



THE REPRESENTATION OF NATURE AND NONHUMAN AGENCY: INSIGHTS FROM NEW MATERIALISM, POSTHUMANISM, AND ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS

DOĞANIN VE İNSAN DIŞI ÖZNEĞİNİN TEMSİLİ: YENİ MATERYALİZM, POSTHÜMANİZM VE ONTOLOJİK POLİTİKALARDAN ÇIKARIMLAR

Abstract

This article explores the potential for acknowledging nature and nonhuman entities as political subjects by challenging the prevailing anthropocentric paradigm in contemporary representation theories. The study integrates conceptual analysis with comparative case studies, utilizing the theoretical frameworks of new materialism, posthumanism, and ontological politics. It explores diverse legal and political initiatives, such as the designation of the Whanganui River as a legal entity in New Zealand, the judicial efforts to confer personhood upon the Ganges and Yamuna rivers in India, the constitutional integration of the rights of nature in Ecuador, judicial decisions regarding the Atrato River and the Amazon Rainforest in Colombia, and local governance experiments in the United States. The findings reveal that these instances collectively strive to redefine nature not just as an entity to be protected but as a rights-bearing subject possessing political agency. The article connects relational ontology, reciprocity, and multispecies citizenship to modern democratic theory, contributing to normative discussions on ecological democracy and showcasing creative institutional frameworks for incorporating nonhuman perspectives into decision-making process. The study ultimately presents, an innovative paradigm that extends the political community's parameters beyond the humanity, providing both theoretical profundity and practical guidance for reconsidering democracy amid ecological crisis.

Keywords: Representation, New Materialism, Posthumanism, Rights of Nature, Ecological Democracy.

Öz

Bu çalışma, modern siyaset teorisinde hâkim olan antropomerkezi temsil anlayışını sorgulayarak doğa ve insan dışı varlıkların siyasi özne olarak tanınabilirliğini incelemektedir. Kuramsal çerçevesini yeni materyalizm, posthümanizm ve ontolojik politikalardan alan araştırma, kavramsal analiz ile karşılaştırmalı vaka incelemelerini bir araya getirmektedir. Yeni Zelanda'daki Whanganui Nehri'nin yasal kişilik kazanması, Hindistan'da Ganj ve Yamuna nehirlerinin hukuki özne olarak tanınma girişimleri, Ekvador Anayasası'nda doğanın haklarının yer alması, Kolombiya'da Atrato Nehri ve Amazon Ormanları kararları ile ABD'deki yerel yönetim uygulamaları, insan-doğa ilişkisinin yeniden tanımlandığı örnekler olarak ele alınmaktadır. Bulgular, bu örneklerin ortak yönünün doğayı salt korunması gereken bir nesne değil, hak ve sorumluluk sahibi bir özne olarak konumlandırmak olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, ilişkisel ontoloji, karşılıklılık ve çoktürülü vatandaşlık kavramlarını demokrasi teorisine ilişkilendirerek ekolojik demokrasinin normatif temellerini tartışmaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, insan dışı varlıkların siyasal temsiline dair hem kuramsal hem de kurumsal düzeyde yeni açılımlar sunmakta ve demokratik topluluğun sınırlarını insan ötesine genişleten özgün bir çerçeve önermektedir.

Muhammed Ramazan DEMİRCİ*

* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Giresun Üniversitesi, Alucra Turan Bulutçu MYO

E-posta/E-mail:
muhammed.demirci@giresun.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0002-6726-7370

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Introduction

Modern theories of political representation are largely grounded in an anthropocentric framework. According to this approach, only humans are recognized as political subjects and considered representative entities. The political community is delineated by the notion of the “human”, whereas nonhuman entities—such as nature, animals, and inanimate objects—are largely excluded from the political sphere. These entities are not regarded as independent agents in decision-making processes but rather as objects to be safeguarded or as natural resources (Bennett, 2010: 104-109). This anthropocentric delimitation raises a critical question: *Who will speak for nature?* In this context, environmental political theorists have long questioned whether political representation of nature is possible and, if so, through whom or what this representation should occur. Thinkers such as Latour (2004) have emphasized that one of the core deficiencies of modern political thought is its failure to recognize rights, autonomy, and agency for nonhuman beings. Latour’s proposal of the “Parliament of Things” can be viewed as a radical intervention aimed at addressing this shortcoming. His concept envisages political representation not solely among humans but also alongside and with nonhuman entities. According to Latour (1993), nature should not be regarded solely as an object of protection, but rather as an actor that must be included in decision-making processes. Thus, the concept of the Parliament of Things challenges the anthropocentric structure of modern politics and calls for a rethinking of the boundaries of the political community.

