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# Across and beyond the Coloniality of Nature

## A Teaching Proposal

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper presents the theoretical background and structure, as well as pedagogical activities, of an Environmental Philosophy course – a large, general intro for third-year undergraduate students – dedicated to a critical analysis of the idea of nature and its meaning(s) for environmentalism. It centers around the consideration that the idea of nature seems at the same time unavoidable in environmental policy and untenable due to its colonial heritage and dualistic ontology. It is designed as an interdisciplinary, hands-on, critical analysis of the role of “nature” in environmental praxis, its coloniality, and alternative understandings of and relationships to “nature”. Conceptually, “nature” is framed as the “transcendental” of Western modernity: both a necessary condition of possibility for its self-understanding and an a priori unification of the manifold that seems so “obviously” subsumed under it. By drawing on interdisciplinary literature including eco-phenomenology, environmental hermeneutics, political ecology, anthropology, and decolonial thought, students are confronted with different approaches to the question of “nature” and invited to critically analyze assumptions, implications, and uses of the term. They are guided by the hermeneutical consideration that the question “what is nature?” reveals just as much about who asks the question as about what is asked.*

**Keywords:** coloniality; currents of environmentalism; decolonial; eco-phenomenology; environmental hermeneutics; idea of nature; pedagogy; pluriverse; societal nature relations; teaching.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I offer a reflection about an Environmental Philosophy course, which I teach along another course on Environmental Ethics targeting the same group of students (General Education course for

third-year undergraduate students). Environmental philosophy is usually rooted in theoretical approaches from continental philosophy, such as environmental hermeneutics and eco-phenomenology, and focuses more on ontology and aesthetics rather than on normative perspectives.

While I was struggling to find a consistent narrative for this course that would clearly mark the difference from the other one, I ran into Steven Vogel's book *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (2016). This book allowed me to articulate more clearly the uneasiness that has accompanied my self-identification as environmental philosopher from the very beginning: the question of "nature"<sup>1</sup>. Vogel conducts a detailed analysis of the contradictory and problematic use of the term nature in environmental philosophy and proposes to get rid of it altogether to finally engage with the actual issue at stake: how we ought to live together sustainably in a world that is ultimately built by us. That the idea of (wild) nature is not neutral and has been complicit in histories of colonial appropriations and displacement was not new to me. My own research revolves around relational approaches to environmentalism and has always questioned dualistic ontologies (Muraca 2016a; 2016b). But is Vogel's proposal of getting rid of "nature" altogether a feasible and/or desirable solution? What are possible alternatives? I wanted students to engage with these questions and to consider critically assumptions, implications in theory and practice, and trajectories for further reflection.

A further significant event that influenced my considerations came from outside of philosophy. In 2018 I was selected as one of 82 leading experts for the *Assessment Report on the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature* by IPBES, the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, a UN-based platform that counts over 140 member governments and offers regular reports on the status of biodiversity. In its foundational documents, IPBES committed to actively include participants from Indigenous people and local communities among its experts and as reviewers of the assessment drafts. In the work for the Value Assessment, we were faced with the ongoing and uncomfortable discussion about the use of the term nature. Many Indigenous languages do not have an actual word for what Europeans call "nature", and, while this term can always be somehow translated into germane concepts, it is often perceived as carrying a colonial mark on it, rooted in European thinking

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<sup>1</sup> I use in this text the term "nature" in quotation marks when it is not preceded by qualifiers like "the idea of" or "the term" or reported as other thinkers' term.

(Reed *et al.* 2024). Despite our well-intentioned attempts at finding alternative terminology, we kept falling back onto the term “nature” or “natural” in an almost frustrating way. I realized that reframing the question of nature goes well beyond a purely philosophical inquiry and is central in research aiming at policy makers as target audience.

Pulling together all these different threads, I wondered what I could offer to students, the majority of whom were committed environmentalists, interested in careers in the environmental sector, and, as most people living in XXX, passionate outdoor hikers enamored with the magnificent display of “wild nature” that this part of the world still offers. How would the question of nature affect and challenge them to think outside the box, while also offering them philosophical tools of analysis to deal with intricate and, possibly, unsolvable problems?

