

*Margins*

**WHAT IF PLANTS COULD TALK?  
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF  
COMMUNICATION**

(A Review of the Book of Anna Lisa Tota *Eco-words. The Ecology of Conversation*, London: Routledge, 2023, 140 pp.)

Svetlana Hristova

*Eco-words. The Ecology of Conversation* (EWEC) is a book, difficult to define once and for all, more flower-like than knife-like, but certainly, like nothing in the world. Suppose I unconventionally begin this review, playing with the title of William Saroyan's famous short story. It is because it reminds me of Anna Lisa Tota's style to open every chapter with quotation(s) from famous ancient and modern philosophers, sociologists and intellectuals, writers and poets, religious and spiritual teachers and thinkers. But more substantially, it is the most direct possible entrance into her eloquently written and theoretically informed book whose focus is more on empathic understanding than on rigidly rational knowledge per se; it abounds with instructive examples, literary and film plots, old-time sayings from various cultures, Eastern parables and defence "katas"; touching human stories, personal experiences or heard and retold memories about relations between parents and children in different stages of their life; between spouses, present and ex; between generations, reproducing continuously wrong patterns of communication; a small but rich in insights book, source of wisdom and practical advice, a kind of a concise toolkit for learning to speak meaningfully and avoid toxic words, to present ourselves in harmony with our identity, and finally to recognise and overcome our traumas by outgrowing the past.

The manuscript in English, translated by Emma Catherine Gainsforth, is preceded by two publications in Italian: *Ecologia della parola. Il piacere della conversazione* (Ecology of Words. The Pleasure of Conversation) in 2020, and *Ecologia del pensiero. Conversazioni con una mente inquinata* (Ecology of Thought. Conversations with a Polluted Mind) in 2023, both published by Einaudi. It could be considered one of the numerous creative results, indirect by-products of the COVID-19

global pandemic. Its subject matter has been contemplated and verified through the lived author's experience over a much longer period. As Anna Lisa Tota recounts, the book is made of "living matter"; the writing alone (compared to a journey) took about two years, a period in which she survived literally through partial aphasia (p. 12).

In some places, EWEC sounds like an intimate confession, but it is first and foremost a dialogue: it invites readers to reflect on their vulnerabilities, therefore, the author chooses to speak in the most understandable language accessible to those who should not be necessarily educated in communication studies: "Under no circumstances will the following pages explain what everyone already knows, using incomprehensible words. Let us leave behind that kind of scientific language which, instead of explaining, excludes and categorises its interlocutors according to their ability to understand the abstruseness it exhibits" (p. 11).

This is perhaps one of the most difficult genres for academically trained social scientists – to leave the ivory tower of high academic discourse and present scholarly ideas to a general lay readership. And few dare to do it, because the constraints of the established discourses, as oppressive as they are, nevertheless provide some security; if not true freedom of thought trapped in clichés, then at least a professional – in terms of a disciplinary (what a double-speak!) identity. And that seems to be the book's second, unspoken purpose: to take readers beyond maintained boundaries – epistemological and ontological – and to offer a deeper understanding of the meaning of their life's ordeals and uncertainties.

### **Approach, Dedication and Intentionality**

This is certainly a very inter- and trans-disciplinary research, fusing into a new blend of communication, memory and identity studies, ecological holism, mixed with Buddhism and other currents of Eastern mysticism; sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis, "dedicated to those who have heard inappropriate words during their childhood. In this sense, the book intends to be restorative" (p. X). But at the end, the author adds that the book "is written for all those who, at least once, were not able to find the right words" (p. 126). One could think that the author is a psychotherapist or a writer, but Anna Lisa Tota is a professor of cultural sociology at the University Roma III in Italy, exploring consistently the field of communication intersected with memory studies through the prism of traumatic personal and collective experiences and their (possible) transformation; author, known internationally for her and Trever Hagen's editing of the Routledge International Handbook

of Memory Studies (2016). Her new book is focused specifically on interpersonal communication, i.e. face-to-face dialogues, no matter how they are conducted – over the phone or virtually (p. 12). In a very essential way, the book is about the basics of social life, the beginning of beginnings: *conversation*. This focus in itself is very revealing about the author’s intentionality. At a time when the pragmatics of political communication have evolved into a further formalization of the psychological subtleties of public manipulation and production of fake news, and the world is moving from post-truth to post-lie (De Jong, 2023), the book aims to do just the opposite: “The following pages do not contain strategic recipes that teach how to manipulate, convince, or influence others. On the contrary, to speak well and listen better, what the book suggests is to eliminate control and manipulation altogether” (p. 2).

