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# From Connection to Correspondence As Approach to Transcultural and Transdisciplinary Collaboration

*Joana Meroz<sup>1</sup>*

One of the most urgent discussions within sustainability research today is: how can global ecological collapse be countered without erasing the local realities of Indigenous peoples? “As Alyne Costa observes, the challenge is that while the ongoing ecological damage is systemic and hence forms a global emergency that affects everyone (even if differentially), any universal solution is problematic since it is by definition bound to override local, Indigenous autonomy.” For example, a ‘conventional’ approach to sustainability that is guided exclusively by ‘universal’ techno-scientific theories of ecosystem restoration may bring about a low-carbon future – but is problematic because it might well entail Indigenous and traditional communities being prohibited from living and working in their lands in traditional ways.

In response, a host of scholars have started examining how sustainability transitions can be achieved ‘justly’, which is to say, where the multiple needs, perspectives, tra-

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ditions and realities of marginalised populations are also acknowledged and respected.

This is a significant first step; but we need to go further. Decolonial scholarship moves beyond questions of representation and reparation to posit instead a radical de-hierarchisation of research practice. In other words, the decolonial proposition is for knowledge production to become a matter of thinking with historically marginalised groups, rather than arising exclusively and autonomously from academic institutions.

However, speaking from my position as an assistant professor of Design Culture Studies working at and from the confines of Dutch academia, I view the translation of decolonial theory into research practices as fraught with challenges. What role can researchers (such as myself), thoroughly implicated as I am/we are in Eurocentric knowledge systems, play in the project of decolonising sustainability research practices and in the co-production of local alternatives? As Ahmed Ansari notes, we generally lack the knowledge of non-hegemonic European languages, cultures, histories, texts and contexts to be able to translate, interpret and configure non-Anglo-European canons.

While I agree, the decolonial project fundamentally entails involving the voices of a variety of actors, such as Indigenous and local experts and scholars, communities of practice and makers, activists and students with whom to co-create alternative ways of knowing/doing, precisely to re-define the knowledge canon. I would argue that one of the core challenges facing the decolonial imperative therefore concerns developing cross-border collaborations without either 'othering' or 'saming' (to borrow from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro). In other words: how to ensure that we are not

surreptitiously reinscribing Eurocentric and reductionist modes of defining who is allowed to enunciate and produce knowledge? How to move away from reinforcing essentialised identities while remaining sensitive to difference?

In our collaborative research project *Decolonising Sustainability Research in Practice*, we are engaging these questions by using Tim Ingold's concept of 'correspondence' to think against the grain of the concept of 'connection'.

The notion of 'connection' evokes fully-formed, distinct and fixed points in space that can be linked up into a network. Across this network, pre-existent views, beliefs and interests can be transported, back and forth. Connection thus assumes and relies upon the idea of static and self-contained positions that exist prior to and independently of each other, which risks reducing difference to predetermined and essentialised identities.

Although sounding similar, Ingold's notion of correspondence is diametrically opposed to the concept of connection. Correspondence refers to points that are not rigid but are set in motion in a process of answering and being answered to. In this movement through time, points transform into lines; lines whose shapes are not independent but mutually responsive – like two people who go out for a walk and attune their steps in relation to the terrain and to the movements of the other. These paths grow in time through processes of co-creating new artefacts and the new knowledge needed to understand them. So, while connection is about the joining up of already-formed identities, Ingold emphasises that correspondence is about the generation of being. The focus is on getting points to move from their fixed positions, meet each other halfway and together cre-

ate new paths for both, paths that are distinct yet reciprocally attuned.

Correspondence's 'togethering' – rather than 'saming' – thus generates conceptual possibilities for developing decolonial modes of transcultural and transdisciplinary collaborations that circumvent connection's problematic 'othering'. Particularly promising is correspondence's notion of 'walking along in difference'. It opens up the prospects, on the one hand, for a relational creation of identities rather than assuming them to be already fixed in advance, and on the other, for a relational creation of knowledge that contains (in the sense both of defying and encompassing) the hierarchical system of knowledge underlying academia.