*Carsten Wergin*

# From Transculture to Transecology

## Coming to Terms with Multispecies Conviviality in the Education for Sustainable Development

**Abstract.** The global climate crisis demands of international politics to make planetary health and well-being an utmost priority. This essay introduces the concept of 'transecology' as a means to acknowledge this demand in teacher education. Severe biodiversity loss and environmental degradation profoundly challenge ethical and pedagogical standards. The text proposes a closer engagement with multispecies conviviality through which to make protection and preservation of a shared heritage, culture and ecology part of the curriculum.

**Keywords.** Anthropology, conviviality, education, Indigenous philosophy, sustainable development, transecology

### Von der Transkulturalität zur Transökologie.

#### Artenvielfalt und Konvivialität als Themen der Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung

**Zusammenfassung.** Die globale Klimakrise verlangt von der internationalen Politik, der Gesundheit und dem Wohlergehen des Planeten oberste Priorität zu geben. In diesem Beitrag wird das Konzept der ‚Transökologie' vorgestellt, um dieser Forderung in der Lehrer:innenbildung Rechnung zu tragen. Fortschreitende Umweltzerstörung und Verluste an biologischer Vielfalt stellen ethische und pädagogische Standards in Frage. Der Text schlägt vor, in Lehrplänen die Konvivialität verschiedener Arten stärker zu thematisieren, um dem Bedürfnis nach Erhalt und Schutz eines gemeinsamen Erbes, einer gemeinsamen Kultur und Ökologie gerechter zu werden.

*Carsten Wergin*

## 1      Beyond Nature and Culture

The decolonial shift in academic theory and practice puts into question the very foundations of what both motivates and justifies a differentiation between nature and culture. Meanwhile, the latter has for a long time governed Modernist perceptions of the world (cf. Escobar 2018; Fischer 2014; Lear 2006; Robbins, Moore 2013). This essay explores some of the challenges this shift poses for teacher education, and it offers a tool for both, nature and culture, to be taught on more equitable terms. Both spheres are strongly intertwined and recognized as such by a growing number of people. Protestors against the devastating effects of the Modernist rational that span from large-scale animal and plant extinction up to a global climate crisis, demand of international politics to make planetary health and well-being an utmost priority. This essay proposes the concept of 'transecology' as both theory machine and methodological approach to acknowledge these concerns in teacher education.

The text sets out with an ethnographic vignette that describes how the concept of transecology came about during fieldwork in Northwest Australia. This is followed by two examples, one from an Indigenous tourism venture and one from the field of vocational training and education, of how the engagement with transecological experiences motivates students to rethink their place in the world. The hypothesis put forward is that an acknowledgement of our interdependence with the environment can activate within people a desire to confront biodiversity loss and environmental degradation not as phenomena that are separate from but integral to their own existence. This convivial approach to the environment is equally transmitted by orchard educators in Southern Germany. After a brief excursion into the challenges and potentials that the engagement with orchard meadows offers for school children, the text closes with suggestions on how (teacher) education for sustainable development can benefit from transecological thinking to foster a world(view) grounded in conviviality.

## 2      From Transculture to Transecology

Central to what I term transecological thinking is a more inclusive understanding of people and place. The Indigenous group I have been most associated with

during long-term fieldwork in Northwest Australia, the Goolarabooloo, call this relationship 'living country' (cf. Roe, Hoogland 1999). The notion emphasises the land as nurturing for people, fauna and flora, while their 'care-full' engagement with it nurtures the land itself (cf. Wergin 2016, 2021). Their concept of 'living country' for me became a "theory machine" (Helmreich 2011, p. 132), as it offers a convivial approach towards being in the world that includes both natural and cultural components. Along these lines, crises in the realms of nature, culture, health and economics that have come to define the new global epoch of the Anthropocene (cf. Crutzen, Stoermer 2000), must be understood as an existential threat to all planetary life, including the human.

