

# Re-imagining Planetary Health Categories

Carlos E. Sánchez-Pimienta

PhD Candidate, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto  
Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholar, Vanier Scholar,  
Massey College Junior Fellow, carlos.pimienta@mail.utoronto.ca

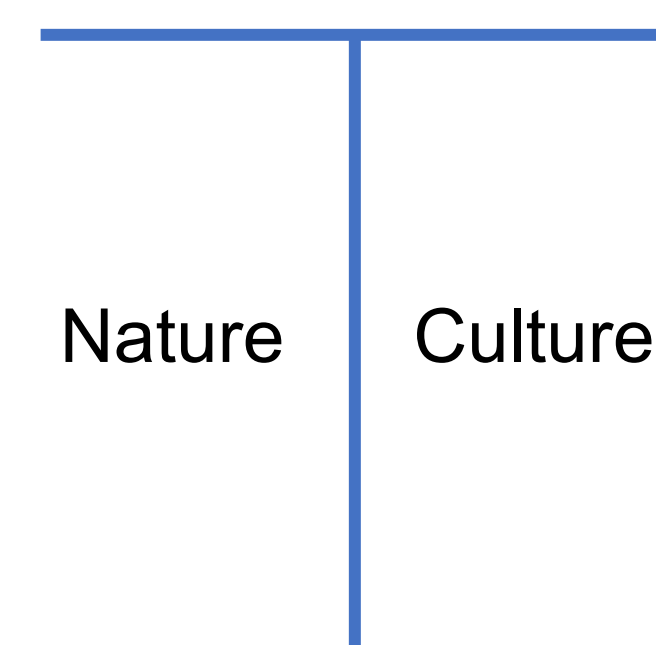
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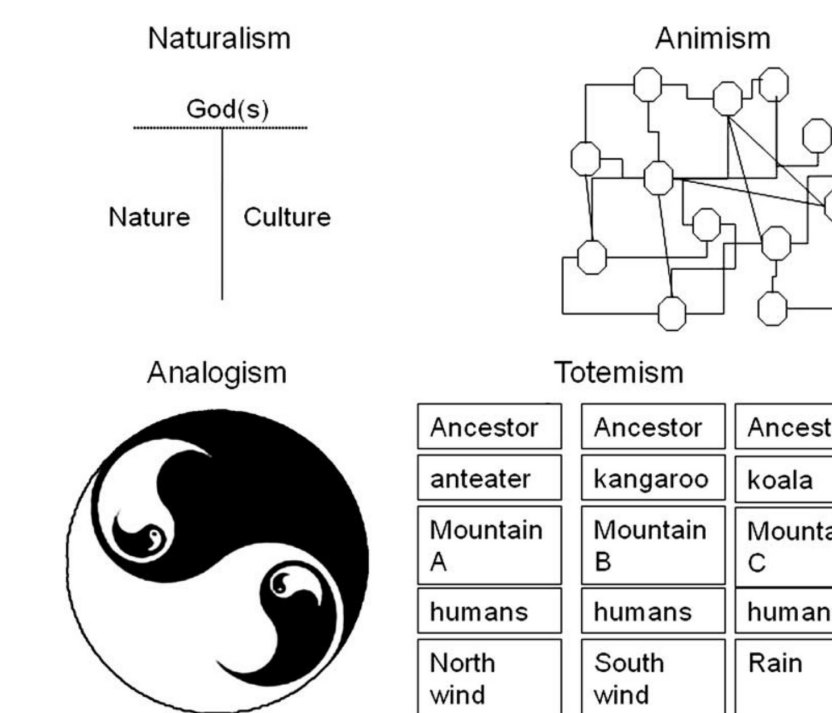
## Preamble

- Planetary health aims to be a progressive framework that “sees humans as part of nature” and integrates Indigenous Knowledges.<sup>1</sup>
- However, which “Human” and whose “Nature” are we talking about?
- I present stories from my doctoral work in Mexico to illustrate the limits of the “Nature” and the “Human” categories in planetary health.

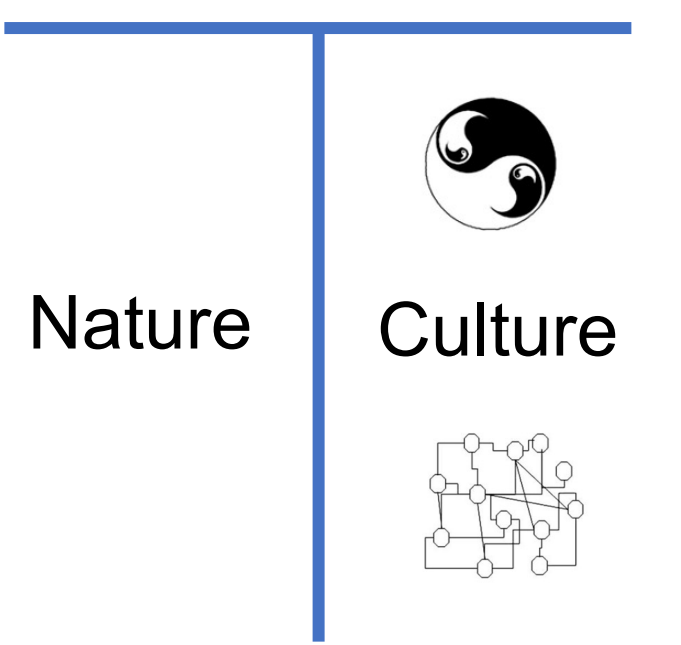
- First, we need to review the basic assumptions of modern Western thought.
- It is often assumed that there is a single reality “out there,” separated from human experience or culture.



