Supplement

Western Genealogies of Nature: Bodies, Territories, and Power

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In 1924, Aldo Leopold wrote a short essay entitled “The River of the Mother of God.” He submitted it to *The Yale Review*, one of the leading literary magazines in the United States at the time. The text was rejected and remained unpublished until many years later, when the yellowed, hand-annotated typescript was found amid the American ecologist’s private papers and published in a posthumous collection. In that text, Leopold described a river with no precise beginning or end, traced on a number of maps of Latin America as a clear, decisive line originating in the heights of the Andes and then disappearing into the depths of the Amazon forest. For the author, that river was a symbol of the “unknown places of the Earth”: an ecosystem of complex interdependencies, a place brimming with life. The image referred to the concept of the wilderness, one of the cornerstones of North American ecological thought. However, the very name of the river, Leopold observed, evoked “the clank of silver armor and the cruel progress of the Cross,” a clear reference to the role of Christianity in the conquest and colonization of

the Americas. The name therefore referenced a process of violent appropriation that had transformed once unknown territories, crossing them, exploiting them, and redesigning them, until, as the author writes, “now there are none left.”[1]

The writing preempted some of the themes that would mark Leopold’s mature thinking. He used the river as he would use the mountains years later, as a lens through which to open up to the understanding of unknown places, learn to appreciate them, and protect them from the excesses of economic development. However, what is interesting here is how the text represents an emblematic example of the Western imagination of nature as wilderness, a remote and uncontaminated elsewhere. The expression “unknown places” in Leopold’s essay reveals a form of colonial ambivalence: on the one hand, he acknowledged the devastating effects of colonization on the landscapes crossed by the river; on the other, he described them as unknown spaces, ones to be discovered and recounted from a Western perspective.

This representation presupposed the absence of Indigenous subjects, despite the fact that these territories were inhabited by populations linked to

[1] Aldo Leopold, *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 123–24.

them by complex socio-ecological relationships. A similar dynamic emerged in the North American landscapes where Leopold moved comfortably as a forestry expert, researcher, and white man, heir and beneficiary of colonial culture. The nostalgia for "unknown places" in his prose may thus be read as a reflection of a discursive device typical of Western colonialism: one that, after occupying and stripping inhabited territories bare, reinterprets them as empty and mythical spaces, emblems of an original nature to be protected and preserved.

In this short essay, I shall set out from the geographical coordinates, however vague, given by Leopold in "The River of the Mother of God" to identify a number of recurring features of the imagery and practices of nature in Western modernity. By this expression, I mean the historical formation that emerged in the sixteenth century from the encounter between Europe and the colonies, based on the individual, the family, and the state as the central units of social organization, and on private property and individual freedoms as the cornerstones of coexistence. Western modernity is presented as a project of emancipation, promoting rights proclaimed as universal. However, the critical knowledge developed by anti-colonial, feminist, antiracist, and environmentalist movements reveals the other side of the coin: a history marked by systemic exclusion, structural violence, forced appropriation, and

profound inequalities, not only between human beings but also between humans and non-humans. These perspectives show how the construction of the modern world is based on relationships of domination and exploitation, drawing boundaries between forms of life to be protected and others to be devalued and eliminated.

In the Western context, the term “nature” has taken on multiple meanings over time. In medieval Europe, the material world was understood as a reflection of the divine, although a pre-Christian view of matter as dynamic and changeable remained.[2] Landscapes, plants, stones, and sacred objects were deemed animated, capable of protecting or harming human beings. The boundaries between subject and object were therefore permeable, as both participated in a system of mutual relations and transformations. With the emergence of modernity, however, a conception of the human being as distinct from the natural world, and of nature as an autonomous and separate realm, came to the fore.

According to environmental historian Carolyn Merchant, up until the Renaissance, a holistic view of nature was widespread, often represented as a mother, a reproductive body commanding awe and

[2] Richard Hoffman, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

respect.[3] With the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, a mechanistic paradigm of the material world prevailed; nature was assimilated into a still-feminized yet inert body, an object to be investigated and conquered. This epistemological shift was intertwined with political and economic relations, the expansive dynamics of European colonialism, and the emergence of capitalism, along with the exploitation of peoples and ecosystems.

