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Moving Towards (More-Than-)Human Solidarities and Sustainable Futures: On the Critical Urgency of the Ecological Turn in Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

This special issue brings together ten pieces that illustrate the state and scope of the Ecological Turn in intercultural communication today, while also pointing to future avenues for research. In this introduction, we emphasize the importance of carving spaces of creativity and resistance within and beyond academia as knowledges and solutions for sustainable futures cannot stem from euro-western-centric and anthropocentric frameworks. We conclude the introduction to this special issue with two recommendations to keep on developing and strengthening the ecological turn in intercultural communication: connecting research and activism, and using creative, embodied and multispecies methodologies.

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Ample and compelling scientific evidence has shown for decades that the crossing of planetary boundaries¹ due to anthropogenic activities means “Earth is now well outside of the safe operating space for humanity” (Richardson et al., 2023, p. 1). While many disciplines have paved the way to show what is at stake to tackle the ongoing ecological collapse, much work remains to be done. With this special issue on the “Ecological Turn in Intercultural Communication,” we bring attention to the interconnectedness between communication, ecology, and culture, as (more-than-)human relationships and communication phenomena cannot be understood as separate and distinct from one another. The ecological turn is a paradigmatic shift inviting us to reconceptualize intercultural communication away from anthropocentric and modernist understandings of the world and of our place in it. The ecological turn means centring the unstable and unruly ways in which humans and more-than-humans are entangled, thereby reframing the very ontology of communication as multispecies assemblages and negotiations (see also Tsing, 2015).

Surpassing the anthropocentric perspective that has long dominated the field of intercultural communication theorizing, the ecological turn in our discipline draws on the more-than-human turn in the humanities and social sciences (see Franklin, 2023 for an overview). This turn challenges anthropocentric assumptions stemming from the Euro-Western-centric system of thoughts that positions

humans above nature and animals and that cements such arbitrary separation as the norm (Franklin, 2023; Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2026, in this special issue). Language plays a crucial role in recapturing, reclaiming, and reimagining ways in which humans and nature are interconnected, each being part of the other. The term *more-than-humans*, used throughout this special issue, is central to the ecological turn as it challenges the very idea that non-human life is lesser while also urging us to expand our “sense of self and sense of justice to the whole ecological world of which we are a part” (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2023, p. 582).

In that sense, communication is inseparable from ecological processes – it is a continuous negotiation of meaning among humans and more-than-humans through which relations are enacted, and the world is co-created. Beyond a focus on non-human-centric forms of communication, an ecological perspective also invites us to approach communication itself ecologically – as interconnected systems of relations rather than as discrete exchanges or isolated variables. In this view, ecology operates both as a metaphor and a methodology for studying communication: it calls for seeing communicative phenomena within the broader ecosystems of meanings, structures, and power in which they are embedded. Such an ecological mode of inquiry encourages more holistic and inclusive theorizing, foregrounding complexity, interdependence, and co-constitution. In doing so, it extends the ongoing conversations from our previous special issue on intercultural communication theorizing (Fanari et al., 2025) towards a deeper, systemic understanding of meaning, culture, and relation.

Scholars of intercultural communication have a need and responsibility to contribute to the work that lies ahead by actively weaving the ecological turn into the fabric of the discipline. As Mendoza and Kinefuchi (2016) wrote in their seminal call for an ecological turn, the ongoing ecological collapse “is not an optional topic that intercultural communication scholars can choose either to take up or not, but it is now the globalized framing context of all intercultural encounters” (p. 276). We use this introduction to make visible the pressing role that intercultural communication has to play to tackle the ongoing ecological collapse, drawing on bodies of knowledge of other disciplines committed to dismantling interconnected systems of oppression. *First*, we emphasize how centering the ecological collapse in our research means revealing the colonial, capitalist, and anthropocentric discursive practices responsible for the crossing of planetary boundaries. Understanding the ongoing ecological collapse as the symptom of a historical structural illness makes it possible to identify meaningful, creative, and transformative solutions rather than keep on putting bandages on a sinking ship. As we discuss structures that enable the ongoing ecological collapse, we briefly engage with issues related to academic structures specifically. *Second*, we present the 10 papers (four invited pieces and six articles) included in this special issue that outline the main tenets of the ecological turn and illustrate what it can entail. Overall, all pieces reveal two central aspects of research within the ecological turn: the use of *trans- and interdisciplinary approaches* and the *centering of power*. We end this introduction with two recommendations to keep on developing and strengthening the ecological turn in intercultural communication: connecting research and activism, and using creative, embodied, and multispecies methodologies.