Critiques of anthropocentric representation are not limited to environmental ethics or ecological politics; they are also increasingly echoed within contemporary democratic theory (Despret, 2016; Dryzek and Pickering, 2019). A fundamental question arises in this context: Should an ideal democracy consider the voices of not only human citizens but also nonhuman beings and ecosystems? This question challenges the traditional boundaries of representation and requires a rethinking of contemporary democratic thought.

The question of political subjectivity becomes even more urgent in the current era, which is marked by deepening environmental crises, accelerating climate change, and mass species extinction. Politics can no longer be defined solely as a matter between humans; it must be redefined as a multi-subject process that includes nonhuman entities as well.

This study aims to examine the issue of nature’s representation and the political agency of nonhuman beings in light of contemporary theoretical approaches. To this end, it moves beyond classical anthropocentric assumptions and engages with the conceptual tools offered by intellectual currents such as new materialism, posthumanism, and ontological politics, exploring how nature can be politically represented and how nonhuman beings can come to be recognized as political subjects. Within this framework, the analysis first critically addresses the limits and anthropocentric structure of modern representation theory, and subsequently explores the possibilities of a new political imagination involving nonhuman actors, along with the theoretical challenges this imagination poses to democratic theory.

1. Nonhuman Agency in the Context of New Materialism, Posthumanism, and Ontological Politics

Since the late 20th century, theoretical paradigms such as new materialism and posthumanism have redefined agency by emphasizing the active roles of nonhuman matter and beings (Coole and Frost, 2010). These frameworks critique the classical humanist subject-object binary and challenge human exceptionalism. Latour (2005), through Actor-Network Theory,

illustrated how diverse nonhuman entities—ranging from microbes to machines—act as participants in social processes.

Latour's (1993) metaphor of the "Parliament of Things" envisions a collective in which humans and nonhumans negotiate political meanings together. His assertion that "we have never been modern" critiques artificial separations between science and politics, humans and nature. Crises like climate change, he argues, demand a political system—objetocracy—that includes nonhuman actors (Latour, 2004, 2018). In this view, even inanimate things may express political "objections."

Bennett (2010), a central figure in new materialism, describes matter as vibrant and agentic. In *Vibrant Matter*, she proposes that matter is not inert but exerts force alongside humans. From bacteria to electric grids, material entities participate in shaping outcomes. Bennett emphasizes that political analysis must include the distributed agency of both human and nonhuman actors. Even the human body, she argues, is a nexus of interacting material forces.

This materialist vision demands a rethinking of subjectivity: humans alone cannot be the sole subjects of political life. New materialism thus broadens political discourse to encompass environmental, technological, and biological agencies.

Haraway (1991, 2003) contributes through her feminist posthumanist critique of anthropocentric hierarchies, particularly regarding human-animal relations. Works like *A Cyborg Manifesto* and *When Species Meet* highlight "multispecies co-becoming," a process of shared existence between humans, animals, and technologies (Haraway, 2008, 2016). Her notion of the "Chthulucene" emphasizes that all life forms are entangled in a web of interdependence. The call to "make kin, not babies" urges ethical relations beyond species and bloodlines—toward a politics of multispecies kinship (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010: 2-4; Haraway, 2016: 103).

In the context of ontological anthropology, Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004) introduces the idea of Amerindian perspectivism. Unlike Western metaphysics, which assumes a unified nature, Indigenous cosmologies regard all beings as "persons" who perceive the world from different bodily perspectives. Jaguars, for instance, are believed to see themselves as human. As Viveiros de Castro (2014) explains, the diversity of body shapes diverse realities—a worldview known as multinaturalism. Here, politics must reckon with ontological plurality and the legitimacy of Indigenous ways of knowing.

Stengers (2010) further develops this pluralist ontology in her "cosmopolitical proposal." She calls for a politics that responds to nonhuman interventions—like climate change—not as background events but as expressions of Gaia. For Stengers (2011), Gaia is not a holistic organism but a forceful composition of elements beyond human understanding. She urges a "slowing down" of thought, where political deliberation becomes a process of living with uncertainty, nonhuman forces, and alternative knowledge systems.

Braidotti (2013) complements these ideas by developing a posthuman ethics. She critiques the humanist tradition for enabling domination over marginalized groups and nonhuman beings. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti argues that the human is undergoing ideological and material transformation due to ecological and technological shifts. Posthumanism, in her view, must embrace a "zoe-centered" ethics, recognizing the vitality of all life (Braidotti, 2018: 6). She calls for dismantling binaries like human/animal and developing new relational models that acknowledge animals and nature as political subjects.

