MARIO BLASER

For Emplacement

POLITICAL ONTOLOGY IN TWO ACTS

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POLITICAL
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IN TWO ACTS

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To El Calafate, the place I was with before the storm of which
Walter Benjamin speaks blew us apart and made strangers of us.

CONTENTS

There, I've finished. Now, if you wish, it's your turn to present yourself, tell us a little about where you would like to land and with whom you agree to share a dwelling place.
—BRUNO LATOUR, *Down to Earth*, 2018

Growing up in Argentina, the dominant (and patrilineal) story I often heard about my family's origins centered on a Swiss great-grandfather who immigrated to the country at the turn of the twentieth century. He met and married my great-grandmother in Rio Gallegos, the southernmost city in continental Argentina, and they had three children in quick succession. My great-grandmother died after the birth of the third child, and soon after, my great-grandfather began a pattern that would last the rest of his life, migrating throughout the country in search of a better life. His descendants, including my grandfather and father, continued this transient pattern of moving between places within the country, although most returned to and then left my great-grandmother's hometown in the South. I have followed a similar migratory pattern, although my own search for a better life has taken me even further; my home for the past thirteen years is almost as close to the North Pole as my birthplace and my great-grandmother's hometown is to the South Pole.

   With a family history that privileges four generations of migrations, and with more than two-thirds of my life spent hopping across the continent, I can say

that the experience of very deep and intimate relationships with a place has been rather alien to my conception of the good life. Paradoxically, over the last thirty-odd years, I have become professionally and personally involved with communities commonly referred to as "Indigenous," in which many (but not all) people express that they are with their place—that is, their very way of being is emplaced. For these people, a good life is always with their place; so much so that to suggest that they could be extricated from the place they *are with* without terrible consequences sounds as nonsensical as saying that one can just move on after being dismembered. While I have worked with organizations of the Yshiro (Paraguay) and Innu (Labrador, Canada) communities in some of their struggles to prevent or mitigate processes that can be likened to dismemberment in the above sense, it never quite dawned on me the extent to which these struggles indexed the entanglements between our sharply contrasting experiences of place, at least not until I began to seriously question the practices and relationships that constitute "my place."

For a variety of personal reasons, which I will not bore you with, a few years ago I began to feel as a sore spot not having a strong connection and dense attachment to the place that I had begun to call home. Amid that feeling, and informed by my ethnographic experience, the naturalness of the kinds of relations to the places I had lived in came under question: What is it that makes it possible for me to *be* in these places in this way, without strong connections and dense attachments to them? I asked myself. Don't get me wrong—I have lived enough in some places (ranging from a megacity of over fifteen million to a small town of seven thousand inhabitants, and many others in between) to get to know them like the back of my hand and have developed attachments in each (to people, special corners, habits) that continue to be part of who I am, in spite of time and distance. However, when I compared my experience with the density of relationships that make up the places of some of my Yshiro and Innu acquaintances, I began to wonder if there was something other than my personal and family history behind the feeling that "my places" were constituted in such a way as to foster a certain readiness to move; a disposition according to which, when push comes to shove, displacement in search of better horizons might at worst be very painful but not the end of life, as dismemberment might imply.[1]

In that train of thought, I began to see that, at every jump, my displacements from a small town in Argentina's South all the way to a small city in the Canadian subarctic had been facilitated by a variety of infrastructures. The infrastructures I refer to include obvious things, like technologies and networks of transportation, systems of communications, and governments regulating

migrations, but also less obvious things, such as ways of understanding and addressing, for example, problems of livelihood, changing notions of a better life, and what counts as worthy of consideration in the pursuit of what gets defined as "the good life." It may sound strange to speak of the latter kinds of things as "infrastructures" that enabled my displacement, but these are the things whose materiality we rarely pay attention to but which are crucial to our ability to act in certain ways and not in others. Now, while all these things, from communication networks to visions of the good life, could be seen as infrastructures that enable displacement, more generally, they can be conceived as what I call *grounding infrastructures*, that is, infrastructures that shape and give "our places" their character. I will expand on this soon; for the moment let me just offer a glimpse of how the kind of things I characterize as grounding infrastructures that enable displacement shape the character of my place, how that connects with the struggles of my Yshiro and Innu acquaintances to defend their *being with* place, and how all of this informs the purpose of this book.

A few years ago, I got a well-paying job (edging me closer to the "better life" I had been chasing) in the only university of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador when, riding on the expansion of extractive industries, financial resources were plentiful. The infrastructures associated with this expansion are largely the same that allowed me to hop across the continent—that is, infrastructures that in various ways propel and facilitate the smooth displacement of people, commodities, services, ideas, and what have you. These infrastructures have also made Newfoundland and Labrador a relatively welcoming place for "displaced people" like me. They make the place feel familiar, perhaps a bit like "home": I can talk to my family in Argentina through WhatsApp, hop on planes to visit old friends in previous homes, read news and support abortion rights campaigns in Latin America via internet, eat dulce de leche, and even get papayas in the middle of the Subarctic winter! At the same time, these infrastructures have reshaped the home Newfoundlanders and Labradorians knew before. For most of them, the "development" or "modernization" associated with the extractive boom was a welcome event; at long last the province's living standards began to catch up with those of wealthier provinces in Canada. And even when bust moments came, these same infrastructures made it possible for many people to move to other "welcoming places" in pursuit of better horizons—again, without implying dismemberment. And this is because the grounding infrastructures that make these displacements possible have become for many (long-established or newly arrived) Newfoundlanders and Labradorians constitutive of "our place." As

long as these kinds of grounding infrastructures are present, we are relatively at home.

While I will not go into the details now, let me indicate that, for anyone paying attention to this Canadian province, it is plain to see that the expansion of these grounding infrastructures of displacement, if not directly overrunning them, is at least altering the grounding infrastructures that sustain the emplaced modes of existence of many Innu I became acquainted with as I came to the province. I met these Innu when they invited me to collaborate with them in their attempts to address some of the impacts that the expansion and intensification of extractivism have had on the grounding infrastructures that sustain their ways of being with place. These other grounding infrastructures (of emplacement) also include things that range from transportation technologies to visions of a good life but are not always congenial to what displacement requires, and thus conflicts often erupt when infrastructures with different orientations encounter each other. Some Innu staunchly resist having infrastructures that constitute them *with* their place interrupted or overrun by infrastructures agreeable to the needs of displacement—for example, a hydroelectric dam. In doing so, they often confront the governments and corporations that promote those infrastructures as vehicles to realize the "greater common good." But sometimes they must also confront some of their own peers who see these infrastructures as bringing a better life for their communities in the present circumstances. The point is not easy to refute, especially when it has become very difficult for many Innu to sustain practices that make them with their place without variously relying on those very same infrastructures of displacement they struggle to contain. For instance, the intimate relations with various nonhumans that hunting practices foster among Innu, and which contribute to constituting them with their places, can hardly be carried out nowadays without elements obtained from market-based supply chains. Not only does the purchase of these elements require cash (brought in by the extractive industries), but also the very supply chains that make them available can only function on the basis of the energy generated from, among other infrastructures, hydroelectric dams. In other words, the orientation toward emplacement in the grounding infrastructures that constitute some Innu *with* their places becomes slowly entangled with and subsumed under a dominant orientation toward displacement.

In the thirty-year span I have been working with the Yshiro communities in Paraguay, I have witnessed very similar processes whereby, in the wake of successive waves of modernization and extractivist expansion, the imperative of displacement slowly overruns what until then had been grounding

infrastructures of emplacement. But, as it happens with the Innu, I have also witnessed how, even entangled and attenuated by the imperative of displacement as they might be, modes of being emplaced nevertheless endure. Thus, in these contexts, it is possible to perceive how grounding infrastructures of emplacement still give shape to places, in part because they continue to noticeably complicate the operations of infrastructures of displacement. This makes these places appear as "frontiers" where we can see with more clarity that in other places the procedures through which grounding infrastructures of displacement intensify their grip and expand beyond their present limits and with what consequences. And, precisely because of their heightened visibility, what happens in these places offers important clues to pondering, more generally, what might be done when grounding infrastructures of displacement end up appearing to constitute not just particular places but "the world" in which "we all live." This, in a nutshell, is the issue I engage with in this book.

I argue that grounding infrastructures driven by the imperative of displacement are constantly proliferating, weakening, and taking over grounding infrastructures more concerned with emplacement, to the point that for many it has become very difficult to realize visions of a good life premised on being emplaced, while for others imagining a good life in which infrastructures of displacement do not play a dominant role sounds utterly utopian, when not outrightly dystopian. This situation is central to, and with varying degrees of explicitness transpires in, contemporary debates about momentous challenges facing the world. We see these debates playing out daily in the news and in academic exchanges. They might take place under the banner of "climate change," "green deals," and "transitions" and in discussions of the role that technology might play in all of this. They may emerge in denunciations of further enclosures of the few remaining commons and the differential costs that humans and nonhumans will pay for staying the same or changing course. Or the debates may surface in calls and warnings of a world moving toward a "multipolar order" and "deglobalization" and in theorizations of exhausted liberalisms, emerging illiberalisms, neofascisms, and utopian alternatives. Polycrisis is the latest buzzword connecting all these topics of concern.[2]

Clearly, these are all issues that mobilize political imaginations—that is, the stories we tell and enact in response to the *fundamental political question of how to live together well*. My pitch in this book is that within debates about the momentous challenges we face are embedded responses to this question that naturalize and reenact the primacy of displacement in grounding infrastructures (ranging from technologies to visions of the good life and everything in between). The problem, I will argue, is that this primacy of displacement is

itself constitutive of the momentous challenges. Thus, the question of how to live together well in the face of these challenges ends up being staged in ways that call forth more of what produces them, and the resulting dynamic begins to resemble a dog chasing its own tail with increasing fervor and without regard for the mess it leaves in its wake.

There are some voices, however, that in increasingly more articulated and audible ways, and from diverse positions outside and inside the academy, seek to intervene in these debates interrogating assumptions that are almost by default constitutive of the question of how to live together well and, hence, also of the kinds of answers that are advanced in the present conjuncture. Indeed, probing who the implied referent is, what is the kind of togetherness at stake, and what is the good being aspired to, these voices recast the fundamental political question as a cosmopolitical one—that is, as a question that (paraphrasing Isabelle Stengers) slows down the spurting of well-trodden answers so that a slightly different understanding of the problems they purport to address may emerge. In this sense, the purposely vague term *momentous challenges*, which I use throughout, signals a placeholder for a problem whose characterization is at the center of the discussions in which this book seeks to participate. Building on these cosmopolitical overtures, I propose a wager: that the dynamic between displacement and emplacement (skewed toward the former) offers a slightly different and potentially fruitful framework for grappling with what is at stake in momentous challenges. Such an approach underscores the importance of exploring what it might take to cultivate, in the face of those challenges, a political imagination that makes room for emplacement.

Though it was not purposefully conceived as such, this exploration has ended up responding to the invitation with which Bruno Latour closed his book *Down to Earth* and which I quoted in the epigraph above. In that work, Latour shared a set of coordinates that he found useful for orienting and positioning ourselves politically in the face of what he called the "new climate regime" (i.e., one way of defining what I call momentous challenges), and then invited his readers to make a similar gesture: to say who we are and how we see the problem that convokes us (i.e., how will we inhabit places in the face of momentous challenges?). In responding to this invitation/question, Latour has remained a constant presence and inspiration for my work, as you will soon see. So may this book be a show of gratitude and recognition of the enormous intellectual debt I owe to his work. That said, the place from which I see momentous challenges is certainly not the same as Latour's. For one thing, I am not in Europe, nor do I have a long family lineage that ties

me to my place. Located in the continent that Europeans colonized and called America, and largely descended from generations of immigrants to the places where we have lived, my status as a "local," even in my birthplace, is complicated in ways that Latour's was not (which is not the same as saying that his was not complicated at all!). But this is just the surface of the complexities at stake in responding to Latour's invitation. Those familiar with his work will know that his invitation to introduce oneself is not about personal histories but rather about the most basic grounding assumptions, the ontologies, that we bring into play when we come to a matter of concern that we may (or may not fully) share with others. In this sense, the term *political ontology* in the title refers to the grounding assumptions and standpoint from which I conduct my explorations in the book. For now, it should suffice to describe political ontology as a militant intellectual "project" that, coalescing out of a loose network of scholars, analysts, commentators, and activists/researchers, implies a rejection of dominant modern ontological assumptions and associated knowledge practices. In line with this, I must emphasize that the book is above all an invitation to essay with and try out the political ontology presented here. Let's see where it takes us and whether it can indeed help us to understand the momentous challenges we seem to be facing in a slightly different and generative way.

