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Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South

Arturo Escobar
Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
and Universidad del Valle, Cali.

ABSTRACT:

The theoretical framework of *Epistemologies of the South* was proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos as a way to recognize other different manners to understand the World. This offers a much more relevant role to non-Western views about our existence. Under this framework the present article describes the concept of relational ontologies, which implies different theoretical fundamentals for those who no longer want to be complicit with the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences by Eurocentric knowledge. Responding to the monolithic idea of World or Universe, this article presents a transition towards the zapatist inspiration of pluriverse, a world where many words fit. The article describes several examples of indigenous reactions against the mining practices, which were extended into the ontological occupation of the land. This article also argues that the knowledge offered by the Epistemologies of the South is much deeper for the context of social transformation than the one that usually originates in the academy.

Introduction: Other knowledges, other worlds

Epistemologies of the South is in all likelihood the most compelling and practicable framework for social transformation to emerge at the intersection of the Global North and the Global South, theory and practice, and the academy and social life in many decades. Its reflexivity about its own location, limits and potentialities is a strength of the framework. To paraphrase its author, it is a proposal that constructs passages between the *No longer* and the *Not Yet* of critical theory if not thought itself. It does not claim to have arrived at a new land of general theories and Big Ideas —in fact, this is explicitly not one of its goals— yet at the same time it dares to outline trajectories for thinking otherwise, precisely because it carves a space for itself that enables thought to re-engage with life and attentively walk along the amazing diversity of forms of knowledge held by those whose experiences can no longer be rendered legible by Eurocentric knowledge in the academic mode, if they ever were. The *Epistemologies of the South* framework provides workable tools for all those of us who no longer want to be complicit with the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences by Eurocentric knowledge, sometimes performed even in the name of allegedly critical and progressive theory. The *Epistemologies of the South* might also be useful to those who have been at the receiving end of those colonialist categories that have transmogrified their experiences, translated them into lacks, or simply rendered them utterly illegible and invisible.

In identifying the infinite diversity of the world as one of its basic premises, the Epistemologies of the South framework (ES) clearly takes on an ontological dimension. By this I mean that in speaking about knowledges, the ES framework is also speaking about worlds. Simply said, multiple kowledges, or epistemes, refer to multiple worlds, or ontologies. The aim of this article is to draw out further the ontological dimension of ES by setting it in to dialogue with certain trends in contemporary critical theory that share with ES its fundamental ethical-political orientation of learning at least as much from the experience, knowledge, and struggles of subaltern social groups as from the academy. These trends –broadly encompassed within a field that we will call "political ontology"—stem from the proposition that many contemporary struggles for the defense of territories and difference are best understood as ontological struggles and as struggles over a world where many words fit, as the Zapatista put it; they aim to foster the pluriverse. What this ontological angle adds to our understanding of contemporary struggles will become clear as the argument is developed.

Part I of the article offers some general remarks on the ontological character of ES, building on some of its key premises. Part II provides an intuitive introduction to the concept of relationality and "relational ontologies" by engaging readers in an imagination exercise that asks them to situate themselves within a complex river landscape in a Colombian rainforest. Part III outlines the framework for the political ontology of territorial struggles in Latin America; this framework is developed from a reinterpretation of the defense of their territories by indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant groups, particularly against large-scale mining and agro-fuels projects. It argues that these extractivist projects can be seen as strategies for the ontological occupation of the territories, and hence that struggles against them constitute veritable ontological struggles. Part IV, finally, engages in a reversal that is well-known to the ES framework: it suggests that the knowledges connected with these struggles are actually more sophisticated and appropriate for thinking about social transformation than most forms of knowledge produced within the academy at present. This is so for two main reasons: first, because the knowledges produced from territorial struggles provide us with essential elements for thinking about the profound cultural and ecological transitions needed to face the inter-related crises of climate, food, energy, poverty, and meaning; and second, because these knowledges are uniquely attuned to the needs of the Earth. As the article's title suggests, those who produce them *sentipiensan con la Tierra* (they think-feel with the Earth); they orient themselves towards that moment when humans and the planet can finally come to co-exist in mutually enhancing manners.[1]

I. The ontological dimension of the Epistemologies of the South

The ES framework is based on a series of premises and strategies, often effectively summarized by its author in compact and seemingly straightforward formulations –insightful formulas or radical reversals-- which nevertheless point at crucial problems within contemporary theory

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1. The terms *sentipensar* and *sentipensamiento* are reported by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1984) as the living principle of the riverine and swamp communities of Colombia's Caribbean coast. They imply the art of living based on thinking with both heart and mind. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbJWqetRuMo. *Sentipensamiento* was later on popularized by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano as the ability found among popular classes to act without separating mind and body, reason and emotion (see, e.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUGVz8wATls).

