I.

In the introduction to his *Bestimmung des Begriffes einer Menschenrasse*, Kant warned his readers not to succumb too easily to the fascinations of the new facts concerning racial and cultural variety and of the authority of observation. The occasion for this essay was the publication of Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1785). Like Herder, an avid consumer of travel literature, Kant challenged the explorers, whose investigation of the plural modes of the human species had »intrigued« rather than »satisfied« him. He contended that one can only look for something »if one knows beforehand what one should look for«. Furthermore, he argued that any concept to be elucidated »through observation« needs to be defined »clearly and in advance« before »appealing to experience«.¹ This essay and its sequel, *Muthmasslicher Anfang der Menschenengeschichte*,² both published in the organ of Berlin Enlightenment orthodoxy, *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (November 1785 and January 1786), provoked the explorer and travel-writer Georg Forster to counter with *Noch etwas über die Menschenrasse* in two installments in Wieland’s *Deutscher Merkur* (October and November 1786). Forster argued directly against the foundations of Kant’s position, namely the cognitive supremacy *a priori* of the ideational and the conceptual fact over the empirical, the conceptual process.³ He sent Herder a copy of his essay to declare

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² Georg Forster s Werke. Sämtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe, Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR, Berlin 1958ff [=AA]. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are mine and all emphases are those of the authors.

³ See here his letter to his friend, the anatomist Samuel Thomas Sömmering of July 23, 1786, AA (note 1) 1 (Briefe 1784 – Juni 1787, bearb. v. Brigitte Leuschner 1978), 515f: »Ich gestehe, dass ich neugierig bin, was man im Publikum sagen wird; denn in dem Ton hat man mich noch nicht sprechen gehört, wiewohl ich Herrn Kant gewiss mit der grössten Bescheidenheit und Glimpf widerlege... Ich wiederhole bloß dies, dass es mir gar nicht drum zu thun war, eine neue Meinung vorzubringen, sondern den unrichtigen Kantschen Begriff zu widerlegen... Ich wäre also hier Deinem Grundsat. *Lebendige blos zu loben*, nicht getreu geblieben; allein mich dünkt, es komme dabei immer viel auf die Art an; und dann,
alliance with him against Kant who had criticized Ideen for its conceptual fuzziness and undiscriminating attitude towards cultural difference. He also wanted to acknowledge the importance of Herder’s book for the development of his own work. Forster, however, saw himself clearly differing from Herder with regard to the intellectual’s cultural status and function in a situation of rapid accumulation of new information that would be crucially important to cultural self-perception. Herder, he explained in the letter accompanying his essay, wrote in order to be, like Paulus, everything for everybody. »I only satisfy the impulse of the moment to communicate what seems probable to me.«  

Where Forster discussed, on the basis of particular anthropological information gathered by himself and others, the probability of certain hypotheses, Herder maintained their truth from the position of general assumptions. Notwithstanding the disagreements with Kant, Herder shared with him the authority of the philosopher who had come upon the new realities of human variety and cultural diversity with the mind’s eye, transported linguistically. Forster’s authority was that of the voyager who had come upon them with his feet, his hands, his eyes, ears, and nose; moreover, whose interpretation of his perceptions had included intervention. We are not concerned here with physical versus symbolic activity, since the explorer’s observation, too, means symbolic organization. Rather, we are concerned with the interactive nature of Forster’s understanding of authority: among other explorers, within independent cultural and natural environments, because this interaction on many different levels supported his tolerance for a working concept of truth as composite, relational, relative, provisional — indeed probable.

Forster the voyager was wary of the fallacies and distortions produced by the particularly rigid hermeneutic circle suggested in Kant’s relegating «experience» — experimental and observational knowledge — to the status of a quarry in which one can indeed only look for something «if one knows beforehand what one should look for.« The relation between concept and observation proposed by Kant — the concept’s elu...