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Ontological Politics in River Defence Debates: Unpacking Fields of Contention in Eco-Centric and Non-Human Turns

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ABSTRACT: In response to capitalist territorial transformations, humans' predatory subjection of nature, and worldwide socio-environmental injustices, a diverse set of eco-centric, other-than-human, and indigenous worldview-inspired perspectives have emerged in water debates and practices. Rights of Nature (RoN) and Rights of Rivers (RoR) approaches are examples of this. But while these 'river ontological turns' hold exciting conceptual and political potential, they also invite critical reflection. Proponents often advance these new ontological perspectives and initiatives as being more 'real' and 'natural' than what came before. We challenge this notion by conceptualising such perspectives, similar to all ontological framings, as *politically contested entrances to imagining and ordering the real*. We argue that these new and alternative ontological understandings of the world – and their related initiatives – are politically produced, culturally enacted, and strategically mobilised. In effect, they contribute to the constitution (or contestation) of particular power relations. Focusing specifically on river debates, we identify and explore the following fields of contention that arise in and from alternative eco-centric and non-human ontological turns: the god-trick; naturalisation; de-centring the human; mystifying/essentialising indigeneity; and subjectification-through-recognition. By discussing these fields of contention, we call for a re-politicisation of the recent river (and other related) ontological turns, their underlying assumptions, and conceptual-political tendencies. Such critical scrutiny can contribute to enriching local/global struggles for riverine environmental justice.

KEYWORDS: Ontological politics, environmental justice, non-human turn, eco-centrism, subjectification, Rights of Rivers

INTRODUCTION

Rivers, mountains, lakes, oceans, and related landscapes and biodiversity have been heavily altered and depleted by human activities. Many of these effects can probably never be turned back, and others might be mitigated through efforts that fundamentally reconsider human/human and human/non-human relations. All around the world, novel activist and academic approaches that call for such reconsiderations and related transformations have proliferated. They promise to break away from modernist

epistemologies and related ontologies (Escobar, 2018; Latour, 2018; Graeber and Wengrow, 2021) by developing innovative policies and strategies that advance new socioecological relations. Among them, a growing number of initiatives to protect, restore, or reclaim rivers have developed. Examples include the recognition of the rights of rivers (e.g. O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones, 2018; Eckstein et al., 2019; Martin and Kauffman, 2019; Kramm, 2020), river rewilding (Lorimer et al., 2015; Flaminio, 2021); dam removal (Sneddon et al., 2017; Hommes, 2022; Harrington and Cantor, 2024), riverine multispecies justice (Houart et al., 2024), and endeavours to respect the spiritual and sentient being of rivers (Stengers, 2010; Jackson, 2021; Wantzen, 2023).

Water Alternatives prominently takes part in investigating these new debates. For instance, the paper by Immovilli et al. (2022) critically discusses Rights of Nature (RoN) and, in particular, Rights of Rivers (RoR) approaches. Academically and politically invited by this and other contributions, we aim to examine diverse approaches in the water governance domain that are inspired by the eco-centric and non-human turn. More than accepting how these novel approaches let "nature speak for itself" (p. 583), we align with Immovilli et al. in seeing Rights of Rivers and connected approaches as political interventions that trigger questions of inclusion, exclusion, and the distribution of political control. But where Immovilli et al. focused on critically analysing policy practices and intervention *outcomes*, here we scrutinise the broader *conceptual* arena of the underlying ontological politics (cf. Yates et al., 2017; Vogt and Walsh, 2021; Flaminio et al., 2022; Whaley, 2022; Houart et al., 2024).

We use recent river debates as an entry point to critically engage with prominent features of the linked conceptual-philosophical currents, in particular those associated with the non-human turn (see e.g. Descola, 2014; Grusin, 2015), eco-centric epistemologies and more-than-human approaches (see e.g. Whatmore, 2013; Tschakert et al., 2020; Celermajer et al., 2021), and the field that could broadly be termed 'indigenist/indigenised ontologies' (see e.g. Laurie et al., 2005; Baud, 2010; Li, 2010; Prieto, 2023). For this paper's purposes, we capture these distinct yet increasingly interrelated and partly overlapping fields under the term 'new ontological turns'. They are far from identical, but they focus on similar assumptions, sometimes presupposing each other or drawing similar conclusions. They all challenge instrumentalist perspectives on other-than-human lives; contest modernist life/non-life and culture/nature binaries; and stress the intrinsic entanglements of the social/human and the natural/non-human (Bakker, 2012; Tsing et al., 2017; Götz and Middleton, 2020; Gerlak et al., 2022; Schmidt, 2023). In many ways, these emerging 'new ontological turns' hold exciting potential for challenging the degradation and destruction of socioecological environments. But at the same time, they invite critical scrutiny, in particular when translated into popularised debates, activist discourse, and concrete local and global actions, legislation, and policy.

In this article, we question how these new alternative ontologies implicitly and sometimes explicitly *re-fix* ontologies, *re-naturalise* the society/nature distinction, and *de-politicise* nature framings, thereby limiting their transformative potential. To explore these contentions and contradictions, we build on and further elaborate some of the critiques made by others (see, for example, Grusin, 2015; Swyngedouw and Ernstson, 2018; Büscher, 2021). We interweave different strands of critical literature and scholarship with the reflections we ourselves have had while engaging with new ontological turn debates in the context of river struggles. An extensive literature review (e.g. Hommes et al., 2023; Hoogesteger et al., 2023; Houart et al., 2024; Vos, 2024) and corresponding collective reflections with scholars, NGOs, and grassroots leaders on these topics have taken place in 20+ international seminars, conferences, and riverwalks, in Africa (3x), Latin America (9x), Asia (4x), Europe (9x), and through international webinars (13x) organised by the authors and network, from March 2021 to March 2024 (see www.movingrivers.org).