The political ontology from which I seek to characterize this "problem" implies a reworking of usual conceptual grammars that may initially feel laborious to some readers. Aware of this, I have tried to use as simple a language as possible, gradually moving from relatively simplified to more dense examples and concepts. I expect the succession to work as steps on a staircase, to some extent in the same sense as Wittgenstein used the metaphor to say that his propositions were "elucidatory," and that once they had produced a certain understanding, they had to be overcome.[3] It is worth noting, however, that this staircase spirals; arguments, ideas, or concepts that are initially presented in a relatively simplified and/or perhaps unnervingly succinct manner are later revisited with greater conceptual density and with the subtlety that ethnographic materials allow. In short then, depending on your familiarity, or lack thereof, with some building blocks I use to assemble the conceptual grammar I mobilize here, I ask you to please be patient with or, alternatively, do not remain moored to the brief and simplified characterizations with which I start! Keep in mind that essaying an ontology in (writing) practice requires unfolding a necessarily circular argument, it implies an exercise in bootstrapping. Any beginning would thus feel insufficient, as little of what might initially

be said will truly make sense until the full circle has been travelled. I hope, however, that with these few pages, I have offered you the tip of a thread enticing enough that you will come into the book to try out the political ontology I am proposing. If so, we will meet again at the end to revisit what the concerns I have sketched here look like from there.

Political Ontology and the Problem
of Displacement/Emplacement

I am aware that arguing about the centrality that the unbalanced dynamics between displacement and emplacement has in momentous challenges is not a "problem" that everyone would quickly recognize, especially in the proposed terms. For the problem to be properly shared, I need to stage it carefully, and this includes making explicit the standpoint from where such dynamics can be conceived as problematic. Since political ontology, the militant intellectual project I previously mentioned, is this standpoint, I begin with a brief recount of its origins to then move on to unfold the conceptual armature that helps me stage the imbalance between displacement and emplacement as a concern.

For context, I want to recall two moments in the recent history of South America. The first was in 2001, when, amid economic collapse, demonstrators in Argentina chanted "Que se vayan todos" (they should all go) against the entire political class that, since the 1990s, had embraced the neoliberal mantra "There is no alternative." The second was in 2011, when, just before a violent police crackdown, Bolivian president Evo Morales accused Indigenous groups, who had been key allies in bringing him to power, of being manipulated by right-wing forces and by the US embassy because they protested against his government's intention to build a road across their territories.[1] The moments mark, on one end, the irruption of a wave of popular mobilizations and uprisings that threw wide open the issue of alternative political projects and, on the

other end, the disavowal of the heterogeneity of projects that had propelled progressive administrations to power in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. But, more importantly, such a disavowal was simply a consequence of the instauration of a new mantra adopted by governments in the region, regardless of their position on the political spectrum: "There is no alternative to extractivism."

Under the commodity consensus, as Maristella Svampa has called this coincidence between administrations of all political persuasions, governments in the region became engaged in an extractivist dynamic characterized by the pharaonic scale of projects in mining and hydrocarbons, agribusiness and biofuels, the integration of infrastructure to facilitate the extraction and export of raw materials, and the solidification of these countries' role as providers in (and thus dependent on) the international commodities markets.[2] For the case of progressive governments, Eduardo Gudynas baptized these dynamics as neo-extractivist and pointed out that one of its key differences from plain extractivism was that parts of the profits made from extractive activities were redirected to sustain expansive social programs that curtailed the potential spread of popular protest against the immediate and localized social and environmental effects of those activities.[3] But, by the same token, it also made the governability of those "progressive" countries dependent on a sustained flow of resources from the export of raw materials, thus generating a vicious circle fueling an ever-expanding extractive frontier.[4]

The expansive and intensifying dynamics of extractivism also expanded and intensified conflicts where governments and corporations stood on one side and communities and grassroots organizations that suffered and/or resented the consequences of particular extractive projects stood on the other.[5] Where progressive governments ruled, these conflicts increasingly involved groups who, in the struggle against neoliberalism, had formerly been allies of the party in government but did not see the neo-extractivism embraced by the latter as an alternative either. It was precisely in these contexts that the opening and (attempted) closing of alternative political projects became most evident. In effect, the popular mobilizations that self-defined progressive administrations rode to hold state power in various South American countries had been partly inspired and nurtured by grassroots projects that emerged or became particularly visible through the 1990s and early 2000s in response to the conditions created by neoliberal policies. Through those years, and having been made redundant to the market economy and to a state apparatus conceived as a mere scaffold for the former, increasingly larger segments of the population organized to protect and/or carve out spaces for their survival.[6] Within

those spaces, but always under siege by the state and para-state forces, some grassroots organizations (of urban poor and unemployed workers, Indigenous and Afro communities, and landed and landless peasants) escaped the forms of subliving that neoliberalism offered them by nurturing their own, relatively autonomous, forms of living.[7] Of course, reacting to the exclusions generated by neoliberalism, an important (even majoritarian) component of social mobilizations of the period, articulated a political demand for social and economic inclusion (or re-inclusion), often interpreted as a generic demand for "development." But there was also an important undercurrent formed by autonomist and decolonial trends that were concerned not about the inclusion of communities or groups within the "system" but rather about the possibility of their existence in spite of it. Conversations among groups that shared these trends began to form a practical and analytical space centered on shared concerns about self-reliance, political autonomy, and, more generally, the pursuit of visions of a good life not tied to notions of development and their universalist underpinnings; inklings of what I will later characterize as *life projects*.

Although with variable presence in different countries, the movements, organizations, and groups furthering these visions of a good life were part of the wide alliances that, also including political parties, unions, and NGOs, lent support and propelled the establishment of progressive governments. Although the latter subsequently adopted what, except for an emphasis on redistributive policies, was the otherwise familiar developmentalist agenda—also promoted by neoliberal governments—based on the extraction and export of commodities. Thus, as the commodity consensus consolidated, governments of all ideological persuasions began to respond to movements opposed to extractivism in very similar ways. They were deemed to be manipulated by the right, according to progressive governments, or by the left, according to conservative governments; or they were variously labeled environmental fundamentalists, primitivists, romantics, and, ultimately, unrealistic. In short, according to both kinds of government, there was no realistic alternative to extractivism to achieve the greater common good; and yet, many grassroots movements kept refusing that claim! Public controversies and conflicts between governments and those movements, as well as discussions among analysts and commentators about these events, made evident that the very definition of "politics" was at stake in that conjuncture. If, as the famous aphorism goes, politics is the art of the possible, then what had become quite explicit at the end of the first decade of the second millennium in South America was how politics itself involves a struggle to define the possible and, by extension, "the real."[8] This is the milieu in which the version of political ontology I am presenting in this book took shape, a

milieu marked by an increasingly obvious challenge to the hegemony of what I call *reasonable politics*.

Reasonable Politics under Question

It is true that when not attributing it to conspiracies of their ideological nemeses, Latin American governments often accuse opposition to extractivism of being "unrealistic" in terms of representing a dangerously naïve misreading of the geopolitical conjuncture and its realpolitik, but in the first decade of the 2000s, that was not all. According to governments, some opposition was even worse, for it represented mere beliefs that lacked any "factual" basis and conspired against the greater common good. This is what Alan Garcia (president of Peru from 2006 to 2011) had to say in 2011 about this kind of opposition:

> [What we need to do is to] defeat those absurd and pantheistic ideologies who believe the mountains are gods and the wind is god. [These beliefs] mean a return to those primitive forms of religiosity that say "do not touch that mountain because it is an Apu, because it is replete with millenarian spirit" . . . and what have you. . . . Well, if that is where we are, then let's do nothing. Not even mining . . . we return to primitive forms of animism. [To defeat that] we need more education.[9]

In other words, and to put it bluntly, opposing a mine to strengthen the position of ideological opponents (on the left or right) was execrable, and doing it in defense of local livelihoods or ecology could be naïve, but opposing it out of concerns for a "millenarian spirit" was utterly irrational.

The fact that presidents were forced, as Garcia was, to explicitly say something that just a few years before would likely have gone without saying was extremely interesting to me. Indeed, during my doctoral field research (1999–2000), on a European Union–funded development project targeting Indigenous peoples in the Paraguayan Chaco, one of the issues I problematized was precisely how stances such as these, deemed irrational and "primitive animism," were seen as "culture" and tolerated as long as they remained circumscribed to the "local communities." For instance, during that period I saw how Yshiro hunters translated the notion of sustainability, proposed by governmental agencies, into their own conceptions based on reciprocity with animal spirit owners. This "cultural understanding" did not generate controversies with wildlife managers until it became expressed in practices that the latter eventually came to consider unsustainable, at which point the managers

began to call for police coercion to keep in check the irrationality of this cultural understanding (now relabeled "erroneous belief").[10]

I observed that policing kept disputes and conflicts over cultural beliefs at the local level, not very far from the communities. Thus, questions about the limits of multiculturalism remained in the shadows. In fact, rarely was anyone (even supporters of the Yshiro communities) in a political organization, NGO, or government office in the capital city of Asunción or in Brussels (where oversight of the project rested) confronted with the need to take a public stand on the rationality (or lack thereof) of the Yshiro "beliefs." That only a few years after my fieldwork this was no longer the case, that these cultural beliefs had to be refuted as unreasonable in public forums by presidents of nation-states, indicated that something had changed in the region. It signaled cracks in the hegemony of "politics as usual," as, with my cothinkers Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar, we began to call a politics that made sense only in terms of the long-standing left and right dichotomy, or the more recent tensions between "defenders of nature" (environmentalism) and (human-centered) "promoters of development" or, within the paradigm of human development, those that see identity politics as central to fighting inequalities and those that see the latter as distractions from what is truly important (i.e., economics).[11]

Given that politics as usual would explicitly or implicitly treat whatever slipped through those cracks as irrationalities, in contrast, it positioned itself as the rational, realistic, and/or (my preferred term) reasonable politics.[12] My use of the label is descriptive, not sarcastic; in other words, it tries to capture the specific assumptions and procedures through which this kind of politics, restrictive in scope, disavows anything that exceeds it. At the core of reasonable politics sits the modernist assumption of one world and multiple perspectives on it. Operationalizing this assumption, reasonable politics turns potentially contentious differences into the expression of different perspectives on the world. Differences turned into perspectives are amenable to be ranked according to putative degrees of equivalence between perspectival representations of the world and the "factual" world itself. This ordering, in turn, makes it possible to deem some perspectives spurious, erroneous, irrelevant, or dangerous and thus dismissible, as extractivist agendas do with whatever opposes them.

