

## **Sketch of a Decolonial Environmentalism: Challenging the Colonial Conception of Nature through the Biocultural Perspective**

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### **English Abstract**

In this article, I am critical of decolonial theory's negligence of the issues of nature and the environment. I work to remedy this problem by providing a decolonial analysis of the operative colonial conception nature. I argue that one of the reasons that efforts to curb human-caused environmental devastation have been ineffective is that the two popular approaches to environmentalist activism — the global warming and sustainability approaches — do not necessarily pose a challenge to the way in which we currently conceptualize nature, nor do they entail a robust ethical view. Then, I propose one potential avenue for developing an alternative, decolonial approach to nature, drawing from environmental philosopher Ricardo Rozzi's notion of the biocultural perspective, which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between human ways of life and the diversity of non-human life. I conclude by analyzing two concrete instantiations of the biocultural perspective in a Latin American context.

### **Resumen en español**

En este artículo, critico la negligencia de la teoría de(s)colonial de los temas de la naturaleza y el medio ambiente. Trabajo para remediar este problema proporcionando un análisis de(s)colonial de la operativa concepción colonial de la naturaleza. Sostengo que una de las razones que se han hecho ineficaces los esfuerzos para frenar la devastación ambiental causada por los humanos es que los dos enfoques populares para el activismo ambientalista – los enfoques del calentamiento global y del sostenibilidad – no suponen necesariamente un desafío a la forma en que actualmente conceptualizamos la naturaleza, ni tampoco implican un robusto punto de vista ético. Entonces, propongo una vía potencial para el desarrollo de un enfoque alternativo de(s)colonial de la naturaleza, basándose en la noción de la perspectiva biocultural del filósofo del medio ambiente Ricardo Rozzi, que hace hincapié en la relación dinámica entre formas humanas de vivir y la diversidad de la vida no humana. Concluyo analizando dos instancias concretas de la perspectiva biocultural en un contexto latinoamericano

### **Resumo em português**

Neste artigo, eu critico o descaso das questões da natureza e do meio ambiente pela teoria de-colonial. Eu trabalho para solucionar este problema, fornecendo uma análise de-colonial do concepção colonial do natureza. Defendo que uma das razões que se tornaram ineficazes os esforços para conter a devastação ambiental causada por seres humanos é que as duas abordagens populares para o ativismo ambiental - os abordagens de aquecimento global e de sustentabilidade – não necessariamente

representam um desafio para a maneira em que nós atualmente conceituar natureza, nem implicam uma visão ética robusta. Então, eu proponho uma avenida potencial para desenvolver uma de-colonial alternativa, a abordagem a natureza, com base na noção de perspectiva biocultural filósofo pelo ambiental Ricardo Rozzi, que enfatiza a relação dinâmica entre estilos humanas de vida e da diversidade da vida não-humana. Concluo por discutir duas instâncias específicas de perspectiva biocultural em um contexto latino-americano.

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There are several approaches to thinking about the problematic way in which many human beings are inhabiting the Earth. Two environmentalist approaches currently dominate the public discourse. The first centers on the phenomenon of global climate change, already beginning to result in processes that would be catastrophic to the survival of many species, including our own. The second approach looks at our practices from the lens of sustainability, recognizing that our use of natural resources is not commensurate with the rate at which these resources can be replenished. Although these two particular approaches to environmentalism have gained widespread recognition, they have not managed to effect significant changes in our behaviors. Perhaps one reason for this is that these conceptions of the problem do not necessarily pose a challenge to the way in which we currently conceptualize nature, nor do they entail a robust ethical view, one which reconfigures our relationship and sense of obligation to our environment.

Decolonial theory, meanwhile, has the resources to provide a needed supplementary approach to understanding our problematic way of inhabiting the planet. With only a few exceptions, however, decolonial theorists have remained largely silent about how the colonial legacy has shaped our conception of nature or how this conception supports the denigration and subordination of women and people of color. Likewise, very little work has been done by decolonial theorists to offer an alternative to the colonial conception of nature. This negligence is particularly surprising given that, across Latin America, ecologically centered social movements are at the forefront of challenging colonial forms of domination and exploitation. In what follows, I aim to work within the decolonial theoretical tradition to address the crucial, but largely neglected issues of our relationship to nature and environment. In Section One, I describe the way coloniality has shaped the operative conception of nature. In Section Two, I propose a starting point for reconceptualizing nature in a way that is consistent with decolonial commitments. Lastly, in Section Three, I analyze two concrete political movements from Chile that exemplify this reconceptualization. I also address some potential concerns regarding my sketch of a decolonial environmentalism.

