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Editorial

Presencing the Future of Democracy and Governance:

A Special Themed Issue

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This special issue, *Presencing the Future of Democracy and Governance*, was conceived from a shared sense that the need to reimagine democracy and governance has never been more urgent, and that the frames and institutions we have long relied on can no longer carry the weight of the present.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 20, 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered an unexpected and much-discussed address, in which he opened by describing "a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a harsh reality, where geopolitics, where the large, main power, geopolitics, is submitted to no limits, no constraints" (Carney, 2026, para 3). He continued by pointing to a condition in which "the rules-based order is fading," and where "the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must" (Carney, 2026, para 6). He revisited Václav Havel's (1978/1985) essay "The Power of the Powerless", which begins with the image of the greengrocer placing a "Workers of the world unite" (p. 5) sign in his shop window to signal compliance with a system no one fully believed in, and which Havel called "living within a lie" (Carney, 2026, para 14). He continued:

> The system's power comes not from its truth, but from everyone's willingness to perform as if it were true, and its fragility comes from the same source. When even one person stops performing, when the greengrocer removes his sign, the illusion begins to crack. (Carney, 2026, para 15)

The call for this issue invited contributions highlighting initiatives which, across a variety of contexts, begin to unsettle these routines of compliance, thereby attending to what is already being enacted in response to the conditions of our current moment. It asked where forms of governance grounded in relationality, care, and ecological interdependence are taking shape, often beyond dominant institutional frames. It asked how such practices emerge, how they are sustained, and what kinds of responsibilities they cultivate across social, cultural, and ecological registers.

Reflecting Inward and Outward: Sensing Into the Fragile Work of Emergence

Entering our sixth year, the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change has worked to stay close to the sensing and shaping of this field and what is emerging in it across very different contexts. Editorial writing, then, has always carried both a particular weight and delight as we attempt to co-delineate an emerging pracademic field. In the weeks leading up to the release of a new issue, when the final—yet often not fully expected—collection of contributions takes shape and our attention shifts from processing to curating, we have developed a cherished practice. We meet each other virtually across distance, across different locations, contexts, and realities, and try to find fitting frames and words that can hold something of what is unfolding between the written words and the praxis that they represent.

As we have written and shared before, this dialogic space also allows us to step back and look critically at the less visible frames and assumptions that shape our curation. Yet, these frames are never neutral. They can open perception, and they can also reproduce forms of compliance, especially when the language of emergence becomes too smooth, too assured, or too quickly detached from the difficulty of acting within the complexity of our current contexts. It has always been our intention for JASC to function as, and develop into a living archive of generative insights and praxis that is beginning to take shape. Linked to this curatorial role comes a recurring question, one that is always accompanied by a personal sense of unease when spoken out loud: What do we actually enact through the ways we frame, select, and name what is emerging? There are traces, also reflected in previous issues, of a language that leans toward a *from – to* movement*,* from something that is broken, no longer functioning, unsustainable or inequitable, to something more promising, more coherent, more just, more responsive to life. While this movement reflects values at the heart of the work, it also carries the risk of creating a bubble of

hopefulness that can become disconnected from the difficulty, ambiguity, and unevenness of bringing new forms into life within the realities we are actually living. At the same time, our own conversations, especially our personal check-ins, which anchor our collaboration even when we are each working under pressure, often carry more ambivalent sentiments. They speak of strain and loss, and also of the lived work of bringing new forms to life while "hospicing" what is ending (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). It is from this more complex ground that this editorial has taken shape.

