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Introduction: Transcultural Thought and the Planetary Emergency

Hannes Bergthaller
Department of English
National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

Yen-ling Tsai
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, Taiwan

It has been almost a quarter of a century since Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer first suggested that human actions had changed the Earth to the point where it had crossed the threshold into a new geological epoch which they proposed to call the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer). The proposal was not merely a statement of empirical facts—it was, just as importantly (and just as controversially), a rhetorical move meant to shock both the scientific community and the broader public into a moment of self-recognition, such that they would acknowledge the degree to which their way of life was affecting the planet and take responsibility for what they had wrought. It was in effect a declaration of planetary emergency: the life-sustaining envelope of the Earth has entered a period of rapid, cataclysmic change whose outcome depends crucially on how people will act on this knowledge.

The resistance which the concept of the Anthropocene initially encountered in the humanities has to be seen in this light, for the declaration of a state of emergency would seem to imply the assumption of sovereign power. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz were only among the first to charge the Anthropocene concept with providing intellectual cover to a technocratic elite bent on exerting what they called “geopower” (Bonneuil and Fressoz 89). In presenting the planetary crisis as a shocking novelty, they were at the same time erasing a long history of “environmental reflexivity.” People did not stumble into the Anthropocene unwittingly; in fact, ecological destruction had met with political resistance every step of the way. Nor

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were climate change, habitat loss, and mass extinction caused by a uniform “humanity”—they were deliberately courted by distinctive groups of people who accepted them as the inevitable price for their own pursuit of wealth and power. The two French historians were also among the first to suggest a host of alternative nomenclatures which would name and shame the real culprits—a game that other scholars picked up with enthusiasm in subsequent years.

Today, this game seems to have been largely played out, as it has become increasingly clear that no matter whether we speak of the “Anglocene” (Bonneuil and Fressoz 76), the “Capitalocene” (Moore) or the “Chthulucene” (Haraway), the underlying set of relevant facts about planetary change remains very much the same. Even those who like to cast aspersions on “big science” and the global bureaucratic apparatus which has assembled the picture of a planet in crisis tacitly recognize that without their painstaking scientific labor, the very insight that local ecological problems ought to be seen as facets of a much larger process affecting all of humanity (albeit in very different ways) would simply be unavailable. Earth system science furnishes an indispensable foundation to any serious effort to grapple with the challenges of the present—but this does not mean that the Anthropocene raises the same questions for all disciplines which have adopted the concept: the much-vaunted, recently settled question of where to place the “golden spike” (properly speaking, the “global boundary stratotype section and point,” GSSP) which marks the geostratigraphic boundary between Holocene and Anthropocene bears only indirectly on the questions of historical causality with which humanities scholars are mostly preoccupied. The “anthropos” which gave the new epoch its name is not a brainchild of Western humanism, but rather a black box that is viewed first and foremost in terms of its effects on the Earth system (Bergthaller and Horn). The task of opening this black box falls to scholars in the humanities and social sciences. This is why Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams, and Jan Zalasiewicz advocate not for an inter- or transdisciplinary, but rather for a multidisciplinary approach to the Anthropocene (Thomas, Williams, and Zalasiewicz).

Meanwhile, the sense of urgency which Crutzen and Stoermer still found lacking has become seemingly all-pervasive: the massive forest fires and floods which hit every continent over the past few years have made it unmistakably clear that climate change is not a theoretical problem whose solution could be left to future generations, but is already affecting us now, to a much greater degree than scientists had anticipated only a decade ago. Against this backdrop, the problem of properly attributing historical culpability for the present state of affairs becomes a secondary

concern, overshadowed by the much more pressing question of what can be done about it now. And yet at the very same time, the world seems to be moving further and further away from a state where the actually existing sovereign powers would act in concert to divert humanity from its current catastrophic trajectory.