While the process of attributing factuality is extremely contested, the power of reasonable politics rests precisely in its capacity to set the terms of contestation (or disagreement) as a matter of perspectives competing for factuality. This very setup also gives primacy to an epistemology predicated on the notion that knowledge is a relationship between a real world "out there" and representations of it, which in turn positions what I call the *Reason Police* in the role of arbiter

in the exercise of ranking the putative factuality of different perspectives. I use the label *Reason Police* to refer to a complex and always shifting tangle (often enshrined in the law) of modern knowledge practices (personified by Science, with a capital *S*) with accumulation practices (nowadays primarily personified by Capitalism) and control practices (personified by the State).[13] Although they are far from being coherent with each other, all of these practices find a point of connection and common justification in their avowed ultimate purpose of realizing the common good. The tangle between these practices is further strengthened by an often-implicit claim that technological prowess is a measure of the tangle's capacity to apprehend reality as it truly is. In blunt terms: "We [i.e., Reason Police] know that we know better how to achieve the common good, because we can send a man to the moon!" Faced with these claims, those who are not engaged in a contest over factuality in the terms set by "reasonable politics" (because they do not adhere to the ontoepistemic assumption of one factual world) have their claims automatically disqualified as being unreasonable or unrealistic.

The assumptions and procedures of reasonable politics are most evident in situations that resemble a typical ethnographic puzzle: how to gauge utterances of "others" that for the ethnographer appear to be manifestly counterfactual. One example would be that a rock is a powerful nonhuman person with will and intentions, when the researcher knows it is just a mineral formation. Usually, in classical ethnography, the resolution of these kinds of puzzles involves explaining to a public that shares the ethnographer's assumptions the logic whereby the culture of the locals begets such ideas. The resolution reflects the analyst's prior assumption that different cultural representations of "the rock" are at stake. Of course, smuggled into the "classic" form of addressing the puzzle is the implicit claim that the analysts get the world right because they can differentiate between the actual rock (i.e., a mineral formation) and cultural representations of it while the locals cannot. Now, while "counterfactual utterances" might be a trigger for edificant intellectual musings among ethnographers, in the wider realm of everyday lives, they can also trigger conflicts, in some of which matters of life and death are at stake. This is particularly the case when, as in many conflicts generated by extractivism, certain kinds of existence are deemed possible while others are not.

We saw these kinds of conflicts proliferate where, in the context of extractivism, defiant communities claimed that at stake were entities that were other-than-human persons with whom they had obligations while states, corporations, and even circumstantial allies could only "realistically" consider them as natural resources or components of ecosystems. What we were seeing in these

cases was that the counterfactual claims of those communities were either outright dismissed or, in the best cases, treated in a similar fashion as (classic) ethnographers have done it: they were considered cultural perspectives requiring understanding or, what is usually the same, tolerance. But even tolerance can only go so far; at a certain point, when the greater common good is at stake, a reasonable politics cannot seriously entertain what ultimately amounts to unrealistic claims. And again, it was where progressive governments ruled that the limits of tolerance showed. Scorning as unrealistic (and violently repressing) the agendas of former allies did little to stitch back together a shared sense of the real subtending state-backed notions of the common good, but it did a lot to show the cracks in the hegemony of reasonable politics. Indeed, the proliferation of conflicts turned evident and intensified coercive practices which, often in the shadows, have always been required to sustain reasonable politics.[14] And to this one must add that the Reason Police's claims to authority (for example, to say that mining is safe, or that a certain species should not be hunted) began to ring hollow for many who would say, "You may be able to send a man to the moon, but you are wrecking the planet to do it. Why should we trust you?" The genie was out of the bottle, and there was no putting it back in.

For my cothinkers and I, these conflicts evidently posed a challenge that was simultaneously conceptual and political. In effect, those conflicts that involved entities that emerged as "natural" (resources or environments) through some practices but also as other-than-human persons through others exceeded the established conceptual repertoires of political economy, political ecology, and/or identity politics, which, sharing in the same ontoepistemic assumption as reasonable politics (i.e., one world and multiple perspectives on it), participated in and fed into its dynamics. The question for us was: How could analysis remain faithful to the politico-conceptual disruption that transpired in those conflicts that challenged reasonable politics, along with its associated critical repertoire? In exploring the question, we found in material-semiotics versions of science and technology studies (STS) and in strands of the ontological turn in anthropology some concepts useful to convey to audiences more attuned to that established critical repertoire, the insights that insinuated themselves to us through colaboring with our nonacademic cothinkers in the field.[15] Let's look to these concepts.

The Pluriverse and Cosmopolitics

A material-semiotics version of STS was the first body of scholarship I encountered that offered me a conceptual language to articulate, for audiences more attuned with a critical repertoire connected to reasonable politics, the

radically different "realities" that I experienced in the field.[16] In effect, through its treatment of reality as the always emergent self-enactment of heterogeneous assemblages—a treatment that strongly resonated with the practices I encountered in my work with the Yshiro—material semiotics offers a way to gain distance from the basic assumption upon which reasonable politics pivots—namely, that the facts of reality are transcendent and that they supply a standard against which different human perspectives can be gauged.[17]

The conception of an always emergent reality has been greatly informed by what transpires in the sites where scholars study scientific practices. These are locations of initial ontological uncertainty, sites defined by concerns or issues that are contoured by the presence of actants—human and nonhuman agencies—which, if they are able to articulate successfully, might become a "fact." Bruno Latour provided a paradigmatic example of the emergent quality of facts in his study of Louis Pasteur's microbes. There, he showed that before everything articulated successfully into the fact "microbes," there was a "matter of concern," an issue, an undefined "thing," that convoked an assembly composed of Pasteur, his collaborators, the social hygienist movement and their detractors, and also of instruments, theories, yeast, and so on.[18] The trajectory of a "thing" from being a matter of concern to slowly emerging as a matter of fact (i.e., a stabilized and definite entity) is propelled through a process of mutual articulation or translation of the multiple (and potentially contentious) actants in the assembly.[19] To this, Annemarie Mol added a further crucial caveat by showing that reality is not only emergent but also multiple, always.[20] In effect, given that reality is done in practices and practices differ, there are always slightly different but coexistent versions of the reality/fact that get realized in practice at a given moment. This does not mean there are many discrete self-contained realities, for the point is that reality is *multiple*—more than one but less than many.

With these elements, material semiotics deactivates the basic premise of reasonable politics—a transcendent and already existing "factual world"—and its authority to adjudicate who and what can be part of engaging the fundamental political question of how we can live together well in terms of adherence to this particular version of factuality. Thus, in contrast to a mode of political critique that hinges upon what we could call "realist factuality" to adjudicate which facts are fabricated (and thus are untrue) and which ones are actually "true" (i.e., not "made"), the point of material-semiotics analyses showing how things are assembled or enacted is not to disavow their reality but rather to show (and participate in) how they become real (or can be *de*realized) through the layering and knotting of multiple concerns.[21] In short, where reasonable politics

stands for a politics of hierarchically articulated perspectives on an already existing factual world, material semiotics enables a politics of worlding—that is, a politics concerned with the processes through which a world (multiple) is brought into existence. As Latour expresses it, no longer being about articulating different (human) perspectives on an already existing world, politics becomes "something entirely different . . . it is the building of the cosmos in which everyone lives, the progressive composition of the common world. . . . Hence the excellent name Isabelle Stengers has proposed to give to the whole enterprise, that of cosmopolitics."[22]

Although Isabelle Stengers had a very particular purpose when she coined it, "cosmopolitics" has become a widely used term—in no small measure through its popularization by Latour—to refer to a politics of worlding.[23] In this sense, cosmopolitics connects with the idea of the pluriverse—a sea of indiscernible multiplicity, a "chaosmos"—operating as the immanent substratum for politics.[24] Thus, politics, redefined as cosmopolitics, can be understood at its most basic level, and against this chaosmic background, as "group formation," to use Latour's terms—that is, as the processes by which existents are formed, made discernible, and take place through their intra-actions.[25]

Now, the very diversity of practices through which existents emerge implies the possibility that they might also group in clusters, forming diverse collectives—that is, self-differentiating associations of existents.[26] These collectives would each enact a different form of politics (understood as the arts of gathering and holding collectives together), expressing their own unique modes of existence, having their own spokespersons, and so on. In this respect, cosmopolitics (and the related idea of the pluriverse) resonates with recent efforts, often subsumed under the label of the "ontological turn in anthropology," to grapple with the ethnographic puzzle of counterfactual utterances without taking modern ontological assumptions for granted, as classical ethnographies did. The underlying premise in these efforts is that, far from signaling that the ethnographers and their interlocutors have different perspectives on a common world, the ethnographic puzzle makes evident that at stake in it are different ontologies or worlds.

Although authors put different emphases on them, a few important points follow from the premise of multiple ontologies. First, the pluriverse here is not just the immanent substratum on which politics operates to shape a cosmos, but a multiplicity that is also composed of self-actualizing collectives or worlds with their own cosmos. (Notice that the terms *worlds*, *ontologies*, *collectives*, and *cosmoses* begin to align as synonyms with slightly different descriptive emphases.) Second, in principle (albeit not in practice, as we will soon see), no

collective (including the analyst's) has primacy qua frame of reference, for they are irreducible to one another. And third, the articulations between collectives are fraught with existential risks (i.e., they change them), which are unavoidable, for it is precisely through them that collectives (and the existents that compose them) emerge and take place as such.

For many commentators and critics, talk of the pluriverse, multiple ontologies, worlds, or collectives evokes the image of self-contained units that might be in contact with (or bounce against) each other like billiard balls but are not intrinsically entangled; and along with such an image come concerns about the crushing effect relativism has on critique.[27] However, this image is way off the mark concerning what the notion of pluriverse seeks to convey. With the appropriate caveats and a few jumps of the imagination, the well-known illustration in figure 1 provides a better approximation to begin grasping the shape this concept acquires when jointly inspired by the ideas discussed above.

FIGURE 1. The bird/rabbit illusion evokes the concept of equivocation. Unknown artist, "Kaninchen und Ente," from the October 23, 1892, issue of *Fliegende Blätter*.

Here we have a bird looking to the left and a rabbit looking to the right—more than one, but less than many. There is partial co-occurrence of the bird and the rabbit in their heads, but the difference is not canceled; the beak of the bird is the ears of the rabbit, the face of the rabbit is the back of the head of the bird, and we can imagine that the parts of their bodies not appearing in the picture do not coincide in time and space as the head(s) do(es). Let the rabbit and the bird stand for different collectives and the practices that world them. In part, they are in the same spatiotemporal location, and they share common traces in the drawing, but those very same traces also articulate them as divergent; they are not the same. And yet, they do not necessarily cancel each other.

Now, if we imagine a multiplication of figures that also partially co-occur with each other (perhaps with the head of one coinciding through similar articulations with the tail of another, which is the feet of yet another, and so on) we begin to get closer to the image of a pluriverse as a tangle of collectives (and existents). Of course, aside from delineating just two figures, another limitation here is that the picture is static. Collectives (as well as the existents that compose them) are dynamic and always emergent; their contours and articulations are always shifting, although partial and transitory stabilizations also occur. So, over the picture, we need to imaginatively overlay not only a more "multiple" multiplicity but also dynamism—and thus, at least mentally, convert into progressive-tense verbs (i.e., "ing") the nouns we use to describe those collectives. They are worlds insofar as they are constantly worlding themselves. We also need another, and quite crucial, imaginative jump: that we are not outside the figure looking in; rather, we are fully immersed in it. This jump not only removes the privilege of our frame of reference (an external view of the whole) but also situates our analytical practices right alongside all other practices—that is, as practices of worlding that configure and reconfigure the shape of this entanglement we are calling *pluriverse*.[28]

Having an initial image of the pluriverse at hand, we can now move on to look a little into its dynamics. I am interested in driving your attention toward the range of possible articulations one could expect between the bird and the rabbit, especially how certain asymmetries might play out in them and, more generally, in cosmopolitics. To address these issues, it is useful to turn to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's concept of equivocation.

