

Special section:

The Human Condition for the Anthropocene: Being more-than-human

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Editorial: Beyond the Human, With the Human: Cultural Science for the Anthropocene

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Abstract: The editorial introduces the Cultural Science Journal special issue “The Human Condition for the Anthropocene: Being more-than-human” as an intervention in how culture is understood under planetary-scale anthropogenic change. Treating the Anthropocene as a contested but pragmatic shorthand for a socio-ecological condition, it foregrounds culture as an operating system of planetary change rather than an epiphenomenon. Drawing on a systemist sensibility, it frames societies, technologies, and ecosystems as open, interdependent systems whose emergent properties are shaped by cultural techniques. Seven exemplary “gateways” (waters, urban heat, AI, agro-techno-biospheres, blue and brown technospheres, plural knowledges, planetary metrics) illustrate where cultural formations and Earth-system processes are tightly coupled. Methodological pluralism and explicit normativity are invited to examine, critique, and reconfigure Anthropocene cultural infrastructures for more just, livable futures.



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“The Human Condition for the Anthropocene: Being more-than-human” is not a call to abandon the human; it is a proposition to re-situate the human within the living, built, and conceptual systems that make habitation possible. It asks how cultures equip people and communities to live with others—human and more-than-human—under conditions of planetary-scale anthropogenic change. In this editorial, we use **Anthropocene** as a shorthand for a socio-ecological condition in which human activities, infrastructures, and imaginaries have become significant co-drivers of Earth’s dynamics. Whether or not the term is eventually formalised as a geological epoch, it names a problematic that is already shaping politics, law, science, and everyday life. We use it pragmatically, recognising that its meanings are contested and that some authors prefer alternative framings—Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene, and others—or may criticise, revise, or refuse the term altogether.

The wager of this special issue is simple to state and demanding to pursue. Culture is not a spectator to planetary change; it is one of its operating systems. Culture is also one of the organising logics and infrastructures through which such change is produced, perceived, resisted, and redirected. Cultural formations stabilise habits, values, and institutions, but they also shape how societies register shifting baselines, tipping points, and ruptures, in both cumulative and sudden trajectories of change.

For this reason, **cultural science** is central rather than peripheral to Anthropocene inquiries. We treat culture as a constitutive medium of more-than-human life: the practices, symbols, institutions, and technical ensembles through which humans cohabit with rivers and microbes, cities and soils, data centres and dunes. Cultural techniques—from kinship to code, from aqueducts to algorithms—mediate the entanglements of the biosphere (living systems), the technosphere (engineered and logistical infrastructures), the anthroposphere (human-made social institutions and activities), and the conceptual worlds in which people imagine and negotiate their place. Cultural Science as a journal offers a venue where these entanglements can be examined with empirical finesse, conceptual depth, and ethical reflection.

The title of the call pairs two phrases that often travel on separate tracks: **the human condition** and **the more-than-human**. This issue leans into that tension, not to dissolve the human into posthuman abstraction nor to re-centre the human in familiar anthropocentrism, but to examine how specific cultural formations make humans capable—or incapable—of living with other beings and systems. This includes questions of responsibility, accountability, and intentionality: who can act, who is held to account, and under which ethical frameworks, when decisions reconfigure soils, seas, cities, or data infrastructures?

We anchor the special issue in what we call a **systemist sensibility**. Societies, technologies, and ecosystems are treated as open systems composed of interrelated subsystems with emergent properties. Such an orientation enables two moves. First, it reframes culture as causal: as the schema through which agents perceive options, coordinate action, and stabilise values across time. Second, it invites comparative inquiry: how do ostensibly different sites—an estuary, an urban heat island, a platform economy, a coastal favela, or a river delta under dam construction—exhibit related dynamics of feedback, threshold, and norm formation?

