



introduction

Regions and Places in the Global Age

*Sea mentira o sea verdad
se abra la tierra
y se vuelva a cerrar
que el que lo está oyendo
lo vuelva a contar*

[Be it a lie or be it the truth
Let the earth open up
and close again
whoever's listening
will tell it again]

—Popular refrain often said at the beginning of a round
of storytelling in the riverine regions of the southern Pacific

This book is about many diverse yet closely interrelated aspects of social, cultural, and biological life at present. It is, above all, about place-based and regional expressions or articulations of difference in contexts of globalization; this implies setting place-based and regional processes into conversation with the ever-changing dynamics of capital and culture at many levels. This conversation, however, is neither about the imprint left on a particular world region by an allegedly unstoppable process of globalization nor solely about how this region responds to it. Instead, it is about a complex, historically and spatially grounded experience that is negotiated and enacted at every site and region of the world, posing tremendous challenges to theory and politics alike.

The flesh, blood, and thoughts of the story come from a particular region in Latin America, the Colombian Pacific. Two contrasting positions arising from this region exemplify the range of responses to globality. The first comes from a meeting of about forty-five leaders and activists representing the most important indigenous and black social movements of the region held on June 18–22, 1995, in the predominantly black town of Puerto Tejada, an hour south of Cali. The goals of the meeting were

to examine the social and environmental situation of the Pacific, discuss interethnic relations, and come up with joint strategies of negotiation with the state on various plans and policies. Under the rubric *Territorio, etnia, cultura e investigación en el Pacífico colombiano* (Territory, ethnicity, culture, and research in the Colombian Pacific), the activists made it clear that what was at stake went well beyond the situation of the moment to involve the definition of life itself, in particular the defense of what they called, in the heady climate of the moment, the *cosmovisiones* (worldviews) of the black and indigenous groups. Four principles for interethnic relations and relations with the state were identified: the fact that the Pacific is “an ancestral territory of ethnic groups”; that these groups are culturally diverse and seek to respect differences both among themselves and in relation to Colombian society; that from this position of mutual respect and difference they assume the coordination of the defense of their territories; and that their traditional knowledges are fundamental to their relation to nature and to their identity and should be recognized as such. Analyses and conclusions followed from there, referring to the defense of territory, culture, and identity. The notion that the Pacific is a territory of “ethnic settlements,” first formulated at this meeting, was to result a couple of years later in a sophisticated conception of the Pacific as a “region-territory of ethnic groups,” a notion that will occupy a salient place in this book.¹

At about the same time, the recently established *Gerencia de Proyectos para el Litoral Pacífico Vallecaucano* (Office of Development Projects for the Pacific Region of the Valle del Cauca Province) held a day-long meeting at a luxury hotel in the also predominantly black city of Buenaventura, which is the most important port in the nation and is located approximately two hours from Cali. The gerencia presented a range of social and economic projects for the subregion that called for a dramatic expansion of investment with the help of international capital and included projects focusing on sewage and water supply, education, and health and a panoply of infrastructural and industrial schemes dealing with electricity, port facilities, roads, a local airport, tourism, large-scale fishing facilities, timber industries, and so forth. The aim was to create the right investment climate in order to turn Buenaventura, including the multiple rivers of its vast rural areas, into a development pole for the nation. The meeting, attended by over two hundred people representing the government and private sectors, was held in response to rising rhetoric about the “age of the Pacific” in which this

vast, rich rain-forested territory was seen as the platform for an aggressive neoliberal strategy of integrating the country with the Pacific basin economies.

Also telling was the subtitle of the activists' meeting: *Conceptos de los Pueblos Indígenas y Negros del Pacífico Colombiano*. The idea that black and indigenous peoples could have knowledge, let alone concepts, was new, although it was becoming more common thanks to discussions about local knowledge in debates over the conservation of biological diversity, particularly after the Earth Summit (the UN Conference on Environment and Development) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Needless to say, no aspect of this knowledge was contemplated at the Buenaventura meeting. But as this book will show in detail, the fact is that groups such as the black and indigenous activists of the Colombian Pacific do indeed produce their own knowledge about the situations they face, and furthermore this knowledge often constitutes sophisticated frameworks that can no longer be overlooked in any discussion of globalization, whether from an economic, cultural, or ecological perspective. Moreover, these frameworks are integral to the struggles mounted by subordinate groups over the terms of globality and also to the effectiveness of such struggles.

Places and Regions in the Age of Globality

The examination of place making and region making from multilevel economic, ecological, and cultural perspectives affords novel opportunities for understanding the politics of difference and sameness that accompanies enactments of globality. According to some arguments, today's politics of difference and sameness is still deeply shaped by the myths of universality and cultural superiority that from the dawn of modernity—the conquest of America by Spain in 1492—have allowed the West to define the identity of others. Ever since, an ensemble of Western, modern cultural forces (including particular views of the economy) has unceasingly exerted its influence—often its dominance—over most world regions. These forces continue to operate through the ever-changing interaction of forms of European thought and culture, taken to be universally valid, with the frequently subordinated knowledges and cultural practices of many non-European groups throughout the world. Eurocentric globality thus has an obligatory counterpart in the systematic act of *encubrimiento del otro* (the covering up of the other), to use the expression of the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel

(1992)—that is, in a kind of global coloniality. This book is, in a very abstract but real sense, about the dynamic of an imperial globality and its regime of coloniality as one of the most salient features of the modern colonial world system in the early twenty-first century. It is thus also about the geopolitics of knowledge: Whose knowledge counts? And what does this have to do with place, culture, and power?²

Described as a poor and forgotten hot and humid forest crisscrossed by innumerable rivers—a *litoral recóndito* (Yacup 1934)—the Colombian Pacific had been integrated into the world economy from the early post-conquest period through exploration, slavery, gold mining, and the subjection or elimination of indigenous inhabitants. Boom and bust cycles tied to the extraction of raw materials such as gold, platinum, precious woods, timber, rubber, and, recently, biodiversity have succeeded each other over the past two centuries, each leaving its indelible imprint on the social, economic, ecological, and cultural makeup of the place.

