EXPLORING SENSE OF PLACE AMONGST SMALLHOLDER FARMERS IN RURAL CIOCIARIA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is inspired by and dedicated to everyone who sacrifices a bit of themselves to feed others.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge Dionisio Pantanella, who on the morning of June 21st 2023, the summer solstice, gently passed on. He was born on the land which I now call home, and tended to it all eighty-six years of his life despite moving to Rome at the age of 14. I am incredibly grateful for the countless hours we shared under the olive trees or on the porch where he recounted stories of life on the farm and all that has changed with the passing of time. It is when speaking with him that I truly began to understand the concept of 'sense of place'. I got to see this land through his eyes, emotions, practices and objects that all wove together to become one distinct place: the Pantanella property. He inspired and encouraged me to take on a massive project in the middle of writing this thesis: acquiring, tending and transforming 16 Hectares of abandoned farmland even though I really didn't have a clue about what that exactly entailed.

What counted, he said, was that you feel the presence of God in all that you do.

Image 1: Dionisio & I sitting on the rocks where his mother used to make cheese from the milk of their flock of sheep. During the war, she would gift cheese and bread to refugees fleeing the bombing in Cassino by foot towards safety in Rome. (Fontana Liri, March 2023)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE: What and who is behind the clogs of Ciociaria?

Ciociaria is the name given to an area without defined geographical borders or ethnic particularities, but is commonly recognized as a combination of territories between the region of Lazio and Campagnia with it's heart in the province of Frosinone. The term Ciociaria takes its name from the particular footwear worn by peasants and shepherds known as "Ciocie", which derives from the Latin word for hoof, made with goat skin and black leather strings which rolled around the leg and held in place a very simple lining of the foot. Due to their meager characteristics, it was a symbol of the poverty of a territory and of a people who lived exclusively on agriculture and who worked with sacrifice for the sustenance of the family.

Until 1870, the territory of Ciociaria was under the rule of the Papal State. After the Unification of Italy in 1871, new laws reclaimed large areas of land from the Church and sold them up until 1883 (Mariani, 2017). However, in Ciociaria, peasants only acquired full ownership of the land one hundred years after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. This slow process of leaving "feudalism" was due, as identified by the historian Cacciavillani, to the permanence of large, noble estates and their fragmentation into many parcels which then leased to peasant labourers. Even after the second world war, harsh rental conditions continued to be imposed on land-leasers, ignoring new legislation which attempted to liberate peasants from subordination. However, slowly peasants began to organize themselves with the help of intellectuals and politicians with the common interest of liberating the land labourer from the oppressor. This is illustrated beautifully in the poem by Gian Dàuli:

Tutti nati dal sen della terra
una grande famiglia formiamo,
d'ogni artiere fratelli noi siamo,
ma nemici del vile oppressor!

E' il lavoro ogni nostra ricchezza
è la terra ogni nostro ideale
e per farci redenti dal male
una libera Armata formiam!

Nell'Armata della terra
Su muoviamo tutti uniti,
ch'ai potenti si fa guerra
pel trionfo del lavoro.

All born from the bossom of the earth
we form a big family,
we are of every artistic brother,
but enemies of the vile oppressor!

Our work is all our wealth
the land is our every ideal
and to make us redeemed from evil
let's form a free Army!

In the Army of the earth
Come on let's all move together,
that war is waged against the
powerful
for the triumph of work.

The 60s was marked by events which ended a long journey of servitude and announced liberation for peasants by recognizing social, political and citizen rights, notably the right to purchase property in exchange for monetary payment. However, this was only one of many ways in which transformation would influence the lives of Ciociarians.

Up until this time, Ciociaria was a peasant land, whose fundamental values were work, family, religion and the sacrifice imposed by poverty. Peasant society has been described as a simple

society with a strong internal cohesion. The members of the community themselves controlled the functioning of the community and the distribution of resources. Individuals would be closely united to each other with little differentiated activities. Consciences also would not differ, adhering to the same values, beliefs and expectations. The large peasant family was also a unit that fulfilled survival needs through a delicate balance of workforce, resources and mouths to feed. A surplus of workforce produced the mobility of young peasants who performed services for other farm families or moved to cities to look for work. This is the case of many Ciociaria farm laborers who in the 1960s "move to Rome to obtain a more profitable salary and who, upon their return, tell their villagers that they have known the cinema or bought shoes at Porta Portese on Sundays" (Compagnoni, 1997, p. 91).

Post-fascist Italy embarked on a process of industrialization and urbanization, leading to a shift away from agriculture as the primary source of employment and marking a new phase of development. The economy transitioned and transformed from a predominantly agricultural economy to one that was linked to the industrial model, from an economy of production and export of primary products to one of manufactured goods. This development has been characterized by the disproportionate degree of growth between the northern and southern regions, and a productive dualism of the presence of a few technologically advanced companies that coexisted with a sector made up of small, entrepreneurial initiatives. Many of the industries formed were born from investments of foreign capital or companies in the North who transferred production to Ciociaria in industrial centers such as Frosinone, Cassino and along the Liri River. The imposed industrialization had no relation to the history, production capacities or agriculture of the area. Agricultural development or the enhancement of local resources was largely ignored, and polices failed to stimulate the creation of entrepreneurial initiatives by residents of the area. These dynamics altered the landscape of Ciociaria and led to an exodus towards industry and an inversion of housing. Historic centers, once vibrant and places of artistic and cultural heritage, were largely abandoned, while peripheralization boomed and continues with the consequent expansion of the peri-urban area even so today.

Here, it is important to distinguish the concept of development from that of progress. Quoting Pasolini: *“Development is an objective of the industrialists that can be reached through an increase in production and through the application of technology. Progress is emancipation and it is the goal that the labourers, peasants, those who work and are therefore exploited, want to achieve”.* (Sviluppo e progresso, 1999)

The years of industrialization represented a social promotion and a renunciation of the cultural values linked to the "model of the poor" (Pasolini, 1999). As such, society was not only transformed materially, but also socially and culturally. A complex society emerged based on the division of labor and on a different type of solidarity: each individual differs from the other in that he is specialized in the execution of a specific activity, however the activities of one are indispensable for the survival of the other. This new process of division of labor separates agricultural and artisanal work from that of industry, which also intensifies the separation between city and countryside (Weber, 2005).

During the years of the economic boom, cultural identity eroded and generated material and spiritual consumerism, standardization and the destruction of values (Mariani, 2017). Three factors shaped the social landscape of Ciociaria. Firstly, in the same moment as Ciociaria was going through industrial development, so too could agriculture have been industrialized, transformed

into a production activity for the broader market. However, peasants, having recently emerged from subordination, had no capital to invest to innovate and improve their farms. Farmers largely continued to practice a domestic economy, characterized by self-consumption and small scale trade. This meant that the large capitalist farm with intensive cultivation which was born in other areas of Italy such as the Po Valley, struggled to arise in Ciociaria (Mariani, 2017).

Secondly, the status of the worker is born through social and territorial mobility. With social mobility, the status of the craftsman and peasant are abandoned. The transfer of workers and their families closer to the workplace constitutes territorial mobility and the phenomenon of urbanization. Considering these two criteria, it can be argued that the Ciociaro peasant never fully assumed this new status. The factories in the industrial areas were easily accessible from the neighboring hill towns and so increased the phenomenon of commuting. It was a contradictory working class that instead of urbanizing in the nascent towns such as Frosinone and Cassino, remained in the countryside in order not to separate from their land.

Thirdly, industrial development led to a significant decline in artisanal activities. The mass-produced product, made in a shorter time and at a lower cost in the factory, supplanted the unique and original product of the craftsman created in the tiny workplace of the shop. The new mass production, which finds its existential foundation in consumerism and advertising, led to the practice of "disposable" objects, which has only grown more widespread among consumers. Poverty, which actuates conservative habits and the recycling of goods, gave way to new opulent behaviors characterized by "anti-savings". As a result, the traditional craft activities that took care of the maintenance of those objects that in the past were intended to last for generations began to become useless and obsolete. This provoked a vicious cycle, leading many artisans, as with the peasants, to industry as the new work destination after the closure of their shops.

A local peasant and artisan identity has historically taken shape through an endogenous process based on the natural characteristics and traditions of the territory. With the decline of small-scale and subsistence agriculture, the culture that was bound to it also fades. A new territorial identity is no longer well defined, struggling to find it’s footing on shaky grounds which is caught between rapid globalization and a seemingly lagging rural. This makes it particularly difficult to revive agricultural and artisanal activities, which soon may vanish into a historical memory of place.

MAIN AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The objective of this thesis is to explore how place is constructed through the continuous and ever-changing relations within space. This is realized by exploring relationships and practices in and beyond place that are actively enacted by smallholder farmers in Ciociaria. This study is grounded among smallholder, family farmers, which leads to the following research question:

In which ways do smallholder farmers within Ciociaria construct a sense of place?

The originality of this research lies in its form as a synthesis of interviews with characters who shape and define the area through their life stories, their work, and cultural productions. Their stories help to recover memories and references that make them feel emotionally close to us. It becomes possible to touch history as something that is not read coldly but is relived through familiar voices. Through a nuanced exploration of their narratives, practices, and interactions, this research aspires to not only enhance our understanding of place-making within Ciociaria, but also contribute to broader discussions on the relationships between human activities and the landscapes they inhabit.

Figure 2: The town of Fontana Liri Superiore in the background, with the Ponte di Sette Luci (bridge of seven lights). It was blown up in 1943 as Germans passed with ammunition and fuel, thus noted as a site of one of the key actions of the resistance against Nazi occupiers.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research builds on two main pillars: firstly, grounded theory combined with (auto)ethnography, and secondly, theory of place.

I. GROUNDED THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

The first pillar of the conceptual framework combines (auto)ethnography with a grounded theory approach. The purpose of ethnographic research is to understand and represent the perspective of a society or group of people. Ethnographers argue in favour of inductive and discovery-based research processes focusing on 'local interpretations' (Fetterman, 2010). This emphasis on the local context and dynamics enriches the analysis as it enables deeper insight into individual and cultural meanings and values, and reveals an interest in explaining differential responses to similar structural circumstances even if conditions appear relatively homogeneous (Roncoli, 2006). As such, I attempt to understand and convey how farmers make sense of their surroundings by actively participating in daily activities on the farms, using daily conversations as data (both with farmers as well as rural inhabitants), and observing and making use of both tacit and explicit information for analysis (DeWalt, 2010).

The additional element of autoethnography allowed me to embody and move through the rural space as a farmer, albeit a very novice and foreign farmer, wherein my identity as a researcher and inhabitant were quite often blurred. I quickly came to realize that I cannot fully separate my observations from my personal experiences and feelings, and so I attempted to mitigate this bias, by remaining self-reflective and open to reassessing my own perspectives throughout the research process. During later phases of coding I was able to distinguish the impressions, questions and feelings from what I was observing, especially as the duration of data collection extended over several months which allowed for certain ideas to cement themselves in recurring patterns of observation.

Grounded theory is a qualitative research strategy employed to derive general abstract theories from the analysis of patterns, themes, and common categories found in observational data. This research uses the Gioia method which is characterized by four (4) steps:

Step[a]	Key Features
Research Design	• Articulate a well-defined phenomenon of interest and research question(s) (research question[s] framed in "how" terms aimed at surfacing concepts and their inter-relationships) • Initially consult with existing literature, with suspension of judgment about its conclusions to allow discovery of new insights
Data Collection	• Give extraordinary voice to informants, who are treated as knowledgeable agents • Preserve flexibility to adjust interview protocol based on informant responses • "Backtrack" to prior informants to ask questions that arise from subsequent interviews
Data Analysis	• Perform initial data coding, maintaining the integrity of 1st-order (informant-centric) terms • Develop a comprehensive compendium of 1st-order terms • Organize 1st-order codes into 2nd-order (theory-centric) themes • Distill 2nd-order themes into overarching theoretical dimensions (if appropriate) • Assemble terms, themes, and dimensions into a "data structure"
Grounded Theory Articulation	• Formulate dynamic relationships among the 2nd-order concepts in data structure • Transform static data structure into dynamic grounded theory model • Conduct additional consultations with the literature to refine articulation of emergent concepts and relationships

Figure 1: *Gioia Methodology of Grounded Theory Development (2013)*

Drawing on Gioia et. al (p. 17, 2013), this research utilizes an inducive approach whereby "we do not presume to impose prior constructs or theories on the informants as some sort of preferred a priori explanation for understanding or explaining their experience". This helps to avoid the categorisation of actions and discourses into fixed analytical groups or assumed trajectories and prevents rigid thinking which could potentially ignore data that does not presume to fit within a preconceived lense of scrutiny and thus be blinded from elements of complexity and nuances which constitute a farmer's constructed reality. Moreover, efforts are made to give a voice to the informants in the early stages of data gathering and analysis, and also to represent these voices prominently in the reporting of the research, which creates rich opportunities for discovery of new concepts rather than affirmation of existing concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). Consequently, the research process is open-ended and can be re-defined within the research process itself.

