Commoning in Urban Gardens in Brussels, an Ecofeminist approach to the Urban Commons

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Abstract

This research focuses on the concepts of commons and ecofeminism in order to analyse three urban community gardens in Brussels Capital Region. The concept of commons enables this research to identify urban community gardens as spaces that practice commoning by using and managing the resource – the garden – collectively. Whereas the ecofeminist lens helps to understand and analyse if the ‘logic of domination’ – characterized by the subordination of women, people of colour, lower class people and nature in social patriarchal structures – are reproduced not only among the members, outsiders and partners, but also between the users and the environment. Therefore, combining both concepts it is possible to seek social, environmental and gender transformation by recognizing diversity – or the lack of – and redefine social reproduction in order to build a cooperative society. Based on qualitative research by participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, it concludes that urban community gardens are potential alternatives that challenge the current patriarchal and neoliberal-capitalist system. The results of the case studies with the support of the theory indicate contextual factors that impact the process of commoning. And it concludes with four key factors that contribute to overcoming the ‘logic of domination’ in urban gardens through the practice of commoning 1) social, cultural and knowledge exchange; 2) ecological responsibility; 3) power decentralization; 4) social and ecological interdependency.
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1. Introduction

Alternatives to escape, challenge or co-exist with the current capitalist-neoliberal system have been studied throughout the last decades by many scholars from various fields. Scholars and activists have come together to find new solutions and put in practice the ‘commoning’ efforts around the world, which is rooted in the literature about commons. Helfrich & Bollier (2019) define commons as a ‘living social system’ shaped by the physical resource and social process. The key aspects are the 1) resources, 2) the ‘commoners’, i.e., the people who use the resource and 3) ‘commoning’ that is the process of sharing knowledge, communication, conflict, negotiations and reciprocal support to manage the resource (Kip et al., 2015).

All literature portrays the origin of the concept of commons mainly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, with the practices of shared land in the rural context (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Cangelosi, 2015; Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Ostrom, 1990). Commons refers traditionally to forests, groundwater, and fishing, but in the last decade it is also used in other domains, such as knowledge (Ramakrishnan et al., 2021), cultural (Bowers, 2009), digital (Fuchs, 2020), health (McGinnis, 2013) and urban commons (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2020; Harvey, 2012; Hess, 2008; Huron, 2018). The last domain is the main focus of this research.

While the term ‘commons’ is well known in academia by several researchers, it lacks a popular language to understand contemporary commons (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019). A body of the literature have pointed out that commons happen through commoning (Bollier, 2015; Bollier & Helfrich, 2015; Helfrich & Bollier, 2019; Linebaugh, 2008; Mies, 2014a; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001). To demonstrate such practice, this research zooms in on urban community gardens and its social dynamics as the ground to explore the concept of commons and commoning. Even though there is also a great body of literature about urban gardens (Cangelosi, 2015; Colding & Barthel, 2013; Kurtz, 2001; Linn, 1999; Rogge et al., 2015; White, 2011), there has not been much explored about the commoning dynamics and to what extent the dynamics are inclusive in the urban context. At the same time that diversity and density might be favourable to flourishing collective projects, it also might represent an obstacle due to self-interests. These ambiguous dynamics in the urban environment offer an opportunity to research how urban community gardens are produced and reproduced through commoning as a social process.
In light of this ambiguity, the case studies will be analysed through an ecofeminist lens with the goal of understanding if the ‘logic of domination’, represented by the subordination of women and nature in social patriarchal structures, are reproduced in urban community gardens. Patriarchy is defined by the male domination and it has shaped the values of our culture (hooks, 2004). Feminists and ecofeminists have pointed out the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy (Mellor, 2002; Mies, 2014b; Warren, 2001). In fact, “[c]apitalism is just the latest avatar of patriarchy. If we want to overcome both, we have to take a different path” (Mies, 2014b, p. xxiv). The oppression and exploitation of women, nature and colonies have been a precondition for the continuation of capital accumulation and growth model.

Finally, the ecofeminist lens allows researchers to analyse whether and how the privilege of some individuals lies on the exploitation of others and the environment. Whilst it challenges the dominant patriarchal world view, it also connects biodiversity and cultural diversity. Ecofeminist ethics offer guidance to resist and create alternatives to the patriarchal system, and so does the commons that seek alternatives to the current economic and political models – beyond the market and the state (Kip et al., 2015).

Given the points above, this research contributes primarily to the literature of commons by analysing the dynamics of three urban community gardens in Brussels. Based on qualitative research via semi-structured interviews and participatory observation, it aims at answering the research question: how does the practice of commoning overcome the ‘logic of domination’ in urban collective gardens? What factors contribute to it? Therefore, it is essential to understand who does and does not take part in the projects and how the internal and external social relations were shaped throughout the years.

The research is divided into five chapters in addition to the current introduction. Chapter 2 contextualizes urban gardening with its own concepts and characteristics; and introduces some context on Brussels. Chapter 3 explores the concepts of commons, commoning and ecofeminism and it concludes with a conceptual framework. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the methods applied ranging from selection of the cases to semi-structured interviews. Chapter 5 draws on the empirical findings by introducing the cases, analysing the results and providing four key factors for the practice of commoning. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with insights that arose from the research, answering the research question and suggesting further research.
2. Setting the ground

2.1. Introduction to urban gardening

Urban gardening has been an object of many academic fields in the last decades, ranging from social to natural sciences, from urban planning to health. This research uses urban gardening as the ground to explore the combination of two concepts, commons and ecofeminism, in three case studies in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR).

Urban gardens can be considered a combination of social and ecological activism aiming to reshape not only the space in the urban fabric but also the relations among humans (Cangelosi, 2015) and between humans and non-humans (Nightingale, 2019). Federici (2012) states that urban gardens are an important resource to take back control over the environment and food production. However, urban gardens represent more than food production, they are spaces of social-cultural exchange (Federici, 2012; Linn, 1999) as well as spaces for tacit knowledge (Barthel et al., 2013).

2.1.1. An umbrella concept interchangeable with other terms?

Through the literature review it is possible to find few different terms referring to urban garden, such as community garden (Colding et al., 2013; Colding & Barthel, 2013; Kurtz, 2001; Linn, 1999), allotment gardens (Barthel et al., 2013; Colding et al., 2013), intercultural garden (Müller, 2012), urban gardening as a movement (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2012; Cangelosi, 2015; Federici, 2012) or as spaces of resistance (White, 2011). Besides, there is no clear distinction between the terms ‘urban gardening’ and ‘urban agriculture’ (Ernwein, 2014; Rogge et al., 2015) as both share the same general definition of places in urban and peri-urban areas where people cultivate food, herbs, flowers and other species. Amidst the variety of terms, the main scope of this research is urban gardens that are organized collectively.

Kurtz (2001) observes the historical context of urban gardening in American cities and states that the two world wars encouraged national gardening programs as a patriotism action and social order, rather than a means of subsistence. From the 1960s onward gardens in vacant lots were referred to as ‘community gardens’ and aimed to empower neighbourhoods to be self-sufficient, be closer to nature and promote sociability. On the other hand, White (2011) points out the inequality and segregation issues faced in Detroit, where people living in suburbs have much more access to food.
supply than lower-income people living in African American neighbourhoods. In West Europe, during the period of the world wars the gardens were important to guarantee food in cities (Rogge et al., 2015). But with the economic growth in the 1960s, people stopped cultivating urban vegetable gardens, as they started having purchasing power to buy food and these gardens were viewed as symbols of high social status (Müller, 2012).

The trend of industrialization and urbanization resulted in the concentration of agricultural production in the countryside, while cities became the spaces for industrial activities and production of goods. Due to this trend, inequalities, segregation and social problems became more visible through poverty and lack of green spaces in some neighbourhoods (Maas et al., 2006). According to Rogge et al. (2015), allotment gardens emerged through these urban conditions for and by lower income population with the goal to generate more recreational opportunities and health care. Nowadays, there is a movement of gardens returning to cities (Müller, 2012). They are framed as ‘community gardens’ and conceived by a community who organizes, manages and maintains within different scopes (Rogge et al., 2015).

2.1.2. Classification of urban gardens

In the literature about commons, urban gardens can be classified as ‘neighbourhood commons’ (Linn, 1999), ‘new commons’ (Hess, 2008), ‘knowledge commons’ (Müller, 2012), ‘urban green commons’ (Colding & Barthel, 2013), and above all as collective action (Rogge et al., 2015).

Rogge et al. (2015) understand ‘community garden’ as a type of ‘urban garden’ and as ‘commons’, since it is organized and maintained collectively. The authors also distinguish urban ‘community’ from ‘allotment’ gardens explaining that the latter differ in terms of organization, management and rules. In Germany, for instance, allotment gardens are protected under federal law. Usually, allotment gardens consist of individual and equal size garden plots within a piece of urban land, and it may or may not hold some elements that are used collectively (Colding et al., 2013; Rogge et al., 2015). According to Colding et al. (2013), allotment garden is similar to gated communities, which the ‘public realm’ is subdivided into ‘club realms’\(^1\). In short, allotment gardens are mainly

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\(^1\) Colding et al. (2013, p. 1041) refer to ‘public realm’ as “all the areas in cities to which the public holds entrance-rights to”. The public realm takes the risk to become private property, thus it fragments the city in ‘smaller publics’ defined as ‘club realm’. The authors give examples ranging from gated communities to roof top terraces (Colding et al., 2013).
different in its property system, where gardeners have the right to manage the plots individually. However, the association behind it has the power to determine the access right on the plots, which often leads to exclusion of outsiders by physical barriers such as fences or hedges (Colding et al., 2013). Outsiders may have access to the common areas, but not to the individual plots.

On the other hand, community gardens are characterized as unstable and short-term constructions. Allotment gardens are usually more formal, while community gardens are traditionally self-organized by a community and its stakeholders (Colding et al., 2013; Rogge et al., 2015). For Krasny & Tidball (2009), community gardens do not only provide a milieu for learning, but also represent heterogeneous environments that integrate food security, social interactions, cultural expression, community activism and environmental restoration.

Community gardens are arenas where urban citizens establish and sustain a threefold relationship with one another, with nature and with the neighbourhood (Kurtz, 2001), and this creates opportunities to build a more democrat society through grassroots gardeners (Linn, 1999). Therefore, urban collective gardens are shaped by a variety of internal and external elements that make it very contextual.

### 2.1.3. Human drivers to urban gardening

It is important to note that motivation to join urban gardening varies from one place to another. In developed countries, for instance, there are barely projects about lack of food (Rogge et al., 2015). What people lack most is time to socialize and participate in collective actions, and urban gardening shows up as an opportunity for social interaction. Cangelosi (2015) goes beyond food production as the main expectation of creating urban gardens and researches the key reasons that give motivation for citizens to join such movements. As the social aspects have been overlooked in the literature, the author aims to frame the practices of resilience in times of crisis.

Nowadays, the focus is mainly on the overuse, enclosure and destruction of the global commons and therefore the local commons are important spaces to raise awareness and to show alternatives.
such as the common use of private property, the local consumption instead of remote consumption and cooperation instead of individual isolation (Müller, 2012). Likewise, Federici (2012) emphasizes the call of Maria Mies who points out that it is necessary firstly a transformation in everyday life in order to review the social division of labour that capitalism has separated. Globalization, for instance, has created a gap between production and consumption intensifying the blindness towards what we eat, what we wear and how we communicate to each other technologically speaking (Federici, 2012). Hence, urban gardening can also be considered as a form of activism as it plays an important role in challenging the neoliberal food production.

When speaking about community gardens, Müller (2012) also highlights the ‘internal commons’ by explaining that reclaiming the commons is also to reclaim people’s consciousness and to turn down the ‘homo economicus’ model, which focuses on competition-oriented individuals and their own advantage. Community gardens may be not only places to learn how to cooperate and interact with each other, but also places that allow gardeners to discover their own bodies to create things and have sensory experiences (Müller, 2012). These experiences represent the (re-)connection with nature through the contact with the soil and the work with the hands. Hence, community gardens offer space to recognize the self at the same time that the individual is part of a collective.

2.1.4. Success factors and tensions in commoning in urban gardens

Rogge et al. (2015) present a range of criteria that enables the study of community gardens as urban commons through material or immaterial elements. Material elements are the size of the resource system, infrastructure and resource units, while work and social time are immaterial elements. These criteria may be shared or divided through specific assignments and tasks. The size of the community also matters for two reasons: first, it defines the level of collective management, and second it allows one to understand the involvement of the community in decision-making processes. In fact, urban gardening as collective management must be analysed on a case-by-case basis (Cangelosi, 2015). Further research attempts to categorize community gardens according to their degree of collectivity, which confirms that social interaction and collective use are the main characteristics of community gardens (Rogge & Theesfeld, 2018). Commons practices require communities at the same time that it creates communities (Müller, 2012).
Another important feature is land ownership, which might be necessary for the long-term performance and maintenance of urban commons (Colding et al., 2013). Even though many gardeners are not owners and have short-term and insecure land contracts, they still invest a lot of time and energy to create the green spaces in neighbourhoods (Rogge et al., 2015). For Müller (2012) the most important ingredient for a successful community is not about the predefinition and restricted rules, but about the openness and even an atmosphere of untidiness, which gives space to cooperation and desires to create new ideas. As already mentioned before, community is about the quality of relations following the principles of cooperation and responsibility towards other humans and nature (Federici, 2012).

