

# Global Higher Education in 2050

## An Ontological Design Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** This article outlines an onto-epistemic perspective for the transformation of the university, an institution currently at the service of an unsustainable and defuturing mode of social and ecological existence, into a pluriversity attuned to the imperatives of being, life, and the Earth. It argues that the key to constructing livable worlds lies in the cultivation of ways of knowing, being, and acting based on a profound awareness of the fundamental interdependence of everything that exists. This shift in vision is seen as necessary for healing our bodies, ecosystems, cities, and the planet at large—in short, for much-needed civilizational transitions, in which a redesigned academy could be a fundamental factor.

**KEYWORDS** pluriversity, interdependence, modern social theory, ontology, transition

### Introduction: The Historicity of the University-Form of Knowledge

I start with the following twofold proposition: First, as a particular form of knowledge production, the university is, itself, in crisis, in a world that is in crisis. The two sides are deeply interconnected, as the crisis of the world is the crisis of a particular mode of existence and world making, to which the University-form of knowledge production (hereafter, the U-form) has greatly contributed. Second, as an ontologically designing agency, the university can be fruitfully seen as an institution in transition, in a world that is, and consciously needs to be, in transition. This is a transition writ large, what Indigenous peoples in Latin America, and a growing number of groups and activists in many world regions, envision as a civilizational transition. This calls upon the U-form to open itself up to a strategy of epistemic and institutional transition at the service of planetary or civilizational transition.

The backdrop to the question of the university can be summarized as follows: all regions and countries in the world are engaged in a senseless mode of living that can only sustain the unsustainable. Everywhere we look, we see instances of

life being destroyed, the planet being wounded, and its peoples being exploited and damaged. This structured unsustainability has gone on largely unhindered, gaining speed and intensity during the past seven decades of globalization and development—or what some call “the Great Acceleration,” meaning the sharp intensification of the use of energy and natural resources since 1945, a distinctive feature of the Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup> It denies places, regions, and countries the possibility of other futures and futures-in-difference—a profoundly defuturing effect.

At the root of this situation are modes of knowing, being, and making derived from dualist ontologies that enshrine human control over the Earth, socioeconomic orders that ensure that such control greatly benefits a minority over most of the planet’s people, and political systems intent on perpetuating this unsustainable condition. A key feature of ontological dualism is the presupposition that entities have intrinsic, separate existence. It pervades most contemporary societies, particularly those considered “modern”; it grounds a destructive and defuturing design of the modes of existence within heteropatriarchal capitalist colonial modernity. Less developed than the critique of dualism is its counterpart: the presupposition that life is not lived under conditions of separateness but of the radical interdependence of everything that exists, or relationality. Can the university be reimagined through the lens of radical relationality? This is the main question addressed in this essay.

There are two confounding factors: first, the fact that most universities are engaged in a substantial restructuring under broad neoliberal parameters; this restructuring is itself contradictory, calling for a two-sided struggle by those seeking radical transformation: a struggle at once over the nature of the university and over its ongoing crisis-induced restructuring. The larger context of this restructuring is the multifaceted crisis of climate, ecology, poverty, inequality, democracy, and meaning engulfing the planet, potentially compounded by the climate- and inequality-induced social upheaval that could happen as a result of ecological “regime shifts,” hidden feedback loops, and cascading effects among the various factors involved in the climate crisis.<sup>2</sup> This means that a downsizing university, with its refocusing of resources and priorities on those fields that structurally contribute the most to the ecological crises (including the defunding of most humanities and social science fields), is even less prepared to face these challenges effectively than in the recent past. As such, the university’s ability to articulate a praxis for itself capable of positively affecting the complex social, ecological, and ontoepistemic dynamics underlying terricide and climate collapse is being severely hindered. One can surmise that, taken as a whole, the university will aggravate the toxic feedback loops of social, political, and economic existence in which humanity is currently enmired.

### On the University-Form of Knowledge and Its Crisis

The task of reenvisioning the university has an overtly political character; it implicates the university not only in the conceptualization but also in the redirection of the processes producing the crisis. While the history of the university cannot be limited to its development in the West, it has become clear that, worldwide, the U-form is increasingly defined onto-epistemically and politico-economically by Euro-modernity. One must then examine the obstacles it faces for transforming itself because of this historical situatedness. At stake here is a renewed calling into question of any universal idea of “Man,” on the one hand, and the reemergence of a nonanthropocentric form of relationality as an alternative foundation for life, on the other.

#### *Modernity's Default Setting: The Secular, Liberal, Mono-humanist Notion of the Human*

The modern university emerged, and continues to operate, within the epistemic configuration of knowledge that crystallized in northern Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, mapped in various ways by authors including Michel Foucault and Sylvia Wynter. There have been many problematizations of modern notions of the human, most famously perhaps Foucault's argument about the figure of Man as the foundation of all knowledge, as both subject and object of his own discourses.<sup>3</sup> Posthumanist perspectives are devoted to discussing the possibility of exiting this onto-epistemic regime. It is not my intention to discuss these trends here. Rather, I will highlight what I believe is a particularly revealing framing of the question of Man by Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter, whose concept of a domineering mono-humanist model of the human, of European origin, I find particularly powerful for understanding both the current civilizational malaise produced by mono-humanism and the possibility of constructing an ecumenical horizon for humanity, which might establish the grounds for a pluriversity.

