



A WORLD OF MANY WORLDS

MARISOL DE LA CADENA & MARIO BLASER, *editors*

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Edited by Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser

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INTRODUCTION

PLURIVERSE

Proposals for a World of Many Worlds

Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena

Unless there is a global catastrophe—a meteorite impact, a world war or a pandemic—mankind will remain a major environmental force for many millennia. A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behaviour at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to “optimize” climate. At this stage, however, we are still largely treading on terra incognita.

—PAUL J. CRUTZEN, “Geology of Mankind”

Many words are walked in the world. Many worlds are made. Many worlds make us. There are words and worlds that are lies and injustices. There are words and worlds that are truthful and true. In the world of the powerful there is room only for the big and their helpers. In the world we want, everybody fits. The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit.

—EJÉRCITO ZAPATISTA DE LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL,
“Fourth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle” (our translation)

This volume works in the tension articulated by these two epigraphs. Accompanying the explosion of political and scholarly discussions about the Anthropocene has been the explosion of protests coming from worlds—usually labeled indigenous—currently threatened by the possibility of immediate destruction by anthropogenic practices. In Latin America—the region with which we, the editors of this volume, are most familiar—political and economic forces that first took hold in the sixteenth century

have acquired unprecedented destructive might. They have also become hegemonic among governments, regardless of ideological persuasion to the left or right. The scale and speed of destruction have become a central matter of political contention that has pitted environmentalists against what is currently called extractivism: the accelerated extraction of natural resources to satisfy a global demand for minerals and energy and to provide what national governments consider economic growth.¹ Technologically mighty, extractivism is how the Anthropocene makes itself present in this part of the world: what can be more eloquent of human geological force than the removal of mountains in a time-efficient search for minerals, the damming of large bodies of water to reroute rivers for hydroelectric commercial purposes, the transformation of rain forests into palm oil plantations or cattle grasslands and of deserts into land for industrialized agriculture? Frequently effected through necropolitical alliances between the state and corporations, and said to serve the national common good, these practices create expendable populations in massive proportions. Environmentalists claim that accelerated extraction destroys nature; investors claim that it develops backward regions. We hold that what is currently being destroyed is also other-than-human persons because what extractivist and environmentalist practices enact as nature may be, *also*, other than such. This is one of the things we (the editors) have learned from a mountain in the Andes of Peru that is also a being and from forest animals in Paraguay that are also spirit masters of their world. We have also learned that their destruction, perhaps unlike the destruction of nature, is hard for analysts to grasp. Similarly, making public these kinds of other-than-humans is difficult for those who live with them; translating their destruction into a political issue is often impossible and even disempowering. After all, hegemonic opinion is that nature is—publicly—only nature; to think otherwise, to think that mountains or animals are other-than-human persons is a cultural belief.²

We locate this collection in the critical space opened by the tension between the scholarly and political recognition of the ecological crisis that threatens to eradicate life on Earth and the obstinate demands for existence presented by worlds whose disappearance was assumed at the outset of the Anthropocene. The tension is, of course, not new. However, awareness of the possible destruction of life on the planet gives this tension a dynamic specific to the current historical moment: if, before this sense of crisis, “the world of the powerful”—let’s call it so, and take it to mean, following the

Zapatista declaration, a world where only one world fits—could disavow the destruction of life that it effected, this is no longer the case. The world of the powerful is now sensitive to the plausibility of its own destruction in a way that may compare, at least in some ways, with the threat imposed on worlds sentenced to disappearance in the name of the common goods of progress, civilization, development, and liberal inclusion. Very few, if any, of the readers of *Nature* can currently deny that the planet is being driven down a perilous path. We all share, as Crutzen says, *terra incognita*. This is a new condition: now the colonizers are as threatened as the worlds they displaced and destroyed when they took over what they called *terra nullius*. Scientific and economic proposals that would make it possible to survive the moment of planetary crisis are many and diverse. Not infrequently they come from rivals, and at times they involve strange alliances. Proposals range from market-friendly environmentalisms to an end of capitalism as the only path to salvation, and even the composition of the common world through a due process that needs to be devised—who would devise it and how the process would transpire is up for discussion. Across their heterogeneity, proposals share an unsurprising—if discouraging—trait in common: it seems almost impossible to imagine a response to the ecological crisis that does not take the world that is responsible for the plausible destruction of the planet as the exclusive starting point in a conversation about the current condition of the planet.

