

Transculturalism Beyond Dualism: In Memory of Rudolf Wagner

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I worked closely with Rudolf Wagner as we prepared for the first version of the Research Cluster *Asia and Europe* back in 2010 and 2011. We were both members of a group that worked to develop a research focus linking health and the environment. We had many lively discussions, and I often found myself debating this or that topic with him, each of us arguing for our particular point of view. But whether we agreed or disagreed, we always did so with mutual interest and respect. Looking back, I can now see that, like Dr. Pangloss, we were living in the best of all possible (academic) worlds. In this essay, I should like to continue my discussion with Rudolf, even though he is no longer with us. I propose to do so by carefully responding to some notes he made for one of his last public lectures, “Of Trees and the Wood, Cultures and CULTURE,” in November 2018.¹ I shall honor him by representing his ideas as fairly as I can, while continuing to disagree with him about this or that matter. I think he would appreciate that. I should like to emphasize that since most of what I write here about Rudolf’s ideas is based on those lecture notes, there is a chance that I have misinterpreted some of them. Should that be the case, I beg the reader’s indulgence.

In his talk, Rudolf railed against something he called “dualism” and/or “binarity.”² He argued that the paradigms of both “culture” and “transculture” share the “prison cell of binarity”—the former because culture implies “difference from the other,” the latter because it deals perforce with both the origins and destinations of material objects, with the dualistic perceptions of historical actors, etc. “The root of binarity,” he wrote, “is the I/other divide, its extension in the we/other divide, and the radicalization of the latter by the nation state.”³

The problems associated with such self-other dichotomies have long been recognized and discussed in anthropology. Culture as an analytical term for understanding human life-worlds was introduced in a paradigmatically transcultural way from Germany to America by Franz Boas in the early twentieth century.⁴ Eventually it became so dominant that many practitioners

1 Rudolf G. Wagner, “Of Trees and the Wood, Cultures and CULTURE” (lecture, international workshop “Recalibrating Culture—Reconfiguring the (Trans)Cultural,” University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany, November 23, 2018). Hereafter cited as Wagner, “Of Trees.”

2 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

3 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

4 See Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1911); Franz Boas,

of the discipline called themselves “cultural anthropologists.” It was also appropriated by a large number of other academic disciplines, eventually becoming central to much of European anthropology as well. But culture as an analytical term came under increasing critique in the early 1980s, mostly from within anthropology, the very discipline that had popularized it. The main points of criticism were not only that this abstract term was easily reified, but also that it led to arbitrary classificatory divisions between various groups, and that these differences tended to be reified, essentialized, and ranked. Not only were human groups forced into shoeboxes labeled “Culture A,” “Culture B,” “Culture C,” and so on, but these artificial creations were often ranked as more-or-less peaceful, democratic, industrious, and so forth. Theories developed regarding the “Culture of Poverty,”⁵ the “Culture of Violence,”⁶ the “Culture of Narcissism,”⁷ etc. Elsewhere, the term was used to justify various forms of exclusion, and sometimes even violence, against those deemed not to belong to a particular culture. In the end, the criticisms became so widespread that these days, most anthropologists have become reluctant even to use the C-word.

Some of these critiques were anticipated by the Cuban anthropologist, essayist, and ethnomusicologist Fernando Ortiz, who invented the notion of transculturalism and was cited by Wagner in his talk. Ortiz avoided the inflexible binary of “self” and “other” by focusing on how cultures in geographical proximity to one another were continually involved in processes of mutual exchange, influence, and adaptation.⁸ But Ortiz did not ignore or depoliticize the power differentials involved in culture contact: On the contrary, he developed his model against the background of the Spanish conquest of Central and South America, and the inequalities resulting from it. In any case, his model of transculturation is clearly more adequate than one that construes cultures as hermetically sealed monads.

But despite Ortiz’s important, even necessary, attempts to avoid what Wagner called the “binaries” inherent in the culture concept, and despite the

Primitive Art (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1927); Franz Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* (New York: MacMillan, 1940).

5 Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Scientific American* 215, no. 4 (1966): 19–25.

6 Raymond D. Gastil, “Homicide and a Regional Culture of Violence,” *American Sociological Review* 36, no. 3 (1971): 412–427.

7 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 2018).