Wynter posits a two-step process for the emergence of Man; the first step accounts for the end of Christian theocentrism with the Renaissance, yielding a rational view of Man, the subject of the budding civic humanism of *Homo politicus*, which she calls Man1. The Copernican revolution was essential to this first civilizational break with Christian cosmology in favor of a rational worldview, a shift that was catalyzed by the conquest of America. By the end of the eighteenth century, when the second phase starts, Man1 had developed into a fully biocentric and economized view of the human, or Man2. Man2 was grounded in a particular rendering of biological evolution in terms of natural selection, Malthus's theory of resource scarcity, and the figure of *Homo oeconomicus* ushered in by the nascent science of political economy. Man2 engendered a Western, bourgeois, secular, and liberal mode of being human, or a *mono-humanist* view of the human. Its Darwinian/Malthusian economic macronarrative centered on the organizational principle

of race subjected to the imperatives of capital accumulation. Man2 is the space within which we live, think, and do—our onto-epistemic existential domain.<sup>4</sup>

Wynter appeals to Frantz Fanon to propose a move beyond the bio-economic genre of the human (which she magnificently deconstructs as “Man2’s biocosmogonical and Darwinian-chartered ethno-class descriptive statement”).<sup>5</sup> In Fanon’s notable conception of sociogenesis (“Beside ontogeny and phylogeny stands sociogeny,” a way of explaining the dialectic of Black skin and white masks confronting all Black people),<sup>6</sup> Wynter finds a *referent-we* or genre of the human markedly different from the cosmogony of secular liberal Man. This leads her to emphasize that the human is not only biology but is also shaped by cultural codes, origin narratives, and storytelling, and that these become wired into the brain and behavior. In short, the human is also always *Homo narrans*; this applies to the allegedly rational narrative of Western Man as naturally bio-economic, which accounts for how difficult it is to change it as the dominant “default setting” for the human. In terms of the Black person, sociogenetically s/he is compelled to experience herself or himself as both normally and abnormally human, being and nonbeing, as the “dysselected” par excellence, leading to Wynter’s conclusion about the human as inevitably hybrid. As she daringly surmises, “Phylogeny, ontogeny *and* sociogeny, *together*, define what it is to be human. . . . With this hypothesis, should it prove to be true, our system of knowledge as we have it *now*, goes.”<sup>7</sup> This applies to the U-form.

For Wynter, then, it is high time that we, so-called modern humans, bring the laws of the dominant genre of the human more fully into conscious awareness, with a view to loosening its hold. Given that we all exist within the autopoietically instituted (self-maintaining) regime of Man2, the challenge is enormous, for it entails envisioning the human as other than Man2. Wynter’s intervention articulates the need to search for figures of the human outside modern Western humanism, to create a new horizon of humanity that enables an ecumenically open view of the human. Short of this, any proposals for dealing with the great problems of the day, including climate change, “are going to be devastating,” first of all for the Earth and the global poor.<sup>8</sup> One might pose the question as follows: How can we move toward a humanism that embraces coeval and pluriversal genres of being human, while preventing reabsorption into the regime of Man? Wynter thus opens a path for a significant “refiguring of humanness”<sup>9</sup> that is essential for working through the onto-epistemic predicaments of modern social theory and ontology. As South African feminist Zimitri Erasmus concludes in her excellent exposition of Wynter’s thought, in the last instance, we arrive at the realization that “living beings bring forth their worlds by what they do. Life is universal. Its modes are pluriversal.”<sup>10</sup>

Modern social theory (MST) faces a fourfold limitation from the perspective of the analysis just presented: *First*, as a form of abstract thought, MST leaves

out the realms of embodiment, practice, and experience, which are essential to understanding the relational making of life and the world. *Second*, MST forgets that the question of the human takes different forms for differently located and embodied humans, especially for those subjected to symbolic and bodily violence because they do not meet the standards of Universal Man, such as colonized peoples. Consequently, *third*, MST evinces a lingering blindness to its historical locus of enunciation within the regime of Man, most poignantly brought into view by the question, Whose idea of the human are we talking about? *Fourth*, the separation between theory and practice has led theorists and critics by and large to stay in their safe academic abodes, from which they imagine other kinds of worlds, but without engaging with the active life- and world-making practices on the ground where politics is actively negotiated and lived. Each of these factors has marred MST's ability to arrive at a fully relational conception of life. These limitations return us to Wynter's daring conclusion: "With this hypothesis, should it prove to be true, our system of knowledge as we have it *now*, goes."

