that also affect various species, among many other shared characteristics.

Due to the homogenization of environmental conditions in urban areas, increasing biodiversity in a short space of time requires intervention. This intervention must aim to transform the space conditions so that they become favorable to the development of species that were previously unable to establish themselves there. Increasing biodiversity is one of Paris City Hall's goals with the *Charte Main Verte*. Increasing community gardens' presence and supporting their existence in the city comes along with a biodiversity discourse.

At *Jardin Saint Julien*, studies conducted to identify the biodiversity in the space found around fifteen different plant species, a number considered low by the local authorities and the managing association. As a result, efforts to increase the site's biodiversity were initiated, which required human intervention. Victoria, a researcher serving as president of the association responsible for the garden, and I planted *Bleu de Champs* seeds in pots filled with soil. According to her, the idea was for flowers to grow in the pots until two mature leaves appeared, at which point they could be transferred to the ground. This method allows for better control of survival conditions during the most vulnerable stage of the plants' development, protecting them from potential threats such as predators, heavy rainfall, or insufficient light.

This approach was a response to previous failed attempts at planting flowers when some association members had scattered seeds directly onto the soil with minimal human intervention. On compacted, unprepared ground, the seeds failed to germinate. To improve the success rate of flower planting, the association members decided first to grow the seeds in pots. They also opted to prepare the soil by loosening it before randomly dispersing flower seeds across the terrain. With these new methods, the members ensured a higher likelihood of the plants growing and reaching maturity.

Why plant flowers? Victoria emphasized the garden's aesthetic appeal. However, the attraction of pollinators was a more prominent concern for the gardeners, both for the association and the local government. By luring different kinds of pollinators—such as birds and insects—the flowers would increase the local biodiversity. With the presence of these animals, which play a key role in plant reproduction, biodiversity can expand even further.

This, however, conflicted with the *laissez-faire* posture, built upon a desire to develop gardening practices that interfere as little as possible with the environment. Without soil preparation, seeds struggle to germinate. Thus, the effort to introduce plants that attract pollinators does not fully align with low-intervention gardening models. To find a middle ground, the members of *Jardin Saint Julien* sought to find a balance between minimal soil disturbance and ensuring the flowers could germinate and survive. They experimented with the least invasive planting techniques, as they understand it, gradually increasing the level of intervention until the plants successfully germinated.

Something very similar happened with the *merisiers* in the garden. Intending to increase bird biodiversity in urban spaces, the City of Paris government gifted a series of *merisiers* to the association managing the garden. This plant, closely related to the cherry tree, is considered by members of *Jardin Saint Julien* to be highly attractive to various bird species. These trees were planted in areas where ropes were there to limit physical human intervention: humans should not cross the barrier. However, the quest to increase biodiversity here took priority over the idea of leaving the space untouched, where nature could express itself only in its way.

The quest to increase biodiversity doesn't seem to go perfectly with a *laissez-faire* nature attitude. Is it possible to have a wild or *friche*-like garden without human intervention, where a short-term increase in biodiversity is sought? It seems that there is a major contradiction to be managed in these spaces. Biodiversity interrogates the idea of an untouched nature in urban environments and *vice versa*. It seems that in these spaces, there is a constant negotiation between the idea of *laissez-faire* nature and the effort to increase biodiversity. This ongoing negotiation, which is not always peaceful, appears to make the existence of these gardens the way they are possible.

5. "NATURE'S" RIGHTS, AN ETHIC PROBLEM

These negotiations and compromises required in the production of these gardens are not only established between humans and non-human living beings, but also take place between different human actors. In the *Jardin des Tulipes*, the gardener Jad — the only salaried worker in both gardens, with a work post named *jardinier animateur*, which we can translate to educational gardener — is the person responsible for the orchard's lushness. He spent his entire life in close contact with agriculture throughout his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in Algeria, where his family-owned rural land. After moving to France, he began working as a driver but maintained his connection to agriculture by cultivating whatever space was close to him, from his balcony to community gardens.

According to some association members, he is known as the green thumb of the neighborhood: everything he touches turns green, which was the main reason for his hiring. To ensure that the plants thrive, reproduce, and blossom, he uses gardening techniques that are pretty complex for those unfamiliar with the trade. He works mainly on gardening techniques from mature plants, not from seeds, especially with the ability of plants to reproduce themselves from a piece of their already mature body, called vegetative reproduction. He places special emphasis on the techniques of layering, cuttings, and grafting. Another important technique in his gardening practice is mass pruning.

