PLURIVERS

Plurivers #1 — Décoloniser le changement climatique

Dreaming the Pluriverse for a Living Planet

A Conversation with Arturo Escobar

Aude Chesnais, Arturo Escobar

I am an activist-researcher from Cali, Colombia, working on territorial struggles against extractivism; on postpatriarchal, postdevelopmentalist, and postcapitalist transitions; and in ontological design. I was professor of anthropology and political ecology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (U.S.) until 2018, and am currently affiliated with the PhD in Environmental Sciences at the Universidad del Valle, Cali. Over the past thirty years, I have worked closely with Afro-descendant, environmental, and feminist organizations in Colombia. My most well-known book is Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third *World (2011 [1995]). My most recent books are* Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds *(2018);* Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible *(2020); and* Relationality: An Emergent Politics of Life Beyond the Human*, with Michal Osterweil and Kriti Sharma (in press). In 2021, I was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.*

1 The following interview was conducted in May 2023 over email by editorial team member Aude Chesnais.

2 _Aude Chesnais (AC): Arturo Escobar, thank you so much for agreeing to share some of your thoughts with us. Your work and specifically the concept of the pluriverse, "a world in which many worlds can fit," has greatly inspired us for the title of our journal, because our goal is to open a space for the diversity of ways people inhabit the earth other than colonial extractivism. Your contribution means a lot to us. Can you share a little about yourself, your work on the notion of pluriverse, and how it ties to climate change?

3 _Arturo Escobar (AE): Thanks very much, Aude, for your invitation to write down some of the ideas on the notion of the pluriverse that I have been gathering out of many sources, as they have emerged from a diversity of sites and struggles. Let me answer this first question at some length and then attempt to give you concise answers to the other questions—with the proviso that each question would warrant a book chapter at the very least! This is an auspicious sign, because it means that lots of people are already saying interesting things about the subject at hand. What I will say is my own processing of this ongoing collective thinking.

4 The best-known sense in which "the pluriverse" is known today is in relation to the Zapatista dictum, "a world where many worlds fit," or, as two close friends and collaborators, Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, put it, "a world of many worlds."[1] The Zapatista idea has an ontological, epistemic, and political impetus that has influenced a multiplicity of inquiries, experiments, and struggles on pluriversal thinking and pluriversal practices over a very broad terrain—from politics to spirituality, from alternative economies to architecture and urban planning, and from design to the digital realm, including decolonial, anti-racist and transgender issues, among many other domains.

5 It seems to me, however, that there is a second sense in which we can understand the pluriverse, related to the first but perhaps deeper; it relates to ideas that have been emerging for some

[1] Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds., *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

decades and that point towards an altogether different understanding of life and the universe from that of mechanicist and dualist paradigms. We find this second dimension, if you will, in two main sources: some strands of science, and nondualist spiritual and wisdom traditions. We find a pluriversal orientation, for instance, in what theorists of complexity and self-organization refer to as co-evolution and *emergence* and spiritual and wisdom traditions understand and experience as inter-being (Thich Nath Hahn's concept), or *inter-existence*. In these views, life is an open-ended, dynamic process that is ceaselessly happening and producing myriad forms, patterns, and entities out of the stuff that makes up the universe ("matter and energy")—as in physicists David Bohm's concept of "unbroken wholeness," the Buddhist notion of "dependent co-arising," biologist Lynn Margulis' conceptualization of Gaia, and many Indigenous peoples' notion of the circularity or spiral of life, to give some examples. From these perspectives, thought itself (including "pluriverse") arises out of this dynamic, and consciousness is a generalized property not only of life and the Earth but of the entire universe, from the get-go. The perspective of a conscious, living cosmos, as many readers of the journal surely know, is gaining traction in some scientific, cultural, activist, and spiritual circles (including through notions such as the noosphere) and has been an important element in the cosmologies and cosmogonies of many Indigenous and territorialized peoples worldwide. I mention this at the outset to highlight the fact, central to the journal, that diversity and difference are harbored at the heart of life. Life, succinctly, is difference all around. Pluriverse, one may say, is an expression of the dance of difference (autonomy) and interdependence, from the physical and biological levels to the psychic, cultural, and political.