We elaborate on the 'new ontological turns' contentions and contradictions as follows: In the next section, we introduce the philosophical background upon which we build our approach to different ontologies. In the third section, we present and elaborate five distinct fields of contention that need to be scrutinised in the debates and policies that popularise and strategize eco-centric, non-human, or

indigenous knowledge-inspired ontologies. We support these conceptual reflections with illustrations from published empirical studies and cases from our own research on rivers. In the conclusion, we reflect on how these five fields of contention are intrinsically political. As we point out, they involve processes of normalisation and commensuration, while also offering opportunities to shift the existing power geometries and human/non-human relations.

OUR CONCEPTUAL POINT OF DEPARTURE: ONTOLOGIES AS HUMANS' FICTIONS OF REALITY

Ontologies are modes of conceptualising and ordering the world, providing a means by which we can imagine, explain, live with, and act upon 'the world we are and live in'. They are sets of concepts and categories that help us identify, assemble, order, and explain particular entities. Thereby, ontologies are linked to imaginary worlds but also to concrete practices, as well as to forms of engagement with these socio-ecological entities. They are simultaneously of an ethical, social, symbolic, and material nature. Ontologies allow us to make sense of socio-ecological entities' nature and properties, their interrelated constituent parts, and the relationships that give them substance and meaning (Boelens et al., 2023). Therefore, ontological constitution and practices *include* the process of material-political translation from the imaginary to material becoming.

In our subject case, ontological river imaginaries may become materialised in concrete infrastructure projects or other territorialisation endeavours (see Hommes et al., 2022; Manosalvas et al., 2023). Their materialisation, however, never emerges 'out of the blue' but is historically and socio-materially rooted in cultural-political contexts. As Hommes et al. (2022: 3-4) point out, it is also importantly "(...) contingent upon a group's ability to mobilize the necessary political, cultural, intellectual, financial, and/or physical-coercive power". Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, onto-epistemological struggles go further than mere encounters over patterned cultural signs, words, language, myths, conceptualisations, or bodies of meaning. Onto-epistemological struggles necessarily include sociotechnical practices and modes of socio-natural configuration. They connect knowledge, power, and truth in particular ways, in order to achieve and legitimise a certain disposition of actors, material tools, artefacts, ecologies, and the human and non-human relations that sustain them (Foucault, 1980). Accordingly, river ontological materialisation projects must be understood as struggles over imaginaries and the associated identities, subjectivities, and meanings that concern the wished-for hydrosocial territorial order (Boelens et al., 2016).

Departing from this notion, we approach river ontologies as (conscious and unconscious) Foucauldian intentions to "tame the wild profusion of existing things". This implies that we need to challenge place-based truths as well as universal representations that presume to know the *nature* of reality. In the water world, these can express themselves as, for example, 'modernist H₂O', functionalist 'river eco-systems', 'rivers as intrinsic rights entities', or 'rivers as sentient beings' (e.g. Wilson and Inkster, 2018; Bourguignon, 2023; Flaminio and Reynard, 2023; Turska and Ludwig, 2023; Mosquera-Guerrero and Krueger, 2024). Consequently, beyond interrogations regarding either 'fiction or reality', we are interested in how truth regimes *work* and how ontological understandings are *mobilised, used, fixed, and devised* by dominant and/or subaltern groups.

In his essay *El idioma analítico de John Wilkins*, Jorge Luis Borges (1942) playfully analysed the taxonomy of the world fictitiously taken from an "unknown Chinese encyclopaedia" entitled the Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge. Borges (1942: 3) describes the Chinese encyclopaedia:

In its remote pages it is written that animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabled, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

Borges takes a pragmatic approach to the arbitrariness of finding universal frames for analysing and describing reality: "(...) it is clear that there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and full

of conjectures. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what the universe is". This observation sets the stage for ontological constructions amidst diversities and insecurities. "The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot stop us from planning human schemes, even though we are aware that they are provisional" (Borges 1942: 3).

Foucault deploys the Borgesian joke to analyse, first, how the heart of the matter is not the strangeness of individual categories, but the unimaginability of this – and other – mode(s) of taxonomic ordering.¹ Second, he shows how existing epistemes, ontologies, and systems of rationality determine our mindset, as well as how knowledge and truth *could be* ordered quite differently. The wonderment about other systems of thought, as imposed by Borges' fables, challenges the limitations of our own mode of thinking. As Descola (2014: 271) elaborates, "(...) it is time that we endeavour to understand how they [other styles of worlding] are composed without automatic recourse to our own mode of composition; it is time that we set out to recompose them so as to make them more amenable to a wider variety of inhabitants, human and nonhuman" (2014: 279). Foucault (1980, 1994) emphasises that dominant power/knowledge regimes often prevent or obliterate alternative ways of thinking and acting. We therefore have to question our own modes of categorising, organising, and conceptualising, and the powers that support them.

This makes it essential to consider the frames that claim to know the 'nature of nature' – or in our case the 'nature of rivers' – as relational. These frames are created, sustained, and transformed in specific social, technological, and natural contexts, which are always and necessarily politically constituted. Consequently, river ontologies need to be seen as construed through ordering modes and models that create a very specific disposition of things (nature/technology/humans/non-humans) and the relationships that sustain and give meaning to them (e.g. Hoogesteger et al., 2016; Rogers and Crow-Miller, 2017; Aubriot et al., 2017; Paerregaard, 2018; Wilson, 2019; Yates, 2022; Macpherson et al., 2024; O'Donnell et al., 2024; Rickard and Ludwig, 2024).

Thus, at the heart of struggles for control over rivers is a struggle to establish or transform 'socio-natural order(s)' and the modes of knowing them, which can be accomplished through the triangulation of knowledge, power, and truth. Whenever scientific, policy, vernacular, or indigenous ontologies and models for explaining river realities and water worlds are portrayed as 'real' (rather than *entrances to imagining the real*), the power-laden ordering agreements, choices, interpretations, and meanings are concealed and naturalised. This, we highlight, is highly problematic, as it veils the intrinsically political character of these ontologies.