## 2. NATURE: WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Vogel (2016) engages critically with McKibben’s claim that “nature” has ended because humans have transformed the world into something artificial and thus deprived “nature” of its independence and separation, which, according to him, is the actual meaning of what “nature” is about (McKibben 1989). Vogel wonders hence how environmentalism and environmental philosophy are still possible if “nature” has already ended and adventures into a detailed analysis of how to understand the “end of nature”. In a nutshell, he discusses first the different and confusing meanings of “nature” and “natural” (intended both as opposite of artificial and as opposite of supernatural) and the contradictory claims that humans are part of “nature” (and therefore what they do is natural just like beavers) or are not part of “nature” (and therefore “nature” has already ended when humans appeared on the planet). In an interesting cascade of details, he demonstrates how contradictory, problematic (with reference to displacement of Indigenous people to protect “pristine nature”) and ultimately useless the concept of nature turns out to be. He then concludes optimistically that, instead of trying to salvage “nature”, we should rather celebrate the end of “nature” and establish environmental philosophy on different grounds. Accordingly, environmental philosophy should highlight the environmental and political meaning and consequences of our transformative practices and focus on taking responsibility for “the built world that we actually inhabit and that actually environs us, and not about the chimera called ‘nature’” (*ibid.*, 43).

Against Vogel, one might contend that humans are not the only agents of transformation, but co-construct the environment with other non-human agential beings and that these differences in degree are grossly neglected in the book – the “built environment” is ultimately “co-built”. Along these lines, new-materialists would agree on giving up “nature”, but instead of focussing on the built environment, they would propose to adopt other terms, such as “more-than-human” or “other-than-human”. Similarly, phenomenologists denounce Vogel’s all too transparent human subject as agent of transformation that does not leave room for residual otherness, ambiguity, recalcitrance or, as Toadvine calls it, slippage (1999). Can “nature” then stand for the unattainable, what resists human construction and conceptual framing? Don’t we still need to maintain a term that refers to what “slips away at my approach” (*ibid.*, 129) and is only accessible in a pre-reflexive way, through art, desires, or feelings? In a similar vein, Bannon resorts to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “flesh of the world” as the corporeal ground shared with and by all sensing beings (Bannon 2014). Against Vogel they maintain that environmental philosophy, instead of giving up “nature”, should re-signify and re-define it.

While I am very sympathetic with phenomenological traditions and agree to a certain extent with the critique of Vogel, I also wonder whether and how the “flesh of the world” or the slippage, but also “the more-than-human” could help address the use of the term in the hybrid genre of summaries for policy makers. When writing the IPBES Values Assessment, we tried to use synonyms but had to come to terms with the barrier of language articulation, the constraints of word counts and merciless length parameters, and ultimately with the expectation to avoid what was perceived as complicated jargon. At the end of the day, replacing “nature” as noun and as adjective (natural) throughout the text turned out to be impossible without making the text utterly unreadable and cumbersome.

## 2.1. *Tell me what nature is for you and I will tell you who you are...*

Instead of addressing the question about nature metaphysically or as a history of philosophy overview, I took as point of departure the framework of “societal nature relations” in sociology<sup>2</sup> and remodeled it in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> “If the term ‘societal nature relations’ refers to the organization of the social metabolism corresponding to a specific societal formation or mode of societalization

environmental philosophy. According to this framework, “nature” as well as the question about it are embedded into historically specific social formations and cannot be disentangled from them. The role of environmental philosophy in this respect is to critically investigate the multiple and diverse ways in which people-nature and society-nature relationships are understood, discussed, implemented, and performed culturally and symbolically (in language, stories, art, value articulations, imagines, mentalities, ...), socially (in and through interactions among people and social groups; in laws and institutions, practices, habits, ...), and materially (how specific social metabolisms are organized in economic production, infrastructures, organizations, urban planning, food supply, ...).

Moreover, by taking at the same time a philosophical meta-perspective, I claim that an environmental philosophy approach that investigates the question of nature should also address how specific relations to nature, as they are understood and implemented in narratives, policies, norms, and habits, inevitably also reveal the way in which societies understand themselves. In other words, the question “what is nature?” reveals just as much about who asks the question (not just as individuals, but also as society) as about what is asked.