6 I suspect that this journal emerged from this very diverse set of trends. As such, as two artist friends would put it, it is a welcome sign of the "search for the pluriverse."[2] It's not an easy search, and it is important to signal the fact that many, perhaps most, of the applications of the notion of the pluriverse, interdependence, and pluriversal politics tend to slide back, to a greater or lesser extent, into forms of universality and realism/objectivism (hence, dualism). This is bound to happen, given the hold that monoversal, monohumanist, and dualist narratives of life have on our bodies, imagination, practices, and institutions. In a recent book with two dear friends, anthropologist Michal Osterweil and biologist Kriti Sharma, we attempt to underscore this inevitable fact through the concept of "onto-epistemic slippages." I know this sounds complicated, but it basically means that it is very difficult to act fully coherently and consistently with the radical insights of interdependence and pluriversality—they are rather a horizon that helps us engage in transformative alternatives with some sense of grounding.

7 I was born and grew up in Colombia, a country that has suffered much due to the historical weight of elite-led monoversal, modern/colonial nation building. In retrospect, my life has been a series of attempts to deal with this fact while finding space to maneuver within it. After training in engineering and science, during which I became interested in technological solutions to world hunger, I moved to the critical study of discourses of "development" as a key instance of hegemonic monoversal thought. Having written a doctoral dissertation that "deconstructed" such discourse, I then directed my attention (and my life, really) towards trying to identify and understand spaces where alternative thinking and practices could be emerging *collectively*, in a diversity of spaces: social movements; environmental struggles (political ecology); critiques of Western modernity, capitalism, and patriarchy; the World Social Forum ("another world is possible"); ontology (difference); design ("designs for the pluriverse"); and relationality and interdependence. My two overriding concerns throughout these searches (which continue) have been what has been happening with difference and with social, ecological, and ontological justice. If I were to name a field that harbors these concerns, I would say that it is political ontology.

[2] *In Search of the Pluriverse*, an art exhibition curated by Sophie Krier and Erik Wong, Het Nieuwe Instituut (The New Institute), Rotterdam, April 22–August 7, 2022, https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/events/op-zoek-naar-het-pluriversum.

8 _AC: We think of decolonial ecology as the necessary bridge to articulate ecocidal and ethnocidal processes, which has been made invisible by what you describe as western ontological dualism. What, do you think, can we do to reconcile this illusion of separation between nature and culture in the West?

9 _AE: It would be impossible to even attempt to summarize here the re/turn of/to ontology in modern social theory and activist practice, and its closely related trend, pluriversality. Both trends have emerged forcefully in disciplines such as geography, anthropology, political philosophy and in fields as varied as political ecology, feminist and critical race theory, spiritual ecology, design, and many others. Questioning the dualism between humans and nonhumans has been central to this emergence. I often point to Marisol de la Cadena's accomplished book, *Earth Beings*, derived from her long-term immersion and investigation into Andean cosmologies and worldmaking practices, as a particularly insightful and powerful statement in this regard (I would hope this book is soon translated into French!).[3] The ontological opening has fueled rich inquiries in a host of domains at the human/more-than-human interface, including decoloniality. Mario Blaser's forthcoming book will be particularly applicable to decolonial ecology, as it reassesses the diversity of proposals in political ontology at present; his first book already explicitly bridged decolonial thinking and pluriversality to arrive at his early formulation of political ontology.[4] I apologize for my little knowledge of the French literature on the subject. Let me mention that several of the recent titles in Éditions du Seuil's *Anthropocène* collection seem important interventions into the broad questions we are discussing here (including books by Malcolm Ferdinand, Andreas Weber, and Sophie Gosselin and David gé Bartoli).