There surely have been many contestations to academic knowledge production from within and from without, as well as powerful dissenting traditions. I will return to the role of these critiques later in the article. For now, I want to emphasize that I am speaking about social theory, not philosophy (for example, nondualist traditions such as phenomenology). By MST, I mean a particular mode of knowledge that operates on the basis of abstraction and detachment; that takes these epistemological operations as the only valid method to produce true, universally valid, comprehensive, and reproducible knowledge about a "reality" external to "the observer"; and that, in so doing, disqualifies many other ways of knowing. This model, historically borrowed from the physical and natural sciences, is prevalent in the social sciences. It presupposes that the whole of life is cut out into allegedly autonomous spheres—the social, the economic, the political, the individual, the cultural—that individual social sciences (sociology, economics, political science, psychology, geography, and anthropology) can understand with confidence and complexity. That these domains have been artificially separated from the flow of life escapes these disciplines' practitioners for the most part. (Is life really divided into these spheres? Isn't life an unending continuum of forms?) In this sense, MST is inherently objectifying and fragmentary. This historical situatedness creates the limitations just described.

Where to go, then? In what follows, I present the outline of a specific proposal. It concerns the shift from ontologies of separation toward an understanding of life in terms of radical interdependence; this shift, in turn, serves as the basis for a hypothesis for moving from the Man-form of Life to an Earth-form as the only possible way to address the conditions of terricide. By way of conclusion, I will offer some provisional implications for the university.

*Relationality as a Reemerging Understanding of the Foundation of Life*

Pluriversality is key for transitions. It means, on the one hand, the transition from an allegedly globalized world made up of a single world, that of capitalist modernity, to a world where many worlds fit.<sup>11</sup> It also refers to life's ceaselessly unfolding character, its continued coemergence out of the dynamics of matter and energy. At the crux of it, for biologist Lynn Margulis, is the notion that life both produces (that is, autopoietically self-maintains) and reproduces itself. Life is, above all, a "sentient symphony," "matter gone wild, capable of choosing its own direction in order to indefinitely forestall the inevitable moment of thermodynamic equilibrium—death. . . . It is consciousness and even self-consciousness."<sup>12</sup> Life is history, process, and relation through and through, from the get-go. Life is flow, impermanence, contact, and endless transformation—in short, a pluriverse. Humans (Manz) have forgotten this fundamental dynamic of life.

The notion of relationality is emerging as a cogent way to think about an alternative foundation for life and the human to that established by the modern ontology of separation. Ontological dualism has brought about a profound disconnection between humans and the nonhuman world, bestowing all rights on humans. Such disconnection is at the root of the contemporary crisis. Conversely, the key to constructing livable worlds must lie in the cultivation of ways of knowing and acting based on a profound awareness of the fundamental interdependence of everything that exists. This shift in vision is necessary for healing our bodies, ecosystems, cities, and the planet at large—in short, for civilizational transitions.<sup>13</sup>

The modern scientific and economic worldview instills in us a cosmovision that divides the world into subjects and objects, a world that we can understand and manipulate at will. This objectivizing operation is a main pillar of modern Western civilization and all the "-isms" that have accompanied it; it is at the basis of the separation between subject and object, reason and emotion, us and them, human and nonhuman, and many other dualisms. The very world that we collectively construct under the premise of separation in turn (re)creates us as beings who experience ourselves as intrinsically separate individuals. This model may be so commonsensical that it may not even occur to us that it is a kind of worldview, or cosmovision, or ontology. Nevertheless, there exist many other cosmoses, reals, and possibles that do not abide by the presupposition of separation; nonseparation, or interdependence, is the condition of all living entities, including, paradoxically, the artificial.

This is to say that things, including ourselves, do not exist quite so independently of one another as we suppose.<sup>14</sup> The objectivizing stance prevents us from coexisting with the full range of human and other living beings in a collaborative manner, one that is wiser in its relationship with the Earth. It creates a single reality from which all other senses of the real are excluded, profoundly limiting the

scope of the political. Questioning this belief in a single reality means developing an entirely different understanding of change and transformation. It is precisely because other possibles have been turned into “impossibles”—a crucial aspect of defuturing—that we find it so difficult to imagine other realities. Speaking of other possibles forces us to rethink many of our everyday practices and politics.<sup>15</sup>

From the 1960s on, there has been a visible wave of struggles by social groups located on the downgraded side of colonial binaries: Black and Indigenous peoples, women, peasants, sexual minorities, marginalized city-dwellers. From these subaltern realities we now get a wide variety of proposals for worlding life on new premises. Many of these proposals are based on the awareness that everything unfolds within meshworks of interrelations. Understanding these struggles as instances of *the political activation of relationality* is the beginning of a long journey toward relational living. We also find tools for relational existence in a whole range of sources, from quantum physics and biological complexity to the most recent postdualist and posthumanist social theories, and from long-standing spiritual practices, such as animism, Daoism, and Buddhism to contemporary interest in plant consciousness, shamanic experience, and Earth spiritualities. The key point here is to develop an acute understanding that all entities are the result of manifold sets of relations, as in the ancestral notion of *ubuntu* in southern Africa (“I am because you are”), interbeing in Buddhism, and multiple other notions.