What Makes the Pluriverse Go Round

Equivocation refers to those situations where interlocutors fail to understand that while using the same term, they are referring to different things. Imagine we are discussing how well the drawing captures the character of the animal portrayed, but you mean the bird and I mean the rabbit, and we do not know we are not talking about the same thing. This is an equivocation. Now, against a background of multiple realities in the making, Viveiros de Castro's concept of equivocation describes the basic mode of articulation that constitutes existents and collectives and, by extension, the pluriverse.[29] In effect, far from being errors that need to be fixed, equivocations are constitutive of the pluriverse; they allow for the very possibility of multiplicity, for the possibility that the rabbit *be also* the bird. And given there is no common referent (a single world out there), different collectives/interlocutors are never referring to exactly the same thing. This does not imply the impossibility of communication. But instead

of being understood as the less distorted possible transfer of stable meaning, communication must be understood as a *working* translation, a translation whose "veracity" is assessed in terms not of accuracy (i.e., a meaning remaining self-identical to its reference while moving) but of efficacy (i.e., it works for the articulated parties). We know that a translation is good only insofar as it works (as articulation).[30] This notion of translation as a working articulation is central to material semiotics' understanding of how realities realize themselves out of chaosmos and to political ontology's own conception of cosmopolitics.

In material semiotics, translations make possible the circulation of what, for lack of a better word, I will call the *vital energy* that moves through and articulates the multiplicities that compose collectives and existents, giving them, well, existence.[31] The working articulations/translations that enable circulation (keep this term in mind!) are what hold existents (and collectives) together as such. When the articulations fail or change, so do the circulations from which existents and collectives emerge, which is tantamount to saying that the existents and collectives also change, or disappear. From a political ontology that embraces the proposition of multiple realities as outlined here, whether different collectives can relate or communicate with each other is never in question—obviously, they can; their very existence attests to the fact that they are always already related and communicated. What is in question is the quality of their articulations as translations and what effects these have in their ways of being. Do these articulations work? How? To what extent? With what results? Are the bird and the rabbit still there as they translate each other? For these questions to remain at the forefront, one must never forget the lack of equivalence at stake in a translation, or, following Viveiros de Castro, one must control the equivocation inherent to translation.

Throughout the book, I will often reinvoke the image of the rabbit/bird to show how political ontology works through situations in which equivocations are at stake. But for this to work well, I need to come back to my point that the concept of equivocation allows us to get a sense of the various possible articulations between worldings and how certain asymmetries might play out in cosmopolitics. Let's begin by pointing out that sometimes (most times) equivocations go unnoticed; the bird and the rabbit might go on, blissfully unaware of each other. Sometimes, the equivocation is productive; the practices of one enhance the other and vice versa. It is when practices interrupt each other that attention to the equivocation becomes crucial, for how the interruption is addressed will yield a response that enhances the pluriverse or one that denies it, as reasonable politics does. Moreover, whether the interruption is even registered by one or more of the parties involved depends on the degree of asymmetry that

the equivocation might harbor. Collective A might be more or less forcefully attuned to and aware of the presence of collective B, but not the other way around. For example, let's say that the rabbit is the "modern collective"—that is, a collective that emerges from, among other things, regularly enacting the modernist assumption that there is only one factual world and various more or less accurate perspectives on it. Now, the rabbit decides it can make better use of its ears and extracts them without even realizing that, at the same time, it is removing the bird's beak and probably killing it. Let's say the ears are mountains, or animals, or natural resources in the rabbit's world, but they are also ancestors or powerful and respected nonhuman persons in the bird's world— that is, they are existents without which it might be difficult, if not impossible, for that collective to live a livable life. The bird therefore tries to defend itself. The rabbit may hear the complaints of the bird but will dismiss them, for in the modern collective of reasonable politics, of one reality and one single world, ears are ears, they cannot also be beaks, and even less can there be bird where there is only rabbit. And while the rabbit might never fully evacuate from its constitution that which exceeds it (recall that multiplicity is inherent to all existents), it might indeed progressively render the bird (as well as other collectives) invisible, inviable, and practically inexistent, all of which implies that the pluriverse becomes a less plausible proposition.

Political ontology emerged as a militant project precisely at the historical moment when extractivism, through its effects, made it clear that the reasonable politics that sustains it is constantly at war against the plausibility of the pluriverse. It is true that even within the space of reasonable politics there are strong currents of opposition to extractivism, and these are very important, as they make possible alliances that, even if not intentionally, keep open some spaces for the multiplicity of the pluriverse to self-realize. Yet, these spaces are often like leftovers from the operations of reasonable politics; they are left to be as long as they do not interfere with what is important and urgent. In this context, and as I have put it with my colleague Marisol de la Cadena, political ontology wants to actively "enable political thought and practice beyond the onto-epistemic limits of modern politics and what its practice allows."[32] To do this, political ontology embraces the notion of cosmopolitics, along with its proposal of a pluriverse of divergent existents and collectives that are constantly worlding themselves (through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions) as part of the basic setup to conceive politics and its fundamental question of how to live together well.

As indicated before, from this standpoint, politics denotes the practices through which, with varying degrees of consistency and stability, existents

and collectives gather and hold themselves together (or world themselves) as they intra-act with each other. Political ontology thus simultaneously stands for a reworking of what we imagine politics to entail, for a field of study and intervention (i.e., that power-charged terrain of entangled worldings and their dynamics), and for a modality of critical analysis that is permanently attentive to its own effects as a worlding practice. In this last sense, the use of the singular word *ontology* is not meant as a universalist claim but rather signals that the ontological assumption (i.e., a pluriverse of constantly emerging existents) that grounds this critical analytical practice is but one possibility. The word *political* then also advisedly signals a particular intention that guides the analysis as an intervention: to simultaneously open up spaces for the realization of the pluriverse and disrupt the processes through which reasonable politics closes them off. Thus, while critics and commentators usually situate it along a general theoretical turn to ontology in social sciences, political ontology is fundamentally a pragmatic proposition regarding how to go about disrupting reasonable politics' attempts to cancel expressions of the pluriversal.[33] In this way, the *political* doubles back on the *ontology*, for among other things, the analytical intervention seeks to enact its own ground. Of course, more could be said about the meaning of these two words and the work they can do together, but that is a task that transcends my intentions here.[34] For now, I think we have enough conceptual elements to move on to discuss how the political ontology I will try to articulate in this book comes to conceive the problematic that plays the role of guiding thread in it—that is, the dynamics between emplacement and displacement in grounding infrastructures.

Grounding Infrastructures

A central tenet of political ontology is that through their intrarelations, existents and collectives world themselves or, better, *take place*. Taking place means both that existents and collectives occur—*they are the practices that bring them into being*—and that such occurrences have spatial effects; they do themselves as places. I use the term *grounding* to direct attention to these spatial effects. I thus begin with the following proposition: all collectives are grounded, but they are not grounded in the same way. The words *displacement* and *emplacement* are precisely intended to distinguish between different ways of grounding (or of taking place). What I call *grounding infrastructures* are (so to speak) the empirical tip of the thread we can pull from to characterize those ways of grounding. Let's begin then with what I mean by infrastructures.

In the introduction to a volume dedicated to the topic, Kregg Hetherington reminds us that the term *infrastructure* always indexes an interpretive tactic, an analytic moment of figure and ground reversal, in which what initially appears as the background is brought to the foreground to show its importance (if not its necessity) to that which initially appeared as the important "action."[35] Let me emphasize what I suggested in my introductory remarks by using the term *infrastructures* to refer to such diverse things as technologies and visions of the good life; and this is that anything—a communication system, a hydroelectric dam, a development project, a microchip, a person, a story, a concept, a political imagination, an action—can be seen as an infrastructure for something else, for the key intent in using the term is to make evident the importance of the former for the latter. In this book, then, the phrase "infrastructures of" operates as an index to direct attention to the role that the "thing" treated as such plays in the "important action" that concerns me—that is, diverging forms of grounding. Depending on the context, though, and to keep with the flow of an idea, sometimes I use the term *practices* instead of *infrastructure* to alternatively stress the dynamism of the thing under analysis or remind readers that, despite their commonsensical association with an assumed immateriality, terms such as *political imaginations* or *visions of a good life* are thoroughly material references. Indeed, stressing the absolute continuity between what is commonsensically distinguished as material and immaterial is central to my use of the term *infrastructure*. One further point about this use: it involves, above anything else, *the analytical choice to foreground one*—and certainly not the most important or intended—*among the many possible affordances* a thing offers. This multiplicity of affordances, which is a feature of any existent qua infrastructure for other existents, has very important consequences to which I will return soon.

Since *emplacement* and *displacement* are the terms that I mobilize to differentiate grounding infrastructures, it is convenient to make explicit how I use a concept at the center of both, that is, *place*. I will not go over the very large body of literature that has critically discussed this concept's associations with modern binaries; rather, I put my use of the term in direct connection with the notion of a pluriverse of constantly self-realizing existents and collectives that I discussed in the previous section. In this vein, *place* primarily refers to the spatiotemporal point where the vital trajectories of a multiplicity of existents or, better, the relations that compose them, meet.[36]

The way I imagine this is as a particular spatiotemporal point of encounter of several threads in a textile. The spatiotemporal quality of place can be

visualized by conceiving the threads that compose it as extending horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, the threads that meet in "this place" extend to and participate in configuring other places "somewhere else"; vertically, the threads extend to the somewhen else (previously existing or potentially future configurations) of the place in question. The play between both is unavoidable; new threads coming into the place must deal with, and will reconfigure, the already existing weft of the textile we call "this place."[37] And of course, what a "particular point of encounter" (or place) to which we are paying attention includes (or how far it extends) will vary depending on the scope of our focus. Our scope might delineate a particular existent or a collective of them, but in either case, they will be composed of the threads that (in meeting one another) compose both. The issue to keep in mind is that, regardless of the scope of our focus, while the threads composing a place might extend (spatiotemporally) beyond the one we are paying attention to, the specific quality of their knotting *in that particular spatiotemporal point* makes each place unique and unrepeatable.

With this notion of place in mind, I contend that the manner in which different collectives (and existents) grapple with the specific and unique multiplicity of the places they are worlding themselves as/in/through/with provides a benchmark to differentiate between ways of grounding or, what is the same, between ways of articulating the circulation of "vital energy" (which moves through the chaosmic multiplicities of the pluriverse) into existents, collectives, and/or places. In this context, *displacement* and *emplacement* designate contrasting forms that this circulation can adopt. When the specific multiplicities of a place appear as a problem that (*existents analytically treated as*) grounding infrastructures must overcome as expeditiously as possible, circulation manifests as what I call *displacement*; when those specificities appear as a condition that grounding infrastructures must carefully cultivate, circulation manifests as what I call *emplacement*.

Displacement and emplacement designate two maximally contrasting possibilities within a spectrum of ways of grounding that would not necessarily fully fall into either. It is worth stressing the point to make sure it is clear: I am not saying that the multiple ways in which existents and collectives ground themselves can be reduced to either displacement or emplacement. What I sustain is that ways of grounding can be *fruitfully characterized in relation to these contrasting points of reference*; and the contrast hinges on the orientation that grounding infrastructures show toward either overriding or cultivating the specificity of places. This is emphatically not a binary contrast where all grounding infrastructures are defined as either one or the other (o is defined

as not 1 and vice versa). Assigning an orientation to grounding infrastructures *is never about absolutes or essences*; *it is always about contrasting degrees of inclination* within a whole spectrum of possibilities.[38] Thus, the labeling of displacement and emplacement is always relative within a comparison; to label a grounding infrastructure as *of displacement* is to say, "This infrastructure is more oriented toward displacement than these other infrastructures, which are (comparatively) more oriented toward emplacement."