### 2.2. Contextualizing urban gardening in the Brussels Capital Region

The research was delimited to select three cases in the 19 municipalities of BCR. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis resulted in lots of uncertainty from March 2020 until the current moment, which made it more difficult to be more present in the field, not only for me as a researcher but also for some of the gardeners to ‘garden as usual’. According to Cangelosi (2015), Brussels presents a mix of grassroots actions, local organizations focusing on social and environmental issues, and involvement of governments. For the selection of the cases, it was observed that in Brussels, some vocabulary in French reflects the type of urban garden. For example, in French there are two definitions: potager (vegetable garden) and jardin (garden) and they can be combined with the adjectives collectif (collective) or partagé (shared).

The city region has a fertile ground for activist movements and social mobilization to handle the urban traumas (Reusel et al., 2015) from the modernization of the city since the World Exposition in 1958. The modern city was an adaptation to the needs of the automobile through the development of viaducts, highways and urban highways that also led to urban sprawl and to the wide-scale urban development of high-rise office buildings and hotels in the city center. The process of destruction of neighbourhoods in order to open space for this ‘modernization’ is known as ‘Brusselization’ in the literature (Cahn et al., 2018).

The rapid urbanization of Brussels caused the emergence of different collective groups and activists (Pak & Scheerlinck, 2015). Urban collective gardens are one of the many examples of groups contesting common space in Brussels to create greener neighbourhoods and foster community. The
gardening sites increased significantly in the last two decades and they are widespread in the BCR. For instance, Figure 1 indicates that between 2013 and 2018 it is estimated an increase of 30% in gardening sites – including collective and family gardens\(^3\) – but the total surface area decreased 4% (Bruxelles Environnement, 2020). The report also identified 26 vegetable gardens threatened by construction projects. Some of the gardens disappeared and others had their size decreased, which confirms that such projects might not be free of contestation struggles in the urban area. Moreover, in terms of green space, the BCR presents a high percentage of green areas, yet it is unequally distributed depending on socio-economic status (Pelgrims et al., 2021).

In terms of population, the city region is characterized by a high number of cultural diversities, for instance one third of the population does not have the Belgian nationality and at least half was not born in Belgium (IBSA, 2018).

**Figure 1**

*Collective and family garden 2013 and 2018 in Brussels Capital Region*

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\(^3\) Family gardens (in French: *potager familiaux*) represent individual plots where it is possible to cultivate food. These areas are mainly managed by public organizations i.e., the regional government, municipalities or public companies like Infrabel (Bruxelles Environnement, n.d.).
3. Unpacking the theoretical concepts

3.1. Commons

In her book *Governing the Commons* (1990), Elinor Ostrom discusses the concepts of commons by Garrett Hardin (1968) and Mancur Olson (1965). Hardin is well known for the work *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in which he brings forward that natural resources are always subject to overexploitation and overconsumption. According to Olson, in the logic of collective action, people will always act moved by rational and self-interest. Both ideas have the ‘free rider problem’ as a common issue - people free-ride at the expense of others (Ostrom, 1990). Therefore, Ostrom (1990) opposes these ideas providing a set of ‘eight design principles’ for long-enduring common-pool resources\(^4\) based on several case studies around the world. However, these principles do not necessarily apply to the ‘new commons’ (Hess, 2008).

Currently, many academic studies of commons are somehow connected with Ostrom’s work, although a new term ‘new commons’ has emerged in the academic debate. Hess (2008) offers this new term to recognize all types of commons that have emerged in the last years, like knowledge, cultural, digital commons, and so on. She states that the adjective ‘new’ “evokes a sense of awakening, of reclaiming lost or threatened crucial resources” (Hess, 2008, p. 38). Meanwhile, Mies (2014a) draws on the meaning of ‘old commons’ and emphasizes the main principle that commons cannot exist without a community. Community in which everybody, including children, are responsible to take care and maintain the commons (Mies, 2014a).

For Kip et al. (2015) the rise of the term new commons relates to the process of ongoing urbanization and they seek to explore how commons take shape in the urban environment in relation to state and capital. However, the authors state that the urban space might facilitate the commoning efforts due the diversity and density that makes the field fertile for social mobilization, which plays a big role in managing the collective resource (Kip et al., 2015). On the other hand, urban space can also hinder those efforts due to some barriers, such as indifference and anonymity (Kip et al. 2015). In fact, the new commons calls attention for solutions beyond the market and

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\(^4\) Ostrom (1990) focuses on common-pool resources and common property rights. Common-pool resource means the natural resource system that is subtractable, while common property regime is the social arrangement, how people organize, maintain and preserve the common-pool resource (Hess, 2008; Ostrom, 1990).
state with renewed participatory processes for self-governance especially in local communities (Hess, 2008).

There are many definitions of commons that, in its essence, can be translated to three important aspects, (1) common resources, (2) institutions as commoning practices, (3) commoners (or communities) that represent the people involved (Bollier, 2015; Bollier & Helfrich, 2012; Kip et al., 2015). These three aspects can also be found in “Rebel Cities” (2012) by David Harvey, who dedicates a chapter of the book for ‘urban commons’.

Lamarca (2015) conceptualizes urban commons as “a dynamic social relationship that is configured through time and struggle (...) they are a contested, collective material and immaterial terrain” (p. 168). Urban commons are often related to the struggles and resistance of certain groups surviving the ongoing urbanization and the enclosure of common spaces, which brings forward Henri Lefebvre’s idea of the right to the city (1968). However, Harvey (2012) points out that the right to the city arose primarily from the streets and neighbourhoods as a reclaim from oppressed groups. Lefebvre, as an academic and intellectual, critically investigates and offers inspirational models on how to respond to the urban crisis (Harvey, 2012).

The urban area comprises institutions in multi-levels, making possible the linkage to other places worldwide. It conceives urbanization as a global process and is perceived as the main realm of everyday modern life (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015). The public space as well as urban commons are continuously under threat to be enclosed, privatized, commodified or segregated in different ways. Throughout history, meeting places and arenas have been enclosed in the city at the same time that others are born to claim collective space (Löfgren, 2015).

As stated by Kip et al. (2015), the commons in the city are subjected to the urban dynamics and must deal strategically with the boundaries of collective action and the different urban actors. The challenge is that such boundaries create a sense of community at the same time that create a form of exclusion. However, if the commons wants to overcome the state and market dynamics it must consider the exclusivity in order to not reproduce social divisions (Kip et al., 2015). Huron (2018) also contributes to the urban challenges pointing out three factors that make more difficult to develop commons in urban environment (i) a big, dense and diverse population; (ii) the city as a site of capital accumulation and the urban as the process to absorb capital and labour through investments in the built environment (Harvey, 2012); (iii) the city as a site of state regulation and
surveillance. Considering these last two, state and capital go hand in hand through tension and collaboration in the urbanization process (Huron, 2018).

However, how to reinvent the commons in industrialised societies, which is embedded in the capitalist system? Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen (2001) point out that reinventing the commons means more than just creating new areas with ‘free access’, instead it requires to re-create a local community of people who would be and feel responsible for the land and care for each other as the basis for production and reproduction of life. In fact, the authors also recognize the challenge to establish such communities in a society where individualisation, privatisation and accumulation rule the system (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001). Reclaiming and reinventing the commons in the city is linked to Lefebvre’s idea of right to the city as it starts from grassroots movements, from local people for local people. Since the city is a space that holds diversity and constant change, Kip et al. (2015) reinforce the need to figure out how to foster commoning in this same context.

### 3.1.1. Urban Green Commons

According to Colding & Barthel (2013), the term ‘urban commons’ often gives the notion that commons are ‘public’ or nonexcludable’, however commons are always under the rules and management of a local community or users. For this reason, the authors prefer to define ‘public spaces with open access’ – or entrance rights – as ‘public realm’. Then they define collectively managed urban green spaces as **urban green commons**, that are:

> physical green spaces in urban settings of diverse land ownership that depend on collective organization and management and to which individuals and interest groups participating in management hold a rich set of bundles of rights, including rights to craft their own institutions and to decide whom they want to include in such management schemes (Colding & Barthel, 2013, p. 159).

The research done about urban green commons mainly brings insights on common property rights regime (that goes beyond state and market property regimes). Some authors have pointed out the importance of urban green spaces to practice citizenship (Buijs et al., 2016; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014) and citizen participation in natural resource management (Dennis & James, 2016). Citizen participation can also reproduce existing power hierarchies, whereas grassroots movements, such as community gardens, might create spaces to resist local, or national, policies that are profit-
oriented (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014). Community gardens in the urban fabric are as important to evoke memories in how to grow food (Barthel et al., 2013) as to develop communities.

Yet not much research has been done in how to foster commoning in the urban green spaces. This research attempts to contribute to the practices of commoning in cities and focuses on urban community gardens as an example of urban green commons. Urban gardening can be characterized as a resource where the process of commoning occurs, which will be explored through empirical research.

3.1.2. Commoning in theory

Commons is socially constructed through commoning. Commoning is about being in community (Huron, 2018), and evenly about an ‘insurgent act’ (Lamarca, 2015). Linebaugh (2008) introduces commons as a verb – commoning – rather than a noun. In his work ‘The Magna Carta Manifesto’, he emphasizes that commoning is collective and is embedded in the labour process – the practice, the field. Summarizing, he refers to commoning several times as the practice of mutual aid, trust, fellowship, collective celebration, reciprocity and sense of self. He sees commoning as “part of the order of nature” (p. 103) and as “relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature” (p. 279). Those characteristics are linked to the work of care and what patriarchal capitalism has been considering as female features in order to impose the sexual division of labour. Male features are considered as mind, reason, objectivity, whereas female features are the physical, the body, emotion and subjectivity. Moreover, ecofeminism – which will be elaborated in the next section – exposes that patriarchal capitalism worldviews are rooted in dualistic thinking that justifies the domination and exploitation of women and nature (Warren, 2001).

In the field of diverse economies, Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) refer to commoning as a relational process, which highlights the role of the community by establishing the rules, access, use and benefits of the resource. Based on Christopher Alexander’s approach of Pattern Languages, Helfrich (2015) draws on patterns of commoning following the paradigm of connectedness instead of individual components.

It has been said above that there is no commons without community (Mies, 2014a). In order to become aware of the self through the process of commoning, Helfrich adds that “there is no commoner without commoning” (2015, para. 3). People become a commoner when their values
and worldview are aligned with the practice of commoning. The values of a community are generated through the everyday interaction with each other (Helfrich, 2015), i.e., through commoning. Nevertheless, commoning is not limited to social relations in groups, for instance in urban collective gardens, rather it extends to society as a whole. She explains that these values are not predetermined, but they are developed and renewed every time that commoning happens. Hence, the patterns of commoning shape the dynamic a community experiences voluntarily, without constraints, based on the principle of cooperation (Helfrich, 2015) and responsibility among humans and non-humans, rather than a group of people based on exclusive interests (Federici, 2012).

The practice of commoning includes the management of the resource through decision-making, negotiations, conflicts, communication, rules and tasks, via peer governance. Peer governance is neither about governing for the people (top-down governance), nor about governing with the people (participation), rather it is about governing through the members (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019). It means that it does not rely on hierarchy, but on ‘heterarchy’, which:

brings together top-down and bottom-up (both hierarchical), and peer-to-peer dynamics. (...) It has the potential to bring into alignment responsible individual autonomy and the need for multilevel governance (hence some sort of hierarchy). (...) It tends to have unranked horizontal relationships of power and authority among participants, which enables the role of individual agents within the system to be reconfigured in multiple ways. (...) A hierarchy is a pyramid of rigidly prescribed power relations; a heterarchy allows power to flow dynamically through multiple and changing nodes in a social network (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019, Section 5, para. 63).

The management of a commons is vulnerable (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019; Velicu & García-López, 2018) to external and internal enclosures. Enclosure is the opposite of commoning. Enclosure conveys separation, while commoning stands for connection. Given that vulnerability, peer governance aims at stabilizing social relationships and external dynamics through a collective process of dialogue and self-organization (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019).

From the perspective of commoners, the German Summer school on the Commons developed ‘Eight Points of Orientation for Commoning’ (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015) rooted in the ‘Eight Design Principles’ of Elinor Ostrom (1990). In essence, the eight points address the personal experiences of commoners to all types of commons based on care, collective responsibility and
needs of the group and resources. Every commons is shaped by its singular environment and people, which makes it very contextual. However, the orientation for commoning brings together important values that commoners should take into account to preserve and use the commons in a fair manner for all the members involved.

To conclude, commoning is the process of creating and maintaining social and intergenerational relationships between people in a community, while this same community preserves its environment. As observed by Sato & Soto Alarcón (2019), learning the ways in which commoning occurs, it helps to understand the mechanisms in which a community is produced and performed by humans and non-humans.