I

I want to begin by describing one environmental problem which arose in my hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico about seven years ago, in which residents debated about whether to build a major road through the Petroglyph National Monument, lands considered sacred to the Pueblo Indians. I am going to argue that this problem would tend to be analyzed in a way that presupposes a colonial conception of nature. But before I do that, I am going to proceed by offering a description of the land, because one of my claims in this paper is that we need to cultivate a relationship with our local environments, and I think that we can better recognize the significance and the distinctness of a particular place when we can envision it.

The startling landscape of this site consists of volcanic rock speckled hills, caves, mesas and valleys. The black jagged rocks contrast sharply with the sage-colored desert plants that grow between them and with the sandy gullies carved out by the always-too-infrequent desert rainstorm. The area contains five volcanoes that form a straight line, where Pueblo peoples say the inner and outer Earth meet. Looking out from on top of the higher points, one can see the oasis-like green strip of the Rio Grande Valley to the east, and beyond that, the Sandia Mountains climb to form the horizon. With few trees in the area, the sky feels immense. Walking around, one comes across lizards, rabbits, insects, and many different kinds of birds. The howls of scandalous coyotes pierce the night, and can be heard in the neighborhoods nearby. The land is also abundant with seeds and medicinal plants that the Pueblo peoples collected. The petroglyphs themselves are images carved onto the face of rocks, mostly by Pueblo Indians, between 1350 and 1680 A.D. There are approximately 17,000 petroglyphs in all. Along with the petroglyphs themselves, the site contains Paleo-Indian artifacts, dating from approximately 12,000 B.C.E. to present (Becker and Becker 2013).

The governors of the Cochiti, Jemez, Sandia, Santa Ana, and Zia Pueblos collectively published an article written by Cochiti tribe member William Weahkee to explain to the public that the site is sacred. In the article, Weahkee describes how the ancestors of the Pueblo Indians chose the site because, given its geographical features, it is the center of great spiritual powers. He explains, “The petroglyph area is where messages to the spirit world are communicated. It is here that our Pueblo ancestors ‘wrote’ down the visions and experiences they felt” (Weahkee 1996). The etched or chiseled-in rock art merges with the landscape, telling of the place itself, of the activities that transpired there, and of the spiritual meanings that were revealed there. Pueblo peoples continue to perform prayers, offerings, and centuries-old religious rituals and ceremonies there, and they “invite people of all races and religions to use it to pray in their customary ways to their own God(s)” (Weahkee 1996).

A conflict arose when voters approved an initiative to build an extension of a major road — the Paseo del Norte extension — through the monument, further connecting the developing West Side of the city to the city itself. The West Side is one

of the few parts of the city where lower-middle income people can own their own homes. These neighborhoods are also newer and safer than other low-income neighborhoods in the city, so many young families choose to make the area home. Because there are few major roads that cross the Rio Grande and connect these outer neighborhoods to the city center, and because the West Side is a comparatively new development, lacking in many of the offerings of the city center, many people must commute daily, resulting in heavy traffic. The Paseo extension would allow for easier traffic flow into and out of the West Side and facilitate future development of the West Side.

In my view, the predominant reading of this problem is one which presumes a colonial conception of nature. Before I can discuss what this entails, however, I first need to articulate the view of coloniality it assumes. I take my view primarily from Nelson Maldonado-Torres' essay, "On the Coloniality of Being," in which Maldonado-Torres explains that 'coloniality' "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). The 'discovery' and conquest of the Americas plays a distinctive role in the resultant coloniality because this particular colonial enterprise brought together the two axes of power of coloniality: 1) the idea of race, which placed those with darker skin into a position of inferiority, or lesser humanity, than the normative subject within a social hierarchy; and 2) world capitalism, which "became tied with forms of domination and subordination," such as the establishment of colonial trade routes, slavery and serfdom (the *encomienda* and *repartimiento* systems), and local commodity production. These economically based forms of domination "were central to maintaining colonial control first in the Americas, and then elsewhere" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 253). The intermingling of these two features — race and capitalism — came to shape the patterns of global power that remain definitive.