Taking this perspective at heart, I start the course inviting students to post on the learning platform an image or drawing that represents their answer to the question “what is nature?” and to briefly explain what they chose and why. Over the years I collected a significant amount of images ranging from photos of forests and rivers, animals, including favorite pets, abstract representations of what students explain as the totality of life or the universe, planet earth, and outer space. In class I repeat the exercise inviting students to post a short definition of what “nature” is (max. two words excluding connectors) to a word cloud that is visible on the screen. The question seems odd at first, because, of course, everyone knows what “nature” is. Why even bother defining it? And yet, the word cloud manifests a level of diversity that surprises students. There are, in fact, barely actual clouds. Even an attempt at clustering different definitions ends up with several semantic fields. Most common clusters are: all that is • everything • all encompassing; life • living beings/organic • biodiversity; wilderness • pristine • wild; untouched by humans/nonhuman • not man-made • not developed; home • earth • the world outside

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(*Vergesellschaftung*), social relationships with nature are the mental and practical manifestations of the ways in which individuals and groups are positioned within and toward that organization, and contribute to maintaining or altering it” (Eversberg *et al.* 2022).

or around • environment; beauty • powerful • colorful; interconnectedness • interconnection • coexistence; freedom • free; and finally, “natural” as adjective added to a noun (natural world, natural processes, ...). Some of the results reproduce Vogel’s analytic classification (nature as everything that exist in this world, whose opposite is the supernatural; nature as opposite to human production, its opposite being artificial) but also go beyond it.

In the critical discussion that follows I guide students to identify some key dimensions emerging from the exercise. First, it seems much easier to say what “nature” *is not* rather than to say what it actually *is*. Second, its meaning is obvious to all of us but, when it comes to make it explicit, a wide spectrum of definitions appears. As obvious as it might seem, the articulation of the idea of nature remains rather vague. Third, it seems very difficult to define what “nature” is without using the term “natural” recursively in the definition. At the end of the discussion, I also invite students to reflect briefly on why they chose that definition and the image they posted and to try and articulate for themselves where they think this comes from, proposing the guiding phrase that should accompany us throughout the course: “Tell me what nature is for you and I will tell you who you are”. I suggest that they always consider this question when engaging with all the readings of the syllabus. The weekly assignment (writing a brief reading response following guiding questions) reminds them to consider this perspective, which we then discuss in more details when we address environmental hermeneutics a few weeks later. Finally, I invite students to ask for whom the term nature is obvious and for whom it might not be such. This is a first gesture towards the decolonial perspectives addressed later in the term.

To contextualize the relevance of the discussion as something that matters not only in theory but also for policy and environmental practice, I then present as case study the IPBES struggle to define “nature” in its glossary. As mentioned earlier, while IPBES is strongly committed to accurately represent the perspectives of Indigenous people and local communities worldwide, it has to come to terms with the absence of a term for “nature” outside of European languages and with the challenge of replacing it with another term that would play a similarly overarching role to include diverse understandings in a more respectful way. In fact, the core of the problem, as we discuss it in the section on decoloniality, is that there is no universally valid term that corresponds to what “nature” does in Western worldviews. The IPBES compromise in the glossary reads as follows:



In the context of IPBES, nature refers to the natural world with an emphasis on its living components. Within the context of Western science, it includes categories such as biodiversity, ecosystems (both structure and functioning), evolution, the biosphere, humankind's shared evolutionary heritage, and biocultural diversity. Within the context of other knowledge systems, it includes categories such as Mother Earth and systems of life, and it is often viewed as inextricably linked to humans, not as a separate entity (see Mother Earth). (<https://www.ipbes.net/glossary-tag/nature>)

The problem with this definition is that, while trying to engage critically with the colonial heritage of nature as a universal, it reinforces its coloniality (Escobar 2008) by fixating it as overarching concept that includes other ontologies into the Western understanding and subsumes alternative concepts under a meta-category that, not surprising, is called "nature" again. "Nature" has thus a double meaning, the locally specific term emerging from Western science, and a functional universal that embraces other meanings from other knowledge systems. This move cannot simply be archived in terms of practicality, guided by the necessity of using plain language for policy makers. The actual question, which disappears in the background behind this apparent solution, is precisely why plain language requires the use of "nature", why environmental documents cannot do without it and cannot navigate a plurality or, as I articulate in section 3.4, a pluriversality of terms and of the worlds that utter them. In other words, why is "nature" a strongly contested concept that stirs vivid discussions in global negotiations and is apparently unavoidable at the same time? Ultimately, getting rid of "nature" or replacing it risks masking the complex layers that makes it so pervasive.