One of the most naturalized binaries of the modern age is that between secularism and spirituality. Modernity’s compulsory secularization banished the sacred from social life, reducing it to a matter of individual choice. The academy, and the entire technoscientific world, followed suit, to the extent that even today it is still almost impossible to speak about spirituality or the sacred in the academy. This is changing, however, and a return to the sacred, in multiple guises, is becoming a noticeable trend among many women, Indigenous, Black, and environmental movements and collectives. A growing number of intellectual-activists are loudly making the case that the sacred is at the very heart of life, something that Indigenous traditions have known all along. Given that secular power, scientific rationality, and modern technology have been three of the main instruments by which the West has been able to impose its will on many other cultures and faiths, the obstacles to resacralizing modern social life seem unsurmountable; this is a key challenge for remaking the university from the perspective of relationality.

The shift in cosmovision toward relationality has the potential to deeply affect the ways in which we live, think, develop knowledge, and act. But many of the dominant practices, institutions, and designs, the academy included, actively work to make this constitutive relationality invisible. Redressing this situation demands an authentic remaking of our customary modes of being, acting, and knowing in tune with the interdependent basis of existence. This takes us back to the university.

### The University and the Potential for a Transition toward an Earth-Form of Life

By and large, the university with its intellectual division of labor has functioned within the onto-epistemic configuration of modernity. It is true that the space so defined has also harbored hugely significant instances of critique and dissent from within; these include, over the past five decades, instances ranging from inter- and transdisciplinarity to new fields of knowledge based on diverse subaltern experiences and the ensemble of “critical studies of” race and ethnicity, gender, colonialism, law, development, globalization, and so forth. Yet one can say that the academy, *taken as a whole*, has functioned at ease within the episteme of Man. Critique and dissent have contributed to questioning the dominant form of modernity and, hence, to intuiting alternative or multiple modernities, yet they have not for the most part broached the possibility of exiting the modern epistemic configuration. Moreover, the past few decades have seen the increasing dismantling, containment, and normalizing of internal critical tendencies, enforced by academics-turned-managers (a.k.a. “senior administrators”) all too eager to fulfill the neoliberal imperatives of the day. The question thus arises: Can the U-form imagine leaving this comfortable (albeit very productive) space behind, examining anew its role in the active production of the nonrelational, and decidedly moving into those domains where relationality abides? It seems to me that it is only in this way that the university can construe itself positively as an institution in transition at the service of civilizational transitions.

It is indubitable that the West has acquired a high degree of civilizational dominance, based on a measure of economic and political unification and technoscientific progress. However, the project of a single global civilization has not come to pass. Nations and civilizations refuse to assemble neatly into a single global order, even though the global experience is deeply shaped by a Eurocentric, transatlantic model, reflected in so-called global (elite) universities. After more than five centuries of imposition of the Western colonial project, many Native peoples—to address only the most conspicuous case of peoples who live with and within modernity, without being completely defined by it—continue to be alive and in some cases culturally vibrant, even if permanently under attack and ontological occupation. The irrationality of the dominant model is everywhere in sight. Some critics underline the spiritual and existential poverty of modern life, given the spread of the patriarchal and capitalistic ontology of hierarchy, domination, appropriation, control, and war that has come to characterize it.

A diverse and pluralistic movement calling for the end of Eurocentric and anthropocentric dominance has been arising because of this modernity’s drawbacks, failures, and horrors, despite its huge technological achievements. Worldwide, the call for civilizational change can be gleaned in ecofeminist perspectives, proposals for degrowth, the defense of the commons, energy transitions,

interreligious dialogues, and strategies for the localization of food, energy, and transport, among other areas. To a greater or lesser extent, in both the South and the North, visions of transition are grounded in ontologies that emphasize interdependence. It is too early to say whether these loosely assembled, heterogeneous visions and movements will achieve a degree of self-organization capable of ushering in significant transformations and perhaps large-scale transitions. For most transition theorists, while the outcome is by no means guaranteed, the move to a different civilizational model—or set of models—has not been foreclosed, particularly if one considers the transformations called for by the urgencies of climate collapse. For many, it is already happening, in the multiplicity of practices that embody, despite limitations and contradictions, the values of deeply ecological, postcapitalist, nonpatriarchal, nonracist, nonliberal, and pluriversal societies.