These clarifications connect with an important point I promised to return to: that a multiplicity of affordances is a feature of any existent qua infrastructure for other existents. The implication is that, aside from other possible roles it may have, in its role as grounding infrastructure, a thing can be equivocal. In effect, as the bird/rabbit image, a grounding infrastructure might be both of displacement and of emplacement. Then, "if grounding infrastructures can both be of displacement and emplacement," you might be wondering, "how can one label some as either?" Or to put it in terms of my omnipresent example, How does contrast allow calling the equivocal drawing either rabbit or bird? I would say, you can't; the illustration is known as the rabbit-bird illusion precisely because of this. Indeed, in the drawing we have a good illustration of what we may call a balanced equivocation, but with the modification of some traces, and without completely eliminating the bird, we could make it more difficult to see it so that what systematically comes into view first would be the rabbit. Then, we could say that the drawing is oriented in that direction. The point I am trying to make is that, while in many cases a grounding infrastructure might approach the perfect equivocal balance of the drawing, in many other cases, the dominant orientation toward displacement or emplacement can be discerned if we pay attention to what kind of effort predominates in it. Let's explore the point through an example, simplified to its bare bones for heuristics purposes.

We can agree that a railway's intention, or, better yet, its imperative, is displacement—that is, the smooth and controlled circulation of "things." Certainly, the railway affords many other possibilities and might play the role of infrastructure for many other "actions." For instance, in a given place, the train station might become a refuge for squatters (perhaps themselves displaced from their homes to make way for the railway), kids from around might use the tracks to flatten coins when the locomotives pass over them, and termites might proliferate by burrowing in the wooden beams that support the tracks. But these possibilities will be allowed to unfold in practice only as long as they don't interfere with the functioning of the railway. Squatters will be chased, barriers to keep kids away will be erected, and beams will be fumigated as many times as needed to protect the railway's intention. It is precisely the effort put

into controlling the potentially disruptive multiplicity constituting the places where the railway is grounded that gives away its orientation as grounding infrastructure. In this sense, I would consider as predominantly oriented to displacement an infrastructure that, in order to get on with the imperative of displacement, is grounded with *as little consideration as possible* for the specificity of a place and constantly seeks to contain expressions of the place's multiplicity that might disrupt displacement.

However, it is important to stress that the orientation of a grounding infrastructure is never completely *un*equivocal. Indeed, while in the case of the railway, the multiplicity of places may appear as a problem to be controlled, it cannot be completely disregarded. For example, train cars need to be properly fitted to the temperatures of the area they operate in or else they might not allow the "smooth displacement" of certain things. The bottom line is that regardless of the intensity of their orientation toward displacement, grounding infrastructures must always pay some form of attention to the specific multiplicity that constitutes a place, even if only to overcome it. But here comes the rub: this attention might become so intense that it starts turning into cultivation. Let's imagine for a moment that the needs and desires of the "locals" (i.e., the squatters, the playful kids, and the termites) become an important concern and actions are taken to adapt the infrastructure to somehow serve them too. In such a scenario the railway's imperative to displacement might become tempered, or, depending on the intensity of the "new concern," the imperative might even be so thoroughly thwarted that the (old) railway ceases to be an infrastructure of displacement to become one of emplacement. Thus, with the qualifier *of emplacement*, I am pointing to another imperative or intention that might orient, in variable degrees, a grounding infrastructure. Hence, I would see a given infrastructure as oriented to emplacement when it pays careful attention to and nurtures the complex array of existing relations that compose a place's multiplicity, to the point that it moves in the direction of overriding or at least containing the imperative of displacement.

There is one last point implied by our simplified example that needs to be emphasized. The equivocality of emplacement and displacement in grounding infrastructures is dynamic; the dominance of either orientation depends on a constant effort, and it can shift. With this, I close a first characterization of displacement and emplacement and their dynamics in grounding infrastructures, which, while admittedly schematic, I hope provides the minimal foundations to unfold the next proposition at the basis of the book's conceptual armature: that similar dynamics transpire within and between collectives in general.

Collectives as Infrastructures of Themselves

Moving from a particular infrastructure, like the railway, to "collectives in general" may sound as an unwarranted jump, unless we take into consideration that infrastructures form assemblages that are recursive and, thus, end up becoming infrastructures for the very worlds they are grounded in/through/as. Hetherington, in the work I mentioned before, leads us to this insight when he points out that the phenomena alluded to with the term *Anthropocene* have rendered obsolete the modern distinction between (natural) environment and (cultural) infrastructure because "it is our infrastructures of global transportation and consumption that produce the anthropocenic environment on which infrastructures are built. Following that logic, we would have to say that carbon is the infrastructure of the infrastructure of carbon."[39]

The takeaway is that if we are not beholden by the distinction between the natural and the cultural (and, I will add, the material and the immaterial), it is possible to see that infrastructures can, in assemblages, operate recursively to sustain the very collective arrangement that makes them what they are. The railway example is, again, illustrative in this regard. Once jumpstarted from previous (assemblages of) infrastructures, the railway enables the increasing extraction, circulation, and production of the very components (from iron to engineers) it requires to exist and expand into larger rounds of extraction, circulation, and production. Thus, even if not its only purpose, the railway becomes an infrastructure for itself and for other infrastructures that, in turn, further potentiate it. If we expand our focus and see the railway as one element in an assemblage of mutually reinforcing infrastructures (including visions of a good life, like those associated with extractivism, for instance), we get a glimpse of how an assemblage of grounding infrastructures can go on giving shape to a collective. Put in other words, since everything that composes a collective plays, in recursive loops, the role of infrastructure for everything else, collectives can be seen as infrastructures of themselves. I contend that as infrastructures of/for themselves, collectives can also be characterized, and compared, through their relative orientation toward one or another of the maximally contrasting poles of displacement and emplacement—that is, collectives might be (comparatively speaking) oriented more toward either displacement or emplacement.

You might object that, in contrast to the railway's imperative of displacement, which is somehow inscribed in its very design, collectives are not so clearly marked by a particular imperative that would incline them in one or another direction. To this I will say, true, collectives have no imperative in the sense

that something purposely designed might have, but one can call "imperative," a pattern that regularly emerges from otherwise unique articulations between existents or infrastructures that have their own orientations and purposes. For example, by observing the frontiers of extractivism, where the modern collective most visibly manifests its expansionism, it is possible to discern how a variety of infrastructures (e.g., laws, enforcing agencies, communication networks, markets, and so on) work in concert, overrunning infrastructures of emplacement in ways that turn tangles of existents—that are only *with* each other—into displaceable commodities (more infrastructures).[40] These commodities can then be circulated to feed into the production of goods and services avowedly required to fulfill a specifically defined notion of the common good (another infrastructure). The latter, of course, implies a certain vision of the good life that requires, and justifies, further rounds of extraction, circulation, and expansion of the infrastructures that make it possible. As the articulations within and between infrastructures that make up the collective consistently privilege displacement, this becomes a regular and ever more entrenched pattern with a tendency to perpetuate the arrangement that produces it, both by becoming an obligatory point of passage and by precluding as best as possible alternative ones.[41] And as they continue to expand, these infrastructures go on constituting the modern collective in a way that is strongly oriented to displacement, not the least because interferences with that pattern/intention (from modes of being with place, for instance) are curtailed.

The modern collective's distinctive pattern of displacement is a familiar target of various critiques, albeit most commonly this is presented in terms of capitalism's voracity and expansionism through dispossession, which is of course part of what I am getting at. However, I want to also signal that this distinctive pattern of displacement produces an effect that is key to understanding what is gained from gauging the equivocal relations between collectives in terms of the dynamic between emplacement and displacement—namely, the universal effect, or what John Law calls the "one-world world."[42] The concept of a one-world world refers to the dominant understanding and experience that we live in one and only one world, reality, or universe. Endlessly being done and propped in "daily practices" that express the modernist metaphysical assumption of a transcendent world or reality out there and multiple perspectives on it, this understanding and experience is central to the distinctive character of the modern collective's pattern of displacement. In fact, for this metaphysics' claim to universality to be plausible and effective, its infrastructures of displacement must be constantly extended.[43]

As Latour famously argued, what moderns conceive of as universal can be seen (not by chance, I would say) as a railway, a network that is both global (because it extends beyond specific places) but also local (because the stations, the rails, and so on are at every step of the way grounded in specific places).[44] Like the railway, the universal might go far but is not actually everywhere; even a dense railway network leaves gaps between its track lines. Someone may object that there are some solidly established universals that, like gravitation, do not show such gaps; they are the same everywhere. Latour would retort that if, in material-semiotics fashion, we keep a focus on practices, even well-established universals such as "gravitation" can be equated to "frozen fish: the cold chain that keeps them fresh must not be interrupted however briefly." From such a stance, it becomes possible to see that

> the universal in networks produces the same effects as the absolute universal, but it no longer has the same fantastic [i.e., transcendent] causes. It is possible to *verify gravitation "everywhere," but at the price of the relative extension of the networks* for measuring and interpreting. . . . Try to verify the tiniest fact, the most trivial law, the humblest constant, without subscribing to the multiple metrological networks, to laboratories and instruments. The Pythagorean theorem and Planck's constant spread into schools and rockets, machines and instruments, but they do not exit from their worlds any more than the Achuar leave their villages.[45]

The emphasized segment in the quote is decisive. Barred fantastic causes, for a universal to be plausible as such, to appear as if it is everywhere, the infrastructures that ground it must be constantly extended. This means that the modern collective enacts a plausible universal effect or one-world world in a form analogous to the railway networks associated with extractivism, constantly displacing things in a way that further enhances its own capacity to expand the entire assemblage, over and over again. In this way, displacement becomes a defining imperative (or pattern) of the specificity or character of this collective. Thus, when I speak of displacement as the imperative that characterizes the modern collective qua infrastructure of itself, the term synthesizes the self-propelling circular relation between the generation, the accumulation, and the controlled circulation of displaceable things to feed endless rounds of extension. This is displacement at its most intense, where the various resonances of the word suitably describe a central feature of the way in which the modern collective grounds itself. In effect, the word *displacement* is associated with *deracination*, *dislodgment*, *supplantation*, and *disarticulation*, all terms that describe what happens

to whatever comes in the way of this collective's form of grounding or taking place. Indeed, in the same fashion as the railway will try to capture, contain, and/or destroy those expressions of (pluriversal) multiplicity that, giving specificity to the places it is being grounded in or through, might directly challenge its purpose, so does the modern collective with whatever threatens to disrupt the dynamic that renders it universal-like—that is, whatever disrupts displacement. This constant work of suppressing and/or containing and controlling expressions of pluriversal multiplicity in a way that protects and props up displacement and its universal effect is coloniality in its most basic form.[46]

This mode of extending infrastructures of displacement has become exceedingly efficient at overrunning forms of emplacement or, in more general terms, the specificity of places. There are obvious consequences to this—namely, the cascading crises at the center of contemporary debates about "momentous challenges." But I am interested in another consequence, which, as I intend to show in the book, might appear tangential but is central to these challenges: it has become harder to clearly spot a significant orientation toward emplacement in grounding infrastructures anywhere. A quick example.

Hunting has always been a very important practice or infrastructure that constitutes the Yshiro with their place as a collective. Before the Chaco region (where their communities are located) was colonized by various agents of modernization, hunting as a livelihood was informed by standing technologies, knowledge of the entities being hunted, the role of their spirit owners, prescriptions about the proper treatment of remains, protocols for meat sharing, and so on. These were all infrastructures quite specific to that place—that is, they articulated the emplacement imperative that gave shape to the collective the Yshiro were with. In contrast, nowadays, hunting practices are strongly shaped by the imperative of displacement. For example, most hunting efforts are today directed mainly at species that, for reasons ranging from market demands to technologies of transportation, are profitable within a cash-generating circuit of commercialization. In these circuits, the Yshiro can sell the product of the hunt to acquire goods that, manufactured in faraway places, have become essential to sustain the collective they are with, which is now partially shaped by those very same infrastructures of commercialization and displacement! This does not mean that the imperative of emplacement plays no role in hunting, but clearly, it is no longer as discernible as such.[47] Of course, such imperative is even less discernible in an activity such as teaching in the school of the community, not to speak of the activities a migrant Yshiro to the capital city of Asunción does to sustain herself.