To achieve this goal, the book promises to “help us break down communication clichés, linguistic routines, [...] catchphrases, that we learn and resort to unconsciously; the way we tend to speak exactly as others expect us to” (p.14). And when I say what *the book aims to do*, this is also in line with the author’s understanding of the power of words – not just as performative utterances, in the sense suggested by the Oxford philosopher John Langshaw Austin in his *speech act theory* in *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), according to which while all words present information, some words can also carry out actions. For Anna Lisa Tota all words have the power by which “saying may not entirely equate to doing, but would nonetheless constitute a strong and valid premise, and frame, for the ensuing action. In this light, words do a lot. Perhaps not as much as actions, but rather [...] a different way of doing things” (p. 37). Tota argues her assertion by referencing a few sociological theories: the theorem about *the definition of the situation* by William Isaac Thomas and Dorothy Swaine (1928); Robert K Merton’s theory of the *self-fulfilling prophecy* (1948) and the *theory of the social construction of reality* by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). But she finds the greatest support of her ideas in Paul Watslawick’s communication theory and radical constructivism, disseminated through Palo Alto School. Or it would be more accurate to say this in reverse: it was Watslawick’s philosophy of *invented reality*, including his redefined concept of *self-fulfilling prophecies*; it was his and his collaborators’ Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don D. Jackson’s approach to therapeutic communication as an intersubjective process, developed in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* that exerted the strongest influence in moulding Tota’s ideas. As she confesses, the latter book has changed her life (p. 47).

Although EWEC is modestly described in the Preface as a “small wicker basket containing information on how we communicate daily [...]. Nothing in it is

strictly original, rather it is a patchwork” (p. XI), the author questions tacitly many if not all basic conventions, the ‘untouchable truths’ about the world we live in, concerning the ideas of time, space, society, Self and, ultimately, communication.

### **The Power of Words in a Quantum World: Boundless and Unbounded**

In the beginning was the Word, and who would ever dare to question biblical wisdom? Certainly, words possess power. But whether it is boundless – like in the Harry Potter magical world, or simply unbounded in one’s imagination? Based on Walter J. Ong’s study of early oral cultures (1982), Anna Lisa Tota reminds us that in the most distant past when humankind had not yet mastered a writing system, words were always actions. In primary orality all linguistic acts were considered performative utterances, what Walter J. Ong calls on this basis, “word-action”, according to Tota (p. 36). Ong develops the idea of the word-action in oral cultures, but never uses the term. He rather points to the Hebrew term *dabar* meaning simultaneously “word’ and “event”. Ong also refers to Malinowski who has made the point that among “primitive” (oral) people language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought. [...] Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power (Ong, 1982: 32). Hence, the briefly whistled definition: *Sound is an event in time* (ibid.: 74). The faith in the ‘primordial’ power of words in the early preliterate Mesolithic cultures was so strong, that naming equally as the creation of images have been considered magical acts, capable of doubling the reality. This ‘omnipotence’ of oral words gradually declines with the introduction of various forms of literacy, a long and continuous process that can be also described as shifting from magic to science, or from the so-called “prelogical” to the more and more “rational” state of consciousness (Goody, 1977), or from Lévi-Strauss’s “savage” mind to domesticated thought (Ong, 1982: 29). But in the long transition from orality to literacy regimes, the words still preserved their power, and as Ong keenly observed, the oral-style thinking was perpetuated in Homer, who refers to speech with the standard epithet “winged words”– “which suggests evanescence, power, and freedom: words are constantly moving, but by flight, which is a powerful form of movement, and one lifting the flier free of the ordinary, gross, heavy, ‘objective’ world” (ibid.: 75).

As Anna Lita Tota highlights, the introduction of writing systems made cognitively possible the separation of word-as-sound and word-as-action, further cemented thanks to the ensuing process of reflexivity and introspection, stimulated by the writing systems. This has ultimately changed the modern way of thinking:

It is extremely hard for us, living in the present and immersed in societies that have been writing for thousands of years, to even begin to understand a process of this kind: this is the result of what Ong defines as “our chirographic bias”, making us to believe that such way of thinking, seeing, conceiving and speaking is “natural”, immutable, and not historically determined. [...] We are no longer even able to imagine other, possible worlds (p. 36).