Only in the early 1980s was the region subjected to an explicit strategy of incorporation into the national and transnational spheres in the name of development. As a result, by the early 1990s the region had become a stage for an intense cultural politics that brought together development experts, black and indigenous activists, biodiversity conservation advocates, capitalists, fortune seekers, government officials, and academics into a tight space of dialogue, negotiation, and confrontation that, albeit for a brief moment, seemed to have an unclear resolution, with local movements and their allies making a valiant and brilliant attempt at providing a workable alternative. Two other factors were crucial in creating the context for this complex encounter: first, the decisive opening of the national economy to world markets after 1990 under neoliberal dictates; and second, the reform of the national constitution in 1991, which, among other things, resulted in a law that granted cultural and territorial rights to the black communities (Ley [Law] 70 of 1993). By the late 1990s, however, the regime of imperial globality had forcefully reasserted itself, and the region became submerged in a quagmire of violence, merciless capitalist expansion, and massive displacement that has affected black and indigenous communities and the environment with particular virulence—a reassertion of the coloniality of knowledge, power, and nature.

Such are the intent and material of the book in their broadest strokes. Emerging from this historical materiality, the book is about the incredibly complex intersections of nature and culture, space and place, landscape and human action, culture and identity, knowledge and power,

economy and politics, modernity and globalization, and difference and sameness associated with imperial globality and global coloniality in a particular corner of the world; it is also about what has been called uneven geographies of poverty and livelihoods, and how they are related to historical political economies and culturally inflected patterns of development intervention (Bebbington 2004). As noted in the preface, I render these geographies manageable by a particular design in terms of six basic concepts: place, capital, nature, development, identity, and networks. These concepts are both chapter titles and notions that articulate my argument throughout the book; thus, while each concept is developed primarily in its respective chapter, most concepts are dealt with in several chapters. To give an example: while place is the central subject of chapter 1, it makes significant appearances in chapters on capital and nature. Another example: biodiversity is discussed at length in the chapter on nature but also figures prominently in that on development and is also treated in chapters on place, capital, and networks. This means the book has a networked or recursive logic in that a number of central subjects are treated in somewhat different ways in various chapters, as partial displacements of the same topic. This also means that while the chapters can to some extent be read independently, only by reading the entire book can the reader develop a comprehensive sense of the work. One further detail: while each chapter interweaves theory and ethnographic research, in most cases the more lengthy theoretical debates are, with some exceptions, relegated to the notes.³

I mentioned above that the book is about many subjects. Among them are a set of geobiological and cultural conditions making the Pacific into a distinct socionatural world; the state policies of development and pluriculturalism that created conditions for the emergence of black and indigenous social movements, and these movements' efforts at steering the region in specific directions; the attempts by capitalists to appropriate the rain forest for extractive activities, by developers to set the region onto the path of modernist progress, by biologists and conservationists to defend this incredibly rich biodiversity hot spot from the most predatory activities of capitalists and developers, and by academics, activists, and intellectuals to understand the whole thing, this complicated process that took them by surprise and found them largely unprepared in terms of having solid studies and theoretical and political approaches. In addressing these questions, the book highlights the tremendous value of activists' knowledge for both understanding and action. For this very reason, the book is above all about difference and

its politics and the difference this politics makes in places such as the Pacific. It is, by the same token, about what theorists call modernity—is it still a viable project in regions like the Pacific? or, on the contrary, do the events happening there suggest that the project of modernity, whatever it means, has to be abandoned once and for all? Finally, it is about ethnography and social theory and their efforts to respond more effectively to the dynamics of today's world: are there novel approaches in social theory that provide better accounts in this regard, perhaps because they are based not only on more inclusive epistemologies but on more diverse ontologies? If this is the case, scholars would be facing a significant reorientation of theory. As I shall discuss in the chapter on networks, some are making this bold claim.

I want now to provide a more explicit account of the book's content and structure, although this will still be barely a sketch in relation to the chapters that follow.

A Political Ecology of Difference

Joan Martínez Alier (2002) defines *political ecology* as the study of ecological distribution conflicts. By this he means conflicts over access to and control of natural resources, particularly as a source of livelihood, as well as the costs of environmental destruction. In many places, local groups engage in struggles against translocal forces of many types to defend their place. It is not easy to conceptualize this defense in all of its dimensions, and this is an important part of the story. In a nutshell, I argue that people mobilize against the destructive aspects of globalization from the perspective of what they have been and what they are at present: historical subjects of particular cultures, economies, and ecologies; particular knowledge producers; individuals and collectivities engaged in the play of living in landscapes and with each other in distinctive ways. I shall say that in regions like the Pacific people engage in the defense of place from the perspective of the economic, ecological, and cultural difference that their landscapes, cultures, and economies embody in relation to those of more dominant sectors of society. What follows is a brief description of the book's chapters and concepts. This constellation of concepts provides a basis for a political ecology framework focused on difference. Some important concepts are missing (e.g., state, gender, culture, science, and knowledge itself), although they will be treated to some extent in various chapters.

Place ✦ Why start with place? For three reasons. First and most immediately because the mobilizations of the past two decades in the Pacific are seen locally as struggles over culture, territory, and place. Black and indigenous movements see the aim of their struggle as one of retaining control of their territory; it is not far-fetched to see these movements as expressions of ecological and cultural attachment to place. In fact, in the mid-1990s indigenous and black activists together came up with a conceptualization of the Pacific as a “region-territory of ethnic groups,” as noted above, that became a gravitating principle of political strategies and conservation policies alike. Place-based struggles more generally link body, environment, culture, and economy in all of their diversity (Harcourt and Escobar, eds. 2005). Second, in a philosophical vein, because place continues to be an important source of culture and identity; despite the pervasive delocalization of social life, there is an embodiment and emplacement to human life that cannot be denied. This is readily acknowledged by people such as the black and indigenous groups of the Pacific, who maintain more embodied and embedded practices of social and ecological existence. Third, because scholarship of the past two decades in many fields (geography, anthropology, political economy, communications, and so on) has tended to deemphasize place and to highlight, on the contrary, movement, displacement, traveling, diaspora, migration, and so forth. Thus, there is a need for a corrective theory that neutralizes this erasure of place, the asymmetry that arises from giving far too much importance to “the global” and far too little value to “place.” To this end, I shall review the deeply historical and always changing character of this region, aiming to understand how, against this bioregional background—that is, the long history of geobiological life, landscape, and human settlement—today’s cultural, economic, and ecological struggles make full sense.