Dismantling Not Fixing the System: What the Ecological Turn Requires

Tackling the crossing of planetary boundaries means addressing what causes it in the first place. It is therefore essential to understand that the ecological collapse underway is the *consequence* not the *cause* of the problem. Research in environmental justice (e.g. Pulido & deLara, 2018) and decolonial ecology (e.g. Ferdinand, 2022) have been pivotal in revealing the destructive strength of the interplay of coloniality, capitalism, and anthropocentricity. Breadth of scholarship has identified the role played by these ideologies to perpetuate and normalize inequalities and prioritize profit over protection (Fraser, 2023 about cannibal capitalism; Pulido, 2017 about environmental racism; Sultana, 2022 about climate coloniality). This line of work has drawn powerful connections between environmental and social inequalities, thereby opening avenues to reveal and challenge deep-running historically interconnected systems of oppression (Hernández et al., 2021). These insights matter for intercultural communication because they reveal how communicative norms about progress, development, and human exceptionalism circulate across cultures and reproduce extractivist imaginaries.

The ecological turn invites us to imagine “a new and radically different worldview of “interbeing” in opposition to the “uncaring neoliberal order” (Olausson, 2024, pp. 178–9). Part of this means dismantling arbitrary anthropocentric dichotomies which normalize the separation between humans and animals, culture and nature and serve as the premise to exploit those we construct as the Other (Olausson, 2024). Anthropocentric binaries construct the realm of the social and the cultural as inherently human. Previous theorizing in intercultural communication has contributed to accentuating this dichotomy, such as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck Value Orientation theory in which “Humanity and Natural Environment” are defined as inherently separate, and the types of relationships envisioned between humans and nature are conceptualized only in terms of varying degrees of domination (see Hills, 2002). The ecological turn therefore urges us to break away from anthropocentric theorizing in intercultural communication and invites researchers to engage with the complex processual and relational enactment of cultural and social realities beyond constraining human-centric frameworks (see also Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016). This renewed focus highlights the important contributions the field of intercultural communication can make given its focus on dissecting what counts as culture.

Ultimately, the ecological turn in intercultural communication points to the breadth of relationships we make and unmake in our everyday lives. These are not only among humans, and neither are the power relations that permeate them. The hierarchies, injustices, and solidarities we witness within and between our societies reveal wider systems of oppression that shape relationships among and between humans and more-than-humans. Widening the scope of what and who counts as cultural and social also sheds light on how the category human is “itself a contingent and shifting marker of identity” (Lloro-Bidart, 2017, p. 263) used to (re)produce hierarchies among humans and more-than-humans. The way we use communication, the way we use language to define in- and out group members, humans, species, and other markers of identities culminates into the distinction of who counts as human and how processes of othering and exclusion are co-constructive. As Ko and Ko (2017, ch. 15) remind us, “racism is *already* entangled with speciesism. What Black folks are experiencing isn’t ‘like’ nonhuman animal

oppression: it is part of it.” Attending to interconnected systems of oppression does not mean drawing parallels—e.g. racism is *like* speciesism, exploiting land is *like* exploiting people, etc.—but means revealing how systems of oppression reinforce and build on one another so that allowing one carves the possibilities for allowing another.

