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## DE/COLONIALITY AND DISPLACEMENT: ONTOLOGICAL OCCUPATIONS AND THE APORIAS OF NEOLIBERAL MOBILITY

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### Abstract

The author discusses the role played by what he calls the politico-colonial ontologies underlying the occupation of lands and the representation of the “Other” as subordinate. The article combines popular songs and music videos on migration and his theoretical-political reflections on global processes of occupation of lands carried out by modern/colonial capitalist ontologies and political economies. He then focuses on Africa, as both limit and future possibility, and on design as tool to reimagine a utopian pluriverse of would-be worlds without “migrants”. The following is a relatively free-flowing text, in the spirit of the Latin American open-ended ensayo (essay form), made up of critical readings of contemporary representations of migrations and displacement (e.g. songs and music videos by well-known artists on refugees and forced migration); analytical reflections on the historical territorial-ontological occupation of “sending countries” by “receiving” countries; and critical design-led reflections on current political and policy debates on the subject, from design futural re-imaginings of the issues to nitty-gritty design issues, for instance, about the spatiality of the treatment of refugees.

### About the author

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### Keywords

migration; Africa; ontological occupation; anti-blackness; design.

## On the onto-epistemic historicity of “migration”

The issue of “migration” (defined, for the purpose of this text, as the movement of people out of their places, particularly those displaced or forced to leave by dire socio-economic conditions, political situations, climate-induced disasters, or a combination of them) is one of the most crucial we can address today. It embodies an utterly global historicity, involving immediate and medium-term pasts, but also a veritable *longue-durée*, i.e., that largely imperceptible past that has become profoundly naturalized. Bringing these pasts into view tells about those conditions that need to be overcome or significantly transformed, if the aim is the passage to “migrantless” futures – i.e., to worlds where everybody can move freely, but also where everybody has the indispensable conditions to remain in place, or to exercise a right not to migrate. That world, by implication, would also have to be one in which the modern goals of social justice and the ability to sustain life on Earth have been meaningfully met, and where presents- and futures-in-difference have become a real possibility.<sup>1</sup>

As a social experience, the contemporary migrant constitutes a historical problematic that embodies in particularly acute manner the pasts, present and futures of the world known as Western modernity. Seen this way, one comes to recognize that migration involves much more than the search for economic survival, social recognition, and cultural and political rights within modern social orders. One begins to discover the reverberations of a more fundamental level involving the entire domain of normalized ways of being, doing, and knowing, how these have progressively become dominant world-wide, and how they have colonized other historical ways of world-making. I will refer to this level as onto-epistemic historicity. By problematizing this most taken-for-granted onto-epistemic past that serves as the foundation of today’s “global world,” one would hopefully contribute to clearing a space for formulating those other futures

1. I borrow the concept of the “right not to migrate” from anthropologist Joseph Wiltberger (Wiltberger 2014), who encountered it among activists in El Salvador.

that have yet to emerge, though many of these futures are always there, timorously showing their face as they strive to be seen, or forcefully shouting, Here we are! Take us seriously!, possibly because their enduring pasts harbor other historicities.

The aim of this text is to explore some facets of this long-standing onto-epistemic historicity. The text is written in the style of a Latin American *ensayo*. *Ensayos* reflect salient intellectual-political debates of the moment. This does not mean that they deal with inconsequential matters. At acute conjunctures, *ensayos* seek to infuse the debates of the day with new energy and orientations. They might help bring into light emerging concepts, such as pluriversality and civilizational transitions, two of the main notions with which this article deals. *Ensayos* are often free-flowing, and as such exempted from following rigorous academic convention, including the extended bibliographical references found in academic treatises. Readers are thus asked to exercise a measure of epistemic pluralism

## Why “migrants” leave?

Let me start with the voyaging into Europe by people from Sub-Saharan Africa as it concerns most directly this journal’s home and issue. I often say, as an antidote to the attitudes generated among today’s Europeans by the arrival of Africans to their shores in large numbers –from xenophobia to asylum policies, and from militarization of borders and policing to NGO support programs — that the answer to “the problem” is very simple, though this simplicity hides its enormous complexity: to contribute to create conditions in Africa – economic, social, material, infrastructural — that allow African people to survive well and with dignity in their places, regions, and countries. This is just common sense. But there are two pre-conditions for this to happen: the first is again seemingly simple: Historicize! If Africans are willing – or rather, forced — to leave their beautiful places and lively communities for uncertain futures elsewhere, isn’t it in great part because of the ravages caused in those same places by the entire colonial enterprise --the breakdown of pre-colonial local and regional

economies, the fragmentation of communities, the pillage of natural resources through the promotion of enclaves, the denial of the pivotal role of women and youth in social spheres, and the bondage of countries through debt – all of that, hardly a century ago, even if starting much before, certainly since that largest mass deportation in history known as the transatlantic slave trade?<sup>2</sup> Isn't because Europeans migrated to Africa, sometimes in large numbers (like the 160,000 Italians in so-called "Italian East Africa" at the height of the colonial enterprise), dramatically disrupting African people's lives? And are these not the very same conditions that have been perpetuated, albeit in new guises, in the postcolonial period by local elites, corporations from the Global North (and today from China, Brazil, India, and some Arab countries), and financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, ironically in the name of progress and development?

