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Entangled with Mother Nature through Anthropogenic and Natural Disasters §

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§ Rethinking human–nature relationships at the intersection of spirituality, environmental care and gender roles in the Chilean town of Constitución.

Abstract: Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a guiding imperative in anthropology to better understand people’s entanglements with nature. This article sets out to investigate the emergence of spiritual ecologies in the Chilean town of Constitución. Unlike most previous studies, we rethink the partial connections and entanglements of humans with nature through linking this to spirituality, environmental care and gender. By adopting a “kaleidoscopic perspective”, we aim to avoid a simplification or a singular representation of the (re-)entanglements with Mother Nature. Constitución provides an excellent setting for studying contemporary changes in human–nature entanglements as compounding crises of earthquakes, tsunami and forest fires, exacerbated by extensive timber production, that have struck the town during the past decade, have led to a resurgence by a large part of the population in interpreting and expressing their relationship with Mother Nature. Through intermittent ethnographic research between 2015 and 2019, we have concluded that the entanglements with Mother Nature in Constitución are the result of what we call Andean performative pragmatism, and the overrepresentation of women within the group of people who care for Mother Nature can be interpreted through an ecowomanist perspective that stands for the creation of social and environmental justice. As such, the findings offer a fresh and updated way to understand and interrogate the challenges confronting present-day human–nature relations in times of climate adaptation both in Chile and far beyond.

Keywords: human–nature relations; spirituality; spiritual ecology; environmental care; stewardship; gender; natural disasters; Chile



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1. Introduction

Wedged in a natural triangle between the mainland, the Pacific Ocean and a river mouth, the Chilean town of Constitución is bordered by hilly, intensively exploited monoculture plantations that result in a deceptive landscape. With this scenery, where beautiful bird sanctuaries exist alongside a wood pulp plant at the beachfront, the town is a place where such contrary pictures have become normal over recent decades. The town is what Marianne Schmink and Charles Wood (Schmink and Wood 1992) would term a place of “a series of ironic twists”. Seemingly well-designed and well-planned strategies, such as planting huge plantations of non-endemic eucalyptus and pine trees to stop erosion of the depleted soil, have resulted in reduced biodiversity and increased the risk of bush fires. Additionally, nature has spun out of control every now and then, and the socio-ecological landscape was then challenged and re-arranged by various disasters. In the past decade, Constitución has twice been one of the worst affected places in the country, once in the context of an earthquake and tsunami in 2010 and then by extreme bushfires in 2017, which recursively confronted the locals with existential shifts and threats. The

town is a place in which these twists are far more than irony; rather, they are the result of a continuous interplay between development and reversal. Grained in compounding crises (i.e., recurrent occurrences of collective emergencies) resulting from these twists in the natural surroundings, it is a continuous struggle for the people of Constitución to regain control over their lives and provide meaning to nature. The recent crises have set in motion a change in thinking about nature in Constitución and the way people make sense of their relationship with nature. Extensive fieldwork revealed that especially (but not exclusively) women started engaging in different types of care work towards nature. This conscious relationship-work between (women) activist groups and the abstract player we commonly call “nature” entails the exploration of different facets of spirituality, Chilean gender dynamics, and an economic paradigm that has shaped Chile and the South American continent for centuries.

Today’s Constitución has about 50,000 inhabitants and is situated in central Chile, about 350 km south of the capital Santiago. The place first emerged centuries ago as a frontier town where especially non-indigenous Chileans, i.e., descendants of the Spanish colonizers, built an economy around deforestation and timber production. Contrary to the Andean cosmology, which is built upon the intertwining of humans and nature, the post-reformation Catholicism paradigm that these frontier men brought with them allows domination over nature and gives the right to exploit it, and has become deeply incorporated in the social–ecological narratives of the area (Lorentzen and Leavitt-Alcantara 2006). The female activist Alejandra¹ noted: “In this region we are very rough—men and women alike. Our history is marked by violence towards nature. We are the result of this violent interface”. Descartes’ famous quote “cogito ergo sum”, which starts from the idea that the ability to think consciously and reflect upon oneself is exclusively human, and therefore positions humans outside of nature, is also often seen as a dominant strain or core structure of this type of theism (Oelschlaeger 1991). The place of Constitución, where large areas are morphed by anthropocentric exploitative activities, is the canvas for this religious–philosophical paradigm. The extreme neoliberal policies adopted under the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s pushed the idea of human domination over nature even further, and it has become deeply rooted in the narratives and practices of Constitución’s people.

Although the idea of domination over nature has been periodically called into question through the frequent occurrences of earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions in Chile, it is mostly the recently heightened manifestation of, and awareness for, human-made disasters that have led various locals in Constitución to actively question their relationship with nature in recent years. During Pfister’s first ethnographic research on the social impacts of natural disasters in Constitución in 2015, one of the female informants explained that humans, non-humans and our surrounding environment are all made out of the same material and life only exists in connection with the environment through using the phrase: “nature is alive, is life. I am alive”. Another inhabitant of Constitución remarked: “We believe that we dominate her, but we are all the time in her, we are one organism”. Both quotes are significant in the upsurge or reappraisal of Andean cosmologies and worldviews in the town. Many people in Constitución have started using symbols, vocabulary, ideologies and the idea of Mother Nature—the all-embracing whole that integrates both living and non-living things—that originate from Chile’s indigenous Mapuche population and similar Andean ideas about nature. Additionally, the nationwide adaptation of these concepts in the battle against anthropocentric activities (such as mining, deforestation and agriculture) alongside attempts to conserve and restore biodiversity and nature reserves may be seen as an attempt to re-negotiate the human–nature relationship in an area where the consequences of exploitation are extremely visible and doom-laden.

In Constitución, this change in perspective is expressed in care work. We observed that many activities are undertaken, mostly by women, to take better care of Mother Nature: educational classes are provided for children and young adults to teach them about the importance of nature protection and conservation; an environmental center has been

founded to exchange knowledge about medicinal plants; and waste collection activities are frequently held to clean up natural areas such as the forest and the beach. The searching and work of these people, put them on a journey of (re)discoveries and (re)inventions concerning spirituality, environmental care and gender roles, which has inspired the central question of this article: how do people in Constitución provide meaning to the changing natural environment and engage in activities to care for Mother Nature?

Marisol [de la Cadena](#) (2015, pp. 167–68) observes in her study of the Quechua people in Peru, that the term Mother Nature—or earth-beings, as the Quechua call it—has become conspicuously public in the Andes as it is frequently used in tourism promotion, indigenous social movements, election campaigns and global warming activism. As such, translations of earth-beings apply the languages of heterogeneous spiritualities, which is adopted from New Age travelers, museum curators and liberation theologians, but ignore the fact “that practices with earth-beings do not necessarily follow distinctions between the physical and the metaphysical, the spiritual and the material, nature and human ([de la Cadena](#) 2015, p. 25)”. Prominent researchers of Latin American indigenous societies agree that different (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) peoples can live in the same place but in divergent life-realities and apply different narratives to provide meaning to these places (e.g., [Viveiros de Castro](#) 2004; [Descola](#) 2013, 2014; [Kohn](#) 2013; [de la Cadena](#) 2015; [de la Cadena and Blaser](#) 2018; [Blaser](#) 2019). Although such divergent life-realities may seem like a fixed separation along ontological lines, there is also agreement that these perspectives on realities of life are partially connected and to some extent interdependent—like the parts that produce patterns in a kaleidoscope, one world is influenced by and cannot exist without the other ([Strathern](#) 1999, 2004; [de la Cadena](#) 2015). Being aware of these differing perceptions, yet acknowledging their connection, is important because whenever different-minded people meet, processes of translation into various narratives occur. In this context, people from different worlds, i.e., with different ontological frameworks, may use the same expression—such as “Mother Nature”—but refer to different things ([Viveiros de Castro](#) 2004). In this article our interlocutors may not always mean precisely the same thing when using the term Mother Nature and, further, we had to meaningfully translate the term from Spanish to English. While our interlocutors usually simply used the word *naturaleza* or “Nature”, they also always used the pronoun “she” and ascribed motherly and caring attributes to her. Corroborated by the occasional explanation that “Nature is our mother who gives us life” (*la naturaleza es nuestra madre que nos da la vida*), we opted for the term “Mother Nature” as the most fitting and meaningful translation.