The role of intercultural communication in addressing and tackling interconnected systems of oppression resonates with the lasting commitment of our discipline to examine how processes of in- and exclusion are reproduced, mobilized, and erased to fit specific purposes (Piller, 2017). Yet, the focus of most research in intercultural communication remains human-centric and many theoretical and conceptual tenets of the discipline are still underpinned by its euro-western-centricity and whiteness (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Sommier, 2024). Centring the ecological turn in intercultural communication is therefore a necessary endeavour, which, as illustrated by the content of this special issue, has a dual effect: it helps reimagine sustainable futures while also reinventing interculturality. As Ganesh et al. (2026, in this special issue) point out in their invited piece for this special issue, the ecological turn is an invitation to “see not only the ecological in the intercultural, but also the intercultural in the ecological.” Addressing the ecological collapse therefore invites intercultural communication scholars to grapple with and challenge some of the theoretical and epistemic lenses shaping our field.

The ecological turn in intercultural communication resonates with macro-level approaches engaging with systems of power and oppression. It also bears acute relevance at the micro- and meso-levels. At the micro-level, the ecological turn invites us, for instance, to explore daily interactions among and between (more-than-)humans, to apprehend the embodiment of lived eco-intercultural identities, and to examine nuances and complexities of navigating social, cultural, species boundaries. The ecological turn also translates into meso-level practices that connect individual interactions and macro-societal structures. This includes, for instance, research exploring how specific communities position themselves, using and repurposing discourses and norms about nature, language, identity, and culture. The ecological turn also serves research looking into how (more-than-)human kinship and ties contribute to fostering sense of belonging across specific contexts.

Carving Spaces of Creativity and Resistance within and Beyond Academia

There are numerous examples of academic spaces being part of and tools in the colonial matrices of power: from the commodification of knowledge (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005), campuses as white spaces (Duran et al., 2022), the reproduction of euro-western-centricity and epistemic injustices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021), extraction of data from minoritized groups (Tierra Común, n.d.) to repression and silencing of solidarity with Palestine (Fúnez-Flores, 2024). Ideological patterns leading to the ongoing ecological collapse are imprinted in the fabric of academia, urging us to turn our gaze onto ourselves and the institutions within which we work. In an individualized competitive neoliberal academia, engaging with the ecological turn also means resisting this system and carving spaces of creativity and resistance to produce different types of knowledge and solutions for sustainable futures. Hernández et al. (2021) put forth the term *academix* to envision different research practices that centre equity, involve indigenous forms of knowledge, and engage with more-than-human actors.

Underlying the injunction of addressing the ecological collapse as scholars of intercultural communication is a call to engage with epistemic injustices that position specific voices and their solutions as the only good ones. Sultana's (2022) work on *climate coloniality* is instrumental here to identify the ramifications of euro-western-centric forms of knowledge in relation to climate governance, climate policies, and climate expertise. The ecological turn calls for addressing the colonial underpinnings of the ecological collapse on a material level (e.g. where does mining take place, who is more affected by water pollution, etc.) as well as on a discursive level to understand who is othered, positioned outside of sustainable futures, and excluded from the realm of humanity altogether through the intersection of race, gender, and class mediating inequalities in the face of the ongoing ecological collapse (Sultana, 2022).

While we are highlighting the role and responsibility of intercultural communication to contribute to reinventing structures and systems (including academic ones), this special issue is not an invitation to claim that knowledge production on climate and social justice lies in intercultural communication. If anything, we need less disciplinary pride and boundaries, and more collective endeavours, or, as Castro-Sotomayor (2026, in this special issue) puts it, we need more conceptual and methodological *cross-pollination*. Carving spaces of creativity and resistance calls for structural changes, for instance in terms of university governance and academic publishing systems, but it also requires bottom-up (support for) initiatives that plant and nurture seeds for deep change (e.g. slow research movement, participatory research practices, unapologetic antiracist education and research practices). Critiques towards academic structures open countless generative possibilities to renew academic practices, such as collaborative writing, open-access dissemination, and inter-institutional networks of care that reimagine research as ecological relation rather than competition (see also Hernández et al., 2021). Above all, the ecological turn is inherently an indigenous one because it urges scholars to detach themselves from dominant forms of knowledge and to listen to and amplify the voices that have historically been silenced within and by academia (see also Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2026, in this special issue).