In the conversations that shaped this issue, this tension became particularly evident. After hearing our summaries of the contributions to the issue and the themes they reflect, Otto pointed to a disconnect between what we shared when we entered the space and what we presented as guiding themes of the collected works. The check-ins, he noted, were grounded in something symptomatic of the present moment, a bifurcation, an initial split that will likely become more pronounced rather than less in the times to come. He described this moment as characterized by rupture rather than transition, fracture rather than fragmentation, and absencing rather than presencing—a sense of loss rather than a sense of rebirth. These check-ins spoke from places where continuity cannot be taken for granted, where connections are under pressure, where structures we rely on begin to fall apart. The contributions gathered here point toward relational practices, toward efforts to build coherence, toward ways of working that seek to respond to these conditions. Both the rupture and the efforts to repair are real. They sit next to each other without resolving into a single story.

Another layer surfaced in our dialogue as we worked with the contributions and the conversations around them. Most of the relational practices described in the articles of this issue neither unfold in separate or protected spheres nor are they realized under stable institutional conditions. They often take shape in the in-between spaces of institutional life, where formal roles matter but do not carry the whole work, where participation depends on relationships, trust, and careful forms of invitation, and where the language through which people are invited into a conversation is itself part of the practice. Some of this work happens in conversations that cannot easily be cited, in exchanges that remain sensitive because of the political and institutional complexities in which and from which people speak, and in forms of convening where entry has to be made possible across difference, exposure, and risk. At the same time, the landscape in which this work unfolds has become more crowded and more disjointed. Initiatives multiply, each carrying its own logic, its own urgency, its own claim to relevance. What binds them is often thin. Coordination does not precede action, nor does action necessarily lead to coordination. Both have to be cultivated, again and again, through attention, through trust, through a willingness to remain in relation even when alignment is partial. We share an example of such work at the end of this editorial.

This condition of fragmented yet interdependent initiatives leaves us with a more demanding task. What does it mean to stay with this tension in how we write, how we curate, how we remain in relation to each other? What kind of space does this journal become when it does not turn away from the experience of things coming apart, and at the same time keeps attention on the fragile work of bringing something else into being?

In our editorial dialogue, Otto referred to the conditions that allow such forms of governance to emerge and hold as the question of the "social soil," or what awareness-based systems change also names as "shared awareness" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025). Many of the contributions gathered in this issue describe what is taking shape: Islands of coherence, spaces of relational governance, practices of care and attunement. The more demanding question concerns the conditions of their emergence. What allows such formations to come into being and to hold? What enables movement toward these forms when everyday experience is shaped by pressure, fragmentation, and uncertainty? One shared sentiment emerging from our editorial conversations around this issue is that without shared awareness, without relational attentiveness, without the capacity to remain with vulnerability and difference, and without vigilance toward struggle, these forms remain fragile and can become harder to sustain than the structures they seek to move beyond.

Presencing the Future of Governance When the Old Bargain No Longer Works

The necessary shift in our own inquiry, then, concerns the careful unpacking of the conditions that enable the emergence of forms of governance grounded in relationality, care, and ecological interdependence. How are they cultivated? How are they held and nurtured? And how, within and through them, can the possibility of moving between what is breaking down and what is beginning to take shape emerge and be sustained? These might be some of the most fundamental questions that a science and a praxis of awareness-based systems change needs to ask and experiment with. They also return us to the intention with which this special issue was first conceived. *Presencing the Futures of Democracy and Governance* began with the sense that the future of governance cannot be approached only through the defense or critique of existing institutional forms. This issue turns toward initiatives that unsettle routines of compliance. Yet, taking such a view also demands that we remain close to the forms of compliance that persist in us, around us, and through the institutional arrangements and the myriad of entanglements (be it our collective dependency on carbon fuels or the pervasive performativity of neoliberal capitalism) that still organize collective, economic, civic, and political life. The question is not only about where signs are being taken down. It is also how long they have been kept in place, what they helped hold together, what costs were hidden by their display, and what becomes possible, and dangerous, once the gesture no longer convinces.

