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Pluriversal Worlding: Design, Narratives, and Metaphors for Societal Transformation

Abstract: This essay examines the concept of pluriversality, which refers to the human power to build worlds differently and envision different models for inhabiting the planet. The Pluriverse, 'a world where many worlds fit', is a decolonial vision created by the Zapatista movement that contrasts with the supposed universality of the Western Modern world. Our planet is still home to many 'worlds' that have resisted the cultural homogenization promoted by colonialism and imperialism. Pluriversality proposes a path for transformational world-building that begins with the belief that alternatives to capitalist modernity are possible. This essay investigates the relationship between the narratives and metaphors a society adopts and the kind of world we design. Pluriversality is focused on creating and nurturing new models of life and reweaving our reality, not on destroying the old. Recognizing and making visible and viable alternatives that enable healthier relationships with nature and each other, particularly the ones created by Indigenous and marginalized communities and peoples of color, is at the core of what pluriversality is about.

Keywords: pluriversality; design; social change; societal transformation; decoloniality; alternative world-making; Indigenous worldviews; design for sustainability.

Introduction

While we have increasingly used concepts such as diversity, inclusivity, equity, and decoloniality to press for social change, I argue that a less known concept, pluriversality, is fundamental to creating substantial societal change. Pluriversality is not a synonym for inclusivity or diversity. Instead, it refers to the human capacity to build worlds differently (based on different assumptions and beliefs) and to the worldviews, epistemologies, and worlds created by Indigenous and subaltern (i.e., the exploited, oppressed, and marginalized) peoples. Pluriversality proposes a path for transformational world-building that begins with the belief that other *possibles* are possible[1]. It invites the deconstruction of narratives that invisibilize the other possibilities of world building that are already real and available at the margins of the modern world. Pluriversality is about societal change as a relational creative practice focused on nurturing new models of life and reweaving our reality, not on destroying the old.

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[1] Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

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The Pluriverse means 'a world where many worlds fit'; it is a vision of a better world created by the Zapatista movement in Mexico[2]. The concept of the Pluriverse contrasts with the supposed *universality* of the capitalist modern world – that is, the belief that we all live in a 'single world' whose center and ideal expression is the Global North. John Law[3] described this worldview of the single world as the 'One-World World' (OWW).

> The notion of a 'One-World World' (OWW) is predicated on the West's ability to arrogate to itself the right to be 'the world' and to relegate all other worlds to its rules, to a state of subordination, or to nonexistence. It is thus an imperialist, colonial notion.[4]

Our planet is still home to many 'worlds' that have resisted the cultural homogenization promoted by colonialism and imperialism, such as the Mayan cosmovision that inspired the Zapatista movement. The Pluriverse refers not only to multiple ontologies, cosmovisions, and epistemologies but also to their suppression and marginalization by the OWW, which imposes a homogenizing vision of the world. Pluriversality entails making visible worldviews, practices, and grassroots innovation driven by social movements, local communities, Afrodescendants, peasants, and Indigenous collectives in their struggle to thrive. "In speaking about them, we enhance their existence and viability".[5]

Several scholars, such as Walter Mignolo[6] and Marisol De la Cadena and Mario Blaser,[7] have written about pluriversality, but the Pluriverse is most often associated with the work of Arturo Escobar.[8] Interestingly Escobar[9] has often made the connection between pluriversality and design, examining the relationship between our cosmovisions and the tangible worlds we build (e.g., our material and visual culture). As a designer who has moved across different worldviews in the Global South and the Global North, I found in Escobar's work a framework within which to situate my design practice and research.

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[2] Levi Gahman, Nasha Mohamed, Filiberto Penados, Johannah-Rae Reyes, Atiyah Mohamed, and Shelda-Jane Smith. *A Beginner's Guide to Building Better Worlds: Ideas and Inspiration from the Zapatistas* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

[3] John Law, "What's Wrong with a One-World World?" *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16, 1 (2015): 126–39.

[4] Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 2020, 14.

[5] Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi, India: Tulika Books, 2019), xxxiii.

[6] Walter D. Mignolo, "Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity," in *Constructing the Pluriverse*, ed. Reiter Bernd (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2018), ix–xvi.

[7] Marisol De La Cadena and Mario Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[8] Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 2020.

[9] Arturo Escobar, "Sustainability: Design for the Pluriverse," *Development* 54, 2 (2011): 137–40; Arturo Escobar, "Transiciones: A Space for Research and Design for Transitions to the Pluriverse," *Design Philosophy Papers* 13, 1 (2015): 13–23; Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 2018.

