THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SUSTAINABILITY

Beyond Development and Progress

Edited by
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We, Afrodescendant women of Northern Cauca, understand the ancestral value of our territories. Our ancestors taught us that we should guarantee our descendants (renacientes) permanence in our territories. Our territories have been defined by life, joy, and peace. Because our love for life is stronger than our fear of death! Territories and Life are not sold—they are loved and defended [Communiqué of the Mobilization of Afrodescendant Women for the Caring of Life and the Ancestral Territory, November 25, 2015].

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M. Brightman, J. Lewis (eds.), The Anthropology of Sustainability, Palgrave Studies in Anthropology of Sustainability, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56636-2_14
INTRODUCTION: FROM WAR TO AUTONOMY, AND FROM UNSUSTAINABILITY TO SUSTAINMENT

From November 17 to 27, a group of 22 women marched from the predominantly Afrodescendant town of La Toma in the Norte del Cauca region in Colombia’s southwest to Bogotá, a distance of 440 km, to protest the illegal and destructive gold mining going on in their ancestral territories. They were accompanied by a group of young men, the guardia cimarrona (maroon guard), organized on the model of guardia indígena, an unarmed practice of self-protection of the neighboring Nasa pueblo (people). Many people joined in along the way, or offered solidarity, in small towns and larger cities such as Cali and Ibagué. Upon arrival to the cold Andean sabana (plateau) where Bogotá is located, and faced with the indifference and dilatory tactics of the bureaucrats of the Minister of the Interior, the women decided to occupy the building, which they proceeded to do for close to two weeks, despite threats of forced eviction and the intense frío sabanero, or the region’s cold, until finally reaching a signed agreement with the government. The agreement called, among other things, for the removal of all the retroexcavadoras (large backhoe excavating machines) used for gold extraction and the drafting of a protection plan for the communities from threats by backhoe owners and other armed actors. By mid-January, however, and despite timid attempts by various government agencies to show presence in the territory, it was clear that the agreements were not going to be fulfilled. By mid-April, Francia Márquez, one of the main leaders of the March, had already penned two amazingly brave and lucid open letters to the government and the public at large. ‘I do not cease to ask myself,’ she asked in the first letter of April 18, ‘Do the lives of black and indigenous people and peasants have any worth in this country?’ And she goes on to say: ‘Everything we have lived has been for the love we have known in our territories, the love we feel when we see the plantain germinate, when we have a sunny fishing day, of knowing your family is close by … our land is the place where we dream of our future with dignity. Perhaps that’s why they [armed actors, including the army, paramilitaries, and guerrillas] persecute us, because we want a life of autonomy and not of dependency’.2

Written in the context of the tense peace negotiation between the government and the FARC guerillas, the letter also contained a direct indictment of the government’s national development plan, one of whose pillars or locomotoras (locomotives) is precisely mining. For Márquez, this
model can only generate hunger, misery, and war. The implication is clear: without transforming radically this model, and without obtaining the conditions of autonomy for the territories, peace will be illusory. There can never be peace, she added in her second letter, ‘if the government is not able to create the conditions to take care of life, if it does not privilege the life of all beings above all private interests and the interests of the transnationals’. As she reminded everybody in her second letter, less than a week later, ‘we started on this march to let you all know that illegal mining is leaving us without our families, robbing us from the possibility of continuing to live in the territory where our umbilical cords are buried’.

Addressed ‘To those women that take care of their territories as if it were their daughters and sons. To the women and men who care for a Dignified, Simple, and Solidary Life’, the letter ended with the March’s slogan: Territories and Life are not sold – they are loved and defended.

This chapter takes the defense of territories, as evidenced in the case of the black communities in Northern Cauca, as a point of departure to raise some questions about the concept of sustainability in anthropology, geography, and political ecology. The movements for the defense of territories against the onslaught by globalized capital, extractivist forms of development, and modernist discourses of progress, growth, value, and order provide an excellent grounding for rethinking sustainability. Anchored on this grounding, and in tandem with certain critical trends in the academy associated with the ‘ontological turn’, the argument I develop here can be stated as follows: Most frameworks and practices associated with ‘sustainability’ at present amount at best to reducing unsustainability, while keeping the underlying world order and vision in place—what activists often call the ‘globalized civilizations model’ and scholars refer to as ‘the One-World World’ (OWW) model (Law 2011). From activists perspectives, however, what needs to be sustained, on the contrary, is the pluriverse or, to use the wise Zapatista formula, ‘a world where many worlds fit’. In this sense, many territorial struggles (by Afrodescendants, indigenous peoples, peasant, and often times poor urban dwellers) can be seen as ontological struggles; they interrupt the globalizing project of fitting many worlds into one. These struggles are important contributions to ecological and cultural transitions toward the pluriverse. As such, the knowledges they produce might be particularly relevant for the search for post-capitalist, sustainable plural models of life. To see them in this way, however, requires that we situate them within a twofold context: the search for transitions, which can be gleaned from transition movements and visionaries in many parts of the
Global South and the Global North; and a renewed understanding of the self-organizing dynamics of the Earth.

