

An Imagined Interview with Rudolf G. Wagner: His Thoughts on the Lifeworld in the Anthropocene Age, the Trees/Forest Metaphor, and the Culture of Nature in Transcultural Studies

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In what follows, we present an imagined dialogue with Rudolf Wagner on possible future directions for transcultural studies, and its connection to the idea of the culture of nature in the framework of what he terms the “lifeworld in the Anthropocene age.” Our piece takes the form of an imagined question and answer session with Rudolf, where we devise a narrative representation conveying some of his provocative and imaginative thoughts on transcultural studies, with a view to stimulating scholars to engage further with these ideas. The source materials used are taken from Rudolf’s unpublished notes, drafts, and outlines written in preparation for talks that he gave between 2014 and 2018.¹ We adhered as closely as possible to Rudolf’s original texts, editing for minor errors, syntax, flow, and clarity.

Q1: Transculturality has been a central theme in your conception of the “Lifeworld in the Anthropocene age.” Can you tell us: “What is transculturality?”

Culture is not a “thing,” but a process. It has no intrinsic sustainability, but it gains this through the continuous agency of successive generations—including new arrivals—to enrich, select, transform, forget, or reject elements. Like human nature, human culture partakes in a continuous flow across the human world, where transcultural interaction is the lifeline of culture, and every cultural item is transcultural. The transcultural interaction, by means of the appropriation, adaptation, or rejection of cultures, *is* the process of transculturality. In short, transculturality is the primordial fact, culture a temporal construct.

¹ The format of this imagined interview with Rudolf Wagner was inspired by Tim Ingold, Lucas Introna, Donncha Kavanagh, Séamas Kelly, Wanda Orlikowski, and Susan Scott, “Thoughts on Movement, Growth and an Anthropologically-Sensitive IS/Organization Studies: An Imagined Correspondence with Tim Ingold,” in *Working Conference on Information Systems and Organizations* (Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2016), 17–32.

The term “transculturality” engages with the human constructs of “culture” by tracing the actual flows between human groups. In nature, it is easy to document this scientifically via DNA tracing, Rhesus factors, and blood groups. For the objective side of culture, the same is true, whether we are dealing with language, plant and animal domestication, tools, forms, and institutions of social organization (from the state to the monastery), practices, fairy tales, technical inventions, forms of dress, forms of depiction, images, or metaphors.

From cultures of antiquity to the present, transculturality systematically investigates these processes of connection. It examines the nature of the shifts that circulatory practices of the past undergo in the present, and the variety of ways in which people, in specific contexts, experience and respond to these changes, as well as the media they use to represent them. Built into the methodological framework of transculturality is a questioning of the intellectual roots and institutional bases of existing disciplines that challenges the boundaries that have, since their inception, sealed them off as hermetic units.

As a system, or more aptly, a web of interaction, transculturality has a triple existence:

First, it exists as a pervasive historical process, most easily visible in material goods that appear in environments classified as belonging to a different culture, such as Roman glass appearing in fourth-century Chinese tombs, or Chinese silk in reports about courtesan’s clothing in Pompeii.

Second, it exists as a perception by historical actors, characterized either by claims to authenticity and fundamental difference from “others,” or by a positive engagement that might go so far as to acknowledge the superiority of certain features in other cultures. The former is evident in the efforts of the ancient Greeks to separate themselves from the *barbaroi*, and early Chinese attempts to establish a fundamental distinction between the orderly and ritualized behavior of the Chinese (*hua* 華), and that of various populations to the northwest, west, south, and east—some of whom were graced with the use of the “dog” radical in their name, such as the *di* 狄. In this context, the binary perception becomes a historical force that might release important historical energies. The latter is evident in writings such as those of the early cosmopolitan Herodotus, when he depicted the grooming of an ideal prince based on the first Achaemenid (“Persian”) ruler Kyros (Cyrus the Great), or Xuanzang’s 玄奘 journey to the land of the Buddha. In this context, the binary perception might come with a critical potential. In both cases, the binary perception is a historical fact and has to be treated as such. Its (present-day) neglect or dismissal as a “wrong” perception on the part of historical actors misses out on an important driving force of historical action.