The notion of civilizational transitions establishes a horizon for the creation of broad political visions beyond the imaginaries of development and progress and the universals of capitalism, science, the economy, and the individual. It does not call for a return to assumed authentic traditions nor for forms of hybridity to be arrived at through the rational synthesis of the best traits of each civilization, as if the seductive but harmless liberal language of “best practices” could be applied to civilizations. Far from it: this call adumbrates a pluralistic, albeit inevitably tense, coexistence of civilizational projects, including those originating from the West’s own rethinking and submerged traditions, through intercivilizational dialogues that encourage contributions from beyond the Eurocentric world order. It envisions the reconstitution of global governance along plural civilizational foundations, not only to avoid their clash but also to constructively foster the flourishing of the pluriverse.<sup>16</sup>

One could argue, in onto-epistemic terms, that the academy (again, taken as a whole) has been an ontologically occupying force in people’s lives and territories. After all, the university trains the experts who then go on, unwittingly, to effect this ontological occupation on behalf of corporations (capitalism) and the state (biopolitics). These professionals enact, day in and day out, Man2’s mode of existence and enforce the modern order. This is, admittedly, a one-sided view of the academy. I hope, however, that it helps us contemplate the stakes of imagining a post-Enlightenment university in onto-epistemic and political terms.

The need to move beyond the established configurations of knowledge was recently brought home forcefully by a seemingly straightforward statement by the brilliant Mapuche activist Moira Millán: “Necesitamos una revolución del pensamiento” (We need a revolution in our thought), she said.<sup>17</sup> It is revealing that this sentence was uttered not by a famous academic or philosopher but by an activist deeply committed to the struggle for the well-being of the Earth and her people. The conclusion she arrives at is no less instructive: that our current *pensamiento*

(thought) is at the basis of what she and the South American Movement of Indigenous Women for Buen Vivir, which she cofounded, have come to name *terricidio* (terricide):

We define terricide as the killing of tangible ecosystems, the spiritual ecosystem, and that of the *pueblos* [peoples] and of all forms of life. Confronted with the terricide, we declare ourselves to be in permanent struggle, resistance, and re-existence against this system. . . . We summon all peoples to build a new civilizational matrix that embraces *buen vivir* [good living, collective well-being] as a right. *Buen vivir* implies the retrieval of harmony and reciprocity among peoples and with the Earth. Summoned by the memory of our ancestors and the lands and landscapes that inhabit us, we have agreed on the creation of the Movement of Pueblos against Terricide.<sup>18</sup>

Terricide emerges as a parallel concept to the Anthropocene; however, it does not lend itself so readily to managerial and technoscientific approaches. It decenters the Anthropos more effectively, paving the way for the question: Is it possible to free contemporary thought—whether in daily life or in the academy—from its current constraints, to enable it to think otherwise? The Anthropocene concept stems from the same being-knowing-doing configuration that brought the socio-bio-geological phenomenon it names into being, and because of this it cannot adumbrate the most fundamental implications of the analysis—chiefly, that at stake is envisioning “the possibility of designing new conditions for being human.”<sup>19</sup> For the women struggling against terricide, this can only be achieved by reembedding ourselves in the land and seeing ourselves as belonging deeply to the Earth, as many Indigenous and territorialized peoples have done for thousands of years. This starting point diverges from most academic theorizing; it provides us with a direct route into the space where relationality abides.

The concept of terricide brings forth the need for a mode of access to the current planetary predicament capable of taking us beyond the categories with which we currently think and purport to amend the world. Is this happening? As I have already mentioned, MST faces clear limitations in this regard. Is modern thought, in whatever guise (from liberalism to contemporary Marxist, deconstructive, and posthumanist approaches), capacious enough to help us escape from the great edifice it has built for itself and provide the sturdy conceptual architecture of contemporary global designs? Or are we rather confronted with the fact that the contemporary crisis puts in evidence once and for all the insufficiency, when not the lethality, of modern modes of thought and existence that seek to deal with the crisis? This much is clear: that we can no longer solve modern problems solely or perhaps even primarily with the same categories that created them—growth, competition, progress, rationality, individuality, economy, even science

and critique. Transitioning into new modes of existence requires different categories and modes of understanding, which would necessarily take us into the territory of relationality.<sup>20</sup>

Toward the end of his book on Foucault, Gilles Deleuze asks whether the Man-form that Foucault mapped out in such detail “has been a good one” for life.<sup>21</sup> He ponders whether humanity might finally enter a relation with forces from the outside that could result in new forms that are neither God nor Man. The most likely answer to the question of the order in ascension might be the Artificial-form, that is, the full arrival of the artificial-as-totality and a new horizon for being, as design theorist Clive Dilnot has presciently argued.<sup>22</sup> However, thinking with some Latin American Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, who emphasize the need to organize for “the Liberation of Mother Earth” as the most important goal to be summoned by all humans today, in the face of the ongoing terricide, one could posit an onto-epistemic transition to an “Earth-form” of life. This is a plausible reading if one considers that, with every effort to defend places and territories, and to implement transformative alternatives on the basis of interdependence, relationality is politically activated and humans begin their journey toward the Earth-form, the Pacha-form, the Gaia-form of life, or the Ecozoic Era.<sup>23</sup>

Were this to be the case, the concern with “the death of Man” (post- and trans-humanisms) would wane, giving way to *incipit terra*, “Here (the era of the) Earth begins” (or, actually, returns). Humanity would enter into a relation with forces from the outside, which could be none other than the forces of the (liberated) Earth. No longer a *university* but a *pluriversity*, the resulting space of knowledge production would become a destabilizing and transformative force at the very center of the modern onto-episteme. Little by little, the autopoietically instituted organization of the episteme would start losing its capacity for self-maintenance and begin to yield to other onto-epistemic domains.