Let me stress again that I am not speaking of purity here but of intensity: the more intensely entangled with and inflected by the imperative of displacement that grounding infrastructures become, the less perceptible an orientation to emplacement turns out to be, and this is extensive to something I call *emplaced collectives*.

A Wager to Shift the Ground from Where We "See"
Momentous Challenges

The concept of emplaced collectives is the lynchpin of the empirically grounded wager I put forward in this book. I will devote the next chapter to explaining what this concept entails. For now, suffice it to simply say this: emplaced collectives are what emerge when the imperative of emplacement most intensely dominates in grounding infrastructures; in this sense, they offer the strongest possible contrast to the dominance of displacement and its empirical manifestation in the modern collective. I say that the concept of emplaced collectives is the lynchpin of a wager because it names a kind of collective that has become barely perceptible, and for many has even become implausible, due to the efficacy of the modern collective's universal effect. To unpack the point, I return to something I said before about the bird/rabbit image.

I pointed out that modifying a few traces in the drawing could make it harder to see the bird and at the same time make the rabbit what systematically appears first. Something of the sort happens as a consequence of the coloniality inherent to the modern collective's way of grounding. Its relentless domestication or suppression of that which, while being entangled with it, exceeds and potentially challenges it, makes it harder to see, hear, sense, or feel anything but its own infrastructures of displacement. For example, amid the destruction of forests brought about by the expansion of agribusiness in the Yshiro territory, the productivity of hunting (and fishing and gathering, for that matter) has declined enormously. As we will see later, this has led some Yshiro to see as a solution that their children be better schooled so that they can get jobs in agribusiness or the state apparatus or become professionals practicing in the capital city of Asunción. In other words, the infrastructures of displacement, which through their expansion challenge the Yshiro's way of being with place, appear for many as the primary resources to meet these challenges. And let us not lose sight of the fact that these infrastructures of displacement include not only technologies and visions of the good life but also supposedly universal categories such as "nature," "culture," "human," "nonhuman," and the like that

are embedded in both and in many other infrastructures of displacement that appear as life jackets amid the present challenges. Infrastructures of infrastructures of infrastructures that become enrolled in that circular motion whereby the problems generated by the dominance of displacement in grounding infrastructures call forth more infrastructures of displacement, enhancing thus the efficacy of the universal effect.

While I agree with many analysts' insistence that we do not confuse the universal effect with plain universality, I would say it is also important not to confuse the word *effect* with artifice or illusion. The universal effect has indeed very practical consequences, and a significant one is that it limits what existents (and the collectives they constitute or might constitute) can do (and imagine) in terms of grounding themselves as (or taking) place in the face of momentous challenges. To put it in other words, one consequence of the universal effect is that political imaginations are pulled into becoming infrastructures of displacement as well. In this context, my wager is that tracing the contours of emplaced collectives' ways of being grounded against the grain of the universal effect— and its regime of (in)visibilities, (in)audibilities, and (im)perceptibilities— offers two kinds of payback. First, it offers a ground from which, in the face of momentous challenges, the fundamental political question can be staged in a way that makes room for emplacement. Second, it provides important clues about the trials that any attempt to cultivate and enact such a political imagination will have to go through. The wager and its potential payoff depend on turning the tension between the enormous efficacy of the universal effect and its nonuniversality into a productive gap from within which forms of grounding less intensely inflected by displacement might be imagined and enacted. To explain this, I need to return briefly to my discussion about changing the image so that the rabbit becomes what systematically comes into view first.

What comes first into view is, of course, a function not simply of what (supposedly) "is there" (in the drawing or else) but also of the relation between the "thing" and the standpoint doing the seeing. Let me put it this way: the rabbit world might make it very hard for many to see the bird's beak when looking at the picture, but it would take an enormous amount of colonizing work to make the bird not feel the beak any longer, and as long as the bird can feel it (and act in consequence), the possibility exists that others might come to sense it too, albeit not in exactly the same way as the bird does. This possibility is what gives political ontology a chance—first to perceive a tension, then to deny the "universal effect" as anything other than a pattern emerging from the dominance of infrastructures of displacement, and finally to begin to formulate the fundamental political question and the challenges it faces in

the present from a different standpoint, one that is neither the bird's nor the rabbit's and yet is not external to them either. Indeed, while the possibility of "seeing" both the bird and the rabbit in the drawing (and imagining a possible dynamic between them) depends on there being a third term to this relation, the standpoint of the viewer, we must remember my proviso that this standpoint is inside the drawing, not outside it. This standpoint is clearly not one from which the whole is seen but rather one as situated, partial, entangled, *and interested* as those of the rabbit and the bird can be.

Although my political ontology is premised on an effort to refuse the invisibilities associated with the modern collective's universal effect, the standpoint it seeks to enact is emphatically not that of the emplaced collectives the figure of the bird stands for in my example. But then where is this standpoint grounded? Well, laying down these grounds is part of this book's experiment, and it begins with the effort to analytically extricate emplaced collectives from the invisibilities generated by the universal or one-world world effect with which they are entangled and in tension. This is what I mean by turning the tension between the universal effect and its nonuniversality into a productive gap. The idea is to analytically generate the maximum possible contrast between the poles of displacement and emplacement (each of which is associated with the universal effect and its nonuniversality, respectively) so that little considered or directly ignored political imaginations can enter the scene. The space created between the poles is also the ground from which I can then proceed to tease out clues about the trials that a politics oriented toward emplacement might have to face.

Let me resort again to the bird/rabbit image to trace in broad strokes what I intend to do, albeit with the caveat that, in principle, we do not even know what we are seeing in the drawing. In this sense, the image stands for the actual messiness of the way in which collectives (and existents) take place, thoroughly entangled with each other (and this includes us!). To get our bearings through this messiness, I will "stretch" the image in opposite directions so that two clearly distinguished figures become visible at the same time; something like this (see figure 2).

Obviously, I am manipulating the image, distorting it, perhaps even caricaturing it, to make patent the bird and the rabbit figures one could *possibly* see in it—and I stress "possibly" because if I were to distort the image in other directions perhaps other figures would appear, a point to which I will return soon. Now, imagine that you do not know what either a bird or a rabbit is. In that case, for my stretching to show you what I want you to see, I would first need to characterize them, on their own and/or through their intensified contrast,
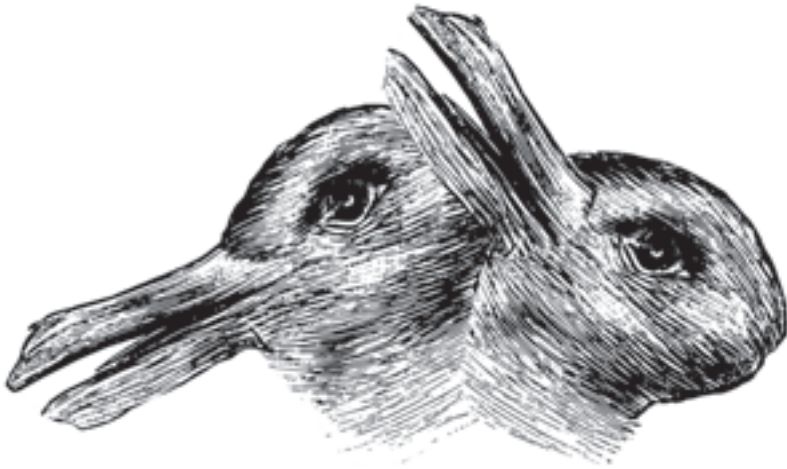
FIGURE 2. Rendering visible, on their own, collectives that are always already entangled. Adapted from "Kaninchen und Ende."

even if actually in the image (i.e., the ethnographic situation), neither are ever on their own and easily distinguishable from one another! To some extent, I have begun doing this in this introduction by describing some features of the modern collective. I continue to do this in the next section of the book where I will characterize emplaced collectives so that you can spot their contours when we delve into the equivocality of ethnographic situations in which infrastructures of emplacement and displacement appear thoroughly entangled.

I stressed that the bird and the rabbit are one set of possible figures that can be made visible in the drawing and that stretching it in another direction could reveal other figures. This connects with my earlier comments about political ontology being more of a pragmatic proposition than anything else. With this, I was alluding not only to the usual definition of pragmatism as being concerned with the best way to address a task or a problem but also to a particular form of pragmatism that recognizes that problems are not given "out there" but instead are cut and staged out of situations, the complexities of which overflow any particular cutting or, to return to my analogy, any stretching. Other "cuts" or problematizations of a situation are always possible (i.e., the image could be stretched in three, four, or any number of ways, instead of two); but whether one or other cut/problematization holds well can only be determined ex post facto. This is because holding well depends on the problematization's capacity to make a difference in how a situation is "done" (conceived of,

addressed, intervened on). Thus, my proposal of using the contrast between emplacement and displacement as coordinates to orient an exploration of momentous challenges is not advanced as a claim of "this cut is better than this other cut because *x*, *y*, and *z*." Rather, as I pointed out in the preface, its formulation is more experimental: "Let's see if, looking at these challenges in this way, we can grapple with them in a more capacious way." A more capacious way means one that contributes to enacting the pluriverse. Recall that, ultimately, political ontology seeks to enact its own grounding, which is no other than the pluriverse. I will flesh out more of this recursive pragmatism as I advance in the book. For now, let me close by bringing this already too abstract discussion down to the ground.

Refusing a Politics of Who

When I say that the political ontology that I essay here aims to explore the possibilities and challenges of cultivating a political imagination that makes room for emplacement and the pluriverse, I am referring to something as concrete as figuring out how to carry on with our mundane existences in our places without relying on the infrastructures of displacement that seem the only "realistically" available. Compared to the ways many of my long-standing Yshiro (and more recent Innu) friends and acquaintances inhabit the places they are with—and even considering the ravages that coloniality has already caused in them—it looks like I inhabit my place as a meeting point of various grounding infrastructures of displacement, a sort of transportation hub that enables as well as obliges its dwellers to be always ready to take off.

But I want to stress the point: grounding infrastructures (in general) are ambivalent; they simultaneously enable and oblige. Infrastructures bent toward displacement enable me to shrug off obligations to place—if I need to, I can move somewhere else relatively easily—but also oblige me to them; I only know how to be with them. Precisely because grounding infrastructures simultaneously oblige and enable, discussions about displacement and emplacement move into a troubling terrain where issues of choice and responsibility get muddled by the distributed quality of agency. This terrain is a barren one for unambiguous stances that would satisfy an appetite for easy condemnations and/or absolutions, but it is a fertile one for difficult yet relevant questions regarding the stories of "our" living together (well or badly)—that is, about political imagination. However, I surmise that for those questions to take shape, it is necessary to foreground a politics of *how* and, at least momentarily, background a politics of *who*.[48] This is especially important for this book,

where given the materials used and my professional trajectory, too quick an association may be established between the identity politics of indigeneity and a politics oriented toward emplacement. Such an association, I argue, would throw the entire effort of opening up political imagination back into the confined terrain of reasonable politics that only offers more displacement. Thus, a brief but emphatic clarification is in order.