Finally, transculturality exists as a theorized, modern scholarly concept. However, the concept itself has a history dating well before Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transcultural” in 1940.² Nineteenth-century world histories are a case in point. These historians acknowledged the importance of transnational interactions but also tended to essentialize cultures (and their borders). However, even in the pre-history of the concept there were different strands, such as studies on the transcultural migration of myth. Initially these studies followed Max Müller’s linguistic framing as migration within language families (e.g. Greek *theos*, Latin *deus*)—especially in what then were called “Aryan” languages—but by 1900, the focus had shifted from tracing names to tracing structures of the mythical narrative.

Transculturality focuses here on the essential diffuseness of constituent elements as they are transformed through inclusion into the hybrid new. According to Lamberto Tassinari (one of the founding directors of the transcultural magazine *ViceVersa*): “Transculturalism [can be envisioned as] a new form of humanism, based on the idea of relinquishing the strong traditional identities and cultures which in many cases were products of imperialistic empires, interspersed with dogmatic religious values. Contrary to multiculturalism, which most experiences have shown re-enforces boundaries based on past cultural heritages, transculturalism is based on the breaking down of boundaries. Transculturalism, by proposing a new humanism of the recognition of the *other* ... is in opposition to the singular traditional cultures that have evolved from the nation-state.”³

Q2: Why is the traditional approach to comparative cultural studies in fundamental contradiction with your understanding of the purpose and approach of transcultural studies?

Cultural studies examines the difference *from* the other while transcultural studies examines interaction *with* the other. The traditional approach to cultural/comparative cultural studies is straitjacketed by binarity—an approach that is generally ideologically derived, and as such, limits and distorts both the process and the resulting outcomes. This binary construct is clearly not fact-based, but derives from an irritation with asymmetry. It is focused on tracing the history of specific, identifiable processes such as terms, institutions, or

2 “The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations [where] ... the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them.” Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995 [1940]), 98–103.

3 Donald Cuccioletta, “Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship,” *London Journal of Canadian Studies* 17 (2001/2002): 1–11; 7.

practices. It often comes with the flaw of focusing on the origin rather than the agency involved in selecting, adapting, or matching the new and foreign with the unquestionably (but utterly invented) authentic local.

Q3: From your description, the study of transculturality appears to run up against the problem of cultural essentialism along national borders, across academic disciplines, where the dominant default lines align with nation, language, territory, and culture. Within this context, what then are the major challenges facing transcultural studies?

Bounded by nation-state-centric cultural essentialism, transcultural studies (TS) faces two crises: The first is a crisis of binarity. TS remains trapped within cultural studies' traditional prison-house of binary relations between an essentialized self and an essentialized other, where the agency driving relational exchanges, processes, and asymmetries is distorted and projected onto the dominant power. This means that agency is assigned to the stronger power without empirical foundation. The bestiary and imagery of modern terms used to define the process of transcultural interaction exemplify this binary prison-house (see further below). The second crisis is one of disconnection from the whole. TS is isolated; it isolates itself from and rejects the need to systematically acknowledge or study the interactive transformations between cultures and the wider natural environment, especially when this involves non-social science disciplines. This all-encompassing environment, in which everything, including our own culture, is a constituent interactive part, I call our great Lifeworld. It is this interaction of "humans with their cultural (in the widest sense) and natural environment" that highlights the crucial role human agency *has assumed*. For this reason, the study of human culture necessarily belongs to our study of the Lifeworld.

Q4: Can you further elaborate on the crisis of binarity in TS?

Currently, TS largely remains trapped within cultural studies' tradition-bound binary framework, with all its resulting distortions and limitations. Both share the same prison cell of binarity. Critiques of the uses of the modern concept of transculturality have focused on:

- the fact that as a rule more than two cultures are involved;
- the notion that defining the "origin" of a feature leads to defining its adaptation elsewhere as a "copy," and;
- that assigning all agency to the stronger power unwittingly and without empirical foundation reproduces the orientalist narrative it set out to critique.

