FROM THE EUROPEAN SOUTH 13 (2023) 29–44

https://www.fesjournal.eu

Can nature speak? A peasant perspective on decolonizing the human-nature relationship through multispecies communication[1]

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ABSTRACT

In our article, we examine the hegemonic human-nature relationship through a postcolonial lens. Our inquiry starts from the assumption that the human-nature relationship needs to be reworked in order to find better ways to respond to the climate crisis and ecological devastation. By radically questioning the current human-nature relationship, we challenge hegemonic understandings of 'human' and 'nature' and call for thinking *with* rather than about 'nature'. We take our cue from Gayatri Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?" and ask the question: "Can nature speak?" We outline how 'nature' is understood as the voiceless 'other,' and is continuously silenced through misleading representations. Thus, hegemonic discourses on climate change are revealed to be intertwined with colonial continuities and epistemological violations, which we examine through indigenous and decolonial approaches as well as the statements of five Baltimore farmers, who were our interlocutors during a research stay. We focus on existing alternatives – especially from agricultural contexts – in which 'nature' is not understood as an "it" (Kimmerer 2017). We ask what potential for change might lie in communication with 'nature', since the etymology of the word (Lat. *communicare*) leads to worlds of co-becoming and sharing. In sum, we follow calls for epistemological and ontological shifts that not only challenge hegemonic discourses on climate change, but also decolonize hegemonic ways of researching, (academic) thinking and understandings of 'the other'.

Keywords
human-nature relationship, othering of nature, decolonial listening, communication, care, silencing

Prologue / *Mistica*

Does soil speak? Does the soil communicate with you?

Amelia Hazen: "The soil speaks through the plants that grow in it and the organisms living within. A healthy soil is visibly lively."

Jesse Bloom: "Of course. It doesn't use human language, but it can tell all sorts of stories about where it's been, how it's feeling, and of course we can always talk about the weather."

Rodette Jones: “Yes, it does speak, it shows by producing or not producing according to how you care for it.”
Allison Worman: “Totally! It speaks as it is and from what it bears. It communicates through action, growth, texture.”
Elisa Lane: “Soil does speak but it takes time to understand its language. I’m still learning.”

In the peasant movement La Via Campesina, which comprises 200 million people across the world and constitutes the biggest global social movement, each meeting starts with a *mistica*, an artistic prologue, which introduces the topic of the day or focuses on a special theme (La Via Campesina 2022). In line with that, we began this article with the statements of five Baltimore farmers, who answered the question, “Can soil speak? Does the soil communicate with you?” – as part of longer interviews which we conducted during a research stay in Baltimore, US. Very much in line with what we will argue later, the *mistica* is understood as “a Cosmovision, not an anthropocentric understanding” (La Via Campesina 2022), and focuses on the peasant relationship with the land. We read these statements as grounded and comprehensive engagements with the human-nature relationship, as counternarratives to hegemonic conceptions of this relationship, as poetic and political. We will draw on these statements in our analysis. They can be seen as seeds for further thinking, as a rich soil in which old assumptions can be composted, in a decolonial un/learning, and new aggregates are assembled to prepare blossoms yet unknown.

They underline that this article is written first and foremost from a farming perspective.[2]

Introduction

“What do you hear the earth saying to humans at this time?” Author, farmer, and activist Leah Penniman puts this question to 38 of the most respected Black environmentalists in her recent book *Black Earth Wisdom* (Penniman 2023). Their different answers are not only eloquently beautiful and rich, but weave together the most pressing socioecological questions and problems of our times. What is more, none of them have any doubt that ‘nature’ is saying something.[3]

In a similar vein, Naomi Klein begins her *Climate against Capitalism* (2015, 29) with a quotation from Victor Hugo: “How sad to think that nature speaks and mankind doesn’t listen.” And, on the evening before the UN Climate Summit in 2014, Oscar-winning documentarian Louie Psihoyos projected onto the UN headquarters in New York “the whole world is singing but we’ve stopped listening” (Bubnoff 2015).