(Santos 2002, 2007, 2014).[2] Perhaps the best starting point for our purposes here is the saying that the contemporary conjuncture is best characterized by the fact that *we are facing modern problems for which there are no longer modern solutions*. Ontologically speaking, one may say that the crisis is the crisis of a particular world or set of world-making practices, the world that we usually refer to as the dominant form of Euro-modernity (capitalist, rationalist, liberal, secular, patriarchal, white, or what have you). Adopting John Law's (2011) compact formulation, we will refer to this world as the One-World World (OWW), that is, a world allegedly made up of a single Word, and that has arrogated for itself the right to be "the" world, subjecting all other worlds to its own terms or, worse, to non-existence; this is a World where only a world fits. If the crisis is then caused by this OWW, it follows that facing the crisis implies transitions towards its opposite, that is, towards the pluriverse. This is precisely what one of the major premises of ES underscores, in stating that *the diversity of the world is infinite*; succinctly, the world is made up of multiple worlds, multiple ontologies or reals that are far from being exhausted by the Eurocentric experience or reducible to its terms.

The invisibility of the pluriverse points at one of major concepts of ES, namely, the sociology of absences. Here again we find an insightful epistemological formulation: *what doesn't exist is actively produced as non-existent or as non-credible alternative to what exists*. The social production of non-existence points at the effacement of entire worlds trough a set of epistemological operations concerning knowledge, time, productivity, and ways of thinking about scale and difference. As we shall see in the next section, the worlds so effaced are characterized by relational ways of being that challenge, and actually do not abide by, the epistemological operations that effect absences. Conversely, the proliferation of struggles in defense of territory and cultural difference suggests that what emerges from such struggles are entire worlds, which we will call relational worlds or ontologies. There are clear ontological dimensions to the two main strategies introduced by ES, namely, the sociology of absences (the production of non-existence points at the non-existence of worlds, and often implies their ontological occupation), and the sociology of emergences (the enlargement of those experiences considered valid or credible alternatives to what exist entails the forceful emergence of relational worlds through struggles).

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2. In what follows I use a number of ES formulations from various sources; I have amended them slightly in some cases, which is why I do not include them as exact quotes. This section is *not* intended as a comprehensive or systematic presentation of ES; rather, I highlight a few of its principles that will allow me to underscore the ontological implications of the framework.

Finally, there are some principles of ES that point at the connection between the production of theory and ontology. The first is that *the understanding of the world is much broader than the western understanding of the world.* This means that the transformation of the world, and the transitions to the pluriverse or the civilizations transitions adumbrated by many indigenous, peasant, and Afrodescendant activists, might happen (indeed, are happening) along pathways that might be unthinkable from the perspective of Eurocentric theories. Said differently, there is a glaring gap between what most Western theories today can glean from the field of social struggles, on the one hand, and the transformative practices actually going on in the world, on the other. This gap is increasingly clear; it is a limit faced by mainstream and Left theories alike, stemming from the mono-ontological or intra-European origin of such theories. To think new thoughts, by implication, requires to move out of the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with the multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle. It is in these spaces that we might also find more compelling answers to the strong questions posed by the current conjuncture. As this article will argue, in parallel to ES, sources of novel theoretical-political projects do exist, but they are more likely to be found at present in the knowledges, practices, and strategies of subaltern actors as they mobilize in defense of their relational worlds.[3]

II.   Yurumanguí: introducing the relational worlds

Picture a seemingly simple scene from one of the many rivers that flow from the Western Andean mountain range towards the Pacific Ocean in Colombia's southern Pacific rainforest region, inhabited largely by Afrodescendant communities, such as the Yurumanguí river[4]: a father

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3. Santos describes the gap between Western theory and subaltern experience as the phantasmal relation between theory and practice. He makes clear that at its most fundamental, this distance is also an ontological distance involving "ontological conceptions of being and living [that] are quite distinct from Western individualism" (2012: 50). These conceptions is what we will call "relational ontologies" in the next section. In a similar vein, Santos takes a clear stand for what he calls "rearguard theories," that is, the theoretical-political work that goes on in the transformative work of social movements. We couldn't agree more (see, e.g., Escobar 2008 for a similar claim).