While efforts to define a more “circular” process of transcultural transfer exist, these critiques demonstrate that TS remains trapped within an enlarged binary model that deals with particular cultures and not with culture as a conceptual framework.

Specific examples include the sites where historical actors are imagined as operating within constructs such as “China and the West” or “Europe and the Orient.” These essentializations were used to radicalize the modern nation-state and mobilize it for colonial occupation and war—while also opening the door to the large-scale emulation of features from various other cultures, where agency was in the hands of the government or local elites (e.g., eighteenth-century Germany, Peter the Great, the Meiji reforms, the Chinese Communists). Examples beyond this “China and the West” construct include studies of the cultural interaction between France and the German states, or China and Korea. The postcolonial treatment of the processes of transculturality has reduced the asymmetry prevailing in such processes to a dependent variable of power asymmetry, and has therefore consistently located the driving agency in the dominant power.

The bestiary and imagery of modern terms used to define the process of transcultural interaction are indicative of this prison-house of the binary. Some examples include: *métissage*, *Verflechtung*, bricolage, interaction, *enjeux interculturels*, braided, trans culture, connected histories, asymmetry in transcultural flows, globalization, translingual, transnational, fusion, amalgamation, comparative, *verwobene Moderne*, international, intercultural, creolization, cultural translation, *Transferts: Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand*,⁴ and *Transkulturalität nationaler Räume in Europa*.⁵

Q5: In your exploration of TS, you coined a new metaphor, using the forest and the trees to describe the relationship between culture and cultures. Can you describe this for us?

Most of the terms for binary transcultural interaction listed above—and there are many more—use metaphor, be it from botany (hybridity or ecotype), metallurgy (fusion or amalgamation), craftsmanship (bricolage), language (creolization or cultural translation), hair styling (braided), or race studies (*métissage*). The same is true for many of the fields successfully overcoming binarity (language family, hyperphylum). These terms are used consciously and are then abandoned when the parallels become forced.

4 Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, *Transferts: les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et XIXe siècle)* (Paris: Éditions recherche sur les civilisations, 1988).

5 Christophe Charle, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, and York-Gothart Mix, ed., *Transkulturalität nationaler Räume in Europa* (Bonn, Bonn University Press, 2017).

My exploration of the relationship between culture and cultures uses the metaphor of the relationship between a forest (which stands for culture) and its trees (which stand for cultures), as vividly depicted by Peter Wohlleben in his book *The Hidden Life of Trees*. The viability of this trees/forest metaphor is further substantiated and strengthened by the empirical findings of scholars and researchers in the fields of genetics, linguistics, and climatology.⁶

Wohlleben is a forester in a small village in the Eifel mountains, which straddle the border between Southwestern Germany and Belgium. His training concentrated on the economic use of trees by the forest industry. Despite his development of alternative methods of profitable and sustainable forest management, Wohlleben's focus remained on the trees rather than the forest. Simultaneously retaining yet also arguing against a "nation-state" single-tree focus, his broader analysis of the interaction among trees does, in fact, deal with the complex process of culture in the interplay between trees and multiple other organisms that we call "forest."

Wohlleben is not writing on virgin soil. His counter-text is the nation-state perception of trees. He does not write about culture, and the thought that he might actually have described its process might not have occurred to him. His main interest is in what might be called the sociability of trees. He often uses anthropomorphic language to describe this sociability, for example, calling the exchange of information among trees "wood wide web," or the mutual support of trees their "friendship." Reviewers had a field day in pointing out this flaw, but were unable to overcome their own fascination with his observations.