Systemism is one among several possible ontological stances. It is adopted here as a pragmatic framework for tracing relations across domains, not as a gatekeeping doctrine. The special issue is open to work drawing on relational, decolonial, Indigenous, posthumanist, and other approaches, including contributions that interrogate or reconfigure systemist framings or Anthropocene discourse itself. Methodological pluralism is assumed: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are all appropriate where there is a clear fit between question and approach, clarity of inference, and openness about limitations and commitments.

Alongside epistemic frameworks, the issue foregrounds **ethical reflection**. No single ethical theory is prescribed. Instead, contributions are expected to make their normative commitments explicit, whether they draw on geoethics, environmental justice, feminist and decolonial ethics, Indigenous relational ethics, or other traditions that address responsibility in more-than-human worlds. Of equal interest are the normative repertoires that emerge in situated practices—from customary law to activist design, from community protocols to experimental governance—which may not map neatly onto established theories.

Seven indicative gateways

To widen the door beyond abstract nouns, we sketch seven exemplary “gateways”. They are indicative rather than exhaustive and overlap in practice. Each foregrounds domains where cultural practices and Earth-system processes are tightly coupled: water, urban climate, digital infrastructures, food systems, extractive and logistic complexes, plural knowledges, and planetary metrics. Work grounded in Majority World contexts and in Indigenous, Black, and other communities whose experiences are often marginalised in Global North scholarship is central to this agenda.

1. **Waters with standing.**

Rivers, aquifers, deltas, and lakes increasingly appear as legal persons, sacred kin, or infrastructural assets. From Andean glacier-fed catchments and Himalayan headwaters to Aotearoa river settlements and deltaic cities in West Africa or South-East Asia, ontological framings of waters reconfigure extraction, accountability, and care. Basin governance, rights-of-nature jurisprudence, Indigenous water sovereignties, and the semiotics and poetics of water are exemplary terrains.

2. **Urban heat as natureculture.**

Heat is not only thermodynamics; it is patterned by shade, surface, species, housing, and social power. Informal settlements, high-rise districts, peri-urban agro-forests, and climate-controlled enclaves experience and narrate heat differently. Cultural designs—tree canopies, reflective materials, courtyard morphologies, vernacular architectures, and care practices—mitigate exposure and redistribute risk. Mixed-methods approaches that combine satellite data, ethnography, policy analysis, and design research are particularly generative here.

3. **AI in contested cultural co-authorship.**

Generative models and other machine-learning systems curate memory, recommend futures, and mediate meaning. They are sometimes described as cultural co-authors; they are also the focus of intense critique regarding bias, opacity, labour exploitation, and environmental cost. When, if ever, do such systems function as participants in cultural evolution rather than as tools? What are the risks of anthropomorphising them, and how do different publics contest claims about machine agency in creative, scientific, or civic domains?

4. **Agro-techno-biospheres.**

Soils, seeds, microbes, platforms, and markets co-produce cuisines, health, and landscapes. From seed sovereignty movements and Indigenous agro-forestry to plantation systems, industrialised supply chains, and digital agriculture, cultural norms and property regimes pattern microbial and vegetal life. Studies of fermentation cultures, agro-ecological design, land struggles, and food-system imaginaries in both Global North and Global South settings develop this line of inquiry.

5. **Blue and brown technospheres.**

Ports, canals, mines, dams, data centres, and logistics corridors stitch together planetary metabolisms. Taken together, they exemplify what Earth System scientists call the

technosphere: the web of built systems that move energy, matter, people, and information around the planet. These matter-moving complexes are grounded in specific histories of empire, extraction, and development. Cultural and legal logics that justify their externalities, as well as counter-cultures that resist or redesign them—from environmental justice struggles in sacrifice zones to experiments in reparative infrastructure—are of particular interest, including at new extractive frontiers such as deep-sea or forest mining.

6. **Plural knowledges, plural worlds.**

Indigenous and local knowledge systems, diasporic and subaltern traditions, quilombola and other community-based forms of territorial care, and urban commons enact alternatives to extractive orders: fire stewardship, kin-centric fisheries, communal land trusts, community-based monitoring. How do these traditions negotiate with state law, corporate actors, and scientific agencies? Co-authored pieces, dialogic formats, and reflexive accounts of collaboration and conflict can illuminate asymmetries of power and recognition.