### 3.2. Ecofeminism

As a branch of feminism, ecofeminism emerged from political activism and academic critique linking gender and environment issues. The term ‘ecofeminism’ was first used by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in her book ‘Lé Féminisme ou la Mort’ in 1974 to point out the women’s potential to call for an ecological revolution entailing a new relationship between humans and nature, as well as between men and women (Merchant, 1990). Ecological feminism (ecofeminism) is as much theory as political activism, and it has emerged worldwide bringing up ecofeminism perspectives in different ways. Ecofeminism is pluralist, but above all, they share the same concern for bringing up historical relations between ‘women’, ‘nature’ and the devaluation of both as being inferior to the male ‘culture’ (Warren, 2001).

The first branch of ecofeminism was developed in the early 1970s and it was referred to as cultural feminism. The theory of cultural feminism is grounded in human biology stating that women are closer to nature than men because of their reproductive capacities. Hence, it claims that women have a special connection with nature as being a source of female power (Merchant, 1990) and this can help to end the exploitation of both women and nature (Warren, 2001).

Another branch of ecofeminism is the social ecofeminists, which criticized the cultural ecofeminists for being ‘essentialist’ and ‘universalist’. Social ecofeminists state that gender is socially constructed and criticize that cultural ecofeminists can reinforce the same hierarchy patterns they are trying to overcome by emphasizing the dualities male/female, culture/nature, mind/body (Warren, 2001).
The middle ground between cultural and social ecofeminists is called socialist (or materialist) ecofeminism. According to Warren (2001), they state that the association of women-nature is both biologically predisposed and socially constructed. They do not focus solely on the domination of nature, rather they claim that the source of male domination are “complex social patterns called capitalist patriarchy” (Merchant, 1990, p. 103), which leads to the division of labour between men and women in the marketplace and unpaid household work, respectively. Socialist ecofeminists believe that ecological degradation is rooted in the capitalist patriarchy with the idea that nature can be exploited technologically for the progress of humanity (Merchant, 1990). Besides, they made visible that the unjustified domination of nature (‘naturism’) intersects with other forms of human oppression, such as sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, ethnocentrism, and so on (Warren, 2001). Warren and Cheney (1991) refer to these as ‘isms of domination’. Acknowledging the pluralism of ecofeminism and its importance to exist, this research will focus mainly on the lens of socialist ecofeminism.

3.2.1. Raison d’être: Challenging the patriarchal structure?

Feminist bell hooks (2004) describes patriarchy as a political-social system characterized by male domination and power that is superior to everything and everyone considered as weak, for instance females. She states that “we [males and females] are socialized into this system” that “shapes the values of our culture” and claims that “dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is a work that men and women must do together” (hooks, 2004, p. 23-24).

In patriarchal societies, women are the ones who have been handling most of the work of care imposed by the sexual division of labour, which is carried out in the private and invisible spaces of homes following the logic of family institution (Herrero, 2013). Hence, women do not have only the role of producing and reproducing life biologically, but also providing sustenance through their social role (Shiva, 1988) as being a mother, wife or ‘the lady of the house’. Household and care work are often seen as an extension of women’s physiology (Mies, 2014b) by the fact they are able to give birth to a child. It is a definition that imposes the production of life as an activity of nature, and not a human activity as an interaction with nature.

The patriarchal system – or the master model (Plumwood, 2003) – is largely composed by a certain class, race and gender, i.e., a white and male elite, that dominates the key concept of rationality.
The dominant masculinism of the master model is used to define the *human* model embraced by the west (Plumwood, 2003). Ecofeminism is, therefore, a critique to the Western characteristics such as the up-down, hierarchical and dualistic rationality. What is relevant here is the overvaluation of “rationality” used as a means to exclude and oppress women, nature, lower class people and race (Plumwood, 2003). The domination of both women and nature are also considered as social problems grounded in socioeconomic conditions and in patriarchal structures that reinforce these conditions based on the conception of privilege and values of dualism and hierarchy (Daly, 1994; Warren & Cheney, 1991).

Likewise, the concept of ‘sexual division of labour’ implies that male tasks are considered as truly ‘humans’ i.e., rational, conscious, productive, planned; and female tasks are determined by their ‘nature’. According to Mies (2014b), this concept leads to a relationship of dominance between ‘human labour’ (male) and ‘natural activity’ (female). Male labour became the main source to provide all the conveniences of life, introducing dualities between man and nature in society, and women’s work became invisible. Shiva (1988) states:

No more was nature a Source of wealth and sustenance; no more was women’s work in sustenance ‘productive’ work; no more were peasant and tribal societies creative and productive. They were all marginal to the framework of the industrial society, except as resources and inputs. (...) The devaluation and de-recognition of nature’s work and productivity has led to the ecological crises; the devaluation and the de-recognition of women’s work has created sexism and inequality between men and women. The devaluation of subsistence, or rather sustenance economies, based on harmony between nature’s work, women’s work and man’s work has created the various forms of ethnic and cultural crises that plague our world today (Shiva, 1988, p. 42).

The invisibility of interdependency and the devaluation and subordination of emotions are essential features of a patriarchal society (Herrero, 2013). The ecofeminism perspective recognizes that human and non-human relations are “gendered in terms of people’s daily lives and activities” (Sachs, 1992, p.7) as women’s perspectives have been put aside in the decision making not only economically, but also socially and environmentally.

The modern economy values work and activities that represent a male role (Mellor, 2002). Throughout history, it created the dichotomy between the work inside and outside of the ‘marketplace’. The work that makes other activities possible; the work that ensures community and nurtures the human body are interminable and are done inside. “The more work is valued, the more
male-dominated it becomes. The more necessary and unremitting it is, the more female-dominated it becomes” (Mellor, 2002, p. 140).

Ecofeminist theory, as well as women’s studies, grew out of activism movements (Mies & Shiva, 2014) in order to provide notions that challenge the patriarchal models (i.e., the rationality, knowledge and ethics) through the connection between the self, biodiversity and cultural diversity (Warren, 2001). Ecofeminists claim that the mechanistic, reductionist and fragmented theories to understand the world are used to subordinate nature with harmful and unsafe technologies (Sachs, 1992). Part of the ecofeminist theory concerns the ethical matter of relationships between humans and non-humans reframing the central values of such. Ecofeminist ethics value care, reciprocity, integrity, kinship and well-being (Warren, 2001).

3.2.2. The ecofeminist ethics values and the application to communities

Ecofeminist ethics offer a guidance to resist unjustified domination and to take action on patriarchal society. Warren and Cheney (1991) explain ecofeminist ethics as a ‘quilt-in-the making’ or ‘quilt-in-process’. This concept refers to the ‘patches’ that are the contributions by people (the quilters) from different historical, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The boundary conditions are that the ‘isms of domination’ – that reproduce the patriarchal and oppressive frameworks – do not belong on the quilt. What belongs on the quilt are patches that challenge all the ways of environmental abuse, inequalities and exploitation of nature, women, children and indigenous people. The quilt thus offers an ethical framework that respects the interaction between humans and non-humans (Warren & Cheney, 1991).

Given these points, ecofeminism is antireductionist by centralizing the diversity and acknowledging the differences and commonalities between humans and non-humans. It is inclusivist as it opens space for values that understand who we are when we relate to each other. For instance, values such as care, diversity, sharing, reciprocity, friendship and love, as well as the ‘indigenous knowledge’5, are often overlooked or lost in the mainstream ethics and society (Warren & Cheney, 1991). Ecofeminist ethics encourages individual autonomy while it also recognizes the existence of individuals as part of the whole, which also contributes to who they are.

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5 Warren and Cheney (1991) refer to the “indigenous technical knowledge” that some people have when they work with land closely.
In order to not reproduce the same patterns from patriarchal society, sustainable communities must be feminist (Plant, 1997). For instance, eco-communities that foster the values of love and respect to all beings. All types of oppressions, the logic of domination and power over the other have a common root in the rationalized belief of exploitation through hierarchical structures. Such hierarchy puts men at the top of the pyramid in all types of political, economic, religious organizations, as well as in intimate relationships (Plant, 1997).

The dominant dichotomy of men as reason and women as nature have confirmed the masculinity power and reinforced the labels of the men as the forceful and women as the domesticated (Plumwood, 2003). In fact, our society has been shaped by the capitalist-patriarchal paradigm which is characterized by dualisms, hierarchies and divisions that are the foundation of polarizations between men and women, humans and nature, reason and emotion (Mies, 2014b). Plumwood (2003) draws on the concept of dualism as “the process by which contrasting concepts (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (p. 31).

Among the conceptual structures that define the struggles of ecofeminism, the most important one is the logic of domination (Ling, 2014; Warren & Cheney, 1991; Warren, 2001). Dualism is a way of dividing the world and exposing differences that signals ‘inferiority’ i.e., the ‘higher’ oppresses the ‘lower’ (Daly, 1994). Whereas power construes and places these differences as cultural constructions using dualism as justification or cultural expressions to reinforce the systems of domination and subordination (Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2001). Examples of key dualistic elements in western thought are male/female, mind/body, rationality/animality, subject/object, master/slave, production/reproduction, universal/particular, reason/emotion, civilised/primitive, public/private, self/other, etc. These dualisms reflect and naturalise the forms of oppression by gender, race, class and nature (Plumwood, 1993, 2003). On the one hand, there is the man, closer to culture, mind and reason. On the other hand, the woman, perceived as essentially linked to nature, body and emotions (Herrero, 2013).

Finally, the role of ecofeminism is not to deny the differences between human and non-human, but to affirm those differences in a non-dualistic and non-hierarchical way by building community and changing the ways of living on the planet. This means a re-evaluation of shelter, nourishment, education, leisure, medicine and science (Daly, 1994). However, Sachs (1992) highlights that
identifying diversity solely as difference does not necessarily mean a shift in power differences. Rather it is important to support diversity and simultaneously redistribute power (Sachs, 1992) in social relations. The intersectionality lens of ecofeminism aims at exposing inequality, power and privilege. It can help to understand not only how systems of oppression take place in commoning, but also systems of well-being and fair relations (Clement et al., 2019; Leder et al., 2019).

3.3. Commoning and Ecofeminism in Urban Gardening

The link between eco-feminism and commons is not new. For instance, ecofeminist academics such as Mies, Shiva, Bennholdt-Thomsen and the autonomist Marxist feminist Federici have argued that commons are not merely resources to be exploited, manipulated and commodified (Mies & Shiva, 2014). In fact, in the last two decades the awareness about the link between commoning and eco-feminism seems to have increased among academics, especially feminist political ecology scholars (Clement et al., 2019; Leder et al., 2019; Rao, 2020; Sato & Soto Alarcón, 2019). The findings through an ecofeminist lens can help to uncover subtle issues related to care, ecological and social responsibility in the commoning process (Clement et al., 2019).

With the literature review of commons (and commoning specifically) and ecofeminism, it was noticed that the values of both permeate the ‘boundaries’ of each other by almost sharing the same principles as represented in Figure 2. By combining both principles, this framework sheds light on a common path towards a social, environmental and gender transformation and it will be used in this research to apply in urban community gardens.
Furthermore, it allows the research to go beyond the question of what and aims to understand how these values are put in practice in the process of commoning. In other words, an ecofeminist perspective facilitates to understand whether and how power occurs in the self-management and organization of the commons. For instance, Velicu & García-López (2018) bring insights from feminist Judith Butler into the work of commons from Ostrom explaining that although cooperation and consensus is often beneficial for the self-organization of commons, power relations and patterns of exclusion can still be reproduced within the commons by, for instance, creating a ‘homogenous’ community. To rephrase it, commons can subtly become a new site of enclosure reproducing patriarchal characteristics.

In the city context, Harvey (2012) interpreted commons as “unstable and malleable social relation” (p. 73) between the collective group and the contextual aspects. And some authors have pointed out the ambiguity of diversity and density concerning the issue of ‘exclusivity’ of the urban commons (Kip et al., 2015). Considering urban community gardens as the ground of this research, Engel-Di Mauro (2018) gives examples of collective gardens that do not necessarily represent a collective action and practice exclusion through racism, classism or settler colonialism. Besides, some urban gardens are largely white and created by and for the middle-class, while others are created to overcome the lack of green space and food security.
Commons should not merely be ‘against’ neoliberalism (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Engel-Di Mauro, 2018; Velicu & García-López, 2018), but rather create and reproduce new collective forms of social relations that is more equalitarian and faces the social divisions implemented by capitalism. Commons as a subsistence perspective, defended by Bennholdt-Thomsen (2012), take in consideration human life as part of the natural process; it “build[s] an important bridge between the individual and the society” making way for the respect among humans and nature (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2012, para. 12).

Creating or preserving the commons involves creating communities, or as I have called elsewhere, it implies ‘commoning’. Urban community gardens have been the places where people come together to claim and reclaim commons and to practice commoning. There is no “commons without a community” (Mies, 2014a). And, community is formed through commoning, which occurs through biophysical, knowledge, cultural and social commons (Sato & Soto Alarcón, 2019). It has a role of going against enclosure by making access wider, shared, distributing the benefits widely and managed by a community through care and responsibility among the members.