Wohlleben's main points are:

- Trees are not stand-alone units, but rather, the main constituent elements in a forest network. Their lifeline is their integration into and interaction with an encompassing process of Forest Culture, which comes with constant renewal. This renewal in turn drives the interaction. Trees that stand alone have low survival rates and life expectancy. The resulting web (so aptly

6 Suzanne Simard is a Canadian forest ecologist, conservationist, professor, designer, and leader of the "Mother Tree Project." In her 1995 PhD thesis, Simard coined the term "wood wide web" (now recognized and used throughout the field and beyond) to describe the vast underground symbiotic networks of fungi, bacteria, and other organisms that connect trees in a complex, adaptive forest ecosystem. Through this web, trees share resources, communicate, provide mutual protection, and process and respond to local conditions (e.g., temperature, precipitation, soil chemistry, and topography). Peter Wohlleben's book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, uses Simard's considerable empirical findings and analyses (in over 200 published papers) to support his thesis. Rudolf Wagner passed away before Simard's seminal book, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, was published in May 2021. See: Suzanne Simard, "Interspecific Carbon Transfer in Ectomycorrhizal Tree Species Mixtures" (PhD diss., Oregon State University, 1995); Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World* (London, William Collins, 2016); Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).

termed the “wood wide web”) is held together by: a common origin, a continuous interaction across all domains, the need to find responses to challenges, and the common destiny of mortality.

- This interactive process is largely invisible, comes in many different forms and languages, and is characterized by a huge excess (well over ninety-nine percent) of constituent elements (for the forest: seeds, bacteria, viruses, pests, nutrients/goods; for culture: migrants, words, information, practices, institutions). These surpluses are needed to secure successful interaction (on average a tree only succeeds in producing one other tree), with most of the ingredients falling by the wayside. It means that the overwhelming majority of these interactive constituents never achieve their immediate purpose, while unwittingly, however, contributing to the sustenance of other agents active in the forest, which in turn contributes to the sustenance of the entire process.

- Arguing from the bottom up—the interactions of trees are structured. Trees directly interact with other trees of the same species, in parental or friendship roles; with trees of different species nearby, in cooperation and competition; with trees further away, in decreasing intensity with increased distance; and with animate and inanimate agents in the same process. The connections consist of links among roots for exchange of nutrition, underground fungi that transmit information, chemical signals carried by the wind warning other trees about attacks from insects or large herbivores, competition for light (for photosynthesis) and nutrition, and protection of offspring. Through these means, trees jointly generate the environment (forest/culture) necessary for their common survival.

- Arguing from the top down—forests depend on (and in part contribute to) larger frames (e.g., climate, sunlight, fires, migration, soil, plants and animals, bacteria, landmass, omnivorous digestion) for their survival and sustenance, including: the exchange of pollinating agents via wind or bees; mutual protection against strong winds (trees prefer standing in close proximity, because even though thinning them out might give the survivors more light for photosynthesis and help make them grow faster, it weakens their capacity to resist pests, winds, etc., and thus reduces their chances of survival); and joint formation of a temperature and moisture level in the forest to provide an optimal living environment. Industrial monocultural tree plantations do much less well than forests with diverse tree species, where conifer and deciduous trees are mixed. Under these latter conditions, the variety of agents sustaining the forest (birds, insects, quadrupeds) can all thrive with some resulting balance.



Fig. 1. Unknown. Angel Oak on John's Island, South Carolina. Photo. Source: Needpix.⁷



Fig. 2. Rob Hille. Mycelium RH, Agaricus bisporus. Photo. Source: WikimediaCommons.

7 "Live Oak Ancient Angel Oak Free Photo," Needpix.com, accessed August 9, 2022, www.needpix.com/photo/1775118/live-oak-ancient-angel-oak-south-carolina-tree-nature.

- The forest, not the trees, is a potentially self-regulatory system. This system interacts with other systems of a higher order, such as climate, moving geotectonic plates, genetics, cosmological factors such as radiation, and commercial market exploitation.
- Forests have a history that involves historical change. Its historicity is evident in the ontogenesis of a tree within a given (i.e., historical) environment and the memory of successful solutions to earlier challenges that can again arise in the genotype or phenotype at any time. This might be caused by mutations, disasters, changes in the macro-system under which they operate, or subsumption of forest management under the logic of industrial production. Apart from disasters, the interaction within a forest, as well as its change over time, operates on a slow-motion scale.