Coloniality operates through multiple channels, thereby reinforcing the patterns it generates. The term 'coloniality of power' describes overt forms of domination (through political, military and technological power, as well as violence), distribution of resources, and patterns of labor (Quijano 2007, 168-71); the 'coloniality of knowledge' centers on knowledge production, as in who produces knowledge, what counts as knowledge, who has access to the institutions and instruments of knowledge production and dissemination (Quijano 2007, 169); and the 'coloniality of being' concerns how coloniality is reproduced in innumerable facets of our daily lives. Maldonado-Torres explains, "It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243).

I would add to Maldonado-Torres' list that the coloniality of being is also reproduced in our conception of nature, where nature comes to be understood as a

realm that is radically separate from that of the human being. This conception can be observed, for example, in the exploitative engagement with earth and with the native peoples seen as barbarians in the early Spanish colonies. The term “extractivism” describes the process of extracting raw goods in large quantities to be exported, without reinvestment into the devastated lands from whom these resources are taken or into the communities that supply the labor involved in these processes. Extractivism has been characteristic of the Latin American context from the earliest conquests of the Americas to the economic policies of the present day, and points to a colonial view about the essential exploitability of the region. The colonial conception of nature also finds expression in Descartes’ view, elaborated during the height of European nations’ battles over colonial territories, which maintains that *res extensa*, as essentially material, corporeal, and mechanistic, is non-convergent with *res cogitans*, which is the domain of rationality, intentionality, agency, and soul. And the colonial conception of nature is perpetuated by economic regimes in Latin America through changes to land ownership that favor industry over local people and the environment, and through the “widespread use of economic metaphors and models for interpreting ecological and social reality” (Rozzi 2012, 35).

Thinking about nature in terms of coloniality reveals why the way in which we approach nature influences far more than just environmental policy. Thinking about the meaning of nature is, in a sense, thinking about the meaning of being, insofar as defining nature involves making a determination about the status of all that is material, corporeal, and living. As environmental feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo puts it, nature is “a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism” (Alaimo 2008, 239). Insofar as women, indigenous peoples, people of color, and the working class have been denigrated because of their supposed ‘proximity’ to nature, they have been seen as “outside the domain of human transcendence, rationality, subjectivity, and agency” (Alaimo 2008, 239). At the same time, determining what is ‘natural’ for the transcendent subject has been a basis for making moral judgments about the bestial behaviors of people of color or the unnatural behavior of LGBT people, for example. Our conception of nature bears on that which is associated or dissociated with nature. In the colonial ethic, the transcendent subject stands apart from nature. As a result, Alaimo says, the concept of nature “has long been waged against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes” (Alaimo 2008, 239). Reconceptualizing nature, then, would have impacts that extend far beyond environmental policy.[1]

In addition to power, knowledge, and being as the principal arenas impacted by coloniality, I believe it would be useful to identify what I call the *colonial ethic* as a dimension of the coloniality of being. The *colonial ethic* includes our way of treating and relating to others, as well as our practices and habits of inhabiting our milieu. It concerns not only institutions and social structures, but also values, affects, and norms. Hence, the ethic at the heart of the conquest of the Americas continues to influence our mode of seeing and relating to the natural world as we study it, extract from it, consume its resources, and protect or develop it. The conceptual severance of human subject

from the natural world, seen as mechanistic, material, and non-agential generates and is perpetuated by an ethic that is objectifying and exploitative.

The two dominant approaches to environmental concerns — the climate change and sustainability models — have difficulty conceiving of the conflict over the Paseo extension as involving an environmental problem. In terms of these discourses, the problem is read primarily as a clash between the interests of the city and those of Pueblo Indians, whose spiritualist perspective does not resonate persuasively. This part of the desert offers little in the way of natural resources, so contamination of these resources is not a concern. Development, overall, is a sustainability concern in a state with not enough water, but filling in the West Side could also mean that people living there would have to commute less out of their own neighborhoods. Furthermore, for the two main approaches, the petroglyphs themselves, in their cultural richness, are only incidental.

## II

The conflict over the Paseo extension can be understood as an environmental concern when read through a *decolonial* lens. *Decoloniality*, in opposition to coloniality, is the practice of undoing the patterns of coloniality. Maldonado-Torres explains, “By decoloniality it is meant ... the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial[2] world” (Maldonado-Torres 2006, 117). Theory is decolonial when it calls attention to ways in which coloniality is reproduced or perpetuated, or when it recovers and shares contributions from the periphery of the Eurocentric worldview as a way to challenge or provide alternatives to this worldview.