- Buy this is not the only way to organize what exists.
- For example, the image to the right<sup>2</sup> illustrates how different knowledge systems organize reality, according to Descola.



- Western thought often deems other knowledge systems to be “cultural beliefs” (not *really* real).
- What could be the value of seriously considering other knowledge systems?



## Whose “Nature”?

### Story 1. Where is the white fish?

In the first days of being back in Mexico, I got invited to an event with community and scientific presentations about Chapala Lake, the source of the Santiago River. The event included panels featuring scientific, journalistic, and community research. One of the presentations discussed water quality in Chapala Lake according to select pollutants. This was a heartfelt topic for local Coca Indigenous inhabitants. Indeed, their municipality—Ponciltán—had the highest rates of renal failure in Mexico. Furthermore, most new cases are present in kids despite kidney failure usually being an older adult’s disease. The presenting researcher showed that the water quality in the sourced points was within safe recreational levels. The finding pleasantly surprised me, as I expected to hear that water quality was poor. However, minutes later, when all presentations finished and the Q&A begun, one of my community collaborators—visibly upset—asked, “If you’re telling us that the water is clean, then where is the white fish we used to catch when we were younger? Where are the other animals and plants that inhabited this lake?”



Digital composite image of the Santiago River at El Salto de Juanacatlán Falls, Mexico  
Source: Carlos E. Sanchez-Pimienta, 2024

- The “Nature” category may lead us to think that pollution or water quality is something “out there” best known through science.
- However, this story showed two ways to determine “pollution” and “water quality” (i.e., threshold pollutant levels vs the presence or absence of the white fish).
- Water quality within recreational levels may lead to acting on other priorities. The absence of the white fish may invite us to restore the conditions of its presence.
- Which approach to water quality may lead to better planetary health benefits?

## Which “Human”?

### Story 2. On narrating *mestizaje* otherwise

When preparing for my doctoral project, I approached the collective *Un Salto de Vida* (A Leap of Life). I was interested in exploring their experience organizing against the negative impacts of pollution on the health of humans and more-than-humans since 2005. To my surprise, I heard some of their members had reclaimed their Indigenous Coca ancestry as part of a legal case to stop the construction of a thermal power station in Juanacatlán. For this reason, they created a new organization, the *Concejo Indígena de Xonacatlán* (Xonacatlán Indigenous Council). At this point, studying the connection between Coca resurgence and their planetary health seemed like an exciting possibility. However, I reconsidered this idea upon discovering the work of Velásquez on Kichwa resurgence in Ecuador, in which peasants reclaimed their Indigeneity after facing the threat of mining.<sup>3</sup> In her conference presentations, Velásquez explained that the mining company decontextualized her findings and tried to use them as evidence to prove that the Kichwa were *mestizo* (i.e., non-Indigenous). I worried something similar could happen to my dissertation work. This situation reminded me of Tuck and Yang’s work on refusing research. I wondered if I could revert the gaze. Instead of researching indigeneity, what if I worked on *mestizaje*?



- Mestizaje* asserts that if an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous person have kids, the result will be a non-Indigenous *mestizo*.
- Both *mestizaje* and the “Human” are tied with values that instrumentalize “Nature” and dismiss Indigenous Peoples and their worlds.
- While *mestizaje* and the “Human” cannot be ditched, there may be opportunities for more accountable relations with these categories.
- In my dissertation, I tell stories that exemplify living with *mestizaje*/Human differently—in ways that may foster more accountable relationships with each other and the land.

## Concluding Thoughts

- The “Nature” and “Human” that Planetary Health practitioners imagine are not neutral, culture-free, nor exist “out there.”
- Instead, “Nature” and “Human” are categories deeply entrenched in modern Western cultural assumptions.
- Efforts to “integrate” Indigenous Knowledges into Planetary Health risk reproducing colonial relationships if the categories of Nature and Human are taken for granted.
- The stories I tell in this poster are not meant to be a more *truthful* depiction of what is real—for the existence of a single truth is a common cultural assumption in the West.
- Instead, with this poster, I attempt to showcase the potential of community stories to help us practice more accountable and livable worlds, even in places of socio-environmental disaster, like El Salto and Juanacatlán in Mexico.



## Let’s stay connected!

Scan the QR code for a digital version of this poster, my contact information and links to other work

## References

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- Velásquez. (2022). Pachamama Politics. University of Arizona Press.

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