8 John McLeod, “Sounding Silence: Transculturality and its Thresholds,” *Transnational Literature* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1–13; Fernando Ortiz, “‘Transculturation’ and Cuba,” in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics* 2nd ed., ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 25–26; Rafael Rojas, “Fernando Ortiz: Transculturation and Nationalism,” in *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History*, ed. Rafael Rojas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 43–64.

desire of some scholars to do away altogether with culture as an analytical term, transcultural scholars both then and now cannot avoid the C-word. I believe that this is inevitable, because scholars in the humanities and social sciences always begin with some kind of human difference. If you claim, as Rudolf did in his lecture, that culture always implies difference from the other, whereas transcultural studies examines “interaction with the other,”⁹ then in the very moment that you invoke the “other,” you have reified the idea of culture as difference, despite your intention to criticize that very idea. If you claim that you want to transcend the self-other dichotomy, but in the next breath re-inscribe it in your discourse by saying that you wish to “interact with the other,” then you are caught in a contradiction. This is the central dilemma of transcultural studies: It wants to position itself as critical of the culture concept, but it is so dependent upon that concept that it inscribes it into its very name. This is *aporia* pure.

In my view, it would be much better for scholars of multiple periods, languages, religions, and societies to celebrate cultural difference rather than be ashamed of it. Like diversity in general, cultural difference can be fascinating and beautiful, and a world without it would be dreadfully impoverished. Anthropologists in particular should take this to heart, since they are often accused of focusing too much on difference, thereby “exoticizing the other.” But according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the word “exotic” has two meanings: The first is, “from another part of the world; not indigenous; foreign”; and the second is, “having the charm of the unfamiliar; strikingly and intriguingly unusual or beautiful.”¹⁰ Anthropology’s well-deserved reputation for focusing on the exotic has to do with both of these meanings, and although each has a different implication, a basic and shared feature unites them: Both are relational terms. Something is spatially exotic or “foreign” only in relation to an observer, and it is “unfamiliar” or “intriguingly unusual” only from a particular point of view. Transcultural studies has no monopoly on relationality, because relationality is characteristic of everything we do as scholars. No matter how you frame it, “relationality” requires at least two *relata*. Difference remains, and difference is beautiful!

In his lecture, Rudolf listed a number of successful “battles against binarity,” all of which he saw in a positive light: “human migration vs. race identity (historical DNA) ... knowledge migration (plants, animals, techniques) vs. pride of originality ... nature vectors (climate, disease agents) vs. pride of locality ... languages (families, hyperphyla, conceptual migration)

9 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

10 William Morris, *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 461.

vs. pride of mother tongue.”¹¹ But this lecture’s focus was a different form of dualism, namely the dualism of nature and culture, which Rudolf also wanted to overcome. This dualism has received a great deal of attention since Bruno Latour’s influential book *We Have Never Been Modern* was published in 1993,¹² and criticism of it increased dramatically in the first decade of the new century, especially in anthropology and related disciplines.

My personal view of the current intellectual state of play with regard to this issue is as follows: The global ecological crisis has played a large part in the appearance and rapid growth of a strand of scientific literature calling itself “post-human.” This literature argues that the global ecological crisis was caused by *anthropos* acting in unsustainable and ultimately destructive ways; that the humanities and social sciences have obscured the problem and even contributed to it through their anthropocentrism (sometimes involving what Rudolf called “human exceptionalism”);¹³ and that they should therefore “de-center” *anthropos* by finally acknowledging that s/he is, and always was, just one part of wider ecological networks, and cannot be adequately understood without reference to them.¹⁴ One strand of posthumanism wants to de-center human beings entirely, and it has strong affinities with those who believe that it would be best for the planet if Homo Sapiens were finally to become extinct.¹⁵ A second strand suggests that progress in the humanities can be made by shifting attention away from *anthropos* and focusing instead on the materials, elements, and beings with which s/he is surrounded. An example of this is Stefan Helmreich’s book *Alien Ocean*,¹⁶ which purports to be an ethnography of marine microbes. Helmreich quotes microbiologist Jo Handelsman who says, “We have ten times more bacterial cells in our bodies than human cells, so we’re 90 percent bacteria.”¹⁷ Microbes don’t live as individuals, and they don’t respect boundaries of organism or species.

11 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

12 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993 [1991]).

13 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

14 Karen Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway,” in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2019).

15 Nick Bostrom, “A History of Transhumanist Thought,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14, no. 1 (2005): 1–25; Max More, “The Philosophy of Transhumanism,” in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, ed. Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3–17.

16 Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

17 In Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*, 283.

As such they have come to be an excellent site for thinking across these radically different scales about what it means to be human. And if humans are fundamentally linked to oceans through microbial life forms, what are the implications for our anthropocentric ethics?