A decolonial environmentalism in the Latin American context dismantles colonial ways of thinking about and relating to the natural world, and it does so by drawing from the perspectives of Latin America’s most marginalized peoples. Decolonial theorists have worked too little on the issue of environment and nature. With a few exceptions,[3] most decolonial theory only gestures towards the connection between capitalism and unsustainable development, or between race and environmental inequality, for example, without offering a sustained focus on the colonial conception of nature or on a decolonial reconceptualization. This is surprising for at least two reasons. First, as my assessment of the colonial conception of nature implies, there are a number of significant overlapping areas between ecology / environmentalism and the decoloniality project (that is, the body of research on coloniality / modernity, which often draws from the established body of decolonial theory, and which is committed to the decolonizing of knowledge, language, power, etc.). Both ecology / environmentalism and decolonial theory argue for a more expansive conception of value than the colonial hierarchical value structure. Environmental philosophy has developed a variety of theoretical resources for attributing intrinsic value to a broader range of beings, places, and events,



and, on that basis, for criticizing ways of thinking and behaving that fail to appreciate such value. Decolonial scholarship could benefit from being informed by (or, at least, about) such theoretical tools. Both projects reject the dichotomist, reductionist, logocentric, and exploitative ways of thinking; both imply ways of thinking that emphasize relational and historical situatedness; and both involve an “articulation of the question of difference (ecological and cultural difference) that can easily be linked to coloniality” (Escobar 2007, 197).

In addition to these shared theoretical orientations, the second reason why it is surprising that decolonial theorists are not paying more attention to ecology and environmentalism is that one of the purported values of the decolonial project is to support the resistance activities of those people who inhabit the ‘underside of Western modernity,’ those who are marginalized by coloniality. Many of the social movements on the part of marginalized peoples throughout the Americas involve environmental concerns. (I will address two such movements in the last section of this essay). Arturo Escobar explains that the modern regime of capitalist nature has “subalternized all other articulations of biology and history, of nature and society” (Escobar 2007, 197). It is these alternative articulations that are at the basis of environmental struggles today, and thus, they “need to be seen as struggles for the defense of cultural, ecological, and economic difference” (Escobar 1007, 197). In other words, these movements are promoting many of the same goals of the decolonial project. Decolonial theory’s failures to attend to and support such movements belies its disconnect from some of the most important ways in which real people are struggling for power, recognition, and justice. This may lend credence to the criticism that the decolonial project has remained largely academic-intellectual, risking the very logocentrism it criticizes (Escobar 2007, 192). To remain consistent with its commitment to those marginalized by coloniality, decolonial theory ought to remain engaged with and be theoretically inspired by the ecologically centered social movements that are at the forefront of challenging colonial forms of domination and exploitation.

Although decolonial theorists for the most part remain silent with respect to the concept of nature, the way they handle one theoretical challenge in particular will have implications for their stance on the nature question: Namely, the challenge of theorizing what it means to be a person. This question arises out of the attempt to challenge the colonial conception of Man, a normative conception that over-represents the bourgeois Western man as if it were the human itself (Wynter 2003, 260). Those who are not included in this ethno-racially based normative conception Man — those who Fanon calls *les damnés* (Fanon 1963) — are dehumanized. Sylvia Wynter argues that “all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources ... these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle” (Wynter 2003, 260-61). That is, the question of what it means to be human determines who is entitled to wellbeing and full autonomy, who will have access to and/or control over resources, and which beings and ways of life will be respected and valued. As animal ethicists warn, however, certain

interpretations of human subjectivity are often the basis of violence against nonhuman living beings (Derrida 2004, 65). Perhaps one reason that decolonial theorists have avoided the question of nature is that deconstructing the colonial conception of nature may challenge the anthropocentrism at its core. Decolonial theorists may be wary of challenging a colonial conception of nature that privileges human beings as standing apart from the rest of nature, especially given that decolonial theorists are fighting for the dignity and empowerment of those who have long been denied it. Ultimately, however, confronting what Mingolo calls the “colonial difference,” or the racialized divide between Man and Other, will force decolonial theorists to take a stand on the relationship between humanity and nature.