These three examples and the farmers’ statements in the prologue confront one of the most essential components of human exceptionalism: humans’ ability to speak. In the

Environmental Humanities, human exceptionalism, anthropocentric worldviews and the mastery of 'nature' by 'humans' are recognized as pressing problems that contribute to the devastation of 'nature' (Rose *et al.* 2012; Plumwood 2002). At the same time, anthropocentric logics as well as nature devastation are intertwined with colonial exploitation and hegemonic Western ways of thinking (rooted in Enlightenment ideas) which foster the denial of nature's agency (Braidotti 2003; Bennett 2010; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Rose et al. 2012, Plumwood 2002). Gayatri Spivak encapsulated this in a talk in 2015: "All exploitation started with the exploitation of 'nature'" (Spivak 2015). Similarly, Leah Penniman writes: "It stands to reason that any hope of solving the environmental crisis will require an examination and uprooting of the white supremacist ideologies that underpin the crisis" (2023, xx).

This article will look at one of these fundamental underpinnings by exploring the question "Can nature speak?", building on Gayatri Spivak's famous intervention "Can the subaltern speak?". Our approach is based on the assumption that the ecological crisis is a crisis of the human-nature relationship (Becker and Jahn 2006), and that we must examine this relationship if we want to strive for much needed ecological change. We see the current global situation, which Brand (2009) has defined as a "multiple crisis" combining many dimensions, as a socioecological emergency, and thus understand 'human' and 'nature' as intertwined in "naturecultural" entanglements (Haraway 2016). This means two things: first, that even though we are searching for less exploitative ways to live with the more-than-human and mainly focus on the 'ecological', this may involve fewer oppressions within the sphere of the so-called 'human', since the exploitation of so-called natural resources plays a central role in any imperial project (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 10) and thus involves violence against 'humans' and 'nature' alike. Secondly, we neither understand 'the human' nor 'nature' within the term human-nature-relationship as solid, complete, or able to be globally defined. Instead, the investigation of the human-nature relationship will overcome certain hegemonic understandings of these two fields and strives for more nuanced and suitable framings of both, as well as of the interstices between and entanglements of 'human' and 'nature.' The interstitial spaces represented by the hyphen highlight the actual field of encounters, which is especially important when it comes to the ability to speak. Communication, listening and response-ability (Haraway 2016) take place in the space embodied by the hyphen.

In sum, our approach can be understood in the context of claims that underline the misleading ways in which the 'ecological' crisis has been researched so far. Meanwhile, Kathryn Yusoff (in Gabrys et al. 2020) criticizes climate science for being obsessed with generating numbers without doing anything to initiate much needed radical change. We follow this call for change, approaching the climate crisis on an epistemological and ontological level.

As the farmers' statements in the prologue underline, less hierarchical and less anthropocentric human-nature encounters do take place and are – especially in non-Western contexts – more than just an imaginary future or an academic idea of ontological turns (Todd 2016). Therefore, our analysis will draw on indigenous and decolonial approaches as well as Western philosophies and theories which decenter the human, critically address the genealogy of epistemological exploitation stabilized through colonial and enlightenment myths, and thereby try to find counterhegemonic conceptions of 'the human' and 'nature'. The theories and approaches we use cross North/South boundaries, since "the solution is not to eliminate the difference but to decolonize the logic of coloniality that translated differences into values" (Mignolo 2011, xxvii). None of these contexts are homogenous: "What is usually called Western modernity is a very complex set of phenomena in which dominant and subaltern perspectives coexist," while indigenous approaches or *Epistemologies from the South* differ in themselves (de Sousa Santos 2015, x). That said, this article is not a further attempt to argue for another ontology (Todd 2016). It is concerned with lived experiences which are there, present and vibrant, but silenced, and it is therefore much more about listening than about writing. In line with Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, it is about "reading with our senses attuned to stories told in otherwise muted registers" (2012, 77).