A third strand would consist of those who, like myself, believe that the second strand is caught in a performative contradiction, since all of our activities as scholars and intellectuals (reading, writing, speaking, teaching, all in natural languages) are profoundly and inescapably human, so that a “non-” or “post-” human ethnography is an oxymoron (Helmreich’s book is, in the end, an ethnography of oceanographers and not oceans). If we are to survive the global environmental crisis, then we *must* reconfigure our relation to our environment; and to do that, we first have to re-think it. We must refuse the facile distinction between nature and culture, realize that our so-called culture includes many “natural” elements, and find new ways to deal with what we used to call “natural resources.” Both the environmental facts *and* the moral and ethical imperatives of our time require that we go beyond anthropocentrism and begin seeing ourselves as part of a wider ecological system. In the end, one can indeed make the case that the dualism of nature versus culture led to our current ecological crisis, as Merchant argued many decades ago.¹⁸ In short, some kind of “de-centering” of *anthropos* is an important and urgent task that is best accomplished by seeing him/her as partly constituted by (and constitutive of) various social, political, and especially ecological networks.

Another influential writer on this topic is the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who has written many books and articles about what he calls “Amerindian perspectivism.”¹⁹ His writings are philosophically sophisticated and exquisitely attuned to the anthropological obsession with the exotic, as suggested by the title of his most famous book, *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Viveiros de Castro argues that according to the myths of those he calls “American Indians,” the world’s multiple beings once shared a generic human condition and were able to communicate with each other. But over the course of time, they became differentiated into animals, vegetables, etc. Nevertheless, these animals, objects, vegetables, and spirits retain an inner human form, commonly translated as their “soul” or “double.”

18 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Wildwood House, 1980).

19 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). See also Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere* (Manchester: HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory, 2012); Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–488; Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,” *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1 (2004): 3–22.

Externally they may look like a jaguar or a plant, but this is merely a skin that hides a human interior. We humans see them as animals, but they see themselves as humans, and they live in conditions similar to humans; that is, they have a social life similar to those who inhabit an Amerindian village. Viveiros de Castro thus draws a contrast between multiculturalism and multinaturalism. The former corresponds to the lived experience of most modern people, who believe that there is a single reality that is apprehended differently by the multiple cultures of the world. In a sense, this is precisely the point of view that Rudolf wanted so desperately to transcend. I suspect that he would have been fascinated by Viveiros de Castro, who claims that Amerindians are not multiculturalists but rather multinaturalists who believe that all of us—humans and plants and animals—share a common culture, and are distinguished by our various natures. What would Rudolf have made of this? What I make of it is a challenging and thrilling oeuvre, but one that, in the end, reifies the distinction between nature and culture. In any case, all of these highly influential ideas involve a fundamental skepticism about allegedly universal dichotomies like mind versus matter and culture vs nature.

These days, many such books are being written and discussed, for example the growing sub-genre of anthropological studies focused on relationships between humans and animals. We used to think that humans had culture and animals had nature, but the more we find out about humans, the more we realize how natural they are, with many of their thoughts and feelings determined by processes over which they have no conscious control; and the more we learn about animals, the more we understand how cultural they are, since they apparently have language, kinship units, rituals, and emotions. Even more interestingly, we discover the many ways in which humans and animals are linked, so that a comprehensive ethnography of most societies should include a discussion of how humans and animals relate to and, indeed, constitute each other. But just as transcultural studies cannot escape the notion of culture, so anthropologists cannot get away from writing about people, even when they try. And that is why, when the anthropologist sets out to write an ethnography of animals, or plants, or the ocean, she ends up writing an ethnography of people. And that is just as it should be: An authentic ethnography of marine microbes would be insufferably boring! In any case, anthropologists no longer speak of “nature vs. culture” but rather of “nature-culture,” and this is another example of a self-contradictory aporia that attempts to transcend a dichotomy, but nevertheless ends up re-inscribing it into its own self-description. In short, we scholars of the humanities and social sciences can’t do without culture, and we can’t do without humans.

Wagner was engaging with this literature when he wrote his lecture. Under the subtitle “The Culture of Nature, Very Tentative First Propositions,” he criticizes an “anthropocentric narrative (that has) three propositions of

asymmetry.”²⁰ According to Wagner, the first asymmetrical proposition is that civilized human beings can be distinguished from “natural” ones like the notorious *Naturvölker* or “nature people” of the German language: He argues that such ideas are “historical and regional,” and gives as examples Euro-America and China.²¹ Anyone who has studied the colonial encounter, the history of anthropology, or Chinese representations of non-Chinese, is familiar with such ideas. They are still with us, for example in the ascription of a kind of environmental sainthood to indigenous people around the world. The second asymmetrical proposition, says Wagner, is that “higher” human cultures exemplify human exceptionalism: He lists “language, art, memory, critical thinking, play, social organization, [and] science” as examples, and says that this proposition is “metaphysical” as well as regional and local, by which I assume he means that the higher value ascribed to such exceptional characteristics cannot be logically derived.²² The third “proposition of asymmetry” is that the actions of all organisms other than civilized (and therefore exceptional) humans are to be understood in terms of “new-Darwinist genetic determinism.” As he pithily puts it, “the higher humans will do what they do, the other organisms cannot help doing what they do.”²³

Wagner continues:

All three propositions have been disproven, the first by rich evidence for “culture” (language, art, ritual etc.) among other human as well as non-human organisms, the second by being anchored in local scriptural rather than rational authority; the third by the evidence that the genetic code is not a closed package that blindly unfolds, but that it offers a vast bandwidth of options which are actuated in a process of “ontogenesis” according to individual circumstances and needs.