In modernity, nature emerged primarily as a territory to be extracted, mapped, and intensively exploited for profit. Subsequently, in North America, the concept of wilderness as a space free from human presence gained ground. Furthermore, nature has been constantly associated—albeit in heterogeneous and non-equivalent ways—with women, racialized people, and Indigenous peoples. These groups have historically been defined in opposition to the hegemonic model of humanity, represented by the white male property owner, and assimilated to animality to justify their inferior status, naturalizing inequalities of gender, race, and species that instead have historical and political roots. Over the following pages, I intend to explore these aspects in greater depth, attempting to think with rivers and mountains in contrast to Leopold, also in light of the current

[3] Carolyn Merchant, *La morte della natura. Donne, ecologia e rivoluzione scientifica* (Garzanti, 1988).

expansion of extractive processes, in which environmental violence is accompanied by patriarchal and neocolonial violence.

Thinking with Potosí

The source of the river evoked by Leopold in "The River of the Mother of God" is located in the Andes, a region home to one of the most emblematic places of the reduction of nature to a territory of extraction: the mountain of Potosí, in present-day Bolivia. Here, in 1545, a huge vein of silver was discovered. The Indigenous peoples of the area were already aware of the presence of the precious metal, but it was only when it was reported to the Spanish—according to sources attributed to the Indigenous shepherd Diego Huallpa—that mining operations and the export of silver began, destined to fill the coffers of the Spanish crown over the coming century. The mountain, renamed "Cerro Rico" ("Rich Mountain"), became the beating heart of a brutal mining economy and played a decisive role in the formation of the world market. The raw material, extracted from the bowels of the mountain, was transformed into currency, and hence currency into a tool for commercial and imperial expansion.

This wealth was made possible by a system of exploitation based on the systematic use of forced

labor by the Indigenous population, who were obliged to work in the mines through a coercive regime known as *mita*. Trying to think with Potosí means coming to terms with the violence of a European-style extractive logic that, albeit under different forms, continues to operate in contemporary capitalism, affecting both the territories and the populations that inhabit them.

The painting *La Virgen del Cerro Rico de Potosí*, created in Bolivia in the eighteenth century by an anonymous artist and now preserved at the Museo Casa Nacional de la Moneda, offers an ambiguous visual representation of the Bolivian peak. At the center of the composition stands the figure of the Virgin Mary, whose body coincides with the shape of the mountain, while her hands, protruding from the mountain's profile, are open in a sign of welcome or blessing. Her mantle is adorned with plant, animal, and mineral motifs that reproduce an Andean landscape crisscrossed by paths and tunnels, creating a visual continuity between the sacred body and the territory. At the foot of the mountain, details refer to the mining industry: tunnels, wells, tools, and human figures engaged in mining activities. Above the Virgin's head, the Holy Trinity holds up a crown, while at the foot of the mountain are the earthly authorities—representatives of the Catholic Church, the King of Spain, and perhaps a few colonial dignitaries—looking toward a large gray globe.

Some interpretations of the painting emphasize the continuity between Christianity and colonial enterprise, interpreting it as a form of legitimization of mining activity understood as a manifestation of divine will. Other perspectives, however, highlight the presence of syncretic elements, which integrate aspects of precolonial visual culture into Christian iconography, expressing a cosmology in which non-human beings actively participate in social and political relations.

There is yet another interpretation, inspired by the reflections of feminist scholar Maria Mies, who observed the structural links between colonialism, capitalist modernity, and patriarchy. According to Mies, capitalism and Western modernity would not have been possible without the domination of colonized populations, the intensive extraction of natural resources, and the appropriation of women's labor, particularly reproductive and care work.[4] The superimposition of the figure of the Virgin on the mountain depicts and at the same time justifies this trinity of expropriation. Potosí is represented as a woman's body, a generous Mother Earth, whose mountain-body is furrowed with openings that reveal the mineral veins. The serene face of the Virgin seems to allude to a willingness to offer herself, to give herself

[4] Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (Zed Books, 1986).

to extraction, thus naturalizing the violence of exploitation.[5]

The fusion between sacred body and mining territory suggests that in modernity, far from placing limits on exploitation, depictions of reproductive bodies legitimized the plundering of resources and the subordination of inferiorized social groups. In this sense, the painting highlights the link between extractive economies and colonial and gender relations that reduce bodies and territories to resources to be appropriated. These processes have made the planet—the globe at the Virgin's feet—a horizon to be governed and redesigned according to the expansive logic of colonialism and capitalism.