Design can be understood as the activity and practice of world-building (or world-making). In this sense, design is the activity that translates intangible values and ideals into tangible experiences and artifacts.[10] Because design emerged as a profession with the industrial revolution, which involved conceiving products and planning serial industrial reproduction, design is the activity that gave shape to the dreams and promises of modernity and brought the modern ways of life into tangible existence. Therefore, since we started to use the term 'design' to name this field of human activity, it has been associated with the values and ideals of modernity and the consumer society. More recently, several scholars have proposed that 'design' is widespread, as all the cultures on Earth throughout the ages have intentionally conceived their material and visual culture,[11] therefore practicing their own style of world-building that can also be named as design.

The fish and the water

Modernity is the worldview and cultural model that emerged in Western Europe and spread throughout the world by colonialism and globalization. As the dominant worldview, it shapes the most fundamental interpretation of our perceptions, so we often mistake its myths and assumptions for an accurate description of reality.

> Modernity predetermines what can be heard; *what can be deemed real and possible; what can be imagined as desirable and ideal*; and how we are supposed to feel, behave, and communicate within these parameters. This conditioning is precognitive – it is faster than thought itself as it structures our unconscious.[12]

Worldviews can be invisible to us, as the fish is unaware of the water that surrounds it. We are completely immersed in our narratives and beliefs we take for granted (Figure 1).

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[10] Richard Buchanan, "Human Dignity and Human Rights: Thoughts on the Principles of Human-Centered Design," *Design Issues* 17, 3 (2001): 35–39; Elizabeth Tunstall, "Decolonizing Design Innovation: Design Anthropology, Critical Anthropology and Indigenous Knowledge," in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, ed. Wendy Gunn, Ton Otto and Rachel Charlotte Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 232–50.

[11] Ezio Manzini, *Design When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2015); Victor Margolin, "A World History of Design and the History of the World," *Journal of Design History* 18, 3 (2005): 235–43; Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman, *The Design Way: Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2012).

[12] Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs, and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 25 (emphasis added).
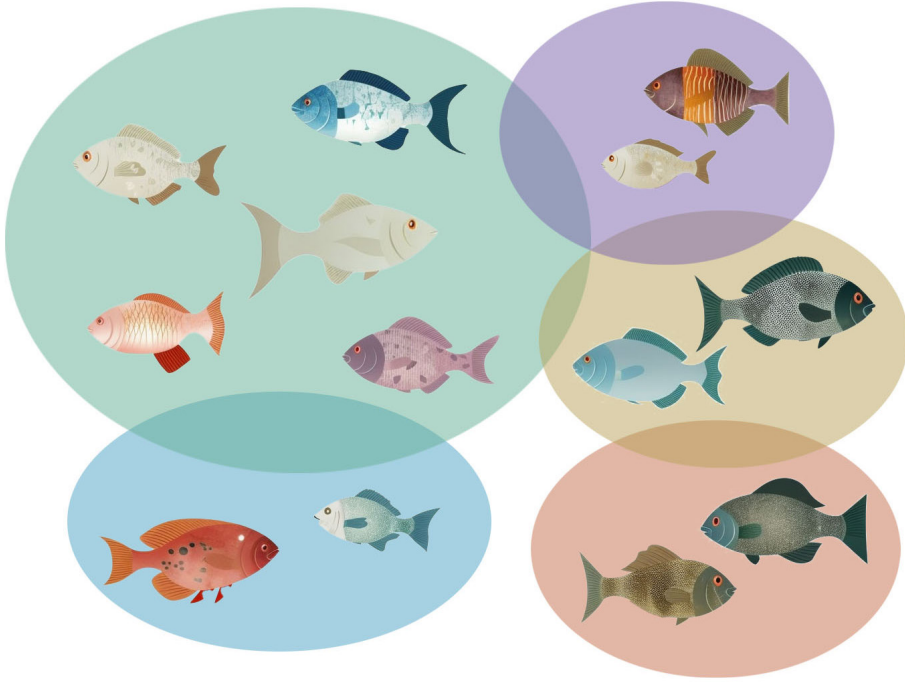
Figure 1. We can understand each worldview as a distinct 'pond' whose waters have particular features (or colors, in this model).