We do not need to rehearse the dramatic figures – even from institutions such as the World Bank — that circumscribe the political economy of the colonial and postcolonial period to recognize that this is indeed the case. Suffice it to ask why, after seventy years of so-called "development" what was known as "the Third World" is far from "catching up," let alone provide decent living conditions to most of its peoples, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Let me assure you that what I have in mind when I speak about creating conditions for dignified livelihoods in The Continent (I always liked the way African radical intellectuals speak about The Continent with a certain confidence, the continent par excellence, humanity's motherland, the source of all rhythm; even Latin Americans feel the need to emphasize the Latin American continent, to refer to what our indigenous sisters and brothers now rightly call *Abya Yala*, or land in full maturity) is NOT "development." Precisely the opposite. One must wager the following reversal: Africa does not suffer from lack of development,

2. On the various dimensions of the impact of enclave colonialism, see the important work of the late Malawian political economist Guy Mhone (e.g. 2000). On the vagaries of "development" in sub-Saharan Africa, see the excellent study by Canadian-Kenyan international political economy scholar Eunice Sahle (2010).

but from its excess – at least the excess of the kind of development pursued in the post-colonial period. These development strategies might at best beef up a middle class intent in adopting the culturally impoverished consumption-oriented, digitally-mediated life styles of the well-off of the world, while their lands are grabbed by transnationals, their ecosystems and unique nonhuman living beings savagely devastated, and most of their peoples even more marginalized from so-called progress than ever before (in what way can this be called "progress"? You tell me!), but can they ever come to produce the abundance they cynically keep on promising? And, could these economies ever hope to be "sustainable"? In the meantime, most regions in Sub-Saharan Africa irremediably march towards gloomier situations, given the well-documented prediction that Africa will be – is – the world region most affected by climate change.

The second pre-condition for making viable the approach of a self-sustaining Africa is even harder to fathom in today's heavily mediatized public spheres –and here conventional media and social media most often work in tandem. For underneath colonialism, post-coloniality, development, and financialized global capitalism, as I have already suggested, lies an incredibly naturalized understanding of what constitutes life, "human," "world," "good living," politics and so forth. This understanding is embedded in a philosophical level of social life that is variously described as a cosmovision, a cosmology, a worldview, a *Weltanschauung*, and a civilizational project. It has to do with the historical experience of the West, with the mainstream Judeo-Christian cosmology, with social and cultural modernity, with the dominant values of the Global North, and certainly with patriarchy, white cultural dominance, and coloniality. I will call this philosophical level, following a certain contemporary usage, and ontology or onto-epistemic formation.<sup>3</sup>

3. I will not be able to deal here with the foundational role of patriarchy as an ontology of domination, appropriation, hierarchy, control, violence and war. No matter where the various authors locate the origins of patriarchy, there is agreement in considering that patriarchy entails the systematic destruction of life. With modernity and capitalism (patriarchy's latest phases), the patriarchal program transmuted into the search for endless progress and the promise of a ceaselessly "better" world. I have in mind primarily the works of Claudia von Werlhof, Maria Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen and Silvia Federici in

Let us understand this ontology for now as that mode of being (of existing, knowing, doing) that provides the grounds for the kinds of societies, economies, cities, ways of being person, of experiencing the body and the natural world, of eating, healing, moving, working ... that are most natural to most of us in the Global North, and by which most people in the world increasingly come to abide or desire. Even if one acknowledges its internal diversity and multiplicity, the weight of this dominant historical ontology is incredibly heavy, almost insurmountable. As some of the most clear-minded philosophers of the modern West have said (e.g., Nietzsche, Benjamin, Foucault), given its pervasiveness it is impossible to describe this ontology – its multiple archives — *in toto*, since it is its discourses that give us the possibility of speaking and thinking, even of being, to begin with. Yet pointing at it in a certain way, problematizing its existence-in-action, is a useful strategy, as the philosophers themselves have shown (e.g., Foucault’s archaeologies and ethnographies of the discourse and practices that have constituted us as modern subjects, themselves among the most significant anchors of the western/modern/capitalist/heteropatriarchal ontologies of the present).

What pushes Africans to leave is, in the last instance, what I would characterize as the ontological occupation of their territories and lives. To be sure, this ontological occupation is imbricated with all kinds of material-discursive apparatuses and practices – “assemblages,” one might say more fashionably today — that are the stuff of post/colonial capitalist economies and of Africa-becoming-modern national and personal projects. But underlying these assemblages, if one excavates further and differently, one finds barely perceptible onto-logics in whose cultural DNA are deeply inscribed mechanisms of occupation, appropriation, hierarchy, separation, control, violence and war. I would suggest that at a very fundamental

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Europe; related perspectives in Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Frédérique Apffel-Marglin; Australian ecofeminists Ariel Salleh, Val Plumwood, and Wendy Harcourt; and a considerable number of Latin American decolonial, Black, and indigenous feminists, too numerous to cite. I examine these works elsewhere (Escobar 2018, In press). This onto-political perspective of heteropatriarchy needs to be incorporated actively into the analysis of migration.

level, the occupying force can be said to be these hetero-patriarchal/colonial capitalist modern ontologies and the One-World world (a world made up of one single allegedly globalized, market-driven world) they have produced – a civilizational anomaly in the process of becoming a monstrosity of sorts. One end-result of such occupation, of particular relevance to understanding migration as a global problematic, is the proscription of radical difference. Migration and the proscription of difference, then, come to be revealed both as a fundamental societal problem and as a futural possibility; this possibility is the pluriverse, a world-in-difference where many worlds can be.<sup>4</sup>

The rest of this text is devoted to exploring the two pre-conditions – the need to historicize colonialism and development on the one hand; and the idea of the ontological occupation of the territories, alongside their material-discursive occupation by capital, post-colonialism, and neoliberal globalization.