The following table has been adapted from Sbarain et al. (2011) and outlines the fundamentals of qualitative research using Grounded Theory. These components have been used to guide the sampling, data collection and analysis stages of the research.

Tabella 1: Fundamentals of Grounded Theory Research (adapted Sabrain et al. 2011)

Component	**Stage**	**Description**
Openness	Throughout research	Grounded theory methodology emphasises inductive analysis. This means that hypotheses are generated from the data and not pre-conceived. The emphasis of a Grounded Theory study may evolve as it becomes apparent to the researchers what is important to the study participants. As such, the researcher must remain open and flexible to change throughout the process.
Analysis	Data Collection & Analysis	Data analysis in grounded theory is an iterative process where data collection and analysis occur concurrently: insights emerging from early data shape further data collection, which in turn adds to existing understanding, and continues until 'saturation' occurs; that is, no new insights emerge from further data collection.
Coding & Comparing	Analysis	Data analysis relies on *coding, the* process of breaking data down into smaller components, labelling those components and *comparing. Comparison occurs at mutiple levels:* data with data, case with case, event with event, code with code, to understand and explain any variation. *Codes* are eventually combined and related to one another, becoming more abstract, and eventually evolve into concepts.
Memo Writing	Data Collection & Analysis	The researcher writes many memos throughout the project. Memos can be about events, cases, categories, or relationships between categories. Memos are used to stimulate and record the researcher's developing thinking, including comparisons (as above).
Theoretical Sampling	Sampling & Data Collection	A theoretical sample is informed by *coding, comparison and memo-writing*. Analysis raises questions, suggests relationships, highlights gaps in the existing data set and reveals what remains unknown to the researcher. By carefully selecting *participants* and by modifying the *questions* asked during data collection, the researcher fill gaps, clarify uncertainties, test interpretations, and builds their emerging theory.

Theoretical Saturation	Sampling, Data Collection & Analysis	Saturation occurs when all of the concepts in the substantive theory being developed are well understood and can be substantiated from the data.
Production of Theory	Analysis & Interpretation	The results of a grounded theory study are expressed as a substantive theory, that is, as a set of concepts that are related to one another in a cohesive whole. This theory is considered to be fallible, dependent on context and never completely final.

The research began with a well-defined main research question and exploring initial concepts relating to the research question. The concepts which intrigued me as I first set out to speak with farmers were: Who was the inhabitant of rural Ciociaria in the past and who are they today? How did people live in Ciociaria in the past and how do they live there today? Do farmers identify themselves with this present? How do they interact with and contribute to their local community? How is farming here different than farming in other parts of Italy?

I initially had drafted my research proposal to explore imaged and re-designed food futures, but soon recognized that it was often tedious or uninspiring for farmers to put energy into thinking about the future when their reality is grounded so strongly in the present. After the first interviews, I realized that other, more prominent themes were emerging from the farmers and so I re-conceptualized my research question and the interview guide to probe deeper into imminent narratives.

While grounded theory allowed me to dive deep into the unknown so to speak, fueled by an insatiable curiousity, ethnography provided the means for me to make and record observations in their raw and unaltered state, including the subjectivity brought forth by my own perceptions and feelings. Pettigrew (2000) promotes that grounded theory complemented with ethnography can "formalize and extend the limited theoretical component of ethnography" (p. 259). Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) and Charmaz (2006) argue that the constant comparative method and systematic guidelines offered by grounded theory can aid ethnographers in mulitple ways. This includes comparing data throughout the research process rather than after data collection, comparing data with emerging categories, making explicit relationships between concepts and categories, and facilitating a shift from description to higher levels of abstraction and theoretical elaboration (Babchuk & Hitchcock, 2013). They furthermore argue that the combined approach allows the researcher to avoid the use of pre-existing disciplinary categories, minimize unsystematic and random data collection, enhance the building of categories, concepts, theory, and erase the separation between data collection and analysis. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) posit that grounded theory can help focus ethnographic research through the study of social processes and increase the ethnographer's connection to the data.

II. SENSE OF PLACE

The second pillar of the conceptual framework uses Place Theory to complement the inductive research process.

Place is a space which takes meaning in cultural, individual and social processes (Altman and Low, 1992). People in places reproduce and transform the identity of landscapes by their conduct, either intentionally or unintentionally (Creswell, 2009). As such, social actors should not be

considered as passive objects of hegemonic processes affecting their place, but rather as capable of altering the web of relations and interconnected practices of which they are part (Horlings et al., 2018).

De Wit (2013) defines sense of place as "*the human experience of place in all its dimensions: physical, social, psychological, intellectual, and emotional. It includes the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes held toward a place, as well as residents' conscious and unconscious attachments to place, their feelings about local political and social issues, and their attitudes and feelings toward other places*".

In any given place, one can draw on materiality, meaning and practice. These categories are all linked (as depicted in figure 1) and can help make sense of sense of place. Places have a material presence, be it their material landscape, the multitude of things that pass through them or the innate properties of materials (Creswell, 2014). Places are locations with meanings where materialities are attached to meanings and vise versa, formed by the meanings that are produced through acts of representation (Cresswell, 2009). Deciphering the meanings individuals attach to places helps the researcher "understand a good deal about culture, values and concerns of the people who built and use [them]" (Raitz, 1987, pg. 49). In addition to materials and meanings, places are marked by practice, which as Creswell beautiful articulates, is "a choreography of habits and rhythms that makes a place distinctive" (pg. 11, 2014). People are always doing things, albeit in varying degrees of predictability or orderliness, and as such, space becomes place when it is used and lived.

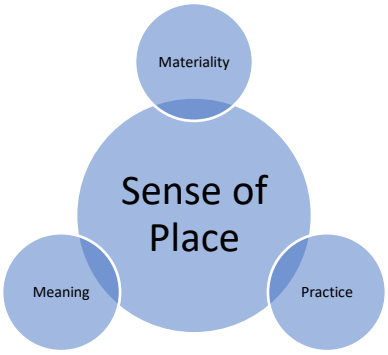


Figure 3: The convergence of materiality, meaning and practice to make up a sense of place.

Both for the individual and for society as a whole, a place is in the constant process of being made, never finalized or definite, continuously shaped via the process of change (Horlings et al., 2020). This can help to obtain a relational and dynamic understanding of the rural space from the perspective of rural inhabitants, and in the case of this research, smallholder farmers in Ciociaria. It is important to note that sense of place may be both shared and contested at a single locality (Arefi, 1999). Places are also unequal in the ways power, capacities and resources are mobilized (Massey, 2004), and even seemingly similar types of resource users may not share the same sense of place (Gurney et al., 2017; Yung, Freimund, & Belsky, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

In the next sections, I review the methods and methodology used for data collection and analysis.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

I moved to Fontana Liri in early December 2020 and began fieldwork for this research in March 2021 which lasted until October of the same year. This allowed me to experience the diversity of all the seasons and how this shapes farm life.

For three months, I had little to no control over my research agenda. The early stages of data collection were at the mercy of two uncontrollable factors: Firstly, the coronavirus pandemic left me isolated within a 5km radius of my parent's farm with many people reluctant to schedule on-farm visits. Secondly, we were struck by very unusual spring climate– heavy, persistent rain and a late frost in the month of April – which impacted farm activities often without a days' notice. This made my initial interactions with the community and the first interviews scattered and unpredictable, but also provided a very honest introduction to the realities of mother nature being the ultimate boss.

Initially, I deliberately allowed my informants to decide when, where and how to meet me and what to share with me. I allowed myself to be guided by the informants until I had gained enough knowledge to approach them and introduce the methodology for this research. I embraced the ethnological methodology of complete immersion into the daily lives of the subjects of study.

At times, I felt completely overwhelmed by the endless streams of inputs and information that was revealed through and alongside my research subjects. I also had to be conscious to distinguish the questions and assumptions which were arising from my own experience as a new resident and hopeful farmer in the area, careful of how my prejudices and interpretations could affect the research. The line between researcher and inhabitant was rather blurry at times, as I was simultaneously observing yet immersing myself in our rural community. I learned to let my research shift forms, revising and co-evolving with every interaction and to have an open mind to explore potential new pathways or insights which may emerge from even the most unexpected of places. Similarly, the questions asked during interviews were reformulated and reoriented as certain themes or concepts became more prominent. For example, I noticed the frequency in which people referred to the concept of sacrifice when working the land and so I revisited this concept in more detail with later interviews. However, the central component of my observations and research was to reveal how farmers perceive themselves, their work, and their environment.

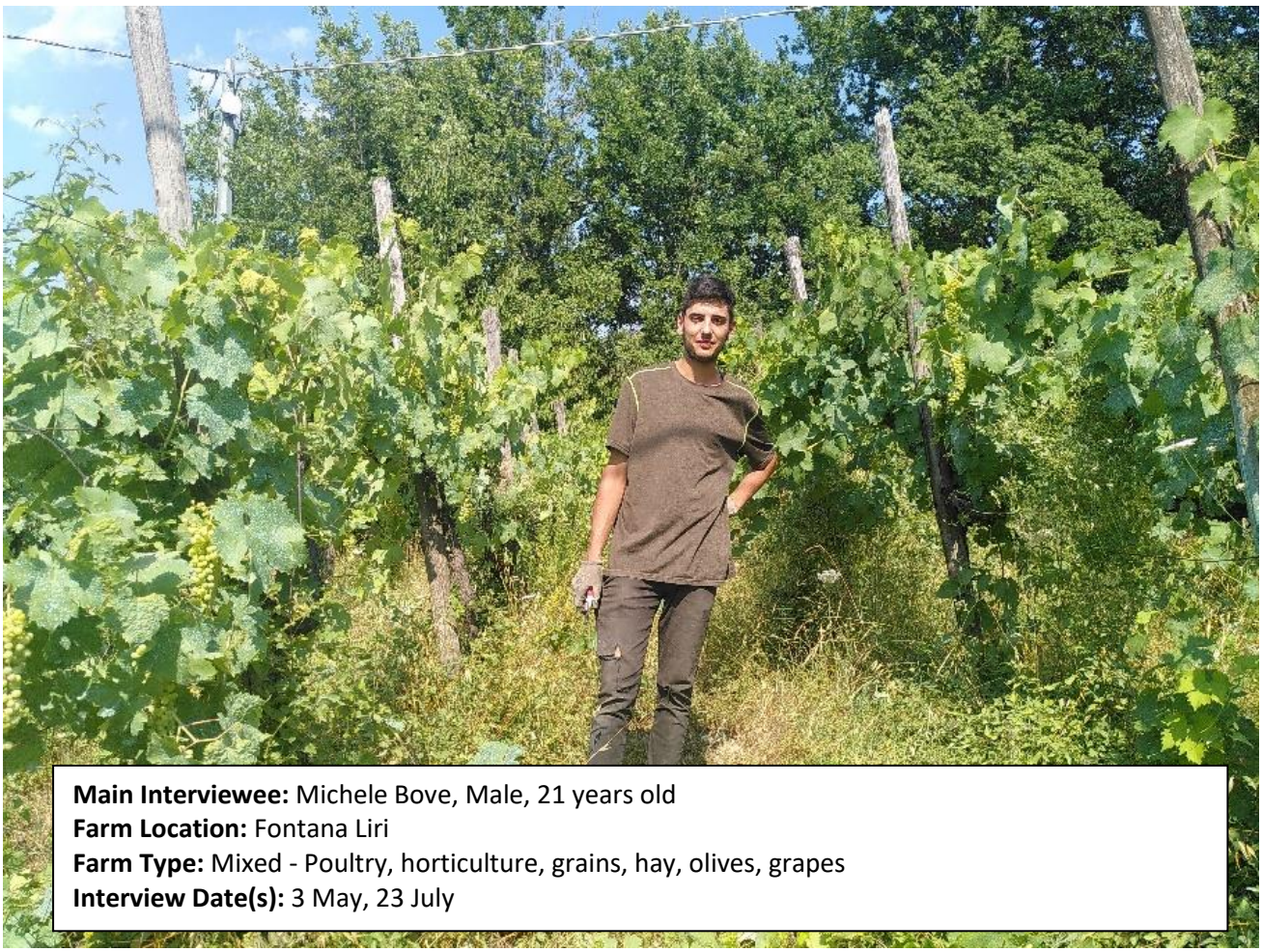
For every farm visit, a farm tour was conducted, lasting between two and three hours. The main method of data gathering was semi-structured interviews, however I also incorporated sensorial experiences, such as walking or eating together. Through these shared experiences, 'sensory knowledge' was developed. Walking was especially relevant in this context, as I was interested in seeing how people interact with their environment, and it granted opportunities to discuss aspects of their farming experience as they emerged in the physical landscape. For example, passing by a well ignited a reflection on the changing climate and diminishing rainfall. This practice of walking allowed for a more embodied understanding of their experiences. This was fused with countless hours of informal interviews and exchanges intertwined in the many months which elapsed since I first stepped into my researcher role.

Starting from the perspective of rural inhabitants, it was possible to engage with their relations, practices and discourses, providing opportunities to better understand how people in that place experienced rural development and how their practices were shaping and shaped by socio-ecological and socio-spatial relations.