In a way, the book invites us to rethink this lost possibility of the boundless power of words. The shift back from a strictly rational, solid, static way of thinking to a more fluid, liquid (to use Bauman’s metaphor), even gaseous looking to the world (p. 31) is made possible in the book by reimagining the reality itself. The door to this ‘new thinking’ has been opened already by Watzlawick’s radical constructivism; the road to it is paved by a series of ‘small theories’, all based on a single metaphor, stemming from quantum mechanics. The book starts with the theory of the *quantum self* of Danah Zohar and Ian N. Marshall, the earliest in this “quantum” series, published in 1990. Danah Zohar, with her educational background in physics and philosophy, took from quantum mechanics the term „quantum“, the minimum amount of any physical entity, displaying the dual nature of particle and wave, light and matter, and transferred by analogy the duality of solidness and movement, to social reality, thus producing an influential metaphor, that underpinned a series of books, published over the next three decades: *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics*; *The Quantum Society: Mind, Physics and the New Social Vision*; *The Quantum Leader: A Revolution in Business Thinking and Practice*; *Zero Distance: Management in the Quantum Age*.

*The Quantum Self*, published in 1990, was an early premonition of the social shift from solidity towards fluidity, a full decade before the famous Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*. As Anna Lisa Tota presents it, the authors argue that it is possible to rethink and redefine the concepts of consciousness and subjectivity, hypothesising, first, “that all living things are interconnected; secondly, it suggests that living things might also have an extended intelligence and consciousness” (p. 18). The condition of constant flux in which *we are wave and particle*, by necessity, affects the human body which takes part in the process of co-producing reality “*by feeling*”. This changes also our perceptions of time which is “not linear but circular: present, past, and future are simultaneously available, it is possible to be here and elsewhere, inside and outside. According to this particular mode of feeling, subjectivity is a continuous mode of becoming, an ongoing transition between “form and life” (p. 19), while the self is conceived as “a field of synchronic and diachronic possibilities,

in which past, present, and future are pliable and can be shaped by our thoughts, they can be re-signified. [...] This is why conversations (including silent ones we have with ourselves, that is, the flow of our thoughts) take on a fundamental role: it is also the intensity and the way we feel towards the streams of thoughts and words that cross us that help shape the field of opportunity we are, what we become” (p. 20). Thus, the subject is finally dissolved into “a set of instances, forces, and synergies that dance uninterruptedly, between waves and particles, employing thoughts, words, and actions, time seems to collapse, the body becomes a temporary dwelling, the self an intention, a disposition that takes shape and reshapes itself over and over again” (ibid.).

Once started with Self and Time, the process of relativisation inevitably affects Space and boundary maintenance: “The boundaries between inside and outside become blurred, as they do not fit the mode of being of waves. In this perspective, it is the constant capacity to reposition that constructs our uniqueness. The quantum self is perhaps also liquid, but not uncertain because it experiences no nostalgia for a lost certainty” (ibid.).

This quantum-isation or “liquefaction” of reality (to refer again to Bauman’s Liquid Modernity) serves the author’s ultimate goal of showing her readers the way out of their traumatic past by overcoming the pathological forms of communication and re-working them into ecological communication patterns. For this reason, Anna Lisa Tota consistently reveals all the possible aspects of quantum-isation – in a quantum theory of experience, based on the concept of the restlessness of events which ends up with the quantum sociology of events by the American sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici. The quantum theory of experience suggests overcoming statism and solidity – especially in our thinking – for the sake of unlocking more possibilities for our “being” rather than “having”. As might be expected, the arguments are based on the dual nature of quanta: “The solid state is the one which most limits us and, insofar as it is static, does not allow us to flow easily. The intention here is to imagine the transformation from one state to the other from the very start, to mitigate its potential costs” (p. 31). Therefore, our thoughts should be set to “roam free, untamed in our minds, insofar as it is precisely our thoughts that delineate the boundaries of the possible, and their intensity which ploughs the furrows of the probable” (p. 32). In her argumentation of the quantum theory of experience, Tota refers to the Wagner-Pacifici’s concept about the “restlessness of events”, and the related paradigm shift to a “quantum sociology of events”. Once again, these concepts rest on the analogy of social life to “quantum mechanics, providing a mathematical description of the dual particle-like and wave-like behaviour and interactions of energy and matter.

