

## Autonomous Design and the Politics of Relationality and the Communal

La tierra manda, el pueblo ordena, y el gobierno obedece. Construyendo autonomía.

"The earth commands, the people order, and the government obeys. Constructing autonomy."

- **Zapatista slogan**

Cambiar el mundo no viene de arriba ni de afuera.

"Changing the world does not come from above or from outside."

- **Tramas y mingas para el Buen Vivir**, Popayán, Colombia, June 2013

In fact, the key to autonomy is that a living system finds its way into the next moment by acting appropriately out of its own resources.

- **Francisco Varela**, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*

On June 9–11, 2013, the second *Tramas y mingas para el Buen Vivir* (Conspiracies and Collaborations for Buen Vivir) took place in the city of Popayán, about two hours south of Cali, in Colombia's southwest. Sponsored by the masters in interdisciplinary development studies (a bastion of Latin American decolonial thought, despite its name) at the Universidad del Cauca and held every other year, the event is carried out as a *cátedra abierta* (open university) where dialogues between academics, intellectuals, and activists from outside the academy can take place. Attended by several hundred participants, largely from social movements and grassroots communities from all over the southwest, the *Tramas y mingas para el Buen Vivir* is an amazing space of interepistemic conversation. The contributions of indigenous and Afrodescendant intellectuals and activists are particularly pointed and enriching, but the interventions by workers, women, environmentalists, peasants, and urban activists are also significant. It is a tremendously inspiring event, perhaps not too uncommon for the Global South, where this type of hybrid space is sometimes cultivated even as part of academic work. Let us listen to some of the sound bites that emerged from the event, of direct relevance to this chapter's themes:

It is time to lose fear about designing our dreams, always with  
our feet on the earth.

We must not renounce the right to fall in love with the territory.

Autonomies are not institutions but forms of relation.

We need autonomy precisely because we are different.

We are building a community of communities.

Decommercialize speech.

The secret is being like children and like water: joyful,  
transparent, creative, and in movement.

And perhaps the two most revealing propositions: “No podemos construir lo nuestro con lo mismo” (“We cannot build our own realities with more of the same”) and “Lo posible ya se hizo; ahora vamos por lo imposible” (“We already accomplished the possible; let us now go for the impossible!”).

These statements are the tip of the iceberg of the irruption of what in Latin America is called *pensamiento autónómico*, or autonomous thought. This chapter inquires whether the Latin American notion of *autonomía* (autonomy), along with the parallel notion of *comunalidad*, or the recrafting of communal forms of being, and their associated practices, can be seen as laying the ground for a particular kind of design thought. Buen Vivir, transitions to postextractivism, and the *Planes de Vida* (life plans or life projects) envisioned by indige-

nous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities are part of this trend as well, and so are the experiences of territorial defense in so many locations where brutal forms of extractive globalization are taking place, such as the defense of seeds, commons, mountains, forests, wetlands, lakes and rivers, and so forth.

It should be mentioned at the outset that many, if not most, of these experiences are, despite their commitment, inevitably undermined by the antagonistic contexts in which they take place; in their search for autonomy, some slide back into developmentalism, others are subverted from within by their own leaders, still others reinscribe older forms of oppression or create new ones, and not infrequently the mobilizations peter out under the incredible weight of the pressures of the day, or owing to outright repression. Be that as it may (and these aspects will be discussed no further in this chapter), the upsurge is on. In fact, one could posit as a hypothesis the idea that at this historical juncture “Abya-Yala/Afro-America/Latino-America,” a land with an intense historical dialectic of commonality and diversity, might be offering to the rest of the world particularly valuable elements for the *pensamiento para la transición* (the thought for the transition).

It is worth recalling that in the context of many grassroots communities, design would take place under conditions of ontological occupation. The concept of autonomous design outlined in this chapter should thus be seen in terms of ontological struggles for the defense of people’s territories and lifeworlds. The question remains, is it possible to think about design under the conditions of repression and violence that often affect such communities? It is precisely in those cases that the idea of autonomy is flourishing and the hypothesis of design for autonomy is taking on the timeliest meaning. I will examine the notions of autonomy emerging in these contexts shortly. For now, it is useful to reflect for a moment on Francisco Varela’s minimalist definition of autonomy, quoted in the third epigraph above. Finding one’s way into the next moment by acting appropriately out of one’s own resources applies as much to organisms as to persons and communities or even worlds. For communities under ontological occupation, while this principle reveals the dire conditions under which their struggle take place, since an important aspect of those resources is precisely what the occupation seeks to destroy, it might also become a guiding notion for strategies for survival and flourishing.

This does not mean that this hypothesis is beyond questioning. As already mentioned in the introduction, is *autonomous design* not an oxymoron? To state it prospectively, the possibility I am trying to ascertain is whether ontologically oriented design could be design for, and from, autonomy. To restate

the case, this would require extricating design from its dependence on unsustainable and defuturing practices and redirecting it toward other world-making projects. What would this mean in terms of the design of tools, interactions, contexts, and languages in ways that fulfill the ontological design principle of changing the ways in which we deal with ourselves and things so that futuring is enabled? This chapter broaches these questions by laying down the rudiments of autonomous design, largely based on intellectual-activist debates taking place in Latin America at present.

The first part of the chapter journeys again to a theoretical register by returning to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980, 1987), focusing this time on their well-known notion of autopoiesis; as will be shown, what these authors call *biological autonomy* may provide useful guidelines for autonomous design. We then move, in the second part, to discuss current Latin American debates on autonomy and the communal. Out of these various threads will emerge a particular conception of autonomous design, as well as a broad idea of what is entailed by the realization of the communal. This idea is complemented, in the third and last part of the chapter, by a description of two experiences. The first, in which I was involved, took place in 1998; it consisted in the development and implementation of a workshop on ecological river basin design for communities in the Pacific rain forest region, using a systems methodology centered on autonomy. The second experience presents the seed of a transition design exercise for a particular region in Colombia's southwest, ravaged by over a century of capitalist development but potentially ripe for a transition imagination. Let me add two caveats before moving forward: first, that this chapter is offered in the spirit of a hypothesis: that design and autonomy can indeed be brought under a common roof; and, second, that it is derived from Latin American experiences and ideas.

### **Autopoiesis and Biological Autonomy**

Beyond a theory of cognition and of the biological roots of human understanding, Maturana and Varela's work constitutes a theory of the organization of the living as a whole. It is both biology and philosophy, a system of thought in the best sense of the term.<sup>1</sup> Their approach to the living is all-embracing, from the cellular level to evolution and society. Perhaps it can be said that it is an attempt to explain life "from the inside" (that is, in its autonomy), without relying primarily on observer-generated concepts of what life is or does, whether in terms of "functions" (like the functions performed by a cell or an

organ), “inputs,” or “outputs,” or the organism’s relation to its environment. Their theory is a departure from these well-known biological approaches; it explains living systems as self-producing and self-contained units whose only reference is to themselves. The approach stems from the insight that cognition is a fundamental operation of all living beings and that it has to do not with representations of the world but with the effective action of a living being in the domains in which it exists (chapter 3). From this it follows that the essential character of the living is to have an autonomous organization that enables such operational effectiveness, for which Maturana and Varela coin the term *autopoiesis*: “Our proposition is that living beings are characterized in that, literally, they are continually self-producing. We indicate this process when we call the organization that defines them an *autopoietic organization*” (1987, 43). It is worth quoting the original, albeit a bit technical, definition. An autopoietic system is that unit which is organized “as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) that produces the components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network” (1980, 79).<sup>2</sup>

I find it useful to think about “organization” in this context as a system of relations among components (e.g., biophysical, cellular, biochemical, nervous, etc., just to think in biological terms for now) whose continued interaction produces the composite unit itself. All living systems have to maintain this basic organization in order to continue being the living systems they are; losing that organization leads to their disintegration. It follows that all relations among living units have to respect the criteria of conservation of autopoiesis. This takes place through what Maturana and Varela call structural coupling; all living systems interact with their environment through such coupling. The key issue here is that the environment does not dictate the relation; rather, it is the organization of the unit (its basic system of relations) that determines its interaction with the environment. Another way of saying this is that living systems have “*operational closure* in their organization: their identity is specified by a network of dynamic processes whose effects do not leave the network” (1987, 89); yet another way to refer to this feature is to say that living systems are structurally determined (“machines,” in the above definition) in that their changes are determined by their organization (in order to conserve autopoiesis; e.g., 1987, 95–100; 1980). But again it is not the perturbations of the

environment that determine what happens to the living being but the latter's organization; the former only triggers the changes.

