

# Pluriversal Politics



*The Real  
and the Possible*

Arturo  
Escobar

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*The Real and the Possible*

Arturo  
Escobar

TRANSLATED BY DAVID FRYE

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Duke University Press Durham and London 2020

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞  
Designed by Drew Sisk  
Typeset in Portrait Text by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Escobar, Arturo, [date] author.

Title: Pluriversal politics : the real and the possible /  
Arturo Escobar ; translated by David Frye.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2020. | Series:  
Latin America in translation | Includes bibliographical  
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019032508 (print) | LCCN 2019032509 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478007937 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478008460 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478012108 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Latin America—Politics and government—  
21st century. | Political culture—Latin America. | Indigenous  
peoples—Latin America—Politics and government.

Classification: LCC F1414.3 .E8413 2020 (print) |

LCC F1414.3 (ebook) | DDC 980.04/1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032508>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032509>

Cover art: Angie Vanessita, *Derechos de la Naturaleza*,  
digital image, 2015.

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*To all those groups engaged in the defense of the pluriverse, particularly to Native peoples worldwide for their historical cosmologies of intimacy with the Earth; to all the women who resist masculinist modes of living, for nurturing relational worlds of care in everyday life; to the Palestinian people, for their tenacious struggle against occupation and their determined resistance against colonialist one-worldism; and to the Earth itself—soil, plant, animal, water, air, spirit—in reverence and trust.*

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Most of these essays were written in the manner of the Latin American style of *ensayo*. Ensayos reflect salient intellectual-political debates of the moment. This does not mean that they deal with fleeting or inconsequential matters. On the contrary, at acute conjunctures such as the past two decades, often characterized in terms of a turn to the left from 1998 to 2015, followed by a vengeful return to the right in recent years, the essay form provides avenues to infuse the debates of the moment with new energy, orientation, or contents. These debates might refer to long-standing preoccupations, such as Latin American identities; the questions of development and modernity; the continent's insertion into global divisions of labor; or that always recurring question in intellectual-political debates, namely, the relation between theory and practice, or praxis. The ensayos might also help bring to light emerging concepts, such as pluriversality, autonomy, communality, and civilizational transitions, the main notions with which this volume deals. Essays of this sort are often free-flowing and as such are exempted from following rigorous academic convention, even if they might be implicitly or explicitly infused with scholarly considerations, as is the case with the chapters that follow. By presenting these texts to an academic audience in the English-speaking world, I ask readers to exercise a measure of epistemic pluralism.<sup>1</sup>

Taken as a whole, the essays convey the following proposition: that realities are plural and always in the making, and that this has profound political consequences. The very concept of world, as in the World Social Forum slogan "Another world is possible," has become more radically pluralized, none the less by social movements mobilizing against large-scale extractive operations in defense of their territories as veritable worlds where life is lived according to principles that differ significantly from those of the global juggernaut unleashed on them. If worlds are multiple, then the possible must also be multiple. This insight crystallized for me one day with the phrase that served as the title for the Spanish edition of this book, *another possible is possible*. Simply put, as I state in the introduction, another world is possible because another real and another possible are possible. That other world is a world where many worlds fit, or the pluriverse. By breaking with conventional premises of the real and the possible, the essays locate politics at this very level.



More than proscriptive, predictive, normative, or even diagnostic, the texts that follow are meant to provide a political horizon in the sense of offering tools for thinking about what to do in the face of the multipronged planetary crisis. They are meant to open paths for personal and collective action in this conjuncture. At the same time, it is important to clarify that the suggested paths are not the only conceivable ones regarding the ongoing devastation, seemingly without end in sight, brought about by predatory global capitalism and its generalized mode of expulsion (Sassen 2014). I specify the contours of such a political horizon only broadly, in terms of a set of axes and principles for personal and collective action (listed at the end of chapter 1), which are far from being a road map to follow. Even more, here and there I insist that each person, group, or community has to find its own way to engage with these axes, such as the relocalization of activities, the recommonalization of social life, and the depatriarchalization and decolonization of existence, in ways appropriate to their own location.

While the volume is indeed a collection of essays, it is also more than that. Its productivity should not be gauged primarily in terms of a more or less cogent theoretical framing, to be developed and expounded throughout the various chapters, as would be the case with a standard academic or modernist text (even if some theoretical coherence is present, especially in relation to the field of political ontology). Rather, the book should be assessed by the extent to which it succeeds in opening up the collective imagination to the idea that a certain kind of politics, an ontological politics toward the pluriverse, is indeed gaining ground in many world settings today. Its value and objective, then, are more prefigurative or annunciatory, if you wish. As the anthropologist Charles Hale put it, the book's main function "is not to analyze compelling problems, develop new theory, or offer a proscriptive program for what is to be done, but rather, to convince the reader to open his or her mind/emotion ontologically, to soak in the energy of so many others in distinct realms who have done so, and especially, to take inspiration from those who are putting those alternatives into practice."<sup>2</sup> Even if I am talking about a proposal to rethink politics for and from Latin America, grounded at its margins, the call *to imagine possibility differently* should resonate with all those who question the hegemonic possible, within which a world of many worlds is impossible. By reflecting on the tools and concepts being developed by social movements and activist-intellectuals south of the border, I hope to suggest other ways to think about the possible and the real and to resist the hegemonic operation positing one world, one real, and one possible, while making visible the myriad instances that this operation considers "nothing" or "impossible."

## Multiple Reals and Possibles as a Description of the Current Conjuncture

I am interested, in the spirit of cultural studies, in telling a better story in relation to the current conjuncture. As Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg, the most adept practitioners of conjuncturalism, say, the articulation of the conjuncture requires a certain level of abstraction, aimed at making visible sites for effective political intervention. Such analyses are necessarily situated and contested, which explains why past conjunctural analyses, whether in the Marxist or non-Marxist traditions, have often been found to be wrong, flawed, or insufficient. The level of abstraction has to navigate between identifying the salient features of the moment (e.g., environmental crisis, skyrocketing inequality, heightened racism and xenophobia), on the one hand, and their relation to the *longue durée* of the epoch (e.g., heteropatriarchy, capitalism, coloniality, modernity, racism, Western civilization, or what have you), on the other. Given the complexity, contingency, and instability of any social context, the task is daunting. I do not pretend to have done any better in the pages that follow, beyond pointing at a set of concepts, arising from a number of social movements, on the one hand, and from academic trends around what has been called the ontological turn, on the other, that help us better to understand today's context. Grossberg refers to this feature of cultural analysis as "radical contextuality" (Grossberg, 2010, 2018, 2019).

The larger context for the essays is what in the tradition of Gramsci and Hall is called an organic crisis, a relatively rare occurrence. I refer to it as planetary crisis, civilizational crisis, or a crisis of climate, energy, poverty and inequality, and meaning. By adding meaning, I want to direct our attention to aspects of the crisis that have to deal with a host of formerly unaccented aspects, including ways of being, knowing, and doing (ontology); spirituality; identities; and culture, emotions, and desires. Conjunctural analysis would investigate the particular forces and sites of tension, antagonism, and contradictions at which this type of crisis manifests itself, and how they are, and might be, variously articulated by diverse political forces, whether of the Right, the Left, or emergent ones. It would also illuminate the spaces within which a counterhegemonic struggle might emerge. The most accomplished climate justice activists, such as Vandana Shiva, Naomi Klein, Patrick Bond, Nnimmo Bassey, and Joan Martínez-Alier, couch the climate crisis in similar ways, perhaps best exemplified by Klein's motto (2014) "This changes everything." In doing so, they articulate climate change as a crisis of global capitalism. Sometimes I extend Klein's title to imply that "everything needs to change," echo-

ing a parallel, but somewhat distinct, collective effort at rearticulating global warming not only as a capitalist crisis but also as a crisis within modernity, that is, as related to a particular ontology or mode of being in the world.

I hope to have shown that, faced with a genuine crisis of our modes of existence in the world, we can credibly constitute the conjuncture as a struggle over a new reality, what might be called the pluriverse, and over the designs for the pluriverse (Escobar 2018). I situate my reading of the conjuncture within a set of dominant diagrams that go beyond capitalism and that in the parlance of Latin American critical theory today are referred to as the heteropatriarchal capitalist modern/colonial world system. This system structures our historical ontology as modern subjects. My main source of inspiration comes from activists of social movements who can be construed as problematizing such ontology as they mobilize in defense of their territories, worlds, and modes of existing. I draw chiefly from some Afro-Colombian and indigenous movements from the Colombian southwest. Their statements, and those by activists from similar movements, constitute the main archive of this volume's essays.

As in previous works, however (e.g., Escobar 2008, 2014b, 2018), I set this archive in conversation with academic trends focused on similar questions. I also show the limitations of contemporary social theory to advance our understanding of the crisis as a crisis of a particular civilizational model, coupled with recent attempts at moving beyond this impasse. The latter is the epistemic dimension of the argument, treated at some length in several of the chapters (e.g., chapters 3, 4, 5). Shifting the episteme of the modern social sciences, which I argue is deeply indebted to ontological dualisms, toward a post-Enlightenment configuration of knowledge forms should be one of the goals of academic cultural politics on a pluriversal register. Finally, I discuss how the active critical stance by movement activists summons us, personally and collectively, into a politics and ethics of interdependence and care as the paths for ushering in worlds and knowledges otherwise less shaped by axes of domination.

### Some Tensions and Open Questions

In thinking about providing a context for English-speaking readers, I decided to focus on the relevance of pluriversal politics in Latin America from two vantage points: its relation to more established and well-known forms of politics, and the possibility of such politics taking place beyond Latin America, particularly in the United States.<sup>3</sup> I will explore these questions by thinking about the tensions between what, as a shorthand, I will call modernist and

ontological politics, or universal and pluriversal politics. I should make clear from the outset that I side decidedly with the kinds of politics that defend a deeply relational understanding of life, particularly through the reweaving of the communal basis of social life, as opposed to the objectifying understanding of life, prevalent in patriarchal capitalist modern settings, as made up of separate, albeit interacting, entities and actions. While the former nondualist ontologies are at times resistant to heteropatriarchal and racist colonial capitalism, the latter have gone along, historically, with systems of domination based on hierarchy, control, violence, and war (e.g., Escobar 2018; Maturana and Verden-Zöllner 1993, 2008; Segato 2016; von Werlhof 2011, 2015). In Latin America, the dominant strategies of doing away with, or at least neutralizing, difference (despite their violence) have not done away with the multiplicity of ways of worlding. This multiplicity finds expression today in the inability of established modern categories to define fully what is at stake in social struggles and conflicts. This is why the reemergence of multiple worlds in Latin America and the Caribbean makes the region a particularly fertile ground for articulating and advancing pluriversal proposals in both scholarly and activist worlds.

Let me introduce the notion of radical relationality. It refers to the fact that all entities that make up the world are so deeply interrelated that they have no intrinsic, separate existence by themselves. Modern epistemology grants entities a separate existence, thanks to the foundational premises of the separation between subject and object, mind and body, nature and humanity, reason and emotion, facts and values, us and them, and so forth. Ontological politics destabilize these dualisms. In both activist and scholarly domains, the challenge to the modernist separation between humans and nonhumans occupies an especially relevant place. The field of political ontology actually focuses on the analysis of environmental conflicts as ontological conflicts involving contrasting configurations of the human/nonhuman relation. As Marisol de la Cadena (2015) and Mario Blaser (2010, 2013; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) have shown, much in indigenous worlds does not abide by the divide between humans and nonhumans, even if the divide is also present in many of their practices. The question thus arises of how to understand worlds that clearly live partly outside the separation between nature and humanity but also live with it, ignore it, are affected by it, use it strategically, and reject it—all at the same time. That they thus defend mountains or lakes against large-scale mining on the basis that they are “sentient beings” or “sacred entities” (our modern translation) calls for an ontological perspective that avoids translating them into “beliefs” concerning mere objects or independently existing things (see chapter 1; Escobar 2018).