Q6: What is the harvest from your trees/forest metaphor, and how should we understand its impact on the relationship between culture and cultures?

When reading Wohlleben's book, my first thought was to use the relationship between the forest and trees as a model and metaphor to conceptualize, on a concrete level, what in human culture is the more diffuse process of an interaction of cultures within the framework of culture. However, stimulated by papers by Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi, and especially those by Timothy Ingold and Gisli Palsson, it dawned on me that, in fact, we might not be talking about metaphor or just a conceptual model when drawing on Wohlleben's work, but about one and the same thing. Instead of offering the forest and the trees as a simile for the relationship between culture and cultures, and highlighting the functional parallels, I now believe that the trees and the forest should be understood as a unified story of the culture of nature. Or, to use the term I spoke of earlier, the Culture of an all-encompassing Lifeworld.

It is important to note here that a metaphor is useful only to the point of its being able to clarify connections. Once this point is reached, the analysis has to move on without being forced into a straightjacket. Following this story as long as it makes sense, I propose this forest/culture dynamic (both metaphorically and concretely) as the framework for TS, in which culture is the overarching system and all cultures are its constituents. The interactive processes comprising this dynamic operate on all levels from the global climate to the forest to the individual tree, in manners visible and invisible, mediated and direct, competitive and cooperative. As far as culture is concerned, this would be culture understood as a subsystem of nature, a constituent part of the Lifeworld. The culture of nature would be the frame for all cultures, down to the visible and invisible linkages between them; all of them constantly impacted by interactions at higher levels.

Who has culture? In a forest, everything and everybody. The culture of the tree is a subset of the vast web of culture that permeates the forest and is sustained by this overarching process of culture we call “forest.” Trees have their rituals—forms of communication, and complex forms of managing their interaction with other organisms. The love-play of the birds; the aesthetic and olfactory attraction of the tree blossoms; the multifarious language forms, from warning cries to bee dances; the sexual hierarchy and complex cooperation within a pack; and the integration of statics and aesthetics in the engineering of the approximation of tree shapes to symmetry—these are all just some of the visible forms. These rituals in fact bear little resemblance to the blind unfolding of a genetic code, just as the development of a particular human culture is in fact hardly determined by the unfolding of some (now scientifically disproven) genetic racial coding. In a complex process of ontogenesis, the individual tree grows into its particular shape and sociability by switching on or off certain genetic features as it adjusts to and interacts with its wider environment. The birds, fungi, insects, and mammals (including humans) all form and decay in the same ontogenetic manner.

Methodologically, to break free from its trap of binarity, TS must study both the tree and the forest, top-down and bottom-up, and across the full range of interactions with all other diverse factors driving the process. The culture/forest must be studied empirically, and as a totality where each of the cultures/trees constituting a part of the whole relates to and interacts with other constituent parts as well as to and with the whole. Within this paradigm, the culture of forests is a subset of the same culture of nature as the culture of humans.

Q7: In what way does the trees/forest paradigm advance TS and liberate it from the prison-house of binarity?

The trees/forest metaphor offers the model of a process driven by an internal dynamic rather than the exercise of “power.” Of course, within this dynamic, disbalancing asymmetries constantly occur (for the forest: fires, human forestry, pests without natural enemies; for culture: epidemics, occupation of lands, monopoly, concentration of innovation, etc.) and for a while they may give individual actors an inordinately large influence. However, the internal dynamic’s self-regulatory mechanism is usually able to generate responses that flatten these asymmetries, as can be seen in the California fires of 2018 and 2019.

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 one of multi-layered global interaction. In the case of forests, this has led to a research focus on the interaction between the constituent members 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 field of research, but also, one that is still largely unexplored.