Finding farming families: A journey through fields and shops

A case-study design was used for this research with a sample size limited to five farms. The question of what constitutes a smallholder, family farm is very much dependent on the context. Physical measures (in terms of land or labour input), market participation and economic size are the most commonly used criteria for defining small farms. In Italy, 60% of farmers have a surface area of less than 5Ha and the average annual earnings are €48,000 (CREA, 2019). All five farms who took part in the research operate on less than 20Ha, have no more than 2 hired operational workers, meaning family labour plays a pivotal role, and demonstrate high levels of self-consumption, thus constituting them as "smallholder, family farms".

Farm 1: Bove Family



Main Interviewee: Michele Bove, Male, 21 years old
Farm Location: Fontana Liri
Farm Type: Mixed - Poultry, horticulture, grains, hay, olives, grapes
Interview Date(s): 3 May, 23 July

The first case, a diversified farm run by the Bove family, was found by walking down the hill from my family's farm during lockdown on my way to the tiny train station where a train passes 6 times per day to connect Avezzano in Abruzzo with Roccasecca in Frosinone. This being a rather absurd or uncommon event drew attention to me, and so our interactions began through a common curiosity to make sense of the other. Our conversations began with brief, informal exchanges to

understand the family's history, their farming activities and their description of the broader community. I was lucky that the begining of my research coincided with the pruning season of olive trees and vineyards, as well as preparing the soil for the upcoming spring planting season. I offered to lend a hand with these activities which they generously accepted, albeit with some mild skepticism owing to my city origins. Initially, I did not mention my research as I wanted to build a rapport with the family and I detected suspicion towards the realm of academia and it's abstract theoretical rhetoric. I used the hours we spent in the field together as an introduction to the area, my neighbours and their routines, the soil, the crops and their stories, all the while granting me my first hands-on farming experience in my new home. I did this with two other neighbours who were producing mainly for self-consumption, however it was with the Bove's that the discussions around the dynamics of farming as a profession deepened and I was curious by the fact that their son was in his early 20s and demonstrated a desire to carry their farm forward. I decided to introduce my research topic during one of my visits, and we continued to meet at varying intervals throughout the season. I used these encounters to test my initial interview questions, although I did not initially record anything. Following our meetings, I wrote case memos to briefly summarize the visit and describe what I saw and felt. In May, I recorded one of our interviews which focused on his dream to open an agritourismo, and another one in the summer to address topics which arose from our last encounter as I proceeded with my research. My relationship and frequent exchanges with the family also allowed me to decipher who else in the area was engaging in farming, and could thus serve as potential case studies for my research.

Farm 2: Tre Casali

I was introduced to the second farm, Tre Casali ('Three Farmhouses'), by the father of Michele who took me there one day after riding around in his truck looking for spare parts for a farming instrument in March. I spent an hour talking with the three young men who were all related, but had varying degrees of experience and positions working on the farm, which has existed in some shape or form since 2017. I realized they were down the valley from my farm, and I asked if I could come back to tour the farm the following week. Even though we were only 1km apart, the summer heat was already in full force so I rode my horse over, allowing me to observe how the landscape changed from the woody slopes near our farm down into the more manicured fields of grain near theirs. The farm extends over 10Ha of land which is divded into an area of woods, their vegetable field, an open grazing area with olives and donkeys and their house, where the ground floor was being transformed into a small processing canteen. A half hectar is surrounded by a corroded metal-zinc fence which used to house thousands of snails which were a trial for biocosmetics before Matteo went to Australia for work in 2018. Their main activity focuses on organic vegetable production, which they sell via Whatsapp to a network in their hometown of Ferentino, a suburb of the provincial capital of Frosinone. The pandemic reignited Matteo's original plans to transform the property into an agritourismo, and so with the help of his two cousins, Giovanni and Enrico, they are slowly transforming the formerly abandoned property into a multi-functional farm.

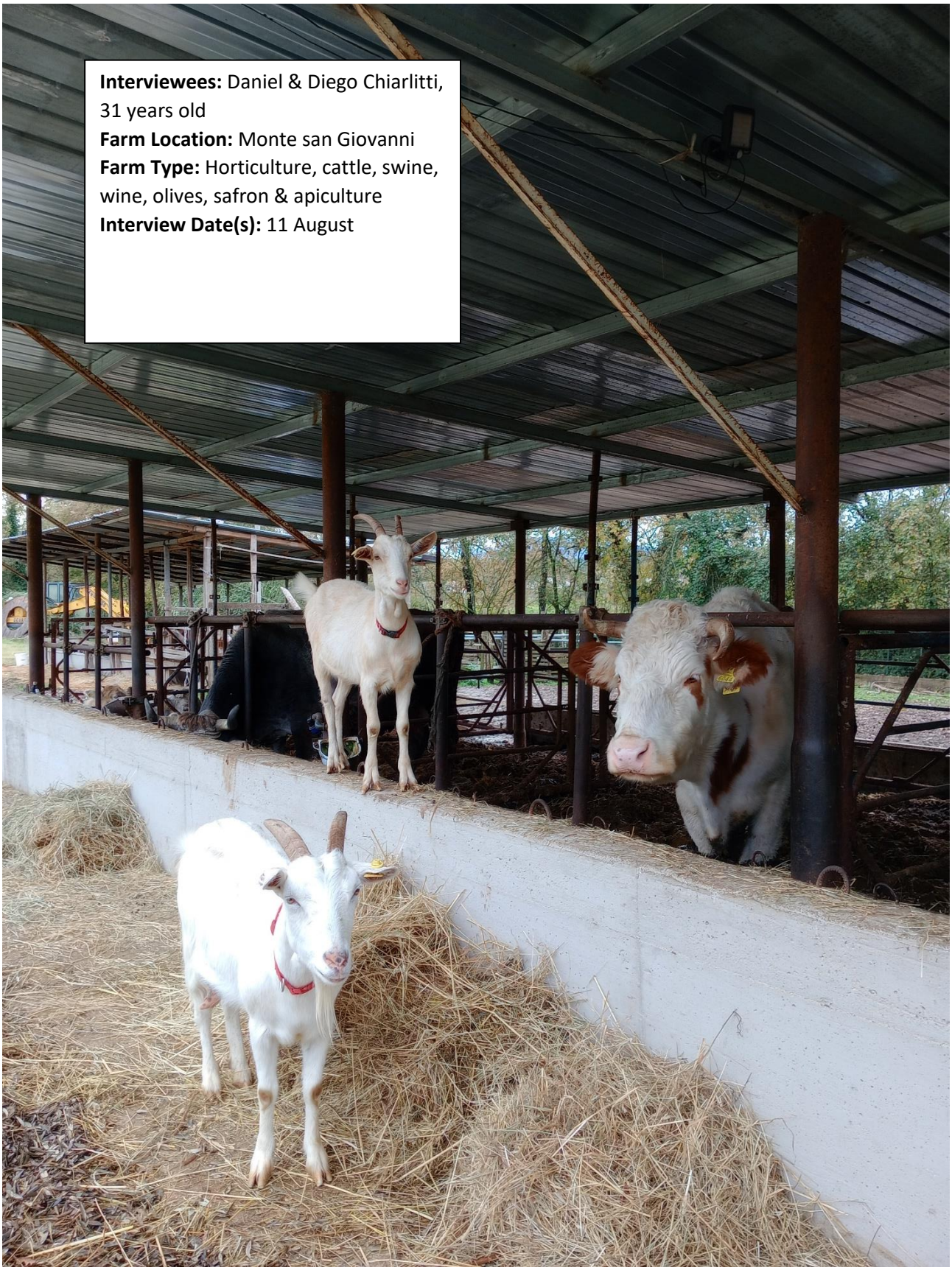
Farm 3: Maceleria Lancia

Main Interviewee: Tomaso Gabriele, 58 years old & Bernardo Gabriele, 29 years old
Farm Location: Rocca D'Arce
Farm Type: Bovine, Swine and Butcher shop
Interview Date(s): 10 & 22 June

The third farm, Maceleria Lancia, was discovered during my quest to find locally-sourced meat for my family. Through my evolving network within the community, I was recommended a local butcher in the adjascent village. After visiting their store and speaking with the father-son duo who inherited the shop from the grandfather, they invited me to visit their farm down the road. It was during that visit that a walk-around-interview took place, where I spoke with Tomaso about the history of the farm, how it has developed since he inhereted it from his father, the breeding, feeding and slaughtering routines of all the animals, and the struggle to find water even after drilling 180m (twice!). We toured a section of the grazing pastures which are enclosed by ancient stone walls, an emblem of a time where people's hands were so deeply intertwined with the land, now they are hard to spot, a rarity, overgrown with blackberry bushes in the abandoned plots throughout the rural landscape. We met the breeding cows and the young cows in the barn who were on a special feeding schedule until their destined slaughter date. I was astounded by how large yet how homey the farm seemed. The farm housed 10 different types of animals, and over 50 cattle alone, yet the only extra help Tomaso had on hand was a young man who helped clean stalls, feed and rotate cows in the pasture. A subsequent interview took place at the shop with the son, Bernardo, allowing me to build on the questions which arose after my first visit the farm. The second discussion focused mainly on the business aspects of their farm and the shop. We covered a large range of topics from changing consumer preferences, the emergence of supermarket chains and it's impact on their business, the lack of government support for small businesses, and

his future vision of food. To this day, I still have a picture of one of his cows which he gave to me hanging in my car, and in any given week you can find our fridge stocked with their products.

Farm 4: AgriTwins



The fourth farm, AgriTwins, was found during a trip to our village's local Monday market where I was surprised and pleased to see two young farmers selling organic produce I could not find in any shop in the area. I presented my research topic and they eagerly invited me to come visit their farm, which I did a few weeks later. I was immediately struck by how small and dilapidated the farm appeared, which contrasted heavily with the diversity, originality and professionalism I associated with their products when I saw their market stand. These were dynamic, innovative farmers who were hustling to differentiate themselves from the other farmers in the area, resourceful and savy, yet incredibly humble. A walk-around interview was combined with a tour of the farm. We stopped to visit their grandfather, the original landowner, who was tending to his fruit trees and examined the area they were hoping to renovate to expand their swine business once the regional funding came through. They inherited the land and had been transforming it ever since they graduated with a degree in agronomy from Perugia university. Since then, they have installed bee hives, planted saffron bulbs, truffles, and converted the entire operation into an organic enterprise, hoping to capitalize on higher prices and niche products, but they expressed the trouble they were having in finding an adequate market in the vicinity. Cities such as Rome or Naples offered a larger consumer base with more money to spend and they were debating whether to continue setting up their stand at my town's market. After a wine tasting and a trip to the creek, we departed with a basket full of goodies and an invitation to go rockclimbing the next afternoon.

Farm 5: Antonio Arcese

Interviewee(s): Antonio & Valeria Iadicola, 36 & 38 years old

Farm Location: Arce

Farm Type: Sheep and Cheese producers

Interview Date(s): 19 October

The last farm, Antonio Arcese, was found through a combination of personal interest and network. Both my local food shop and the supermarket stocked a delicious pecorino cheese flaked with hot pepper flakes. Inspecting the label, I was delighted to discover that it was from the neighbouring village. I asked the shop owner for the contact details of the farm and made an appointment to visit the farm with one of the owners. Turning down the gravel road leading to the farm, I was surprised that this unassuming house and small barn housed the largest cheese producers of our area. In fact, most of their 600 sheep remain outside until the winter months, unless they are birthing, and you do not need more than 30m2 of working space to produce hundreds of fresh and aged cheeses a week! Apart from being crafty when it comes to utilizing space, the couple was serious about their sheep, and initially was very protective and hesitant about partaking in any academic probing. However, within minutes I confided my exasperation with my goats and declared their produce was the result of my worrying cholesterol levels, and seeing I had adorned my sturdy workboots for the occasion, we were laying in the stalls with newborn lambs exchanging our emotional hardships of our summer farming endeavors. Antonio took over the business from his father, who still helps out by delivering cheese to various towns nearby, and his wife Valeria joined on as the principle cheese queen after quitting a job in chemistry. It was refreshing, inspiring and informative to finally speak with a female farmer, especially someone who was considered an outsider. During the interview, we snuck off to her cheese cave to discuss juggling motherhood with the responsibilities of the business, the perception and expectations of women, and what it's like working alongside your partner 365 days of the year.

MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA

Eventually, a total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in Italian. The interviews were recorded – upon agreement with all subjects – with a voice recorder app on my phone and all data was saved at two separate locations: the computer storage and WUR OneDrive. In order not to accumulate too much raw data, I made sure to transcribe the recordings within a few days of the interview taking place. I manually transcribed the interviews, which was done in two stages. First, I selected segments of our conversation which in any way pertained to their experience as farmers. This was quite challenging as it was hard to decide what was *not* important, especially during the initial interviews where everything was new and exciting and I wasn't thinking about the practicalities of transcribing three hour long conversations. Subsequently, I manually translated those segments into English. I put short, colour-coded labels beside these segments that were based on objective categories (ie. "input, land, feeling, relationship, market, labour, prices"). While this was not part of the coding process, it helped me sort through and between the numerous physical pages of raw interviews as the data collection and analysis process evolved.