[...] For analytical purposes, such an analogous approach to events would allow us to grasp events in their movements and trajectories and their stabilisations in forms and objects: movement and stability; particle and wave; continuities and discontinuities; form and flow” (p. 32).

Ana Lisa Tota first referred to Wagner-Pacifici and her concept of the restlessness of events back in 2017, in an article about the state terror and “strategy of tension” in Italy spanning a long period (1947–1993). To construct her theoretical framework for the analysis of the traumatic events (terrorist acts in recent Italian history) Tota draws on the ideas about the restless nature of historical events, offered by Wagner-Pacifici in her analysis of the exemplary case of September 11, in which the concept of event is freed from its narrow historical frame with a methodology able to capture the intrinsic restless nature of events, claiming that any historical account of an event can only be partial (Tota, 2017). We shall return to this earlier text of Ana Lisa Tota, but now it should be highlighted how similar social facts as terrorist acts in the USA and Italy give rise to new conceptualisations, capable of better approaching the traumatic events with their effect of “infinite malleability, as events can be folded and reshaped in multiple ways” (Tota, 2023: 78), this theory being “particularly effective in understanding both the biographical trajectory of traumatic events in the case of individual subjects, and the future trajectory of these events, which concerns the next generations” (ibid).

Finally, in this world of increasing uncertainty and unexpected traumatic events, theories of quantum reality, where the Self can find – if not salvation, at least hope – in its unbounded ingenuity, offer us a possible direction for societal transformation that begins first within ourselves. Yet, with all these quantum theories the danger remains of complete relativization of the categories of our thought – time, space, subjective and objective reality – in case we forget that a metaphor is still not an explanation. As Anna Lisa Tota herself reminds her readers, “this reflection on waves and particles, fascinating as it is, risks taking us too far. What interests us here is that it opens up a series of questions that allow us to reflect on a concept such as the extended self, by which we mean a redefinition, at least a partial one, of those boundaries separating the inside and the outside (p. 107).

### **On the possibility of an anthropology of communication**

In my concluding notes on this book, I will outline possible directions for a new anthropology of communication, since such potential exists, even if not always in explicit form. To do this, I will distinguish between *personal* specifics, *genera-*

*tional* prerequisites, and the *quality of time, socio-cultural* background (or socio-cultural horizon?), that precondition and incite the author's ideas transformed into her reflections.

**Personal:** In a way, books like these are fascinating as they offer a very personal narration, full of “soft whispers, kind proposals, and gentle invitations” (p. XIII), leaving me at the end with the feeling that I know the author almost as well as my daughter, sister or a friend with whom I am ready to share some of my innermost fears, doubts and hopes. Because she already did it with us, the readers. Still, this is not autobiographical literature, rather Ana Lisa Tota dared to turn her own life, including her own body into a research field. She has been doing this in a very female and feminine way: brave to dissolve her borders, to open herself from inside out and to share embarrassing and even painful moments. Her style is affected by this femininity, in which words have been “woven”, and the concepts are “embroidered”, “a patchwork, like those our great-grandmothers used to make” (p. XI).

As “Eco-words are always embodied, which means they always both require and impose their corporeity on the content they are expressing, their being a product of the body, in and about the body” (p. XV), a big part of the book, devoted to the ecological (healthy and fulfilling) conversation is focused on body and its special role in the communication processes: body speaks for itself, remembers and forgets; the body takes part through emotions in the subject's experience – overtaking the mind or even getting independent from it; the body as cultural construction and social intersection – that of the families with traumatic histories, transfers restlessly the traumas through generations. One of the most interesting analyses of the complexities of the body-mind relation, but also – the even greater complexities of the “tuning” of a body among other bodies are revealed in the brief self-reflexive stories of the author's participation in seminars on sensitive dance (Tuscany, 2008) and on sacred body movements (Centeno, 2013). These are two body-centred cases with different takeaways and lessons learned from them. But the skilful self-observation and self-analysis of her own body with all its disturbing and enlightening experiences is an example of autoethnographic research in intersection with performance studies shifting lens onto the author's self which could be considered a contribution to the anthropological expansion of communication studies, analysed by Anjana Mudambi and Amy N. Heuman (2024).