For ease of exposition, allow me to distinguish between ontological politics proper, namely, those forms of politics that explicitly or implicitly draw on radical relationality, and modernist politics, which take for granted the ontology of separation. I should stress, however, that strictly speaking all forms of politics are ontological in that they all involve an ontological dimension: they have implications for what counts as real, for modes of existence, and for adjudicating ethical or nonethical action.<sup>4</sup> All forms of politics are relational, yet differently so. I sometimes use a heuristic to distinguish between “weak relationality” and “strong relationality.” In the former, characteristic of modernist politics, entities are first assumed to be ontologically separate; then they are reunited through some sort of connection, such as a “network,” but even when this is done, it is clear that the entities, now found to be related, preexist the connection. More importantly, modernist forms of politics stem from ontologies that are deeply embedded in the negation of the full humanity of multiple others and the nonhuman, and this has to be taken seriously into account when considering them as strategies for action. In radical ontological politics, by contrast, there are no intrinsically existing entities to be found, since nothing preexists the relations that constitute it; in other words, reality is relational through and through. Throughout the book, the reader will find ample instances of such nondualist ontologies and their corresponding pluriversal forms of politics.

I would like here first to examine the relations between pluriversal politics, on the one hand, and modernist forms of politics intended to effect progressive social change, on the other; following from that is a second issue, that of the relation between pluriversal politics and the Left. Together, these two issues raise a key question: do moderns have a role in ontological politics toward the pluriverse, on their own or alongside those explicitly advancing such politics? A third persistent question concerns the viability of ontological politics in actually existing communities. How prevalent and effective is this sort of relational and pluriversal politics, especially when compared with more established political strategies? Hereafter, I rehearse two contrasting answers to these questions. While the first set envisions the possibility of effective bridges between the various kinds of politics, the second, largely drawn from a trend in African American radical thought known as Afro-pessimism, is skeptical of such a possibility. My hope is that my comments will help readers to articulate their own sense of the relation between pluriversal and modernist politics.

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## On the Possibility of Articulating Ontological and Modernist Forms of Politics

Can modernist politics contribute to fostering a pluriversal politics? This seems to be a key issue related to ontological politics, and it takes several forms, all of them important. Can modernist forms of politics aimed at fostering radical social change (say, in relation to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism) be effective in resisting social injustices, potentially in tandem with pluriversal forms of politics? Or are they necessarily at odds? Do not the very people engaging in pluriversal ontological politics, such as those defending communal and autonomous worlds, also participate in modernist politics, for example, vis-à-vis the state? Can we moderns play a role in the politics of the pluriverse? While I do provide some partial answers to these questions in this volume, and in other recent books (2014b, 2018), given their recurrence, I would like to offer some brief additional comments. I do not think there is a way to settle this dispute once and for all; it will remain an open question.

### *Ontological Politics as Pluriversal Politics*

Let me start with a straightforward statement: I believe multiple ways exist for those of us who operate on the basis of modernist politics to contribute to pluriversal politics even if not embracing ontological politics explicitly—for instance, modernist struggles for economic democratization, for depatriarchalization and the end of racism and homophobia, for environmental justice, and academic critiques. A substantial amount of resistance to injustices and inequities fits the bill. That said, it is also important to recognize that many modernist forms of politics are counterproductive in relation to pluriversal politics; they reproduce and strengthen, rather than undermine, the modernist ontology of separation from which they stem. This is especially the case with liberal forms.

Adapting a broad typology of forms of politics drawn from the field of international development (explained in chapter 6), I would propose a three-layered characterization to sort out and evaluate the field of political strategies.

The first layer comprises political strategies and designs conducted *in the name of progress and the improvement of people's conditions*; these are the standard biopolitical liberal forms of design and politics, such as those by most neoliberal governments, the World Bank, and mainstream NGOs. They take for granted the dominant world (in terms of markets, individual actions, productivity, competitiveness, the need for economic growth, etc.); taken as a whole,

they can only reinforce the universals of modernity and their accompanying capitalist institutions with their strategies of domination, control, violence, and war; they are inimical to pluriversal politics.

The second layer comprises political strategies and designs *for social justice*: this is the kind of politics practiced with the intention of fostering greater social justice and environmental sustainability; it embraces human rights (including gender, sexual, and ethnic diversity), environmental justice, the reduction of inequality, direct alliances with social movements, and so forth. Some progressive development NGOs, such as Oxfam, and a number of social movements, might serve as a paradigm for this second trajectory. In principle, these forms of politics may contribute to pluriversal politics, especially if they are pushed toward the third trajectory.

The third option would be pluriversal politics proper, or political strategies and designs *for pluriversal transitions*. Those practicing this option would engage in ontological politics from the perspective of radical interdependence. In doing so, they would go beyond the binary of modernist and pluriversal politics, engaging all forms of politics in the same, though diverse, movement for civilizational transitions through meshworks of autonomous collectives and communities from both the Global North and the Global South.<sup>5</sup> No readily available models exist for this third kind of politics, although it is the subject of active experimentation by many social struggles at present. How these kinds of politics might initiate rhizomatic expansions from below, effectively relativizing modernity's universal ontology and the imaginary of one world that it actively produces, is an open question in contemporary social theory and activist debates.

Let me underscore that many activists and groups move in and out of the three types of politics just outlined. Even highly politicized social movements, such as those by ethnic, peasant, and urban marginal groups, engage in actions and critiques that can easily be qualified as modernist—for instance, in their critiques of inequality, corruption, and dispossession in the name of rights, culture, access to land and public services, and so forth. Readers will recognize such instances in the statements by some of the Afro-descendant and indigenous actors featured in the various chapters. In this way, their practice could be described as modernist, Left, and pluriversal at the same time. At their best, they engage in the interplay of politics from the perspective of their autonomy and through collective decision-making processes. I do not want to suggest, however, that all resistance by these groups is explicitly ontological or pluriversal.

Those committed to one or another form of leftist politics and alternative modernity can usefully consider the following questions, among others: What habitual forms of knowing, being, and doing does a given strategy contrib-

ute to challenge, destabilize, or transform? For instance, does the strategy or practice in question help us in the journey of deindividualization and toward recomunalization? Does it contribute to bringing about more local forms of economy that might, in turn, provide elements for designing the infrastructures needed for a responsible ethics of interexistence and the deep acceptance of radical difference? Does it make us more responsive to the notions of multiple reals and a world where many worlds fit? Does this shift encourage us to entertain other notions of the possible, significantly different from those on offer by capitalism, the state, the media, and most expert institutions? To what extent do our efforts to depatriarchalize and decolonize society move along the lines of liberating the Earth and weaving the pluriverse effectively with others, human and not?

The fact is that we all live within the Earth as pluriverse; we weave the pluriverse together with every existing being through our daily practices. We are all summoned to the task of repairing the Earth and the pluriverse, one stitch at a time, one design at a time, one loop at a time, so to speak (Escobar 2018). Some of our stitches and loops will likely contribute to the web of relations that sustain life, others less so or not at all. Our collective weaving of *a place*, including a form of habitation, is a major part of it. We are summoned by place into entanglements with each other and with nonhumans, whether in conflict or cooperation or both, as all of us, willy-nilly, live in coexistence with multiple others through intricate relations that define our very way of being, even if most often we imagine those relations as weak links from which we can easily disassociate ourselves. As the geographers Soren Larsen and Jay Johnson (2017) put it in their work on the contested nature of places and landscapes in which Native and non-Native peoples coexist, this confers on place a political and spiritual dimension, which I believe can and needs to be struggled over in urban territories as well (Escobar 2019).

This agency of place and the pluriverse—that they call us into coexistence with others—suggests that pluriversal politics itself involves an entanglement of forms, inhabiting a spectrum from the radically relational to the modernist liberal, and that we are all, ineluctably, part of it. Seen this way, the seemingly firm boundaries between the Global North and the Global South, and between what might be considered modern or not, weaken significantly and, eventually, begin to dissolve. Succinctly put, the struggle to reinhabit the pluriverse is everyone's. As we will learn from the Nasa indigenous movement in Colombia (chapter 3), we are all thrust into the liberation of Mother Earth from whichever place and position we happen to occupy, for as long as Earth is enslaved, as the Nasa argue, so are all living beings.



*Pluriversal Politics and the Left*

A second important question is that of the relation between ontological politics and the Left. The election of Hugo Chávez as president of Venezuela in December 1998 inaugurated a period of progressive governments in the continent that lasted until about 2015, when a turn to the right again manifested in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, among others. According to the United Nations, the progressive governments accomplished noticeable reductions in poverty and modest reductions in inequality. However, their policies were based on utterly conventional development strategies, modernizing to their core, organized around the extraction of natural resources. For some observers, despite the reported accomplishments, these experiences demonstrated the limitations of achieving significant transformations within any modernizing Left framework (see Escobar 2010 for a review).

It might be the case, however, that taken as a whole, modernist-leftist policies create less inimical conditions for pluriversal politics than neoliberal right-wing regimes, which, in Latin America at least, are often bent on brutally crushing any form of dissent and resistance. Mexico and Colombia are, sadly, notorious cases in this regard. Pluriversal and leftist politics could be mutually enabling, though this convergence cannot be taken for granted, as exemplified by the repression of environmentalist and indigenous organizations in Ecuador and Bolivia under their respective Left governments. It is also the case that in their practice many social movements blur the boundaries between counterhegemonic and ontological politics. Drawing on Audre Lorde's (1984) well-known provocation ("The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"), one might say that counterhegemonic politics use the master's tools to push radical demands forward, to the system's breaking point, if possible. This might involve modernist practices such as claiming rights, using legal instruments (such as the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, ILO 169, which has been used adroitly by indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, albeit with mixed results), negotiating political rights with the state, and so on. Strategies of this sort make counterhegemonic use of hegemonic tools with varying degrees of effectiveness (Santos 2007).<sup>6</sup>

For these strategies to move along the lines of pluriversal politics, nevertheless, they must take on an explicitly political ontological character. In the spirit of Lorde's revolutionary imperative, this would imply, as maintained by some black and Latina/o scholars, broadening the parameters of change so as to articulate their anticapitalistic and antiracist stance with languages and strategies that push beyond the dominant ontologies. From this perspective, it

should be clear that principles of struggle such as autonomy, territory, communality, and care cannot easily be accommodated within actually existing Left discourses; while much can be done to advance these causes through counter-hegemonic strategies, they also require an explicit ontological framing that advances the principles of interdependence and relationality.<sup>7</sup>

*Pluriversal Politics in Actually Existing Communities*

I deal in passing in these essays with the criticisms about the plausibility of pluriversal politics, particularly as compared with better-known Left strategies. These critiques are addressed to perspectives that are perceived as too localist and not infrequently take the form of charges of romanticism (see, e.g., Gibson-Graham 2002, for a countercritique). Emotions run high in these exchanges. I will not rehearse my responses here (see chapter 1; Escobar 2014a, 2018), but I would like to add some elements from the perspective of the previous discussion. Let me start by rearticulating the question, or rather questions: Is pluriversal politics a workable horizon for action? Is the construction of autonomous spaces from below sufficient to even make a dent in the global capitalist system of domination? We speak about recomunalization as essential to pluriversal politics, but are not communal logics central to the subordination of women and youth? Do the struggles in question really embody other principles of being, knowing, and doing, as ontological politics claims? Or, on the contrary, are they not mired in internal conflict and contradiction, thus too vulnerable to external threats and repression to have a chance of success? Are they not often reinscribed into modernist frameworks by their all-too-powerful adversaries, particularly the intolerant heteropatriarchal and economic norms of capital and the state? Are not the territories of difference and the ZADs (*zones à défendre*, or zones to defend) liable to being reoccupied materially and ontologically by the powers that be?<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of these questions are the criteria for assessing the effectivity of diverse forms of politics and resistance. Thinking in terms of articulations, alliances, convergences, bridge building among systemic alternatives, and rhizomic and meshwork processes of connection among antisystemic movements is but a starting point. Positing the possibility of articulations among transformative alternatives, however, is essential for conveying the idea that, at times at least, they might be able to make a dent in the structures of devastation and oppression. This kind of thinking—along with a critical reassessment of well-known notions of rescaling, the nature of structural change, global/local binaries, and so forth—is crucial so that antisystemic alternatives are not dismissed

as unviable, ineffective, place-specific, small, unrealistic, or noncredible alternatives to what exist. Ideas and movements aiming toward the convergence of alternatives endeavor to drive this point across.