Part I of this chapter starts with some very brief remarks about political ecology (PE), situating the emergent field of political ontology with PE’s genealogy. Part II summarizes the ontological approach to territorial struggles, highlighting the central role of relational worlds or ontologies in this onto-epistemic political field. Part III highlights the need for going back to a profound understanding of the Earth as some indigenous activists and ecological visionaries do at present, in order to ascertain the farsighted character of the thought being produced by these actors, largely outside of the academy, and to rethink sustainability. The conclusion, finally, underlies the crucial role of knowledges produced in territorial struggles for transitions to the pluriverse. It also makes an initial foray into the notion of design for transitions or, as some design thinkers call it, for moving toward an Age of Sustainment. I should note that each part is very sketchily developed given space limitations. By outlining the argument as a whole, however, I hope to lay down the bare rudiments of a political ontology approach to sustainability.

**FROM POLITICAL ECOLOGY TO POLITICAL ONTOLOGY**

There are many ways to tell the genealogy of political ecology.\(^4\) There is broad agreement about its starting point in the 1970s, when a number of social scientists began to analyze the relation between society, or capitalism, and the environment by combining ecological frameworks (largely from the cultural and human ecology of the 1950s–1970s) with social theory frameworks, particularly Marxism (yet from other perspectives as well, such as systems theory). Some of the early critiques of sustainability were influenced by this early political ecology.\(^5\) Since then, the field has remained intensely interdisciplinary, with geography, anthropology, sociology, ecological economics, and environmental history perhaps playing the most prominent roles. Since the 1990s, post-structuralism favored a shift in focus toward the various regimes of representation and power (discourses, science, patriarchy, whiteness, and colonial narratives) through which ‘nature’ has been culturally constructed, historically and in place. In general terms, what came out of these two very productive phases was an understanding of political ecology as the field that studies the multiple intersections between nature, culture, power, and history. Emphases oscillated between ‘the social production of nature’ (more prevalent in Marxist geography) to ‘the cultural
construction of nature’ (in post-structuralist-inflected anthropology). Ecological economics maintained a relatively unique path for a time, centered on reframing economics through various material-energetic analyses and questions of valuation. It became linked with political ecology explicitly through a concern with environmental struggles, for instance, in terms of what Martínez-Alier called ‘ecological distribution conflicts’ (2002; see also Healy et al. 2013).

These approaches or phases overlap today in the work of many authors; a certain theoretical eclecticism characterizes political ecology. The current moment can nevertheless be considered a distinct, third phase. This phase can broadly be described as post-constructivist and neo-materialist. While it incorporates many of the insights of the constructivist moment (nature is historically and culturally constructed) and continues to pay attention to the social production of nature by capital under globalizing conditions, the center of attention now is on an entire range of aspects that were largely bypassed by the social and human sciences as a whole. The category that perhaps most aptly harbors these diverse tendencies is the ‘ontological turn’; it has become salient in geography, anthropology, and political theory during the past decade. What defines this turn is the attention to a host of factors that deeply shape what we come to know as ‘reality’ but which the academy rarely tackled—things like objects and ‘things’, non-humans, matter and materiality (soil, energy, infrastructures, weather, bytes), emotions, spirituality, feelings, and so forth. What brings together these very disparate list of items is the attempt to break away from the normative divides, central to the modern regime of truth, between subject and object, mind and body, reason and emotion, living and inanimate, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, and so forth. This is why this set of perspectives can be properly called post-dualist. More colloquially, it can be said that what we are witnessing with post-dualist, neo-materialist critical theories is the return of the repressed side of the dualisms—the forceful emergence of the subordinated and often feminized and racialized side of all the above binaries.