Overall, urban gardens are still one of the most important movements to regain control over food production and to create social spaces to share and produce knowledge as well as environmental regeneration. Thus, urban community gardens can reinforce the idea of commons, at the same time that it challenges the patriarchal structures of our society by creating a space for collaboration and sharing.

Women’s grassroots political movement has offered new insights that diversity is pointless without a change in the logic of domination of not only gender, but also race, class, age, religion and ethnicities. Expressively, ecofeminists must be intersectional. Kings (2017), argues that ‘intersectionality’ is a powerful tool to analyse and understand that a person’s relationship with the environment (in the Global South or North) is not completely dependent on any one aspect of their lives, whether gender, race, class, sexuality or age but rather a combination of all of the above and more besides. (p.71)

The main body of the ecofeminist literature addressed in this research is from the 1990s and 2000s. But it is important to acknowledge that only recently that ecofeminists started to consider themselves explicitly as intersectional ecofeminists. Said that, power can occur not only vertically in oppressive and hierarchical relations but also horizontally in emotional relations between
humans and between humans and environment (Clement et al., 2019). Hence, ecofeminism (1) challenges the dualisms, for instance, between man and woman, culture and nature; (2) acknowledges the interdependency among humans and nature; and (3) embraces the intersections among race, age, class, ability and so on.

In order to reverse patriarchal domination, it is necessary to change the ways human beings relate themselves to nature and communities (Daly, 1994). To rebuild society in a non-patriarchal way it requires to foster diversity among people in order to build collective power and internalize the advantages of diversity by redistributing power (Herrero, 2013; Sachs, 1992). It is necessary to redefine social reproduction in a more cooperative way, instead of reproducing the divisions between “the personal and the political”, and the “political activism and the reproduction of everyday life” (Federici, 2012, para. 23). However, the question still remains – how to do it in a society that is built upon the patriarchal structures and is even reinforced through the new waves of capitalism?

Redefining ‘community’ is only the beginning towards a social reproduction more collective, which is, first of all, a process of identifying patriarchal systems and then promoting “non-capitalist principles that contribute to building a ‘cooperative society’” (Engel-Di Mauro, 2018, p. 5). As stated by Clement et al. (2019), the concern is about how humans connect and interact with nature in a destructive patriarchal context that can help to promote emotional and transformative approaches to commoning practices. Therefore, urban community gardens are potential places to analyse and evaluate how the process of commoning practices are put in practice.

Finally, based on this conceptual framework the empirical research aims to answer the research question if the practice of commoning overcomes the logic of domination in urban gardens. If so, how? What are the main factors contributing to it?
4. Methodology

4.1. Positionality: researcher’s background and interest

The elements present in this Master Thesis, like theories, conceptual framework, collecting and interpreting data, the sites, the self as well as the relationship between researcher and respondents, are interdependent. Based on feminist standpoint epistemology, Harding (1995) presents the ‘strong objectivity’ program in order to delink the idea of neutrality in research and to consider that social identity as well as the experience of the body shape knowledge and research. As such, strong objectivity takes into consideration values and interests and calls to start research from marginalized lives. It helps to clarify the connection between marginalized lives and other social relations by disclosing how the dominant mechanisms and institutions affect other social positions.

Because there is an interdependency between data and self, social identity shapes knowledge and the representation of data, at the same time that knowledge shapes the standpoint of the researcher. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge my identity as a white Brazilian young woman living in Brussels, with a background in Architecture and Urbanism and practical experience in community building especially in favelas and social housing. I also have encountered limitations to conduct interviews because of the language. Nikulina et al. (2019) summarize very well when they say that language is not only a teaching or learning effort, but it is also “affected by ideologies, social identities, power and agency” (p. 4). Most of the interviews were not conducted in the mother tongue neither of the respondent nor the researcher and my own view might influence how the data was collected. The interpretation of the data is based on my perception of the interviews considering not only the words spoken but also the body language.

4.2. Building a conceptual framework

This research encompasses two main concepts, commons and ecofeminism, on the ground of urban gardening, which also has its own definitions. The literature review explored the three topics identifying their main characteristics. Later, the concepts were narrowed based on their similarities, which enabled me to identify the gaps in the triad. Urban gardens that are self-organized and self-managed can be considered as urban green commons. In the concept of commons, I focus mainly on the social practice of ‘commoning’ – the process of being in community. In other words, I focus
on the ‘urban community gardens’ – as expressed in the literature. The concept of ecofeminism intersects with some aspects of the theory of commons and urban community garden, and it aims to look at those from a standpoint that ‘community’ and/or ‘commoning’ involve values, emotions and care economy that are invisible and even subordinated in the neoliberal-capitalism system at the same time that are embedded in this system. Therefore, the empirical research draws on the ground of collective gardens in the context of Brussels to explore the conceptual framework of commons and ecofeminism.

4.3. Empirical research

4.3.1. Selection of the cases

Firstly, a desk research was conducted. The website of Bruxelles Environnement and literature were consulted to get acquainted with urban gardens in the BCR. In total, I found about 35 urban gardens in the BCR, of which I selected 20 of them, based primarily on the criteria that is a collective urban garden. From the ones that had an email address available, I sent an introduction about the research and a self-invitation to visit the garden in October 2020 in order to understand how the group is organized, managed, who are the people involved, when and how it started. At the end of 2020, I also visited gardens spontaneously, sometimes accompanied by a gardener and other times alone observing physical elements like the type of plots.

Secondly, it was defined criteria to select the cases, such as the diversity of the group (ethnicity, gender, age, education, working situation), accessibility and visibility in the city, collective management (individual, semi-collective, collective), amount of people, how old is the project, acceptance of new people and availability of taking part in this research. These criteria were grounded on the first observations of the field and learnings from the literature. Another criterion that played a role in the limitation of the research(er) was the willingness to speak in English or Portuguese. Between October 2020 and February 2021, I visited seven gardens in total. Other cases might answer those criteria, but due to the time limit of the research, three cases were selected to start the field observations more closely and to be analysed according to the conceptual framework of this research: Le Jardin Collectif du Chant des Cailles in Watermael-Boitsfort, Pot’Albert in Anderlecht and Autour de Marguerite in the City of Brussels (see Figure 3). The cases will be described later.
In the meantime, I also participated in an info-session ‘Creating a collective vegetable garden in Brussels’ organized on December 5, 2020 by Le Début des Haricots, a non-profit organization that supports citizen initiatives, among other actions. The main challenge expressed by this organization, and also one of the reasons to organize such an event, was the organization and management of the group itself. Afterwards, there was a follow up from Le Début des Haricots with those who decided to start an urban collective garden. In December 2020, I also had the opportunity to interview one of the organizers, in order to get an institutional perspective.

4.3.2. Participatory observation

The participatory observation took place between February and June 2021. During these four months, I participated in collective activities in two of the cases. With the on-field observations it was possible to understand how the garden works and who are the actors involved actively in the
Besides, the goal was also to meet and connect with the gardeners and that they could also notice my presence on the field. For that, informal conversations took place on the field. Some users gave me a tour around the garden showing the different activities and often pointing out who were the gardeners taking care of the plots, the compost, the chickens, and so on.

In February 2021 I visited the garden Autour de Marguerite and presented myself introducing the main topics of my research. At the end of the meeting, the participants invited me to be in a community group via a communication app in order to give me a tool to follow when some members would be in the garden, the tasks, activities and so on.

In March 2021, I participated in an online meeting of the General Assembly of *La Ferme du Chant des Cailles*. There were more than 30 people present and it lasted for four hours. In this meeting, they discussed questions of the project as a whole, and not only about the collective garden. However, it was important to observe how the group organized itself including other actors from the project. In this same month, I also participated in a collective event in Pot’Albert which facilitated donation and exchange of plants and seeds, organized by the Institut de La Vie Asbl. From this moment, I was included in the communication app group by the community and the institutions who manage the project, so that I could communicate when I would go to the garden, observe how communication is conveyed, who are the active gardeners and when there are new activities.

### 4.3.3. Semi-structured qualitative interviews

Complementary to the participatory observation, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in each case in order to gain specific knowledge about the practice of community (‘commoning’) between the participants (‘commoners’) exploring their personal point of view about the project they take part in. According to Letherby (2003), one way to approach people, especially when speaking about their lives, is through non-hierarchical relationships where the interviewer can share their identity and exchange knowledge, allowing reciprocity and mutual interaction. Besides, I am not an expert neither in urban gardens, nor in the ecofeminist concept, meaning that is a learning process for me, as a foreigner researcher, and for the ones who had a closer contact with me.
The interviews took place in May-June 2021. As can be seen in Table 1, most of them were conducted in English, two group interviews were conducted with a mix of English and French and one was in French. In total, 20 people – of which 3 of them were local institutional actors – participated in a semi-structured interview, and other 3 were unstructured interviews. One respondent was no longer active in the garden and in a process of leaving the neighbourhood, and another one was a newcomer in the project. Interviews took place on the field or in the institutional office, and only one was online. The interviews lasted between 40 and 120 minutes.

Table 1

Semi-structured interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Language of the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pot'Albert</td>
<td>26/05</td>
<td>PA1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>02/06</td>
<td>PA2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>institutional</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>03/06</td>
<td>PA3</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/06</td>
<td>PA4</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>institutional</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autour de Marguerite</td>
<td>28/05</td>
<td>AM1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>07/06</td>
<td>AM2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14/06</td>
<td>AM3</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14/06</td>
<td>AM4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English (***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14/06</td>
<td>AM5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>English (***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chant des Cailles</td>
<td>30/05</td>
<td>CC1</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30/05</td>
<td>CC2</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30/05</td>
<td>CC3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30/05</td>
<td>CC4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>mix of English and French (**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30/05</td>
<td>CC5</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>gardener</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>CC9</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>gardener</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English (*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>09/07</td>
<td>CC10</td>
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<td>female</td>
<td>mix of English and French (**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>09/07</td>
<td>CC11</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>institutional</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. (*) interviews conducted in English with a certain level of effort (**) group interview
The questionnaire was based on five themes: the context of the garden, process of entry, process of working in the garden, dynamics of collaboration and impacts of the project in the self and surroundings. The questions encompass values and meanings, as well as questions about the vision of the project, management and of the group itself. The questions were always oriented towards the ‘process’ since it brings insight about the learnings and opportunities throughout the years. It is important to acknowledge that language might affect some answers as some people are not used to speaking English and have difficulties expressing emotions and values or tell stories about their past.

The two local institutional actors had a different set of questions because the aim was to understand what role they play in the garden, in the neighbourhood and how is the relationship with the people.

During the interviews or sometimes when it was finished, some respondents gave feedback that the questions made them reflect about personal or group dynamics they did not realize before. Afterwards, some gardeners also encouraged other people of the group to take part in the research, contacting me via email or if they saw me in the garden, they would approach me.

4.3.4. Transcription and Analysis

With the consent of the respondents, all the semi-structured interviews were recorded in order to be transcribed. The analysis took into consideration the answers and the participatory observation. Except for the institutional actors, all the interviews were conducted with the same questions, with very little modifications from one case to another, which allowed me to look for patterns, evidence and logic in each garden. Hence, the interpretation of the data followed a few steps. First, through thematic analysis I could review the answers of each garden and identify general codes. Second, the codes were clustered into themes that resonate with each other, for example, community and diversity, nature and garden, management and conflicts, activism and challenges, physical space. Finally, from these themes, it was identified recurrent sentences as well as contradictions in the three cases that portray some important processes in the gardens described in the section 5.2. Therefore, based on my interpretation of the themes, the sentences from the respondents were used via direct citation in order to illustrate and highlight the practices of commoning. The interpretation of the results with the support of the theories of commons and ecofeminism enabled me to identify four key factors that contribute to answering the research question.
4.4. Ethical considerations

All the qualitative semi-structured interviews were recorded only for the purposes of this research with an informal consent from the respondents. However, in order to preserve their confidentiality, I decided to not reveal the names of the interviewees since all the three gardens represent a small community and some gardeners might be easily recognizable.

During the visits I also became part of groups on communication apps as an observer, but I do not use the messages in this research. I acknowledge it was not a collective consent from the group, but rather a permission that I got from two or three people. On the other hand, there was a collective consent from the gardeners of the Chant des Cailles that allowed me to take part virtually in the General Assembly meeting. Therefore, this type of data was mainly used as inspiration for the next steps of the research.
5. Empirical findings

In this section, the results of the interviews, participatory observation and desk research is presented. The sources of the information are primary data based on the interviews with gardeners and institutional actors as well as secondary data based on the websites of the projects (when available). The empirical research attempts to answer the research question: how does the practice of commoning overcome the ‘logic of domination’ in urban gardens? What factors contribute to it? As already mentioned, to answer these questions the interviews were oriented towards the different ‘processes’ that exist in the collective garden as a way to identify the practice of commoning.

This chapter is organized as it follows: first, the cases are introduced describing the general characteristics of each. Second, the commonalities and differences of the gardens are presented in order to frame the context of each case. Third, the data gathered from the interviews is presented based on the processes of commoning. Finally, with the support of the literature, the interpretation of the results allowed me to identify four key factors in order to answer the research question.