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«There are women artists who deserve the title of goddess, and Fatoumata Diawara is one of them.» I wrote these words in my little notebook after a concert of hers I attended at the relatively intimate Mor-torco Music Hall in Durham, North Carolina, on March 26, 2019 (this was the second time I saw her, the first being a few years back, at the large concert hall on the campus of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill). In her performance, I thought, she was a shaman – a sha/wo/man — enticing us with her ritual stick and ecstatic dance into the concert stage as into a sacred space, where nothing else but a pure experience of music would transpire if we ob-

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4. This essay is located within the growing field of political ontology. This field emerges at the intersection of the renewed scholarly concern with ontology of the past two decades, on the one hand, and social struggles against extractive operations, seen as “ontological struggles” in that they stem from resistance to occupation of people’s territories by the One-World world ontology, on the other. For an introduction to political ontology, see particularly Blaser 2010, 2013; de la Cadena 2015; de la Cadena and Blaser, eds. 2018; Escobar 2018, In press. The notion of “One World World” has been proposed by John Law (Law 2011), referring to that (Western) manner of world making that arrogates for itself the right to be “the world,” at the exclusion of all other worlds and their futures.

serve her call, in complete joy, in true celebration of life, and in solidarity with those whose very lives are being disrupted and perhaps destroyed in The Continent (“Timbuktu Fasso,” “Nterini,” “Clandestin,” ...). Her ethos of decolonial love is most evident in “Clandestin,” her moving song about those who undergo the voyage across the Mediterranean sea, risking their very lives, and is displayed in the song’s World Circuit video from December 17, 2012. It’s Real Life the migrant men leave behind –place, family, wives, lovers, children; en route, they travel through sands, barren lands, and market towns until they arrive by the edge of the sea, old-fashioned cell phones in hand, perhaps to negotiate the travel across in the infamous *pateras*, as they are called in Spain, the fragile migrant boats prone to capsize and sink. As they board, we see the singer sitting and playing her guitar among the men in the crowded boat, sing she does until her face begins to turn somber and she can no more contain her tears out of pain for the men. She cries, she cries, her sad tears rolling down her face from the whole of her being ... How could it be otherwise? (And I think, as I watch: We should all cry with her ... How could it be otherwise?) Throughout the video, one can feel her profound care for the lives of the migrants. Let us listen to the song’s lyrics (English translation from the Wassoulou language, I believe):

The fault lies ...  
 The fault lies with Europeans  
 Our young people get up and decide to emigrate  
 To go on an adventure in search of money  
 They left their mothers at home  
 They left their fathers at home  
 Some call them Illegals  
 But we call them Men of Adventure  
 I ask our leaders, isn’t there someone to help  
 them stay at home?

Chorus: They count one, two, three, four, five,  
 six, seven, eight, nine ...  
 They count one, two, three, four, five, six, seven,  
 eight, nine ...  
 Up to ten years ...  
 Many perished. Many died  
 ...

They’re leaving, and throwing themselves in the  
 hands of betrayal  
 Their adventure ends badly  
 I say that the fault lies, the fault lies with ...  
 Many perished. Many died.<sup>5</sup>

### Africa’s exemplarity

In Africa, «nothing works, but everything is possible,» remarks the Sudanese writer Abu Gassim Goor, as quoted in a little but enlightening book *Invisible Governance. The Art of African Micropolitics*, by urbanists David Hecht and Abdou Malik Simone (1994, 52). This marvelous reversal should make people think twice about the overwhelming image of Africa as a “basket case” of so-called development. What the authors have in mind is Africans’ ability to make do with the remnants of traditions and the rubbles of modernity (a modernity that never seems quite to work or go according to plan), Africa’s potential «not only to survive but restructure and reinvent itself within a context of global realities... African societies may have become underdeveloped in the web of advanced capitalism, but they have also not been fully captured and are slipping further out of either comprehension or control. The postcolony is more trapped by and more removed from Western agendas all at the same time» (*ibidem*, 15). One would have to ponder whether the new scramble for Africa of the past quarter century has not dramatically changed the situation –can one even still speak of a postcolony, especially confronted with the fact that large swaths of African rural and urban lands – as in other parts of the Global South and some in the Global North — have been earmarked as sites of extraction and speculation by global capital (Sas-

5. From her debut album, *Fatou* (World Circuit Records, 2011). See the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piXLHdmAEMQ> (accessed June 21, 2019). She returns to the theme of migrants in Nterini, from the 2018 album *Fenfo*. “In a world of 7 billion people, there are 1 billion Migrants. This is the story of one man’s journey,” reads the initial legend across the screen in the corresponding video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gmGL5SqaY>; accessed June 21, 2019). To be sure, as she says, while migration is a problem of utmost seriousness, there have always been nomadic practices in West African traditions; her wish is for all worlds, all doors, to be open to all peoples, enabling genuine sharing, after which most nomads/migrants/travelers will most likely go back home, enriched by the experience.

sen 2014), including the capturing of the consumption power of Africa's growing middle classes – those nascent, spoiled and individualistic middle classes, I must add (at least if one thinks about Latin America, who seemingly feel most at home at that junk global space which is the Universal Shopping Mall).