The geographers Gibson-Graham have exposed the capitalocentric and globalocentric nature of a great deal of the critique of place-based alternatives. Most of these critics, whether Marxists or poststructuralists, they suggest, “do not see *themselves* as powerfully constituted by globalization. The realists see *the world* as taken over by global capitalism, the new Empire. The deconstructionists see *a dominant discourse* of globalization that is setting the political and policy agenda. In different ways, they both stand outside globalization, and see it ‘as it is’—yet the power of globalization seems to have colonized their political imaginations” (2002, 34, 35). As I explain in chapter 1, this modernist and masculinist political thinking, which ineluctably disempowers the local and place based by locating the decisive power to change things in the global, depends on the ontological assumption of the existence of a one-world world, one real, and one possible. I am not saying that all those who adhere to modernist leftist politics fall into this globalocentric trap; very often, they also endorse progressive politics of place. I am suggesting, however, that the very question of the political effectiveness of a given movement or strategy is laden with discursive operations and emotional attachments that need to be made explicit as part of the process of making up our minds about it.

Moving toward the realization of multiple reals/possibles is the best antidote against globalocentric thinking; it enables us to consider the power of the place based and of local becoming in new forms, perhaps envisioning what Gibson-Graham imaginatively called a homeopathic politics, that of healing multiple locals through communal economies and logics connecting with each other into diffuse, constitutive, and sustaining forms of translocal mesh-worked power. Telling this story is perhaps not as thrilling as recounting the saga of the great capitalist machine and its potential overthrow, but it is one to which more and more groups seem committed. As Gibson-Graham put it, “The judgment that size and extensiveness are coincident with power is not simply a rational calculation in our view but also a discursive choice and emotional commitment. . . . Communities can be constituted around difference, across places, with openness to others as a central ethics. . . . New forms of community are to be constructed through cultivating the communal capacities of individuals and groups and, even more importantly, cultivating the self as a communal subject” (2002, 51, 52). In the last instance, it is a matter of cultivating ourselves as theorists and practitioners of multiple possibles, even as we alternate between diverse types of strategy. What practices of resubjectivation

are needed for actively and effectively desiring nonpatriarchal, noncapitalist, and deeply relational modes of being, knowing, and doing? In other words, we need to disidentify ourselves actively with capitalism, masculinism, colonial, and racist practices and with the ontologies of separation that are an integral part of most, if not all, forms of oppression in the world today.

One might call this disidentification, following the Mexican feminist sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2017), a *politics in the feminine*: one centered on the reproduction of life as a whole, along the care–conservation axis, in tandem with the social reappropriation of collectively produced goods (post-capitalism), and beyond the masculinist canons of the political linked to capital accumulation and the state. Or one might speak of it, with the Argentinean anthropologist Rita Segato (2016), as a politics that ends the “minoritization” of women that has accompanied the decommunalization (radical individuation) of modern worlds, in favor of a recommunalizing autonomous politics that reclaims the “ontological fullness” of women’s worlds. For Segato, patriarchal masculinist ontologies, with their foundational binary matrix, not only represent “the first and permanent pedagogy of expropriation of value and its subsequent domination” (2016, 16) but continue to be at the basis of most forms of violence and predatory accumulation. They can only result in a “pedagogy of cruelty” functional to the deepening of dispossession. This ontological mandate has to be dismantled by building on the relational and communal practices that still inhabit, albeit in fragmentary and contradictory ways, many Afro-Latin American, indigenous, peasant, and urban marginal worlds. Let us listen to Segato’s conclusion before broaching the notion of a radical rupture from the metaphysical structure of modernity (2016, 106):

We need to remake our ways of living, to reconstruct the strong links existing in communities with the help of the “technologies of sociability” commanded by women in their domains; these locally rooted practices are embedded in the dense symbolic fabric of an alternative cosmos, dysfunctional to capital, and proper of the *pueblos* (peoples) in their political journey that have allowed them to survive throughout five hundred years of continued conquest. We need to advance this politics day by day, outside the state: to reweave the communal fabric as to restore the political character of domesticity proper of the communal. . . . *To choose the relational path is to opt for the historical project of being community.* . . . It means to endow relationality and the communal forms of happiness with a grammar of value and resistance capable of counteracting the powerful developmentalist, exploitative, and productivist rhetoric of things with its al-

leged meritocracy. *La estrategia a partir de ahora es femenina* [the strategy, from now on, is a feminine one] (my emphasis).

This is a feminist and radical relational politics I fully endorse.

### **On the Need for a Radical Rupture and Its Political Implications**

We need to consider another position as we try to make up our minds about the strategies into which we might want to put our best energies and ideas. It can be stated in a number of forms. What do we do if we arrive at the conclusion that everything that surrounds us—institutions, governments, religions, academies, even the innermost aspects of our beings—has been so thoroughly colonized by modernity as to make any counterhegemonic use of modernist tools practically inoperative and counterproductive? If, confronted with the history of horrors visited on the pluriverse by the heteropatriarchal capitalist colonial/racist world system, one realizes that not much, perhaps nothing, of what the modern/colonial world has to offer is of value for the urgent task of reconstruction, repair, and resurgence of all, and particularly subaltern, worlds? Would these growing realizations—seriously entertained by some, albeit perhaps not too many, critics, in different parts of the world—not lead us to conclude that the time for a radical rupture and departure from those dominant worlds has arrived? This would seem to me a perfectly valid inference, even if it might make the question of praxis even more intractable. And it is the conclusion arrived at by a number of African American writers.

Before we go there, let me return to Bob Marley.<sup>9</sup> Let us listen to the following powerful statement on ontological politics from his 1979 song “Babylon System,” which Marley sings in the perfect rhythm of Jamaican reggae:<sup>10</sup>

We refuse to be  
What you wanted us to be  
We are what we are  
That’s the way it’s going to be.

One could find many layers of meaning in just this statement; it is indeed about identity, but not only; it is an unambiguous refusal of the ontological imperative to be in a particular way, a way that for black peoples all over the world involves at the least widespread misrecognition, oftentimes outright denial of their being, and not infrequently lethal forms of nonrelation, as in repeated police killings and mass incarceration. One can also read in these lyrics a call to everybody, black and nonblack, to refuse to be what “they” want us to

be—*they* being the Babylon system, in Marley variously a synonym for Western civilization, capitalism, intractable racism, and unbridled globalization: “Babylon system is the vampire, yea! / Suckin’ the children day by day, yeah! / Me say de Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire / Suckin’ the blood of the sufferers, yeah!” It would not be far-fetched to suggest that it is also about whether one—we all—can join in the singing and feel a profound identification with those in dire need of disidentifying with “de system” as a matter of survival. For have all of us not, too, been “trodding in the winepress much too long”? Are we not part of the system he decries and condemns: “Building church and university, wooh, yeah! / Deceiving the people continually, yeah! / Me say them graduatin’ thieves and murderers / Look out now they suckin’ the blood of the sufferers, Yea! . . . Rebel, rebel!” Can we not be, too, part of the active forces compelled to “tell the children the truth,” part of this truth being that “You can’t educate I / For no equal opportunity / Talkin’ ’bout my freedom / People freedom and liberty!”?

The Jamaican political theorist Anthony Bogues (2003) has written about Bob Marley in his book about black heretics and prophets as exemplary radical intellectuals who, operating in the interstices of modernity, have drawn not so much on the privileged critical resources offered by modern critical theory as on the “dread history” excavated from the practices of Caribbean subaltern resistance and worldviews (181). Such history contains “a profound radical ontological claim” that is critical, utopian, and redemptive. It constitutes grounds for a project of “becoming human, not white nor imitative of the colonial, but overturning white/European normativity” (13), precisely as in Marley’s refusal to be “what you wanted us to be.” For Bogues, heretics and prophets of this sort perform a crucial symbolic displacement; drawing on the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter, he argues that they contribute to “the creation of counterworld ideologies in the context where the black is a *nothing*” (176).<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, race is central to this politics, as Marley also reminds us: “Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war, me say war.”<sup>12</sup>

The notion of the black person as nothing underlies the “metaphysical infrastructure” of Western modernity, as the influential black intellectual Na-hum Chandler aptly calls it (2014). It discloses the impossibility for the black person of achieving ontological fullness as a human within any dominant onto-epistemic social and political order. It is inherent in the very declaration that “black lives matter.” A common starting point is the virulent and seemingly endless violence against black peoples in general and young black males in particular. The writer Jesmyn Ward (2013) courageously describes the

cultural and existential impact of such violence in a recent memoir, vividly speaking about the subsumed rage and accumulated grief caused by seeing so many close relatives and friends face violent deaths. How to speak about such a history of unending loss, she asks, a history that seemingly extends to any foreseeable future, so as to “write the narrative that remembers, write the narrative that says: *Hello. We are here. Listen*”? Not easy, she says (251).

Not easy for scholars, either, though the debates are intense and eloquent in ways I can hardly do any justice in a few paragraphs. “Theory of blackness is theory of the surreal presence,” writes Fred Moten (2018, ix) concerning the regime of “epidermalization, criminalization, and genocidal regulation” underlying the stolen lives that accompany blackness, in the face of which only a reconstructive flight from imposition seems to make sense. The entire edifice of modern thought is involved in this predicament, as the Brazilian feminist scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) has argued in one of the most incisive treatments of the long-standing philosophical background of antiblackness. In her view, the deployment of racial difference anchors an onto-epistemic regime that for centuries until today’s global times has prompted a kind of social subjection in which the most allegedly rational institutions of society, such as the law and the economy, provide the very tools of obliteration. This onto-epistemic context called globality, she argues, needs to be understood in these terms so as to undermine it.

Working within the archives of the Western critique of metaphysics, Calvin Warren (2018) develops this proposition, arriving at a political ontology of antiblackness as the most enduring constant in Western cultural history. For Warren, the prison-industrial complex as a form of reenslavement and the repeated police murdering of blacks should serve as testimony to the enduring force of this ontology at the social level. His argument, however, is primarily philosophical. From his perspective, all solutions on offer—whether couched in terms of black humanism, as in social and legal policies targeting antiblackness; or postmetaphysics, as in hermeneutic strategies proposing antiracist understandings of the human to contest racialized notions of being—are found wanting, if not counterproductive. The reason is that all these approaches overlook the fact that the black person fulfills the position of “nothing” in a world structured and ruled by metaphysical assumptions embedded in binary thinking, naturalized universals, liberal humanism, social rationalization, economism, and entrenched ideas of order, freedom, agency, and so forth. Only a politics of “improvement” is thinkable and practicable within this ontological order, and that will not suffice to redress the “metaphysical holocaust” (13) enacted by antiblackness as a systematic “accretion

of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions *designed* to impose nothing onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence *as nothing incarnated*” (9; my emphasis).