This article sets out to illustrate the different paths that our informants walk in search for new ways of relating to nature. Many of them are women, mothers and activists who were and still are part of a system that is violent towards nature. In part due to the recent and frequent disasters, this group decided to work towards changing the ways of relating to nature. In doing so, they automatically question other dynamics baked into the Chilean society. [Blaser](#) (2019) describes this as a perspective-changing process that takes place through people’s engagement in interrelated sets of human–nature interactions. We rethink the partial connections and entanglements of humans with nature in Constitución by adopting a “kaleidoscopic perspective” as proposed by [de la Cadena](#) (2015). The different elements of a kaleidoscopic picture may seem clearly demarcated from each other, but in reality, they are dependent of and produced by each other—also, and very importantly, they rearrange when twisted. By looking at Constitución through the lens of a kaleidoscope, we aim to avoid a simplification or singular representation of the (re-)entanglement with Mother Nature. For example, most informants remain Catholic, but in parallel feel confident to explore the Mapuche belief system, even when lacking any Mapuche ancestry. Additionally, the twisting of a kaleidoscope that results in the rearrangement of the picture, symbolizes the occurrences of natural and human-made disasters in Constitución. As [Solway](#) (1994) noted, during crises and ruptures, social dynamics are brought to the surface and become especially visible. It creates a momentum in which people rethink their value frames, attitudes and actions. By departing from such

an angle, we rethink the partial connections and entanglements of humans with nature through linking them to spiritual ecology, environmental care and Andean gender notions. Constitución provides an excellent setting for studying contemporary changes in human–nature entanglements as the compounding crises provide a window for studying societal changes. As such, the findings of our study offer a fresh and updated way to understand and interrogate the challenges confronting present-day human–nature relatedness in times of climate adaptation both in Chile and far beyond.

The data for this article were gathered by the first author in Constitución through an ethnographic approach in which various methods and techniques were applied, such as participatory observation, key informant interviews, oral histories, semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation. The first fieldwork period took place in 2015–2016 (6 months) and focused on post-earthquake social dynamics and resilience, while the second period of fieldwork was performed in 2018–2019 (18 months) and concentrated on human–nature relations. During the first fieldwork period, 39 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diversity of people, in terms of age, gender and socioeconomic status, from different areas of the town. They had in common that they were severely affected by the earthquake/tsunamis of 2010 and had to make sense of this extreme outburst of Mother Nature. Another 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the second period coupled with extensive participant observation and informal and open conversations with informants. During this period, Pfister talked to all local actors involved in and relevant for shaping the town’s socio-ecological landscape, including actors from the forestry industry and the commercial sector. For this article, however, we mainly focus on informants that were engaged in environmental care (such as climate/environmental activists, municipality employees and schoolteachers). This selection of informants was very heterogeneous in terms of class, gender, age and other socio-economic markers, but had as common denominator their environmental care activities and a search for alternative modes of (re-)connecting with nature.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections, followed by conclusions. The section below elaborates on our theoretical ideas on human–nature relatedness at the intersection of spirituality, gender and care. The purpose of this section is not to provide a complete theoretical discussion on these complicated dimensions but to arrive at a set of broad, but sufficiently clear, concepts to serve as a framework for what follows. The third section provides an overview of Constitución as a “place-world”, a term used by Keith Basso (1996) to describe the result of the place-building process. The subsequent two sections portray the divergent worlds/realities, the acts of engagement and the meaning-making processes of our informants in Constitución that, together, as partial connections, form the basis for answering the central question in the conclusions.

2. A Kaleidoscopic Perspective on Human–Nature Entanglements

As Mathez-Stiefel et al. (2007, p. 70) observe, people’s actions towards the natural world are an expression of culturally constructed nature–society relationships that result from a set of symbolic representations, value systems, situated knowledge and practices in which concepts of gender play an important role. Various researchers of Andean societies have noted (e.g., Reichel 1999) that these gender-based knowledge systems are deeply embedded in the Andean pre-Christian cosmology and worldview. The principal characteristics of most Andean religions show gender parallelism and complementarity, reflected in and reinforced by social organization. Andean perspectives as well as the Mapuche worldview’s on Mother Nature or Pachamama, refer to more than a geophysical environment, and automatically include a spiritual layer (Galdámez Zelada and Millaleo Hernández 2020). Central to this spiritual layer are equilibriums within material and immaterial forces and that a good life comes from all forces being in balance. From the Mapuche perspective, disasters are the result of general imbalances or of humans not living in respectful unity with their surroundings (Galdámez Zelada and Millaleo Hernández 2020). During fieldwork, consciousness of such imbalances was omnipresent. Many

people, especially in the post-earthquake interviews, spoke about how the earthquake was “Mother Nature’s way to defend herself”. Andrea, a very affluent summer resident of Constitución, even stated that, by means of the earthquake, “nature wanted to rebuke humans for their misbehavior”. While these quotes seem to be talking about nature as an actor, they also speak of a strong awareness for the consequences of human actions, and perhaps of a bad conscience towards Mother Nature. In the second fieldwork period, when the human-made bush fires and the forestry industry were at the center of attention, conversations about the economic paradigm, and by extension religions/spiritualities and gender dynamics, were frequent. In Spanish, the noun for nature (*la naturaleza*) is feminine and this grammatical fact makes all language concerning the topic automatically sound feminine. However, the issue should not be reduced to the domain of linguistics. The representation of nature as feminine is common to many societies and it has a long history of imaginations, narratives and conceptualizations (Warren 1996; Plumwood 2003; Baintur 2015). As Gottlieb (2004) noted, this representation of nature should not be seen as the usual animism or the imagination of goddesses controlling the forces of nature but rather as the representation of the earth as mother. As such, women and nature are seen as connected through their reproductive qualities, and often perceived and treated in a similar way (Baintur 2015; Merchant 1990, 2014). While a mother gives birth to children and provides for them, the earth gives birth to vegetation and provides nourishment and takes care of all beings (Baintur 2015, p. 15). Alejandra, for example, drew the same parallels between the role of women/mothers for their family and the role of Mother Nature for humanity and provided this poignant local example: “Here in the region, especially in the rural zones, families function when the mothers are stable. You see women with several children, the fathers are not there, and the fathers do not pay. This works, because the woman carries it all, balances it all. She is the backbone”. This feminine connection to nature perspective has served as a basis for the theorization in eco-feminism (see, for example, Plumwood 2003) and later on, ecowomanism (Harris 2011a, 2016) that is, to some extent, a counter-perspective to the nature/culture dualism of patriarchal thought (Gaard 2003). According to Merchant (1990), the description of nature as feminine is closely related to value systems, and the changing conceptualizations of nature are therefore likely accompanied by changes in cultural values. For that reason, eco-feminists argue that the close connection between nature and women makes the environment a feminist issue and that everything that is associated with women, emotions, non-humans and the body, has historically been devalued by patriarchal Western traditions (Gaard 2003).

Such a worldview of nature was also embraced by the patriarchal Catholicism that the Spanish sought to establish in the Andes. This form of Catholicism used gender concepts in terms of force and violence to establish authority and control over Andean societies. If the Earth is feminine, an ideology of male dominance allows the subjecting of women as well as nature. Viewing “the Earth as property subject to the disposal of the powerful” led to the paradigm of extractivism in Chile, resulting in a strong mining sector, the forestry industry and large-scale agriculture (Encyclopedia 2021, p. 5). All three sectors include inherently violent transformative practices towards the earth and soil and are predominantly male professions². One female activist asked: “Have you seen anything more aggressive than a chainsaw? And yet most men I know enjoy handling one!” She added that, for that reason, feminism is “inseparable from all current issues”. It follows that transforming societies towards establishing sustainable human–nature relations also involves a change in the social organization in terms of gender roles and performances.