In posthumanist frameworks, animals and nonhumans are not merely symbols but actors with the potential for agency and inclusion within political discourse. Braidotti (2022) proposes a "new relationality" rooted in interspecies reciprocity and non-exploitative ethics.

In summary, thinkers like Latour, Bennett, Haraway, Viveiros de Castro, Stengers, and Braidotti reimagine politics beyond anthropocentrism. Their methodologies broaden the concept of agency, contest representational standards, and advocate for the ontological inclusion of nonhumans. This body of theory provides the groundwork for envisioning a more-than-human democracy—an idea further elaborated in the subsequent sections through empirical case studies and normative proposals.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual-analytical methodology to explore the representation of nature and the integration of nonhuman agency into political thought. Rather than relying on empirical data or quantitative analysis, the research is grounded in a systematic examination of theoretical frameworks emerging from contemporary political philosophy, ecological theory, and ontological thought.

Methodologically, the study draws on critical theory, posthumanist thought, and new materialist perspectives to examine in depth the critiques directed at the anthropocentric structure of modern theories of representation. In this context, the works of thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Isabelle Stengers, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro are treated as conceptual cornerstones and interpreted within an interdisciplinary framework.

The research also incorporates a comparative analysis of legal and political models that have been implemented in various countries to enable the political representation of nonhuman entities—such as the legal personhood of the Whanganui River, the constitutional recognition of the rights of nature in Ecuador, and judicial decisions in Colombia. These case studies are analyzed not only as practical exemplifications of normative discourses but also as experimental contexts that illustrate the conditions under which theoretical assertions regarding the parameters of the political community can be realized.

The methodological approach aims to reconceptualize core political notions such as representation, citizenship, subjectivity, and political community. In doing so, it undertakes a project of rearticulation not only within the limits of existing structures, but also within the imaginative space of alternative political futures. By combining conceptual analysis with normative evaluation, this approach opens up a theoretical inquiry into the feasibility of pluralistic and multispecies political models that may serve as alternatives to anthropocentric understandings of modern politics.

3. New Approaches to the Representation of Nature: Legal Rights and Case Studies

The question of nonhuman actors' participation in the political domain has begun to move beyond the realm of theory into concrete practice. Recently, several countries have taken remarkable steps toward recognizing legal personhood and rights for rivers, forests, and ecosystems. This section examines selected case studies from diverse geographical contexts to analyze how anthropocentric conceptions of law and politics are undergoing transformation through emerging practices of nature's representation.

New Zealand: Recognizing the Whanganui River as a Legal Person: In 2017, the New Zealand Parliament enacted the *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act* (2017), marking a pioneering legal development by granting legal personhood to the Whanganui River. This legislation recognizes the river as a legal entity with its rights and establishes a governance structure that includes two *kaitiaki* (guardians) responsible for representing the river's interests. One guardian is appointed by the Māori (the Indigenous people), and the other by the Crown, forming a co-governance model that brings together two distinct worldviews. This legal

framework recognizes the Whanganui River as a living and sacred ancestor in Māori cosmology, not just a natural feature.

The Māori principle “*Ko te Awa te Mātāpuna o te Ora*”—which translates to “The river is the source of life”—reflects the deep emotional and cultural attachment that river communities feel toward the river and expresses an ethical obligation of care (Hutchison, 2016). The Act brings into the legal realm the spiritual and community-based values attributed to the river by the Māori, establishing a novel system of representation based on reciprocity and guardianship between humans and nature.

This case represents a powerful and symbolic example of how nature can be positioned as a subject within Western legal systems. It is particularly significant in that it transcends anthropocentric legal paradigms and integrates Indigenous knowledge systems and cosmos-centered ontologies into formal legal representation processes (O’Donnell and Talbot-Jones, 2018).

India: The Ganges and Yamuna Rivers: A similar development took place in India in 2017. The Uttarakhand High Court recognized the Ganges and Yamuna rivers as *juristic persons*, thereby granting them legal personhood (Uttarakhand High Court, 2017). The court declared that these rivers possess legal rights and can represent themselves in court in the same manner as a human being. The judgment explicitly referred to the sacred status of the Ganges and Yamuna in Hindu belief, as well as their indispensable ecological role.

The court further ruled that the rivers could initiate legal action against any acts of pollution or environmental harm. This decision was noteworthy for positioning nature not merely as an environmental resource but as a legal subject. Although the ruling later faced legal and administrative obstacles and was ultimately overturned by the Supreme Court of India, it remains significant as an indication of how the concept of the rights of nature is beginning to penetrate traditional legal systems.