This is a key feature of both biological and social or cultural autonomy; systems can undergo structural changes and adopt various structures in response to interactions with the environment, but they have to maintain a basic organization in order to remain as the units they are. Historical interaction among autopoietic units (worlds, one might say) often takes on a recurrent character, establishing a pattern of mutually congruent structural changes that allows the respective units to maintain their organization (pluriversal interactions). This eventually leads to the coordination of behavior, communication, and social phenomena through co-ontogenies, resulting in all kinds of complex units (codesign); in humans, this process takes place through language.<sup>3</sup>

Before I move on to link this to social movements and design, however, it is prudent to address the question of why we talk about "systems." Poststructuralists might find questionable the use of this concept, which, like those of structure, identity, and essence, has been heavily criticized and deconstructed for its connections to organicity, totality, and lawlike behavior, without even mentioning the military-industrial applications of systems analysis. This criticism is important, yet here again we find an example of poststructuralism deconstructing too much and not reconstructing enough; networks and assemblages have, of course, been important reconstructive agendas (e.g., Latour 2007; de Landa 2006), but I think it is fair to say that the question of wholes, form, and coherence remains unsolved in social theory. Complexity theory offers useful clues in this regard. As Mark Taylor put it in discussing precisely this issue, "after considering the logic of networking, it should be clear that systems and structures—be they biological, social, or cultural—are more diverse and complex than deconstructive critics realize. Emergent self-organizing systems do act as a whole, yet do not totalize. . . . Far from repressing differences [as deconstructivists fear], global [i.e., systemic] activity increases the diversity upon which creativity and productive life depends" (2001, 155).<sup>4</sup>

Neomaterialist and neorealist scholars might find some unsuspected allies in the lessons of complexity. For instance, complexity theory might be useful for ascertaining how certain socionatural configurations (including capitalism, patriarchy, and modernity) gain stability, despite their changing character. Is it possible to think about nontotalizing configurations that do not behave like conventional systems but that nevertheless act as wholes? Crudely stated, systems thinking is predicated on the idea that the whole emerges from the inter-



play of the parts. Over the past three decades, theories of emergence and self-organization have underscored the fact that these processes result in complex systems that are in no sense fixed and static but open and adaptive, often existing within conditions of instability and far from equilibrium (poised between order and chaos). When biologists pose the question, why does order occur?, and discover certain basic dynamics underlying the organization of all living systems (from the cellular and the organismic to the social levels), they are rearticulating the question of the *coherence and wholeness* of the perceived order of the world (see, e.g., Kauffman 1995; Solé and Goodwin 2000; Goodwin 1994, 2007); they find coherence and creativity in natural processes, including emergence and complexity, fractal patterns, and self-similar formations. These are questions of intensive differences and morphogenesis, of the relationship between the form of life and the life of form (Goodwin 2007). These might be useful concerns for designers as much as for neomaterialist and postdualist theorists.<sup>5</sup>

To highlight some elements from the theory of autopoiesis: living beings are autonomous entities in that they are autopoietic, that is, self-producing; they generate themselves through the recursive interaction among their components. This is the definition of biological autonomy. Autopoietic systems are wholes that relate to their environment through structural coupling. They are both open to their environments and operationally closed; indeed, the system is open to its environment in proportion to the complexity of its closure (its degree of autonomy), that is, the complexity of the basic system of relations that makes the system what it is. This operational closure is the basis of the organism's (or the system's or assemblage's) autonomy.

One caveat before we consider the application of these principles to the domain of the communal form of living and politics: don't claims about autopoiesis and autonomy negate claims about relationality? I do not think so. First, and perhaps the easier point, Latin American conceptions of autonomy are predicated on a radical notion of relationality. Alterity, within a rigorously pluriversal conception, is a constitutive dimension of relationality, not merely the other. Second, as for autopoiesis, it too relies on a conception of the universe as flux.<sup>6</sup> Autopoietic entities do not preexist their environments; they are mutually constituted but according to certain processes and rules. Autopoiesis reconceptualizes the relations of determination, requiring active engagement with other beings (what Maturana and Varela actually call love). Autopoiesis names a type of self-creation that is anything but autonomous in the modernist sense; it is not about self-sufficiency. To say it colloquially, autonomy and

autopoiesis spell out the conditions that prepare systems (beings, communities) for confident relating and greater sharing. In the case of subaltern communities, this preparation takes a lot of conjunctural thinking and strategizing (at times engaging in what to outside observers might appear like strategic essentialism or the defense of culture).

### **Autonomy in the Social and Cultural Domain**

Ever since the irruption of the Zapatistas and their cry of *Ya Basta!* (Enough Is Enough!), the struggle for autonomy has raged in Latin America, principally among indigenous peoples but also among other rural and urban groups. “Que se vayan todos, que no quede ninguno!” (“Let them all go away, let not one remain”), shouted the Argentinean unemployed to all the politicians and economic elites in whose representations, the protesters claimed, nobody could ever be trusted again after the economic collapse of 2001. Similar calls have been heard since, for instance, among the Indignados movement of southern Europe and the Occupy protesters in the United States. In Latin America the call for autonomy involves not only a critique of formal democracy but an attempt to construct an altogether different form of rule anchored in people’s lives, a struggle for liberation and for a new type of society in harmony with other peoples and cultures (Esteva 2015).

The Mexican development critic Gustavo Esteva has provided the following useful distinction from the perspective of the tenacious resistance to development, modernity, and globalization by indigenous and peasant communities in southern Mexico. He distinguishes among three situations in terms of the norms that regulate the social life of a collectivity:<sup>7</sup>

- **Ontonomy:** When norms are established through traditional cultural practices; they are endogenous and place specific and are modified historically through embedded collective processes.
- **Heteronomy:** When norms are established by others (via expert knowledge and institutions); they are considered universal, impersonal, and standardized and are changed through rational deliberation and political negotiation.
- **Autonomy:** when the conditions exist for changing the norms from within, or the ability to change traditions traditionally. It might involve the defense of some practices, the transformation of others, and the veritable invention of new practices.



“Changing traditions traditionally” could be a description of autopoiesis; its correlate, “changing the way we change,” designates the conditions required to preserve it, that is, to shift back from heteronomy to autonomy and ontonomy, from allopoiesis to autopoiesis (for instance, from heteronomous developmentalism to life projects). So understood, *autonomía* (autonomy) describes situations in which communities relate to each other and to others (say, the State) through structural coupling while preserving the community’s autopoiesis. It tends to occur in communities that continue to have a place-based (not place-bound), relational foundation to their existence, such as indigenous and peasant communities, but it could apply to many other communities worldwide, including those in cities who are struggling to organize alternative life projects.<sup>8</sup>

The crucial elements for maintaining a mode of existence that is both relational and communal include particular types of relations among persons, relations to the Earth and to the supernatural world, forms of economy, food production, and of nurturing plants and animals, healing practices, and forms of deliberation and decision making. The concept of *territory*, as utilized by some social movements, is a shorthand for the system of relations whose continuous reenactment re-creates the community in question. In the context of the long historical resistance of indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in countries like Colombia, *autonomía* is a cultural, ecological, and political process. It involves autonomous forms of existence and decision making. Its political dimension is incontrovertibly articulated by indigenous organizations in Colombia during the past two decades: “When we fail to have our own proposals we end up negotiating those of others. When this happens we are no longer ourselves: we are them; we become part of the system of global organized crime”<sup>9</sup> The statement also points at the continuous slippage between autonomy and heteronomy, particularly in social movements’ relations to the State. There is no absolute autonomy in practice; rather, *autonomía* functions as a theoretical and political horizon guiding political practice.

*Autonomía* in these cases involves the ontological condition of being communal. The Zapatista put it well in their remarkable Sixth Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle in 2005: “[our] method of autonomous government was not simply invented by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN); it comes from several centuries of indigenous resistance and from the Zapatistas’ own experience. It is the self-governance of the communities” (Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas 2006, 77–78). In describing the autonomous movements in Oaxaca during the same period, Esteva similarly writes, “It is a social movement that comes from afar, from very Oaxacan traditions

of social struggle, but it is strictly contemporary in its nature and perspectives and view of the world. It owes its radical character to its natural condition: it is at the level of the earth, close to the roots. . . . It composes its own music. It invents its own paths when there are none. . . . It brings to the world a fresh and joyful wind of radical change” (2006, 36–38). Autonomía is thus exercised within a long historical background, which has led some researchers to argue that, particularly in cases of indigenous-popular insurrection such as those that have taken place in southern Mexico, Bolivia, and Ecuador over the past two decades, it would be more proper to speak of societies in movement rather than social movements (Zibechi 2006). We can go farther and speak of *worlds in movement* (Escobar 2014). These societies/worlds in movement are moments in the exercise of cultural and political autonomy—indeed, of ontological autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

This characterization of autonomía is a response to the *current conjuncture of destruction of communal worlds by neoliberal globalization*. Interestingly, the aim of autonomous movements is not so much to change the world as to create new worlds (community, region, nation) *desde abajo y a la izquierda* (from the bottom and to the left), as the Zapatistas like to put it. Autonomía is not achieved by “capturing the State” but by taking back from the State key areas of social life it has colonized. Its purpose is to create spheres of action that are autonomous from the State and new institutional arrangements to this end (such as the well-known Juntas de Buen Gobierno, or Councils of Good Government, in Zapatista territories). At its best, autonomía seeks to establish new foundations for social life. Zapatista autonomy, for instance, involves the transformation of the procurement of key social functions, particularly in the following domains: eating, learning, healing, dwelling, exchanging, moving, owning (collective ownership of land), and working (Esteva 2013; Baschet 2014). While it would be impossible to analyze here how the practices in each of these domains have been transformed along the axis heteronomy-autonomy, making them more autonomous, in all likelihood this experience constitutes the best example of design for autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