10 Decolonial thought has been an important source for pluriversal thinking. For Walter Mignolo, a main lesson of the Zapatista uprising was that "the ontology of the pluriverse could not be obtained without the epistemology of pluriversality."[5] Mignolo has been an adamant critic of Western universality and how to delink from it by constructing pluriversality as a dialogical universal project within the contexts of power that have characterized the entanglement of cosmologies, from the Conquest of America till today. Dealing explicitly with the power hierarchies among worlds brings the decolonial angle to the fore.

11 There is an intensely felt need (certainly in activist and even some farsighted policy spaces) to move from the critique of modern dualisms to re/constructive ecologies and ontologies inspired by relationality. There is a welcome sense that the time for just critique is over. We take this realization as a point of departure in our book with Michal and Kriti.[6] How do we move from nonrelational to relational living and worldmaking? How do we interrupt the active production of nonrelationality by patriarchal/colonial capitalist social orders? As we argue, if we look at much activist practice at present (e.g., concerning climate, energy, food, cities, alternative economies, and so forth) what we see is a decided, albeit at times tentatively and confusedly, *political activation of relationality*. In *Relationality*, we seek to counter the powerful myths of individuality, competition, calculation, and relentless growth by positing radical interdependence as an altogether different foundation of reality and a vital standpoint for re-narrating and re-making life. We arrive at a capacious notion of designing as at once a praxis of transitioning between narratives of life and an essential worldmaking practice for the healing of the web of life. We see our book as an invitation to everyone to discover the awesome potential of acting from interdependence

[3]Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[4]Mario Blaser, *Not About the Anthropocene: An Essay of Political Ontology for Life Projects* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2023); *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[5]See Mignolo's account of the genealogy of the concept of the pluriverse in "Foreword: On Pluriversality and Multipolarity," in Bernd Reiter, ed., *Constructing the Pluriverse* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. ix–xvi, at p. ix. For a recent statement on decoloniality, including the entry of "nature" into decolonial thinking, see Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[6]Arturo Escobar, Michal Osterweil, Kriti Sharma, *Relationality. Remaking and Restor(y)ing Life* (London: Bloomsbury, in press). We develop many of the aspects treated in this interview in this book.

and care, in tandem with the myriad struggles and experiments already engaged in redesigning life, politics and the human toward more livable and pluriversal futures.

12 It will be interesting to see how "decolonial ecology" evolves throughout the first few years of the journal. It's an emergent field, of course, with roots in decolonial thought and political ecology, broadly speaking, but, as I understand, with a more decided ontological orientation than decoloniality and political ecology have had until recently. In this respect, I look forward to reading Malcom Ferdinand's new book, *Decolonial Ecology. Thinking from the Caribbean World*, which came out recently in English.

13 Perhaps we may think of decolonial ecology as a bridge towards relationality—as bridging nature—culture, economy—politics, secular—sacred, theory—praxis, mind—body, etc.—and as a series of researches and interventions that serve as portals into relational, pluriversal world-making. Healing these divides, and the toxic loops of existence they have deployed and in which all are, to a greater or lesser extent, enmeshed, if not trapped, would be an apt description for a liberatory praxis of ontologically-oriented decolonial ecology.

14 _AC: In articulating the concept of *sentipensar* or "feel-think," you point people to reconsider the way they understand and relate to the world. What are some important lessons we can learn across alternative epistemologies including Indigenous cosmologies and their efforts to "liberate mother earth"?