We start from the ideas proposed by authors such as de la Cadena (2015), de la Cadena and Blaser (2018) and Strathern (1999, 2004) who have rethought the partial connections and excessive entanglements of these various human–natural worlds in the Andes and beyond. In the literature, the abovementioned authors use the term “worlds” to refer to the different ontologies or culturally formed perspectives as a rather radical expression of how divergent these perspectives and perceptions may be. In this article we try to capture these connected worlds through the local voices or rather narratives in which they are

translated. [Strathern \(2004, p. 52\)](#) proposes “partial connections” as an analytical tool to stimulate thinking in terms of relationality and interdependence. With this, she means that the conceptualizing entities (or collectives) are intra-related and can only be understood as such. That is, they are not separate, autonomous entities, which is an often-applied division in discussions about Mother Nature and predominant in policymaking in the Andes. In this latter way of thinking, a distinction is made between various autonomous units, the Indigenous population, the descendants of the Spanish conquerors (including the Andean nation state) and the Mestizo, the group of people with mixed Spanish and Indian parents, all with their own, often contrary, frame of reference. However, as [Strathern \(2004\)](#) argues, they cannot be divided into parts and wholes because the fractal parts, their life worlds and narratives in which they are expressed, are intra-connected and have emerged from, and evolved with, each other. As such, the fractal parts together constitute the whole but can still only be studied through the parts, i.e., the stories that people tell and the concepts and language they use to do so. Thus, accepting that these fractal parts are intra-connected, like in a kaleidoscope, zooming in or out leads to patterns which are different after each change ([de la Cadena 2015, p. 32](#)). More concretely, while the lives of the people in Constitución may be based on diverging worldviews and cosmologies, shaped by, among other aspects, spirituality and notions of gender, they are also related in histories, calendars, identities and practices. It also means that those people in Constitución who are working to bring about changes in society, and in the ways they relate to nature, do not need to completely renounce old beliefs, old convictions and old ways of life when they explore new ideas and spiritualities. We argue that this kaleidoscopic perspective is especially helpful when studying the divergent human–natural worlds in which the people in Constitución participate, and the narratives that they apply to translate these perceptions into something more graspable, and enables an analysis of how they appear within each other and overlap. In other words, recognizing such partial connections of seemingly divergent mind-worlds makes it easier to understand why the informants of this study adopt parts of different narratives in their own mind-world. It may, for example, explain why people who are not (descendants of the) Mapuche—do not have a cultural commonality, or “lifeway” in the terms of [Grimm \(2001\)](#), that refers to an Indigenous religious tradition, including animism, as a guidance for economic, political, social, cultural and environmental life—do not live in Mapuche territory, readily adopt elements of the Mapuche belief system that fit the new spiritual current they have discovered within themselves.

Adopting a kaleidoscopic perspective of different worldviews allows one to unravel the differentiating perspectives, or rather ontological aspects, to understand nature–society relationships. These ontological position-takings are closely related to people’s normative orientations and their actions, the activities of everyday life and how they interact with nature ([Mathez-Stiefel et al. 2007, p. 70](#)). One’s normative orientation, the frame that guides actions and shapes values about nature, is predominantly shaped by one’s founding beliefs. What we observed among our informants in Constitución and describe here is their mental shift, partially triggered by compounding disasters, away from a narrow framing of the Christian religion as the only worldview towards a more earth-centered spiritual ecology. As [Mickey \(2020\)](#) notes, the literature offers many different explanations of spirituality. According to [Webster \(2012, p. 7\)](#), most of these are related to pragmatism or “forum shopping”, in which different religious practices are mixed into a “faith-lite” version of spirituality. Being spiritual-but-not-religious meets individual desires, triggered further by the capitalist market, in the form of workshops, patronizing spiritual teachers and life coaches, books and social media platforms. However, as [Mickey \(2020, pp. 4–5\)](#) brings to the fore, Webster’s existentialism is too humanistic or anthropocentric, and fails to address the more-than-human concerns of spirituality. This involves what we usually call nature—in which humans make up just a small part, entangled in multispecies networks amidst the complex self-organizing dynamics of the cosmos. This is nicely reflected in the quote of a male informant from 2015: “The earthquake was Mother Nature claiming back territory!” Therefore, in line with [Sponsel \(2012\)](#) and [Vaughan-Lee and Hart \(2017\)](#),

Mickey proposes an inclusive approach to spiritual ecology along the lines of ecology and knowledge. Ecology refers to the interconnections between humans and the other inhabitants and habitats of nature, while knowledge denotes the various, multiple ways of knowing that includes differences in multiculturalism and interreligious commitments. Thinking ecologically is very much in line with the ideas of partial connections or intra-connectedness outlined above. So, starting with a partial connections concept, combined with a spiritual ecology approach, allows a kaleidoscopic perspective on intra-connected parts and worlds of the people in Constitución.

According to Mickey (2020, p. 1), the concept of spiritual ecology is more comprehensive and inclusive than religion as it also includes “non-traditional or informal expressions of religious life”. There has been much anthropological work on the relationship between religion and nature (see e.g., Reichel 1999; Keane 2007; Kollar 2019; Chambon 2020; DiBona 2020), showing that religion is more than an ideological belief and what is written down in sacred texts by including rituals, moral/ethical norms as well group organizing aspects. In addition, it comprises both worldview of which the scope is the world and cosmology of which the scope is the universe or cosmos (Reichel 1999), and as such, allows the inclusion of Indigenous religions. However, following Mickey, we opt for the term spirituality to emphasize the active search for meaning in life, for connectedness to God as well as nature as/and the cosmos, either through adopting a specific (parts of a) worldview or cosmology or both and act according to this frame of reference. By stressing individual flexibility and interpretation, it allows both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian and Andean spiritual understandings of nature, such as those of the Mapuche people in Chile, as well as more blended forms. Each individual may then twist this blending kaleidoscopically to his or her liking. Spiritual ecology can be observed as activities in everyday life, such as walking, breathing, gardening and cleaning (Vaughan-Lee and Hart 2017)—exactly the activities carried out by our groups of informants in Constitución. Further, these activities can also be seen as a kind of stewardship action, i.e., particular forms of valued reciprocal relationships between human and non-human life in pursuit of sustainability (e.g., Jackson and Palmer 2015; Darnhofer et al. 2016; Bennet et al. 2018). Stewardship is very much influenced by the more explicitly normative, subjective aspects that can be captured by the term ‘care’ (Enqvist et al. 2018). Although crucial, care remains an understudied dimension of stewardship. According to Enqvist et al. (2018, p. 2), care refers to the desire to ‘look after something’ and is informed mainly by values, meanings, emotions, connection or responsibility, but also by a sense of attachment and sense of place.

Senses of place and of attachment refer to place-building processes through interactions between individuals, social and biophysical elements (Stedman 2016; Thornton 2008). Balée and Erikson (2006, p. 2) consider a place to be a landscape when a “collision between nature and culture” has happened. While we reject the antagonistic implication of nature and culture in this quote, we agree that both nature and culture are involved in shaping the place in a social-environmental fashion. Through becoming aware of these building processes, people develop a sense of place, resulting in a motivation to engage in stewardship activities. This implies that care is not only a cognitive and mental phenomenon but is also embodied in the practices and activities through which relations are constructed and reconstructed (Enqvist et al. 2018, p. 6). In other words, engaging in care and experiencing a place involves material and social exchanges between various lifeforms, that together produce the place of Mother Nature and enable people to develop a sense of place and motivation to take part in it.

As such, Mother Nature “has a say” in how she is cared for, and the caring activities of the people in Constitución can be considered to be the result of their various, partially connected, worlds and Mother Nature, embodied through shared engagement and experience. The next section now outlines the “place-world” of Constitución, “wherein portions of the past are brought into being” (Basso 1996, p. 6), the place that our informants make sense of, the meaning they attribute to their surroundings; or, as Rodman (1992) argued, the

social constructions by the people living in them and knowing them; they are “politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions”.