Thus, one of the great ironies of this situation is that our ability to conceive of the current crisis in planetary terms (i.e., to understand local events such as floods and wildfires as symptoms of an overarching planetary condition) is a product of the very same historical forces which have led us to this juncture, in the first place. The underlying conception of the Earth as a complex system of systems whose geological and biological components interact in such a manner that life was able to persist for more than four billion years—but in vastly different configurations which testify to the planet’s irritability—marks an underappreciated paradigm shift in how we view life and its relationship to the planet. This paradigm shift was gestated in the political hothouse of the Cold War, as the USA and the Soviet Union were competing over whose version of industrial modernity would lead mankind to a brighter future, with both pursuing ambitious modernization projects at home and underwriting them in nations they were trying to sway to their side. Scientists on both sides of the Iron Curtain began to worry over the potential effects of large-scale nuclear war and intensified their study of the Earth’s atmosphere. James Lovelock’s and Lynn Margulis’ Gaia hypothesis—the avatar of today’s Earth system—began as a spin-off from Lovelock’s work on NASA’s Viking mission to Mars, itself a product of the space race between the superpowers (Clarke 23-26). The many technological advances which helped Lovelock’s hypothesis to graduate from an inspired hunch into an empirically substantiated theory, such as satellite imaging and digital data processing, would have been inconceivable without a globalized R&D and manufacturing infrastructure.

The Anthropocene may have been a long time coming, but it was the global spread of industrial modernity during the second half of the twentieth century—the period which environmental historians have dubbed “The Great Acceleration” (McNeill and Engelke 2014)—which escalated local ecological problems to the point where they become a planetary condition. Yet without the infrastructures of industrial modernity, we would be unable to even recognize this fact. Thus, a social formation which conceived of itself as the necessary culmination of a singular and universal history of human progress, and which derived from this conception the right to disinherit all other cultural traditions, has, at one and the same time, revealed itself as irrationally self-destructive *and* disclosed a set of ecological boundary conditions

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that are indeed necessary and universal. We know that industrial modernity is pushing the Earth as a whole towards a zone of great danger, but we only know it because modernity itself has provided us with the conceptual tools to grasp this situation. For scholars in the humanities, this means that grappling with the meaning of the Anthropocene therefore involves a kind of double movement. We must critique the terrestrial blindness of industrial modernity, its inability to reckon with or remedy its own destructive effects on the planet, even as we recognize that such an effort is profoundly shaped by that which it repudiates: industrial modernity itself has created the conditions under which any conceivable alternatives to it must be assessed.

The wager of this special issue is that the Anthropocene therefore requires us to think *transculturally*. When the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch proposed the concept of transculturality in the early 1990s, he did so out of a recognition that contemporary world society was making it increasingly impossible to think of cultures as internally homogenous entities that could be clearly delimited from each other. The concept of culture as it emerged in the eighteenth century was used to distinguish between and compare different peoples. “Culture” named the total sum of material practices and symbolic forms that constitute a given “folk” (in the terms of Johann Gottfried Herder, who played a key role in propagating this way of thinking about culture), nation, or ethnic group, comprehensively shaping the world view and the behavior of those who belong to it (Welsch) Cultures were assumed to be internally homogenous and clearly distinct from each other, suggesting a world made up of “cultural packages” associated with groups of people, “coherent inside and different from what is elsewhere” (Mol 80). Already with Herder, but especially in its more modern versions associated with the school of anthropology founded by Franz Boas in the early nineteenth century, this concept implied a kind of cultural relativism which has since become commonsense among humanities scholars: each culture must be judged on its own terms, and none can claim precedence over each other.

As Welsch pointed out, such a view of culture is profoundly at odds with the realities of life in most industrialized countries. Modern societies are rarely ethnically homogenous, and more importantly, they are internally differentiated in all sorts of other ways that run counter to the notion of culture as a coherent whole: with respect to how people live their lives, ethnic identities frequently carry less weight than class or gender identities. Just as much as the latter, ethnic identities are not simple historical givens, “traditions” that, as the Latin roots of the latter terms suggests, are simply handed down from generation to generation, but are constructed through