Capital ✦ One of the main ways in which places have been transformed in the past centuries the world over is through capitalism. No account of place making can overlook the production of place by capital, and there are few examples of this as vivid as the transformation of a complex, self-organizing humid forest ecosystem into a monocultural landscape, as it continues to happen in many parts of the Pacific with the spread of African oil palm plantations, or the replacement of the meandering and rooted mangroves by a monotonous succession of rectangular pools for industrial shrimp farming. Marxist political economy has been the main

corpus of theory enlightening scholars on these processes, yet Marxism was not very good at dealing with nature. The engagement of Marxism with culture and nature in recent decades has been very productive; applying these new frameworks to questions of place allows one to see the actions of capital in the Pacific in a new light. However, this is only half of the picture; for the other half, one has to look at the plethora of economic practices that local groups have either maintained over the long haul or created in recent times. Could some of these actually be seen as noncapitalist practices? How does one decide? As we shall see, mainstream political economy has been unable to see noncapitalist economies in their own right. Besides economic practices oriented toward self-subsistence, some collective shrimp farming practices created by local groups in the southern Pacific, in the very encounter with industrial shrimp farming, could be seen in terms of noncapitalist economies. Is this reinterpretation a naïve conceit in the minds of the social groups engaged in them or, worse still, wishful thinking on the part of the analyst? Or could there be something different in these practices that capitalocentric frameworks have previously rendered invisible? Finally, could theorists and activists plausibly entertain the project of cultivating subjects of economic difference, particularly subjects who desire noncapitalist economies? A positive answer to the question may shift academic and activist perspectives onto a new plane, as we shall see.

Nature ♦ Many environmentalists argue that there is a generalized ecological crisis today. Humans are destroying their biophysical environments at record speed and in unprecedented magnitude. Capitalist modernity, it would seem, has declared war on every ecosystem on the planet, and few places exemplify the scale of this destruction as patently as the Pacific. Philosophically minded ecologists argue that the ecological crisis is a crisis of modern systems of thought. Modern science and technology not only contribute to rampant destruction, but no longer seem able to devise workable solutions to it. This is why epistemological questions are fundamental in discussing questions about nature, and as such they will be given due importance in this chapter; there is, in short, a coloniality of nature in modernity that needs to be unveiled. Again, this is only half of the picture, and, as in the case of the economy, one needs to search for the other half in the place-based ecological practices existing in the Pacific. In the river settlements, black groups have historically enacted a grammar of the environment—a local model of nature—that exhibits a

striking disparity in relation to modern understandings of nature. This grammar, embedded in rituals, languages, and forms of classification of natural beings that might look strange to moderns, constitutes the cultural-ecological basis of how they farm and utilize the forests. These traditional production systems, as biodiversity experts and activists came to call them in the mid-1990s, have had a built-in notion of sustainability, one that, however, has become impracticable in recent decades owing to a variety of pressures. Here lies one of the most difficult predicaments for conservation advocates and activists: pushed to rationalize ecological and environmental practices to ensure “conservation,” they are aware that in doing so they are moving away from the long-standing, place-based notions and practices which ensured a reasonable level of sustainability until recent decades. Is it still possible to argue in favor of ecological difference for the Pacific this late in the game? Or are activists and conservationists forever doomed to bring nature into the realm of modern planning to ensure conservation? And if so, how can this be done without reinforcing coloniality (that is, the subalternization or even elimination of local grammars and knowledge of the environment) at both cultural and ecological levels?

Development ♦ Development, in conjunction with capitalism, has been the single most important transformative force in the Pacific. In the early 1980s, the first plan for the putative comprehensive and integral development of the Pacific created the region as an entity susceptible of development. Few before the 1970s would spend a dime on developing this insalubrious, backward region. By the early 1990s, however, speaking of the development of the Pacific had become *de rigueur*, and institutions like the World Bank were quick to jump on the bandwagon. Not everything went according to the developmentalist script, however. While much conventional development did indeed take place, often with negative consequences for local peoples and ecosystems, many projects, especially those under participatory development schemes, enabled a certain degree of creative appropriation, even subversion in terms of intended goals, by local groups. This was the case with a number of projects that became linked to the social movements for cultural and territorial rights that had swept over the southern Pacific since the very early 1990s, for example, the establishment of cooperatives for the commercialization of cocoa and coconut; women’s associations for shellfish marketing; innovative popular art-cum-literacy projects that brought low-technology radio and printing materials to local groups,

through which they creatively linked literacy, history, and identity; and the biodiversity conservation project for the region, which black and indigenous activists profoundly transformed. Drawing on debates on postdevelopment and coloniality, this chapter suggests that these acts of counterwork by locals can reasonably be seen as producing alternative modernities—modern yet different ecological, economic, and cultural configurations—but also an inkling of alternatives to modernity, what could be termed decolonial configurations of nature, culture, and economy.