Content of This Special Issue: Main Tenets and Scope of Research on the Ecological Turn

This special issue brings together four invited papers and six articles submitted as part of the special issue that underwent standard double-blind peer review process. All pieces illustrate the main tenets of the ecological turn in intercultural communication and the breadth of topics it entails.

Ten years after their foundational and inspirational call for an “ecological turn” in intercultural communication, we are humbled and honoured to open this special issue with an invited contribution from S. Lily Mendoza and Etsuko Kinefuchi whose foundational work had been so inspiring to us and many others in the field of intercultural communication. In their essay, entitled “The (Re-)volution We Need: Hearing the World Speak Again,” the authors historicize several key concepts that make visible and challenge the normalization of the nature-human divide (in the field of intercultural communication and beyond) and of interlocked systems of oppression. What is more, they open up the epistemological, ontological, and practical possibilities and complexities

of talking from the position of “ecological beings who are in relationship with other species beings” (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2026, in this special issue). In sharing their own impressions and experiences, Mendoza and Kinefuchi (2026, in this special issue) urge us to position ourselves as ecological beings, to historicize and reclaim our connections to more-than-humans. This is a very important reminder given the crucial role played by our positionalities in research (Jadallah, 2024) – the ecological turn requires that we, as researchers, open up and grapple with our own ecological dimensions.

José Castro-Sotomayor (2026, in this special issue) echoes the urgency of engaging and widening with our ecological positionalities in his essay on ecocultural identity, powerfully reminding us that: “In the same way that identity cannot be conceived as apolitical or ahistorical, neither can it be thought of as existing outside or beyond the ecological realm—aeological.” Doing otherwise, he argues, would be a case of *anthropocentric avoidance gesture* where scholarship is confined to human only matters. In his essay, Castro-Sotomayor (2026, in this special issue) discusses the findings of a narrative literature review of articles published in two journals of intercultural communication between 2017 and 2024 that reveal little intercultural communication publications centre ecological and environmental issues. Results from this narrative literature review highlight the importance of working across disciplines and concepts to learn from fields farther along in the ecological turn and to sharpen the ecological outlook of intercultural communication.

The emphasis placed by José Castro-Sotomayor (2026) on “conceptual and methodological cross-pollinations with ecocultural work” resonates with the invited piece by Shiv Ganesh, Klara Fischer, Eva Friman, Jutta Haider and Sofie Joosse. The authors urge us to move beyond binaries, including when it comes to the disciplinary boundaries we build and perpetuate through our work as scholars. With this in mind, Ganesh et al. (2026, this special issue), point to the relevance of outlining principles that can guide “critical communication analysis of ecological issues” as a whole rather than focusing on discipline-specific blueprints. The five principles they present in their paper all engage with the centrality of power in shaping and restricting what counts as knowledge – for instance about the environment, culture, (more-than-)humans – and envisioning associated social change. Power works through arbitrary dichotomous binaries, the authors remind us, and underpins all domains of life – tackling inequalities therefore inherently calls for trans- and interdisciplinary work.

This impetus is also put forth by Halualani and Todd (2026, in this special issue) who lay out sharp and inspirational foundations for an *eco-critical intercultural communication framework* that weaves together critical intercultural communication and critical environmental communication studies. Both lines of work, the authors argue, centre power and a commitment to move past hegemonic and normative discourses and practices. As Halualani and Todd (2026, in this special issue) remind us, the thorny concept of culture has kept intercultural communication scholars busy and arguing for decades. The ecological turn once again forces us to engage with that notion and the (human-centric, colonial) frameworks of power that permeate it. In outlining the eco-critical intercultural communication framework, Halualani and Todd (2026, in this special issue) put forth a number of questions to help us, intercultural communication scholars, challenge narrow views of culture as solely a human domain and open up renewed avenues of research.