### A Few Thoughts on the Universities of the Future

World, Earth, Life: here the university’s concern and its reimagining should start, with what the world and the Earth have come to be (made), largely as the result of human action, and why they could—should—be otherwise. Confronted with this dramatic situation, only strategies aiming to re-create and strengthen local and regional capabilities to *heal and sustain the web of life* make any sense. It is imperative that humans regain their ability to see and make and design otherwise, to make plural futures possible again. What would it mean for the current U-form to face this historical responsibility? What type of institution would it need to become to move in this direction? As an ontological designing agency, the university is central to this historical conjuncture, and so it can be an essential element in its redirection. Such a practice of ontological redirection might be summarized as a transition from the

university to a *pluriversity*, in turn an aspect of the transition from universality—the project of fitting all worlds into one, the One-World World according to Man2, or the world of competitive individual agents in globalized markets—to pluriversality, or a world where many worlds fit, a world of many worlds.<sup>24</sup>

The reappearance of a lexicon of repair—mending, repurposing, refashioning, regenerating, resurgence, remaking, retrofitting, reassembling, care—besides being a sign of the times, suggests that the university is itself in need of repair and reassembling, so that it can become an agent at the service of healing the web of life and the planet at large. The repairing of the university can be described as a sort of *onto-epistemic retrofitting*, involving a redesigning of all its components, so that it can begin to function within a Life- and Earth-centered cosmovision. This comprehensive retrofitting requires a profound democratization of knowledge forms, or what in Latin American decolonial thought is called epistemic decolonization. But it involves much more than knowledge; conceiving of the university as an assemblage of sorts (materially, socially, politically, spatially, epistemically, and so on), entangled with many other similar and much larger assemblages, can provide some elements for such onto-epistemic praxis.

This effort can be guided by questions such as: What would it mean for the university to imagine itself as part of a much larger living system? What would be the epistemic and institutional implications, in terms of epistemologies, curricula, courses, majors, and degrees? How could the U-form become a participant in the praxis of healing the complex webs of interconnections and interdependences that make up the bodies, places, and communities that we all *are* and inhabit, a healing and caring force in itself? What would it mean to redesign the university from the vantage point of social justice, respect for the Earth, and the rights of all human and nonhuman entities? What would be the implications of such redirection for rethinking existing intellectual divisions of labor—disciplines, units, bodies of knowledge, fields, methods, forms of the dissemination of knowledge?

My hope is that these questions help to frame paths toward the transformation of the contemporary university toward the pluriversities of the future. Such approaches need to deal with complexity while providing a sense of agency. This need is magnified by the fact that, as Tony Fry and Madina Tlostanova have argued, existing academic epistemologies are incapable of comprehending the complexity of the compounded planetary crises.<sup>25</sup> For these design thinkers, new ways of understanding this unprecedented complexity are necessary to inform transformative policy. Short of this, institutions will only perpetuate the defuturing pressures, perpetually increasing the damage to the planet; they will be unable to deliver viable futures. The political imaginaries that these authors call for go beyond Euro-modern perspectives, posthumanism, and techno-utopian transhumanism, and even beyond most critical theory at present.

One tenet of Bill Sharpe's "three horizons" framework is that the third horizon, representing the emerging pattern that might eventually replace the declining system, grows on the fringes of the present system, where other visions of the real and possible futures are being cultivated. I believe that in the work being undertaken at the onto-epistemic and social margins and peripheries of those worlds where Man still reigns (including in the academy) we might find auspicious points of departure. These margins exist in many spaces in both the Global South and the Global North, perhaps as "pockets of the future in the present."<sup>26</sup> But those concerned with the future of higher education need to think about the articulations between the U-form and this broader complexity; this articulation generates "the turbulent domain of transitional activities and innovations that people are trying out in response to the changing landscape between the first and third horizons."<sup>27</sup>

Let me provide a few examples of potential scenarios for visualizing the universities of the future. The first is a straightforward example of epistemic and epistemological retrofitting: imagine and design a major (or program, or concentration, or transdisciplinary option at the bachelor's, master's, or PhD level) that focuses on the study of pluriversal transitions conceived on the basis of the awareness of the radical relationality of life. Let's call this major or field "transition studies," or "pluriversal studies." What would be its main components (courses, theories, and methods, reading lists, research priorities)? The main competencies of its graduates? Where would you initially house such a program (for example, in global studies, philosophy, ecology, none of the above)?<sup>28</sup>