The forest metaphor takes up the horizontal communication within the forest, as well as communication with external factors such as climate, fire, or radiation; and it comes with a historical dimension. However, research has not yet shown an active engagement with the past. For human culture this is clearly an important dimension. So, applying this metaphor to transcultural studies would free the burden of proof in such work from nation-state constraints, and create a triangular, interactive process with three axes: the first axis being that of other cultures; the second, that of the past as another culture; and the third, that of the natural environment. Binariness and the accompanying uni-directional assignment of power and agency would now be replaced by a multi-directional and multi-dimensional process, where the constituent parts would be interconnected with the whole and interact with it, and all resulting explanations would be fact-based and empirical.

Q8: Could this holistic paradigm you are describing be the solution to the crisis of disconnection between culture and the wider natural environment that you raised earlier?

Exactly! The study of human culture necessarily belongs to the study of our Lifeworld and its all-encompassing networks. Because of the reality of the trees/forest metaphor, this study must be inclusive and interact with all disciplines and fields—including the natural sciences.

Transcultural interaction can be conceptualized as a “world wide web” throughout human history. This web is the norm, the constant, and the lifeline of culture involving all societies and groups. It is held together by a common origin, a continuous interaction across all domains, and the need to find responses to natural challenges. Culture retains or regains vitality through “cross-pollination” within the sphere of this web. It does not result from a foreign implant, but necessarily lives by the merger of external and local genome. Like the “wood wide web” (the self-regulating, dynamic, interactive forest network so vividly depicted by Wohlleben), this world wide web of cultural interaction operates through its own coded language and system of communication; visible or palpable signals make up only a minute part of its communicative system.

The structure of this web consists of travelers and migrants. Cultural signals are transmitted and transported through human agency, both intentionally and unintentionally. The migration of humans, including merchants, conquering armies, and religious institutions, consists of stories told, reports from far-off lands, translations, etc. The transmission mechanism is triggered by the

built-in “program” or “instincts” within cultures, which are self-regenerative. This process can only be successfully achieved through interacting with others, setting into motion the flowering of new cultural features that, in turn, generate their own abundance of stimuli traveling the transcultural web. As they migrate, these young cultural features bear fruit that is dependent on their compatibility with the environment of the new site, and their acceptance as something new or amazing.

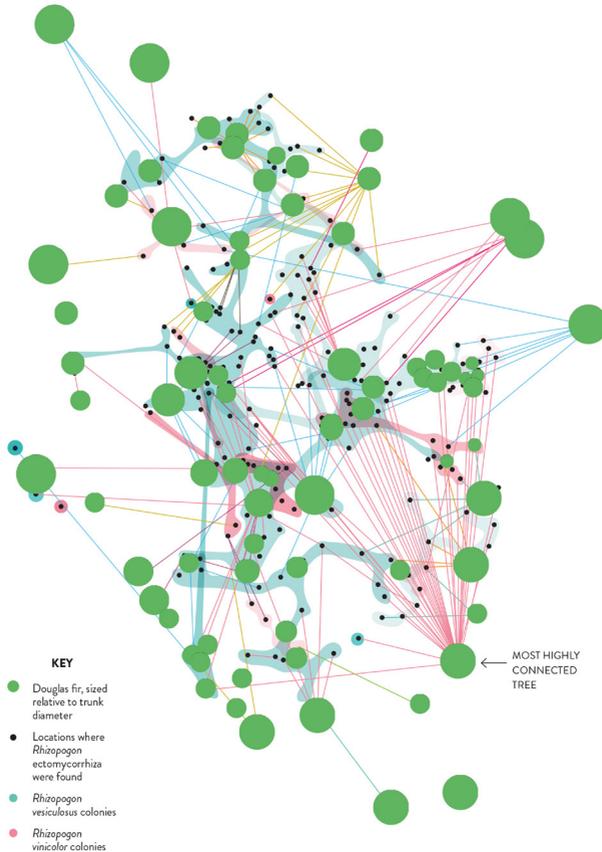


Fig. 3. Dave Hansford, Networking Opportunities, Source: *New Zealand Geographic*, © Kowhai Media.⁸

⁸ Dave Hansford, “The Wood Wide Web: Forests Have Their Own Information Superhighway, and It Works Much Like Ours, Carrying Information, Trade—and Cybercrime,” *New Zealand Geographic* 184 (Nov–Dec 2017), accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-wood-wide-web/>.