Marshal McLuhan[13] once said that the fish knows nothing about the water since **it has no anti-environment** to enable it to perceive the element in which it lives. We become aware of who *we are* through the contrast with what *we are not* (*me* in contrast with *not-me*). The catch with modernity is that it claims to be universal (Figure 2). Thus, there is no 'not-me', only a '*not-yet*-me'. The narrative of the OWW places the different cosmovisions and ways of knowing within an imaginary timeline: becoming modern, aka development. The 'not-yet' is precisely the mechanism through which alternatives become invisible – as if we are all part of this same timeline, destined to become modern, and the different ones' just need a little help to 'catch up' (i.e., they are 'developing'). Modernity corresponds to the future of the entire humankind, so any worldview, epistemology, or world-making practice different from the OWW is characterized as belonging to the past and exiled to the category of 'tradition'. Any alternative to the cosmovision of the OWW is seen as a return to the past, therefore worthless and not a valid vision of a better future.
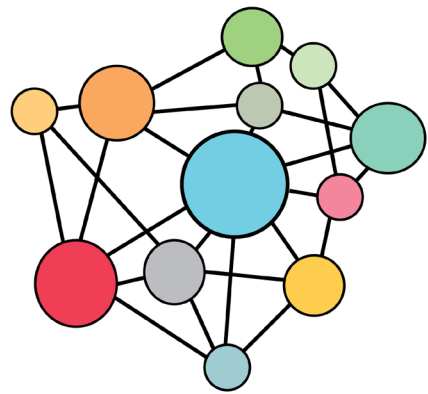
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[13] Marshall McLuhan, War and Peace in the Global Village: An Inventory of Some of the Current Spastic Situations That Could Be Eliminated by More Feedforward, ed. Quentin Fiore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

MODERNITY/COLONIALITY   **PLURIVERSALITY**
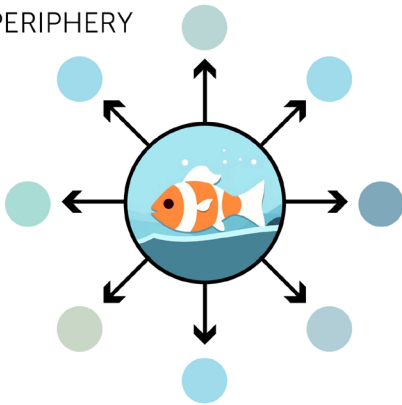
PERIPHERY

Figure 2. The fish who spent its entire life immersed in modernity is not able to see cultural differences as alternative 'waters' but as problems to be corrected so the entire planet can swim in the same blue waters.

But what is a world? And why is this understanding crucial for change?

> *[. . .] every vision of what life is constructs a world.* In fact, that is what the cosmovision concept means. This applies as much to the cosmovisions of ethnic groups as it does to the dominant cosmovision of modernity, European in origin, even if modernity is considered the true or most accurate way to think and thus to exist. Every vision of the world is based on a series of implicit premises, arises from particular histories, and has implications for the sort of world it constructs.[14]

Understanding that 'every vision of what life is constructs a world' entails that transformational social change takes place at the level of meaning-making (myths, beliefs, collective narratives, metaphors, dreams). We cannot only look for change in our tangible experiences, organizations, and systems because these are at more superficial levels.

Humans inhabit a physical world, a planet, but we do not directly experience this physical reality because our experience is always mediated by an interpretation of what the world is – i.e., by our cultural system of meaning (or the 'water', in our fish metaphor).[15] For instance, we all know that our eyes can only perceive a small

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[14] Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 121–22.

[15] Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

range of the color spectrum. Still, the raw perception must be interpreted through our language and the categories established by our cultural group.[16] Thus, the human perception and experience of the physical world are always dependent on language and cultural interpretation.

Humans need to make sense of their lives by attributing meaning to their experiences. A shared system of meaning that is passed down through generations is what Clifford Geertz defines as **culture**. He affirmed that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs."[17] Culture shapes not only people's interpretation of the world (how we understand reality, ourselves, and what we do) but also human cognition: our thinking and problem-solving strategies.[18] These webs of significance are woven through the stories we tell each other and our shared beliefs, creating a collective 'narrative' for what the world is (or ontology). Modernity can be considered a mega-collective narrative that claims to be universal, i.e., all of humanity should interpret the world similarly. In this sense, **a supreme form of power sits in ruling what the 'correct' interpretation of the world is, therefore limiting the terms through which reality can be imagined and transformed**. Stuart Hall[19] explained that colonialism involved bringing the European categories to describe and represent the New World, therefore incorporating it into the European narrative of the world (which formed the OWW).

Pluriversality is about recognizing that there are and there might be multiple alternative interpretations (or 'waters' in the fish metaphor). Furthermore, even though the narratives that frame the interpretation of the world are a product of people's imagination, they have real implications for the kind of tangible world we build. Groups of people who interpret the world radically differently (through other narrations) interact with the material world differently, creating different worlds (Figure 3).

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[16] Aleksandr Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[17] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

[18] Luria, *Cognitive Development*.

[19] Stuart Hall. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *The Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1992), 275–331.