Autonomía often has a decided territorial and place-based dimension. It stems from, and re/constructs, territories of resistance and difference, as the cases of black and indigenous movements in many parts of the Americas show; however, this applies to rural, urban, forest, and other kinds of territories in different ways. In the case of the well-known movements of the unemployed in Buenos Aires after the crisis of 2001, the exercise of autonomy in-

cluded both a critique of capitalism and the creation of new forms of life (from daycare centers and urban gardens to free clinics, the restructuring of public schools, and the recovery and self-management of abandoned factories); in other words, it involved the creation of noncapitalist spaces and other forms of territoriality. New practices began to emerge, such as workplace democracy and horizontality in the self-managed factories, and communitarian values rather than market values in the communities. The goal of the movements was to produce in different ways and to create nonexploitative labor relations, not so dependent on capital and the State, over an entire range of activities involving production and social reproduction. In urban movements one can see the interplay among territorial organizing, collective identities, and the creation of new forms of life that is often at the core of autonomy (Mason-Deese 2015; Sitrin 2014).<sup>12</sup>

The place-based dimension of *autonomía* often entails the primacy of decision making by women, who are historically more likely than men to resist heteronomous pressures on their territories and resources and to defend collective ways of being (e.g., Harcourt and Escobar 2005; Conway 2013). There is often, in *autonomía*-oriented movements, the drive to re/generate people's spaces, their cultures and communities, and to reclaim the commons. These processes involve epistemic disobedience and foster cognitive justice (Santos 2014). Some say that *autonomía* is another name for people's dignity and for conviviality (Esteva 2005, 2006); at its best, *autonomía* is a theory and practice of interexistence and interbeing, a design for the pluriverse.

It is important to remark, however, that the capacity of communities to create and maintain their autonomy depends on their transversal skillful coordination of efforts at many levels, from the local and regional to the transnational. For autonomy to take root, "there has to obtain the conjunction of a local regime of autonomy, understood as the basis for the self-government of social life, and a planetary network open to the collaborative interconnection of living entities" (Baschet 2014, 72). As they free themselves from the State form, autonomous collectives tend to self-organize as a plurality of worlds through intercultural planetary networks. As the salience of the Planes de Vida and life projects of communities reveals, control over a basic level of production is indispensable for an effective translocal politics of articulation. For Baschet, this basic production infrastructure is a *sine qua non* for liberated spaces to grow and go beyond their determination by capital, the dominant economy, and the law of value.

Colombian anthropologist Astrid Ulloa (2010, 2011, 2012) similarly sees territorial autonomy as a multiscalar process. We already cited her work with indigenous groups in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the Colombian northwest. Based on the strategies of these groups, she suggests the notion of indigenous relational autonomy, stemming from the confrontation between indigenous groups and local and translocal actors. Anchored in the ontology of the circulation of life (chapter 2), indigenous groups develop strategies in their dealings with diverse actors, from the direct local intermediaries of extractive operations and regional megadevelopment projects to transnational legal regimes that not infrequently act as mechanisms of symbolic appropriation, given the neoliberal understanding of nature and forms of eco-governmentality they often deploy through, say, carbon markets and Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) schemes. In so doing, as she proposes, the Arhuaco, Kogui, Kankuamo, and Wiwa peoples engage in a complex interepistemic and interontological geopolitics aimed at creating alternative territorialities that might result, to the greatest extent possible, in an effective articulation of territory, culture, and identity for the defense of their lifeworlds.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Realization of the Communal: Nonliberal Forms of Politics and Social Organization**

Let us consider an important concept of the Nasa mobilization, the Minga social y comunitaria (Social and Communal Collective Work). “The word [*la palabra*] without action is empty. Action without the word is blind. The word and the action outside the spirit of the community are death.”<sup>14</sup> Notions of community are making a comeback in diverse epistemic-political spaces, including indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant mobilizations, particularly in Mexico, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru; this rekindled interest in things communal is also present in some urban struggles throughout the continent. The communal has also become an important concern for decolonial feminism. It is also found in some transition-related approaches, for instance, those that speak of commoning and community economies (e.g., Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013). Talk of community in Latin America may take a number of forms: *comunalidad* (communality), the communal, the popular-communal, struggles for the common, communitism (community activism), and so forth. Here I will use *the communal* or *communal logics* to encompass this range of concepts.

The historical background of this “return of the communal,” if we are allowed to put it in these terms, is very complex; for the case of Latin America, it includes the emergence of indigenous movements after 1992, the political turn to the left and the rise of progressive regimes after 1998, and the particularities of the indigenous-popular insurrections in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador. A recounting of this context is beyond the scope of this book, as is a discussion of the many critiques raised against communal notions—from charges of romanticism and going back to the past to warnings about the repressive character of communities (see Escobar 2010a, 2014, for a detailed account of both the context of these critiques and the responses to them).<sup>15</sup>

Communal thought is perhaps most developed in Mexico, based on the experiences of social movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas. For Esteva, *la comunalidad* (the condition of being communal) “constitutes the core of the horizon of intelligibility of Meso-American cultures. . . . It is the condition that inspires communalitarian existence, that which makes transparent the act of living; it is a central category in personal and communitarian life, its most fundamental *vivencia*, or experience” (n.d., 1). As Oaxacan activist Arturo Guerrero puts it,

*comunalidad* is a neologism that names a mode of being and living among the peoples of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, plus other regions in this state of southeastern Mexico. It expresses a stubborn resistance to all forms of development that have arrived to the area, which has had to accept diverse accommodations as well as a contemporary type of life that incorporates what arrives from afar, yet without allowing it to destroy or dissolve what is one’s own (*lo propio*). . . . Communalism is the verbal predicate of the We. It names its action and not its ontology. Incarnated verbs: eat, speak, learn . . . These are collectively created in specific places. It only exists in its execution. . . . We open ourselves to all beings and forces, because even if the We comes about in the actions of concrete women, men and children, in that same movement, all that is visible and invisible below and on the Land also participates, following the principle of *complementarity* among all that is different. The communal is not a set of things, but an *integral* fluidity. (forthcoming, 1)<sup>16</sup>

The Mexican sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar has recently proposed the concept of *entramados comunitarios* (communitarian entanglements) as opposed to “coalitions of transnational corporations,” two contrasting modes of the organization of the social. By *communitarian entanglements* she



means “the multiplicity of human worlds that populate and engender the world under diverse norms of respect, collaboration, dignity, love, and reciprocity, that are not completely subjected to the logic of capital accumulation even if often under attack and overwhelmed by it” (2012, 12). As she explains on the same page, “such community entanglements . . . are found under diverse formats and designs. . . . They include the diverse and immensely varied collective human configurations, some long-standing, others younger, that confer meaning and ‘furnish’ what in classical political philosophy is known as ‘socionatural space.’” Gutiérrez Aguilar’s distinction also aims to make visible “the *gigantic and global confrontation* between diverse and plural communitarian entanglements, with a greater or lesser degree of relationality and internal cohesion, on the one hand; and, on the other, the most powerful transnational corporations and coalitions among them, which saturate the global space with their police and armed bands, their allegedly ‘expert’ discourses and images, and their rigidly hierarchical rules and institutions” (13).

It is important to emphasize, however, to return to Guerrero, that communality can be understood only in its relation with the noncommunal exterior; “this is the *outside spiral*: it begins with an external *imposition*, which unleashes, or not, an internal *resistance*, and develops into an *adaptation*. This result is *lo propio* (what is one’s own), and the We” (Guerrero forthcoming, 2). In other words, the communal does not refer to an ontological condition that preexists a social group’s interactions with its surrounding worlds *but is the very product of such interactions*. Said otherwise, the “We” is never produced in isolation but is always coproduced through an interplay among heteronomy, autonomy, and ontonomy. At the same time, it is clear that communitarian entanglements involve a type of human relation centered on *lo común* (the common), always attempting to overflow their determination by capital.

The massive mobilizations and popular insurrections that took place in Bolivia during the years before the election of the country’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales, in 2006 have been another fertile ground for the theorization of *autonomía* and the political. The literature is already vast and cannot be summarized here (Escobar 2010a); only a few contributions of particular relevance for this chapter’s purposes will be presented, based on the work of indigenous and nonindigenous intellectuals. In her important work on liberalism and modernity in Bolivia from indigenous perspectives, the Bolivian scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1990, 2014) interprets indigenous struggles, starting with the famous rebellion of Tupac Amaru and Tupac Katari in 1780–1781, in terms of the tension between liberal and communal forms of life



and social organization. The tension between these forms, as she states, has shaped much of Bolivia's history, as they are interwoven "in a chain of relations of colonial domination" (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990, 20). It remains so today, as shown by the intense insurrections of 2000–2005, before Morales's election, when the collective memory of the events of 1781, including the dismemberment of Katari and the exhibition of his lifeless body parts in different public spaces in La Paz, yielded a desire "for the reunification of the fragmented body politic of indigenous society" (2014, 9). Rivera Cusicanqui gestures at a crucial dimension of politics in relation to communal groups, namely, their non-linear conception of time and history and yet their strict contemporaneity.