symbolic technologies, in response to the exigencies of the present, as Benedict Anderson famously showed. Rather than thinking of cultures in terms of “packages” or self-containing “spheres,” Welsch argues, we ought to highlight their constitutively networked character (both in terms of individual people migrating and in terms of communications linking formerly isolated locations) and their hybridity. In modern world society, it becomes increasingly impossible to say what is “proper” to a culture and what is foreign to it (the proliferating concerns over “cultural appropriation” can be viewed as an inchoate response to this situation). Whereas multiculturalism and interculturalism still presuppose a notion of cultures as entities which are primordially distinct and enter into relationships only by the vagaries of history, Welsch suggests that networking and hybridity ought to be seen as fundamental characteristics of life in general. Thus, their contemporary amplifications are not to be misconstrued as a loss of original purity, but rather as the unfolding of an inherent potential. He finds his views anticipated by Edward Said: “All cultures are hybrid; none of them is pure; none of them is identical to a ‘pure’ folk; none of them consists of a homogenous fabric” (qtd. in Welsch 76). Thus, the differences *between* cultures can only be properly understood by way of the difference *within* cultures, such that they are never “one,” never identical to themselves.

Welsch’s argument ran parallel to contemporaneous debates in anthropology, which likewise sought to articulate new models of cultural difference. Thus, the anthropologist Matei Candea urged his fellow anthropologists to develop more subtle conceptions of culture which would enable them “to think through a difference that is ever-shifting, thick and yet relational, partly shared and partly personal, generative and complex” and take in “embodiment, emplacement, affect, and world-making activities” (Carrithers et al. 174). In short, culture is not just about representing fixed identities or a plurality of world-views, but about different ways of doing life and making a multiplicity of worlds, a world of many worlds. It is important to appreciate the paradox in this formulation. People, and not just human ones, make worlds—yet these worlds are ineluctably enmeshed, they jostle with each other, and are what they are because of how they relate to each other. The Anthropocene compels us to attend to this “ontological unruliness of the world, to multiple temporal scales, and to intertwined social and natural histories,” as Andrew Mathews writes (Mathews 67). In a time of planetary emergency, the Earth is our ultimate figure for this condition of radical entanglement, an absolute metaphor (as Hans Blumenberg would have it) for a manifold which always points towards oneness but never allows itself to be

reduced to it: *One Planet, Many Worlds*, to quote the title of Dipesh Chakrabarty's most recent contribution to these debates.

From a transcultural perspective, then, cultural difference is not an obstacle to understanding, not something that would necessarily hinder our efforts to come to shared terms with what is happening to our worlds, but instead that which makes any kind of transformative change possible, in the first place. Such a perspective is especially needed today as the social forces which thrive on conflict seem everywhere bent on turning cultural difference into a source of enmity. This is indeed the subject of the first essay in our special issue. In "The Challenge of Transculturality in the Era of the Misanthropocene," Jean-Yves Heurtebise takes issue with those scholars of the Anthropocene who turn the critique of industrial modernity into an occasion to dismiss the Western humanist tradition in its entirety and to champion pre-modern or non-Western cultural traditions as a remedy for the West's pathologies. They thus hypostasize cultural difference in precisely the way criticized by Welsch, erasing the ways in which so-called indigenous, non-European, and "Western" cultural practices have always intermingled and borrowed from each other. In doing so, they also tend to end up negating the only qualities which might save humans from themselves: their capacity for self-cultivation and that "softness" of cultures which, as Heurtebise writes, makes it impossible for them *not* to mix. They fail to recognize that the war against the Earth is also a suicidal war of humanity against itself.

Our second essay by Li-hsin Hsu, "'Because the bees buzz underground, / we have earthquakes': Chen Li's *The Edge of the Island at the Brink of the Anthropocene Ruin*," narrows the aperture to examine a particular body of poetry which explores Taiwan's place in the Anthropocene. The island's headlong plunge into industrial modernity in the decades after World War II illustrates the intimate connection between the Great Acceleration and the Cold War. In drawing attention to the ecological costs of militarization and economic development, Chen Li's poems also associate the political cross-current in which Taiwan found itself caught up with its exposure to elemental forces such as typhoons and earthquakes. The poems thus not only dramatize the geomorphic force of industrial modernity, but effectively turn the island into a miniature model of the Earth system, nudging readers to recognize how the agency of humans is inextricably intertwined with non-human forces.