3. The Place-World of the Pearl in the Maule Region

As is hopefully evident by now, worldviews on human–nature entanglements do not appear out of the blue but are temporally and spatially situated and mutually influence each other. Therefore, we start with a short account of place-making processes in and around the town of Constitución, affectively called “*La Perla del Maule*” (“the pearl of the Maule region”) by the locals. By starting with a short sketch of how today’s monoculture plantations emerged in and around Constitución, we want to illustrate how such locally grounded entanglements with Mother Nature evolve over time through ecosystem processes as well as socioeconomic developments. As such, we partially draw on the multi-disciplinary field of historical ecology, which is concerned with how humans influence their environment and how they in turn are influenced by their environment (Balée and Erikson 2006). To an extent, authors of historical ecology differ in their opinion about how influential the human species really is and how mutual human–nature entanglements actually are (Balée and Erikson 2006; Brondizio 2006). We found that the people of Constitución, and especially our group of informants, are in a process of increasing their awareness of their incorporation into nature, rather than perceiving themselves as the single most powerful actor. In line with Thornton (2008, p. 6), we therefore perceive the landscapes around and the place of Constitución itself as “relational fields” where “people affect places and places affect people”.

Where Constitución is today, there used to be vast green-leaved forests of trees that were considered materially valuable in the then (and still) prevalent economic/religious paradigm. This resource-rich hinterland, together with a natural harbor along the riverbanks, attracted Chileans of Spanish descent to the area during the late 18th century for engagement in timber production and ship construction. These activities led to a rapid deforestation of the area that, over time, led to severe problems with erosion. In a village near Constitución, the rapid expansion of dunes and the depletion of the soil worried the locals, and a specialist biologist was enlisted to help at the beginning of the 20th century. He decided to plant the non-endemic eucalyptus and pine tree species, that make up the monocultures of today, because they are fast growing even in depleted soil. In the “Federico Albert” nature reserve, named after this biologist, visitors find a wooden sign stating: “The richness of a forest is equivalent to the well-being of a nation. A people that kills its forests destroys its own resources. [. . .] A person who destroys a tree, kills a living being. A person who plants a plant or tree can enjoy its benefits and leaves a sign of his/her existence on earth for future generations”. This quote reflects his deep understanding of forests as ecosystems and their meaning for human existence. By planting a mixed (though not endemic) forest on the ground of expanding dunes he intended to stop erosion and believed that restoring the forest would make this spot of earth fit for the future—it was an act of social-environmental stewardship. However, this fast-growing forest led to a kind of economic spin-off in the area as other people saw how well these non-endemic trees grew and could be harvested every 15–20 years. They started planting the same tree species to develop monoculture plantations all over the place, especially on the rugged hills around Constitución. When recontacting her for this article, Alejandra explained that she considers this type of thinking, in terms of “reaping benefit”, as deeply rooted in Chilean culture but especially Chilean masculinity, which has been shaped for centuries in the context of taking over land, being the sole breadwinner and making a living under harsh conditions, all culminating in the neoliberal paradigm that is deeply manifested in people’s minds and even the juridical framework of the country.³

Today, wood is still the most popular construction material in Constitución, and wooden structures have become a trademark of the city’s identity. Federico Albert’s original idea and his narrative have been spun into one that is reconcilable with the economic paradigm of our time as well as the local identity. Constitución’s largest players in the wood market are all internationally certified as environmentally friendly, and wood is marketed

as the most sustainable construction material. In an interview with the public relations manager of the local wood pulp plant, he stressed that Constitución's environmental problems existed well before the plant was established in town. The original forests had been cut, the soil was exhausted and people worried about erosion. "So, on the contrary", he said, "with our activities and our efforts for continuous reforestation, you could say that we are actually favorable to the local environment". At the other end of this spectrum of opinion are those who emphasize how huge monoculture plantations destroy the habitat of local wildlife and lead to acidic and depleted soil. They criticize the exploitation of the "forests"⁴ as the primary economic activity in the town, with climate change already showing its ugly face. A good example is the worst bushfires in Chilean history that swept over the local plantations in 2017, devastating huge areas of flora and fauna, leaving Constitución under smoke and with rationed drinking water for weeks. The fires even wiped out one of the town's rural satellite communities entirely. The "fire storm", as the extreme bushfires in Chile were called, hit Constitución hard and many people lost their homes and livelihoods in the flames. Critics claim that healthy mixed forests of endemic tree species would not have been as vulnerable to the flames.

The fire storm occurred just seven years after much of the town's center was destroyed by the large earthquake that hit Chile in 2010. The tsunami waves that followed spilled over the center and were even more destructive than the megaquake had been, taking many lives. Although people in Constitución are pretty much used to earthquakes, as these occur regularly, the compounding crises of the past decade have left their marks and traces. Although our interlocutors know that earthquakes are natural, geological events, and that the vast majority of bushfires are caused by careless humans, some perceived these compounding crises as a "cry for help" or even "revenge by earth itself". Frequently, we encountered phrases that portrayed the earthquake as Mother Nature's way "to restore the balance" or "to rebuke humans for their misbehavior". Some informants explained this as God's will, but most framed it in the context of environmental change and "Mother Nature's fight for survival". In the view of most of our informants, most people in Constitución disrespect their relationship with nature and are too intrusive. As one of our informants phrased it: "due to her general benevolence, she lets this happen for a while but, at some point, has to defend herself in order to exist". As such, we see these events, and how some people make sense of them, as the origin of the emerging ideas around spiritual ecology, care and responsibility in Constitución.

Against the backdrop of ocean, river and pine-covered hilltops, the contemporary town of Constitución consists of a small center surrounded by hilly suburbs and a number of more-rural satellite neighborhoods. The bustling grid-like center at first sight seems to be typical of Chile: stuffed with big pick-up trucks, collective taxis and pedestrians running errands. The inner town, with its 'plaza' (market square) around which banks, cafés, the Roman Catholic church, as well as the municipality's offices are located, has been reconstructed and is busy like a beehive during rush hours. The numerous Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestant churches are often located in buildings outside the center within their specific neighborhoods. On closer inspection, you can find reminders of the natural disasters all over the place. A memorial site has been erected on the island in the river where many people died after the tsunami, forgotten "leftovers" of the earthquake in the form of ruined houses and buildings can be seen between reconstructed buildings, a tsunami-mitigation park has been built near the beachfront where once a working-class neighborhood existed, and a relatively fire-resistant strip of native vegetation has been planted close to the burnt-out satellite community in anticipation of future bushfires. All of these examples and quotes clearly show how Constitución's socio-ecological landscape evolves in a flow with nature.

Since the arrival of the first settlers, the majority of Constitución's population have been adherents of post-Reformation Catholicism. However, since the 1980s, people have been increasingly converting to evangelical Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism, and now, most of the 19 churches in Constitución are Pentecostal. In the post-Reformation

Catholic churches, the prevailing worldview that has long been preached is that domination of nature by Christians is God's will, although this view has become slightly more moderate and, in more recent times, the Catholic church has become more concerned with the world surrounding people, or what is referred to as nature.⁵ Although most Protestant churches appear to be a little more conservative in their teaching, especially the Pentecostals, subscribing to the biblical teaching that God have given humankind dominion over the Earth, not all Protestants are uniformly adopting this view. Some mainstream Protestants, as elsewhere in Latin America, are more likely to articulate an environmental ethos (see, for example, [Lorentzen and Leavitt-Alcantara 2006](#)). What seems to have now changed among those adhering to these various Christian traditions, generally as a response to the most recent disasters, is a growing awareness of the entanglements between people and nature and the notion of a responsibility of care towards nature among the townspeople.

