



# Hum(us)

Relearning Relationships of  
More-than-Human Entanglement  
in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage

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Relearning Relationships of More-than-Human

Entanglement in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage

Master Thesis Anthropology and Development Studies

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## I. Abstract

With the urgency of the climate and ecological crisis, it is imperative that the nature-culture dualism supporting human exceptionalism and utilitarianism is broken down. Inspiration for alternative ways of relating to nature can be found in the anthropology of indigenous communities, but not enough attention has been paid to how people living in a society where dualism is dominant might transition towards an ontology of relationality that acknowledges the entanglement of human and other-than-human beings. My research aims to fill this gap by investigating how residents of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage in Ireland are relearning more-than-human entanglement as an alternative to nature-culture dualism. In my research I have found that, although the ecovillage aims for a cohesive community dedicated to sustainable living, there is a lack of cohesion among residents due to a variety of factors. This, in turn, impacts the more-than-human relationships and the extent to which they are relearned collectively. Cloughjordan appears to be a community by design, rather than by practice, where intellectual relearning prevails over embodied relearning. I conclude that the relearning of more-than-human entanglement cannot be seen as separate from the relearning to live a communal life, and that literature on the more-than-human does not acknowledge this explicitly enough, therefore reproducing the dualisms it critiques.



## II. Acknowledgements

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## 1. Introduction

If the climate and ecological crisis is not properly addressed, we will be faced with extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, food scarcity, mass displacement and overall immense human and non-human suffering. Human-induced climate change has already caused widespread adverse impacts to all life on earth. Natural and societal systems are collapsing, and if swift action is not taken, this cannot be reversed. Despite this urgency, global greenhouse gas emissions are still rising (IPCC 2023). The dominant response to these crises is that earth's resources must simply be quantified and managed more appropriately. The climate and ecological crisis is presented as a failed modernist project, which could supposedly be fixed through the right interventions (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 212–13). Not only does this apolitical approach deny the reality of the unequal share in these crises and capitalism's role therein (Moore 2017), but it also allows nature to be continued to be seen as something external to society, rather than something deeply entangled with the fate of humankind and its environment (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). This has led to human exceptionalism and utilitarian thinking that prioritises the value that humans might derive from their environment, and has enabled the continuation of the appropriation of nature (Boughton 2020). What I write at the beginning of this paragraph already feels painfully familiar to those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and is becoming more real every day that the entanglement of humans and their environment is denied.

Because of the disproportionate material impact of rich countries on the climate and ecological crisis, there is a need for an ontological shift that breaks down the dualism between nature and society (Hickel 2019, 30–32). Although dominant, this ontology is not shared by all. Heterogenous groups, figuring predominantly indigenous peoples, make up a pluriverse of ontologies and epistemologies that negotiate their being together through practices of care (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 3–5). Anthropology on human-nature relationships tends to focus on the ways of knowing and being within such groups (e.g. Chao 2022; Chua 2021; Haberman 2013; Kimmerer 2020; Rose 2008). Although indigenous cultures provide us with many inspirations, a lack of attention has been paid to how people living in a society where dualism prevails might move from a dualistic ontology to one of relationality that acknowledges the entanglement of being. My research aims to make a start at filling that gap.

A place where the transition away from dualism is supposedly made is in ecovillages. Ecovillages are examples of spaces where people come together to live more communally and sustainably. According to Litfin, they present both a way of being based on the idea of the world as an integrated whole, as well as practical living skills as an alternative to the unsustainable options modernity provides (2012, 125–26). Research on ecovillages, however, does not make these processes

of transformation sufficiently concrete due to the generalisation and idealisation of the daily realities of ecovillagers (Brombin 2019; Litfin 2012). The struggles of overcoming dualism and stepping away from capitalism remain obscured. The question of whether ontological transformation is taking place thus remains. To gain a better understanding of these processes, I have done research with residents of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage in Ireland during the winter and spring of 2024. My main research question during this time was: How do residents of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage relearn relationships of more-than-human entanglement as an alternative to nature-culture dualism?

In this thesis, I will first address the need for understanding how one might move from a detached way of existing to one of relationality. Drawing on the work of Descola and Ingold, I will elaborate on the separation between humans and nature and I will demonstrate that this conception of reality is only one way of existing in the world (2014; 2016). I will go into the efforts that have already been made towards a more relational view and I will further delve into ecovillage philosophy and the social justice critique ecovillages face. I will then discuss my methodology and the combination of ethnography and arts-based methods I have applied during my research. I will discuss the shortcomings of my methodology and I will point out the ways in which my positionality has influenced the research practice. In the three chapters thereafter, I will present and discuss my empirical data. Each chapter starts with a collage that I have made from magazine cutouts and photos taken in the field to creatively and intuitively express the topics covered in that chapter. To give room to the creative writing I have done during my fieldwork, I will then introduce each chapter with vignettes, which capture my experience of doing research. In the first empirical chapter, I will illustrate my site of research and I will dive into the ways in which it aims to be a cohesive community dedicated to sustainable living. I will present the utopian promise that Cloughjordan holds, but I will also show that despite its intentions, the fundamentals of the ecovillage hold flaws that impair community cohesion. In the chapters thereafter, I will carefully hold the utopian promise up to the light and discuss tensions between the real and the ideal. In the second empirical chapter, I will go into depth on the relearning of more-than-human relationships in Cloughjordan, showing the different ways in which residents do and do not feel connected to other-than-humans. At the start of my research, I intended to focus only on these more-than-human relationships, but I found that the relationships that residents have with one another were crucial for understanding the more-than-human relationships. The third empirical chapter therefore goes into this and shows the complexities of learning to adopt a communitarian way of life. Lastly, I will reiterate my findings and conclude what they mean for the relearning of more-than-human entanglement. I believe that by exploring these perspectives, a valuable contribution can be made to the urgent efforts of rediscovering how to think, how to act, and, eventually, how to exist.



## 2. More-than-Human Entanglement: Theoretical Perspectives

### 2.1 Naturalism vs Animism

At the turn of the century, leading environmental scientists expressed that we live in a new geological era dominated by human activity for which they suggested the term ‘the Anthropocene’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2021, 17–18). It is in this era that the separation between humans and nature is supposedly broken down due to the deep entanglement of the fate of humankind and its environment (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). However, in dominant discourses nature continues to be portrayed as something external to society that can be quantified and managed. The climate and ecological crisis is presented as a failed project of modernity, which can be fixed through the right interventions (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 212–13). In this section, I will expand on the idea of nature-culture dualism that underlies these dominant discourses and relate it to naturalist ontology. I then expand on the colonial and capitalist histories of naturalism. I end on its opposite, animism, and explain how understanding the differences between the two has been crucial to my research.

Discussions on whether nature shapes culture or culture imposes meaning upon nature have been central within anthropology for many years. Both perspectives, however, limit a true understanding by taking the dichotomy between the two as self-evident, and by universalising their conception of nature (Descola and Pálsson 2004, 2–3). According to Descola, there are four ontologies that describe how humans relate to nature: naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism<sup>1</sup>. Ontologies, in this case, are the systems of properties of the beings which are deemed to be real (Descola 2014, 67). Naturalism is characterised by a distinct difference between humans and other beings due to their reflective consciousness. Although all is made up of the same elements, it is only humans to which culture can therefore be attributed. Nature-culture dualism is central to naturalism, and the tradition of modern science is strongly associated with it (Descola 2014, 89–90). In many ways, it is responsible for human exceptionalism and utilitarianism that highlights the value that humans might derive from their environment (Brombin 2019, 195), and it has enabled the continuation of the appropriation of nature (Boughton 2020).

Important to point out is that naturalism lies at the heart of colonialism, which made the world a place that could be rationally understood in sharply denoted universal categories: between subject and object, human and non-human, nature and culture. By dehumanising colonised bodies, colonisation was made into a worthwhile endeavour, rather than an unethical one. Breaking down

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<sup>1</sup> From here onwards, totemism and analogism will not be discussed, because I am interested in the contrasting dimensions in relating to nature of naturalism and animism.

dualism is thus also a decolonising effort (Quijano 2007, 173–77). For those unfamiliar with other ontologies, it seems impossible to break away from naturalism, however. De la Cadena and Blaser call this the power of the one-world that cancels out all possibilities that lie beyond what it deems possible. They introduce the pluriverse to make room for the reality of many cultures all over the world for whom a dichotomous epistemology is meaningless (2018, 3). Even though I believe that making room for other ways of being is an important step, I also believe that there is a need for an ontological shift that radically breaks down utilitarianism within dualist society because of the disproportionate material impact of rich countries on the climate and ecological crisis (Hickel 2019, 30–32). This resonates with an alternative to ‘the Anthropocene’: ‘the Capitalocene’. The Capitalocene does not take humanity as a whole, the *anthropos*, as the starting point for the climate and ecological crisis, but emphasises the unequal share in these crisis, situating it within the colonial, capitalist system of domination, exploitation and appropriation (Moore 2017).

In contrast to the destructiveness central to naturalism, animism is an ontology that requires the fostering of values such as respect, reciprocity and care (Boughton 2020). It assumes the inner world of all beings is similar. Thus, everyone is endowed with a soul and can be communicated with, including animals, plants, and non-living entities such as mountains. Despite physical differences, sociality is extended to all beings (Descola 2014, 70). New animism describes the returned interest in such epistemologies that understand the world through relatedness and in ontologies that recognise spirit in all human and non-human entities (Boughton 2020). These ways of being, knowing, and valuing oppose and destabilise dualism and utilitarianism and bring about a sense of responsibility for other-than-humans. Considering nature as something to be exploited is unfathomable when nothing is considered less than human and all beings are persons in their own right (Hickel 2022, 235). Food and materials that one may receive are gifts, which need to be accepted with reciprocity in mind. One learns to be careful to not take more than they need or the other is able to give (Hickel 2022, 256).

To understand whether the relearning of more-than-human entanglement is taking place in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage, I first had to understand the current more-than-human relationships in the village. Therefore, my first sub-question is: What are the more-than-human relationships in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage? Understanding the differences between naturalism and animism was crucial in characterising these relationships, because it brought different attitudes towards other-than-humans to the surface, and allowed me to place these within broader debates on nature-culture dualism. This sub-question included gaining an understanding of which residents in the ecovillage engage with which other-than-humans, and to what end. Additionally, it focused on how other-than-human beings are being talked about, and what values underlie such choices of language. Lastly, I have paid attention to the dimension of power. I questioned who had the power to make decisions

on how other-than-humans were being treated, and which forms of knowledge were considered worthwhile in decision-making processes. Was there room for the experience of a world full of spirits, as animist ontology defines?

## 2.2 Becoming and the Anthropology of the More-than-Human

In the previous section, I have outlined the differences between naturalism and animism. In this section, I will explain that, despite the usefulness of these categories for my research, Ingold's concept of 'becoming' provides a more hopeful perspective on the possibility of relearning more-than-human entanglement. I then place the idea of becoming within larger debates on the more-than-human, and explain which other-than-human beings I focus on in my research. I end this section with how I have integrated these concepts within my second sub-question on changing more-than-human relationships.

Although Descola's ontological categories are analytically useful, they too limit a true understanding of how one might exist in the world. Descola is a naturalist himself and the creation of four distinct, preconfigured categories is indicative of a naturalist way of doing science. If animism were taken as the mode of analysis, ontology would be the study of 'becoming' instead of 'being' (Ingold 2016, 312–14). From this point of view, changing one's ontology becomes a possibility rather than something that is inherently inconceivable. I therefore like to take on Ingold's perspective here, and argue that we inhabit a world of continuous and potentially limitless differentiation, in which everyone is constantly coming to terms with the world through the unfolding of relations with others (2016, 303). Since ontology is the study of the systems of properties of that which is considered real in the world, it is in many ways also the study of what is perceived to be real. One way to make the study of relearning more-than-human entanglements more concrete is thus by focusing on perception and the senses. According to Gibson, who laid the groundwork for the approach known as 'ecological psychology', organisms are not passive recipients of stimuli, but active recipients who, in intentional movement, seek out information that makes their environment meaningful to them (1979, 52–58). Due to action being implicated in perception, what is perceived is thus a result of how we act, and which practices constitute our life. There is no limit to what one might be able to perceive and through discovery one is constantly 'becoming within one world of nevertheless continuous variation' (Ingold 2016, 4). This also means that perception is a cultural matter, because culture provides us with practical, everyday training in how to fulfil tasks appropriately, influencing what we may or may not learn to perceive (Ingold 2000, 166–67). In line with decolonial pluriversality (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 11–12), perceiving the world as empty from other-than-human souls, as separated bodies and minds, as culture standing apart from nature, is thus only one possible perception that is culturally constructed, although it is a dominant one.



Next to the concept of becoming, more efforts have been made to disrupt naturalism and introduce concepts that help us grapple with other-than-human beings as deeply entangled with humans. In an attempt to collapse the distinction between humans and non-humans, the science fiction of Haraway calls for the making of kin with other-than-humans in multispecies assemblages. As another conceptualisation of our current era, she introduces ‘the Chthulucene’, which refuses all borders of time, space, and species through ‘myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus’<sup>2</sup> (2015, 60). Her tentacular way of thinking feels almost monstrous in its entanglement. Monsters of our current times, such as jellyfish taking over the sea, do indeed show that their terrifying character is only because of their entanglements with humans. Denying this entanglement and the ways in which species suffer from one another, is a threat to life. Symbioses need to be constantly negotiated (Swanson et al. 2017, 4–5). Additionally, the concept of more-than-human sociality critically looks at why other-than-humans have been excluded from being social and looks at how this might be given back, while considering the limits of human knowledge. We ‘are’ and ‘become’ in dynamic relations with other species in a social web of life (Tsing 2013, 27–36). Latour’s concept of ‘common worlds’ also argues for the necessity to include all being and entities within a radically expanded conceptualisation of the social (2004). Although interest in the more-than-human is thus growing, knowledge on how humans may start conceptualising themselves as being part of the social web of life is still limited.

Whereas earlier studies of the more-than-human focused on the relationships between humans and animals (e.g. Haraway 2003), recent studies have seen a ‘plant turn’ in anthropology. Following provocative research within the natural sciences on plant intelligence, plants are increasingly being given an active role in the social sciences. Rather than seeing plants as passive objects subject to human and animal action, researchers of the plant turn are centring plants as ‘communicative, sentient, and worldmaking actors’ (Gutierrez 2023, 1–2; Chao 2022, 8). This has given rise to new methods in ‘planthropology’, which help understand how plants can be known intimately and on their terms (D. Gibson 2018). In this thesis, I refer to the non-human actors in my research as ‘other-than-humans’, because it more fully captures the combination of plants, crops, trees, soil, and the landscape. In section 5.4, I will expand on why a more-encompassing term than ‘plants’ is necessary in my research. I do want to point out, however, that animals have not been centred in this research, because they are more frequently considered as beings with agency (Gutierrez 2023, 2).

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<sup>2</sup> With the idea of human-as-humus, Haraway emphasises that, in the end, all beings become part of the earth (Timeto 2021, 324). I am indebted to her work for the title of this thesis. I have stylised humus as hum(us) to highlight the importance of community, the ‘us’, to relearning more-than-human entanglement.

With the concept of becoming, situated within broader debates on the anthropology of the more-than-human, entanglement with other-than-humans becomes a possibility, and is explained partially as a result of which activities are part of our lives. My second sub-question focuses on how more-than-human changes take place throughout residents' lives: How have the more-than-human relationships changed during ecovillagers' lives? With this question I have looked at participants' more-than-human relationships in childhood, and how they have changed as they got older and moved to Cloughjordan. I have focused on the differences between these phases to draw out processes of relearning. In line with Gibson's ecological psychology, I have focused on which practices were part of these different life phases, and I have paid attention to sensorial experiences to bring in the aspect of perception.

### 2.3 Relearning in Ecovillages

In the previous sections, I have outlined the importance of collectively coming towards an animist way of being as an alternative to naturalism, and I have explained the advantages of looking at the challenges of our time through the lens of becoming. I would like to highlight that the becoming with the world through the unfolding of relations with others, as Ingold describes, is not limited to social relations with other-than-humans, but also includes humans (Ingold 2000, 189–208). In this section, I will introduce ecovillages as a space in which relearning may take place collectively, humans and other-than-humans both implicated. I will go into depth on the definition of an ecovillage, and I will go into the research that has already been done on ecovillages. Lastly, I will introduce my third sub-question that integrates ideas about ecovillages into my research.