For the figures of capitalist extraction are reaching unheard of levels in Africa: «China secured the right to grow palm oil for biofuels on 2.8 million hectares of Congo, making it the world's largest palm plantation» (*ibidem*, 107). Isn't it thus out of sheer ignorance that the question in the mind of many Europeans, “how come Africans want to leave their countries and move in with us,” is even possible? Are the actions of “the Europeans” (global powers in general) not a large part of the reason why, especially if we agree with Sassen's conclusion that the brutally simple result of the new complex logics of expulsion is a veritable “savage sorting” of peoples and places? Because in the last instance, what is at stake is the massive expulsion of peoples from the space of Life, and the onto-epistemic/material occupation of those spaces by a One World world bent on extraction. This savage sorting – another way of conjuring up “the migrant” – is the sine qua non of the privileged worlds so many of us “enjoy” and have come to depend on in the Global North – the world of “Amazon Prime,” so to speak.

The Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr tackles these issues in a recent inspiring study. For him, the effects of the shocks of enslavement and colonialism still persist today. It is necessary to examine critically these legacies as well as the own responsibility of African politicians and ruling elites. Africa must reinvent her economic models based on her own civilizational models, he argues, articulating culture and economy in novel ways, different from the economism of the modern homo economicus, to which homo africanicus cannot be reduced. Sarr envisions a significant and sustained effort on the part of African intellectuals to rethink the Continent from within, with its own categories, learning from and renovating its traditions and vitalist ontologies, drawing on people's extant *vivre-ensemble*, as embodied in categories such as ubuntu. Only an epistemic work of this sort can

provide conditions for Africa's transition to an Africa yet to come, one that does not feel the need to replicate the outworn models from other societies but that is capable of inventing her own, so as to finally regain her ability to be, «the spiritual lung of the world», as it was at the dawn of humanity (Sarr 2018, 141). Sarr's emphasis in the creation of new imaginaries from a sovereign intellectual position, as a response to the current philosophical and spiritual crisis fostered by Western cultural-economic and development models, contains important teachings for all those interested in civilizational transitions, whether in the Global South or the Global North.<sup>6</sup>

Because of all of this, there is something about Africa's exemplarity. I borrow the expression from the prominent African-American intellectual Nahum Chandler.

This exemplarity stems from the fact that Africa stands in between its being deeply shaped by the onto-epistemic historicity of the modern West – a historicity always wanting to go global, mirroring capital's voracious appetite for fast and always irresponsible expansion, a veritable anti-care for the world –, on the one hand, and the potential crafting of futures beyond that modern historicity, on the other, futures less traversed by axes of extraction, violence, racism, and the proscription of difference. “Africa,” says Chandler, «may be adduced as a theoretical metaphor which could propose a certain hyperbolic re-narrativization of the system of modern historicity, not only as pasts, but as futures» (Chandler 2013, 13). I shall deal with the question of de/futuring in the next section; for now, let me add that what Chandler means by re-narrativization is a renewed awareness of the limit of the modern West as World, that is, as onto-epistemic formation, from which one might be able to infer passages to futures that are not just global extensions of what (we assume) exists. Chandler arrives at this conclusion through a careful rereading of W.E.B. Du Bois' oeuvre, particularly his less known works concerning the question of Africa and the world order. For Du Bois, Chandler argues, Africa posed like no other region the question of the future of the whole world, to be

6. I am quoting from the Spanish edition of the original 2016 French publication with the same title, *Afrotopia*.

explored neither by appealing to primordial roots, continental isolationism (uncritical Pan-Africanism), nor of course through redemption by European philosophy (or development!) but through a positing of the possibility of worlds other than those of a global modernity. Rethinking Africa, for Du Bois, inevitably implied a fundamental rethinking of Europe. From here Chandler reinterprets Du Bois' celebrated analysis of "the problem of the color line" as a global problematic, which today becomes the problematic of the migrant.

Thinking about migration thus means scrutinizing the entire philosophico-political relation between Africa and Europe, or between the Global North and the Global South. At stake is the possibility of an onto-epistemic non-alignment with Europe and the USA. «Africa was for Du Bois an exemplary scene of an age old problematic that had in the modern era become fundamentally global» (93). This is the issue of the relations among peoples, and whether such relation can ever lead to a widespread ethos of onto-epistemic hospitality and genuine freedom. This central philosophical question is refracted perhaps most poignantly today through Africa. All this happens «at the limit of world» (e.g., 99), opening up the possibility of another civilization, an alternative planet-wide historicity, with a new sense of the "colors" of the peoples of the world, beyond the categorical forms enacting the proscription of difference mandated by the West. The entire edifice of modern thought is involved in this predicament, as Brazilian scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva (Ferreira da Silva 2007) has argued in one of the most incisive treatments of the long-standing philosophical background of antiblackness. In her view, the deployment of racial difference anchors an onto-epistemic regime that for centuries has prompted a kind of social subjection in which the most allegedly rational institutions of society, such as the law and the economy, provide the very tools of obliteration. This onto-epistemic context called globality, she argues, needs to be understood in these terms in order to undermine it.

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We find lucid expressions of these ideas in popular culture. Let us listen to the following powerful statement on ontological politics by Bob Marley, a prophet of our times, from his 1979 composition "Babylon System," sung by Marley in the perfect rhythm of Jamaican reggae:<sup>7</sup>

We refuse to be  
 What you wanted us to be  
 We are what we are  
 That's the way it's going to be.

