



REMAKING THE DECOLONIAL
Breaking Free from Naturalism

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Who Speaks for Nature?

This question may seem peripheral. In fact, it is central. Every time we invoke the repair of colonial damage, we should ask: Who is speaking on behalf of nature? After all, it was nature that was first wronged in the grand gesture of expropriation/appropriation. Not because it was materially plundered, but because it was conceptually confiscated. It was, in fact, under the auspices of naturalism—the value system that separates humans from nature and commands the former to dominate the latter—that Europe established itself as the centre of all that is good, of reason, of truth, of history and order, and so on, while simultaneously viewing the rest of the living world as mere matter to be governed.

Naturalism, the Matrix of Colonialism

Colonialism is not, first and foremost, an economic or political venture; it is the inescapable stumbling block of a metaphysical project—one might even say they are consubstantial. In fact, naturalism is the condition of possibility for the colonial enterprise. Before it set about dominating peoples, Europe first severed the human from the living. It declared nature to be its radical externality and therefore available. Henceforth, Europe was merely able to perceive nature's putative 'utilities' without the prudence, care, forbearance, and compensations that co-belonging prescribes everywhere else. This would soon be cast as the immense periphery of the world's centre—an undifferentiated amalgam of ahistorical, organic societies: the devil's vast empire and the tomb of the spirit. Meanwhile, it naturalized certain humans, thus legitimating their subjugation.

The same thought mechanism that distinguishes subject and object, spirit and matter, and reason and corporeality establishes the hierarchy between colonizer and colonized. The sixteenth-century Valladolid controversy, which institutionalized slavery, was not merely a theological dispute; it was the inaugural scene of an ontological colonialism with a naturalistic foundation. It was here that certain peoples were decreed to belong to nature rather than history, partaking in silence rather than vocal expression.

From Valladolid to Berlin: Separation Becomes a System

From Sepúlveda to Descartes, the distance did not increase, strictly speaking; it was distilled to a finer point. It attains its pure outline with Hegel, as Europe wraps itself in its refusal to embrace the world. The former justifies conquest by the ‘naturalness’ of peoples; the latter, a century afterwards, proclaims mastery of nature as humanity’s destiny. Between the two, metaphysics turned on its axis: God was no longer master of the world—reason was. Naturalism became epistemological. The Enlightenment universalized this logic: freeing the human from nature is the civilizational programme. History becomes the yardstick by which the degree of people’s disembodiment is measured. But only through the dialectical vice does separation reach its culmination: Europe is cast as the subject of the universal Spirit, the other worlds its infancy. Europe becomes history. Africa is deemed ‘outside history’ on the grounds that it remains ‘natural’.

Then comes Berlin (1885): naturalism becomes a map. What metaphysics had conceived, geopolitics executes. The pacification of the European continent is signed against a newly declared enemy: nature. The cannons that once fell silent between

fratricidal brothers are
now trained on nature
within the framework
of a war that federates

under the twin banners of ‘civilization’ for industry in Africa and ‘progress’ for its repercussions in Europe. Strictly speaking, this remains naturalism. Europe has made peace at the expense of nature and of colonized peoples. In truth, the two are one. Land, forests, and peoples are turned into ‘resources’; the carve-up, the border, administration, and bureaucracy bring the separation to completion. The map becomes the territory; the real becomes subordinated to the sovereignty of representation.

The Spiral of Extraction and the Trap of Immanent Colonialism

Modernity has made no headway; it revolves around itself, deepening the gesture of mastery through expropriation. From religious mission to scientific mission, from military to digital conquest, the same paradigm winds on, fundamentally colonial at its core. In reality, one should not isolate a single one of its transmutations. Otherwise, we risk patrimonializing it, even at the very heart of mechanisms ostensibly dedicated to its repair. Pursuing this project requires mobilizing a fine-grained attentiveness to its naturalist manifestations. Capitalism, for example, is merely the economic rendering of the same paradigm: the systematic monetization of the distance the human has taken from the things among which it was once entangled—nature, the group, the body. Each new dis-organic rupture does not enlarge the domain of the market; it sharpens it.