15 _AE: *Sentipensar* is an epistemology arising from Latin American peasant and Indigenous peoples' quotidian practices. It's a mode of knowing that does not depend on the mind/body and observer/observed divides, so dear to modern knowledge, including social theory. There have of course been many radical questionings of such dualisms in the academy, from second-order cybernetics to feminist standpoint epistemologies and decolonial theory. The dualisms in question constitute the very core of modern rationality and representational onto-epistemologies. Letting go of them is not easy; the point is to lessen their hegemonic hold on knowledge while opening up spaces for other epistemologies stemming from other ontologies. That's why we feel it's more appropriate to speak of onto-epistemic configurations (rather than separate ontology and epistemology), modernity being one of them, and to make visible, and *practice*, alternative ways of being, knowing, and doing that do not operate based on the dualisms above mentioned. Sentipensar is a way of knowing appropriate to a deeply relational onto-epistemic configuration; it bridges heart and mind, body and soul, and opens space for knowledge practices that value intuition, emotion and feelings, besides the more standard rational modes of knowing (these will not disappear, of course, they will be resituated into a pluriversality of knowledge practices). In this way, we may recover the ability to relate to what is ineffable in life, to the sacred, to the unbroken wholeness that is Life.

16 The concept of terracide, proposed in South America by the Movement of Indigenous Women and Diversities for Buen Vivir (collective wellbeing) which originated in the Puelmapu (the Mapuche territory in what is known as Patagonia) is, in my view, one of the most powerful articulations of the planetary crisis.[7] The terracide involves not only the killing of the biophysical ecosystems, but also of the "perceptible ecosystems," including spiritual beings, ancestors, and knowledge, that is, those that for us, moderns, are imperceptible but that for Indigenous peoples are essential to maintaining the biophysical ecosystems and life as a whole. When the Nasa Indigenous peoples of the Colombian Southwest speak of the "liberation of Mother Earth," this is what they have in mind. Their call, as they hasten to add, is not just for Indigenous peoples, it is for all the peoples of the world.

[7]There are many internet sources on "terricidio," though largely in Spanish; see, for instance, Rompeviento TV, "Mujeres indígenas frente al terricidio: Un conversatorio - Hecho en América," *YouTube*, December 9, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3-gma_shEk; Deliberó en el Lof Mapuche Pillán Mahuiza el Campamento Climático Pueblos contra el Terricidio (revista resistencias.wix site.com)

17 The concept of terracide decenters the anthropos more radically than the Anthropocene by proposing a non-secular, non-anthropocentric approach based on a praxis informed by the land, ancestors, and non-human entities. While the Anthropocene has made palpable the reality of ecological limits and the magnitude of the impact of technological capitalism on the earth's natural systems, it lends itself to managerial and techno-scientific solutions to problems that overflow technoscience's ability to solve them. It shelters the idea of a new global reality that all humans, without distinction, should rally around and master. As such, it misses the point that what is at stake is *a new ontology of the human* capable of inspiring substantial mobilizations for *new ways of dwelling on the Earth*.

18 The Mapuche and Nasa conceptualizations and movements are instances of what we might call "archives of relationality." There are many sources of relationality—so many that it would take a book(s) to even begin to map this vast terrain, if it were possible! In this vast archive of relational sources, Indigenous onto-epistemologies, it seems to me, occupy a privileged place. There are many outstanding statements by Indigenous activists and intellectuals from many parts of the world that explicitly write from relational perspectives—for instance, the Native Canadian (Anishinaabe) scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and the Potowatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer, to cite two prominent Indigenous writers and activists who are becoming well known in the English-speaking world and beyond[8]; and Moira Millán, Davi Kopenawa, Ailton Krenak y Adriana Guzmán to mention a few of the most well-known in South America. Latin American Indigenous and Black feminisms constitute an incredibly active space of thought and practice in this regard, and surely there are equally diverse sets of living archives of relationality in French Ultramarine Territories, in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, and in the old worlds of Europe. I am certain many of these will inhabit the pages of *Plurivers* from the start.

19 _AC: Overall, how confident do you feel about the coming of the pluriverse? How can this approach enable us to reframe and address climate change?