We will begin by conducting a postcolonial reading of the hegemonic human-nature relationship. Then, in a decolonial and multispecies approach, we will reconsider our postcolonial insights. In the first part, we will discuss the othering of 'nature' and, second, the representation of 'nature' in hegemonic climate change discourses. While, with the second, we echo precisely Spivak's point of critique, namely the powerful silencing through representation, the focus on othering also follows important lines of postcolonial inquiry.

By briefly analysing the binary thinking behind the notions of 'human' and 'nature', we do not want to reproduce these ways of thinking but would like to show the fractures, the instability, the rickety construction of these hegemonic interpretations. We understand postcolonial theory here as a lens to show the continuations of colonialism and we use decolonial approaches to focus on ways of unlearning these.

Therefore, we will reconsider our insights from the postcolonial reading through multispecies or more-than-human perspectives to come closer to a decolonial unlearning and turn to counterhegemonic perceptions of the human-nature relationship by focusing on contexts, ontologies, epistemologies and place-bound practices in which the ability of 'nature' to speak is existent, perceived, influential and, above all, unquestioned. By investigating the question "Can nature speak?", we will overcome hegemonic understandings of 'the other' and focus on the entanglement of and communication between 'humans' and 'nature' in certain places at certain moments.

Our investigation of the human-nature relationship is written from an agricultural and farming perspective – a field that is highly entangled with (drivers of) colonial exploitation and thus should not remain purely a natural science but open up to the humanities. On the other hand, counterhegemonic farming practices and agricultural genealogies offer tools to overcome exploitative ways of encountering 'nature' (Redecker and Herzig 2020) and can thus assist the humanities in solving questions regarding 'the environment'.

Nature othering

"We're still largely trapped inside the enlightenment tale of progress as human control over a passive and 'dead' nature that justifies both colonial conquests and commodity economies" (Plumwood 2002).

In the Western discourse on 'nature', the man of reason endowed with logos (Braidotti 2013) was constructed in opposition to irrational 'nature', which was wild, deterministic, passive, and above all unable to speak. According to Val Plumwood (2009, 118), "Human/nature dualism conceives the human as not only superior to but as different in kind from the non-human, which is conceived as a lower non-conscious and non-communicative purely physical sphere that exists as a mere resource or instrument for the higher human one." To put it in postcolonial terms, 'nature' is conceptualized as the completely 'other', as the counter-image, which must be clearly distinguished from 'the human'. Such demarcation stabilizes the construction of 'the human', as described in the context of othering processes between 'humans' by Edward Said, who explains in *Orientalism* (1979) how colonial discourse produces colonized subjects and colonizers alike.

Building on Stuart Hall's critique in *The West and the Rest* of a discourse that "constructs an over-simplified conception of 'difference'" (Hall 1992, 189), we could say that categorizing 'humans' as distinct from 'nature' not only obscures relatively recognizable power relations and lines of difference such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class, and forcibly unifies them, but also overlooks the multiplicity of subtler distinctions and intersectional links within human distinctness.[4] Likewise, on the side of 'nature,' phenomena, things, and organisms are thrown together which take the most diverse forms imaginable. Most diverse (life) forms and 'species' outside of human society are thus unified and made invisible. Additionally, such a binary pair leads to the assumption that there are only 'humans' and 'nature' and nothing in between, nothing entangled or interwoven, no continuum, no overlappings and no exchange.