For Warren, the corollary of this pervasive antiblackness is a kind of ontological terror that operates very differently for blacks (a perpetual falling, the source of violence and domination) than for whites (confronting the terror of the nothing that is blackness, and of the potential coming to an end of that nothing that, even if it were imaginable, could only be fathomed as a total upheaval of the existing metaphysical world, hence terror). From here follows a responsible black nihilism, with momentous implications:

Part of the aim, then, is to dethrone the human from its metaphysical pedestal, reject the human, and explore different ways of existing that are not predicated on Being and its humanism. This is the *only* way black thinking can grapple with existence without Being. . . . Perhaps what I am suggesting is an *ontological revolution*, one that will destroy the world and its institutions (i.e., “the end of the world,” as Fanon calls it). But these are our options, since the metaphysical holocaust will continue as long as the world *exists*. The nihilist revelation, however, is that such a revolution will destroy *all* life—far from the freedom dreams of the political idealists or the sobriety of the pragmatists. (23, 171)

The dire conclusion of an irredeemable antiblack world, from which no significant form of genuine coexistence can ever arise, has a redeeming end, for the abyss it sketches may lead into “something exceeding and preceding the metaphysical world” (171), namely, the spirit. It is thus that “black nihilism must rest in the crevice between the impossibility of transforming the world and the dynamic enduring power of spirit” (171).<sup>13</sup>

I find Warren’s formulation compelling for the most part. His accomplished nihilism could be seen as a counterpoint to the notion of a responsible anthropocentrism posited by posthumanism and many transition narratives. I can see its major premises applying to Afro-Latin America, with the pertinent qualifications. There, too, a pervasive structure of antiblackness hangs over social life as a great onto-epistemic unconscious, along with anti-indigeneity. Looking at the black kids striving to clean the windows of passing cars at the main intersections in Cali, Colombia, or attempting to sell fruit or distribute a newspaper, most frequently encountering a deeply naturalized disrespect as a response, a dehumanizing gaze over which they have no control, one would have to conclude that an antiblack structure is inextricably entwined with the entire fabric of Latin American Euro-modernity. As another instantiation of



antiblackness, I could cite what the brilliant Afro-Colombian activist Carlos Rosero once told me, explaining why his movement does not fight for inclusion: “Neither do we want to become citizens, since to do so would amount to returning to the times of slavery.” As he put it elsewhere, “We are the descendants of the slave trade. Our papers say: ‘Afro-descendants: descendants of the Africans brought to America with the transatlantic slave trade.’ What do I personally think? If the slave trade is at the basis of capital accumulation, then inequality and racism are at the basis of the same process. I can make headway on the problem of territory, of ethno-education, up to a certain point, but if I do not solve the fundamental problem I do not solve anything” (cited in Escobar 2008, 69).

There are tensions between these Afro-Latin American statements and the African American radical thought so sketchily reviewed here. One source of tension is the emphasis on the political economy of antiblackness. It has always seemed to me much harder to articulate an anticapitalist critique in the United States as part of a critical race or gender discourse, whereas in Latin America an anticapitalist stance is most often taken as a given. But perhaps the most important source of tension stems from the agency that is often expressed by Afro-Latin American and other subaltern activists, committed as they are to fighting for lives of joy, meaning, and dignity, as among those struggling to keep the Colombian Pacific as a territory of life, peace, happiness, and freedom (see chapter 7). This agency, however, cannot be detected easily through philosophical and academic debates; it has to be experienced in place, as it happens; one would say, academically, that it has to be documented ethnographically, going well beyond the text. The valence of this agency is stressed in relational approaches to the city, focused on the everyday resourcefulness and survival tactics of popular groups in the poor neighborhoods of the Global South. In these works (e.g., Amin and Thrift 2017; Escobar 2019; Simone and Pieterse 2017), attention shifts to the play of affect, street intelligence, and network-like relational collective action—to the city’s “ground-level hum,” to use Amin and Thrift’s vivid notion (2017, 5). There the ethnographic analysis focuses on the multiplicity of popular practices that often arise out of the sheer fact that the city—and, one may add, the metaphysical infrastructure that underlies it—does not work according to plan.

We also see the emphasis on the political economy of antiblackness in African thinkers such as Achille Mbembe (2017), who emphasizes the connection between antiblackness, modernity, and capitalism, from the time of the Atlantic slave trade—what the Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (2014) fittingly calls “the catastrophe”—to today’s biodigital economy, finance

capitalism, and neoliberal globalization. Do these various emphases pose challenges to the premises, conclusions, and politics of Afro-pessimism, even while sharing a great deal of its political ontology analysis? Only the question will be posed here, as I begin to move toward the conclusion. Let me quote from a contribution by Christina Sharpe to the Afro-pessimism debate to return to the initial question about the relation between modernist and pluriversal politics; in her view, Afro-pessimism is an attempt “to build a language that, despite the rewards and enticements to do otherwise, refuses to refuse blackness, that embraces ‘without pathos’ that which is constructed and defined as pathology. . . . It is work that insistently speaks what is being constituted as the unspeakable and enacts an ethical embrace of what is constituted as (affirmatively) unembraceable” (cited in Sexton 2016). This construes Afro-pessimism as an epistemological and an ethical project, which Jared Sexton also finds skillfully articulated in Wilderson’s statement about being able to, finally, “think Blackness and agency together in an ethical manner” (cited in Sexton 2016).

The most eloquent statements about the need to consider simultaneously the everyday effects of racism and antiblackness and the agency of those most subject to it, it seems to me, come from black and Latina feminists, particularly in their insistence on an open-ended, reconstructive politics of difference, even if they are fully aware of how such politics risk becoming ineffectual or counterproductive. Equally significant in this regard is the emphasis on spirituality, love, healing, and the care for the nonhuman world, within a frame of radical social justice, espoused by some black and Latina feminists, such as bell hooks (2000), Fania and Angela Davis (2016), Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, and Cherríe Moraga (e.g., Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). I believe that in the works of these authors—diverse as they are—these constructive emphases and the political ontology of antiblackness are not mutually exclusive, yet their articulation needs to be discussed as they are tried out in practice.

Such articulations can most powerfully be gleaned, in my view, from the recent work of some black feminists in both the United States and Colombia. Let me start with *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman’s (2019) incredibly original, powerful, and lucid reconstruction of the lives and deeds of young black women arriving from the South in New York (Harlem) and Philadelphia, between the 1880s and the 1930s, only to find an equally virulent, albeit different, form of racism in what they expected to be spaces of freedom in the urban North. The book’s opening paragraph goes so much against the grain that it bears quoting in toto: “At the turn of the twentieth century, young black women were in open rebellion. They struggled to create autonomous and beautiful lives, to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting

them, and to live as if they were free. This book recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes. It is a narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia” (2019, xiii). As Hartman goes on to say, the book’s aim is “to illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable” (xiv). Upon arrival, what these girls find is “the plantation extended into the city” (4), the city as a new enclosure. This enclosure eventually became the “black ghetto,” cemented by liberal social reformers and sociologists, the state, and the police, with their spatial, moral, and social strategies for improvement, as if saying “*Negro, don’t even try to live*” (22). Women got the worst of it, owing to the entanglement of violence and sexuality that conditioned so much, if not everything, about them. Yet, Hartman tells us, the challenge is to see how they survived, and at times even thrived, in this context of brutality, deprivation, and poverty, how their beautiful experiments in living—in between the kitchen and the brothel, the street and the crowded tenements, the laundry work and their intimate lives in their bedrooms—yielded lives that were painful but at times also beautiful, fugitive moments of going about as if they were free, in the mist of “the insistent hunger of the slum” (84).

Hartman is surely painfully aware of the onto-epistemic grasp on black lives (“When would the colored female achieve her full status as a woman?” [177]), but she refuses to see only the horror and not the beauty, to linger on the tragedy without putting forward a compelling view of how young colored girls tried “to make a way out of no way, to not be defeated by defeat” (347). It was left to them to envision things otherwise, to dance within the enclosure, to set into motion “a fierce and expanded sense of what might be possible” (59). In so doing, they enacted another important moment in the long history of black radicalism and refusal. Hartman’s creative, careful, and loving unearthing of the histories of these forgotten young women demonstrates why another possible is, must be, possible. It is an invitation to us all to reply positively to her question, “Who else would dare believe another world was possible . . . [and] be convinced that nothing could be said about the Negro problem, modernity, global capitalism, police brutality, state killings, and the Anthropocene if it did not take her into account?” (347). Who indeed?

That there is an entire archive of the “being-in-difference” embodied by black women has been superbly explored by Avery Gordon in her most recent book. But it is a question not just of enacting difference but of how such difference at time gets to constitute veritable moments of an “other utopianism” capable of creating spaces of autonomy, however fugitive and temporary. It is in

these zones that one can glean the at-times sophisticated subaltern consciousness and understanding of what it would mean to live in a better world held by the black women living in many of the world's popular neighborhoods. Paying attention to them might help us see why the utopian is not an absolute impossibility, since "it is in us," too, in "all those things we are and we do that exceed or are just not expressions of what is dominant and dominating us" (2018, 64). "Running away," she says—an ancestral and paradigmatic Afro-diasporic practice, one might add—"is a process . . . of trying to find a way of living in different terms, whose outcome is unfortunately never given in advance. It's extremely difficult to let go of living on their terms, to let go of the bad and the good and find another way. It requires a certain degree of embodied indifference or organs for the alternative that conviction or rhetoric alone does not yield. It requires a certain practice or preparation in property relations with which we are often less familiar" (185).

To end, let us explore this theme of running away, and Hartman's "Who else . . ." question, by listening to the narratives of another group of black women in another "black city-within-the-city" (Hartman 2019, 17), the Distrito de Aguablanca, or DAB (Aguablanca District), in the city of Cali. Almost nonexistent in 1980, today the DAB reaches 700,000 inhabitants, a large percentage of them Afro-Colombians who have been forcefully displaced by armed conflict and land grabbing in other parts of the country's Southwest, particularly the Pacific rain forest region. There, *mujeresnegrasafrodescendientes de Cali* (black-Afrodescendant-women of Cali, or *munac*), a term introduced by Elba Palacios to convey the entangled forms of oppression faced by black women but also the multiple dimensions of their resistance and creativity, display enormous courage and creativity in constructing urban territories. Black feminist activist groups in the DAB—among them *Otras negras . . . y feministas!*, the Casa Cultural el Chontaduro, and the Colectivo Sentipensar Afrodiaspórico (Afro-diasporic Sentipensar Collective)—investigate the realities of the *munac*, construct autonomous networks of support, and develop frameworks for peaceful and dignified coexistence (see Campo et al. 2018; Lozano 2014, 2016, 2017; Machado 2017; Palacios 2019). Theirs can be said to be a practice of weaving urban worlds, where racialized and ethnicized women may find safer conditions for daily urban living. "Reexistence" is a major trope of these women's groups, a process of creating autonomous lives and constructing auspicious conditions for fostering life in general, building on historical memories of oppression and the manifold forms of negation of their being, but also on the recollection of their struggles for freedom, including the experience of *cimarronaje* (running away, maroon experiences), that always anchor

their actions. This decolonial black radical feminism gets at the core of the centuries-old power relations in cities such as Cali. Of the *munac*, one could say, echoing Hartman (2019, 59), that they might be bringing about a “revolution in a minor key” (59), even if it is largely invisible to most inhabitants of the city, particularly its white and mestizo elite and middle classes.