With the dissolution of social and cultural support structures and the looming climate and ecological crisis, people all over the world have started bottom-up initiatives to create alternative ways of living in the form of ecovillages. They follow in the footsteps of the back-to-land and co-housing movement, which originated in the 1960s (Litfin 2012, 125). Since the formation of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) in 1995, thousands of these ecovillages all over the world have come together with the purpose of supporting each other, educating the world about ecovillages and growing a regenerative movement (GEN 2023; Litfin 2012, 125). There is a great diversity among ecovillages: some are documented, many more are not; some prioritise the implementation of green technology, others embrace sober lives; some focus on spirituality and collective awareness, whereas others are agricultural projects focusing on self-sufficiency (Brombin 2019, 191–93). Despite their diversity, Litfin sees unity in them too, and characterises ecovillages as 'planetary knowledge communities grounded in a holistic ontology and seeking to construct viable living systems as an alternative to the unsustainable legacy of modernity' (2012, 125). This holistic ontology is based on a deep connection between humans and other-than-humans. It consists of two main elements:

permaculture and Gaia theory. The core of permaculture is to create 'virtuous' instead of 'vicious' cycles to regenerate the land, vitalise the community and create a cohesive whole of integrated human and natural systems (Litfin 2012, 129). Central is the wise management of energy resources and the minimisation of waste. Because permaculturalists believe that some degree of technological and economic collapse is likely to happen in the upcoming decades, they are preparing themselves by having a 'descent culture' of scaling down energy and creating viable, sustainable futures in the present (Litfin 2012, 128–31). Gaia theory views Earth as a holistic, self-regulating biochemical system. It is both an image with a scientific grounding as well as a political symbol. Going against the atomism and reductionism of modern science, it proposes wholeness, interdependence and dynamic complexity instead (Litfin 2012, 131–32).

Although Litfin provides an extensive account of the culture of ecovillages and discusses their relevance, she remains on the level of abstract descriptions. How the more-than-human relationships in ecovillages take shape specifically is not elaborated on. Brombin, on the other hand, looks into concrete everyday practices in which the interaction between humans and other actors is addressed. She describes the experience of one of her participants who works in the garden and grew an intimate relationship with the vineyard. Through her practices of care and sensorial engagement, a reciprocal relationship materialised in which she 'became' with the garden (2019, 200–204). Although Brombin thus looks more closely at the concrete relationships, I am left wondering how the community of the ecovillage took part in these processes of becoming. Additionally, she tends to generalise this example to all ecovillages, and does not address the challenges of this process in the context of a dualistic society. To get a proper understanding of the processes of relearning, I believe it is essential to understand more about the context of the ecovillage.

That ecovillages are not spaces of perfection comes forward in the work of Chitewere and Taylor on the Ecovillage at Ithaca in the USA (2010). They hold the idea of the ecovillage up to the light of social justice and found that the focus on building community for the middle class led to limited engagement with issues of social justice. Residents struggled with bringing marginalised peoples into their community, despite their desire to do so. Additionally, due to the complexities of sustainability, residents often opted for the consumption of 'green' goods instead of engaging with the larger social, political, and economic context of the climate crisis. Choosing for escaping the city and building a new life on the countryside where relationships with nature are supposedly closer also creates a contrast with the environmental justice movement, which aims at ameliorating the living conditions in poor urban neighbours by addressing the racial capitalist systems. Despite both aiming for a way of living that is in harmony with each other and other-than-humans, the reality is a large disconnection between the two movements (Chitewere and Taylor 2010). That ecovillages constantly navigate



between the real and the ideal is expanded on by Lockyer. He states that ecovillages, as any utopic project, almost never realise their ideal, but that the focus of utopianism should not be on the outcome but on the bottom-up process, which in itself is emancipatory (2007, 1–23).

Although there is thus literature on both ecovillage philosophy, as well as more-than-human relationships in ecovillages, and the social justice critique they face, these perspectives have not yet been brought together. My third sub-question is therefore: What is the role of the ecovillage community in residents' processes of relearning relationships of more-than-human entanglement? With this question, I address how residents relate to each other, how they organise themselves, and how they engage with the broader society and issues of justice. Through this lens, I aimed to understand the processes of relearning within the context of community, as it integrates the frictions that may come forward when residents aim to organise social and economic life in a communitarian way.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Combining Ethnography with Arts-Based Research

The research I have conducted is of a qualitative nature. In this case, this means that I have worked with a combination of ethnographic narrative, visual and other sensorial data. My research has primarily been exploratory and inductive. The paradigm in which I find myself is that of constructivism, which assumes that meaning is always created by the researcher and participants rather than something that objectively exists out in the world (Teddle and Tashakkori 2009, 6, 22).

For my fieldwork, the two fields of study I have primarily worked with are ethnography and arts-based research. Central to ethnography is fieldwork that combines participant observation with qualitative interviews (Patton 1990, 81). Although my research foregrounds a question about humans, I have been inspired by ideas within multispecies ethnography, because to understand relationships between humans and other-than-human implies also being able to study the latter (D. Gibson 2018, 93). Multispecies ethnography brings other-than-humans to the forefront of anthropological inquiry and focuses on the relationships between humans and a multiplicity of other living entities (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). In my research, I have been influenced by the shift in research practices in multispecies ethnography, specifically the use of other senses in addition to the visual and textual observational methods, such as smell, taste, sound and touch (Blaise 2013). In my research, I have dug not only into my participants' sensorial experiences of their relationships with other-than-humans, but I have also explored my own feelings of being part of a more-than-human world through writing and other forms of creative expression, thus also making autoethnography part of my research practice (Williams 2021).

Additionally, I have applied arts-based methods. Arts-based research practices are methodological tools that adapt the creative arts to address social research questions in a holistic and engaged way (Leavy 2015, 21). Both artists and qualitative researchers tend to have in common the dedication to understanding social phenomena and the construction of meaning, making arts-based practices a good addition to qualitative methods (Leavy 2015, 27). The epistemological philosophy of arts-based research is that art is able to convey meaning, can help in understanding the self and others, brings into knowing that which cannot be put into words, and includes multiple ways of knowing, including the sensory and imaginary (Gerber et al. 2012).

#### 3.2 Data Collection

My fieldwork consisted primarily of participant observation. During my time in Cloughjordan, I got close to participants by participating in their lives, making observations in the meantime, and

reflecting on it daily (Bernard 2002, 342–44). During my time in the ecovillage, my primary site of observation was the farm, where I worked two times a week together with volunteers. Additionally, I went to the general members' meetings and meetings from smaller groups within the ecovillage organisation. I also frequently attended workshops, events, talks, and webinars hosted by the ecovillage. Next to these concrete moments of participant observation, I often engaged in small talk and informal interviewing to establish, maintain and expand the network of participants (Driessen and Jansen 2013). These were especially with my gatekeeper, my hosts and the other people they hosted, and the volunteers and volunteer coordinators. Additionally, I formed relationships with some of my participants with whom I got along especially well. Lastly, I went to social events, such as dinner parties and the weekly open farm lunches. From the participant observations, I have collected approximately a 150 pages of handwritten notes that include inscriptive, transcriptive, and descriptive fieldnotes (Clifford 1990, 51–52) and reflections.

In addition to participant observation, I have conducted ten qualitative, semi-structured interviews of between 20 and 75 minutes, adding up to approximately a 120 pages of transcriptions. Four of these interviews were with volunteers, three with residents who have been involved for a few years, and three with residents who have been part of the project for a long time. Eight participants were female, and two were male. Ages vary from volunteers in their early twenties to residents in their seventies. These interviews addressed the past and current more-than-human relationships and questioned how the community was involved in the changes of these relationships. Additionally, I addressed their motivations for moving to Cloughjordan, and the challenges they have experienced in living here. You can find the interview guide in Appendix 9.1. Nine of the interviews have been recorded and transcribed so that I could focus on the participant and contextual data. One participant was not comfortable with this, so I took notes during their interview, which I worked out immediately after. During and after all interviews, I have made additional observations, which I have written down as fieldnotes.

To elicit that which cannot easily be put into words, I have asked the interviewees to do a cultural probing exercise in advance, on which they could elaborate in the interview. Cultural probes are sets of materials that provoke inspirational responses from participants. They provide the researcher with inspiration and a feeling for the perspective of participants (Gaver, Dunne, and Pacenti 1999). In this research, I have asked the residents to take ten photos of the ecovillage that symbolise their more-than-human relationships. I printed the photos and asked them to stick them in a booklet I gave them. They were then invited to draw on top of the photos what the camera did not capture. Below each photo there was room for notes. Six out of ten participants have done this exercise, and I have also filled a booklet myself. The cultural probe booklets are in Appendix 9.2.

Furthermore, I have organised an insight session at the end of my stay to share what I had been working on and get responses on my insights. Additionally, I hoped it would get people talking about the subject, which I later heard it did. Some people left earlier or arrived later but in total there were 15 attendees. In this insight session, I first presented the context of my research. I then shared my first, tentative insights. After these insights, there was room for questions, followed by five minutes of participants' reflections on what stood out to them from the presentation. After this, I let them make pairs and make a poster on what they would like to do with these insights to make the information more actionable. At the end of the workshop, they presented their posters to each other. Observations from this session have been written in my notebook, and I also have obtained five posters from the last section.

Lastly, I have acquired three reports that Cloughjordan has published in the months I was there, as well as several other documents on the community's workings. I also have about 300 photos that are either artistic expressions or provide information of notable places and things. Lastly, I have about a 100 emails from residents. These include reports of harvests, notable events, and interesting mail interactions.

The different types of data collection all serve my research in different ways. The interviews were essential to my research because there I could ask about the past more-than-human relationships and how they have changed, which is something I would not have been able to observe. Additionally, it gave me the opportunity to closely examine the language that residents use. Through the interviews, I could understand how residents perceive their relationships with other-than-humans themselves. By taking the cultural probes as a starting point, I could go deeper into residents' sensorial experiences and emotions concerning the topic. The data I gathered from Cloughjordan's own documents and educational events taught me how they present themselves. The insight session was mainly organised to give my research back to my participants, but also allowed me to check my findings with them. The participant observations then allowed me to critically question my data. With the observations in the back of my mind, I could better understand tensions, paradoxes, and discrepancies. Although the other types of data I have collected have been absolutely necessary for my research, it is mostly due to participant observation that I was able to construct the story that this thesis holds.

The strength of my data collection methods is that I was thus able to triangulate my findings (Patton 1990, 66), see my topic from multiple angles, and not take anything at face value. I have practiced reflexivity by rigorously documenting the methodological choices I have made and the challenges I faced (Patton 1990, 66). Due to the continuous reflection that resulted from this, I was

able to amend my research question and focus as I went along. One of the things I realised once I came back from my fieldwork and looked at my data with a fresh eye is that due to the nature of the cultural probes, participants had a tendency to idealise their more-than-human relationships because they focused on aesthetic appeal and coherency. Luckily, through triangulation I could nuance such perspectives. Furthermore, many of my interviews I only transcribed once I was back in the Netherlands. I was thus no longer able to ask follow-up questions. I realised late in my process that the workings of the community would take up a larger portion of my research than I had anticipated, resulting in most of what I had learned about this coming from participant observation without being able to be confirmed or denied through interviewing. Lastly, I am aware that ten interviews is a small sample size, especially considering that four out of these were done with volunteers who had lived in Cloughjordan for a maximum of one year. Certain perspectives thus come forward more than others, which I will discuss in the next section.

### 3.3 Sampling Strategies

During my research, the central unit of study was the physical ecovillage to which I was given access by my gatekeeper, a resident who organises research in the ecovillage. Ecovillages are organised in broader networks with other ecovillages and affiliated organisations. However, because I centred the human and more-than-human relationships in the village, I have focused on the physical ecovillage and its residents. At times, I have gathered data from ecovillage-related activities that other organisations and its people also participated in, such as webinars. I have decided to include these data in my sample anyway, because they give crucial information about how the ecovillage presents itself, which topics it values covering, and how ecovillagers respond to these. Occasionally, people from the village and neighbouring areas joined activities. I did not exclude them from my sample, because their presence in these activities shows their involvement in the ecovillage.

Because my primary site of participant observation was the farm, I have gotten to know the volunteers and volunteer coordinators well. At first, I thought their perspectives might not be as relevant due to their age and their limited time in Cloughjordan, but exactly because they had only lived in Cloughjordan for a short amount of time, their insights on how they relate to the community and on the differences compared to their lives outside of Cloughjordan were exceptionally sharp. Additionally, because they work with other-than-humans every day, their perspectives on processes of relearning have been valuable. However, my involvement with the volunteers also means that I have gotten a specific point of view that might not resonate with some residents. The farm is deeply embedded in the ecovillage by providing produce to the residents, but with its location at the back of the land it is also in some ways isolated from the rest of community. Because I have not only paid

attention to the farm, but also to many other aspects of the ecovillage, I have aimed to not make my perspective too singular.

As for the interviews and cultural probes, my strategy for sampling has been one of convenience, where I have talked to everyone who was willing to have a conversation with me (Patton 1990, 241–42). Because those were not many, I did not have to exclude anyone from this sample. The participants have been acquired through the residents' mailing list, the members' meeting, and personal contact. I am aware that convenience sampling is not the most strategic way to gather participants. To make my sampling more meaningful, I did set a minimum of ten interviews, and I paid attention to having various participants included in my sample in terms of type of involvement in the ecovillage, length of involvement, and age. In Appendix 9.3 you can find an overview of the residents I have interviewed and other residents who come forward in this thesis, including relevant background information. In this overview, you will see that with some participants I had more extensive relationships. Therefore, I had more opportunities to ask them follow-up questions. These participants and their perspectives thus come forward in my thesis more.

Because many residents living in the ecovillage did not join the activities I participated in, and because the sample size of the interviews is relatively small, there is a chance that the perspectives in this thesis are not representative of the entire ecovillage. Additionally, because the ecovillage lives by the seasons and I visited during the winter, there is also a chance that I have encountered a perspective that is typical of the drowsy winter rather than the ecovillage all year round. However, if a researcher were to do similar research again in the winter months and primarily at the farm, they would likely find similar stories. This thesis might not tell the entire story that resonates with all residents, but it highlights aspects that arise clearly from different participants in my sample. Because each ecovillage is deeply imbedded in local structures, this thesis is not representative of the entire ecovillage community, however.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The different types of data I have obtained have been analysed differently. Before I could analyse the interview data, I first had to transcribe the interviews. For the strategy of transcription, I opted for naturalised transcription, where I stayed close to the original data, but made it suitable for the written form (Bucholtz 2000, 1461). The interview data could then be analysed most elaborately by doing a thematic analysis, using ATLAS.ti. Doing a thematic analysis allowed me to be flexible and reach depth. The analysis consisted of three parts. I first coded all my data in an open way to identify relevant concepts and their properties. I then related categories to their sub-categories to eventually find common themes that would guide my theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 59). I worked iteratively and

often went back to earlier stages to refine my analysis. Codes ranged from more general themes such as everything that had something to do with 'food', to the identification of 'emotions' and 'activities', to specific themes such as the use of the concept of the 'cycle'. While coding my data, I made networks to visualise how my codes relate to each other, and I wrote memos whenever I realised something interesting that was worth documenting. These memos were both about the content as well as the methodological choices I was making.

As for my fieldnotes, I initially started digitalising them and importing them into ATLAS.ti to code them alongside the interviews, but I gradually realised the complexity of trying to combine different types of data into one coded whole. Some of my fieldnotes were descriptive, while others were more reflective, and some were elaborate, while others were quick jottings. Because of the combination of ethnography and arts-based methods, I also wrote many entries that explored my topics through creative writing. Because I could not analyse my fieldnotes consistently, I decided to no longer analyse them in the same way as the interviews, but rather keep them as a frame of reference that guided how I analysed the rest of my data. I often went back to my notes to understand how what I was discovering in the interviews fitted into the rest of my findings. Whilst writing my empirical chapters, I used empirical examples from both the interview transcripts as well as the fieldnotes, which meant that I often had to get back to my notebook to find crucial examples I was looking for. Because, during my fieldwork, I had already underlined important passages and tabbed significant entries, finding those examples was a smooth process.