Using grounded theory assumes a non-linear process which is recursive, and at times it feels like jumping off a cliff without being fully certain that the safety parachute will release. From the moment the very first data is generated, comparative analysis begins and permeates through the entire research process. Insights emerging from early data shape further data collection, which in turn adds to existing understanding, and continues until 'saturation' occurs; that is, no new insights emerge from further data collection.

After the first interview was transcribed, I made an Excel table to facilitate the coding and comparative analysis process. In Grounded Theory, codes identify social and psychological processes and actions as opposed to themes (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Coding occurs in iterative phases: 1) Initial coding phase, 2) Focused, more selective coding phase and 3) Theoretical coding, whereby focused codes are built up into a substantive theory as they are integrated into a cohesive structure by the emergent theoretical code (Hernandez, 2009). My observation notes or personal reflections were not coded, but helped me navigate my thoughts and feelings as the research progressed. I also jotted down notes or questions which I thought could help me in upcoming interviews.

Initial coding categorizes and assigns meaning to the data by comparing incidents, labelling patterns and beginning to look for comparisons between the codes (Birks & Mills, 2015). Codes were kept as similar to the data as possible and reactions, emotions and related actions were also documented to capture implicit details.

Focused coding builds on the initial coding phase, using the more significant or frequent codes from initial coding to sift through the data. Theoretical sampling coupled with constant comparative analysis moves data analysis to a conceptual level and directs subsequent data collection (Birks & Mills, 2015). For example, after the first interview with the Bove family, who farms mainly for subsistence and derives the majority of their income from labour activities associated with farm management (ie. Pruning, cutting trees, fertilizing), I wanted to look for farmers who interacted in various degrees with the formal market (ie. Stand at the market, physical shop in the village). Another example of theoretical sampling was targeting farmers who

operated in different value chains in order to cover the diversity of farming activities and products of the area. Perhaps someone who sells processed goods or meat, rather than fresh vegetables, experiences and interacts with place in very different ways. Maybe they don't, but I personally found this diversity intriguing and decided to march ahead.

Where initial coding fractures the data, focused coding begins to transform basic data into more abstract concepts allowing the theory to emerge from the data (Chun Tie et al., 2019). During the focused coding stage, I was more selective and conceptual, making decisions about which initial codes made analytical sense to begin categorizing the data. During this stage, I moved across interviews and my own personal observations to compare people's experiences, actions and interpretations. This stage was the most challenging for me, as I struggled to make sense of the data and so I decided to combine a deductive approach within the grounded theory. Here, I drew upon Halfacree's (2006) model of spatiality which outlines three interconnected elements: materiality, practices and meanings. Firstly, representations of space (materiality) are formal representations which find objective expression. Secondly, spatial practices (practices) refer to actions -flows, transfers, interactions - which facilitate both material expressions of permaneance and societal reproduction. They are associated with everyday perceptions of space and structure our everyday reality, while at the same time being rooted within that reality (source). Thirdly, spaces of representation (meanings) are diverse and often incoherent images and symbols of space as directly lived. After indexing the data within these broad codes (deductive), I formulated sub-codes which were derived directly from the data (inductive), reflecting the main research findings. Those sub-codes interconnected the range of different perspectives that goes from an understanding of places as (1) material, physical sides, through the position of (2) places as sites of social relations to (3) an understanding of places as social constructs and subjective experience.

Examining the focused codes, value was identified as a core concept which wove through diverse categories such as food, local, rural, land, money, work and labour. There were varying perceptions of what held value, both for the farmers themselves and what they saw as the values held by their broader community as well as society at large. These perceptions of value were not fixed, but rather fluid, simultaneously embedded and malleable within the past, present or future. What became apparent was that there is a perceived disconnect between the value of food, as a product to be consumed, and the value of the work that goes into producing food. Here, the distinction between material and immaterial value converges when looking at the price of food products. Farmers struggle to translate the costs assumed as a small producer to consumers and therefore cannot justify why their prices are higher than those at the supermarkets. How can something which is essential to our survival, a daily ritual of nourishment, be so depreciated, with farmers reduced to compete in a brutal price war waged between themselves?

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In this chapter I present the findings of this research, illustrating how farmers living in Ciociaria constitute place through daily practices that are continuously made and re-made in relation to other practices, feelings, emotions, material structures and objects.

Figure 4: The results are an expression of long fruits of labour. Here I can say that my cheese is starting to take shape! I think my goats agree!

1. THE MATERIALITY OF PLACE

This section relates to the materiality of place; the physical resources farmers draw from through their relationships in and beyond place. The material sense of place plays a significant role in how people perceive and connect with their surroundings and influences experiences, memories, and emotional responses within a specific environment. What is shown here is that land use changes, investment policies, a consolidating retail landscape and the climate are shaping farmer's sense of place.

1.1 A Lagging Rural: Spatial distribution of investment

"We have a government that only thinks about themselves. Any money leftover goes to Rome and leaves us with nothing. A community needs money and investment to develop." – Bernardo (Maceleria Lancia)

Human-made landscapes give us valuable clues to culture. Where is time, effort and money invested? When driving down my street, Via Casale ('farmhouse road'), there are a few things which strike you. Heading North, down the hill towards the Santopadre train station, the road is destroyed in two places by landslides, making it risky and technically illegal to traverse. After a year of waiting, residents have tired of the feeble roadblock, threw it aside, patched some dirt over most inconvenient hole, and transit resumed. Further up the road, an electricity pole has slowly been inching it's way closer to the ground, like a clockhand moving in slow-motion, each month representing a 12 degree shift towards either 3 or 9 o'clock. We are waiting to see who

Figure 5: Part of the 2km road leading to my farm. Believe it or not, this is actually the most maintained part, no potholes! It is managed by my local municipality, so if there is any hope of fixing it I will have to find external funding for it myself.

comes first: the power outage or the energy company? There are crater-sized potholes littering the roads, and when we first moved in, the garbage truck never passed. This, in part, can help explain why or how our valley came to be inhabited by only eight families when there used to be almost twenty just a few decades ago. The abandoned rusticas and overgrown fields are a mere testament to those times. My family was drawn to this dilapidation, the authentic representation of a rurality uncommon to see in the province where my father is from, in Lombardia. When we registered as residents there was a tally on the wall: 21 new residents and newborns in the year 2021, 28 deaths and departures. I soon became aware that the decay and neglect I was witnessing as a new, rural resident in Ciociaria was also permeating the life of smallscale farmers as they struggle to stay afloat among a myriad of changes.

Farmers stated that the rapid growth of the Italian economy after the war and the uneven distribution of the benefits of industrial development contributed to a drastic change in the physical landscape of Ciociaria. On the one hand, this industrialization was a positive change that initially brought economic prosperity which helped to lift many out of poverty, but it was also a badly implemented process that has left a socially, economically and ecologically destroyed territory. Paper factories blossomed along the Liri river, making use of hydropower and the flat terrain which connects some of the biggest towns of the region: Sora, Isola Liri and Cassino. During this time, urbanization and the growth of tertiary employment led to an exodus from the countryside and a reduction of the agricultural sector. People not only left the countryside, but historic centers of cities and towns also experienced the phenomenon of desertification. A concentration around the urban, productive hubs emerged, with fertile agricultural land and forests cleared for the construction of suburb-style concrete houses, usually three stories high to accommodate all three generations which live under one roof. Some traditions have not waned! This migration trend becomes a vicious cycle. With less inhabitants, the government collects less taxes and thus has less money to invest in public services for the remaining residents. As a young parent or elderly person, you may feel almost obliged to move to a larger city in order to receive adequate education or healthcare. Costs are rising and convenience reducing due to outdated infrastructure, increasing fuel prices and poor public transport alternatives. I once tried taking the bus into town since I didn't have a drivers license, only to find myself waiting for over an hour and needing to call my neighbours to pick me up since the service just simply never showed up.

Farmers, however, generally continue to reside on the land to which they tend. Commuting is neither a logical nor viable option for. If you have birthing or sick animals, you need to be able to check-up on them multiple times throughout the evening. In doing so, farmers are becoming increasingly more isolated. They see their neighbours disappear, their neighbourhood shops close, and forests starting to grow on fields once cultivated. Not only from an aesthetic point of view, but in terms of morale, it can feel daunting. With a decline in both hobby and professional farming in the area, there is a simultaneous process of physical and cultural afforestation, resulting in an erosion of a certain sense of place and way of life. For Matteo, this was one of his major motivations for developing his agritourismo: "(By farming here) we are going against the fear that people are abandoning the land which is bad in two senses: aesthetically and people lose their culture." Here, a contrast is observed between farmers and older people who remember the former prosperity of rural life, while younger people only know the current state and consider it normal.

Historically, the peasant holding in rural Ciociaria was transmitted integrally between generations. Following the war, and the subsequent migration to urban centers and abroad in search of employment, many homesteads were fragmented or sold off by those who remained. You can find homemade “for sale” signs pinned to decaying doors or hanging from olive trees and electricity poles as you drive through the countryside. Abandoned plots, areas sometimes encompassing entire hillsides, stand out against their cultivated neighbours, with stone walls providing the only evidence that someone once tended to them. Previously, owning land was deemed a valuable asset that could not only provide sustenance in the form of food, fibers or materials, but capital if sold. Today, the bank won’t let you use agricultural land or rural properties as collateral because their portfolio is littered with sequestered rural assets that they can’t sell. I purchased my farm which includes 2 houses and 16 Hectares of forest, olives and arable land for the same price as a parking lot space in Milan.

Farmers I spoke with believe that their territory has a lot of untapped potential. “Italy has a lot of resources which are not exploited (‘non sfruttate’). The good things we do have, we are still playing games with. We have farmers who are willing to work, yet we sign contracts to buy foreign milk at 90 cents/L.” They feel new investments are concentrated around urban hubs or directed towards businesses which feed into an industrialized agricultural production model, leaving small-scale producers cut off from opportunities to invest, adapt and grow their business. Bernardo lamented: “We have a government that only thinks about themselves, and any money leftover goes to Rome and leaves us with nothing. A community needs money and investment to develop.” Moreover, there is the tendency to reward status rather than behavior. A large part of direct support policies go towards commodities, and since joining the single market of the EU, there is the perception that the situation has deteriorated for smallholder farmers. “If you look at Sardegnia, every family, speaking of a rural household, not something industrial, had 4-500 sheep. So why does this region need to import milk from abroad? Let’s use what we already have.” Where funding is available, through local initiatives (ie. GAL: Gruppo di Azione Locale) or EU funding (CAP, PSR), there are many barriers for small-scale farmers. You must be prepared to face excessive bureaucracy, and complex institutional and regulatory frameworks, essentially buying the right to public subsidies. You must succumb to absurd tax rates and regulated controls by sanitary bodies, both of which come with costs that many small farmers are not able to assume. Farmers also explained that funding or accreditation bodies impose strict criteria when it comes to farming and processing practices which often are not compatible with traditional or artisanal methods. The production of rennet, the binding property for most cheeses, for example, is now intensely controlled with specific hygiene and sanitary requirements. Rennet used to be a very common by-product of the Spring lamb slaughter, but now artisanal caseificio (cheese makers) must alter their practices and assume additional costs to acquire or certify a material which could be easily produced on-site. Another example of policy affecting the landscape of farmers is the lack of recognition of agro-silvopastoral as viable land-use system. Forests are not considered to be a surface which contribute to the aesthetic or productive landscape of a farm. There are stricter regulations for keeping animals outside in a semi-wild, pasture system than indoors. Thus, farmers who are continuing to farm like their ancestors did, mixing livestock grazing with a woody component (usually olives, nuts or oaks) can be better off bulldozing the forest to build a stable than to continue shepherding. These regulations and restrictions, further reinforced by funding mechanisms which promote a sanitized, industrial and monoculture way of farming, push some farmers out of business while also modifying the physical landscape by directly controlling what types of infrastructure is permitted and what type of crops are valued.

References to the successful development and promotion of diversified and multifunctional farm activities, such as agri-tourism, in other parts of Italy were made in every interview. "Certain provinces or communes have recognized the value of their local products and so they have begun investing in the land, with support from the government. They realize that agriculture can be closely linked with tourism." However, setting-up these activities requires both specific personal capacities and specific services. Services dedicated to research, information, technical and managerial assistance, for example, are terribly lacking from this perspective, both from public institutions and agricultural associations. "Change and support needs to come from the top. We have good rapport with local government entities, but we are abandoned by the region (Lazio). They don't appreciate the sacrifices small businesses make. The National government is making detrimental trade deals which are pushing small farmers and agri-businesses out. This is all to offer cheaper prices to consumers. It would help if the government made a level playing field with industrial agriculture."