In the last section, I tried to stage a dialogue between Latin American critical thought and black radical thought and politics, highlighting the debates introduced by black feminists. At the academic level, one can muse over the possibility of sustained conversations among what, in my view, are some of the most vibrant academic debates at present, particularly the following strands: first, black radical thought and black and Latina feminist thought in the United States; second, Latin American decolonial feminisms (Espinosa, Gómez, and Ochoa 2014; Segato 2015, 2016), black feminist thought, and decolonial thinking (see, e.g., Mignolo and Walsh 2018 for recent statement); and third, the critical thinking emerging from indigenous intellectuals across the Americas.

The importance of the question of blackness and agency is paramount, if we are to heed Mbembe’s argument that, with the intensification of the global economy of dispossession, we are attending to a generalized blackness, a veritable *becoming black of the world* (2017, 6). Here again we find an array of positions in tension, including, among others, Mbembe’s appeal to a notion of a universal community, even if an open one—a common world in which all of us can be full human beings (182), on the heels of onto-epistemic restitution and reparation.

### **A Final Note on Political Ontology and Radical Relationality**

Earlier I made the case that we all weave the pluriverse together through our designs and daily practices; thus the struggle to reinhabit the pluriverse in an Earth-wise manner is not just for indigenous peoples or people in the Global South but for everyone. The Native Canadian author Leanne Simpson has driven this point home vehemently, as far as indigenous peoples are concerned (2017, 246):

We must continuously build and rebuild indigenous worlds. This work starts in motion, in decolonial love, in flight, in relationship, in *biiskabi-yang*, in generosity, humility, and kindness, and this is where it also ends. I cannot be prescriptive here because these processes are profoundly intimate and emergent and are ultimately the collective responsibilities of

those who belong to unique and diverse indigenous nations. I don't want to imagine or dream futures. I want a better present.

I would like to suggest that this statement—an active lesson from indigenous movements to all who wish to struggle for the pluriverse—applies to all worlds, with certain caveats. First, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all resistance is ontological in the relational sense that Simpson's Radical Resurgence Project so powerfully envisions. We need to push all strategies and forms of politics ontologically and decolonially. What I mean by this is the following: First, we all need to actively unlearn the ontologies of separation and a single real that shape our bodies and worlds; for instance, can we unlearn the liberal individual—that antirelational Trojan horse that inhabits each of us in modern worlds—in a similar way that we endeavor to unlearn patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism? Second, we all need to be mindful of the multiple ways in which our actions depend on, and often reinforce, the metaphysical infrastructure of the current dominant systems, including its universal constructs and objectifying relations, its anthropocentrism, secularism, and Eurocentrism, and its colonialist hierarchical classifications in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.

As the essays in this volume contend, most worlds live under ontological occupation. Such occupation is effected through the categories and hierarchical classifications historically deployed by governments, corporations, organized religions, and the academy as the main purveyors of a dominant onto-epistemic structure. Environmental conflicts in Latin America and elsewhere make this assertion patently clear. At stake, for instance, with the expansion of oil palm cultivation, large-scale hydroelectric dams, mining for gold and strategic minerals, and many mega development projects is not only the forced displacement, if not outright destruction, of particular territories and worlds but their active occupation by the modernist ontologies serving as scaffolding for relentless growth and hyperaccumulation at the top. This type of environmental-cum-ontological conflict is precisely the focus of political ontology, a nascent field that provides the architecture for this volume. The various essays contribute to constructing this emergent field as a space for exploring the politics of the pluriverse, building on the notion of multiple realities and possibles implicit in the agenda of many social movements. While the chapters can be read as self-contained units, they build toward this understanding through different registers. Many of the essays will provide readers with a synoptic view of Latin American social theory at present.

In locating these essays between the present moment (the brutality of neoliberal globalization) and the epoch (capitalist Euro-modernity), I have sug-

gested that we might feasibly construe the current conjuncture in terms of a civilizational crisis. Whether one articulates the conjuncture as the struggle over modernity, going beyond Euro-modernity toward multiple modernities, as Grossberg (2010, 2019) has cogently done, or in terms of the crisis of civilizational models pointing to transitions beyond modernity as a key possibility space, and perhaps attractor, for a multiplicity of struggles, I side with scholars for whom the forging of new connections and transformative orientations is a central practice. Political ontology is part of this effort. As Blaser (2013) puts it, political ontology is not a new approach for another realist claim on the real; in fact, the forms of ontological politics discussed in this book are but a manner of foregrounding the array of ways of conceiving what exists so as to make tangible the claim of multiple ontologies or worlds. In this vein, political ontology is a way of telling the stories of world making differently, in the hope that other spaces for the enactment of the pluriverse might open up.

To conclude, let us listen to the straightforward and powerful rendition of articulatory politics by the women gathered at the International Forum on Femicides of Racialized and Ethnicized Peoples, held in the predominantly black port city of Buenaventura, on the Colombian Pacific, not far from Cali, in April 2016. The forum denounced the systemic connection between the genocide of women, and black women in particular, and global capital accumulation. It brought together many of the lines of argumentation discussed in this preface, ending with a commitment to the radical relationality and pluriversal politics embedded in the notions of Ubuntu and Buen Vivir as civilizational alternatives. Radical relationality emerges in this kind of political space as the best possible antidote to the metaphysics of separation and isolation and the ontologies of antiblackness, coloniality, heteropatriarchal social orders, and the devastation of the Earth. Radical relationality is an answer to the imperative that “to reweave community out of the existing fragments should thus be our banner” (Segato 2016, 27). The forum’s final declaration partially states:

We analyzed together the current upsurge in diverse forms of violence against women and their relation with global capital accumulation and its racist and colonialist expression in Latin America. We concluded that feminicides are functional to territorial dispossession and the extermination of indigenous, black, and popular rural and urban communities and peoples. We also examined the forms of resistance and autonomous organizing by women from the space of their communities. . . . We experienced with joy women’s ability to create and re-create common existence, their

active sharing and capacity to repair their grief and pain, transforming them into knowledge and struggles for justice.

We demand from the state, governments, transnational corporations, and [societies] in general to stop the war against women, their communities and peoples, to respect their territories and guarantee their lives. . . . We exhort social movement organizations to assume a deep commitment toward dismantling colonial capitalist patriarchy, so that we can journey in line with our desires and aspirations toward Ubuntu and Buen Vivir.<sup>14</sup>

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These essays deal with the politics of the possible, with the way our notions of what is real and what is possible determine both our political practice, from the personal to the collective, and our sense of hope. I am asking readers to reflect on whether it is possible to have a different way of thinking, or rather a different way of *sentipensar*, about what is possible. I emphasize *sentipensar* (and its correlative noun, *sentipensamiento*), as currently used by activists in various parts of Latin America, to suggest a way of knowing that does not separate thinking from feeling, reason from emotion, knowledge from caring. This activist epistemology lies at the very heart of this book.<sup>1</sup>

By a different way of *sentipensar* about the possible, I mean more than a clever variation on the well-known formulation that emerged from the World Social Forum, which first met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001: “Another world is possible.” Though I am partly inspired by the reformulation of possible worlds that was so intelligently and passionately set forth at that forum, in this book I seek a different sort of effect, one derived from the idea that to reach those possible worlds, we first have to go back to an even more basic level, the level of what we call “the real,” and consider this other formulation: another world is possible because another reality is possible. In other words, conventional thinking about the real and the possible will never get us to those other worlds. This *sentipensamiento* is emerging powerfully among subaltern groups and movements, as well as in critical spaces within the academy; it’s in the air, and many people and social groups are starting to think it explicitly. It’s what is behind the essays that follow.

These essays were written between 2014 and 2017, in contexts ranging from academic presentations to activist events—vague as the line between those two domains often is, especially in Latin America. All but chapters 4 and 6 were originally written in Spanish, and all have been slightly revised, except for the introduction and chapter 1, which were written in the main for this book, and chapter 8, which incorporates new material.

I am aware of the abstract nature of the proposition that *another possible is possible*. In the first chapter, I present some of the theoretical underpinnings behind this proposition. Readers who wish can skip that chapter and go straight to the rest, perhaps returning to the theoretical discussion later on.

Though each chapter can be read independently of the others (so that it would be no problem to start by reading the last chapter first, for example), in a way they are all in dialogue with one another, creating synergies in the exposition of the main ideas.

I should note that these chapters were written before the remarkable events in Colombia during the first half of 2017, including the mass civic strikes in the predominantly black cities of Quibdó and Buenaventura; the granting of legal rights to the Atrato River by the Constitutional Court of Colombia; and especially the successful referendums against large-scale mining and hydrocarbon exploration and drilling in a number of communities, such as when more than 97 percent of the population of the town of Cajamarca, Tolima, voted against what would have been one of the largest gold mines in the world (La Colosa, belonging to the South African corporation AngloGold Ashanti), a case with enormous international repercussions. These cases, coming about despite intensive efforts on the part of the state to undermine them, suggest a possible scenario that is perhaps a bit daring and undoubtedly provisional: In Colombia (and perhaps in Mexico as well), conditions may soon be ripe for meaningful social transformation, given the crisis and the extreme dysfunction that have gripped the institutions in both countries and the discourse about them, as well as the increasingly brutal repression of the people.

I don't think this proposal is completely unreasonable. Might we be talking about a possible *pachakuti*, a world reversal, in these countries, perhaps in the short to medium term? Perhaps one like the *pachakuti* that shook Bolivia with huge indigenous and working-class insurrections between 2000 and 2006, leading to the election of Evo Morales as president of that country, though his regime has since failed to establish a regulatory system outside of, against, and beyond the established capitalist social order?

Exploring this hypothesis would take a lot of collective research and debate. The work would have to be based on the premise that "there are historical moments in which a society's internal conflicts, hostilities, and rifts overflow all the structures designed to administer and channel them," as the Mexican sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2008, 19) suggests in her excellent investigation of the events that led to the Bolivian *pachakuti*. Thinking about Colombia and Mexico from this perspective would also be a productive exercise. Are conditions being established for a *pachakuti* in those countries? Might their current social dynamics be helping to "permanently reconfigure the instituted order on several levels and through contrasting tempos" and doing so "in an expansive and permanent yet discontinuous way; that is: laying down

rhythms, generating cadences” (21)? Are they perhaps generating “the potential to alter social reality in a profound way so as to preserve, through transformation, long-standing and collective living worlds and to produce new and fertile forms of governance, connection, and self-regulation” (351)? The perspective of this book is that we cannot imaginatively approach these questions using the conventional lenses of the real and the possible.<sup>2</sup>

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have always insisted that all intellectual production is collective, even more so if we consider it from the perspective of interrelationships and interdependence, the central focus of this book. What we usually consider “influences” can often be seen as coauthorships, or at least as “conversations with.” The thoughts and ideas of others appear here and there in what one writes, and those are what these acknowledgments refer to, with special affection. Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser, Cristina Rojas, and Michal Osterweil have been my traveling companions on the road to understanding relationality and its importance in the struggle to defend and rebuild territories and worlds, and they read drafts of the introduction and chapter 1 with a critical eye. Members of the Process of Black Communities (Proceso de Comunidades Negras, PCN) remain important in my writing. My special thanks on this occasion go to Marilyn Machado, Charo Mina Rojas, Carlos Rosero, Francia Márquez, Yellen Aguilar, and Danelly Estupiñán.