Many practices allegedly intended to save the planet continue to destroy it. Along with extractivism, such practices manifest the contemporary colonial ontological occupation of territories by what John Law has called the one-world world: a world that has granted itself the right to assimilate all other worlds and, by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits.³ Extractivism continues the practice of *terra nullius*: it actively creates space for the tangible expansion of the one world by rendering empty the places it occupies and making absent the worlds that make those places. And because central attempts to save the planet are frequently indifferent to those worlds, grassroots protests against extractivism have mushroomed; while they are not exclusively a matter of indigenous concern, groups known as indigenous figure prominently in creative, difficult, and complex partnerships with allies hailing from heterogeneous worlds: nongovernmental organizations, peasants, Afro-descendant groups in Latin America, organic produce growers, small merchants, some workers' unions, university students, liberation theology priests and nuns, feminist

lawyers, and, of course, environmentalists. Within these alliances, nature is practiced both as such and not only as such; their goal is to defend the specific ways they make their lives and worlds against extractivist destruction. Their alliance is summoned by what Isabelle Stengers calls “interests in common which are not the same interests,” or what we see as the making of an “uncommons”: the negotiated coming together of heterogeneous worlds (and their practices) as they strive for what makes each of them be what they are, which is also not without others.⁴ We return to the uncommons at the end of this introduction; for now, suffice it to say that built upon a heterogeneity that negotiates for symmetry (if with difficulty), these alliances reveal that the commonality touted in claims about the national common good is an imposition: to be such it requires the destruction of what the state cannot recognize. Instead, acknowledging the uncommons that brings them together—an interest in nature or the environment that acknowledges neither is only such—these alliances may also be capable of refracting the course of the one-world world and proposing, as in the Zapatista declaration, the practice of a world of many worlds, or what we call a pluriverse: heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity. We are inspired by the Zapatista invitation to reworlding possibilities. The moment of the realization of the destruction of the Earth, the current historical moment, can be one when people reconsider the requirement that worlds be destroyed. It can also be one when the conditions for dialogues toward the reconstitution of worlds can be formulated. Thus, we want to pair up the threat posed by the Anthropocene with an opportunity of similar proportion, by taking the present as a moment to reconsider the material-semiotic grammar of *the relation* among worlds that dominates the fabrication of the current historical moment. It is toward that reconsideration that we propose the pluriverse as an analytic tool useful for producing ethnographic compositions capable of conceiving ecologies of practices across heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds.

Our proposal for the pluriverse as analytic is not only an abstraction: being ethnographic, it emerges from our variously mediated (yet embodied) experiences of worldings that fieldwork confronted us with, and that incited us toward a disposition to be attentive to practices that make worlds even if they do not satisfy our demand (the demand of modern epistemology) to prove their reality (as they do not leave historical evidence, let alone scientific). Examples include human practices with earth beings

and with animal spirits that populate forests. Emerging from (and requiring) this disposition, the pluriverse is not a matter of fact or concern but rather an opening toward a possibility that needs care—a “matter of care” as conceptualized by Maria Puig de la Bella Casa.⁵

Presenting the pluriverse as an ethnographic proposal requires a caveat: we think of ethnography as a scholarly genre that conceptually weaves together those sites (and sources) called the theoretical and the empirical so that thereafter they cannot be pulled apart. Practiced in this way, ethnography becomes a concept-making genre—yet ethnographic concepts are idiosyncratically (and perhaps oxymoronically) concrete abstractions. With a disposition toward the pluriverse, ethnographic concepts may also indicate excesses to the theoretical and the empirical—think earth beings or animal spirits that populate the forests once again. Unlike theoretical or philosophical concepts, ethnographic concepts signal their connections to place, for they are not without it. They emerge through the hallmark practice anthropology calls fieldwork. Yet, rather than a means of collecting information, we think of fieldwork as the practice of (and not only at) a crossroads involving the practices of the anthropologist and of those that she works with.⁶ At this crossroads, ethnographic concepts are composed with both the separation and the connection that constitute fieldwork practices. Composed ethnographically, these concepts emerge with the awareness that they constitute practices and are, thus, worlding tools. As such, ethnographic concepts lie within the field of political ontology.

We use the term “political ontology” to designate an imaginary for a politics of reality, and a field that stands where political economy and political ecology, formulated with ideas of nature and economic growth, are insufficient (at times even unable) to think antagonisms that, for example, involve things like mountains and forests that emerge as resources through some practices but also as persons through other practices. Where political economy will only accept that, at bottom, such conflicts are about the distribution of resources, political ecology (especially in its post-structuralist version) can only upend the analysis a bit: at best the conflicts are between perspectives on the mountain or the forest, neither of which cease to ultimately be only what they are. In our work, political ontology emerged as a concept at the specific historical moment when anthropogenic practices (such as extractivism) seemed to almightily lean against the plausibility of the pluriverse: in those circumstances, the contention between,

for example, practices of intense deforestation and local persons' practices with what we would call forests could be a matter concerning political ontology. Yet political ontology can also underpin the negotiations within the above-mentioned alliances among heterogeneous worlding practices that come together around dissimilar interests in common. Regardless of the analytical condition, political ontology wants to enable political thought and practice beyond the onto-epistemic limits of modern politics and what its practice allows. We capitalize the concept—therefore Political Ontology—to call attention to the specificity of the imaginary that we propose here, namely, the consideration of the pluriverse as a possibility. Political Ontology, as we are using it here, operates on the presumption of divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions. It asks how those practices transpire and with what consequences. Political Ontology thus simultaneously stands for reworking an imaginary of politics (the pluriverse), for a field of study and intervention (the power-charged terrain of entangled worldings and their dynamics), and for a modality of analysis and critique that is permanently concerned with its own effects as a worlding practice.