How does naturalism recycle itself into its very critique? As the paradigm, as the operating system of modernity. Ecological and decolonial discourses are unconsciously infused with it whenever they purport to ‘speak for nature’. In doing so, they reinstall nature as an object of discourse rather than a system of co-belonging. Western neo-animism, which claims inspiration from Indigenous wisdoms, renews an exotic sentimentality:

it celebrates ‘nature’ yet still dispossesses the peoples who are its living expression. Likewise, ‘wilderness’ policies exclude local communities in the name of preservation: a colonial ecology that re-enacts the gesture of expulsion. Even ‘the sustainable’—a moral notion—remains captive to the logic of profit. It is colonized. To repair without transforming the paradigm is to prolong the debt. Repair ought to partake not of reform but of revolution. Revolution, for its part, is anti-naturalist.

Transvaluing the Real

To step out of naturalism entails relocating the centre of enunciation. More radically still: it is to abandon separation as a starting point of thought and begin from relation. Not repairing nature—inhabiting the world.

Indigenous peoples, who make up five percent of humanity and handle eighty percent of terrestrial biodiversity, embody this politics of continuity.

They are not defending an abstract ‘nature’; rather, they preserve, without ‘protective’ enclosures, an order of the world grounded in gift and counter-gift, the included middle, land’s inalienability, etc. Their way of existing—where care, struggle, and world are one—constitutes the true ecological avant-garde, and thus a decolonial one.

Where coloniality recedes, the earth breathes. This is the law of equivalence of the living. The vernacular revolutions and non-romantic ecologies they reformulate amount to a politicization of co-belonging and responsible anthropocentrism, which ought to inspire every gesture of remembrance.

The Architecture of Living Remembrance

A place of memory for colonialism, conceived from this proposition, should resonate neither as a monument nor as a museum in the classical sense: not a closed object dedicated to the grammar of the past but a space of re-inhabitation of the world, porous to the complexity of the colonial so that it finds no purchase on the site.

Its architectural stance should refuse the frozen commemorative gesture—the one that isolates, that separates the viewer from history—and instead adopt an ecotonal form, that is, one sited in between: between building and ground, between matter and memory, between human and nature.

This place would speak less about colonialism than from the avoidance of its persistences, including their anticipations. It would host regeneration, planting, sound, and speech. It would be made of reversible materials, permeable soils, and spaces of use rather than of veneration.

It would be natural.

Reparation here would take the form of an architectural gesture of relation: a building that breathes with the earth, that gives room to the communities' voices and to the continuity of the living. Accordingly, all monumentality would cease to be vertical, and all museification, fixed; it would become a fragment of the world returned to the world's memory.

It would be habitable.

Conclusion

Colonialism did not merely conquer territories; it durably disorganized the given of the world. Undoing colonialism would not suffice. Coloniality must be addressed. The hard line here is naturalist. Nature is not threatened by the hu-

man as such, but by the disembedded human, whose very dynamic is to colonize. Likewise, naturalism forms the metaphysical substrate of colonialism rather than a simple epistemic regime. The separation of human and nature precedes racial and economic

hierarchization. It constitutes their condition of possibility.

Coloniality presupposes a conversion of attention, a sidestep away from naturalism, away from the project of a separate human. The decolonial gesture begins when we stop speaking in nature's place and start speaking from it. More prosaically, it is a matter of shifting decolonial critique from a moral or political terrain to an ontological one. By underscoring this other essence of colonialism, we drop the blinders and touch a fundamental knot: the very structure of the Western model, which appears in rarely articulated filiations (Sepúlveda, Descartes, Kant, A. Smith, Hegel, Bismarck, Musk), and which only naturalism allows us to illuminate. Without such attentiveness, we would systematically fail at the geopoetics of the world, which any place dedicated to the repair of colonization ought to prototype.

Translated from the French by Manyakhalé Diawara