Ricardo Rozzi is one philosopher who has insightfully described the interconnection between ecological and cultural concerns. He formulates the problem resulting from our colonial conception of nature in terms of *biocultural homogenization*, a process that entails “losses of native biological *and* cultural diversity at local, regional, and global scales” (Rozzi 2012, 29). Rozzi argues that this process “leads to the disruption of the interrelationships between cultures and their land, and results in the massive replacement of native biota and cultures by cosmopolitan species, languages, and cultures” (Rozzi 2012, 29). This framework insists upon the connection between the mass extinction of species, the elimination of linguistic and cultural diversity, and losses of sustainability on regional and planetary scales. One example of the connection between these various elements is that the displacement of native and rural peoples from the lands they occupy is often connected to a loss of protection of environmental diversity, because this displacement is often caused by development projects. Native and rural peoples have long served as stewards of the land, recognizing that conservation practices also promote and protect their own autonomy, traditional habits, and their home (Rozzi 2012, 32-33). In short, the wellbeing of diverse cultures is connected with the wellbeing of a biologically diverse non-human world.

Rozzi worries that our modern ethics fails to link human ways of life with the environments where they occur. We are unable to see that “in the long-term, inhabiting a particular habitat generates recurrent forms of inhabiting, i.e., habits configure the ethos or character of humans and non-human animals alike ... In turn, the performance of the cultivated habit modifies the habitat where they take place” (Rozzi 2012, 41). In other words, our habitual activities are enabled and constrained by the particular places they take place in. Think of the dynamic relationship between human activities and climate, or between the formation of communities and geographic features like rivers or forests. The non-human beings around us exercise agency and assert their being. They co-habitate. At the same time, our habits and cultures influence the beings and material process around us. Consider, for example, the widespread integration of plastic packaging into the commerce of food. Our worlds are suddenly full of things that do not need to be handled with care, things that can be easily shipped from distant sources, and waste that ends up in unknown places. Once we buy these packaged foods, they



are to be used up and thrown away. We develop deeply engrained habits of using and discarding.

One cause of our failure to recognize a link between us, where we live, and how we live involves many people's lack of a substantive physical and emotional connection with places that are largely unmodified by human activities. Currently 80% of the population in Latin America lives in cities, making it the most urbanized region in the world (UN-Habitat 2012, XI). If it is the case that habitats and ways of life are deeply intertwined, then lacking regular, meaningful contact with the rhythms, processes and lifeforms within the non-developed environment produces a physical and cognitive disconnect from the diverse peoples, languages, and biota of the regions we inhabit. This then results in a desensitization to the loss of non-human life and diversity within these regions. Although Rozzi is critical of urbanization, I do not take his central argument to be that humans' development of their environment is intrinsically bad. Rather, it is important, in addition to this development, to preserve avenues for having relationship with a diversity of biota, with a place that retains its integrity separate from human intervention or domestication. It is only by having access to points of contrast to urban landscapes that we can come to recognize the significance of our development practices. Furthermore, having a personal connection with undeveloped places helps us cultivate a sense of responsibility for them in their particularity.

Having considered what biocultural homogenization entails, it becomes clearer why the frameworks of sustainability and global climate change are not in themselves adequate for addressing the deepest dimensions of much of humanity's problematic way of inhabiting the earth. These discourses do not necessarily escape the shadow of the colonial ethic at the heart of our problematic inhabitation. Sustainability advocates are concerned with reducing consumption just to the level of sustainability, thereby allowing us to sustain our way of life. The sustainability approach relies heavily on the notion of managing the scarcity of resources, one of the main presuppositions of capitalism. Indeed, sustainability has a straightforwardly economic discourse and orientation: How can we sustain our activities to the greatest degree possible at a sufficiently diminished cost for the environment? If we could develop technologies that would allow us to continue our behaviors indefinitely, the requirements of the sustainability model would be satisfied. Advocates of climate change discourse are concerned about changes in temperatures and the catastrophic resulting consequences. They are focused on us ceasing only the patterns of activity that generate these changes. The problem with these approaches is not that their worries are illegitimate or that they fail to recommend important changes. The problem is that neither approach entails an inherently robust ethical position, and our mode of inhabiting is an essentially ethical concern. Environmental activism drawing from the sustainability and climate change models is not advocating for a drastically different way of relating to our environment and co-inhabitants, making both positions easily co-opted by people who have a perverted relationship to the environment. A decolonial environmentalism, in contrast, insists that our way of life is a deeply ethical matter.

In contrast to the two approaches from popular environmental activism described above, much environmental philosophy does develop and draw from more expansive value systems than that of the colonial ethic. Even so, the decolonial approach improves upon the anti-anthropocentric perspectives favored by most environmental philosophers by integrating the cultural perspective. From this perspective, questions about the impacts of the ways of life of particular groups – the Pueblo peoples, for instance – come to the fore, but also questions about the artifacts, languages, and histories of particular cultures. While environmental philosophers emphasize the loss of biological diversity, the decolonial approach draws our attention to the relationship between these losses and losses in cultural diversity.