However, initiatives are beginning to sprout up in areas such as Val di Comino and Ponte Corvo due to proactive and devoted local municipal governments who recognize the potential of their local specialties and want to ride the wave of the Slow Food or Km0 movements which promote a type of agriculture which reflects Ciocaria's not-so-distant past. Farmers noted that the capacity of an area to attract private investment and public spending depends largely on the nature of territorial development plans and their capability of local government to make them effective and recognizable. There is the belief that the development of rural areas is certainly possible if local uniqueness and artisanship is valorized, and small and medium businesses are placed back into focus as the driving force behind rural economies. Michele shared his aspirations: "If you are in a place that isn't so developed, like around here, with very few agriturismos, it's good to bring it forward because then people get introduced to new places. People don't know anything about us here. Here we are in the middle of nature and we have a lot of local products to offer."

1.2 Rise of the supermarket and fall of the local alimentare

Historically, retailing in Italy has been decentralized with small, neighborhood shops controlling both the grocery and non-food sectors, many of which are family-run. Depending on the size of a village or town, you could commonly find an alimentare (small food shop), butcher, panificio (bakery) and a weekly market providing a variety of local and seasonal products for its inhabitants. This system provided farmers with several convenient and consistent sales channels and allowed the vendor to have direct contact with both their consumers and their suppliers. Relationships were maintained through informal purchasing agreements and a degree of personal rapport. Certification was not required, transport distances were short and packaging was simple. Supply was coordinated between several farmers to meet the town's demand, minimizing waste as much as possible. However, the introduction of inter/national supermarket chains have pushed small, local food shops out of business, and consequently altered the purchasing habits and preferences of consumers alongside the retail landscape.

For smallholder farmers, this giant new entrant is undermining their business in two fundamental ways. Firstly, consumers are becoming more accustomed to one-stop shopping, favouring convenience over the traditional habit of visiting the weekly market or alimentare for their culinary needs, and specialty shops for all the rest. As these larger shopping centers are located along major roads and in larger towns, economic activity is pushed further away from rural spaces and the sources of food. As Bernardo, a cattle and pig farmer and butcher explained to me, by shopping at a large supermarket you are essentially putting a mask in front of the farmer. Engagement with the product, it's producer and origins, is replaced by labels on the package. Some farmers strive to maintain contact and visibility via direct sales, mainly at weekly farmers markets. Depending on the day of the week, different villages will host a market in their main piazza. Vendors set up stalls with items ranging from clothes, cookware, garden plants and flowers, fish, spices and fruits and vegetables. They only need to ask permission from the local municipality and pay a participant fee, no certifications required. Here, fresh produce vendors can be generally split into two categories: importers and producers. While the market offers direct contact with customers, farmers find themselves facing similar competition to that which they face in the supermarket, played out in another locale. Importers notably distinguish themselves by offering produce that is out of season, sourced outside the province from commercial growers, and selling high volume for low prices. This leaves the small-scale farmers competing amongst themselves with the same seasonal offering. "There has to be a control of prices at all levels. If I can only manage to produce meat for 13euros, how is it possible that others are selling at 7 euros? Here there is something in the dark which doesn't come out. We need to value local production. There needs to be an agreement from the top (the state). I can't go to war against them, I have already lost at the beginning. They will continue working, and I will close. Alternatively, we enter into a battle of the poor…the small producers." Roberta, whose sons run AgriTwins, told me that she once came home from a market with 40 euros of sales. Deduct gas, the stand fee, plus the uncounted cost of her time, and she wonders if she is worse off than had she stayed at home "*at least I could have prepared bread dough for tomorrow*". The family is lucky, in three, they manage to divide tasks between them, some having more contact with the client-side of the business, while one son prefers to focus on machinery and manual labour. Time is none the less invaluable, so farmers

have to vouch carefully which market is worth the trip. Building a loyal customer base is key, but the market has vendors fighting for a narrow and diminishing population. The fact that they are held in the morning, from 8am until noon, means a large portion of the general working population cannot access them. While stores follow the custom of closing during lunch from 13.00 until 16.00, supermarkets are the only ones open non-stop for 12 hours. This didn't use to be the case. An alimentare owner told me that the previous franchise owner of a large supermarket chain respected the standard mid-day pause, somewhat leveling the playing field. Nowadays, customers want to shop once, at their discretion, and supermarkets are there to meet their demands.

Figure 6: Agritwins market stand displaying their assortment of organic produce.

Secondly, as supermarket chains benefit from economies of scale, they are able to offer the lowest prices for many goods, mainly sourcing products from industrial suppliers, who in the case of Ciociaria, are not located in the region. Along with convenience, customers have become fixated on price. Farmers contested whether this was the result of Italy's long-standing economic issues since they joined the Euro, so as to put the burden on the demand rather than the supply side, but they were all baffled by the prices supermarkets were able to offer. They simply cannot compete. "Prices are going up for all inputs, but supermarkets continue to offer low prices, so essentially farmers are losing money. If it costs 5euros/kg to butcher and process a carcass you end up with a selling price of 9euros/kg for the meat…How then is the supermarket able to sell minced meat at 6euros/kg?" – Bernardo (Maceleria Lancia). Moreover, supermarkets abide by strict purchasing guidelines for their suppliers, which often

smaller farmers struggle to meet. Even a small bakery in the town of Arpino requires that eggs come with a stamp which meets EU safety requirements, despite being able to physically access and evaluate the conditions of the supplying farm, or set up alternative vetting systems.

Consequently, the opportunities for selling, what constitutes the material landscape for smallscale farmers, has been reduced as their trusted sales channels become less frequented or inaccessible. Antonio Arcese, whose cheese products can be found in local branches of a national supermarket chain, explained that initially they demanded exclusive distribution rights of his products, all the while taking larger margins in exchange for bulk orders. This puts farmers in a difficult position of having to choose between business relationships which have been forged over time, or gaining access to a highly competitive, but growing channel. That same farmer still sells to local foodshops in the area, and this relationship allows both parties to benefit from distinct perks such as stocking a special caciocavallo which is produced in small batches. This possibility for experimentation and feedback is lost when farmers sell to supermarket chains. Personally, as a customer, I am always happy to run into him on his delivery rounds to catch up on how the flock is doing, tips on how to spruce up my cheese aging cellar, or if I should be alarmed by the pink mold forming on my caciotta. These interactions provide an exchange which bonds me to both the store and his products. I know that there is a physical space where I can find a vendor who is intentional about what products he stocks and tries to promote local, specialty products.

1.3 Mother Nature: The ultimate boss

Agriculture is dependent on a number of factors which are beyond the direct control of a farmer, but the greatest influential element is the weather. One bad storm, too little rain, too much rain, or a deadly fungal infestation each have the potential to devastate an entire crop and bankrupt a person, family, farm or even an entire farming community. The natural variability of local weather conditions from day to day and year to year can be a barrier for farmers and causes a huge amount of stress. At crucial times of the year such as the flowering period or hay harvest, the talk in all bars and amongst all farmers is the weather. It also means that farmers are largely grounded in the present, taking each season, each year with a grain of salt. Naturally, planning is required, especially since many tasks and interventions are performed with expected outcomes anywhere from 2 months to 8 years later, however, farmers seemed reluctant to place too much certainty in what the future held. "Here, you have to walk day by day. You can't plan too far ahead because so much can change. The further ahead you go (with your plans), the more difficult things become. One day the government says one thing, the next day another. Plus the climate is constantly changing. (Michele Bove)".

Bernardo and his family have raised cattle on their land for the past four generations. They have attempted to dig a well 4 times in the hopes of finding water, digging as far down as 200m at a cost of 80euros per meter, to no avail. Currently, they rely on an overflow from a nearby waterfall and river which the government gives special permission to source from. They fill up thousand-liter water tanks on trucks twice a month. In the summer, there are limits to how much and how frequently you can access the river. Recently, he's seen a decrease in the amount of precipitation in the Winter and Spring, leading to less water available during the dry summer months. On top of that, the local government has proposed turning the waterfall into a tourist attraction which would further reduce the amount of water available or potentially even disrupt their ability to access the site at all. "*Without water, we can't do anything."* The situation seems dire. Paying for water is out of the question. Input costs are rising for everything from electricity, grains, and labour, making it already difficult to compete with cheaper imported or industrial products, so there is no room for an additional water bill. When touring the farms, I noticed all were dependent on rain-fed systems, either directly sourcing from a flowing body of water or a well. This makes them very vulnerable to any drastic weather events. To mitigate weather liabilities, some farmers are turning to technology for assistance. AgriTwins is installing a new satellite system which tracks the moisture levels and other temporal indicators in his olive groves with the aim of being able to detect increased susceptibility to parasites, infections or drought and subsequently intervene appropriately. But this technology costs over 4,000 euros, a sum many cannot afford, and it is only thanks to a two-year grant that aims to improve the sustainability of olive cultivation that he can foot the bill.

The changing climate is also affecting the decisions farmers are making about what to plant. For example, many observed that native olive varieties such as Moraiolo, Frantoio, and Minutella aren't suited to the increasing temperatures and diminishing rainfalls. Yields are decreasing every year. A farmer who has inherited their land with a certain variety in their groves can't do much about the diminishing litres of oil they are collecting at the oil mill each fall. Despite all of your best efforts, investments and interventions, if the wind doesn't blow as required for pollinating and the heat dries up the fruits, you are left with no harvest in the fall. For a new farmer, it means carefully selecting which type of cultivar will thrive best in the future. This is leading to a trend where people are favoring more productive and resistant varieties than the native and ancient

breeds of Lazio. Even non-farmers are noticing the change and the most commonly sold and planting seedlings are Leccino since it is much more drought tolerant and is resistant to Xylella, a plant pathogen, even though it has a weaker taste and Tuscan origins. It's a tradeoff many are willing to accept. There is enough uncertainty to worry about as it is. While switching varieties can seem like a mild mitigation strategy, some farmers are completely changing to crops which in previous decades would have been difficult to produce profitably. Although the emergence of exotic productions is not widespread within the smallscale farming community here, it is a trend that farmers identify as another variable that is slowly changing the physical landscape of their territory.

The hilly landscape of the pre-Appenini has a large influence on what and how farmers here produce. There is a special term used to define our area: "zona disagiata" or 'less favored agricultural area'. You receive compensation simply for farming on this type of terrain, which is characterized by high costs of agricultural activity due to difficult climatic conditions, the altitude and steep slopes which make mechanization impossible or costly. It's an attempt by the government to protect the territory, encourage farming and prevent depopulation. Visually, you can see the influence of the topography on cultivation types as you drive up from the plains around Roccasecca up into the valley of Santopadre and Arpino. The flat plains are dominated by wheat, corn and other grains. As you ascend, these plains give way to large, rolling hills striped with olive groves and vineyards along their contours. As you reach 600-700m, the hills become chopped into fragmented parcels which blend together woodland, rock, olives, vegetable patches, and small grazing fields. It is rare to find a parcel larger than 4 Hectares, a result of families fractioning their land after the war, especially as members emigrated to North America or France. This leaves you with a rather scattered impression of houses and parcels arbitrarily distributed, the roads seemingly an afterthought. This layout is manageable if you are homesteading, but to make a profitable business it comes with many challenges. Not having all of your land in one continuous piece means you must consider access and irrigation for each plot. Time is spent travelling between locations means interrupting work flows and less frequent monitoring. The compressor of a harvesting tool must be towed up steep embankments manually, add that to the fun of laying and moving harvesting nets, and you can see why it's preferred to cultivate a flat strip than a terrace.

The wavering uncertainty and ultimate dependence on an uncontrollable force is nested in much larger uncertainties about the national and international context of agriculture, including changes in international trade policy and climate. These uncertainties, coupled with the arduous nature of the terrain is contributing to the lack of new entrants in the sector. While many families and individuals bear the risk and the burden to continue growing here, someone with entrepreneurial spirit might be looking for a more predictable investment.

2. THE MEANING OF PLACE

This section elaborates on the meaning of place; the emotions or feelings evoked through a person's own experience of place.

2.1 Without sacrifice there isn't well-being

Every morning I begin my day by milking my goats Yogi and Bip. Before breakfast, I go fetch them from the stable and they follow me into the milking shed. They now accept my direct contact, hop onto the milking stand, munch on their grains, wait patiently until I'm finished, and then we go back and join the herd and proceed to go out on our morning graze through the thickets of bush that I am clearing using their appetite instead of machines. This is a ritual and routine which I eagerly look forward to, and I feel a slight tinge of pride when I think of how effortlessly it now flows. Yet, my morning revolves entirely around the needs of the flock as daily milking cannot be missed or postponed, meaning I am tied to a regimented schedule irrespective of sleep, health, weather, appointments, deadlines or guests. Missing a session means no milk, yoghurt or cheese output or the risk of the animal developing painful mastitis. Unlike trees or vegetables, one day of neglect will not lead to serious ailment, but with animals, there is no Christmas, sleepins or time off. There have been days when I felt completed depleted and overwhelmed: when my animals suffered, when they escaped, when they died. I have been pushed to the brim and found myself asking in despair "Do I want to continue with this?" There exists a simple solution: call a trader and sell. This can be resolved, you can alleviate your stress. But I never made the call. The animals are my favourite part of the farm. When I see them munching on newly formed shoots with their tails wagging or hear their bells chiming when they are out in the forest I feel my heart is utterly content. They are as much as part of my landscape as the olive trees or the river. Their purpose is equal parts functional as sentimental.