5.1. Introduction to case studies

The three cases are located in different parts of the BCR, in the cities Watermael-Boitsfort, Anderlecht and City of Brussels. The three cities have different profiles regarding the quality of life, however there are local or internal elements that the cases share with each other. In the following, each collective garden will be described according to their history, self-organization, types of plots, management methods and population.

5.1.1. Chant des Cailles

La Ferme du Chant des Cailles is a transition project with different activities in the same field. It is a mix of citizens and professional actors working together around urban agriculture. The activities are divided in ‘poles’ of activities including the bercai, a cooperative, collective garden, aromatics, market and the project Quartier Durable of Logis-Floréal. Each pole is autonomous, but all of them constitute the global project under the agreement of a non-profit association (ASBL).

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6 Space where they keep the sheeps.
(see Figure 4). The General Assembly is the meeting where all the effective members get information and vote for the initiatives of the whole project. The project occupies over 25,000 square meters. However, this research focuses mainly on the collective garden of the Chant des Cailles.

**Figure 4**

*The new governance model of La Ferme du Chant des Cailles*

![Diagram of the new governance model of La Ferme du Chant des Cailles](image)

*Note.* Adapted from Report (2019)

The idea of the collective garden started in 2012 and the cultivation of the land in the beginning of 2013. The garden is managed by the citizens in a volunteer-base and it is open for all the inhabitants of Watermael-Boitsfort or within a maximum radius of 1.5 km from the field. Currently, there are about 80 gardeners participating in the collective project.

The organization of the collective garden is summarized as it follows:

- Every Sunday, the gardeners gather on the field to work collectively.
- Every month, the gardeners meet for a plenary meeting in order to manage the garden collectively.
- The gardeners are required to respect a Charter which outlines the functioning of the garden.
- There are several working groups assigned for the management of the project, such as educational garden, medicinal herbs garden, constructions of furniture or structures, compost, communication, internal regulation and so on.
- The garden corresponds to 4,000 square meters and the plots are semi-collective managed by small groups. Each plot is autonomous to work around a certain type of crop, but the major rule is to not use chemical fertilizers or pesticides.
- The gardeners communicate to each other about meetings and working groups via a mailing list.

The space of the Jardin Collectif du Chant des Cailles is divided by ‘collective’ plots, managed by the whole collective; ‘semi-collective’ plots, managed by small groups of families, neighbours or friends; ‘historical’ plots that exist before the creation of the collective garden. In fact, 70% of the space is dedicated to the production of food and 30% to the development of convivial gatherings, pedagogical activities, meetings and celebrations.

The collective garden occupies 12% of the land and it is only one of the several activities of the Chant des Cailles. The whole project is organized under the values “[t]ogether, professionals and citizens experience an ecological, democratic, social, relational and economic transition towards a sustainable, participatory, solidary, fulfilling, just and resilient world” (my translation). Above all, these values are the main guideline of the project for those who want to join the project.

5.1.2. Pot’Albert

The urban garden Pot’Albert is located in Cureghem, in the city of Anderlecht. The land of 2,000 square meters is property of the municipality. However, three non-profit local organizations, Mapuche Urbano, Institut de la Vie and Projet de Cohésion Sociale Albert (PCS Albert), hold the right to use the land under a temporary occupation agreement between the parties.

In the 19th century, the land was occupied by a gas factory that led to contamination of the soil. Between 2010-2014, there was a request from the people of the neighbourhood to transform the area into a collective urban garden. With the project Contrat du Quartier – Canal Midi, the

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Anderlecht Municipality carried out not only the decontamination of the site, but also the incorporation of a new and healthy soil with layers of insulation, required by the regional government institution \textit{Bruxelles Environnement-IBGE}. Finally, in the end of 2014 there was a mobilization of the institutions and citizens to reflect on the construction of the collective garden.

In the following years, the organizations took over the management of the urban garden offering courses about gardening, plants and seeds. Then, it started a mobilization of the citizens to take part in the project and create a consolidated group to continue the project. There were about 18 people in the first meeting to design the parcels. The original idea was to consider 2/3 of the land as a collective plot and 1/3 as individual plots, which was freely distributed to the people present in the meeting. The objective of the urban garden was to create a local project, raise awareness about healthy food, create a place for exchange and meetings between the inhabitants, and create a pedagogical garden.

Currently, the Pot’Albert is co-managed by the Institut de la Vie and PCS Albert together with the citizens. Throughout the years, more people joined the project and today it counts 40 parcels. The demand for an individual plot became bigger and the common area became restricted to the paths between the plots and the green area around the garden.

The two organizations try to organize monthly meetings for the management of the project together with the citizens, as well as a collective work to maintain the common area. Besides, there are also celebrations and neighbourhood parties in the field. The meetings organized by the institutions were suspended for more than one year, from March 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020. However, the gardeners continued to be active in the individual plots and sometimes took care of the maintenance of the surroundings.

Many gardeners live in the social housing in front of the garden in the Square Albert 1er, but there are also people living in the neighbourhood. The 40 plots are cultivated by users of all ages with different cultural, professional and social backgrounds. Nationalities range from Belgian, Moroccan, Congolese, Spanish, Turkish, Bulgarian, Ukrainian to Colombian.

The garden has a limited size, which is currently oversaturated with the individual plots. There is no space for newcomers, but it is possible to subscribe to a waiting list managed by PCS Albert.
5.1.3. Autour de Marguerite

The project Autour de Marguerite is located at the Square Marguerite in the north-east of the extension of the City of Brussels. First, a group of citizens of the Quartier des Squares started gardening around the arena sport of the Square Marguerite. In 2018, the project received a European fund, which allowed the people to install herb boxes, a book box and insect hotels. The actions have been happening for almost ten years around the square, but it is only between 2017 and 2018 that the municipality gave access to the citizens to grow vegetables and fruits in an enclosed space in the upper part of the Square Marguerite.

With the support of the Brussels Municipality and the regional institution Brussels Environment, one of the goals of the project is to create a connection among people from the apartment buildings, the children who use the playground, the young people who use the sports field and other users of the park. The group of citizens started organizing every season a neighbourhood party. At the same time, another important point of the project is to create a space where people can cultivate vegetables and fruits, fostering greener areas in the city. The primary school Émile Jacqmain also became a partner in the project creating educational activities with the children at the school, for instance with the compost, and in the garden.

The project became an urban garden and it has no individual plots. Any person can take part in the project and there are no internal rules. However, only a few members have the key to access the enclosed space. The idea is that some gardeners hold a few responsibilities in order to make the project run, for example, sharing the tasks of plantation, maintenance, communication, organization of the festive events and contact with partners and external actors.

The garden is open every day in the morning. The main channel of internal communication is via communication app groups, where the gardeners who have the key say when they would open the space and that people are welcome to join. During the week, retired people are more present and young people usually go on weekends. External communication is done via social media8.

Although the space is enclosed, the participants decided to plant fruit trees and vegetables closer to the gate so that any person on the street could harvest the food when they are ripe. In general,

8 https://www.facebook.com/Square-Marguerite-Living-Streets-884586348409507
there are more elderly retired women participating than young people or men. In terms of nationality, the majority of the gardeners are European people from Belgium and neighbouring countries, but people from other backgrounds, for instance homeless people, are also invited to pick up fruits or vegetables in the garden.

5.2. Commonalities and differences of the cases

Embedded within BCR, the three gardens represent an occupation of public space in the city, but it has its commonalities and differences regarding the context of the surroundings, the use of the internal space, the criteria to receive newcomers, the degree of sharing among its members, the self-management, the status of the land, the profile of the human drivers and finally the values that shape the projects. Each of these characteristics are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2

*Characteristics of the urban collective gardens*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Collective Garden Chant des Cailles</th>
<th>Pot’Albert</th>
<th>Autour de Marguerite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Watermael-Boitsfort</td>
<td>Anderlecht</td>
<td>City of Brussels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land tenure</strong></td>
<td>In danger (precarious occupation agreement)</td>
<td>Stable (but occupation temporary agreement)</td>
<td>Stable (occupation temporary agreement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proprietary of the land</strong></td>
<td>SCL Logis Floréal</td>
<td>City of Anderlecht</td>
<td>City of Brussels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Openness to the neighbourhood</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, but...</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intern management</strong></td>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>Citizens + Institutions Institut de la Vie &amp; PCS Albert</td>
<td>Self-management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extern management</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average of age of the gardeners</strong></td>
<td>32-75</td>
<td>35-75</td>
<td>32-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amount of people</strong></td>
<td>80 people</td>
<td>40 plots</td>
<td>20 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender balance</strong></td>
<td>more women</td>
<td>women/men</td>
<td>more women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Since when</strong></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2017-2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Primary data from interviews by author

Another important factor comparing the three cases is the context where they are located. For example, Chant des Cailles and Pot’Albert are surrounded by social housing buildings, while
Autour de Marguerite is surrounded by high buildings for the middle-class population\(^9\) (IBSA, 2018). However, it is not possible to look at these factors in isolation. According to the interviews, for instance, the majority of the gardeners working actively in the Jardin Collectif du Chant des Cailles are not living in social housing, whereas in Pot’Albert the majority of people are living in social housing as well as facing other issues related to social cohesion.

Based on the desk research and the observations on the field, it is possible to establish a typology of the collective garden and later it will be taken into account for the analysis. The three gardens present different dynamics in the personal or collective organization of the space. In Chant des Cailles there are only semi-collective and collective plots. In Pot’Albert, originally the idea was to have 1/3 individual and 2/3 collective, but currently it has nearly only individual plots and a few small spaces for collective work. Autour de Marguerite does not have plots and all the spaces are considered as collective work.

The organization of the space also reflects the possibility to receive newcomers. In Chant des Cailles, there is always a rotation of the semi-collective plots and therefore, it is possible to participate together with other users and in the collective work. In Pot’Albert, there is no space anymore to receive newcomers, hence there is a waiting list in case someone gives up on his/her plots. Since the Autour de Marguerite has no plots, all the work is collective and there are no criteria to participate in the group, therefore everybody is welcome to join.

Internally, a remarkable characteristic is the physical isolation. The field of Chant des Cailles is completely open and accessible for everyone who wants to enter since there are no gates or locks. The collective and semi-collective plots of the garden are also open. As can be seen in Figure 5, Pot’Albert has also its main entrance of the garden open to the public, but the majority of the individual plots are closed with little, and sometimes big, cages to purposely avoid vandalisms. The third case, Autour de Marguerite, is a gated space in the park, as illustrated in Figure 6. Although some fruit trees are located closer to the gate, only a few members have the key, and thus the power to allow visitors and other gardeners to enter.

Figure 5

Physical isolation – Pot’Albert

Note. Adapted from Sonia Dermience, 2021

Figure 6

The gated space of Autour de Marguerite – View from inside the collective garden

Note. Copyright 2019 by Philippe Clabots
In terms of management, the three gardens have monthly meetings for decision-making, but they might be different in how they do it. The collective garden of Chant des Cailles has monthly meetings and collective work in the garden. Besides, they are organized according to a charter and the group itself decides the rules, the tasks, the responsibilities and they manage their own conflicts through ‘collective intelligence’ methods. Pot’ Albert is managed by the citizens and the two local non-profit organizations, which try to organize monthly meetings. The organizations have the responsibility to manage the waiting list, to deal with the conflicts, to look for subsidies to support the project and to ensure that the garden follows the framework imposed by the Municipality and the IBGE. However, some individuals make their own decisions without necessarily consulting the whole group or the organizations. For example, the cages on the individual plots are not allowed, but the gardeners built the cages themselves in order to protect the crop from vandalism or thieves. A few people started doing it, and in the end, others followed the same idea. In fact, even though the associations are important actors in the management of the garden, the gardeners organize themselves the way they want. This has an impact on the dynamic of the group, since some people have more power than others because of age, physical strength, time available, gender and so on. The Autour de Marguerite tries to share the tasks and organization among its members, but some members invest much more time than others. For the management of all the activities and the garden, there is a group called *groupe de pilotage*. They have meetings when it is necessary to take-decisions for a project, subsidy or urgent topics of the garden. But in general, they communicate to each other informally via the WhatsApp/Signal groups.

The status of the land also plays a role in the future of the collective garden, which also may have an impact on the organization itself. All of them are under a temporary occupation agreement, but only Chant des Cailles has been threatened with losing their right to cultivate in the land. The field was loaned in 2012 under the temporary agreement and free of charge to a group of citizens and professionals to build the farm of Chant des Cailles. Nevertheless, the Société du Logement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale (SLRB) – the Brussels Regional Housing Company – announced a project to build 70 housing units. The members of the field created a working group\(^\text{10}\) to stand against the construction which would have a relevant impact on agriculture and social activities.