That being said, living an environmentally friendly life in Constitución (and in Chile in general) is hard and needs constant, conscious effort. The easy path is to buy pre-chopped salads sold in plastic bags on the street market, running errands by car while enjoying its air-conditioning, accepting meat as the basis of each meal, and ignoring the garbage that is being left on the streets, beaches and in the forests. Additionally, since the 1970s, much of Constitución's infrastructure, politics and economic, environmental and social policies have been influenced by the interests of industry. Specifically, the largest local employer is the wood pulp factory called *Celco* by the locals, which is situated at the beachfront between the tsunami mitigation park and majestic rock formations. Not only does this huge visible plant trigger countless everyday conversations about humans and their relationship with Mother Nature; it also stands as a symbol for how different needs (economic, ecological, political, nature, etc.) have to be continuously balanced. This is exemplified by the empathetic words of the environmental education teacher Rosa (46) towards her students after watching a documentary on drinking water shortages in northern Chile: "What we saw is true for Constitución as well. I know that many of your families may depend on *Celco* economically, but this does not mean that you should renounce your basic rights, like, for example, the right to drinking water". People like her, who recognize the kaleidoscopic nature of issues and try to sensitize themselves and others to the partial connections between different perceptions of the world, make up a large part of our informant pool. Within this group of people, there is considerable variety in terms of age, education and social class, although the majority were female. What unites them primarily is their awareness of the unfolding environmental crises in Constitución and far beyond, as well as their personal and collective search for a worldview and a way of living that provides room to reconcile humans and Mother Nature. The challenge is to do so in a place where worldviews diverge, where environmental narratives are instrumentalized and rationalized, and where the economic necessities of many people seem to limit time and room for change.

Living in Constitución was, and continues to be, a constant exercise of downplaying or turning a blind eye to the abovementioned contrasts and problems. About 20 years ago, the *Celco* plant had no exhaust filters and the strong cauliflower-like smell emerging from the plant was normality for the town's inhabitants. Normality also was, and still is, enjoying an afternoon at the beach amidst empty beer cans, plastic bags and cigarette ends. For a considerable proportion of the male working population, harvesting, loading and transporting trees with heavy machinery is not only a breadwinning activity but also offers a space to perform a particularly virile type of masculinity in a society in which talking positively about gender equality has become good form. One female informant noted in a conversation about the much celebrated "Women's Day": "It's a fine line between really valuing the woman for her individual strengths and faults while enduring a machismo society and the typical congratulations for cooking great food on that day. The latter is just to keep us at home so that men can go about their business the rest of the year". Our group of informants try to change this mentality of turning a blind eye and strive to not only live more sustainably themselves but to also show others what they may gain from living in a more environmentally friendly place.

The following section is about the changing perceptions of Mother Nature among our informants, followed by a section on the various environmental protection and conservation activities which have become part of the town's socio-ecological landscape, especially since the bushfires of 2017. Such activities do the opposite of downplaying and blanking out, and try to actively reshape connections with Mother Nature through actions of care.

4. Composing and Decomposing Perceptions of Entanglement with Mother Nature

Worldviews are composed of belief systems and experiential knowledge, and integrate expressions of rationality with emotions and spirituality. As such, these worldviews are not fixed entities but remain under constant development, closely related to the material world in which they are practiced (see, for example, [Chambon 2020](#); [Keane 2007](#)). In line with a Christian worldview, be it Roman Catholic or Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism, many of our informants' first reaction to the question what nature means to them was a description of nature as living space, habitat or beautiful wilderness. They referred to everything that was around them, but especially to beautiful landscapes, forests, or other relatively untouched places. In general, our informants used words like "beautiful", "wonderful", or similar positive attributes to describe nature. They made clear that nature is not associated with an urban space, while villages or more generally rural areas ("*en el campo*") were sometimes considered as part of nature. The typical image of their association with nature generally contained green forests, the ocean, and wild animals, and usually went together with human solitude, a place to meditate, to connect with our human origins. This image that several informants constructed corresponds with the idea of the romantic myth described by [Uggla \(2010\)](#). Indeed, despite the local exploitative activities, parts of Constitución's environment, such as the majestic rock formations with birds circling above, really do give an impression of this untouched and wild romantic myth. However, the spectator position—watching nature in the form of the rocks and birds while driving past in a car—is symbolic of how people see themselves: as generally removed from nature but enjoying diving into nature every now and then. This attitude is very much in line with the Christian paradigm of humans being removed from nature but having the power to use nature.

The earthquake and tsunami in 2010 and the bushfires in 2017 were major events that influenced the worlds of the people of Constitución and mobilized dormant social dynamics ([Bateson 1972](#); [Sullivan 1988](#); [Tambiah 1990](#); [Reichel 1999](#)). When talking about the earthquake, all the informants described *la naturaleza* (nature) as something positive and impressive, and as deserving a lot of respect. This in itself already implies that the relationship is not primarily perceived as one of unilateral domination, but rather as reciprocal. Many informants talked about a "balance" (in other words: a relationship) with nature in which humans tend to abuse or reap benefits from. This notion that imbalances between humans and nature provoke disasters is very much in line with how [Galdámez Zelada and Millaleo Hernández \(2020\)](#) describe the Mapuche narrative, though none of the informants had any Mapuche ancestry or connection. In the context of this imbalance, resulting from human misbehavior, informants described nature as an actor; as someone who may act violently—albeit without bad intentions—in order to achieve a clear objective (such as "reclaiming" territory). Even the immensely destructive (at least on a local level in Constitución) earthquake and tsunami in 2010 were frequently described with horror fused with awe. This admiration of nature's ferocity might seem surprising but it again emphasizes how the people of Constitución perceive their relationship with nature as a reciprocal relationship of respect and love—at least in the context of crisis. One informant, the dentist Juan Carlos Gonzalez (60)—a calm, well-situated and very self-reflective man—even stated that he experienced the violent disruption of everyday life from the earthquake and its aftermath as "healing" and, at times, even enjoyed the "freedom of not following the system [and] living in the moment, closer to nature". A similar view was expressed by art teacher Andrea Calussi (30), who said that she experienced neither severe fear nor panic during the earthquake. Instead, confronted with the uncontrollable forces of nature, she

clearly felt and followed her instincts which, in retrospect, taught her that she is a purely natural being. When we talk about this perception of nature as an actor, it is important to keep in mind that the people of Constitución never blamed nature for their losses. Most of them looked upon the occasional ferocity and destructiveness of Mother Nature as an act of self-defense.

Of course, not everyone in the town started questioning their worldview and way of living in the context of these compounding crises, and not all of those who did started to act differently—“mind work” is easier than acting appropriately, especially when you are embedded in a societal system that is contrary to your vision. Nevertheless, experiencing compounding local crises, further fueled by the national and global context of unfolding climate crises, opened a window for change in Constitución. The small group of individuals with a history of this kind of environmentalist-thinking gained traction and were joined by those who found themselves forced to profoundly rethink life by these extreme events. Many people became aware that social action takes place within, and thus interferes with, the biophysical environment, and that biophysical action, such as disasters, interact with the social environment. The 2017 bushfires illustrate well how humans and nature are intertwined with and conditioned by one another: most bushfires are initially caused in some way by humans (be it an out-of-control campfire, a thrown cigarette butt, broken glass that focuses sunlight, or arson). Events then unfold within the set of conditions the surroundings offer (monocultures, summer, wind, etc.) and may quickly spin out of control. Most people in Constitución are now increasingly aware of that, and they are also highly conscious about their potential role in the occurrences of bushfires. As such, this event can be seen as another element that ignited activism for environmental protection and against climate change. As a result of this general growing awareness of human–nature entanglements, people’s practices, ethical outlooks on themselves and their world, environment and resources also changed (Berkes and Folke 1998, p. 4). A new set of ethics, or a new “understanding of what constitutes the right relationship with [. . .] the natural world” is an intrinsic motivation to engage in stewardship activities (Bennet et al. 2018).

In Constitución, we could generally identify three types of narratives concerning perceived human–nature entanglements. Most of the people, and particularly men, working in timber production or for *Celco* (maybe 10,000 people in total) are in the most difficult position when it comes to allowing themselves to become part of this wind of change: their livelihood and sometimes their identity depends directly on their jobs. This identity oftentimes corresponds to the traditional Chilean masculinity described above by Alejandra, who also offered a little personal anecdote that describes such a goal-oriented egocentrism: “The other day, at my mum’s home, my brother arrived with a truckload of poles that he needed to install a new water tank. I had been working in my mum’s garden for weeks, loosening the hard, dry soil manually, planting little plants. They wanted to transport the poles right through where I had been working, their only concern being how to get those poles to the designated spot. They did not look down at the ground. At no point did they seem to think about what would happen to the plants if they passed through there. Now, I do not argue in these situations, I just sat down and let nobody pass. But I wondered: Why were they so insensitive? We mostly do not cultivate these sensitivities in men”.