The more I engaged in questions of care and concern as environmental anthropologist and transcultural studies scholar, and parallel to those with 'living country', the more I felt the need to reassess the very concept of transculturality. Transculturality emphasises processuality as the very foundation of cultural expression (cf. Burke 2009; Coronil 1997; Ortiz 1995; Welsch 1999). Meanwhile, transculturality with its focus on culture also runs a risk to promote the very dualism between nature and culture that has been scrutinized by the decolonial shift. The notion of transecology is to overcome this dualism that persists in transcultural thinking to the extent that 'nature' is woven into cultural expression not only as that which can be discovered and described but, more importantly, as that which makes the discovery and description possible in the first place (cf. Neimanis 2015). This recognition of 'nature' as that which precedes cultural inscription enables an affirmative engagement with more-than-human actors that anthropologist Donna Haraway sums up in the formulation to "make kin" (Haraway 2015, p. 161). With this she emphasises a need for, "stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections" (Haraway 2015, p. 160). Related scholarship, notably that of eco-feminists, fosters the search for more "mutualistic forms of rationality" (Plumwood 2009, p. 116). As environmental philosopher Val Plumwood explains,

> [w]hen we hyperseparate ourselves from nature and reduce it conceptually, we not only lose the ability to empathise and to see the non-human sphere in ethical terms, but also get a false sense of our own character and location that includes an illusory sense of agency and autonomy. (ibid., p. 117)

In line with Plumwood's critique of the 'hyperseparation' of humans from nature, the transecological approach shifts the conventional focus on the consequences of human interventionism in the environment towards the multifaceted (and often unintended) consequences such interventionism has as it is impacted on

by diverse ecological forces. In this sense, transecology does away with hyper-separations on the level of ascribed cultural and ecological difference and adds to the transcultural project a means to include those spheres in which the term 'culture' departs from human-centeredness. The following illustrates this in an ethnographic vignette.

## 3    Case Studies: Thinking the World in Transecological Terms

It was in May 2012 that I sat with Elisabeth F.[1] at her recently opened 5-star hotel in the tourist town of Broome, at the Indian Ocean coast of Northwest Australia. We spoke about how important it has been for her to incorporate the particularities of the local environment in the design of her hotel, she explained:

> It was very important to me that I built something that reflected Broome. I didn't want to be Bali. I didn't want to be Melbourne [...] I wanted this to reflect Broome, and so I built it to actually recognize the climate. So, from now on [i. e. early May], you don't need air conditioners in this property, really. All the doors are open in the restaurant even right through November, December. The only time we close them is, in fact, because of the rain. So, everything is built so that you get this amazing breeze [...]. The spa is not little, closed-in rooms that have no light. They all have louvers. So, this time of the year, you lie there, and you can hear the birds, and you can hear the rustling of the wind and the breeze in the leaves. And you feel the breeze across your body, and it's beautiful. I mean it's beautiful! To me, that's celebrating where we are [...] And then also recognizing that this is not a tropical climate. This is actually a semiarid climate. We have a very shallow water table that turns to salinity very quickly. So, our landscaping was very much based on understanding that and using, incorporating plants that had low water usage, but also that were a reflection of this area [...] Now, a lot of these things cost an enormous amount of money. And one would say, "Why the hell did you do it?" It's a very good question because it's very hard to recover in hospitality. But, to me, it was a sense of responsibility to a community and to a place. (Wergin, Transcript 120504)

Elisabeth F. describes the importance of living with the particularities of a place. This has proven valuable for the design of her hotel but also valuable in its own right. Her acknowledgment goes beyond monetary advantages that deem

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1   All names have been anonymized.

air-conditioning unnecessary. She takes a transecological approach to the world that is founded in a *care-full* consideration of the interrelationship of people with their environment. In (teacher) education this view can be fostered by asking to *compare* worlds; that is, "to weigh them, on a more equitable basis" (Latour 2013, p. 21). In another interview, a former employee of the Kimberley Training Institute, the largest provider of training and vocational services in the north of Western Australia, illustrates this comparative approach by drawing on his long-term work experience with Indigenous communities:

> Former Employee: People were here minding their own business and then non-Aboriginal people came in and said, "Okay, you mob, you're all going into missions" […] and then they go, "Oh well, blackfella's hopeless, […] they're unreliable, they can't get organized." I said to people, "You ever been to the football field on a Saturday, you ever seen the Peninsula Bombers [i.e. an Aboriginal Football Team on the Dampier Peninsula, NW Australia]?" They all get in a bus and they all come down, and if the game starts at 2:00, they're all there dressed and ready to go at 2:00.

> Wergin: That's a good example, because what I hear a lot when I talk to people in tourism is, "One of the problems is, we want to organize a tour but then they're not there."

> Former Employee : Sure, sure. Because people don't have the same commitment to a job that we have to a job, because it's a different culture, it's a different idea of what's important […] I get out [to the community] and I go […], "We're going to give this training today, okay?" And they go, "Look, grandma's sick. She needs to go into the hospital." […] So we get grandma, we put her in a car and we take her to the clinic. So while we're waiting at the clinic, the fuckin' tire on the car goes down […]. So then we go, "Where's the spare?" And they go, "Well, we haven't got a spare. We'll have to get this one fixed." "Okay, where's the jack?" "We don't have a jack either." So we need to get a car to get a jack, to jack it up, to take the tire off, to get the tire to get it fixed. So […] we got the tire off and we go, "Where can we get the tire fixed?" And they go, "At the garage over there." "Cool, let's go there." "Oh, it's closed for lunch now. It's not open until one." "When's grandma going to get out of the clinic?" "Grandma gets out of the clinic at two." "Okay, well …Then we may as well go have lunch." So we go have lunch and do something. "Why don't we go fishing?" Because someone comes past in a car and they go, "Well, let's go fishing and then we'll come back and then we'll fix the tire and pick up grandma." So all of a sudden, the day is done. And that's one day! (Wergin, Transcript 121122)

To reconcile the different world(view)s that this interview excerpt portrays marks a substantial challenge within the wider project of decolonization (cf. Wergin 2017). However, being faced with such a challenge also provides strong means to foster transecological thinking. It asks students to engage with world(view)s that are ontologically different to the one they are familiar with. This confrontation provokes a reassessment of one's own place in the world.

In what follows, I turn to the Lurujarri Heritage Trail as an example for how this can be achieved. This nine-day walk follows an Aboriginal Song Cycle along the Indian Ocean coast. It is run annually by the aforementioned Indigenous group, the Goolarabooloo, as an Indigenous tourism venture that brings people and place together through active participation in and experience of what it means to care for the environment.

## 4    From Transecological Thought to Experience

On my first Lurujarri Heritage Trail, in 2012, I met a lecturer from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). Since the early 1990s, participation in the trail has been part of the RMIT curriculum that is offered to students of landscape architecture. On the third night in, we sat at the campfire and I asked the lecturer about how he prepared his students for this experience. He responded that this was his fifth trail but that he never told his students much in advance about what would be happening during the nine-day walk. "It's an experience that is difficult to put into words," he tried to explain and added that usually, around the third or fourth night, a student comes up to him and exclaims in frustration, "I'm not learning anything." This is after three days of walking, following Indigenous guides through the land, accompanying them through mangroves to catch mud crabs or over the extensive dune system along the Indian Ocean coast, listening to them telling stories and pointing out middens and artefacts. I asked how this was possible, and he explained that the way things are presented to the students is different from what they are used to. Some students do not identify the experiences offered to them as learning until they are presented in an itinerary – until someone or something tells them when to switch into learning mode. This, however, was not how the Goolarabooloo would engage with trail participants.