The most important target of post-dualist political ecology is the divide between nature and culture and the idea that there is a ‘single nature’ to which there correspond ‘many cultures’. The deconstruction of the first divide started in the 1980s, with the works of Ingold, Strathern, Descola, Haraway, Law and Latour (and many others, including in other parts of the world). The recent scholarship, however, makes a concerted effort at re-connecting nature and culture, and humans and non-humans, through
a rich variety of theoretical and ethnographic proposals and investigations. Re-connection may take the form of visualizing networks, assemblages, naturecultures or socionatures, or compositions or ‘more-than-human’ worlds always in the process of being created by all kinds of actors and processes. ‘Distributed agency’ (e.g., Bennett 2010) and ‘relational ontologies’ are key concepts here. Whether these post-dualist trends finally manage to leave behind the anthropocentric and Eurocentric features of modern social theory and their particular accentuation in the Anglo-American academy is still a matter of debate. In the remainder of this section, I discuss two lines of work that are tackling this problematic: feminist political ecology and political ontology.

It is not a coincidence that much of the most interesting work being done at the interface of the ontological turn and political ecology is being done by feminist geographers, anthropologists, and political theorists. Perhaps it could be said that they are the ‘most consistently relational’ among the academics working across the nature/culture divide, while being mindful of not ‘re-worlding everything into one lens’, as Paige West put it (as many of us, academics, are prone to do). Though not strictly located within political ecology or feminist political ecology (although see Harcourt and Nelson 2015), the relational writings of feminists from the Global South are very important for radicalizing the insights of post-dualist feminist political ecology. Carolyn Shaw (2014) proposes the African feminist notion of ‘negofeminism’ —a feminism that is non-ego based—as a basis for relational thinking and writing, a notion that recalls that of the ‘expanded ecological self’ of deep ecology. Something similar can be said of the potential contributions to feminist political ecology and post-dualist political ecology by decolonial Latin American feminists, for whom an essential part of any feminist work is the deconstruction of the colonial divide (the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ divide instaurated since the Conquest of America, slavery and colonialism and that is alive and well today with modernizing globalization and development; see Espinosa et al. 2014). Of course, feminists have a strong living genealogy on which to construct their theoretical-political projects on a ‘high relationality’ mode, from questions about the situatedness of knowledge, the historicity of the body, and the salience of emotions and affect to the relevance of women’s voices from the Global South. This heritage is reflected today in the feminist commitment and creativity to exploring other ways of worlding, including new insights about what keeps the dominating ontologies in place. Feminist political ecology today can be said to be a transnational practiced space of
understanding and healing (e.g., Baksh and Harcourt 2015). They suggest that attachments (to body, place, and ‘nature’) have ontological status. In some versions, there is an explicit aim to build effective bridges across worlds by revisioning community, spirituality, and place intimacy, as a way to repair the damages inflicted by the ontology of disconnection. Anzaldúa’s powerful call on all us, humans, to be *nepantleras*, bridge builders and re-weavers of relationality, is shared by some of these new orientations (Anzaldúa 2002).

Along with decolonial feminist political ecology, political ontology can be said to be an ontological-political strategy to re-weave life and community with the many territorial struggles of today. The deconstruction of the colonial divide is also central to political ontology. The term ‘political ontology’ was coined by anthropologist Mario Blaser (2009, 2010, 2013) and continues to be developed by this author along with de la Cadena and Escobar (e.g., Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2010, 2015; Escobar 2014; Blaser et al. 2014). The emphasis is on worlds and worlding in two senses: on the one hand, political ontology refers to the power-laden practices involved in bringing into being a particular world or ontology; on the other hand, it refers to a field of study that focuses on the inter-relations among worlds, including the conflicts that ensue as different ontologies strive to sustain their own existence in their interaction with other worlds. It should be emphasized that political ontology situates itself simultaneously within critical trends in the academy and within ongoing struggles for the defense of territories and worlds. It is this active and profound commitment to thinking from the space of struggles involving ecological-ontological conflicts that gives political ontology its specificity at present. ‘Ontological struggles’, in this context, as we shall see in the next section, also signal a problematization of the universalizing ontology of the dominant forms of modernity—what John Law (2011) has descriptively called ‘The One-World World’. Political ontology is also intended to make visible the ontological dimension of the accumulation by dispossession that is going on today in many parts of the world with extractivist development models, principally large-scale mining, agro-fuels, and land grabbing linked to commercial agriculture (McMichael 2013). Against the will to render the world into one, political ontology asserts the importance of enhancing the pluriverse.