The important contribution of the more-than-human, ecocentric, and de-colonising perspectives is that they demonstrate precisely the political and social character of the water world's material, ontological, and epistemological constructions. They show how a distinction between nature and society is a deeply political construct and how misrecognising this (in mainstream academia, policy formulation, 'development' interventions, and public discourse) in and of itself is a fundamentally political act that suffocates other representations (e.g. Blaser, 2013; Escobar, 2018; Kothari et al., 2019). Therefore, our critique is not directed at how ontological turn theorists have helped to break open the mono-ontological fixes. Quite the opposite! Instead, we question how much of their application in everyday policy, including activist debates, globalising policy discourses, and popularised alternative approaches may in fact attempt to *re-fix* ontologies, *re-naturalise* the society/nature distinction, and *de-politicise* nature framings (see also Bessire and Bond, 2014; Rawson and Mansfield, 2018). We elaborate this below through the identification of five distinct fields of contention in new ontological turns, as expressed in river debates.

¹ "it is not the 'fabled' animals that are impossible, but the narrowness of the distance separating them from (and juxtaposing them to) the stray dogs, or the animals that from a long way off look like flies. What transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of those categories to all the others" (Foucault 1994: xviii).

FIELDS OF CONTENTION IN THE WATER WORLDS' ONTOLOGICAL TURNS

In human geography, it is widely acknowledged that nature and society mutually constitute each other. They interweave as socio-natural networks in which humans are part of nature as much as nature is part of human society (Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1993; Ingold, 2000; Baviskar, 2007). As such, rivers are also understood as simultaneously social, physical, and symbolic entities. They are entangled human and non-human communities that define and depend on each other (Boelens et al., 2023; cf. Harris and Alatout, 2010; Jackson et al., 2022; Krause, 2022; Reyes-Escate et al., 2022). Socio-nature scholarship has helped to question the modernist and neoliberal dichotomies between nature and society, human and non-human, or subject and object. These notions have also inspired and/or found parallels with many of the alternative eco-centric and non-human water ontologies.

The recognition of these socio-natures and relationality, however, is – in and of itself – not necessarily transformative or supportive of advancing socio-environmental justice. Such recognition does not question capitalist-exploitative relationships or the distributional and procedural injustices that shape most river socio-natures (cf. Vos and Boelens, 2014, 2018; Goldman et al., 2018). For this reason, beyond questions of the 'truthful representation' or 'academic accuracy' of rivers' socio-natural constitution, we need to draw attention to the political design and use of these ontologies. We need to dissect their convenience for either the politically and economically dominant or for sub-altern groups who struggle to defend their riverine livelihoods and water-based territories. Our point of departure is this notion that socio-natural entanglements are always political, and that the different onto-epistemological perspectives on riverine socio-natures are therefore also *politically produced and contested entrances to imagining and ordering the real*.

Table 1 provides a summary and overview of the five fields of contention that we find in river debates' 'new ontological turns' and that we elaborate in the following sections. These do not exist and function in isolation, but are intrinsically entwined with each other, have common features, and share conclusions: they all relate to the danger of 'depoliticising deeply political ontologies'. However, for the sake of clarity, we have decided to first disentangle them individually before bringing them together again, in our conclusion, as different sides of the same coin.

The god-trick

The 'god-trick' is based on the assumption that there is one objective way of knowing that is disembodied, non-biased, and absolute, and that this produces accurate and objective accounts of the world. According to Haraway (1991), this myth allows a systematic denial of the connections between power, knowledge, and subjectivity – experts "seeing everything from nowhere". In fact, this denial of experts' subjectivity is deeply entrenched in dominant river policy-making and practice. Water experts, managers, and policy makers present their modernist onto-epistemology, mode of knowledge production, and policy models as scientifically objective truths. Through this 'trick', experts turn into powerful political actors who, behind the mask of neutrality and scientific reason, are justified in taking decisions and implementing interventions based on their specific 'objective' and 'non-compromised' ways of knowing (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014; Zwarteveen, 2015).

Proponents of non-human, eco-centric, and multispecies ontologies have questioned these dominant onto-epistemologies for their claims of being objective and universal. Furthering early critiques of this objectification these theoretical bodies share the notion that socio-natural realities are relational and actively *enacted* through materially embedded historical, cultural, and political processes (Yates et al., 2017; Tschakert et al., 2020; Celermajer et al., 2021). New onto-epistemological perspectives have shown, for instance, how neoliberalism informs policies by actively deploying the 'scientific expert's myth'. However, in their counter-ideologies and approaches, the popularising activist and policy-oriented

Table 1. Five fields of contention.

| Field of contention | Key characteristics | Points of contention |
|--|---|--|
| 1 The god-trick | Particular ways of knowing and ordering (onto-epistemologies) are presented as objective, apolitical, and absolute. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connections between ways of knowing, knowledge, power, and subjectivity are obscured. • Claiming unquestionable universalised truths and ways of knowing suffocates others' perspectives, ways of knowing, and related knowledges, with important (dis)empowering effects. |
| 2 The tendency to naturalise | Human-produced ideas about nature, the rights of nature, and human nature (identities) are presented as intrinsic, 'natural' (and therefore unquestionable) traits. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The human (and political) efforts that produce the ideas of a 'natural/intrinsic characteristic' or 'truth' are invisibilised. • Naturalising a particular human group's characteristics impinges on its self-determination. • Commensuration and normalisation delegitimise deviance and discipline alternative knowledges, orderings, and actions. • In the case of RoN: Western human-nature dualism is not overcome but reinforced. |
| 3 De-centring the human | De-centres the human, obliterating human exceptionalism and the diversity of human practices. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The roots and impacts of (some) humans' exceptionalism in transforming socio-natural relationships are not addressed. • Generalising assumptions about humans and non-humans overlook complex, on-the-ground realities and diversities, so constructing objects that justify specific interventions. • May support a depoliticised 'politics of indifference' towards certain human groups. |
| 4 Mystifying and essentialising 'indigeneity' | An innate link between indigeneity and closeness to nature and the non-human is assumed and prescribed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reproduction of paternalistic-colonial relations, including ethnic-spatial fix. • Dichotomous Western vs Indigenous values classification and misrepresentation. • On-the-ground complexities, livelihood needs and practices are overlooked; and unequal power relations and not always 'ecologically wishful' ways of engaging with nature, humans, and non-human beings, are legitimised. • Danger of forging an internal 'pressure to comply' with a dominant or convenient idea about indigeneity. |
| 5 Subjectification through recognition | Entities are recognised as subjects with specific characteristics and 'true' natures ('for their own sake'). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unequal power relations between 'the recogniser' and 'the recognised' are reinforced. • Subjects are known and governed according to the terms of 'the recogniser'. • Other subjectivities or systems of recognition (vernacular, hybrid, etc) are suppressed. • Equalising and harmony discourses invisibilise the politics of how and by whom particular human and ecological communities are turned into subjects (that is, subjectified and/or subjected to the recognisers). |

versions of ontological turns scholarship often use the very same 'god-trick'. Similarly, they present their own, alternative onto-epistemologies as 'objective ways of knowing' that result in 'universal truths' (Swyngedouw, 2011; Boelens, 2015).