The rest of this introduction presents the chapters as they engage three thematic axes: concepts as worlding tools, the reworking of politics in terms of the pluriverse, and the Anthropocene as a scenario of politics characterized by an undeclared war.

It Matters What Concepts We Use to Think Concepts

Inasmuch as knowledges are world-making practices, they tend to make the worlds they know. The seeming redundancy of this phrase—which echoes our interpretation of the title of the section, a phrase we borrow from Marilyn Strathern⁷—emphasizes that the knowledge practices we (modern scholars) have at our disposal are, in turn, conditioned to reinstate themselves. A consequence of this feature is that it may perform epistemic and ontological invalidations—or absences—of the possibility of the multiplicity of worlds that the Zapatista declaration calls for. This concern underpins all the chapters in this volume: they show a persistent care for the conceptual grammars through which, on rendering itself and its objects intelligible, scholarly knowledge performs itself. In other words, knowledge is recursive: knowledge reveals itself by making its objects (conceptual or material) through procedures that need to be recognizable (as knowl-

edge) by the community that practices it. What the community of knowers does not recognize as knowledge is displaced along with its reality-making possibilities. As Marilyn Strathern puts it in chapter 1, “knowledge” the concept is a means to knowledge and, in the case of scholarly, modern knowledge, deploying the concept and its requirements, to thus move from means to end (knowledge), may constitute both the subject and object of its practice. Hence the relevance of concepts as a matter of ethnographic concern: as analytic tools—tools used to produce knowledge—they carry a self-duplicating potential that may “explain difference away.” The latter is a phrase Helen Verran has made popular to warn about epistemic explanations that may translate difference back to their image and thus cancel the difference. Emerging from the world modern knowledge makes, its concepts and grammars have the capacity to assimilate practices (and also concepts and grammars) that diverge from it. Take, for example, “culture”—“one of the most complicated words in the English language,” according to Raymond Williams.⁸ He explains that this notion emerged in its modern sense during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when it was used to differentiate between European and other human groups.⁹ Intriguingly, therefore, culture has a history that is itself embedded in the history and imaginary it helped articulate: that of a world populated by heterogeneous human groups. Hence the limits of deploying culture to represent such heterogeneity: explaining through categories that made the difference appear in the first place may amount to explaining the difference through “the same,” or difference in terms that are homologous to the self to which difference appears. For example, deploying culture to explain differences that emerge in collectives that do not make themselves with such categories would enact culture and explain away, or block, the possibility of difference as it might emerge if the situation were allowed to display itself without categories awaiting it.¹⁰ There would be knowledge of difference indeed; but that knowledge would be of cultural difference: knowledge enabled and delimited by the practice of the category deployed (culture).

The proposition that modern knowledge co-constitutes subject and object resonates with Alberto Corsín Jiménez’s contribution, chapter 2. He proposes “trap” as a concept and ethnographic tool to search the relations that compose and perform knowledge. As a concept, the trap also works as a machine: a gathering of heterogeneously composed relations and conditions required to capture prey that therefore is also of the predator’s design. In this sense, the trap works as an interface, proposing that, just as prey and

predator are trapped to (and with) each other, the subject and the object of modern knowledge cannot be conceptually (or practically) separated from one another. Recursively making a concept full of relations—trap—to think about concepts (and the relations that make them), the chapter itself illustrates the working of a trap, or a method that releases what it makes or traps and in so doing enables an analytical view of the requirements of modern knowledge. With the notion of a trap, Corsín also signals the importance of the material composition of knowledge: subject to creative originality, its architecture conditions what it catches, but the catch can also surprise the trap maker (within the conditions of the trap we would think).

The systematic recursivity of the chapter is inspired by Roy Wagner's ethnographic analysis of "double encompassment," a condition Wagner illustrates with an analysis of "hospitality as self-guesting": a situation where the conditions of guest and host exist within the same entity. For example, a shaman is guest to the land while, as one of the threads that constitute it, he or she also is the land. Or a soul is guest to a body, which is not without it. These "double captivities" (or "hostings," depending on the situation) are Wagner's ethnographic concepts.¹¹ As such, they may allow for conceptual transformations of modern epistemic tools while being made by the latter—a double enabling. Corsín Jiménez uses Wagner's doubling as insight to recursively search the relations with which modern knowledge produces itself. In this sense, he writes, "It is in fact one of my central intuitions that modern knowledge is essentially a trap to itself, such that most forms of 'explanation' are guests unaware they are actually being hosted—predators who do not know their own condition as prey."