During my research, I have also gathered visual data from the cultural probes and the workshop, made by participants. I initially imagined that I would have to translate the visual data into narrative data, but because participants described what they had made so extensively, I realised this did not provide me with extra information, other than the realisation that the cultural probes invited idealised stories. I also took many photos during my research, most of which were aesthetically oriented pictures of other-than-humans. I enjoyed the process of taking them and photography has helped me to be more present in my research, but upon coming home I realised I could not learn much from them. However, some of my photos were text-oriented, such as photos of flyers scattered around the village. These I imported into ATLAS.ti and coded similarly to the interviews. Lastly, I have analysed the emails and documents by highlighting that which stood out to me most.

### 3.5 Ethical Reflection

During the research I have conducted, several ethical concerns and difficulties arose. The first concerns the gaining of access. My arrival into the ecovillage was announced by a gatekeeper, who organises academic research in the ecovillage. Upon arrival, I was not yet sure what his position in the



community would be. Although his support in my research process, for example by passing on messages through the community email, has been incredibly helpful, it was also a challenge to build my own relations outside of the official channels. Riese argues that access is not one moment of entering a community, but rather 'the process by which a researcher and the sites and/or individuals he or she studies relate to each other, through which the research in question is enabled' (2019, 3). In my research, I have noticed that maintaining good relations was a continuous process in which I had to learn to open myself up. During most of my fieldwork it was incredibly hard to emotionally connect with the people around me. I was hesitant to show too much of myself and my politics in fear of participants starting to give socially desirable answers and I therefore focused solely on my interlocutors. At the final stage of my fieldwork, I decided to be myself more and I sought out human contact that was not defined by my research, which enabled me to build relations that did not only make my research more enjoyable, but also often led to informative conversations. Although from the beginning I had taken on a constructivist epistemology, it took some time for me to internalise that this meant I did not have to wear my 'researcher mask' at all times.

The second ethical aspect concerns informed consent. Although my arrival into the ecovillage was announced and residents were thus made aware of my presence and intentions, this did not mean I was able to get formal consent from everyone whom I observed. To ensure more ethical research practice, I never listened in on conversations, and in contact with new people I tried to make my role explicit early in the conversation. Because the community is relatively small and everyone knows each other, my presence was always questioned by people who did not recognise me, making this disclosure a natural rather than a forced process. For the cultural probes and interviews, I was able to ask verbal consent from the participants at the beginning of each interview. Additionally, the cultural probe booklets made explicit how their data would be used. Although I was thus partially able to obtain informed consent, this did not automatically ensure ethical practice (Bell 2014).

A better way to ensure ethical research is, in my opinion, a dedication to reciprocity. Reciprocity is embedded in the relationships formed during research, and in the products that result from it (Glowczewski, Henry, and Otto 2013). I have tried paying attention to reciprocity in several ways. First of all, I volunteered at the ecovillage for a variety of tasks. From the second week onwards, I helped at the community farm twice a week, contributing to the local food system. Additionally, I helped prepare a seed share event and designed a flyer for the community seed bank. In my relationship with my hosts, I dedicated myself to reciprocity by doing some painting jobs in the house in exchange for their generous hosting. Secondly, I tried making my research process enjoyable for the participants. Many have told me afterwards that they thoroughly enjoyed participating in my research and that the combination of creative expression and conversation helped them explore topics they

usually do not talk about. Thirdly, I feel passionate about giving back my insights to the community. Therefore, I will not only share my thesis with the community, but I have also organised an interactive insight session at the end of my stay. In many ways, I think that my greatest contribution to the community is the conversations that those involved in my research started to have with the people around them. Fourthly, I feel the responsibility to give voice to human and other-than human perspectives that usually remain hidden out of sight. I have therefore tried writing a nuanced thesis that explores various perspectives through multiple lenses to complicate that which is thought to be known about ecovillages. Lastly, as beings in contact with other beings, perhaps the most important way to ensure reciprocity is through the creation of valuable, reciprocal personal relations. The aforementioned journey of learning to create and maintain such relations has thus been an important one.

A fourth area of concern is the storage of data and the ensuring of anonymity. The different types of data I have obtained have been stored and anonymised differently. The fieldnotes in my physical notebooks will not be shared, because the data contain sensitive information about my participants and myself, including their names and other signifying information. The same goes for the recordings of the interviews and the cultural probes. The interview transcripts, however, have been anonymised and I have made versions of the cultural probes that blur any sensitive information. Both can therefore be obtained upon request. All data is kept on OneDrive and will be destroyed after ten years upon publication. In this thesis, I have used pseudonyms for all participants. Irrelevant indicative information has been left out, but to introduce participants into the text I have given them some background information. Residents and acquaintances of Cloughjordan thus might recognise participants in the descriptive information I deemed necessary to include. I hope and trust that residents will treat each other with respect concerning the new stories that have surfaced and that they will stimulate constructive conversation rather than conflict. I have decided it would be best to name the ecovillage, because Cloughjordan wants to publish my thesis if it is deemed relevant to the community. Additionally, ecovillages differ significantly and due to contextual data readers will be able to discern the specific ecovillage.

Lastly, there is the question of the afterlife of my thesis. Glowczewski, Henry and Otto (2013) emphasise that in the age of the Internet, products of research, such as a thesis, may take on a life of their own over which researchers do not have complete control. My research insights may be interpreted differently than I intended or may be appropriated for causes I do not stand behind. This stretches the responsibility for my writings far into time (2013, 120–22). On the one hand, I acknowledge the control I have is limited, but on the other hand, it has made me even more conscious of my responsibility to write a nuanced thesis that emphasises the situatedness of my insights.

Additionally, I am always open for providing more explanation on my research outcomes, whether that is to one of my participants, a journalist, or a fellow researcher.

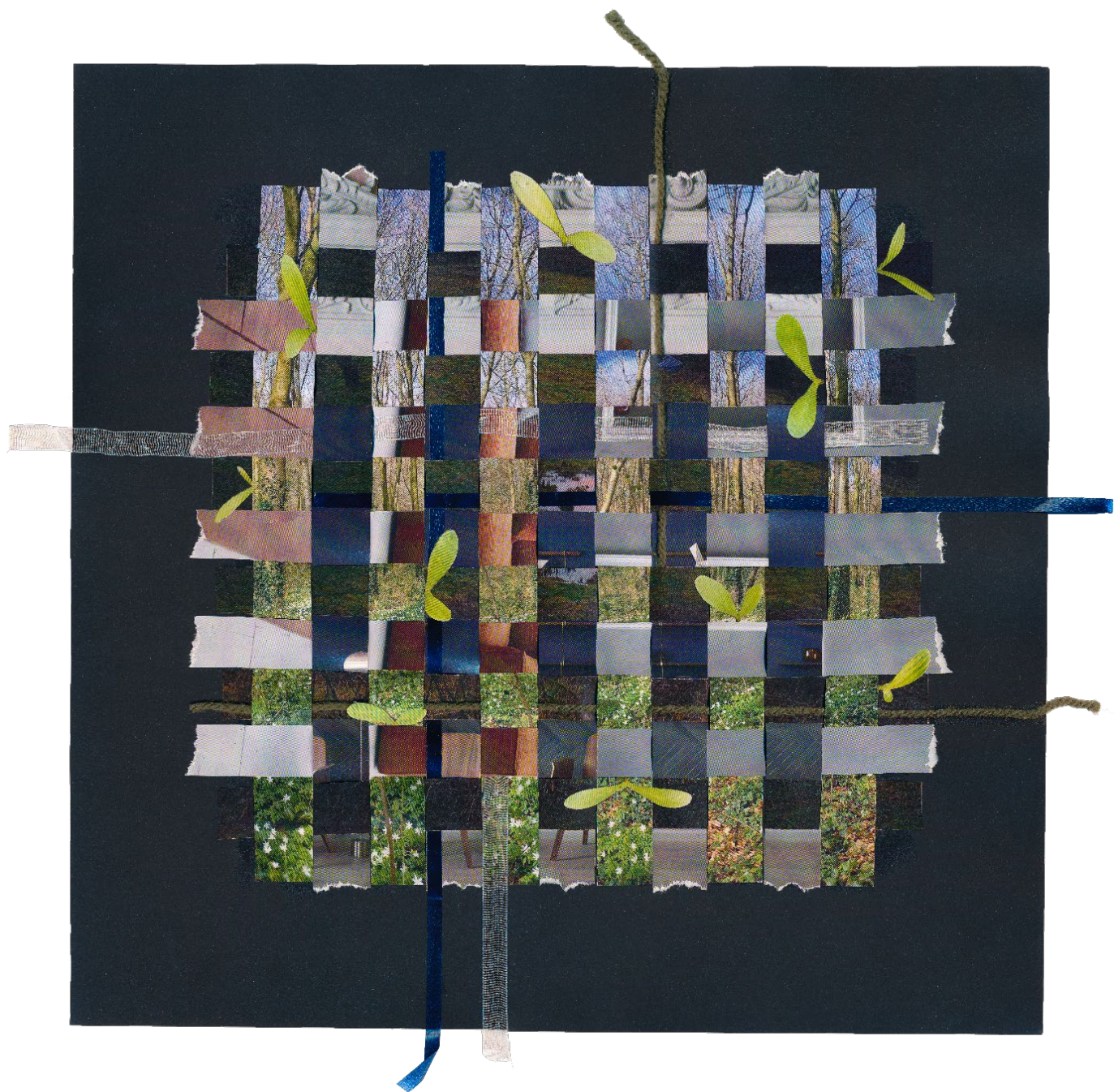
### 3.6 Positionality

As a researcher, I am in power of the shape of my research, and I am in control of the eventual ethnography. This means I am concerned with the 'politics of the gaze': how I represent those about whom I write. This includes the power of being a researcher, as well as the power of aspects my identity (Pillow 2003). I am aware that I have taken myself with me in the field, and that this has influenced the questions I have asked, what I have observed, and how I have interpreted my data. Through continuous reflexive writing, I have tried to make my position explicit.

What I did not realise when I started my research at Cloughjordan is that I had many expectations. After quite some years of worrying deeply about the climate and ecological crisis and its injustices, and after having done many actions to bring down oppressive systems without seeing results, I was at a point in my life where I was looking for a close-knit human and more-than-human community that would prove that it is possible to create alternatives to the status quo. I am very ideological in nature, and I have the tendency to idealise ideas about another world, because I so desperately want them to be true. I do this constantly, often unaware, as to put my own discomfort of living in a system in which I do not and do not want to belong, at ease. It is what gives me hope. When I started uncovering that the reality in Cloughjordan is much more complex, messy, and sometimes sadly unfulfilling, I was overtaken by a strong feeling of disappointment that took many weeks to be verbalised. Many of the crises I have been through in the last couple of years were triggered, without a support network around me to guide me through this pressure cooker of an experience. It is therefore not unlikely that I have experienced the ecovillage as more disconnected than other people would have.

Additionally, as a climate justice activist I have often found myself in spaces where politics were much more radical and social justice oriented than in Cloughjordan. This has allowed me to notice many things that other researchers would not have, from the lack of attention to pronouns to the expressions of unintended hierarchies. However, perhaps it has also made me overly critical. From these activist groups I have also learned what a strong sense of cohesion feels like, even if it may be rare. Unlike other researchers, I thus had something to compare my experiences to. Despite my background as a person longing for a different way to exist in the world, and despite my background as an activist, in this thesis I have tried to convey the complexities of ecovillage life in an open way. I have not been hesitant to share my critique, but I have also tried to write a nuanced story that stays away from cynicism and nihilism.

Although I have a critical attitude, in various ways I partake in the systems I want to bring down and I have brought my privileges with me into the field. I am white, middle class, highly educated, able-bodied, thin, and young. Despite my social justice lens, there are likely many dimensions I have missed and therefore reproduced. Being able to worry about the climate and ecological crisis because I do not have to worry about fulfilling basic needs is in many ways already a privilege. Additionally, I am well-aware that I have been raised within a dualist society and that I am still far away from unlearning the dualisms in my head. It is therefore likely that in my writing this shines through. My hope is that despite its flaws, this thesis has been able to foreground questions that I believe are necessary to ask.





## 4. The Utopian Promise of Cloughjordan Ecovillage

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First, there was the vastness. A grey sky reflected in towering waves stretching as far as the eye can see. Then, there were the hills. Shades of rolling green dotted with houses, crops, and sheep. There, in the middle of this isolated beauty, surrounded by fields and woodlands, a village appears. Cloughjordan is a small town in the middle of Ireland with almost 800 residents. Despite its size, it has a café, two supermarkets, and a bookshop that with its radical books on politics and ecology is my reading list materialised. To some, this place might seem like any typical Irish town, with more pubs and churches than you would expect a small village to need, but I know that if you follow the main street and take a right when you see an old stone house, you will enter the only ecovillage of Ireland: Cloughjordan Ecovillage. Upon entering, you will first encounter the residential area. Each house is unique: designed, and sometimes even built, by the owners themselves. Many of the houses do not seem that different from what you would usually find in the Irish countryside, but among homes made up of rectangles and triangles, you can find cob dwellings with curved walls, and if you look closely, you will find solar panels and sedum on roofs. There are no fences between the houses, but rather hedges in which life can thrive. There is much space here. Some of it is intentional to leave room for other-than-human lives, but many spots are building sites not yet sold. The roads are curved and narrow as to enjoy the journey. Cars are guests here. Interwoven in the landscape are softly whispering brooks. Behind the residential area, there is a newly planted woodland, with next to it a field for the local soccer club. Because the sub-soil dug up during the building process was not allowed to leave the site, it was all gathered into a hill from which the stars can be viewed. Behind this Sky Bowl there is the community's amphitheatre. At the edge of the village, there are the members' allotments and an apple orchard with more than sixty varieties. Further down the back, there is the community farm. An unusual wonder in the landscape is the sensory garden. This peaceful haven has several areas which invite an exploration of the senses through interactions with plants. If you would like to take a walk, a biodiversity trail around the village guides the way. On your journey, you will find a Celtic labyrinth. Rocks show the way in this circle that goes round and round until you reach the centre. Arrive in Cloughjordan, and you will notice the freshness of the air. Every morning, I open the window, watch the first light, and listen to the birds sing. And in the evening, if the sky is clear, stars shine brightly among the pitch black.

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This vignette describes how I experienced Cloughjordan in the first weeks of my research. It captures the utopian promise the ecovillage holds. In this chapter, I will go into the history of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage. I will then explain how it aims to be a model for sustainability and community and expand on the ways in which residents' motivations align with this vision. I will conclude that with its ideals the village seamlessly follows the literature on ecovillages. However, I will also show that in its

conception, Cloughjordan holds fundamental flaws for the building of a cohesive community, which I will expand on in chapter 6.

#### 4.1 The History of Cloughjordan Ecovillage

At the end of the 20th century, a group of people came together to start envisioning that which would eventually become Cloughjordan Ecovillage. As dedicated environmentalists, they wanted to build the first ecovillage in Ireland. They were looking for a communal, sustainable way of living as an alternative to the status quo. This search for a new way of life started with the search for a suitable piece of land. After two years of searching, they found their site in Cloughjordan, County Tipperary (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2024)<sup>3</sup>. With 67 acres, its size was not only appropriate, but its location in a village was also meeting members' wants. Both the ecovillage movement and the contemporary environmental justice movement arose around the same time and share concerns about the climate and ecological crisis. Where environmental justice activists build movements in the city because that is where most class and race-based environmental inequality is situated, most ecovillages are established on the countryside because here members feel physically and psychologically close to nature (Chitewere and Taylor 2010, 143–45). Members of Cloughjordan engage with environmental justice critique by stating that moving to the countryside was not a way for them to 'set themselves apart from society', but a way to regenerate a rural area instead. A recent deprivation review shows the most deprived areas in Ireland are in the big cities, but that rural areas are also facing disadvantage (Pobal 2023). Since the arrival of the ecovillage, Cloughjordan has seen a 55% increase in population and an economic reinvigoration, thus showing that they have been able to engage with the village in the intended way. An additional reason Cloughjordan would be a suitable site is that Tipperary is known for its high-quality farming land. The plans for a community farm would benefit from that. Because they were afraid members would continue to live their lives primarily in Dublin instead of in the local area, they chose a site that would not be too close to the capital city. Situated in the middle of four large cities and their universities, Cloughjordan would be perfect for the educational activities they were planning to host. With a train station nearby, visitors would be able to reach the village easily.