Some widespread alternative river god-views are laid down in universal declarations that explain Mother Earth's being, the rights of nature, and the rights of rivers. But these claims misrepresent riverine socio-natures' diversity, contradictions, and situatedness. Apparently informed by Northern river perspectives, the Universal Declaration of River Rights (drafted in 2017 and signed by hundreds of entities worldwide) establishes that "(...) all rivers shall possess, at minimum (...), (1) The right to flow". Many (e.g. Mediterranean and African) rivers, however, naturally run dry during a large part of the year. Also, this declaration re-introduces society/nature binaries that deny socio-natural entanglements: "(...) rivers – not people – own the water that flows within them (...)". Furthermore, legally and onto-epistemologically, it fortifies the power of river governance in the hands of the state and of science: "(...) all states shall implement these rights in full (...), by developing and implementing specific metrics and thresholds according to the most recent scientific understandings of integrated ecological river health" (Earth Law Center, 2024).

Other common illustrations of absolutising god-views and universalising projections relate to, for instance, mystical relationships with sentient river beings; ways of knowing nature through a direct connection with it; and listening to the voices of the fish, amongst other examples. We do not deny the existence and importance of these (highly diverse) onto-epistemologies. Our point is that grassroots, indigenous, and campesino organisations often mobilise their vernacular, historically-rooted, and more-than-human onto-epistemologies *in conjunction with* consciously and strategically designed more-than-human socio-natures. The latter is a legitimate and understandable political-strategic tool for empowerment and self-defence. But it should be recognised as a specific *politically devised entrance* to interpreting, *re-presenting*, and ordering the real. By generically framing such specific representations and ways of knowing as objectified 'onto-epistemological facts' and 'truthful realities', engaged academics and activists fail to understand this political practice. Such failure is problematic.

One illustration of this failure is how the Universal Declaration of River Rights (just like numerous NGOs and academia) refers to 'factual' grassroots worldviews while stating and proclaiming generically that "(...) rivers in particular are sacred entities possessing their own fundamental rights (...)". (GARN, 2024). In multi-diverse everyday realities, however, river communities may often dynamically shape a 'strategic nature'. We would like to raise the alert against interpreting these complex onto-epistemological realities in a reductionist and de-politicised manner (cf. Li, 2013). As we ourselves have also often witnessed (in over three decades of long-term action-research collaborations with grassroots communities), strategic river representations sprout from inventive contextual struggles. Herein, sentient rivers are often purposefully mobilised as apolitical divine agents by local villagers. They "(...) resignify 'nature' itself as an anchor for social justice and collective ethics. They believe that incorporating [mountain deities] and [sacred sites] into their local environmental movements offers the only viable strategy for counteracting the power of extractive industries" (Bacigalupo, 2022: 181; see also Dukpa et al., 2019).

In short, dominant as well as sub-altern groups portray their own onto-epistemologies as objective ways of knowing reality, and through this they advance and defend their interests in strategic and creative ways. Engaged academia, however, needs to avoid using that same objectifying trick. Playing the 'god-trick' is playing with fire: It renders real-life people and dynamic knowledge and belief systems vulnerable to essentialisation, romanticisation, exoticisation, and ultimately, marginalisation. Rather, scrutinising and recognising the political character and power of the 'god-trick' in any onto-epistemological tradition is key to understanding how and which interests, knowledge, power, and truths are advanced.

The tendency to naturalise

Closely related to the above analysed 'god-trick' are the dynamics of naturalisation, which present specific ideas and truths (e.g. about nature or the rights of nature) as natural and therefore given. Whereas the 'god-trick' deploys claims to objectivity in how something is studied and known, processes of naturalisation instead are based on claims about the 'true nature' (so the 'true inner being') of humans, non-humans, and their relations – absolutes and intrinsic truths that originate from 'the laws of Nature'.

Critical scholars have effectively criticised how, for example, capitalist social relations, economic laws, and scientific conventions have been represented as 'natural'. This has made that profound inequalities, injustices, and ecological destruction have been normalised as 'Nature' following its 'natural laws' (e.g.; Latour, 2004; Sullivan, 2009; Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018). For example, consider the water business discourse of 'nature-based solutions' being used to justify river and climate change adaptation projects. In a similar manner, water scarcity is frequently relegated to the realms of 'Nature' or an abstracted form of climate change, obscuring how it is often the direct result of water grabbing or destructive socio-environmental interventions (Mehta, 2005; Wutich et al., 2022). Such normalisation and naturalisation make it difficult to recognise these deeply ideological ideas for what they are (Mouffe, 2013; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014).

We argue for the need to be aware of these 'naturalising' tendencies, not just in the cases of elitist-modernist and neoliberal truth-workings, but equally in counter-hegemonic academia and activism. Clear examples are the naturalisation of pristine or historic forms of nature by dam removal proponents (as if there had existed 'real' natures there before the dams, to which we could and should return) (e.g., see critiques by Jørgensen, 2017 in Canada; Hommes, 2022 in Spain; Drapier et al., 2023 in France). Other manifestations can be found in the naturalisation of indigenous identities and (riverine) worldviews (as if these do not constitute contemporary global-local and urban-rural hybrids), or the naturalisation of indigenous interests and lifestyles (as if these archaically stem from and live with nature's laws).