Carney's Davos speech gave this tension a stark formulation. He described decades of participation in what was called the rules-based international order: "We joined its institutions, we praised its principles, we benefited from its predictability. And because of that, we could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection" (Carney, 2026, para. 16). He then names the compromise that sustained this order: "We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false," that "the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient," that "trade rules were enforced asymmetrically," and that "international law applied with varying rigor depending on the identity of the accused or the victim" (Carney, 2026, para. 17). Its fiction was useful. It provided "public goods, open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security and support for frameworks for resolving disputes" (Carney, 2026, para. 18). And so, returning to Havel's greengrocer, he concludes: "We placed the sign in the window. We participated in the rituals, and we largely avoided calling out the gaps between rhetoric and reality. This bargain no longer works. Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition" (Carney, 2026, paras. 19–20).

The rupture Carney named reaches directly into the terrain of democracy and governance. The question is no longer only how more participatory, relational, or ecologically responsible forms of governance might be imagined. It is also how they can take root when the wider architectures of coordination have lost part of their credibility, while still shaping the conditions of action we live in and work by. The old sign remains in many windows. In some places, it is defended more aggressively. In others, people are searching for new forms, alliances, and practices that allow them to stop performing belief in arrangements they know to be failing, without collapsing into isolation, withdrawal, or retreating into command and control.

The rules-based international order in which that sign was placed was, for all its asymmetries, a multilateral one. It rested on the belief that collective problems could be addressed through shared institutions, rules, agreements, and forms of representation that gathered states around common tables. The weakening of this multilateralist order changes the terrain on which governance is practiced. Many accounts of contemporary global governance now describe this terrain as fragmented, competitive, minilateral, plurilateral, or post-multilateral, pointing to the persistence of inherited institutions alongside a proliferation of smaller, more selective, and more strategic forms of cooperation (Cooper, 2025; Dee, 2024; Prantl, 2025; Stephen, 2025). Yet, the "post" in post-multilateralism does not simply mean after. As Stuart Hall wrote on the notion of the post-colonial, "post" can mark a condition that comes "without final supersession," where older formations continue to operate while losing their capacity to organize the field on their own terms (Hall, 2002, p. 244). Post-multilateralism, in this sense, names a similar unsettled terrain. It marks the loss of confidence that coordination can be held primarily through multilateral institutions, state-centered representation, rule-based architectures, and consensus-based decision-making whose unevenness could and still is bracketed for the sake of stability.

What follows from this loss is not yet settled. One trajectory moves toward unilateral dominance, bilateral bargaining, strategic autonomy, and the hardening of borders around national interest. Another moves through polycentric or minilateral arrangements in which action is taken by coalitions, regions, cities, movements, institutions, communities, firms, and knowledge networks that no longer wait for one center to authorize movement.

Polycentric governance names one part of this emerging field. In Ostrom's formulation, "polycentric systems are characterized by multiple governing authorities at different scales rather than a monocentric unit" and each unit "exercises considerable independence to make norms and rules within a specific domain" (Ostrom, 2010, p. 552). Carlisle and Gruby (2019) define polycentricity as a "complex form of governance with multiple centers of decision making, each of which operates with some degree of autonomy" (p. 928). The crucial issue, however, lies in whether these multiple centers become capable of functioning as a system. Multiple sites of initiative can also produce noise, duplication, competition, exhaustion, and diffuse accountability. Carlisle and Gruby therefore distinguish the existence of semi-autonomous decision-making centers from a functioning polycentric governance system, which depends on whether centers "take each other into account in competitive and cooperative relationships and are capable of resolving conflicts" (p. 928). This distinction brings us back to the shift in inquiry named above. Polycentricity cannot be treated as a solution-form. It describes a condition in which coordination must be cultivated, reframing the question of the conditions for cultivating the social soil as essentially a governance question. What allows multiple centers of initiative to become mutually responsive, without being absorbed back into a single center or dissipating into isolated activity?