## *2.2. Theoretical background: "nature" as the transcendental of Western modernity*

In a Kantianesque move I propose to consider the idea of nature as a quasi-transcendental concept and, more specifically, as *the* transcendental of Western modernity<sup>3</sup>. Without engaging in details with Kant theoretical philosophy, I choose the term "transcendental" as an operational metaphor because of its dual meaning of (1) a necessary and *a priori*

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<sup>3</sup> I use "modernity" uncapitalized to acknowledge the debates on multiple modernities and trans-modernity (Dussel 2002) and to not take for granted Western modernity as a unified totality and a unique grand narrative.

condition of possibility (of knowledge) and (2) as a principle of unification of the manifold. Other than the Kantian technical understanding, the concept of nature is not merely a formal principle but a constitutive one that underpins Western ontologies at their core.

Accordingly, the idea of nature operates like a blind spot behind which it seems impossible to go and is always already implicated and implicit in its own definition. It is, as I said, vague and obvious at the same time. In its vagueness it serves as unification of a manifold of meanings, concepts, and practices subsumed under the overarching idea of “...” – and here I have to pause because there is no other word that can take the place of “nature”. It is obvious what it means and any diligent attempt at unfolding its meaning runs against the impossibility of not returning to it. In the second sense of *transcendental*, nature could be understood as a (if not *the*) necessary condition of possibility for the self-understanding of Western modernity.

As *transcendental*, the idea of nature grounds and reproduces the meanings, social structures, and practices of Western modernity and of Westernized societies not only culturally, operating as principle of justification for modern social imaginaries, but also socially and materially. Across a profound and yet incremental shift that is well described by Merchant (1990), the material basis of survival and social reproduction, its imaginary, and the relationships among individuals and social groups are reframed in terms of “nature” as something separate from society and culture.

Whitehead calls “bifurcation of nature” the process that marks the simultaneous beginning of modern science and philosophy (Whitehead 2004). Accordingly, the Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities served well the nascent sciences in their shift away from ecclesiastic authority and towards “irreducible and stubborn facts” (1967, 3). Through the bifurcation of nature, measurable elements were separated from non measurable ones, including color, smell, and taste, and nature was thus stripped of all experience. All those characteristics that could no longer find a place in nature were exported on a different stage conveniently delivered by modern philosophy in support of the new science: the representational subject, which fulfilled a double task, a dumpsite for what was excluded from nature and the foundational ground for certainty and truth (Muraca 2016a).

Going back to my proposal, one could remark that Kant’s transcendental apperception accounts only for the one side of the bifurcation, the transcendental condition of possibility (and foundational ground) of all

knowledge in the subject. But how about the other half of the bifurcation? The other transcendental condition that made modernity possible is left by Kant in the noumenal fog, whereas the unity of phenomenal nature, the manifold of experience, is guaranteed by the transcendental necessity of the “I think”.

The double movement of the bifurcation legitimizes a separation that goes way beyond epistemology and solidifies a dualism, in which “nature” becomes eventually “abstract social Nature” (Moore 2015) – the abstract, quantifiable commodity that can be owned and that is separated from abstract Humanity, while encompassing “virtually all peoples of color, most women, and most people with white skin living in semi-colonial regions” (2016). On the other side of the bifurcation the (colonizing) subject is posited as self-sufficient, independent, and superior. The *ego cogito* emerges from the *ego conquiro* (Dussel 2002).

A further implication of considering “nature” as the transcendental of Western modernity is not only that “nature” thus understood underpins different traditions of environmentalism and models of conservation (from wilderness to ecosystem services and Natural Capital), but also that the idea of “nature” behind (Western) environmentalism is based on the same (colonial) ontology that justifies the overexploitation of natural resources. As Gernot Böhme (1989) brilliantly illustrate, the Romantic aesthetics of nature, which inspires so much of early conservationism and emerges as reaction against the objectifying and instrumentalizing gaze of the Enlightenment, ultimately shares with its antagonist the same idea of nature as the other of reason and civilization. It is rooted in a “bourgeois aesthetics of nature” made possible by the new lifestyle of the bourgeois intellectuals who encounter, in their leisure time, “nature” as the naive, wild, primitive other, that can be observed, contemplated, and enjoyed at a distance, from the point of view of those who are not engaged in a working relation to and with it. As Böhme further remarks, the externalization and instrumentalization of nature and the aesthetic relation of contemplation and admiration are the two sides of the same coin.