The continuation of 'nature's' othering has also been highlighted by de Sousa Santos et al. (2007, xxxv). They state that the resilient subaltern figure of nature is still with us. Through the established dualisms of nature/culture, human/nature and the associated attributions, 'nature' remains 'the other' and does not get a voice itself. As the current debate on climate

change shows, even in the current recognition of so-called 'environmental' problems and the much invoked urgent need to protect 'nature,' power relations remain, as Farhana Sultana elaborates in her analysis of what she calls "Climate coloniality" (2022, 7). She calls for human/nonhuman relationships to be reworked while valuing Indigenous and traditional knowledge and sciences worldwide (Sultana 2022, 7). Like Escobar, she challenges epistemic coloniality and calls for epistemological and ontological shifts that foster pluriversality instead (2020, 8). Meanwhile, Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) addresses the fatality of the dualism from the perspective of New Materialism. She notes that earth-destroying fantasies of consumption and exploitation are fed precisely by the fact that the material is regarded as dead, without a will of its own (Bennett 2010, ix), and thus represents 'the other' par excellence.

In sum, a counterimage to the hegemonic human-nature relationship, to 'nature' as 'the other' is one approach to initiating a radical shift in the climate change discourse.

Nature's representation

"No one asked plants, 'What can you tell us?'" (Kimmerer 2013, 42)

In climate change discourses, 'nature' as 'the other' is negotiated by 'humans', who decide what should happen to it. Even after the recognition that 'nature' is to be protected – perhaps most popularly communicated through the paradigm of conservation – the silencing of 'nature' remains, since it continues to be treated as an object of negotiations.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017) calls attention to these (post)colonial continuities: "Beyond the renaming of places, I think the most profound act of linguistic imperialism was the replacement of a language of animacy with one of objectification of nature, which renders the beloved land as lifeless object." Kimmerer shows that it is not just a matter of speaking differently about 'nature', but of understanding it as alive, and thus communicating with it rather than about it. Similarly, Said explains in reference to "the Orient" that it is not perceived as an equal interlocutor within imperial discourse, but rather as the 'silent Other' (Said 1985, 17).

In texts and statements describing climate change and thus the urgent need to alter something about the way 'nature' is treated, 'nature' itself is rarely given a voice. Even the founding document of so-called sustainability, the Brundtland Report, focuses on economic reorientation (Hauff 1987). Climate conference agreements have rarely involved listening to 'nature' itself.[5] Even critical reporting rarely incorporates 'nature's' needs. Articles accompanying the climate conferences focus on actors such as the Pope, the Chinese and American presidents, BP, Shell, managers and multinationals, their needs and their (possible) capacity to act (Hecking 2015). 'Nature,' represented by melting glaciers, an "island that will soon no

longer exist" or "storms, drought, floods," on the other hand, is only thematized as a victim or a threat (Hecking 2015).

However, as Sultana proposes, decolonizing the climate change discourse is not only about "having a seat at the table (e.g., participation at the COP26) but determining what the table is" (2022, 9). As long as the Western notion of one homogenous 'nature' (that is, 'the other' in relation to 'humans') is upheld, a decolonization of the climate change discourse will not be achieved. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, referring to Said's remarks, point out that the texts of the so-called Orientalists are accorded a much higher status than the "objects" they speak about (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2015, 102). Something similar happens in negotiations over 'nature': it is obscured precisely by representations – because "scientists decided long ago that plants were deaf and mute, locked in isolation without communication'' (Kimmerer 2013, 19).

Thus, in addition to the obvious material aspects of colonial domination, the violent power of representation, which is also central to postcolonial inquiry, is hegemonically perpetuated in relation to 'nature'. When Miriam Nandi states that postcolonial theory clearly sides with the disenfranchised, or those whom Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth" (Nandi 2006, 123), 'nature' ought to be included in these considerations, since it is not granted its own agency, rights, or voice.

We do not merely want to recognize that the othering and representation of 'nature,' the epistemological part of climate colonialism, needs to be reworked, but in the following explore the frictions in which other understandings and many diverse and situated human-nature relationships are flourishing.

Can nature speak?

"The forest is always talking [...]" (Toi Scott in Penniman 2023, 39)

As has often been quoted and critically discussed, Spivak responded in the negative to her question "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988). No, the subaltern cannot speak. Both Indian men and English colonists speak for or about Indian women in ways that silence them.