20 _AE: I already mentioned the tendency to slide from relationality into nonrelationality, from the pluriverse to the monoverse—hence contributing to maintaining anthropocentrism and the devastation of Earth. This in itself is not necessarily a problem but part of the process of building a pluriversal politics, but we need to be mindful about the slippages that occur along the way. We are also noticing many superficial attempts at using notions such as interdependence, resurgence and pluriversality, despite good intentions, including by mainstream actors such as business consultancies and NGOs. In these cases, pluriverse is understood in terms of intrinsically existing "cultures" that interact with each other (the proverbial billiard ball model), as in liberal multiculturalism, rather than as thoroughly co-constituting themselves. The pluriverse is not an additive concept (the addition of monoverses or universes) but an inextricable entanglement of interdependent worlds. One would hope that pluriversal politics would thus entail an eager and conscious practice of entanglement across unranked ways of worlding.

21 But there are ominous trends that increase the pressure of the tendency to make the world on—extractive global corporate capitalism, for one. Let me point at another one that often goes unremarked, and this is technology. At a time when the hypermodernity of cutting-edge technology and all things AI intend to reduce most aspects of daily life to calculation and algorithmic computation, albeit coated with a thick veneer of unquestionable progress, we need to ponder deeply about what cannot be accounted for by logocentric analyses and algorithmic rationality. This would involve an onto-epistemic (not only politico-economic) reorientation of technology. To the question, "who is doing the crucial cultural-political work of imagining the future?" one would have to answer that the techno-patriarchs of new technologies are gaining the upper hand. Their patriarchal imaginaries are about leaving behind body, earth, and place

[8]Leanne B. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

in an allegedly unstoppable march towards inexhaustible energy, technological abundance and, of course, untold profits for the few.

22 Hence the importance of pluriversalizing technology, which requires considering monohumanism, monotechnologism, and pluriversal transitions together, since there exists, no doubt, a correlation between the intensification of the capitalist engineering of the Earth on the heels of accelerating extraction (largely in the South, a great deal of it for the minerals and metals needed to fuel the "green transitions" in the North, such as lithium, in what amounts to a carbon modernity/coloniality), the rise of computation and artificiality, and the continued ontological might of the monohumanist model of the human as "naturally" competitive, aggressive, individualistic, and rational. Countering the combined defuturing effects of these deadly processes by envisioning different futures, and futures in difference, becomes an onto-epistemic, cultural, and political endeavor of utmost importance.[9] How do we imagine and create historically unprecedented forms of human sociality, capable of enabling multiple reweavings of the human with the Earth, within an ontology of care for the web of interdependencies that makes up Life? At stake is the reappropriation of technology in attunement to place, locality, and the relational reality of a living cosmos. Pluriversalizing technology needs to be approached from the premise that life is constituted by the radical interdependence of everything that exists. It means designing technologies that support a world of many worlds, with an active awareness that constructing worlds under the premise of ontological separation negates the possibility of existence for the ontologically different and divergent.

23 But technology is going the other way, as eloquently announced by many critics (from Illich, Simondon, Stiegler and Virilio to Byung-Chul Han and Yuk Hui). There would be much more to say about this, of course, but this is not the space for it. Even then, as many transition advocates and visionaries put it, the transitions are already happening. One might invoke Arundhati Roy's prescient, of-quoted sentence, to bring this answer to a close: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."[10] So with the pluriverse?

24 _AC: Finally, climate change is causing a phenomenon of eco-anxiety, which can make it hard for people, especially the youth, to feel hopeful and find their place in the coming world. What would you like to tell them?

25 _AE: Referring to the climate crisis above all, Bayo Akomolafe, a wonderfully creative Nigerian psychologist, philosopher and activist, greets those entering his Emergence Network with the following sobering thought: "What if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?"[11] What indeed? What if, as South African climate justice activist Patrick Bond put it, this means that it is "paralysis above" (meaning, no action or irrelevant action at the level of government and established institutions), yet "movement below" (at the level of grassroots and transition activism, an "earth democracy" possibly rising, as Vandana Shiva summons us to work toward)? Or if we agree with Naomi Klein that the climate crisis "changes everything"? So, the situation is more dire, since compounding the climate crisis is the utter inability of world elites and those in power to do anything meaningful, let alone effective, about it. The same applies to the war in Ukraine, a total failure of those in power to choose life over death, allowing nineteenth-century nationalisms and imperialism to override the potential for pluriversal hominization and planetarization, and of course placing profits over the wellbeing of all.