### 3. NARRATIVE AND STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

Because the course serves students from all backgrounds, most of which do not have a philosophical formation, I avoid philosophical jargon and invite them to reconstruct with me the adventures of the idea of nature,

to trace its history and contradictions, and to explore alternative paths for environmentalism. I use interdisciplinary literature, case studies, and policy documents.

### *3.1. Section one: currents of environmentalism and the idea of nature*

In the first section, I draw on Martinez-Alier's classification of currents of environmentalism to critically analyze assumptions and implications with respect to the idea of nature in them (2002). Starting with the first current, "the cult of Wilderness", students read Rolston's defense of the idea of wilderness as wildness (2001) and passages from Thoreau, Emerson, and Roosevelt. In class, we discuss Shenandoah National Park as a case study. Shenandoah was created as National Park relatively late (in the 1930s) in the wake of the New Deal and in response to the need for a large wilderness area on the East Coast of the US. Encounters with "Nature and Wildernes" were considered an essential right for Americans, part of their heritage and national identity. The area which is the park today was already "developed" in the second half of the 18th Century at the expenses of the original people that had lived there since time immemorial. To create the park, a new displacement of the settlers – farmers of European descent – was necessary. Without entering here the complex layers of Shenandoah history (including during Segregation Era debates about the rights of Black Americans to participate in the "spirit of America" embodied by the exposure to wilderness), I show students posters from the visitors center that define what wilderness is (quoting the 1964 Wilderness Act) still in terms of an area that is "untrammeled" by man. Together we unfold the meaning of wilderness and its contradictions. First, wilderness refers explicitly to pristine nature defined as the state of America previous to the arrival of white settlers. Second, wilderness is defined in terms of areas where humans are "visitors who do not remain" and, as in the case of this park, who are forcibly displaced twice (the original people first, the white settlers then). Third, a wilderness area has to be managed to be kept wild but the management has to remain unnoticeable to preserve its primitive character. The paradox of this understanding is manifest in one of the most popular areas in Shenandoah, Big Meadows, an open area displaying a biodiverse grassland. In order to maintain it and prevent the forest to take over, the area is regularly mown (when visitors are not present, I presume), but no animals (like sheep) are employed in order to keep the presence of "man" unnoticeable.

Zooming out from the specific case study, we then move to theoretical and historical analyses. By comparing images from the Shenandoah webpage and David Friedrich's paintings, I lecture on the concept of the Sublime. Cronon (1996) helps us identify the foundational role that wilderness still plays as myth of origin for the United States, but also proposes alternative understandings of it in terms of the "wild others at home" that encounter us everywhere as something not created by us. We analyze Deep Ecology as theory and as social movement and discuss critically its assumptions and implications from the point of view of ecofeminism (Plumwood 1993) and from the Global South (Guha 2000).

For the second current of environmentalism, the "Gospel of Ecoefficiency", I start again with case studies from ecological economics and ecosystem services research. We analyze the concept of Natural Capital and its critique (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010) and, in a second step, I present a more theoretical analysis of nature in capitalism. We discuss "abstract social nature" and the racial roots of "nature" in capitalism (Moore 2015), highlighting how "nature" marks the divide between a eurocentric concept of Humanity and otherized others who are excluded from it. Additional readings expand on racial capitalism (Vergés 2017), on primitive accumulation with Federici (2018).

### *3.2. Transition: environmental philosophy without nature*

At this point students are prepared to engage with "nature" as a problematic idea. As transition to the second part of the course, they now read Vogel and his critique of "nature" as pivotal center for environmentalism and environmental philosophy. This reading is challenging for many students, but the topics addressed in the previous weeks have prepared the terrain well for this encounter. At the end of class I open a poll asking students to cast a vote about whether they agree with Vogel on getting rid of "nature" in environmentalism. Usually, at this point, a significant majority of students is reluctant to agree with Vogel, although they find it difficult to articulate arguments. This is a wonderful opportunity to bring into collective awareness how emotional people get when it comes to "nature" and how difficult it seems to get rid of it.