Chapter 1 is also concerned with knowledge. Strathern anchors her discussion in encounters among worlds that compose themselves, the encounters, and indeed the knowledges and practices brought to them, with heterogeneous tools—including heterogeneous forms of relation. She thus sets out to open up—or look into—the diverse relations (the forms and compositions that make them count as such) that transpire at encounters and even make them possible without becoming the same relation. She uses the term "domain," a notion she has productively deployed in previous works.¹² Domain is both empty (enough) of conceptual meaning and capable of carrying empirical reference to thus allow analysis. Domain may signal spheres of life; for example, we say that the modern world makes itself with the domains of nature and culture and recognizes itself in such di-

vision. Encounters (everyday, or extraordinary) across partially connected (and also heterogeneous) worlds may be sustained by conversations that draw from domains in which not all participants in the encounter participate. Continuing with our recent example, not all worlds make themselves with the domains of nature and culture, nor with the epistemic relationship between, say, subject and object that may ensue from it. When such domains are deployed, what transpires and the way it does may not be the same across the worlds that participate in the encounter. Refreshing this conversation—to which she has contributed for a long time¹³—in chapter 1, Marilyn Strathern discusses cases in which the unshared or divergent element is the relation itself. As a means to make knowledge and to organize exchanges, divergence among relations—not only in terms of when they are established or what they connect or disconnect, but in what counts as relation itself—acquires complex saliency in circumstances of knowledge exchanges between, for example, scientists and indigenous ritual practitioners about an event that concerns both, albeit in ways that are not the same.

Divergence is a concept Strathern uses in chapter 1 and with which, in this text, she converses with Isabelle Stengers.¹⁴ Given the specificity of this concept, a brief explanation is necessary. Divergence, as proposed by Stengers, does not refer to difference between people, practices, or cultures conceived as discrete entities that share constitutive properties and therefore can be compared (and thus be similar or different).¹⁵ Rather, divergence constitutes the entities (or practices) as they emerge both in their specificity and with other entities or practices.¹⁶ Strathern foregrounds the knowledge encounters with which she illustrates her arguments as a situation of divergence: for example, an encounter around dead bodies that is both an encounter (a relation) with the kin of one of the groups that participate and with repositories of scientific knowledge. Both groups had an interest in common (knowledge exchange), yet what constituted knowledge (what the dead bodies became as they emerged from relations specific to the groups) was a site of divergence—a disagreement that could not be solved without undoing what each of the groups were in relation to their interest in common: the dead bodies and knowledge exchange.

Significantly, Strathern seems to be saying that the scholarly knowledge practices that make dialogues may include incommensurabilities. Dialogue may be the site of divergence, and thus house an interest in common that is also exceeded by interests that are not the same. Critically, excesses

across knowledges (ours and others') and hence not-knowing (as we and they usually know) may be an important condition of dialogues that allow for a form of understanding that does not require sameness, and therefore rather than canceling divergence is constituted by it. It may be important at this point to remind the reader that we are not talking about difference understood as a different (cultural) perspective on dead bodies, the object that both scientific knowers and their cultural others would share yet interpret differently (each from their cultural perspective). Instead, we are talking about the intersecting of understanding and divergence at a partial connection: an encounter of knowledge practices (and entities) as they also continue to exceed each other (in divergence). What constitutes the excess may be obscure to participants in the conversation, yet it would also be constitutive of it. Elements in the dialogue may rest unknown: that may be an awkward condition, yet not a deterrent for conversations across worlds.

Can conditions be created so that heterogeneous knowledge practices (indigenous and nonindigenous, for example) do not encounter each other in a relation of subjects to objects? (Or not only in such relation?) Chapter 1 may suggest such a question; Helen Verran, in chapter 4, may offer grounds to think possible responses. An important assumption of her proposal is that concepts are world-making tools and therefore particular to worlds and their knowers—yet concepts (different from those participants bring with them) can also be made in the here and now of knowledge encounters maintaining the difference between knowers. In situations of knowledge encounters, she explains, there is nothing that everybody knows, for participants are all heterogeneous knowers—yet they need to be aware of such a condition. Doing so requires them to cultivate a specific epistemic demeanor, consisting in the ability to articulate the how and what of their divergent epistemic practices—their knowledges. Bringing crucial attention to the figure of the knower, her proposal is to enable an ethical politics of doing difference together without any participating know-how canceling any other one. This is a politics in which the negotiated agreement through which concepts emerge in the encounter does not cancel differences among knowers; rather, it makes those differences visible as the epistemic then and there from where participants come to the encounter, and which they have to be ready to leave behind (while maintaining awareness of how they go about making them). The encounter thus

becomes the opportunity for the creation of concepts different from those every participating knower brought with them.