The uncertainty the lecturer generated by not explaining much to his students in advance was the most valuable methodological preposition he could offer them. The frustration with presumably "not learning anything" marks a decisive moment because it sensitizes students for their approach to the Indigenous world(view) they engage in. This shock-experience allows them to leave Modern-

ist expectations behind and to turn to the experience of the world of the Goolarabooloo of which they had already been a part since they set out on 'living country'.

Admitting to 'not learning anything' means for students to open up to the possibility of learning transecologically. They no longer try to note down the take-home-message of a university course. Instead, they are red-dirty from the pindan sand and soaked in sweat from the sun. They have learnt to seek the shade when sitting down with the Goolarabooloo to hear a story about the land and their community. Slowly, learning routines make way for the lived experience of conviviality – the people and the land. "This is very real," one student says. "This is living country," the Goolarabooloo explain (Wergin, personal fieldnotes).

As teachers and students are confronted with both, their vulnerability when conventional learning habits fail, and the creative energy that stems from living country itself, it paves the way towards reconnecting with the environment and learning through experience. The potential of transecological teaching stems from such learning through experience, especially in the context of education for sustainable development. The United Nations has announced the *Decade of Eco-Restoration* (UN, 2021) and immersive engagements assist in putting this call into action. As a participant in the 2015 trail, a non-Indigenous woman in her mid-forties from Sydney, explained to me,

> For years, we would look at people who are Indigenous as those who had lived simpler lives, less socially evolved or whatever. But over time, I think a lot of people are realizing that they are closer to the truth or closer to living in harmony with the world than we are. (Wergin, Transcript 150901)

UNESCO supports education for sustainable development (ESD) as part of its internationally oriented environmental policy that finds its origins in the 1972 United Nations World Environment Conference (cf. UNESCO). ESD offers a global platform for transecological questions to foster more than mere awareness of the co-dependence of life as part of (teacher) education. As a final example for this, and to extend the geographical scope, I take my observations made during fieldwork in Australia to Germany and apply them to environmental education about orchard meadows.

## 5    Fostering Multispecies Conviviality in the Orchard Meadow

In Germany, there are an estimated 300,000 hectares of orchard meadows nationwide that provide for around 5,000 animal and plant species. In Europe, however, a decline in orchard meadows of 70–80 % has been recorded since the 1950s. With dwindling areas, the possibilities of passing on knowledge about plant varieties, traditional agricultural techniques, but also cultural festivals and customs are lessening, too. On 19 March 2021, orchard meadows were therefore included in the German Federal Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The corresponding application from 2019 had 1.3 million supporters (cf. German Commission for UNESCO; see also Wergin 2022).

Orchard meadows present a complementary example to the Lurujarri Heritage Trail. They equally serve to transmit values that are worth protecting in an intergenerational contract of care and concern (cf. Wergin 2022). In the past, orchard meadows were both vital food sources and providers for multispecies habitat. But labour facilitation and optimized land use have significantly impacted them. Most importantly, contemporary fruit trees are usually dead after 10 years of extensive harvesting, which stands in stark contrast to the survival of trees in traditional orchard meadows, where some continue to grow for more than 100 years. Today, orchards are a work-intensive luxury. The Rhine-Neckar region, located in south western Germany, is made up of alluvial land, which means the meadow has to be stripped and hay has to be cleared because fertilization would hinder herbs and flowers to grow. For the average consumer, this stands in stark contrast to the supermarket-availability of fruits, regardless of whether locally in season or not. However, the latter offer little variety, especially if compared to the many types of apples that grow in orchard meadows.

Since 2017, 21 orchard educators in the Rhine-Neckar-Odenwald-Kraichgau region work with numerous municipalities, kindergartens, schools, private individuals and orchard owners inspiring hundreds of children and adults for the habitat. They offer a variety of modules for children of different ages, from 6 to 14 years. These courses include: "The Apple Tree", "The Meadow Orchard", "Insect Excursion", "Plants", or "Pressing Apple Juice in the Meadow". Under the experts' guidance, children receive a hands-on experience of what grows, how animals live and also hibernate in a meadow. They equally learn about plant names like dandelion or buttercup, where those originate, or how they relate to the ways in which plants were traditionally put to use.