**Generational:** There are specific conditions, historical events, dramatic upheavals and difficult victories in which generations mature, but also receive and share life lessons. As Anna Lisa Tota recounts, many scholars of her



“generation (the one born in the 1960s) grew up weaned on radical constructivism – breaking, in other words, with the epistemological conventions of realism, and firmly believing in a theory of knowledge in which the latter no longer reflects “objective” ontological reality, but exclusively an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience. [...] It meant moving from an intellectually compelling theory to a way of acting in everyday life, in which being could substitute for having, and fluidity could override the rigid solidity of every univocal interpretation. This did not just involve an exercise in empathy to shift from “my” solid, static interpretation to that of another, recognising its uniqueness, legitimacy, limits, and mutual complementarity; it meant changing perspective and allowing the course of events to guide our choices and decision-making processes” (p. 30).

If there is a “generational bias” that can be described so consistently as in the quotation above – inevitably, it must have been generated as a reaction to and interaction with the preceding generation – that of the parents who have survived WWII, and the teachers, the great men of letters who have turned their traumatic experiences into scholarship.

Not occasionally one of the most influential books in Anna Lisa Tota’s life is *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (PHC) by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson (1967). Many of the topics, problematized in EWEC belong to the pragmatics of interpersonal communication in the traditions of Paul Watzlawick. In the *Foreword* to the PHC, Bill O’Hanlon recognizes that the book together with Haley’s *Strategic Psychotherapy*, also published in the 1960s, signalled the shift from individual to interpersonal lens for viewing therapy problems and solutions, noticing the *language shift from symptoms to problems* as an indication of moving away from the pathological and psychodynamic framework. “The ecology movement was still beginning at the time Pragmatics first came out, but that sense that we are all embedded in contexts was not at all intuitive for many people” (O’Hanlon Watzlawick et al. 1960: XI). What a remarkable observation that seems to outline the most prolific direction of development for the next generation of scholars, and followers of the traditions laid down by Watzlawick. This is exactly the direction of Anna Lisa Tota with her *Eco-words*: following the bequeathed scientific traditions, the disciple moves beyond her teacher, by extending the principles of eco-communication to the surrounding environment, the animal and plant world that has “silently” accompanied humankind during the thousand’s years of unbridled development.

As a scientist, working for a decade on the topic of sustainable development, it was exactly the title of the last sub-chapter that attracted my attention to the book. For

the author, this “last paragraph is a digression intended to offer a literal interpretation of the title of this book: what if plants could talk?” (p. 122). She distinguishes from those scholars of communication studies “who believe that the act of communicating is an exclusive prerogative of human beings as [...] it would be strange to assume that only mankind can communicate, without providing any specific scientific evidence to confirm this hypothesis” (ibid.). The sub-chapter provides a concise overview of the results from different plant studies: starting from the experiments of the Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose since the early 20<sup>th</sup> C., through the experimental series of Dorothy Retallack conducted in Denver in 1968 on the relationship between music and the well-being of certain plant species; to the revolutionary findings of Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird (1973) published in a book about the communicative abilities of plant species. The latest contribution is made by the German scholar of forestry science Peter Wohlleben who worked as a forest ranger for many years and published in 2015 a unique book, translated into English in 2016 as *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*. With his book, Wohlleben urges us, that if we realise the “capabilities” of plant life, then we will also begin to treat plants differently, will cease to view forests as lumber factories, and will understand how forests can serve as oases of respite and recovery for us.

Wohlleben’s publication became a best-seller, but not without generating considerable controversy, the debates ranging from the most enthusiastic acclamations to outright denials.

As one of the reviewers, Sharon Elizabeth Kingsland points out, although the book presents sound scientific research results on plants’ life, it is rather “not so much what the science says, but what the science causes Wohlleben to think and imagine, which is the subject of this book” (Kingsland, 2018: 2). The most important in this debate however is the fact that books like this are a fair attempt to raise the public awareness about the issues of human ecology, and how to inhabit the planet in harmony with all living systems. Drawing on Wohlleben we may say by analogy, that humankind should live like a forest in which “trees of different ages coexist and wisely look after each other” (p. 123), and only in rare and abnormal conditions, such as after war conflicts, the generational continuity has been lost, children without parents, “young orphans competing with each other over resources – light, air, and water” like “endless poplar groves in which the trees are planted in rows” (ibid.). The implicit assumption in the question “*What if plants could talk?*” is not a childish belief in fairy tales; it is the deep ecological insight that more and more people now develop this kind of sensibility and empathy that enable them to “hear” the problems of even the most silent inhabitants of the Earth.