IMMATERIAL WORLD

ONTOLOGY / NARRATIVES

DESIGN DESIGN DESIGN DESIGN

PROP DECOR PROP COSTUME
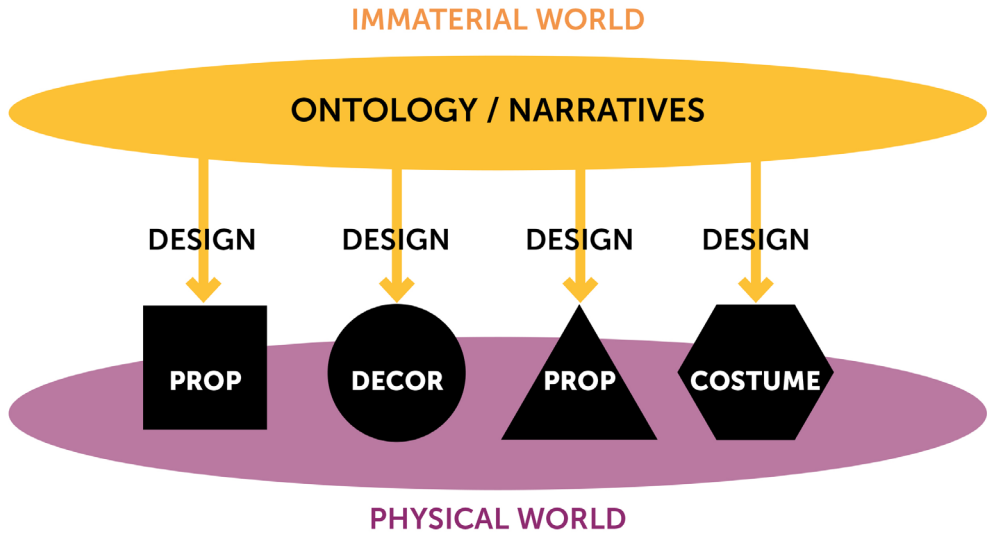
PHYSICAL WORLD

Figure 3. Humans live in an immaterial world of the mind shaped by our language and narratives. Design is the human ability to give form to the ideals of our narratives and bring them into tangible existence. By doing so, we are reshaping the physical world to conform to our narratives. We design the props, decors, and costumes that enable us to 'play' a role and live in our imaginary narratives. However, this is a two-way relationship, as our designs and designed environments also have the power to change us and our imaginations.

Change as a creative process

The Pluriverse framework presses for social change as a recognition that colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist modernity have brought immense suffering to numerous societies. Pluriversality can be a creative pathway to change in which new alternative realities can be imagined and acted upon, particularly by the subaltern groups who defend other models of living.[20]

However, the web of significance (with its categories, assumptions, and beliefs) that structures and sustains neoliberal capitalism and the colonial matrix of power *limits how change can be imagined*. Thinking through these categories and assumptions, people tend not to see all the possible ways of thinking, alternative life projects, grassroots innovation, and visions of the future that the peoples of color on the Earth have been creating. It becomes difficult to recognize and respect what does not fit the episteme of modernity.

One of the essential features of the ontology and episteme of modernity is the duality and separation between mind from body, nature and humanity, subject and

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[20] Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*.

object, observer from observed, us and then, good and evil, and so on.[21] Those imagined separations have profound implications for the ways we imagine change happens. When we think through such assumptions, *the pathway to change often takes the shape of defeating or dismantling an enemy* (an evil entity). I have suggested a key myth of modernity is seeing societal problems as separate from ourselves and our minds, as a 'dragon' that has to be slayed[22] – not realizing that the 'dragons' reproduce in our minds through our ways of interpreting reality. *The search for dragons to slay is part and parcel of the meaning system that sustains capitalist modernity*.

The imagined fundamental separation between good and evil gives rise to several myths of modernity. We imagine that once evil is defeated, we reach a state of goodness and perfection: the promised land of modernity. In fact, the fundamental promise of modernity is that science and technology would eliminate the evils that have plagued humanity since the beginning of time. And yet, our attempts to get rid of germs created super-bacteria, our attempts to get rid of pests generated pesticide poisoning. Humanity has staged several revolutions to overthrow an evil political system only to see a new monster rise to power. In other words, we can tear this world apart, but while we keep interpreting the world through the categories and assumptions of modernity, we will reconstruct it in a very similar way. We must imagine the world in different terms in order to reassemble the debris into a new world that values dignity, respect the planet's interconnected web of life, and enable communities of peoples of color to flourish.

Are there other ways to understand the relationship between good and evil? Absolutely. Indigenous, subaltern, and non-western cultures throughout the world have other interpretations. For instance, modernity has a very troubled relationship with the conceptions of darkness (the time and place of rest and renewal) and death in comparison with several indigenous cosmovisions. The world is not necessarily a dichotomy between something that is fundamentally good (light) and evil (dark). Goodness can be a matter of balance and harmony. We can understand that night and day, positive and negative, summer and winter, yang and yin are essential parts of the whole of our existence. We are not seeking to defeat the other side but to have a balanced relationship (e.g., the Buddhist middle way). Instead of envisioning goodness as a perfect state to be achieved, we can imagine life as a limitless flow in which we constantly interact with a world that is alive, always in motion,[23] so goodness (balance and harmony) is created through active relations.