Grasping the connection between these elements helps to shape cultures that preserve all the elements in this network. The solution to biocultural homogenization involves taking on what Rozzi calls a *biocultural perspective*, one which is cognizant of “the interrelated causes and feedbacks between the processes of biotic, linguistic, and cultural homogenization” (Rozzi 2012, 29-30). Rozzi asserts that in order to promote human and non-human wellbeing, we need to “develop a philosophical approach that re-couples the habits of the inhabitants with the habitats they inhabit” (Rozzi 2012, 28). In the next and last part of this paper, I will look to two cultural sites, both from Chile, that exemplify different aspects of this decolonial challenge to the colonial conception of nature.

### III

It is perhaps of no surprise that Amerindian peoples have been at the forefront of efforts to seriously challenge the colonial conception of nature. The Mapuche, a people that inhabits primarily the southern part of Chile, is one such group. The Mapuche International Link (MIL) is an organization seeking the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. It has issued a statement on environmental matters that reflects not only many of the insights developed in Rozzi’s work, but also a commitment to being at the forefront in developing practical solutions to environmental problems. The organization’s environment platform states that “in the system of *pu newen* (“pu newen” means the “forces” or “vital energy” of nature) everything is interlaced, everything relates to everything, everything nurtures/feeds everything” (MIL 2012). As a result, environmental crisis is “a civilizational crisis.” Challenging the colonial ethic, the MIL argues that “as long as society does not question or challenge its way of life, based on a self-centered, materialistic, individualistic, consumerist and patriarchal vision, the capitalist system will continue to grow stronger, generating in that way the disappearance of ecosystems and cultural diversity” (MIL 2012). The MIL’s statement concludes in the following declaration: “For thousands of years the native peoples have carried out development models in harmony with nature. We believe it is possible to apply these ancestral knowledges in today’s society to generate a technology for the environment, an alternative energy policy, and education thought out of a new system of values that places the diverse forces of nature in the same horizontal plane as the human being, in

order to attain the art of inhabiting” (MIL 2012). The MIL holds that ethical inhabitation requires a new way of thinking nature, a thinking that perceives beings in a non-hierarchical and essentially interconnected way.[4] The statement suggests that while the MIL is interested in preserving the autonomy of the Mapuche, it also has a political vision for broader society that is rooted in ancestral knowledges, beliefs and values. In learning from the Mapuche, or from any of the different cultural groups in Latin America, for that matter, it is important that we remain open to these knowledges, belief systems, values, and conceptual tools without imposing our own. Otherwise, decolonial scholars not only limit ourselves to Western theoretical categories, but we risk imposing these categories on others.

In addition to the environmental philosophies of the Mapuche and other Amerindian groups, I believe that we can draw philosophical insight from Latin America’s long history of political movements by landless peasants and workers seeking land reform, even in an urban context. For example, in Chile, from the late 1940s through the 1970s, many destitute farmworkers and miners came to occupy the outskirts of the capital city of Santiago with their families, engaging in hundreds of *tomas de terreno*, or land seizures, and forming slums which became what are the present-day *poblaciones*, or low-income sectors, of Santiago.[5] Inhabitants’ goals were modest: people demanded a right to housing, and they were not going to tolerate inhumane living conditions, such as a lack of basic services, overcrowding, or a lack of protection or sanitation. Their communities organized, electing leaders and forming alliances, aggressively asserting their political power and squelching any government efforts to remove them. It is worth noting that these communities were a vibrant center of political opposition to Pinochet’s dictatorship in subsequent years (Cabalin 2012, 7). But what is especially remarkable about the *tomas de terreno* is the challenge they posed to centuries-old patterns and philosophies of land ownership based upon the private ownership of property by a select wealthy few. Cristian Cabalin explains that the *poblaciones* defined themselves according to values of solidarity, building up their own neighborhoods and organizing for themselves, and a unique sense of emotional connection and cooperative ties among neighbors that has been passed down through generations (2012, 6).