The second example expands upon the first. It seeks to respond explicitly to the challenge reportedly posed by ecologist David Orr: "The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it."<sup>29</sup> Imagine a pluriversity (or part of one) capable of training effective healers, imaginers, repairers, transitioners, re/designers, weavers, and caretakers of the mesh of life. Describe some of its features. How would you respond to its detractors, including those championing the economized view of knowledge and innovation?<sup>30</sup> How would you explain it to those who are well intentioned but who would see this proposal as romantic or unrealistic, if not outright dangerous? How would you convince diverse constituencies that at the core of the U-form should be the "historical project of life," in opposition to the terricidal capitalisms of the day? Would such an institution be capable of making a dent in the active redesigning of planetary society by the techno-patriarchs of the artificial and the technological singularities (nanotechnology, synthetic biology, cognitive enhancement, genomics, robotics, space travel), who promise "life

beyond biology” and beyond Earth, all of which would continue to erode the biophysical foundations of all living? What would be the role of the increasingly defunded arts and humanities, and the “weaker” social sciences, in crafting such a vision, considering that their own survival is at stake in the context of the crisis-induced restructuring of the university that favors those fields that most directly contribute to unsustainability and defuturing? What would it take for the natural and physical sciences to extricate themselves from these pressures and undertake a decisive reorientation toward an ethical planetary praxis?

Let me address, finally, the thorny questions of the relation between pluriversal and critical modernist approaches to the university and of where to start. Can these two approaches work in tandem, reinforcing rather than undermining each other? Under what conditions would “radical relationality” become an effective principle of rupture and transformation for the universities of the future? Conversely, would the U-form succeed in simply giving this alternative ontology a comfortable, partially domesticated, home under the big tent of late capitalism and progressive liberalism?<sup>31</sup> I attempted to give the best answer I could to a similar question concerning politics in general in a recent work.<sup>32</sup> I briefly rehearse that argument here, as I believe this larger question usefully frames the politics of the project of the pluriversity.

I believe that there are multiple ways to build effective bridges between progressive modernist politics and pluriversal politics—for instance, around struggles for economic democratization, for depatriarchalization and the end of racism and homophobia, and for environmental sustainability and environmental justice. That said, it is also important to recognize that many progressive modernist forms of politics are counterproductive in relation to pluriversal politics; they reproduce and strengthen the modernist dualist ontology from which they stem. There are no readily available models for the articulation of both types of politics, although it is the subject of active experimentation by many social struggles at present. How these kinds of politics might initiate rhizomatic expansions from below, effectively relativizing modernity’s universal ontology and the imaginary of One World that it actively produces, remains an open question.

Those committed to one or another form of leftist politics, critical social theory, and alternative modernity (including within the academy) can usefully consider these questions: What habitual forms of knowing, being, and doing does a given strategy or approach challenge, destabilize, or transform? For instance, does the strategy or practice in question help us in the journey of deindividualization and toward recommunalization? Does it contribute to bringing about more local forms of economy that might, in turn, provide elements for designing infrastructures for an ethics of interexistence and the deep acceptance of radical difference? Does it make us more responsive to the notions of a world where many worlds

fit? To what extent do efforts to depatriarchalize and decolonize society, as well as related critical MST, transcend anthropocentrism, contributing to weaving the pluriverse effectively with others, human and not? Can a reimagined university move forward, in practical (not just theoretical) terms, toward a pluriversal understanding of humans and the world? Can it contribute to weakening the prevailing rationality that prioritizes measurement, optimization, competitiveness, capitalist entrepreneurship, technoscientific innovation, and so forth?

This means that it is important to push all strategies ontologically and decolonially. What I mean by this is that (a) we all need to actively unlearn the ontologies of separation that shape our bodies and worlds; for instance, can we unlearn liberal individualism—that antirelational Trojan horse that inhabits each of us in modern worlds—in a way similar to how we endeavor to unlearn patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism? Can we unlearn anthropocentrism and really, deeply, relearn to live well in practical terms—to interexist—as living beings with all other living entities? (b) We all need to be mindful of the multiple ways in which our actions and knowledge depend on, and often reinforce, the metaphysical infrastructure of the current dominant systems, including their universal constructs and objectifying relations, their anthropocentrism, secularism, and Eurocentrism, and their colonialist hierarchical classifications in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. Let us consider the pluriversity as a form of ontological politics that foregrounds a vast array of ways of conceiving what exists, so as to make tangible the claim of multiple ontologies or worlds.