In his book *Pluriversal Politics*, Escobar invites intellectuals on the Left to an epistemic opening' that embraces the other ways of thinking, of struggling, and of existing that are emerging at the margins.

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[21] Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 2020; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper One, 1983).

[22] Renata Leitão, "Recognizing and Overcoming the Myths of Modernity," in *DRS 2018 Conference Proceedings*, ed. C. Storni, K. Leahy, M. McMahon, P. Lloyd & E. Bohemia (London: Design Research Society, 2018), 955–66.

[23] Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*.

> This opening might lead intellectuals on the Left to think beyond the episteme of modernity, to dare abandon once and for all their most treasured categories, including development, economic growth, progress, even the very category of 'man'. It challenges them to feel-think with the Earth and with communities in resistance so as to rearticulate and enrich their thought.[24]

Intellectuals on the Left can keep the discourse of defeating capitalism and still be oblivious to the vast knowledge produced by Indigenous and subaltern peoples in their struggle to defend other models of living. Or even, they might regard Indigenous and marginalized epistemologies and ontologies as 'curious' and 'exotic' and not as legitimate and valid contributions to the construction of the future. Escobar suggests that such contributions are "the cutting edge in the search for alternative models of life, economics, and society".[25] At issue here is the ability to recognize them and to identify and understand the means through which modernity, as the ontology of the 'One-World World' (OWW), works to make them invisible or worthless.

Designing a good life

Human's search for meaning involves creating speculations to many deep questions: *What is the purpose of life? What can fulfill our lives? How can we achieve happiness? What is a good life? and What are the acceptable means by which to lead a good life?* There are no definitive answers to those questions, but each collective narrative (or cosmovision) proposes answers to the purpose and meaning of life – conjectures that are accepted as true and become beliefs.

Among the most important conjectures are answers to the question: *What is a good life?* Differently from the large philosophical conceptions about the nature of good and evil, those answers have more tangible features: the supposed roles, pathways, experiences, environments, and relationships that lead to or constitute a good life. We also envision the things that are part of that life, and the activity of design is involved in constructing such desirability. In other words, the good life has to be envisioned in an achievable and tangible manner to give direction to people's lives, shaping people's aspirations and what is considered desirable.[26]

For instance, a conjecture of *what a good life is* has been conceived as the American Dream. It is based on the promise of social mobility, comfort, and access to consumer goods that previously were only accessible to the elite. In our consumer society, the good life involves having money to spend on goods and services, so society is divided into haves and have-nots. It is a conjecture because there are no guarantees that

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[24] Ibid, 36.

[25] Ibid, 39.

[26] Renata Leitão and Solen Roth, "Understanding culture as a project: Designing for the future of an Indigenous community in Québec," *Form Akademisk* 13, 5 (2020): 1–13.

pursuing this vision of a good life (i.e., having) can actually bring happiness.[27] On the contrary, recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of young people in the Global North experiencing severe mental health issues. But western conjectures of *what a good life is* are still important in the relationship between the modern world and the marginalized other worlds.

The game of the 'One-World World' (OWW), aka modernity

Each mega narration, such as modernity, can be described as a metaphorical 'game' with its definition of what life's ultimate goals are and the acceptable means to lead a good life. People who live in a 'world' are playing that particular game with defined goals, rules, strategies, roles, boards (their territories), etc. We can imagine that different societies on Earth would be playing different games on their own boards until colonialism or imperialism arrived. Metaphorically, colonialism and globalization forced numerous boards to play by the 'universal' rules of modernity. The Global North shares a strong belief that the entire planet should play the game of the OWW, seeking its goals and following its rules. As we know, people from different origins and ethnicities have distinct positions on the OWW board that might hamper their potential to win the game.

Bayo Akomolafe, in his talk at the Pivot 2021 conference, told a story using the game metaphor. I will never be able to do justice to his amazing storytelling abilities, so I recommend that you watch his presentation.[28] I will try to summarize the plot. *Akomolafe told the story of an island where people lived in harmony until the arrival of the colonizers. The leader of the colonizers presented a game to the islanders, who had to play that game; otherwise, the colonizers would kill the inhabitants. If the islanders won the game, the colonizers would leave, and the inhabitants would be free. But if they lost, the colonizers would continue to encroach on the island. The islanders didn't know how to play the game; they had never played it, so they tried and failed. And for many years, the islanders kept trying to win the game and failing, losing, and losing again. At some point, the inhabitants decided to study the game, develop strategies, and build schools to teach the game to children. They created universities devoted to the study of the game. Eventually, after enormous effort, the inhabitants were able to win the game. Everybody on the island was jubilant! They had finally gained their independence. The colonizers were unfaze; they didn't seem defeated at all. They seemed even happy about leaving the island. So, the inhabitants got confused; it didn't feel like a victory since the colonizers were happy about it. As they sailed away, the colonizers left a final gift: a mirror. The inhabitants looked at their reflections and saw the same facial expressions, the same clothing, and the same posture of the colonizers. They had become just like the masters. Therefore, the colonizers won, even if they had lost and left the island.*