This statement is an unambiguous refusal of the ontological imperative to be in a particular way, a way that for Black peoples all over the world involves at the very least widespread misrecognition, often times outright denial of their being, and not infrequently lethal forms of non-relation, as in repeated police killings and mass incarceration in the US and the treatment of African migrants in so many parts of the world. One can also read in it a summons to everybody, Black and non-Black, to refuse to be what "they" want us to be — they being the Babylon system, in Marley variously a synonym for Western civilization, capitalism, intractable racism, and unbridled globalization: «Babylon system is the vampire, yea! / Suckin' the children day by day, yeah! / Me say de Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire / Suckin' the blood of the sufferers, yeah!» It wouldn't be farfetched to suggest that it is also about whether one — we all — can join in the singing, and feel a profound identification with those in dire need to dis-identify with "de system" as a matter of Survival. For, have all of us not, too, been trodding in the winepress much too long? Are we not part of the system he decries and condemns: «Building church and university, wooh, yeah! / Deceiving the people continually, yeah! / Me say them graduatin' thieves and murderers / Look out now they suckin' the blood of the sufferers, Yea! ... Rebel, rebel! Can we not, too, be part of the active forces compelled to Tell the children the truth, part of this truth being that You can't educate I / For no equal opportunity / Talkin' 'bout my freedom / People freedom and liberty!?» Needless to say, race is central to this politics, as

7. From the album *Survival*, Kingston, Island/Tuff Gong Records, 1979.

Marley also reminds us: «Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war, me say war.»<sup>8</sup>

### Migration to the North and the (global?) ontology of anti-blackness

Migrants from the Global South attempting to craft lives of meaning and dignity in the Global North are part of the war Marley talks about. One may see this war as a reflection of the territorial-ontological occupation of “sending countries” by “receiving” countries, in allegedly bygone times as much as today. Underlying it is a notion of the Black person as nothing, a veritable «metaphysical infrastructure,» as Chandler aptly calls it (Chandler 2014). It discloses the impossibility for the Black person of achieving ontological fullness as a human within any dominant onto-epistemic, social and political order. It is inherent in the very declaration of “Black Lives Matter,” in which one can hear a structural connection between antiblackness, modernity, and capitalism, from the time of the Atlantic slave trade — what Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (Eboussi Boulaga 2014) fittingly calls “the catastrophe” — to today’s bio-digital economy, finance capitalism, and neo-liberal globalization.

The articulation of a different historicity and sense of the limit of world is powerfully developed in the recent work of some Black feminists in both the US and Latin America. One of the best explorations of this question comes from Saidiya Hartman’s incredibly original and lucid reconstruction of the lives and deeds of young black women arriving in New York (Harlem) and Philadelphia between the 1880s and the 1930s from the US South, only to find an equally virulent, albeit different, form of racism in what they expected to be spaces of freedom in the urban

North. This aspect of the historical “migration North” has been little chronicled, if at all. The book’s aim is «to illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable» (xiv). Upon arrival, what these girls found was «the plantation extended into the city» (Hartman 2019, 4), the city as a new enclosure (as in migrant quarters in today’s large European cities?). This enclosure eventually became the “black ghetto,” a reality created by liberal social reformers and sociologists, the state and the police, with their spatial, moral, and social strategies for improvement, as if saying «Negro, don’t even try to live» (*ibidem*, 22). Women got the worst of it, due to the entanglement of violence and sexuality that conditioned so much about them. Yet, Hartman tells us, the challenge is to see how they survived, and at times even thrived, in this context of brutality and deprivation, how their beautiful experiments in living — in between the kitchen and the brothel, the street and the crowded tenements, the laundry work and their intimate lives in their bedrooms —, yielded lives that were painful but at times also beautiful, fugitive moments of going about as if they were free, in the mist of «the insistent hunger of the slum» (*ibidem*, 84).

Hartman is acutely aware of the onto-epistemic grip on black lives («When would the colored female achieve her full status as a woman?», (*ibidem*, 177), but refuses to see only the horror and not the beauty, to linger on the tragedy without putting forward a compelling view of how young colored girls tried «to make a way out of no way, to not be defeated by defeat» (347). Because it was left to them to envision things otherwise, to dance within the enclosure, to set into motion «a fierce and expanded sense of what might be possible» (59). In so doing, they enacted another important moment in the long history of black/migrant refusal. Hartman’s creative, careful, and loving unearthing of the lives of these forgotten young women is an invitation to us all to reply positively to her question, «Who else would dare believe another world was possible ... [and] be convinced that nothing could be said about the Negro problem, modernity, global capitalism, policy brutality, state killings, and the Anthropocene if it did not take her into ac-

8. “Wat,” from the album *Rastaman Vibration*, Island Records, 1976. The inextricable relation between racism and war has been carefully treated by the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (Maldonado-Torres 2008); see also Foucault (Foucault 2003, Lectures 3 and 11).



count?» (347). Who indeed? Needless to say, this applies to the question of the “migrant.”

That there is an entire archive of the “being-in-difference” embodied by black people has been superbly explored by Avery Gordon. It’s not just a question of enacting a difference, but how such difference at time gets to constitute veritable moments of an “other utopianism” capable of creating spaces of autonomy, however temporary. In these zones one can garner subaltern expressions of what it would mean to live in a better world, like those held by the black women and migrants living in many of the world’s popular neighborhoods. Examples of life affirming practices by Africans and Afrodescendants are found in all historical moments; witness, for instance, Chimamanda Adichie’s accounts of such practices even in the midst of the horrors of the Biafran War, in her masterfully chronicled in her 2006 highly regarded novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. One might think as well about the “Negro Spirituals” by Du Bois and others, and of African American modes of cultural production as spaces and practices of substantive freedom during slavery, reconstruction and beyond.