26 We are far from heeding Akomolafe's admonishment that climate change is not a problem that organizations can draw lines around and manage, because climate change *is* the world; as such, given its incalculable and unbounded complexity, climate change is "ontologically *unframeable*,

[9] Tony Fry, *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

[10] There are many sources for this quote, e.g., https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6134.Arundhati_Roy

[11] "The Emergence Network is a research inquiry into the otherwise," https://www.emergencenetwork.org/.

unthinkable and *incalculable*."[12] No amount of computational power and scientific research can change this predicament at the very heart of Western rationality. We need to come to terms with the limitations of the discourse of the wise management of the planet embedded in notions of sustainability, innovation, ecological modernization, technofixes, and so forth. This is another task for a decolonial ecology.

27 This is to say that the situation is even worse than just "the problem," for, as Greta Thunberg reiterates, big actors are systematically failing to "treat the crisis like a crisis." The crisis is multifaceted: it is a crisis of climate, energy, food, poverty, inequality *and meaning*. Crisis discourses, including the polycrisis, fails to take meaning into account. By this I mean the fact that youth in particular have a very hard time finding compelling sources of meaning for their lives —they no longer find them in governments, corporations, organized religion, or even science and the academy. But it's more than "eco-anxiety," it seems to me: a generalized anxiety and depression that is certainly behind the elevated statistics of suicide among the young, particularly but not only in the Global North.

28 This is "the bad news." The "good news" is that if "This Changes Everything" (Klein's already intimidating title), it also means that "everything needs to change," and this to me entails an open-ended task of reconstruction in which we all, particularly the young, need to get involved. Reconstruction of what? Of the very web of Life. We all have the chance to reconceive ourselves as weavers and repairers of the web of interrelations that make up the bodies, landscapes, places, communities, and societies that we are and inhabit. We can think about carrying out this task anywhere and anytime, starting from where we are, ideally collectively—a step, a stitch, a loop, a practice at a time. Caring for the web of life means seceding to the extent possible from the patriarchal, colonialist, capitalistic toxic loops of existence (the individual-rationality-scarcity-market loop above all) that traps us in a life-race of competition, aggression, consumption, and fear increasingly driven by a computational rationality.

29 I am not saying doing this is easy. But I believe many young people already know that the conventional bourgeois script of a "successful Life" no longer works for them. Nor is it easy to resist the alluring neoliberal mantras of innovation, entrepreneurship, and unlimited wealth—another dead end for the vast majority of youth, especially from the Global South. There are no shortcuts or blueprints, and perhaps the best guide is to be attentive to what starts to happen as we attempt to transform things together, including the mutual learning and co-emergences that our actions might nurture in our places, coupled with creative forms of meshworking and co-inspiration across places worldwide. There are lots of interesting and fascinating experiments and movements that foster the pluriversalization of life, by which I mean those that contribute to the re-communalization of social life, the re-localization of productive activities, the strengthening of local autonomies, the depatriarchalization and decolonization of social relations, the re-earthing of cities, and manifold forms of reintegrating with the Earth.

30 As we state in the conclusion of our book on Relationality, perhaps there is a Planet B, after all: the Planet being created collectively at present by the infinite number of beautiful experiments emerging from interdependence, pluriversality, and mutuality the world over, activating their incredible potential. This, to me, is a sign of the importance of seeing ourselves, especially young people, as mindful and effective weavers and carers of the web of life.

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[12] Bayo Akomolafe, "What climate collapse asks of us," August 17, 2019, https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/what-climate-collapse-asks-of-us, original emphasis.