Our postcolonial analysis above on the othering and representation of 'nature' in climate change discourse similarly forces us, for the moment, to answer the question "Can nature speak?" with 'no.'

Another reason why we are currently compelled to answer the question "Can nature speak?" in the negative is that the very definition of language implies that it is a human capacity and that this capacity, in line with the human othering discussed above, distinguishes humans from all 'the others' (Glock 2015, 327).

Such othering is not a naïve process but an active violence, as Kimmerer shows, describing the elimination of her ancestors' Patawatomi language: "It's no wonder that our language was forbidden. The language we speak is an affront to the ears of the colonist in every way, because it is a language that challenges the fundamental tenets of Western thinking – that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use" (Kimmerer 2017). Here, Kimmerer opens the important perspective that language is not a stable given but can be contested, or even violently erased.

So, what is language, when does language emerge? Language, expression (or, in some cases, words) and the ability to speak only resounds or has an effect if it comes into contact with an interlocutor, an 'other'. The definition of language implies that it serves as a tool of communication (Glock 2015, 328). The word "communicate" derives from the Latin *communicare,* meaning "to join to an equal part, to unite," "to share something or receive a part, to partake, to participate in" (Lewis and Short 1849). Thus, 'nature', the nonhuman or more-than-human world is excluded from the realm of sharing, receiving and taking, from the communal care found within the word communi*care.* At the same time, we could adopt another perspective, namely that humans have never learned to communicate with 'nature' in the sense of the Latin definition; they have not learned to unite with it or to "join to an equal part." – 'Nature' cannot speak, because they are, to take up Steyerl's (2014, 8) reading of Spivak, not heard. Likewise, Bennett argues that the "material powers call for our attentiveness, or even respect." Her point is that matter has been expressing itself (to us) for a long time, but has been ignored. By seeing matter as alive and expressing itself, Bennett wants to illuminate "what is typically cast in the shadow" (2010, ix). Something that lies in the shadows, something that is silent, is present, but kept in the dark. When we ask, "Can nature speak?", we need to focus on the 'human' role in this conversation, our response-ability (Haraway 2016), and that includes our willingness to hear the silence and the silenced or the expressions in a language that is not our own (Kimmer 2013, 48). Deconstructing the human exceptionalism of language use, farmer Elisa Lane underlines this by saying that she is still learning the language of the soil. In this vein, Donna Haraway reminds us: "Storying cannot any longer be put in the box of human exceptionalism" (Haraway 2016, 39). In our interviews, the farmers describe reading the soil through "the plants that grow in it and the organisms living within" (Amelia Hazen) or "action, growth, texture" (Allison Worman). They listen to new forms of expressions.

When it comes to the ability of 'nature' to speak, it is necessary to give space to stories that may be told in a language we have yet to learn. However, this 'we' is not unified, as De Sousa Santos argues: "a few of us speak colonial language; the large majority of us speak other languages" (2015, 2). A language that defines 'nature' as an "it," as Kimmerer puts it (2017), is by far not the only existing narrative. In *Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram

observes: “In indigenous, oral cultures, in other words, language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses, while in Western civilization language seems to deny or deaden that life, promoting a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances” (1996, 51). Following this, broadening the realm of storying can be one form of decolonial un/learning, since as Vázquez states: “to listen means to bridge the colonial difference” (2012, 243).

Sceptical of our current language skills, Bennett warns in *Influx & Efflux* that “[l]anguage will always be an inexact repetition of the press of the outdoors; every wordy composition will be more or less untrue to stupendous, ethereal influences that signal without words” (2020, xxii).[6] Here she overturns the tremendous power that is associated with language and gives importance to more-than-human expressions and meanings. With a wonderful disregard for human exceptionalism, Nelson et al. write: “Sidestepping the human/nonhuman dichotomy, we understand that language straddles the social and the biological, the human and the nonhuman” (2023, 189). We regard these two insights as cornerstones for a decolonial listening.