Minilateral arrangements offer a strategic vocabulary for altered governance landscapes by identifying selective forms of cooperation among smaller groups of actors (Falkner, 2016; Panda & Park, 2024). While polycentricity draws attention to multiple centers of decision-making that can become mutually responsive, minilateralism describes narrower frameworks often organized around urgency, shared interests, or the willingness to move when broader multilateral processes stall. These actors are frequently locally anchored, with "local" understood broadly to include community, regional, national, and Indigenous actors, as well as institutional and social movements (Falkner, 2016; Newell, 2026; Panda & Park, 2024; Pattberg et al., 2018). The force of these entities comes from being rooted in specific histories and responsibilities, acting within concrete places as well as a highly networked global field (Newell, 2026; Pattberg et al., 2018). Newell's (2026) work on the governance of fossil fuel phase-out shows how concrete this question has become. In the energy transition, phase-out clubs, Just Energy Transition Partnerships, and treaty proposals have emerged amid frustration with the slow pace of climate negotiations. These initiatives can create what Newell calls "stepping stones" toward broader multilateral responses (Newell, 2026, p. 604). They can move faster than formal negotiations, gather first movers, and create momentum. At the same time, Newell's assessment

remains cautious. Such initiatives can create "important 'islands' of energy governance" while still falling short of the multiscalar response required to meet our current polycrisis (Newell, 2026, p. 607). They may plug gaps, create norms, and support partial coordination, while remaining weak on inclusivity, legal strength, and the ability to disturb incumbent systems. They show that other patterns are possible, yet their existence does not yet answer how they connect, how they endure, how they shift power, or how they remain accountable to those most affected by the transitions they seek to advance.

The social movement literature gives another way into the same terrain. Della Porta (2025) writes that much of social movement theory was built for "normal times," meaning structured times in which expectations can be built from previous experience, cognition, and relations (p. 11). The present looks different. Movements increasingly develop in times of threat, crisis, and exceptional conjuncture. Under such conditions, action does not merely respond to structures. It can change relations, identities, and the field in which actors move. Della Porta therefore calls for a shift from causal toward processual approaches, because "feedback loops are continuously produced and reproduced" as movements enter multiple arenas (p. 13). This processual view of social movements has direct relevance for the contributions gathered here. Governance futures do not appear just as institutional designs. They emerge through cascades, translations, repertoires, occupations, invitations, refusals, solidarities, and fragile acts of appearing together. They travel unevenly across places. They are adapted, absorbed, blocked, repressed, amplified, or transformed.

For JASC, this is also where the editorial task outlined in the opening becomes more concrete. To curate a living archive of emergence cannot mean collecting hopeful fragments while leaving the conditions of their fragility unnamed. It means staying close to the full spectrum: the work of dying and the work of being born. The pull of command and control and the fragile cultivation of shared awareness, of interiorizing governance into our shared spaces of attention and intention. The proliferation of initiatives and the slow labor of making them mutually responsive. The promise of polycentricity and the danger of dispersion without soil. The contributions to this issue offer different entries into this field. They give us material with which to ask, more concretely, what kinds of awareness, relationships, methods, and institutional conditions allow democratic and governance futures to be presenced in a time when the old bargain no longer works.

Articles in This Issue

This special-themed issue opens with two *Commentaries From the Field*. Georgiana Ward-Booth's *Gardening Alongside Landscaping: Dispatches on Planetary Governance From a Shifting System* (Ward-Booth, 2026), locates the question of governance inside the United Nations system, through the lived experience of three senior Resident Coordinators, Allegra Baiocchi, Ozonnia Ojielo, and Pauline Tamesis. Ward-Booth writes from her experience with, and

affection for, the UN, as well as from a clear reckoning with its limits. She traces the tension between the institution's "landscaping" functions, its frameworks, mandates, and coordination architectures, and the quieter "gardening" work through which people read the soil of a situation, tend relationships, and enable what is locally grown. The commentary describes moments where procedure runs out and ethical improvisation becomes necessary, where leaders act from purpose while carrying the risks of institutional non-recognition. It also points to the underground infrastructures that sustain such work, including peer support, prayer, movement, family, safe thinking spaces, and the social soil of trust that the institution depends on without fully seeing. Through images of roots, desire lines, seed banks, and gardening, the article shows that planetary governance cannot depend only on new architectures. It also requires practices of listening, enabling, and holding space for local intelligence, ancestral knowledge, and courageous leadership already at work within the cracks of the old paradigm.