Identity ✦ The constitutional reform of 1991 created the conditions for an intense period of cultural and political activism by local black and indigenous groups. One of the most defining aspects of the period was the indisputable emergence of the category of *comunidades negras* (black communities) as a central cultural and political fact—so central that collectivities such as the network of ethnoterritorial organizations known as Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN) adopted the category for itself, the state issued development plans “for the black communities,” and so forth. The category took on local force, at least at the level of movements, NGOs, and church organizations, and of course the development apparatus. Most analysts concur that there was indeed a veritable “relocation of ‘blackness’ in structures of alterity,” as Peter Wade (1997: 36) descriptively put it. Were these identities the product of the neoliberal state (e.g., Ley 70 of territorial and cultural rights)? Were they the result of the decided action by social movement activists? Or something in between? An adequate answer to these questions can be attempted only by a careful tacking between theory and ethnography. Contemporary theory, including poststructuralism, feminist and critical race theories, and cultural and psychological frameworks in various fields, has given great salience to questions of identity as an expression of the politics of difference; activists unambiguously described their actions in terms of the right to cultural difference and to a black or indigenous identity. Generally speaking, what relations between the individual and the collective, between culture and politics, between state and social movement action, between activist and expert knowledge account for the making of particular identities in place-based yet translocal situations? Moreover, even if there were no “ethnic identities” or “black communities” before 1990, Pacific local peoples did not have any trouble knowing who they were and how to talk about themselves and others, including whites—it’s just that they did it according to a very different regime of representation

of difference and sameness, of belonging. What happened with these “traditional” identities once the post-1990s regime erupted onto the picture? As we shall see, there are no easy answers to these questions, and, again, I will highlight the knowledge about identities produced by the social movements.

Networks ♦ Biodiversity, social movements, capital, knowledge, and so on are decentralized, dispersed, and transnationalized ensembles of processes that operate at many levels and through multiple sites. No current image captures this state of affairs at present more auspiciously than that of the network. The salience of the network concept has to do with cultural and technological processes fueled by digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). A lot of hype in network talk arises from many quarters (from physics and mathematics to systems science, sociology, anthropology, geography, and cultural studies), but interesting ideas also emanate from network approaches. For example, the concept of biodiversity was barely known in the late 1980s; by the early 1990s it had become a transnational assemblage bringing together all kinds of organizations, actors, knowledges, endangered species, and genes. A movement organization such as PCN, which started as a regional force, embarked on a strategy of transnationalization by 1995–96. By the late 1990s there were networks of Afro–Latin American movements and Afro–Latin American women activists, where only sporadic contacts had existed a few years before. But there are networks of all kinds. Is it possible to differentiate between dominant and oppositional networks, for instance? Or are they all so inextricably tied that even an analytical separation of them becomes useless? Or between local and regional and transnational networks? Or between the hierarchical and centralized networks that have characterized most modern organizations, on the one hand, and the more self-organizing, decentralized, and nonhierarchical “meshworks” that characterize many contemporary movements, on the other? Or how does one reconcile being-in-place and being-in-networks? Finally, what are the implications of network thinking for social theory, including concepts of scale, space, ecosystem, and the real itself? If what some theorists are arguing is correct, the network concept would be a reflection of a more substantial reinterpretation of how social reality comes into being; the notions of actor network, assemblages, flat ontology, and flat sociality push one to think about the real in relational and contingent, not structural and law-driven, terms.

Thinking from the Colonial Difference

Coloniality, according to Walter Mignolo, is, on the one hand, “what the project of modernity needs to rule out and roll over in order to implant itself as modernity and—on the other hand—the site of enunciation where the blindness of the modern project is revealed, and concomitantly also the site where new projects begin to unfold. Coloniality is [. . .] the platform of pluri-versality, of diverse projects coming from the experience of local histories touched by western expansion; thus coloniality is not an abstract universal, but the place where diversality as a universal project can be thought out, where the question of languages and knowledges become[s] crucial” (cited in Escobar 2004a: 218; see also Mignolo 2000; Walsh 2007). The notion of coloniality thus signals two parallel processes: the systematic suppression of subordinated cultures and knowledges (*el encubrimiento del otro*) by dominant modernity; and the necessary emergence, in the very encounter, of particular knowledges shaped by this experience that have at least the potential to become the sites of articulation of alternative projects and of enabling a pluriverse of socionatural configurations. The modernity/coloniality/decoloniality perspective (MCD), to be discussed at length in the chapter on development, is interested in alternatives which, arising from the epistemic borders of the modern-colonial world system, might pose a challenge to Eurocentric forms of modernity. Succinctly put, this perspective is interested not only in alternative worlds and knowledges, but also in worlds and knowledges otherwise.

To give a more intuitive entry into this notion: The fact that the Pacific has always been connected with a dominant national Euro-Andean modernity has entailed the persistent suppression (often violent exclusion) of black and indigenous knowledges and cultures. This very situation, nevertheless, has been accompanied by an ongoing production by these groups of diverse knowledges about nature, economy, person, and the world in general. These knowledges are generated in the ceaseless process of living at the epistemic borders of the modern colonial world system, as happens in so many instances of border thinking by black and indigenous inhabitants. Literally speaking, black and indigenous groups of the Pacific—like, surely, many other groups in the world—have always lived in a pluriverse of culture and knowledge. But they have done so as *dominated* groups, which makes all the difference. Activists of local movements, as I suggest in this book, emerge from this border and produce knowledge that shuttles back and forth alongside the mo-

dernity/coloniality, universality/pluriversality interface. This border, furthermore, constitutes an exteriority of sorts (not an ontological outside) to modernity. I shall say that these activists conduct their struggle from the colonial difference—in this case, a colonial difference that has to do with blackness or indigeneity and with living in particular landscapes and ecosystems.⁴

A number of notions enable the construction of a framework for thinking theoretically and ethnographically about and from the colonial difference. The framework presented below incorporates elements from a variety of proposals, chiefly those of political ecology, modernity/coloniality/decoloniality, politics of place, and diverse economies, all of which I will present at some length in subsequent chapters. For now, I need only point out the rudiments of the framework.

For several reasons I have found it useful to think about the colonial difference under three interrelated rubrics: economic, ecological, and cultural difference (Escobar 2006 [1999]). First, the transformation of regions such as the Pacific by imperial globality is indeed a triple transformation, or conquest; it entails the transformation of local diverse economies, partly oriented to self-reproduction and subsistence, into a monetized, market-driven economy; of particular ecosystems into modern forms of nature; and of place-based local cultures into cultures that increasingly resemble Euro-Andean modernity. Dussel has similarly suggested that the political field is traversed by the three domains I have just described: the ecological, the economic, and the cultural. For him, the primary end of politics today is the perpetuation of life on the planet (Dussel 2006: 55–61, 131–40). Second, even if the transformation of regions such as the Pacific never stops, it is never complete. Academics have thought about these processes in terms of resistance, hybridization, accommodation, and the like. These have been useful notions, yet they have tended to obliterate the potential of difference for worlds and knowledges otherwise. I shall see if it is possible to arrive at an alternative formulation.