The Indian case illustrates how religious and cultural values—such as the sanctity of rivers—can be translated into legal discourse, while also pointing to the possibility of radically expanding legal protections against ecological destruction. The legal personification of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers serves as a striking example of how environmental law can push beyond anthropocentric boundaries and reflects an ongoing transformation in the relationship between law and nature.

Ecuador: Constitutional Rights of Nature and Pacha Mama: Ecuador is the first country in the world to constitutionally recognize extensive rights for nature. The 2008 Constitution of Ecuador grants rights to *Pacha Mama* (Mother Nature), establishing an unprecedented legal framework. Articles 71–74 of the Constitution guarantee the rights of nature to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its life cycles and structures (Tanasescu, 2013: 855). This revolutionary approach rejects the view of the environment as merely a resource or object for human use, instead positioning nature as a rights-bearing subject in its own right (Cullinan, 2011; Kauffman and Martin, 2017).

The first legal case based on these constitutional provisions—the *Vilcabamba River case* of 2011—marked a historic moment as the first court ruling issued in favor of nature. The court ordered the suspension of a road construction project that was harming the river and ruled that the Vilcabamba River’s “right to restoration” had been violated. This case, which took place in Loja, Ecuador, has since served as a global precedent for nature rights advocacy.

Under this constitutional system, any individual or community is entitled to petition public authorities on behalf of nature's rights. Nature is no longer viewed merely as an environmental object to be protected, but rather as an autonomous legal actor with its own right to representation. Although challenges have arisen in practice—such as the prioritization of economic development projects or limited enforcement of court rulings—the Ecuadorian model nonetheless provides the most advanced normative framework for the legal representation of nature to date.

The incorporation of the concept of *Pacha Mama* into constitutional language signifies more than a technical legal status for nature; it also represents the formal recognition of Indigenous cosmologies and relational ontologies at the level of the nation-state (Walsh, 2010). This development marks not only a legal transformation in human–nature relations, but also an epistemological and ontological paradigm shift.

Colombia: Rights for the Atrato River and the Amazon Rainforest: Another groundbreaking example from Latin America comes from Colombia. In 2016, the Constitutional Court of Colombia declared the Atrato River in the Chocó region a living entity and a subject of rights (Wesche, 2021; 543). The Court assigned specific responsibilities to both the government and local Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities for the protection of the river, and mandated the appointment of legal representatives—*guardianes del río*—to act on behalf of the river (abcolombia, 2024; O'Donnell, 2019: 173). This decision established a legal framework aligned with the ontologies of Colombia's Indigenous communities and redefined the state's environmental obligations.

Subsequently, in 2018, Colombia's Supreme Court recognized the Colombian Amazon Rainforest as a rights-bearing subject (Bustos and Richardson, 2023: 237). The Court emphasized that the existence and ecological integrity of the Amazon are protected under the Colombian Constitution. The decision confirmed that the Amazon has basic rights, including the right to life, health, and a healthy environment. It also required the government to come up with a specific plan to stop deforestation in the area.

This legal approach in Colombia elevates nature to the status of plaintiff and rights-holder, transforming environmental protection from an abstract principle into a framework of enforceable legal rights. The recognition of ecosystems such as the Atrato River and the Amazon Rainforest as legal subjects represents a radical innovation in environmental law. In particular, the Amazon case exemplifies a novel legal strategy in addressing climate change. The Court framed the protection of a healthy environment as a precondition for securing the fundamental rights of future generations. By doing so, the Court effectively expanded the boundaries of the political and legal community to encompass nonhuman entities like forests and rivers.

United States: Local Ecological Governance and the Rights of Nature Movement: While the United States does not yet have a comprehensive federal law recognizing the rights of nature, notable initiatives have emerged at local and state levels. For example, in 2010, the City of Pittsburgh adopted a municipal ordinance that banned hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and, as part of that regulation, formally recognized the rights of nature (Challe, 2021). Environmental initiatives have increasingly emerged in areas facing ecological threats. In 2019, the *Lake Erie Bill of Rights*, which the city of Toledo, Ohio, passed in 2019, said that Lake Erie has the right to exist in a clean and healthy state and set up legal ways to punish people who break the law (Lake Erie Bill of Rights, 2019). Although the ordinance was later invalidated by an Ohio state court on the grounds of jurisdictional overreach, it has been considered a significant example of grassroots ecological democracy.

The rights of nature movement in the United States is largely driven by civil society initiatives and local governments, aiming to recognize the environment not merely as a resource

to be protected but as a rights-bearing subject. Partnerships with Indigenous communities have further strengthened the movement in some cases. Notably, in 2021, a joint initiative between the Anishinabe people and a local municipality near the Canadian border led to the recognition of legal personhood for the Magpie River, with appointed guardians designated to represent the river’s interests (Benner, 2024).

