Traditionally, symposia followed a banquet so I must apologise for not providing a sumptuous meal with this special issue. However, this issue’s exploration of Roots and Routes holds true to the initial idea of the symposium as a discussion amongst friends/colleagues of some weighty matter. In this case we come together at the invitation of Professor Ananta Kumar Giri from the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, India to explore issues pertaining to ethnicity, socio-cultural regeneration and planetary realisations. It was Professor Giri who coordinated these special symposium contributions. The format presented here is one occasionally practised by various disciplines where a leading scholar in the field sets out a range of issues in a ‘poser’ and invites trusted colleagues to engage with their ideas. So this is not so much a dialogue in the sense of an interactive or combative engagement but a series of scholarly reflections provoked by Giri’s poser.

The immediate context for Giri is his native India where there are ongoing issues of marginalisation and resistance, both political and violent, afflicting India’s many indigenous tribal communities and indeed many other parts of the world. Giri offers a critique of the dominant trend to essentialise ethnicity to block identities that have arisen in attempts at resistance and self-definition in the face of an uncomprehending nationalist agenda. For Giri, the issue hinges on the pluralisation of identity which can resist essentialist discourse. For him, ethnicity is not a simple category but an invitation to explore our identities as both local and global sojourners. He sees such explorations as creative and generative of multiple trajectories and accompanying narratives in which identity is enacted, as verbal processes of being and becoming. This reframing is what the respondents in this special issue all tackle from various perspectives.

The short reflections that follow Giri’s opening paper range in formality and temper from the free flowing of ideas as in the three opening responses by Fred Dallmayr, Piet Strydom and Ivan Marquez to structured and formal papers such as those offered by Zazie Bowen and John Clammer. Somewhere in between these two poles my paper considers the question of rootedness and our many routes through the lens of cosmopoiesis whilst Meera Chakravorty approaches Giri’s work through the lens of mystical and indigenous poetry drawn from her deep knowledge of Baul, Sufi and tribal oral traditions. It goes without saying that much ground is covered as a result of the range of perspectives brought together. What is important is that each paper brings with it a freshness and openness to the thinking required to go beyond traditional engagements with questions of power and marginality.

Certainly, the encounters between intellectual, cultural and scholarly traditions, what Giri refers to as transmodernity, sit at the heart of the planetary conversations he has in mind. Routes are not simply those taken when we migrate, mix and merge but they stand for intellectual and cultural encounters that stretch our epistemic realities and challenge our ontological anchors. Indeed, the whole question of roots in the twenty-first century is being challenged as our consciousness of belonging is shifting between the local-locale of rootedness to the global-flow of routes. I am reminded of the wonder to be found in such transitions and of the work of walking, narrating, reflecting, critiquing, dancing and singing we must all undertake, and to which these papers in this symposium point, as we move over the horizon of the known into new landscapes of thought and identity.

Such a move is captured beautifully in the work between the white Australian Margaret Somerville and her indigenous Australian interlocutor Tony Perkins when they explore place, identity and deep memory in the lives of aboriginal Gumbaynggirr peoples of northern coastal New South Wales. At the end of this journey of roots and routes Somerville reflects:

We move between our intimate knowledge of these places, the infinite detail of the prints in the sand, the crunch of shells in the midden and the vast lines and shapes of connection (Somerville and Perkins 2010: 224).
Perhaps, in dipping into this symposium on Roots and Routes you, the reader, may find a similar sense of expansive possibility. That is our hope as we gather to discuss things in the manner of Plato who declared, in the guise of Eryximachus:

So if you on your part approve, we might pass the time well enough in discourses; for my opinion is that we ought each of us to make a speech in turn... (Plato 1909: 177D)

References
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Author
Marcus Bussey is Senior Lecturer in History and Futures at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. He is a futurist and researcher with the arts Research in the Creative Humanity’s Centre and also a member of the university’s Sustainability Research Centre. He works on cultural processes that energise social transformation. He uses futures thinking to challenge the dominant beliefs and assumptions that constrain human responses to rapid cultural, social and technological change.

Marcus has co-authored with Professor Richard Slaughter Futures Thinking for Social Foresight (2005). He has also co-edited two books with Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojević – Neohumanist Educational Futures (2006) and Alternative Educational Futures (2008). In addition he has edited Tantric Women Tell their Stories (2007) and published a book of poetry Clare and Francis (2012). Marcus has held fellowships at Nanyang Technical University, Singapore and Tamkang University, Taiwan. He is currently Discipline Head of History and Program Leader in Futures Studies at his university. Marcus is on the editorial boards for the Journal of Futures Studies, Foresight, On the Horizon and Social Alternatives.