4. The Yurumanguí river is one of five rivers that flow into the bay of Buenaventura in the Pacific Ocean, with a population of about 6,000 people, largely Afrodescendants. In 1999, thanks to active local organizing, the communities succeeded in securing the collective title to about 52,000 hectares (82% of the river basin). Armed conflict, the pressure from illegal crops, and mega development projects in the Buenaventura area, however, have militated

and his six-year old daughter paddling with their *canaletes* (oars) seemingly upstream in their *potrillos* (local dugout canoes) at the end of the afternoon, taking advantage of the rising tide; perhaps they are returning home after having taken their harvested plantains and their catch of the day to the town downstream, and bringing back some items they bought at the town store –unrefined cane sugar, cooking fuel, salt, notebooks for the children, or what have you. On first inspection, we may say that the father is 'socializing' his daughter into the correct way to navigate the potrillo, an important skill as life in the region greatly depends on the ceaseless going back and forth in the potrillos through rivers, mangroves and estuaries. This is correct in some ways; but something else is also going on; as locals are wont to say, speaking of the river territory, *acá nacimos, acá crecimos, acá hemos conocido qué es el mundo* (here we were born, here we grew up, here we have known what the world is). Through their *nacer~crecer~conocer* they enact the manifold practices through which their territories/worlds have been made since they became *libres* (i.e., free, not enslaved peoples) and became entangled with living beings of all kinds in these forest and mangrove worlds.

Let us travel to this river and immerse ourselves deeply within it and experience it with the eyes of relationality; an entire way of worlding emerges for us. Looking attentively from the perspective of the manifold relations that make this world what it is, we see that the potrillo was made out of a mangrove tree with the knowledge the father received from his predecessors; the mangrove forest is intimately known by the inhabitants who traverse with great ease the fractal estuaries it creates with the rivers and the always moving sea; we begin to see the endless connections keeping together and always in motion this inter-tidal 'aquatic space' (Oslender 2008), including connections with the moon and the tides that enact a non-linear temporality. The mangrove forest involves many relational entities involving what we might call minerals, mollusks, nutrients, algae, microorganisms, birds, plant, and insects -- an entire assemblage of underwater, surface, and areal life. Ethnographers of these worlds describe it in terms of three non-separate worlds (*el mundo de abajo* or infraworld; *este mundo*, or the human world; and el *mundo de arriba*, or spiritual/supraworld). There are comings and goings between these worlds, and particular places and beings connecting them, including 'visions' and spiritual beings (e.g., Restrepo 1996). This entire world is narrated in oral forms that include storytelling, chants and poetry.

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against the effective control of the territory by locals. Nevertheless, the collective title implied a big step in the defense of their commons and the basis for autonomous territories and livelihoods.

This dense network of interrelations may be called a 'relational ontology'. The mangrove-world, to give it a short name, is enacted minute by minute, day by day, through an infinite set of practices carried out by all kinds of beings and life forms, involving a complex organic and inorganic materiality of water, minerals, degrees of salinity, forms of energy (sun, tides, moon, relations of force), 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; it reveals an altogether different way of being and becoming in territory and place. 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 preexist 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). Going back to the river scene, one may say that 'father' and 'daughter' get to know their local world not through distancing reflection but by going about it, that is, by being alive to their world. 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 keep the mangrove-world always in a state of becoming are always changing, to mess up significantly with them often results in the degradation of such worlds. Such is the case with industrial shrimp farming schemes and oil palm plantations for agro-fuels, which have proliferated in tropical regions in many parts of the world, often built at the expense of mangrove and humid forest lands, with the aim to transform them from 'worthless swamp' to agro-industrial complexes (Ogden 2010). Here, of course, we find many of the operations of the One-World world (OWW) at play: the conversion of everything that exists in the mangrove-world into 'nature' and 'nature' into 'resources'; the effacing of the life-enabling materiality of the entire domains of the inorganic and the non-human, and its treatment as 'objects' to be had, destroyed, or extracted; and linking the forest worlds so transformed to

'world markets' for profit. In these cases, the insatiable appetite of the One-World world 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.