These case studies illustrate various practical models for representing nonhuman actors. The guardian model in New Zealand offers a framework that reconciles Indigenous knowledge with state authority; meanwhile, the constitutional and judicial recognitions in Ecuador and Colombia incorporate nature directly into the political community. Developments in India and the United States reveal efforts to give voice to nature through creative interpretations of existing legal systems or bottom-up local initiatives. What unites these diverse efforts is a shared commitment to expanding the concept of representation and granting political agency to nonhuman entities.

This trend is closely connected to the conceptual transformations addressed in the next section: approaches that go beyond conventional representation—such as relational ontology and multispecies citizenship—form the philosophical ground on which these practical innovations are built. Theoretical debates on the political representation of nonhuman actors have increasingly found concrete expression in legal and institutional developments across various countries. This section showcased groundbreaking instances where nature has received legal subject status, along with various representational models and normative frameworks. Table 1 below summarizes the key characteristics of these case studies and provides a basis for analytical comparison across different legal and political contexts.

Table 1: Countries Recognizing Legal Representation for Nature

Country	Legal Framework/Decision	Form of Representation	Represented Entity	Year
New Zealand	Te Awa Tupua Act	Co-guardian model	Whanganui River	2017
India	Judicial Decision	Legal personhood and guardianship	Ganges and Yamuna Rivers*	2017
Ecuador	Constitution	Rights-bearing subject	Pacha Mama	2008
Colombia	Constitutional Court Ruling	Legal guardianship	Atrato River	2016
			Amazon Forest	2018
USA (Local)	Municipal Ordinances	Community representation	Lake Erie**	2019

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

* The judicial decisions granting legal personhood to the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers were subsequently overturned by higher courts, and thus remain legally unenforceable.

** The Lake Erie Bill of Rights, enacted through a municipal ordinance, was later invalidated by a federal court on constitutional grounds.

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of legal practices concerning the representation of nonhuman entities. The models developed across different countries offer various mechanisms

for representation, including the recognition of legal personhood, the appointment of guardians, and the constitutional attribution of rights to nature. These examples are significant in illustrating the diverse normative and institutional approaches employed in integrating nature into the political community.

The aforementioned practices are not merely legal instruments but also political experiments that compel a rethinking of the conceptual boundaries of representation. In this context, practices of representing nature can be perceived not merely as empirical instances but also as typological frameworks rooted in specific theoretical underpinnings. Table 2 below outlines four principal models, categorized according to their underlying normative assumptions and the institutional actors responsible for their implementation.

Table 2: Typology of Representation Models

Type of Representation	Example of Application	Theoretical Foundation	Who Represents?
Guardian Representation	Whanganui River (New Zealand)	Relational Ontology and Reciprocity	Indigenous and State-Appointed Guardians
Constitutional Representation	Ecuadorian Constitution	Ontological Politics and Buen Vivir	State, Citizens
Judicial Representation	Colombian Court Decisions	Cosmopolitical Proposal and Indigenous Ontologies	Court-appointed representatives
Local Representation	US Cities (e.g., Toledo, Pittsburgh)	Ecological Democracy and Citizen Science	Municipality, NGOs, Public

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Table 2 delineates four principal approaches to the political representation of nature—guardian representation, constitutional representation, judicial representation, and local community representation. This typology reflects institutional arrangements and reveals how the relationship between humans and nature is conceptually framed. For instance, the guardian model emphasizes relational ontology and reciprocity, whereas constitutional representation defines nature’s rights directly through constitutional norms. Judicial representation highlights the role of high courts issuing rulings in favor of nature, while local representation is more closely associated with citizen science, environmental movements, and community-based organizing. In this sense, the representation of nature emerges not merely as a matter of legal status, but as a domain that reflects the ontological diversity of political imagination.

4. Beyond Representation: Relational Ontology, Reciprocity, and Multispecies Citizenship

The theoretical frameworks and practical examples discussed above demonstrate that the concept of representation in politics cannot remain confined to human actors alone. At this juncture, concepts that seek to move beyond traditional notions of representation and envision a new understanding of political community become particularly significant. Among these are *relational ontology*, *reciprocity*, and *multispecies citizenship*. This section explores approaches that place human–animal–nature relationships at the center and conceptualize politics through these relational networks. The aim is to engage with forms of thought that do not regard nature merely as an object to be represented, but rather as a relational subject—one capable of engaging in political processes alongside humans.