7. **Planetary metrics and imaginaries.**

From planetary boundaries and climate dashboards to speculative art, ritual, and popular media, representational tools organise attention and action. Which images persuade publics? Which numbers travel across domains and which remain provincial? How do different communities visualise risk, responsibility, and possibility? Studies of visualisation, narrative, pedagogy, and public reasoning all speak to this gateway.

Why now?

Three developments render this work urgent.

First, **planetary coupling** is no longer only a metaphor. From urban heat to riverine floods, from zoonoses to supply-chain shocks, cultural techniques and infrastructures have become co-drivers of Earth dynamics. Understanding—and changing—those couplings requires granular accounts of culture in action, attentive to power, place, and history.

Second, **technological mediation** has intensified. Machine-learning systems, digital platforms, and sensing networks now shape attention, memory, and coordination at scale. Their cultural logics—optimisation, prediction, personalisation, extraction—do not float above the world; they redistribute power and risk within it. Empirical studies and critical interrogations of these logics are both needed.

Third, **pluralism has become actionable**. The proliferation of legal experiments (such as rights of nature), design interventions (such as sponge cities and climate-sensitive architectures), and civic forms (such as citizens' assemblies and Indigenous-led councils) demonstrates that alternatives are not mere thought experiments. They are already here, if unevenly, and they demand analysis that is empirically careful and normatively explicit.

Design of the issue

The special issue is designed as a **forum rather than a silo**. Cross-referencing among accepted pieces and, where appropriate, short “responses” will stage productive disagreements as resources for learning. Review will be collegial and exacting, with an emphasis on constructive critique, methodological transparency, and accessibility across fields. No single contribution is expected to address all the domains sketched above; situated work that speaks clearly to at least one of the gateways—or proposes a neighbouring one—is sufficient.

The issue speaks to scholars in cultural studies, media studies, environmental humanities, science and technology studies (STS), legal theory, and design research who engage more-than-human questions. It is equally entangled with social scientists and economists working on institutions, commons, platform governance, and infrastructural transitions, and with Earth and environmental

scientists concerned with the cultural mediation of Earth-system dynamics, including urban climate, hydrology, and land-use change. Conversations extend to Indigenous scholars and community researchers, practitioners, artists, and policymakers whose situated expertise can refract and challenge academic frames, as well as to data scientists and digital humanists developing methods that translate across domains and scales.

Interdisciplinary co-authorship, negative results, replication studies, and reflective accounts of failed interventions are treated as materials that help a community learn. Where compatible with community standards and ethical constraints, the issue values the sharing of data, code, field notes, or design artefacts that enable reuse and dialogue.

In sum, this special issue regards culture as a causal force in the making and unmaking of cohabited worlds. It examines how cultural practices, institutions, and artefacts configure more-than-human relations under Anthropocene conditions—through law or layout, ritual or representation, code or canopy. Cultural Science offers a venue where empirical finesse, conceptual depth, and ethical reflection can move together, including in disagreement, to explore what it may mean to live beyond the human, with the human.

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The LLM application had been trained by the scientific interests, views, and academic drafting style of Martin Bohle (ORCID 0000-0002-8794-5810) to function as an ‘external representation’ (Renn, 2020, p.242). Martin Bohle publishes on societal and philosophical features of the Earth sciences, particularly taking a systems perspective on planetary-scale anthropogenic change. He is a retired science program manager of the European Commission (Brussels, 1991-2019). who was educated in physical oceanography (Kiel, 1980). He has been an Associated Fellow at the Max Weber Centre (Erfurt) since 2024. Further affiliations are: IGDORE (martin.bohle@IGDORE.org), Edgeryders (EU), Ronin Institute RIIS 2.0 (US), IAPG (Rome, Italy), and Lifetime Fellow of the EGU & AGU.