III. Territoriality, ancestrality, worlds: outline of political ontology.

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 an activist from the Afrodescendant community of La Toma, also in Colombia's southwest, engaged in a struggle against gold mining since 2008, "*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.*"[5] Such resistance takes place within a long history of domination and resistance, and this is essential for understanding territorial and commons defense as an ontological political practice. La Toma communities, for instance, 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; the world's memory we need to recuperate").[6] 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.[7]

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5. Statement by Francia Marquez of the Community Council of La Toma, taken from the documentary La Toma, by Paula Mendoza, accessed May 20, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrgVcdnwU0M. Most of this brief section on La Toma comes from meetings in which I have participated with La Toma leaders in 2009, 2012, and 2014, as well as campaigns to stop illegal mining in this ancestral territory and the March to Bogotá of November, 2014.

6. From the documentary by Mendoza cited above.

7. I borrow the term futurality from Australian designer Tony Fry (2012)

Within relational worlds, the defense of territory, life, and the commons are one at the same. To this extent, this article's argument can be stated 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 ontological. 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 the universal world of individuals and markets (the OWW) that attempts to transform all other worlds into one. By interrupting the neoliberal globalizing project of constructing One World, 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 over the pluriverse.

Another clear case of ontological occupation of territories comes from the southernmost area in the Colombian Pacific, around the port city of Tumaco. Here, since the early 1980s, the forest has been destroyed and communities displaced to give way to oil palm plantations. Inexistent in the 1970s, by the mid-1990s they had expanded to over 30,000 hectares. The monotony of the plantation –row after row of palm as far as you can see, a green desert of sorts-- replaced the diverse, heterogeneous and entangled world of forest and communities. There are two important aspects to remark from this dramatic change: first, the 'plantation form' effaces the relations maintained 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 can thus be said to be the most effective means for the ontological occupation and ultimate erasure of local relational worlds. In fact, plantations are unthinkable from the relational perspective of forest-worlds; within this world, forest utilization and cultivation 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, as it was already mentioned, 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).

One of the main frameworks proposed for understanding the occupation of territories and resistance to such occupation is that of political ontology (Blaser 2010, 2014). 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. This framework links conversations in critical theory (particularly in indigenous studies and Science and Technology Studies, STS) with momentous developments in socionatural life (e.g., Latin American indigenous uprisings and struggles). The space crafted by researchers at this intersection is particularly hopeful to illuminate effective paths towards the planet's ontological reconstitution (de la Cadena 2010, in press). It should be stressed, however, that this framework is not limited to ethnic minority territories. In different ways, it applies to all social groups world-wide, including to the ontological occupation of popular neighborhoods in many of the world's urban areas.[8]

Political ontology also helps us to understand the persistence of the occupying ontologies. Although taken as the common sense understanding of "the way things are," the One-World world is the result of particular practices and historical choices. A crucial moment in the emergence of such practices was the Conquest of America, which some consider the point of origin of our current modern/colonial world system (e.g., Mignolo 2000). Perhaps the most central feature of the One-World project has been a twofold ontological divide: a particular way of separating humans from nature (the nature/culture divide); and the distinction and boundary policing between those who function within the OWW from those who insist on other ways of worlding (the colonial divide). These (and many other derivative) dualisms underlie an entire structure of institutions and practices through which the OWW is enacted. There are many signs, however, that suggest that the One-World doctrine is unraveling. The ubiquity of the language of crisis to refer to the planetary ecological and social condition (chiefly, but well beyond, global 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

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8. How not to understand the situation in Ferguson, Missouri; Detroit, Michigan; Buenaventura in the Colombian Pacific; or of so many ethnic minority quarters in the big capitals of the Global North but as ontological (often ontological-military)occupations?

life is another manifestation of the OWW's crisis. Here we find a clear instantiation of Santos' paradox that we are facing modern problems for which there are no longer sufficient modern solutions. The crisis thus stems from the models through which we imagine the world to be a certain way and construct it accordingly.

The unraveling of the OWW fosters momentous questions for both social theory and political activism on behalf of territories: How did the 'One-World world' 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, de la Cadena, and Escobar 2014). These are key questions for a pluriversal *ontological politics*. 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, ed. 2007; Bollier 2014; Bollier and Helfrich, eds. 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, yet it is not intended to 'correct' the view on 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, de la Cadena, and Escobar 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 one-world 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.