I would like to mention some of the people I have been in more direct contact with over the two or three years when I was writing these texts, and whose works and influence I see most clearly in them: Eduardo Gudynas, Patricia Botero, Betty Ruth Lozano, Gustavo Esteva, Xochitl Leyva, Vilma Almendra, Manuel Rozental, Enrique Leff, Diana Gómez, Laura Gutiérrez, Verónica Gago, Maristella Svampa, Rita Segato, Claudia von Werlhof, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Alberto Acosta, Álvaro Pedrosa, Olver Quijano, Javier Tobar, Adolfo Albán Achinte, Catherine Walsh, Janet Conway, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Astrid Ulloa, María Mercedes Campo, Elba Mercedes Palacios, David López Matta, Anthony Dest, Sheila Grunner, Catalina Toro, Gabriela Merlinsky, Viviane Weitzner, Tatiana Roa, Joan Martínez Alier, Federico Demaria, Giorgos Kallis, Mario Pérez, Eduardo Restrepo, Natalia Quiroga, Lina Álvarez Villarreal, Eloisa Berman, Iván Vargas, Alfredo Martínez, Andrea Botero, Ulrich Oslender, Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves, and the team of researchers from Scandinavia and the Andes gathered by Esben Leifsen for the project “Extracting Justice: Exploring the Role of Prior Consultation in the Resolution of Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Latin America,” funded by the Norwegian Research Council (2013–17).

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Thanks to the team at my Colombian publisher, Ediciones Desde Abajo, for embracing this book, and for the wonderful job they do of disseminating critical and emancipatory perspectives and meaningful reflections from the very heart of popular and subaltern experiences.

This English version has benefited hugely from extensive comments by reviewers for Duke University Press and from friends Charles R. Hale, Orin Starn, and Marisol de la Cadena. Their thoughtful comments are reflected throughout the book, but especially in the preface to the English edition. A two-week stay at the University of California in Santa Barbara (March 2019), at Charlie R. Hale's invitation, was likewise extremely significant in terms of conversations about the preface. I am particularly indebted to Avery Gordon, Paul Amar, and Elizabeth Robinson for enlightening conversations on Afro-pessimism, the politics of transitions, and pluriversality.

This English version originated in a conversation with Gisela Fosado, my editor at Duke University Press. When she asked me one day what I was working on, I mentioned that I had just finished a book of essays explicitly written in Spanish, even if, as I hastened to add, I knew very well that what doesn't exist in English doesn't exist for the Anglo-American academy. "Let's see if we can do something about that," she replied. Soon after, she proposed the book to the Latin America in Translation Series that UNC Press and Duke University Press have maintained for a good number of years. My thanks to the series committee for welcoming the book among its titles in translation, and very especially to Gisela for her steady encouragement, support, friendship, and active feedback and insights into what I happen to be writing about. Finally, I am very grateful to David Frye for his willingness to undertake the translation and for the excellent job he did on all aspects of the text.

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# Another Possible Is Possible

These are bold perspectives, but in the short term we can't afford the luxury of working to reproduce mechanical scenarios. If possible, the experience of collective global coexistence in recent years, the practice of sociocultural diversity, of political ecology, and of a humanizing environmental history will allow us to design new though imprecise civilizational horizons.

—HÉCTOR ALIMONDA (1949–2017), IN MEMORIAM

(Voz de mujer)

Tú no puedes comprar el viento  
Tú no puedes comprar el sol  
Tú no puedes comprar la lluvia  
Tú no puedes comprar el calor  
Tú no puedes comprar las nubes  
Tú no puedes comprar los colores  
Tú no puedes comprar mi alegría  
Tú no puedes comprar mis dolores. . . .

(Woman's voice)

You can't buy the wind  
You can't buy the sun  
You can't buy the rain  
You can't buy the heat  
You can't buy the clouds  
You can't buy the colors  
You can't buy my joy  
You can't buy my sorrows. . . .

(Coro: voces de mujeres)

Vamos caminando  
Vamos dibujando el camino  
Aquí se respira lucha

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(Vamos caminando)  
Yo canto porque se escucha  
(Vamos caminando)  
Aquí estamos de pie  
¡Que viva la América!

(Chorus: women's voices)  
Let's keep walking  
Let's trace the path  
Here we breathe the struggle  
(Let's keep walking)  
I sing to be heard  
(Let's keep walking)  
Here we're standing up  
Viva América!

— CALLE 13, "LATINOAMÉRICA"

Reality is a proposition that we use as an explanatory notion to explain our experiences. Moreover, we use it in different ways according to our emotions. This is why there are different notions of reality in different cultures or in different moments of history. . . . We live the "real" as the presence of our experience. I saw it, I heard it, I touched it.

— HUMBERTO MATURANA, "METADESIGN: PART II" (1997), 3

This is a series of essays about the politics of the possible, about our ideas about the real and the possible and how they determine our political practice, from the personal to the collective, as well as our sense of hope. We could have turned to any number of theories, from quantum physics or complexity theory to anthropological analysis, to show how we live with a fairly naive concept of the real, but in the end, as Maturana suggests in the epigraph, we make decisions with our emotions, or at least not entirely with our reason. This is why I suggest we must *sentipensar* (feel-think) new notions about what is real and thus what is possible.

To put it as succinctly as possible, I would say that we base our conventional notions of what is real on a belief that we interact with the world as individuals separate from that world; the world seems external, outside of us, a

predictable context within which we move about freely. The scientific principles we learn in our formal schooling (and that the media rely on) teach us that we can understand this world by gazing on it as neutral and objective observers. The conventional scientific approach thus instills in us a cosmivision that divides the world into subjects and objects, a world we can understand and manipulate at will. The entire edifice of modern Western civilization (with its particular forms of patriarchy, racism, and capitalist exploitation) is based on this objectivizing operation—on this dualist ontology, as we will call it—because it is based on a strict separation between subject and object, reason and emotion, and many other dualisms that we will uncover in this book, and yet more dualisms that readers will go on to discover on their own.

Now, although this dualist ontology of self-contained subjects and objects has already raised a wide range of critiques and inquiries, as I explain in the first chapter, it is still hard to understand its serious implications for the way in which we live our lives, construct our worlds, and conduct our politics. Questioning these notions is not easy, because we grow up and live with them; we bring them to life with our actions. What could be more solid than the world on which we are standing? What could be more real than the world surrounding us, in which our minds seemingly wake up every morning? It is hard to deny. Whenever we leave the house, whenever we walk about the world, we have to take for granted that doors, streets, offices, computers, people, and so on exist. These are no illusions.

At the same time, as we will see, all these things, including ourselves, do not exist quite so independently of one another as we suppose. The question is how this basic fact of experience has become a belief in an “objective reality” about an “external world” consisting of “entities” distributed through space, each of them independent of the multiplicity of interactions that produce them. This objectivizing stance leads to the ethos of human dominion over nature that forms the basis for patriarchal culture and capitalist societies. It prevents and disempowers us from coexisting with the full range of human and nonhuman beings in a collaborative manner that is wiser in its relationship with the Earth and with the flow of life. It creates a single reality from which all other realities and senses of the real are excluded, thus profoundly limiting the scope of the political.

Questioning this belief in a single reality means developing another, entirely different understanding of what change and transformation are, and thus of what politics can be. The real, the possible, and the political are all joined at the hip. It is precisely because other possibles have been turned into “impossibles” that we find it so difficult to imagine other realities. Speaking of



other possibles and other realities forces us to rethink many of our everyday practices and politics.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting critically on politics from this perspective is crucial if we are going to have a horizon from which we can move toward open-ended civilizational (nontotalitarian) transitions. If all we have is a political practice based on the conventional understanding of the real/possible, it will be extremely difficult for us to extract ourselves from the current global politics of war that underlies capital accumulation. Our current understandings are inadequate to confronting the capitalist hydra. We would end up in a struggle for mere survival, functioning on behalf of a system that has been constantly expanding for five hundred years, at war with the planet and with all of life.<sup>2</sup> We can see that the capitalist system depends on this objectivizing and dualist conception of the real in so many of its dimensions: the idea of self-contained spheres (“economics,” “society,” “politics,” “culture,” and so on), as if the ceaseless flow of matter/life could be squeezed into these neatly organized pigeonholes; the construct of the autonomous “individual” who maximizes his “utility” through market decisions; the idea of a self-regulating market, as if it were not linked by multiple strands to the whole meshwork of the real; the concept of nature as a “resource” rather than as life itself; and the mode of understanding that it relies on, the so-called science of economics, a veritable Cartesian castle in the sky founded on these same presuppositions. These premises, and many more, form the ontological basis of capital and its practice of plunder and destruction.

The questions posed in this book are based on two interrelated points. The first concerns the rise in recent decades of so many realities that hegemonic discourses about the real had previously deemed inexistent or else implausible alternatives to what exists (Santos 2014), including most social groups located on the oppressed side of colonial binaries: black and indigenous people, women, peasants, marginalized urban dwellers of all sorts. From many of these subaltern realities, we now get a wide variety of proposals for “worlding” life on new premises; in other words, for constructing other worlds. For instance, the proposal of the indigenous Nasa people of southwestern Colombia (see chapters 2 and 3), which they base on their statement on the liberation of Mother Earth, arises from an utterly different notion of the real/possible and other practices of world making.

The second underlying point is the awareness that all existence is radically interdependent. Everything exists in relation, arising and developing in meshworks of relations. Perhaps to make it manageable, we modern humans have invented the powerful fictions of the individual (the ego), the economy,

free markets, nature, and many more, each of them as an irrefutable reality that exists intrinsically on its own. These beliefs work quite effectively, for they end up producing us as such. But are we really the autonomous individuals we imagine ourselves to be? Can we really separate something called “the economy” from the endless, ceaseless flow of life? Aren’t we humans also “nature,” so that all the things we have invented as “nonhuman” (food, air, water, minerals, microorganisms) also constitute us? When we appeal to reason, when we call for “thinking with a cool head,” aren’t we paradoxically making an emotional and selective decision? Asking ourselves these questions marks the beginning of a long journey toward a life consonant with other ontologies, a journey toward a profound consciousness of the relationality and interdependence of all that exists, which is in turn indispensable for imagining other possible worlds.

A main objective in gathering these texts under the rubric of *Another Possible Is Possible* (the title of the Spanish-language edition) is to provide political-theoretical tools to counter a powerful tendency of experts, politicians of the Right, and many intellectuals of the Left, to delegitimize all arguments favoring local struggles to transform the world and to exclude proposals by subaltern groups from serious consideration, because—they argue—such proposals will never suffice to change the situation substantially. In the case of the Right, only the “major players,” such as science and technology, corporations, states, and institutions like the World Bank, are capable of dealing with the serious problems of poverty and environmental degradation. For the traditional Left, local alternatives will never be powerful enough to overthrow the “monsters” of capitalism, imperialism, or globalization. From their perspective (often enough shared by the average person in the street), the alternatives proposed by these groups are too local, small, partial, utopian, and unrealistic, or else they think that the groups proposing them “are trying to make us go backward.” But perhaps the most common and devastating label that they plaster on them is *romantic*. In the final analysis, both Right and Left use their respective premises of what is real and possible to arrive at the same place: they reproduce the world as we know it. At this level, they are all the same. Talking about “another possible” offers an antidote to these accusations of romanticism.