***The Quality of Time, Cultural and Societal:*** There is growing anxiety in the time we live – the air full of unpredictability and fears of all possible social, military and environmental risks. We almost palpably feel that everything is changing – our world and our minds. This quality of time is certainly close to what José Ortega y Gasset defined 100 years ago as a historic crisis – a radical change with catastrophic character when the traditional norms and ideas are rejected as false. However, unlike in the great Spanish philosopher’s description, contemporary society has not lost its capacity to navigate in the global ocean of uncertainty and has taken the course towards a new deal – with nature and our way of co-habitation. The recent COVID-19 crisis has turned into a real “constitutive danger of our co-living” (Barry, 2022: 222), implying a civilizational shift, reinforcing trends whose beginnings we found a century ago: adopting healthier and less wasteful lifestyles; further “naturalization” of human culture including human body that is continuously rationalised and sacralised at the same time. This ‘naturalization’ of culture goes together with the emerging public awareness about human responsibility to nature, implying culturalization or humanization of nature, a kind of late-modern animism (Hristova, 2023). As Mike Featherstone put it, “for many this is an unexpected radical departure, as animism entails not just mixing nature and culture, but acknowledging some form of agency to not only animals and plant life forms, but to places, things, objects, tools...” (Featherstone, 2023: 31).

The *Eco-words* is a bright child of our troubled times, determined to work for change from within. Open-minded, alert and curious, ready to question any rigid (and outdated?) conventions, attracted by the mysteries of Eastern esotericism, the book is very European and Western at the same time: who but the West will turn with such devoted imagination to the East? And changes happen, they become discernible. In a recent article in *Cultural Geographic* Elizabeth Straughan, Catherine Phillips, and Jennifer Atchison reveal how *more-than-human comfort and conviviality* are achieved and how *trees become foregrounded in people’s everyday lives* by analysing the e-mails which have been “sent to trees living in the City of Melbourne, Australia – from near and far, sharing personal dilemmas, jokes, poetry, confessions, political concerns, and more” (Straughan et al, 2023: 507). This change does not surprise us, there will be much more in future. It deserves to be studied and discussed.

When the study of communication capacities develops attentively to our identities and our bodies, to all living forms around us in the space – to the world – within us and around us in all its multicultural variety – what else can such scholarship be named but an anthropology of communication? There are already different attempts to develop this sub-discipline, e.g. the *Anthropology of Indirect Communication*, ed-

ited by Joy Hendry and C.W. Watson (2001) which nevertheless remains with a more restricted scope. Certainly, there is a historical legacy and long research tradition of slow accumulations by which scientific knowledge advances. But the new post-humanist ethics insisting on extending the standards of humanity over the whole world is already a fact.

Finally, if communicating healthily and reasonably contributes to our quest for meaning, so vital for humans in the current metacrisis, then anthropology of communication could be a major part of cultural sociology, defined as investigation, primarily dedicated to analysing the centrality of meaning-making in social life.

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the death Nazi camps during WWII, psychotherapist and author of the world-famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*, noted about contemporary society: "Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for". In his small book, full of tragic optimism, he shared the shocking story of a young woman, whose death he witnessed in a concentration camp. "It is a simple story. There is little to tell and it may sound as if I had invented it, but to me, it seems like a poem. This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her, she was cheerful despite this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard", she told me. "In my former life, I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously". Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness". Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree", she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes". What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here-I am here-I am life, eternal life'" (Frankl, 2022: 96).

This poignant story of the human search for meaning even in the most inhuman conditions, in which a tree can speak and give courage, brings us back to the long evolutionary journey through which a series of generations pass to discover the horizon of posthumanism. Sometimes history illuminates human suffering, long-term commitments and noble efforts with a happy ending. In 2001, Paul Watzlawick received the honorary award for his outstanding achievements in the field of meaning-oriented humanistic psychotherapy from the Viktor Frankl Foundation of the City of Vienna.