These forms of subaltern consciousness, to return to Gordon, might help us see why the utopian is not an impossibility even for those inhabiting dominant worlds, since “it is in us,” too, in «all those things we are and we do that exceed or are just not expressions of what is dominant and dominating us» (2018, 64). «Running away,» she says – an ancestral and paradigmatic Afrodiasporic practice, one might add — «is a process ... of trying to find a way of living in different terms, whose outcome is unfortunately never given in advance. ... It requires a certain degree of embodied in-difference or organs for the alternative that conviction or rhetoric alone does not yield» (*ibidem*, 185). And so it is for all of us privileged peoples dwelling in the apparent smoothness characterizing the urban quarters of the Global North, those who still abide by the categories of the heteropatriarchal capitalist modern/colonial regime, coded as White, even if those categories are today leaking more glaringly than ever before.

Let’s explore this theme of running away by listening to the narratives of another group of black women in another «black city-within-the-city» (Hartman 2019, 17), the Distrito de Aguablanca (Aguablanca District, DAB) in the City of Cali. Almost nonexistent in 1980, today the DAB reaches 700,000 inhabitants, overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian “migrants” to the city, forcefully displaced by armed conflict and land grabbing in other areas of the country’s southwest, particularly the Pacific rainforest region. There, *mujeres-negras-afrodescendientes de Cali* (black-Afrodescendant-women of Cali, *munac*), a term introduced by Afro-Colombian philosopher Elba Palacios to convey the entangled forms of oppression faced by black women but also the multiple dimensions of their resistance and creativity, construct urban territories and autonomous networks of support for peaceful and dignified co-existence (see Lozano 2014, 2017; Machado 2017; Campo 2018; Palacios in press). Theirs is a practice of weaving urban worlds otherwise, where racialized and ethnicized women may find safer conditions for daily living. “Re-existence” is a major trope for these women’s groups, a process of creating autonomous lives and constructing auspicious conditions for communal life, building on the manifold forms of negation of their being but also on the remembrance of their struggles for freedom, including the experience of *cimarronaje* (maroonage) serving as anchor to their actions. This decolonial black radical feminism goes at the root of the power relations in cities such as Cali. Of the *munac* one could say, echoing Hartman (Hartman 2019, 59), that they might be enacting a «revolution in a minor key,» even if one that is largely invisible to most inhabitants of the city, particularly its white and mestizo elite and middle classes.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of the question of Blackness and agency is paramount to understand the experience of so many migrants (within the African diaspora and beyond, and whether subnational or transnational), if one takes into account Achille Mbembe’s argument that, with the intensification of the global economy of dispossession, we are attending to a veritable becoming black of the world (Mbembe 2017, 6). Here

9. This section has also been influenced by the U.S. discussion on Afro-pessimism, which I review in Escobar (In press).

one finds an array of positions in tension, including Mbembe's appeal to a notion of a universal community, even if an open one — a common world in which all of us can be a full human being (*ibidem*, 182), on the heels of onto-epistemic restitution and reparation. In this vein, let us listen, to end this section, to the powerful rendition of a politics of care by the women gathered at the International Forum on Femicides of Racialized and Ethnicized Peoples, held in the predominantly Black port city of Buenaventura, on the Colombian Pacific, not far from Cali, in April, 2016. The Forum denounced the systemic connection between the genocide of women, and black women in particular, and global capital accumulation. It ended with a commitment to the radical pluriversal politics embedded in the notions of Ubuntu and Buen Vivir as civilizational alternatives. As their final Declaration partially states,<sup>10</sup>

We demand from the State, governments, transnational corporations, and [societies] in general to stop the war against women, their communities and peoples, to respect their territories and guarantee their lives ... We exhort social movement organizations to assume a deep commitment towards dismantling colonial capitalist patriarchy, so that we can journey in line with our desires and aspirations towards Ubuntu and Buen Vivir.

Radical relationality emerges in this political vision as the best antidote against the metaphysics of separation and the ontologies of antiblackness, coloniality, heteropatriarchal social orders, and the devastation of the Earth. Radical relationality as an answer to the imperative that «to reweave community out of the existing fragments should be our banner» (Segato 2016, 27). As I suggest elsewhere (Escobar in press), the reweaving of the communal, and the encouragement of relations across communities striving for autonomy should be a guideline for action for those groups, whether in the Global North or the Global South, se-

riously wanting to embark upon the journey towards a world where many worlds fit.

### Lastly, Design

Two movements shape the vagaries of the globalized economy: expulsions and occupations; both come accompanied, as if their ineluctable shadow, by two incredibly damaging processes: human and ecological devastation, and defuturing. Today's geographies of extraction have as their condition of possibility ontologies of defuturing. Defuturing is the inevitable outcome of the ontological occupation of the experiences, knowledges, and territories of peoples. All regions and countries are engaged in an irrational mode of living that can only sustain the unsustainable. This structured unsustainability has gained speed and intensity during the past seven decades of globalization and development. Less recognized is the fact that the globalized model negates regions and countries the possibility of different futures. Everywhere one looks, we see instances of life being destroyed, the planet being wounded, its peoples being exploited and damaged. This massive defuturing effect amounts to a civilizational crisis, and design is central to it.<sup>11</sup>

Structural unsustainability and defuturing are the result of particular design practices. The short-term futures offered to humans in the name of economic growth, development, markets, and material prosperity destroy the possibility of different futures and futures-in-difference, especially those futures where the sustainment of life itself has a future. Structured unsustainability is deeply inscribed in modern worlds, even if it hides in everything it does, including amidst the very rhetoric of un/sustainability (e.g., the “sustainable development goals”). But perhaps no more, as growing discourses pointing at the dominant model's defuturing effects suggest (e.g., collapsologie in France, Extinction Rebellion in the UK, youth cli-

10. From the Foro's Declaration: <https://movimientos.org/es/content/declaraci%C3%B3n-del-foro-internacional-sobre-femicidios-en-grupos-etnicizados-y-racializados> See the Foro's blog, <http://forofemicidios2016.blogspot.com/>

11. The concepts of defuturing and sustainment are at the center of the Australian design theorist Tony Fry's influential work (e.g., 1999, 2012). For an extended discussion of trends in critical design studies, including design for social innovation and transition design, see Escobar (Escobar 2018).

mate movements in Europe and the US, and climate and environmental justice movements worldwide).

