

Introduction

SHiFT COST Action CA21166 – Social Sciences and Humanities for Transformation and Climate Resilience – explores innovative concepts and theoretical frames that mobilize Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences generated knowledge for integrated and hybrid societal transformations in climate change strategies. This mission requires an inclusive and dynamic approach to transdisciplinary exchange, an approach that repositions the relationship between theory and practice, science and society, politics and culture.

By combining interdisciplinary, experimental and co-created knowledge, innovative solutions emerge to address complex environmental issues, because collaborative efforts across disciplines build effective mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building strategies in the face of the rapidly accelerating complexity of climate challenges. This transition from individual to collaborative knowledge requires that work produced by the more than 300 researchers from over 30 countries that constitute the SHiFT community is shared and published.

In the context of SHiFT's mission, this Special Issue also echoes a central challenge of our times: bridging cultural and ecological consciousness in response to accelerating climate disruption. Cultural heritage – often perceived as static or backward-looking – must be reimagined as a dynamic interface between human values, ecological ethics and planetary futures. In this sense, SHiFT emphasizes the urgent need for epistemological transition: a move from extractive paradigms to regenerative cultures, where knowledge from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences is not ancillary, but foundational to designing equitable climate responses. Recognizing culture as both a medium and a method for sustainability reinforces the political significance of memory, identity, imagination and place-making in times of ecological uncertainty. Such recognition calls

for frameworks that are not only inclusive but transformative, crossing disciplines, ecosystems and communities in search of just, situated and culturally resonant solutions.

Knowledge exchange and shared learning about critical practice, engaged with real-world problems, promote flexible, adaptive, and multiple scale, multiple time-frame experiential knowledge, terminologies and epistemic hybridizations. The articles here compiled mobilize the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in the exploration of the intersections of cultural heritage and sustainability, within the framework of SHiFT COST Action. This exchange of action-oriented knowledge takes the shape of a collaborative Special Issue of E.REI, the E-Journal of Intercultural Studies published by the Centre for Intercultural Studies of the Polytechnic University of Porto.

Knowledge, dialogue, coexistence and intercultural understanding are essential factors of the complexity that characterizes contemporary society. Hence the importance of the prefix “inter” of “interculturality”: “inter” as a movement of mutual knowledge and as a model of reciprocal communication, in equality, without a dominant or a dominated one. The idea of multiculturalism has oscillated between utopia and political exploitation as, in reality, many so-called multicultural societies only tolerate the presence of so-called “different” cultures, knowledges and identities, that live closed in on themselves, marked by ethnicity, religion or language, without ever trying to get to know each other and live together on a day-to-day basis. But it must be recognized that all cultures are hybrids, all cultures suffer and exert intercultural influences. This is why the E-Journal of Intercultural Studies fosters the scientific debate on intercultural studies, as the basis for a future of constant translation and dialogue on a global scale.

Interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches like this one elaborate wide-ranging and, hopefully, long-lasting answers for pressing questions about transformation and climate resilience, taking into consideration diverse epistemic frameworks on politics, education, human behaviour, societal structures, cultural values, and ethical issues, among others. In fact, while the Arts and Humanities question established paradigms and motivate revolutionary change, the Social Sciences critically address the political and economic institutions that contribute to climate changes and inequalities, thus setting the stage for inclusive decision-making policies that do not ignore indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage and community engagement.

This Special Issue comprises a core group of SHiFT COST Action transdisciplinary researchers and practitioners from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, who

gathered at the Centre for Intercultural Studies of the Polytechnic University of Porto in March 2025 for a Writing Retreat that explored the intersections of cultural heritage and sustainability. This writing retreat became an effective yet informal way of meeting, co-working and advancing the preparation of solid scientific deliverables. Over the course of three intense days, researchers conducted focused discussions and shared insights drawn upon each other's expertise and experiences across different social, political, economic, environmental and technological contexts. This Special Issue is the outcome of that collective effort to critically reimagine cultural heritage as a dynamic driver of sustainability through rigorous, cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration.

Climate change has reshaped state cultural policies and their environmental focus. "Has Climate Change Transformed Cultural Policy? A review of contemporary approaches", by Carlos Vargas, recognises the increasing integration of sustainability goals into cultural agendas, while also highlighting significant gaps in policy evaluation, equity and long-term impact assessment. Emphasising the need for both instrumental and transformative measures of effectiveness, the Vargas's work explores the societal and cultural implications of environmentally informed policies. It discusses emerging trends, such as cross-sectoral collaboration and cultural justice, alongside their critical shortcomings. The article concludes by outlining future research and policy directions, advocating inclusive, reflexive and ecologically grounded cultural governance.

"Decolonizing Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Sustainability through a Cultural Studies Lens", by Clara Sarmiento, Maria Manuel Baptista and Gabriela Santos, explores the intersection between critical heritage studies, decolonial epistemologies and sustainability through the analytical lens of cultural studies, with particular emphasis on Stuart Hall's theoretical contributions. Authors argue that traditional heritage discourse, dominated by western frameworks, perpetuates colonial power relations that marginalize local communities and knowledge systems while failing to address contemporary sustainability challenges. The "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith, 2006) privileges expert knowledge over community autonomy, commodifies living cultures for tourism consumption, and maintains institutional structures that exclude marginalized voices from heritage-related decision-making. Drawing extensively on Stuart Hall's cultural theory – particularly on his concepts of culture as a contested terrain, representation politics and post-national identity formation – Sarmiento, Baptista and Santos discuss alternative frameworks for heritage understanding that validate diverse knowledge systems and

support community self-determination. Hall's analysis of cultural hegemony and hybrid identity formation provides essential tools for understanding how heritage operates as a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. The article integrates these insights with decolonial epistemologies, examining how concepts including cognitive justice, epistemic reconstitution and frontier thinking provide practical methodologies for creating more equitable heritage alternatives.