A clear illustration of the tendency to naturalise is visible in Rights of Nature (RoN) and Rights of Rivers (RoR) debates. Advocates of these approaches often portray nature's rights as emerging from natural, inevitable, or even universal or divine logic (Rawson and Mansfield, 2018; Kinkaid, 2019; Boelens et al., 2021; Immovilli, 2022). To naturalise RoN approaches, *certain humans* (or rather: selected ideas about them) are explicitly mobilised. As Tanasescu has analysed, in Ecuador, 'the indigenous symbol' is strategically deployed as an essentialisation of people "who would naturally stand close to nature (...) the indigenous symbol made the claims on behalf of nature seem uncreated, unmediated and apolitical" (Tanasescu, 2015: 115).

This is not just a problem of academic-conceptual essentialisation but may also have adverse political effects. As Tanasescu (2015: 118) states, "(...) far from the rights of nature being an indigenous creation, they in fact have the potential of going squarely against some indigenous practices". Examining territorial river struggles in New Zealand, Māori scholar Brad Coombes goes even further: "The award of person rights to nature as a solution to land claims within national parks may invalidate indigenous rights to development and self-determination (...) [this fact] may suggest that it is a technique for appeasing dissenting voices or delimiting indigenous activism" (Coombes, 2021: 31).

RoN enact a contradictory logic when "(...) in the name of overcoming Western human – nature dualism, and its concomitant anthropocentrism, it turns to Western notions of rights [and] personhood" (Rawson and Mansfield, 2018: 100). Tanasescu adds that "(...) in presenting nature as a subject, [the rights of nature] carefully fit it into a [Western] history of progressive expansions of what we call moral subject" (Tanasescu, 2015: 113). In this way, nature is made part of a universal (but Western liberal) human history of rights conquest that has nothing to do with most indigenous philosophies. Rawson and Mansfield (2018: 101) therefore draw the following conclusion: "(...) the rights-based approach and holistic models of life that constitute RoN are not just connected to the same Western ideas of nature and law it rejects,

but through these connections Western thought and modes of existence are further universalized as natural".

'New' alternative ontologies, including RoN and RoR (as illustrated above), have been made to seem natural and inevitable in many contexts and countries. However, this acclaimed naturalness does not 'naturally' follow from any universalistic nature. Rather, recognition or advancement of any such new ontological framing as 'objective truth' should be recognised as the result of political struggles, confrontations, and negotiations in which rules, norms, knowledge, rights, and laws are shaped and remade (Tanasescu, 2022; Immovilli et al., 2022; González-Serrano, 2024; McNeish and Moreno Socha, 2024). Thus, paradoxically, 'naturalisation = humanisation'. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that RoN is a new mode of *humanising rivers and nature*. This allows us to focus on *the politics of how and why rivers are humanised – and by whom*.

The outcomes of this, bringing nature subtly but (even more) deeply into the human realm, can be controversial, to say the least. For example, whereas the UN and the Earth Law Centre (2024) state that in Ecuador's Constitution "all people have universal rights to represent Nature and can bring suit in her name, [which has] been key to stopping development projects threatening the integrity of Nature", the early evidence has not always been positive (e.g. Valladares and Boelens, 2017, 2019). Among several illustrations: In March 2015, backed by Guayaquil's elites, government forces forcibly evicted 40 Afro-descendant families from their Isla Trinitaria riverine territory. Four hundred police destroyed their homes and livelihoods. The government's justification was that their houses were within the El Salado Mangroves Fauna Production Reserve area. Its core argument was implementation of the Guayaquil Ecológico project to recover the river-riparian spaces of the Reserve. The elites, however, were interested in 'nature-friendly' golf courses and related eco-business exploitation along the river. Together, government and private actors deployed the Rights of Nature discourse to legitimise the eviction of these most marginalised of families. And finally, at the eviction site, they only implemented short-lasting, aesthetic interventions that did not address the estuary contamination problems (CDH, 2015; pers. comm. Esperanza Martínez, 7 June 2022).

The RoN and UN declarations of Mother Earth's and rivers' universal, 'natural', and 'intrinsic' rights tend to invisibilise the tremendous human efforts needed to *produce* 'nature's rights' as natural and intrinsic. Any 'intrinsic rights' of nature that need human (or even legal) recognition is a *contradictio in terminis*. A political-ecology view shows that neither human nor natural rights are ever intrinsic (i.e. self-referential or simply 'pertaining' their subjects). On the contrary: Rights result from claims vis-à-vis others; rights demand particular patterns of authority; and rights establish politically contested agreements and relationships among subjects situated in their onto-epistemological network.

De-centring the human

Catton and Dunlap (1978), among others, have challenged the social sciences to engage in the urgent task of dismantling the 'human exceptionalism paradigm'. Since then, myriad bodies of transdisciplinary sciences and activism have constructed important alternatives to the Enlightenment ontology of nature as primordial, autonomous, and mechanistic, open to human extractivism (cf. Goldman and Schurman, 2000). In the non-human turn, this is often translated into the need to 'de-centre the human'. We strongly identify with movements fighting against states' and elites' exceptionalist claims to having the right to destroy the planet and accumulate 'natural resources'. At the same time, however, we warn activists and academics of the need for caution regarding how popularised non-human and RoN/RoR policy debates ontologically and generically tend to de-centre the human. One main reason is that human (elite) groups certainly *are exceptional* in how they have radically transformed the human/non-human milieu (Grusin, 2015; Büscher, 2021). This demands that we address the roots and impacts of this exceptionality, instead of 'ontologising it away'. It also asks for political contestation and the devising of strategies to make particular classes responsible. De-centring the human in policy and activist currents may tend to create

binaries between 'generalised humans' and 'generalised non-humans'. These binaries may blind us not just to the exceptionally destructive capacities of some humans and their inventions, but also to the exceptional suffering of others. At the same time, it might blind us from recognising the exceptionally creative capacities that humans have for reversing the transformation, not just of their own environments, but of the planetary system as a whole.