While political ontology is very much influenced by the ‘more-than-human’ trend of late, and also seeks to scrutinize human-centered assemblages, by placing itself deeply (ethnographically and politically) within
worlds that are not constructed solely on the basis of the nature/culture
divide, even if pushed to become partially connected with the OWW and
hence to make themselves also in terms of the divide, political ontology
advocates hope to render visible those heterogeneous assemblages of life
that enact non-dualist, relational worlds. Political ontology also has a decid-
edly decolonial orientation in that it rearticulates the colonial difference (the
hierarchies of differences created historically by the effects of the OWW’s
domineering ontology on other worlds and knowledges), and the OWW’s
epistemic inability to recognize that which exceeds it, into a vision of
relational onto-epistemic formations in movement that renovates our
understanding of ‘the human’ and of what exists in general. The historicity
of political ontology at the present moment, lastly, is given by the utter
necessity, as gleaned from many indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant
mobilizations in Latin America, of defending relational territories-worlds
from the ravages of large-scale extractivist operations, such as mining and
agro-fuels (e.g., Gudynas 2015). Against the ontological occupation and
destruction of worlds effected by the globalization project, political ontol-
gy emphasizes the importance of thinking from, and within, those config-
urations of life that, while partially connected with the globalizing worlds,
also remain unoccupied by them (de la Cadena 2015).

THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF TERRITORIAL STRUGGLES
IN LATIN AMERICA

Elders and young activists in many territorial communities worldwide
(including increasingly in urban areas) eloquently express why they defend
their worlds even at the price of their lives. In the words of the same activist
from the Afrodescendant community of La Toma already mentioned, ‘It is
patently clear to us that we are confronting monsters such as transnational
corporations and the State. Yet nobody is willing to leave her/his territory; I
might get killed here but I am not leaving’. Such resistance takes place
within a long history of domination and resistance, and this is essential for
understanding territorial defense as an ontological-political practice. La
Toma communities have knowledge of their continued presence in the
territory since the first half of the XVII century. It’s an eloquent example
of what activists call ‘ancestrality’, referring to the ancestral mandate that
inspires today’s struggles and that persists in the memory of the elders,
amply documented by oral history and scholars (Lisifrey et al. 2013). This
mandate is joyfully celebrated in oral poetry and song: Del Africa llegamos con un legado ancestral; la memoria del mundo debemos recuperar (‘From Africa we arrived with an ancestral legacy; we must recover the world’s memory’).

Far from an intransigent attachment to the past, ancestrality stems from a living memory that orients itself to the ability to envision a different future—a sort of ‘futurality’ that imagines, and struggles for, the conditions that will allow them to persevere as a distinct world.

Within relational worlds, the defense of territory, life, and the commons are one and the same. To this extent, this chapter’s argument can be restated as follows: The perseverance of communities, commons, and the struggles for their defense and reconstitution—particularly, but not only, those that incorporate explicitly ethno-territorial dimensions—involves resistance and the defense and affirmation of territories that, at their best and most radical, can be described as pluriversal, that is, as fostering the co-existence of multiple worlds. Conversely, whereas the occupation of territories by capital and the State implies economic, technological, cultural, ecological, and often armed aspects, its most fundamental dimension is ontological. From this perspective, what occupies territories is a particular ontology, that of individuals, expert knowledge, and markets. By resisting the neoliberal globalizing project, many indigenous, Afrodescendant, peasant, and poor urban communities are advancing ontological struggles. The struggle to maintain multiple worlds—the pluriverse—is best embodied by the Zapatista dictum, un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos, a world where many worlds fit. Many of these worlds can thus be seen as engaged in struggles for the perseverance and enhancement of the pluriverse.