I already mentioned the definition of political ecology as the study of ecological distribution conflicts, meaning by this, conflicts over access to and control of natural resources. In providing this definition, Martínez Alier (2002) was making an extension from political economy as the study of economic distribution conflicts—class distribution of wealth, income, assets, and so forth—to the field of ecology. This two-pronged, political ecology perspective is missing an important dimension of conflict, namely, the cultural. It is necessary, in other words, to consider those conflicts that arise from the relative power, or powerlessness,

accorded to various knowledges and cultural practices. To continue with the example above: by culturally privileging the capitalist (e.g., plantation) model of nature over the local diverse agroforest, ecosystem model, not geared to a single product and to accumulating capital, a cultural distribution conflict has been created. This conflict has ecological and economic consequences, so that economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts are intimately intertwined.

There is added value in including the cultural, and this is to neutralize the tendency to ascribe determining importance to the economic or to the ecological, depending on the taste of the researcher. In other words, economic crises are ecological crises are cultural crises. It is important not to separate these three domains but to let them interpenetrate each other. When considered together, the domains of subjectivity and culture, economy, and ecology provide the basis for theoretical insights about how to reorient societies away from the nightmarish arrangements of the present and toward cultural, ecological, and cultural practices and singularities that could constitute tangible alternatives to capitalist significations and realizations, fostering the construction of new existential territories.⁵

Two further points about the cultural dimension. First, cultural distribution conflicts arise from the difference in effective power associated with particular cultural meanings and practices. They do not emerge out of cultural difference per se, but out of the difference that this difference makes in the definition of social life: whose norms and meaning-making practices define the terms and values that regulate social life concerning economy, ecology, personhood, body, knowledge, property, and so forth. Power inhabits meaning, and meanings are a main source of social power; struggles over meaning are thus central to the structuring of the social and of the physical world itself. This concept shifts the study of cultural difference from the modernist concern with multiculturalism to the distributive effects of cultural dominance (coloniality) and struggles around it; more than cultural justice movements at present emphasize interculturality. I define *interculturality* as a project, that of bringing about effective dialogue of cultures in contexts of power (Escobar 2006 [1999]). On the movement side, these dialogues are often enacted from the colonial difference. This is clearly the case with groups such as PCN, as we shall see in abundant detail.

Second, cultural conflicts are often the reflection of underlying ontological differences, that is, different ways of understanding the world and, in the last instance, different worlds. These differences are more patently clear in the case of, say, indigenous peoples and ethnic minori-

ties. While they are increasingly recognized, for instance, in conservation programs (e.g., indigenous knowledge) they are rarely incorporated into program and project design, for to do so would mean very significant transformations in the existing frameworks and ultimately a radical questioning of foundational modern assumptions, such as the divide between nature and culture. The fact that dominant modern ontologies are connected to these other ontologies asymmetrically through the very same projects means that the latter are almost inevitably refunctionalized at the service of the former. This is why it can be said, with Blaser (forthcoming), that political ecology implies a political ontology in many cases. The political ontology framework thus constitutes a further elaboration of coloniality and of the coloniality of nature in particular.

Akin to the “women and politics of place” conception (Harcourt and Escobar, eds. 2005), the above argument brings together into one framework discourses and struggles around culture, often the focus of ethnic, gender, and other movements for identity; environment, the interest of ecology and environmental justice movements; and diverse economies, the concern of social and economic justice movements.⁶ This conceptual framework aims to analyze the interrelations created within subaltern struggles (black people’s, in the case of the Pacific) around identity, environment, and economies, in all of their diversities. In doing so, I aim to demystify theory that ignores subaltern experiences and knowledge of the local economy, environment, and culture *in order to relocate their politics of place as key to our understanding of globalization*. As we shall see in the last chapter, on networks, many subaltern struggles can be seen today in terms of place-based yet transnationalized strategies—or, more succinctly, as forms of place-based globalism (Osterweil 2005a). At the theoretical-political level, the focus on difference can also be interpreted in terms of the logic of articulation outlined by Laclau and Mouffe (1985); emerging out of the antagonisms that necessarily pervade social life, the logic of difference is a means to widen the political space and increase its complexity. The articulation of struggles across differences may lead to the deepening of democracy—indeed, to questioning the very principles of liberal democracy, if conceived from the perspective of the colonial difference. The following table summarizes the framework (see Escobar 2006 [1999] for further detail).

A final word about why I place so much emphasis on difference and conflict. First, as the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff says, the valuation of difference needs to be accompanied by the acceptance of complementarities and by convergences constructed out of the

Table 1. A Political Ecology of Difference: Economic, Ecological, and Cultural Distribution Conflicts

Context/ Historical process	Concept/Problem	Theoretical/ Academic response	Intellectual/ Political project	Social/ Political responses
Global capitalism	Economic distribution (negation of economic difference)	Internalization of externalities	“Sustainable” capitalist development	Environmental governmentality
Reductionist science and technology	Ecological distribution (nega- tion of ecological processes)	Highlighting of incommensu- rability of (mod- ern) economy and ecology. Ecological eco- nomics and politi- cal ecology	Need to re- embed econ- omy in society and ecosystems	Struggle over the environment as a source of livelihood; environmentalism of the poor
Modernity/ Coloniality (modern colonial world system)	Cultural distribution (negation of cultural difference)	Highlighting of Incommensura- bility of (Modern) Economy and Pluri-Culturality; Politics of Place Frameworks; Articulatory Politics; De- Coloniality	Need to re-embed econ- omy in society, ecosystems, and culture	Place-based struggles for economic, ecological, and cultural dif- ference; social movement networks; autonomy, counterhegemony; decolonial projects

diversity of worldviews and practices (2002: 26; see also Maturana and Varela 1987). Second, while highlighting power, conflict should not be seen as reducing everything to power or to quantitative assessments of inequalities. The emphasis on conflict and difference is not about exclusion or segregation, as some might fear. To continue with Boff, if talk of conflict and interculturality is about justice, it is also about forgiveness; if it commands, for instance, reparations, it does so in the sense of the acknowledgment of historical injustice rather than revenge. In the best of cases, the language of distribution conflicts entails serious individual and collective confrontations with difference but without (having to) fear; it entails bridge building and technologies of crossing across difference (Anzaldúa and Keatin, eds. 2002). As the biologists Maturana and Varela (1987: 246) put it, “A conflict can go away only if we move to another domain where coexistence takes place. The knowledge of this knowledge constitutes the social imperative for a human-centered ethics. . . . As human beings we have only the world which we create with others—whether we like them or not.” This is, in fact, the deepest lesson of biology in the opinion of these two thinkers: “Without love, without acceptance of others living besides us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness” (246).