The North American Wilderness

The extractive logic is not incompatible with the environmentalism of the wilderness typical of US culture, to which Leopold himself belonged in some ways. William Cronon demonstrated that the North American image of nature, which emerged between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, blended elements of the romantic sublime with the

[5] Miriam Tola, "Between Pachamama and Mother Earth: Gender, Political Ontology and the Rights of Nature in Contemporary Bolivia," *Feminist Review* 118, no. 1 (2018): 25–40; Simon Ferdinand, "Mining the Virgin Mountain: Personifying the Earth in Colonial Potosí," *Environmental Humanities* 18, no. 2 (2026).

myth of the frontier, proposing the preservation of remote environments through the creation of parks and reserves.[6] John Muir, one of the protagonists of this movement, described wilderness as a temple in which to experience the divine. Wilderness had a spiritual and aesthetic value; it had to be left free from human interference, preserved in its original purity. However, national parks, presented as “virgin” and “wild,” soon became tourist destinations for the bourgeois elite and later for the urban masses, offering temporary respite from the industrial modernity of cities. Leopold took up this tradition, but shifted the focus from Muir’s romantic sacredness to the complexity of ecosystems and the stability of biotic communities.

It is well known that Leopold’s approach changed over time. Early in his career, he was influenced by Gifford Pinchot and focused on the rational management of natural resources for human purposes. Later, he became the forerunner of an environmental ethic based on the interconnections between all living beings in the biotic community—humans, animals, and plants. This position was accompanied by the project to preserve large tracts of land, a proposal that brought him closer to Muir. While

[6] William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69–90.

in Muir's writings humans were external observers of majestic landscapes, Leopold's writings emphasized their internality with respect to the community of the earth.

However, as Indigenous and decolonial studies show, particularly the work of Kyle Whyte and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, much of what Muir and Leopold admired in North American landscapes was actually the result of Indigenous practices of living.[7] These were not "unspoiled" spaces, but lived-in territories, modified by cultivation practices, controlled burning, hunting, and relations of kinship with non-human beings. Yet, both in Muir's contemplative environmentalism and in Leopold's vision of "unknown places," these territories were thought of as *terra nullius*, vacant lands to be subjected to state sovereignty.

According to Gilio-Whitaker, Leopold failed to recognize that the violence of colonization had profoundly altered Indigenous land management practices and that the environmental policies he advocated followed the same logic of expropriation up

[7] Kyle Whyte, "How Similar Are Indigenous North American and Leopoldian Environmental Ethics?" SSRN, March 1, 2015, https://ssrn.com/abstract=2022038; Dina Gilio-Whitaker, "Environmental Justice Is Only the Beginning," *High Country News*, July 1, 2022, https://www.hcn.org/issues/54-7/indigenous-affairs-perspective-environmental-justice-is-only-the-beginning/.

to a point. Preserving the wilderness in fact implied a double removal of Indigenous populations: a physical removal, since the establishment of protected areas often involved the expulsion of their inhabitants; and an epistemic removal, through the attempt to minimize the traces of Indigenous presence in the landscape and delegitimize the ancestral knowledge that had matured over time and been painstakingly renewed. This approach had lasting effects on environmental policies both in the United States and on the level of global conservation policies.

Although Leopold's land ethic in some respects challenges the reduction of nature to a resource, it is an ecological thought that does not depart from the colonial mode of inhabiting territories, because it ignores the deep link between colonial history and the destruction of ancestral socio-ecological relationships. The ecologist's invitation to "think like a mountain," while relevant, does not offer adequate responses to the current expansion of extractive processes, which display elements of continuity with colonial economies.

Body-Territories

The term "extractivism," which emerged in Latin America in the 1990s, offers a critical perspective on the intensive exploitation of territories for the export of

natural resources such as fossil fuels, lithium, and copper. Although the phenomenon is not new, in contemporary capitalism the constant increase in global demand for energy and raw materials has given rise to new forms of extractivism. In recent decades, Latin America has seen the opening of new oil and mining frontiers and the construction of large infrastructure projects, often controlled by transnational corporations. Extractive economies leave behind devastated territories, forcing the population to live and work in unhealthy and polluted environments or move away. In short, these projects have a profound social and environmental impact, transforming large areas of the continent into veritable sacrifice zones.

In response to growing extractive violence, exacerbated by the strong presence of military and paramilitary forces, protests and mobilizations have multiplied, often led by the very social groups that this violence has made particularly vulnerable. Argentinian sociologist Maristella Svampa identifies territorial ecofeminism as one of the most effective forms of resistance to extractivism, as women and those involved in the social reproduction of communities have been able to recognize and denounce its destructive effects on their bodies, communities, and ecosystems.[8]

[8] Maristella Svampa, *Feminismos ecoterritoriales en América Latina* (Fundación Carolina, 2021).