Verran's proposal is sustained empirically: ideas for the process were produced by participants in a project to create the Garma Maths Curriculum—an entity emerging in conversations between modern math and Yolngu Aboriginal ways of measuring and counting (that were not a practice of mathematics). Promoted by the liberal Australian state in the 1980s, it was taken up by Aboriginal and white Australians interested in doing difference together. Using Strathern's terms, the Garma Maths Curriculum would be one with no subject knowledge creating its object knowledge. The process required from participants in the encounter, first, to not know as they would know as either a modern thinker or a Yolngu thinker; and, second, to compose with what emerged to them unmediated by their knowledges. Verran characterizes the first requirement as "bad will," cultivating a feeling of alertness with respect to one's own habits of knowledge so as to be able to reject the temptation, always present, to propose one's common sense to think difference. Exercising bad will, the knower is able to do both—recognize the demands of her knowledge and refuse to implement them; in so doing, she may acquire the capacity to attend to what emerges in the here and now of the space opened by the shifting of the two conditions, with and without the requirements. This is the stage for the practice of the second requirement, which Verran calls "good faith": a commitment to articulate analysis with the conditions that constitute the here and now of the encounter itself with participants emerging self-different, not only what they were, while remaining aware of their there and then as well. When difference is done together, none of the heterogeneous knower participants becomes the other, yet they do not remain only what they were either.

This mode of participation requires working at the site of divergence, where the coincidence among participants does not absorb their being who they are. This may create the conditions for a decolonial practice where modern thinkers—herself, the readers, us—may be caught (as Verran was) in analytical and experiential incongruous discomfort (for example, both criticizing and understanding the requirements of Yolngu practices, or of mathematics) that is not only such, for they also make sense: they work in different registers, may talk to each other, and offer space to work toward making mutual differences emerge. The incongruous discomfort creates a

welcome disjuncture—one that does not make the usual sense and where difference can be made together. This is, Verran says, a cosmopolitical practice: the working together of divergent cosmologies where knowers (and not just her entities or concepts) dissolve themselves (are able to give up and maintain their there and then) in the practice of the here and now of a knowledge encounter that produces a know-how that becomes through the encounter and includes what was there before, yet it also changes it.

Cosmopolitics Meets Political Ontology

Cosmopolitics is a concept that we originally borrowed from Isabelle Stengers.¹⁷ She originally proposed it with the intent of opening modern politics to the possibility of divergence among collectives composed of humans and nonhumans that, following her (Greek-inspired) definition of politics, agreed to gather around a concern. Members of these collectives all recognized the importance of the concern and could also disagree about it precisely because they could recognize its importance. Among the events inspiring Stengers's cosmopolitics was the European anti-GMO movement bringing together young urbanites, farmers, and biologists from the Continent along with African and Indian peasants—all with their own specific reasons to resist GMOs. The movement made all these groups interdependent: the anti-GMO collective expressed an interest in common that was not the same interest. It was underpinned by the divergence among the groups that composed the collective.

In chapter 3, Stengers explains that the demands posed by Political Ontology exceed her original conception. We agree: we used Political Ontology to suggest a politics among heterogeneous worlds and called this a cosmopolitics, a notion whereby cosmos is always an emergent condition resulting from disagreements among divergent worlding practices participating in the discussion. Thus, we borrowed cosmopolitics from Stengers and gave the term an inflection of our own.¹⁸ Grounded in ethnographic situations, for us cosmopolitics was a tool to think about disputes (we can also call them gatherings) that concerned and included participants whose presence was not recognized by all who participated in the gatherings. As mentioned, our paradigmatic ethnographic examples involved a mountain that is also an earth being and forest animals that are also spirit masters of their world. We called them other-than-humans (instead of nonhumans)

to emphasize that, while actors, they did not share the epistemic or ontological status of laboratory things.¹⁹ We also proposed that these other-than-humans participated in political gatherings (usually convoked in connection with their potential destruction) both as existents (but not nature or humans) and as beliefs (about nature). The dispute about what these other-than-humans were, which depended on the relations that enacted them, composed a complex negotiation that included cultural tolerance (or intolerance) of “indigenous beliefs” and ontological politics (through enactments of the entities in question and the denial of their being—other than beliefs).