In terms of where to start, let me quote science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, whose recent magisterial novel, *The Ministry for the Future*, describes a plausible transition to a sane human society and a genuinely sustainable planet, a transition to take place during what remains of the twenty-first century.<sup>33</sup> In an earlier interview, he stated:

But what do we do with a vision of a distant utopia when we see the situation that we're in right now? What can we do right now to bridge that vision with our current reality? What steps can we take in the present that get us to this positive future we can imagine? Well, first we have to keep in mind that the solution is going to take decades, generations, and we can't let that discourage us. We have to take the steps that are necessary now. It's a scaffolding theory, like a coral reef. You build the scaffold you can in this current situation, and then hope the next generations can keep building on that scaffold and raising the level of discourse and activity to achieve a higher level of interaction with the planet.<sup>34</sup>

The process can start anywhere; in a way it is always starting, but whatever change is initiated should be done to the extent possible based on the criteria of social

justice, profound concern for the Earth (interdependence), and pluriversality. In short, it should be done from an ontological perspective. It might thus be that pluriversal politics, including the pluriversity, gradually becomes a space for effectively telling other compelling stories of world making, against terricide. Pluriversal politics calls on us to consider anew the fundamental insight that the world does not exist “out there,” separate from us but that we construct it with every one of our actions—that the world is always coemergent with our actions, even if within a complex dynamic of causality, contingency, and drift.

It might be the case that the university will continue being for a while what it has been until now, serving even more effectively the cosmovision of those who rule the world. This situation is not tenable in the medium or long term, either for the planet or for the major institutions impacting it. I have suggested that the onto-epistemic perspective of relationality is a worthwhile horizon for a reattunement of the university to being, the Earth, and life and to the pluriversal nature of existence. Another university is possible; to heed this call, however, demands from us a reimagining of possibility. The fate of human society and the Earth is at stake.

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### Notes

1. McNeill and Engelke, *Great Acceleration*.
2. See Watts, “Risks of ‘Domino Effects.’”
3. Foucault, *Order of Things*.
4. Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe.”

5. Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 42.
6. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11.
7. Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 25.
8. Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 16. For other writers making similar points, see Akomolafe, "Coming Down to Earth"; Fry and Tlostanova, *New Political Imagination*.
9. Ferreira da Silva, "Before *Man*."
10. Erasmus, "Sylvia Wynter's Theory," 62.
11. See Kothari et al., *Pluriverse*; Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*.
12. Margulis and Sagan, *What is Life?*, 213.
13. We develop this argument at length in Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma, *Designing Relationally*.
14. Sharma, *Interdependence*.
15. I explain this proposition at length in Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*.
16. One of the most elaborate visions of transition is the Great Transition Initiative ([greattransition.org](http://greattransition.org)). For a succinct summary of the argument, see Raskin, *Journey to Earthland*. See also the transition framework in Sharpe et al., "Three Horizons."
17. Millán, "Moira Millán." There are plenty of sources on terricide on the net in Spanish, and a few in English.
18. *Plan B Noticias*, "Participó Vutá Trawn."
19. Nocek and Fry, "Design in Crisis," 3.
20. Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma, *Designing Relationally*; Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*.
21. Deleuze, *Foucault*, 127.
22. Dilnot, "Designing in the World."
23. See Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, for a fuller treatment of this idea and sources.
24. de la Cadena and Blaser, *World of Many Worlds*.
25. Fry and Tlostanova, *New Political Imagination*.
26. Sharpe et al., "Three Horizons."
27. Sharpe et al., "Three Horizons." I believe many of the imaginative proposals generated during the Santa Barbara workshop take place in this intermediate domain (H2).
28. Schumacher College in southern England has maintained several transition-oriented master's programs (Dartington Trust, "Schumacher College"). A successful PhD program in "transition design" at the Carnegie Mellon University School of Design has existed for close to a decade (Carnegie Mellon University School of Design, "PhD in Transition Design"). The Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), the third-largest design training school in North America, has been engaged in a fascinating example of redesigning to ensure diversity, inclusion, and decolonization, led by African American dean Dori Tunstall, based on the premise that the current modernist design project constitutes "colonialism 2.0." The restructuring is organized under the rubric of respectful design, according to five strategies: foregrounding the demands of subaltern and marginalized groups through cluster (not isolated) hires; owning up to the institution's complicity with racism and white supremacy; establishing authentic relations with marginalized communities; hiring for critical mass; and defining standards for the recruitment of students and faculty to reflect historical and systemic exclusions. See Tunstall, Keynote address; Tunstall, "Respectful Design."
29. The quote appears on a number of internet sites as coming from Orr's book *Ecological Literacy* but without a page number given. See, for instance, *goodreads*, [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/80381.David\\_W\\_Orr](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/80381.David_W_Orr) (accessed November 5, 2021).

30. Argentinean feminist anthropologist Rita Segato contrasts the “historical project of things” (linked to masculinity, capital, and the state) with the “historical project of connections” or relationality. Segato, *Contra-pedagogías de la crueldad*; see also Segato, “Manifesto in Four Themes.”
31. I owe this question to one of the journal’s anonymous reviewers.
32. Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*; Escobar, “Now That We Know.”
33. Robinson, *Ministry for the Future*.
34. Robinson, “Great American Sci-Fi.”

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