In mainstream water policies, for instance, de-centring humans' exceptional agency has led to overlooking the complex lived realities of riverine families, livelihoods, meanings, values, identities, and rights systems. These policies have constructed their own river dwellers and water users, with identities that conveniently fit the models and policies (Roa-García, 2014; Hoogesteger, 2015; Hidalgo-Bastidas et al., 2018). In this way, they justify dramatic interventions (e.g. Nixon, 2009; Sanchis-Ibor et al., 2017; Lynch, 2019; Aubriot, 2022; Duarte-Abadía, 2023; Heikkinen, 2024). The mainstream nature-science-policy nexus takes exceptional agency away from 'targeted human beneficiaries' and simplifies their ontological diversity in line with expert notions. It thereby produces policy models that depoliticise their deeply political choices while dehumanising the people they affect. In fact, they perceive and construct abstract 'equals' rather than recognising highly differentiated and plural realities.

Brackel et al. (2023) provide a common illustration. Communities affected by the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan (elaborated by Dutch and Pilipino 'experts') were reduced to "people in PowerPoint pixels". These people, who would soon be displaced, disappeared from view through the 'upscaling perspective' of hydro-territorial transformation programs (cf. Melsen et al., 2018). Actively de-centring the human, and thereby constructing ignorance, helps to 'rationally' intervene in the complex water world. This *de-humanises* water reality. Rather than revealing the on-the-ground realities, only governable subjects and objects appear: an empty space for constructing and ordering rivers, water users, and identities.

This picture is the contrary of what the posthuman and non-human turns intend to accomplish. Nevertheless, in de-centring the human, many dam removal campaigns in North America and Europe tend to misrecognise the peasant communities who build their livelihoods on the small and medium-sized dam systems – dams whose removal they project will 'enliven rivers' and re-centre nature (for critical reflections, see Sneddon et al., 2017; Drapier et al., 2023; Harrington and Cantor, 2024). Hommes (2022: 604) shows how communities along Spain's Mijares river fiercely contest dam removal that would dry out a local irrigation canal: "Destroying the Toranes Dam is damaging this natural, territorial, and social ecosystem in which we live, it is destroying an organised community [in reference to the irrigation community]". Another illustration is how RoN policy advocates may unwittingly collaborate in new enclosures of riverine commons (Duarte-Abadía et al., 2023). For instance, in the Andean wetlands of Tungurahua, Ecuador, campesino-indigenous communities deploy territory-situated conservation practices, but international conservation agencies threaten them with RoN-based court cases that could take away their ancestral governance rights if they fail to comply with PES-based conservation schemes (pers. com. Juan Hidalgo-Bastidas, 10/04/2024). In parallel, RoN and RoR policies de-centring the human may invisibilise powerful interests. Kinkaid (2019: 561), for instance, shows how RoN imposition on the Hindu-religious rivers Ganges and Yamuna by India's right-wing Hindu-nationalist government may lead to the violent expulsion of Muslim and Dalit river dwellers (labelled 'unclean' tannery polluters of the sacred rivers) while leaving the overall environmental status quo unchallenged.

In general, Büscher posits that, for the purpose of understanding how capitalism has made humans alienate themselves from non-humans, "[...] it makes little sense to decentre the human" (2021: 7). Because we live in increasingly alienated interrelationships, we have to re-emphasise our (human) bonds with and dependence on the rest of life. This pays genuine attention to the agency, life worlds, and exceptional potential of highly divergent water commons and collectives. This *re-centring* would also challenge any de-contextualised and detached prescription of the diverse identities and nature of human and non-human collectives.

Mystifying and essentialising 'indigeneity'

The 'ecologically noble savage syndrome' may be one of the most serious Achilles' heels of the RoN, ecocentrism, and riverine ontological turn debates. It relates to the recurrent assumed link between 'indigeneity' and 'closeness to nature', as portrayed, for example, by the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (2024): "For indigenous cultures around the world, recognising rights of nature is consistent with their traditions of living in harmony with nature". In a similar manner, Andersson et al. (2021: 7) question "the romantic stereotype of Indigenous peoples as being magically connected to nature", but continue on the next page to state that, generically, "on a fundamental level, Indigenous peoples do not separate themselves from nature and the environment" (p. 8). Indigenous scholar Brad Coombes reacts against such widespread essentialist portrayals: "(...) it is assumed that Indigenous peoples are archetypal citizens of nature, but that has consequences for their developmental interests (...)" (2021: 36). As Halbmeyer states, in mainstream indigenist literature, the global indigenous policy network, and environmental-activist movement's discourse, "Indigenous peoples have been cast as ideal types representing modernity's fading pre-modern Other" (2018: 1), so they supposedly need to be defended against modernity. But millions of self-defined indigenous people would not recognise themselves in this nature/space-bounding of their identity – constructive inquiries regarding territoriality and rootedness (Vos et al., 2020) thus become essentialised through the 'ethnic spatial fix' (Moore, 2005).

In river debates, it is common to find the tendency to essentialise indigenous wisdom and identities, stress intercultural harmony, and portray 'Living Well' as dichotomously originating from the 'inside'. All wrongs are explained as coming from the Western, capitalist 'outside'. As indigenous scholar Sandy Marie Grande reminded us, in many of the indigenist (and now, RoN and RoR policy and scholarship) writings we find a renewed "construction of Indian as eco-savior in the realm of fantasy, of oversimplified, and, thus, de-humanized identity (...) the age-old typification of the 'ecologically noble savage' is being resurrected and employed by certain factions of environmentalists, eco-philosophers, and eco-feminists alike" (Grande, 1999: 313; cf. Bessire, 2014; Anthias and Hoffmann, 2021). Consequently, the indigenous unequivocally become the guardians of nature (Tanasescu, 2015: 115).