It is against this background that El Alto, the largely Aymara city close to La Paz that grew to close to a million people in less than three decades, heavily populated by peasant migrants expelled by the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s (largely on the advice of Jeffrey Sachs, which was adopted by the military ruler of the time), became, for sociologist Félix Patzi Paco, a school for communal thought. For this Aymara intellectual, the transformation pursued by these movements took place "from the perspective of their own philosophy and their own economic and political practices" (2004, 187–188). Similarly, writing about the insurrections against neoliberal reforms in 2000–2005, Pablo Mamani (2005) speaks of an "indigenous-popular world" in movement, stemming from a society different from liberalism, and Gutiérrez Aguilar (2008) writes about the fracture of the liberal paradigm effected by the communal-popular forms. As she concludes, the insurrections demonstrated "the possibility of transforming social reality in a profound way in order to preserve, transforming them, collective and long-standing lifeworlds and to produce novel and fruitful forms of government, association, and self-regulation. In some fashion, the central ideas of this path can be synthesized in the triad: dignity, autonomy, cooperation" (2008, 351).

These interpretations unveiled the existence of a Bolivian society "characterized by noncapitalist and nonliberal social relations, labor forms, and forms of organization" (Zibechi 2006, 52). The main features of nonstatist and nonliberal regulation include deliberative assemblies for decision making, horizontality in organizations, and rotation of assignments. The struggles created forms of self-organization aimed at the construction of non-State forms of power. These forms appeared as *micro-gobiernos barriales* (neighborhood microgovernments) or *anti-poderes dispersos*, that is, diffuse and quasi-microbial, intermittent forms of power (Mamani 2005). The struggles (a) aimed to reorganize society on the basis of local and regional autonomies; (b) set in movement noncapitalist and

nonliberal forms of organization, particularly in urban areas; (c) introduced self-managed forms of the economy, organized on communal principles, even if articulated with the market; and (d) engaged with the State, but only to dismantle its colonial rationality. The objective was not to control the State but “organizarse como los poderes de una sociedad otra” (“to become organized on the basis of the powers of an other society”; Zibechi 2006, 75).

Emerging from this interpretation is a fundamental question, that of “*being able to stabilize in time* a mode of regulation outside of, *against, and beyond* the social order imposed by capitalist production and the liberal state” (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008, 46).<sup>17</sup> Patzi Paco’s concept of the communal system spells out this hypothesis: “Our point of departure for the analysis of communal systems is doubtlessly the indigenous societies. In contradistinction to modern societies, indigenous societies have not reproduced the patterns of differentiation nor the separation among domains (political, economic, cultural, etc.); they thus function as a single system that relates to both internal and external environments [*entorno*]. . . . The communal system thus presents itself as opposed to the liberal system. The communal system can appropriate the liberal environment without this implying the transformation of the system [and vice versa]” (2004, 171–172). One can relate this conceptualization to the theory of autopoiesis and autonomy.<sup>18</sup> In the communal economy, as practiced by urban and rural indigenous groups, natural resources, land, and the means of labor are collectively owned, although privately distributed and utilized. The entire system is controlled by the collectivity. The political dimension is just as important as the economic dimension; power is not anchored in the individual but in the collectivity. In the communal form of politics, “social sovereignty is not delegated; it is exercised directly” through various forms of authority, service, assembly, and so on; in short, the representative “*manda porque obedece*,” or rules through obedience (Patzi Paco 2004, 176), which is also a main Zapatista principle.

The proposal of the communal system implies three basic points: (1) the steady decentering of the capitalist economy and the expansion of communal enterprises and noncapitalist forms of economy; (2) the decentering of representative democracy in favor of communal forms of democracy, or *comunalocracia* (Guerrero in press); and (3) the establishment of mechanisms for genuine interculturality (Patzi Paco 2004, 190). Patzi Paco is emphatic in stating that the communal system is not predicated on excluding any group. It utilizes the knowledge and technological advances of liberal society but subordinates them to the communal logic; in the process, the communal system itself be-

comes more competitive and fairer. The proposal is not a call for a new hegemony but for an end to the hegemony of any system, for taking leave of the universals of modernity and moving into the pluriverse of interculturality. To achieve this goal may perhaps require a refounding of the societies of the continent based on other principles of sociability. Patzi Paco's conceptualization of the communal system offers persuasive principles for autonomy-oriented redesign.

To sum up: in lieu of state-driven development based on imputed needs and market-based solutions, *autonomía* builds on ways of learning, healing, dwelling, producing, and so forth that are freer from heteronomous commands and regulation. This is crucial for design projects intended to strengthen autonomy. Thus, *autonomía* means living, to the greatest extent possible, beyond the logic of the State and capital by relying on, and creating, nonliberal, non-State, and noncapitalist forms of being, doing, and knowing. Yet it also requires organization, which tends to be horizontal in that power is not delegated, nor does it operate on the basis of representation; rather, it fosters alternative forms of power through types of autonomous organization such as communal assemblies and the rotation of obligations. *Autonomía* is anticapitalist but not necessarily socialist. If anything, it can be described in terms of radical democracy, cultural self-determination, and self-rule. In linking design and democracy, design theorist Gui Bonsiepe (2005) actually defines democracy as the reduction of heteronomy, that is, of domination by external forces, and the process by which dominated citizens transform themselves into subjects, opening spaces for self-determination and autonomous projects.

This does not mean autarky or isolation; on the contrary, *autonomía* requires dialogue with other peoples, albeit under conditions of greater epistemic and social equality. Moreover, it requires alliances with other sectors or groups in struggle—strategies of localization and interweaving not intended to insert “the local” into “the global,” following conventional views, but a type of place-based globalism (Osterweil 2005) that connects autonomous movements with each other. These alliances are seen in terms of “walking the word” (*caminar la palabra*), a concept developed by the Colombian Minga social y comunitaria to point at the need to come into visibility, make demands on society, and collectively weave knowledges, resistances, and strategies with other movements.

One final caveat about the notions of community and the communal: as the Buenos Aires militant research collective Colectivo Situaciones put it, rather than being a preconstituted entity or an “unproblematic fullness,”

the community “is the name given to a particular organizational and political code, a singular social technology”; in resisting being rendered an anachronism by the modern, the community summons “actualized collective energies”; as such, and “against all common sense, the community produces dispersion,” and this dispersion could become central to the invention of amplified non-statist modes of cooperation (Colectivo Situaciones 2006, 212, 215). The appeal to community itself is thus not anachronistic, as moderns often dismissively reply; on the contrary, “the community summons actualized collective energies. . . . Communal doings and their openness to internal contradictions and ambivalence are a reflection of the radical contemporaneity of communities with respect to other modes of organization and cooperation”—including, one might say, standard modern forms that are by now more anachronistic (213, 215).

To speak of “communities in resistance” does not imply an essentialist or homogenizing vision of the community, as some critics adduce. It means understanding how, despite communities’ fracture and fragmentation, communal actions might reveal “transition paths, beyond the dualism between modernity and postmodernity, universalism and communitarianism. . . . [They reveal] collective biographies of microrevolutions for self-determination” (P. Botero 2015, 17–19). That said, it is important to investigate exactly how, in the midst of the conflicts and heterogeneity that inevitably shape these communities because of their subaltern condition, there appear in them new forms of life, solidarity, and militancy. While the internal diversity of the communities might generate strife and disorganization under the pressure of intense repression and displacement, it often also yields types of intercultural diversity capable of broadening the processes by which they endow their worlds with meaning. These dynamics usually escape the attention of researchers too intent on finding antagonist oppositions in the midst of communities in struggle (which of course are also there). To go beyond this habitual research behavior requires a different epistemic positioning, one in which the researcher genuinely sees herself or himself as part of the collective action she or he is studying, as well as the willingness to interact with it. Far from disappearing, in many communities in struggle the collective dimension is woven out of plurality and disagreement (P. Botero and Perdomo 2013).

There is perhaps no clearer example of the openness of the communal at present than the decolonial and communitarian feminisms that are emerging in some popular and ethnic communities. For the Aymara intellectual-activist Julieta Paredes, communitarian feminism is a strategy for pursuing the twin

goals of depatriarchalization (in relation to both autochthonous and modern patriarchies) and decolonization (in relation to liberal, modernizing, and capitalistic hegemonies, including individualizing Western feminisms). In this framework, the community is seen as “the inclusive principle for the caring of life” (Paredes 2012, 27). The community “is another manner of understanding and organizing society and of living otherwise. . . . It is an alternative proposal to that of individualistic societies” (31). This is why it implies an entire *tejido* (weave) of complementarities, reciprocities, and forms of autonomy and interculturality that include, for rural communities, relations to urban communities and transnational groups and, of course, the entire range of nonhumans. The community links together body, space, memory, and movement within a dynamic cyclic vision; this is the complex process that anchors the *Vivir Bien*, or collective well-being.

In all of these experiences, the community is thus understood in deeply historical, open, and nonessentialist terms. If anything, there is an emphasis on the creation of new spaces for the communal. It follows that the realization of the communal is always an open-ended historical process. In Maturana and Varela’s (1980) language, as social systems, communities are third-order autopoietic entities whose “operational closure” (often coded in terms of “the defense of our culture” by locals) is maintained throughout the communities’ relation to their “environment” (the sociopolitical and ecological context, broadly speaking); through this always-ongoing form of relating (structural coupling), communities may undergo structural changes of various types (e.g., by adopting the use of information and communication technologies or novel market practices); however, the basic system of relations has to be maintained for the community to preserve its autopoiesis, that is, its capacity for self-creation. *Autonomy* is the name given to this process.