In the following years, meetings between members and the local community were held. Not only did members have to agree on a development plan together, but they also wanted to ensure their arrival would be welcomed by the locals. Members were worried what they would think of these

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, whenever I say Cloughjordan, rather than Cloughjordan Ecovillage, I mean the ecovillage and not the regular village, unless stated otherwise.



‘eco-hippies’, but through years of getting to know each other and understanding mutual benefits, they were eventually won over to the point of no objection.

Since the mid-nineties Ireland had been in a financial boom, often referred to as the ‘Celtic Tiger’. Due to rapid economic growth, getting a loan was easier than ever. Funding for this ambitious project could therefore relatively easily be secured, and in 2005, when planning permissions had been obtained, the land was purchased (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2024). Then, a long process of building houses and infrastructure began. Unfortunately, due to the economic crisis of 2008, finances collapsed, and the community was forced to make a decision. Either they would decrease their investment in infrastructure and shared buildings, or the prices of the sites would go up. The community decided to keep their infrastructure plans, which led to about half of the people who had invested in the project being forced to pull out. It is in this moment that the first fractures in the idea of a socially just community started to appear, because it was those with fewer means who were no longer able to be part of the project. Nonetheless, those who had already put their money aside were able to stay on, and in 2009 the first people moved into their new homes. In 2012, important infrastructure such as internet and solar panels were installed (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2024). However, due to problems with the management of wastewater, the local council has halted the building of any new houses since 2013. There are plans for the improvement of infrastructure, more houses, short-term accommodations, community facilities and more, but these are still under consideration. Currently, there are about 50 houses and a hostel. There is an enterprise centre from which rooms can be rented for activities, but at the moment there is no community building in which you can walk in and out. Figure 4.1 shows a map of the ecovillage. At the bottom is the main street of the village, from which the residential area of the ecovillage can be accessed.



Figure 4.1: Map of Cloughjordan Ecovillage

Figure 4.2: Entering Cloughjordan Ecovillage from the main street

There are around a 120 residents in the ecovillage, among which approximately 35 children. Most residents are above 50 years old, and a considerable portion of the community is retired. Because most have been involved since the early 2000s, they were notably younger when they started the project. In the last couple of years, several residents have passed away or have moved away, which allowed new, younger members to move in. Almost all residents are white, and many of them are from Ireland, but there are also residents from other parts of Europe and from North America. Few members are Black or of colour, and of the few that are, most have joined only in the last couple of years.

## 4.2 A Model for Sustainability and Community

At the heart of Cloughjordan's development plans lies a collectively agreed on Ecological Charter that outlines the village's sustainability standards and how to achieve them. Although the houses may look different, they all abide by these standards. Especially for those houses that do not look particularly odd, you would not be able to tell from the outside that they are sustainably built, but in reality, they are frozen-in-time experiments of what was known about affordable, sustainable building at the time. Additionally, they have a 100% renewable heating system that generates heat through the burning of waste wood from a nearby sawmill. Due to these measures, Cloughjordan Ecovillage has an ecological footprint of half the national average. Other ways in which they work towards their sustainability goals is through the attention for land care. Every decision concerning the way in which the land is being handled is carefully considered. They have planted 17.000 native trees since their arrival, and there is a concern for biodiversity. Members are encouraged to pay attention to the species they encounter so a biodiversity assessment can be made. One part of the village is an edible landscape with wildlife corridors to which humans are visitors. Lastly, the members-owned biodynamic community farm

provides organic produce twice a week to its members. This farm is run by the farmer, volunteer coordinators, and volunteers from the European Solidarity Corps. This is a volunteering program for young people between 18 and 30 years old that is funded by the European Union. Each year, a new group of European volunteers arrives to work on the farm and learn about the way in which Cloughjordan organises itself. Because the village currently does not have the financial resources to pay for a consistent farm staff, they are dependent on the volunteers. In the past, this has led to significant problems whenever volunteers dropped out of the project. Because volunteers must leave after a year, there is also a lack of knowledge accumulation. Luckily, the volunteer coordinators are able to stay on for longer and guide the farm towards its goals throughout the years.

The ways in which the village is organised is based on the Viable System Model of governance, which is modelled after nature's self-organising system (Beer 1984). In Cloughjordan, this means the structure is flat and members-led. Decision making has thus far been done consensually, but the ecovillage is slowly moving towards a sociocratic approach instead where sub-groups are given the mandate to make decisions autonomously. Only members are part of the decision-making process, and residents who are not members, such as the volunteers, do not hold voting power. Once a month, there is a meeting to which all members are invited. All members are required to do a 100 hours of volunteering work per year in one or multiple of working groups, but this is not checked. Many members are doing much more than that, but there are also members who are no longer engaged in neither the development of the ecovillage nor the collective work to keep the ecovillage running. In chapter 6, I will elaborate on the tensions this creates.

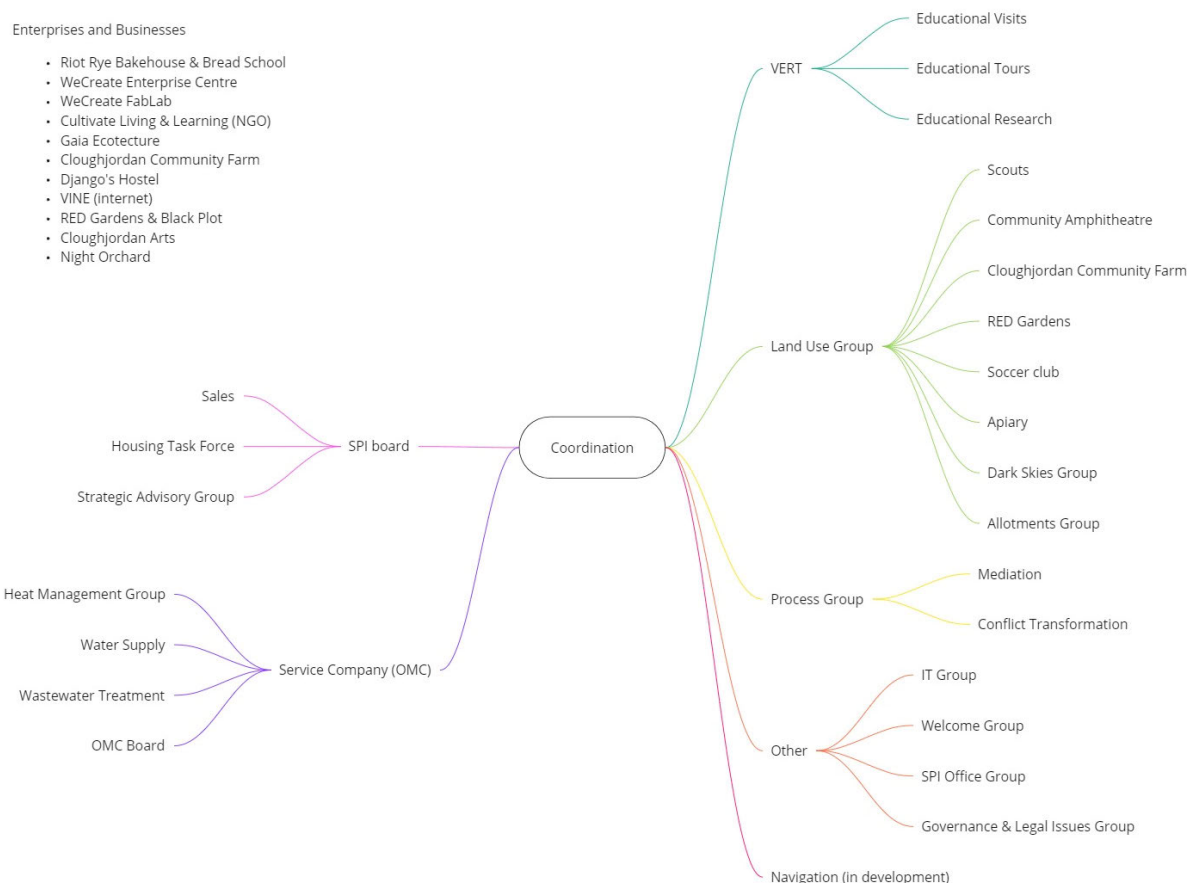


Figure 1.3: Organisational map of the active groups of SPI at the beginning of 2024

The ecovillage is made up of a number of groups which together make up the organisation (Figure 4.3). Although they want to step away from capitalist structures, to arrange practicalities, such as the securing loans and grants, the village is technically registered as a business called Sustainable Projects Ireland (SPI). This business has its own board, which oversees core activities such as the sales of sites. Due to national regulations, a second board had to be created which oversees the management of services such as the heating system, wastewater treatment, and water supply. With the arrival of the economic crisis, tensions between these two boards arose. The model of the project was based on people buying land, so when half of the people had to pull out, there were great debts and all work had to be done completely voluntarily. It was during this time the service company believed it to be necessary to step in and take authority. With the financial strain in the back of their mind, not everybody liked the flat structure anymore. This led to a period in which the two boards were competing, but the service company has taken a step back and tensions have since been resolved. Next to these two boards, there are two primary activity groups. One of them is VERT, which oversees educational activities at the village, such as visits and research. The other one is the Land Use Group, which includes entities such as the amphitheatre, the farm, and the apiary. They also have a Process Group, which manages things such as mediation. There are several random groups such as the IT group

and the Welcome Group, which welcomes new members. Lastly, there are several enterprises and businesses, such as the Riot Rye Bakehouse and Bread School, the WeCreate Enterprise Centre, and the educational NGO Cultivate. Around the time of my arrival, the village was in the middle of the creation of a Navigation Group that focuses on the creation of a vision and next steps for Cloughjordan. Because the core groups do not naturally come into contact and would otherwise miss each other, they all report back to Coordination which brings out a report every three months. The board of the farm reports separately, because it is a bigger entity that in practice works on its own, but technically it is still part of the Land Use Group. Cloughjordan Ecovillage is part of the Global Ecovillage Network, in which they support other ecovillages (GEN 2023).

All meetings I have attended started with a check-in, in which attendees told the room how they were doing. The most significant meeting is the members' meeting, which is held once a month on Saturday afternoon. Before the meeting, all members get sent an agenda so they can prepare themselves. The meetings I have attended were facilitated by members of the Process Group. At the beginning of the meeting, the meeting agreements were reiterated and in the room two large sheets of paper inform everyone about them. They state agreements such as 'seek to understand', 'use I language', and 'don't interrupt'. Through having these agreements, they try to have respectful and effective meetings, which stay within the planned two hours. The other meetings I have attended were held in smaller groups at the end of a workday. Although these were also facilitated, they were slightly more chaotic and rushed, and power differences surfaced more clearly in this environment. Because of them being at the end of the day, I felt that everyone was tired and wanted to go home. Although the principles set for the general meetings are aimed to be applied in all meetings, I thus felt like they were not as successfully integrated in these small-scale meetings.

#### 4.3 A Community of Like-Minded People

In this village, a community of people comes together that shares concerns about the climate and ecological crisis, although opinions on how the community should engage with these crises differ. One person who has experienced this is Lucia<sup>4</sup>, a Colombian woman who has lived in Spain for a large portion of her life. She volunteered at the farm a few years ago and since then she has come back several times, because she feels at home in Cloughjordan. She hopes that one day she will be able to move here. One of the things that keeps drawing her back in is that in Cloughjordan she meets people who do not necessarily have the same ideas but share her concerns. She found that being back in Barcelona, she would often fall back into unsustainable patterns. The environment Cloughjordan provides, with its people and nature, helps her step out of these patterns. This is echoed among

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<sup>4</sup> All names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

residents, who came to face the urgency of the climate and ecological crisis at some point in their lives and went looking for alternative ways of living where their lifestyles would be less damaging and perhaps even contributing to the solutions of the crises of our time. One of those residents is Saoirse, an Irish musician who has lived in Cloughjordan for many years. Throughout her life, she had felt like her connection to nature and her own intuition and wildness was something that belonged to her childhood past. Through contact with another small eco-community in Ireland, she realised there were more people who thought like her, and a desire for living together with other people who try to make the world a more sustainable place was seeded.

A second aspect of Cloughjordan that drew members in is the dedication to community. An example is Aedan, an Irish academic and writer who had lived in community in various periods in his life. After seeing his mother pass away in isolation, he decided that this is not how he wanted to grow old, and he was drawn back into the idea of community living. Similar forces drove Abigail, an American woman who moved to Ireland with her husband for whom it was his home country. She was very aware that she did not have a network here, and since her husband did not have a healthy lifestyle, she was afraid something would happen to him, and she would be left alone. When he had an accident and passed away, she was incredibly grateful for the community around her. Next to these personal motivations, there is also a shared belief that the crises of our time should be addressed by grassroots, place-based, community-led initiatives. The webinar series I attended during my stay was called *Ómós Áite*, the honouring of place, which was delving into various aspects of relearning to be connected to a place and organising from there, showing its importance to the community.

With its commitments, Cloughjordan thus fits seamlessly into what the literature considers an ecovillage to be. It is a settlement community focused on the shared goals of sustainable living and ecological engagement, based on principles of self-management, self-sufficiency, and low environmental impacts (Brombin 2019, 191–93). They are dedicated to both the ‘eco’ part, as well as the ‘village’ part of what an ecovillage consists of. Members’ motivations align with this vision. However, with its history and the specific ways in which the community is organised come complexities, which make community cohesion in the village a challenge. I will elaborate on this in chapter 6. First, I will go into detail about residents’ processes of relearning relationships with other-than-humans.







## 5. Seeding Entanglement: A Partially Collective Process of Relearning

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On the first day of my work at the farm it is especially cold. One of the volunteers has taken me under her wing and we are walking along the brassica field, harvesting kale and Brussels sprouts. I do not have a knife with me and accidentally break off an entire Brussel top. Despite having borrowed gloves, my fingers are freezing, and I feel incredibly clumsy. I have no clue what I am doing. My boots are leaking, and I can feel my feet getting wet. Water from the leaves jumps onto my glasses. I am confronted with the very real conditions of working the land in winter. Later that day, when the produce has been harvested, the food has been brought to the distribution point, lunch has been eaten, willows have been cut, and meetings have been concluded, I take a shower, get into bed, and cannot get out of it anymore.

It is the third day at the farm and our afternoon consists of weeding, which I have already decided is my least favourite task. Everything hurts and my mind is overflowing from how monotonous the work is. I break the silence: 'Do you actually enjoy this?' Surprisingly enough, the volunteers do. They like touching the plants, having their hands in the soil, and being very precise with a task that benefits from rigor. Don't I think it is satisfying to see the rows being done? All I can think about is how disappointed I am in myself that I don't like it as much as I thought I would. Why can't it be just like tedious creative work, like embroidery or crochet? To that the answer is obvious: that I can do comfortably, on the couch, in a warm home. This is wet. Cold. Muddy. Or maybe it's just that I am not experiencing the satisfaction of creating something. 'You're creating food!', they say. With that I cannot argue, but it doesn't take away my feeling of defeat.

I wake up exhausted and drag myself to the farm. Despite feeling overwhelmed, I have to get started. The bed of pak choi needs to be cleared so I take out the entire plant and pick off the healthy leaves and tops. It is surprisingly satisfying to do. I can let out my frustration through the semi-destruction I need to cause, but at the same time picking the leaves is still a very delicate endeavour. The leaves make such a nice crunchy sound when they snap off, and I like using my fingers to take off the tops. Perhaps it is because of how overwhelmed I am feeling that I am experiencing less pressure to enjoy the farm work today. Or perhaps because my head is so full, what first felt like a boring task is now a calming one. Later that day, there is nothing for me to do for a moment, so I wander off and take out my camera. I try to capture the beauty of the farm, and the act of doing this makes me appreciate it more. It is like I look at the world in a different way when I look through the lens of a camera. I feel more in the moment, and suddenly I notice all these little things that I previously did not pay attention to. I cannot yet quite fathom it, but I feel like this day changed something within me.