### 3.3. *Beyond “nature”: eco-phenomenology and environmental hermeneutics*

Left suspended with the question about what to do with nature, it is now time to look more directly into environmental philosophy and engage with potential alternatives. I focus on two key traditions: (eco)-phenomenology and environmental hermeneutics. We start the discussion recollecting that who asks the question about “nature” is part of the question itself and that structures of experience can be critically analyzed from the first-person perspective. Students read Donohoe (2016) who proposes to rethink “nature” in terms of lifeworld. By taking a genetic phenomenology approach, she distinguishes effectively between *homeworld* and *alienworld* and highlights the importance of sedimentation of meanings in constituting both. Donohoe and Bannon (2014) help me articulate how “nature” can be resignified as the process through and in which sensitive bodies are in relation through space and time, as a shared “being-in-the-world” that differs from how inanimate bodies are situated “within-the-world”, to re-read Heidegger. The world not as object, but as pre-given horizon of common experience that connects all sensitive bodies (regardless of consciousness) becomes thus the lifeworld *or* “nature”. The unfamiliarity of phenomenological language is rendered accessible by an opening exercise described in section 4. At the end, we critically discuss the idea of *homeworld* and *alienworld*, as the readings do not address socio-historical conditions under which a homeworld can and cannot emerge or is destroyed, as it is the case with colonial displacements or racial exclusion (Kimmerer 2013; Finney 2014).

This critical analysis offers a perfect transition to environmental hermeneutics, which brings the discussion about sedimented meanings back to history and society. After a brief introduction into the hermeneutical circle, I highlight how horizons of meaning are, like native language, albeit not fixed or unchangeable, something that “we” find ourselves always already embedded into collectively, something we receive under specific historical and social conditions sedimented into traditions. Applied to “nature”, environmental hermeneutics invites us to consider landscapes as analogous to a palimpsest with stratified meanings (Drenthen 2009), some of which are more readable than others with some passages entirely overwritten and only recognizable through feeble traces. There is no better case study than the Netherlands to discuss “nature” as hermeneutical co-constructed landscape where ecological restoration inevitably requires to engage with stratified histories of meaning-making. We read Drenthen’s analysis of three different approaches to ecological

restoration. Students work in groups to identify stratified meanings and the conflicts emerging from them – landscape is never simply landscape. As additional reading Klaver's critical reconstruction of traditional Dutch landscape painting offers a great example of meaning-making and how traditions are built over time (2012). Students are invited to deconstruct what seems obvious (such as the immediate association of Dutch landscapes with tulips, a relatively late import from Turkey and an environmental hazard).

### 3.4. *Decolonial critique*

The next step is obvious: moving from the Netherlands to the US, we apply the method of deconstructing landscape legibility and palimpsest layers to the colonial history of this country. We engage with Kyle Whyte's analysis of how settlers colonialism seek "to erase Indigenous economies, cultures, and political organizations for the sake of establishing their own" (2018, 135) via what he calls a *vicious sedimentation* that constantly ascribes settlers ecologies onto Indigenous ecologies by producing settlers' landscapes that fortify settler ignorance about other layers of meanings in the landscape. In the face of how colonization makes the sedimentation of meaning vicious and ultimately violent, the discussion inevitably drifts towards environmental and epistemic justice. We are brought back to the long shadow of colonial "nature". Before confronting students with challenging decolonial literature, here again, I start with a case study that brings to awareness the colonial gaze, violent displacement and loss of homeworlds, and the infantilization of Indigenous communities in extractive project that "formally" employ participatory methods. We watch the outstanding documentary *La Buena Vida* by the German director Jens Schanze ([http://www.maschafilm.de/en/la\\_buena\\_vida\\_the\\_good\\_life.html](http://www.maschafilm.de/en/la_buena_vida_the_good_life.html)) about the Wayúu community of Tamaquito in Northern Colombia facing the destruction of their way of life by the Cerrejón coal mine. The film successfully links the self-congratulatory discontinuation of coal extraction in Germany as a step towards a green turn with the expansion of extractivism in Latin America to keep fueling the undiminished hunger for energy in Europe.