Complementing these papers that present and comment on the main tenets of the ecological turn in intercultural communication, the special issue includes articles that show what theoretical, conceptual, and methodological innovations are part of the ecological turn. Two contributions in particular turn to novel theoretical approaches that *widen and blur ontological and epistemological boundaries* of intercultural communication. This is the case of Emilian Franco's (2026, in this special issue) (auto)ethnography which powerfully illustrates the relationality of human and more-than-human actors. Franco (2026) uses encounters with water in different settings during his ethnological fieldwork in Brazil to engage with his positionality as well as historical, colonial, material, and ecological entanglements. Franco's (2026) piece illustrates once again how central to the ecological turn interdisciplinarity is as the author draws on literature from posthumanism and Marine Science and Technology Studies. In turn, Dominic Busch (2026, in this special issue) talks of a shift towards *post-intercultural communication* that becomes visible in relation to the ecological turn. The author retraces and addresses rhetorics of (dis)continuity that characterize shifts towards posthumanism and post-intercultural communication, while addressing what the implications are with regards to the notion of culture.

Two pieces included in the special issue also invite us to *challenge dominant approaches to concepts central to field of intercultural communication*. One such concept is that of *intercultural communication competence*. In her article, Jane Woodin (2026, in this special issue) invites us to consider possibilities for re-designing the notion (and frameworks) of intercultural competence by decentering its human-human focus. While it is beyond the scope of Woodin's (2026, in this special issue) paper to offer a systematic review of intercultural communication competence models, the author provides a thorough overview of seminal literature on the topic, including dominant models and their critiques. Woodin (2026, in this special issue) presents findings from a project exploring stories of people's connection to nature and interplay with their well-being. The themes identified in the stories people shared are used to highlight how intercultural communication competence frameworks and nature connection could intersect further. Another phenomenon central to intercultural communication scholarship and explored in this special issue is that of *group dynamics*. In their invited contribution, Liu et al. (2026 in this special issue) provide insights into the role of group identity and group orientation in relation to pro-environmental behaviours. The findings from two studies, one conducted across the U.S. and the other in Accra in Ghana, are brought together and reveal that normative influence in promoting pro-environment behaviours is very much situated. What is more, the findings fill an important gap. In connecting group orientation and group identity in normative influence across cultural contexts, the authors demonstrate the complex entanglements and interplays of these aspects.

Finally, two articles in this special issue showcase the variety of topics that can fall within the realm of the ecological turn. Restrepo Garcia's et al. (2026, in this special issue) study draws the contours of intersectional activism focusing on the use of social media by Francia Márquez Mina, a key figure in Colombia's contemporary political landscape. Their piece draws important connections between identity, activism, politics, intercultural dialogue and digital ecologies that underline how environmental activism and fight for social justice can be interwoven in discourses by activists and political actors. Another

topic included in this special issue is that of interracial friendships envisioned through the metaphors of air, water, soil, and energy by Akie Fukushige Wenk (2026, in this special issue). The socio-ecological model of interracial friendship proposed by Wenk (2026, in this special issue) to talk about race highlights the extent to which hegemonic ideologies travel between and connect different levels, from mundane interpersonal interactions to society at large. With this novel framework, Wenk (2026, in this special issue) outlines the relevance of looking further and from different angles at interracial friendships, a topic that has received scarce attention thus far.

The 10 articles included in the special issue highlight key aspects of the ecological turn through the range of topics they tackle, the theoretical lenses they draw on, and the methods they use. In particular, all of the pieces emphasize the *trans- and interdisciplinary orientation* required to engage with interconnected social and environmental issues, and the *centering of power* to dismantle arbitrary dichotomies, render visible interlocked system of oppression, and foreground indigenous, minoritized, and more-than-human voices. Across these contributions, communication itself emerges as the process through which ecological relationalities are negotiated, embodied, and contested – from discursive activism on social media to embodied storytelling with more-than-human entities. Together, these studies foreground communication as an ecological negotiation of meaning: a material, ethical, and relational practice rather than mere symbolic exchange.