Defuturing actions are having a harder time covering-up the mess they have created and continue to create, including the crisis of refugees and migrants, and what is to come as climate change forces larger groups of people to be on the move (the inoffensively called “climate refugees”). In the meantime, the worlds already made go on designing defutured worlds, and expelling their peoples. This has to stop. We need to retrieve, and remake, our ability for future-making, through designing and making otherwise. Only strategies aiming to recreate and strengthen local and regional capabilities to heal and sustain the web of life seem to make any sense. It is imperative that humans regain their ability to see and make otherwise, so as to make plural places and futures again possible.

The ability to sustain Life and to sustain people-in-place requires acknowledging the profound grounds of pervasive unsustainability. While development and the global capitalist market-driven economy are fundamental to it at present, its historical roots, as I have tried to argue in this text, go deeper into long-standing patriarchal and modern/colonial ontologies; these ontologies have progressively eroded those forms of existence based on the profound interdependence of everything that exists, such as those maintained by indigenous and aboriginal peoples worldwide, and women’s practices of care and repair.<sup>12</sup> The recovery of the capacity to sustain life demands facing up to the fact that much of what we believe to be supporting us in actuality systematically undermines the conditions of our very existence as beings-in-the-world. It requires from us coming to terms with the fact that the worlds in which those of us who are privileged live and feel safe (actually hostile worlds based on competition, hierarchy, inequality, disregard for all living beings, instrumental rationality, violence, and war), are of our own making. The recognition of their defu-

turing character is the necessary foundation for worlds otherwise, or the pluriverse. We need to become newly attuned to the ubiquity of destruction and our role in it as modern agents, if we want to regain the ability to heal, care, and make otherwise – to make worlds where all who so wish can stay put in their places and see them thrive, as the collectively constructed worlds that they are.

Why design? Design is undergoing a significant reorientation, based on a growing recognition of its world-making power and defuturing role. Critical design perspectives reimagine design creatively as a space for transformative social innovation and substantial cultural and ecological transitions supportive of the sustainment of life. They broach the logic of defuturing as a civilizational issue, seeking to restore to the world its radically open, relational, creative, and pluriversal character. They do so while being cognizant of the fact that in designing the worlds in which we live, we are ineluctably designed by them; in this way, not only design and the designed but the designing they go on performing, all have to be rethought. This has to be done in full awareness of the relationality (radical interdependence) that dominant design/ing stifles and the inter-culturality (pluriversality) it precludes, and of the concomitant need to nurture a world where many worlds fit. In Latin America, this awareness is leading some activists and design theorists to search for forms of design/ing that strengthen the autonomy of communities in the pursuit of their Life Projects for collective re-existence, in the belief that every community practices the design of itself. One could imagine a network of place-based and region-wide transition design movements in a diversity of countries slowly converging, enabling the patient but steady design labor of re/construction of novel human/nonhuman configurations endowed with a degree of operational autonomy, journeying towards civilizational models based on the healing, care and sustainment of Life. Transition design narratives could be an auspicious space for thinking about the redesign of the social – in place and regionally – in ways that lessen people’s dire need to “migrate.”

\* \* \*

12. The notions of care and repair, particularly in relation to women’s practices, have been emerging steadily in various fields, from feminist economics and Latin American social and solidarity economies and liberation theology, to approaches emphasizing commoning and the commons. Jocelyn Olcott and Marija Bartl are currently leading a multi-year transnational feminist research project on epistemologies of care.

«I have the antidote ... for all those who have no identity

We are identical ... For all those who arrive without announcing

I have the antidote ... for those who are still here, those who are not, and those who will be coming,» sings the Puerto Rican group Calle 13, in “Pa’l Norte,” a song offered to «all the migrants of the world, as a call of good will and hope for All, for All,» as it follows with its rapping cadence the indigenous and mestizo faces inching little by little across Latin America towards the imagined North.<sup>13</sup>

From a different part of the world, the once-refugee from Sri Lanka, M.I.A, also asks, «Borders, What’s up with that? Identities, what’s up with that?» Her singing is direct and powerful, as the images composing the official video:<sup>14</sup>

Freedom, ‘I’dom, ‘Me’dom  
Where’s your ‘We’dom?  
This world needs a brand new ‘Re’dom  
We’dom - the key  
We’dom the key’dom to life!  
Let’s be ‘dem  
We’dom smart phones  
Don’t be dumb!

Borders (What’s up with that?)  
Politics (What’s up with that?)  
Police shots (What’s up with that?)  
Identities (What’s up with that?)  
Your privilege (What’s up with that?)

Broke people (What’s up with that?)  
Boat people (What’s up with that?)  
The realness (What’s up with that?)  
The new world (What’s up with that?)  
Am gonna keep up on all that  
...

Guns blow doors to the system  
Yeah fuck ‘em when we say we’re not with them  
We’re solid and we don’t need to kick them  
This is North, South, East and Western  
...