We would categorize the vast majority of the remaining inhabitants (about 35,000) as passive knowers. They are increasingly conscious of at least the most visible problems (such as plastic bags and garbage) and the human footprint on the environment, but they are hesitant to act. They see it as important to educate children on these topics, but do not take concrete actions that would change their daily routines (such as using public transport, rejecting plastic bags or recycling garbage at home). One informant said that she believed that tiny actions could have big influences. When asked what actions she took, she had to think hard and then answered: “Me, as an individual person, I do not do much. At work I do things such as minimizing the use of chemicals, reusing gloves, and recently we started composting organic residuals. In the end, I spend like nine hours a day at work, so my contribution at work is what counts”. With her actions at work, she follows company

guidelines of sustainability, but the quote suggests that she is reluctant to act in her personal life and pushes individual responsibility away.

The final group of about a few hundred people could be labelled actively conscious or consciously active—both would be true. The word activist often comes with a connotation of rebellion or opposition, and is associated with protests or blockades, none of which applies to this group. Rather, we are talking about individuals who, in their private lives, have started to explore their reciprocal relationship with Mother Nature. From this connection, an inner need to take responsibility emerged, and they found different ways of searching for and expressing this connection with Mother Nature through actions of care. Mind work and actions come together, and by performing this search for spiritual connection publicly (such as by picking up rubbish in public places and posting pictures of the results on social media), they started to activate more people. In one conversation, the label “feminist of action” came up and it seems an apt description for both women and men within this group. By performing care work for Mother Nature, the men of this group show this increased sensitivity that Alejandra missed in her brother, and through caring for nature they may also take a first step towards breaking societal gender norms.

5. Spiritual Work and Caring for Mother Nature

The recent ruptures in Constitución’s local narrative have kickstarted a process of conscientization and a search for new ways of living with nature, a shift that can be observed especially well in the domains of spirituality and environmental care. Collective (as well as individual) care work for Mother Nature has become an increasingly important tool in the process of reforming the spiritual connections between Mother Nature and the consciously active people in Constitución. Such an exploration of “personal and spiritual relationships between men and women and the land” is a characteristic of the Andean (gender) context (Serrano et al. 2006). In the aftermath of the 2017 bushfires, a variety of social actors, concerned with environmental protection and climate change, emerged. Our informants frequently voiced their concerns about their own, and most importantly their children’s, future: “What will our planet look like in the near future?” Climate change concerns related to the bushfires had brought this question to the fore but, in the course of this growing awareness, people also started to question other aspects of how they and others relate to their surroundings. They had become extremely aware of thrown away garbage on beaches, monoculture plantations, lacking environmental education, recycling, consumption patterns, and much more—they stopped turning a blind eye to these issues. Both the search for new spiritual connections with Mother Nature and a preoccupation with the wellbeing of future generations are indicative of changing ethics of care and should be seen as intrinsic motivations to take up stewardship actions (Bennet et al. 2018). We view the local environmental stewardship movement in Constitución as simultaneously an expression of, and a tool for, building a spiritual ecology that allows our informants to shape sustainable ways of living that incorporate a responsible relationship with Mother Nature.

As Bennet et al. (2018) noted, environmental stewardship actions originate in the realization by local people that “they are proximal to [and] connected to” the environment that they care for and this can happen on very different scales. In Constitución, most stewards (groups, individuals or networks of actors) focus on very visible problems that can be addressed directly and relatively easily by them, and could be influenced easily by the broader population (Bennet et al. 2018). One of the most public actors was a group called Eco Mauchos that started out by meeting each Sunday to collect garbage at various places. Initially, their primary goal was “to get the dirt off her [Mother Nature’s] back”, as one woman explained. Quickly, however, they started dressing up in green or yellow shirts, took fun pictures of their activities and posted them on social media, thereby attracting more people. Subsequently, they started placing improvised garbage cans next to overflowing municipal bins, which led to some controversy but, again, gave them much publicity. They welcomed everyone into their group, and soon even some politicians and Celco employees joined quietly but regularly. One woman explicitly stated about the participating politicians:

“We are happy about everyone who joins. More hands, more collected garbage, cleaner earth. But we don’t do politics here, there is no space for self-portrayal”. In other words, the care actions must be the center of attention.

Coulter (2016) views care as ‘integral to social justice’. In the case of Eco Mauchos, this quest for social justice can be noted on several levels. First, collecting garbage off Nature’s back is a way of doing justice to Mother Nature, who has been polluted by people. Second, during those garbage-picking Sundays, the predominant topics of conversation all concerned social justice in the wider, societal sense: consumption, the economic system, paid work vs. what Mother Nature could provide us with, as well as child rearing. Most participants in these groups continuously thought about what they could change beyond their garbage-picking activities and how they could influence the wider society. Despite the wide age range, from children to pensioners, within the group, they were, in a way, unified in their opinions concerning the abovementioned topics. The discourse ran along the lines of: we have lost our connection to Mother Nature because we have been corrupted by the needs of consumption and are caught in a system of paid work. Nature provides us with the frame of reference of how our life should be but, as we have ignored this framework for so long, we now have to put emphasis on re-establishing our mutual connection and respect with Mother Nature and nurse her back to health. Quotes along these lines, as well as the repetitive activity that garbage gathering is, may give the impression of an almost meditative exercise that has a touch of self-imposed penance. However, the group was successful at turning these gatherings into fun activities and soon broadened their set of activities. They started organizing workshops concerned with sustainable ways of living, such as how to compost, how to garden, how to combine individual with planetary health and so on. By framing the activities in a fun, light way, by leaving the door open for new people, and by joining forces with other groups, they spread knowledge and collective learning about human–nature entanglements and reformed local notions about care and responsibility.

It was striking, however, that those who were taking up responsibility were primarily women. Our initial interpretation was that this was due to pragmatism: in many Chilean families, fathers work outside the home, which makes their schedules much less flexible for other activities. The hypothesis that mothers feel responsible for Mother Nature because of the shared mother role was received as a beautiful, coherent motive for these activities by our informants, but was not voiced by themselves. Rather, the reason that came up frequently was, surprisingly, force of habit. One female informant explained: “I don’t think that it has much to do with the fact that many women don’t work outside the home. I think women have always done this type of work, looking after others and after the home”. Another woman went more into detail: “The women who grew up in rural areas in this region may talk of an idyllic childhood, climbing trees and all that. But really, their childhood (including my own) was interrupted by the responsibilities of rural life [much more than that of boys]”. The essence of these quotes is that from early childhood, women have to carry out care work, so they are attuned to doing this in all situations. In rural areas, women often become mothers quite early, so responsibilities, care and motherhood often eclipse all other facets of such biographies.

Even where women are in paid work, their work often revolves around caring tasks such as teachers, nannies and housekeepers. A different, less obvious and stereotypical example was given by Javi, a young woman who was the deputy public relations manager of Celco at the time of the interview: “We have 350 people working here at the plant [most are male]. We have another about 400 truckdrivers who come and go several times a day [all male with one exception]. And in the nursery garden we have about 300 women who take care of the seedlings”. The huge local nursery garden mainly produces trees for reforestation but there is also a small department that cultivates native trees from seeds that rangers find in the forests bordering the monocultures. As the native species have trouble reproducing on their own, especially when close to monocultures, these seeds are given the optimal conditions for growth in the nursery garden before being transferred

back to their place of origin once they are strong enough, a process which takes several years of intensive care. The person who heads this department is a young professionally trained agronomist. She pointed out that the six women working under her to care for the native species' "tree babies" are untrained workers that are in some ways far more skilled than herself. "They don't see the trees as a mass product for the industry. They understand that they are living organisms with needs". While she meticulously cleans and geotags the seeds upon arrival, she prefers to leave the actual care work to these tree keepers, whom she describes as older, motherly women who absolutely excel at caring for the plants. She told the anecdote of how she wanted to throw out one tree she believed had died when one of the women, who had been working in the nursery garden for almost 20 years, urged her not to do so: "Let it be. I tell you it is alive!" Being rather new in this management role, she did not want to appear too bossy so—without any expectations—she let the tree be. A week later, it had recovered. Apart from being a nice anecdote about inter-species care and understanding, it is another example of how women take the role of dedicated caretakers upon themselves when it comes to nurturing nature.