Relational Ontology and Reciprocity: Relational ontology locates the essence of beings in the relationships they form rather than fixed attributes (Barad, 2007: 388-389). From this view, a river is constituted through its ties with communities, ecosystems, and cultural practices, positioning nature as part of an ontological continuum with humans. For the Māori, the Whanganui River is a living ancestor and spiritual being (Charpleix, 2018: 26); its legal personhood reflects reciprocity and challenges the Western subject–object divide. Similarly, Indigenous principles such as Andean *ayni* or North American treaty practices highlight duties toward nature alongside rights (de la Cadena, 2015; Whyte, 2018).

The legal recognition of the Whanganui River not only grants rights but also obliges guardians to “listen” to the river, embodying the idea of “speaking with nature” (O’Donnell and Talbot-Jones, 2018: 4). This approach requires combining scientific data with Indigenous ecological wisdom, recognizing nature as both a rights-holder and an epistemic agent. Reciprocity thus becomes the ethical foundation: humans must sustain the integrity of natural systems in return for nature’s contributions (Plumwood, 2002: 171).

Concepts like *Buen Vivir* stress collective and harmonious living with nature, offering alternatives to individualistic development (Gudynas, 2011: 441). In this framework, representation evolves into a dialogical relationship where guardians are accountable not only to humans but also to the nonhuman beings they represent. Such a model expands political responsibility into a two-way, ethical partnership with nature.

Multispecies Citizenship: Reimagining the Boundaries of the Political Community: Multispecies citizenship—also referred to as interspecies citizenship—compels a rethinking of the boundaries of the political community. Classical models of citizenship are grounded in the human individual as the bearer of rights and responsibilities within the context of the nation-state. However, the ecological crisis, growing awareness of species interdependence, and the rise of posthumanist thought have raised a critical question: should the political community be composed solely of human beings? (Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 2008).

Multispecies citizenship advocates for the incorporation of nonhuman entities into the political and social community. This approach redefines citizenship not as a fixed legal status or contractual arrangement, but as a set of ethical and practical relations of cohabitation. Theoretically, this model seeks to decenter human subjectivity in conceptions of political representation, rights, and responsibilities; instead, it offers a new political ontology rooted in the multiplicity of ecological relationships.

Concrete applications of this conceptual shift are increasingly evident. For instance, in several Dutch cities, urban trees have been assigned identification numbers and registered in municipal databases as “inhabitants,” thereby being incorporated into city planning processes (Wolch, 1998). Similarly, some municipalities have established “councils for nature,” analogous to youth or elder councils, to symbolically represent nonhuman interests.

The *Zoopolis* model proposed by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) categorizes animals into three groups: domestic animals are considered “co-citizens,” whose welfare must be integrated into shared living arrangements; wild animals are viewed as members of “sovereign communities” whose habitats must be respected; and dependent animals are placed under a regime of care and protection.

Although such multispecies political imaginaries have not yet been fully integrated into mainstream political theory, they reveal the evolving normative contours of citizenship and offer an alternative model for the future of political community. From a theoretical standpoint, *multispecies citizenship* aims to convert the hierarchical distinction between humans and

nonhumans into a horizontal relationship of solidarity. This approach is not merely an ethical aspiration but is also closely tied to the goals of ecological integrity and sustainability. After all, ecological sustainability is constructed not only through state policy but also through public consciousness, collective values, and participatory practices.

If trees, birds, or rivers are recognized as “residents” of a city, then practices of urban planning, law, and governance must undergo fundamental transformation. For this reason, some scholars have introduced the concept of *sustainable citizenship*, redefining citizenship not merely as human-centered rights claims but as a practice and ethic of coexistence between human and nonhuman beings (Dobson, 2003; Cao, 2015; Dobson and Saiz, 2005).

As emphasized in the posthumanist scholarship compiled by Karpouzou and Zampaki (2023), the notion of a *trans-human community of beings* extends citizenship beyond the boundaries of time, space, and species. According to this view, when people living within a river basin perceive themselves as part of the same ecological cycles—not just the same political borders—citizenship gains both democratic and ecological dimensions. This reconceptualization of citizenship integrates not only rights but also duties to the natural world.

Various societal practices already exhibit traces of multispecies citizenship, despite still undergoing normative construction. In certain “citizen science” projects in Europe, members of the public collaborate with scientists to monitor and safeguard ecosystems, effectively serving as voluntary stewards of nature (Irwin, 1995; Haklay, 2013). Such participatory ecological initiatives provide experiential foundations for multispecies citizenship.

Similarly, environmental committees in local governments, ecological pacts made with agricultural communities, or the inclusion of animal rights and environmental literacy in school curricula all reflect efforts to expand the boundaries of human society toward a broader ecological community (Latulippe and Klenk, 2020: 7).