Engaging our ethnographic setting, Stengers suggests that tolerance may protect what she calls “those that know” (for example, “that other-than-humans are beliefs about nature”) from a frightening prospect: that of having to consider that those practices and entities they deem unreal (and destined for extinction) could present themselves with the power to create a situation where ontological clashes would have to be anticipated everywhere without offering guarantees for the preservation of that which makes “those that know” who they are. She calls this prospect the “challenge of animism”: it is frightening because it unsettles what she calls the modern command “to not regress” to a supposed earlier stage when “we” were unable to discern reality from belief. This command, she says, makes us (those that know) who we are: those that move forward protected against past illusions. Rejecting what we consider regression, we form a collective that disdains others that we also tolerate as we wait for their disappearance, or actively destroy them when driven by intolerance. The fright that animism produces is not irrelevant; it may level the terrain, for “when ontological politics demands that we take seriously the existence and power of other-than-human beings, it is we who cry: do not demand that we do that when we ourselves are concerned, or you will destroy us” (Stengers, this volume.) Hence the possibility of animism threatens those that were not previously threatened with extinction; the prospect that what makes them be could be taken away from them frightens them. This opportunity is not to be lost, and accordingly, animism should be reclaimed. This, Stengers clarifies, does not mean that the reality of other-than-human beings needs to be proven. Doing so would imply translating practices with those entities into the sphere that distinguishes “those who know” from “those who believe.” Instead, reclaiming animism might translate, among other things, into recovering that which we (those who know) have been

expropriated from and regenerating the practices that the expropriation has destroyed.²⁰

To draw an image of what she means by “expropriation,” Stengers uses the figure of the testator, the character who tested (the reality of) what alchemists presented to a prince as gold. Like a prince would do with his testator, we have delegated to a routinized debunking habit (for example, a proclivity to demand epistemic or historical evidence) the charge of protecting us from what cannot demonstrate its “real” existence. Snickering is a manifestation of that debunking habit; even the possibility of questioning such a habit is met with a smirk. Escaping the compulsion to debunk as nonexistent that which we (those who know) cannot recognize (which could have as concomitant sequel its destruction, either immediate or tolerantly deferred) requires that we face our fear of animism so as to betray it and thus recompose ourselves as the situation demands. Recomposing does not mean making ourselves larger or more comprehensive by adding the practices that make other-than-humans to the practices with which “those who know” make nature—mountains or animals—to follow our example. That would make us all the same and cancel the divergences among heterogeneity that make us who we are. Recomposing ourselves means disowning our testator’s habit so as to recover the capacity that Stengers calls “the pragmatic art of immanent attention.” This she describes as “an empirical practice of ‘realization’” (“realization” is Whitehead’s term) and “an art of diagnosis, which our addiction for ‘the truth that defeats illusion’ has too often despised as too weak and uncertain.” Translating Stengers to our goal in this volume: nurtured by what Helen Verran calls “bad will”—the practice of a deliberate abjuration to the transcendence of the “then and there” that makes us who “we” are—immanent attention could include the ability to attend to presences that are or can be but do not meet the requirements of modern knowledge and therefore cannot be proven in its terms.

The Anthropocene as an Opportunity for Pluriversal Worldings

The phenomena bagged under the term Anthropocene disrupt the nature/culture divide that had made the world one. Seemingly, then, Anthropocene houses a paradox. On the one hand, by revealing the historicity of the nature/culture divide, it opens a crack through which modern knowers can consider the possibility of collectives that do not make themselves through

such a divide, and in turn these collectives can make a bid to emerge into a public space that effectively excluded them until now. On the other hand, modern knowers know about this event through an epistemic regime that rests on the divide under question. In this context, it is worth asking how the commitment to the one world occurs in practice.

Chapter 5 sheds some light on how the one-world commitment works. John Law and Marianne Lien's contribution is a detailed rendering of how nature (and culture) is done along with salmon in Norway. By attending to the practices that make a nature-culture entity (salmon), their chapter complicates the now well-known argument that modern knowledge represents culture as multiple and nature as singular, coherent, and stable. Following the practices that make both wild and farmed salmon (as well as the distinctions between them), they describe how, rather than singular, these practices make a nature that is multiple, noncoherent, and ongoing. And yet, they say, the assumption of a single nature holds. They surmise that at least in part this is because each practice of nature assumes and enacts a single world, a unified space-time container where the multiplicities of practices occur. In this way, chapter 5 suggests that not even awareness of the notion of nature as done by humans (or culture) undoes the assumption of a one-world world.