Figure 7: The beginning of my milking journey: in my parents shed with my 3 year old Saanen named Yogi, July 2021.

Figure 8: My first birthing season in 2023. Holding my beautiful 2 month old named Chop who's father is Girgentana, a rare milk breed from Sicily. Unfortunately, 2 weeks after this picture was taken he and his sister were eaten by wolves.

Farming is a demanding profession that requires long hours, physical labor, and perseverance. There is no differentiation between days of the week or the weekend. As Bernardo explained: "You can't do this work if you don't have a passion for it. It doesn't weigh me down to wake up at 5am to take care of the animals. But if it's not in your blood, you can't support the weight of it" We invest immense effort and make innumerable sacrifices to keep our farms running smoothly. This dedication creates a strong bond between farmer and farm, and the land becomes more than just a piece of property; it becomes a part of one's identity and livelihood. For Matteo, "working the land satisfies you at the emotional and moral level".

However, the arduous reality of farming can conflict with one's own attachment, passion or traditions. In fact, the first to reject the profession of farming are often the children of farmers themselves. "To do this work, you have to have it in your blood. It becomes more than a job. For that reason I can't and wouldn't expect my sons to carry-on the business. They must decide for themselves. Of course, I would like for its continuation, I took this over from my father, but it can't be forced. This work comes with a lot of sacrifices. (Tomaso, Maceleria Lancia)" His son Bernardo went on to explain that the consequence of disruption of inter-generational inheritance is that farmers struggle to find willing and able workers. "Looking around at the other villages, butchers and farmers retire and their children don't want to take over the business. They can't find anyone to buy it, so they close."

The notion of "*sacrifice*" came up in every single interview, but I needed to dig deeper. What do farmers feel like they are forsaking for other considerations? As I have experienced first-hand, there is a sense of obligation to put the well-being of the animals or the farm in front of your own. This feeling can be amplified depending on your gender and family composition. Valeria confessed to me: "As a woman and a mother, it's particularly hard. You lose yourself a bit. So much is invested in managing everything, there is always something which needs to be done, and no time for yourself." Historically, peasants were bound to contracts in positions of subordination to wealthy landowners. While this system no longer prevails, farmers still feel bound to their land, albeit in another form. "You are really tied to the business. You cannot go away for 10 days….who will look after the animals? Even if I would find someone to take-over, they would have to come here to learn how we do everything because each farm, no matter how small or similar they seem, has their way of managing the feeding, grazing, cleaning. You also struggle to separate yourself from it because you've invested everything, not just money. You don't easily want to hand that over to someone else."

Matteo summarized the situation: "If you look at those who are working the land, very few are unhappy. They may be tired, but they are happy. We have a saying '*Sensa sacrificio non c'é ne'anche il benessere'*, translated to "without sacrifice, there isn't well-being". It is acknowledged and accepted that there is inherently a level of personal hardship which comes with the profession, and farmers are willing to tolerate this as long as they are able to sustain their livelihoods and reinvest in the continuation of their farm. However, recently they are finding less recognition and sympathy from the broader community. I detect an air of desperation in Antonio when I ask if he feels people understand his plight: "Who cares about

what we are experiencing or thinking? Of course, I speak with other farmers in the area, but it only goes that far. No one else is interested."

2.2 Perception & value of farmwork

When I tell locals that I am starting a farm in Fontana Liri, they are utterly perplexed. I am an immigrant, a woman, relatively young, not marrying into a farming family, university educated, have very little practical farming experience, and voluntarily left a well-paying job in the corporate sector. This combination of factors makes it an uncommon and unexpected venture, but what is most surprising is the phrase that often ensues: "*it's very admirable what you're doing*". It leaves me rather conflicted. I am praised for my "alternative" project and my perseverance. However, this recognition and professed admiration is a stark contrast to what my peers have experienced in the past and continue to feel to this day. Valeria, a cheesemaker from Arpino who married into a farming family, confided in me: "I studied chemistry, but now I work full-time here on the farm making and selling cheese. Since I married Antonio, people make that association to explain why I do the work I do. It isn't common to find a woman who is managing a farm. So if I were to do this work without my husband, people would question it a lot more. Why would I choose to do this type of work when I have a degree and other options? This (farming) is seen as the last resort for someone."

Her reflection echoes a sentiment of an entire generation who drummed into their children that they should go away, go to university, gain qualifications, and find a job in the city. Migration from rural to urban areas was seen as a sign of progress and modernity, while agricultural labor was associated with traditionalism and backwardness; no steady job, no future. "The generation of our parents convinced us that working the land was a struggle and working in a factory was the easiest and best option. (Matteo)" This is not simply because of the grueling nature of the job, it's rooted in classist, social stigma. Matteo explained "Calling someone a farmer was and is an insult, implying a person is ignorant…working the land and that's it. Not understanding that this person gives sustenance to our country." The derogatory association reiterates a social hierarchy remnant of the feudal system and symbolizes the low value people place on farmwork.

While farmers today may be able to shrug off the thinking of the past, they are confronted with the effects of an industry-wide problem: "People have so many options, so many choices of how to spend their money, but they no longer see the value in spending money on food. I actually think we are worse off now. (Bernardo)" Our willingness to pay a certain price for a good is influenced by our beliefs about its quality, utility, and desirability. Thus, price can shape the meaning we assign to different products and services in society. The supermarket has amplified the concept that food should be cheap, hawking customers with the lowest prices for all their caloric needs. Some niche products have managed to mitigate this propaganda, wherein a high price is associated with quality (also undoubtably linked to supply): think of caviar, champagne, truffles. However, many staples which we consume on a daily basis are less desirable, even though they have very high utility. It leaves farmers feeling disheartened that people don't recognize their role as vital contributors to our well-being. Antonio told me that he feels as

consumers become increasingly disconnected from the realities of farmwork, they are less likely to recognize the importance of supporting local farmers.

One evening I went to help out at a village festival where AgriTwins was serving panini with their own products. The cheese, however, was gathered from a series of local producers and I took time explaining to each customer a small story about who produced the cheese. One young man interrupted me mid-sentence and said "I don't understand, do I have to grab this myself? I don't care about who produced it, I just want a sandwich". The emotion I felt was closer to rage and offense than to embarrassment. I didn't want to give him the food. I personally knew these producers and I felt the need to protect their cheese from being devoured by an unappreciative and slightly intoxicated glutton. If someone doesn't give you 30 seconds to explain the origins of the product they are about to ingest, are they going to bother reading a label? There seems to be a constant need for us to prove ourselves, that our work and our products merit their asking price. Communication is key, but what if it is falling on deaf ears? "Consumers don't enter the discussion into all the inputs and work behind the final product so it's very hard to justify why our products are more expensive" (Daniel, AgriTwins). When I first moved to Fontana during COVID, I reasoned that the economic fragility of the community was changing purchasing habits, but Bernardo cautioned me: "Now with the crisis, yes people have financial constraints, but only up to a certain point because you see many people with a €900 phone or going out to the bar paying 6 euros for a drink. But people don't see it the same way for food. This has changed with our generation."

However, there has been a meaningful change that has evolved with this same generation; the transition from "contadino" to "azienda agricola". Historically, the profession of farming was also a denomination of a person and tied to a certain social standing within society. Within the feudal system in Italy, farmers occupied the peasant class with very little autonomy and possibility for social mobility. Nowadays, the social and economic dynamics of farming have evolved, resulting in a shift in perception of agriculture as a profession pursued by individuals based on their personal interests, passions, and aspirations. Daniel described to me "in the past, everyone in the area worked the land. Until the arrival of industry, it was our only job. At the age of twenty my grandfather went to work at The Polveriera (a military factory in Fontana Liri which employed 30,000 people), but he continued to devote himself to the countryside, always cultivating with traditional means and re-investing his money into the farm. We had cows and pigs; we produced eggs, meat, wine and vegetables for the needs of the family. My grandfather has never lost his peasant identity and his farming traditions have been passed on to us. He taught us that it was important to always be able to feed ourselves. After finishing university, we decided to expand on that idea and make a living from it. Now, we support our parents with our farm and they work with us, no longer in factories."

3. THE PRACTICE OF PLACE:

This section uncovers how place is lived out. How does meaning and material impact practice itself?

3.1 The act of producing

As you drive from the center of cities and towns and make your way through the periphery on your way to the countryside, you will see that scattered between houses, mechanic shops and wood yards are small allotments where residents are growing a mixture of vegetables, fruits and small animal rearing. This practice not only visually bridges the rural and urban landscape, but also ties the traditions of the peasant past to the present. During the post-war wave of industrialism in Ciociaria it remained a common practice for families to cultivate a small plot of land, either directly adjacent to the dwelling, or on a nearby parcel, and grow basic staples for the family. Historically, this would include a pig, a cow and a few sheep for meat and milk, and a mixed variety of olives, vines, fruits and nuts in small quantities. Today, the practice continues, although the diversity of what is cultivated has diminished, with animals being one of the first things to disappear from a farm. Not only do they require daily care and commitment, laws introduced in the 90s created constraints and obligations that proved to be too onerous for the small farmer-breeder and European regulations have continued along this line. People feel that the many regulations have been aimed at hindering rather than encouraging small peasant ownership. None the less, many persevere and continue with determination to practice varying degrees of auto sufficiency, although it is mainly the older generations, those aged 50-90, who are found out on the land. "Here, many people are farmers as a hobby or in their spare time after work so they have meat, eggs and vegetables for the family." This means that residents inhabiting the peripheries of towns and cities, and therefore have easier access to the rural space, or with relatives still maintaining the family parcel will have access to seasonal vegetables, oil and fresh eggs year-round at a cost lower than any supermarket, alimentare or farmers market. While on the one hand, this tradition demonstrates that certain residents maintain a degree of attachment to their land and have access to homegrown, seasonal and local produce, it also negatively affects small-scale farmers who find themselves competing in a very narrow space between large-scale commercial farmers and the local homesteader.

Two of the farmers I interviewed try to differentiate themselves by becoming certified organic. However, they find it difficult to justify their price point because people with their own vegetable patch also view themselves as organic growers by using traditional farming methods which often incorporate organic practices as a result of economic necessity. This doesn't consider the additional costs for these producers of obtaining and maintaining certification, not only for fresh produce but for transformed food products as well, which requires finding a certified external laboratory. Offering the same products and varieties which others can find readily available with the additional label of "organic" does not translate into high sales volume. For these two producers, they focus on jams, spreads, "sotto olio", or other transformed goods and selling either directly to small bottegas (specialty food shops) or at artisanal fairs, especially in the bigger cities such as Frosinone, Cassino, and Sora where they can fetch a price they feel is compatible with the quality of their products and the time invested: "*People are more curious, they have more money*". Others don't find the certification process necessary or don't want to become entangled in

another bureaucratic burden, but reiterated that the differentiating factor they can control and compete with is the quality of their product. "The only way you can compete with CONAD (Italian supermarket chain), is with quality. Consistently deliver on premium quality using local inputs, raising animals in a healthy way, slaughtering humanely and then processing and refrigerating quickly. People still appreciate this, especially Romans…they don't even look at the price!" – Bernardo (Maceleria Lancia)

For all farmers I spoke with, fostering long-term relationships with customers is extremely important and they do this in several ways: allowing farm visits, offering delivery services or customizable orders, providing samples of other products. Farmers want to interact with their customers and create an environment where questions and feedback are welcomed. This transparency and dialogue helps put a face behind their products in a time where food items are becoming increasingly obscured behind plastic packaging, complicated labelling and long supply chains. I detected a sense of criticism and disapproval of industrial farming which has become "too mechanical, sterile and profit-oriented. There is no heart in it." Smallscale farmers are trying to combat this in how they farm, what they farm, and how they sell. "It's important to counter the greenwashing we see. Organic for us also means no more intensive farming, no more industry. A biological consortium can exist, but not organic as an industry. Organic doesn't simply mean no chemicals, it should represent a farmer vision that goes beyond how we farm. Otherwise, it's always the larger who is eating the small."

Despite the common struggles faced by small-scale producers in the area, when approaching the topic of more formalized or organized cooperation, farmers expressed both desire and hesitation towards collaborating with their peers. Everyone who was interviewed admitted that their failure to collaborate results in missed chances to collectively address common challenges (e.g., climate change or market fluctuations) and a lack of collective bargaining power. However, the main obstacle to cooperation in the area is that farmers view each other as competitors rather than collaborators. "What is missing here are cooperatives. Like in the North with the milk and cattle producers. I mean, they also have problems, but they are organized. Here, everyone thinks for themselves. It's a bit of ignorance. But you need good governance for that to work." They feel the space is too small for many "small-scale" farmers to operate within a geographical area. I was surprised to discover that the province of Frosinone is the only one in Italy which does not have any producer cooperatives. Farmers explained that it is difficult to find farmers who are like-minded in their approach to agriculture and that often people are unwilling to think beyond themselves. They fear the governance systems needed to form a cohesive entity to combat rising input prices, cheap imports and industry subsidies is fallible. This constrasts starkly with the way small farming communities organized themselves around communal assets and shared labour in the mid 1900's. In my neighbourhood alone there are two husking platforms which were used not only used for post-harvest, but served as a gathering place where various farming members to discuss the nature of their activities, exchange seeds and other inputs, and occassionally dance and celebrate. The social cohesion of the broader community is faltering, and farmers seem unwilling or unable to spare any time or energy into stitching it back together.