The notion of the pluriverse, it should be made clear, has two main sources: theoretical critiques of dualism and so-called "post-dualist" trends stemming from what is called "the ontological turn" in social theory; and the perseverance of 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; U.S. and Canadian

American Indian cosmologies;[9] or even in the entire Buddhist philosophy of mind; they also exist within the West, as alternative Wests or non-dominant forms of modernity (see, e.g., Santos 2014). Some of the current struggles going on in Europe over the commons, energy transitions, and the relocalization of food, for instance, could be seen as struggles to reconnect with the stream of life; they also constitute forms of resistance against the dominant ontology of capitalist modernity. Worldwide, the multiple struggles for the reconstruction of communal spaces and for reconnecting with nature constitute an indubitable political activation of relationality. Urban and rural territorial struggles and struggles over the commons are often examples of such activation. All of the above are important elements of the ES, particularly of the sociology of emergences.

IV.   Transitions to the pluriverse, Buen Vivir, and the politics of theory

From an epistemic and ontological perspective, globalization *has taken place at the expense of relational and nondualist worlds*, world-wide. Economically, culturally, and militarily, we are witnessing a renewed attack on everything collective; land grabbing and the privatization of the commons (including sea, land, even the atmosphere through carbon markets) are a sign of this attack. This is the merciless world of the global 10%, foisted upon the 90% and the natural world with a seemingly ever increasing degree of virulence, cynicism, and illegality, since more than ever 'legal' only signals the self-serving rules that imperialize the desires of the powerful (free-trade agreements, intellectual property rights, defense treaties, commercial legalities, surveillance, and so forth). It is in this sense that the world created by the OWW ontology (despite all of its accomplishments, if you wish) has brought about untold devastation and suffering; its time is running out. The remoteness and separation it effects from the worlds that we inevitably weave with other earth-beings are themselves a cause of the ecological and social crisis (Rose 2008; de la Cadena in press). Epistemic and ontological analyses thus emerge as necessary dimensions for understanding the current conjuncture of crises, domination, and attempts at transformation.

We are now in a position to return to our argument about why knowledges produced in the struggles for the defense of relational worlds

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9. 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.

might be more farsighted and appropriate to the conjuncture of modern problems without modern solutions 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 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.

Let us begin with the discourses of transition. The emergence, over the past decade, of an array of discourses on the cultural and ecological transitions necessary to deal with the inter-related crises of climate, food, energy, and poverty is another powerful sign of the unraveling of the OWW and the emergence of the pluriverse. What one-worlders call the anthropocene --itself an expression of the profound effects on the biophysical integrity of the planet associated with the OWW—points at the need for a transition. In the Global North and the Global South, multiple *transition narratives and forms of activism* articulate veritable cultural and ecological transitions to different societal models, going beyond strategies that offer anthropocene conditions as solutions. Mapping this domain is a key task for ES and pluriversal studies.

Transition discourses (TDs) are emerging today with particular richness, diversity, and intensity to the point that a veritable field of 'transition studies' can be posited as an emergent scholarly-political domain. Notably, those writing on the subject are not limited to the academy; in fact, the most visionary TD thinkers are located outside of it, even if most engage with critical currents in the academy. TDs are emerging from a multiplicity of sites, principally social movements world-wide and some civil society NGOs, from some alternative scientific paradigms, and from intellectuals with significant connections to environmental and cultural struggles. TDs are prominent in several fields, including those of culture, ecology, religion and spirituality, alternative science (e.g., complexity), futures studies, feminist studies, political economy, and digital technologies.

The range of TDs can only be hinted are here, and there needs to be a concerted effort at bringing together TDs in the North and the South.

In the north, the most prominent include degrowth; a variety of transition initiatives (TIs); the anthropocene; forecasting trends (e.g. Club of Rome, Randers 2012); the defense and economics of the commons (e.g., Bollier and Heilfrich, eds. 2012; Bollier 2014); and some approaches involving inter-religious dialogues and UN processes, particularly within the Stakeholders Forum. Among the explicit TIs are the Transition Town Initiative (TTI, Rob Hopkins, UK), the Great Transition Initiative (GTI, Tellus Institute, US), the Great Turning (Joanna Macy), the Great Work or transition to an Ecozoic era (Thomas Berry), and the transition from The Enlightenment to an age of Sustainment (Tony Fry). In the Global South, TDs include crisis of civilizational model, postdevelopment and alternatives to development, Buen Vivir, communal logics and *autonomía*, food sovereignty, and transitions to post-extractivism. While the features of the new era in the North include post-growth, post-materialist, post-economic, post-capitalist, and post-dualist those for the south are expressed in terms of post-development, post/non-liberal, post/non-capitalist, and post-extractivist (see Escobar 2011, 2014 for a complete list of references).