Although these groups were not focused on environmental protection in a traditional sense, they established their identity through the creation of communal spaces that express and honor the dignity of their inhabitants. Thus, they exemplify the deep ties between a cared-for habitat and the wellbeing of the inhabitant. Cabalin explains, “The seizure of lands signifies a space of recognition and differentiation, because through it, subjects behold themselves as protagonists in their own biographies and trajectories” (2012, 6). By seeking out for themselves the promise that life in the city holds, these inhabitants claim what Eduardo Mendieta, following Henri Lefebvre, calls “the right to the city,” which entails rights to work, to education, to health, to habitation and habitat, to socialization, leisure, and exchange (Mendieta 2014, 7). Inhabitants of the *poblaciones* claim these rights through communal possession-taking

of a neighborhood, rather than accepting that only those who own private property in the city are entitled to the right to the city (Mendieta 2014, 6).

In the foregoing example, I have suggested that the domain of “environment” is not only the wilderness beyond the places we inhabit, but also our developed habitats. This approach might raise the worry that conflating urban environments with those which have been left mostly unmodified by human activity might render ineffective arguments about the need to protect non-developed places insofar as they are “natural.” Furthermore, if everything is understood to be a part of nature, including aspects of our culture, whence the critique of particular ways of inhabiting? If all human activities can be thought of as “natural,” one might argue, then we lose the sense of nature as non-human life, which human activities are destroying. My reply is that conceiving of nature as the interaction between human and non-human agencies, or conceiving of environment as including our homes and communities as well as the non-developed regions beyond our homes need not entail conflating the technosphere with the biosphere, or highly urbanized spaces with spaces that largely retain their native biological makeup. Indeed, I am arguing for the preservation of native biota and cultures, not only in the face of growing urbanization, but, importantly, *through* the ways in which we live in those urban spaces. Rozzi’s biocultural perspective demands that we become more fully cognizant of what lies beyond cosmopolitan environments so that in our modes of inhabiting our immediate milieu, we can simultaneously be responsive to the biota and peoples sharing the larger region.

Another potential worry regarding my call for a decolonial environmentalism is that it is not immediately clear what alternative ways of relating to nature are available to most people. Perhaps one might agree that the conceptual severance of humanity and nature is problematic and desire to transcend the colonial ethic of objectification, disconnection, and exploitation of the environment. Nevertheless, for city dwellers with no ties to native cultures, it may be seemingly impossible to imagine a positive alternative to the colonial conception of nature. This worry lends credence to Rozzi’s argument that urbanization is one of the biggest causes of our inability to imagine such alternatives. He writes: “The accelerated rural-urban migration has generated a physical barrier that obstructs [people’s] contact with the regional habitats, and also with the habits of communities that have inhabited these habitats for generations. To city dwellers in Latin America, the peculiar languages, ecological knowledge, and practices of regional communities remain even less visible than the vast biological diversity of Amazonas, Pantanal, or the high Andes” (2012, 33). In the face of this problem, Rozzi believes that field environmental philosophy, which involves on-site experiences of biocultural diversity, can help to overcome these limitations (2012, 47). I find this suggestion reasonable, as most city dwellers are close enough to rural areas to make these areas accessible for regular visitation. They are also close enough to be expected to acquire in-depth knowledge about regional environmental concerns. Indigenous groups working on environmental initiatives span across the Americas. City dwellers can seek out, learn about, and support these local movements.[6] Admittedly, some city dwellers cannot afford to travel beyond their neighborhoods. I would suggest that public

education programs, especially for younger children, have the responsibility to facilitate regional knowledge through field trips and by enlisting community members to teach traditional, Indigenous, and local ways of knowing. All students could thereby grow up with a stronger emotional connection and deeper knowledge about their regional environment.

A final concern I would like to address here involves the feasibility of putting decolonial environmentalism into action. One might defend the global warming and sustainability focuses, worrying that a decolonial environmentalism recommends changes — such as a conceptual and ethical reorientation to the environment — that are too complex or would take too long. One might argue that the fact of the matter is that environmental devastation is a serious problem *right now*, and we cannot wait for a new environmental philosophy to sink in or a deeper relationship with environment to develop. To this I would answer that as a *supplement* to global warming and sustainability focuses, the biocultural perspective's concern with the local — regional peoples, languages, values, flora and fauna — is in numerous ways *more immediate* and would hence be more effective for motivating action than the planetary doomsday perspective taken by the alternate approaches. First, a focus on the biocultural diversity of one's own region is geographically more immediate. This means that local legislation and one's own activities can have a direct influence on environmental outcomes. Second, with the biocultural perspective, environmental concerns have more emotional immediacy because one has the sense that his or her own habitat is at stake and because the issues are more concrete. As opposed to focusing primarily on far-away ice sheets and glaciers or just on future generations, one can focus on a specifiable group of people that will be concretely affected by particular decisions. For this reason, local movements, such as those of the Mapuche Indians, the Pueblo Indians, or impoverished workers fighting for land are tangibly more energized and focused than global environmental movements, which can feel abstract and overwhelming, and where advocates can feel powerless to effect change.