In the second *Commentary From the Field*, Rob Ricigliano and Sidney Hargro's *Leveraging Resources for Governance Transformation: Early Insights From The Governance Futures Network*, (Ricigliano & Hargro, 2026) the authors reflect on the first years of building the Governance Futures Network (GFN), a global network of practitioners working across democratic crisis and governance transformation. The piece is grounded in the metaphor of the Pando Grove in Utah, a vast clonal colony of trees whose many visible trunks are connected through a shared underground root system. This image allows Ricigliano and Hargro to show how visible growth depends on forms of support, connection, and resource flow that remain largely hidden from view. They describe how the network gathers diverse perspectives, supports flows of information and inspiration, and experiments with pando funding as a way of shifting resource decisions closer to those working in the system. Its greenhouses are member-led collaborative project spaces where ideas are brought into practice around areas such as collective decision-making, ritual, leadership, and prosocial digital spaces. The commentary asks what kinds of infrastructure are needed for governance work to endure, including trust, shared sense-making, long-term resourcing, and forms of coordination that can hold both immediate action and deeper transformation.

Our special themed issue also features an *Invited Article.* In *Love, Power, and Spirit: The Futures of Human-AI Symbiosis and Conscious Evolution*, Ivana Milojević and Sohail Inayatullah (2026) take up one of the most contested sites of contemporary governance: the rapidly expanding field of artificial intelligence and its reconfiguration of language, labor, visibility, agency, and care. Writing through two personal narratives, one grounded in decades of futures work on post-human ethics, the other in the unexpected experience of linguistic and professional empowerment through generative AI, they refuse both simple technophilia and rejection. Instead, they ask what kinds of awareness, metaphors, and relational commitments are being cultivated in and through human-AI encounters. Their analysis begins with the intimate and seemingly ordinary: grammar correction, time saved, the easing of linguistic

marginalization. It then follows these ordinary encounters into the structural violence embedded in algorithmic systems, where closed categories, default settings, and bureaucratic forms of digital indifference determine which histories and identities can be recognized, and which are made illegible. Through the lenses of love, power, and spirit, and through four scenarios, Milojević and Inayatullah show that AI has become part of the social field through which futures are imagined, narrowed, expanded, colonized, or liberated. Their contribution asks what it would mean to design and inhabit technological systems from a deeper quality of awareness, so that the future of AI becomes less a question of optimization alone and more a question of who we are becoming with in relation to the systems we create.

This issue assembles three *Peer-Reviewed Articles*. Lea Spahn, Susanne Maria Weber, Pauliina Jääskeläinen, Karen Mpamhanga, Cláudia Neves, and Karine Oganisjana's article *Lifting the Roof' With Democracy-as-Becoming: The Potential of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Innovating Governance in Educational Institutions. A Pattern Approach* (Spahn et al., 2026) brings the question of governance into adult, professional, and organizational learning. Based on the Horizon Europe/UKRI project "Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Responsive Pedagogy and Democracy-as-becoming", the article works with seven case trials across six countries to ask how democratic governance can be sensed, practiced, and reorganized through aesthetic and embodied learning. Its contribution lies in reframing governance as something that is also constituted through bodies, relations, sensory orders, affective registers, and everyday practices of organizing, and not just through fixed architectures of rules or procedures. Methodologically, the authors combine a pattern approach with vignette research, identifying recurring situations of transformation while keeping them grounded in lived, embodied, and context-specific moments. The article identifies five promising patterns of governance for a transformative shift in a time of pressing systemic challenges: facilitating vulnerability, cultivating embodied responsiveness, establishing collective aesthetic practices, otherness as resourceful not-knowing, and an ethics of care-fullness. Its vignettes stay close to the small and consequential shifts through which governance is reworked in practice. "Lifting the Roof" names the article's central gesture of making the often implicit grammars of educational governance visible, so that democracy-as-becoming can be practiced through the reworking of power, relation, institutional habit, and commoning from within everyday educational forms.