The most nearby orchard meadow in the city of Heidelberg is the municipal meadow in the district of Kirchheim. While this isolated meadow is well fre-
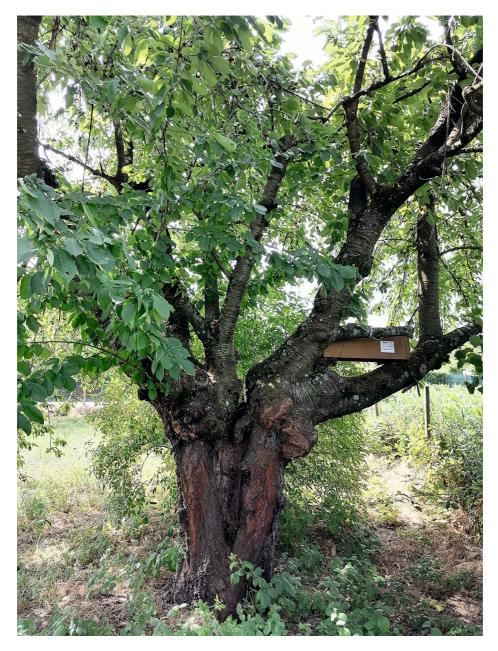
Figure 1: Old apple tree in the orchard meadow in Heidelberg-Kirchheim with nest set up to attract the little owl. The entrance to the nest faces the trunk so that during their first attempts to fly the young can climb back in (Photo: Carsten Wergin 2022).

quented by schools, its future is uncertain. New trees are not to be planted. They would enhance the meadow but this is not in the interest of the municipality. The meadow is located adjacent to large outdoor and indoor sports facilities that, in the long run, are to attract international events and guests in need of accommodation. One of the sites chosen by the city of Heidelberg to build such accommodation is the orchard meadow. If it is reduced to old, partly dying trees, compensation to be paid for destroying it will be significantly reduced as well. However, as I was told in a private conversation by one of the orchard educators, while trees are not to be planted a seed might 'accidentally, of course' fall to the ground. Or, a little owl (Athene noctua) might pass by and decide to nest, a bird that is not critically endangered but whose presence would generate additional pressure to preserve the orchard meadow (fig. 1).

In this sense, the orchard educators team up with seeds, microbes, and the little owl to protect this multispecies habitat. While their transecological thinking (convivial, entangled, equitable) challenges conventional norms, values, and aspirations held by the municipality by confronting them with a call for multispecies justice. If they will protect the meadow remains to be seen. Meanwhile, their initiative provides a strong case for multispecies conviviality as significant addition to the ESD curriculum as it offers students means to acknowledge and foster their shared presence in the world on more equitable terms.

## 6    Concluding Remarks

Severe biodiversity loss and environmental degradation profoundly challenge ethical and pedagogical standards. This has strong impetus on research and teaching. The above cases have shown how Indigenous ways of learning can open up new perspectives for (teacher) education. As the Indigenous custodians explain to trail participants from the top of a sand dune and with an overarching gesture, "You come from your university but this here is my university." Along these lines, the transecological approach, exemplified by Indigenous experiences like the Lurujarri Heritage Trail or transmitted by the orchard educators of the Rhine-Neckar-Odenwald region, provides (teacher) education with possibilities to incorporate experiences of multispecies conviviality in curricula that speak to the growing demand to help protect and preserve our shared heritage, culture and ecology.

## Acknowledgements

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## Author

**PD Dr. Carsten Wergin.** Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Heidelberg Center for Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University. Research focuses: critical heritage studies, decolonialism, environmental humanities
wergin@uni-heidelberg.de    ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6362-5241

Correspondence Address:
PD Dr. Carsten Wergin
Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies
Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg
Voßstraße 2, Gebäude 4400
69115 Heidelberg
Germany