Another clear case of ontological occupation of territories comes from the southernmost area of the Colombian Pacific, around the port city of Tumaco. Here, since the early 1980s, the mangrove and humid forests have been destroyed and communities displaced to give way to oil palm plantations and industrial shrimp cultivation. Inexistent in the 1970s, by the mid-1990s oil palm had expanded to over 30,000 hectares, and the industry’s projection was to double the area in a few years. The monotony of the plantation—row after row of palm as far as you can see, a green desert of sorts—has replaced the diverse, heterogeneous, and entangled worlds of forest and communities. There are two important aspects to remark from this dramatic change: first, the ‘plantation form’ effaces the relations maintained with and by the forest-world; emerging from a dualist ontology of human dominance over so-called ‘nature’ understood as ‘inert space’ or ‘resources’ to be had, the plantation is one of the most effective means to
bring about the ontological occupation of local relational worlds. In fact, plantations are unthinkable from the relational perspective of forest-worlds; within these worlds, forest utilization practices take on an entirely different form that ecologists describe in terms of agro-ecology and agro-forestry; even the landscape, of course, is entirely different. Not far from the oil palm plantations, industrial shrimp companies were also busy in the 1980s and 1990s transforming the mangrove-world into disciplined succession of rectangular pools, ‘scientifically’ controlled. A very polluting and destructive industry especially when constructed on mangrove swamps, this type of shrimp farming constitutes another clear example of ontological occupation and politics at play (Escobar 2008, 2014).

Mangrove forests are primary examples of what here is called a ‘relational ontology’. The mangrove-world is enacted minute by minute, day by day, through an infinite set of practices carried out by a multiplicity of beings and life forms, involving a complex organic and inorganic material weaving of water, minerals, degrees of salinity, forms of energy (sun, tides, moon, relations of force), human activity, spiritual beings, and so forth. There is a rhizome ‘logic’ to these entanglements, a ‘logic’ that is impossible to follow in any simple way, and very difficult to map and measure, if at all; this logic reveals an altogether different way of being and becoming in territory and place.11 These experiences constitute relational worlds or ontologies. To put it abstractly, a relational ontology of this sort can be defined as one in which nothing preexists the relations that constitute it. Said otherwise, things and beings are their relations, they do not exist prior to them.

As the anthropologist Tim Ingold says (2011: 131), these ‘worlds without objects’ are always in movement, made up of materials in motion, flux and becoming; in these worlds, living beings of all kinds constitute each other’s conditions for existence; they ‘interweave to form an immense and continually evolving tapestry’ (p. 10). These worlds do not require the divide between nature and culture in order to exist—in fact, they exist as such only because they are enacted by practices that do not rely on such divide. In a relational ontology, ‘beings do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it, and in so doing – in threading their own paths through the meshwork – they contribute to their ever evolving weave’ (p. 71). Commons exist in these relational worlds, not in worlds that are imagined as inert and waiting to be occupied.

Even if the relations that ceaselessly enact the mangrove-world are always changing, to significantly mess them up often results in the degradation of such worlds. Such is the case with industrial shrimp farming schemes and oil
palm plantations for agro-fuels, already mentioned, often built with the avowed aim to transform them from ‘worthless swamp’ to agro-industrial complexes (Ogden 2010). Here, of course, we find many of the operations of the OWW at play: the conversion of everything that exists in the mangrove-world into mixes of ‘nature’ and ‘resources’; the effacing of the life-enabling materiality of the inorganic and the non-human, and their treatment as ‘objects’ to be extracted, eradicated, or destroyed; and linking the forest-worlds so transformed to ‘world markets’ for profit. In these cases, the insatiable appetite of the OWW spells out the progressive destruction of the mangrove-world, its ontological capture and reconversion by capital and the State (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Escobar 2008). The OWW, in short, denies the mangrove-world its possibility of existing as such. Local struggles constitute attempts to re-establish some degree of symmetry to the partial connections that the mangrove-worlds maintain with the OWW.

**THINKING-FEELING WITH THE EARTH**

There are many signs that suggest that the One-World doctrine is unraveling, and political ontology helps us understand this process. The ubiquity of the language of crisis to refer to the planetary ecological and social conditions (chiefly, but well beyond, climate change) heralds this unraveling. The growing visibility of struggles to defend mountains, landscapes, forests, territories, and so forth by appealing to a relational (non-dualist) and pluri-ontological understanding of life is another manifestation of the OWW’s crisis.