Christine Wamsler's article *The Seeds We Sow: From Polycrisis and -Isms to Interbeing and Societal Transformation* (Wamsler, 2026) examines the "Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet" (ZASP) online course as a spiritually and scientifically grounded response to climate anxiety, disconnection, and diminished agency in the midst of the polycrisis. Based on a mixed-methods study of three course cohorts, the article reports significant increases in resilience, connection, hope, empowerment, and coping, as well as a decrease in climate anxiety. Wamsler reads these shifts through the field of Inner

Transformation for Sustainability, locating the roots of today's crises in paradigms of separation expressed through individualism, materialism, consumerism, elitism, extractivism, and related "-isms." Wamsler shows how Thích Nhất Hạnh's central course concept of interbeing (Nhất Hanh, 2020) offers participants a way to reframe suffering, agency, mortality, and engagement through a felt sense of interconnectedness with self, others, nature, and time. She also stays close to the non-linear nature of transformation, as participants describe renewed presence, self-care, ethical engagement, and action, alongside relapse, ambivalence, and uncertainty about how to carry these insights into work, activism, and wider systems. The article places spiritual practice within the issue's broader inquiry into the conditions through which inner shifts may become sustained forms of collective and societal transformation.

Nancy Zamierowski's article *Sensing the System: Collective Perception, Governance, and Conditions for Action in Complex Organizations* (Zamierowski, 2026) examines an awareness-based research pilot with a mission-driven organization protecting the Amazon rainforest as it moved from a volunteer-based structure toward a more formalized governance model. The article conceptualizes governance as a matter of coordinating perception, meaning-making, authority, and action in situations where knowledge, roles, and decision-making power are distributed unevenly across the organization. Methodologically, it is designed as a qualitative case study grounded in participatory and awareness-based action research, with cooperative inquiry structuring cycles of action and reflection. Interviews, guided sensing journeys, systemic constellations, workshop observations, visual maps, participant reflections, and follow-up conversations are used to examine how relational and structural dynamics become more perceptible to participants. The systems sensing process surfaced leadership divergence, misaligned authority, communication strain, and different orientations toward the organization's purpose. Yet the article also stays with what did not move. Expanded perception remained partial and uneven and did not translate into coordinated action where decision-making authority was absent, collective integration was constrained, and organizational power remained misaligned. The article offers a careful account of systems sensing as a way of making implicit dynamics available for shared interpretation, while showing that perception alone cannot carry governance transformation unless what has been sensed can be held, integrated, and acted upon.

The issue also includes Antonio Casado da Rocha's *Book Review*, *From Transactional to Relational Democracy: Review of The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A First-Person Account in Policymaking (Larrea, 2024).* (Casado da Rocha, 2026). The review engages Miren Larrea's first-person account of action research for territorial development in Gipuzkoa, a Basque context that has become a significant site for experimenting with collaborative, territorial, and polycentric forms of governance. Casado da Rocha reads the book as an account of facilitation as awareness practice, where slow thinking, embodied memory,

and relational work help move democratic practice from transactional exchange toward collective learning.