These practices are responsible for the results that have earned him the title of green thumb of the neighborhood: beautiful, abundant flowers in a wide variety of colors; productive fruit plants; impressive foliage; colorful gardens throughout spring and summer; as well as hybrid plants producing different types of fruits at the same time. Some of the visitors to *Jardin des Tulipes* want to learn gardening techniques. Some spend the afternoon watching Jad develop his techniques or trying to reproduce them with him. Others spend their time discussing their problems with their plants at home.

This fascinating and curious perspective on Jad's practices in the garden is not the only one. At the very beginning of my fieldwork in the community gardens, I spent a day with Jad, accompanied by a classmate from my master's program, Kevin. We followed the gardener through several of his daily activities. At one point, leaning against some raised planters in a corner of the garden, he explained to us, for the first time, the principles behind the various grafting techniques he uses.

These techniques require a mature plant to serve as the base — the grafted plant — and a small piece from another plant to be joined to the base — the graft. For the technique to work, the vascular tissue of one plant must be in direct contact with that of the other. This way, the sap can circulate freely through the graft, nourishing and keeping it alive. There are several ways of achieving this, each with different names: Spanish, English, horse, and others.

What differs is how the graft and the base are cut, and how they are joined. After a short period, about two weeks, the graft begins to integrate with the base plant, becoming a single plant. However, the branch from the graft produces leaves, flowers, and fruits with characteristics completely different from those of the original plant. These characteristics are inherited from the grafted plant.

Once successful, this technique allows for constructing a new plant using an already mature base. It enables the creation of a single individual capable of producing flowers in a wide range of shapes and colors and fruits with different textures and flavors. Another interesting aspect of plants created through grafting is that their reproductive cycle follows that of the base plant. This allows the production of vegetables and fruits outside their usual seasons without chemical inputs. Moreover, a grafted plant can be more resilient than one grown from a cutting, for example. This is because it is the base plant that ensures the resilience of the entire organism. A base that is resistant to the climate conditions of the space where it is planted will provide greater resistance to the graft as well.

Jad always emphasized the importance of paying attention to the botanical family of the plants before performing a graft. Just like in human organ transplants, the body — which I've referred to as the base — may reject the graft. However, the technique's success is practically guaranteed within the same botanical family. In the *Jardin des Tulipes*, several plants have undergone grafting, including a pear tree that bears branches producing pears, apples, and quinces and a rose bush that produces flowers in a wide variety of colors.

After Jad initially explained grafting, Kevin responded surprisedly: "But this is magic!". Without us noticing, Manon had approached during the conversation. At the time, she was a member of the association that manages the *Jardin des Tulipes* and was actively involved in collective urban gardening projects across Île-de-France, the greater Paris region. Not long after, she left the association to take part in the creation of another community garden elsewhere, far from Goutte d'Or. Upon joining us, Manon overheard part of our conversation about grafting. In response to Kevin's comment, she said: "That's not magic, that's trafficking!". She continued, saying it bordered on witchcraft: "Why would we want cucumbers all year round? What's the point of transforming plants like this?". These questions directly responded to Jad's earlier comments about the benefits of grafting. In Manon's discourse, respecting the natural cycles of plants with as little intervention as possible appeared to be a core value for some association members.

To her, his interventions were considered too much. What's the point of transforming plants in this way? The intervention that Jad promotes through plants and, consequently, in the landscape seems to cross an ethical barrier for some people involved in *Jardin des Tulipes*. So, there seems to be implicit plant rights for some people, which defines how far we can go with gardening

practices. According to this vision, a part of what we have in today's garden requires crossing a limit of human intervention in the biological processes of these plants.

These practices can be considered problematic and invasive. The defense of ideas such as "*laissez-faire* nature" is put forward to interrogate practices such as Jad's: any kind of human control over the processes of other living beings should not be accepted. Following this idea, as discussed before, the garden can be viewed as a place where nature can find a place to thrive in its way in the urban context. This posture towards gardening practices brings us back to the term *wild* as the opposite of cultivated, according to the definition discussed by Berque (2010). Could this quest of letting nature do its own be understood as a quest to build *wild* gardens?