Over the next weeks, working on the farm becomes my favourite part of doing fieldwork. It is the only time during the week that I can focus on just the task at hand. I love using all my senses to do the work, I talk to my plants when I am happy to see

them again, and I look in awe at how they are growing back bigger and stronger the warmer the weather gets. Cooking with vegetables I have harvested myself is the most fun and creative way to end the day. When a friend joins me in Cloughjordan, I proudly show her all the crops and tell her everything I know about them. When I eventually have to leave, saying goodbye to the farm is one of the hardest things I have to do. I wanted to foster a connection, but never would I have expected that I would get so attached to this piece of land and the life it holds.

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These vignettes tell the story of how, over the course of my fieldwork, I fell in love with the farm. I had a desire to feel a connection with the other-than-humans around me, and it is with time that I learned to truly appreciate my time among the crops. In the previous chapter, I explained how Cloughjordan aims to be a cohesive community dedicated to sustainability. Although not everyone experiences this the same way or to the same extent, many residents share with me the desire for a strong connection with other-than-humans. In this chapter, I look at whether the relearning of more-than-human entanglement is taking place, and if so, where, by whom, and in what way. I will first expand on the type of relearning that takes place by learning directly from other-than-humans via sensorial engagement, showing that the experience of more-than-human relationships is a rather passive one for residents who do not have the time to engage actively. I will then show the language of permaculture as a way for residents to align with one another on this topic, while also showing the limits of Cloughjordan being a community by design, rather than practice. Through the lens of techno-managerial narratives and spirituality, I will conclude that different ways of knowing and being explicitly and implicitly struggle to find their way in Cloughjordan.

### 5.1 Who Has the Time to Touch Some Grass?

According to the Urban Dictionary, the online dictionary for pop culture phrases, telling someone to ‘touch grass’ is a way of saying that they need to get some fresh air and come back to reality (‘Urban Dictionary: Touch Grass’ 2024). Izabel is a Brazilian woman who moved to Cloughjordan a few years ago and feels strongly about what is ‘real’ and ‘natural’. In our interview, she referred to a recent webinar where the differences between ecovillages and mainstream society were discussed. Ecovillages often get the critique that they withdraw from society, but she believes that actually ‘most of society has been withdrawing from things that they were supposed to be.’ Not eating fresh vegetables directly from the farm, but rather from all over the world and packaged in plastic is not ‘natural’ according to her. Despite her feeling of needing to be in touch with ‘reality’, which in her case primarily refers to eating locally, she herself feels detached from the other-than-humans around her. She has moved from a different part of the world to Ireland, and therefore does not feel knowledgeable about the plants here. ‘Because I came from a different context, area and geographical

area, I had no idea what was there in the beginning and I had no idea what to do with it.' The knowledge that she did have from her country of origin did not 'translate', and although she is in the process of learning, she also feels held back from committing to this process: 'I don't have an interest [in having a plot at the allotments]. I have a lot of things to learn before trying to plant my own vegetables.' She would love to understand the other-than-humans around her house more, but at the same time she cannot commit to these relationships, because she spends most of her time behind her computer, working. She expressed that although she loves going outside and taking a walk around the village, she has not been doing so lately because she does not have the time. In many ways, she is not in touch with the 'reality' she herself describes, despite wanting to be. This raises the question of who has the ability to foster more-than-human entanglement.

That there is at least some ability for relearning among the residents is visible through the fact that there is a shared experience of sensorial awareness. In describing their other-than-human relationships, they often refer to their senses. The visual senses are most common. In my interviews, there were many references to the colours of things. The grass is exceptionally bright green, the trees turn orange and yellow in the fall, and the blue of the sky changes throughout the year. Residents enjoy observing the beauty of colours, and generally, other-than-humans are often described as beautiful. Because the produce from the farm was often mentioned as part of their relationship, taste also often surfaced. They mention how delicious they think the vegetables are and they express their appreciation for the value they bring to their health. Several participants did not only refer to sight and taste, but also mentioned touch, smell, and sound. One of the volunteers, Niamh, told me that she loves touching plants, because she thinks it is 'satisfying'.

... in the forest, if there is some nice moss on the tree, I'll stroke it or if I'm watering my onion seedlings, I'll rub my hand over them, and it's kind of almost like there's something, like they transfer something to you that just makes you happy.

Those who named this broader range of senses all spent a considerable time with other-than-humans and did so in an active manner. Most of them worked at the farm and had been working at farms even before coming to Cloughjordan, thus giving them more time to develop this sensorial awareness. One other participant for whom this is clear is Saoirse, the musician who surfaced in the previous chapter as someone passionate about living in a community dedicated to sustainability. Besides music, she also has a passion for herbalism. We did a walk and talk together in one of my first weeks in Cloughjordan and whilst walking we gathered plants for a herbal tea. I noticed that she used all her senses to identify the plants for our tea, being careful not to accidentally poison us. To gather the plants, she attentively touched them, and we enjoyed the smells the herbs afforded us.

The sensorial engagement these participants experience is in line with what Ingold describes as 'becoming'. Dependent on which practices are part of participants' everyday lives, their experiences of the more-than-human world differ. Izabela feels unknowledgeable about the plants in her garden, does not touch them often and therefore does not bring up touch in conversation about her relationships with other-than-humans, but she does mention the hedgerows that she sees changing throughout the year as she is sitting by the window in her home office. This might not be a relationship in which she actively takes part, but the value that the experience of beauty brings to her life is nonetheless worth noting. Niamh and Saoirse, on the other hand, who touch plants daily, do describe to me how that interaction feels. The perception of these participants is different according to their everyday training in how to fulfil tasks appropriately (Ingold 2000, 166–67). It appears that changing sensorial awareness is thus possible by including different practices into their lives.

Since more-than-human entanglement may be relearned through extended engagement, it is remarkable that it is volunteers who work at the farm and most residents never set foot on the land, despite it being a space where such engagement may be practiced. Volunteers also express their frustration with this because they feel members of the farm do not understand what is happening on the land. In my vignettes, I showed that learning to love the farm was not an easy process that required time and patience. I had to move through the discomfort before I could enjoy my time among the crops. Perhaps more residents would like to go through a similar process, but it is only very few people for whom that is a possibility. In the current way that the ecovillage works, residents need to make a considerable income to be able to afford to live there, and therefore they have to spend a large portion of their time working. Preoccupied with the demands of their nine-to-five jobs, the labour that comes with having a family, and the pressures of keeping a financially fragile ecovillage running, participants feel like they do not have enough time to go out into their gardens, learn about the species around them, and foster a more-than-human connection. I asked Aedan, the academic and writer from the previous chapter, if he works in the garden or works with other-than-humans in any way. He said:

Very rarely. My partner does all the work in the garden. She loves being out gardening and at times she'll give me tasks to do, which is usually digging holes or replanting stuff, which I don't get great pleasure from, I must say. I haven't, in other words, discovered my way of being in the garden that gives me pleasure. And I suppose because I'm usually very, very busy. I have lots on my plate. That's something I haven't made time for.

This example shows that in Cloughjordan there might be an abundance of other-than-humans and spaces where active interaction with them might be practiced, but that time is, unfortunately, scarce. This leads to some residents experiencing an – although worthwhile – more passive relationship with

other-than-humans. This is pointing towards a larger challenge of this time. Under the pressures of late capitalism, in which people are fighting for their time, and work and other obligations ask far more from them than they can carry, attentiveness and perception are impaired (Crary 2014), and fostering active more-than-human relationships feels far away from those who are trying to make ends meet. Relearning may be psychologically possible, but practically it appears to be only limitedly attainable for most.

## 5.2 Permaculture as the Language of Collective Relearning

To counteract the limits that time imposes on relearning relationships with other-than-humans directly through sensorial engagement, I have observed residents learning about other-than-humans from each other. In Cloughjordan, the way to do so is through the principles of permaculture. As documented by Litfin, one of the core elements of the holistic ontology of ecovillages is permaculture, which focuses on land regeneration, community vitalisation, and the creation of a cohesive whole of human and natural systems. Permaculture emphasises the wise use of energy and the return to cyclical processes (Litfin 2012, 128–31). It was first developed by Bill Mollison and his student David Holmgren in the 1970s and was later expanded on by the latter into twelve principles. Some of these principles include practical measures, such as the production of no waste and the use of renewables, while others focus on how communities can work together, for example through self-regulation and the focus on small, slow solutions. Important is the idea that we can design our lives more wisely by following nature's patterns, and that diversity leads to greater resilience (Holmgren 2002).

Because of permaculture's centrality to ecovillage ontology, it is not surprising that Cloughjordan's local NGO, Cultivate, offers yearly permaculture courses which many ecovillagers have followed. In one of my first conversations with my host, he introduced me to *The Earth Care Manual* (Whitefield 2011), an influential permaculture handbook that he hoped I would like to read. He told me that when he first read it, it made him rethink everything. He was specifically struck by their approach to minimising energy consumption. It was not just about using renewable energy sources, but also about mundane things such as where you place things in your house. Lettuce, for example, should be inside where you can see and take care of it every day, whereas an apple tree that does need as much work can be outside. He had never thought about it like that. He is not the only ecovillager I have encountered for whom permaculture has been integrated into their everyday life. After having presented my first ideas during my insight session, one of the teachers of Cultivate's permaculture course got to work on their poster. I checked in with him on how they were doing, and he started talking enthusiastically about how he liked how entanglement and complexity surfaced so clearly from my research. Before I knew it, he had equalled my insights with the whole system approach and pointed out that permaculture sees nature as an entity that can teach us how to do

things better. This terminology, although familiar to me, was not something that had arisen from my presentation, showing how central permaculture is to his way of thinking, as well as how passionate he is about spreading knowledge about it.

More common than such explicit mentions of permaculture are the ways in which the principles of permaculture have slipped into ecovillagers' language. As mentioned above, the return to cyclical processes is one of the core elements of permaculture. In many interviews, I have found references to the idea of the 'cycle'. One of the pictures Izabel brought to our interview showed the sky as it was changing throughout the seasons. She chose it because it reminds her that 'spring is coming soon' and 'everything comes in cycles.' Also for Aedan the awareness of the 'cycles of the seasons' is something that he enjoys about living in Cloughjordan. The cyclical nature of things is not limited to the awareness of the seasons, however. For Niamh, there is a beautiful cycle to the growing of food. She loves the seed saving process, because it allows her to see the 'whole cycle of life. You grow the fruit, you harvest it, you save the seeds. And then you can plant the seeds next year and they grow, and each of those will produce a big plant that will give you kilos of fruit.' Additionally, she is fascinated with how matter gets broken down and reused. On describing the feed used on the farm that is made from comfrey, she says:

You're using something that's taking minerals and nutrients from deep in the soil, and you're fermenting the leaves, you're making a feed, which you can feed to your plants, which will then feed you, and it's just part of this really beautiful cycle of everything is broken down, everything is reused and the whole cycle sustains itself like that.

Due to permaculture's idea that residents can design their lives more wisely by following nature's patterns, I have often observed the use of metaphorical language that plays with human and other-than-human characteristics. On the one hand, other-than-humans are given characteristics usually only attributed to humans. Rocket looks 'sad', for example, or nettle is considered an 'ally'. On the other hand, concepts typically associated with other-than-humans are applied to human concepts. People 'compost' ideas they no longer want to carry with them, consciousness gets 'seeded', et cetera.

Other concepts that often recurred in my conversations are the ideas of abundance and resilience: the fruitful outcomes of applying permaculture designs. Izabel is aware of how many flowers flourish around her house, even if some have been cut the previous year, and Aedan is amazed by how full the bushes of raspberries are after a long winter. Lastly, since care for the earth and each other is one of the core ideas behind permaculture, respect is one of the permaculture principles that surfaced in my interview with Rebin, a Kurdish man from Turkey who was a volunteer a few years ago. According to him, respect has several dimensions. First of all, it means that we have to be part of

nature, rather than control it. It also means being kind, trying to understand each other, and having empathy. Lastly, it means taking part in nature. 'Making your hands dirty, grow your own stuff, grow your harvest, cook.'

These quotes show that among residents the principles of permaculture provide a hopeful frame of reference. Cycles are not only being noticed, but also enjoyed. There is beauty and hope in the idea that everything may become anew, and fascination is experienced in trying to understand the principles of permaculture better. With the sharing of knowledge on permaculture through literary sources and educational courses, an implicit feeling of community is created. Permaculture provides the community with the language that helps residents understand each other and share their knowledge confidently with actors outside of the community. However, due to the primarily intellectual sharing of permaculture knowledge, there is a scientific feel to the way in which residents interpret permaculture. The fact that most residents are highly educated likely contributes to this. During my time in Cloughjordan, I attended a lecture on permaculture and community by Alfred Decker. In this lecture, he admitted that since the rise of permaculture, its principles have primarily been applied to land designs, rather than having been holistically integrated. His lecture was an attempt to rectify this and show permaculture's importance to communities. When permaculture is primarily a set of practices in creating land 'designs', its focus is rather pragmatic and does not provide a vision of totality (Roux-Rosier, Azambuja, and Islam 2018, 557–59). Nature continues to be portrayed as something that can be managed and fixed, just with other principles.

As I described in the previous section, Izabela and Aedan both experience a disconnect in their relationships with other-than-humans due to their lack of practical knowledge and time. With the language of permaculture, they can intellectually align with other residents on their more-than-human relationships, but their experience of the cycles they describe is a limitedly embodied one. Niamh and Rebin, both of which have worked on farms extensively, do place themselves in the cycles they describe by emphasising how they take part in the process of growing food. The language of permaculture thus brings residents together but does not fully take away the challenges described in the previous section. Residents of Cloughjordan do not want permaculture to be a primarily intellectual endeavour, but they struggle to integrate its principles in practice, because they lack a feeling of embodiment in the relationships with the other-than-humans involved in their 'designs'. Cloughjordan thus appears to be a community by design, rather than a community by practice.

### 5.3 Reproduction of and Resistance to Techno-Managerial Narratives

Next to permaculture appearing as a rather technical and intellectual way for various residents to relate to other-than-humans, there are also other ways in which techno-managerial narratives are



being reproduced. With techno-managerialism, I refer to the apolitical position of wanting to find the 'right' technologies and tools to manage resources better without considering the public's desires or the systems in which such management takes place (Swyngedouw 2015, 138–41), as well as the neoliberalisation of nature where economic terms are introduced as markers (MacDonald and Corson 2014, 44–65).

In the previous chapter, I described that Cloughjordan has an ecological footprint of half the national average. When you enter the ecovillage, there is a sign that proudly states so, and when you open the website, it is the first thing you see (Cloughjordan Ecovillage 2024). Measuring impact through ecological footprints has been critiqued by critical journalist Mark Kaufman for being introduced by the fossil fuel industry to put responsibility for the climate crisis on individuals rather than industries and powerful institutions (2020). At the same time, it also renders the complexities of the climate and ecological crisis into apolitical signifiers. The technical story of the ecological footprint thus reproduces the idea that the climate crisis is only a crisis of the inappropriate management of resources (Swyngedouw 2015, 133). Through the proud presentation of its ecological footprint, Cloughjordan contributes to this idea. Focusing on the 100% renewability of the heating system and its efficiency is another example of techno-managerial language. At the same time, it is understandable why they present themselves with these statistics. One of Cloughjordan's biggest streams of income is their educational programme, which includes activities such as visits from schools and universities. Their ecological footprint is in a way a form of marketing that legitimises Cloughjordan as an educational institute for sustainability. Because of their dependence on the income provided by their educational programmes, it is difficult to step out of such narratives.

Ambiguous techno-managerial narratives do not remain within the educational realm. The farm constantly balances between managerial attitudes and radical disruptions thereof. On the one hand, they have the responsibility to provide food for a community and they must therefore work the land efficiently and according to needs from members and boards, but on the other hand they must exhaust neither the soil nor those who work the land. During my time at the farm, I have seen the farmer and volunteer coordinator bowed over books full of graphs and spreadsheets filled with statistics to maximise the yield and I have seen them struggle to comply with members who want more, better-looking, and a greater variety of food to be produced. Yet, I have also experienced how I was never rushed to finish my tasks faster than would be enjoyable, and that every decision was made with care concerning the land, its species, and the capacity of the volunteers.