Needless to say, communities’ exercise of autonomy takes place today under astonishingly inimical conditions. The ongoing war on things communal also means that communal-based transition initiatives and territorial struggles indeed prefigure potential worlds to come (like the musics they sometimes create), yet they have to realize themselves within incredibly hostile environments that relentlessly undermine their efforts. This is the political ontology—held in place by capitalism, corporate coalitions, expert institutions, repressive and police states, and dualist rationalities—within which autonomous initiatives have to struggle. They surely cannot flourish in isolation, but perhaps the strategies of interweaving being tried out across myriad tiny islands of attempted autonomy might result in the renovated continents, however small for the



time being, imagined by transition activists and designers. Can autonomous design contribute to this pluriversal realization of the communal?

This long historical, political, and theoretical background on autonomía and the communal has been necessary to convey the importance of placing autonomy within the scope of design, on the one hand, and of constructing the communal as a design space for ontologically oriented design, on the other. It was also a way to convey what the Latin American struggles' specific contributions to the *pensamiento* (thought) of transition might be.

### An Outline of Autonomous Design

The remainder of this chapter will lay down additional elements for thinking about the relations among autonomy, design, and the realization of the communal. This will be done in three parts. The first identifies some principles for autonomous design, drawing on a particular experience in Colombia in the late 1990s; the second extends these lessons based on the chapter's discussion of autonomy and the communal. The third, finally, sketches a transition imagination exercise for a particular region in the Colombian southwest.

Autonomous design—as a design praxis with communities that has the goal of contributing to their realization as the kinds of entities they are—stems from the following presuppositions (slightly modified from PCN and Escobar 1998):<sup>19</sup>

- 1 *Every community practices the design of itself*: its organizations, its social relations, its practices, its relation to the environment. If for most of history communities practiced a sort of “natural design” independent of expert knowledge (ontology, spontaneous coping), contemporary situations involve design based on both detached and embodied forms of reflection.
- 2 Every design activity must start with the strong presupposition that *people are practitioners of their own knowledge* and from there must examine how people themselves understand their reality. This epistemological, ethical, and political principle is at the basis of both autonomy and autonomous design. (Conventional development planning is intended to get people to practice somebody else's knowledge, namely, the experts'!)
- 3 What the community designs, in the first instance, is *an inquiring or learning system about itself*. As designers, we may become co-researchers



with the community, but it is the latter that investigates its own reality in the codesign process.

- 4 Every design process involves a *statement of problems and possibilities* that enables the designer and the group to generate agreements about objectives and to decide among alternative courses of action (concerning the contamination of the river, the impact of large-scale mining, a particular food-production project, landlessness, the struggle to defend place and culture, discrimination against women, availability of water, etc.). The result should be a series of scenarios and possible paths for the transformation of practices or the creation of new ones.<sup>20</sup>
- 5 This exercise may take the form of building a model of *the system that generates the problem of communal concern*. Given this model, the question that every autonomous design project must face is: what can we do about it? The answer will depend on how complex the model of reality is. The concrete result is the design of a series of tasks, organizational practices, and criteria by which to assess the performance of the inquiry and design task.<sup>21</sup>

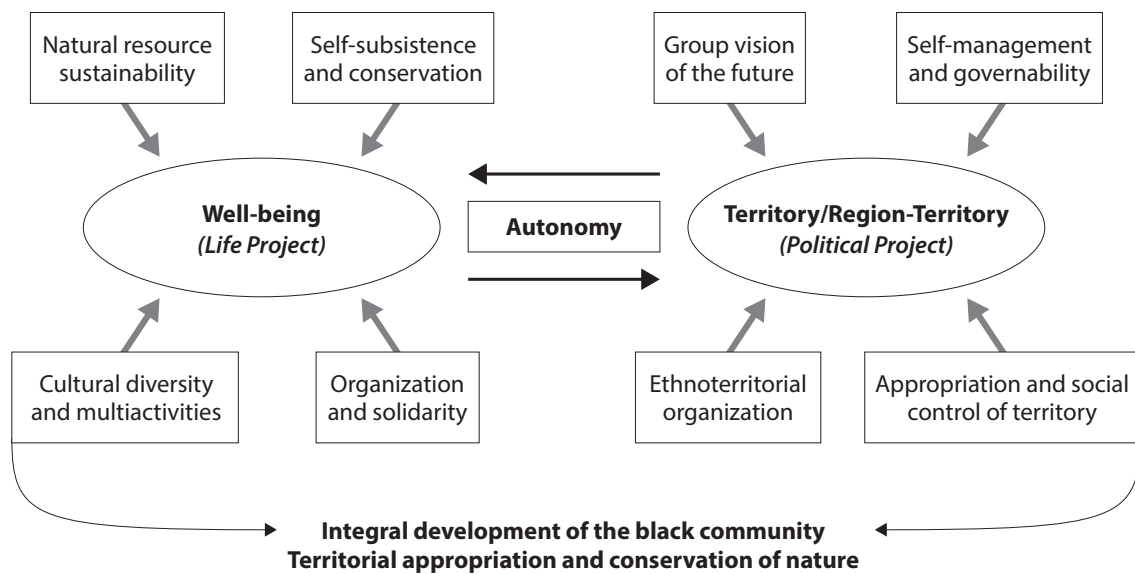
In building the model for the particular concern, it is important to recognize that *problem statements always imply solution statements*; problems never stand as neutral statements about reality; the entire process is political since any construction entails choices that affect people in particular ways. Problem statements are by the same token necessarily partial. The group's perception of the problem is continuously evolving as the conceptualization of it becomes more complex in light of new thinking, new information, more involved experimentation, and the like. The more complex the conceptualization of the system that produces the problem, the sharper the sense of purpose and of what needs to be done. Problem statements need to address the question, "Why do we/I see this as a problem?," and to follow each "because . . ." with another "why" until participants' values are made explicit. The design process also needs to broach the questions, What/who needs to change? Why is this change not happening now? What consequences would follow if such changes were to happen? And these inquiries must be repeated at various scales, including the household, community, and regional (e.g., river basin) levels and beyond.<sup>22</sup>

A problem statement is thus the *expression of a concern* that the group has about people's condition (ideally shared by the designer). In the last instance, what the autonomous design process wants to accomplish is to make not only

the community but also the larger society more sensitive and responsive to the newly articulated concerns of the collectivity. This can be seen in terms of generating, out of the breakdowns that the systems' exercise unveils, a range of possibilities for disclosing new spaces for the exercise of community autonomy as the group deals with the problems at hand. It should be apparent by now that, according to this perspective, the ideal situation for autonomous design obtains when the client, the designer, the decision maker, and the guarantor of the system are the same entity (Churchman 1971), namely, the community and its organizations.

The workshop's systems methodology might seem a bit dated now, yet it is useful as a starting point for understanding autonomous design practices. In this particular instantiation in the Colombian Pacific, the workshop contributed to the creation of concepts and scenarios that, eventually, resulted in a framework developed by Afrodescendant movements (to some extent in conversation with indigenous activists) and provided the basis for a sophisticated political ecology by the movement, which I have analyzed at length elsewhere (Escobar 2008). Some of the key notions included that of the Colombian-Ecuadorian Pacific as a "region-territory of ethnic groups," the conceptualization of the territory as the space for the "life projects of the communities," a framework for the conservation of biodiversity based on the defense of territory and culture (very different from the established frameworks designed by conservation biologists and economists), and a set of guiding principles for the region's own vision of development and perspective on the future (Escobar 2008). Autonomía became central to the entire process. Figure 6.1 is a representation of the process (see PCN 2000, 2004).

We can recognize in this model the pillars of a design imagination centered on autonomy and the realization of the communal. Autonomía involves the articulation of the life project of the communities, centered on the *Vivir Bien* (the well-being of all, humans and nature), with the political project of the social movement, centered on the defense of the region-territory. (Notably, the notion of *Vivir Bien* in this framing is very similar to that of *Buen Vivir* that become well known in the 2000s, discussed in the last chapter.) While the life project is grounded in the long-standing relational ontology of the river communities (referred to as *cosmovision* during those years), the political project is based on the work of ethnoterritorial organizations, requiring the effective appropriation of the territories and guided by the communities' own vision of the future. Would it be too far-fetched to suggest that this particular social movement was pursuing a strategy of autonomous, ontologically ori-



6.1 Basis for a culturally and ecologically sustainable development and perspective of the future. Redrawn based on diagram from PCN (2000: 5; 2004: 38).

ented design? In this and similar cases, one could argue that a codesign process is at play in which communities, activists, and some outside participants (including expert designers) engage in a collaborative exercise, with planner, designer, decision maker, and guarantor coinciding to a great extent with the communities and the movement.