Comparable to the farmers’ statements, an example of nonhuman storying and decolonial listening is provided by Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose (2012) in their article *Storied-places in a Multispecies City*, in which they show that animals tell stories and locate meaning. “At the core of our thinking about multispecies storying,” they write, “is the willingness to recognize storied-experience in nonhuman places – to accept nonhumans as ‘narrative subjects’” (van Dooren and Rose 2012, 4). They explain that although penguins in Sydney select their breeding sites according to certain criteria, not every site that meets these criteria is important to them. In this way, they refute the habitat concept. Other factors are relevant, such as the presence of other penguins, their own accumulated experiences at that site, as well as their longing for their own birthplace. Penguins choose places that “carry penguin histories and stories” (2012, 10). Van Dooren and Rose describe how the penguins built “their own richly meaningful and storied worlds,” and conclude their work by stating that penguins are thus “generators and inheritors of meaning” (9). Narration or communicability is thus understood here not only as terms transformed into syntactic constructs. Van Dooren and Rose do not impose the preconceived notion of habitat on penguins and their places, suggesting that penguin nesting sites need only have a particular ecological constellation and are thus interchangeable, but instead focus more precisely on the historiography of penguins in a particular place.

It is easy to criticize this perspective for remaining anthropocentric, for continuing to read penguin stories through the lens of the ‘human’. But one might counter that every conversation, even between two beings considered human, is always shaped by an in-between. All

communication involves interpretation. Every conversation involves a translation, since what one participant says meets the experiential background and the reading of the other participant in the conversation. What makes this exchange possible, however, is the willingness to put oneself in the other person's world of experience. The boundaries of this empathy are determined by the norms of discourse, of the intelligible. The work of translation is expressed by farmer Elisa Lane, one of those farmers Penniman (2023) might call "earth-listeners": "Soil does speak but it takes time to understand its language. I'm still learning." She indirectly explains that response-ability is not easy to achieve. Her interpretation hints at a completely different understanding of involvement with 'the Other', which has been elaborated by Karen Barad. Barad warns that "entanglements are not a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one, but rather for specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world. Entanglements are relations of obligation – being bound to the Other – enfolded traces of Othering. Othering […] entails an indebtedness to the 'Other.' [...] 'Otherness' is an entangled relation of difference (*différance*)" (Barad 2010, 65). This approach would be a radical reformulation of the concept of the 'Other'. It implies that 'the Other' is not something that must be distinguished or separated from the self, but that the very naming of the 'Other' resonates within the self and thus produces entanglement and response-ability. Differentiation would thus be understood as a material action that does not separate but, on the contrary, connects and commits (Barad 2015, 163). These very commitments are already practiced in the world we call 'nature.' For example, animal species that have the same frequencies in their sounds remain silent while other animal species are communicating on the same frequency to allow them to have their dialogue (Bubnoff 2015). Consideration, then, is also a form of communication, and that also means letting others speak, as well as noticing silence. In order to care adequately, one must know how to understand, how to 'read' the expressions of 'the other'. This requires some training, which may not be easy. Kimmerer explains in relation to her fieldwork as a biologist that she cannot ask salmon directly what they need – so she asks them through experimentation and tries to listen carefully to their responses (Kimmerer 2013, 284). Similarly, from an agricultural perspective, farmers' ability to read the soil's expressions is made possible by their specific peasant knowledge about soil, plants, textures. In addition, knowledge of and experience in a certain place seems to be required. What the farmer Allison Worman describes as "action, growth, texture" may well vary from region to region, requiring a close reading of a particular place that unfolds over time. The exchange is possible because of a deep understanding of the broader ecological interrelations, an understanding of the context, the surroundings, the exposition and many other factors in a certain place. Vanessa Watts describes, from a Mohawk/Anishinaabe perspective, the conception of Place-Thought, which is "the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because

they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (2013, 21). Along similar lines, farmer Amelia Hazen answered the question "How does the soil care for you?" by saying, "I appreciate the way soil makes me think and grow." This farming perspective illustrates an understanding of mutual co-becoming, or as Escobar outlined, "things and beings are their relations, they do not exist prior to them" (2016, 18).