We then move on to analyze decolonial theories. Reading decolonial anthropologist Arturo Escobar, students are reminded that there is no "one nature" but that nature "is differently experienced according to one's social position and [...] is differently produced by different groups



or in different historical periods” (1999, 5). According to him, there is a coloniality of nature in Western modernity that cannot be denied and that has led to the subalternization and erasure of local grammars and knowledges of the environment (2008). Escobar wonders whether the global environmental crisis might not also be a crisis of the modern idea of nature and hopes that the knowledges emerging in the colonial encounter might become “the sites of articulation of alternative projects and of enabling a pluriverse of socionatural configurations” (*ibid.*, 17). He proposes to rethink “nature” as an anti-essentialist project via local alliances, for example, between local communities and scientists (1999).

In a next step, I invite students to explore how non colonial encounters can be possible and what this implies. We read the challenging and beautiful work by Marisol de La Cadena that takes an interesting spin on the idea of controlled equivocation developed by Viveiros de Castro. For De la Cadena, controlled equivocation is not only a method for anthropologists, but becomes a political practice of encounters across radically different worlds. The key point of her proposal is that the encounter is not between different *interpretations* of the same world, but between different worlds or, better, world-making-practices. The same word (for example *territory* or *water*) might be shared and translated across worlds but translation never resolves the equivocation that words existing across worlds relentlessly embody, because the same word may refer to different things depending on the world that utters it (2019). Thus, meanings and worlds overlap but never entirely collapse onto one another and words have, in these encounters, always what she calls an exceeding meaning, through which something might be such and, at the same time, not only such. Thus, for example, for Quechua speaking communities in Peru, mountains are *tirakuna*, which she translates, aware of the inescapable equivocation, with “earth-beings”. Machu Picchu / Ausangate is at the same time a mountain in general, a site of biodiversity, a place full of important minerals, a beautiful site for tourists to come, and “a powerful earthbeing, the source of life and death, of wealth and misery” (2010, 338), but each meaning is not instead of the other or as a translation of the other. Ausangate as earthbeing inhabits a world of practices and reciprocal responsibilities that cannot be reduced to or translated into any of the other worlds. Equivocation is not there to be resolved, but protected as a space where the encounter across worlds might take place and alliances might be forged if both accept that they both understand *and* do not understand the same thing by the same word. Applied to “nature” this means to leave open the space for worlds that do not make themselves



through the distinction between humans and non-humans and might, for example, consider people in continuity with mountains (2019).

Moving towards the end of the course, we are left to think about how to navigate “nature” through encounters that try to be less colonial and how we can make space for a *pluriverse of socio-natural configurations*, where the pluriverse is not a relativistic mingling of multiple perspectives confined to their particular location, but rather the open and tentative, horizontal encounter across worlds that are at the same time rooted in local practices and universal. While remaining explicitly entangled with its specific locus of embodiment and enunciation, each perspective speaks beyond it and encompasses a world of many worlds.

### 3.5. *So what? From theory to practices*

In the last week of class there are still no simple answers and students feel a light sense of frustration while at the same time being aware of having developed sharp tools of analysis and critique. What are we left to say at the end? I propose different ways of rethinking “nature” in the space of the pluriverse that keeps open the equivocation and does not try to resolve it. An interesting route is to move from theory to practice, to what decolonial anthropologist Rita Segato calls a “responsive anthropology” that “is addressed and solicited by, and answerable to, the people who for a century served as its objects” (2022, 4). How are communities framing the question of environmentalism and of “nature”? We go back to the beginning and to Martinez-Alier’s currents of environmentalism and focus now on the third one, “Environmentalism of the Poor” or, a term that I prefer, “Environmentalism of Livelihoods”, a bottom-up relational collection of practices that use different terms depending on the struggles, which are not isolated but in alliance with each other. Some of these terms might even use “nature” as one term among others. Another trajectory is the proposal by Di Chiro that “nature” is re-invented by communities of struggle as a “historically dynamic and culturally specific” term (1996, 311) that allows for experiments of unity in difference rather than unity of sameness.

But we ultimately leave the question open and embrace its undecidability.