Q9: If TS is an examination of cultures and cultural phenomena within a world wide web of cultural interactions, how does humankind and our anthropocentrically-limiting narrative fit within this whole? If this narrative is to be rejected or recast, how and what should replace it?

The anthropocentric narrative comes with three propositions of asymmetry that have all been disproven:

- It refers only to humans of so-called higher, dominant cultures, who have typically relegated all other humans to the realm of nature. This relegation is historical and regional in nature, with prominent examples being Euro-American and Chinese perceptions of others. It has been disproven by rich evidence for “culture” (language, art, ritual, etc.) among humans of other cultures (as well as non-human organisms).
- It claims human exceptionalism (e.g., language, art, memory, critical thinking, play, social organization, science). This claim is metaphysical as well as historical and regional in nature, and it has been discredited, as anchored in the authority of local scriptural traditions rather than rationality.
- It assumes neo-Darwinist genetic determinism for all other organisms (including the *Naturvölker*). While higher humans do what they will to do, other organisms cannot help doing what they do. This third proposition supports the first two through a “scientific” argument, but that argument has been disproven by evidence that inheritance is not a closed genetic package that blindly and uni-directionally unfolds from parent to offspring; rather, inheritance occurs through a vast bandwidth of options that are actuated in a process of “ontogenesis” according to individual circumstances and needs, including but not limited to genetics.

Given that 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—why does this anthropocentric narrative remain so strongly and deeply embedded? Because it is encoded into, and justifies, a whole array of practices concerning “nature” and mankind, which are in turn fortified by real-life economic and political interests. Overcoming this narrative is not just a question of seeing its weaknesses, but of creating enough of a groundswell (argumentative, social movements) to actually force its rejection and change. Abandoning this anthropocentric narrative entails that we:

- Redefine the notion of “agency” by delinking it from origins in a conscious, rational, “higher human.” Instead, agency will be defined by the resulting impact(s) of the interactive process(es) between all actors. The past, the

wind, the fungi, the wolves, the leaves of the trees, humans, the camera, bees, and meteors all have agency.

- Redefine “actors” and their “actions.” Actors are all cultivated in complex interactive ways. None of them acts randomly. Science, scholarship, and art are part of the complex process of nature’s culture.
- Acknowledge ontogenesis, which takes place in a Lifeworld that involves various ever-widening networks from the immediately local to the cosmic.
- Explore the underlying dynamics of interactions, where the burden of proof for interaction within nature’s culture is no longer required for each instance, and only required for unexpected processes of interaction.

Q10: What comes next for TS?

TS should critically examine the interaction of humans with their cultural and natural environments, with the focus on the crucial role of human agency upon the whole Lifeworld.

Human identity is anchored in the assumption of physical supremacy in the natural world and authenticity and identity in culture. The tension between the dependency on interaction and the need for ego-strength has led to a broad range of cultural activities that deny this dependency or make it seem irrelevant, as well as an equally wide range of practical activities that actually reduce this dependency and invert existing asymmetries. The tension between the two conflicting aspects has been exponentially increased by, first, the dramatic development of the human impact on the environment and the equally dramatic rise in the released agency of the environment and its impact on humans, and, second, the exponential increase in the means of communication and material exchange beginning at the dawn of the nineteenth century, with a resultant exponential increase in cultural interaction across all domains.

Both developments increase the perceived fragility of interaction within the Lifeworld and the need to enhance the stability of the perception of self, as they are a threat to maintaining the story of physical supremacy over the environment and ultimate authenticity and identity. Consequently, vast energies have been released in the attempt to cope with these threats, ranging from denials of an environmental challenge and fundamentalist religious, economic, and political tendencies on the one hand, to efforts on the other to develop ways and means for sustainable relationships with the natural environment and frameworks to secure and facilitate cultural interaction.