Akomolafe's story is a powerful metaphor for coloniality. Beyond exploitation and oppression, violence was the destruction of epistemologies and ways of living. Moreover, playing the game of the OWW has been made seductive and presented as

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Bayo Akomolafe, "Making Sanctuary: a posthumanist micro-politics of getting lost in fluid times," Pivot 2021 Conference, https://vimeo.com/582156585/2d20cd9aa8, the story starts at 5:05, acc. on March 5, 2023.

the one and only pathway toward happiness and the good life.[29] Winning the OWW game has been promoted as The Universal aspiration, as described by Walter Mignolo:

> Under the spell of neo-liberalism and the magic of the media promoting it, modernity and modernization, together with democracy, are being sold as a package trip to the promised land of happiness […] Yet, when people do not buy the package willingly or have other ideas of how economy and society should be organized, they become subject to all kinds of direct and indirect violence.[30]

Depending on your position on the board of the OWW, the "package trip to the promised land of happiness", stated by Mignolo, is rarely delivered (if ever). However, we should focus on those "other ideas of how economy and society should be organized" that face "all kinds of direct and indirect violence" because they represent the struggle to build and nurture the Pluriverse.

Frequently, the goal of inclusivity and equity is to provide any person who is playing the game of the OWW with an opportunity to win. Unquestionably, opportunities, inclusivity, and equity are fundamental in a globalized world where the 'game of the OWW' is the only game many people can play. On the other hand, pluriversality recognizes that not everyone on this planet should be playing the game of the OWW, and that countless other metaphorical 'games' exist, have always existed, and can still be created. Not everybody has to play the game of the OWW and embrace its vision of happiness and the good life.

Pluriversality and sustainability

I argue that enabling people to play different games – with different goals and rules, with different visions of what happiness is – is essential to create sustainability. The model of life and the style of world-making of the OWW (aka, the consumer society) are leading us toward an ecological collapse. Our productive system devastates and pollutes the traditional territories of numerous people (particularly those who are not fully playing the game of the OWW) to extract materials to make products that will end up in the garbage after less than one year of use. Then the garbage will further pollute the environment and contaminate the natural resources of many other communities. Why should we make more people play the OWW game?

> Because today, 20% of the world population that lives more or less according to this model of well-being consumes 80% of the physical resources of our planet. Very banally, even if it deals with terribly dramatic topics, there is not enough ecological space to sustain all others: 80% of the world population that today consumes 20% of the resources,

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[29] Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, 2–3 (2007): 168–78.

[30] Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, 2–3 (2007): 450.

but legitimately tries to live better. To do it, they have to confront, or are forced to confront, the dominant ideas of well-being, the equation 'well-being = more products'.

If all habitants of this planet really try to have access in a similar way to wellbeing, the catastrophe would be imminent: an ecological catastrophe, if they had the access, or a social catastrophe, if a few had and the majority did not have this access (or rather a catastrophe of mixed characteristics, as unfortunately this may happen really soon, or worse, it is already happening).[31]

Pluriversality is about creating the condition for other 'games' to thrive – particularly the ones that are attuned to nature and respect the limits of the planet and the interdependence of all beings. That is why pluriversality is intimately related to sustainability. Creating sustainable societies asks us to recognize that there are and there might be other worlds – i.e., other possible narratives, other ways to produce and build worlds, other ways of living, other value systems, and other ideas of what a good life is.

Facing a different game

Pluriversality is about recognizing that humans can operate differently. So, I will tell you two stories about how this recognition appeared in my life. The first one took place when I was eleven years old in Brazil. Although I did not know the word 'Pluriverse', an event made clear that there are different worlds on Earth.

Like most Brazilians, I have a multi-ethnic background. I have European, African, and Indigenous blood. I have enslaved people and slavers as ancestors. One grandfather was a professor, and the other, a medicine man. At home, I learned that people could see the world through completely different perspectives and lenses, living in very different narratives. People in my family occupied different positions in the game of the colonized Brazilian society (an 'extension of the OWW game', so to speak) based on their ethnicity and skin color. I understood that I had a privileged position in the Brazilian game, even though several people in my family did not. But I was still understanding the world from within the board of the OWW game – even if the 'Brazilian extension' was at the periphery of the main board of the OWW.