But glorifying indigenous nature-society relationships and essentialising ideas of indigeneity in relation to nature, place, space, and rivers is problematic. First, many studies reveal how, historically, indigenous empires have conquered and enslaved not just people but also nature, in particular rivers (e.g. Cáceres, 2002; Boelens, 2015). Next, the prescribed, binary ideas are oftentimes – consciously or unconsciously – a continuation of colonial practices (Li, 2010). Roca Sánchez's (2022) study on the construction of indigeneity in Bolivian history shows how the indigenous/non-indigenous dichotomisation has emerged time and again: "(...) most academic and activist literature aims at recalling colonial, class and neoliberal and ethnic tensions between binary interpretations about indigenous and non-indigenous people" (2022: 155). She further shows how diverse actors (including states, academia, NGOs, and movements) often coalesce to purposefully and politically shape specific 'convenient' identities, especially around 'the indigenous'.

This engineering of cultural essentialism and reified identities has potential dangers. As Nancy Fraser (2000: 112) stated, "Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, (...) puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture". This may often repress cultural dissidents or 'disloyal' groups. As a result, far from critically scrutinising, for instance, class differentiation, patriarchal, discriminatory, or unequal relations within a subordinated culture, such critique is discredited as 'inauthentic' or as undermining the group's identity (Fraser, 2000). In a similar strand, "indigenous peoples' capitalist practices [such as building casinos or selling their forests as timber] do not figure strongly in the movement's public transcript" (Li, 2010: 397). This urges academia (and activists) to critically reflect on mythicising assumptions and proposals. Ontological turns must remain grounded in everyday politics, contradictions, and needs. The identities, modes of belonging, and practices of nature-care that indigenous families are *assumed* or *expected* to

display are most often at odds with everyday lived realities. Therefore, unreflective ontological constructs "(...) may lock indigenous communities into a future of limited development if plans depart from scripted biocentric identities" (Coombes, 2021: 33).

Illustrative of this danger is the colonialism-born myth that indigenous peoples would generically disavow (collective or individual) land and water rights. Combined with the ecocentric RoN slogan 'Nature has no owner but itself', this may deeply compromise the everyday livelihoods of peasant, indigenous and fisher communities. It does not help to redress historical land dispossession and water theft and may deny them legitimate property rights. The granting of personhood rights to the New Zealand Whanganui River and Te Urewera territory has received international praise. However, as Coombes (2021: 38) explains, land restitution and territorial ownership were indigenous key claims, "so tribal members were surprised that their claims were later translated into deliberations about rights-of-nature". Many Māori associated nature's personhood policies with "diversionary tactics intended to bypass our ownership claims (...). They divert attention from a long history of Māori activism to recover ancestral lands" (Coombes, 2021: 44, 51).

It is certain that mystifying, essentialising, and functionalising indigeneity is a common practice in state-centred and neoliberal recognition politics (Hale, 2004; Li, 2010), allowing "compatible identities and claims" while opposing transformative and redistributive reforms. This is a litmus test for RoN and RoR strategies, too. Coombes says, "Attempts to discredit indigenous ownership claims are an important context for the sudden appreciation of personhood approaches (...) any gains from award of personhood are at the expense of aspirations to repatriate homelands" (2021: 36).

To conclude, special care and scrutiny is needed in dissecting the ways the ontological turns engage with selected ideas of 'the indigenous'. It is imperative to be attentive to the danger of potentially naturalising, prescribing, or freezing convenient notions of identity and culture. Prescribed notions are not only inaccurate but also express the reproduction of paternalistic and colonial relations and cover up potential inequalities or contradictions that may exist within the groups termed as 'indigenous'. They have negative effects on those groups that they aim to support.

Subjectification through recognition

In the above sections we have elaborated on the potential pitfalls of certain assumptions about the human-nature relationships underlying new ontologies and related policies. Importantly, based on these assumptions, their holders seek the *recognition* of desired or convenient relationships (e.g. nature seen as subject or indigenous groups as river guardians) and the *un-recognition* of others. The very process of recognition has sparked critical reflections in the field of political ecology. These serve to formulate another 'call for caution' in recognising sidelined human and non-human actors.

Beyond onto-epistemological recognition, seeking political and legal recognition (of nature's rights or of particular groups' norms, privileges, ways of living, etc) implies a 'recognising party' and a 'party being recognised'. This usually takes place in the prevailing state-dominated legal-political hierarchy. It often results in the invalidation of legal pluralist conceptualisations (i.e., those that make no a priori hierarchisation among 'official/legal' or local 'customary/vernacular/indigenous' sociolegal systems) (Roth et al., 2015; Roth, 2020). It also leads to a political bias in which 'what matters', including procedures and institutions, are decided by 'the recogniser', who in most cases is the state. In many countries, technocratic procedures define how such recognition and representation will take place. So if they are legally recognised, local rights frameworks and related socio-natural relationships may face expert-dominated re-definition, assimilation, or subordination (O'Donnell, 2018; Valladares and Boelens, 2019; Sieder, 2020). It is, however, also important to recognise and identify possible opportunities involved in (state) recognition. Marginalised actors are often constrained by state law, but at the same time they can also use it as a powerful resource for claiming or defending their interests *through* recognised rights.

Recognition of nature *as subject* has its own challenges. First, if nature or particular rivers are recognised as subjects with personhood rights, there is the classic, intrinsically political RoN-policy dilemma: "Who represents and speaks for nature (or others to be recognised) and how?" An African proverb illustrates this fundamental onto-epistemological struggle: "Until lions have their own historians, hunting tales will continue to glorify the hunter" (cited in Galeano, 1996: 104).² Clearly, it is *humans only* speaking for nature: those who are best able to mobilise their voices locally, nationally, or transnationally.

Second, Roth et al. (2015) and Boelens (2015) have pointed out that *re-cognition* means "knowing again but reinterpreting within a particular ontological framework" – the ontological framework *of the recogniser*. When related to nature, such recognition therefore implies un-recognising nature as an object and defining it as a subject. The definition of such a specific 'nature subject' is intrinsically accompanied by strategies aimed at governing, steering, and protecting this same subject and its defined characteristics. More than just the acknowledgement that nature is to be addressed as a subject, it deals with the fundamental issue of *what kind of subject* nature is (or is *projected to be*), according to *whom*, *why*, and *with what impacts*. This opens the field of subject-making or 'subjectification' (Foucault, 1982, 2008), which is not new but part of a long tradition. Throughout history, state bureaucracy, scientists, policy institutes, and other influential actors have ontologically and socio-technically constructed their objects and subjects to be imagined and governed (e.g. Hommes et al., 2020; Mills-Novoa et al., 2020; De Jong et al., 2024). For this, they have named, normed, and naturalised nature, water, rivers, rights, identities, and organisations, turning them into foci of governance.