Analogously, we suggest that to open up the possibility of a world where many worlds fit, it is not enough for the Anthropocene to disrupt the nature and culture divide that makes the world one. Rather, the practices that render the Anthropocene visible—as well as the proposals for survival—must also disrupt such a divide. As a matter of planetary concern, the Anthropocene requires analyses and proposals that would reveal the inner workings of the one-world world so as to prevent their destructive capacity—including when they work as tolerance to what is not itself. This is an overriding concern in chapter 6, by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski. They take issue with Chakrabarty's argument that the Anthropocene could only be met by the human species, which would emerge as subject only after the realization by all of humanity of its common doomed destiny as implied by the Anthropocene.²¹ In other words, differences would stand in the way of self-preservation of the species and, paradoxically, could only be overcome, if at all, by the threat of common demise. To this proposal Viveiros de Castro and Danowski respond that the problem is not one of the human species fighting internally along lines of self-destruction or self-preservation and therefore needing unity. Instead, they say that while there

are two camps in conflict, culprits and victims, the dividing line that forms the camps is not simply internal to *Homo sapiens*. Forming the camps are entire assemblages of humans and nonhumans (think of organisms such as transgenic soy whose very existence depends on that complex assemblage we call industrial capitalism). Thus, they argue, while it is very hard to trace the lines between one camp and the other (most humans and nonhumans enrolled are victims and culprits at once), it is important not to lose sight of the difference between assemblages that are thoroughly invested in the practices that generate the Anthropocene and those that are more or less forcefully dragged along. The authors identify the former as Humans; they call the latter Terrans.

Who are the Terrans? Viveiros de Castro and Danowski do not have a definite answer to this question; however, they do have a sense that Terrans are not a molar body, a Deleuzian whole that is self-similar in spite of its variations. They also reject the idea that a big-scale problem must be given a big-scale solution. Rather, they ask if it is not precisely a reduction of scales that the Anthropocene calls for. What they call the people of Pachamama, those myriad worlds who, since the conquest of the Americas, have been encroached on and damaged, could be an example of the Terrans. Distinguishing between Humans and Terrans allows an engagement with the current fate of the planet that takes stock of the colonial destruction of worlds as the destruction that the culprits of the Anthropocene imposed on its victims. The peculiarity of this destruction is that, waged in the name of progress (or under the command not to regress, as Stengers would say), it has never been recognized as such. Paradoxically, the end of the world as we know it may mean the end of its being made through destruction: facing destruction at an unprecedented rate, the collectives that colonialism—in its earliest and latest versions—doomed to extinction emerge to publicly denounce the principles of their destruction, which may coincide with the assumptions that made a one-world world.

Could the moment of the Anthropocene bring to the fore the possibility of the pluriverse? Could it offer the opportunity for a condition to emerge that, instead of destruction, thrives on the encounter of heterogeneous worldings, taking place alongside each other with their divergent here(s) and now(s), and therefore makes of their taking place a negotiation of their going on together in divergence? Can the Anthropocene be the scenario of both the end of the world (as hegemonically conceived and practiced) and the inauguration of what Helen Verran calls “a cosmopolitics as the politics

of collectively doing cosmologies together and separately”? That the latter phrase was inspired by Verran’s work with her Yolngu colleagues makes for a hopeful answer.

A Speculative Opening, Not a Conclusion

Almost fifty years ago, Pierre Clastres suggested that the limitations of anthropology were a consequence of its habit of following the road mapped by its own world. He deemed that road “the easiest road,” one that could be “followed blindly.” Away from the limits of anthropology’s own world and on a different road, he proposed “taking seriously” the men and women inhabiting what he conceptualized as “primitive societies . . . from every viewpoint,” even from those that negated those of “the Western world.” “It is imperative to accept . . . that negation does not signify nothingness; that when the mirror does not reflect our own likeness it does not prove there is nothing.”²² Currently, the limitations facing anthropology are not felt by the discipline only. They are experienced beyond anthropology as a result of the upheaval of the crisis facing the planet expressed in the word Anthropocene, allegedly the “most influential concept in environmental studies over the past decade.”²³ The crisis this word (and cognates) brings to the conceptual fore may also offer some critical opportunity to slow down thought and take time to consider the possibility of nature that is not only such like the mountains and forest animals that have inspired our works and this discussion. We echo Clastres and translate his ideas to our proposal: the absence of our image does not reflect nothingness. Our proposal takes the opportunity of the current planetary crisis to invite anthropology to reckon with the idea that much of what the discipline deemed cultural beliefs might be *not only* such. This invitation may be difficult to accept. Many will deem it irresponsible, warn us of its dangers, and turn around shaking their heads in irritation.

Our proposal affects modern disciplines and their forms of knowledge. It questions the power granted to their capacity to distribute the real-real (or the natural-real) from the cultural-real as well as the benevolent authority with which they permit the latter (not infrequently as a lesser presence.) We consider all these—the division that distributes realities as well as the combination of power and benevolence that sustains it—as historical events. We then suggest that such capacity might be limited to the province of the division that those disciplines and their knowledges require;

not meeting those requirements (or “absence of their likeness,” Clastres would say) may indicate an excess to such division, not the emptiness of nonexistence, and not only the workings of culture. In such cases, rather than concluding that there is nothing to talk about, conversations about what is might take place in a political field—political ontology—where modern knowledges may or may not present themselves as an exclusive decision-making field or result in one.