This emphasis of the framework also signals the widespread desire for peace that exists in many places like Colombia. To an order of imperial globality enforced through violence, the ecology of difference answers with a debate on distribution understood as the search for a shared sense of peace and justice. As a value, peace-with-justice does not belong completely to the domain of rationality but to that of ethics; it requires an attitude of transformation, caring, and solicitude in the face of difference and injustice. Peace-with-justice should be seen as always in process, something that can be approached only asymptotically but can never really be reached. To the declaration of war on nature and humanity by neoliberal globalization, there can only be a declaration of peace in which peace is both the means and an end. It is in the light of a planetary sense of ethics and spirituality like that found in the best of ecology and pluralist religious thought and in the best humanist traditions of secular modernity that one may find elements for a workable strategy of peace out of the recognition of conflict. Peace—understood as a set of economic, cultural, and ecological processes that bring about a measure of justice and balance to the natural and social orders—is the deepest meaning of the ecology of difference that aims toward worlds and knowledges otherwise.⁷

As a PCN activist put it, “Las diferencias son para enriquecer la acción y el pensamiento” (Differences are meant to enrich action and thought). For these activists, difference is the very source of a *pensamiento propio* (a thought of one’s own), of differentiation in thought. One often finds among movement intellectuals the notion that difference is the very core of existence, that what persists is difference itself, not any unchanging essence. Difference is what defines being, and as difference is always in the process of being transformed, so is being. The oppressor, the colonizer, the dominant seek to occupy the time and energy of the subaltern to preclude difference from becoming an active social force. In places such as the Pacific today, this occupation of the time and space of difference is effected through brutal acts of repression and imperial models of war, economy, and development. Confronted with this situation and with the ideology of a *pensamiento único* (single thought) that pervades much of the world, activists attempt to create a breathing space for difference.⁸

The framework of the political ecology of difference (the integrated framework of diverse economies, environments, and cultures) is offered here as a contribution to a “global outline of a practical politics” that works by reading world events for difference, rather than just for dominance, and by weaving connections among languages and practices of economic, ecological, and cultural difference (Gibson-Graham 2006: 30). The framework is not offered as a universal approach; on the contrary, it is a *theory of difference* that is historically specific and contingent; it is a response to the present moment that builds on intellectual and political developments in many places, particularly some parts of Latin America. It is also partly a response to Eurocentric teleological arguments about the alleged universality of modernity and globalization. Above all, it is an attempt to think with intellectual activists who aim to go beyond the limits of Eurocentric models as they confront the ravages of neoliberal globalization and seek to defend their place-based cultures and territories; it is, finally, about projects of decoloniality in and for the present.

Colombia as a Theater of Imperial Globality

Talk of peace seems paradoxical when the world is increasingly nasty and in chaos. It is not well known that there are three million internally displaced people in Colombia, a disproportionate number of them black and indigenous. So much violence, often fueled by hatred and racism, one might think, surely needs to be confronted on its own terms. In-

deed, to give just the roughest sketch of Colombia—one of five or six regions in the world where the struggle for the imposition of the terms of imperial globality is most fierce—let us say that in this country the “cruel little wars” (Joxe 2002) of imperial globality have been ongoing for several decades, as every year its fatidic embrace of territories and domains of social life broadens. Colombia represents patterns of historical exclusion found in many parts of Latin America but rarely in such depth. While inequality has been aggravated over the past twenty years by successive neoliberal regimes, it has a long historical basis in the structure of land tenure and industrial and financial capital. Today, 1.1 percent of landowners control over 55 percent of all arable land (and as much as one-third of this may be linked to drug money). Over 60 percent of the Colombian population live on incomes below the UN-established poverty line of two dollars a day. The armed conflict that affects the country is well known. It brings together a disparate set of actors—chiefly left-wing guerrillas, the army, and right-wing paramilitary groups—into a complex military, territorial, and political conflict, often intertwined with and aggravated by wealthy drug mafias.⁹ From the perspective of imperial globality, all of these armed groups can be seen as war machines more interested in their survival than in peaceful solutions to the conflict. Massacres and human rights abuses are the order of the day, inflicted primarily by paramilitaries but also by guerrillas, and the civilian population is most often brought into the conflict as unwilling participants or sacrificial victims.

The subnational dynamics of imperial globality is pathetically illustrated by the experience of the Pacific region. This rain forest area has been home to about one million people, 95 percent of them Afro-Colombian, with about fifty thousand indigenous peoples belonging to various ethnic groups. Since the late 1990s, guerrillas and paramilitaries have been steadily moving into the region in order to gain control of territories that are either rich in natural resources or the site of planned large-scale development projects. In many river communities, guerrillas and paramilitaries both have pushed people to either plant coca or move out. Displacement has reached staggering levels, with several hundred thousand people displaced from this region alone. Displacement in some areas has been caused by paramilitaries, and this has often resulted in the expansion of African palm plantations by rich growers. The expansion of the palm frontier is supported by the government as a development strategy, including funds from Plan Colombia; this promotion has been

linked in recent years to the international demand for biofuels.¹⁰ In many world regions similar to the Colombian Pacific, ethnic minorities inhabit territories rich in natural resources that are now coveted by national and transnational capital (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz, eds. 2006; Blaser, Feit, and McRae, eds. 2004). Beyond this empirical observation, however, lies the fact that imperial globality is also about the defense of white privilege worldwide. By *white privilege* I mean not so much phenotypically white, but the defense of a Eurocentric way of life that worldwide has historically privileged white peoples (and, particularly since the 1950s, those elites and middle classes around the world who abide by this outlook) at the expense of non-European and colored peoples. This is global coloniality at its most material.