River and nature subject-making therefore always has two sides: on the one hand, endowing them with 'agency' *and* on the other hand 'subjecting' them; or in other words: 'empowering' them *and* 'controlling' them by norming and defining them. This is inherently political. Xu and Swyngedouw (2023) show how China's new 'ecological civilisation' policy of nature subject-making – presumably anti-Western and less anthropocentric – in fact seeks to enhance social cohesion, national identity and control, and strengthen China's global norm-shaping power. Ecuador's government actively deploys RoN to subjectify nature, people, and rivers, all at once (Valladares and Boelens, 2017). Elites around the world do the same, as did ancient indigenous and colonial empires.

Nature subject-making is a battlefield. Illustrative among many is the recognition of Rights of Rivers and its connected subject-making, as with Colombia's Magdalena River in 2019. The river is re-presented (through its presenters' eyes), re-cognised (known again), and re-produced (as capitalist socio-nature). As one Colombian activist-researcher has stated, the Magdalena River's guardian commission was installed top-down and included the national government, the hydroelectric company, and public-private river/environmental governance corporations. The river's fisher communities were not part of this initiative. Particular humans were literally de-centred. It was no bottom-up process, but "a court did it (...) not a history of social movement (...). It was green-washing (...). At the same time, people's territories are handed over for mining (...). Rivers, at the end of the day, have no authority, are no-man's land" (in Boelens et al., 2021: 473). Rivers' subject-making and subjection can go hand in hand.

Socio-environmentalist movements seek to represent nature through alternative, nature subject-making strategies. They thereby contest official ontologies and foster other modes of seeing and ordering reality. When trying to claim nature to be a subject with personhood rights, however, they usually also invisibilise their own agency. This makes their claims appear natural, self-evident, or 'indigenous', as we have outlined in previous sections. In doing so, they subjectify nature and define how and by whom nature and rivers are to going be represented. In this way, actors try to establish control over imagining and materialising rivers' use, infrastructure development, investments, knowledge frames, and governance of, by, and over both human and non-human subjects. Recognising the above calls us to

² This refers to "the indignity of speaking for others", as Deleuze characterised Foucault's critique of Marxist/progressive intellectuals claiming to represent, mistakenly, the voice of silenced (misrepresented) gay, women's, and minority groups.

critically scrutinise *by whom, how, and for what purpose* these strategies of subjectification are deployed and with what effects for socio-environmental justice.

CONCLUSIONS: DISENTANGLING ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS FOR SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

In this paper, we have identified and explored five fields of contention that arise in and around eco-centric and non-human ontological turns in the water world. We are aware that we have lumped together diverse strands of scholarly debate, activism, and policies under the umbrella of 'new ontological turns'. Even though they are certainly not all entirely identical, we see important resemblances and consequently also similar potential pitfalls, which we have sketched in this contribution. We hope that together, they serve as a call for continuous critical scrutiny and (self) reflection, as well as for empirical groundedness. In doing so, we hope to help avoid or constructively deal with these dangerous pitfalls that will otherwise cancel out the promising dynamics triggered by the emerging ontologies. Together, these points of contention call attention to the underlying mechanisms of *equalising* (e.g. perceiving one socio-nature, one humanity, or one nature), *essentialising* (e.g. of 'the indigenous' or of nature), *universalising* (e.g. proposed solutions), *naturalising* (e.g. truth claims), and *invisibilising* (e.g. contradictions, politics, or diversity). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that new alternative ontologies, including those underlying Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers activism and policies, are new modes of *humanising rivers and nature*. This realisation allows us to see these as new, politically laden *entrances to imagining and ordering the real* and to focus on the politics of *how* and *why* nature and rivers are humanised and by *whom*.

We therefore argue that endeavours to scrutinise the proliferating post-anthropocentric, ecocentric, or indigenist/indigenised frameworks need to go beyond a focus on examining the *truthfulness* of ontological and normative repertoires to dissecting how they fundamentally *embody* and (*re*)*produce* power relations. These frameworks are at once historically rooted, politically produced, culturally enacted, and strategically mobilised by humans. As such, they need to be seen as understandings of the world that intrinsically *contribute to the constitution and profiling* of particular power relations – or their *contestation* – in the practice of human-nature governance. In consequence, they should be studied in terms of their actors, their origins, their agency, and their entanglements in power geometries and relations. We hope that the insights we have advanced will encourage researchers to empirically explore the workings of the fields of contention that we have sketched and that researchers, movements, and policy-makers alike can take them as a starting point for critical self-reflection and discussion.

To support and advance actors and movements that strive to promote socio-environmental justice, it is quintessential to create spaces of shared reflection on these ontological controversies and fields of contention. Such shared reflections in the water world ought to involve river communities, activists, artists, engaged scholars, and committed policy-makers. Collectively, we need to foster a critical understanding of humans' engagement and entanglements with our vital water flows and the ontological constructs that we make of these relationships. We expect that this will enrich local/global struggles for riverine environmental justice (Shah et al., 2021; Lafaye de Micheaux and Kull, 2020; Oslender, 2021; Boelens et al., 2023). It may support riverine commons and commoning endeavours in their struggle against the politics of truth: their struggle to claim and defend the right to construct their own local water models and cultures and create their own water world (Vos et al., 2020; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2023; Hoogesteger et al., 2023; Rizzi and Mollinga, 2024). These coalitions (in the water realm but also beyond) can open up new possibilities for politically discussing the existence of myriad notions of socio-natures, thereby re-politicising the environmental debate. Or, as Fanon (1963: 187) once argued, it may inspire "the renewal of forms of experience and the rebirth of imagination".

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