It should be pointed out that the ontological occupation of territories and worlds just described often takes place in the name of development, hence a renewed questioning of the civilizational imperatives of growth and development should be an important element of any transition. Like markets, development and growth continue to be among the most naturalized concepts in the social and policy domains. The very idea of development, however, has been questioned by cultural critics since the mid-1980s; they questioned the core assumptions of development, including growth, progress, and instrumental rationality (e.g., Sachs, 1992, p. 1; Rist 1997; Latouche 2009; Escobar 2011). These critics have argued that it is possible to imagine the end of development, emphasizing the notion of alternatives *to* development, rather than development alternatives, as goals for transition activists and policy makers. The idea of alternatives to development has become more concrete in South America in recent years with the notions of Buen Vivir (good living, or collective wellbeing according to culturally-appropriate ways) and the rights of Nature. Defined as a holistic view of social life that no longer gives overriding centrality to the economy, Buen Vivir "constitutes an alternative *to* development, and as such it represents a potential response to the substantial critiques of postdevelopment" (Gudynas and Acosta, 2011, p. 78; Acosta and Martínez 2009). Very succinctly, the Buen Vivir grew out of indigenous struggles as they articulated with social change agendas by peasants, Afro-descendants, environmentalists, students, women, and

youth. Echoing indigenous ontologies, the BV implies a different philosophy of life which enables the subordination of economic objectives to the criteria of ecology, human dignity, and social justice. The debates about the form BV might take in modern urban contexts and other parts of the world, such as Europe, is beginning to take place. Degrowth, commons, and BV are 'fellow travelers' in this endeavor. They are important areas of research, theorization and activism for both Epistemologies of the South and political ontology. Another very important area of discussion debate and activism in South America, linked to BV, is that of the Rights of Nature. Together, BV and the Rights of Nature have re-opened the crucial debate on how do Latin Americans want to go on living. The rights of nature movement is thus at the same time a movement for the right to exist differently, to construct worlds and knowledges otherwise (e.g., Gudynas 2014).

Buen Vivir and the rights of nature, resonates with broader challenges to the 'civilizational model' of globalized development. The crisis of the Western *modelo civilizatorio* is invoked by many movements as the underlying cause of the current crisis of climate, energy, poverty, and meaning. This emphasis is strongest among ethnic movements, yet it is also found, for instance, in peasant networks for which only a shift toward agroecological food production systems can lead us out of the climate and food crises (e.g., Via Campesina). Closely related is the 'transitions to post-extractivism' framework. Originally proposed by the Centro Latinoamericano de Ecología Social (CLAES) in Montevideo, it has become an important intellectual-activist debate in many South American countries (Alayza and Gudynas, 2011; Gudynas 2011; Massuh, 2012; Coraggio and Laville, eds. 2014). The point of departure is a critique of the intensification of extractivist models based on large scale mining, hydrocarbon exploitation, or extensive agricultural operations, particularly for agrofuels, such as soy, sugar cane or oil palm; whether in the form of conventional –often brutal—neoliberal extractivist policies in countries like Colombia, Perú or México, or following the neo-extractivism of the center-Left regimes, these are legitimized as efficient growth strategies.

Let us now move to the second context that makes the knowledges produced by those engaged in struggles for the defense of territories and relational worlds perhaps even more appropriate and meaningful than those produced from the detached perspectives of science and the academy. This context is none other than the fate of the Earth itself. One of the most compelling visions in this regard has been proposed by the North Carolina ecologist and theologian Thomas 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 towards this goal of re-embedding ourselves within the Earth. Within these traditions, humans are embedded within the earth, are part of its consciousness, not an individual consciousness existing in an inert world. Every living being exist because all others exist. 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.[10]

Given that the human has become a cosmic force itself, however (what is now called the anthropocene), we (moderns and all humans) 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 than 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 –which is precisely what many relational struggles in defense of the territories and the earth are doing.[11]

10. Statement by Marcus Yule, gobernador Nasa, at the congress, "Política Rural: Retos, Riesgos y Perspectivas", Bogotá, Octubre 28-30, 2013. These ideas could be seen as an extension of the *Ubuntu* principle ("I exist because you exist") to the entire realm of the living. Archbishop Desmond Tutu ventured such at this extension (cited in Bassey 2012: 9).
11. Berry had developed a well worked out statement on the anthropocene *avant la lettre*, that is, 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 accom-

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"; again, we can think here of the many functional cosmologies maintained by many peoples throughout history, including in the alternative Wests themselves. Within these other stories, the universe is a vast manifestation of the sacred, and the sacred is saturated with being and spirituality. 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 new 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 the reencounter with the numinous universe. That Berry calls for a necessary complete restructuring of our civilization is perfectly understood by many activists of territorial struggles, activists of transitions to the pluriverse, and those who emphasize the need for a rediscovery of spirituality and the sacred.