3.2 No Cash Needed: Reciprocity & Resourcefulness

Ciociaria is rich with cultural traditions grounded in food production. It is difficult to find someone who doesn't have a favourite family jam recipe or secret liquor distilling trick they are delighted to share with any open ear. I was marveled by the capacity of farmers and rural residents to know, deal with, develop and convert living nature into food or other items for the homestead. What was even more compelling was not only that people were eager to share their knowledge orally, but often when you showed interest in a certain topic of activity, they offered their time to demonstrate, construct, collaborate or experiment, often unexpectedly dropping by with a seedling, tincture, tool or item that related back to your original discussion, and it was often foraged or harvested from their own land. So many relationships were forged this way and I was humbled by the generosity and resourcefulness of these new acquaintances. This was a stark contrast to the household I came from where everything was purchased and nothing was created. My father always told me: "one hour of your time is worth 30 euros, remember that", implying that it was best to outsource many tasks that would then leave you with time to make more money to continue purchasing things. Many farmers, on the other hand, see cash as a resource which should only be used to procure things which cannot be made, refurbished, or exchanged. A brief exchange at the market with an elderly local struck me: "In order to occupy the rural space, you have to be a bit anti-capitalistic". An example illustrates this perfectly. I had the idea of cultivating wild asparagus on half a hectare of land after observing it growing spontaneously beneath my olives and along the forest borderline. Included in my initial budget was a designated amount for seedlings which I could purchase for €1.50 each. This came up in a conversation with a local elder, who barked back at me: "Only someone as stupid as you would buy wild asparagus seedlings. Go out and dig them up!" For him, it was absurd that you would pay for something which is readily available, free, and only required a sturdy spade and a bit of time. For me, it was an input that could easily be acquired to save me some time so I could do other things on the farm.

I observed that reciprocity and payment in-kind is deeply ingrained in our rural community and plays a significant role in shaping social interactions, economic exchanges and cultural practices. When AgriTwins needed a combined thresher to help harvest his fava beans, a neighbouring farmer came by. When I asked how much it cost him for this service, he replied that he goes out and helps with another piece of machinery that his neighbour doesn't have. No cash is ever exchanged, rather a trade in labour and use of equipment. The same thing happens with timber harvesting where lending a hand in chopping and sorting wood of a fellow community member is repaid with a certain amount of the harvest, not cash. Timber was identified by farmers as a very valuable asset for both the farm and homestead, providing heating for the winter months, but also material for fencing and structures. So rather than dedicating your energy and time towards an activity which generates income which can subsequently be used to purchase wood, you directly occupy yourself with either tending to your own forest or to someone else's and receive timber as the payment. It is important to note here that varying degrees of informality were observed on each farm, and one cannot be categorized as completely informal or formal, but rather existing on a spectrum comprised of different dimensions depending on the product or activity.

I encountered numerous examples of ingenuity when it came to turning "waste" into a valuable input on the various farms I visited. AgriTwins raises cattle who produce manure which gets applied to the fields and soil and then into crops which in turn are fed back to the cattle. Well-bred manure implies that no or very little fertilizer needs to be purchased. Others were more creative with their fertilizers: *"I mixed one kilo of eggshells got at the bakery in Arpino, 1 kilo of ashes from my fireplace, 10 kilos of manure from my stable and nettle that I collected from the field below my house. I let it steep in water for 24 hours and then used it as fertilizer for my vegetable garden."* Regardless of their technique, no one I came across was using synthetic fertilizers, and instead relied on either auto-produced or locally sourced manure. The same frugality applied to water use. All farms I visited used rainwater harvesting and water recycling, while three implemented water-saving techniques like mulching or cover cropping. At Antonio's cheese farm, the whey by-product from producing ricotta is picked up by a local pig farmer who uses it as a protein input in their feed. All these examples demonstrated that farmers have distanced themselves from the input market and implement many closed cycles (ie. nutrients, water).

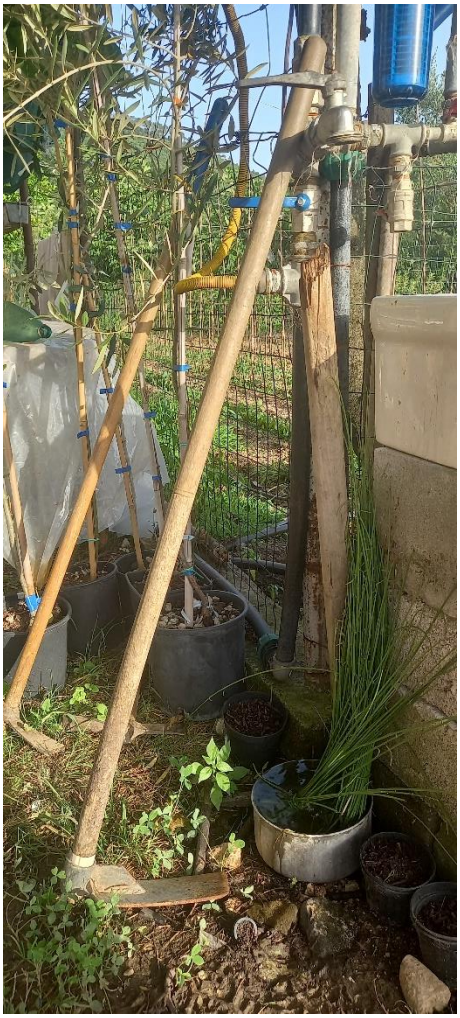


Figure 9: A fantastic example of resourcefulness. A leaky faucet drips into a pot which contains the branches of a willow tree which are kept moist and then used to tie the vines of grapes to their support structures.

I also had the impression that each farmer deeply understood their environments. They were able to identify multiple wild plants which could be used for anything from tying grapevines to enriching fertilizer. I realized that the assets owned by rural households greatly influenced their ability to sustain their livelihoods as farmers. Each farm was a visible microcosm which not only supplied the main farm products, but a myriad of tools, materials, and nutrients.

In the sun-drenched hills of Boccafolle, Daniel skillfully transformed a native plant, the olive tree, into a valuable tool that aids his work on the farm. His family farm is made up of olive groves, vineyards, two stables and vegetable plots. As we walk through his groves, he hand-selects fallen branches from the trees. These branches are more than just discarded debris. With a skilled eye, Daniel chooses a sturdy branch with a natural curve and gnarled texture. Back in his workshop, he carves and shapes the olive branch into an implement called a rastrella. Using hand tools that seem to have occupied this space since a time long before he was born, he refines the wood, smoothing its surface to ensure optimal function and form. The implement, a fusion of a rake and a broom, is sharpened into several slender prongs, each designed to delicately comb through the soil between the rows of his vegetable crops. This innovative tool serves a dual purpose: it efficiently removes weeds while gently aerating the soil, allowing his vegetables to thrive without disturbing their delicate root systems. The use of the olive tree branches extends beyond functionality; it speaks to a deep-rooted connection with the land and a savviness with local

resources. The olive tree, an emblem of the region's history and culture, becomes a tool that assists Daniel in carrying out a routine, but essential task. By crafting tools from materials sourced directly from his own farm, he embodies the quality of someone who is in direct and constant communication with his environment. As Daniel tends to his crops with his handcrafted tool, forged from the bounty of the land, I reflect on the fact that nothing seems wasted, everything has a purpose or can be re-purposed.

Figure 10: A local cane, similar to bamboo, is used as support systems for tomatoes and other climbing vegetables.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The intention with this thesis is to recount in which ways smallholder farmers of Ciociaria construct a sense of place. This was explored by weaving together stories and observations in which multiple meanings, materiality and practices interact, clash and overlap to constitute place in a continuous, ever-changing way. Undoubtedly, this recount is incomplete and must be viewed as an interpretation based on my limitations and perspective. None the less, I attempt to illustrate the intricate dynamics between cultural practices, historical narratives, ecological dynamics, and socio-economic contexts which influence how smallholder farmers in Ciociaria cultivate and sustain their sense of place. Naturally, the arguments of this thesis are different than if they were to be written when I finished my data collection in 2021. Since then, I have taken on a project of restoring and stewarding 16 hectares of land which includes tending to 30 animals and hundreds of olive and fruit trees. This experience has undoubtedly influenced my perspective on how it is to inhabit and farm the same rural space where my research has taken place. One could say I took an immersive plunge to understand how farmers understand, experience and practice place.

In the first chapter of the results, I have shown how material changes in space, such as the development of factories and supermarkets have influenced social relations and practices in and beyond place. In the second chapter, I explored the meaning people attach to place, derived from their personal or collective experiences, memories, and interactions within that location. In the third chapter, I examine how place is lived out in everyday practices.

In this section, I analyze and discuss my results in dialogue with the context outlined in the introduction in chapter one and the theory outlined in chapter two. In short, I will step back from field to reflect on how the local character relates to larger patterns and processes.

THE PRODUCTION OF RURAL CIOCIARIA

The stories told in the previous chapter show how farmers living in Ciociaria constitute place through daily practices that are continuously made and re-made in interplay with other practices, feelings and emotions, and material structures and objects. Farmers define their rural locality attaching value and importance to specific and different spatial and representational practices. This builds on Halfacree's model of the rural space which is simultaneously imaged, material and practiced, wherein we see how materiality and social representation coexist and interrelate in the practice of a spatial context at a specific time. The physical features of a place can influence the types of activities and interactions that occur there, which in turn shape the social dynamics and cultural identity associated with the place. The supermarket, for example, manifests itself as a material structure, but influences the lives of farmers in multiple ways. It symbolizes a change not only in the material landscape of the rural space, but also how food is produced, distributed, and consumed, impacting economic activities and personal connections within the community. For the farmers who wish to enter this retail channel, it means altering their practices to obtain certain quality or safety standards, as seen with the cheesemakers Antonio and Valeria who are no longer able to produce their own rennet and are obliged to perform monthly sanitation tests on their on-farm laboratory at their own expense in order to stock their cheeses on supermarket shelves. For the farmers who are unable to access the supermarket, they must resort to organizing themselves in smaller groups to sell at specialty artisanal markets or push direct-to-customer sales as the traditional weekly village street markets become less frequented. Here, we can see how a physical space shapes the interaction and personal relationships between people living in the same locale. Farmers and consumers no longer interact at the supermarket, but at the local weekly market they do. The supermarket also evokes emotions for farmers who feel a mix of frustration, resentment and fear towards this new entity which they perceive to be distorting the perception and value of food. We also saw how rural smallholder farmers are deeply rooted in their physical landscapes. Their livelihoods, practices, and routines are intricately tied to the land they cultivate. The physical features of the land, such as the vegetation, slopes, contours and elevation, influence their

farming practices by defining what is possible and not (ie. heavy mechanization). In some cases, it was observed that the connection between the land and identity is profound, with the landscape itself becoming a repository of memories and stories.

Moreover, it was shown that rural areas are not static entities but rather dynamic and socially constructed spaces that evolve over time through the interactions of various actors. The disintegrating infrastructure, the trend of land abandonment, rural development policy, the changing climate, traditions of foraging and crafting are all open-ended processes shaping the realities in and beyond the rural space in Ciociaria. In this way, practices (including discourses), social relations, meanings and the material world can be seen as perpetually under construction, relational, loaded with meaning and shaped by a broader history (Ingold, 1993; Massey, 2005).

Through the stories presented in the previous section, it was seen that the production of the rural space is not contained in the rural localities. As van der Ploeg (2007) notes: “Global and local forces are interwoven in and through production spaces, each of which is to be understood as a battleground where they are linked through internal relations and mutually shape and reshape each other. One cannot be understood without the other.” Despite the research being grounded in the narratives of rural farmers in Ciociaria, there is a dialogue that extends and interacts with broader geographies and practices, as well as the power relations that influence them. The first section of the results showcased the multiple scales involved in the rural politics of the production of the rural space in Ciociaria and the influence of translocal political interests on specific localities. This is reflected in the development process which transformed an agrarian landscape into an industrial one through policy and investment, as well as in the changing habits of consumers who have been introduced to new material realities (ie. supermarkets and products from abroad) which influence their perceptions and practices around food. As such, it can be argued that industrialization is affecting the everyday lives of people in the area, facilitated and legitimised by specific discourses and formal representations which guide the development of rural Ciociaria. The supermarkets and factories are both material and social constructs which constitute part of how certain practices gain more power and prevail over others.