What sets Chen Li's poems apart from many Western theorists of the Anthropocene is that he is wholly focused on the arrival of industrial modernity, with gale-force, rather than anticipating its end or imagining a break with it. The same might be said of the two short stories which Michael Boyden examines in the essay

“Heterotemporality and Posthumanism in Alternative Futurisms,” by Indigenous Canadian author Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk) and the Nigerian-American novelist and comic strip artist Nnedi Okorafor. Boyden reads these stories as examples of *alternative futurisms*: they demonstrate how peoples whom the temporal framework of Western modernity had relegated to the past claim a future for themselves—neither by rejecting modernity outright and straightforwardly recuperating pre-modern ontologies, nor by assimilating to it, but rather by weaving back and forth between the two. Boyden’s analysis shows how these concerns become manifest in the complex, polychronic narrative forms the authors adopt for their stories.

If there is an author whose oeuvre ought to be inescapable in a special issue on transculturality and the Anthropocene, it would have to be Gary Snyder, often referred to as the poet laureate of the American environmental movement. No other American poet has worked as persistently and thoughtfully to build bridges between East and West as Snyder, and has furthermore done so with the explicit aim of changing how we understand humans’ relationship to the Earth and its other inhabitants. In “Ecocide, Hybrid Landscapes and Transcultural Fluidity in Gary Snyder’s *Danger on Peaks*,” Tomasz Sawczuk zeroes in Snyder’s landscape descriptions in which he deliberately blends Eastern and Western iconographic conventions and blurs customary distinctions between the sacred and the profane, public and private. Memories of Snyder’s hikes to Loowit/Mt. Saint Helens in the years after World War II, when the serenity of the mountains stood in stark contrast to the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which were haunting his teenage mind, are cross-cut with the images of destruction he witnessed when he visited the same mountain after the great eruption of 1980, and the regenerated landscape he encounters when he visits again in the early 2000s. Layering his memories of landscapes in this fashion, Snyder reflects on nature’s capacity for both destruction and healing, and on the question how humans’ capacity for both fits into a world where nothing is truly permanent.

The concluding essay of this special issue is also concerned with landscape, but it returns the discussion to Taiwan: Yi-tze Lee’s “Landscape Renewal, Multispecies Networks, and Environmental Change: Ritual Practice by the Amis as Reaction to Planetary Emergency” is an ethnographic study of rituals by which the Lidaw Amis on Taiwan’s East Coast bind themselves to the multispecies matrix which constitutes the landscapes they inhabit. These rituals are ways of world-making: they re-enact the lives of their ancestors and connect their own lives to those of their descendants.

Yet after a century of colonization and forced modernization, these worlds often no longer exist, and the relationships to other living creatures that constituted them have been sundered. Yet Lee shows how the Lidaw Amis adjusted their ritual practice to these changing circumstances in ways that allow them to maintain the relationships that constitute their way of life. He demonstrates powerfully that transculturality is a multispecies affair, and why the planetary emergency demands a multidisciplinary response. If the essays in this special issue point towards a shared conclusion, it is that in the Anthropocene, fixed cultural identities have become a dangerous impossibility.

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About the Authors

Hannes Bergthaller is professor at the English Department of National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei. He is a founding member and past president of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and the Environment. His research interests are focused on ecocritical theory, environmental philosophy, social systems theory, and the literature and cultural history of US environmentalism. His publications cover a wide range of issues and authors, from the science fiction of Kim Stanley Robinson to fossil energy in John Updike's Rabbit trilogy. Together with Eva Horn, he co-authored *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (Routledge, 2020).

Yen-ling Tsai is a cultural anthropologist and a part-time organic rice farmer who teaches at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Hsin-chu, Taiwan. Yen-ling has been studying the multispecies dynamics in organic paddy fields in Taiwan, examining how histories and ongoing realities of settler colonialism and capitalist expansion shape divergent practices of cultivation and care. Her latest research project focuses on the contingent human/non-human collaborations in forming the "golden apple snails diaspora" in Asia, first from Argentina to South Taiwan, and then from Taiwan to Japan and the Philippines. Yen-ling's academic writings have appeared in journals such as *Indonesia*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Current Anthropology*.