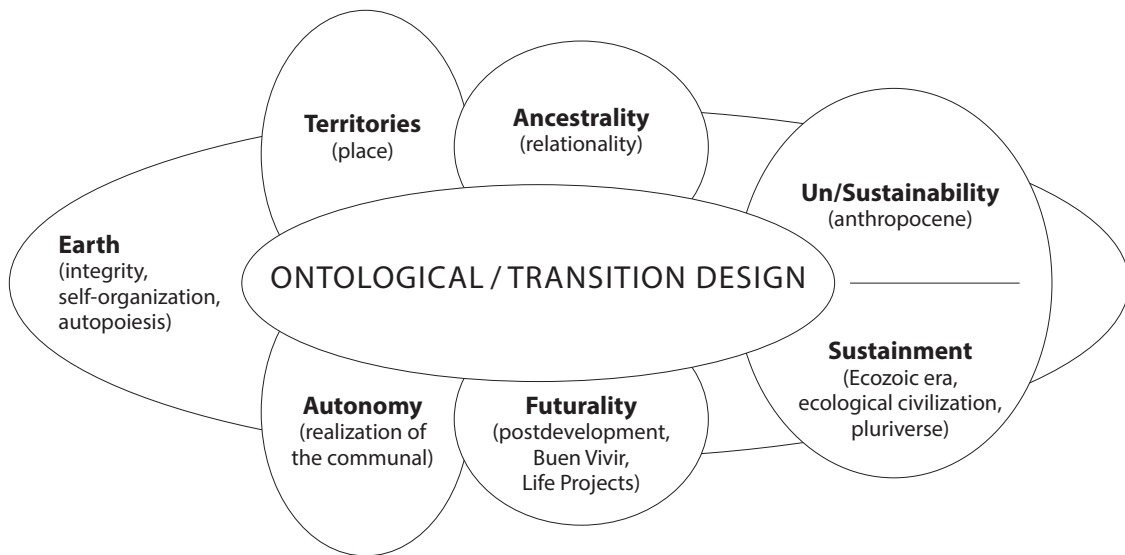
It is noteworthy that this experience was based on the organizational principles agreed on by the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Black Communities Process, PCN) since 1993 (and which remain in force to this day, even if in an enriched form that nevertheless maintains their basic structure). These principles include the affirmation of identity (the right to be black); the right to the territory (as the space for the exercise of being); autonomy (as the right to the conditions for the exercise of identity); the right to their own vision of the future, including the communities' right to choose their own model of development and of the economy according to their cosmovision; and the right to historical reparations (see Escobar 2008, 221–227). These principles anchor not only the internal decision making of the organization but its relation to the State and to other actors. In cases such as this, *it is of crucial importance for designers to develop a profound understanding of the political project of the movement* (not necessarily to share it in its entirety but to apprehend it fully) and to be willing to submit all codesign activities to the same principles. This is a sine

qua non for working with political (say, ethnoterritorial) organizations under the rubric of autonomous design.

### **A Few Additional Features of Autonomous Design**

From the theoretico-political discussion that occupied most of this chapter we can propose the following additional elements for thinking about autonomous design (again particularly for the Latin American context). Autonomy-oriented design

- Has as its main goal the realization of the communal, understood as the creation of the conditions for the community's ongoing self-creation and successful structural coupling with their globalized environments.
- Embraces ancestrality, as it emanates from the history of the relational worlds in question, and futurity, as a statement about futures for communal realizations.
- Privileges interventions and actions that foster nonliberal, non-State-centered, and noncapitalist forms of organization.
- Creates auspicious spaces for the life projects of communities and the creation of convivial societies.
- Considers the community's engagement with heteronomous social actors and technologies (including markets, digital technologies, extractive operations, and so forth) from the perspective of the preservation and enhancement of the community's autopoiesis.
- Takes seriously the transition design imperatives of place building, re-localization, renewed attention to materiality and nonhumans, and the creation of interepistemic collaborative organizations.
- Gives particular attention to the role of commoning in the realization of the communal; conversely, it devises effective means to encourage diverse economies (social and solidarity economies, alternative capitalist and noncapitalist economies).
- Articulates with the trends toward Buen Vivir and the rights of nature and with related trends elsewhere (e.g., degrowth, commons).
- Fosters pluriversal openings; it is, to this extent, a form of design for the pluriverse, for the flourishing of life on the planet.
- Thinks deeply about, and creates spaces for, strengthening the connection between the realization of the communal and the Earth (its relational weave at every place and everywhere), in ways that enable humans to



**6.2** Autonomy, Transition, Sustainment. A framework for autonomous design and design for transitions.

relearn to dwell on the planet with nonhumans in mutually enhancing manners.

- Gives hope to the ongoing rebellion of humans and nonhumans in defense of relational life principles.

Conceived in this fashion, autonomous design can be considered a response to the urge for innovation and for the creation of new forms of life arising out of the struggles, forms of counterpower, and life projects of politically activated relational ontologies. This is, indeed, too much to place at the doorstep of any given theoretico-political imaginary. To restate, what is at stake here is not so much, or not only, how things are but how things can be. As Esteva puts it, “hope is not the conviction that something will happen, but the conviction that something makes sense, whatever happens” (2009, 22).

Figure 6.2 is a particular rendition of the framework presented thus far. By this point, the explanation of the diagram should be straightforward: the starting point of all design process for transition toward Sustainment, or toward an Ecozoic era, should be the Earth itself, the preservation of its integrity and self-organization. For the case of design with communities and social movements struggling for the defense of territory and place, the goal of the design process should be the strengthening of the community’s autonomy and its continued realization. This design process takes place by building on the ancestrality of the community (its long-standing relational practices, however contradictorily they happen to take place) and orients itself toward

futurity, embodied in the community's Life Project. The design process also takes place in resonance with the broad struggles of the day, such as those for postdevelopment and Buen Vivir. In the last instance, the aim is to transform the conditions that create unsustainability and defuturing and, hence, to provide a pluriversal alternative to the human-created anthropocene.

### **A Transition Imagination Exercise for the Cauca Valley Region in Colombia**

Many regions in the world could be said to be ready to embark on significant cultural and ecological transitions, although few might be prepared for it. Afrodescendant movements in the Colombian Pacific have been engaging in this type of process since 2000, in a limited way given the onslaught of developmentalist and defuturing projects (Escobar 2008, 2014). In this region, the recalcitrant regional elites and State institutions continue to push economic strategies that will only increase eco-social devastation, violence, and unrest—against all scientific evidence and ecological, social, and cultural common sense. This region is in fact a prime laboratory for local and regional transition projects, and as such it can provide rich lessons for alternative pluriversal articulations.

On the other side of the western Andean cordillera, traveling eastward from the main Pacific port city of Buenaventura, lies the fertile Cauca River valley; this region could well be considered a poster child of development gone awry. Capitalist development based on sugarcane plantations in the plains and extensive cattle ranching on the Andean hillsides started to take hold in the late nineteenth century. It gained force in the early 1950s with the setting up of the *Corporación Autónoma Regional del Cauca* (Cauca Regional Autonomous Development Corporation), patterned after the famous Tennessee Valley Authority, with the support of the World Bank. By now it has become clear not only that this model of development based on sugarcane and cattle is exhausted but that it has caused massive ecological devastation of hills, aquifers, rivers, forests, and soils, besides profoundly unjust and painful social and territorial dislocation of the region's peasants and Afrodescendant communities. The region can easily be reimagined as a veritable agroecological stronghold of organic fruit, vegetable, grain, and exotic plant production and as a multicultural region of small and medium-size farm producers, a decentralized network of functioning towns and medium-size cities, and so forth. Other attractive futures can surely be imagined for this region.



Nevertheless, these futures are at present *unthinkable*, such is the strength of the hold the developmentalist imaginary has on most of the region's people and, of course, the power of elite control. While the region is ripe for a radical transition, this proposition is unthinkable to elites and most locals, and certainly to its middle classes, whose intensely consumerist lifestyle is inextricably tied to the model. Under these conditions, is a transition design exercise even possible? Moreover, could it have some real bearing on policy, mind-sets, actions, and practices? To raise this question means to put this chapter, and this book, on trial, so to speak. I am interested in showing, even if tentatively and again as a hypothesis, that even under such antagonistic conditions a transition design imagination can be set in motion. Let us see how.

### **The Cauca River Valley: Regional Development Gone Awry**

The Cauca River, Colombia's second most important waterway, runs for 1,360 kilometers, flowing northward from its origin in the Colombian Massif, a group of high Andean mountains in Colombia's southwest. Seventy percent of Colombia's freshwater is said to originate in the massif. It is there also that the Andean mountain chain splits into three, giving origin to inter-Andean valleys, such as the Cauca Valley. The valley opens up progressively in between the western and central cordilleras (the latter has several snowy peaks above five thousand meters). The first part of the larger Cauca River basin (the focus of this exercise, known as the Alto Cauca, or upper Cauca) widens progressively, following the river for more than five hundred kilometers, covering an area of 367,000 hectares; its width ranges between fifteen and thirty-two kilometers. It is an incredibly beautiful valley, flanked by the two cordilleras and traversed by many smaller rivers and streams. The flat plains have an altitude of a thousand meters and an average temperature of twenty-five degrees centigrade. A traveler looking at the valley with a relational gaze in the 1950s would no doubt conclude that it could easily support a very pleasant and culturally and ecologically rich existence. Locals actually refer to the valley with the name of the most famous colonial hacienda still standing: El Paraiso (Paradise). This future, however, was being foreclosed by the 1950s as the defuturing forces gained speed and strength.