These developments are not taking place as a self-sustaining natural process. They are taking place:

- On a material level and on the level of articulation. The study of this material level is the object of a range of scholarly fields in the sciences

as well as connected fields such as demography, scientific archaeology, economics, and law.

- By being articulated on different levels—this articulation is essential for them to gain standing and develop from an individual to a collective level of human agency. This is where a wide range of cultural professionals come into play, such as scholars in the humanities, social sciences, hard sciences, journalists, religious advocates, schoolteachers, and legal specialists who operate in the vast space of public articulation between state and society.

Transcultural studies should explore the interface of the real-life tensions between unstable, fragile, enriching, and threatening interactions within this Lifeworld and the unending human efforts to mentally construct and practically secure and act out individual, group, and national stability in this Anthropocene age. To address this constituent tension of human existence, which has reached a critical point through human action and threatens to move towards a cataclysmic destruction of both nature and culture on Earth, requires the courage and wherewithal to take on a huge scholarly challenge that is beyond the capacities of our inherited instruments, but must be embraced, because humans are not only a crucial part of the problem, their thoughts and deeds are a crucial part of the solution.

Exploring the transcultural domain within this whole—including the complexity and historicity of the tensions within the general focus—TS should compel us to go beyond the inherited scholarly fields and their methods in three domains:

- First, we will have to go beyond the nation-state borders delimiting scholarly fields in the humanities and social sciences. We must further develop the appropriate framework for this research, which has already begun in places like Heidelberg University's Cluster Asia and Europe in a Global Context.
- Second, we will have to go beyond the methodologies developed in these inherited fields, because they are derived from and remain substantially specific to these particular environments, even when they claim universal validity by positing anthropological constants, or using instruments borrowed from mathematics. This will also require that we further refine the methodologies for studying the dynamics of transcultural interaction that have already been conceptualized and even preliminarily tested.
- Third, we will have to go beyond the traditional boundaries of scholarly investigation that construct a human/human world that disregards the critical interaction with the natural environment, and we will do so by absorbing, engaging with, and stimulating scientific research relevant to the human-nature interaction within our Anthropocene age.

By breaking through and going beyond the boundaries of our inherited fields of study, we should finally be able to begin bringing together the best the human mind can offer, in order to provide the empirical and analytical bases for informed action by the public, state authorities, and international bodies.

Q11: Do you have any questions you would like us to keep in mind as we set off on this TS journey into the Lifeworld?

Well, I do have a few (very Kantian) questions about the culture of nature—of which human culture is a constituent part—that might serve to open up this exploration:

- Is there an underlying aesthetics of beauty linking the different articulations of nature’s culture (e.g., visual, olfactory, mobile, from a Giacometti sculpture to the outer shape of organisms, from flower smells and tree shapes to cloud performances)? If so, how do these links operate?
- Is there an underlying logic of interaction driving the agency of the different actors (once the notion of genetic determinism is abandoned)?
- Is there an underlying grammar of language linking the different forms of communication from verbal to olfactory to electrical to movement and color?
- Is there an underlying measure of time guiding the different agents of nature’s culture? How does it manifest itself and how do the different actors interact?
- Is there an implied notion of space in the interaction of the different agents of nature’s culture? How is this manifest, and how do the different scales (i.e., the different positioning and relationships) of these different agents interact both within their constituent cultures and across this space?
- Is there an underlying notion of identity informing the agency of the different agents and their perception of and interaction with others?
- Is there an underlying memory trove of past experiences on which agents draw to respond to present challenges? What are its forms of preservation, access, selection, and sharing? What is history after the end of the dictum that “all history properly so called is the history of human affairs?”⁹
- Is there an underlying notion of ritual regulating the interplay between actors?

Finally, I would like to sum up with these thoughts: the Lifeworld in the Anthropocene Age points to the interaction of humans with their cultural (in the widest sense) and natural environments; with the prefix “anthropo-,” it highlights the crucial role human agency has assumed. Relations in both domains are vital as well as unstable. In the domain of culture, transcultural interaction is the lifeline. In human relations with nature and its agents, constant interaction is the lifeline.

9 Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 212.