Among residents, I have also seen a few instances of techno-managerial language. Izabela, for example, often talks about her garden as something she does not know how to 'manage'. Due to her

previously described lack of knowledge, she feels like working the garden is something she should know how to handle appropriately, rather than sense, explore, and discover. This perspective is rather utilitarian, because the outcome seems to be more important than the experimental process. It is also a testament to neoliberalism, where success is measured by results and there is no room for failure. This then renders the act of gardening as something reserved for experts. This perspective is understandable when practical knowledge holders are mostly people for whom it is their job, such as farmers or employees at Cultivate. At the seed savers' meetings I attended, I observed that members relied on their 'expert' to guide them. At every meeting, they waited until one of the residents was there, who has worked on a farm for most of his life and has a lot of knowledge on agriculture and seed saving. Despite some of them having quite some experience in seed saving by then, they still did not trust themselves to do it without his guidance. At the same time, he himself enthusiastically resists this narrative. Next to saving seeds, he hosts weekly sessions for everyone interested in growing vegetables at home. He often emphasises this is something everyone can do and that you do not have to be too precise with it. His ultimate illustration of this is that he often also just throws seeds into the garden to see what happens, presenting himself as an expert who is nonetheless not afraid to take risks and experiment.

At the same time, it is important to note that for residents who specifically try disrupting these narratives, the use of non-techno-managerial language does not necessarily ensure relationships they consider as caring. Saoirse came forward in section 5.1 as someone who engages intimately with other-than-humans through her herbalism practice. She described to me an experience she had a few years ago, where one of her neighbours had instructed a digger driver to build a path on the mound where she would say her prayers every day. What felt like a sacred space to her had been ruined by this path. She told me that he was talking 'like an oil executive', although she thought this was probably unintentional. He had all the language ready, of vulnerability and biodiversity, but at the same time he was 'kicking these things that were the biodiversity he was talking about.' The response from the Land Use Group was that they wondered if the mound was truly as important to biodiversity as Saoirse was telling them. To some of them, this mound full of weeds was not the type of biodiversity they were trying to protect, in contrast to the trees which they do want to preserve. For Saoirse, this experience was part of the reason for her to study herbalism, because she wanted to become someone who could speak with authority about the species around her and therefore be in a place to protect them from harm. She hoped that if, for example, she would cure people with a cough syrup made from plants growing around, she would be able to stop them from being destroyed.

What is telling about these stories is that residents thus are challenging each other on what concepts such as biodiversity mean in practice. The previously described collective dedication to

permaculture does not prescribe how to act in various situations. Different ways of knowing are then competing to be acknowledged as valid. Members of the Land Use Group questioned Saoirse's hands-on knowledge of the mound, and Saoirse felt her spiritual relationship with the place was not considered in the decision-making process. This left her feeling angry and hurt, and led her to decide that the only way in which she could speak with more authority was through becoming a herbalist, whose knowledge she hoped *would* be taken seriously. Which knowledge is valuable is thus continuously contested, depending on the context and from whom it comes. Exactly having such discussions is part of what community work consists of, and in Cloughjordan these conversations do take place, but not all types of knowledge come forward equally. Especially experiential knowledge that is embedded in spiritual encounters does not appear at the foreground. I will explain this further in the following section.

#### 5.4 Spirituality and the Big 'Something'

The complexities of permaculture and techno-managerialism, and discussions on how to act in various situations surfaced often in Cloughjordan, and in many cases in shared spaces, such as in meetings and talks. What does not come forward as clearly are people's spiritual relationships with other-than-humans. With spirituality, I mean the belief in or the experience of animism, in which all beings are endowed with a soul and can be communicated with. I also refer to the idea that sociality is extended to these beings (Descola 2014, 70). In section 2.2, I have explained that the creation of categories such as animism fits into a naturalist way of doing science, and that according to Ingold the concept of becoming more accurately describes the ways in which humans come to terms with the world around them (Ingold 2016). To include this perspective, I therefore also include the expression of the feeling that there is 'something', even if residents cannot quite put into words what this means, into my definition of spirituality. In this way, I can discuss the various ways of looking at more-than-human entanglement.

That some participants are still searching for their words to describe their more-than-human relationships is the first telling sign that this aspect of relearning is not collectively shared. Both the words used to describe these connections as well as the entities they relate to differ. I introduced my research as one looking into residents' relationships with initially plants and eventually other-than-humans. One of the residents told me that relationship is too strong of a word for her, and she would rather use 'connection', while another participant said it 'is more than a connection, it *is* a relationship'. I have also observed members being in search of more 'cohesion'. As for the other-than-humans, multiple participants have said that they do not feel a connection to individual plants, but rather the 'landscape'. Words such as 'entities', 'beings', 'species', and 'living creatures' all have made their way into residents' vocabulary, and some also experiment with the pronouns they want to give

to other-than-human beings, resisting using 'it/its' and trying 'they/them' instead. Another way in which various participants described the more-than-human world was through the use of 'the outside', often contrasting it with the supposedly disconnected life inside. Unsurprisingly, also common was the use of the words 'the environment' and 'nature', both of which have been critiqued for externalising the more-than-human world and reinforcing nature-culture dualisms (Jessop 2012; Lamb 1996, 479–80).

This lack of a shared language is not surprising when there is a lack of conversation among residents about their relationships with other-than-humans, outside of the channels of permaculture. Perhaps the most striking example is participants' reaction to my cultural probes and interview questions. Several participants noted they thoroughly enjoyed both, because these were subjects that they did not often talk or even think about. One of my participants said she 'had never even considered the question.' Through doing this, they realised new things about their relationships with other-than-humans. Aedan believed that my research was 'groundbreaking', bringing in perspectives that were completely new to him. As a researcher, I was surprised by this, because although I had gathered from the literature that not all ecovillages engage in spiritual practices and conversation (Brombin 2019, 191–93), I had not expected my perspectives to be so new to so many.

It is especially surprising, because I have also met residents who *do* have a very spiritual relationship with other-than-humans. Partially due to our extensive contact, Saoirse often comes forward in my research as someone for whom that is the case. She describes herself as explicitly spiritual. Before she did her herbalism course, she already felt deeply related to other-than-humans, because for her it was a way to be in touch with her instincts. She would talk to the wind and pray to spirits. But what especially shaped her perspectives was her herbalism course. Here, she met her teacher who did not see plants as resources, but as sentient beings. She was teaching her herbalism in the way indigenous peoples would. She introduced Saoirse to the idea that indigenous peoples did not only learn from each other through trial and error, but that they would also learn from other-than-humans directly by talking to them, listening to them, and dreaming with them. She described being part of this course and being part of this group of other students as finding her 'tribe'. At that point in her life, she had already lived in the ecovillage for many years, and she does describe moving to Cloughjordan as an important part of her life, but it was not as significant for fostering her more-than-human relationships as this group was for her. She also told me there is only one other resident with whom she shares this relationship explicitly, although she has also often been surprised by others. When she was campaigning for the preservation of trees, she got many messages from friends who told her they were happy she was doing so. She said:

I realised I'm totally not alone. I'm just the only one who makes it visible, I think, that I could see. I was the only one walking around, like, you know, stopping on my walk through the city to put my hand on a tree, you know. I didn't see other people doing that. But when it came to when I spoke really publicly about protecting trees, it turned out actually the majority of us really care about trees and talk to them, you know. Which is very heartening. So maybe it's not that those of us who feel a really deep connection are in the minority. It's only that those of us who are willing to be open and say it before everybody else are in the minority.

This quote is telling for the lack of conversation in Cloughjordan on the spiritual. It shows how clearly Saoirse experiences her connection as something that other people also have, but that she is one of the few people who expresses it explicitly.

Another resident who has an explicitly spiritual relationship is one of the Italian volunteers who describes herself as being religious. For her, spirituality is more about the transcending of the physical body and moving into the realm of the spiritual. Being surrounded by other-than-humans in the forest, with the light hitting the trees beautifully, is a way for her to enter this meditative state. For her, spirituality is thus less about her direct relationship with these other-than-humans, but rather about how they help her reach a desired state of being. Looking at the world this way is something she has built over the years by asking many questions to the universe and having formative experiences, and not something that Cloughjordan Ecovillage has necessarily contributed to.

As a researcher, I was deeply fascinated by Niamh's relationship with other-than-humans. You might recall from sections 5.1 and 5.2 that she feels a strong sensorial engagement and that she places herself into the cycles she describes due to her practices at the farm. She even said that when touching plants 'it's kind of almost like there's something, like they transfer something to you that just makes you happy.' She also described feeling 'something' when being in the forest, 'it's like you can really feel the sense of life, like the chlorophyll.' And yet, she distinctly calls herself a non-spiritual person. 'I'm a really scientific, really rational person, so I don't feel like there's this kind of animistic connection, but at the same time there's definitely something there for me.' This experience of the 'something' that cannot be put into words, and perhaps does not even want to be categorised as animistic or spiritual, is something I have seen more often. There is an old, gnarly tree in Cloughjordan that interestingly appeared in many interviews, and two volunteers described it as really having 'something'. One of them is Alícia, a Catalan volunteer. She often opts for the language of 'magic' to describe sensorial experiences that transcend the common language of beauty. She also used it to describe how fascinating it is that through preserving you can keep food that you have harvested a

long time ago from rotting. She would not quite see plants as social beings like the animals she is close with, but she does feel something that she is still in the process of figuring out.

Thus, despite having spoken to various residents who have spiritual experiences with other-than-humans one way or another, they do not appear at the surface of Cloughjordan. The ecovillage intellectually stimulates the idea of decolonisation, and specifically the return to the Irish language and Celtic practices and belief systems, but these are rarely embodied through shared practices. During my time, I have only seen them be expressed in educational spaces, such as webinars. Additionally, by focusing on specifically Irish practices, there is no place for the exploration and appreciation of general spirituality. According to Saoirse, one of the reasons for this lies with the economic crisis of 2008 and how the ecovillage responded. The people who fell away were the ones who had lower incomes and, according to her, many of them were non-capitalist 'hippies'. Where before these type of people with a more spiritual inclination were the majority, they now were existing on the margins of Cloughjordan. She believes another reason for the lack of conversation is residents' Irishness. With the introduction of Catholicism, the Celtic spirituality of the Irish was firmly suppressed and controlled. They were no longer free to have their own spirituality. The influence of the church only went down once child abuse scandals came to light in the nineties. She thinks that since then a fear of belief lives within Ireland, because it might be used to control people. She expressed to me her disappointment with Cloughjordan not being the place for her to explore spirituality more in community. That is what she expected the ecovillage to be. She once tried to set up a group for culture and spirituality, but this was met with a hard no. It was meant just as a support group and as a tool to ensure events would keep happening, but the community was afraid it would control what is being practiced, even though she explicitly stated this was not the idea. For her, the herbalism group was the polar opposite: a place where the teacher, with her beliefs, created a safe space to explore these vulnerable topics collectively. Saoirse is not the only one who would like spirituality to be part of the community more. During my insight session, one of the participants teamed up with her and told us afterwards that she travelled to different ecovillages during the summer and experienced that other ecovillages have a stronger practice of fostering relationships with other-than-humans, for example through rituals. She looks up to Saoirse and sees her as a leader who could help the community forward concerning this topic.

In chapter 2, I have raised the questions of what the more-than-human relationships in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage are, how they have changed throughout ecovillagers' lives, and what the role of the community is in these processes of relearning. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that there is a large variety of more-than-human relationships in Cloughjordan. Residents enjoy how their senses are being stimulated due to the physical closeness of beautiful other-than-humans and the easy

accessibility of tasty produce from the farm, but due to their lack of time, for most this relationship is a rather passive one. This is because the more-than-human relationships are largely shaped by what practices are part of residents' lives. To counteract the limits imposed by this type of relearning, residents have found a way to relearn together and find an implicit feeling of community in the principles of permaculture, but this does not take away the aforementioned challenges or the struggle to find ways to balance different ways of knowing and being. With the primarily intellectual focus of Cloughjordan, residents experience not only that other types of knowledge struggle to be acknowledged in decision making, but also that other ways of being do not easily come to the surface where they can be discussed and experienced. This makes the relearning of more-than-human entanglement in Cloughjordan a process that is partially experienced collectively, and partially individually. Despite residents' intentions and desires for more-than-human intimacy, relearning is experienced by some members of the community as something that does not take place as much as they would want or expect in an ecovillage. I argue that this feeling of loss relates to a general lack of cohesion in the community. It is not surprising that vulnerable topics such as experiential knowledge and spiritual ways of relating to other-than-humans are not easily talked about when the community struggles to come together. I will elaborate on these complexities of relearning to adopt a communitarian way of life in the next chapter.





## 6. Paradise or Retirement Plan: Relearning to Live Communally

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I go back in time and look at Cloughjordan through the eyes of disillusionment. Where I first saw the beautiful vastness of Ireland, I am now struck by a feeling of isolation. When I arrived here, I was enchanted by the type of sustainable living the ecovillage embodies. From the climate justice activist spaces I had familiarised myself with over the years, I thought the only way to live sustainably outside of capitalism was precariously. I understood damp, mouldy, cold squats, not these large, comfortable homes. Now I know that this type of comfort makes living in Cloughjordan a privilege for the lucky few. I know that it is only possible by not radically disrupting capitalist status quo. Whereas I first loved to see other-than-human life thrive in the spaces between the houses, I now miss all the people who could have lived here, who could have made Cloughjordan a more diverse, and close-knit community. I still love the farm, but I would love to see faces pop up between the crops that I have not seen before. Where are the children playing in the fields? Where can I go when I spontaneously want to meet others? Why do I feel so alone here? I am grateful for the birds because they break the silence roaming the streets.

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This vignette shows how, over time, I started to realise Cloughjordan is not as cohesive a community as I would have expected or hoped. Despite their intentions for a connected community as described in the chapter 4, Cloughjordan's reality does not quite meet its ideals. In the previous chapter, I have expanded on the ways in which the relearning of more-than-human entanglement is taking place and I have explained this process as being both collective as well as individual, explaining the individuality partly because of the lack of personal connection in the ecovillage. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the types of community disconnection in Cloughjordan, and I will give reasons for why I think the village is experiencing it. I will first go into the lack of face-to-face contact and capacity, to then explain capitalism's influence on the lack of diversity in the ecovillage. Thereafter, I will explain some of the conflicts simmering among the residents and I will explain the inherent fragility of community living. In the last section, I will expand on how residents themselves reflect on the lack of cohesion in Cloughjordan.

### 6.1 The Lack of Face-to-Face Contact

Walk through Cloughjordan on a workday and you will find that the streets are mostly empty. Perhaps you will encounter a pensioner on their walk, or a volunteer cycling around to finish a to do, and if you will they might say hello, but there are also people who no longer greet each other. If the weather is nice, maybe you will find residents on their lunch break, but generally the village is silent. Even though the ecovillage was built specifically far away from Dublin as to not have residents work there, many

residents leave Cloughjordan during the week and go to the city for their work. Others retreat into their homes to work. Perhaps if there were any shared buildings, these people would come together to drink coffee, talk about the weather, and work in each other's company, but Cloughjordan does not have any shared buildings, despite it being part of the original plans, and even the plans after the economic crisis. It was partly because of these communal buildings they decided to raise the prices for the sites, so the fact that they eventually did not come into being is experienced as a loss by many. In the members' meetings, the desire to change this surfaced multiple times. For the time being, there is the WeCreate Enterprise Centre where rooms can be rented out for activities such as the weekly farm lunch, but it does not provide a consistent space for members to come together. As I explained in the previous chapter, the farm could also be a place where people come together, but permanent residents do not come there often. One of my hosts expressed that in summer she likes to help out at the farm every once in a while, but during the cold winter months, she does not feel drawn to meeting other residents there. This emphasises that there is thus not only a need for a collective space, but also that it needs to be a comfortable place for members to want to go there throughout the year.