\(^{10}\) [https://amischampcailles.wordpress.com/](https://amischampcailles.wordpress.com/)
In respect to Pot’Albert, the non-profit organizations hold the right to occupy the land together with the citizens under the temporary agreement. The project seems to be stable and, for the moment, the City of Anderlecht has no intention to request the land back for other purposes. In fact, there is a negotiation to gain the permanent right to use the land for the collective garden, but first, they need to make sure to follow the framework imposed by the City, for instance, taking out the little cages of the individual plots. The gardeners agree to take it out when they manage to construct an outsider fence to protect all the plots against thieves and vandalism. Similarly, Autour de Marguerite is not facing any threat by the authorities as long as they respect the rules to use the space.

Finally, the collective gardens are also characterized by the profile of its human drivers. In general lines, the majority of gardeners working in the three collective gardens are women above 55 years old. But age is more striking than gender. Among the engaged people in the three gardens, the majority are elderly or near elderly people. The striking difference in terms of profile among the gardens are in respect to culture and education level. The majority of gardeners in Chant des Cailles and Autour de Marguerite are West European, the so-called ‘white people’, and highly educated. In Pot’Albert there is a great mixity of users from Maghreb region, Central Africa, South America and East Europe and only a few are from West Europe and highly educated.

Overall, one point that the three urban gardens of this research share and is central for their existence is the values of commons and commoning. Regardless of their management, the profile of the gardeners, their structure or organization, they all aspire to build community among the members and outsiders from the neighbourhood. They all believe that the collective garden is a means to foster social contact, but not only about it. The concern about healthy and organic food, the contact with earth and the open sky space are as important as the social activities. These spaces have become essential especially in the occasion of the lockdown of the COVID-19 crisis where people were restricted to be in their houses or surroundings.
5.3. Commoning in practice

The literature of commons portrays the process of being in community as commoning. Although the word ‘commoning’ was not used during the interviews, the respondents referred to the dynamic of being part of a collective group in several moments. In fact, every garden is a system shaped by its users, the surroundings, the land, the partnerships, the internal and external dynamics.

In the three gardens, there were gardeners who stated that the project “is more than a garden” (PA3, CC8, AM1), whose goal is not only to grow food, but also to foster community with the people living around. For instance, all the three gardens organize feasts and/or cultural exhibitions with the members and/or with local organizations. During the festivities, some members who have artistic background stated they were invited to give a performance and that was a gateway to connect with other residents and users:

We are really trying to make this something more than just a vegetable garden, but the place of aggregation for this area which tends to be under some respects an area where people find it a bit more difficult to meet each other and talk to each other, to the neighbour. (…) We are all very busy, so sometimes when you hear there is a neighbourhood party or something like that, it is easier (…) this is a place where we can make a connection with the nature but also with each other. (AM1)

Some respondents stated that being part of such a project contributes to the ‘village feeling’, meaning that you make friends and get to know many people from the neighbourhood. There is also an emphasis of this feeling in Brussels that is a big and busy city – “It is the first time in my life in Brussels” (PA1); “I feel much less isolated and I have been living in Brussels for 10 years, but it is the place that really made me feel… ok, I belong now” (AM1). CC1 told me about an experience living in a community in Israel:

I was 19 by the time and when I came back from there, I said that is the way I want to live, but there is no way you can live like that here. And I have been kind of searching for that for 35 years. And one day I arrived here on the field of the Chant des Cailles and I said: ‘hey! You found it’ (CC1).

Likewise, the respondents often acknowledged positively the different skills and talents people have, which range from the easiness to speak in public to the ability to cook a special dish or to cultivate ‘Moroccan mint’. This also contributes to the sense of purpose, feeling of belonging and to a ‘safe’ place where people can be themselves without constraints.
In the garden, people invest time and energy in what they are good at. In Chant des Cailles, however, the members also invest time and energy for a ‘social and environmental cause’ since the land and consequently the project is threatened to privatization, and the gardeners are fighting to keep the project the way it is (with the professional and the citizen activities).

The goal and the consequence of creating a community is clearly a relevant point to make stronger connections in the neighbourhood as well as to foster social cohesion. On the other hand, some people may not feel part of the community; the community itself may face challenges to integrate other people; and a few members may feel overwhelmed with the amount of work that the garden demands. Two respondents with similar roles from different gardens expressed a similar opinion that they would like other gardeners to take more actions in the collective tasks. For instance, they give instructions to some people and later either people forget what they are supposed to do or stop participating in the project. “When I have a new one, I tell some of those things you have to do, basic ones, and afterwards I like this person to give the instructions to somebody else and I can also do something I like” (AM3).

During COVID-19, when gatherings in big groups like neighbourhood parties were restrained, also provided time for gardeners to give more attention to local projects. Besides that, some respondents expressed the difficulty to be enclosed at home and the need to be in contact with nature. The housing conditions of some people from the garden Pot’Albert is not helpful especially in the occasion of a lockdown. One of the respondents expressed that there are:

people who have a little apartment with no terrace, no garden, nothing. So, the buildings here are in very bad condition. They are often too small for their families and they also have a lot of problem with humidity. Apparently, there are walls that are completely black because of the humidity (...) and with the confinement that we have had, being closed in these little apartments… it must be really hard; and having just a little piece of earth is very important for them. (PA4)

Clearly, the physical space where a person lives, be it the house or the neighbourhood, has a role in the motivation or need of some people participating in the project. Hence, it is not possible to look at the challenges that a community faces in isolation, because it is often linked with other internal and external factors that will be discussed below.
5.3.1. Several communities in one community

When asked about diversity, there are a few tendencies from the respondents. First, some of them referred to the diversity among people and biodiversity. Second, when referring to the people, some of them tended to believe it is diverse considering that there are users from different countries, but not necessarily from different cultures, for instance, a group of people from West Europe. Third, diversity of knowledge referring to the several abilities and skills one group has. Fourth, when talking about social cohesion, there was often a distinction between the people from the garden and the residents from social housing. Social cohesion was a recurrent subject when talking about diversity.

In Chant des Cailles, most of the respondents acknowledge the lack of diversity and the importance to integrate those who live in the social housing and there is a concern in how to invite them to participate more. In fact, one respondent stated that:

it is more than inviting (...) in every transition project there is a problem because we are mostly white, middle class, educated people (...) it may be a narrow circle. (...) We share strong things and when you come to a place where you share strong things, it is difficult to enter the circle. So, we must be attentive to welcome when someone we do not know come, and to the people not enter by force in the circle, we have to let them enter. (CC2)

The main narrative in Autour de Marguerite is ‘everybody is welcome and included’. Although the respondents acknowledge the positivity of including outsiders from different backgrounds, they often refer to a specific person that engages with outsiders, for example, with the young guys that use the park around the vegetable garden. - “I think it is not diverse for the moment, but I think only time can get more diverse” (AM4), - “There is no reason why it should not be more diverse. She is integrating everybody she can, she speaks to everybody who comes by, but maybe it will take time” (AM5).

In terms of age, even though most people are elderly, some respondents stated that the intergenerational aspect is diverse and important for a few reasons. First, because of tacit knowledge (Barthel et al., 2013) – people tended to believe that some elderly people have an expertise in gardening or even in dealing with others, and so they accept their guidance. Second, parents find the interaction between children and elderly important, especially those who are ‘expats’ and have no contact with grandparents. Third, elderly and retired people might have more
time available than younger people working full time and with children. Therefore, younger people usually participate on weekends. Fourth, from the perspective of elderly people, they also have positive feelings to be part of such a project. “We do not feel old here, because there is room for everyone” (CC8, my translation).

5.3.2. “What can I do?”

Gender did not seem to be an issue among the respondents. They did acknowledge more the presence of women, but they also confirm that there are “surprisingly” (AM3) also men. Although the female respondents found it usual to have more women in this type of ‘social project’, they also observed an evolution in the presence of men in the project, which increased throughout the years.

There are much more women than men, much more women. I think it's something cultural and not only the European one, because when you see the people who come here from the Logis-Floréal, there are a lot of Moroccan... how to say from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia... But they are women, okay, maybe it's two or three men who come, if not... they are women. (CC7)

Moreover, it is also remarkable that in the three gardens women are usually in ‘leading’ positions, for instance, planning and demanding the next tasks of the collective plots or collective activities. However, some of them feel uncomfortable and lonely in this role. They expressed the desire to be “really collective”, not only in the actions but also in the planning of what and where to plant. They stated that the gardeners could be more proactive in proposing and taking the responsibility to make it happen in the collective garden.

When gardeners from the Chant des Cailles were asked about leadership, all of them disagreed with the word ‘leader’. They believe in a shared governance and, in this sense, every person can be a ‘leader’. But, in respect to the collective garden, they do refer to one of the respondents as the ‘coach’, ‘the pilot’, ‘the reference’, ‘the one who knows a lot about gardening’.

In Pot’Albert, one of the ‘driving forces’ of the project is also female, but she acknowledges that she has this role because it is part of her job as a teacher, cultural worker and as a Belgian citizen. Being part of a community where there are mainly citizens with migratory background from a different culture, means that she is also more privileged than others for having a better understanding of the language and the political system.
5.3.3. “Sometimes I think I am living in another planet…”

This sentence was expressed by one of the respondents (PA2) that was moving away from the neighbourhood. She had not been very active in Pot’Albert and expressed that the management of the garden was chaotic. She explained that she has been working for 30 years and that she is used to being efficient. In fact, this personal observation also sheds light on the management of the other gardens and alludes that urban gardens do have a different pace and dynamic from the ‘outside world’:

Some people do not have patience and they want things to… in our society things have to go fast. We have to be efficient and here we are not efficient at all. If you use the standards of efficiency here, it is close to zero. (…) We do not have to be. It is an experiment. We experiment something else. Something else that has another time of action. (CC7)

As already mentioned, the three cases are more than just a vegetable garden. It highlights the different communities present in a space, especially Pot’Albert, where the presence of immigrants from different continents are more visible. This also reflects in the understanding of the rules and management. For instance, the group in Pot’Albert was not formed as self-organized, but rather an institutional initiative with the goal to foster social cohesion in the neighbourhood. It started with the idea to have two-thirds of the land as collective and only one-third individual parcels, which turned to be almost completely individual.

In terms of management, the three cases have different dynamics. The group of Autour de Marguerite does not follow any charter. The collective garden of Chant des Cailles is self-organized under a collective charter created in 2013\(^\text{11}\). In contrast, Pot’Albert is co-managed by the two local institutions PCS Albert and Institut de la Vie, which follow the rules from Bruxelles Environnement. The organizations also created an internal charter that outlines the rules of the garden. Even though people sign the internal charter and commit themselves in following the rules, some people do not respect it in practice. For example, it was highlighted that a group of Moroccan men, who are very present in the garden, organized barbecues among themselves and also created fences in their individual parcels, taking over parcels from other gardeners as well as ‘monopolizing’ the water – which is limited and scarce. These internal problems created a tension

in the group, especially between those men, who are more able to impose their opinion, and old ladies, who do not have physical strength to carry the water, for example.

They [the old ladies] have been telling us for a long time that it is not fair, that their parcel is smaller, that they have less access to water. It is difficult. And then, there are maybe the people who have a bit more of an education in Europe, maybe Belgian people who are more able to understand the frame… because it is a frame from our culture, no? There are rules, ok, it is a collective project, you decide everything together, the water has to be distributed equally for everybody, there is a land for each person that you have to respect and the commons are taken care by the whole group. And there are other people who have another frame, who have another culture origin, another education, who maybe know a lot more than this group about plants or about chicken and how to build little cages. So there is a different kind of knowledge, but the groups [the Moroccan men and the old ladies] do not really integrate. (PA4)

These issues became the main challenges of the project. First, according to the City of Anderlecht the internal fences are not allowed. However, the gardeners are threatened by vandalism of some other people destroying or stealing the vegetables. Vandalism seems to be a real problem not only in the garden, but in the neighbourhood. Second, the garden is not independent on water means and when available is limited, which requires a management to distribute the water equally to all the parcels. Third, in the beginning of the project some plots were bigger because there was space available. Throughout the years, more people took part in the project and the space became more limited in order to welcome everybody. Therefore, since the plots are very small (some of them have only two square meters) some gardeners take over if they think it is not occupied, not respecting the waiting list. It was also said that there are differences in the type of cultivation. For instance, people who prefer monoculture, might think that the plots with polyculture are abandoned.

In fact, the garden functions and exists despite the management from the institutions. At the end of the day, the gardeners do what they want and they take initiatives themselves to take care of the garden. Under those circumstances, the main role of the local institutions is to try to manage the conflicts by mediation on a daily basis. At the same time, they look for subsidies to build an external fence and system of rainwater recuperation to solve some problems in the long term. Despite the ‘chaotic management’, Pot’Albert is a meeting point for people from different cultures. There are conflicts, but there are also exchanges of knowledge and collective reflections on how to deal with vandalism. Above all, there is a collective improvement.
5.3.4. “People know why they are here”

On the other hand, the self-organized group of the collective garden of Chant des Cailles has an intense agenda with the meetings about the project. The respondents often mentioned the several meetings they have every month – and some of them every week. The charter represents not only the rules, but also the values of the project, and members must follow it if they want to continue in the project. Everybody is supposed to work in the collective plot and participate in one collective meeting at least once a year. There are 80 people in the vegetable garden, but only 20 are active in the decision making. “I think we need that [monthly or weekly meetings] because if we do not do that, we cannot organize ourselves. I think it is necessary. It is not possible to work on the earth and do nothing else. We have all this structure because we had these meetings too” (CC9). Everything is decided in the collective meetings, which is based on a shared governance. When asked about the conflicts and tensions in the group, the respondents stated that in general people try to get along with each other and people make an effort to move forward by accepting the decision by the majority “We even try to reach a consensus, but often it is more like a consent, which means that there are people who say ‘I can sleep with it. I am not for it, but I accept it’” (CC8, my translation). In general, they manage to find a resolution for the tensions, but if something is more difficult to solve, they call an external person to facilitate the meeting in a neutral and unbiased way. However, there are members who left the project because they could not accept some decisions.