The issues that concern me in this book are, in general, the different ways in which collectives are grounded and what effects these have (i.e., a politics of how). In particular, I am interested in the kinds of grounding enabled by practices or infrastructures of emplacement and what they can offer to political imagination. I am not concerned with the identity label that may be (self-) ascribed to "human" practitioners associated with infrastructures of emplacement (i.e., a politics of who). Afro-descendants, seringueiros, non-ethnicized peasants in Latin America, and a variety of urban/rural communities of practice that, across the continent, do not fit into the Indigenous identity slot can be involved in practices that constitute, or might eventually constitute, emplaced collectives or collectives whose grounding infrastructures largely lean in that direction.[49] By the same token, and as I hinted at before, people and groups who do in various ways fit into the Indigenous identity slot might be engaged in practices that are antithetical to such infrastructures. However, it is also worth emphasizing that I am not in the business of adjudicating authentic (i.e., good) versus inauthentic (i.e., bad) indigeneity by way of someone's adherence to practices or infrastructures of emplacement or of ranking the relative authority of various identities to "own" or represent these practices.[50] This does not mean that issues of identity play no role in the dynamics of emplacement and displacement; in fact, identity is mobilized as leverage at particular junctures in these dynamics, as we will see in the coming chapters. Yet, the mobilization of identity says more about the purchase that certain categories have in the terrain of reasonable politics than about the practices associated with emplacement and displacement. Thus, although nowadays they are often entangled, I find it important to analytically distinguish the politics implicit in practices or infrastructures of emplacement from the identity politics component of indigeneity. The question of the relation between these kinds of politics is a legitimate and important one but it can only be meaningfully raised if the distinction between them is first established.

An important reason to draw this distinction is to refuse the minoritization of the politics associated with emplacement. The concept of minoritization, which I borrow from feminist scholar Rita Segato, directs attention to a public sphere that is patterned after a binary hierarchical structure where

the universal political subject, the generalizable Human (the White, property-owning, heterosexual, patriarchal male) occupies the center while everyone else is minoritized.[51] Being minoritized means one is relegated to the realm of the particular (when not also rendered a lesser being). Thus, in contrast to the universal political subject whose issues and statements are considered of general interest, the issues and statements of those minoritized are treated as, well, minor, only concerning them and those who specialize in their "particular" issues.[52] In refusing minoritization, I seek to avoid having practices and infra-structures of emplacement treated as a minor issue. It is at this point where I ask you, my dear reader, to join me in the wager I am proposing in this book and exercise your imagination to transpose insights I have gathered from my own experiences in the "frontiers of displacement" to other settings, perhaps closer to your experiences and concerns as analyst and practitioner. This request is particularly pertinent if you conceive of your setting as urban (as opposed to rural) and non-Indigenous. Albeit the sharp distinctions these categories purport to describe are far from being stable and uncontested; they do index heterogeneities that cannot be brushed away easily. For instance, I am aware that these heterogeneities might raise two interconnected questions: whether the contrast between emplacement and displacement I work with in the book boils down to a contrast between the "Indigenous" and the "non-Indigenous," and whether the political ontology I propose has purchase outside "extractive frontiers" in "rural areas" and among "Indigenous communities." To the first question, I can advance a clear no: the contrast is not about Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Now, to the last question I will respond that the answer is largely up to you; however, there are a couple of things that I can emphasize so that political ontology can travel to your setting perhaps with more ease.

Political ontology emerged from what might loosely be described as "indigenous settings" because it was there that something that had always been obvious to our interlocutors in "the field" became visible to me (and my cothinkers): the ontoepistemic conflicts that reasonable politics denies but harbors at its core *whenever and wherever it operates and regardless of whether or not it involves what might be labeled "Indigenous peoples."*[53] For example, think how the Reason Police quickly shuts down questions about the "thing" at stake in a conflict through a derogatory remark such as "tree hugger" hurled at people chaining themselves to trees slated for removal by city authorities or, more prosaically, through the offhanded dismissal as "emotional" of a given person, family, or community's refusal to accept that some form of benefit or compensation (monetary or otherwise) will offset changes brought to their "way of life" by a policy or process that anyone in their "rational mind" should

ultimately see as the greater good. In short, it is important to keep in mind that, as analytical practice, political ontology involves a particular way of interrogating conflicts so as to open up their ontoepistemic political potentials beyond the limits of modern or reasonable politics. Yet—and this is a crucial argument I am trying to make in this book—this opening up has to be done carefully. It cannot be done aimlessly or taken as a self-justified purpose—that is, it must address a problem that orients it; otherwise it turns into recklessness.[54] In this sense, it is the careful staging of the predominance of displacement in grounding infrastructures *as an orientating problem* that I work toward in the coming pages.

Enter the second point I want to emphasize. While present throughout my ethnographic materials, extractivism functions in the book as the archetypical figure of the modern collective qua infrastructure of displacement. Thus, its "frontiers/limits" are wherever the imperative of emplacement, timid as it might be, is pushing back on displacement—perhaps in the attempt to make a community garden in the city, perhaps in a cooperative's initiative to buy local, but also perhaps in the discussions of whether we should be eating papayas in the Arctic, or whether the destruction brought by sourcing lithium for a green transition is a necessary evil, or in debates about whether we should be supporting the export of "our" values somewhere else, and, if we think this is worth it, how far? Despite what? And at what cost? Of course, as I pointed out early on, limits and borders are much more perceptible and evident (for some of us) where infrastructures of displacement encounter comparatively more robust infrastructures of emplacement, and, for several reasons, this tends to be in areas that might be conceived of as rural. However, remember that the frontier/limit is fractal, internal to all grounding infrastructures, and inherent to their equivocality. This is crucially important, for the question of limits between emplacement and displacement—where one starts and the other finishes and, even more importantly, how these limits are traced, policed, and/or pushed in one or another direction—is at the center of my inquiry. In effect, as I have advanced previously, from a political ontology standpoint the problem that becomes foregrounded in the momentous challenges everyone speaks about is the pronounced imbalance that favors displacement over emplacement within grounding infrastructures, wherever the latter are.

Connecting both points brings us back to my refusal of having a politics oriented toward emplacement reduced to a minor issue and to my request that you exercise your imagination to help transpose to other settings some insights you may encounter as you read the book. In settings such as "urban" areas, where many, like myself and perhaps you, might feel that infrastructures

of displacement are all there is, generating robust infrastructures of emplacement poses a challenge that is far from being minor. Indeed, this challenge is not about solidarity with a minority "over there" who is under threat by the advancing extractivist frontier. Rather, it is about imagining a good life "here" that is not premised on the infrastructures of displacement many of us depend on (and even love) so much. As I will argue, the challenge is embarking on a journey to cease being what we are.

Overview of the Book

Since I conceived this book as the essaying of a proposal, a tryout, I ended up visualizing it as the rehearsal of a theatrical play. Thus, following this introduction where I have laid out the "props" I will use, the curtains will open to a "play" in two acts punctuated by a prelude, an interlude, and a postlude. These three sections are extended "commentaries" that carry most of the weight of my wager about the fruitfulness of thinking about momentous challenges through the dynamics of displacement and emplacement. The two acts, in turn, delve more directly into ethnographic materials and are tasked with giving flesh to the commentaries that precede them and providing new elements to move my wager one step forward in the next commentary. This counterpoint between commentaries and acts will go slowly, tracing a circular movement that will eventually bring us back to my initial concerns, now better equipped for you to gauge whether the tryout has paid off.

In the prelude, while characterizing emplaced collectives (and their life projects) on their own, I address the question of how the limits or boundaries between collectives (and, by extension, between emplacement and displacement) can be traced analytically. Further, I argue that different ways of analytically conceiving and treating the boundaries between collectives suggest different kinds of political imaginations with diverging scalar orientations. In act 1, we leave the emplaced collectives "on their own" and plunge into the actual messiness of the "ethnographic situations," where we can only find them already equivocally entangled with the grounding infrastructures of displacement that are constantly extended and redeployed by the modern collective. Drawing on materials produced through my involvement with the Yshiro people's project to "recover the yrmo" (their traditional territory), I explore how, qua grounding infrastructures of displacement or of emplacement, divergent visions, and practices of the common good become fertile terrain for one another, generating impasses that underscore some of the trials that a politics oriented to emplacement must face. In the interlude, we emerge from the messiness of the

ethnographic situation, carrying along some threads that allow me to discuss how the dominance of displacement is expressed nowadays in debates about momentous challenges. I argue that these debates also provide evidence that the distinctive coloniality of the modern collective is shifting in ways that are consistent with a postnatural formation of power. By analyzing a conflict that has pitted Innu hunters against wildlife managers, in act 2 we dive back into the messiness of the ethnographic situation to get a sense of how this postnatural formation of power might operate and what role science plays in it. I emerge from the ethnographic situation one last time in the postlude, where I weave together the various threads that I have been pulling throughout to present a succinct diagram of a political ontology in which a proposal for emplacement makes sense. On this basis, I then move on to make explicit and raise a series of questions about the challenges of enacting a cosmopolitics oriented toward emplacement that will have accrued throughout the counterpoints played between acts and my extended commentaries. By the end of the journey, I hope to have made a compelling case for the fruitfulness of this approach and to have provided a useful set of prompts for continuing a discussion on what it might take to address momentous challenges when these have been restaged as coextensive with the dominance of displacement in grounding infrastructures.

NOTES

1. Mind you, I am not speaking of that spectrum of displaced people for whom *not moving* is likely to result in the end of a livable life.

2. On polycrisis, see Tooze, "Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis"; Henig and Knight, "Polycrisis."

3. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 90.

1. See Achtenberg and Currents, "Bolivia."

2. As is well known, the Washington consensus of the 1990s focused on financial valorization through policies of adjustment and privatization and redefined the state's role as being simply that of a regulatory scaffold for the market society. In contrast, fueled by the growing global demand for raw materials, the commodity consensus focused on the implementation of capital-intensive extractive projects where, in addition to transnational investors, the state could also play an active role. See Svampa, "Commodities Consensus."

3. Gudynas, "Diez Tesis Urgentes sobre el nuevo extractivismo." See also Gudynas, *Extractivisms*.

4. With different intensity, depending on the country, the neo-extractivist dispositive combined extractivism of raw materials for export with a new form of internal extractivism that siphoned state social expenditures through the expansion of microcredits and the general financialization of economic transactions. See Gago, *La razón neoliberal*.

5. This does not mean that communities themselves would not have become divided around these extractivist projects, but more often than not, those divisions have been purposely fueled by governments and corporations.

6. Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance*.

7. Chatterton, "Making Autonomous Geographies"; Collectivo Situaciones, *Bienvenidos a la selva*; Fernández, *Política y Subjetividad*; Uribe, "Emancipación social en un contexto de guerra prolongada."

8. In his recent book, Arturo Escobar counters the reduction of "the possible" precisely by questioning commonsensical understandings of "reality." See Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*.

9. Cited in De la Cadena, *Earth Beings*, 169.

10. Blaser, *Governmentalities and Authorized Imaginations*; Blaser, "The Threat of the Yrmo"; Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond*.

11. One of the first coordinated efforts we made with my colleagues to think through this situation with others was a workshop we hosted in Colombia titled "Política mas allá de la política / Politics Beyond Politics." That event put me initially in contact, mainly through the "node" that is Arturo Escobar himself, with the loose network of scholars, analysts, commentators, and activist/researchers who, as I mentioned in the preface, were trying to take the pulse of ongoing processes in Latin America and help give shape to political ontology. The ideas of these colleagues, not all cited in this book but included in the acknowledgments, have greatly informed my thinking, even if through our divergences.

12. Blaser, "Is Another Cosmopolitics Possible?"; Blaser, "Notes towards a Political Ontology."

13. My understanding of Science (with a capital *S*) draws on Isabelle Stengers's characterization of sciences other than the experimental ones (and particularly physics) as "satrapies laying claim by proxy to a force of which they are utterly devoid, and which they can only imitate." This force, argues Stengers, is the very exceptional achievement of the experimental sciences—namely, experimental objectivity or "proof," which is nothing more (or less) than using the setup of an experiment to give "reality the power to make a difference in the way it is interpreted." It was what she calls "propaganda" that presented this very exceptional achievement, specific to experimental setups, as a general method for obtaining "objective" (i.e., indubitable) knowledge. See Stengers, "The Challenge of Ontological Politics," 87–88. Let me stress then that the distinction between the sciences and Science seeks to signal a divergence between the specificity of the former, on the one hand, and the overblown claims to have the capacity to know reality as it is associated to the latter. Nevertheless, a thread connects what are otherwise very heterogeneous "modern knowledge practices": they all inherit from a method that regularly (but not always coherently) has enacted the modernist assumption of "one world out there" and multiple perspectives on it. On the way in which the tangle I call *Reason Police* becomes enshrined in the law, see Boulot and Sterlin, "Steps towards a Legal Ontological Turn."