Joining a working group provides another way for people to meet each other, but as I mentioned earlier, many people are not engaged in the ecovillage, even though 100 hours of volunteering are technically required. During my research, I kept running into the same people, most of whom are retired or work for the ecovillage. Occasionally activities are organised, and usually at least ten people show up, but it is important to note that these activities are often organised by either the same small group of active people, the NGO, or people for whom organising such workshops is part of their job. There does not seem to be enough capacity to organise more activities on a voluntary basis. The meetings are not well-visited either. For every person that would come to the members' meeting, there would be at least one person who would not be there. During meetings, members of various working groups were pleading for more engagement, because they were struggling to manage their tasks. This shows the village is under the constant strain of a lack of capacity. A resident who gave a tour of the ecovillage said that there is always more to be done, and never enough people to make it all work as well as they would want. She emphasised the need for them to take care of themselves, especially within such a straining environment as an ecovillage under pressure, but it seems there are not enough active people to carry the weight of some people taking a step back. According to Aedan, there is always strain in Cloughjordan, but they try not to let it govern them. His approach is to make plans for the ecovillage despite the pressures, and trust the rest will follow.

## 6.2 The Pervasiveness of Capitalism

In this section, I argue that the lack of capacity in Cloughjordan is not due to unwillingness, but flaws in the ways that the ecovillage is set up. Buying land and building a house in Cloughjordan is expensive.

You have to have a well-paid job and come to Cloughjordan with two breadwinners to afford moving there. If this is a possibility for you, you will find yourself in the difficult position where you will have to spend most of your time working and will therefore not be able to contribute to the village as much as you would perhaps like. For many, even if they would work full-time, they would still not be able to move to Cloughjordan. In section 4.3, I introduced Lucia, who keeps returning to Cloughjordan since her volunteering period, because she enjoys being part of a community where people share her concerns about the climate and ecological crisis. Despite the community struggling to come together, the aim to be a cohesive ecovillage dedicated to sustainability is enough for her to feel at home in Cloughjordan. Therefore, she is dreaming of moving to Cloughjordan, but she is worried it might never happen, because she cannot afford to live there. The income she will be able to make will likely not suffice. She is not the only one. Volunteers, other short-term stayers, and children from residents constantly want to come back, enamoured by the promise the ecovillage holds, but there is no space for them and the space that is available, is often outside of their budgets. There are plans for cheaper living options, but these are still in the beginning stages. If they were allowed to build compost toilets, tiny houses could already be built, but the municipality currently does not allow this. Aedan admits that setting up more ecovillages is not necessarily going to happen, because politics are becoming more intrusive. Even if the ecovillage would like to do things differently, they do not feel able to.

If you do have the income, it is still not possible to come to Cloughjordan at the moment, because no new houses have been built since 2013 due to the wastewater problems. In the initial plans, the amount of people living in Cloughjordan was twice as big. It is thus not strange capacity is lacking. This also means that since the beginning of the formation of the group, there has been little reinvigoration from young people. When Aedan and his wife moved to Cloughjordan, they did not consider themselves old, but this has since changed.

We have begun to grow old here. As many people have. I mean, that's the difficulty about not being able to build out the ecovillage and get in a lot of younger people. And that, I mean, we're feeling that very much now, I think.

If a home in Cloughjordan were to become vacant due to members passing away or leaving, the buying of a house is similar to any other market. There is no veto for new people coming to live in the village and no formal process to introduce members to the community. The volunteers expressed their frustration with this because Cloughjordan therefore risks attracting people who do not share their vision or commitment. To them, the ecovillage feels more like a beautiful living option for those with financial means than a community.

Additionally, the ecovillage misses the opportunity to specifically foreground marginalised peoples who would bring in new perspectives, even though residents express that they would like the ecovillage to be more diverse. The demographic makeup of Cloughjordan is indeed rather homogenous. Due to the way the village currently works, almost everyone is of age, and everyone is middle class. Black, fat, disabled or otherwise marginalised peoples are less likely to find their home in Cloughjordan. Therefore, the environmental justice critique that Chitewere and Taylor offer is also partially applicable to Cloughjordan. By following the ruralist impulse and not having more affordable housing available, they have created a community that is inaccessible to most (Chitewere and Taylor 2010, 155–68). Many residents speak out against global injustices and networks with social justice movements are being created, but those facing the most deprivation and environmental disadvantage are not the ones who can benefit from Cloughjordan's utopia building directly, making the ecovillage a safe haven for the middle class. It is not that the residents would not have liked it to be different, but Cloughjordan is a testament to the pervasiveness of capitalism. When accessibility depends on how well paid your job is, it might be nearly impossible to make the ecovillage a place for the many. This does not only make the village a disappointment from a justice perspective, but also leads to a community with little capacity and a lack of diversity that, just like permaculture describes (Holmgren 2002), would have made the community more resilient.

Cloughjordan is faced with the very real conditions that make it nearly impossible for the community to reach its ideals, although the process of trying to reach those ideals is in itself noteworthy (Lockyer 2007, 1–23). Aedan himself, although thoroughly enthusiastic about the ecovillage, therefore also sees ecovillages more as models, as monasteries of this time, than as viable ways of living that work for everyone. He thinks it is only for specific people who feel very committed to the vision. Characterising Cloughjordan as a model is remarkable because it is in line with the conclusion from the previous chapter that Cloughjordan is a community by design, rather than by practice. The intellectual ideas behind the ecovillage appear to be more significant than the lived reality because it is the ideas that could convince people that a more sustainable way of living is possible. Seeing Cloughjordan as a monastery is also telling. It does not only emphasize the ideal of community, but also stresses the value of preserving knowledge. Monasteries are places where various types of knowledge are stored (Chen 2021). In his discussion with a group of students, Aedan focused on the lessons that Cloughjordan has learned, such as the building of sustainable housing, and he sees Cloughjordan as the place where such knowledge is kept safe. He is also passionate about preserving the Irish language and bringing back Celtic traditions and would love for this to be more prominent in Cloughjordan. Characterising Cloughjordan as a monastery is testament to this. He sees the village as a utopia in the sense that utopia is not a place of perfection, but a place in which

residents live working towards a horizon that keeps moving and store all that they learn along the way.

### 6.3 The Fragility of Community

Next to the lack of face-to-face contact, the limited capacity, and the little diversity, there are other factors that make the community not as connected as it would like to be. I have learned that conflict is also part of life in Cloughjordan. One resident told me once that Cloughjordan might seem like a utopia, but it is not paradise. He said that people may pretend it is wonderful, but at the same time they do not say hello to their neighbours because of things that have happened in the past. I have observed that ideas within the community indeed often differ greatly. This is for example on the politics of sustainability. Saoirse's account of the destroyed mound is a good example of vastly different perspectives coming together in the same space. What I also found telling, is that my host told me that some residents are 'doomers' who believe society will collapse and self-sufficiency must thus soon be reached, while he himself has a more hopeful perspective on the future. Lota is a Portuguese dancer who moved to Cloughjordan a few years ago and tries to bring difficult subjects to the surface with her arts practice. One of the subjects she once explored is that of taking the plane. She describes that due to Ireland being an island 'there's still a flying mentality, and so I wanted a project that sort of brought to the fore the idea that you don't have to fly.' Another one of her projects was on how residents relate to food, and on the need to get more people to join the farm. This is something that resonates with Abigail, who takes care of the distribution of farm produce and feels passionate about the value that the fresh food could bring to residents' lives. She said:

... it's surprising to me, or a bit of a disappointment, that we don't have more members from the ecovillage that are members of the farm. So, we have approximately a 100 adults living here, but we probably only have 40 or 50 of those that are members of the farm, because it's too expensive. And for me, what's too expensive is buying litres of Coca-Cola and flying to Europe, you know, a couple of times a year, and having new clothes, and buying expensive cars, which I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a lot of expensive cars here, really big, posh houses. Those things, having the best technology – people buy these iPhones that cost them like €1600,-. Like, to me, what you put into your body, what you're doing to the soil, to the air, to the people that work on the farm, that's what is richness to me, you know.

This quote shows that there are indeed significant differences in residents' priorities, and that Abigail feels a disconnection between herself and other residents, who make vastly different decisions. Also beyond the topic of sustainability, politics differ. Aedan told me that he once described Cloughjordan as a socialist island beyond capitalism in the press, but he got backlash from residents who did not

want him to use such contested terms. According to Abigail, COVID also played an important part in breaking down connections between people. She did not get a vaccine for various reasons, and she said that 'if you didn't have a vaccine or if you wanted to talk about why you didn't want to take the vaccine, you were shut down.' Under the constant strain of financial struggle and a lack of capacity, it is not surprising that disagreements have the possibility to escalate into conflicts that make residents fall out with the community and feel disillusioned from the promise the ecovillage holds. Izabel has often seen how disagreements have impacted the community negatively, and she would love for people to become more acceptant of having different opinions. Personally, she does not mind the disagreements, but she also understands why it happens: 'if they didn't have strong opinions, they wouldn't have started this anyway.'

Ecovillages are often critiqued for their escapist nature, and the inaccessibility of Cloughjordan is a testament to that, but at the same time I would argue that with the fundamental structure of the ecovillage, separating themselves from the rest of society is an illusion. Additionally, I would argue that these disagreements show that discussions that are happening outside of the ecovillage seep into the ecovillage and create divisions between people. It is therefore not surprising residents feel conflicted about how they should relate to the broader society. I was specifically struck by the discussion after the permaculture and community talk. To the question of how the ecovillage could engage more with global issues, one resident responded that they will first have to do things right within their own community. I saw many nodding heads in the room, but also one resident who responded firmly that if they first want to get everything right here, they will never get to contribute to the rest of society. She believed they cannot wait for perfection. This point of discussion came up often in the days thereafter, showing how alive this discussion is in Cloughjordan.

Despite the inseparability of Cloughjordan and the broader society, residents continuously, and often probably unconsciously, create divisions between themselves and others. The main way they do so is by setting themselves apart from the city. Alícia, the Catalan volunteer, expressed a strong dislike for the city. She grew up in a small village where she had a lot of freedom to go the forest and the mountains. When she was around seven years old, her parents moved to Barcelona, but she always kept longing for her village. Even though by now she has lived in the city for most of her life, she felt deep down that she did not want to be there. Going to Cloughjordan was a way for her to escape. In one of our conversations, she told me she needed to get out of the city, because the people there are out of touch with reality. Many of my participants lived in the city at some point in their life and expressed both their dislike with the way of living they experienced there, as well as their gratitude for how different living in Cloughjordan is. The city thus becomes the antithesis of life in the ecovillage, but I would argue that this separation creates a stereotype of what life in the city is like. To

state that all city dwellers are out of touch with reality goes against Cloughjordan's own commitments to have an inclusive plan of change. Aedan articulated this statement during the discussion with students, but at the same time he himself also created a contrast between Cloughjordan and the city multiple times in our conversations. The conviction of not wanting to present themselves as being inherently different or better, does not take away that occasionally a contrast between 'us' and 'them' is created. I would argue that such contrasts give meaning to the commitment residents have made to Cloughjordan. Because ecovillagers feel so conflicted about the community, it is meaningful for them to create some sense of togetherness. Through the creation of a 'them', an 'us' also materialises.

What life looks like outside of the ecovillage thus impacts life within Cloughjordan, but there is also an inherent challenge in living in a community. I described earlier that conflict plays a role in ecovillage life. When you share a land together and organise yourselves collectively, such disagreements and disappointments become inescapable. Lota described to me how living in community is a fragile endeavour. Because information travels quickly within a small group of people, you have to be careful with what you share with people. She used to be someone who shows herself easily, but now she is more hesitant to let down her guard. Before moving to Cloughjordan, when she met someone new and showed up vulnerably, and they would eventually find out they did not fit well together, it would not be a problem.

I don't have to go to meetings with them and they're not my neighbours. I don't have to walk in the same circles. ... Here, if something happens, you have to negotiate being in a members' meeting, working together as part of a group. And so everything is slightly more fragile if it breaks.

This shows how complicated living in community truly is. Pressures from outside and within the ecovillage affect the fabric holding the community together. Even with a Mediation and Conflict Transformation Group, conflict simmers under the surface, and residents are struggling to find their way in this alternative way of living. I therefore did not find it surprising that in my insight session in which I shared my conclusion that the community could learn more from each other, one participant said it is important to not forget the need for individuality. More extensive interdependency would be too fragile, so residents struggle to find a way between the individual and the communal.

#### 6.4 From Awareness to a New Cloughjordan Ecovillage

It would be unfair, though, not to acknowledge the fact that the ecovillage is very aware of its lack of cohesion. Some time ago, a survey was conducted among residents and one of the main conclusions was that the residents were disappointed with the lack of connection they felt with one another. In meetings, it was explicitly acknowledged that many members are missing, and that there is a need to

bring previously active members back into the community and heal the pain that has been felt. At a dinner party, a resident did not hesitate to say he believes residents are destroying their own community. Striking did I find the statement from someone who was sitting across from me. He considers Cloughjordan either a minor success, or a massive failure, but leaning towards the second. Especially in a more relaxed setting, residents were thus very open to share their disappointments in Cloughjordan. To transform Cloughjordan's lack of cohesion, the Navigation Group presented a year-long plan facilitated by action researcher Hilary Bradbury at the beginning of my fieldwork. This process will hopefully help the community to acknowledge past hurts and move towards shaping their visions for the future of the ecovillage. I choose to believe that, with commitment, the community may reach greater cohesion than they currently experience.

A group that the community may look towards for inspiration is the group of volunteers and volunteer coordinators. In conversation with them about Cloughjordan, they were perhaps the sharpest regarding the lack of cohesion. It is not that they do not understand why Cloughjordan is the way that it is, but they are not afraid to also be critical. One volunteer told me that I might still want to go to other ecovillages to continue my research, because due to the disconnection Cloughjordan is not really an ecovillage to him. Everyone may smile, but he thinks it is a mask. It is not that there is malevolence behind this mask, but under it there is simply nothing. According to him, most people do not want to commit to community here. One of the volunteer coordinators called Cloughjordan a retirement plan in which people share nothing but a heating system and a farm. Even then, the service company is partially run by people outside of the ecovillage, not everyone is a member of the farm, and it is run by volunteers. Such perspectives might seem harsh knowing that residents would love for Cloughjordan to be different from what it currently is, but the volunteer perspective is likely this harsh because they know what a different experience may look like. One of them called themselves 'the community within the community'. Because they have no obligations outside of the farm, they have the capacity to work together towards their goals and because they live together they have much face-to-face contact. Not unimportant is that they are incredibly dependent on each other, because they live together and share the experience. For Alícia, this is the first time living with people she did not know before, and for her it was a helpful experience to learn how to live together. She knew these people would not necessarily think the same way as she does, but they are all here for a reason and that is 'big enough to be like a bond'. With this in mind, the volunteers have committed to moving past their differences and finding a way to exist side by side. Still, it is important to acknowledge that shaping the community in a similar way to the volunteering group is currently not possible due to the inherent, seemingly unescapable structure of the ecovillage.



In section 2.3, I proposed that the role of the community is crucial to understanding residents' processes of relearning relationships of more-than-human entanglement. In this chapter, I have explored what community living in Cloughjordan means. With the absence of much face-to-face contact, the limited capacity, the lack of diversity, and the simmering conflicts, Cloughjordan shows the complexities of relearning to adapt to a communitarian way of life. Residents experience little cohesion and are in a continuous process of trying to find each other amidst their differences. In the conclusion, I will reiterate these points and bring them together with the conclusions from the previous chapters. I will reflect on what this means for relearning more-than-human entanglement, and I will give recommendations to residents on how they could move towards a new Cloughjordan Ecovillage.

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1 Cloughjordan Ecovillage: Complex Human and More-than-Human Realities

At the beginning of this thesis, I have outlined that the climate and ecological crises expresses the need for disrupting nature-culture dualism and moving towards a way of being in the world that acknowledges the entanglement of human and other-than-human beings. I have explained that research on this topic would be well-suited to be executed in an ecovillage, due to their supposedly holistic ontology. I have proposed three sub-questions, which each address a part of my main question on the relearning of relationships of more-than-human entanglement as an alternative to nature-culture dualism. The first sub-question focuses on what the more-than-human relationships in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage currently are, the second one aims to answer how these relationships have changed throughout ecovillagers' lives, and the last one looks at the role of the community in these changes.