This perspective holds the potential to fundamentally transform our understanding of both democracy and citizenship. If democracy is defined as “the self-government of the people,” then who—or what—counts as “the people”? This question lies at the heart of multispecies citizenship and is directly connected to the redesign of democratic structures, which will be the focus of the following section.

5. Transforming Democratic Theory: Structure, Citizenship, and the Boundaries of The Political Community

The political agency of nonhuman entities and the representation of nature introduce a profound rethinking of democratic theory and practice. Traditional models of democracy focus on human participation, but the inclusion of nonhuman beings calls for redefining the *demos*—who belongs in the political community. This change calls into question long-held ideas about representation, citizenship, and legitimacy.

In classical representative democracy, elected officials speak for human constituents. Nonhuman beings—nature, animals, future generations—are either excluded or represented indirectly, often at the discretion of human actors. Nonetheless, the legal acknowledgment of nature's rights and the designation of guardians establish a novel framework (Stone, 1972; Eckersley, 1999). For instance, in New Zealand, the Whanganui River is represented by guardians accountable to both the Māori community and the river itself.

This raises a fundamental question: How can representation and accountability be extended to nonhuman subjects? Some theorists propose “proxy democracy” or “constructed

representation,” where experts, ecologists, or Indigenous leaders act as intermediaries (Brown, 2009). Although unelected, they serve as voices for the nonhuman within political systems.

Democratic participation must also evolve. Seemingly minor decisions—like tree trimming in urban areas—raise the issue: who defends nature’s interests in governance? In some cases, ecological experts participate in public forums, or citizens’ assemblies invite input on behalf of the environment. More radical suggestions include establishing a legislative “Parliament of Things” (Latour, 2004: 260).

Citizenship, too, is being reimagined. Recognizing nonhumans as rights-bearing entities implies a legal transformation. When the Colombian Supreme Court granted rights to the Atrato River, it symbolically included it within the national community (Republic of Colombia Constitutional Court, 2016). This ruling reflects an ecological expansion of citizenship—what Braidotti (2013) calls *posthuman citizenship*—where both humans and nonhumans share moral and political status. This new citizenship foregrounds collective responsibility and ecological sustainability over individual liberties.

Democratic legitimacy is also affected. Traditionally grounded in human consent, legitimacy must now reflect temporally and spatially extended interests—including those of future generations and ecosystems. Climate change underscores this issue: decisions must incorporate nonhuman concerns that transcend current voter preferences. Democratic theorists like Dryzek (2013) and Dobson (2003) argue that legitimacy must also respect ecological limits. A dam that gets the most votes may still be illegal if it hurts biodiversity in a way that can’t be fixed.

This reasoning has led to changes in the constitutions of countries like Ecuador and Bolivia, where environmental protections are written into law and sometimes take precedence over majority rule (Boyd, 2017). These steps mark the emergence of *ecological constitutionalism*—a legal foundation for including nature in governance.

Institutional innovation follows. Expert panels, scientific advisory boards, and ethics councils increasingly deliberate on behalf of nonhuman interests. In several countries, Climate Citizens’ Assemblies composed of laypeople and scientists collaboratively shape climate policies. A next step would involve conservationists, Indigenous representatives, and guardians of nature in co-decision processes—forming what Latour (2004) envisions as multispecies democratic platforms.

These developments reflect a response to the “representation crisis”—where citizens feel alienated from their institutions. Permitting individuals to advocate not only for themselves but also for ecosystems of concern can rejuvenate democratic engagement. This trend is already visible in environmental movements, where activists claim to speak for forests, rivers, and the Earth.

Bennett (2010) contends that the democratic public sphere must transform into a “human–nonhuman–network dialogue.” The global spread of the rights of nature movement affirms that democratic life can be revitalized by acknowledging our dependence on ecological systems (Kotzé, 2019: 7). This evolution is likely to inspire new forms of democratic institutions that recognize and incorporate ecological interdependence.

Challenges remain. Key among them is accountability: how can representatives of nature ensure fairness and avoid misuse? Possible answers include multi-stakeholder oversight, term limits, and participatory mechanisms involving affected communities.

Another tension lies in balancing ecological preservation with human needs. For example, limiting water use to protect rivers may harm agriculture. These dilemmas will test the flexibility

and ethical depth of democratic systems. But at its core, democracy is about finding a way to settle differences of opinion through discussion. Adding nonhumans to the political arena may make it better at getting fair results.

In conclusion, recognizing nonhuman agency redefines the political community as a planetary collective. This perspective entails an ethical shift: as Leopold (2001) writes, expanding “the ethics of the community” to include “soils, waters, plants, and animals.” Such a vision calls not just for new rights, but for a new kind of democracy.