The proposal does destabilize a hegemonic state of affairs; the irritation of those so destabilized is to be expected—even understandable. But the proposal is not irresponsible. Instead, it alters the conditions of the response, which would now include the obligation to consider (rather than denying) the possibility (of being) of that which does not reflect the image of the hegemonic order of things. Considering that the power of modern disciplines and their knowledges to cancel the possibility of what emerges beyond their grasp was a historical event (the result of a coloniality that needs not be such), our proposal offers those disciplines the possibility to use their creative might differently: without the undisputable certainty of superiority, and accepting that rather than resting on colonial world-making, their prevalence could be achieved in constant negotiation with worlding practices that might not—or might not only—reflect them.

Our proposal also opens space to rethink what a political circumstance might be and how it might become. To partake in political gatherings, or to be considered a political matter, entities (or, perhaps, events and relations) would not require, like current practices of politics demand, to (re)present themselves deploying historical (or scientific) evidence of existence. They would instead be required to present themselves with what makes them be—in all their heterogeneity. Our proposal is an invitation to think that instead of the sameness that recognition supposes, politics might not start from, nor resolve in ontologically homogeneous grounds. Rather, the grounds of adversarial dispute or of allied agreement would be what we call uncommons.

And this is our last point: we propose uncommons as counterpoint to the common good and to enclosures, and, as important, to slow down the commons (including its progressive versions.) While usually deployed across adversarial political positions, all three concepts converge in that they require a common form of relation, one that (like labor or property) connects humans and nature conceived as ontologically distinct and detached from each other. Any of these three concepts—including the commons in its

progressive version—may cancel the possibility of worldings that diverge from the ontological divisions and relational forms they require. Repeating that “it is important what concepts think concepts,” and to avoid canceling divergence, we propose the uncommons as the heterogeneous grounds where negotiations take place toward a commons that would be a continuous achievement, an event whose vocation is not to be final because it remembers that the uncommons is its constant starting point.

NOTES

1. Eduardo Gudynas, “El Nuevo Extractivismo Progresista,” *El Observador del OBIE* 8 (2010): 1–10; Anthony Bebbington, “Political Ecologies of Resource Extraction: Agendas Pendientes,” *ERLACS* 100 (2015): 85–98; Fabiana Li, *Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Activism, and Expertise in Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Maristella Svampa, “Commodities Consensus: Neoextractivism and Enclosure of the Commons in Latin America,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 1 (2015): 65–82.

2. Mario Blaser, “The Threat of the Yrmo: The Political Ontology of a Sustainable Hunting Program,” *American Anthropologist* 111, no. 1 (2009): 10–20; Mario Blaser, “Notes Towards a Political Ontology of ‘Environmental’ Conflicts,” in *Contested Ecologies: Nature and Knowledge*, ed. Lesley Green, 13–27 (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013); Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics,’” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 334–70; Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

3. John Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 1 (2015): 126–39. On the idea of ontological occupation, see Arturo Escobar, *Autonomía y Diseño: La Realización de lo comunal* (Popayan, Colombia: Editorial de la Universidad del Cauca, 2016).

4. See Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices,” *Cultural Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (2005): 183–96; and Isabelle Stengers, “Comparison as a Matter of Concern,” *Common Knowledge* 17, no. 1 (2011): 60.

5. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things,” *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 1 (2011): 85–106; Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

6. As a practice of/at the crossroads of practices, fieldwork is a site of many sites, localized and also nomadic; it includes sites away from the ethnographer’s office but does not end there.

7. Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1992).

8. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87.

9. Williams, *Keywords*, 88–93.
10. “Difference” here is a placeholder, an empty signifier for what would emerge in the absence of culture as world-making category.
11. Roy Wagner, “‘Luck in the Double Focus’: Ritualized Hospitality in Melanesia,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. s1 (2012): s161–s174.
12. Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
13. Marilyn Strathern, “No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case,” in *Nature, Culture and Gender*, ed. Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, 174–222 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
14. Marilyn Strathern uses “divergence” in previous texts as well—perhaps not in conversation with Stengers. See Marilyn Strathern, *Kinship, Law, and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7; see also Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.”
15. Those differences, the relation that makes them, and their explanation would be within the same domain.
16. Importantly, divergence is a tool to think what we have called “interests in common that are not the same interest.” Stengers, “Comparison as a Matter of Concern.”
17. Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.” See also de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes.”
18. See Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.”
19. See de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes”; de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*; Blaser, “The Threat of the Yrmo”; Blaser, “Notes Towards a Political Ontology of ‘Environmental’ Conflicts.”
20. Here, we are paraphrasing Stengers.
21. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.
22. Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State*, rev. ed. (New York: Zone, 2007), 20.
23. Jason Moore, “Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason Moore, 1–11 (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 2.

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