In terms of administrative divisions, most of the valley falls within the Valle del Cauca department, but an important area lies in the Cauca department to the south. The Alto Cauca starts at the Salvajina Dam, constructed in the mid-1980s by the Cauca Regional Autonomous Development Corporation to

regulate the water flow of the river and to generate electricity for the growing agroindustrial complex centered in the city of Cali (population: 2.5 million) and for the city's growing middle classes. The geographic Cauca Valley is a bio-region also shaped by up to forty smaller river basins, several lagoons, and extensive wetlands, many of which were destroyed or severely impacted by cane cultivation. Its soils are very fertile, well drained, and of relatively low salinity. Superficial and deep aquifers have been a rich source of high-quality water for both agricultural use and human consumption. Historically, this ecological complex of mountains, forests, valley, rivers, and wetlands has been home to hundreds of plant and animal species. All of these features have been systematically undermined by the agroindustrial operations.

Even if the majority of the population of the region is mestizo, the Afrodescendant presence is very significant. There are several predominantly black municipalities in the Norte del Cauca (including the municipality of Buenos Aires, within the sphere of influence of the Salvajina Dam; the community of La Toma, whose resistance to gold mining was described in chapter 2, is also located in this municipality). Up to 50 percent of Cali's population is black, according to some estimates, which is largely the result of migration and forced displacement from the Pacific region over the past thirty years, making Cali's black population the second largest in urban Latin America after that of Salvador da Bahia (Brazil). This is an amazingly important social fact for any design project. Most of the black population is poor; at the other end of the spectrum there lies a small white elite, extremely wealthy, who pride themselves on their European ancestry. This elite has traditionally controlled most of the land and owned the largest sugar mill operations. In 2013, 225,000 hectares were planted in cane and 53,000 in pastures for cattle. Although only about sixty holdings are over five hundred hectares, this figure is deceiving since the large landholders also lease land or buy the cane produced on a large number of smaller farms exclusively dedicated to cane. The use of water in sugarcane cultivation is intensive, about 10,300 cubic meters per hectare in the region. This sector uses up 64 percent of all surface water and 88 percent of subterranean water. Over 670,000 hectares of hillsides (more than half of the total area) have been affected by extensive cattle ranching.<sup>23</sup>

Traveling up and down the valley on the main highway one sees what most locals consider a beautiful green landscape: hectare after hectare of sugarcane in the plains, almost without interruption, and cattle leisurely roaming the foothills. But this landscape is the result of more than a hundred years of ontological occupation of the valley by a heterogeneous assemblage made up

of the white elite, cattle, cane, water (the dam, allegedly intended to control floods and regularize irrigation, plus the ubiquitous irrigation canals in the cane fields), chemicals (the tons of pesticides and fertilizers used in sugarcane cultivation), the State (the political elite, completely wedded to the model), experts (the Cauca Regional Autonomous Development Corporation in particular), global markets (demand for white sugar), and, of course, the black cutters, without whom the entire operation (despite increasing mechanization) would have been impossible. The black cutters actually refer to sugarcane as the green monster and associate it with the devil; for them it is far from a beautiful landscape (Taussig 1980). The entire assemblage is “concreted in” by a large network of roads, trucks (the *trenes cañeros*, or long trailer trucks loaded with cane, impossible to avoid if you are traveling by car, as sugarcane is cultivated year-round), and, of course, the entire industrial, financial, and service infrastructure in Cali and nearby towns.<sup>24</sup>

After more than a century of allegedly smooth functioning, of well-oiled operations by this heterogeneous assemblage—touted as a *milagro del desarrollo* (development miracle) by local elites and celebrated in folk culture in multiple ways, from soap operas to salsa music—its profoundly defuturing effects are finally becoming visible. They are visible in the exhaustion of soils, sedimentation of rivers, and contamination of aquifers; in the desiccation of wetlands, the erosion of biodiversity, the deforestation and severe erosion of hills and mountainsides, the respiratory health problems of black workers and nearby populations because of the ash they inhale during the periodic burning of the cane after cultivation, the repression against black workers’ attempts to organize for better conditions, and the persistence of racism and profound inequality, all integral to the cane model.

Linked to inequality and the poverty of 60 percent of the population, as its inevitable result, is the high degree of “insecurity” and “delinquency” decried by the middle classes, who attempt to find security by living in heavily surveilled apartment complexes and gated communities, and by restricting a great deal of their social lives to the ubiquitous, well-policed, globalized shopping centers.<sup>25</sup> One wonders how the model goes on, year after year, despite its blatant and obvious failings, failings that some activists and a handful of academics and intellectuals are already beginning to identify, despite the apparent unawareness of most of the population and the absence of any critical voice in the dominant media, which continues to celebrate the model day in and day out, in so many forms. This is the challenging backdrop (not uncommon for regions in the Global South) against which any transition design

strategy will have to be crafted. Let us discuss a few of the major aspects of this endeavor.

### **Generating a Transition Design Imagination for the Cauca Valley**

Even a purely theoretical transition design exercise for a region such as this is a daunting task, and even more so if one hopes for some degree of implementation. Yet considering the huge number of actual cases of impactful regional re/development and revitalization worldwide (including the famed Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States, and of course the Cauca Valley after the construction of the Salvajina Dam, all considered tremendously successful from a capitalistic perspective), the question arises, why not? Conventional regional re/development, it goes without saying, has the advantage of relying on the naturalized histories of capitalist development, whereas the type of regional transition envisioned here would go against the grain of such histories. Many of the design ideas discussed in previous chapters may, of course, be invoked in support of the exercise in question. However, as Colombian design theorist Andrea Botero, from the media lab at Aalto University in Helsinki, argues, “despite these advancements, our understanding of how to go about setting up, carrying on, and more broadly, sustaining collaborative and open-ended design processes in explicit ways is still limited” (2013, 13). As she goes on to say, there is a great need for methods that enable collaborative design over longer periods than usual, that elaborate on the evolving roles of designers under this extended temporality (beyond, say, being initiators or facilitators), and that take to heart the distributed nature of design agency, including, one needs to add, nonhumans. The articulation of design-in-use practices in the context of temporally extended collective design activities is particularly important at this point in time.

It is relatively easy for ecologists and transition activists and designers to propose scenarios to trigger the design imagination. I have proposed one such scenario above. Recall, first, the overwhelming landscape of omnipresent sugarcane and cattle, and their in/visible effects. Then try to reimagine it “as a veritable agroecological stronghold of organic fruit, vegetable, grain, and exotic plant production and as a multicultural region of small and medium-size farm producers, a decentralized network of functioning towns and medium-size cities, and so forth.” Easy to imagine, perhaps, but still locally unthinkable. What follows are some elements that might go into a transition design

exercise for the Cauca Valley to take place over a number of years (let's call it the *Cauca River Valley Transition Project*).<sup>26</sup>

There are two crucial tasks to be accomplished at the start of the project: gathering a codesign team and creating a design space with which the collaborative design team would coevolve. Creating an attractive identity for the design space might be useful, but that is just the start. The importance of the design space cannot be underestimated, as rightly underlined by Andrea Botero, Kari-Hans Kommonen, and Sanna Marttila (2013). These design theorists understand the design space “as the space of possibilities for realizing a design, which extends beyond the concept design space into the design-in-use activities of people” (186). The design space involves tools for mapping design activities aimed at locating participants’ possibilities in a continuum from consumption to active creation. The design space is always coconstructed and explored by multiple actors through their social interactions involving technologies, tools, materials, and social processes. Through ongoing design activity, it becomes “the space of potentials that the available circumstances afford for the emergence of new designs” (188). The concept thus goes well beyond the focus on objects, workplaces, and design briefs to embrace design-in-use in all of its complexity, including of course the multiple users’ inputs and designs. This expanded notion of design spaces might be particularly effective in what Botero calls “communal endeavors,” those that “stand midway between being the project of a recognized community of practice or teams [say, La Toma’s territorial organization] and being simply the coordinated actions of unidentifiable collectives or ad-hoc groups” (2013, 22).

In this dialogic space, design coalitions would create a new, radical vision for the valley and a vision for large-scale change, well beyond the business-as-usual adjustments. In the first year or two of the project, the coalitions and collaborative organizations involved would be tasked with the construction of an initial vision and framework for the transition(s). One could think of the design space as a kind of lab or set of labs where vision making and codesign meet, resulting in organized conversations for action (for instance, a Valle del Cauca Lab but also a Cali Lab, given the city’s commanding presence in the valley; or labs focused on specific domains of social and ecological actions, whether soils, wetlands, workers, or what have you).

Given this overall objective (and the politically highly charged and controversial character that the process will take on as it evolves), at least in the initial phases of the Cauca River Valley Transition Project process, the actors involved in the codesign team will be limited. It will be essential that the main



actors share the fundamental goals of the exercise in the broadest sense. That said, the actors should include at least the following sectors: social movement organizations (urban and rural, Afrodescendant, indigenous, peasant, and various urban groups); organizations of women and youth, particularly from marginalized rural and urban areas; the academy and intellectual life; arts and alternative communications and media. It will also be essential that this team be seeded with epistemic, social (in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, generation, class, and territorial basis), and cultural (ontological) diversity from the get-go, since this will be the only reasonable guarantee of a genuinely plural design outcome. Activists, intellectuals, people from nongovernmental organizations, and academics, including those in the natural and physical sciences, are all in principle good candidates for the team (it should be said that it is not uncommon in Latin America for individuals to perform several of these roles, simultaneously or sequentially; in the Cauca Valley, there is a significant natural reservoir of persons already quite adept at carrying out interepistemic conversations). It will also be crucial for this team to develop the ability to think communally and relationally, in onto-epistemic terms (although of course not necessarily in these theoretical terms).<sup>27</sup>

The actual transition exercise would start to evolve from this initial process, and it would have to include both the continued *generation of contexts* capable of nourishing the idea of a transition and concrete projects intended to develop particular aspects of the design for social innovation (Manzini 2015).<sup>28</sup> Some of the goals and activities of this phase might include the following:

- Making visible the “civilizational breakdowns” and defuturing practices of the current model. What are the main ecological and social manifestations of unsustainability and defuturing (e.g., effects on water and soils, the systematic impoverishment of black workers, rampant consumerism, and destructive forms of extractivism, including gold mining, just to mention a few)? It will be necessary to map the political geology and ecology of sugarcane and cattle in newly creative ways, from the perspective of their materialist ontologies.
- Creating a sense of the region different from the “folk” regional narrative that prevails, particularly in Cali, dominated by sugarcane, salsa music, sports, and commerce. This would require articulating a *plural bioregional notion* for the entire Alto Cauca, beyond the purely geographical or folk concept.