When picking up garbage on Sundays with Eco Mauchos, there were always many more women than men, with the exception of the representative figures. This was especially striking because, in conversations between the individuals, gender equality was part of the regularly discussed progressive topic-mix. Similar observations were also made explicit by a young woman working for the newly formed recycling company Hilo Verde (meaning green thread). While accompanying her on educational home visits about separating and recycling home waste, she commented that almost all the people who had signed themselves or their families up were woman—and during the eight home visits we made together we did not talk to a single man. Many informants voiced that, besides the "force-of-habit" argument, another reason for this preoccupation with Mother Nature's wellbeing must be grounded in many men's insensitivity to their surroundings—like when Alejandra's brother wanted to transport the poles. The topic of sensitivities (*sensibilidades*) came up often and our informants insisted that it is not so much a biological given that men are less "sensitive" or "attentive" than women, but rather "a missed chance to cultivate this sensitivity". It is for this reason that almost all initiatives in Constitución try to work with families and young children in an attempt to break this cycle. One informant mentioned a conversation she had with a group of friends, all of them mothers, concerning sensitivity, fears and perceptions: "I told them that since I became a mum [16 years earlier], I feel physically more sensitive. And emotionally and psychologically as well; attuned to my children's needs. This is why mothers need to have more of a say: because we know how to identify what is really important, what needs to be changed!" Another informant also mentioned that she prefers to work with women/mothers, because they are more "permeable", in the sense that she perceives them as more open-minded, and they have the power to "potentiate" the issue: "If you conquer a mother's mind, your chances are good that whatever you are teaching the kids will continue at home as well". The quotes show that the gender performances observed in Constitución are entangled with the shift in spirituality and a search for new ways of life. It is interesting how this revolution of minds starts from a position where many women recognize and claim their power through their traditional roles rather than rejecting them. Through their care work, our informants—including men—celebrated traits commonly ascribed to the feminine, such as being "sweet", "caring" and "sensitive". Rather than striving for emancipation by blending in with the male stereotype, they wish to stop labelling certain traits as male or female and also advocate for everyone to become more attentive, sensitive and caring.

The mental and manual care work is a search and one that is, if we zoom out, a search for a future on a depleted planet. Especially our female informants had explored aspects of the Mapuche belief system and culture and incorporated these in their ways of thinking and acting. Those who had tried to immerse themselves in Mapuche culture perceived that there was more room for mystical and cyclical thinking. One informant mentioned menstruation as an example that used to be (and probably still is for many people) a taboo

topic, almost a flaw of the feminine. Within this context of exploring the Indigenous belief system, the image of menstruation changed into almost a matter of pride: “It has to do with the mythology of the moon, the changes of moon, sun and the tides of the sea”. Within a paradigm, where holistic and cyclical thinking is the basis of everything, there is room to interpret monthly hormonal changes as what they are: an important part of nature, a sign of fertility, a female power.

Another example was provided by the environmental education teacher, Rosa. She not only provides environmental education; she has also founded the environmental center “Mon Mapu” (meaning fertile land in Mapudungún) and tries to live her life as “cyclically” as possible. By this, she means reusing material, composting organic waste, harvesting in a respectful manner and much more. She explained that she had seen a documentary about how Mapuche communities harvest fruit from the Maqui tree, a spiritually important endemic tree. The whole community comes together and holds baskets under a tree while one person shakes the tree. They collect what they can and leave the rest on the tree for birds and other animals because they are aware that those other organisms need food as well, and the Maqui tree needs the birds for successful reproduction by carrying the seeds to other parts of the forest. This form of “being with Nature and considering other beings too” is what she has learnt from Mapuche culture and what she teaches in her classes at Mon Mapu. Another informant, also without any Mapuche ancestry, named her crafting workshop and massage practice “Newen” (meaning energy or strength in Mapudungún). She calls traditional plants by their Mapuche names when she offers homemade teas to her clients and proudly self-identifies as a witch or shaman. She has great respect for Machis (traditional Mapuche healers) who are spiritually chosen and undergo training in their community.

This respect for, and falling back on, holistic thinking that prevails in Mapuche culture can also be seen in the other stewardship actions carried out in Constitución, albeit in a less explicit manner (Galdámez Zelada and Millaleo Hernández 2020). The Mapuche culture, which has been oppressed and devalued for many decades by the Chilean state and its general societal ideology, constitutes an indigenous belief system that, in part due to its locally rooted origin, seemed to offer many of our informants an alternative way of seeing and thinking about Mother Nature (Galdámez Zelada and Millaleo Hernández 2020). The fact that their knowledge of the Mapuche worldview was often rudimentary and/or romanticized is not overly relevant—the work of worlding, of building a new thought structure and a new way of connecting to Mother Nature, is a work of trial and error, of creativity, and mental flexibility. This is in line with how Mickey (2020) views spiritual ecology: “There is something provocative and transformative associated with spirituality, calling to mind experiential and experimental ways of life”.

In all these stories, we see how our informants in Constitución yearn for a connection with Mother Nature that they consider just and meaningful. They work to establish this connection through actions of care towards Mother Nature. The active search for feeling connected to a god, or in this case, to Mother Nature, through exploring Andean indigenous belief systems and Mapuche culture as possible frames of reference, can be considered as spiritual work. The conscious shaping of a spiritual ecology through environmental stewardship actions is also a quest for an all-encompassing social justice. It may seem counterintuitive that women, who often struggle for greater gender equality especially within the domain of care work, are so active in this environmental care movement. On the one hand, it could be a group of women who carry out care work towards Nature out of conscientiousness—because someone has to do it. On the other hand, we would like to propose an interpretation that brings together the emancipatory ideas of our informants with the observed, and seemingly traditional, enactment of gender roles. If care and stewardship is about social injustice (Coulter 2016), then caring for Mother Nature could be seen as empowerment and solidarity. This relates to the ideas linked by Harris (2011a, 2011b, 2016) to the term “ecowomanism”, which stresses the importance of social justice and religious meaning-making in thinking about and reflecting upon women’s

interconnectedness to the earth. Women (and some men) come together to care for and protect another woman—Mother Nature. In doing so, they create a new worldview for themselves, which has equality, justice and care at its core, that extends to Mother Nature and other life forms. Richards (2003, p. 250) also argues that Latin American feminism has traditionally been striving for the recognition of “domestic and maternal virtues”—in other words, women want to be more empowered within their role as women.

6. Discussion and Conclusions: Towards an Entangled Relationship with Mother Nature

In this article, we set out to investigate narratives about the divergent worlds of human–nature relations at the intersection of spirituality, environmental care and gender roles in the aftermath of compounding crises. Adopting a kaleidoscopic approach, we explored the partial connections of different worldviews and cosmologies and the entanglements of social-ecological dynamics in the Chilean town of Constitución. As a place with visible contrasts, Constitución is a town where different worldviews sometimes collide, for example, when environmental activists meet *Celco* officials. However, our focus was on the much less confrontational activities of our consciously active informants, who are in search of a worldview that includes Mother Nature’s wellbeing and tries to confront and solve various environmental problems they perceive locally, as well as nationally and globally. This mental work, sparked by the town’s compounding crises, creates the basis for a locally grounded spiritual ecology (Mickey 2020): our informants want to feel connected to and in tune with Mother Nature and all the beings she encompasses. To establish and express this spiritual connection, they engage in a range of stewardship activities or, more concretely, in care work. Through this care work they repeatedly twist the kaleidoscope to create new patterns. The search for the perfect pattern (which may not even exist) is by no means over, but rather an ongoing process of trial and error that involves mental and emotional engagement. The central question underpinning this article is: how do people in Constitución provide meaning to the changing natural environment and engage in activities to care for Mother Nature? The answer to this question has two components: one responding to ontological processes of meaning making, and one responding to the latter part about engagement and care work.