VI.   Conclusion:

Epistemologies of the South and political ontology are theoretical-political projects that aim to reinterpret contemporary knowledges and struggles oriented towards the defense of life and the pluriverse. They highlight ecologies of knowledge and ontological struggles in defense of territories and for reconnection with nature and life's self-organizing and always emergent force, arguing that they constitute a veritable political activation of relationality. Moving beyond 'development' and the economy are primary aspects of such struggles. They also show that in the last instance our human ability for enacting other worlds and worlds otherwise will depend on humans' determination to rejoin the unending field of relations that make up the pluriverse.

This geopolitical epistemological and ontological reflection deconstructs and allows us to see anew the social and ecological devastation

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plishment 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.

caused by dualistic conceptions, particular those that divide nature and culture, humans and non-humans, the individual and the communal, mind and body, and so forth. It reminds those of us existing in the densest urban and liberal worlds that we, too, dwell in a world that is alive. Reflection on relationality re-situates the human within the ceaseless flow of life in which everything is inevitably immersed; it enables us to see ourselves again as part of the stream of life.

Epistemologies of the South and political ontology are efforts at thinking beyond the academy, with the *pueblos-territorio* (peoples-territory) and the intellectual-activists linked to them. In this regard, they show the limits of Western social theory; these limits arise from social theory's continued reliance on its historical matrix, the modern dualist episteme and ontology. Modern social theory continues to operate largely on the basis of an objectifying distancing principle, which imply a belief in the 'real' and 'truth' –an epistemology of allegedly autonomous subjects willfully moving around in a universe of self-contained objects. This ontology of disconnection ends up disqualifying those knowledges produced not *about*, but *from* the relation. It is thus that social theory comes to silence much of what brings life into being. To re-enliven critical thought thus requires bringing it again closer to life and the Earth, including to the thoughts and practices of those struggling in their defense.

Coda:

On November 18 of 2014, a group of 22 women started a courageous march from La Toma, Cauca, to the capital city of Bogotá, hundreds of kilometers away. They were greeted and joined by solidary people all along the way. This time their march was motivated by the continued illegal presence of large backhoe machines owned by outsiders engaged in gold mining. Very well-known is the fact that backhoe mining with the use of mercury and cyanide is very destructive. The mining was destroying their river and polluting the water; people who opposed them received death threats. Despite repeated protests, demands, and international letters in support of the community's efforts to get the machines confiscated or at least taken out of their territories, there was no effective action on the part of the state to do so, which motivated the march as a last resource action. The women's various *comunicados*, invariably including the refrain: "Afrodescendant women's movement for the protection of life and the defense of the ancestral territories," involved exemplary statements of territorial and ontological politics. We cite a few here, in ending: *We are Black women from the north of Cauca, descendants of*

African men and women who were enslaved, with knowledge about the ancestral value embedded in our territories. We know many of our ancestors had to pay for our freedom with their lives; we know of the blood that our ancestors spilled to get these lands; we know they worked for years and years in slavery to leave these lands to us. They taught us that you don't sell land; they understood that we needed to ensure that our people could permanently remain in our territory. …. Four centuries have passed, and their memory is our memory; their practices are our practices transmitted through our grandparents; our daughters and sons continue today reaffirming our identity as free peoples. …. Today our lives are in danger and the possibilities of existing as Afrodescendant Peoples is minimal. Many men and women are threatened with death. We women have lived from ancestral mining, an activity that enabled our ancestors to buy their freedom, and ours. This activity is linked with agriculture, with fishing, with hunting and to ancestral knowledges that our elders and our midwives have inculcated in us so that we can remain as peoples. Because our love for life itself is stronger than our fear of death, we convene all of the solidarity of those opposed to illegal mining and opposed to the threats against the people that protect Life and the Ancestral Territories.

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