I would also suggest that, given the gravity of the multiple crises the planet is now dealing with (crises of the environment, the climate, society, and meaning), subaltern pluriversal proposals are proving that we have a more urgent need today than ever for new thinking about the real/possible. At a time like this, we can apply the well-known principle (often attributed to Einstein) that “we cannot resolve the problems of one era using the same mental frame that

created them,” or the formulation of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “we have modern problems for which there are no modern solutions”—such as climate change. We might also decide to accept, in the words of a young Afro-Colombian activist from the Pacific rain forest on the border between Colombia and Ecuador that is currently being ravaged by “development,” that “we cannot think about our world in the same way; either we take a step forward, or we’ll fall twenty years behind.”<sup>3</sup> It is, in the final analysis, a matter of making the unthinkable thinkable, and the thinkable believable and possible. This is an essential principle for the civilizational transitions that so many groups and activists are now calling for.

The following chapters are an invitation to stop thinking about our worlds with the dominant categories that created these crises, and instead to move forward in a process of relearning the real/possible, beyond the certitudes of modernity and the conventional categories that, it is worth underlining, are the very ones used by the institutions perpetuating the crisis: the World Bank, the great corporations, most states, organized religions, and also to a large extent the academy. Their categories replicate the conception of the world held by the powerful. The nightly news shows repeat them day after day in their reports on “the way things are,” *as if the world really were that way*. We cannot reconstruct the world and create genuinely new worlds using the same categories by which we are destroying it! I hope these texts may help us to develop antidotes to the accusation of romanticism, or at least to radically invert it. Aren’t the true romantics the people who insist that more of the same (more corporate solutions, more World Bank–style development, more “green economies”) will lead to lasting improvements? We should arrive at the conclusion that we can’t expect anything good—for life, for land, for people—to come out of such institutions.<sup>4</sup>

In everyday language, believing in a single notion of the real/possible usually translates into “being realistic.” Maybe we can now add a question mark or two to this expression. What does “being realistic” mean? It means believing that in the final analysis there is a single correct way to see and understand things (based on rationality and science); believing that these (our) universal truths must prevail against all others, which in our view are less correct, or false; being convinced that we live in a world made of a single world, and being shocked by the opposite possibility; and being sure that the truth of this single (usually Western) reality—which obviously we all share, as we should!—is the space from which we ought to promote our projects (whether they be for becoming very rich or for resisting capitalism). Often, it also means we believe that the knowledge of men, of whites, of Euro-Americans and Euro-Latin

Americans (whether or not we belong to these groups), is superior to that of all other social groups and that their lives are more desirable. It means thinking that those who insist, in their obstinacy, on defending principles other than these are hopeless romantics who really don't have to be listened to. It means, finally, giving up the right to dream. How small this "reality" shrinks by the time we have filtered it through our questions. The world of the *incurable realists* is reduced to a CNN version of life, to the realpolitik of nation-states, and to self-help schemes that serve the big corporations.

Finally, a word on the subtitle of the Spanish edition of the book, *Abya Yala/Afro/Latino América*. In the prologue, I referred straightforwardly to Latin America. As we will see in chapter 2, that name conceals the colonial histories of conquest and enslavement that constitute it. Renaming this continent is a first step toward participating in a politics of the real and of the possible. From that point forward, we should dig more deeply into the pluralization of the worlds that inhabit it, and begin to think from the viewpoints of those cosmovisions that have always conceptualized and constructed their existence from below and with the Earth.

### Guide to the Book

Allow me to present briefly each of the chapters that follow, including the context in which each was produced.

Chapter 1, "Theory and the Un/Real: Tools for Rethinking 'Reality' and the Possible," uses a theoretical reflection to draw links between a series of domains—some theoretical, others not—within which we may investigate other concepts of the real and the possible. We find a first series of spaces in many ancestral traditions, from the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples, animism, and matriarchal societies to Buddhism and Earth-based spiritualities. The second series derives more directly from the academy; it includes cybernetics and the sciences of complexity, self-organization, and emergence; the attention that is once more being given to ontology in social theory, in what is known as the ontological turn; and finally the notion of a pluriverse. Far from being mere holdovers from a bygone time, the first series of spaces still drives the construction of contemporary worlds. The second evinces noteworthy attempts to think beyond the idea of a single world, a single reality, a single form of the possible. These trends will help us to derealize the realist that each of us carries within ourselves, and to think-live with a more complex and effective awareness of the inexhaustible *tejido* (weave) of interdependence that sustains life and allows it to flourish, which is to say, the pluriverse.

Chapter 2, “From Below, on the Left, and with the Earth,” was first prepared for the Seventh Latin American and Caribbean Conference on Social Sciences organized by CLACSO (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales), which took place in Medellín, November 9–13, 2015. Held every four years, this is the most prominent event in the social sciences in Latin America, attracting a huge number of participants, especially young scholars. I was interested in showing that Latin American critical thought is not in crisis, as some have argued based on the apparent end of the progressive cycle in Latin America, but rather that it is in fact more vibrant and dynamic than ever. The theoretical contributions to a rethinking of the region resonate all across the continent—in meetings among native peoples; in *mingas de pensamiento* (collective thought activities); in debates among urban and rural movements and collectives; in assemblies of communities in resistance; in mobilizations of young people, women, peasants, and environmentalists; and undoubtedly in some of the sectors that have traditionally been considered the quintessential spaces for thought, such as the academy and the arts. Here I use the Zapatista expression for thinking about alternatives, “from below and on the Left,” but I explicitly add the dimension of Earth as essential to any critical thought in the present. Thinking from below brings me back to reflecting on the current bumper crop of writing on the notions of territory, autonomy, and communality, to which I pay special attention. Finally, for useful ideas about how to think with the Earth, I turn not to the thought of ecologists (important as it is) but to the cosmovisions or relational ontologies of territory-peoples (indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants, in particular), for they are closely in tune with the Earth.

Chapter 3, “The Earth~Form of Life: Nasa Thought and the Limits to the Episteme of Modernity,” continues exploring thought about the Earth, though in a somewhat more academic register. The essay was originally prepared for the opening address in honor of the new doctorate in the cultural history of Colombia at the Universidad del Valle in Cali on November 1, 2016. I first presented it a few days earlier at the International Colloquium of Multiple Knowledges and Social and Political Sciences (Universidad Nacional, Bogotá, October 18–21, 2016). In it I outline a potential line of research based on Michel Foucault’s archaeological analysis of discourse. But my basic motivation for writing this text was something else: to construct an argument based on a statement that the Nasa people of the northern Cauca region in Colombia proposed more than a decade ago, the Liberation of Mother Earth, which I bring up at the end of chapter 2. Taking off from this Nasa statement, the chapter sets up a conversation between the Nasa proposal and discourse analysis. A

detailed reading of the Nasa archive allows me to propose the adoption of the notion of the Liberation of Mother Earth (a genuine concept-movement) as a potent principle for all political action and design work. This principle will show us a path toward undertaking, from wherever we happen to be, the task of “weaving life in freedom.” The lucid knowledge of this indigenous people from northern Cauca imbues us with the idea of a civilizational change, from the Man-form (that of anthropocentric modernity) to the Earth~form of life (relationality and biocentrism).

Chapter 4, “*Sentipensar* with the Earth,” prepared for the International Colloquium on Epistemologies of the South, held at Coimbra, Portugal, July 10–12, 2014, reflects on how the concept of the epistemologies of the South proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos can serve as a framework for recognizing the diversity of ways of understanding the world and giving meaning to existence. It aims at highlighting the ontological dimension of the epistemologies of the South. Working on this framework, the chapter describes the concept of “relational ontologies,” illustrating other sorts of theoretical tools for those who wish no longer to be complicit in the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences on the part of Eurocentric globalization. Up against the hegemonic idea of “One World made from one world”—the capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial globalized world—the text suggests a transition to “a world in which many worlds fit,” the pluriverse. It offers examples of popular resistance against extractive mining, which involve not only physical occupation but also what I term the “ontological occupation” of territories. The text then suggests that the knowledges derived from subaltern groups are more appropriate to the profound social transformations needed to face the planetary crisis than many forms of knowledge produced in the academy.

Chapter 5, “Notes on Intellectual Colonialism and the Dilemmas of Latin American Social Theory,” was written at the invitation of Maristella Svampa for a special issue of the sociology journal of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata in Argentina. Maristella asked authors to address two issues: first, how we should think about intellectual or epistemic dependence with respect to the theoretical currents of the central countries; and second, questioning the conditions for producing a more independent social science. I respond in the first part of the chapter by questioning whether it is possible to think outside the modern episteme, which I describe based on Foucault’s concept of episteme. In the second part I briefly discuss some areas of emerging research in Latin America that, in a variety of ways, are all poking around the boundaries of the episteme, so to speak: relationality, Buen Vivir (Good Living), nature rights, decolonial feminisms, and civilizational transitions, among others. In the fi-

nal section I present at greater length a few examples of autonomous social theory production with which I am somewhat familiar, from Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and Argentina. These experiences involve the explicit creation of interepistemic spaces in which the primacy of academic understandings is subverted in favor of a determined stance for the “knowledges otherwise” of subaltern groups.

Chapter 6, “Postdevelopment @ 25: On ‘Being Stuck’ and Moving Forward, Sideways, Backward, and Otherwise,” is a conversation with Gustavo Esteva, perhaps the most perceptive and persistent critic of development, originally prepared for a special issue of *Third World Quarterly* on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the English translation of *The Development Dictionary*, edited by Wolfgang Sachs. In our discussion of postdevelopment, we reassess the critiques of the concept and openly discuss what “living beyond development” means today. The topics we cover include how development discourse continues to shape mentalities and practices; the tensions and contradictions in the institutional world, which remains trapped in its compulsion for development and particularly with the so-called sustainable development goals, established by the UN for the 2015–2030 period; the new forms and manifestations of resistance to development; and the relevant experiences that give us a glimpse of worlds that exist beyond development and are heading toward the pluriverse, worlds that are at work creatively constructing a contemporary art of living. Along the way, we propose a few ideas about rethinking “development cooperation” in terms of effective acts of solidarity for civilizational transitions, both in the Global South and in the Global North, perhaps ultimately dissolving that border.

Chapter 7, “Cosmo/Visions of the Colombian Pacific Coast Region and Their Socioenvironmental Implications,” was prepared for the forum “Pacific Vision: Sustainable Territory,” organized by *Revista Semana* of Bogotá (the most important weekly in Colombia), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which took place in Bogotá on May 18, 2016, with participants from the government, major economic interests, the academy, and a handful of activists. The economic and social crisis assailing the planet has put the Pacific region of Colombia—and other regions with similarly high levels of biological and cultural diversity—in a particularly vital position. As I argue in this text, however, realizing this planetary vocation will require us to collectively establish a novel way of looking at things that is quite unlike the so-called development strategies currently prevailing throughout the region. By accepting this historical challenge, the Pacific would be signing up for an ambitious transition strategy in which territorial

sustainability equates to the sustainability of life as a whole—a view far from the economic concepts of productivity, competitiveness, and efficiency. As I try to show, many of the ideas necessary for this transition toward *Otro Pazífico Posible*, “Another Possible Peacific”—the motto of an international campaign defending the region—already exist in the proposals and practices of some territorial-ethnic communities and organizations in the region, and in some academic approaches. Promoting a transition vision for the Pacific with any resoluteness, however, will require a true codesign strategy in which many people committed to genuine intercultural dialogue would have to participate. In such a strategy, we will find a different form of conceptualizing social action for the so-called postconflict period.