The growing interest in our *Innovations in Praxis* section has been one of the notable developments of the past year. This issue includes one contribution in this format, continuing our commitment to forms of writing that stay close to practice as it unfolds. Chloë Spackman, Renu Burr, and Lisa Doig's *Islands of Sanity, Sanctuary, and Solidarity: Women Politicians in Australia Recoding Power Through Relational Governance* (Spackman et al., 2026) writes from Next25's "Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women initiative", co-created with women parliamentarians in Australia across party lines and levels of government. The authors describe the piece as an anarchive, drawing on Erin Manning's (n.d.) concept of an archive of traces that catches experience in the making and carries it forward as a score for continued becoming. This form fits the work they are recounting, since the initiative is still unfolding through stories, program memories, participant words, prototypes, and small shifts in parliamentary practice. The article is organized around three qualities that the authors identify as having emerged through the program. Sanity draws on Margaret Wheatley's (2024) language of "islands of sanity" and refers here to clearer seeing, shared sense-making, and the capacity of women parliamentarians to understand themselves and the parliamentary system with more spaciousness. Sanctuary is evoked through Bayo Akómoláfé (2025) and names the creation of protected, loving, and courageous spaces where women can set down some of the armor demanded by political life and meet one another in trust. Solidarity carries the movement back into the Australian party-political system, as relationships across party lines become a source of collective agency, informal support, practical prototypes, and visible acts of care inside parliamentary life. Through these three movements, the article shows how relational governance is being cultivated within a political culture shaped by adversarial procedure, gendered power, and public performance, and how women politicians are beginning to recode power through shared purpose, connection, and mutual accountability across difference.

After a brief pause in the previous issue, the *In Dialogue* feature returns here with a particularly timely conversation. Olja Jovanović, Mila Bakić, Jelena Kleut, Nikola Koruga, Marija Radoman, Nenad Radulović, Milan Stančić and Oliver Koenig's *When the University Speaks: On the Role of Neutrality, Responsibility, and Democratic Practice Under Pressure* (Jovanović et al., 2026) is situated in Serbia's sustained wave of student-led protest following the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, and the subsequent attack on students during a peaceful memorial gathering at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. In the time that followed, faculties across Serbia became occupied university spaces where students and staff learned to hold institutional failure, public grief, and democratic responsibility in collective awareness. Student plenums assumed responsibility for collective decision-making, and the university entered public visibility as a place where democracy was practiced under pressure. The dialogue gathers university workers from

Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, speaking as teachers, researchers, professional staff, colleagues, citizens, and members of institutions exposed to political, financial, and legal pressure. Their conversation gives a situated account of how the university was changed by the blockades, by repression, by student courage, and by solidarities that formed across institutional positions usually kept apart. It asks what academic autonomy can mean when calls for neutrality are made in a context where students are being attacked, universities are being financially and legally pressured, and public speech by academic workers is framed as political bias; it also asks how university workers understand their responsibility when students are already practicing direct democracy inside the institution. The dialogue gives a vivid example of what enacting democracy under pressure can look like. It asks how such moments of lived democratic invention can become more than an emergency response, and how the practices and relations opened in crisis might reshape the future governance of universities and other public institutions.

The Santa Marta Train: Creating Conditions for Transformative Multilateralism

This editorial closes with a final vignette from the wider field of practice in which this issue has taken shape. It brings the question of transformative multilateralism back to the concrete struggle over fossil fuel phase-out, where the limits of existing climate diplomacy have become especially visible. Following the Belém Declaration signed at COP30 in November 2025, which called for a coordinated and just transition away from fossil fuels, the Santa Marta Conference convened by Colombia and the Netherlands in April 2026[1] gathered governments, researchers, Indigenous representatives, and civil society actors around the question of how such coordination might actually be practiced. The Santa Marta conference emerged from the recognition that, while global climate negotiations have largely focused on emissions targets, far less attention has been given to the shared governance challenges involved in winding down fossil fuel extraction itself. The conference was preceded by an academic pre-conference, which was hosted by the University of Magdalena in Santa Colombia. The lead-up to these events gave an opportunity for Kjell Kühne (Director at LINGO[2] and Academic Chapter co-facilitator) and Megan Seneque (Visiting Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, and Associate Editor of this journal) to collaborate. They worked together to create conditions for a different kind of dialogue on transformative multilateralism:

[1] See: https://www.fossilfueltreaty.org/conference

[2] See: https://www.leave-it-in-the-ground.org/

The two of us had many conversations and conducted a number of dialogue interviews with key influencers in the leadup to the Academic Pre-conference, hosted by the University of Magdalena in Santa Marta, Colombia. The Pre-Conference contributed to the deliberations in the main conference, led by the governments of Colombia and the Netherlands. Kjell had invited Megan to co-host the Multilateralism Workstream with him. We had agreed that connecting with key people before the conference would both build the relational field and surface potential leverage points for collaboration, as we sought to bring some coherence into the many initiatives committed to the transition. We designed two sessions for the pre-conference.

In our current context, where universal, top-down decision-making is widely contested and a crisis of legitimacy pervades many multilateral spaces, our goal in these sessions was to create the conditions for a different form of dialogue around what multilateralism might mean. For such dialogue to be meaningful and real, we needed to give people a visceral, embodied experience of the realities and complexities involved in intervening in what has been termed "carbon entanglement" (Gurría, 2013). Such embodied experience allows for different expressions of transformative governance and decision-making to emerge, as (together) we seek to create the conditions for transformation. Our intention was to give an experience of such systemic dialogue over two sessions.

The first session used Vester's sensitivity model, a systems mapping method for identifying key variables in a complex situation and examining how strongly they influence one another (Vester, 2007). In this case, it was applied to carbon entanglement, the dense set of economic, political, infrastructural, financial, and cultural dependencies that keep fossil fuel extraction in place. Using chairs and coloured wool, participants turned the resulting systems map into a physical arrangement and placed themselves and their initiatives within it. This allowed them to experience their work as part of a wider dynamic system, rather than as separate efforts. When it came to dialogue, drawing on Isaacs' understanding of dialogue as a practice of thinking together across difference and uncertainty (Isaacs, 1999), participants could speak from their own perspectives while exploring the implications for systemic intervention and collective decision-making.

The second session explored different understandings and expressions of multilateralism, drawing from the unique experience of participants. It then used the Three Horizons framework to understand the 'history' of multilateralism and why we are where we are in relation to multilateralism (Horizon 1); to further explore what a future beyond fossil fuels might look like (Horizon 3); to start to surface what is required to shape transformative pathways, and the implications for

different expressions of multilateralism that address issues of power and current power imbalances (Horizon 2).

Our overarching intention was to create the conditions for honest, real conversation across difference, in the context of these complexities. Our hope is that this can contribute to releasing the transformative and dialogic potential of transformative multilateralism in a dynamic and complex geopolitical landscape. The need for inclusive, participative, transparent, co-designed processes, which bring together multiple knowledge systems and contextual understandings, is critical in these times. Kjell had termed the Process the *Santa Marta Train*, which began in Colombia and is now journeying toward Tuvalu, where Tuvalu and Ireland will co-host the Second Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels in 2027, carrying forward the work begun in Santa Marta. In the famous novel *100 Años de Soledad*, placed somewhere near Santa Marta, the train transports bananas. Nowadays, it transports coal. As the Santa Marta Process moves forward, it seems we can see the coal train finally leaving Santa Marta behind.

As we curate the contributions that make up JASC, we do so not as distant observers but as practitioners ourselves, engaged in the relational work of awareness-based systems change in our own contexts. Through the editorial work, our intention is to help bring this evolving body of practice and inquiry more fully to life. We do this by lifting up diverse innovations across contexts, reading them through our own engaged experience, and carrying the relational principles of awareness-based systems change into how we work with authors, tend to their contributions, and participate in the ongoing shaping of this evolving field of inquiry and practice. It is our hope that the intention we hold is reflected through and in-between the contributions found in this, and in every, issue of JASC.

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