Every semi-collective functions according to the decision of the small group. Some respondents mentioned other gardeners who are more individualistic and do not participate in collective actions. For some of them it is a problem and usually, people who are more collective driven do not get along with the ones who have an individualistic behaviour. One respondent expressed that the members who impose themselves, “If one person is too much oneself guided, it is the role of the others to say ‘hey! It is collective!’’. It is also the responsibility of the other to let the one does that single. It is a collective responsibility” (CC2). Moreover, although some citizens with migratory background started participating in the collective project, they still do not dare to participate in the decision making. “I think it will take time and maybe it is intimidating” (CC8, my translation). All the respondents acknowledge positively that the field became a place for mixity, but they also stated that some users still do not accept ‘those from the social housing’.
5.3.5. “I do not want to make this type of project a burden”

In Autour de Marguerite, the management is concentrated in a small group of retired people and one of the respondents holds lots of responsibilities in organizing the group, asking for subsidies, contacting the authorities, reaching out to the people from the neighbourhood and so on. When asked about how decisions are made, some respondents stated that they take decisions together and that is very democratic. However, there is not much clarity if the group meets regularly or not. Respondents confirmed they are asked to give their opinion about some ideas, but it is not clear who has the final word.

Different from the other two gardens that do not have a leader, the garden Autour de Marguerite acknowledges the leadership of one or three people from the core group. Except for the ‘leader’ who sometimes feels overwhelmed with the demand of work, the other respondents expressed satisfaction with the way that the management functions. Some of them stated they do not have a lot of time to spend and that do not want to make this type of project a burden.

5.3.6. “It is a tool of emancipation for all of us”

Some respondents from the three gardens mentioned that they have been doing some other social actions in the neighbourhood, for instance, planting flowers on the streets or supporting local agriculture projects. When asked about activism, some respondents in Autour de Marguerite consider the project as “gentle activism” (AM1) or “soft activism” (AM2). There was an apparent hesitation to call it ‘activism’, meaning that there is a contrast between what people consider ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ activism. Whereas in Chant des Cailles, people did not hesitate to state that the project is also a form of activism because they are trying to change the world (CC7), they contribute to a new vision (CC9). “We do something practical against climate change. It is as important as manifestations” (CC7). Another respondent goes beyond climate and biodiversity and stated that activism is also the social side of it, referring to the social cohesion goal.

Both Autour de Marguerite and Chant des Cailles are grassroots projects initiated by local citizens. Even though Pot’Albert was initiated by local institutions, some respondents still considered it as activism, referring to the appropriation of the public space by the residents.
In the sense of activity, it [the garden] gives you empowerment. We have a real activity on the ground of Brussels. We are part of the urban system of Brussels. We do a public garden, we are in charge of a public garden and I think it makes all of us activist. (…) The only protection we have is the group, the solidarity of the group. We do not have protection of the local council, the organization cannot manage the project correctly, so it is really the gardeners who do the project. (…) It is their solidarity, their complementarity, their desire, that make the project. (…) I am not really interested in having my garden alone. I would like it, but I like the community thing. And yes, it is a tool of emancipation for all of us.

(PA1)

This statement resonates with one of the interviews of Chant des Cailles, when CC7 mentioned “I think the citizens do not have to wait for the politicians to move. Moving ourselves is the only way to change”. The area was a contaminated wasteland and the residents reappropriated it creating an urban garden, which can be considered a case of success in environmental restoration and social cohesion even with its flaws. As already pointed out by the respondents, currently the City of Anderlecht is not helping the project financially, therefore the gardeners and the local institutions are running the project in daily life dealing with internal and external tensions as far as they can.

5.3.7. “Alimentation for the body and for the mind”

It is not new that urban gardens are about local production of food. However, as already mentioned, it is also about the social, cultural and knowledge exchange (Federici, 2012). When asked about the meaning of the garden, the respondents stated not only the importance of making space for nature in the city, but also the social aspect of it. They often mentioned that the urban garden is more than just growing vegetables in the city and that is also about the community.

The gardening, the relation to the ground, gathering, all those elements, it is a real project about that and for that. It is not only to be reconnected with nature, but it is that nature could be the medium for that. (PA1)

Hence, the garden is a space where people come together to cultivate nature and relationships. “When you see people from these huge buildings coming out in the evening to sit together in the garden, maybe drinking tea or making barbecue, you can see it has a good influence in the city” (PA3).

When asked about nature, all the respondents stated to have become more aware of the presence and importance of nature in the city. In the same way, they link it to positive emotions and feelings
such as love, happiness, peace and calmness. Overall, when speaking about emotions, the gardeners feel emotionally attached to the garden stating their proudness to be part of such a project. Some of them also shared how they feel angry and frustrated when the garden is destroyed by outsiders. In Chant des Cailles, for instance, they are currently fighting against the privatization of the land, which demands many meetings and grassroots organization to protect the project.

Some of them often made the distinction between nature – the garden – and the ‘outside world’, referring to the ‘busy life’ of ‘work’ and ‘private life’. It can be noticed on the respondents’ answers that the relation with the soil and being in the garden means a different pace of action. The ‘outside world’ is busy and fast, while in the garden “you learn patience, because it is at least a year. If there is something that did not work now, you can try again next year. You cannot try it next week because the time of nature is long” (CC7). When asked about the learnings throughout the years, the respondents indeed stated to have learned to be more patient and tolerant, to be less individualistic and to care more for the community.

In all the cases, the garden is the place where nature becomes the means to create social relations, shedding light on the interdependency between humans and non-humans. The place makes it possible that people from different origins come together to garden, to meet and to learn from each other. One of the respondents stated:

> The fact of being in a place like this, in a beautiful nature and a lot of living things, it is good for everyone and we have it here. (…) That’s the common point, everyone needs this environment. That is the beauty. (CC8, my translation)

The respondents in the three gardens mentioned the importance of the garden as a place for conviviality between neighbours. Besides, when there is a welcoming, the physical space may be where residents can express their cultural backgrounds through celebrations reducing the social conflicts and promoting cultural integration in cities (Colding & Barthel, 2013).

### 5.4. Contextual factors that impact the success of urban gardening

As can be seen, the three cases have different realities from each other, but they still share mainly the values for fostering community. Every commons is shaped by its singular environment and people, which makes it very contextual. Therefore, it was identified three contextual factors that also impact on the practice of commoning in urban community gardens. First, it is the internal
process and the realization that the mixity among communities does not happen organically in any of the cases. Due to the density and diversity in urban areas (Kip et al., 2015), one of the challenges of commons as well as urban community gardens is to form and strengthen the community through power decentralization, which means that the project might not be inclusive from the beginning. Once the community is consolidated, it gives space to open up the group and address the issues of accessibility to other communities. This issue highlights that it is not only a matter of making the access wider and shared (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001), but also of letting those enter the group. It seems important to meet those who are not part of the garden and invite, understand their needs and integrate them. This element thus raises the question, is it possible to create a project that is inclusive from the beginning or is it necessary to have first a consolidated community that creates the space for inclusion?

Second, the external push that has an impact on the internal process. For instance, Chant des Cailles is currently being threatened to lose the land use right. Since the project benefits more than 700 people, this external push has made Chant des Cailles well known in many parts of the city. Hence, it became even more important to open up the group and foster social cohesion with the local residents, pushing forward the internal process. In contrast, Pot’Albert was created in order to build social cohesion in the neighbourhood, which might be considered as an external push too. The respondents have exposed that the garden and the gardeners are vulnerable to vandalism, lack of water and green space and therefore, the lack of government support. These external factors have pushed the inhabitants to engage collectively in a social mobilization and sensibilization to pacify the destruction and promote a cleaner neighbourhood. Last, even though Autour de Marguerite seems to be currently the most stable case, it is dependent on the permission of the government to occupy the gated space in the park.

Third, the garden as a physical space. For instance, the three community gardens have confirmed the importance of the quality of the physical space to integrate the several communities in a neighbourhood. It is where people, be them members or residents, can exchange knowledge via the cultural celebrations – for instance celebrating the Ramadan –, making a barbecue or sitting around. It is the place where users feel they can be themselves while sharing the space with other members. The respondents have also expressed that the connection with nature, working with the hands and
working with other members arouse emotions. In fact, the garden may be a pretext for social connections at the same time as it contributes to the green spaces in the city.

5.5. Key factors for commoning

This research has focused on the commoning practices in urban collective gardens, which was primarily based on the concept of urban (green) commons considering three important aspects: (1) common resources, that is the common land where the gardening and shared activities occur; (2) commoning practices, that is the dynamic of being part of such a group, which varies from case to case; (3) commoners – here I have referred to them as ‘gardeners’ –, that are the people taking part in the urban collective garden. The internal and external dynamics that shape the collective practices in Pot’Albert might challenge the idea of urban commons, since there are mainly individual plots. However, the project still fosters community and commoning among the residents through debates and sensibilization in how to deal with internal and external conflicts. Results show that there is a collective improvement since the beginning of the project.

Among the cases, Chant des Cailles is the only one that is currently in danger of enclosure. Not only the collective garden, but the whole project benefits more than 700 people directly or indirectly by providing jobs, local production of food, social activities and the open and green space as a meeting point. The gardeners’ claim resonates with Lefebvre’s idea of the “Right to the City” (1968) and goes beyond, also claiming a space for nature in the city. Therefore, it is a social and environmental struggle.

Although the newest case Autour de Marguerite is also under a temporary contract, it is perhaps the most stable case since it occupies a gated space in a public park. Hence, it is less likely to be contested by local authorities.

Overall, the empirical findings suggest that an urban collective garden holds several processes that cannot be seen as individual elements, but rather as complementary since they overlap throughout the project creating an integrated system. Based on the theories and the case studies, it was possible to identify four key factors that contribute to answering the research question of how the practice of commoning overcomes the logic of domination in urban gardens.
5.5.1. Beyond food production: social, cultural and knowledge exchange

As can be seen in the cases, an urban collective garden is *per se* a place where people cultivate food, herbs, flowers and other species. Throughout the years the cases have become more than just a vegetable garden, creating spaces where people meet, work together, share knowledge and cultural practices. It goes beyond the action of merely cultivating food – as pointed out by Federici (2012) – and also becomes a place to cultivate social relationships.

The results have pointed out that, even though the gardens have different dynamics, they all share the same goal of creating a community with local residents. That is to say that commons, ecofeminism and urban gardens are contextual. Besides gardening, the projects organize feasts where people from the neighbourhood can meet each other and socialize. This confirms the claim by Kip et al. (2015) when they state that the diversity and density might facilitate social mobilization and commoning in the urban space. On the other hand, the authors also point out that diversity and density in the urban space might lead to indifference and anonymity too. If the gardeners do not take into account the issue of ‘exclusivity’ (Kip et al., 2015), they might reproduce social divisions that are already structurally present in society.

Analysing the interviews, it was possible to identify the social division in a neighbourhood when the respondents made the distinction between the ‘people from social housing’ – as a label – and ‘we’ – the gardeners, even if it is unconsciously. From an ecofeminist perspective this reflects a dualism between those who live in a social housing and the others who do not. In other words, there is a focus on scarcity based on stereotype and prejudgment, rather than focusing what is common *despite* the differences. Reviewing Plumwood (1993) and Daly (1994), dualism exposes differences that are considered as ‘inferior’ and are used as cultural expressions that reinforce the systems of domination and subordination. The exclusivity of the cases is given not because the gardeners chose to be exclusive, but because exclusivity is perhaps structurally present in the society as a whole. Therefore, it makes sense when one respondent said, “we have to let them enter” (CC2).

The conceptual framework suggests that patterns of exclusion and power relations can still be reproduced within the commons by creating a ‘homogenous’ community. Chant des Cailles seems to be closer to the theory of self-organization of the commons in shared governance. The respondents have stated that the collective garden is multicultural. However, only 25% of the
gardeners are actively engaged in the collective discussions. The respondents have also acknowledged that the majority of the collective is white and middle-class.