Finally, chapter 8, “Beyond ‘Regional Development,’” explores the potential of codesign, as conceived by and for the autonomy of local subaltern communities. It centers on the generation of a transitional imaginary for a particular region in the Southwest of Colombia, the geographical valley of the Río Cauca, whose largest urban center is the city of Cali. For more than a century, this region has been subjected to a capitalist model based on sugarcane plantations in the flatlands and extensive cattle ranching in the foothills. The ecological devastation caused by this model is already evident in the hills, aquifers, rivers, forests, farmland, and wetlands, as is the massive, profoundly unjust, and painful social and territorial dislocation of the peasants and communities of African descent in the region. This region can be reimagined as a true bastion of agricultural production of organic fruits, vegetables, grains, and tropical plants, and as a genuinely multicultural region of small and midsize agricultural producers, and a functional, decentralized network of towns and midsize cities. Imagining an end to sugarcane and to the upper-class and middle-class ways of life supported by the agroindustrial model, however, is still unthinkable for the elites and governing officials, and also for most of the people. In this chapter, I use an ontological design perspective to work out the rudiments of an autonomous design proposal, as a collective exercise in codesign toward a new socionatural configuration that will be quite unlike what we have now, including in the cities. To imagine this beautiful, fertile, and now utterly devastated valley from both the historical perspective of the self-organization and relationality of life and that of the cosmovisions and desires of subaltern groups and other interested groups, we have to go far beyond all known schemes of regional development and prevailing notions of urban planning. In terms of theory, this chapter tries to show that “another design is possible,” for it is based on a different reading of reality. It behooves us to take seriously the hypothesis that another possible is possible.



Taken as a whole, these chapters may be considered essays in political ontology and pluriverse studies. They form part of the collective project to move beyond (or behind or sideways of) the modern onto-epistemic formation. However, and perhaps more relevantly, they are also an effort to contribute to realizing the communal and pro-autonomy worlds that keep popping up, with more and more insolence, and perhaps more forcefully as well, in some regions of Abya Yala/Afro/Latino América, come hell or high water, and glimpses of which can already be seen in the most unexpected corners of the planet, including the Global North. Out of all these dissident imaginations and epistemic insurrections, with all the doubts, obstacles, and contradictions of their concrete practices, we may be witnessing the slow rebirth of the pluriverse.

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INTRODUCTION

### Preface to the English Edition

- 1 The practice of personal and group blogs in many languages, I believe, resembles the intellectual style I am describing here.
- 2 Charles Hale, personal correspondence, November 20, 2017.
- 3 These themes recur in the questions by audiences during oral presentations and in review processes connected with the material presented in this volume.
- 4 Modernist forms of politics have enshrined a naturalized political culture in which only certain practices and institutions, largely those associated with liberal representative democracy or with their socialist counterparts, count as political (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998). This “political” domain is taken for granted as real. Within this domain, objectivity and truth are possible. It is relational in that the political stands in some relation to other equally naturalized domains, particularly the economy. This relationality is limited when compared with the radical relationality of the emergent forms of ontological politics featured in this volume. In these latter forms, even the very existence of pregiven domains is questioned. This is why it is important to highlight equally the ontological dimension of the political and the political dimension of ontology.
- 5 The Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA), launched in May 2019, is devoted to catalyzing convergences of this sort among transformative initiatives worldwide. See Kothari et al. 2019, 341–42; and the GTA website, [www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org](http://www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org). See also Vikalp Sangam, a confluence process spearheaded in India by Ashish Kothari, <http://www.vikalpsangam.org>. Some of these initiatives use the concept of weaving. In the art world, the project Antropoloops, by Rubén Alonso, an architect and ethnomusicologist from Seville, Spain, maps and weaves world musics in ways that could perhaps be applied to struggles. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oatdM-jsVal&feature=youtu.be>. Thanks to Alberto Corsín for bringing this neat project to my attention.
- 6 A well-known collection of Zapatista texts includes Subcomandante Galeano’s own rendition of the question of the master’s house. As the group involved in the anecdote concludes, it would not make sense to fix a house “that does not serve to live,” because it only maintains well those on top, while they trample on those below and destroy the house along the way. Better to build a new house/world, while preparing for the eventual collapse of the old one (Comisión Sexta del EZLN 2016, 8). I thank Anthony Dest for reminding me of this passage.
- 7 I will not deal here with anarchism as a theoretico-political perspective and practice, although its role in renovating political debates in Latin America, in-

cluding in homegrown approaches to *autonomía* and the communal, is clear and understudied.

- 8 The zones to defend, or ZADs, are sites or territories that have been occupied by activists resisting mega development projects. The term was first used by protesters blockading the construction of a large international airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, near the city of Nantes. The village that resulted from the occupation has lasted more than a decade, despite heavy police repression. This has been an inspiring struggle, replicated in other places in France and Europe. It may be seen as an instance of Klein's "Blockadia" (2014). See the movement's website, <https://zad.nadir.org/?lang=en> (accessed July 31, 2018). I visited the ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes on June 7, 2018. My thanks to Christophe Bonneuil for the invitation for this visit, and to the *zadistes* who welcomed us that day.
- 9 I dedicated *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018) to exemplary figures of radical relational politics and the struggle for the pluriverse, including Bob Marley, the Zapatistas, and the Afro-Colombian and indigenous movements of Colombia's Southwest, some of whose thoughts and deeds are told about in this volume.
- 10 From the album *Survival* (Kingston: Island/Tuff Gong Records, 1979).
- 11 Bogue's work, I believe, as well as the work of Caribbean writers such as Sylvia Wynter, Paget Henry, Lewis Gordon, Édouard Glissant, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, anticipated some of today's discussions on black radical thought from ontological perspectives.
- 12 "War," from the album *Rastaman Vibration* (Kingston: Island Records, 1976). The inextricable relation between racism and war has been carefully treated by the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2008).
- 13 Warren situates his work within the critique of metaphysics in Western philosophy (particularly Heidegger and Vattimo), on the one hand, and a series of historical archives concerning the invention of the Negro and the black person as nothing through scholarship, science, law, and pictorial representations, on the other. In commenting on his work, I do not claim to be an expert on Afro-pessimism, black radical thought, Black Optimism, and Afro-futurism, or even to have a complete picture of the map of these illustrious scholarly trends. It seems to me, however, that the questions raised by these trends about blackness and antiblackness (its ontology; the social life and social death of the black subject; the question of how to understand black existence in an antiblack world; the dismantling of white supremacy; the articulation of refusal and affirmation; the resilience and perseverance of black people in the face of the continued trauma of slavery and antiblackness; the ways in which antiblackness confers meaning on nonblacks as human; and the questions of agency and politics) are of utmost importance to all those wishing to comprehend these very issues in relation to other subaltern groups and those interested in different understandings of whiteness. These trends are often associated with Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Frank Wilderson, Orlando Patterson, Jared Sexton, Christina Sharpe, and Fred Moten. (Moten is identified with Afro-mysticism by Warren; see Warren 2017.)

- 14 From the forum's declaration: <https://movimientos.org/es/content/declaracion-del-foro-internacional-sobre-femicidios-en-grupos-etnicizados-y-racializados>, accessed October 30, 2019. See also the forum's blog, <http://foro-femicidios2016.blogspot.com>.

### Prologue

- 1 The terms *sentipensar* and *sentipensamiento* were first reported by the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1984) as the living principle of the riverine and swamp communities of Colombia's Caribbean coast. They imply an art of living based on thinking with both heart and mind, reason and emotion. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbJWqetRuMo>. They were popularized by Eduardo Galeano; see, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUGVz8wATIs>. Approximate translations in English would be "feeling-thinking" or "think-feeling."
- 2 The election of the right-wing politician Iván Duque as president of Colombia in May 2018—and the increasing repression and assassinations of social activists that have ensued since then—is having a strong impact on the conditions for popular protest and mobilization; these, however, have not stopped altogether.

### Introduction: Another Possible Is Possible

Epigraph: My thanks to Gabriela Merlinsky for this quote by the great Argentine environmentalist Héctor Alimonda, who died a few weeks after sending Gabriela a text containing this marvelous phrase.

Epigraph: From the version featuring the great black singers Susana Baca and Totó la Momposina singing the refrain. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkFJE8ZdeG8>.

- 1 This is why I sometimes use the notion of "the real/possible" in this book, without meaning to imply that they are one and the same. I explain these terms in chapter 1.
- 2 See the excellent analysis by the Colombian activist and doctor Manuel Rozental (2017a, 2017b) of worldwide war (Syria, Libya, the Middle East, Venezuela) as the essential mechanism for the accumulation of capital.
- 3 I explain these and other aphorisms in chapter 7, where the references will also be found.
- 4 An effective way to counter the accusation is to turn it upside down by showing that the accusers, not the accused, are the true romantics. I often try out ways of turning conventional perceptions upside down with my students, coming up with formulas such as the following: The problem with the world isn't extreme poverty but extreme wealth; Africa isn't being "killed" by too little development but by too much; The greatest "failed state" is the United States, where elections are for sale, wars are manufactured, everything gets handed over to the corporations, and people don't bat an eye; The more elitist a university is, and the closer it is to the circles of power, the more conventional its view of the world, and therefore

the more cut off from people's true experiences and needs (this, to denaturalize the glorification of universities such as Harvard). And to denaturalize the value assigned to choosing a profession in business, engineering, economics, and so on, because these are "productive" careers, and to overturn the subsequent devaluation of the arts and humanities, I might say: "It is the knowledge produced by these conventional careers that keeps helping to destroy the world; on the other hand, the knowledge produced by the humanities and social sciences is what has the potential to guide us in the process of reconstructing the worlds we are destroying." It's important to be mindful, however, that these strategic reversals imply a return to the idea of a real world with a single truth.

### Chapter 1: Theory and the Un/Real

- 1 With the use of the tilde (~), I am suggesting that the terms are not completely separate, but are in continuity with each other.
- 2 Colombian and Latin American anthropologists and political ecologists also tell us that the Kogui and Arhuaco peoples of the Sierra Nevada consider themselves the "elder brothers" of humanity, in charge of maintaining world balance, beginning with their own territories.
- 3 This argument has been developed since the 1970s by the German feminists Claudia von Werlhof, Maria Mies, and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen. See von Werlhof 2015 for an introduction to this literature and von Werlhof 2019 for a discussion of the "new matriarchies." This research program (and the related work of Silvia Federici, Ariel Salleh, Wendy Harcourt, and Latin American feminists such as Rita Segato, María Lugones, Sylvia Marcos, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, among others, as well as communitarian and decolonial feminists) is independent of the feminist theories that prevail in the Anglo-American academy, where they have often instead been criticized as essentialist. See Escobar 2018 for a discussion of these analyses.
- 4 Humberto Maturana and Ximena Dávila have been carrying out a research and action project on matriztic cultures and the biology of love with colleagues in Santiago de Chile for many decades. See the Matriztica School (Escuela Matriztica, a formulation that combines the words "matristic" and matriz or "matrix"), <http://matriztica.cl/>.
- 5 The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (2008) offers the well-known example of the "flower," which interexists with the planet, soil, water, pollinating insects, even the sun, all of which are essential to its existence. It should be added that in Buddhist meditation, interdependence goes hand in hand with equally important reflections on impermanence and compassion; only then can the vision of interbeing be realized. The ultimate objective is to be able to *practice interdependence and not remain trapped in philosophical or conceptual reflections about it*.
- 6 The Buddhist literature (and secondary literature) on the mind is so vast that it is almost ridiculous to mention any particular sources. However, for a useful introduction to the question of mind by an eminent Buddhist teacher, see Mingyur Rinpoche 2007. A key, basic Buddhist text from the twelfth century can be