The unraveling of the OWW fosters momentous questions for both social theory and political activism on behalf of territories: How did the OWW become so powerful? How does it work today? How is it made and unmade? Can it be rearticulated in terms of a plurality of worlds? (Law 2004, 2011; Law and Lien 2012; Blaser et al. 2014). This conjuncture and questions define a rich context for political ontology and pluriversal studies: on the one hand, the need to understand the conditions by which the OWW continues to maintain its dominance; on the other, the emergence of projects based on different ontological commitments and ways of worlding, including commoning (e.g., Nonini 2007; Bollier 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2012), and how they struggle to weaken the one-world project while widening their spaces of re-existence.
The ‘pluriverse’ is a way of looking at reality that contrasts with the OWW assumption that there is a single reality to which there correspond multiple cultures, perspectives, or subjective representations. For the pluriverse proposal, there are multiple reals; however, the proposal is not intended to ‘correct’ the view of a single real on the grounds of being a truer account of ‘reality’. The pluriverse is a tool to first, make alternatives to the one world plausible to one-worlders, and, second, provide resonance to those other worlds that interrupt the one-world story (Blaser et al. 2014).

Displacing the centrality of this dualist ontology, while broadening the space for non-dualist ontologies, is a sine qua non for breaking away from the one-world story. This implies a transition from concepts such as ‘globalization’ and ‘global studies’ to concepts centered on the pluriverse as made up of a multiplicity of mutually entangled and co-constituting but distinct worlds.

As it was mentioned in the introduction, knowledges produced in the struggles for the defense of relational worlds might be more farsighted and appropriate to the conjuncture of modern problems without modern solutions (Santos 2014) than its academic counterparts. To substantiate this claim fully requires that we locate these knowledges within a twofold context: that of the need for civilizational transitions, on the one hand, and the planetary dynamics brought to the fore by global climate change, the destruction of biodiversity, and the anthropocene. The first context involves a consideration of the multiplication of discourses of transition over the past decade; the second, the pressing historical need to become attuned again to what the North Carolina ecologist and theologian Thomas Berry (1988, 1999) has poetically called ‘the dream of the Earth’ (Berry 1988, 1999). Territorial struggles, as it will be argued in this last section, are producing among the most insightful knowledges for the cultural and ecological transitions seen as necessary to face the crisis; these knowledges are also profoundly attuned to the self-organizing dynamics of the Earth. Only the second of these factors, however, will be discussed here (see Escobar 2015 for a discussion of transition discourses).

There are many non-dualist philosophies (more often known as cosmovisions) that reflect a deeply relational understanding of life, such as Muntu and Ubuntu in parts of Africa; the Pachamama or Mama Kiwe among South American indigenous peoples; US and Canadian American Indian cosmologies; the Buddhist philosophy of mind; and non-dualist cosmogonies from various historical civilizations. Non-dualist traditions also exist within the West, as alternative Wests or non-dominant forms of
modernity (see, e.g., Santos 2014; Dreyfus and Kelly 2011; Goodwin 2007). These are expressions of the fact that, like every other living being, humans and non-humans alike are an expression of the creative force of the earth, of its self-organization and constant emergence; simply put, every living being is implicated in the existence and co-arising of all living beings on the planet. One of the most compelling visions in this regard has been proposed by Berry. For Berry, ‘the deepest cause of the present devastation is found in a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and the bestowal of all rights on the humans’ (1999: 4). He identifies governments, corporations, universities, and religions as the fundamental establishments that keep this state of affairs in place. We, moderns, have lost our integral relation with the universe, and must restore it by bringing about a new intimacy with the Earth. As the first ‘radically anthropocentric society’ (1988: 202), we have become rational, dreamless people.

Given that we cannot be intimate with the Earth within a mechanistic paradigm, we are in dire need of a New Story that might enable us to reunite the sacred and the universe, the human, and the non-human. The wisdom traditions, including those of indigenous peoples, are a partial guide toward this goal of re-embedding ourselves within the Earth. Within these traditions, humans are embedded within the earth, not an individual consciousness existing in an inert world. As a Nasa indigenous leader from Southwest Colombia put it, somos la continuidad de la tierra, miremos desde el corazón de la tierra (‘we are the extension of the earth, let us think from the earth’s heart’). Most Western intellectual traditions have been inimical to this profound realization.14