The cases have confirmed the potential of the gardens in promoting social and cultural integration raised by some scholars (Colding & Barthel, 2013). But it is important to notice who is present and what impact the members have in the project. What became clear when analysing the cases is that this cultural integration is part of a long and collective learning process. Exemplifying in chronological order and based on the respondents’ perspectives, the group of Chant des Cailles started the project with a desire to make it work welcoming everybody interested in taking part in the innovative project. In the meantime, some respondents remarked on events of exclusion, racism and power by few members, i.e., not everybody corresponds to the collective values. Once the group, or at least part of it, was consolidated they started opening more to include the people who did not dare at first to enter the circle before, exposing a cultural gap. At the same time, the local government started to request the project to be more inclusive. The first strategy was to make a big neighbourhood party, but new inhabitants from immigrant origins did not feel invited. The second strategy was to create a party with the immigrants listening to their needs. This was developed in partnership with Maison de Quartier des Cités-Jardins – a local institution that works with social cohesion. The party was considered a success and since the second half of 2019 more citizens with migratory background started taking place in the field. In fact, sharing a cultural celebration is a way to break the prejudgements people have about a culture they do not know. Chants des Cailles became a pretext for the integration of the communities. Even if some people do not necessarily work in the collective garden, they have discovered the field as a leisure place to sit around, to meet others and to chat. Similarly, Pot’Albert has also experienced internal conflicts between communities and gender mentioned previously. When asked about what changed throughout the years, the respondents believed it was ‘time’ and dialogue. In contrast, Autour de Marguerite has not expressed any intercultural conflict, but it is also considered a more homogenous community.

Finally, the collective gardens offer a space for collective learning on how to deal with each other, how to preserve relationships while addressing the conflicts (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019), and how to practice commoning despite the differences. As can be seen, social, cultural and knowledge exchange help to consolidate the community through the several communities in a neighbourhood.
5.5.2. Ecological responsibility

Besides the social and cultural aspect of urban gardens, the interviews have revealed the action of bringing back nature to the city. All the cases occupied spaces where the soil was inactive. The site of Pot’Albert, in particular, was contaminated because of the presence of a gas factory in the past. The request from the citizens and the local institutions to transform the space in a garden, led the government to clean the soil. The gated space of Autour de Marguerite was previously occupied by a certain species of plant (hydrangea) and today there is a variety of flowers, fruits and vegetables. In the 2000s, the site of Chant des Cailles was occupied by conventional agricultural activities, but for two years the land was inactive until the start of the project in 2012.

Besides social, cultural and knowledge exchange, urban collective gardens are usually spaces that have an ecological responsibility by integrating local production of organic food and environmental restoration (Krasny & Tidball, 2009). The respondents often brought the concern about what they eat and how they cultivate seeds and the vegetables. In the charter, when available, there are strict rules that pesticide or any chemical product is prohibited in the garden.

Looking at the cases through an ecofeminism perspective, women are still the majority among the participants of the project. Moreover, if the urban collective gardens are threatened by privatization or enclosure, it means to be threatened by ecological degradation with the idea that nature can be exploited for the progress of humanity (Merchant, 1990). Like ecofeminism that grew out of activism, Chant des Cailles still struggles to keep the transition project in the site the way it is. In contrast, Pot’Albert is not threatened by enclosure, but is threatened by other external factors, like vandalism and scarcity of water, that bring challenges for the group in daily life. Consequently, commoning might become vulnerable to the enclosure of relations (Velcu & García-López, 2018).

The collective garden as a green space was a relief for some residents, especially those who have precarious living conditions, as in the case of Pot’Albert. In addition to environmental restoration, the empirical findings from the three cases have revealed that people seek human as well as non-human relations by (re-)connecting with nature. As said by one of the respondents, the garden becomes a tool for emancipation and empowerment of the citizens. The participants who are active in the collective garden, are usually also engaged in other subjects about climate change, mobility and social cohesion.
5.5.3. Power decentralization

The self-management of a collective garden is the heart of the community and it is an important aspect of commoning, which is a relational process (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). The ecofeminist perspective facilitates to understand how power occurs in the organization of the commons through self-management. Analysing the process of management, it is possible to uncover issues related to care and responsibility among the members and the environment (Clement et al., 2019). The literature about commons and commoning emphasize the everyday interaction based on the principle of cooperation (Helfrich, 2015) rather than based on self and exclusive interests. Likewise, ecofeminism focuses on ‘power with’, also based on the collaboration between a community, instead of ‘power over’, which means domination and authoritarianism.

The cases have different management from each other. For instance, Chant des Cailles attempts to decentralize the leadership of the whole project by creating working groups and discussing every rule in meetings through collective intelligence. In Autour de Marguerite, the management is concentrated in a small group of retired people, that is linked to the availability of time. And Pot’Albert, that according to the data, presents two different levels of management. First, the management by the local institutions that take the lead in creating the rules, waiting list, subsidies and daily conflicts. And second, the self-management by the citizens, that create their own internal rules regardless of the charter and sometimes individualistic-driven.

If commoning is about being in community, and community stands for collaboration, then power decentralization must be at the core of collective gardens. Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen (2001) recognize the challenge to establish such communities in a capitalist society based on individualisation, privatisation and accumulation. To overcome the challenge, it is important to analyse two aspects: how power (decentralization) happens and who is part of the decision-making. First, the values of a community are generated in the everyday interaction between the members through commoning (Helfrich, 2015). This means that fundamentally, power decentralization is based on the values and the social process of commoning. Congruently, the respondents of Chant des Cailles have stated that collective management takes time and it does not follow the ‘standards of efficiency’ of the ‘outside world’. The rules and the charter were created in the beginning of the project, but how the meetings are facilitated is an evolution process, which is currently based on collective intelligence.
Second, who is taking part in the decision-making also plays an important role in the power decentralization. As it was already mentioned, some respondents from Chant des Cailles have recognized the importance of welcoming and including people from different origins in the project. Thanks to a social cohesion project in the neighbourhood, there is a group of North African women that started taking part in some activities in the garden. However, they have not participated in the meetings yet. Some people assume they do not feel at home and that language might also be a barrier.

In contrast, the decision-making in the Autour de Marguerite seems to be concentrated in the hands of the small group of retired people, since some respondents have stated to not be aware how the internal management works. In fact, younger people who still work and/or have children have limited time available, mainly on weekends, while retired people are more present in the garden on weekdays. Since there is no charter or clear rules, some members participate in the garden when and how they can, without necessarily committing themselves to collective responsibility. Even though the main narrative is to include every person who wants to join the group, the collective responsibility is not explicit and the power remains concentrated in the hands of a few members.

In essence, power decentralization in urban collective gardens is more than merely sharing the tasks among its members. It is a group process and a choice made consciously by the community to not only give voice for the ones who are present, but also try to reach out those who are not present. According to Sachs (1992), acknowledging diversity does not necessarily mean a shift in power differences. Therefore, it is important to support diversity and simultaneously redistribute power. For instance, in Chant des Cailles, there was first an internal process to strengthen the community towards collective responsibility. Once there is a collective evolution, the community is then able to acknowledge the importance of opening up and welcoming those who do not feel part of the group.

5.5.4. Social and ecological interdependency

Finally, yet importantly, social and ecological interdependency was identified in different degrees in the three cases. Ecofeminists claim that mechanistic, reductionist and fragmented theories (Sachs, 1992) as well as the overvaluation of ‘rationality’ (Plumwood, 2003) of understanding the world are used as means to exploit and oppress women, nature, people of colour and lower class.
Therefore, ecofeminism stands for a holistic understanding, which implies integrated and interdependent communities. Acknowledging the interdependency between humans and nature is an act of weaving a collective power (Herrero, 2013).

The collective gardens can be considered a refuge for some and a relief for others. All the respondents connect nature – the garden – with emotions, be it positive or negative. In fact, when people feel part of a community, they also feel vulnerable emotionally. Then commoning might be in itself a form of human interdependency (Velicu & García-López, 2018). Moreover, the respondents have also expressed an emotional attachment to the garden, especially those who are struggling to keep the right to use the land. Herrero (2013, p. 304, my translation) summarizes well the endurance of Chant des Cailles: “There is no revolution without passion, without love for life and for the people. Investing time and energy in such unequal struggle, in which sometimes there are so many doubts about the result it will have, is only possible if one lives with full meaning, with the head and with the heart”. Likewise, the community of Pot’Albert also has its struggles in everyday life due to its context. The interdependency among the members, the (re-)connection with nature, having an objective together is what makes all the three projects stronger. Through interdependence it is possible to find a common ground between the people and the space.

The social and ecological interdependence is perhaps what makes collective gardens essential projects in the city. All the cases have confirmed that it is not only about cultivating nature in the urban environment, but it is nature as the means to also cultivate social relations. This happens when people work together side by side or when they use the space to simply meet other people. The three gardens have been spaces for celebrations through the different cultures. “Everyone needs a beautiful environment like this. It is not cultural, it is everyone” (CC8, my translation). In this sense, the garden itself as a space reveals to be crucial to the encounter of the several communities in a neighbourhood.
6. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse the practice of commoning in three urban community gardens in the Brussels Capital Region. Based on qualitative research by participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, it can be concluded that urban community gardens, within the concept of commons and ecofeminism, are potential alternatives that challenge the current patriarchal and neoliberal-capitalist system by attempting to build a community in a more cooperative way.

The concept of commons enabled this research to identify urban community gardens as spaces that practice commoning by using and managing the resource – the garden – collectively. Whereas the ecofeminist lens helped to analyse not only the social relations among the members, outsiders and partners, but also the relationship between the users and the environment. Therefore, combining both concepts it is possible to seek social, environmental and gender transformation by recognizing diversity – or the lack of – and redefine social reproduction in order to build a cooperative society.

Harvey (2012) interpreted commons as unstable, yet malleable social relations between the collective group and its context. By analysing the three urban gardens it was possible to conclude that indeed every case is shaped by certain conditions that I identified as contextual factors: 1) the internal process; 2) the external push; and 3) the quality of the physical space. In addition, the results of the case studies with the support of the theory indicated four key factors that contribute to overcoming the ‘logic of domination’ in urban gardens through the practice of commoning: 1) social, cultural and knowledge exchange; 2) ecological responsibility; 3) power decentralization; and 4) social and ecological interdependency. The contextual and the key factors for commoning are closely associated to each other since the contextual factors have a role in pushing forward or holding back the collective actions.

Considering the ecofeminist lens, gender appears as a subtle issue in the three cases. Only in Pot’Albert that it was spoken explicitly about men imposing themselves and taking over the water and the plots, while women, usually old ladies, did not have the voice to fight equally. Even though, gender seems not to be an issue in Chant des Cailles and Autour de Marguerite, the three gardens have mentioned that there are more women than men, and often women are in ‘leading’ positions to push forward collective actions.
Above the gender aspect, what became clear in the three gardens is that the cultural background plays a crucial role in how social relationships are shaped in a community, even though the three of them present different dynamics from each other. In terms of origins and backgrounds, Autour de Marguerite is more characterized by a homogenous European community, while Chant des Cailles and Pot’Albert have a mixity of backgrounds, which is probably due to the social housing in the surroundings where many citizens with migratory background live. Pot’Albert, in particular, is the case which has more members from different origins. Recognizing the diversity not only in terms of gender and age, but also race and class has confirmed the importance of looking at the cases through an intersectional view.

Finally, none of the three cases overcome the ‘logic of domination’ uniquely, since power over can still occur vertically, through the government, and horizontally between a few members (Velicu & García-López, 2018). It is true that in the three cases there are gardeners who do not necessarily correspond to the community values. It is not possible to mediate all conflicts and the practical solution is sometimes excluding those who are more individualistic. However, some respondents have expressed the concern to the sustainability of the group in a long term. What matters is striving to strengthen the collective view while it acknowledges some differences in an honest way. All the cases have given steps forward to a collective evolvement. In this way, the gardens have proven to be the place to experiment another type of governance through collective intelligence, or by not respecting the rules because the external factors are too destructive, or through the narrative of inclusion. Overall, power decentralization seems to be an important step towards social, environmental and gender transformation.

Urban community gardens, here analysed within the concepts of commons and ecofeminism, have confirmed that “individuals working together can bring forth more humane, ethical, and ecologically responsible societies” (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019, Section 1, para. 5). Hence, the practice of commoning is a process of unfolding humanity (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019). A humanity that is part of nature, and not apart from it. Therefore, the social and ecological interdependency in urban community gardens brings together social-cultural diversity and the (re-)connection with nature through environmental restoration in the urban fabric.
6.1. Limitations and directions for further/future research

Urban community gardens can be seen as microcosms integrated in several urban scales, that is the surrounding, the neighbourhood, the city, the region. Each case provides a constellation of physical and historical factors that should be analysed if one wants to understand deeper their implications in the community project. Moreover, during the interviews in Chant des Cailles, some members assumed that residents from the social housing do not feel at home in the neighbourhood or that they are not interested in the project. Further research is needed to clearly understand the reasons behind these assumptions.

While talking to the members of the cases, I found out that there are several ‘personas’ in the group. For instance, the ones who are active, the ones who do not feel welcome; the ones who do not agree with the type of the garden; the ones who do not follow the values, but they are still present, etc. For this research, it was not possible to encounter all these ‘personas’ due to the time limit and language constraints. But it would be important to understand in more detail their role and their vision of the project.
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