Avenues for Future Research

As editors, our purpose with this introduction is to map the conceptual terrain of ecological intercultural research and to identify concrete pathways for future inquiry that connect theory, method, and praxis. The pieces gathered in this special issue bring visibility to the depth and richness of scholarship on the ecological turn in intercultural communication, while also pointing to future avenues for research. This special issue also indicates ways in which academic structures are part and parcel of the problem and underlines our responsibility to do research differently. While the content of the special issue powerfully illustrates what the ecological turn in intercultural communication entails, no work is without its limitations, and the special issue reproduces some of the caveats of dominant academic practices and structures that we hope to see challenged in the future. For one, this special issue is published under the Taylor & Francis company, one of the leading scientific commercial publishers involved in monetizing research to maximize profit over accessibility (Bergstrom et al., 2014). The ecological turn calls for a radical shift away from dominant business models of academic publishing embedded in and perpetuating euro-western-centric and neoliberal standards of academic knowledge (see also Neff, 2020). Carving and supporting publishing spaces of creativity and resistance is essential to allow for various forms of knowledge that move past the anthropocentricity and coloniality of dominant knowledge formations.

The pieces included in this special issue offer numerous pointers for developing further the ecological turn in intercultural communication and we would like to highlight especially the following two points as critical avenues for future research. *First*, as illustrated by the piece by Restrepo Garcia et al. (2026, in this special issue), activist work, especially from indigenous communities, has been central to addressing the crossing of planetary boundaries. The significance of activism in social-

environment justice struggles (Alberro, 2023), as well as the centring of power in scholarship from the ecological turn highlights the relevance of bridging the gap between activism and research. Practices of scholar-activism do not separate social change from research, but instead combine them to maximize the transformative power of activism and research (Garcia et al., 2025). Scholar-activism shares many characteristics with the tenets of scholarship on the ecological turn: it sets out to blur arbitrary dominant and normative boundaries in its commitment to co-create trans- and interdisciplinary emancipatory knowledge for social justice (Garcia et al., 2025; Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2021; Routledge & Derickson, 2015). In disrupting the status-quo, scholar-activism also provides important critiques of dominant normative academic structures and practices, and ultimately pushes to reinvent what research is about.

This connects to the *second* avenue for future research we want to emphasize: the importance of using creative methods to include more-than-human actors in intercultural communication. This is the case of research on multispecies ethnography (see e.g. Lamb, 2024; Lloro-Bidart, 2017). The sharp, powerful, and inspiring autoethnography of Emilian Franco (2026, in this special issue) illustrates the benefits of moving away from human-centricity in research and how embodied methods can serve this purpose. Embodiment, as an epistemological, ontological, and axiological approach can further bridge the gap between human and nature in a material and ecologically situated space – the body, as a physical manifestation of the human, also existing in a material, spiritual, and ecologically situated space that transcends humanity itself. Another aspect related to creative methods and approaches is related to the very way we engage in our research, often forced to follow linear and euro-western-centric assumptions of time. In contrast, creative methods remind us of the power of cyclicity, the importance of being present and just being in the moment, as well as the serendipitous aspect of nature in running its course (González, 2000). Temporality is central to the ecological turn that urges us to move away from linear timelines of modernity and progress (Tsing, 2015), both in how we do research and in how we think of time.

We find these two points – connecting research and activism, and using creative, embodied, and multispecies methodologies – particularly important as they are underpinned by the commitment to include voices from a variety of (more-than-)human positionalities. This is essential to the ecological turn that cannot stem from human-centric and euro-western-centric forms of knowledge. We hope this special issue illustrates the urgent need to work from trans- and interdisciplinary research to produce (more-than-)human solidarities and sustainable futures.

Note

1. The planetary boundaries framework includes nine aspects (i.e. biosphere integrity, climate change, novel entities, stratospheric ozone depletion, atmospheric aerosol loading, ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows, freshwater change, land system change, biosphere integrity) that are essential to the regulation of the Earth system as a whole. The planetary boundaries framework shows the safe operating zones for

each boundary for Earth to remain habitable to humans. As of 2023, six out of the nine planetary boundaries have been crossed (see Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2024).

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