Given that the humans have become a planetary force, however (what is now called the anthropocene), we (all humans, but particularly moderns) need to formulate a more explicit project of transformation and transition. Berry seeks to give shape to this project by calling for a transition from ‘the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic era’, or ‘from the period when humans were a disruptive force on the planet Earth to the period when humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing’ (199: 7, 11). Above all, we need to recognize that modern culture provides insufficient guidance for the Ecozoic era, and that hence we need to go back to the Earth as a source of insight for action—which is precisely what many relational struggles in defense of the territories and the earth are doing.15 This mandate has significant implications for how we think about sustainability.
Activists at the forefront of these struggles will easily recognize Berry’s dictum that ‘Earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects’ (2013: 4). Ecology, in this sense, becomes ‘a functional cosmology’ (I should emphasize that these statements by Berry stem from a biocentric, not anthropocentric, vision; they do not rely on an epistemology and ontology of subjects and objects). Again, we can think here of the many functional cosmologies maintained by many peoples throughout history, including in the alternative Wests themselves. The new stories seek to reunite the sacred and the universe. While indigenous traditions have an important role to play in this endeavor, so does a transformed understanding of science, one which would help humans reinterpret their place at the species level within a new universe story. By placing it within a reinterpreted cosmology, science would move beyond the dominant technical and instrumental comprehension of the world to be reintegrated with the phenomenal world and so it would contribute to humans’ reencounter with the numinous universe.

**Conclusion**

That Berry calls for a necessary restructuring of our civilization is perfectly understood by many activists of territorial struggles and transition activists worldwide. They can be said to be engaged in the sociology and political ontology of emergences that characterize the pluriverse (Santos 2014; Escobar 2014). In the Global North, emphases on the relocalization of food, energy, and economy, as in the Transition Town Initiative, for instance (Hopkins 2011), and the degrowth (e.g., D’Alisa et al. 2014) and commons (Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Bollier 2014) movements are also part of this emergence; they emphasize the historical re-communalization of social life and its reconnection with the Earth (e.g., Macy and Johnstone 2012). Here again, we find the idea of the farsighted character of the knowledge produced by transition forms of activism, and I want to mention some of the knowledges created by territorial struggles in ending. This character can be gleaned from the following aspects of such knowledges: they evince a profound understanding about life and the Earth; they articulate a farsighted political strategy vis-à-vis capitalism and the State; they include forms of knowing that operate through relation and experience, as well as embodied and embedded reflexivity; they exhibit an acute consciousness of the planetary conjuncture; and they envision realizable utopias for the construction and entanglement of
worlds toward the pluriverse, such as the visions of Buen Vivir (well-being) and rights of nature currently being spearheaded by movements and dissenting intellectuals in South America (e.g., Acosta and Martinez 2009; Gudynas 2014, 2015). Transition knowledges problematize the teleology, outcome orientation, economism, and instrumentalism of expert knowledge, development, and conventional design.

The academy has not been auspicious to relationality; indeed, from the perspective of this chapter it could be said that the academy, taken as whole, has been part of the occupying ontology. We, academics, often ignore living knowledges, communal and spiritual knowledge, art, even other ‘non-academic’ literatures that would be relevant for our inquiries (for instance, the growing field of spiritual ecology, of which Berry is a central figure, which would be so relevant to rethinking sustainability). Unsustainability cannot be addressed only theoretically, even if theory of course will be important in the transitions debate. To take seriously the profound insights of relationality implies that we need to partially move beyond the logos to practice and experience; that we give up the individual idea of what it means to be radical; and willingness on our part to transform our academic and knowledge practices accordingly, in order to welcome a much larger collective of humans and non-humans into our conversations that we have done thus far. In short, it calls on us to re-learn to walk the world as living beings.\textsuperscript{16} This is the imaginary that feminist and decolonial political ontologies are attempting to build, as practiced spaces for understanding and healing, and as pluriversal pedagogies for re-weaving co-creating worlds with others.

While I can barely hint at this aspect of transitions here, I would like to end by making a brief reference to an emerging notion of design from ontological perspectives. The basic insight is straightforward: in designing tools (broadly speaking, objects, services, structures, and interventions), we are designing ways of being (Winograd and Flores 1986). Design generates our structures of possibility—it creates a ‘world-within-the-world’ (Fry 2012)—that contributes to unsustainability and defuturing (destruction of futures). We design the world and it designs us back. The key question is: Can relationality furnish the elements for a new foundation for design? There are multiple sources for thinking that this indeed can be, or is actually, the case. Australian designer Tony Fry speaks of ontological design as a strategy for a transition from Enlightenment to Sustainment. So understood, design would challenge the unsustainability intensified by capitalist modernity. In some approaches, the visions of transition become the basis for new design practices, indeed to the very thought of design for transitions.\textsuperscript{17}
By re-positioning the human among earth beings, vibrant things, and spirituality and the sacred, these novel design orientations might contribute to reinvent the ‘human’ in non-dualist, post-humanist ways.