When I was 11 years old, because of extraordinary circumstances, my tiny family (mother, sister, and me) ended up in an isolated Caiçara community (Brazilian Métis people) on an island, Ilha das Peças. At that moment, the community did not have electricity, tap water, or cars, and very little money circulated. In other words, it was still out of the board of the OWW game. My mother fell in love with the community, and it was mutual. Many members of the community still adore her. They offered her a house in the community and she decided to spend a sabbatical there.

I will never forget the day we moved in. We were traveling in a boat full of furniture. As the boat approached the island, I could see several dozens of people

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[31] Carlo A. Vezzoli and Ezio Manzini, *Design and Innovation for Sustainability* (London: Springer, 2008), 17.

standing, waiting for us. When we arrived, each person took an object or a piece of furniture and carried it to our house. In 10–15 minutes, all our belongings were in the house. Nobody asked us for money or anything in return; there was nothing transactional in their help. They simply welcomed us and wished us good luck. I was in awe! I have never seen something as efficient in my life. Ever. They knew a family needed help, so the community stopped for 30 minutes and helped them. How simple! That move is still my gold standard of efficiency.

Even though I was a child, it was clear to me that I was watching a different model of society based on relationality and collectivity and not on individualism. They had different values and ways of organizing themselves. Without a doubt, they had problems and flaws, but that model of society was clearly a distinct world. Because tourism had not yet arrived, they were not the 'exotic others' in 'exotic places' who perform and commodify their culture for outsiders. They were not (yet) operating from the periphery of the OWW board. A few years later, the OWW arrived in full force with devastating consequences. Assimilation into the OWW board invariably transforms local and indigenous peoples (who live autonomously from the land) into poor people.[32] But the day my family moved in made me recognize that other inspiring models of society exist today among the wretched of the earth.

Metaphors for other worlds

A second personal story illustrates the process of demeaning what is not part of the worldview and epistemology of the OWW. I was spending New Year's Eve with some friends in Montreal. In Quebec, there is a tradition of spending December 31st in front of the television watching an annual comedy special named "Bye Bye". In contrast, Brazilian New Year's Eve is a gorgeous celebration. A few Brazilians at the party (including me) started to describe our traditions: millions of Brazilians dress in white and gather on our numerous beaches to celebrate the new year. We honor the African Yoruba sea goddess Yemanja to ask for good luck and prosperity in the next year. Yemanja is the great mother, the Orisha of the oceans, the giver of our lives. These traditions have their roots in the ontologies brought to Brazil by West African enslaved people. Even though Brazil is still part of the 'board of the OWW game', a few aspects of Brazilian culture are 'disputed territories', so to speak; that is, zones where several worlds clash.

A Canadian friend was taken aback. He told us he thought that education had advanced in Brazil in the last few decades. For him, with a better level of education, it was surprising that people could still be ignorant enough to partake in that kind of celebration. I asked him: *do you really think that our traditional celebration is a demonstration of ignorance?* His answer: *yes! It is a sign of ignorance.* So, I wonder: what happens when cultural ways of feeling our connection to the planet's web of life are perceived as embarrassing, ignorant, or inferior? (Figure 4). Does the 'enlightenment'

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[32] Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, "Os Involuntários da Pátria: Elogio Do Subdesenvolvimento," *Chão da Feira – Cadernos de leitura* 65 (2017): 1–9.

of humanity have to prevent us from honoring Earth and the oceans? Is the 'evolution' of humankind to spend New Year's Eve in front of a television? I imagine the future of a humanity that does not know how to honor nature is to live in a totally artificial environment.

Figure 4. Worshippers celebrating the Orisha of the ocean at the Festival of Yemanja in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. [lazyllama/stock.adobe.com]

Since the 16th and 17th centuries Scientific Revolution, the metaphor of nature as a machine has been part of the Western worldview.[33] *Can you tell me why the metaphor of the ocean as our mother is worse than the metaphor of the planet as a machine composed of predictable and controllable mechanisms?* Why is one metaphor acceptable and the other ignorant? Water is life, and this is not a metaphor. Our oceans enable us to live, they are life-givers; this is not a metaphor either. Think about the production of oxygen, climate stability, food, humidity, etc. Human life is intimately linked to the oceans. Several indigenous ontologies embrace the notion that Earth or the land is our mother.[34] "Earth is our Mother (and this is not a metaphor: it is real)."[35] Many people discredit indigenous (non-Western) epistemologies because they are not

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[33] Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

[34] Manulani Aluli Meyer, "Indigenous and authentic: Hawaiian epistemology and the triangulation of meaning," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 217–32.

[35] Leroy Little Bear, "Jagged Worldviews Colliding," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 77.

factual. No, the ocean is not a deity, this is a metaphor. As the planet is not a machine, this is also a metaphor.