Many more questions remain, nonetheless. Here, I have provided only a sketch of some of the key features of decolonial environmentalism. I have argued that it involves a reconceptualization of nature as involving the interactions between human living, the places we inhabit, and non-human life. I have also argued that Latin America is rich with philosophies that exemplify such a perspective, pointing briefly to two examples. This reconceptualization of nature is, however, admittedly vague, and the work of exploring the parameters and implications of this idea remains, as does the work of developing or recovering and sharing more precise articulations of alternative theories and perspectives of nature. Furthermore, given that we all live on the same planet and are, therefore, influenced by each others' ways of life, a full decolonial approach to nature would need to explain how to integrate local conceptions of nature into a globally shareable vision for ethical living. In addition to this theoretical set of questions, there are also many practical problems, including the problem of how to protect the diversity of cultures, peoples, languages, and species in the face of mass urbanization. It is evident that far more work on these issues remains to be done. My



hope is that by confronting these questions, decolonial theorists may be able to more effectively unsettle the colonial conception of nature, one of the central nodes of coloniality.

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## Notes

[1] Naomi Klein suggests that if it is the case, as some climate scientists hold, that the U.S.'s entire economic paradigm is a threat to ecological stability, then the type of ecologically minded resistance movements that face up to this threat by challenging the logic of ever-expanding economic growth are ultimately calling for "revolutionary change to the political and economic hegemony." Naomi Klein, quoting British climate expert Kevin Anderson, in "How Science is Telling Us All to Revolt," *The New Statesman*, October 29, 2013.

[2] For Walter D. Mignolo, from whom Maldonado-Torres takes his conception of modernity/coloniality, "modernity" refers not to "the natural unfolding of world history, but the regional narrative of the Eurocentric worldview." See Walter D. Mignolo, "Preamble: The Historical Foundation of Modernity/Coloniality and the Emergence of Decolonial Thinking," in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. S. Castro-Klaren (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), 13. According to this narrative, the Western world is modern, a term designated to denote a historical moment in which significant forms and degrees of progress have been made, in contrast to both the past and to present places who have not achieved such progress. On Mignolo's view, the modernity of the West has only been made possible by way of its hidden histories of imperial/colonial relations.

[3] Two scholars whose work has focused on issues of nature or environment include Arturo Escobar (see, for example, his "After Nature: Steps to an Anti-essentialist Political Ecology" in *Current Anthropology* 40.1 (1999), pp. 1-30) and Enrique Leff (see *Saber Ambiental*. Mexico: Siglo XXI (2000)). Other areas where incisive work on the environment can be found include scholarship on the politically guiding notion of *el buen vivir* (sometimes translated as 'harmonious coexistence'), work on poverty or race, and equal rights to natural resources, and the Latin American political ecology effort (such as the CLASCO-established Grupo de Trabajo en Ecología Política).

[4] The indigenous peoples of Bolivia and Ecuador have likewise drawn from traditional values and knowledges to propose *el buen vivir* — harmonious coexistence, or living well — as an ethic that is meant to guide development henceforth. For an

explication of how this idea has come to be taken up in a concrete political context, see Eduardo Gudynas and Alberto Acosta, "A renovación de la crítica al desarrollo y el buen vivir como alternativa," in *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana* 16:53 (April - June 2011), 71-83. Also see Rolando Vasquez, "Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening" to appear in Raúl Fonet-Betancourt (ed.), *Capital, Poverty, Development, Denktraditionen im Dialog: Studien zur Befreiung und interkulturalität*, Vol. 33, *Wissenschaftsverlag Mainz: Aachen* (2012), 241-52.

[5] *Tomas de terreno* still occur in Santiago, though not at the scale of those described above.

[6] Naomi Klein has pointed to the group Idle No More, which aims to promote Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection, as one large-scale movement that has united a broad sector of environmentalists. See Jason Mark's interview with Klein, "Naomi Klein: 'Big Green Groups are More Damaging than Climate Deniers,'" in the *Guardian*, September 10, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/sep/10/naomi-klein-green-groups-climate-deniers>.

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