In terms of meaning making, it should be noted that people engage in meaning making all the time, mostly without even noticing. What makes Constitución especially interesting is that most of our informants find themselves in a process of actively and consciously morphing a new worldview or cosmology, as a way to survive in an area struck by natural disasters. This search was fueled by compounding crises and is carried out in a very pragmatic manner. People draw on elements of different local ontologies and ways of living, leading to a locally grounded (though developed within the global climate change discourse) creative and pragmatic ontology. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope illustrates very well how these different elements can be combined into something new. It also underlines the agency of the people in search of a new worldview that underpins their trajectory towards social and environmental justice and the process of trial and error in finding a beautiful pattern. By adopting this approach, we aim to provide some impetus to rethinking contemporary debates on human–nature entanglement, especially in post-colonial Andean towns that are confronted directly and indirectly with anthropocentric activities, such as deforestation and forest fires, and also with the recurrent forces of nature, such as earthquakes, droughts and tsunamis.

As a way to interpret and answer the meaning-making part of our central question, we introduce the concept of “Andean performative pragmatism”, which we borrow in part from Blaser (2019). Blaser (2019) introduced the term “Indigenous performative pragmatism”, which further builds on the ideas behind Pratt’s (2002) “native pragmatism” label. In using the term indigenous, Blaser refers to the experiential grounding of ontologies in emplaced collectives in contrast to universalism. By introducing the term Andean, in place of Indigenous, we refer to a specific blending of ontologies, one that is typical of

the Andean region—neither purely indigenous, nor colonial, nor post-colonial. With this reference to a specific place or region, within which similar place-making processes take place, we emphasize that it is not a universal process but rather the result of the dialectics between a place-world and universal discourses, such as the climate change debate. Andean pragmatism as a concept allows a creative combination of various perspectives or ontological assumptions about human–nature entanglements that lie on the broad spectrum ranging from over- to under-socialized accounts⁶ (Granovetter 1973, 1992). The idea of Andean pragmatism also gives room for a rather free combination of various worldviews and cosmologies such as, in the case of Constitución, Roman Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism, Mapuche beliefs and other types of spirituality. These normative orientations of people can be co-jointly used to frame people’s actions towards and interactions with the biophysical nature and/or Mother Nature. Instead of “assuming that different stories have to compete to see which one is true or to see who can explain (away) the other, the stories are assumed to have local validity” (Blaser 2019, p. 90).

At first sight, Constitución seemed to be a place with dualistic perspectives on nature, very much along the lines of over-socialized and under-socialized accounts. However, on closer inspection, it is a place where human–nature entanglements are extremely visible and, every once in a while, its population is firmly reminded of that. It is within this complex setting that our informants seek to combine worlds once considered unconnected and incompatible. Through collective engagement in conscious caring activities, people try to reconcile these complexities while rekindling their spiritual connection to Mother Nature.

This environmental stewardship, as a way to take better care of Mother Nature, is a growing phenomenon. The fact that so many people already participate in such activities in such a visible way, while apparently enjoying themselves, seems to have had a triggering effect on other people. Interestingly, a majority of these stewards are women, and most of the newest recruits are women as well. In Constitución, we see this overrepresentation of women as them striving for social justice and solidarity with Mother Nature. Some of the women carry out practices typical of activists and framed by Mapuche spirituality, terms, and symbols. As such, it is Andean pragmatism in the creation of a locally grounded spiritual ecology in combination with the performance of care work towards Mother Nature that characterizes the socio-ecological changes observed in Constitución. The activist methods that we encountered during our fieldwork can be captured by the concept of “ecowomanism” (Harris 2011a, 2011b, 2016) that stresses the necessity to focus on issues of social justice and religious meaning-making concerning the earth. The concept of ecowomanism does not only bring together the core topics of this article—human–nature relatedness, gender and religion—it is also useful for recognizing the systematic violence rooted in theologies and histories that must be carefully re-interpreted and perhaps dismantled in order to act more justly (Harris 2016, p. 12). One such element of systematic violence is the idea of dominance and superiority, over nature as well as women, found in the patriarchal Catholicism that was brought to Constitución centuries ago. The increased activity of women in stewardship activities in Constitución and their partial adoption of Andean cosmologies may very well be an attempt to promote justice for Mother Nature as well as a striving for greater gender equality.

In addition, building upon ecofeminist and ecowomanist approaches, Mohai (1992) and Van Liere and Dunlap (1980) argue that women do more nurturing and caring work (in the home as well as in their jobs) than men, and as such, they are socialized to value cooperation and concern for others. This implies that women have a stronger “ethic of care” orientation “by being considerably more nurturing, compassionate and concerned with the needs of other” (Hechaviarria 2016, p. 143). Research has shown that women are more concerned about environmental issues and inclined to show more environmentally oriented behavior than men (see, for example, Mohai 1992; Davidson and Freudenburg 1996; Blocker and Eckberg 1997; Zelezny et al. 2000; Rickinson 2001; Dietz et al. 2002; Tindall et al. 2003; Burn et al. 2012). This is very much in line with our findings that women are more closely attuned to nature, most likely because their roles place greater value on

sharing, cooperation and emotional support. To conclude, the divergent worlds of the people of Constitución and their striving to re-entangle with Mother Nature is the result of Andean performative pragmatism. We interpret the overrepresentation of woman within the group of people who care for Mother Nature not as a return to traditional gender roles, but rather through an ecowomanist perspective that sees not only a greater role for women in sharing and caring but also, and maybe more importantly, in the creation of social justice. Thus, the entanglement of the people in Constitución with Mother Nature lies at the intersection of the inextricably linked relationships between a changing natural environment, a search for spirituality and the reinterpretation of gender notions. As such Mother Nature has triggered a shift, through a series of ironic twists, in the way she is cared for, while, at the same time, being the result of this care work.

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Notes

- ¹ All the informants in this article have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.
- ² As an example of the forestry industry, an equality report on the “Corporación Chilena de la Madera” from 2021 shows that 13.5% of employees are women. However, this includes administrative jobs in forestry companies as well as university-qualified engineering or development jobs within these companies. During fieldwork in the plantations, we observed almost exclusively male workers and mechanics working in harvesting, transporting and replanting trees, tasks which all require heavy machinery and brute force (<https://www.corma.cl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Reporte-Mujer-Forestal.pdf>, accessed on 5 January 2022).
- ³ Neoliberalism in Latin America, known as “market reforms”, started in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s and spilled over to all the other countries of the continent (except Cuba) in the two decades afterwards. Neoliberalism comprised the introduction of a series of structural reform measures, such as liberalisation of trade and capital flows, privatisation of state assets, deregulation and free markets, and labour reforms, with the intention to reduce the role of the state in the economy, assign a larger role to markets, and create macro-economic stability (Escobar 2010). Today, neoliberalism is deep-rooted in Latin America, especially in Chile, where neoliberal policies were brutally installed after the military coup of 1973. For further reading on Latin American neoliberalism, we suggest Rodríguez (2021).
- ⁴ A more accurate word for this landscape is “plantation”. However, the locals, even those working professionally in the timber industry, use the Spanish word “bosque”, meaning “forest”. People know the difference, yet still opt for using this wording. This indicates an interesting shift of standards: in colloquial language, the diverse ecosystem that a forest constitutes is being reduced to growing trees, describing the biodiversity-impovertised ecosystem of a plantation. Only a very few people use the word “monocultivos” (monoculture plantation) rather than forest. Those are generally among the most active caretakers of Mother Nature.
- ⁵ This has been especially encouraged by the second encyclical of Pope Francis *Laudatio si’* (Praise be to you), with the subtitle “on care for our common home” that appeared at 25 May 2015. In this encyclical, the pope literally referred to Mother Earth by quoting Francis of Assisi: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs (Pope Francis 2015, p. 3)”. He critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming and appeals to all people in the world to take “swift and unified global action” to take better care of Mother Earth of which we have forgotten that we are part of: “our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters (Pope Francis 2015, pp. 3–4)”.
- ⁶ “Under-socialised” accounts of nature consider Mother Nature to be the all-embracing whole in which humans make up just a small part. “Over-socialised” accounts perceive humans to be disconnected from nature and, as the most powerful agent, at best preserve nature or else exploit it.

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