Making money (What’s up with that?)  
Breaking internet (What’s up with that?)  
Love wins (What’s up with that?)  
Living it (What’s up with that?)  
Being real (What’s up with that?)

Egos (What’s up with that?)  
Your values (What’s up with that?)  
Your beliefs (What’s up with that?)  
Your families (What’s up with that?)  
Histories (What’s up with that?)  
Your future (What’s up with that?)  
My boys (What’s up with that?)  
My girls (What’s up with that?)  
Freedom (What’s up with that?)  
Your power (What’s up with that?)  
...

This is North, South, East and Western

What’s up with a world of weapons, profits, cell phones, internet, egos and, needless to say, Borders? Is it all real? Where is our “We’dom? Our collective selves? Our power, values, our freedom? How are our histories made and what do they have to do with our futures? Why “North, South, East, and Western”? It is so often the case that gifted artists express, more powerfully than theory, what’s really going on. In M.I.A.’s lyrics one may hear the sounds of historical ontologies and political economies of defuturing, and a rendition of the possibility of the futural based on other strengths and experiences. So with Roger Waters’ “Last Refugee” song and short film video, from

13. See Calle 13, Pa’l Norte, published October 25, 2009 (music video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBYO1ZfxxSM> (accessed June 21, 2019).

14. M.I.A. “Borders,” published on February 17, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Nw7HbaeWY> (accessed June 21, 2019). Here is the Wikipedia summary of the video: “The video begins showing all-male South Asian refugees as they run through the desert and climb wire fences which replicate Melilla border fence, with M.I.A. performing the song in front of the scenes. The men then spell out the word ‘LIFE’ with their bodies across the fence. In subsequent scenes, the refugees are seen forming a boat with a pyramid in the middle, and crowd on to small boats, accompanied by the singer. The final scenes picture M.I.A. and some of the men sitting on rocks by the sea, wrapped in gold Mylar blankets. The video ends with the refugees wading into the sea.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borders\\_\(M.I.A.\\_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borders_(M.I.A._song))

the tellingly titled album, “Is this the Life We Really Want?”, which presents us with an imaginative rendition of the refugees’ creativity, a type of agency that cultivates a memory of what life was as a tool to imagine what one day might get to be again. Waters’ socially conscious music and radical politics suggests that this video’s reference are all of the recent refugee crises of the world.

### Civilizational Transitions? Farewell to “the migrant”?

The North American ecologist and theologian (“geologian,” in his words) Thomas Berry spoke about a transition to the Ecozoic Era as «[a] transition from the period when humans were a disruptive force on the planet Earth to the period when humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing» (Berry 1999, 11). From Berry’s perspective, becoming present to the Earth inevitably implies becoming present to each other as humans in mutually respectful and dignified ways. I find the notion of healing and re-weaving the mesh of life, by repairing the damage done to it by the heteropatriarchal capitalist/colonial ontology of separation, and working towards ontologies of care, to be practicable principles for the kinds of transformations needed to do away with the forced movements of people across the planet. I cannot rehearse here, as this text comes to an end, the argument for why it makes sense to see these transformations in terms of civilizational transitions, at least for the time being, a call most cogently articulated by some indigenous movements from Abya Yala/ Afro/Latino-America (see Escobar 2018; 2019).<sup>15</sup> Such transitions would consider the need to rethink and rebuild communities (the re-communalization of social life); the re-localization of activities (those which can most feasibly be localized, including aspects of food, transport, energy, building, educating, healing); and the strengthening of local autonomies and direct

forms of democracy. They would also be informed by the principles of the simultaneous de-patriarchalization and decolonization of societies; the Liberation of Mother Earth; and the flourishing of the pluriverse (See Escobar in press for a discussion of these six axes and principles of transitions).

From the recent critical design perspectives, we are all designers and we are all designed (e.g., Fry 1999, 2012; Manzini 2015, 2019; DS4SI in press). This means we need to take responsibility for the worlds we create with others, humans and nonhumans. We need to contribute to interrupt the global project of fitting all worlds into one, and we can do this almost anytime and anywhere we are, a sketch/ a stitch/ a recursive positive loop at a time, collectively. From this perspective, transition design may be defined as a praxis for healing the web of life – or the net of interdependencies among humans, nonhumans, and tools, broadly speaking, that make up each place, each locality, each region, and the world at large –, and design may thus come to be seen as an open invitation to us all to be mindful and effective weavers of that web. Conceivably, this is what many migrants do, as they attempt to craft lives of meaning, at times perhaps performing a «revolution in a minor key,» (ci da una citazione di Hartman senza mettere la pagina da cui è tratta o forse lo dice verbalmente?) as Hartman says of the young black women moving North at the turn of twentieth century U.S.A. Along the way, “me” and “you,” “self” and “other,” “us” and “them” will come to lose their constituent power, since we will come to finally realize that we all exist because everything else exist, that no living being and no human group exists, or can exist, by itself and that, consequently, only an attitude of hospitality and care towards all forms of life makes any sense. The historical figure of the migrant, like Modern Man, might finally disappear, «like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.»<sup>16</sup>

15. One finds the idea of civilizational crisis in many domains, including insurrectionary politics: “The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that that this [Western] civilization is already dead ... [its end] has been clinically established for a century” (Invisible Committee 2015, 29). As they go on to say, the West is the catastrophe — nobody is out to ‘destroy the West,’ it is destroying itself.

16. This is the much celebrated last sentence of Foucault’s archaeology of the modern human sciences (1970).

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