At issue here is the kind of world our choice of preferred metaphors creates. *Please stop one moment and imagine how different our world-building practices would be if we acknowledged the oceans as life-givers, so we should treat them with respect and reverence.* Can you see that the choice of metaphors we use to think about reality creates completely different worlds? We can choose to see that we are part of an interconnected web of life. And we can choose to see the planet as inert matter that can be exploited and polluted. Our systems of extraction, production, consumption, and discard are based on the latter assumption. As a consequence, we dump about 8 million metric tons of plastic into the oceans every year (Figure 5).[36] The use of plastic has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have recycled no more than 10% of all the plastic ever produced.[37] Is this a good example of evolution, enlightenment, and rationality?

Figure 5. Plastic island on the ocean. [Stefano/stock.adobe.com]

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[36] World Economic Forum, *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastics* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2016).

[37] Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The Global Commitment: 2022 Progress Report (Isle of Wight, UK: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022); GAIA. Plastic Exposed: How Waste Assessments and Brand Audits are Helping Philippine Cities Fight Plastic Pollution (Quezon City: Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, 2019); Greenpeace, Circular Claims Fall Flat: Comprehensive U.S. Survey of Plastics Recyclability (Washington, D.C.: Greenpeace, 2020).

If we want to build a different world, we must first be open to new interpretations and metaphors. Recognizing and making visible alternative metaphors and narratives that enable healthier relationships with nature and each other is at the core of what pluriversality is about.

Conclusion: Change as creativity and alterity

One of the Zapatistas' guiding principles is *Construir y no destruir* (to construct and not destroy).[38] Because no matter how many dragons we defeat and systems we destroy, we still have to reconstruct a world that is filled with debris. If we do not imagine new ways of life and create new narratives, the reconstruction will look very similar to the old system, or a new monster will take the place of the slayed dragon. I understand that destroying and defeating dragons might seem easier than creating or even imagining the world operating in different terms (assumptions, categories, and metaphors). Several people have said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. What if the end of capitalism isn't a static moment, a recognizable dramatic end? What if it is already in transition, and our limiting narratives are making it hard for us to see it? The alternatives – the other worlds – have always existed.

Pluriversality is a call to get in touch with Indigenous and subaltern leaders and innovators. In Brazil, for instance, I can mention the work of Ailton Krenak, Daniel Munduruku, Ibã Sales, and Antônio Bispo dos Santos. They are creating new visions of the future based on Indigenous and African cosmovisions and epistemologies. Not only read about them, but try to spend time with communities at the margins who are accessible to you and open to receive you. Listen to them without seeing yourself (and your culture) as superior. Learn to think and feel with them, share stories, dance, and sing with them. Gahman et al. (2022) tell the story of the Leftist urban intellectuals who arrived in Chiapas (Mexico) in the 1980s with the intention of creating a revolution and spreading Marxist doctrines to rural Indigenous peasants. In the end, those university-educated socialists were philosophically 'conquered' by Indigenous worldviews as they spent time in the remote jungle and highlands of the Chiapas and started to gain an understanding of the histories, ways of being, and rhythms of life of the local Indigenous people.

Portuguese scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos[39] developed a framework named "Epistemologies of the South" that aims to enhance the recognition of ways of knowing developed by subaltern social groups as part of their resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions. For him, "South" is not a geographical concept but a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism. Santos[40] described three guidelines for an epistemology of the South [my translation]: 1)

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[38] Gahman et al., *A Beginner's Guide to Building Better Worlds*.

[39] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Epistemologies of the South and the Future," *From the European South: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities* 1 (2016): 17–29.

[40] Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses, *Epistemologias Do Sul* (Coimbra: Almedina, 2009).

learning that the South exists, 2) learning to go to the South, and 3) learning to take action from the South and with the South.

Those guidelines can serve any urban intellectual from the North (again, not a geographical concept, but a metaphor for privilege) interested in Pluriversality. First, *learning that the South exists* – i.e., recognizing that there are many, many brilliant people who operate outside of the episteme of modernity. In other words, consider their works as valid contributions to the future and not as mere curiosities or exoticisms. Escobar stated that the main inspiration for his work on the pluriverse has been "the political struggles of indigenous, Afrodescendant, peasant, and marginalized urban groups in Latin America who mobilize with the goal of defending not only their resources and territories but their entire ways of being-in-the-world".[41] Pluriversality is about making those alternative worlds visible and contributing to their flourishing. Second, *learning to go to the South* does not mean going to a beach resort. Spend time with the innovative communities in the South and allow yourself to have your interpretation of the world transformed by them. Third, *learning to take action from the South and with the South*. Become a real ally and start to understand 'change' from their assumptions and worldviews so that change is not only the destruction of the old but a creative activity in which we reweave our webs of significance. Reimagining the world through the metaphors and narratives of the South (and others outside modernity) could enable us to build our tangible worlds differently.

Acknowledgments

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[41] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, x.

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