- Getting a sense of the diverse life projects of the communities and collectivities involved, including those in marginalized urban areas and even those seemingly without place and community.
- Promoting a diversity of actions, such as digital platforms to enable broader participation in the codesign process; thematic clusters and design labs; traveling interactive exhibits and labs to encourage and facilitate the generation of new imaginaries about and for the region in smaller towns and the countryside; compendia of realistic cases (particularly useful to demonstrate that “other economies are possible”); competing metastories; the collective creation of scenarios, whether grounded in existing cases extrapolated to fulfill the vision of a particular community or speculatively imagined to elicit open-ended design reflections.<sup>29</sup>
- Envisioning actions that privilege bottom-up, horizontal, and peer-to-peer methodologies and design tools, yet involve top-down elements as needed, although always subordinated to the goals arising from the communal dialogues. There will surely be many methodological hurdles to work through. For instance, how can one design spaces where collaborative organizations might create the conditions to dignify the manifold memories of the past, acknowledge the multiple overlapping worlds and reals, and consequently provide resonance for the numerous futures that populate the discursive and emotional space of the broad range of Cauca River valley inhabitants?
- Creating a series of “Cali Labs” intended to ascertain the range of answers to the question, “What do you want Cali to be?,” to be followed by scenario building where the various visions can be put on display, along with potential transition and speculative design imaginaries developed by the codesign team—so that more and more people come to entertain an image of Cali as a truly hospitable space for dwelling, rather than an unsustainability machine that is rapidly destroying even its own rivers.
- Designing methods and tools to activate the multiple communal design histories (vernacular, diffuse, autonomous), found among so many rural and urban groups and in so many places throughout the valley, and their intersections with expert design.
- Assessing the impact of climate change on the various local worlds (peoples and ecosystems) by learning from the many transition initiatives in the world that are dealing with this question, such as the Transition Town Initiative, and strategically invoking broad transition imaginaries such as Buen Vivir and degrowth. This design aspect potentially touches

on everything: agriculture (as Via Campesina [2009] is fond of saying, “small farmers cool down the earth”), energy and transportation (diminishing the exponential growth of private cars and moving toward alternative light, decentralized transportation systems), city planning, commons (parks and recreation), and so forth. The concept of resilience, resituated in the ontological context of autonomous worlds, might be important in this area.

- Creating art and communications media and digital platforms for the transitions. Performance art (including about nonhumans, for example, about how to “liberate” the exhausted soils and bring them back to life), transition music and dance (building on the region’s strong musical traditions, including salsa and the black musics from the Pacific and Norte del Cauca regions), social media, and new mainstream media contents that destabilize the folk discourse about the region and position the new one in the collective imaginary will all be integral to the design task. This aspect will build on strong popular education and communication sectors that have been present in the region since the 1980s. There is a great potential in the transition imagination to generate an unprecedented wave of cultural activism.

There is a whole range of other issues that could be considered from the viewpoint of transition design frameworks, such as the relation between diffuse and expert design; the creation of knowledges that might travel from one location to another; the learning process as the project moves on; the role of design research; the use of prototypes and maps; the creation of scenarios under rubric of small, local, open, and connected strategies (Manzini 2015); digital and live storytelling; the design of tool kits from and for communal spaces; smart media campaigns; and questions of scale, among others.

This presentation is of course extremely tentative and general. It is offered more as an indication of the kind of design inquiries that might be at play in transition efforts than as an actual road map to be followed. I am perfectly aware of the overly ambitious nature of the proposal. Let us say that it was intended largely as a theoretical exercise and, as such, as a contribution to critical design studies. It was also intended to buttress the idea that “another design is possible,” a design for the pluriverse. At the same time, it might be considered an example of the dissenting design imagination that, as this book has tried to show, is emerging in various design domains. Perhaps, in the last instance, this effort was my imperfect attempt at making a political-ontological state-

ment by relying on those ultradesigned spaces we call the academy and the book.

Let us listen once again to the words of Nasa activists of the Northern Cauca region as a way to conclude; they bring to the fore both the stakes and the kind of alliances that might be forged:

As we said in 2005 and say again now, the releasing (*la desalambrada*, or getting rid of the barbed wire) of Uma Kiwe (Mother Earth) will depend on uncoiling the heart (*desalambrar el corazón*). And uncoiling the heart is going to depend on uncoiling Mother Earth. Who would have believed it: heart and earth are one single being. That is what we know and feel in this moment. Being this way, should we get on the train of progress? . . . Looking at it clearly, we are left with but one path: we have been saying it for years, but now it gains strength: au-ton-o-my. It is not difficult to see it if the heart is awake. And, speaking of autonomy, it is something very simple: to live as we like and not as is imposed on us. To take life where we want it to go and not where a boss—whoever he might be—says we have to be. But we cannot live autonomy without a territory. And there cannot be territory without Mother Earth. And there is no Mother Earth as long as she is enslaved. . . . That is why we have returned to our farms since December 2014. This is why these are our farms and not others. . . . In that way we return to the path of autonomy, and we open the trail to the freedom of Uma Kiwe. We know . . . that we are capable of a little, and that we can only learn and triumph as an entanglement, a heap (*en montonera*). Not only of male and female Indians: *una motonera* (a swarm) with peasants, with Afrodescendants, with people from the city. It is true that the doubt is sown and is strong. We invite you to turn off the television and look at one another face-to-face: our history, our struggle, our words, which are clumsy but sincere. . . . Turn on your flashlight and illuminate well. Then you will see clearly that this struggle is out of Northern Cauca and not from or for Northern Cauca. Out of the Nasa people but not of the Nasa people. Every freed farm, here or in any corner of the world, is a territory that adds up to reestablish the equilibrium of Uma Kiwe. It is our common house, our only one. There it is, yes: come in, the door is open.<sup>30</sup>

In this incredibly lucid statement lies the basis for autonomous and transition design praxes, to be developed a bit further in the conclusion. *The door is open.*

## Coda: The Communal in the Case of the Peoples without Community

Tell me how the universe came about, and I will tell you who you are.

We can choose who we wish to become when we have decided on  
an in principle undecidable question.

- von Foerster, "Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics"

It is often said that the notions of relationality and the communal apply only to rural or indigenous peoples, or to those cases where people maintain an attachment to a territory; in other words, they do not apply to urban moderns always on the move. This is a partial truth at best, for we all exist within the pluriverse. For those of us who live in the delocalized and intensely liberal worlds of middle-class urban modernity, the historical imperative is clearly that of re-communalizing and reterritorializing. New territories of existence and novel forms of being communal need to be imagined, many of them unprecedented, appropriate to the age of unsettlement. For those of us without an ancestral mandate to help our worlds persevere, the question becomes, how do we recreate and re-communalize our worlds? How do we develop forms of knowing that do not take words and beings and things out of the flow of life—that is, forms of knowing and being that do not recompose nature as external to us, as dead or unsentient matter? What kinds of rituals might we develop to this end? How do we render our inevitable existential condition of being *entre mundos*, between worlds, into a hopeful praxis of living, a space for contributing to stitch worlds together within a pluriversal ethics?

The fact is that we are not just individuals; while each of us is indeed a singular person, we inevitably exist as knots or relays in networks—nay, weaves—of relations. The communal is the name we give to these entanglements and weaves. There is no contradiction between the singular person and the communal as the space within which she or he always exists in relation. As Ivan Illich liked to put it (Gustavo Esteva, pers. comm., July 28, 2015), for those of us who were not born in the midst of a community and who have been constructed as individuals by our histories, there is always friendship and love as the seeds to forge new commons.

Gloria Anzaldúa refers to the condition currently faced by many people as “living in nepantla, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems” (2002, 541), or living between worlds. This condition renders conventional categories of identity obsolete, calling for new paradigms and

narratives that enable creative engagement with each other and the Earth. For Anzaldúa, being a *nepantlera* means inhabiting a zone of possibility, not a cause for fear or closing borders. It is an occasion for imagining and creating a “new tribalism” (560), one that avoids the old story of either assimilation or separation. She calls on us to move from the militarized zone of divisions to a roundtable that always acknowledges the kinship among all things and people. “When you relate to others, not as parts, problems, or useful commodities, but from a connectionist view, compassion triggers transformation” (569). Herein lies an ethical principle for relational re-communalization.