The methodologies of cultural studies, including conjunctural analysis and participatory ethnography, enable the operationalization of decolonial insights through radical inclusivity and democratic cultural practice. Central to the article is Hall's analysis of the political economy of culture, which provides frameworks for understanding heritage commodification while developing community-controlled heritage economies as democratic alternatives. The integration of environmental justice analysis with cultural studies reveals how memory and traditional ecological knowledge offer integrated approaches to cultural and environmental sustainability. Inspired by Williams (1961) "long revolution" toward democratic social transformation, the article concludes that decolonizing heritage requires coordinated transformation across governance structures, economic models and pedagogical approaches. Therefore, the theoretical framework here developed provides roadmaps for heritage institutions to contribute to social justice and sustainable development while supporting community empowerment and cultural sovereignty.

Local communities represent the basis for a balanced wellbeing since they are the place and space for living. "Intercultural, intergenerational, interspecies, and interdisciplinary work at the community level: New European Bauhaus preparatory arrangements in Oeiras and Sintra, Portugal", by Cristiano Pedroso-Roussado, argues that those communities function as dynamic spheres entangling a diverse range of backgrounds, cultures, aspirations, behaviours, beliefs and resources. Thus, their holistic comprehension becomes crucial to inform collective decisions at the local, regional and national level. At the international level, Europe is implementing the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative that holds a promise to achieve a sustainable, inclusive and beautiful future. One of its Lighthouse projects is the Bauhaus of the Seas (BoS) that pilots intercultural, intergenerational and interspecies projects that are locally-grounded, reconnecting coastal communities to their aquatic ecosystems. In this article, Pedroso-Roussado analyses the preparatory arrangements for achieving the New European

Bauhaus values in Oeiras (Bauhaus of the Seas city), and in Rio de Mouro, Sintra, where participatory, intercultural, intergenerational and interdisciplinary projects are under development. Throughout this work it is argued that operating at the local levels with the support of the local actors, as seen in Oeiras and Sintra, is paramount to achieve the New European Bauhaus goals and transform the livelihoods of urban and peri-urban communities.

As society faces increasingly critical challenges and pressures across a range of areas, third level education is under ever greater scrutiny concerning how it may provide a meaningful and significant leadership role in response. The need for education which is orientated towards navigating interrelated challenges beyond traditional disciplinary distinctions is clear, however, the ways in which this is actualised remains opaque and often restricted within embedded or possibly even disjunct cultures of learning whilst still invoking the language of “transformation” and its manifold possible meanings. “Connecting culture and education for sustainability through transdisciplinary learning”, by Evan Boyle, Cristina Calheiros and John Barimo, suggests that “culture”, as a fourth pillar of sustainability, may actually help to enable an innovative approach to thinking and practicing education. This approach is necessary in relation to the transformation and even regeneration of educational processes and institutions and how they are understood, developed and delivered. This is especially important with regards to the complex web of sustainability challenges underpinning the polycrisis at local, regional and global scales across all sectors of society. As an opening to a larger conversation, Boyle, Calheiros and Barimo propose a blended pedagogy of the transdisciplinary sustainability education praxis with transcultural education to foster global cooperation and action amidst the polycrisis.

The articles that constitute this Special Issue examine the intersections between biocultural heritage, cultural ecosystem services and climate resilience, informed by diverse disciplines, worldviews and positionalities. They seek to foreground cultural and epistemic pluralism as essential to envisioning alternative pathways for a liveable future. Articles explore participatory, community-based, arts-informed and historically grounded approaches in order to challenge dominant paradigms and contribute to the co-creation of regenerative knowledge systems. By opening space for critical reflection, situated practices and collaborative imagination, this Special Issue advances SHiFT’s core

ambition: to reposition the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts not at the margins, but at the heart of sustainability transformations.

As the pages that follow will demonstrate, confronting the multifaceted realities of climate change demands more than technical solutions: it requires a reimagining of cultural heritage as a living, dynamic force within sustainable transitions. The contributions assembled in this Special Issue converge around the urgent need to integrate decolonial epistemologies, intercultural dialogue, community agency, and educational innovation into transdisciplinary climate action. By critically engaging with power structures, inherited knowledge systems and participatory models of education and governance, these works analyse how cultural heritage can become a transformative resource for equitable and ecologically grounded futures. This Special Issue invites readers to traverse intellectual boundaries, challenge established narratives and embrace the generative intersections of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In doing so, it positions interculturality not as an abstract ideal, but as an active practice of mutual recognition, cooperation and resilience. Let this be not only an academic exercise, but a collective call to rethink our shared responsibilities, to reframe sustainability through cultural lenses and to co-create knowledge that is as inclusive as it is actionable.

The Editors,

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