The call of Anna Lisa Tota, a loyal disciple of Watzlawick, with her present book, is timely and understandable: "To be able to speak and think well is an essential condition to be free and authoritative citizens of the world. It is also a

necessary condition to promote peace, not conflict. In this historical moment all disciplines should contribute, whether or not in the field of humanities: faced by such complex and ongoing transformations, scholars in social sciences must speak out” (p. XI).

## References

- Barry, L. (2022). Epidemic and Insurance: Two Forms of Solidarity. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39(7–8), 217–235. doi.org/10.1177/02632764221087932
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Berger, P. L., Luckmann, T. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Doubleday: New York.
- De Jong, T. (2023). *Future Human Behavior: Understanding What People Are Going To Do Next*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Featherstone, M. (2023). Culture and crisis: Some reflections on the consequences of national, consumer and digital formation processes. *Divinatio*, 51, 15–59. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1206820>
- Frankl, V. E. (2022). *Man's search for Meaning*. Hermes. [in Bulgarian]
- Goody, J. (1977) *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Hendry, J. & Watson, C.W. (2001). *An Anthropology of Indirect Communication*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hristova, S. (2023). The Crisis as Usual or Living on the Volcano of Civilization: The Post-Pandemic New Global. *Divinatio*, 51, 105–130. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1206830>
- Kingsland, S. E. (2018). Facts or Fairy Tales? Peter Wohlleben and the Hidden Life of Trees. *The Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 00(0):e01443. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bes2.1443>
- Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. The Free Press: New York.
- Mudambi, A. & Heuman, A. N. (2024). Expanding Upon Critical Methodologies and Perspectives in Communication Studies, *Communication Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2024.2350255
- O’Hanlon, P. (1967). Forward. In: Watzlawick, P., Beavin Bavelas, J. & Jackson, Don D. (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*. New York and London: Norton & Company, IX–XI.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Straughan, E., Phillips, C. & Atchison, J. (2023). Finding comfort and conviviality with urban trees. *Cultural Geographies*, 30(4), 507–524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740221136284>
- Tompkins, P., Bird, C. (1973) *The Secret Life of Plants: A Fascinating Account of the Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Relations Between Plants and Man*, Harper & Row: New York.
- Thomas, W. I., Swaine, D. (1928) *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York.
- Tota, A.L.and Hagen, T. (eds.) (2016) *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, Routledge, London.
- Tota, A. L. (2017). ‘I Know, But I Have No Proof’. Authentic Past and Aesthetic Truth in Post-War Italy. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 5, 27–49. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2017.512003>, Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321675817\\_I\\_Know\\_But\\_I\\_Have\\_No\\_Proof\\_Authentic\\_Past\\_and\\_Aesthetic\\_Truth\\_in\\_Post-War\\_Italy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321675817_I_Know_But_I_Have_No_Proof_Authentic_Past_and_Aesthetic_Truth_in_Post-War_Italy) [accessed May 28 2024].
- Wagner-Pacifi, R. (2010). Theorizing the Restlessness of Events. *American Journal of Sociology*, 115(5), 1351–1386.

- Watzlawick, P., Beavin Bavelas, J. & Jackson, Don D. (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*. New York and London: Norton & Company.
- Wohlleben, P. (2016) *The Hidden Life of Trees: What they Feel, How they Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, trans. Jane Billingham. Greystone Books: Vancouver and Berkeley.
- Zohar, D. & Marshall, I. (1990). *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics*. New York: William Morrow & Co.

*Biographical Note:* Svetlana Hristova is an urban sociologist and anthropologist, researcher and lecturer, associate professor at the South-West University, Bulgaria, initiator and chair of the Thematic Area Urban Management and Cultural Policies of the City at ENCATC (2008); member of the international expert panel of European Heritage Label (2019–2021), member of the Managing Board of the ESA RN07 Sociology of Culture. Her research interests in the cross-field of sociology of culture, urban studies and visual anthropology are exemplified in national and international projects devoted to public space, cities and their cultures. Author and co-editor of publications in Bulgarian, Russian, English, and French, the most important of which are: *Public Space: Between Re-Imagination and Occupation* (Routledge, 2018) with Mariusz Czepczyński and *Culture and Sustainability of European Cities: Imagining Europolis* (Routledge, 2015) with Milena Dragičević Šešić and Nancy Duxbury.

*Email:* sv.hristova@abv.bg