In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated that Cloughjordan Ecovillage aims to be a cohesive community where like-minded people come together to dedicate themselves to more sustainable ways of living. I have argued that there is a large variety of more-than-human relationships in Cloughjordan, and that the differences between these relationships are mostly due to changes residents have made to their daily practices, according to Ingold's concept of becoming (Ingold 2016). For residents who have the time to interact with other-than-humans actively and on a daily basis, relationships are more embodied than for those residents whose lives do not allow for practices that would help them foster their more-than-human relationships. Because direct, sensorial engagement is central to the process of relearning, the main contribution the community could make to relearning more-than-human entanglement is creating room for shared practices that involve other-than-humans interactively, but the focus of the ecovillage lies elsewhere. Through the language of permaculture, residents find a way to talk together about their more-than-human relationships and create an implicit feeling of relatedness, but in the way that permaculture is interpreted it often remains on the level of the intellectual. Techno-managerial narratives are therefore constantly being reproduced, even though there are also many residents who resist these. Cloughjordan appears to be a model, a community by design rather than by practice, where intellectual exploration prevails over embodied relearning. Not all residents resonate with this approach, and different ways of knowing and being therefore come to the surface and are being played out. The spiritual relationships that residents experience, in all their shapes and sizes, however, do not play out on the public stage. There is both a resistance to and a desire for making this aspect of the experience of the more-than-human a collective endeavour. I have argued that this vulnerable topic is not collectively explored, due to the

lack of general cohesion that residents experience. The relearning of more-than-human entanglement rarely takes place in a communal way because, in general, the community struggles to adopt a communitarian way of life. There is a lack of face-to-face contact between residents, and a lack of capacity to organise more together. Despite its intentions, due to the inherent structure of the ecovillage, it does not escape capitalism and a lack of diversity follows. The real conditions of the ecovillage disrupt its ideals. Additionally, forces outside of the ecovillage weather the fabric from within and create disagreements that escalate into conflicts that are still simmering under the surface. Community holds within itself a certain fragility that makes cohesion in the ecovillage a challenge, which, in turn, makes the relearning of more-than-human entanglement a complex process. Due to the disappointments residents feel, contrasts with the rest of society are created to explain commitments made to the project. The community does, however, acknowledge its lack of interconnection, and is currently in the midst of a process to create more cohesion among themselves.

Following these results, I argue that the relearning of more-than-human entanglement in the Cloughjordan Ecovillage is intertwined in the process of relearning *human* entanglement. Although the initial focus of my research was only on the relearning of the more-than-human, I realised that the two are, in fact, inseparable. During my fieldwork, I have seen residents learning from other-than-humans directly through their senses, but I have also seen the potential for relearning via connections that residents have with one another. This, perhaps, might be the core of disrupting nature-culture dualism. The urgency of the climate and ecological crisis holds within itself a need for creating radically different relationships with other-than-humans, and the breaking down of exploitative and oppressive systems, but I argue that literature on the more-than-human (e.g. Haraway 2015; Ingold 2000; Latour 2004; Swanson et al. 2017; Tsing 2013) does not show sufficiently how relationships that people have with one another affect how they relate to other-than-humans. Subjects that, initially, do not seem related to the more-than-human – like residents in an ecovillage struggling with time and capacity – may, in reality, influence the more-than-human relationships that these residents aim to have. Although likely subconsciously and unwillingly, with the focus on the disconnection between humans and other-than-humans, it is that which plays out between humans that does not get enough explicit attention, therefore reinforcing exactly those dualisms that this literature critiques.

With my research, situated within a society where dualism prevails, I have brought to light the complexities that ecovillages experience in trying to create an alternative to the status quo. Due to the focus within anthropology of the more-than-human on indigenous communities (e.g. Chao 2022; Chua 2021; Haberman 2013; Kimmerer 2020; Rose 2008), there is not enough attention being paid to how people living in dualist societies try and struggle to create more-than-human relationships that disrupt nature-culture dualism. I argue that residents of utopic projects and academics need to be

honest about the messiness of community, and the relearning of both human as well as more-than-human entanglement. Ecovillages should not be idealised (e.g. Brombin 2019; Litfin 2012), but taken seriously as spaces where the struggles of breaking with the status quo play out. It is only through being honest and open that we, beings who dream of another world, may come a little bit closer to our ideals.

## 7.2 Limitations and Further Research on Relearning More-than-Human Entanglement

Following my data, these conclusions come forward prominently, and are supported with both my own observations as well as thoughts vocalised by participants. There are, however, limitations to my research, which point towards suggestions for further research. First, I suggest that more research on the relearning of more-than-human entanglement must be done, because knowledge on these processes is still limited. I suggest that the human part of more-than-human entanglement must be considered integral to this research. In the design of my research, I did not do this initially and focused on the more-than-human relationships in Cloughjordan, only to later extend this into a more elaborate study on the community aspect of the ecovillage. I suggest that it would be worthwhile to do more research on Cloughjordan Ecovillage that takes both the human as well as the more-than-human into account from the beginning. It would be especially interesting to develop (arts-based) methods that synergise the two. Since residents are currently in the middle of a process of creating a more cohesive community, it would be interesting to compare the results from such research with the conclusions this thesis proposes. Because ecovillages differ greatly among themselves, and Cloughjordan is a community that many residents themselves consider not very connected, it would be interesting to do a comparative study between different ecovillages and other community and sustainability-driven settlement projects to understand the differences between these spaces and how these differences shape the more-than-human relationships. This way, ecovillages could also learn from each other. Generally, collaborative research processes could help ecovillages and similar projects come closer to their aims. I would have liked to do such collaborative action research in Cloughjordan, but due to a lack of time, I have not been able to do so. Lastly, I suggest that significant contributions to the subject of more-than-human relearning could be made when these processes would also be researched in spaces that do not explicitly create an alternative to the status quo. It would be interesting to understand marginal processes of relearning by doing research with, for example, people living in the city practicing community gardening. Research on this could point towards insights on whether the relearning of more-than-human entanglement must take place in place-based communities, or that other ways of coming together might also contribute to this process.

### 7.3 Recommendations for Cloughjordan Ecovillage

On providing recommendations for Cloughjordan Ecovillage, I want to start with acknowledging that I understand that changing the fundamentals of the ecovillage is a nearly impossible task. I understand that to step out of the basic workings of the village, probably the only options would be having a very wealthy donor provide residents with a piece of land on which to build their community, or squatting a space and therefore risking repression from the state. What I will say, however, is that through continuing to build networks with climate, social, and environmental justice movements, they could find ways to make not the ecovillage itself, but the movement, more in line with concerns of justice.

My other recommendations are related to the current process of trying to create a more cohesive community. In line with my conclusions, I would recommend the community to see the cohesion they are looking for also as an endeavour to create more-than-human relationships that are embodied, next to intellectual. The more-than-human relationships would benefit from a more cohesive community where experiential and spiritual ways of knowing and being may come to the surface, where they are safely discussed and experienced together. At the same time, the community may find more cohesion *through* the more-than-human. Permaculture is showing the beginning of how shared more-than-human relationships create a feeling of connectedness, but residents could expand on this. When the two are truly taken together, human and more-than-human, nature-culture dualism may be disrupted with time, commitment, shared practices, and dialogue. It is then that the idea of one integrated whole may find its way on the horizon; a whole of humans, other-than-humans, and all beings that eventually turn into hum(us): the soil that will hold us all.

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## 9. Appendix

### 9.1 Interview Guide

#### **Introduction:**

- (Re)introduce myself and my research.
  - Student Anthropology and Development Studies RU Nijmegen, the Netherlands
  - Researching the relearning of relationships between humans and other-than-humans
- Explain the goal of the interview.
  - Understanding relationships with other-than-humans (plants, rocks, the landscape etc.), how they have changed when moving to the ecovillage, and what the role of the community was in these changes
  - Motivations for moving to Cloughjordan and the challenges experienced
  - Emphasise participant to use their own terminology (e.g. relationship does not resonate, but connection does)
- Go over ethical procedures.
  - Participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any moment.
  - Storage and anonymity details
  - Ask consent for audio recording

#### **(Cultural probes):**

*In case participants did not do the cultural probes, I ask about their current more-than-human relationships.*

Questions for inspiration to ask in relation to the cultural probes:

- Can you explain to me what we see in this picture?
- What words come up when you look back at this picture?
- Why have you taken a photo of this?
- Why have you drawn this on top of the photo?
- What does the drawing add to the photo?
- Why have you chosen this colour/medium/shape etc.?
- Can you tell me how this picture makes you feel?
- How did you feel when making this picture/drawing?
- How does this picture relate to the others you have made?

**Relearning in the ecovillage:**

*Summarise more-than-human relationships.*

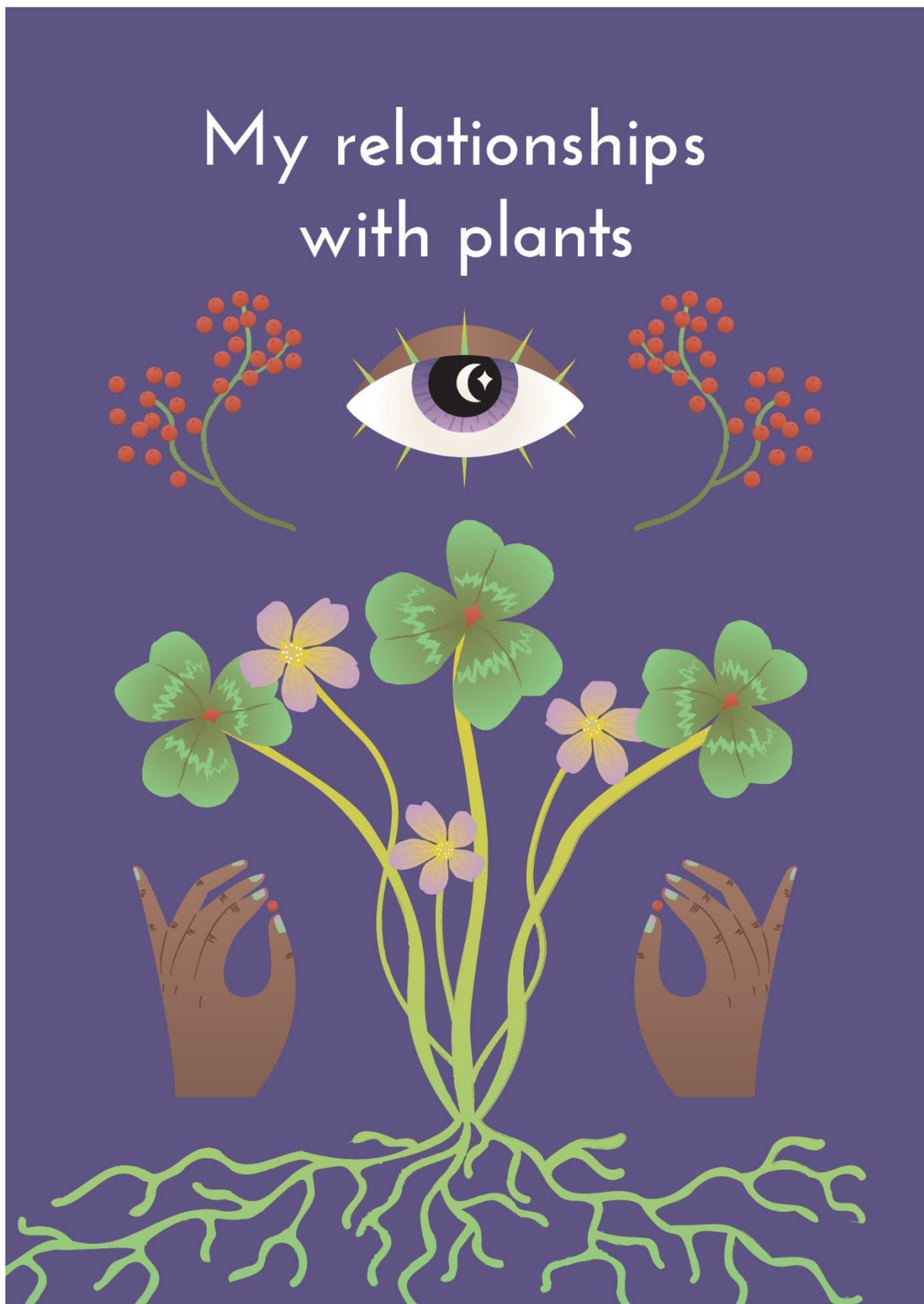
- Were your more-than-human relationships different before you moved to Cloughjordan?  
How were they different?
- How do you think your more-than-human relationships changed when you moved to Cloughjordan?
- Who or what contributed to the change?
- What is the role of the community in these changes?

**Moving to and living in Cloughjordan:**

- What were your motivations for moving to Cloughjordan?
- What was your process of moving to Cloughjordan like?
- Were your more-than-human relationships part of your motivation for moving to Cloughjordan? In what ways?
- Could you describe a happy moment in Cloughjordan? And what about a difficult moment?
- Why do you think there are not more ecovillages?

**Conclusion:**

- Reiterate goal
- Considering this goal, do you think there is anything I have missed?
- Thanking for participation



# Hello!

Thank you for participating in my research! In this booklet I will ask you to do a creative exercise. I am wondering, what are your relationships with plants?

## Who am I?

I am Elsa van Dam, 23 years old, and I'm currently doing my MSc thesis of Anthropology and Development Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. I am passionate about anything creative, the souls of plants, and communities creating alternatives to the status quo.

## What is my research about?

In my research I explore the question of how human-plant relationships may be relearned. I look at current human-plant relationships in Cloughjordan, practices in which plants play a central role, and the ways in which relationships with plants may change.

## How will your answers be used?

I will use your answers for two purposes. First of all, they will be used to explore answers to my research questions. Secondly, I will use them to prepare our interviews. All data will be handled according to ethical standards and no information will be traceable to individuals.

## The exercise

For the exercise, I ask you to do the following:

1. Make 10 photos of the ecovillage that symbolise your relationships with plants. This can be a plant in your house, a beautiful view, a hobby, a memory, et cetera.
2. Send the photos to me so I can print them and give them back to you. My contact details are on the next page.



3. Draw on top of each photo what the camera doesn't capture. This can be anything! Maybe the feeling it gives you is missing, the history of the picture should be included, or maybe something is left out of sight - like the roots of a tree. It can be both abstract as well as figurative. Use whatever medium you feel comfortable with.
4. Stick the pictures in the booklet on the following pages. Under each picture there is room to write down your thoughts.

If, at any moment, you have any questions, you can always contact me. Have fun!



Kind regards,  
Elsa

#### Contact details

+31640122753 (WhatsApp/Telegram/Signal)  
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## Now it's your turn!

My name is:

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My age is:

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I have been living in  
Cloughjordan since:

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This is me!

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### 9.3 Participant Overview

Name	Participated in an interview	Role in Cloughjordan	Notes
<b>Izabel</b>	Yes	Resident (since a few years)	
<b>Chiara</b>	Yes	Volunteer	Because she is a volunteer, I have often talked with her throughout my research.
<b>Saoirse</b>	Yes	Resident (since a long time)	Next to the interview, Saoirse and I did two walk and talks, one before and one after the interview.
<b>Aedan</b>	Yes	Volunteer (since a long time)	Because he was my gatekeeper we have discussed the progress of my research several times during my stay.
<b>Rebin</b>	Yes	Resident (since a few years)	He was a volunteer before he became a resident. We have met up several times since the interview.
<b>Niamh</b>	Yes	Volunteer	Because she is a volunteer, I have often talked with her throughout my research.
<b>Abigail</b>	Yes	Resident (since a long time)	
<b>Lota</b>	Yes	Residents (since a few years)	
<b>Alícia</b>	Yes	Volunteer	Because she is a volunteer, I have often talked with her throughout my research.
<b>Aria</b>	Yes	Volunteer	Because she is a volunteer, I have often talked with her throughout my research.
<b>Lucia</b>	No	Short-term resident	Because she was one of the other people my hosts hosted, I have often talked with her. A few years ago, she was a volunteer at the farm.