Farming will always be a nonhuman-human encounter in a certain place. The activity of farming is a re-action guided by tentative questioning. Through plants, the soil tells us whether it is healthy or rich in nitrogen, whether it needs water or is in a stable condition. Plants let us know about the soil's community members, its/their needs, what kind of protection a particular soil desires, what it is afraid of, and also what the soil is able to give or how we need to interact with this soil to receive from it what we desire from this relationship. So we can read plants as soil's language – a language that gives voice to the mycorrhiza fungi, microbes, algae, micropores, the whole highly connected web, which is not just beneath us, since we are part of it. These are not poetics that lie beneath us, this is what holds us up. Careful gardening is one way of responding to questions by another that call "us" to action. The act of careful gardening and farming is a re-action led by a request. What is more, sometimes it is a receiving without ever having asked for anything. For this we need a willingness to communicate, and for communication we need a willingness to be attentive, to take care – or as Thom van Dooren et al. put it, "arts of attentiveness" (2016, 1), which they describe as "modes of both paying attention to others and crafting meaningful response.

> We need to care for one another, to lend an ear; we might want to start listening, because "to listen can indicate much more than simply a sound coming to our ears […]. [D]eep attentive listening is an act of honoring – honoring the other, who speaks to us, telling the stories of their being in various voices and sounds." (Kato 2015, 111)

Listening, as Pauline Oliveros shows, is "the potential for connection and interaction with one's environment" (Oliveros 2005; quoted in Kato, 2015, 111). Since the meaning of care, as Thom van Dooren says, "is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way [… and] to become subject to another" (van Dooren 2014, 291), the 'othering' is deconstructed and with care the object becomes subject – within us. Sophie Chao and Dion Enari describe such a process in "Decolonizing Climate Change: A Call for Beyond-Human Imaginaries and Knowledge Generation" (2021, 40), based on the knowledge and experiences of Kabi, an Indigenous Gimi man, suggesting that "we might learn to know and imagine the climate through our bodily flesh and fluids – the air that we breathe, the waters that nourish us, and the soils that hold us." This is what multispecies worlds are about. To care for another, to

sense that the Other is entangled with us, in us, but at the same time is not like us. This understanding enables stories, in which, as Haraway states, “multispecies players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying attuned to still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation” (Haraway 2016, 10). To deal with climate change and the socioecological crises of our time, “we must change the story; the story must change” (2016, 40). The un/learning will mean telling other stories, and especially letting others, including nonhumans, tell stories to change the story/s.

Listening to the ‘environment’ would mean finding ways of responding affirmatively to the silent exploitation of ‘nature’ (and ‘humans’).[7] Human-nature relationships such as factory farming, desertification, ocean eutrophication, silent and “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011) through pesticide use, exploitation of (seasonal) workers, or land grabbing would have to be changed because they are unaccountable in a relationship of care, in doing together. We should not cling to the easy anthropocentric idea that ‘nature’ cannot speak, for ‘our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories’ (Kimmerer 2013, 9).

Conclusion

“To think-with is to stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth.” (Haraway 2016, 40)

Having shown how ‘nature’ has been repeatedly understood as ‘the other’, even as calls for change have been voiced, we examined one of the most profound distinguishing features between ‘humans’ and ‘nature,’ the use of language, by asking the question “Can nature speak?,” and in doing so showed, through our theoretical investigation and enriched by the voices of Baltimore farmers, that ‘arts of attentiveness’ and ‘deep listening’ as well as acts of translation make ‘communication’ possible.