The case of Colombia and its Pacific region thus reflects key tendencies of imperial globality and global coloniality. The first tendency is the link between the economy and armed violence, particularly the still-prominent role of national and subnational wars over territory, peoples, and resources. These wars contribute to the spread of social fascism, defined as a combination of social and political exclusion whereby increasingly large segments of the population live under terrible material conditions and often under the threat of displacement and even death (Santos 2002; Escobar 2003a). In Colombia, the government's response has been to step up military repression and surveillance within a conception of "democratic security" that mirrors the U.S. global strategy as seen in the Iraqi case: democracy by force and without the right to dissent—a deterrence against common people.

Second, Colombia also shows that despite what could be seen as excellent conditions for achieving a peaceful society and democracy (e.g., very rich natural endowments, a large and highly trained professional class of both sexes, and determined cadres of activists that continue their labor of love against all odds), the opposite has happened. Why? Because the local war is in part a surrogate for global interests; because of intransigent national elites who refuse to entertain needed social reforms; and because the war logics (including drug mafias) have taken on a self-perpetuating dynamic. Finally, the Colombian case makes patently clear the exhaustion of modern models. Development and modernity, to be sure, were always inherently processes that created displacement. Yet what has become evident in the face of the excesses of imperial globality in places like the Pacific (but one can think also of the Sudan, the Middle East, and others) is that the gap between modernity's displacement-

producing tendencies and displacement-averting mechanisms is not only growing but becoming untenable—that is, unmanageable within a modern framework (Escobar 2003a).

Which brings me back to the question with which I started this section: Does it make sense to talk about peace in this context, and if so, how is one to have a reasonable expectation that this talk will not play into the designs of the powerful? I shall take up this question again in the concluding chapter when I discuss the problematic of transition based on the idea that modernity's ability to provide solutions to modern problems has been increasingly compromised, making discussion of a transition beyond modernity feasible again. The intuitive question for now is this: Is globalization the last stage of capitalist modernity or the beginning of something new? I will address this question from the perspective of a politics of peace, place, and difference in which it finds its *raison d'être*.

Some Scholarly Contexts

The reader will find many references to specialized debates in the chapters that follow. I want to make only some very general remarks about literatures here. To start with political ecology: emerging in the 1970s out of the marriage of several ecological-oriented frameworks and political economy, political ecology has been an established field since the 1980s; today it is an interdisciplinary field drawing on many disciplines (geography, anthropology, ecology, ecological economics, environmental history, historical ecology, development studies, science and technology studies) and bodies of theory (liberal theory, Marxism, post-structuralism, feminist theory, phenomenology, postcolonial theory, complexity, and natural science approaches such as landscape ecology and conservation biology). More important is the range of questions with which it deals: the relation between environment, development, and social movements; between capital, nature, and culture; gender, race, and nature; space, place, and landscape; knowledge and conservation; economic valuation and externalities; population, and land and resource use; and so forth. This range of questions, conversely, refers to problems the very salience of which lends relevance to the field; these include, among others, destruction of biodiversity, deforestation, resource depletion, unsustainability, development, environmental racism, control of genetic resources and intellectual property rights, biotechnology, and

global problems such as climate change, transboundary pollution, loss of carbon sinks, and the like.¹¹

This work is situated within two domains of recent anthropological inquiry. The first is the trend started in the 1980s with the study of modernity and continued today, in a fruitful manner, with theoretical and methodological proposals focused explicitly on the ethnography of expert (Western) knowledge practices. This approach, pioneered by such scholars as Marilyn Strathern (e.g., 1991, 1992) and Paul Rabinow (e.g., 2003), is seeing a sophisticated development particularly in the field of the anthropology of science and technology and science and technology studies (STS), including informatics and cyberspace (e.g., Hess 2001, Hakken 2003). A crucial issue here is how to do the ethnography of situations that are fundamentally shaped by the same knowledge formations of which the ethnographer's knowledge is itself a product. This has led to ideas about critical anthropology (Marcus, ed. 1999), emergent forms of life (Fischer 2003), anthropology of the contemporary (Rabinow 2003), network and distributed studies (Riles 2000; Fortun 2003; Osterweil 2005b), and reconstructivist agendas in science studies (Woodhouse et al. 2002; this latter proposal seeks to bring together academic and nonacademic knowledge production spheres). The recasting of critical modernist anthropology is important to my study because it centers largely on activist knowledge practices—in many ways, as we shall see, a modernist enterprise. The second trend in which this book is situated is that of world anthropologies, an approach intended to de-essentialize anthropology and to pluralize anthropological inquiry by building on nonhegemonic anthropological practices. As in “worlds and knowledges otherwise,” the world anthropologies project aims to foster “other anthropologies and anthropology otherwise.” My book can be read in this light.¹²

With its acute reflexivity, the anthropological study of modernity pushes the boundaries of inquiry toward a renewed critical modernism; however, as I see it, it does not aim to question the project of modernity in the way that, say, Santos, Boff, or Mignolo do, nor do they call for a change of paradigm beyond modernity. This is why my book also adopts a framework that has been variously called “geopolitics of knowledge” (e.g., Mignolo 2000) in the humanities and “critical geopolitics” in geography (Slater 2004). These proposals, though connected to poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, are based on more than that; in particular, they bring fully into the picture the contributions from outside Eurocentric theory in order to put these theories' categories in question; these

tendencies also engage with attempts to reimagine the world's geographies of power and knowledge in conjunction with social movements and experiences like the World Social Forum process. Besides questioning Western discourses, these trends pay attention to the epistemic potential of local histories embedded in or arising from the colonial difference, locating there some of the most meaningful sources for political action and for alternative world constructions. These local histories have remained largely invisible in Eurocentric theory precisely because they have been actively produced as nonexistent—as noncredible alternatives to what exists—calling for what Santos (2004) labels a sociology of absences that brings them into visibility, and a sociology of emergences that enables the enlargement of the range of knowledges that could be considered credible alternatives. This book is devoted to this sociology of emergences by foregrounding the contributions of a particular social movement.