Would community gardens, therefore, be urban green spaces designed to be flowery and productive, where different gardening techniques can be experimented with? Or would they be places where plants and other living things can find their rightful place in the city, building a wilder space? These conceptions appear to be based on a different relationship established with non-human living beings. On the one hand, there is a perspective that seeks to recognize the rightful place of these beings, particularly within a highly anthropomorphic urban context. Within this conception, human interventions are kept to a minimum, considering other purposes these spaces are meant to serve, such as increasing urban biodiversity.

On the other side, there is a search for deeper interaction between humans and non-humans, where human interventions actively contribute to shaping these spaces through ongoing interaction with non-human life. From this perspective, human intervention is not limited, nor does it appear to conflict with the garden's goals, such as welcoming residents and increasing biodiversity. In both perspectives, there seems to be space for humans and non-humans. However, the spaces that result from each are different — and, more importantly, the resulting practices are significantly distinct.

This also leads to a notable aesthetic difference within the gardens. From a perspective that allows for, even encourages, greater human intervention, the garden tends to be more colorful and abundant with flowers and fruit. From a perspective more aligned with *laissez-faire nature*, green spaces take on features more closely associated with *wild* and *friche*-like landscapes, such as tall, unmanaged grasses, spontaneously growing shrubs and irregular plant groupings. These different conceptions seem to coexist and, at times, conflict with the management of the gardens, playing a significant role in shaping their landscape.

CONCLUSION

Discussions surrounding the relationship between humans and non-human living beings are not new in academic literature. Likewise, urban community gardens have long been a subject of interest for researchers. What kinds of relationships between humans and non-humans emerge in these gardens? How do they influence the gardens' very constitution? Throughout the discussions presented in this article, I have traced some of these relationships, which proved to be significant in shaping the landscape of the gardens. As discussed in the introduction, I am not speaking solely of the garden's visual or figurative aspect when I refer to the landscape here. Landscape certainly includes the visible, but more importantly, it refers to practices and, consequently, the beings responsible for shaping the space.

Among the perspectives presented here, many seem to begin with the idea that human impact on nature is predominantly negative. By proposing a garden management approach aligned with *laissez-faire* nature, the gardeners appear to advocate for humans' withdrawal from actively shaping the landscape. Would this, then, create space for non-human beings within the city, a *wild* garden?

Even while acknowledging the impossibility of creating a space with no human intervention, some gardeners support developing a *wild* or *friche*-like space. Thus, it is not only the practices that matter but also an aesthetic that evokes a space of minimal human intervention. At the same time that these perspectives are prioritized, they come into conflict with goals assigned to the gardens by public authorities — such as openness to the public and the enhancement of biodiversity — as well as with minors, though present, conceptions that favor greater human intervention in the space and with non-human living beings.

These tensions raise questions such as: what are these gardens for? They clearly have a social function, one that has been widely discussed in various studies (Firth et al., 2011; Mestdagh, 2013; Demailly, 2014). However, if the goal is to create spaces that ensure rights for non-human living beings — where human intervention should be minimal — then human and, by extension, social activities are constrained. They constantly operate on the threshold of the least amount of human intervention necessary to serve some purpose, whether to enable human occupation or to foster biodiversity. Faced with this scenario, we must ask: who are these gardens for? The most straightforward answer is that, as spaces meant to uphold the rights of non-human beings, they belong to them. Yet, within all the limits imposed, they are also for humans, though only up to the boundaries set by a *laissez-faire nature* perspective.

Throughout the text, I have argued that this approach to community gardens seems to stem from a conservationist view of the human–nature relationship, in which human intervention is regarded as always, or often, harmful

to natural processes. But is human intervention always negative? This debate is not new, particularly in the context of protected areas such as national parks. De Aguiar *et al.* (2013) discusses how the first conservation units in Brazil inherited a conservationist model from the United States. Over time, as conservation practices evolved and new discussions emerged about the possibilities of interaction between humans and nature, environmental laws were revised to include traditional communities — such as maroon communities, riverine peoples, Indigenous groups, and others — and their perspectives "within the framework of coexistence, management, and resource use" (De Aguiar *et al.*, 2013, p. 197). Estrada *et al.* (2022) explores how Indigenous identities are deeply entangled with the non-human beings in their territories and how their relationship with these beings often aligns more closely with conservationist logic.

Can we bring this debate into the urban realm to consider urban green spaces? Reflecting on community garden management through the lens of how we, as humans, relate to other living beings in these spaces seems to offer a powerful tool for imagining what forms urban nature takes in those gardens.

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