While my main research informants were smallholder farmers, I spent a considerable time observing and discussing with other rural inhabitants, ranging from small shop owners to members of ecological associations to retired chemistry teachers at a bar. This allowed me to unearth the coexistence of multiple and contested ruralities: the one promoted by the governing bodies; the one practiced by smallscale farmers; the one lived by smalltown dwellers; the one imagined by new rurals such as myself. They are neither homogeneous categories nor are they encompassing of all the diverse ruralities in Ciociaria, but are woven between each other, coexisting in constant negotiation, an insight which mirrors scholars Amin (2002) and Massey (2004) whose research investigated the cohesive notion of community. The diverse meanings associated with being a farmer reveals that there are different identities which coexist in the same rural locale. An example of this is the reaction and reception I received as a new, foreign farmer in the area. “Alternative” and “admirable” are two words which often leave me embarrassed. I am stumbling through the initial and messy phase of agri-entrepreneurship and look to fellow neighbours who have been subsistence farming for generations who receive no such acclamations or associations. A paradox emerges when contrasting these two attitudes. Praising the foreign farmer for bringing change while belittling the native farmer implies a double standard based on the origin of the individual. It reveals an inherent bias towards local farmers due to the familiarity of their background, where their contributions might be taken for granted or overshadowed by the novelty of the foreign farmer's arrival. It reflects a tendency to overlook or underestimate the contributions and expertise of the local, while overly glorifying outsiders.

Massey's concept of "power geometry" and the "politics of place" offer valuable insights into understanding the diverse roles and identities that farmers embody within this region. In Ciociaria, being a

farmer is not just a vocation but a complex amalgamation of historical, cultural, and economic factors that shape their spatial experiences. Power geometry helps unravel the hierarchical structures embedded in the socio-economic fabric of Ciociaria's farming community. Place sustains difference and hierarchy both by routinizing daily rounds in ways that exclude and segregate categories of people, and by embodying in visible and tangible ways the cultural meanings variously ascribed to them (Gieryn, 2000). Class-segregation was experienced by farmers with the feudal system, exemplified by their inability to own land or participate in democratic processes, and continues to influence the narratives associated with a rural way of life. This was seen with the derogatory nature of correlating farmers with a low social standing and perceiving their contribution to society as minimal. The status and identity of a farmer are influenced by power dynamics related to access to resources, access to markets and political influence. While some farmers may wield considerable power due to historical landownership or connections with local authorities, others might find themselves marginalized due to limited access to resources and decision-making processes. These power geometries create distinct trajectories for different farmers, resulting in varying levels of agency and representation within the broader societal landscape. Furthermore, Massey's concept of the "politics of place" sheds light on the contested nature of the rural space in Ciociaria. Farmers and rural residents might hold different viewpoints about the direction of rural and/or agricultural development or the importance of the preservation of traditional practices. The overlapping power dynamics and the politics of place shape the identities, roles, and experiences of farmers.

EMERGING THEORY: DISCONNECT BETWEEN FOOD, FARM & FARMER

"The transformation of development has been too fast for us…. I actually think we are worse off now" (Antonio Arcese)

In an increasingly global and consumerist world, farmers seem overwhelmed and depleted by the culture of uncritical consumption that is structuring human relationships with their environment, their food and with each other. The growing detachment between the production of agricultural outputs and the supply of food to the wider population is one of the principal characteristics of the modern food, thus "distancing the consumption of food as a social practice from its production as a geographically and socio-economically positioned activity" (Ilbery et al., 2005). Van der Ploeg (1992) argues further that agriculture is becoming disconnected from local features such as nature, labour skills, the labour process and end products, and while heterogeneity and 'localness' emerge as features of contemporary agriculture, they must be assessed in relation to the dominant tendencies towards 'standardization'. I would like to argue that the disconnect between people and the origins of their food production has far-reaching philosophical implications, contributing to a society that is spiritually impoverished. From an ecological ethics perspective, the disconnect from food production fosters a disengagement from the natural world, leading to an impoverished understanding of our place within the larger ecosystem. Philosophers like Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess argued for an ethical framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms. When individuals are disconnected from the processes that sustain them, they are more likely to exploit resources without considering the ecological consequences. This lack of awareness and responsibility contributes to environmental degradation and an impoverished sense of stewardship over the planet, leading to a spiritual emptiness as we lose touch with our ethical responsibilities to the Earth.

Reflecting on the case of Fontana Liri, I am marvelled by the speed and intensity of change my valley has experienced in the past half a century. The house where I currently reside did not have electricity until the mid 70s. The previous owner walked 14km to school every morning. People came to fetch water from our stream with mules and metal containers a mere 50 years ago. Today, the same property is connected through wifi, bus services and municipal hydro lines. But these are mainly infrastructural improvements, and do not reflect the influence these changes have had on the social and cultural fabric of our communities. The peasant civilization which existed up to the fifties and sixties was replaced by the consumer society within five to six years, not within five to six centuries; transforming the identity of people by engulfing them in a toxic consumerism. Here, I have been inspired by Passolini's view of "development without progress"; the consequences of pushing forward a development which prizes mega shopping malls, highways and chaotic urban centers and turns small towns into what Marc Augé termed "non-places"; spaces where history, traditions and relationships get lost. Pollution, the decline of pastoralism and small-scale agriculture and the difficulty of restarting it, the end of industry and it's consequent unemployment, new emigration of young adults and students, large-scale distribution which destroys artisans and small businesses; all these events are signs of a local history which since the 1950s has not walked towards true development but progressively towards a loss of knowledge, culture and any local identity. According to Passolini, development often ushers in a superficial veneer of progress that fails to translate into meaningful improvements in the lives of marginalized communities. In the case of Ciociaria's farmers, this theory finds resonance as traditional agrarian practices intermingle with the commodification and globalization of food. Despite the influx of technological advancements and infrastructural changes, the core challenges faced by farmers, such as access to markets and fair pricing, persist. Passolini highlights the disparity between the appearance of development on the surface and the underlying reality of stagnation or even regression for certain segments of society. This is echoed in the stories recounted by farmers during this research who feel they have been left behind as they struggle to earn decent living wages, thus prompting us to critically examine the nuances of rural development

initiatives and shedding light on the need for holistic and territorial approaches that will genuinely improve the lives of rural farmers beyond mere cosmetic changes.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Looking towards the future, this research opens the possibility to explore how the local can render insights into the (im)possibility of socio-economic development of rural communities. Citing the argumentation of Van der Ploeg (1994), "rural development can only be a success if it relies on the cultural identity and the specific patrimony of the areas concerned (landscape, craftsmanship, history etc.). This means that solidarity in favour of rural areas must be organized in deference to their diversity. Development actions must, necessarily, be specific, because we are dealing with various forms of diversity (the areas themselves, diagnoses, actors, institutional structures)."

What was revealed in this research is that the transformations which took place in the fifties and sixties eroded the pre-existing reality and the cultural imagery connected to it. Subsistence crafts and agriculture, built on values of solidarity and strong sharing of a local identity, have been forcibly replaced by industrialization which has left a disastrous environmental and economic legacy. Thus, we must make space for the possibility but also the imagination of a re-proposition of communities and activities that start from a local economy to give a new meaning to the territory. This reasoning has been highlighted by several academics who assert that the vulnerability of social–ecological systems to drivers of change is inherently place-based, and there is increasing recognition of sense of place as an important tool to understand responses and develop solutions (Rajala et al., 2020).

Barca, McCann and Rodriguez-Pose (2012) highlight two fundamental aspects of place-based approach to development. First, this approach assumes that geographical context really matters, whereby context here is understood in terms of its social, cultural, and institutional characteristics. Adopting this view, space-neutral policies will "always have explicit spatial effects, many of which will undermine the aims of the policy itself unless its spatial effects are explicitly taken into consideration" (Pike et al., 2006). Second, the place-based approach focuses on the issue of knowledge in policy intervention: Who knows what to do, where and when? Bad policies, he argues, which limit or inhibit the growth potential of regions or perpetuate social exclusion, are a consequence of local elites failing to act. This can be amended if new knowledge or ideas are promoted through the inclusion and interaction of local groups. Kloppenburg sees local knowledge as "'derived from the direct experiences of the labour process which is itself shaped and delimited by the distinctive characterisations of a particular place with a unique social and physical environment'" (1991: 528). He argues that this knowledge should be upheld and utilized as it is tuned to the requirements of local conditions, however it should not be romanticized nor should the possibilities for collaboration with external sources be ignored. Barca (2009) in his report 'An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy' suggests that place-base approaches to development address the "persistent underutilization of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion". I am immediately reminded of a phrase which struck me during one of my earliest interviews with Bernardo over the counter of his butcher shop in Rocca D'arce where he bluntly told me "*the government wants businesses like mine dead*" as he proceeded to sever a piece of lamb shank. It is imperative that we begin acknowledging the contributions of smallholder farmers. In doing so, I believe that we strengthen the social fabric and promote social equity within our communities.

If the modernization paradigm, criticized previously by Passolini, was largely grounded upon industrialization and the functional distinctiveness of rural space as agricultural space, then its successor needs to be seen as a critical process of reconnection. Contemporary neo-consumerist and neo-capitalist models are in strong contradiction with the restoration of an anthropological model that revalues the locality and is based on respect for the cycles of nature. While it seems extremely difficult for administrative bodies operating at the local level to carry out redevelopment planning, using a place-place

approach, it now appears that such an approach is indispensable for the revitalization of the local economy and the protection of the ecosystem which sustains it. Small businesses contribute to economic diversity and prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a few large corporations. By supporting local small-scale farms and businesses, we promote a decentralized, economic democracy by distributing economic benefits more widely within the community and reduce the dependency on exhaustive global supply chains.

Yes, local food is often more expensive than alternatives from hundreds of kilometers away. It can be hard to understand these dynamics because we have been conditioned to believe that food should be cheap. However, nutrient dense food isn't cheap. Food raised with high environmental and animal welfare standards isn't cheap. Food raised by people who earn a living wage isn't cheap. So while the price tag may initially seem higher, hidden within are innumerable, intangible benefits. Supporting local food production can foster a deeper connection to the land and community, reinforcing and maintaining a dynamic social fabric and encouraging ecological stewardship. This connection allows consumers to learn about the origin of their food, the methods used, and the people behind it. Such interactions can cultivate a greater appreciation for the value of food, the effort it takes to produce it, and the interdependence between producers and consumers. Drawing on sense of place theory, which emphasizes the involvement of local residents in shaping their environment and communities, the process of reconnection requires active community participation and decision-making. Pasolini's concerns about the erosion of values and human connection can thus find a glimmer of hope in the resurgence of agrarian practices that emphasize community, stewardship of the land, and a reawakening of a sense of place that he so deeply valued.

"When the ancestral world has been depleted, when all the peasants and artisans have died, when the fireflies, the bees, the butterflies are no longer, when industry has made the cycle of production unstoppable, then our story will end." (Excerpt from the film 'Omelia Contadina', Alice Rohrwacher & JR, 2020)

CONCLUSION

While locked up in an old farmhouse on an abandoned homestead in the middle of the pandemic, I set out with the following research question:

In which ways do smallholder farmers within Ciociaria construct a sense of place?

The aim of this study has been to share the perspectives of smallholder farmers in an attempt to understand how their reality is shaped, and by whom. By participating, observing, describing and analysing the daily practices of several smallholder farms in Ciociaria, this thesis has shown that the widening disconnect between consumers and producers has contributed to a sense of marginalization of farmers within rural communities, and that farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain their livelihoods. Through an exploration of materiality, meaning, and practice, it was found that lagging investment in the rural space, the rise of supermarkets and the commodification of food, the unpredictability and uncertainty of the climate, the perception of sacrifice and a lack of security, the declining social value of farmwork, the act of producing food, the culture of reciprocity and resourcefulness of farmers, all weave together to form a distinct sense of place.

Using autoethnography and grounded theory I attempted to step away from any preconceived notions, be personal or academic, and enter the world of my research subjects. However, this research did have its limitations. Firstly, I must acknowledge that my age, gender, race and the general presence of a researcher may influence the behavior and responses of the farmers I spoke with. Moreover, as the majority of my interviews took place between May-August, seasonal biases could lead to an incomplete understanding of farmers' experiences and practices. Additionally, my interests and intentions collided with my lack of local or practical knowledge about the particularities of farming in this specific environment and was further impeded by my rusty farming-specific Italian language skills. This affected my initial interviews and observations by restricting my ability to fully understand, interpret, exchange and record information and must be seen as a limitation of my research. I must also acknowledge that I entered the research process with preconceived notions about farmers' practices, assuming that there would be many more ecological and political motivations behind the scenes, and so I had to be careful to not unintentionally focus on information that would confirms those beliefs while overlooking other important information. Lastly, the ethnographic nature of this study constrained me to focus on five case studies within close geographical proximity to one another which hinders the generalizability of the results and represents an incomplete picture of farmers' realities in Ciociaria.

Ultimately, this research offers valuable insights into the intricate relationship between people and their environments, and how these connections shape both individual and collective identities. I have also argued in favour of what Passolini called ‘development without progress’ when examining the rural space of Ciociaria. The perception and social value of farmwork has changed as a result of economic transformation, rural exodus, and agrarian reforms after the war. The shift towards industrialization and urbanization diminished the importance attributed to farming and has contributed to the economic marginalization, social disintegration and cultural erosion felt by farmers.

The implications of such research can extend beyond academia to influence policy decisions, community dynamics, and the broader understanding of human-environment interactions. These findings encourage the integration of local perspectives in development projects, allowing smallholder farmers to have a more active role in decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods.

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