Conclusion

Taken together, the theoretical discussion and comparative case studies examined in this article demonstrate that the political representation of nature is no longer a purely speculative or philosophical concern. Rather, the findings reveal an emerging transformation in contemporary political and legal imaginaries, in which nonhuman entities are increasingly repositioned as rights-bearing subjects with political relevance. Across diverse contexts, the cases analyzed indicate a shared effort to challenge anthropocentric models of representation and to reconfigure the boundaries of the political community.

The political agency of nonhuman entities and the question of nature’s representation hold the potential to transform political theory and practice in the 21st century. This article began by critiquing the anthropocentric character of modern theories of representation, and developed a perspective that moves beyond the human-centered paradigm through the lenses of new materialism, posthumanism, and ontological politics. Theoretical contributions ranging from Bruno Latour’s *Parliament of Things* to Jane Bennett’s vibrant matter and from Donna Haraway’s call for multispecies kinship to Viveiros de Castro’s plural ontologies, demonstrate the permeability of the boundary between the human and the more-than-human. From an analytical perspective, this study indicates that contemporary political theory is undergoing a paradigmatic shift: representation is no longer exclusively grounded in human consent or speech, but increasingly mediated through relational, ecological, and institutional arrangements that translate nonhuman interests into political claims. As scholars like Isabelle Stengers and Rosi Braidotti remind us, the critique of anthropocentrism is not merely a philosophical stance but a planetary necessity: interpreting the climate crisis as “Gaia’s troubling intervention” highlights the unsustainability of human dominion, while posthumanist ethics—with its zoe-centric orientation—demands the inclusion of all life forms within our ethical community.

Concrete cases show that these theoretical insights are gradually taking form in reality. The recognition of legal personhood for a river in New Zealand, the acknowledgment of sacred rivers as rights-bearing entities in India, the elevation of nature to the status of legal subject in Ecuadorian and Colombian constitutional and judicial decisions, and the bold steps taken by local governments in the United States—all point to a shift wherein nature is no longer a mute object but an entity whose voice must be heard. Each of these developments expands our political imagination and compels us to ask new questions: How can a river, forest, or animal community be represented? Who advocates for their interests, and how? When human decisions conflict with ecological needs, how do we find a balance? These questions lack easy answers, but political theory must now face them directly. Even though these cases have different laws and cultures, they all share three common points: the establishment of guardianship or representation for others, the conversion of Indigenous or relational ways of thinking into legal terms, and the rethinking of political legitimacy to include more than just human authority.

As this article has argued, the concepts of relational ontology, reciprocity, and multispecies citizenship provide pathways for moving beyond traditional understandings of representation. A form of representation that speaks with nature rather than merely about it; an ethic of reciprocal

belonging that views human–nature bonds as obligations; and a vision of citizenship embedded in ecological interdependence—these ideas may not yet be mainstream, but they are already germinating in academic debates and activist practices. The recent discussions within the United Nations regarding a declaration of the rights of nature further suggest that global governance cannot remain indifferent to this transformation. What began as tentative steps in the early decades of the 21st century may, in time, evolve into normative frameworks of international law and become integrated into state policy.

This transformation will also have profound consequences for democratic theory. A new understanding of democratic legitimacy is emerging—one that evaluates legitimacy not solely in terms of human majoritarian consent, but in relation to the continuity of life itself. In the future, political candidates may find themselves campaigning not only to human constituents, but also to the ecological spirit of the regions they seek to represent. Winning the favor of a river or a forest may cease to be a metaphor and become a practical political strategy. Though this vision may seem utopian, it is in fact a call to integrate sustainability into the core of democratic governance. In this respect, the article contributes to the literature by offering an integrative framework that connects legal experimentation, ontological pluralism, and democratic theory, rather than treating the representation of nature as a purely ethical or symbolic concern.

Ultimately, recognizing the political agency of nonhuman actors entails a modest yet radical recalibration of humanity’s self-conception: the human is not a privileged sovereign, but a member of a rich and interdependent community. The other members of this community—animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and entire ecosystems—have long been objects of politics; now they are gradually becoming its subjects. This development brings with it new debates in political philosophy, new legal frameworks, and a new form of ecological empathy in public consciousness. The ecological crisis of the modern world may be a call to reimagine democratic principles on a planetary scale. Future research may build on this framework by empirically examining how nonhuman representation operates in practice, particularly in cases where ecological rights conflict with economic development or democratic majorities. Advanced academic debates and practical experiments alike suggest that the future of democracy depends on including the nonhuman in its story.

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