#### 4. EXERCISE IN CLASS: IMAGINE A TREE ...

Before starting the section on phenomenology and hermeneutics, I propose what I call a phenomenological meditation exercise. I invite students to sit comfortably, close their eyes and breathe deeply to quiet their mind. I then ask them to imagine a tree, as follows: "Take some time to see clearly the image in front of your eyes and feel other sensations if any (sounds, smell, ...)". I offer prompts about possible sensations, where the tree is, what it looks like, how it feels.

In a further step, I invite them to come back to awareness and to write down and/or to draw their tree and "what you see, what you feel, what you hear, what comes to mind without thinking too much about it".

The second part of the exercise is a critical reflection about the sedimentation of meanings and where they come from. Students are asked to re-read their notes and reflect critically on them along a series of questions: "What tree have you envisioned? Why that tree in particular? Does it remind you of something? What does it bring into memory? Did you have any difficulties in visualizing a tree? If yes, why do you think it is the case? With what senses did you feel the tree or represent it to yourself? What are the sedimented meanings you can detect in your relationship to the tree and your experience of it? Where do they come from?"

I explain what "sedimented meanings" are and sometimes offer additional prompts, such as "Ask yourself where these meanings come from: Is it your childhood? Where? Was it moving elsewhere? Is it some particular experience? Is it watching films or reading? How did you learn to feel a tree the way you do?"

Students are then invited to share in small groups what they feel comfortable sharing.

We then collect in the plenary some contributions that students want to share. The general feeling is of surprise – they had rarely entertained the idea that "a tree" is never simply a tree and that it can carry so many layers of meaning and meaning-making stories. Once, a student from Camerun shared her reflection about a tree that no one else in the class could relate to and how she felt indeed as a foreigner without anyone to share it with. The exercise helps students understand *homeworld* and *alienworld* and the hermeneutical concept of sedimented meanings.

The imagined tree and the reflection on it become thus a window to worlds and their encounters. I usually conclude the exercise projecting a poem by Rilke and invite students to let it speak to them.

What birds plunge through is not the familiar space,  
in which you see all forms intensified.  
(Out in the Open, you would be denied  
your self, would disappear with no return.)  
Space reaches from us and translates Things:  
to grasp the true existence of a tree,  
throw inner space around it, from that space  
that lives in you. Surround it with restraint.  
It has no limits. Only then, held  
in your renouncing, is it truly tree.<sup>4</sup>

It is a perfect transition to the phenomenological call to go back to the things themselves, the “truly tree” that can only be in the (phenomenological) relation to it and that is different from what birds plunge into, which remains, for us, utterly unfamiliar.

## 5. CONCLUSION

What is left to say? Every time I teach this class I feel that the question, unresolved and intentionally so as an exercise of justice, sits with me over and over again. I answer to students uttering their frustration with the braveness needed to inhabit contradictions and make space for what is beyond our horizon. I also remind them that philosophy is the exercise of articulating questions and keeping the questioning going. It is a fatiguing practice, and a beautiful one. I also remind them of the necessity to pause the questioning sometimes to be able to act, of the importance of getting dirty with compromises to allow for a language that serves policy makers and, yes, uses “nature” inevitably. But I also stress that keeping the word, instead of getting rid of it, is holding onto a visible mark of its complicated history, a trace that we do not want to do away with to buy for us a newly found innocence. Sitting with the contradiction also means accepting responsibility for it. And listening. It is a reminder that the common home, the *oikos* of ecology (and economy) is not something already given, but a task ahead of us, to build, horizontally, step by step, from the worm’s eye and not from the bird’s eye view.

I am, personally, reminded of a story that my Greek teacher shared with us in school. We were discussing the heavily debated Homeric question: did Homer ever exist? Was he a historical figure or a mythical one?

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<sup>4</sup> Revised translation from Rilke 1989, 263.

Or was he just the collector of the innumerable stories sung by *aidoi* over centuries? At the end, to wrap-up the debate, he said: the *Ilias* was not written by Homer, but by someone whose name might as well have been *homer*. Not THAT Homer, the mythical figure, but a more humble, particular *homer*, maybe a nerd collecting stories told by others, a name for many men. Can “nature” then similarly become just a name, one among many in a pluriverse of worlds, a humble, located, and locatable name for many things? No longer THAT mythical “nature”, for the conquest of which colonial empires fought, no longer the synthesis of the manifold, but one of many ribbons holding together a colorful bouquet.

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