According to this new orientation, too, there are design traditions all over the world and in all cultures, in that every community, in some sense—and in increasingly explicit ways—practices the design of itself. Although this is more a hypothesis for now than a cogent framework, it can be said that one of the greater challenges for sustainability thinking today is to come up with ways in which communities can design their worlds from a space of autonomy, thus contributing to enhancing the pluriverse. Ontologically understood, design could become a powerful critique of, and an alternative to, development, endless growth, unsustainability, and defuturing, a way of healing territories, life, and the Earth. This, too, is the meaning of the principle of La Toma women’s march with which this chapter started: Territories and Life are not sold – they are loved and defended. Far from merely reducing unsustainability, the thrust of this thought is the sustainability of the pluriverse.

NOTES

2. Francia Márquez, ‘Situación que carcome mis entrañas. A propósito de la orden de bombardear el Cauca’, open letter, April 18, 2015 (this and all other translations are mine).
3. Francia Márquez, ‘A las mujeres que cuidan de sus territorios como a sus hijas e hijos. A las cuidadoras y cuidadores de la Vida Digna, Sencilla y Solidaria’, open letter, April 14, 2015. I should note that the reference to the umbilical cord refers to the long-standing practice among rural and forest Afrodescendant communities to bury the placenta and umbilical cord in order to create an indissoluble link with the territory, so that humans become an integral part of it, and a bit more than human, too.
4. This is not a comprehensive review by any means. I want to highlight some elements of the political ecology genealogy of importance for political ontology. There are many schools of political ecology (sometimes not earmarked as such) in many parts of the world going back to the 1970s, including Latin America and South Asia, Catalunya, France, Germany, and Scandinavia. This complete genealogy is still to be told in English, given that most reviews to date focus in the Anglo-American traditions. See Escobar (2010) for
additional references, and Bryant, ed. (2015) for an excellent comprehensive collection on contemporary political ecology. See also Dove et al., eds. (2011); Harcourt and Nelson, eds. (2015).

5. For instance, by Redclift (1987) and Leff (1986).

6. Thinks, for instance, about Dianne Rocheleau, Paige West, Laura Ogden, Wendy Harcourt, Sarah Whatmore, Anna Tsing, Gibson-Graham, and Jane Bennett, among others. While not all of these scholars construct their work explicitly as feminist, a feminist sensibility to relation and multiplicity is always present.


9. From the documentary by Mendoza cited above.

10. I borrow the term futurity from Australian designer Tony Fry (2012).

11. I have in mind here, of course, Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of rhizomes (1987), and Laura Ogden’s (2010) remarkable extension of this concept to the human/non-human assemblages in the Florida Everglades.

12. Archbishop Desmond Tutu ventured an extension of the Ubuntu principle—usually explained as ‘I exist because you exist’—to the entire realm of the living (cited in Bassey 2012: 9).

13. See the excellent collection of writings on the Idle No More movement (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). Many of the articles, stories, and poems can be read on an ontological register.


15. Berry had developed a well worked out statement on the anthropocene well before the term was officially coined. As he put it in The Dream of the Earth, ‘We are acting on a geological and biological order of magnitude. . . . the anthropogenic shock that is overwhelming the earth is of an order of magnitude beyond anything previously known in human historical and cultural development. As we have indicated, only those geological and biological changes of the past that have taken hundreds of millions of years for their accomplishment can be referred to as having any comparable order of magnitude’ (1988: 206, 211). Or, from his last published book, ‘So now we awaken to a period of extensive disarray in the biological structure and functioning of the planet . . . . [we are] dealing with the disruption and even the termination of a geobiological period that has governed the functioning
of the planet for some 67 million years’ (1999: 3). One can read his proposal of the Ecozoic era as a purposive response to the anthropocene.

16. Aprender a caminar el mundo como seres vivos es el punto de partida para re-aprender la vida, remark made by Adriana Paredes Pinda, Mapuche machi and poet, Chapel Hill, October 30, 2014.

17. Various types of ‘design for transitions’ are emerging in the academy as well, for instance, at Schumacher College in southern England, and at Carnegie Mellon University, where a new PhD program in Transition Design has been created (led by Terry Irwin, Gideon Kossoff, with the collaboration of Damian White, Ezio Manzini, and other design thinkers). See (Irwin 2015; Tonkinwise 2015; Manzini 2015), and http://design.cmu.edu/content/doctoral-research-foci

REFERENCES