The anthropocentric narrative is encoded into and justifies a whole array of practices concerning “nature” and these in turn are fortified by real-life economic and political interests. Overcoming this narrative is not just a question of seeing its weakness, but of creating enough of a groundswell (argumentative, social movements) to actually force a change.

The evidence against all three propositions has been increasingly accepted (perhaps helped by a decreasing faith in the collective rationality of mankind including humans from the “higher cultures” and by the visibly stronger agency of “nature” in reaction to human interventions).²⁴

20 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

21 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

22 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

23 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

24 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

This is a fair summary of historical and anthropological thinking about the dualism of “man” and nature, and its slow but steady erosion as a result of recent intellectual currents. Evidently, at the time he wrote this lecture, Rudolf’s imagination had been seized by a book that contributed to this development: *The Hidden Life of Trees* by the German forester Peter Wohlleben.²⁵ Rudolf was far from alone; Wohlleben’s book was an international bestseller and his fans included Pope Francis and the former German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt. The book itself is wildly and unashamedly anthropomorphic: “Trees have friends, they feel loneliness, they scream with pain and communicate underground via the ‘woodwide web.’ Some act as parents and good neighbors. Others are brutal bullies to rival species. The young ones take risks with their drinking and leaf-dropping then remember the hard lessons from their mistakes.”²⁶ Rudolf’s notes here are most interesting, and after reading them, it seemed to me that many of our intellectual differences of the past were perhaps superficial. Now I could see more clearly that he was trying to shift our focus away from the differences between the so-called “cultures” of the world and toward their interconnections; struggling to apprehend them as parts of a single system; warning against the “stand alone” (culturalist, naturalist, human exceptionalist) models that he labeled “pathological”; and doing his best to see culture as “an interconnected self-regulatory process with, for example genetics, history, and linguistics probing the interconnections between the constituents of this process.”²⁷ He went on to speculate about how best to consider the relationship between “culture” as a general human phenomenon and the various “cultures” that we typically study. These are the fruits he harvested:

1. The forest/Culture is a dynamic interactive process. Wohlleben’s “wood-wide web” corresponds to a cultural worldwide web.
2. This process is self-regulatory.
3. This web is held together by a common origin, a continuous interaction in all domains, the need to find responses to challenges, and the common destiny of mortality.
4. It has visible and invisible intermediaries like wind, insects, birds, quadrupeds, fungi, and pests; all of whom are like cultural brokers, who feed on this system and secure the interaction among its constituents.

25 Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: The Illustrated Edition*, trans. Jane Billinghamurst (Vancouver: David Suzuki Institute, 2018).

26 Tim Lusher, “The Man Who Thinks Trees Talk To Each Other,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2016, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/sep/12/peter-wohlleben-man-who-believes-trees-talk-to-each-other>.

27 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

5. Stand-alone trees have low survival rates and life expectancy.
6. Collectively however, both trees & cultures generate the environment necessary for their common survival (moisture, temperature, nutrition, procreation/social and political organization, language, ritual, leisure pursuits, war, defense, transport, trade, innovation).
7. Both Forests and Cultures depend on and contribute [to] larger frames: for example climate, migration, soil, plants and animals, bacteria, landmass, omnivorous digestion for their own survival and sustenance.
8. The forest/culture process is historical. Its historicity is evident in the ontogenesis of a tree/culture within a given (=historical) environment and the memory of successful solutions to earlier challenges that show up in the geno- and phenotype at any moment.²⁸

I began this article by noting that in one of his last public lectures, Rudolf Wagner was railing against something, but he was also defending something. After I read through his notes, I understood what he was trying to defend, and was indeed inspired by what his wife Catherine Yeh later told me was his “breakthrough moment.” He was proposing something that, although it was very difficult and challenging, might just solve the problem of duality, and even contribute to a new paradigm.

The understanding that all cultures are subsets of a worldwide Process of Culture moves transcultural interaction from an awkward footnote to the center of research, and from a binary model to that of multi-layered global interaction. In the case of forests, this has led to a research focus on the interaction between the constituents within a forest. The results of such research have fundamentally changed the understanding of the tree. The dynamics of the process of transcultural interaction is a comparably vast, demanding, and stimulating, but also largely unexplored field of research.²⁹

In the name of Rudolf Wagner, I invite you to explore the forest, rather than just looking at the trees.

28 Wagner, “Of Trees.”

29 Wagner, “Of Trees.”