Thinking Like a Mountain

Territorial ecofeminism has popular origins. It arises on the social and geographical margins, in rural and Indigenous contexts, where the impact of extractive industries is most pronounced. In Patagonia, for example, women from the Mapuche Indigenous communities organized a march that reached Buenos Aires in the spring of 2021 to demand a law preventing the exploitation of ancestral territories. In Bolivia, in the Tariquía nature reserve, women have long opposed extractive operations and are regenerating the territories through agroecology and community forest management. Although these are heterogeneous practices, which often do not identify as “feminist” (a term associated with urban, white, middle-class experiences), they generate anti-patriarchal dynamics that are embedded in local ways of life. At the same time, they open up possibilities for dialogue and alliance with other feminist movements in Latin America and beyond.

In this context, the reflection on the link between bodies and territories, developed by Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant activists has taken on a key role in the contemporary Latin American landscape. The notion of “body-territory” should not be confused with the modern view that assimilates women, racialized subjects, and animals to nature. On the contrary, it relates the historical processes of

patriarchal violence against women's bodies to the epistemic and material violence of colonialism and to the extractive violence that devastates territories. The latter are understood in Indigenous worldviews as the fabric of social and spiritual relationships between humans and non-humans. According to Lorena K abnal, a Guatemalan communitarian feminist, the defense of the body-territory is a political process that combines the struggles in defense of land and water with the healing of individual and collective trauma. These processes, based on the recovery of ancestral knowledge, are indispensable for regenerating the strength of communities and sustaining practices of resistance.[9]

Through transnational solidarity networks, the practices and concepts referred to here have transcended their contexts of origin and become part of the political lexicon of contemporary social movements. In particular, extractivism has become a widely used concept in Europe to describe an economic and political logic based on the intensive extraction of value, not only from rural and urban territories but also from labor and social relations, as well as human and non-human bodies. Political ecologist Maura Benegiamo observes that, in a broad

[9] Giulia Marchese and Tzk'at Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales, "Oltre la cura: difesa e recupero del territorio corpo-terra. La proposta di sanación della Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del feminismo comunitario territorial," in *Ecologie della cura*, ed. Maddalena Fragnito and Miriam Tola (Orthotes, 2021), 193–206.

sense, the term refers to “an advanced stage of capitalism, which in its progress takes on increasingly deadly and destructive aspects, proving itself ever less capable of guaranteeing the promise of a general increase in well-being and improvement in the living conditions of the population.”[10]

In Italy, for example, the term “extractivism” is used to contest the touristification of cities and the construction of large-scale projects that exclude local communities from decision-making processes and ignore social and environmental impacts. An example more closely related to the original meaning of the term is represented by the recent mobilizations in defense of the Apuan Alps where, since the late 1980s, white marble extraction has experienced rapid expansion due to the growing demand for calcium carbonate, widely used in the food and cosmetics industries.[11] Here, various associations and environmental groups have promoted public initiatives, including collective mountain walks, protests, art exhibitions, and conferences, united by the slogan “Mountains don’t grow back,” aimed at highlighting the irreversible effects of environmental destruction caused by extraction.

[10] Maura Benegiamo, “Ecologia politica e sviluppo,” in *Introduzione all’ecologia politica*, ed. Luigi Pellizzoni (Il Mulino, 2023), 123.
[11] Chiara Braucher, “L’estrattivismo apuano. Storie di un territorio in Occidente,” *Into the Black Box*, May 26, 2023, https://www.intotheblackbox.com/articoli/estrattivismo-apuano/.

Thinking Like a Mountain

From Latin America to Europe, territorial ecofeminism and the multiple movements resisting various forms of extraction highlight the deep-seated connections between social and ecological injustice. Rooted in the experiences of the communities involved, these critical perspectives challenge the conceptions of nature established in Western modernity, from the reduction of ecosystems to resources to wilderness environmentalism. At the same time, these collective processes, mindful of the interdependencies between bodies and territories, reconfigure nature as a relational and dynamic sphere with which to regenerate or activate modes of existence incompatible with the logic of extractivism.

Biographical Notes

Miriam Tola is an associate professor in the Department of Communication and Media at John Cabot University in Rome, where she teaches feminist media studies and ecocinema. Her research interests include feminist and postcolonial theory, political ecology, and cultural media studies. On these topics, she has written and edited several essays, including the monograph *Resurgent Commons: Feminist Political Ecologies in the European South* (2026), and the edited volumes *The Routledge Handbook of Eco -media Studies* (2023) and *Ecologie della cura: Prospettive transfemministe* (2021). She has held research and teaching appointments at Northeastern University in Boston and the University of Lausanne.