14. I use the word *hegemony* in the Gramscian sense of a dominance that is *not mainly and/or explicitly* based on coercive imposition but rather involves a substantive component of persuasion.

15. Two good surveys of the connections and divergences between the ontological turn in anthropology and material-semiotics STS are Gad, Jensen, and Wintereik, "Practical Ontology" and Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*.

16. For an overview of material semiotics, see Law, "Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics."

17. See Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond*.

18. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*. See also Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public."

19. This trajectory is, of course, reversible, as a stabilized "fact" may again become "an issue," thus making visible the presence of the entire "assembly" that constitutes it: "Translation [or

articulation] is by definition always a misunderstanding, since common interests are in the long term necessarily divergent." Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 65.

20. Mol, *The Body Multiple*.

21. Latour, *Pandora's Hope*.

22. Latour, "Turning around Politics," 813.

23. Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal."

24. In Latour's case, cosmopolitics as the composition of the common world resembles the process through which matters of concern are slowly articulated into matters of fact, a resemblance that is fractally implicated in the constitution of everything, be it the microbe, the nation, or the common world. I will return to this point in the interlude.

25. On "intra-action," see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

26. I borrow the term *collective* from Latour, who has pointed out its contrasts with "society" in that the latter often refers to an association of humans while the former refers to the entire association of humans with their nonhumans (from animals to gods and so on). To some extent, following Descola, my slight modification to this is that rather than speaking of human and nonhumans (categories that are associated with a particular collective), I prefer to speak of collectives as associations of existents, adding the further point that those existents are themselves multiplicities. See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Descola, "Modes of Being and Forms of Predication."

27. For a recent rendering of such concerns, see Canessa, "Methods Really Do Matter"; Hornborg, "Mistranslating Relationism and Absolving the Market."

28. Here, the term *entanglement* picks up a degree of complexity that makes any pretense of purification utterly hopeless, as Dussart and Poirier have aptly argued. See Dussart and Poirier, "Knowing and Managing the Land."

29. Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation."

30. Viveiros de Castro has a beautiful analogy to get this idea across: thinking of translating with control—that is, with awareness of the equivocation—would be analogous to thinking of walking as controlled falling; we never have a final certitude that it works, only that it works so far as we have not fallen. See Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," 5.

31. My notion of circulation as a sort of vital energy is inspired in Latour's "circulating reference." See Latour, *Pandora's Hope*.

32. Blaser and de la Cadena, "Introduction: Pluriverse Proposals for a World of Many Worlds," 6.

33. See Dos Santos and Tola, "¿Ontologías como modelo"; Eitel and Meurer, "Introduction: Exploring Multifarious Worlds"; Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*; Ruiz Serna and Del Cairo, "Los debates del giro ontológico en torno al naturalismo moderno." Subsequently, unless explicitly indicated, when I use the term *political ontology* the reference is to this project.

34. See, for example, Biset, "Formas de lo común"; Biset, "¿Qué es una ontología política?"

35. Hetherington, "Introduction: Keywords of the Anthropocene," 6.

36. I am partially inspired by Doreen Massey's work for this relational conceptualization of place, although I also overlay upon it the kind of ontological multiplicity that I

have been illustrating with the bird/rabbit illusion. I do not think that in her own conceptualization of place as a meeting of trajectories Massey had in mind this kind of multiplicity, where more than one "place" can occur in the same location at the same time. In effect, Massey uses the notion of multiplicity to open up established notions of space and place as homogeneous categories (e.g., abstract space, self-identical, essentialized place) but stops at the "level" of phenomena/existents that are taken to constitute the actual multiplicity of those homogeneous categories. This stops short of conceiving of the kind of ontological multiplicity that I have been illustrating with the bird/rabbit image, which requires that the constitutive multiplicity of all phenomena/existents remain at the forefront regardless of level. Thus, political ontology does not stop operationalizing the notion of multiplicity at any level, for it takes multiplicity to be recursive and all-pervasive. As I said, collectives are multiplicities of existents that are themselves multiplicities that take place. And it is precisely by attending to the recursiveness and pervasiveness of multiplicity that it becomes possible to conceive of the bird/rabbit kind of multiplicity. It is, however, important to indicate that there is nothing inherent to Massey's notion of space and place that would prevent a more expansive operationalization of multiplicity in using them; she just does not do it. See Massey, *For Space*; Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*; Massey, "A Counterhegemonic Relationality of Place"; Peck et al., "Symposium."

37. See Blaser, "Life Projects."

38. I emphasize the point to stave off a rather recurrent interpretive slippage in critical assessments of what is implied when an analysis proceeds by way of contrast. The slippage involves disregarding the careful work of staging a relational contrast, then quickly accusing the analysis of being binary when the binary is actually in the eyes of the beholder. For a recent iteration of the slippage, which in turn builds on various previous ones, see Nadasdy, "How Many Worlds Are There?"

39. Hetherington, "Introduction: Keywords of the Anthropocene," 6.

40. Of course, the underside of this transformation is the redistribution of these "disentangled tangles" as refuse, which my colleague Josh Lepawasky has forcefully brought into focus with his concept of "discard-scapes." See Lepawsky, *Reassembling Rubbish*. Markus Kröger speaks of "existential redistribution" to refer to these processes. See Kröger, *Extractivisms, Existences and Extinctions*.

41. This is a standard narrative, in actor-network theory, of how certain states of affairs gain stability and become the taken-for-granted terrain or hinterland in which subsequent action must operate. For a succinct rendering of the point, see Law, *After Methods*, 32–35.

42. Law, "What's Wrong with a One-World World?"

43. One could infer, via the example of Romani people, for instance, that some collectives might be more or less forcefully driven by their circumstances to take place through infrastructures of displacement, and yet in contrast to the modern collective, neither need nor seek to constantly expand them. See Toninato, "Romani Nomadism"; Sevillano, "Nomadism as Ancestral Homeland in the Romani Culture."

44. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 117–20.

45. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 119. Emphasis added.

46. The concept of coloniality is associated with a long-standing set of discussions about the relations between Latin American societies and modernity, particularly with

the shape these discussions adopted as modernity came to be conceived, in this milieu, as indissociable from justifications of internal colonialism. In North American academia, these discussions became known as the modernity/coloniality and decoloniality research program. This program built on and expanded Anibal Quijano's seminal concept of the coloniality of power. Succinctly, by modifying the noun *power*, the adjective *colonial* was intended to signal that the dominant pattern of global domination specific to the modern/capitalist world-system (based on racial, class, gender, and other classifications) originated at the turn of the sixteenth century with the conquest of what came to be called "the American continent." In other words, the term *colonial* was intended to modify a certain conception of "power" (mainly Marxist) that did not pay attention to the centrality of colonization in the process of modernization and its expansion. In this book, I am seeking to disentangle the concept of coloniality from its almost ordained association with modernity—not to "save" modernity from its inherent coloniality but so we can recognize the operations of coloniality even when they do not come in the guise of modernization. I will return to this point. For a succinct overview of the modernity/coloniality research program, see Escobar, "Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise."

47. Even the examples that might clearly index an emplaced mode of being might be entangled with displacement in this way, as when relations with "local more-than-human-beings" such as spirit owners or ancestors require items obtained through commoditized circuits. See, for example, Carreño, "Places Are Kin" and Hirsch, "Investment's Rituals."

48. I take inspiration from Law and Joks for the notion of a "politics of how." See Law and Joks, "Indigeneity, Science, and Difference."

49. See Carneiro da Cunha, "Indigenous People"; Courtheyn, "Desindigenizados pero no vencidos"; Courtheyn, "Territories of Peace"; De la Cadena, *Earth Beings*; Escobar, *Sentipensar con la tierra*; Oslender, "Geographies of the Pluriverse"; Ruiz-Serna, *When Forests Run Amok*.

50. This preemptive deflection of an automatic association of my arguments with identity politics also informs two editorial decisions. One is the decision to not discuss sources from what could be labelled "Indigenous philosophies" in this introduction. Although these sources have been constantly central to my version of political ontology, I needed here to delay their discussion until after I made explicit my avoidance of a politics of who. The other is my decision to avoid the usual citational practice that prefixes the names of authors with the typical: "Indigenous [or specific ethnonym] scholar X argues that . . ." I understand the importance of doing this in many contexts, but there are also many problematic assumptions in this practice (about the automatic scope and authority—or lack thereof—that an identity label suggests), which rub against my intention to foreground a politics of how. Thus, I cite authors not because they represent this or that identity group but because the way in which they explain aspects of practices of emplacement have resonated the most with me.

51. Segato, "Patriarchy from Margin to Center."

52. The concept of minoritization also helps to describe a general mechanism that mobilizing the various categories of differentiation within the already universalized category of humans (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and so on) at the same time ranks their relative importance and, according to their assignment to the relevant category,

grants them variable degrees of authority to present their "minor issues" in the public sphere of politics. We can see how, in this guise, minoritization is closely connected and entangled with the dynamics of ranking factualities, which I described under the rubric of reasonable politics. Indeed, in reasonable politics, disputes about factuality often also involve implicit or explicit disputes about the putative authority that differently "identified" human subjects have for establishing the relevant "facts" in a disagreement; this is why issues of authenticity become important in identity politics.

53. Of course, intensity is a perception relative to the standpoint of who perceives.

54. It is worth stressing that the need to be careful is not the same as being risk averse. In this regard, in their overview of ontological turns, Holbraad and Pedersen have me saying that adopting a position of open-endedness is risky and irresponsible when what I actually said was that each situation requires carefully weighing whether one must keep on or stop opening the black boxes that compose it, and that adopting the general rule that one must always either open or close them without attending to what the situation requires is simply reckless. For my original argument, see Blaser, "The Political Ontology of Doing Difference." For Holbraad and Pedersen's interpretation of my argument, see Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, 54.

<p style="text-align: right">PRELUDE</p>

1. Barras, "Life Projects."

2. Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Rist, *The History of Development*.

3. It is worth clarifying that the word *life* in *life projects* does not gain meaning in relation to that of *death*. In this sense, life projects are not an expression of those salvific tropes that, riffing off concerns with finitude, are unavoidably connected with biopolitics. If anything, and equivocal as it might be, the term *life* here plays the role of an affirmation of a given mode of existence, which might have its own (other-than-biopolitical) categories of finitude, or even none.

4. Morris, "Emplacement."

5. I have chosen to base this discussion on written sources from across the continent rather than on my own ethnographic experience because I think it is important for readers to have direct access (through my citations) to the works of these intellectuals and the possibility of exploring further some topics I can only skim over in this chapter.

6. And it is precisely for this very same reason that discussions of ontology in material-semiotics enabled me to articulate in a language "hearable" within the academy what I encountered in my work with the Yshiro and exceeded the categories of analysis I was used to deploy. In other words, far from "discovering" anything new (which I doubt anyone has ever claimed), discussions of ontology have helped to open the categorical field for those of us strongly shaped by the universal effect of the modern collective, to better grasp something of what spokespersons from emplaced collectives have been saying all along. No surprise, then, that many of the principles I discuss here will resonate with my discussion in the introduction about the academic sources from which political ontology draws inspiration. And yet, the differences between sources of relationality are also very telling, as we will see soon.