Cultural studies is another important scholarly context for the present work. More than any other field, and after a period of apparent complacency, cultural studies today maintains a built-in reflection on its own contextuality. As Grossberg sees it, “Cultural studies is a project not only to construct a political history of the present, but to do so in a particular way, a radical contextualist way, to avoid reproducing the very sort of universalisms (and essentialisms) that all too often characterize the dominant practices of knowledge production. . . . Cultural studies seeks to embrace complexity and contingency, and to avoid the many faces and forms of reductionism” (2006: 2). Besides being contextualist and relational, cultural studies is centered on the study of conjunctures, understood in terms of articulations or condensations of contradictions within a given social formation that need to be examined along multiple axes, planes, and scales. This conception fits well with my focus on regions and places in the age of globality and on the particular conjuncture of the Colombian Pacific. The goal is not only to ascertain where and how the Pacific is at present, but also to illuminate how it can move from one conjuncture to another; these tasks, again, need to be developed in tandem with local social movements.¹³ By focusing on the cultural potential of the knowledges produced by social movements and the epistemic force of local histories such as those of the black communities of the Pacific, the MCD perspective seeks to articulate cultural studies as a decolonial project.¹⁴

The last and perhaps most relevant body of work within which I would like to situate my book is the study of social movements. This field has

been largely cultivated by sociologists and, to a lesser extent, political scientists and historians. Anthropologists are a late arrival to the field (although not completely; see Nonini, Price and Fox-Tree forthcoming), but there are reasons to believe that the interdisciplinary approaches arising from anthropology will have a noticeable influence on the field as a whole. For one thing, contemporary social movement theories are inadequate to explain the complexity of current forms of collective action—from place-based ecological, women's, and ethnic movements to antiglobalization protests (Leyva Solano 2003; Osterweil 2004, 2005b; Escobar 2004b). For another, a number of emphases are emerging from anthropological approaches, including the focus on activists as knowledge producers (and hence, the ethnography of knowledge production practices in this context); the blurring of the boundary between academic and activist worlds and knowledges, which a growing number of anthropologists are promoting for both theoretical interest and political disposition; and a series of concepts and domains of inquiry that arise readily from anthropological situations and reflections or in particular ways, such as, among others, network ethnography, ethnocartography, mapping of knowledges, ethnography of identities and activist figured worlds, cultural politics, and activist, partisan, or militant anthropology. Some of these notions are derived from encounters with movements themselves and with, so to speak, the activist within, in the sense that many of those wishing to understand today's movements also want to act and think with them and from their social and epistemic locations.¹⁵ This means that the point of departure for working with activists is the political position of the movement, not academic interests; this creates a different basis for arriving at an enriched knowledge that, while allowing for disagreements, is arrived at from the perspective of the activists' reading and valuation of their own collective knowledge.¹⁶

The idea that social movements should be seen as knowledge producers is one of the main insights of this trend. This insight has many dimensions, beginning with an emphasis on the articulation between knowledge and resistance established by movements themselves; the identification of knowledge as a tool for struggle; the fact that activists more than ever engage in research on their own experiences—sometimes even drawing on critical academic theories; the relation between activist knowledge production and critical genealogies of thought; and the challenges all of the above pose for more conventional understandings and institutions of knowledge production. This trend is leading

to engagements focused on knowledge production practices with particular movements, in the belief that knowledge is embedded in local contentious practice and in larger historical struggles (Holland and Lave 2001). The aim is to study the embeddedness of knowledge in social relations, that is, knowledge being produced in dialogue, tension, and interaction with other groups, and how this knowledge is enacted and networked.¹⁷

My attempt in this book is to build on ethnographic research in order to identify the knowledge produced by activists and to use this knowledge and these analyses to conduct my own analyses about related topics—or, as I like to put it, to build bridges between political-intellectual conversations in social movements about environment, development, and so on and conversations in the academy about corresponding issues. The book is only partly an ethnography of knowledge practices per se, although it is largely based on ethnographic research focused on activist knowledge, showing the tremendous complexity of its production and its embeddedness in social, political, and cultural processes. To say it metaphorically, as the Afro-Colombian historian Oscar Almario put it in his keynote address at the conference “Afro-Reparations: Memories of Slavery and Contemporary Social Justice,” which included an opening act by an accomplished drummer from the city where it was held (Cartagena, October 19–21, 2005), my book is “un esfuerzo de la academia para estar más cerca de los tambores” (an effort by the academy to be closer to the drumming).¹⁸

A word about the book’s title. First, *Territories of Difference* brings together two important social movement concepts in the Pacific: territory and difference. They are also persistent theoretical concerns in a number of fields. Any territory is a territory of difference in that it entails unique place making and region making, ecologically, culturally, and socially. In cases where different ontologies are involved, the theoretical and political treatment of difference becomes even more important. Second, I have decided to use “life” instead of “nature” or the “environment” in the subtitle since it seems to me that what is involved in situations such as that of the Pacific is the understanding and defense of life itself, in all of its complex manifestations. At issue for movements such as PCN is not just the environment, but the fact of being different and, in the last instance, life itself; hence, territories of difference are also *territorios de vida*, or territories of life, in the activists’ conceptualization. Finally, the Spanish *redes*, more than the English term *networks*

commonly used to translate it, conveys more powerfully the idea that life and movements are ineluctably produced in and through relations in a dynamic fashion (“assemblages” would be a better translation). Images of *redes* circulated widely in the southern Pacific in the 1990s; represented graphically as drawings of a variety of traditional fishing nets, lacking strict pattern regularity, shaped by use and user, and always being repaired, *redes* referred to a host of entities, including among others social movement organizations, local radio networks, women’s associations, and action plans.¹⁹