The responses of the farmers are counter-narratives to hegemonic conceptions of the human-nature relationship. They highlight that the call for more-than-human perspectives and for the response-ability that we examined while asking whether ‘nature’ can speak is neither meant as a metaphorical call for a better world, nor as a linguistic or theoretical experiment, but is instead grounded in material and existing realities, in which language is not here to represent or analyze ‘nature’ but is made and used by what we like to call ‘nature’ – by humans and nonhumans alike. The responses of the farmers can be understood as a prelude to the radical shift in climate change discourses called for by Yusoff (in Löffler et al. 2020).

In summary, our article does not seek to show that ‘nature’ needs only to be understood differently, but to highlight that when ‘we’ begin to establish less exploitative ways of encountering what we call ‘nature’ or, following Gayatri Spivak, if ‘we’ begin to listen differently, ‘we’ will see that we do not have to think ‘nature’ differently but will experience another kind of

‘nature’ – one that is silenced, including by climate change discourses, but has never been silent. ‘Nature,’ then, is no longer thought of *as something,* but becomes someone “to think with” (Haraway, 2016), not something to talk about, but someone to engage with and listen to. Thus, the disruptive distinction between ‘human’ and ‘nature’ is challenged, as the Latin roots of communication lead us to an understanding of becoming-with each other. Therefore, we should endeavor to “join to an equal part; to unite” with ‘nature’. “Decolonizing is a process and not an event; it is ongoing unlearning to relearn,” according to Sultana (2022, 10). Can we unlearn colonial language and hear the “language of animacy” (Kimmerer 2017)? In communication and commun-i-care, we can find an “I” and a “commune” and “action” and “care.” Maybe these are missing pieces for the much-needed change in responding otherwise to climate change. We might want to listen to what it means to share this world in communal action. We might want to overcome circumstances in which we need to ask whether ‘nature’ can speak, we might want to establish worlds in which we are able to respond with care to the question: “What do you hear the earth saying to humans at this time?” (Penniman, 2023).

Notes

[1] The authors would like to thank the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation, Germany for the PhD scholarship of Sophie von Redecker. Furthermore, the authors would like to thank Dr. Lucy Duggan for the language editing, and Prof. Dr. Jane Bennett, Prof. Dr. Gabriele Schwab and Ella von der Haide for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this work. We would like to acknowledge that parts of this article have been written during a research stay at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, which, like the encounters with the urban farmers of Baltimore, took place on indigenous land of the Piscataway and Susquehannock peoples. We acknowledge the history of genocide and ongoing systemic inequities. Furthermore, we want to acknowledge that the history of the university of Kassel-Witzenhausen is partly intertwined with the colonial history and postcolonial continuities of the *Deutsche Kolonialschule Witzenhausen*.

[2] The farming perspective from which this article is written also means that the authors’ position stands for more than the two ‘human’ authors. This article is “unthinkable” (Haraway 2016) without the land, the soil, the fields which taught me first, since as a farm child I learned to communicate with them before human language became a tool for expression.

[3] In the following, terms such as human and nature are placed in single quotation marks to illustrate the problematic character of these categorizations. Nature is not a monolith, nor is humanity. Such standardizations reproduce hegemonic worldviews. Moreover, participation in ‘the human’ was and is violently contested.

[4] Such unification has also been criticized in response to the discourse on climate change and the concept of the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd 2017; Mirzoeff 2018; Haraway, 2016).

[5] Cases in which rivers, for example, have been given rights as a “juristic/legal person/living entity” (Kothari and Bajpai 2017) could partly be read as attempts to counter the silencing of nature. A discussion of the limits and anthropocentrism of those rights can be found in Kothari and Bajpai 2017.

[6] A description of the term *anexact*, which Bennett borrows from Deleuze/Guattari, can be found in Bennett 2020, 119.

[7] By environment, we mean the surroundings in a certain place of a certain being, and not an anthropocentric notion of ‘nature’ as the periphery surrounding a ‘human’ centre.

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